

Please Prevent Speeding

On Tuesday there occurred five fatal road accidents on the same highway killing at least 18 and injuring close to a hundred. Was it because the victims died and were hurt in separate accidents that the report failed to send any shiver down the nation's spine and make top national news? The fact that all the five tragedies took place the same day and on the same road has apparently failed to impress news caterers of the nation. But why? There is one other aspect of the news that should set the authorities and all socially conscious people thinking seriously about preventing these accidents from becoming a regular pattern. The Dhaka-Chittagong highway is evidently becoming a death-trap, and very fast too. Can we afford it?

The bad thing — this increasing rate of road mishaps on this highway — is happening at a time when Dhaka-Chittagong road journey was certainly coming up to international standards of bus travel. The overall improvement of highway travel between the two metropolises of the nation was in no mean measure facilitated by an unprecedented improvement of the road understandably at some unprecedented cost. No doubt both of these happy developments were prompted by the growing importance of movement between the two cities. Increasing insecurity on this highway — from accidents and from waylaying by gangs — is poised to negate the achievement that was in the making on this road.

Speeding trucks were involved in three of the mishaps on Tuesday. And speeding buses in the remaining two. Speeding evidently was the culprit, more than the type of vehicles. Again, a rickshaw and an auto-rickshaw were rammed clearly meaning that their slower speed and lowly presence on the road invited the ramming. We have been crying hoarse about doing something effectively to curb speeding and overloading on the highways. At least on two highways — Dhaka-Chittagong and the other Dhaka-Aricha — there should be more checks — stationary and mobile — as also regular patrolling by traffic sergeants on motorbikes. Why is this obvious and pressing need being neglected?

Rickshaws could be made to keep off highways — if only there were enough local roads connecting the villages and towns. In the low-lying districts of the Dhaka, Barisal, Sylhet and Chittagong divisions highways have brought about a mini-revolution by connecting hundreds of towns and villages. For many of these the highway is but a bridge — the only bridge. Ridding the highway of slow-moving rickshaws or even slower-moving pushcarts and 'vans' etc. would amount to undoing that invaluable bridge. If this cannot be resorted to as a general rule for highways the authorities can of course look for stretches where alternate 'local' roads could be developed for use of the slow vehicles thus relieving the artery roads of their heavy loads of traffic.

When will the traffic controllers of the nation take up the very important question of manning the buses and trucks? We very strongly call for far more stringent requirements for a person wanting to drive a bus or a truck. How about requiring that they should at least be matriarchs? And why not have woman drivers specially for buses to begin with? They have proved more responsible all over the globe. We have a hunch that infection among the drivers and their cohort by the *mastani* streak found in the young ones in the towns do play a part in the reckless driving that forms an essential part of all vehicular accidents. This could hopefully go down with the coming of more and more woman drivers.

Our condolences to the bereaved families.

Requiem to the Living!

In a supremely unbelievable buffeting of fate at the Birmingham hospital in central England, Dorothy Cushing emerges as a lady — the first ever perhaps in medicare history anywhere — who had to cancel her own funeral after hearing the requiem alive!

A wrong diagnosis of lung cancer owing to an X-ray mix-up put her through three months of agonising chemotherapy and much more. For the 51-year-old grandmother it was not a struggle for life but a battle with death because that was the inexorable thing she had been consigned to as a pronounced patient of cancer.

Somewhere down the line after absorbing the critical shock, she braced for the inevitable, made her will, put the undertaker on alert, gave away her jewellery and clothes, and arranged with the crematorium to get her ashes scattered by her relations as the last wish.

The doctors admitted to mistaken identity, one should say, in a belated but a rare show of professional integrity which if it were mischievously withheld would have meant her normal tissues undergoing toxic effect of prolonged chemotherapy. So a compensation suit has got underway for the mental and physical damages caused by the wrong diagnosis. A country where minor infractions of a citizen's rights — like somebody's car barely back-driven into the outer limit of another man's compound by a genuine mistake — are taken to court, a major lapse such as the one committed at the Birmingham hospital will only naturally be moved against. And if one were to sift through the legal cases filed against hospitals, doctors and health insurance companies in the West one would be overwhelmed by the sheer number of these. Even so, this case involving Dorothy is bound to go down as a milestone in that it has already proved costly to the patient and might as well be the same to the goodwill of the hospital, let alone the money it may have to pay in compensation costs. To err is human but doctors are the least expected to do so while diagnosing. They have to make it fool-proof by thorough checking, counter-checking and a whole lot of other permutations and combinations done to arrive at a firm conclusion.

The sensational story provides some food for thought as far as the state of affairs in our own hospitals goes. Since occasionally we hear about contradictory pathological and other diagnostic results authenticated by different laboratories, clinics and hospitals our susceptibility to getting wrong X-ray results would be equally great. We have had instances of a gauze or a small surgical instrument being left inside the body after an operation has been completed. Let the level of hospital care improve in our country.

International Trade and Environmental Hazards

by Abdul Bayes

ECONOMISTS have long considered trade as an "engine" of growth — growth in terms of output, income and employment. The "free trade" is said to have furthered the growth process by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers that are alleged to deter the flow of goods and services across countries. The degree of success in this regard, although not of an enviable order, should leave wide space for complacency among free traders. For example, merchandise trade — including both primary commodities and manufactures — is reported to have grown eleven fold since 1950 and is now tallied at 3.5 million million, outpacing, probably, the expansion of global output as a whole. Trade in services is also on a rise and so is the case with direct investment in foreign countries. The recently concluded GATT is likely to add a fillip to the long awaited march towards free trade and enhanced global welfare.

The virtues of free trade are premised on the theory that global prosperity, *ceteris paribus*, would reach a maximum only when resources move unhindered across commodities and across countries. And in this process, it is likely to outweigh any temporary loss to any group or individual. But despite such assurances, growing concerns are gradually brewing as trade-led economic development is alleged to deplete the resource base upon which hinges future productivity and growth.

Some Facts that Need Attention

Available evidence tends to depict that a quarter of the total world's physical trade involves goods derived directly from the basket of primary products such as timber, fish and copper. For many of these commodities, export claims a bigger chunk and thus is exerting tremendous pressures on the health of the resource base.

For particular countries, the impact of trade is even greater both in terms of the economic value and environmental costs. Since many of the desperate developing countries' precious foreign exchange earnings depend on the exports of these commodities, more often than not — the golden eggs are being procured at the cost of the goose. The tropical timber trade — both legal and illegal — is reported to be having tyrannical impact on rain forests all over the world.

No less disturbing seems the current maze of trade reforms. The ongoing trade reform is most likely to affect agricultural food commodities such as grains, coffee, rubber and cattle accounting for about one-tenth of the value of world trade. However, while the net economic gains out of liberalization were duly accounted for by the economists, the same could hardly give a sympathetic look at the other wise far reaching impacts that the liberalized schemes might set in. Vying for more exports, the developing countries might destroy the capability of traditional agriculture to remain competitive — an especially grievous loss not only because uprooted farmers rarely have any viable alternatives, but also because native agriculture can be more ecologically attuned and biologically diverse than the monoculture crops that replace it through large scale trade. Of course, the new GATT rules might compensate

the producers of tea, coffee, pepper, natural rubber etc. by way of reduced tariffs and enhanced revenues but at the same time would encourage (in the absence of careful policy reforms) negative environmental activities. Expansion of agricultural land into the rain forests and the promotion of cash crops over subsistence farming would comprise a few of the adversaries.

Taming Profits and Manning Environment

It thus appears that although many of the ill-effects of expanded trade could be eradicated through deployment of appropriate policies, nevertheless the net effect of an expanded trade in the long run might appear as a bane and not as a boon solicited. Many people reckon that, on the one hand, environmentalists fear free trade for its capacity to destroy world environmental order while, on the other hand, the free traders fear environmentalists' powerful argument to deter expanded commerce and trade. With a view to making trade more environment friendly, economists tend to suggest the following strategies:

First, diversifying the production base would offer several means of combating environmental hazards in the developing world. For agriculture, it would mean doing away with monocropping system and for industries it would mean producing varied products. Economists prescribe that developing countries should shift away, as did

Taiwan and South Korea, from heavy reliance on natural resource extraction to light manufacturing as textiles. Second, persuasion of alternative types of trade is believed to facilitate both income generation and environment preservation. Example of this type would be the exports of non-timber forest products such as spices, rubber etc. Experience shows that they are more sustainable than timber. Third, selective tariff escalation might help minimizing the rents. Fourth, differential domestic tax and subsidy policies should be used to divert resources to environment friendly projects. Trade should be free but those related to environment should be severely dealt with tariff axe in order to discourage their grandiose exports.

The Last Word

The faster growth of world trade should be celebrated with caution. Any growth of trade at the cost of environment might place short run gains ahead of long run losses. Appropriate policies need to be orchestrated to buy (and save) both trade and environment. Policies towards an export-led growth might sound better but could turn out to be bitter when environmental considerations are bypassed. The imperatives, therefore, lies not on discouraging exports but on discouraging exports of those that deplete the much more valuable natural resource base.

War Crimes Judge Out for More Justice

Allan Thompson writes from Ottawa

As a UN war crimes tribunal prepares to hand down its first indictments for atrocities in Bosnia and Croatia, Gemini News Service reports that the South African judge heading the tribunal also wants to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity in Rwanda.



Justice Goldstone:

"Only the victims can forgive"

in one way in Yugoslavia and ignored or dealt with in a dif-

ferent way in Rwanda or elsewhere," he says.

Goldstone, who was appointed prosecutor of the ex-Yugoslavia trials in July, was formerly a South African Supreme Court judge and head of a groundbreaking commission investigating political violence in his country.

In November, he says, the tribunal will hand down indictments against those it considers most responsible for campaigns of "ethnic cleansing" and other atrocities in former Yugoslavia. Trials will begin next year.

Goldstone pledges that there will be no trials in absentia and no death sentences. He acknowledges the impossibility of prosecuting everyone guilty of crimes against humanity. Instead, prosecutors will choose cases they find most symbolic of the types of atroci-

ties that have been committed, in order to send a clear message that such actions are not acceptable.

"People who suffered want some official acknowledgement," he observes.

Goldstone also acknowledges that the tribunal has a weakness — its inability to force states to surrender accused war criminals for trial. The most it can do is issue an order declaring someone to be an international fugitive from justice.

"We are proceeding, as I believe we must, on the assumption that all countries will comply with their international obligations," he says.

The tribunal was established in The Hague last year in line with a Security Council resolution and is the first international body of its kind

military junta an amnesty in return for the return to power of President Jean Bertrand Aristide, but says that in general he opposes such measures.

"People who have committed serious crimes against humanity should not be forgiven by anybody but the victims," Goldstone stresses.

"I don't know what crimes the people in Haiti have or have not committed, but I believe that whether in Haiti or South Africa or any other country, people who have committed serious breaches of humanitarian law, people who have committed crimes against humanity, should not be forgiven without a public trial and in the case of the gravest breaches, appropriate punishment."

He admits the importance of avoiding lengthy, Nuremberg-type trials if reconciliation, forgiveness and lasting peace are to be fostered, but emphasizes: "It's an area where justice must determine the result, not political decisions."

ALLAN THOMPSON is a reporter in the Ottawa bureau of "The Toronto Star" newspaper.

AYS A young shopkeeper: "This is our national trait. People call it smuggling, but we call it our business inherited from our ancestors."

But underneath the veneer of pride is a wellspring of frustration and discontent.

ANOTHER arms dealer, Javed, asks: "We do not want to be selling arms, but do we have an option? What else can we do in this mountainous area? There is no other work for us. We do not have a single factory."

HAYA GUL agrees: "It is the government's indifference and apathy that has pushed us behind so many Pakistani towns in the development race."

IN A small gun factory, worker Mohabat Khan peers through a rifle barrel he is crafting and says he does not want his children to grow up to be gunsmiths. A dozen heads nod in agreement.

"We want to give our children education," says Khan. "We want them to become doctors and engineers."

Pakistan : Guns Galore on the Frontier

A town in Pakistan's wild west boasts of having one of the largest inventory of guns for sale in South Asia. Qudssia Akhlaque of Inter Press Service took a trip to sample the wares.

ever, is the Australian-made Augstar that fetches up to US\$6,600.

One dealer says he can even make rocket launchers on special orders from private parties. But he refuses to divulge the names of the buyers who are willing to shell out as much as US\$1,000 per launcher.

Nearly all the dealers are Hindus or have undertaken the sacred Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Comments one bystander: "After making the first Rs 100,000 (\$3,000) each businessman goes on haj to repeat."

Dealers say their major clientele is made up of Pakhtoon tribesmen from the

Khyber, Waziristan, Kohistan, and Malakat areas in the country's west. Most men in Dara Adamkhel carry weapons. Yet, the town in a relatively peaceful place. There seems to be a balance of terror that keeps crime rates down. Says weapons dealer Jamal Hussain: "Arms do not disturb peace, they maintain it."

Town residents are subject to harsh tribal laws that show no mercy to criminal elements. Tribal courts and a rough and ready form of justice have kept crime rates low in this volatile area.

Women are completely absent from the streets. Haya Gul, owner of one of the sophisticated arms shops in the

market square, says: "They stay home and look after the house and children. They go out only to fetch water and firewood."

Haji Malik Mohammad Aslam Khan, of the Afridi tribe, is revered my most of the town residents as their father figure.

Last year, he won a seat in Pakistan's national assembly on the strength of his support in the area.

Stickers from his campaign bearing his election symbol of a gun are still proudly displayed by arms dealers here. But he does not seem to have brought much of a difference to the lives of local folks.

There are very few schools scattered over the area and only one college. The college is quite useless because the lecturers seldom show up," says Jamal Hussain.

Children are inducted into the arms trade early. At the age of 10, most of them know the names of the different kinds of arms available in the

We Empathise

Sir, Your editorial titled "We Empathise" on September 30, 1994 provides the serious readers with food for thought.

Like the Titanic, the ferry Estonia was capsized on the stormy night in the Baltic Sea due to metal fatigue during the sea journey. It may happen with any river/sea vessel despite the technological achievements and scientific support that lend certain amount of security to travelling in the waterways. The owners of the vessels/ships should make a note of it and seek the assistance of the people who are associated with the shipbuilding activities in any part of the world. The reason of metal fatigue is not known to many of us in present times.

In fine, we have no adequate words to express our heartfelt condolences to the members of the bereaved families of the victims of the Baltic tragedy. We pray for the eternal peace of the departed souls.

Prof. Abul Ashraf Noor
Pabna

M C Academy

Sir, Our attention has been drawn by a letter of Mr Saleh

Ahmed Chowdhury in your paper of Sept 26, 1994, to the state of the development of M C Academy, Golapganj, Sylhet. This institution is situated in a good place and should come up with good results in examinations. But attention of the educationists to the matter seems to be very poor. It should be nationalised as a government school and college upto the degree level immediately. This institution is congenial for education and it can accommodate a good number of students from the neighbouring areas. Moreover, the poor students are unable to attend school and colleges which are situated in district towns far away from their home, mainly because of financial reasons.

In greater Sylhet, Golapganj Thana is known for the educational feats of its sons and is considered an elite area. So, we draw the kind attention of senior government officials to this matter, like ex-secretaries, who hailed from this area. We hope that attention and personal visits of high officials will expedite the upgradation and improvement of M C Academy.

M Ali
Ghoramara, Rajshahi

To the Editor...

"My Patches of Disquiet"

Sir, In "My Patches of Disquiet" column of August 27 the columnist Mr Waheed Haque complained of a university professor who objected to certain entries in the new Bangla Academy dictionary while taking part in a TV discussion. Disagreeing with the professor, Mr Haque wrote: "In a society aspiring to be just and fair and egalitarian the right of the individual even to his pet fetishes and prejudices is to be accepted, even upheld. But not at the expense of other people's beliefs or the society's sustaining mores and values."

This passage seems so self-contradictory, so deconstructive of itself, that I could not help writing to comment upon it. Mr Haque appears to be saying that in a just and egalitarian society an individual's "pet fetishes" and prejudices should be upheld only if they conform to the mores of that society. I could not understand what the value of such a proceeding is in the kind of society that he describes. In a free and just society the individual's right to dissent is what has traditionally been held to be of some value — indeed the value

quoted is the columnist's considered view of the operation of freedom of opinion in a democratic society then he differs only in one particular from the rabble-rousing religious extremists in the just concluded Tasleem Nasreen affair. The extremists too, airily conceded the right of Ms Nasreen's freedom of thought and expression, but added the proviso: "Not at the expense of other people's beliefs or the society's sustaining mores and values." They thus appropriated to themselves the right of interpreting and determining "other people's beliefs" (as if they had complete omniscience of what beliefs lay in the hearts of the people of the society), and called for the highest punishment for Ms Nasreen.

I am intensely saddened by Mr Haque's statement for from his other articles I had always taken him to be the spokesperson for liberal and rational ideas. I would have much preferred him, when speaking of the freedom of opinion on any subject, trivial or serious, to say something like the following: "Dear Professor, I disagree absolutely and utterly with what you say. I think you are talking drivel and poppycock; but I will defend to best of my power your right to say it in public or private while giving myself the same right to oppose you in speech and writing, in public and private." Need I mention that this is exactly what I have written then he must necessarily approve of the suppression of dissent in such countries, for example, as the erstwhile Soviet Union and pre-

sent day China, neither of which allowed disagreement with what its authorities declared to be "the sustaining mores and values" of its society. Moreover, if he thinks that society is so monolithic as to recognize immediately that it has been offended by an expressed opinion then he must be thinking of a society like North Korea's.

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