

## 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 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 intercine kilkenny-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 is from 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 capitally unvisualisable.

With the coming of the quantum approach to reality, pioneered by Max Plauck but so effectively promoted by Einstein, things got eons 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 especially to physicists of the order of Einstein, Heisenberg or the lately-in-fashion Stephen Hawking.

# World Trade Organization Ready to Take Off

**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.**

as founder-members of the new organization.

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**C**RAFTED 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.

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

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 had 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

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 had 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.

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 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

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.**

WHILE we seem to be drifting, our future appears incredibly unpredictable. Our political leadership find it more entertaining ridiculing each other than to lead us out of the impasse. Perhaps they cannot overcome the crisis because it is mostly their creation. What led to this deadlock in the first place? Let us have a dispassionate look at that and think of possible options of steering out of it. Unless we find it comforting to end up as a paramountly dependent country there simply has to be a way out.

What are the minimum socio-economic conditions required for parliamentary democracy to function smoothly?

1. Some amount of sound reproductive economic order.

2. Visibly honest and independent judiciary.

3. Impartial election system.

4. A free but responsible mass communication system.

5. Stable, disciplined civil and military bureaucracy.

6. A minimum level of education.

7. Matured political behaviour.

8. Willingness to share power.

9. Bare minimum consensus on major national issues.

10. Uniformity within diversity.

Parliamentary democracy as we see it, functions today in West Europe is the result of centuries of social struggle within. Feudal system decayed with the advent of capitalism. Merchant class took the lead. Parliament was established. It was no better than ours at the

moment till the mercantile class remained dominant in society. Parliament virtually turned into a rubber stamp to legalise their plunder within and outside respective countries in collaboration with monarchy. Discipline, order and smooth operation of bourgeoisie democracy only came about with the expansion of industrialisation. This graduation took generations. In some cases, more than hundred years. Perhaps, changed international scenario may lessen the period of transformation in the developing world now-a-days but how can we just replicate it within a span of one or two decades without having gone through the struggling changes in productive and social relation?

Present political turmoil is an expression of intensive socio-economic struggle in above light. Good news is constant vigilance and timely reform may rectify anomalies in our nascent democratic process. Bad news is, trading class is dominant in both the government and opposition. Conflict is for power not principle. What do we do — liquidate ourselves? Or work out a course of action where entrepreneurial class will gradually emerge as the new ruling class. Shutting ourselves off will not help

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.

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

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

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 literally 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 a 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 Mohamad, 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

### 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.

ALONG MY WAY  
S B Chaudhuri

## 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 loadbearing 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

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

I kindly request