

A Window-opening Visit

The visit of South Korean Prime Minister Lee Yung Dug, the highest-level one ever paid to Dhaka from Seoul, since they established diplomatic relations in 1973, was significant on the very face of it. Although Lee himself said he was honoured to be the first prime minister from his country making the trip, we think, the honour has been ours, too.

South Korea which is little less than two-thirds the size of Bangladesh, with a population very nearly contained at 43.7 million, has been a global success story in rapid economic advancement. It became an independent republic in 1948, a status that Bangladesh attained 22 years thence, in 1971. We can take heart in the fact that we are almost at a similar stage of economic development that Seoul was after the first two decades of her independent existence. In this line of thinking, we are discounting our 19 years under Pakistan rule as a period lost in politico-economic wilderness.

So, it is the inspirational appeal which South Korea holds for us that made Lee's visit, as the head of a high-powered 15-member delegation, so very welcome an event. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has said we have things to learn from the South Korean experience. It is an instant eye-opener that the population growth rate in that country fell from 2.7 per cent during 1960-66 to only 0.91 per cent in 1992. An increasing number of working women marrying late and having a say in family affairs are said to have made that possible. But it is the 'dust of inferiority complex thrown in your eyes' to make up for any lost national self-respect, by sheer work ethics and an aggressive instinct to grow that turns the tide for a nation.

South Korea and Bangladesh share striking commonalities between them. They respect nuclear non-proliferation and human rights. Both are democracies wedded to free market economies. Societally they are homogeneous and heavily reliant on agriculture with a population density among the highest in the world. ROK has huge iron and coal deposits. But we are tapping coal and have natural gas and petrol.

It's good that the phrase "complementarities between the two economies" has sprung from the South Korean PM himself. We see the complementarity in the manpower we can offer them and the ventures they can have with us in the field of petro-chemicals and, perhaps, electronics. The South Korean investment in Bangladesh is likely to be 60 million US dollar in the near future while this has reached 700 million US dollar in Vietnam, all in the last three years. Among the dignitaries who recently visited us Lee stands out for his unreserved appreciation of our investment climate. So, hope springs.

But trade has largely been a one-way traffic — heavily tilted to the South Korean side. We therefore hail the tariff reduction by South Korea for our jute goods hoping that the preferential treatment could be accorded to some brand new items like tea, newsprint, leather and fertilizers.

Lee came to Bangladesh after his trips to Vietnam and Singapore on a diplomatic-cum-economic mission. South Korea is standing for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for 1996-97. She will also be a contestant for the post of the Director General of the new-born and prestigious World Trade Organisation. We wish her success. For our part, we feel, our bridge-building to South-East Asia will receive an impetus only if we can build on Lee's visit.

The Visionary who Built

Physicians and surgeons are known to the society as practitioners of the art of healing. Not many are aware that there are doctors who care more for the science of the physical well-being of man and go into research rather practice — research on which practice largely bases itself. Dr Mohammed Ibrahim was a research physician par excellence and the fact was recognised on a very high plane — he became the chief scientific adviser to the President of Pakistan on more than one occasion. Today, on the fifth anniversary of his death, the nation would remember him for doing something more than becoming an eminent research physician. Dr Ibrahim was a Pasteur in reverse. The legendary Frenchman, surpassed in charisma and scientific fame only by Einstein and Marie Curie, was a great organiser of research establishments of lasting worldwide value. Very few outside France remember him for that. We eulogise Dr Ibrahim for his achievements as a great organiser of medicine-oriented scientific research and the founder-builder of this nation's biggest self-financed non-government and non-profitable hospital. We remember him for his insight which asked him not to diffuse his cares and attention — one is free to call it also life's ambition — over a more generalised agenda than the specialised hospital he leaves as a shining legacy.

Our admiration of the man, the scientist and the organiser in Dr Ibrahim can have two very meaningful expressions: all the good people in the nation taking an interest in BIRDEM, his gift to the nation, winning ever new laurels in the service of research and of ailing humanity and, two, to encourage conditions in which other successful physicians would come forward to emulate and even Ibrahim's record of service to the nation — by establishing similar non-profit and non-government self-financing hospitals and research facilities.

Although Rabindranath did not take lessons from Schumacher, who was full two generations and more his junior, he never planned his Visva-Bharati to grow into the size it now has. Very many responsible people feel that at the root of whatever makes today's Visva-Bharati move light years away from Tagorean educational ideals lies the problem of its size. BIRDEM has grown perhaps a hundredfold or more since its tin shed days at Segun Bagan. And it is growing. As long as Dr Ibrahim lived he loved to see it grow. That doesn't mean it would go on growing in a unitary fashion and without necessary devolution of function until eternity. There should, to start with, be at least five centres, preferably at divisional headquarters, offering the same services as BIRDEM's but developing independently although through the active co-operation and even enlightened leadership of the parent organisation in Dhaka.

We pay our respects to the memory of that wonderful visionary who translated his dreams into reality by his own hands.

Population Control: More Sincere Efforts Needed

by Prof M T Haq

FOR many years by this time the population problem has been regarded to be the number one problem of the country. Rightly so. For years Bangladesh has been living under the dismal shadow of the classical Malthusian theory of population indicating diseases, natural disasters, wars, accidents, hunger, starvation, malnutrition and what not. In Bangladesh human lives are very cheap, although they should not be like that. One example: Just the other day, like many other occasions, a launch with some 400 people went down in the river. How can this happen in a rather good season if there happened to be some 'effective supervision'? The boat was overloaded. We have not heard much about it from the directly accountable and responsible Shipping Minister in this regard. In any civilized country where there is a semblance of democracy, the responsible minister perhaps have resigned because of his failure to run the work of his Ministry in a responsible manner. Road accidents and so many deaths every day, as reported in the news media, are so frequent that any democratic government, even a dictatorial one would perhaps hang its head in shame. There is failure almost everywhere in terms of the welfare of human beings. There are rules, regulations and laws for almost everything, but these are rarely enforced.

Now let us turn to population control. A policy in this respect has been followed 'in the country' for many years by now. But what is the success story? In a country where births and deaths are not recorded well enough, the birth rate or the death rate and the demographic figures appear to be a sort of jugglery with statistics. The statistics in Bangladesh must be taken very cautiously. The Statistical Pocket Book, Bangladesh '93, gives the following provisional information on population increase:

Natural growth

Area	1987	1992
National	2.19	1.98
Urban	1.74	1.58
Rural	2.24	2.05

Apart from the above, the statistics given year by year show a gradual decrease of population by points. This is perhaps more to satisfy others. The population might have decreased but in not so fine and regular way.

My conviction is that there is a little or no decrease in the rate of population growth over the years — a decrease not enough at all to make any impact on development. Although the government has taken so many steps to curb the population growth, their impact is at best negligible or minimal.

Govt Steps

Now, what are the steps taken by the Government for population control? They are, of course, many such as educational programmes. The facilities made available to the couples in the form of birth con-

trol pills, contraceptives, etc. The system of ligation is also there, after the birth of one or two children, but not strictly followed. Other measure which should be strictly applied is to raise the marriageable age of both the girls and the boys. There are reportedly, laws about the marriageable age already but I doubt if these are at all implemented. My usual advice informally discussed with my friends and relations is that the appropriate age for marriage for girls should be minimum 20 years and that for boys 25 years. I am, however, not very aware about the biological and medical aspects of the proposal. This is left to the medical practitioners to advise the government on the matter. For the boys perhaps this is all right because the boys nowadays are not so willing to marry soon for the simple reason that there is hardly any job for many in the country. It may be that some 30 to 40 per cent of the total active population in the country are unemployed in one way or the other.

More Expenses, Less Gains

In Bangladesh, there is however no other sector than family planning where so little has been obtained against so much expenses. As a matter of fact, demographic studies over the years present interesting data. In the capitalist countries of the West, population control through family planning was hardly attempted ever. If we

start looking at this problem from mid-1750 which may be taken as the starting point of the modern Industrial Revolution that began in the United Kingdom, we find that during the 18th and the 19th centuries, economic development in the western countries went on at a rapid pace and along with this population also grew rapidly. As economic development accentuated with technological improvements, population also grew at a very high rate. But then the wealth of these nations which today we call GDP, grew at a much greater pace making rapid increases in per capita income. This process continued almost unabated up to the end of the nineteenth century by which time the people of those countries were enough educated and their sense of values changed.

At the turn of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the people of the western countries preferred to have better standards of life and other amenities instead of going in for ever-increasing families. If the choice was to be made, for instance, between a small car and a baby, the family would perhaps choose the former. Roughly speaking, if we look at the broad sweep of economic history and demographic experience, we would be led to the situation that, with rapid economic growth, population in those countries rapidly increased but it came

to the point when people preferred higher standards of life to bigger families. This process has, however, taken some 100 to 150 years to complete the full cycle. Hardly anything was done at the state level or officially to bring about a reduction in population in the developed countries of the west. It occurred automatically with enlightenment. In the socialist countries like the former USSR, China and others, however, the culture was different and the people were made socially conscious in this respect.

The present day developing countries cannot go through such a process in the matter of population control or family planning. But then, over the years, we got so little results by spending so much. Apart from the measures already mentioned more vigorous measures are needed with a view to reforming the society in Bangladesh. The measures include widespread publicity, and the spread of education. An additional measure may be to prohibit a man from having more than one wife unless there is a justification for another wife, as the Islamic code dictates. This matter may be taken up by the Ministry for Religious Affairs to assist in the process of family planning.

Rural-Urban Flow

There is the unchecked flow of people from the rural areas to the urban centres. And there is also the story that landless man comes to the town leaving his wife and children behind in the village.

usually works as a labourer or a rickshaw puller and settling down he goes in for a second wife. The helpless first wife somehow discovers this by herself moving to the city and being helpless accepts the ordeal of staying together. The man then stops working and his two wives begin to work to feed him and their children, who keep on growing in number. This is a common occurrence and the population policy must take this into consideration. There is surely a Women's Welfare Ministry which should have a country wide massive organization to propagate its views.

The mosques and madrasas could be used for the propagation of ideas about birth control. Two-pronged efforts directed both to the men and the women must be there, to be effective. The marriage registrars' offices must be reorganized to assist in the process of family planning.

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Lula Campaigns for Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Tony Samphier writes from Rio de Janeiro

The yellow and green bunting hung in every street to celebrate Brazil's World Cup victory is drooping, because no-one has the heart to take it down. But new political colours are appearing as the bearded leftist "ogre" takes on the clean-cut bank manager in the race for the presidency.



Luiz Inacio 'Lula' da Silva: Losing his head

tenders, though the pollsters say Cardoso has a sizeable lead over Lula.

"Fernando Number Two" chant the *petistas* — supporters of Lula's Workers Party (PT) — more out of despair than conviction. Cardoso stands head and shoulders above Collor de Mello, im-

peached in 1992, in the integrity stakes. But sitting in the back seat of his campaign are many of those who manufactured "Fernando Number One".

The stack of right-wing possibles had no hope of stealing the socially-conscious middle-classes away from Lula, so Brazil's ruling elite had their eye on Cardoso as the best anti-Lula candidate.

The conversion was completed in April when Cardoso, to the annoyance of many in his own Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), made his flirtation with neo-liberalism official by announcing an electoral marriage to the Party of the Liberal Front

Very real possibility of a *Lula* victory is causing increasing unease in some sections of the military," remarked the specialist *Brazil Report* in June, in a report that a prominent retired General had urged "conservative forces" to defeat Lula by uniting behind one "excellent" Cardoso.

Cardoso announced his candidacy as late as possible, giving sufficient time for supporters to beg him to stand. As Finance Minister, he sched-

uled the introduction of the Real to coincide with the celebrations for Brazil's World Cup soccer victory to obscure any teething problems. And thanks to some clever fixing of economic conditions before the big launch, the new currency reduced inflation to single figures from more than 40 per cent.

Then he sat back and watched his opinion poll ratings rise as the "Real factor" took effect.

In comparison with Cardoso's lox-like strategy, Lula has been bungling. The Brazilian Popular Front, a mixed bag of left-wing parties established to bolster Lula's bid for power, has become a cross of the PT finds increasingly difficult to bear.

One minor partner in the Popular Front openly stated that "we support Lula for president, but not this (Lula's manifesto) programme."

The PT is publicly parading its internal contradictions — conflict between leftists in charge of party management and elected politicians who represent the party's right-wing. Lula is caught in the crossfire. He dances to the tune of the party's Left, but his outlook is

now more in tune with those excluded from his command structure. As a result, his campaign appears to lack focus and direction, especially on economic policy.

In July, Roberto Freire, a leading light in the Popular Front and arch-enemy of Cardoso in Congress, was the first of Lula's friends to say: "We cannot have a candidate who defends inflation." This prompted the PT to reconsider its opposition to everything the Real stood for. It was too late: Lula had become a sitting target for his enemies who gleefully denounced him as the "inflation candidate."

"We are in a black hole," concluded a prominent PT member. Lula however, appears unfazed, pacing himself while those around him panic. "I don't see any such cause for concern," he says.

Lula's choice of vice-presidential running mate, respected economist Aloizio Mercadante, could prove his most effective weapon on the economic front. Mercadante made his mark by challenging Cardoso to a public debate on the economy, whereas Cardoso's understudy, Marco Antonio de Oliveira Maciel, lacks personality. Commented a Congressional colleague: "He is good will."

This is a matter worth considering seriously now. There is no denying the fact that in a poor country like Bangladesh, with the per capita income being one of the lowest in the world, making trips abroad lavishly on public exchequer, is nothing but a luxurious act. Every country, in the world, even the wealthier ones, have reservations about undertaking foreign trips and visits. Even our neighbouring country, India, which is much ahead of us, in the economic field, has recently imposed restrictions on government officials going abroad. This has been possibly done on economic grounds only to reduce unnecessary expenditure and burden on the public exchequer.

It is learnt that our government could take up an ambitious and expensive plan for training officials of a privileged cadre abroad. The plan has been conceived by the same people who are going to take the privilege of it. This could entail an annual expenditure which is, to say the least beyond our means.

The expenditure has to be made out of foreign credits with an increase foreseen in the burden of foreign debt on poor people of this country. Needless to say, proper training of officials is essential and of utmost importance, if we are to increase efficiency of the government. We have for this purpose, two well-equipped institutions in our country. Human resource development leads to poverty alleviation by income generating activities. The government machinery as a whole should have specific plans and programmes for achieving that goal. Also the people who run the government should have

Now the question is, in a country, where people are struggling day and night for food, clothing and shelter and where the elected prime minister is all for giving 'Dhal-Bhat' to hungry mouths of a teeming people, it is difficult to find any good reason why we have to train our officials abroad. To spend a huge sum in foreign exchange every year for training abroad which can be managed locally for a fraction of that cost, would be nothing but extravagance. Besides there are offers from different countries under a various programmes to undertake training abroad.

The present government being an elected one, is expected at every step to keep the interest of the public uppermost in its mind and work accordingly, leaving aside any programme which could cost the public exchequer much with little gain.

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C'wealth Games and our participants

Sir, Not to speak of gold or silver, unfortunately this time we could not fetch even a single bronze medal. All our team members to the Commonwealth Games are returning home empty handed.

We once again suggest that our Bangladesh Sports Federation should regularly organise and hold sports and games competitions at Thana and District levels first without further wastage of time, energy and public money, and then select and send capable competitors to participate in the regional and international games and sports.

O H Kabir
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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

An appeal to NBR

Sir, I refer to the National Board of Revenue (NBR) notification #08/MASHUK/94 of April 12, 1994 pertaining to 1) VAT- 15% or 2% BTT (Business Turnover Tax) deductions of indentors to be credited into the Bangladesh Bank relevant A/c on the same date of disbursement to the indentors; 2) the forex dealers/scheduled banks will be held liable to ascertain whether to deduct 15% VAT instead of only 2% BTT irrespective of whatever BTT certificate earlier issued by the Bangladesh Bank.

The serial #2 is the bone of contention between the banks and the indentors holding 2% BTT certificates i.e. the mini indentors, as the Bangladesh Bank authorities have reiterated the aforesaid NBR notification, thereby making it mandatory for the scheduled banks to implement the same in toto.

Further elaboration at this stage is essential so as to eliminate any misgivings whatsoever which may arise in the minds of the readers. Insofar as the serial #1 is concerned, it definitely sounds a great scheme for plugging one loophole. Unfortunately, this one loophole can trigger, opening the floodgates of corruptions, appalling miseries and financial catastrophe to the small indentors. Since a bank normally has to handle 50 or more such disbursements daily, it becomes literally inundated with works such as preparation of 50 or more transactions, 50 pay orders and to credit the proceeds on the same date of disbursement in the Bangladesh Bank. Theoretically this may be more than correct but in practice, quite a daunting task, as stated above.

Hence, to beat this paper chase, on the same date deadline, the serial #2 becomes a handy tool in the hands of the bankers. On the pretext of ascertaining 15% VAT instead of 2% BTT the bankers attend only to the 15% VAT cases, which are few and far between, sweeping under the rug the majority consisting of the 2% BTT indentors. End results is a sky-high pile up of back log (s) in disbursements and the available funds are used or abused as they like.

Insofar as the indentors are concerned they have to submit quarterly and a consolidated annual statements of PRC i.e. earnings actually received and also earned during the year. These statements the indentors have to submit, because the