

Crisis in the North

North Bengal is not a world apart from the rest of the country but it surely has its special attributes as well as problems. Indeed, every region of the country is different with its bounties and lackings and all of them together make a whole. The northern region is currently experiencing a sort of famine not officially acknowledged. But reports regularly carried in different dailies give an unmistakable picture of famine stalking at least parts of the greater Rangpur district. President of Gano Forum, Dr Kamal Hossain, after his visit to the region, has demanded that the region be declared a distress area.

Known as a deficit area for long, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Sirajganj, Thakurgaon, Panchagar, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram etc have faced a prolonged drought this year at a time when the cultivation of aman paddy was supposed to go on in full swing. It needs little elaboration to get an idea of what happens when the main crop of an entire area gets lost due to natural vagaries. When the crop failure was reported, we ran an editorial asking for meeting the emergency situation. However our plea seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

Now the situation is worsening with every passing day. People are dying of starvation and the authority refuses to accept the fact. Instead, it is very adamant to pass the incidents of death as the death from diarrhoea. With virtually no preparation for meeting the emergency situation in the area, the government's refusal to accept the fact can be politically convenient but for the famine-stricken people it surely is a cruel dispensation. Our suggestion was that free-food — which has to be cooked — centres for the starving people should be started because the distribution of foodgrains leaves enough leeway for mishandling of the programme and even misappropriation of the cereals.

Reports reaching here are categorical that the government feeding programme has proved to be too little too late. Whether the area is declared as a distress area or not, is entirely an administrative choice. Any such declaration makes some sort of a difference in that national attention is drawn to the issue and a collective attempt is made to share the burden of the wherewithal. If the government feels its administrative capacity to meet the situation is good enough, no question of finding fault with the decision. But if it does neither take the responsibility of making the nation known of the real situation nor engage its organs for efficiently dealing with the emergency, then of course it is faltering on the most important job of managing an affair involving the lives of people.

The structure of North Bengal society is such that a persistent food deficiency has chain reaction on the vulnerable groups, peasants in particular. Even if emergency food delivery is ensured, the real farmers have to borrow money from *jotdars* (a class of land owners) at an irrationally high rate of interest for cultivation of their land on lease. With the farmers providing the inputs and repaying the loans at the time of harvest, they are left with little crop as their share. Reportedly the agricultural rehabilitation programme in the North of the country has already run into a snag. The scheme drafted for covering as many as 33,000 small farmers has been sliced to benefit only 1,700 of them.

So the cumulative effects of a flawed relief programme and a reduced agricultural rehabilitation scheme will be felt for a longer time than expected. The government seems to be little aware of the negative impacts of such a situation on the economy as a whole. The people of the area have been forced to sell their last bits of possession to keep their body and soul together. Their purchasing power has fallen to the lowest possible level. The situation therefore demands a crash programme both for feeding the starving people and for their agricultural rehabilitation.

Rains in Double Mind and a Hesitant Autumn

It is the whole of a week that the weather people have pronounced the end of monsoon. One thing essential clóre that weather has made into her regular job is to prove the weathermen wrong. And the wet and low *kajal*-black clouds have continued their domination of the sky in the freakish unpredictable manner they have been doing for the whole of the rainy season. If monsoon is not here anymore, where are the showers and drizzly spells coming from? The poet did prepare us for such wayward conduct of the elements — *Kone Khepa Shrabon chhutey elo Ashwiner anganyar* — but even he in his universality of empathic comprehension could not envision the rain carrying on its wanton mischief to the beginning of Kartik. Shall we in our quest for an explanation of this, blunder into that bundle of a cliché — the vagaries of nature — which explains nothing but stops the quest? No need to do that for intermittently between spells of an overcast sky and its attending pourings, the sky has indeed started to smile as benignly and sweetly as only a Bengal autumn sun can.

The rains this year were far from generous and failing to exhaust their watery load they are still in two minds about leaving. This is vitiating the royal arrival of *Sharat* but in the nip in the air that is already being felt in the morning and the nightly foreboding of a chill, the bell of departure for the rains is clearly being heard. And indeed why the hurry? Well into *bisharjan* or the tenth of the Ashwin new moon there ever remains a good chance of a swamping good rain. We are not yet past that.

If the white sailing clouds and a surfeit of shiuli and the shiny dazzle of the dewdrop are not winsomely here, the eating delights are already in. However, a sad note is sounding a discord here. This is the delicate time between a departing summer crop and an arriving winter one. If the two fail to keep their appointments, the humans — and possibly all living forms — are in for some unpleasant time. Price of perishables are rocketing and in the northern region there are pronounced symptoms of a famine condition. But the purgatory will be passed. A bright *Sharat-Hemanta* duo is a heavenly way to bide this transition. There is still the whole of Kartik to make good for the failed *Sharat*. And after that the plenitude of Poush. Let the days remaining before that now start translating the poet's picture of the autumn: *nabo-kunda-dhabola-dala sushital, ati-shunirmal shukhoshomujjala*.

THE Uruguay Round of GATT talks ultimately ended at Marrakesh, Morocco in mid-April this year when over 120 nations signed the GATT agreements after seven years of gruelling debate and negotiations. During the Round's negotiations and after signing the accord, a fair amount of dissent was expressed in different capitals of the world. Violent protests also broke out in India and France where farmers blocked all major roads for few days. Irrespective of the countries they belong to, the intelligentsia also became divided over the benefits and merits of the GATT accord. While the supporters of free trade argue that the accord will enhance the world trade by billions of dollars in the coming years, the opponents see a growing global income inequality between the rich and the poor. The GATT agreements, according to them, will unleash an era of transnational corporate hegemony, a new facade of imperialism.

When this is the outside scenario, the Uruguay Round has remained mostly an unnoticed affair in Bangladesh. Neither the parliament nor the press has shown 'due responsibility' to take the country into confidence about the likely fallouts of the GATT agreements. Our self-congratulatory intelligentsia have also failed to live up to the occasion.

Parliament's Role

In a country with the "Parliamentary form of Government",

In this era of Middle East peacemaking, Israel's leaders speak of "peace between peoples".

They have dropped the propaganda line that Arab enmity to the Jewish state is eternal and, instead, argue that Arabs and Jews can live side by side and prosper.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin inaugurated the new public relations policy in July while in Washington for the signing of a non-belligerency pact with Jordan's King Hussein. Rabin reiterated this line in August at the opening of the first border crossing between Israel and Jordan, saying that "the two peoples ... wanted this to happen".

This line is being elaborated by his Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. During a recent visit to Cyprus he said the region is entering "an entirely new era" in which territory and boundaries are no longer the key factors governing relations between countries. A country can no longer rely on its armed forces for strength in this age of long-range missiles. Instead, strength is based on its intellectual and scientific achievements which have a global range.

And, he asserted: "markets are more important than countries," calling for an Israeli-Arab common market. Co-operation can begin, he said, in developing regional tourism and water resources.

Elegant and eloquent, economic and eminently reasonable, this line of talk is being peddled by Israeli spokesmen and diplomats the world over.

What Israel preaches is, however, belied by what it practices.

The Labour Party won office in 1992 on the platform that it would negotiate a comprehensive peace based on the "land for peace" formula. Soon after taking office Labour declared the "freeze" on settlement activity demanded by the United States as the price of providing

The Uruguay Round of GATT Talks Remained Almost Unnoticed in Bangladesh

by Munim Kumar Barai

the parliament is the highest elected body and the majority party is mandated to govern the country for a certain period. In the parliament, from day to day affairs to long term matters are debated or discussed, laws are passed and enacted. Active participation of the members of the party in power and those who are in the opposition is needed for healthy democracy. As a representative body of the people of the country, a parliament must reflect the interest and welfare of the majority people and not of any particular class or group. An issue, even if it occurs outside the boundary of a sovereign state, that has transnational implications can also prominently figure in the parliamentary discussions. The developments relating to GATT's 8th Round and the subsequent acceptance of the agreements are matters of that nature. That is why GATT was a lively issue for a long time in the parliaments of most of the democracies in the world.

Being a signatory to the accord, Bangladesh Government had much to do to inform the people about what she expected to gain from the agreements. The Parliament could have been the best place to do so. But every informed person knows what our honourable MPs have

done so far with this issue. The Round never became a serious issue in the Parliament either. As Bangladesh has already signed the agreements at Marrakesh, so the ratification of the agreements by the Parliament is now a mere formality. Anyway, a democracy with a Parliament should have shown a greater sensitivity to the GATT issue.

Intelligentsia and Press

When any government or its parliament fails to perform its responsibility to the people on some vital issues in a desired manner, it becomes a solemn duty of the intelligentsia of a country to take up the matter on their own shoulders. Nobody vest this duty on them, but they only act as an abeyance to their internal urge. In Bangladesh where the electronic media becomes a ruling party property, the press should play a benevolent role to encourage the intelligentsia to come out with their opinions and ideas on such issues. The GATT agreement is such an issue which will over a period of time affect the manufacturers, traders, farmers, labourers by one way or other. Though it is true that being a poor developing country, Bangladesh has very insignificant or no leverage to in-

fluence the courses of action of GATT, even then making the countrymen aware of the implications of the GATT agreements was necessary. The intelligentsia perhaps could have done a better job had they come out appropriately.

Implications

It would be a bit amateurish to attempt to talk about the implications of GATT agreements for Bangladesh in a very short space. Again, there are many who may argue that as Bangladesh has been bracketed as a least developed country in the agreement, she would be least affected by the provisions of the agreements. But this is not a right impression because, Bangladesh cannot remain immune to the changes that will sweep the world trade scenario due to the GATT agreements. The agreements on goods, services and intellectual property right (IPR) protection are the three pillars of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the replacement of GATT. The related issues like tariffs, non-tariff barriers (NTBs), subsidies and dispute settlement mechanisms have also been widely dealt with in the agreements.

Now let us take the case of agriculture. As per the provisions of the agreement, devel-

oped and developing countries have to cut agriculture subsidies by 21 per cent and 13 per cent respectively, while subsidies exports are to be cut by 36 per cent. As a result of these cuts, world agriculture price is likely to increase by 10 per cent or more; availability may also be curtailed. Though Bangladesh has achieved near self-sufficiency in food production, it is still a deficient country. If she can turn herself into a food-surplus country, then exporting food under GATT provisions would fetch her extra forex. But if the increase of population outpaces the growth of agriculture at some stage, then she will have to import food with more price. Again, being a natural calamity prone country, it can face bad harvest year (s) due to excessive rain, flood or even drought.

It is now estimated that within coming two to three decades, 60 to 70 per cent of the global economy would rest on biotechnology. Its application would be pervasive in pharmaceuticals, chemicals and other industrial and agricultural areas. By enlarging the domain of Patent and IPRs under the GATT agreement, the developed world has ensured their permanent domination over the developing nations in

the areas of high technology. Bangladesh has no way to escape this. Live saving drugs, health care, agricultural seeds may be costlier in the future. Moreover, out of eight industrial goods, viz. pharmaceuticals, construction equipment, medical equipment, steel, beer, furniture, farm equipment, woodpulp and toys on which the developed countries have agreed to reduce import tariff by 38 per cent, Bangladesh can benefit from pharmaceutical exports alone. New arrangement in apparel and garments could only fetch her extra revenue.

Conclusion

Projecting future is always a tricky exercise. So talking about the future implications of the GATT agreements for Bangladesh is not an easy task either. But one could have reasonably expected that the government, the press and intelligentsia of Bangladesh played a far responsible role to highlight the pros and cons of the GATT agreements and what they mean for Bangladesh. Remaining unaware, they will not be able to explore and reap from new opportunities even if they are there in the GATT accord. It is unfortunate that many unimportant issues get so prominence frequently in Bangladesh. Much time and energy of the nation is lost for them while many vital and strategic issues like GATT agreements and others remain rather neglected, unnoticed and untouched sometimes, maybe, intentionally.

Israel Not Practising What it Preaches

Michael Jansen writes from Nicosia

In recent months, Israeli officials have changed their tune regarding relations with Palestinians. However, despite talk of Jews and Arabs living side by side and prospering, the words are so far proving hollow.



guarantees for loans of \$10 billion for immigrant absorption.

At the same time Labour inaugurated a new settlement policy, called the "Sheves" plan. The plan provides for the integrated economic development of Israel and the occupied West Bank and Gaza and

for linking Jewish settlements in the territories to Israel "proper" through an elaborate network of roads.

The private sector is encouraged to invest in this development plan, making it impossible for the government to impose a "freeze" in future.

Instead of cutting off financial incentives to encourage Jews to settle in the territories, Labour continued to fund individual settlers, offering grants to the value of \$18,000 an half of the 150 illegal colonies planted there.

To encourage Jews to settle in the territories, the government also allocated to certain settlements a large proportion of a \$280 million job creation fund. And the government accelerated settlers' registration of private houses and flats.

The Sheves plan is designed to transform the situation in the territories during the present two year period of Palestinian self-rule so that once negotiations begin on the permanent status of the West Bank and Gaza the Palestinians will be unable to demand an Israeli withdrawal and the return of the territories to Palestinian sovereignty.

Israel's aim is to block Palestinian self-determination and prevent the emergence of a Palestinian entity by making it impossible to separate Palestinian population centres from Jewish settlements.

Israel has already taken over about 30 per cent of the territory of the West Bank where 120,000 Jews live among a million Palestinians and 40 per cent of the Gaza Strip to accommodate 4,000 Jews settled among 850,000 Palestinians.

Israel has accelerated its building programme in and around Palestinian East Jerusalem. This year the number of Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem reached 160,000, giving them a slender majority over the native Palestinians

who seek to make their sector of the city the capital of the emerging Palestinian entity.

The Government has also initiated legislation in the Knesset to ban all Palestinian political activity in East Jerusalem. If passed it would force Palestinian nation-building institutions in the city, like the PLO's headquarters at Orient House, to close down or relocate.

Israel has already warned various international organisations providing technical and economic assistance to the Palestinians that offices in Jerusalem should be shifted to autonomous enclaves in Gaza or Jericho.

Through its military orders banning Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza from entering East Jerusalem, Israel has cut them off from their historic and religious capital.

Palestinians from the territories are deprived of medical care in the city's hospitals, schools for their children and jobs in firms and offices in East Jerusalem. West Bank and Gaza produce cannot be sold in Jerusalem or, even, be transported through East Jerusalem en route to Palestinian markets in the territories.

Israel's policies violate the terms of the Oslo accord, the key document governing relations between Israel and the PLO. Article IV states: "The two sides view the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit, whose integrity will be preserved during the interim period."

Israel's policies make it clear that it has no intention of

preserving that unity and integrity. Under the Oslo accord the permanent status of Palestinian East Jerusalem, boundaries and sovereignty over the territories is to be decided in negotiations "as soon as possible, but not later than the beginning of the third year" of Palestinian self-rule.

Israel insists that these negotiations cannot begin until May 1996, the latest possible date given in the Oslo timetable, while the PLO demands negotiations "as soon as possible," particularly on the issue of Jerusalem.

By postponing, in order to create facts on the ground, Israel is trying to pre-empt the final status negotiations which are, according to the Oslo accord, meant to produce a "permanent settlement based on Security Council resolutions 242 and 338" demanding Israeli withdrawal from the territories captured in 1967.

Israel violates the spirit of the Oslo accord as well as its terms. The government committed a particularly flagrant violation when on September 1 the Israeli army closed off, for 10 months, 3,000 acres of prime West Bank farm land, containing 17 subterranean wells. The produce of this area amounts to 60 per cent of the total reaching the West Bank in winter.

Palestinians claim that Israel took this action in order to enable Jordan to sell \$30 million worth of produce in the West Bank to make up for the shortfall. If this is true, the Palestinians, last year's partners in peace, without whom there would be no peace process, are being made to suffer in order to please Jordan, this year's partner.

Such peacemaking cannot produce a just and enduring settlement. —GEMINI NEWS

MICHAEL JANSEN was born in the US, lives in Cyprus, and has covered the Middle East for many years.

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.

Steno-typist at Civil Surgeon's office

Sir, Unlike other four high officers at the district level who have both stenographers and steno-typists, the Civil Surgeon has only one steno-typist and no stenographer under his disposal. Actually the steno-typist has to serve both as a stenographer and steno-typist. As a result, he has to always remain so busy and restless that he virtually does not find any peace of mind. But he does not get any extra benefit for working so much and so hard.

So, the authority concerned are earnestly requested to make the existing steno-typist a fullfledged stenographer and create more posts of steno-typists in Civil Surgeon's office.

Kamrul Islam
Sirajganj

Imagine, it's a large size fire fly!

Sir, This world has advanced enormously on the road to creativity and invention. Scientists and researchers have done so much to win over the odds of nature and changing features of animals, fishes, birds and plants in favour of

human needs. They have succeeded in making larger bodies of species through cross breeding. They have moved us from darkness to light. How is it if they can get us a large size of fire fly with the blessings of science?

Imagine, if it is at all possible to make a fire fly very large in size through cross breeding or any other scientific way, then villagers would get free natural illumination around them! And our poets and litterateurs often quoting fire fly in their pieces would find newer interest too in the dimension. And the scientists also must see whether the fire flies can be brought to various uses of illumination by man.

All this sounds absurd, isn't it? But isn't it novel, too?

Md Apu Kabir
86/1 Hossaini Dalan Road,
Dhaka

Expensive treatment for poor patients

Sir, It is very often seen in newspapers that financial assistance is solicited on behalf of poor patients, from the government or well-to-do persons of the society for expensive treatment of complicated diseases at home or abroad. But such an approach does not

seem to be very helpful since there is no certainty that the desired money will be forthcoming in time or the amount collected for the treatment will be adequate. So, I feel that there should be some planned programme in this regard. Therefore, the following proposals are placed before the government for consideration:

(i) A Fund should be created;

(ii) The source of the fund may be imposition of nominal surcharge on electric, telephone, gas, WASA, municipal bills etc, say, Taka one only per bill;

(iii) A cell may be opened under the Ministry of Health, comprising qualified doctors with ancillary staff to administer this matter. Their main function will be to identify those patients who really deserve such an expensive treatment in the country or in a foreign country, and make necessary arrangement for their treatment; and

(iv) Only the poor and needy persons may come under purview of this programme.

Md Shahed Iqbal
48, Laksmi Bazar, Dhaka

Compromise between positions!

Sir, Confrontations between the dogmas over population growth control eventually came to a mutual position in the Land of Mummies recently, not too late hopefully. The new regulation — a product of compromise between the extremes of conser-

vatism and radicalism — is as potent as the hero like Enola Gay, which can be treated as a world saver at work.

However done, the accepted terms for growth retardation entrusting individual states with jurisdictional liability over the issue may be the last hope for the 5.7 billion humans and more coming along fast.

So far so good. Now what must stimulate one and all to get into action with the new vision conceived at the grand meet of the super species will essentially be the missionary zeal, unlike mercenary attitude, to salvage the unfortunate, born and unborn alike, that ban instill the spirit of caring for the wellbeing of the surviving humanity in a short period.

Equipped with new policy, coupled with possible rewards, the family planning — rather birth planning, for that matter — has to be practised by all from now on with strictest application of the regulation formulated at the UN Population Conference' 1994, regardless of who and where.

M Rahman
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

Twin murder mystery

Sir, We are terribly shocked and spell-bound by the gruesome murder of Mehjabin Soma (22) and her mother Prof Nilufar Chowdhury (50) and the sensational sensational statement made by the maid servant Romena Begum (30).

We however fail to get any

satisfactory reply to the following questions: i) Why did not Romena flee away from the house after killing Soma? ii) How could Romena dare to stay in the house, plan for Prof Nilufar's murder also, and wait for her return from college for long four hours, without any fear of being caught red-handed with Soma's corpse?

iii) How was Romena sure about fleeing from the house after killing Prof Nilufar? iv) Why did not Romena attack or kill Prof Nilufar as soon as she entered the house — about four hours after the murder of her daughter? v) Prof Nilufar reportedly scolded Romena while taking lunch at the dining table for the bad taste of the fish fry; this infuriated Romena and she rushed to the kitchen, brought a 'boti', started striking Prof Nilufar and killed her. If Prof Nilufar had not scolded Romena what would have been the future course of action of murderous Romena?

We would request our police investigating officers, psychiatrists, psychologists and criminologists to kindly tell us the mystery of this twin murder.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Dilkusha road

Sir, This is about the stretch of thoroughfare in Motiheel C/A from the American Express Bank towards RAJUK and also the two major connecting roads — the first turn to Sadharan Bima

Bhaban and the 2nd turn to Sadharan Bima Sadan.

This is the most important road along the northern side of Bangabhaban and at present it has become too tough even to walk by through the long queue of the parked staff buses. The length and breadth of a major portion of the road has virtually become a permanent bus stand. The road is only 30 feet wide and these buses keep almost half of the width occupied. This illegal practice is going on for the last few years.

Important offices like bank, insurance, foreign firms, govt departments, showrooms, airlines, travel agencies etc are situated on this Dilkusha road. And people have to visit them, naturally in the face of hazards.

Unfortunately for the visiting people for the last few years the Dhaka-Nganj local service private buses are also plying through this road recklessly belching out black smoke, and blowing hydraulic horn continuously.

The offices of this very important commercial area as well as their clients, both are suffering at their worst. Will the concerned authorities tell us whether it is a part of posh commercial area or an ordinary bus depot/stand.

I as a sufferer and on behalf of the others so in Dilkusha Commercial Area earnestly urge and hope that the concerned authorities take urgent step and proper action to give us some relief from these hazards.

Faruk
Dilkusha C/A, Dhaka