Dhaka, Monday, March 20, 1995*

Help the Deportees

The story of the returning citizens of Bangladesh from Saudi Arabia is demeaning. scandalous and dishonourable for any self-respecting country. Saudi Arabia has every right to deport illegal immigrants, and all those without proper documents. But it has no right to bundle more than two thousand of them in a ship capable of carrying less than a thousand, send them on a voyage without food, medicine. And, unbelievably. without adequate fresh water for the voyage. One person died on the voyage due to lack of medical treatment. News reports say that he was severally injured while being rounded up by the Saudi police, and was already in a bad shape when we was put on board.

We are extremely proud and conscious of our brotherly relations with Saudi Arabia. We are also appreciative of the help and assistance that Saudi Arabia provides for us. Therefore, we think that what has happened, occurred due to mismanagement and due to the neglect and bungling at lower levels. However, we think we need to bring this gross violation of all norms of human conduct to the notice of the Saudi Embassy in Dhaka so that it can immediately take remedial measures, in order that further ship loads of our brothers who are likely to follow soon, will not suffer such indignity and physical pain.

However, what we find unforgivable, is the total spineless behaviour of our officials both in Jeddah and in Chittagong and Dhaka. We would like to know why our consulate in Jeddah did not protest when our citizens were being herded like cattle on this substandard and inadequate ship. Second, why our officials did not know about the miserable conditions our fellow countrymen were going to face on the journey? Third, why our own officials were not waiting at the dockyard with food, medicine and other emergency items to meet the immediate needs?

The official handout published in yesterday's newspapers is a shameful example of undignified and humiliating mindset. It did not have the minimum self-respect of expressing even a modicum of indignation at such a miserable treatment of our own citizens. If we do not respect ourselves, why should others? The handout quotes newspaper reports about some deportees as having valid visas, and asks them to contact the Bureau of Manpower. This is shameful. Instead, the Bureau should have been at the dockside to look into such cases and help. There is time even now. We urge the authorities to give up their bureaucratic attitude to help these people in need, not by official handouts, but by being at their side with a genuine desire to help them. Let us not forget that it is these people's remittances that fill our foreign exchange coffer which in turn makes us boastful of our huge(?) reserve.

New Govt Flats

The metropolis is fast running out of breathing spaces. Usually we blame it on overcrowding little realising that haphazard human habitation is no less a cause for it. Till such time as we are able to stem the tide of migration from the rural areas to the capital city by developing growth epicentres, we have to put up with an overpopulated city Let's face that hard fact and plunge head-long into land development projects to house more and more people.

The Works and Housing Ministry, as part of its plan to build 3000 new flats for government officers, has had its eyes transfixed on the vacant spaces within the compounds of certain government colonies. It is learnt that construction work, has already started on playgrounds at some places "further squeezing physical exercise facilities for the children and degrading habitational environment". As it is, most parents in the city are deeply worried over their children's aggressive behaviour at home due to lack of juvenile outings to parks or playgrounds which are few and far between.

The Ministry is only expected to set norms in healthy habitation with its khas lands and the project money to draw on, giving it a certain freedom of action not enjoyed by the private sector. The suggestion obviously is: why don't they look beyond the old colonies and develop new lands and raise housing estates thereon with a bold new vision? In any event that is the option they will have to take, sooner or later. So why not take it now? The city is stretched to its limits from the east to the west, so that expansion has to be in the northerly direction, duly covered by shuttle trains opening out to the vast suburban expanse.

One very important reason why there has to be a dispersal of the government's own housing settlements away from the concentric zones is that the existent colonies, built in 1950, have a lifespan of eighty years. Since new high-rise buildings will have to be constructed there after the present structures are declared as dilapidated in 2030 AD, the new flats being planned for immediate construction sound scientifically flawed on two counts: Not only will they squeeze into the space between buildings in immediate terms they would also be habitationally hazardous in the long run with two sets of high-rise structures facing each other, eyeball-to-eyeball.

Betel Leaf as Villain

Military governments the world over have a queer notion about the business of governance. They tend to divide all things in two categories: white or black — earlier white was replaced in some places with communist red bug. The last vestige of junta rule in South-East Asia, the Yangon government, is seemingly no exception to this rule. The dictatorial regime has come quite heavily on 'decadent alien culture', meaning Western-style dance, rowdy birthday party and noisy sing-along music. The authorities in Yangon have announced rewards for information on violation of the official ruling.

However, at times the dictator-preacher role does not go mutually well and can look ludicrous simply because of its self-righteous selection of subjects. Dictators swoop on areas that were better left alone. The Yangon government has made betel leaves its target of attack. The chewing of betel leaves with lime and nut has been made an offence in six townships of the capital. Betel leaf, introduced by Khsias, one of the prominent ethnic groups of the Indo-Burmese culture, was never known to be a sex-stimulant. The junta regime has now come up with that allegation against this popular leaf known for some of its medicinal qualities.

Global Currency Market Turmoil: URRENCY markets wo-Taka's Stance

dollar's value down 10 per cent against the Japanese ven and 12 per cent against the ALONG MY WAY German Deutsche mark. On the flip side, the exchange rate

rldwide came under a

heavy squall this mo-

inth. The gusts sent the US-

of our taka was marked up

against the dollar some 0.37

that the dollar had gone

through another severe buffet

ing when it had dipped below

the historical level of 100 yen.

to a \$ for the first time. Since

then, the dollar has stayed be-

low the 100 ven mark most of

the time. Meanwhile, the

Federal Reserve Board - FRB

or just, the Fed, as the US

central bank is known every-

where - has raised interest

rates. The latest hike in US in-

terest rates came only last

month. Higher interest rate

raises the vield on dollar as-

more attractive

sets. Dollar holdings become

it was about done with raising

US interest rates apparently

sparked off the currency mar-

ket turmoil. Receding hopes

for additional gains flowing

from US interest rate hikes

prompted currency traders to

move away from the dollar

There were also talks of re-

duced US capability to inter-

vene in the foreign exchange

market by buying dollar against

ven and mark to inject fresh

demand for its sagging cur

rency. It may be recalled that

late in January, the United

States had committed \$20 bil-

lion loan to Mexico from its

Exchange Stabilization Fund to

help that country overcome a

deep financial crisis. That fund

provides resources to the US

authorities to intervene in the

foreign exchange market to

buy international currencies to

support the dollar. The fund

was known to be of a size of

more than \$25 billion.

However, operators thought

that after meeting the pledge

to Mexico, the amount left in

the fund, would be insufficient

to intervene effectively in the

trillion-dollar-a-day global cur-

Exchange Rate Mechanism

(ERM) of the European

Monetary Union (EMU) was

bringing collateral damage to

the dollar. Among the 12

member-nations of the

European Union (EU) Britain

and Italy had effectively stayed

out of the ERM since

September 1992. ERM allows

the remaining currencies in

the system to fluctuate within

a 15 per cent band. Originally,

the band was 2.25 per cent.

However, the range had to be

widened following a crisis in

August 1993. The German

mark is the strongest currency

in the ERM. This time, cur-

rencies of Spain and Portugal

started sinking rapidly, near-

ing the floor of the 15 per cent

band. Funds held in the

Spanish peseta and the

Portugese escudo flowed into

the German mark, the strong

currency. The mechanism fol-

lowed by the currency traders

in effecting the transfer of

funds usually entailed selling

peseta and escudo for dollar

first. Then they would sell the

dollar for mark. The currency

transaction, called 'a cross' in

the jurgon, only tended to

weaken the dollar further

from Japan's huge trade sur-

plus with United States, there

is another proximate reason

for the dollars sharp fall this

month. Japan's financial year

closes on March 31.

Therefore, many of the

Japanese investors and com-

panies were repatriating funds

held in the United States to

square up their accounts be-

fore the end of the financial

year. In other twords, they

were converting their dollars

into yen. This generate a wave

of sale of dollar for buying yen.

To all appearances these

transactions acted as powerful

drag on the dollar while send-

ing the yen way up at the same

the US authorities were just

content to watch and let the

dollar slide. Some analysts

have termed it as a begin ne-

gleet of the dollar. They have

also come up with an array of

reasons why it happened to be

so. These arguments appear to

"Trampled to death"

It would seem that initially

As against the yen, apart

against the mark.

Meanwhile, a crisis in the

rency market.

A signal from the Fed that

It's just about nine months

per cent by the central bank.

S B Chaudhuri



be particularly potent in the context of the dollar's decline . against yen. Weaker dollar makes American exports more competitive as the goods turn cheaper in terms of other currencies. By the same logic imports are rendered costlier. Low-priced dollar could thus act to expand America's exports while cutting back imports at the same time. The net outcome would be a reduc- \ tion of trade deficit. Yet, costlier imports could also hit up inflation.

Even more telling is the current perception about diversification of foreign investments in the United States itself. These investments in US bonds and other financial assets effectively finance America's trade and budget deficits by creating inflow of funds. Persistent decline of the US currency erodes the value of these dollar assets and raises the fear that the foreigners may withdraw their investments. However, such a risk of exodus of foreign investors is much less when funds flow in from diverse sources involving several currencies. Analysts say that this exactly is the situation now. During the earlier days, particularly in the latter 1980s. Japan was the principal source of foreign investment in US financial assets. A plunge in the dollar's value against the yen would be a cause for real concern then. Things have changed now. Other countries. including the newly industrialised nations of Asia, are putting more of their funds in financial assets in the United States. By and large, these countries continue to bank on the dollar's safe haven image. Dollar's slide against the yene does not impact their curren-

cies with the same intensity. Another reason why the US authorities did not act immediately to arrest the downswing could be because the dollar remained strong against the currencies of Canada and Mexico who emerged last year as first and third, respectively among America's trading part ners. Albeit, that did not reflect the strength of the dollar really. Rather, it was the weakness of these currencies

that showed up. Anyway, official move to shore up the dollar did come eventually. World's 15 leading central banks mounted a concerted two-day currency market intervention, buying dollar against the German mark and Japanese ven. However, the market just shrugged it off and the dollar continued to droop. Then came official peep talks In the United States, the dollar's decline was termed unwarranted and overdone, followed by expressions of resolve to maintain a strong and stable currency. Germany echoed these sentiments, calling the currency market gyrations exaggerated. In the event, the market did pause after these pronouncements but the dollar resumed its

downward course soon enough. Market players now are said to be working on the basis of a threshold of a dollar value of 90 yen. The dollar had actually drifted even lower but then crept back across that level. The dollar also tested a record low of 1.34 Deutsche marks. Some analysts believe that the market would calm down only if US interest rates are raised to lure currency traders towards the dollar. It would be an added bonus, they say, if the German interest also are cut reduce the attraction of the mark. During the height of the currency turmoil, Bundesbank — the German central bank - did say that it might consider a small rate cut but has not run so yet. For now, the main focus is on the coming March 28 meeting of the Fed's Open Market Committee which decides US interest rates. Meanwhile,

Farakka

Japan's fiscal year is nearing

Sir. The adverse effect of the Farakka Barrage is causing serious problem to agricultural irrigation and water transport in Bangladesh.

When the world is considering greater sharing of the natural resources for improving the lot of the people on global basis ignoring political boundaries, India being the closest neighbour of Bangladesh is rather playing inhuman and narrow tricks towards reaching a just agreement for sharing of the Ganges water.

Would India be a little bit humane and considerate?

M Zuhietul Haque Assit Prof. BAL. Dhaka

its close on March 31 which might reduce the drag on dollar and arrest the yen's rise.

Again, it's quite possible that the historic low rate of the dollar could itself trigger a rally. Intrepid currency traders could bet that the dollar's fall has bottomed out and it was time for a rebound. They would then flock back to the foreign exchange market, buying dollar again. And the dollar would bounce back.

HE central bank's revaluation of the taka by 15 paisa to a dollar on March 7, could be seen as a fallout from the global currency market turmoil. The dollar. Deutsche mark and yen, all are included in the basket of foreign currencies through which the taka's value is measure. An exchange rate adjustment to fully reflect the movement of the currencies in the basket would have probably called for appreciation of the taka's value against the dollar by more than 5 per cent as compared to the 0.37 per cent correction carried out actually.

uation will impact the econone in different ways. For one thing, it will reduced the cost of import since importers will spend 15 paisa less on each dollar they buy. Changes in cross rates will bring comparable advantage in respect of import denominated in other international currencies. Travellers abroad and foreign remittances will gain similarly. Tourists and other visitors to this country, on the other hand, will get less in taka for their foreign exchange. Cost of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) would come down due to savings in the outlay on imported stuff. Albeit lower valuation of dutiable goods might hurt Customs revenue. The burden of country's external debt will become a shade lighter to bear in terms of taka of course. Also, lower import prices could bring benign consequence for inflation.

Even so, tiny dose of reval-

Migrant workers abroad will get less in taka for the foreign currency they remit home. Import-intensity of export would determine the extent of revaluation's impact on exporters. Where the import content of the product exported is high, exporters will save some money on inputs they procure from abroad. However, the savings will not compensate them fully for lower taka receipts against foreign exchange earnings. On balance, exporters are more likely to lose. Currency appreciation does not advance export competitiveness.

Looking Back at

March towards Independence March 20, 1971

A series of discussions between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other Pakistani leaders - particularly those ones who were anxious about the possible disintegration of Pakistan took place.

Mian Mumtaz Mohammad Khan Daultana, chief of the Pakistan Council Muslim League who flew into Dhaka on March 19, met Sheikh Mujib, and this meeting, the first one of its kind since the general elections, went on for about an hour. While stressing the need for an early solution of the present political and constitutional crisis to protect and preserve the country's unity, he said that all eyes were turned towards the talks between the President and the Awami League chief. Khan Wali Khan, president of the National Awamy Party, had also had a meeting with Sheikh Mujib who remained consistently unvielding with his demand, namely, the overall freedom of Bangladesh.

Later in the evening. Mufti Mahmood, a leader of the Jamiatul Ukma i-Islam also met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at his Dhanmondi residence. Mufti Mahmood later told newsmen. We have discussed the political situation" and "the talks shall continue. We want the solidarity and integrity of the country". He declined to comment on the dialogue between Sheikh Mujib and General Yahya saying that it was going on and that it was too early to comment.

Asked if Mufti had any formula of his own to resolve the 'current political impasse', he replied in the negative. He, however, added that Sheikh Mujib might have some formula.

A number of processions, decorated with banners and festoons and reverberating with slogans that full-throatedly called for the struggle for independence, passed by the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and went around some parts of the city.

(Compiled by Aasha Mehrin Amin with Afreen Huda)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

Industry. Dhaka responds to The Daily Star questionnaire:

be helpful.

The Economy has been a Victim of the Stalemate



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.

M Anis Dowla (AD): We feel that the present political stalemate reflects the problems in transition to democracy. Like in the past, dialogues between the major political parties and resulting consensus' can provide the wayout.

What is essential for urgent reflections at political levels is that the economy has been a victim of the prevailing political stalemate. In the present phase of economic boom in the Asian countries. Bangladesh is being quoted adversely for its contentious political situation. At this trend, we shall miss the investment train. It will be relevant to mention what a famous economist posed as a question whether Bangladesh can afford too much politicking without having link with economic priorities. "Good economy fosters good politics and bad economy spawns bad politics", he remarked, and concluded that because of preference to bad politics. Bangladesh economy is being

reduced to shambles. We, therefore, firmly expect that in the larger interests of

the economy, the political parties will come forward with honest intentions. If the intentions are honest, it will not be difficult to overcome constitutional and legal hurdles. In our view, the Government has a major role in this process. At the same time, the opposition should realise that agitations on the streets will cost the fu-

DS: Everybody is talking about elections, but when should it be held - with 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. AD: Ideally, election should

ture generation very dearly.

be held at the expiry of the current term of the Jativa Sangsad but it seems to be uncertain in the present con-

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

AD: Enactment of a law alone does not ensure free and fair election.' It is independence and effectiveness of the Election Commission which are essential for free and fair election. We feel that to ensure fair election, law enforcing agencies and the administration need to be placed functionally and administratively under the Election Commission during the entire process of election. Besides. Election Commission should be absolutely neutral in accepting or rejecting election results. The role of the Indian Chief Election Commissioner can be a guide for such prac-

Vigilance committees consisting of local elite, businessmen, school teachers, religious leaders and others, can help

establish credibility of the elections. Involvement of international bodies to observe the election process can also

DS: How to formulate a Code of Conduct for political parties to hold elections? How to ensure the implementation of such a code? AD : Justice Shahabuddin's

M Anis Ud Dowla, President, Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and

interim government, as far as we know, tried for such a code of conduct but the efforts did not succeed. Nevertheless, the political parties should sit together and try to formulate such a code. What is necessary is the effectiveness and independence of the Election Commission.

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?

AD: We support computerisation of voters' list and introduction of identity cards These can significantly eliminate the scope of false votes.

The next election should not, however, be delayed on this ground. It has been established in India that even pending introduction of computerised list of voters and identity cards, it is possible to hold fair elections.

DS: We hear a lot about black money being a factor in the next election. What are your suggestions to make election funding transparent and accountable?

AD : Black money is a misnomer. What is essential is that election spendings must be transparent and accountable. The present Rules give enough powers to the Election Commission to require submission of election expenses, sources of funding but these

are not being enforced. If the Election Commission becomes effective in enforcing the ceilings on election expenses and scrutinizing the sources of funds, 'money factor' will lose its effectiveness in the election

the next election should be held? What about Constitutional amendments? AD : We have given our

the mechanism under which

DS: What are your views on

views earlier. Any Constitutional amend-

ments have to be based on consensus decision of the major political parties.

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?

AD: As stated earlier, a free and fair election depends on the effectiveness and impartiality of the Election Commission.

Understanding between the government and the Opposition, in our view, is not only one of the essential elements of democracy, but a sine qua non for economic development. It gives the most convincing signal to the investors.

Successful economies all over the world' show that the ruling party needs to take the opposition into confidence and keep it informed of different aspects of state policies. Trust and confidence beget goodwill. Such initiatives obviously do not mean giving in but reflect the best of democratic values. It should not be forgotten that the destiny of 120 million people is at stake

IN FOOLS' PARADISE?

Let the Flowers Remain Unplucked, the Martyrs in Peace

by Nadeem Qadir

T was too unexpected. It pained me. It hurt me, I wondered as I stood at a distance from the Shaheed for the Minar, Memorial language martyrs' - last 21

February.

There was more of trouble than tranquility, a war-like security and very few with real feelings or respect for our martyrs. Some, like myself, watched in awe as what was happening — respect or just another event for fun.

A large number of security personnel sealed off the memorial complex hours ahead of the arrival of the prime minister. There was some tension in the air as small groups of opposition student wings marched chanting anti-government slogans.

There were few crude bomb blasts. After a while some gun shots created panic, momentarily. I thought what was I doing here. I did not have a bouquet or a placard, just my

The premier came. But thousands who gathered, many of whom left soon after having

a glimpse of the head of government, joined a race to be at the memorial first as soon as police moved away. At least five climbed the memorial to ensure everyone could see their

bouquet boasting the name of

their respective organisations.

The gentleman guiding the mourners repeatedly urged them to come down and to others' to quickly move on as their "is no television camera!!!" Yes, he got the spirit

Where is the tear, the respect and above all, the solemn song that is the day's anthem: "can I ever forget the Ekushey February/Dyed red with the blood of my martyred brothers/Solemn February is made up of tears/shed by countless mothers who lost their sons."

I saw a number of families visiting the memorial after 2:00 am and overhead a little child asking: "Mother what is happening here?" They were explaining, but will the tiny one believe them after seeing

the frenzy? I left consoling that those wayward men were mostly young as well as driven by extreme partisanship, but when

their leaders come they would

be tamed. It did not happen.

The 22 February newspapers carried pictures of leading political groups with many leaders smiling and aiming to ensure they made it to the clicking cameras. I decided to forgive the activists after seeing that episode again on the

television. Also from the morning of 20 February my family along with the gardener were alert to save the blooming winter flowers from being stolen by local boys to join the frenzy at the memorial and nothing more. Now they are preparing for the Independence Day on 26 March.

I caught one boy and told him he will have the best flow ers provided he narrated the significance of the day. Sadly

he left without a single flower and red-faced

If we do not try to understand the essence of these sacrifices, feel the pain of those who lost their loved ones for the cause of the country and at least try to do what the martyrs' had dreamt about in an independent Bangladesh, why just fool everyone by being there for just a circus - nothing more.

Please let the flowers bloom in the gardens and the fragrance spread across the country where known and unknown martyrs (the shaheeds not late as many fail to distinguish between the two words) are in their eternal peaceful sleep. Do not trouble them or wake them to this bizarre real-

When I filed the day's story. I was forced to mention the brief trouble and felt ashamed what the world would think of us as a nation, which cannot even properly pay respect to the brave sons of the soil.

The writer is Special Co rrespondent with Agence Fra nce Presse (AFP), in Dhaka

Sir. The poor unfortunates

who fell victim to stampede while collecting Zakat and Fitra, were neither killed by wild elephants nor by any intentional human motive; we will only blame ourselves for not adopting the right method in distributing Zakat and Fitra. as prescribed by Allah the Almighty. Things will not get any better until and unless we care to understand and obey by the divine messages as ordained on us. Apart from the very sensible suggestions from OH Kabir that shouldering responsibilities by the respective council members to help donate distribution of Zakat and Fitra, it is still wiser to donate without making it known. Khawja Vigar Moinuddin

Dhaka