

Will This Shame Awaken Us?

First, a most sincere pat on Unicef's back for doing a magnificent job of keeping us informed about the state of health of our children. Through the mechanism of the annual State of the Children report, this UN body keeps the world leaders and the public abreast of how they are doing in looking after the children. Not only that, it helps us, the media, by ringing alarm bells on critical issues, thereby triggering corrective measures in time.

As for us, there appears to be quite a few alarm bells ringing. What Unicef has to say about the state of our children is utterly shameful. According to the internationally accepted standard of nutrition only 7 per cent of Bangladesh's children can be considered to have normal health. The rest, more than 90 per cent, are underweight and stunted before the age of two due to malnutrition. That is not all. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of iodine deficiency which affects the mental and physical growth of our people. As a consequence when in most countries the people are growing taller, our people are growing shorter. Then there is the most devastating consequence of it all. Our people are gradually becoming less and less intelligent. Compared to the previous years there is a drop in average IQ of our people.

What can be more shameful for us as an independent people? These are usually some of the consequences of foreign rule or colonial exploitation. But all these are happening in independent Bangladesh. Such has been our lot, and continues to be so, simply because of lack of policy priorities. Not that we did not have resources but that we have spent these badly. Not that we did not know what the Unicef report has brought home to us, but that we chose to ignore it. To be fair, much of the aberration occurred due to the long military rule in our country, during which time our government spent exorbitant amounts for its own constituency. Again to give due praise where it belongs, the present government has tried to change some of the policy absurdities that it had inherited. Where, however, we will fault this government, and do so emphatically, is that it failed to bring the sense of urgency and social mobilisation that is so very necessary to tackle problems of such immensity. It approached these massive social problems in the usual bureaucratic style which ended up doing too little too late.

There is really no more time for us to waste. In fact time ran out on us quite sometime back. Let us now take these dire facts to heart, and mobilise all our governmental and non-governmental resources to provide some basic services to our people. Iodine and basic education we can provide to our people. Resources are there. Only the will is missing.

Expanding Reach of Mastani

Why should doctors be lagging behind? The politicians began using the musclemen first, in the process some of them becoming tough guys themselves. In the good last decade of the last century of the second millennium the whole of Bangladesh was slowly converting itself, in fits and starts, to the new religion of *mastanism*. Political parties were the first to work the alchemy of sublimating the phenomenon of the individual musclemen into a socio-politically meaningful and effective *mastani*. The other strands of society competed hard to have a place in the bandwagon. Came the professionals, in their own good time.

But no one, in even such a setting, thought a doctor would take to this. They have ample patients and other preys to vent their frustrations on, hardly needing any other quarry. Teachers had similarly their students. Nobody expects a teacher or a doctor to use their fisticuffs in an inter-necine kikkenny-cat manner, that prerogative belonging so far to the parliamentarians of the world.

On the Victory Day itself, an angered doctor at the Shishu Hospital fell upon another physician of the same organisation. The wrathful one, seething with the feeling of being wronged by the other, came with a regular entourage in a microbus, called out the victim and carried him away to pulverize him in a manner requiring serious hospital attention.

Mastani is having ever new converts to it in all walks of our life. Such conduct as the doctor's does seriously undermine the image of the profession and the respect with which the society ought to hold it.

Big Bright Einstein Eyes

The agency report possibly put it rightly when quoting a source suggesting pop superstar Michael Jackson had shown interest in adding Albert Einstein's eyes to his collection of human oddities. Oddities? Why should eyes, perfectly normal eyes, be a specimen of human oddity?

Some people thought Einstein's brain must have featured some speciality that humanity comes across only once in a millennium or two and that belief led to preserving his brain by a pathologist who says the idea is to research into that one in ten billion brains. A pathologist is not the ideal person to do such researching — and upto now no neurologist is on record as showing interest in that brain possibly because they feel there's nothing different in that pudding-like stuff kept in three jars in an Arkansas apartment.

The eyes case is decidedly an improvement on that. Like his flamboyant hair, his black bright semitic eyes attracted you first and literally fixed you, even if you didn't know these were Albert's.

But it was the eyes that Einstein disbelieved. It was his Relativity theories, specially the later General one, that scientists were forced not to *visualise* reality in order to verify it. Relativity of time and light travelling at constant and absolute velocity even in respect of objects moving to and from it — or that question of how would light appear to you if you moved alongside at the same speed — are things capably *unvisualisable*.

With the coming of the quantum approach to reality, pioneered by Max Plauk but so effectively promoted by Einstein, things got cons far from what eyes see or can ever see — like the wave-particle duality of nature or the true picture of an electron. Eyes as such have the least reason to be celebrated when they belong specially to physicists of the order of Einstein, Heisenberg or the lately-in-fashion Stephen Hawking.

World Trade Organization Ready to Take Off

THE stage is nearly set for the World Trade Organization (WTO) to open its doors on January 1, 1995 — less than two weeks away. Establishment of WTO will mark the first concrete step towards the implementation of the Uruguay Round global trade accord, reached after more than seven years of fractious negotiations conducted under the aegis of GATT — the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

WTO is emerging as the first structured world body designed to oversee global trading norms. It will replace GATT to which it really owes its birth. Perhaps this is as it should be. The Bretton Woods conference of 1944, in setting up an agenda for bringing order to the world economy, had also sought an International Trade Organisation (ITO) to be established at the same time as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In the event, only a watered down version of ITO appeared, and that too three years later in 1947, when GATT was set up. From its very inception, GATT had been viewed and treated as an *ad hoc* arrangement. Some wits had even termed GATT as the general agreement to talk and talk!

World Bank and the IMF celebrated the 50th anniversary of their founding this year with a splash. It has taken the third pillar of the Bretton Woods agreement more than 50 years to come up. Yet, there is a consolation. Some 44 countries had participated in the Bretton Woods conference. The global accord for the creation of WTO has been signed by 124 nations.

Ratification of the global trade pact by signatory nations

Ratification of the global trade pact by the United States and Japan came in early December. The EU Council of Ministers are due to meet today (December 19) with a programme to ratify the agreement and finalise legislation to implement it.

is needed before WTO can get going. The agreement itself does not contain any stipulation that a certain minimum number of countries have to ratify the treaty to enable the new organisation to become operational. All the same, it had come to be recognised that a sufficiently large number of countries would have to ratify the deal to permit the new world body to make a meaningful start. In particular, ratification by the world's major trading nations was considered a must. That implied a green signal from the Quadrilateral Group of trading nations, comprising of the United States, European Union (EU), Japan and Canada. Better known as the "Quad", the group accounts for nearly two-thirds of the total world trade.

Ratification of the global trade pact by the United States and Japan came in early December. The EU Council of Ministers are due to meet today (December 19) with a programme to ratify the agreement and finalise legislation to implement it. The European Parliament is expected to approve the deal in the following week. Canada is said to be planning to complete the process before December ends. Many other countries, for instance most of Southeast Asia, also have ratified the accord. Only a few — Switzerland, Cyprus, Poland and Brazil among them — are said to have indicated that they would find it difficult to complete the process of ratification by December, not because the accord is contested but because

of delays for other reasons. Most of the remaining countries are going ahead with plans for ratification by the end of the year. Latest counts indicate that some 100 countries would have completed the national procedures for ratification within December. That is generally reckoned to be more than adequate for the WTO to start functioning from Jan 1 as scheduled. The process of ratification of the Uruguay Round accord

zation if the panel holds three rulings in a five-year period to have been unfair. The authority of the WTO to settle trade disputes among the member countries could thus effectively be compromised. Albeit, some analysts maintain that the US stipulation for ratification does not change the equation dramatically. Every member country has the right to quit the WTO at six months' notice anyway, they point out. All the same, a standing US threat to

gone round that Portugal might prefer to delay ratification unless all formalities of the aid package are settled first. And France is said still to have lingering qualms about the accord. Nonetheless, general expectations are that all the member states will have completed the process of ratification before Christmas.

Pursuant to the trade liberalization terms of the Uruguay Round agreement, Japan had to open its rice market partially to foreign imports. To go by the media reports circulating at the time, Japanese rice farmers were up in arms against the move. Well, the Japanese government announced a \$60 billion financial package prior to ratification of the agreement, to support partial liberalization of rice imports and other agricultural reforms. Elsewhere in Asia, the world trade pact raised waves of protests, albeit for different reasons. In some of the countries, such as South Korea, the Philippines and India, things have been relatively quiet in Bangladesh.

Neither does Uruguay Round agreement ratification seem to figure as a topic being talked about around here. All the same, a foreign news agency has recently reported the authorities here as saying that ratification of the agreement in our case does not require legislative approval. Anyway, existing dispensation lets current GATT members take up to two years to ratify the world trade pact even after the WTO comes into being, and still be counted

as founder-members of the new organization.

CRAFTED over a period of more than seven years, the Uruguay Round package has been billed as the most ambitious bid ever to free world trade of barriers. The avowed objective of the global accord is to introduce a rule-based system that enables world's trading nations to compete freely. Higher the competitiveness of an economy, the better placed it would be to benefit from the new trade order. And the WTO will be there to see that the competing nations observe world trading rules. A smooth functioning of its new dispute settlement procedure will be of crucial importance to the WTO. GATT also had a dispute settlement procedure. However, a country against which a complaint was made had the right to veto against the decision of a GATT trade dispute panel. In the new WTO dispute settlement procedure, panel decisions, once taken, can only be blocked by unanimity. In short, the WTO is designed to eliminate the power of any one country to block an adverse trade ruling.

Considered in this perspective, the apparent willingness of the world's most powerful trading nation to quit WTO rather than abide by all its decisions, can only be viewed as disconcerting. It is also evident that the world's major trading nations will retain their arsenal of trade weapons for unilateral retaliatory action against others and against one another. All of these surely are not positive signs of a truly multilateral trading system emerging under the aegis of the new World Trade Organization.

ers to form a cabinet in order to hold elections. The fact that he is elected on BNP's ticket could make the opposition reluctant to accommodate to his measures. Moreover, it is sure to disrupt the ongoing democratic process.

4. In view of considerable snags over the above options it is only natural to seek the opinion of the people. Since both the confronting camps are supposedly acting on behalf of the people so let the people decide whether they want next general election under a non-partisan caretaker government or the existing elected one.

Referendum can be held. It will save humiliation of capitulating to each others demand through either dialogue or agitation. In democracy one simply has to accede to people's verdict. The election commission can be separated from the executive. It will conduct the referendum. The government by remaining neutral can only gain. The electorate can regain confidence over its ability to hold free elections in future. In case they loose, there is no disgrace in bowing to the majorities' wish. Rather, it is a dignified way of accepting defeat. Moreover, they get a chance to prove their serious intent of resolving the crises.

The opposition will have an opportunity to seek mandate from the people over an issue they claim to be a national demand. Finally, it is the country that gains most.

The writer is a development worker with more than two decades of experience.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

by the signatory countries had not been smooth everywhere. Final passage of the treaty in the US legislature had been of crucial importance because a negative vote would have unravelled the package hampered out through more than seven years of tortuous global negotiations. The world watched the trail of ratification of the agreement in the United States with avid interest. Thus it was reported that compromises have been made in bringing necessary modifications in the US trade laws to make these conform to the terms of the global accord. The final deal that ensured validation of the global trade pact by the US legislature, proposes to set up a panel of retired American judges to review WTO rulings, permitting the United States to pull out of the organi-

quit WTO would probably crimp the organization's agenda on dispute settlement. In EU's case, ratification of the Uruguay Round agreement had been slowed down by an internal dispute between the European Commission and member states over negotiating authority. The European Court has since ruled that the agreement gives mixed competence to the European Commission and member states. This implies ratification of the agreement by each member states before or after its validation at the Union level. Earlier, the EU had to sanction an aid package of some \$500 million to one member state, Portugal, to help its textile industry absorb the shock from phasing out of trade barriers as provided in the global pact. Words have

Where are We Heading?

by Ali Ahmed Ziauddin

Our national life is yet again at crossroads. Both the camps claim they are championing the people's cause. But never propose to consult them. Hugely organised public meetings are anything but consultation.

other than strengthen lawlessness.

A brief account of the 5th parliament

It was born out of an election widely recognised as impartial. Expectations were high. Achievement is unfortunately low. Except agreement over the form of government, consensus on any other major national issue has not been possible. Today, the pertinent question is why did so many pay so much for so little?

Out of the total vote cast, both BNP and AL along with their declared and undeclared allies fetched nearly 33 per cent each. Numerically, BNP captured more seats but not enough to form the government. Jamaat's support was crucial. It was made possible entirely due to a temporary constitutional provision of inducting 30 non-elected but equally powerful women members. So the eventual BNP government came about not because of popular will of the majority but on the grounds of technicality. While the essence was of a minority government, visible formation was that of a majority.

Instead of building a bridge through consultation and consensus with the mainstream opposition, the government

displayed too much authority, and not much wisdom. By brute majority perhaps government is possible, but not good governance. Ridiculing and snubbing the opposition at every moment may be very tempting, but not a very wise political behaviour. Present political uncertainty stems largely from BNP's continuous failure to realise above mentioned age-old unwritten but mandatory parliamentary norms in spirit.

Sadly, the story doesn't end here. The opposition by and large proved irresponsible and to some extent irrelevant. It seems their one and only agenda is to make BNP's governance uneasy at any cost. To top it all, occasional utterly ridiculous outbursts by the leader of the opposition keeps one wondering her maturity to provide leadership.

Our national life is yet again at crossroads. Both the camps claim they are championing the people's cause. But never propose to consult them. Hugely organised public meetings are anything but consultation. When rampant plunder is the general order, autocratic administration at political and economic managerial level is the only natural outcome. Both the camps are infested with

this disease. That's why they are scared to take the people into confidence. Rather, they feel comfortable at intrigues and deals under the table. When that too seems a distant possibility, prospects of sliding towards another Rawanda looms large in the horizon.

Outwardly, acceptance or non-acceptance of a caretaker government is a prestige issue for both sides. Prestige, indeed has a lot to do with image. And image is a very important element in any type of partisan politics. So it simply has to be addressed seriously. Let us then consider probable options.

Options

1. While the concept of a caretaker government with the prime minister is rejected by the opposition, the party in position dare not accept it without her. For the moment it is difficult to imagine any tangible development towards a non-partisan caretaker government through dialogue.

2. A national government with proportionate representation from the existing parliament is conceivable but hardly feasible given the present deep mistrust among the contending parties.

3. The President can intervene with his emergency power.

To the Editor...

The sound of steelbars

Sir, Every morning I wake up to the metallic sound of hammering steelbars. This rather monotonous symphony is created by labourers working on the building site next door. As a civil engineer I do like hectic building activities, but my heart is bleeding, knowing that every stroke from the sledgehammer makes contribution to weakening of the steelbars. The quality of the building construction is accordingly reduced.

I know this is "the normal procedure in Bangladesh", but believe me or not, this "normal procedure" gives a loss of millions of Taka every year in terms of reduced load capacity. The systematic strokes from heavy sledgehammers lead to micro cracks in the crystalline structure of the steel.

I also know that the purpose of the hammering is to straighten the bars, coming bended and twisted from the supplier. But bearing in mind that the bars play an important role as reinforcement, making concrete to a suitable load-bearing construction material, this "procedure" should be strictly forbidden. And so it is in my home country.

The consequence of this way of handling steelbars, is one of two alternatives:

1. Taking into consideration the loss of capacity, the consultants have to increase the quantity of reinforcement to compensate for the loss. It means higher cost (i.e. waste of money).
2. Neglecting the loss of capacity, the construction will

have less security against collapse than specified in the standards for design and calculation. The outcome will be a higher rate of frequently collapses (again waste of money).

I kindly request my colleagues, consultants within civil engineering, to pay some attention to this issue. Maybe some specifications in tender documents should be made concerning proper handling of reinforcement. Production of standard lengths not more than eight meter and keeping the bars in straight lengths, would make transport, storage and handling easier, moreover ensure better quality and security of the concrete constructions.

Helge Dieset, a foreigner

No more hartal please!

Sir, I thank Mr Hanif Rahman for his letter appreciating my write-up published in your paper. I would also like to thank him for reminding us that we sometimes become captives in the hands of mastans and hoodlums who are used by the politicians to snatch our fundamental rights to vote. Yes, voting-right is our fundamental right like our right to live, right to eat etc and we ourselves are responsible to see that our rights are obtained and exercised properly and justly.

I have in my earlier write-up cited example of 1954, 1970 and 1990 elections where majority's wishes have

been reflected in choosing the representatives to the Parliament and I personally think that in any area where majority wants to vote for some particular candidate, any powerful minority and even government officials cannot prevent it. I agree that sometimes political parties arrange false votes. Even political activists with the help of hired 'mastans' tried to force the voters from entering into the election booth. That may happen even in a election conducted under a caretaker government if we, the voters and the citizens are not strong and careful enough to resist it. The answer is given by Mr Hanif Rahman himself when he says that we the voters have to be conscious and vigilant over our rights and should collectively protect our rights. My experience says that political parties sometimes arrange false votes for two sections of voters — educated rich and illiterate poor. The rich class often do not bother or are hesitant to go to vote and the other section cares little to go to vote until and unless some political parties arrange to bring them to the polling booth as they, in most cases, do not understand the efficacy and importance of their voting rights. Also many of their names in the voter-lists and their father's name either are not enrolled or spelled wrongly which helps the political party-workers giving false vote.

So in my opinion the educated class would have to be more responsible in conducting a free and fair election and

change the atmosphere. We will have to act soon. Generally we only talk but do not act properly.

Here, I would like to mention again that most of us do not like the idea of hartal as a means of showing our disapproval as it hampers our economic growth and curtail our fundamental rights. But have we ever collectively tried to reach the opposition parties to lodge protest or to make them understand that we want them to other ways to find out protest in a democratic manner? Most political parties, I believe, want public support for and approval of their activities. Whenever they would feel that the majority do not like hartal they would refrain from calling hartal so frequently and find alternative ways for materialising their demand. Our ways to show our disapproval collectively is to make our politicians understand that whatever they do should reflect people's wishes. For this people should also keep a watch.

We should always remember what Lord Acton said "constant vigilance is the price of liberty".

Munira Khan, Green Road, Dhaka

An appeal

Sir, We are grateful to the opposition parties for reducing the time of hartal announced for December 7 and 8, to one and half days with a break from 6pm to 10pm on December 7.

This proves that our political parties are not oblivious to the sufferings of the people caused due to the call of hartal as a political protest.

As hartals interalia disrupt our communication with foreign countries and adversely affect our international trade and commerce, we appeal that as a matter of policy hartals when needed may be called on Saturday or Sunday or on both the days considering the fact that most of the developed countries observe Saturday and Sunday as weekly holidays. Our observance of Friday as weekly holiday has resulted in dislocation of our foreign dealings for three days in a week.

If hartals are called on Saturdays or Sundays then this dislocation will not aggravate further. This will also enable the people to avoid fixing social functions on Saturdays or Sundays. The foreigners who observe weekly holidays on Saturdays and Sundays even in our country shall get least disturbed. We hope our political parties will consider this appeal seriously.

A A G Kabir, Dhaka

"Bravo Mahathir..."

Sir, I have learnt, thru your columns, about the courageous and honest statements of Mahathir Mohammad, the hon'ble Prime Minister of Malaysia delivered in a keynote address to the International Conference on human rights recently held in KL. I hail his role as a vocal

critic of western hegemony — dual standard and hypocrisy.

I am as well distressed and totally frustrated for the unusual silence of the middle-eastern capitalists over the systematic annihilation of Bosnian Muslims and for their shameless cooperation with the West. I wonder if these friends of the West care in any way for the regard of human rights?

As rightly said by the hon'ble Mahathir "record of the democratic governments of the West is not very inspiring". Their standard of human rights vary from place to place or people to people, depending on their interests.

This is high time that the Asian Leaders condemn the double standards of the West and devise their values of human rights. And I believe it's our turn now to organize our "Amnesty (International) Asian".

In another section of the news I have read about the US concern for the trial of Kurdish MPs in Turkey — another instance of US hypocrisy while they alongwith their henchmen seemed unconcerned of the Bosnian massacre.

I condemn the atrocities that are being carried out on innocent Bosnian population and indifference of the West and the UN controlled by them. And as such I want to voice, as the voice of the repressed Third World countries, to start thinking seriously of establishing a UN for the Asians.

A F Rahman, Dhaka