

by SAMS KIBRIA

Public Debate on FAP

Long before the preparation — let alone publication — of the full text of the Flood Action Plan (FAP) it came under attack. That was not without precedent but certainly at risk to be off target. Now that the final draft report has been released by Agriculture and Water Resources Minister M Majid-ul-Haq the arguments for or against the plan can be really meaningful. The minister has gone so far as to hold responsible for the criticism, among others, "a lack of understanding" of the process. This lack of understanding, according to the minister, owes to a large degree to the media's failure to come to terms with the technicalities of the process.

At this stage we are not in a position to make any comment on the merits of the 65 projects identified nor are we competent enough to say if the minister is right or wrong in claiming the FAP studies to be the most comprehensive in the water sector to date. However we feel — and rightly so — that the claim needs to be substantiated. Now the details have come in, one way of proving its justification is to make it acceptable to the people. Once the people have okayed, even a less than perfect plan is much better.

However, the problems in obtaining such a popular approval on a complex issue such as the FAP are numerous. Better it would be if the issue had been thoroughly discussed in parliament. Since that prospect appears to be out of sight, the need for taking the issue to the public proves overriding. This is possible if the media can be fully and properly utilised for the purpose. The purpose then is to inform the public in clear and understandable language supported by charts and graphs, maybe, on the TV. The print medium, newspapers in particular, can carry articles highlighting the various aspects of the plan.

Only then people can participate in a highly informed debate on this matter that is important. By the minister's own admission, the coordination study between the various aspects of the flooding problem is yet to be taken up. Then there is the more intriguing question of combining the structural works with non-structural measures. Nobody can be sure to what extent the combination will take place and with what results. But at least let the people know beforehand what is being put in place. They have the chance to give their opinions on the various elements of the plan. After all, transparency matters.

Useful Visit

Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's brief visit to Male has been an unqualified success, as it was perhaps expected to be. The two countries have had the finest of relations with no differences between them whatsoever even remotely requiring to be negotiated.

The PM's visit has produced some concrete results — bilaterally. The elevation of the joint committee from the secretaries' level to that of the Foreign Ministers, speaks of the importance being accorded to the task of widening the scope of cooperation between the two countries. That the governments and the private sectors of both the countries will work towards expanding and diversifying the bilateral trade, increasing the scope of investment and exporting more skilled and unskilled manpower augurs extremely well. The direct exchange of money orders between Dhaka and Male helps upgrade the employment conditions. Initiatives are to be taken to encourage manpower export including professionals from Bangladesh to Maldives.

The bilateral contact has helped bolster the regional spirit in keeping with a summit decision that valued frequent exchanges of visits between heads of state and government within the SAARC region to fill in the void between summits. As the SAARC Chairperson Khaleda Zia took the opportunity of briefing the Maldives President about the keen interest the Malaysian Prime Minister had shown in building a bridge between SAARC and ASEAN when she visited him recently. The joint communiqué makes a mention of this as well as the need for having a link with the European Union.

The identity of views on the accords in the Middle East and establishment of a non-racial democracy in South Africa together with the expression of concern for human tragedies in Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia was mutually refreshing. Their impassioned call for the adoption of special measures, promised to the least developed countries under the Uruguay Round Agreement, could not be more timely.

Costly Amateurishness

Rarely has a coincidence been as instructive as the one that occurred in the AIDS-related coverage of our newspaper on Saturday. The full four-column unmissable photo on the front page ran this newsy caption: "A colourful anti-AIDS rally was brought out by AIDS Awareness Committee yesterday". The colour to it was added by some fashion-world stars whom we give a big hand for showing commitment to a social cause.

However on the much less bright, and certainly not a vague, side, has been the outcry of 26-year-old Habibur Rahman who felt 'crippled mentally and socially' for being wrongly diagnosed HIV positive in a Dhaka diagnostic centre on being referred to it by a so-called general hospital. Returning to Dhaka from Hong Kong a month or so ago, he landed in that hospital. The MD of the diagnostic centre had reportedly been absolutely certain about the genuineness of the finding reached by an application of what was claimed to be 'a latest method'. It was on the strength of such a claim that a national daily published the news of Habibur Rahman being HIV positive. The same newspaper put the matter in the right perspective after Infectious Diseases Hospital, the National AIDS Committee and the IPGMR gave him a clean chit saying his blood contained no AIDS virus whatsoever.

The unprofessional, amateurish and irresponsible way in which Habibur Rahman's case has been handled opens our eyes to what is needed to be done on the AIDS front. First and foremost, let's have an information centre preferably with branch offices in the land or sea port areas, to be at the beck and call to answer all sorts of queries about the irreversible disease. Secondly, why not put together a one-stop service for screening AIDS suspects or taking them in for isolation or treatment, if they prove positive. AIDS belongs to the grey area of the unknown as it is and how counter-productive it will be if we were to fail to disseminate whatever little we know about the syndrome!

THE failure of the dialogue has disappointed and saddened the nation. Inevitably, recriminations follow such failures. This is exactly what is happening now. What is needed, however, is not recrimination but dispassionate and objective assessment of the situation in order to determine the next step. Life did not come to a stand still nor did the political crisis disappear with the departure of the Commonwealth Envoy. We are, in fact, back to square one.

The Daily Star published my interview on 22 November when I spoke about the implications of the two latest proposals made by the two sides. The reasons for acceptance or non-acceptance of the proposed solutions must be sought in their relative merit. The government's proposal, in my analysis, is just not workable. The explosive situation that will prevail within the cabinet will tear it apart, creating an even more serious national crisis. Permit me to clarify the role played by the Commonwealth Envoy, as I see it. His statement, prior to his departure, has raised many eyebrows and caused much concern.

Let me begin by explaining how the Commonwealth got involved in the dialogue. In mid-September the Commonwealth Secretary-General Mr Emeka Anyaoku came to Bangladesh on an official visit. It should be clearly understood that it was not the Leader of

the Opposition but the government which invited him to visit Bangladesh. He came and paid a courtesy call on Sheikh Hasina. At no stage during the discussions did Sheikh Hasina even suggest that the Commonwealth might play a role in the matter. It was the Secretary-General himself who offered his good offices in seeking a solution to the political crisis. He had met the Prime Minister on the previous day. Sheikh Hasina responded to the offer positively.

I would like to emphasize here that there was no uncertainty or ambiguity on our part or on the part of the Commonwealth Secretary-General about his Envoy's role. In the correspondence that followed, the Leader of the Opposition informed Mr Anyaoku that she expected the latter's Envoy to "facilitate" the talks without getting involved in the dialogue itself. In her letter dated September 27, 1994 to Mr Anyaoku she said, "While I do not expect him (the Envoy) to take part in the talks, his presence will be most useful in establishing the ground rules for the dialogue." She reiterated her position to the Secretary-General in her letter of 5

October 1994 in which she said, "Your distinguished envoy can be of great help in arranging the time, place and format for the talks. In particular, I hope he will be able to ensure that the official news media will not be used to present biased and tendentious reports about the talks. I am constrained to make this request because our experience with the TV, radio as well as government-owned newspapers has been most unsatisfactory. I do not, of course, expect your envoy to get involved in the dialogue itself which must remain our responsibility. He will have rendered a great service if he can facilitate the talks by creating the right conditions." Quite clearly, the Secretary-General shared the view because there was no hint from him that his envoy would undertake any task beyond what Sheikh Hasina had set out in her letters. Sir Ninian Stephen must have known all this because, upon his arrival in Dhaka on 13 October, 1994 he said, "My mission is to be available to facilitate discussions between the parties in any way that might be appropriate."

Sir Ninian's statement on November 20, 1994 must be viewed against the background explained above. His mandate was clearly established and defined. He knew the precise nature of his task. He certainly knew what he was not expected to do. It may be recalled that during the talks held between the two sides in the Parliament Building, he was not present. His presence was not considered necessary because his role was merely that of a facilitator.

It was only when the discussions in the Parliament Building proved fruitless that talks at the Deputy level was resumed at the State Guest House Meghna. The Envoy was present at the talks but it was a dialogue between the Deputy Leader of the House and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. The Envoy had no significant role. He did transmit, at one stage, the written proposals from one side to the other but no one thought that he would make proposals on his own or undertake any mediatory effort.

He could encourage the two sides to reach agreement and even advise them or offer ideas but no one asked him to mediate or arbitrate. Why he chose to make such a fundamental

departure from his mandate is a mystery to all of us. It is equally inexplicable why he had to go public with his personal views. There is no doubt whatsoever that he deviated from his mandate and made an unwarranted statement. He could not possibly have a "proposal" of his own and in fact he did not have a proposal.

We all knew as indeed he himself knew that it was the government's proposal which he had brought to us. The Opposition was negotiating with the government, not with him. In his eagerness to impose this solution on the Opposition he chose to claim that it was his own proposal. It is a matter of profound regret for us that he ceased to be neutral when he made the statements on 20 November. If he felt that his mission had failed, he could simply express regret and depart. He had no right to sit on judgement over the actions and policies of the political parties of Bangladesh. Countless citizens of this country found it surprising that a representative of the Commonwealth Secretariat sought to influence our public opinion by holding a press conference.

The Envoy's reference to

"violence" has surprised people in this country. No one wants violence and certainly the Opposition does not want violence and does not even have the means of indulging in violence. So what was he hinting at? Was it the peaceful protest of the Opposition that he was referring to? These remarks are an unwarranted interference in our internal affairs. What was most galling for most people in this country was his patronizing remark that "The Commonwealth will not abandon Bangladesh." I do not know exactly what he meant by this comment. Was he referring to the Commonwealth Secretariat or those donor countries who belong to the Commonwealth? Why should he, of all persons, feel himself entitled to give us such a condescending assurance?

The Commonwealth Secretary-General has reportedly tried to defend his Envoy. I realize why he cannot do any less. We can understand his reaction to the episode which has neither enhanced the image of the Secretariat nor helped the dialogue process. The whole nation was a witness to Sir Ninian's final role. Perhaps we should put it down as a grave error of judgement of an well meaning person and try to forget it. Life moves on and perhaps all this will be soon forgotten. This, I am sure, is what we all should do.

The author participated in the dialogue process as the Political Advisor to Sheikh Hasina

Cafes Revive as Siege City Approaches its 1,000th Day

Paul Hockenkos writes from Sarajevo

A third cold winter of shortages looms and residents of the besieged city, of Sarajevo still often have to dodge sniper fire. But, reports a Gemini News Service correspondent, there are young people in the cafes and Sarajevans exude confidence and determination.

WITH two plastic water jugs in each arm, 67-year-old Hebib Filipovic climbs the five flights of stairs to his apartment, as he has done many times a day since Sarajevo came under Serb attack in April 1992.

For two-and-a-half years, the retired electrician, his wife and mother-in-law have lived without running water and electricity.

"We're lucky because we're still in our own home," he says, pointing to crumbling pockmarks where grenades hit their building. "And we're going to stay. Nothing can be worse than last winter, and we survived that."

Even as Sarajevo nears its thousandth day of siege on December 6, cut off from Bosnian government held territory by the Bosnian Serbs, the city exudes a spirit of confidence and determination.

Although a third winter of shortage and hunger lies ahead, Sarajevans seem to have lost their fear. Today, they are more defiant than ever that the Bosnian Serbs will never take their city, and that somehow, regardless of the cost, they will persevere.

Despite the sporadic sniper fire from the Serb-held hills above the city, some aspects of life have returned to normal. Young people frequent the cafes again and stroll freely through the old city.

"We don't look as good as we used to," says Zida, a 31-year-old graphic artist. "I've lost 21 pounds and now all my clothes are too big for me." What she misses most from



the old days, she says, are her friends who have gone to the West, been killed or are at the front.

Although small shops and marketplaces are open again, few people have the German marks necessary to buy fresh vegetables or coffee. Most people live on humanitarian aid that consists of bread, meal, cheese, beans and powdered milk.

"Our job is to get the people here enough food to subsist, and that's hard enough," says

Peter Kessler of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The Bosnian Serbs routinely hinder aid convoys that cross their territory. "Whether Sarajevo makes it through the winter again depends on the war," says Kessler. "We're building up reserve stocks now as quickly as we can."

The tinge of hope in the air comes largely from the recent advances of the government troops against the Bosnian Serb Army, which still occupies two-thirds of the country. In contrast to last year, the mostly-Muslim army and Bosnian Croat forces are allied once again.

Sarajevans are convinced that the military initiative has finally turned in favour of government forces, whose recent offensive re-took key territory in northwestern and central Bosnia, as well as around Sarajevo's Mount Igman.

The people of Sarajevo pay for their army's advances with ever-heavier artillery attacks from the surrounding hills. But no one begrudges the army its victories. "Our army is stronger than ever," says Filipovic. "We'll win this war yet, without the international community. They've done nothing but let us down."

Morale in the government

army is high, even though most soldiers still fight in jeans and tennis shoes, says Filipovic's neighbour, Zlatan, a long-haired philosophy student, now frontline soldier. The Serbs, he says, have lost their will to fight.

"We're fighting for our homes and our lives. The Serbs don't know what they're fighting for," he says, on weekend leave for the first time in four months. "Once the Serbs have pillaged a city, they have no reason to keep it. Our soldiers used to live there."

At the government army headquarters, General Jovan Divjac says that the army's top priority is defending Sarajevo and the besieged eastern enclaves. "The Bosnian Serb Army captured most of its territory in the first months of the war," he points out, "before a real government army even existed."

At the time, the Yugoslav army still had bases throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina and cities fell easily. Despite the weapons embargo, he admits, light arms from "a few small friends" have been coming through.

The renewed Muslim-Croat alliance has been decisive in recapturing key points such as Kupres, the city that reopens the main road to Central

Bosnia. But after nearly a year of war between them, the relationship between the government army and the Bosnian Croat units is still uncertain.

The Bosnian Croats, under their own command, fight only for "Croatian" cities in formerly Croat-populated regions. "They get paid \$110 a month; we're lucky if we're ever paid," says Faruk, a member of the prestigious Bosnian Special Forces. "Why should they want to integrate into our army?"

Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic has called for a general mobilisation of all men between the ages of 16 and 65. "We will destroy and annihilate the enemy," he thunders. But of the 600,000 people on Serb-held territory (in contrast to 2.3 million on government land), all able-bodied men have long been conscripted into the Bosnian Serb Army.

Despite reports of dissension among the Bosnian Serbs, Karadzic retains a lot of support within the army and the leadership. UN sources admit that the economic sanctions against his "Serbska Republika," nominally enforced by Serbia and Montenegro, are having little effect.

What the outside world denies the Bosnian Serbs, it gets from the UN. In exchange for

restricted passage to Sarajevo and the enclaves, Karadzic demands half of all UN humanitarian aid and 30 per cent of fuel. There are many innocent Serbs who are suffering too," says Peter Kessler of UNHCR. Most people here call the deal blackmail.

Criticism of the UN's role is scathing. "France, Britain and Russia openly pursue a pro-Serb policy," says Aida, a young Muslim lawyer, echoing an accusation heard from the street corner to the highest offices of the government. "They tell us that we can't defend ourselves. They say that if we fight back they'll order air strikes or leave," she says. "I say let them leave. We can fight our own war."

Bosnians may be bitter about their treatment, but they remain committed to a multi-ethnic, multi-national state. In Sarajevo, Muslims, Croats and Serbs still live together.

"Karadzic and his bandits aren't normal Serbs, they're Chetniks, fascist Serbs," says Snezna, a 30-year-old Muslim school teacher. "My neighbours and friends are Serbs. They're still here with us."

Sarajevans say that the war is far from over. They are determined to hold their city and re-establish the internationally recognised borders of their state.

With a weary smile, they insist that the real war has only just begun.

PAUL HOCKENOS is a US freelance journalist based in Berlin.

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.

'We are Concerned'

Sir, I along with many other readers share your concern (Editorial 'We are Concerned' on 22/11/94) and at the same time two questions, with the benefit of hindsight, haunt my mind. One, why, to start with, our soldiers went to a place for peacekeeping practically unarmed? I read somewhere that peacekeeping forces are required only when there is no peace to keep. These Serbs are armed to their teeth and operate with a vengeance to annihilate the Muslims. Bangladesh soldiers can be an added attraction for them to attack. Secondly, the Russians are the only friends of the Bosnian/Croatian Serbs. Are we moving the friendly government of Moscow for the safety of our men. Or we are leaving everything to the UN?

A reader

Anthony D'Mello

Sir, Arsarul Islam Chowdhury's write-up "A tread down memory lane" (Daily Star 17th Nov) was truly absorbing and interesting.

I recall the tremendous services rendered to the sub-continental cricket by the late Anthony D'Mello. D'Mello was then president of the Indian Cricket Control Board and it was his untiring efforts that made possible the West Indians' first visit to India. It was also India's first official Test series played at home.

Earlier an English team way back in the thirties visited India under Jardine's captaincy but India at that time did not enjoy recognition as a Test team and hence the tour was considered as unofficial.

Indian cricket received official recognition from the MCC much later and India played her first official Test series against England in the UK in 1946 when the senior Nawab of Pataudi led the Indian team. Even then the English cricket authorities arranged three-day Test matches considering India to be no better than one of their county teams. It however goes to the credit of the legendary Wally Hammond under whose skipperhood, England did defeat India in a three-day Test match and rounded up defeat the 3-Test match series with a one win, two draws result.

Asrarul rightly maintains that the salient feature of the West Indies-India 1948 cricket rubber was the 779 runs accumulated by the dashing batsman Everton Weekes but he has perhaps inadvertently failed to mention that the latter also created cricket history by scoring five successive Test centuries.

Though Asrarul spoke of the famous three W's (Walcott, Weekes and Worrell), the last name, the most prolific and well-known amongst the three, however could not make the Indian tour in 1948 and on India's part, they could not avail themselves of their star

batsman. Vijay Merchant who was earlier called to captain the Indian side but declined at the last moment due to some pressing personal problems and thus Lala Amarnath was made to take command.

Today we talk of India's strong batting line-up but in 1948 India also had batting stalwarts like Vijay Hazare, Ravi Mody, Mushtaq Ali, Hemu Adhikari, Vinoo Mankad, K C Ibrahimi and Lala Amarnath. The team, however, missed the services of Vijay Merchant at that time — doubtlessly India's ace running machine.

And much before West Indians discovered the fierce Welsley Hall and Griffiths, they already had a deadly speedster in Prior Jones who toured India in 1948 and whose pace struck fear in the heart of every batsman who had to face him.

Last but not the least, in spite of the tension prevailing between India and Pakistan as an aftermath of the partition, Anthony D'Mello who was born in Karachi saw to it that during the 1948 West Indian tour of India, the Caribbeans also made it a point to play a few matches in a new-born country.

Robert Kader

34 Mehdiabagh, Chittagong

Caretaker government

Sir, I feel I am a supporter of BNP. But I do believe that the only way of holding a free and fair election in Bangladesh for at least the next 15 years is to hand over power to a neutral caretaker government. I don't understand why BNP's top brass is so adamant over the issue. It is no shame to accept a reasonable opposition demand; rather it is a sign of large-heartedness. In this con-

nection I fully appreciate the article, "The Dialogue and How to End it" by your learned columnist Mr Abu Abdullah published in the 13th Nov. issue of your paper. I pray that good sense prevails upon our political leadership.

Mrs Montaj Jahan Fulbari, Sylhet

Well done UNSC

Sir, The Serbs' aircraft dropped napalm and cluster bombs on the Bosnian Muslims at the UN safe haven of Bihaq. The UN Secretary General B B Ghalil authorised the use of air power to defend the town of Bihaq. 30 NATO planes — British, Dutch, US and French — launched a massive air attack from Italy on the Serb held Udbina airport in Croatia and destroyed Serb anti-aircraft installations, the runway and a surface-to-air missile site. The Russian President Boris Yeltsin backed the UN Security Council decision that allowed the NATO strike. We congratulate all the permanent and non-permanent members of the UNSC on the timely and successful operation.

For over the last four years the Serbs have been shedding the blood of innocent Muslims in Bosnia. The world conscience and the UN have at last realised the Serb atrocities and the great slaughter of the Bosnian Muslims. We hope the NATO air attack would teach the Serbs a lesson to behave in future failing which a great catastrophe awaits them. Indeed sometime the UN has to make a way to stop war for the sake of justice and peace.

We would request our 1200 Bangladeshi troops stationed in Bihaq on UN peace keeping mission to maintain their morale and courage high in-

spite of heavy odds and to ensure the safety and security of every Bosnian.

We would also like to suggest that the UN should immediately arrest Serb leader Rodovan Karadzic and put him on trial as a war criminal for the sake of peace and stability in Europe.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203

Appointment of judges

Sir, I had an opportunity to read an article written by Mr Kuldip Nayyar entitled "Appointment of India's Chief Justice" published in your esteemed paper on 18th November. He has rightly pointed out the procedures, merits, demerits, problems, systems and services of judiciary at the highest level of a country. We like to suggest a few points applicable to Bangladesh as under:-

- 1) The practice of giving preference to a person brought from the bar should be strictly followed from lower level to highest level. If this system can be introduced, the quality of bar will, no doubt, improve.
- 2) The selection of judges from bar and bench should be only by the Chief Justice, without political interference.
- 3) To remove huge pending cases, there should be appointment of more judges at all levels from lower courts to the highest court.
- 4) The circuit bench system should be introduced at headquarters of each Division immediately to remove huge pending cases and sufferings of poor people.
- 5) The charge of heavy fees by the lawyers should be minimised and a restriction as

such should be imposed by the Supreme Court.

6) The Chief Justice should have power to declare government invalid in case of crisis in the country and should assume power.

M Ali Ghoramara, Rajshahi

Constitutional amendments

Sir, The Constitution of the country is a sacred document. All the members of the parliament are pledge-bound to protect it. We have already made many amendments to the Constitution. Many more amendments shall probably have to be made in future too. Say, for example, the women are demanding to have their membership direct from the general election. The present size of the parliament was determined on the basis of population at the time of making the Constitution. The present size of our population is approximately 12 crore. Whether 300 members are sufficient to represent the 12 crore people of Bangladesh is a matter to ponder over. The present system of nominating the female members is to be reviewed. There should be a fixed number of women seats in the parliament but the members shall have to be elected by the general voters of the country.

The present move to amend the Constitution for holding three consecutive elections under a caretaker government should also be carefully examined. This move, if accepted, will perhaps leave a recorded evidence that we as a nation are not trustworthy (because we don't trust each other).

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury Kalabaghon, Dhaka