

Why This Cat and Mouse Game?

Frankly, we are getting a bit weary of this on-again and off-again 'negotiation' game. Everyday, we in the print media, are carrying news of who met whom, and who said what, and are trying to make some sense out of them, and then hoping against all hopes that something positive will come out from all this political play.

Sheikh Hasina's speech the other day has made the opposition's position clear. She was definitely more reconciliatory than before. The very fact of her not calling for the expected series of hartals is a sign of both softening and of becoming aware that hartals are eroding her bank of supporters.

So please stop this cat and mouse game, and get serious about taking the final steps to firm up the understanding which is almost there.

Serving Our Readers Better

Today your newspaper enters its fifth year of publication. During the past four years, we have tried to serve our readers to the best of our ability. On this day we remember with pride and gratitude the man who had started it all — our founder editor, late S M Ali. How much of his vision we have been able to live up to only our readers can judge.

This year, in addition to the Agenda '95, we are proposing to undertake three campaigns (see anniversary issue) on urgent concerns of our readers. These areas have been chosen from numerous letters and telephone calls that we received in response to our request for suggestions for '95.

As we enter our fifth year of publication we realise that we still have a long way to go. With your — our readers' — support and guidance we pledge to try much harder than before, and will hopefully be a better newspaper than we are today.

Threat to Film

1995 marks the centenary of the world film. This cultural landmark could be celebrated as one of the greatest pageants in the annals of human history but for two looming threats. One of them concerns the decaying process of the screen images. This concern has been amply voiced by UNESCO chief Federico Mayor.

Most people will find no difficulty in agreeing with Mayor when he observes, "the art of the cinema is the custodian of the 20th century's memory." But the problem is that most of the motion pictures were taped on perishable types of film.

RICE is the staple food for the Bengalees and the commodity is estimated to account for about one-fourth of the average household expenditure in Bangladesh. However, the poorest 40 per cent of rural and urban areas is reported to spend a bit more on this staple food item viz. 38 and 32 per cent respectively.

Drs Quazi Shahabuddin and Sajjad Zohir of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies recently produced a report on Markets and Macro Economic Transmission in Bangladesh wherein a valuable overview of the growth and structure of rice market in Bangladesh was succinctly presented.

A NY spotlight on the state of broadcasting in Bangladesh is welcome (Khurshida Haq's review, Star, Dec 9). The BMR of Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Radio Bangladesh (RB) is not that difficult logistically, as there are several supporting institutions at home and at the regional and international levels to assist the developing countries update the standard of service to the hungry audience in this IT age of global village concept.

A new local entrant to this service industry has to undergo orientation and basic training courses at NIMC (The National Inst of Mass Comm), coupled with on-the-job training. Thereafter there are staff courses at regular intervals throughout a person's career; even while moving up vertically after promotion. The technological side of this electronic medium is changing so fast that it is impossible to

For Whom the Rice Market Rings

by Abdul Bayes

the degree of participation by different farm sizes of households etc.

Rice Market Structure

It could be gleaned from the report that the rice market in Bangladesh grew thicker over a period of two decades or so. For example, as compared to the early 1970s when only 15 per cent of the rice output used to find ways into the market, the share rose monotonically in successive years and in 1990, the proportion shot up to about 50 per cent.

Commercialization of rice output also seems to have undergone radical changes. Traditional notion holds that only large farmers are generated while those at the bottom of farm size strata are in general subsistence and deficit farmers. The report by Shahabuddin and Zohir, using data generated by Nuimuddin, tells us a different story. It appears that all classes of farmers in Bangladesh, with varying

degrees, now go to the market to sell their surplus. The average proportion of output marketed for all sizes of farms in progressive districts is reported to be 53 per cent in amon season and 86 per cent in boro season. During the amon season, even functionally landless farms (with only 0.49 acres of land) marketed one-fourth of their produce in the study year (1990) while small ones marketed 41 per cent, medium 47 per cent and tycoons 58 per cent the share in boro season stood at 63 per cent for small, 81 per cent for medium and 92 per cent for large farms.

Channels for Paddy Output

Farias and beparis still continue to be the prime source of the output marketed. Their number went up by a factor of 12 to 15 from a little over 40 thousand in early 1970s. More than two thirds of the output now is sold at the

farm gate, mostly to these Farias and beparis as against one-third in the late sixties. Small rice mills and crushers directly knock at farm gate to tap one-fifth to one-fourth their paddy requirements. Even the agents of paddy wholesalers and aratidars, not so much in the past, now seen at farmers' doors. This phenomena goes to imply that farmers are not merely in the marketing stage but they are at the centre of markets. Another interesting finding is that although there is large difference in the degree of market offerings across farm size groups, there is, however, no significant difference discernible on account of farm gate prices fetched by different sizes of farms. By and large, the findings tend to reject the hypothesis that market is only meant for the large and, therefore, any talks relating to market reforms only supports the interests of the bigger ones.

Channels for Rice

Rice marketing function is predominated by an arsenal of small scale paddy processors.

price ratio. Based on the notions that the market grew thick and that geographical decentralization took over the earlier concentration situation, the authors point out that the distribution cost including traders' profit not only has remained low relative to retail prices but perhaps has decreased somewhat. The outcome so depicted does not seem surprising since it has been noted earlier that the farmers now market two-thirds on farm, compared to one-third two decades ago.

Concluding Remarks

It seems that the rice market in Bangladesh has grown matured over time. This is evidenced from the fact that private stock now amounts to three months' rice requirements compared to only one-month's two decades back. Second, technological progress and surplus disposal seems highly correlated, be it for aggregate, cross section data or cross section farm level data. And third, rice economy has enhanced its share of economy-wise stocks.

Marketing margins of rice in the early 1970s, varied between one-fifth to one-fourth of the retail price. In 1982-83, the margin was estimated at 26 per cent and the IFRI estimate for 1989-90 places the rate at 21 per cent.

Has the margin fallen? The authors chose to be non-committal on this issue but (perhaps to soothe those who would like to rejoice a fall), brings to the fore certain features of the margin — retail

the electronic media has to be geared for modern after-sale service and proper maintenance setups. Maintenance is always lagging behind in the use of high-tech equipment in the DCs for several reasons: spares inventory control, which is linked to foreign exchange; trained servicemen armed with proper equipment, and the administrative ability to resource regular modernization projects.

The invasion, and popularity of satellite broadcasting in the developing countries came at a cyclonic speed. Before the century is out, multi-media is likely to become a commercial reality and may overtake the DCs in the same manner. What could be done locally now is at least to be mentally prepared for the changes, and not be caught napping with untrained staff during the transition period.

The writer is a multi-media consultant.

BMR in the Broadcasting Sector

by A Mawaz

The technological side of this electronic medium is changing so fast that it is impossible to render proper service without frequent reorientation courses.

render proper service without frequent reorientation courses. There are two regional broadcasting institutions in the Asia-Pacific zone to look after the development requirements of the public broadcasting networks in the member countries. One is the ABU or the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, and the other AIBD, the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcast Development. The ABU deals with the common policy matters of common interest to the members, while the AIBD looks after the training needs at the regional and specialist levels.

based in Kuala Lumpur (KL). Batches of Bangladeshi trainees are a regular sight at AIBD, encompassing all the sectors of broadcasting: programme, engineering, management and news. A very large number of RB and BTV staff have been trained up by AIBD at KL and also at the home bases. Members of ABU send high level delegates to the annual conference of the ABU, and to the ABU seminars and symposia.

broadcasting are state controlled. Therefore the programme or news presentations are severely and strictly limited to state policy. It is a fallacy for the outsiders to presume that the staff are inadequately trained, and cannot reorient quickly to changed policy guidelines. TV production houses are coming up slowly in Dhaka, encouraged by the audio-visual demands of the NGOs for the production of documentaries, many of which are screened abroad by the foreign NGOs or donor agencies.

replaced by electronic TV camera and magnetic tape recording even for the master copy, as digital editing is better, faster, and cheaper. Such production houses have to be encouraged in the private sector, with better tariff facilities, and state patronisation from time to time (does BTV accept outside locally produced TV programmes excluding the commercials?).

Donor Countries Softening Stance towards Myanmar?

Minn Thu writes from Yangon

The West seemed to change its hardline approach and strategy after military leaders held two meetings with political detainee Aung Su Kyi for the first time.

MAJOR donor countries are reviewing their policy towards Myanmar in view of recent political developments indicating a change of attitude of the ruling military owing to pressures exerted by the international community.

This became apparent in successive visits last month of senior officials from the West and also from Asia, all of whom showed interest in renewing economic ties with Myanmar, one of world's least developed countries (LDC).

Developments in the political scene particularly the two meetings between top military officials and detained opposition leader and 1991 Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Su Kyi, were believed to have contributed to the initial success of Myanmar's efforts to improve its image abroad and earn the goodwill of donor countries.

For the first time since the 1988 coup senior officials from the United States, Germany and Britain visited Myanmar to discuss economic cooperation.

Major donors suspended all aid and loans to this country of 45 million after the Sept. 18, 1988 coup because of dissatisfaction over the way the

ruling military handled the pro-democracy movement and because of its alleged human rights violations.

The international community has been applying external pressure on Myanmar, demanding the release of Ms. Su Kyi and other political detainees, and the speedy transfer of power to the civilian government composed of those duly elected in the May 27, 1990 polls.

The West, analysts observed, slightly changed its hardline approach and strategy towards Myanmar when Senior General Than Shwe, chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and Secretary I Khin Nyunt held two meetings with Ms Su Kyi for the first time since her detention in July 1989. The meetings were held last Sept. 20 and Oct. 28.

"Malicious accusations, pressures and coercion were reduced to some extent as the country achieved more political and economic stability", said Lt. Gen. Nyunt.

The visiting diplomats regarded the meetings between the military and Myanmar's number one political detainee as a welcome development and conveyed their strong interest in issues of critical concern,

especially human rights, democratisation and counter-narcotics.

The deputy minister of Germany's federal ministry of finance, Jurgen Echternach, arrived here Nov. 1 to discuss economic cooperation and business opportunities. His visit followed that of Jurgen Staks, counsellor first class and head of the southeast Asia division of the German foreign ministry.

The United States sent Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Asia and Pacific Affairs Thomas Hubbard; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour Affairs Nancy Ely-Raphel; International Narcotic Matters Bureau Asia Programmes Division Chief Douglas Rasmussen; and National Security Council staff member Eric Schwartz.

The American delegation, during a three-hour meeting on Nov. 1 with Lt. Gen. Nyunt, "cordially and frankly discussed improving relations, development trend of Myanmar's political and eco-

nomic conditions, progress in drug abuse control, prospects for cooperation between the two countries and human rights", according to the state-run media.

The delegation stressed the importance of a genuine process of political reconciliation, including substantive dialogue with Ms Su Kyi, her release and that of other "prisoners of conscience", and a political process that genuinely permits people's participation, analysts quoted Mr Hubbard as saying.

The American official indicated that the US wanted to see more constructive relations but made it clear that significant improvement in issues of concern was necessary if there was to be meaningful progress in bilateral relations, they said.

"We pointed out that failure to move forward on these critical issues of concern will lead to further restriction in our political and economic ties," diplomats quoted Mr Hubbard as saying at a press conference in the Thai capital of Bangkok.

Diplomats said Mr Hubbard, who had a serious business-like and extensive talk on a range of issues, requested a meeting with Ms Su Kyi but this was turned down by the military.

Analysts opined that the military naturally would not want any outsider to meet her when the dialogue has just started.

However, Lt. Gen. Nyunt gave the assurance that discussion with Ms Su Kyi were held on the basis of mutual respect and that these meetings would continue.

The SLORC secretary also told Mr Hubbard that an agreement would soon be signed with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on its role with regard to political prisoners and assured the American official that approval of prison visits would be forthcoming. Myanmar home affairs minister, Lt. Gen. Mya Thinn, held

talks with the regional representative of the ICRC, David Delapraz, on Nov 3.

The visit of US officials followed a policy review to pursue American interests more directly and more actively through talks with the Myanmar government. But the US delegation also warned of less positive developments should its "conditions" for renewing bilateral ties were not met.

When the new American charge d'affairs, Marilyn A Meyers, called on Lt. Gen. Nyunt on Oct. 27, official media reported that she "spoke of improving bilateral relations."

Then came Assistant Undersecretary for South and Southeast Asia David Dain of the British Foreign Commonwealth Office, who called on Lt. Gen. Nyunt and "discussed promotion of friendly relations and bilateral trade," official media reported. — Depthnews Asia

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.

Political fatwa!

Sir, The main opposition party appears to be vacillating at a critical period of its existence. It is completely ignoring feedback from the responding majority public opinion as appearing in the media (go back to the parliament), and is feeling smug and self-righteous in its monomaniac view that the party in power has to be brought down by hook or by crook. It has abandoned its previous stand of fair election mechanism and has openly and publicly come up with a single one-point plan of bringing down the present government. Other smaller (opportunistic) parties are taking the cue from this environment of picking up the crumbs.

The motivation is wrong and the instability is being en-

couraged by enemies(!) of the country, who will certainly take advantage of the situation. We have to start all over from zero once again, thanks to the quality of our peripatetic leadership.

It is high time to discourage such myopic leadership. Now we have political fatwas!

A Husnain Dhaka

Cold spell victims

Sir, According to the weather forecast, this year will see the severest of cold waves in years. Already 13 people have died of the sweeping cold wave in the northern parts of the country. The number may not be alarming but it will surely increase with another cold spell. The victims are

mainly from the poor and deprived section of the society. Unlike us who look upon winter as the best part of the year they regard it as a curse. Winter brings for them untold miseries and augments their sufferings. For us who are very sufficiently equipped to face winter the cold poses no threats but for those who cannot even afford to purchase a blanket or a quilt to fight the biting cold, winter is a nightmare. Even in the capital after dark we can find thousands of homeless people lying on the pavements shivering.

Our government cannot provide some assistance to these poor souls by distributing blankets, quilts and other necessary items. The opposition parties can also play a vital role too. All we hear from the political leaders of our country are promises which are devoid of any true commitment.

At present the political situation of the country is in a disastrous condition. The whole nation as a result of this political impasse is moving towards an utter hopelessness. I really find it amazing how self-centered the politicians of this country are. They announce

massive agitation programmes to realise their demands but when it comes to solving some problems facing the poor people they seem to lose all interest. Most of the politicians of our country, apparently, are interested in what serves their purpose. This is outrageous.

Why don't we have a massive programme to save the countless people from the sweeping cold wave? Such a programme should not be expensive. If the government and the opposition parties can afford to waste millions in campaigning, they can jolly well spend a small portion of that to lessen the miseries faced by the ordinary people. The question is, why should the single life be lost due to the intense cold wave? The blame is not only on the government but also on the opposition parties who are at present causing inconceivable damage to the country by their preposterous agitation programmes. If the opposition or the government have any intention of gaining public support, then they must serve the people first.

Touheed Peroze Dhaka University

OPINION Why Not a 'No Winner-No Loser' Game?

Kazi A Latif

Bangladesh is possibly facing the worst political crisis of all times. It appears that a little bout is in progress in the political arena of the country between the 'title-holders' (the ruling BNP) and the 'challenger' (the AL). The 'challenger' maintains that the country is under a 'corrupt', 'vote-dacoit', 'inefficient' leadership, and that it cannot be trusted to supervise the next general election. On the other hand, the titleholder rejects that claim saying that it has got a 'mandate from the people to rule for five years, supervise a general election and hand over power to the winner. So far it was a debate, but now it has turned into an open fight and the common people are watching — some with horror being worried about the future of the country, and others with amusement counting plus and minus points of both.

Two rounds of the 'bout' are already over (Ninian round and Resignation round) and it now appears that the parties are perhaps preparing for the final round which may be called 'knock-out round'.

Many political observers believe that the most likely solution could be acceptance by both the parties of the 'no winner no loser' principle. This can be achieved perhaps

by giving authority to the President to run the country during the interim period of six to eight weeks through Advisors to be appointed by him applying his best judgement and in consultation with the political parties represented in the Sangsad. Such persons shall not contest in the election.

This idea is in no way new, but under the changed context it should be worthwhile giving a fresh thought to it. The President is very much a part of the administration, being the number one person in the protocol, and the Prime Minister governs on behalf of the President. In such a case, it will be grateful to handover power to the President, rather than to a 'neutral, non-party third person'. Of course, this will require amendment of the constitution which the ruling party has to accept. If we analyse it further, it will be evident that neither party will be a total loser or total gainer, but both will be on the same footing.

However, if both the 'contestants' vow to play the game to the finish, we may find both knocked out and beyond the referee can finish counting upto ten, a third player may be in the ring to declare himself winner!