

Realizing the Social Goal

The first World Summit on Social Development ended on a compromising rather than a high note. A 10-point declaration received a consensus approval from the delegates representing 184 countries at the last moment. A social summit of this order was expected to suggest concrete measures to specially address the problems facing the poor. Such a summit needs not only to be clear about the goal but also about how to achieve it. The Copenhagen summit's special focus on society did not really succeed in drawing out new pledges. The week-long deliberations could produce some vague assurances only.

If that was the weakness of the conference, there were a lot of analysis of issues, soul-searching and suggestions that might help formulate the future agenda for the international community. This time also social development was largely defined in terms of economic growth but there was at least some recognition that there are other indices to measure the progress of a society. To see society in its entirety, man needs to be placed at the centre of all developmental efforts. The primary concern ought to be the creation of a congenial environment for the overall development of human head and heart. There was a clear, albeit not very much pronounced, message that not everything should be determined by commercial concerns.

While all this is yet to be reflected in the national and international development policies, the more immediate issues have been elaborately dealt with. For example, prime minister of Bangladesh, Khaleda Zia has put forward a few concrete proposals that merit attention. Her suggestion for the constitution of an international task force under the UN aegis with the responsibility of making the entire multilateral system more effective in eradicating poverty looks very practical. The establishment of an independent commission to recommend on crucial issues of global concern is another of her suggestions that holds tremendous prospect. This can be of great help particularly in the cases of cancellation of outstanding debts, making structural adjustment less hurting and fulfilling the ODA targets. Add to this the 20:20 debate that favours a commitment of 20 per cent of a nation's resources along with 20 per cent of international aid for the social sector.

The fact that the lessening of pressure on global resources owing to the end of the cold war has been greatly offset by a not so readily admitted trade war must have constrained the developed nations in making new pledges. But things showed signs of moving forward. We will be counting on that forward movement in the future.

Consumer Rights

Today is the World Consumer Rights Day. In our country the consumers are on the receiving end and hence any event relating to the protection of their rights is highly important. In the absence of any organised movement for the protection of consumer rights, the market is controlled and even conveniently manipulated by the traders. The way artificial crisis of goods are created should be considered not only a departure from genuine business practice but also a violation of laws of the land. So the illegal practices should be dealt with legally.

This apart, however, there are a whole lot of issues concerning the consumers' rights. These start with good dealing by the sellers and may end up in ensuring the quality of the products and goods. While courteous behaviour should be mutual, there are aspects that must not depend on a buyer's lack of knowledge or courtesy. Because this might put at risk the health and even lives of the consumers. The fact is that our consumers hardly know about their rights in the market. They are mostly apologetic, specially when they themselves are less smart than the salesmen or saleswomen. Trade here is often based on a dose of cheating, some intimidation and uncouth promotion.

It is precisely for these reasons that the consumer goods can register as much a rise as 20 per cent within four months. The Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) holds that the essentials have recorded a price hike by 8.74 during the month of Ramadan compared to the past year's. There are subtle economic forces that sometimes push up prices but in our case the consumer items become dearer during the two Eid festivals and hardly return to their original indices. This is what is really unacceptable. If the market forces were responsible for the price hike, nobody had any reason to complain. So a strong consumer rights movement is necessary. But first the people must be aware of their rights.

US Assurance for Afghans

We regard as considerably significant the US State Department's statement that it is ready to work with whatever government emerges in civil war-torn Afghanistan. With the UN mission in deep waters following President Rabbani's dithering on the formation of a compromise and composite governing council to prepare Afghanistan for the national election, the voicing of the US interest in the matter couldn't have come a day earlier.

There can be three implications of the US statement. First, although the cold war era has ended the US recognises that the anarchy in Afghanistan "threatens regional stability and US national interests." Secondly, the US may be assuring the parties concerned that if they would succeed in reconciling their differences, Washington will be pleased to extend support to the government to emerge from such a process. It could count on the USA. Thirdly, Washington is leaving the nearly one dozen Islamic factions working at cross-purposes in Afghanistan to sort out their own differences through purposeful negotiations. But it is unrealistic to expect that those who factionalised and carried forward their contentious mini struggles among themselves will be instrumental in disbanding their separate identities of their own sweet will.

Thus we think there has to be a persuasive input of the world body into the peace-making process instead of waiting for one or the other faction to emerge as the military winner — of most probably doubtful durability — to deal with. So the UN mission in Kabul needs to establish a useful contact with negotiators among the Afghan feuding parties rather than their military leaders. No nation can live permanently on perennially martial output.

Turkey: Passage into EU

Arshad-uz Zaman writes from Istanbul

ON 6 March 1995 Turkey crossed a very important milestone in her national foreign policy objective. She signed with the powerful 15-nation European Union (EU) Customs Union, an essential first step for her towards her drive to become full member of this organisation.

Signing of the Customs Union with EU did not come about easy for Turkey. She applied for membership more than three decades ago in 1963 when EU was a tiny six-nation body. Since then it grew to twelve when Britain and her partners joined. On 1 January 1995 it has swollen to 15 and there are several European states waiting in the wings.

Whereas western European states came in early and were joined by eastern European state like Greece, progress of Turkey towards EU has been strewn with thorns. Membership of EU is by unanimous decision of member states, who each has a veto. Turco-Greek relations oscillate between 'frothy and tepid' and Greece has put up one road-block after another on the path of Turkey. The most important is the fate of Cyprus. Since 1974 Cyprus has been effectively partitioned between Greek populated internationally recognised Cyprus and Turkish populated Northern Cyprus recognised by Turkey alone, whose 30,000 soldiers provide security to this tiny state. There are other disputes like the islands in the Aegean Sea shared by Greece and Turkey and some of whom lie perilously close to each other's borders.

It is a measure of the tenacity of Turkish foreign policy that in spite of numerous obstacles she has remained steadfast in her ambition to join EU which has grown into a powerful bloc and has the potential to grow into the most powerful market of the world.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, who is the current President of EU, while welcoming the unanimous vote in favour of Turkey, stated, 'this is very important moment in the relations between Turkey and the EU'. Turkish

Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, who flew to Brussels specially for the occasion, stated, 'this is not only a very important date for Turkey, but a historic date for Europe. For 62 million Turks it will open a market of 430 million European consumers'. German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel stated, 'the agreement will integrate Turkey further to EU and will act as a brake against religious extremism'. The document signed between 15-nation EU and Turkey must be ratified by the European parliament. Although Turkey has many detractors in that body, it is now expected that there will be no further obstacles.

According to the present time-table Customs Union will come into effect on 1 January 1996, when all barriers between Turkey and EU will come down. Among the 15 members there are economic

heavyweights led by Germany and weak ones like Greece and Portugal. Turkey, with her present state of economy will figure in the lower half of the table. The passage into the EU will be painful as evidenced by the weaker members of the EU. On the other hand the prize is big. It is the huge European market, which is continuously expanding. Turkey's own economy has been growing at a healthy rate in spite of ballooning inflation.

Turkey has taken more than three decades to join the Customs Union, a step dispensed with for other member states. There is a long way to go for full membership. There will no doubt be more pitfalls and obstacles. The hard headed Turks can be counted upon to stay on course for the rest of the journey. After all Turkey has been part of Europe for more than a thousand years.

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Looking Back at March towards Independence

March 15, 1971 Sheikh Mujib added: 'The people of Bangladesh have demonstrated in no uncertain terms that they would die rather than surrender... today the entire people are united in their determination not to submit to Martial Law. I, therefore, urge those to whom the latest order has been directed, not to yield to the threat that has been levelled against them. Seventy-five million people of Bangladesh are behind them and their families. Meanwhile, Z A Bhutto, speaking at a press conference in Karachi, said that the present deadlock on the constitution could not be resolved 'by ignoring the wishes of the people of West Pakistan as represented by the majority party in the West Wing'. He told that he supported the demand for lifting of Martial Law and transfer of power to the people's elected representatives. Mr Bhutto reiterated that in the situation faced by Pakistan, having a geographical distance, between the two parts, 'the rule of majority did not apply'. Various leaders of minority parties publicly criticised Bhutto's speech of the previous day. Nawabzada Sher Ali Khan said 'I hope and pray that he has been incorrectly reported.' Malik Hamid Sarfaraz, General Secretary of the Punjab Awami League, said, 'I am dumbfounded to hear that Mr Bhutto, the erstwhile sole protagonist of the solidarity of Pakistan, in his craze for power, has thus virtually demanded secession of the two Wings of the country.' Mian Nizamuddin Hyder, MNA-elect, said the existing national crisis had taken a 'serious turn' because of the irresponsible statements made by the PPP Chairman. The President of the Council Muslim League bitterly criticised Bhutto's suggestion for the transfer of power to two majority parties, and accused him of spreading chaos and confusion throughout the country, while political circles in East Pakistan said such a suggestion proved that Bhutto believe in two Pakistans. (Compiled by Rashida Ahmad)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'Political Dialogue Must Start Immediately'



Muslehuddin Ahmad, Chairman, Civic Watch - Bangladesh and President of North South University responds to The Daily Star questionnaire:

The Daily Star (DS): What, according to you, are the reasons for the present political stalemate? What is the way out? Please elaborate your personal views on what should be the next step.

should also project their own plans and programmes — both political and economic — so that the people can take all these into consideration in casting their votes in the next elections. The majority of the people of Bangladesh may be illiterate but they never made mistakes when casting their votes.

But the major problem arises because of alleged election rigging and media coup. The people may vote alright but the ballot boxes have different ballot papers and even in case of proper voting a different election results may appear through media coup. Magura, Mirpur and the most recent one — Brahmanbaria-6, as reported, are the alarming examples of election irregularities. It is an utter political irresponsibility and indeed foolishness for any political party to go for such election irregularities. The ruling party indeed earned considerable credibility in terms of holding elections though it lost municipal elections in Dhaka and Chittagong but Magura election destroyed it completely and plunged the country into a total political chaos. The opposition got all the grounds to claim that the people's right to cast their votes in a free and fair manner appears no longer assured and the democracy achieved through long struggle and considerable sacrifices stands seriously threatened.

Therefore, the opposition not only boycotted the Parliament but also geared up their agitations through repeated strikes and hartals. Half-a-day hartal — dawn to dusk hartal — 48 hours hartal — roads and railways blockade and what not. Who suffers? — the people. People can not go to work. Even rickshaws are damaged and rickshaw-pullers beaten up. But after the hartals the people are being congratulated for their wilful participation in making each hartal a success — what an irony!

The ruling party apparently feels that strikes and hartals continue to make the opposition unpopular but as the people suffer, undoubtedly they also feel that the government does not govern; it can not ensure people's safety, their right to work and lead a normal life. Another argument of the ruling party is that it is better not to go for a direct confrontation with the opposition in the street. Fine, but as the country's future is already at stake, they only way out is to go for serious dialogue for an amicable settlement. The ruling party, however, argues that — we went for negotiations but no positive response from the opposition and our doors are still open. Anyway, the story of year-old political stalemate and failed negotiations is well known to the people. Bangladesh does not really need Lord Ninians. Their desire and offers to help deserve appreciation, but a nation should be conscious of its sovereign position.

And here I may mention that our organisation — CIVIC WATCH — BANGLADESH —

December without any publicity to organise a dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition. Apart from talking individually to some leaders of both parties, we met the leader of opposition and talked to her for about two hours. We gave several alternative proposals for a possible solution. We detected some flexibility on one or two proposals. Thereafter, we contacted the ruling party with written proposals. Though weeks have elapsed, we are still waiting for an appointment at the highest level. Indeed, Civic Watch - Bangladesh renews its offer to start immediately a shuttle dialogue and once a firm basis is available, a summit meeting could be arranged for finalisation of the deal. There is already an indication of willingness on the part of the Prime Minister to sit in a dialogue with the opposition leader. She should now send a proper invitation to the opposition leader and this would create positive negotiating environment. The conscious citizens are terribly concerned about the political future of Bangladesh and Civic Watch would welcome all those who would like to join the pursuit for an amicable solution. Indeed, we urge upon both the ruling party and the opposition to show necessary flexibilities and agree on a dialogue that could really 'untie the gordian knot of our politics'.

Our suggestion would be to start the dialogue on the offers made publicly by the Prime Minister on December 28-29, 1994 and leader of the opposition on January 10, 1995. Though the opposition politicians, probably out of frustration, are trying to move out of the commitment of leader of opposition of January 10, 1995, it seems that the following could form the basis for negotiations:

1. Prime Minister to resign 30 days before election (There could be negotiations on proposed 45 days/60 days etc).

2. President to hold the general election under executive authority to be provided with help of an Advisory Council of 10 members of (a) neutral persons or (b) members of the Parliament or members of the political parties to be nominated in equal numbers by the ruling party and the opposition.

If the opposition does not return to the Parliament the only alternative would be to adopt legal cover for these in the next elected Parliament.

DS: Everybody is talking about elections, but when should it be held — within the next few months or later in the year or at its scheduled time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for the timing of your choice.

lary relating to issue of identity cards and their use in the election. However, it seems advisable to go for general election as quickly as feasible. If the proposed dialogue becomes successful, setting of election date would be easier.

DS: How to ensure an independent Election Commission? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed?

MA: It is not difficult at all. Put people in the Election Commission who are honest and have guts to go by the book irrespective of who is or will be in power. And there are such people in Bangladesh. The Election Commission must stick to the rules and regulations and implement them without fear of favour. There is a general feeling that if the Election Commission acted appropriately in Magura election, the country would not have fallen into this political mess.

DS: What are your views on the need for a computerised voters' list and identity cards? Can we ensure fair election without them? If we want them, then what should be the time frame for elections?

MA: Computerised voters' list and identity cards can go a long way in ensuring fair election. Again, honesty is the most important factor. One may have duplicate identity cards unless the system of issue is fully computerised, controlled and checked automatically through computer.

DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political understanding between the ruling party and the opposition to ensure a free and fair election? Is such an understanding possible? If yes, then what should be the next step? If not, why not?

MA: It does not require much of understanding between political parties. It depends on the honesty of a political party. If a political party itself asks its nominees to remain within election laws, the problem will be considerably reduced. In the last general election, black money was not a major factor and indeed, in my opinion, it was not a factor at all. There was no rigging, no mustamism. It proves that our political parties, if they want, can operate within law and give the country a free and fair election. It they want they can do it again and the country does not need any Caretaker Government for that. The same people, same political parties, and same bureaucracy were there in the last general election; the caretaker government did not go round and preach any virtues on them. If all the political parties and bureaucracy behaved differently, Caretaker Government could have probably done nothing. But it did not happen. Therefore, it is the political parties and the bureaucracy which must act again as they did in the last general election and prove to the people that they want good of the people and welfare of the country.

Civic Watch is an organisation devoted to promoting all sorts of civic and political rights.

OPINION

Speaker's Ruling on Resignation of MPs

Dr M Mufakharul Islam

Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali's ruling on the resignation of 147 members of the Parliament belonging to the opposition parties is divided into two parts. In the first part of his ruling he has argued, on the basis of Article 67 (2) of our Constitution and Rule 177 (1), that three requirements need to be fulfilled by a member who intends to resign: (a) He shall sign the writing, that is resignation letter as per Article 67 (2) of the Constitution; (b) He shall write the resignation under his own hand; (c) He shall not assign any reason for his resignation.

But on a more careful reading of this part of the ruling it appears to me that as far as the written part of our Constitution and its Rules of Procedure are concerned, for resignation of a member of the Parliament to be valid only one condition — this is condition (b) mentioned by the Speaker — needs to be fulfilled. Let me explain the basis of my contention.

The first condition mentioned by the Speaker is said to arise out of the Bangla version of Article 67 (2) of our Constitution. But there is no phrase in the English version of this Article which can be translated as 'বাকস্বাক্ষর পত্রযোগে'. This will be clear if we quote this Article: 'A member of Parliament may resign his seat by writing under his hand addressed to the Speaker, and the seat shall become vacant when the writing is received by the Speaker, or if the Office of the Speaker is vacant or if the Speaker for any reason is unable to perform his function, by the Deputy Speaker'. What seems to have happened is that the words 'by writing under his hand' have been translated as 'বাকস্বাক্ষর পত্রযোগে'. As a matter of fact the Bangla translation of this part of the sentence should be 'বহুস্ত লিখিতভাবে'.

Thus the questions of 'বাকস্বাক্ষর পত্রযোগে' cannot be treated as a requirement for resignation. It is not being suggested that an unsigned resignation letter will be valid. The point that I am trying to make is that Members of the Parliament who framed the Constitution did not explicitly mention the need for signature, it must have (rightly) been considered too obvious to

need mentioning.

With regard to the third condition mentioned by the Speaker, it is true that as per Rule 177 (1) of the Rules of Procedure a member who submits a letter of resignation to the Speaker cannot assign any reason for his resignation. But again, this cannot be treated as a condition for valid resignation because even if a member mentions a reason for his resignation the Speaker cannot reject the resignation letter on this ground. All that he can do is to delete the reason from the resignation letter. Thus, it appears to me that we are left with only one condition 'বহুস্ত লিখিতভাবে' that is, condition (b) stated by the Speaker, on the basis of which the validity of a resignation has to be judged. This condition is laid down by the words 'by writing under his hand in Article 67 (2) as quoted above. This is also stipulated under Rule 177 (1) of the Rules of Procedure adopted by the Parliament. This rule reads: 'সংসদের আসন হইতে পদত্যাগ করিতে ইচ্ছা কোন সদস্য এই মর্মে লিখিতভাবে স্বাক্ষর করিয়া বহুস্ত লিখিতভাবে জ্ঞাপন করিবেন যে, তিনি তাহার আসন হইতে পদত্যাগ করিতে ইচ্ছা'.

Thus, the requirement for 'বহুস্ত লিখিতভাবে' is stipulated both under a provision of our Constitution and under the Rules of Procedure framed by the Parliament. The implications of this requirement are obvious: (a) a resignation letter cannot be typed one (i.e. it has to be hand-written by the member who intends to resign), (b) no resignation letter can be addressed to the Speaker jointly by more than one member. It would thus follow that if a resignation letter is typed one and/or if it is signed jointly by more than one member it will not be valid.

In the light of the above, I feel that the Honourable Speaker's ruling would have been more straightforward as well as more convincing if he had proceeded on the basis of the English version of Article 67 (2) of our Constitution and Rule 177 (1) of the Rules of Procedure adopted by the Parliament. The writer is Professor, Department of History, Dhaka University.

Bangladeshi health

Sir, WHO's treatment of DMCH will be a healthy means of improving 'healthcare delivery system' for this South Asian state if taken good care of as prescribed. When the populace of shocking percentage is sick with malnutrition, mental retardation, digestive malfunction, and birth defects, among the major medical subjects, WHO's care of the country's treatment is like an X ray of a

hope of the world's most crowded nation still fighting for healthy life. As is the case, Bangladeshi hygienic system deserves modern treatment in view of the global advances in the medical discipline, while the possibilities of more inventions, such as HIV preventive method, in this LDC cannot be dismissed with wrong diagnosis. In addition to all other district hospitals, the nation

should have Medical Zones provided with adequate medical care facilities toward sound health for everybody by the turn of the next century. Mandatory frequent thorough checkup of all citizens and supplied them with necessary aids affordable will keep the nation healthier banking on Better Health Better Life spirit. M Rahman Zila School Road, Mymensingh

To the Editor...

Mustard oil edible oil, vanaspati, butter oil, ghee etc. etc but in most cases they are not properly punished due to lack of evidence. Against this backdrop it is time to enact harsh laws to punish those culprits responsible for food adulterations. In the event of delay in implementing capital punishment it is very likely that future Bangladeshis would be retarded mentally, physically and so on. Even those pharmaceutical companies who produced and marketed paracetamol syrup using poisonous compounds were not punished properly though so many children died due to this paracetamol syrup intake. Let the food and drug administration gear up their activities while honourable JS members may enact appropriate measures and laws to combat all sorts of adulteration practices in food and drug for the benefit of the nation! Sadiq Alee Maghbuzar Dhaka