

Better Deal for Women

That women in Bangladesh are discriminated against is known. What is however little known is that even the laws — both civil and labour — of the land are more protective than they are impartial to the women. So protective are the legal provisions that women are mostly denied the right to equal opportunities and treatment. The condition once again confirms the vulnerability of women and this is how the modern drive for their empowerment is compromised. This is how the International Labour Organisation (ILO) views the present status of women in Bangladesh.

Entitled 'Female Employment: The Window of Opportunity for Poverty Alleviation in Bangladesh,' a report prepared by the ILO East Asia Multidisciplinary Advisory Team, has in fact pointed to subtle but intrinsic discriminatory provisions and flaws without coming hard upon our legal system. What it has indirectly said is that in the changed reality of our society, such legal provisions call for reform — and the sooner the better — to keep abreast with the challenges of the time.

In the report, well-documented facts in the shape of statistics, have been presented in support of the claims. Yet to our mind, the cold figures cannot give the full picture of the deplorable status of women. For example, women's share in the country's labour force has gone up from just four per cent in 1974 to 10.6 per cent in 1989. The figure might have shown further improvement over the past five years, but it is still one of the lowest in the world. More importantly, female labourers are hardly recognised as such — just five per cent of them have earned the recognition as employees as against 83 per cent of them known as unpaid family helpers. Still worrying is the fact that women earn much less than their counterparts for the same work.

The report has expressed fear that the growth strategies, instead of benefiting the poor women in particular, may have been the cause of further sufferings for them. This is at least in the short to medium term. The problem then boils down to some specific points where actions should be taken immediately. The ILO suggests gender-sensitive approach to women's employment. Accepting this, we add that women's education should be brought to the fore. When they are educated enough to take on challenges, the empowerment process will get a shot in the arm. And empowerment is a key to breaking the unjustly imposed socio-economic barriers.

Bosnia's Assertion

For the first time in nearly three years the predominantly Muslim government in Bosnia has military initiative in its hands. Not quite in an unalloyed sense: the Croat militia has had a part in the capture of the Serb-held Kupres township. Karadzic's troops have been driven about 10km to the northwest, in a self-evident retreat.

Nothing could be a happier turn of events than to see that an aggrieved party has tasted a military victory, no matter how modest it is. The sympathisers of the Bosnian government worldwide would be happy over the morale-boosting potential for the hitherto subdued forces in Bosnia.

Yet, can the Muslims and Croats, making a common cause to fight the Bosnian Serbs since their federation's acceptance of the international peace plan, throw up their fists in jubilation and say, Hurrah?

They cannot—not as yet, for sure. There are two reasons for sounding this note of pessimism. First, the victory is largely attributed, by western observers, to the haltage of oil and arms supplies to the Bosnian Serbs by their one-time mentor Milosevic in Belgrade. The latter withheld the flows to apparently compel Karadzic to accept the international peace formula given by the contact group of five, several months ago. Since this is a difference of opinion in the same ethnic group, the military success of the Bosnians may have dubious implications for the government in Belgrade to reconsider the sanctions on the Serbs in the embattled zone. Karadzic may declare his territory to be in a full state of war. The path of negotiations is being abandoned completely. This is testing time for Milosevic to remain steadfast with his professed policy of pressuring Karadzic to accept the peace formula.

Then, by western reckoning, capture of the Serb position by the Bosnian government forces, was made possible by their receiving arms despite the embargo. So, some powerful countries might not feel induced to go the whole hog for waiving the arms embargo on the Bosnian government. Already the US proposal for it received a setback as 10 out of 15 members of the Security Council refused to support lifting of the arms sanction against Bosnia in the UN General Assembly vote. So, Bosnia may be left to fend for itself.

No Mercy

Frequency of acid-throwing has not been as pronounced lately as it once was some years ago. The lull came after capital punishment had been prescribed against the social malady. In some cases it was applied too.

In recent months we have been outraged by incidents of girl abduction. Almost invariably these were plotted suggesting that a vengeful wrath had been in the brew much the same way that acid-throwers planned their operations before inflicting the corrosive substance upon those who spurned their advances. So, one thing has led to the other.

A Daily Star report gave details of a mind-boggling incident of serial acid-burning that afflicted two girls and a boy, in a row, at a village in Gazipur. Shirin, 16, the principal victim, was in critical condition while her two young cousins Ayesha, 7, and Tanver, 5, were recovering. Mujibur Rahman's marriage proposal to Shirin was turned down, so he avenged when all the three were in deep sleep.

In its earlier incarnation the malaise had crept up to the urban areas after being fairly widespread in the sleepy villages of Bangladesh. Let's beware of the pattern that is about to unfold. In the present case, we must make sure the culprit is apprehended and indicted, regardless of his family background or connections. Then he should be capitally punished, so that his ilk would never dare raise their head again. The law enforcement people are urged to take stock of progress in all such cases and mete out the harshest deterrent punishment to the scoundrels.

Third World Economies: From Victims to Villains?

by Abdul Bayes

There was a time when the third world countries used to derive their biggest chunk of foreign exchange from export of low-income elastic raw materials and agricultural products, but over the years, their share in world manufacturing exports jumped four folds — from 5 per cent in 1970 to 22 per cent in 1993.

BEFORE steam engine and power looms could step in to stimulate faster growth, there was a time when the so called third world countries used to dominate the global manufacturing output. Surprising though it might appear, statistics from economic history as documented in the Economist (October 1st-7th 1994) tend to show that third world countries (mainly China and India) accounted for about three-fourths of world manufacturing output back in 1750 and over 60 per cent in 1830. The erosion then started gradually and by 1913 (eve of the First World War), the share plummeted to only 8 per cent. The same documents further led us to believe that China had been the world's largest economy for most of the time in recorded history until 1850 and as late as 1930. China accounted for about one-third of world manufacturing output. With the passage of time, however, the 'lead' was overtaken by other countries, capturing world trade and output, whom we now call the developed countries. The discerned gradual dissipation could be added to, inter alia, a volley of economic, social and political factors that history is well replete with.

Old Order Changeth!

It is now a time, perhaps, when the third world economies seem to regain a portion of their surrendered corridors. A glance at the World Bank reports would show that during the last two decades (1974-1993), the GDP of rich industrial countries grew at 2.9 per cent per annum as compared to 3 per cent of the developing countries, on average. However, a slight disaggregation tends to reveal that during the same period of

time, the growth rate of East Asian 'tigers' stayed at about 8 per cent and that of South Asian 'cats' at about 5 per cent per annum — both running above the rich and the poor countries' average. Needless to mention, such promising outcome of Asia has already become talks of tales. What would happen in the future?

Well, the World Bank papers seem no less hopeful about the bright future of third world economies in the days to come. For example, it is stipulated that during the ensuing two decades (1994-2003), rich industrial countries are likely to experience a growth rate of 2.7 per cent per annum as compared to the developing countries' average of 4.8 per cent. At disaggregated level, East Asia would swell to 7.6 per cent per annum and the developing countries to 5.3 per cent. By and large, it appears that the third world countries of Asia would continue to retain the title of fastest growth in the coming two decades also. If this yawning gap tends to persist and if the projected growth rates do occur in practice, so argue many thinkers — (i) the rich countries' share in world trade would shrink to two-fifths only; (ii) China might replace America as the world's biggest economy by 2020; (iii) as many as nine of the top 15 economies could be from today's third world countries; (iv) world economy is likely to alter and (v) the existing economic and political equations might be upset to yield new

Sweet and Sour

While celebration should be afoot in the third world club, ring of concerns, nevertheless, looms large on the opposite camp. The anxieties and agonies seem to haunt not only the politicians of the West but also some of their economists. The rise of the North is viewed to be at the cost of the South assuming trade is a zero-sum game. The haste and fervour with which Western technologies are on board to South, the fast changes in production structure, the rapid opening up of their economies and the thrust with which economic reforms are embraced in these economies all seem to add to the prevailing grave concerns. There was a time when the third world countries used to derive their biggest chunk of foreign exchange from export of low-income elastic raw materials and agricultural products, but over the years, their share in world manufacturing exports jumped four folds — from 5 per cent in 1970 to 22 per cent in 1993. The developing countries are now facing the West in most of the economic activities. The victims of the past thus show up as villains at present!

Give and Take

The economic strength so gained has already given them the power to haggle. Somehow world trade in the past assumed a one-way traffic with transfer of resources from the North to the South. Now is time when the growth rates of the patrons could possibly be

dictated by the growth rates of the clients. There are many ways in which such hypothesis would work. First, on the demand side — developing countries are now appearing as the largest markets for the DCs. It is estimated that some 42 per cent of America's exports 20 per cent of Western Europe's and 48 per cent of Japan's are reported to sail for the third world countries. In the three years to 1993, America's exports to developing countries grew at an annual rate of 12 per cent while the same to rich countries rose only by 2 per cent a year. Over the same period, the third world countries increased their imports by 37 per cent and their exports rose by a modest 22 per cent. In other words, for the first time developing economies were acting as a 'locomotive' helping to pull the rich world out of its recession of the early 1990s (The Economist, October 1st-7th 1994).

On the other hand, growth in developing countries has historically been hooked on to the growth rates of the West (e.g. the demand for Bangladesh carpet or high quality apparels has been a function, among other factors, of per capita income of the West). Over the years, there seems certain aberrations on this count. For example, while a recession hit the West recently, developing countries could escape the rot, possibly to an extent, only by the sheer increase of trade among themselves. The proportion of non-Japanese Asian exports that go to other Asian countries is re-

ported to rise from 26 per cent in 1986 to 37 per cent in 1992. If the share continues to rise further, Western demand could become weaker as a major determinant of the growth of the Southern economies.

Not a Zero-sum Game

International trade is not a zero-sum game, at least, if David Ricardo's theory of comparative costs is followed in true spirit. The fact that developing countries could hardly gain from trade in the past could be adduced, mainly, to the erstwhile highly protective devices that deterred optimal resource allocation as per comparative cost principle. If the world is opened up further, the earlier one-way traffic could be turned into many ways of traffic to the producers and consumers of both developed and developing countries. Suppose, developing countries continue to grow fast. Would it be at the cost of the developed countries? Possibly not and, in fact, such growth could help developed countries also. First, the rising productivity in developing countries can reduce the per unit cost of imports of the DCs and thus raising their real income. For example, it is reported that about one-third of all clothes bought by America and one-fifth of those in Western Europe is reported to come from developing countries. And as a result, over the last ten years, the average prices of shoes and clothes fell by one-fifth in real terms (consumers' surplus should be up and jobs in competing inefficient factories should be

down in this case). Second, as the developing countries walk up the hill of growth, reduction in poverty (not necessarily through) should bring forth socio-political stability to allow Western investors safe and sound investment in these economies. Third, as neo-classical economists (and almost all of them from the West) emphasise competition as the panacea for higher growth, the competition triggered off by these economies should help relocate their resources at optimum points.

Bangladesh's Pie

By and large, it appears that Asia is possibly very soon going to dictate world trade and investment and possibly negate the traditional line of thinking about the gains from trade. Within Asia, the relatively poor South Asian countries should also take up the challenge. And within the poor, the poorest Bangladesh can also make some pennies out of this changed global environment. At the moment, trade accounts only 8-9 per cent of her GDP. This compares almost equally with India but far less than Pakistan (15 per cent), Malaysia (70 per cent) or Sri Lanka (30 per cent). Given stable macro economic stability, an assurance of political stability, persuasion of economic reforms with right earnest, honest and efficient governance and credibility of government policies should enable Bangladesh to take advantage of the "reverse linkages". And all of these efforts should be premised on the idea that the world now is not what it used to be before.

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Verbal Battle Drowns Out the Ticking of the Countdown Clock

Frances Kelly writes from Hong Kong

As the countdown to the return of Hong Kong to China continues, relations between Britain and Beijing are at a low ebb. Governor Chris Patten and mainland officials are trading insults and many key points remain deadlocked.

Hong Kong



Hong Kong Island ceded to Britain 1842. Kowloon peninsula ceded 1860. New Territories (975 sq km) leased 1898 for 99 years. All returning to China 1997.



Governor Chris Patten

schools and hospitals, as well as one new programmes for the elderly and the disabled.

China has denounced the spending spree as "welfarism" and as a move that will put a heavy financial burden on the future government, despite Patten's promise that government will inherit HK\$120 billion if the economy remains on course.

Perhaps more significantly from China's point of view, Patten has also offered to cooperate with China's Preliminary Working Committee, a group of Chinese and Hong Kong advisers appointed by Beijing to prepare for the handover.

Patten has given his blessing to informal contacts between

Hong Kong civil servants and the Preliminary Working Committee, but stressed that civil servants should not attend formal meetings.

That falls far short of Beijing's demand for formal links between the committee and the civil service.

China has written off Patten's peace offerings as "lip service".

A frustrated, table-thumping Patten showed his exasperation else, reasonably and honourably and sensibly, anybody else thinks that we should be offering," Patten said. "What else?"

"I think that there are times when it makes a great deal of sense to put away old gramophone records, especially when

they're badly scratched, and try to engaged in serious forward-looking, positive debate and dialogue, and I think we've long since arrived at that situation in 'Hong Kong," he added.

To some, Patten's olive branch is a desperate attempt to break the deadlock that has paralysed progress on Sino-British talks in the two years since he introduced election reforms to increase the pace of democracy in the territory.

Meanwhile, many key issues on the handover remain stuck in a diplomatic limbo. Talks on adapting 1,689 local laws and international agreements have been stalled and little progress has been made on setting up Hong Kong's Court of Final

Appeal. Decision also have to be made on who can continue living in Hong Kong after 1997.

Britain "cannot simply say, 'From now until midnight on 30 June 1997 we take the decisions and after that it is up to the Special Administrative Region government,'" said Patten. "We are handing over responsibility for the lives and the welfare of Hong Kong's people."

While Britain and China continue to bicker, their deteriorating relations are whittling away at confidence in the territory.

Emigration is again on the rise with an estimated 62,000 people expected to leave the territory this year, compared with 53,000 in 1993, according to Hong Kong's Deputy secretary for Security.

Doctors, lawyers and other professionals have also expressed fear that their standards could suffer by a Preliminary Working Committee suggestion that the degrees of mainlanders be automatically recognised in the territory after 1997.

Also worrying to some Hong Kong legislators is the commit-

tee's plan to create a shadow legislature in 1996 that would have the same functions as any other legislative body.

"China was compelled to initiate this move after the British Hong Kong government closed the door to any cooperation with China," according to the officials China Daily. The newspaper said the body will be able to write new Bills before or after 1997 and declare invalid those that China believes contravene the Basic Law, Hong Kong's post-1997 constitution.

Hong Kong legislator and Democratic Party chairman Martin Lee has called the idea of a shadow council a "monster."

As Britain and China continue to hurl abuse at each other, Hong Kong residents have no choice but to count down the days to the handover.

'Beijing is now erecting a monument at the Lo Wu bridge border crossing between Hong Kong and Shenzhen which will be embedded with an electronic timer that will tick off the days to the resumption of Chinese rule.

Nestled among a display of azaleas and bauhinia, the "countdown clock," the New China News Agency claims, will "remind people of the approach of the great day."

— GEMINI NEWS  
FRANCES KELLY is a Canadian freelance journalist based in Hong Kong.

OPINION

Wanted: More Cleansing Weeks

Alif Zabr

How many more teenage and slit-throat murders are we going to see? It is shocking to find that a gang of teenagers can murder in a cold-blooded manner another known teenager colleague in his own flat under the guise of a friendly get together.

This is more than a law and order situation. The morals of the society is rotten to the core, when teenagers start imitating the gruesome acts of some of the elders of the society. This menace has to be nipped in the bud by the government on top priority basis.

The society, and therefore the government are very fond of observing "Days", Week's and anniversaries on innumerable issues throughout the year. Not a single day passes without the mass media announcing the "celebration" of this and that. These 'days' are for the good acts. What about the evil acts, for cleansing up the society, and at least to divert the attention of the younger generation to lead a normal healthy life?

The social problems of the information age (IT) has to be tackled, immediately, and in phases, with allocation of additional resources. Deterrents must be introduced in daily life to save the future generation. At this moment of indignation I can think of only a couple of ideas, to start with:

— clean up (not close down all the shops), the video rental shops, and maintain strict surveillance. Increase the operation taxes to maintain the

extra supervisory and regulatory cost, and deter the mushrooming of these shops offering undesirable goods. There should be age limits for certain operations.

— anti-drug week to continue once a month throughout the year. The perils of the drug menace are obvious.

— crackdown on the shady 'beauty parlours', massage centres and cheap hotels offering hourly service or rental. Point: make it difficult for those with ulterior motives. It is not difficult to keep watch through informers (pay commission for information leading to prosecution).

— strict 'do and don't' rules for agencies dealing with human trading and manpower agencies sending personnel abroad. Also check up on the activities of some agencies reported to be exporting blue movies abroad.

— having access to easy money encourages crime, regardless of the age group. It is difficult to eradicate black money activities, but the operators should be made to face deterrent punishment (like death sentence for drug trafficking in some countries).

— the society, and the mass media editors give too much importance to political activities, diverting attention from the new antisocial activities (thriving in the ever-changing society). We need social caretakers first, then pay attention to political caretaking. Politics stink in this country of course I am a part of it).

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.

The society, now

Sir, It is indeed shocking to hear of murders, acts of violence, robberies, casualties in accidents, which claim and/or affect people of all walks of life in our society.

Time and time again people have tried to blame the government, the law enforcing agencies or parents alone for what happens. However, the problem is not a simple one, so we cannot find a simple overnight solution.

Why are there spontaneous mob attacks or pelting of stones, especially during hartal hours? Why is there violence following petty arguments in our university campuses? Why are today's youngsters attracted to drugs and use foul language? Why is there so much obscenity in so many of our films and publications? Why don't people abide by such simple things as traffic laws?

These are just a few questions that can be asked of today's lawlessness. One can think of the answers, too —

theoretically. Indeed, there are people out there who are trying their best to improve our society's morals and values. But everyone concerned (most people should be) should get involved in implementing the solutions to our problems.

The basis of all answers is education. Proper education — not only (passive) teaching through conventional books but also books and visual aids on practicalities of life (eg social malices, family values, etc) should be provided at appropriate levels, both at school and at home. Children should be made to understand from an early age what's wrong and what's right.

The whole society must take responsibility of rearing a child until the time he/she is fully established and a responsible member of the society.

Many a time, children's bad behaviour and misdeeds, especially teenage boys, are overlooked by their parents. They should be made to understand the consequences of

their acts and at least be given a proper scolding.

I hope to see the day when our society would be relatively crime-free and when ordinary people would be able to use the streets or stay at home not fearing that something unfortunate may happen to them.

S Chowdhurt  
Dhaka.

Bad influences

Sir, We were simply shocked to hear about the brutal murder of a 15-year old school boy, Ishiaque Ahmed, at the hands of yet another bunch of school going boys very wellknown to him. Although it appears, Ishiaque too was a mixed up kid and his lust for adult movies eventually led to a sad end to his life! With this macabre murder, many will now look at the school boys in a different way. However, we cannot solely blame them, as open exposures of sex and violence seem to be the main causes to snatch the innocent minds of the school children and teenagers. Random and easy availability of adult movies and such exposures from some cable TV programmes are seducing, corrupting and bringing bad influence on the youngsters all over.

Pornography and shows pertaining to expression of violence should be replaced by

religious, educational and sports programmes, which are bound to have better impact on the youngsters and the society as a whole. This change is possible if we unitedly demand for such channels and also avoid watching rather vulgar Indian and English movies on cable TV in front of our kids. In fact, even some commercials, particularly on undergarments are sheer pornography!

We have learnt a great deal of a lesson and should therefore be more careful and care to give some time to know "what's happening at our homes, specially the working parents, having teenaged children, mind it more. In such cases, one must get a trusted relative as a guardian to keep watch.

People living in apartments and private houses must gear up extra security measures like, increase the number of guards and restrict strangers, especially youths during office hours, 7 am to 5 pm and even after; before entry they should be properly identified and communicated through intercom telephones.

There have already been too many murders and crimes, so why not take proper precautions?

Concerned  
Dhaka.