

Bleeding Rwanda

The Rwandan tragedy is far from coming to an end. On Saturday government troops opened fire on refugees at the Kibeho camp in southwestern Rwanda. The ensuing stampede of panicking people, numbering 80,000 inside the camp, amidst heavy rains to compound their plight, left about 8,000 dead and another 2,000 injured.

Ever since the situation has been very tense. The Hutus fled their homes, many of them crossing the border to seek shelter in Burundi. And those who could not do so, went to camps within Rwanda guarded by French soldiers at that time. Kibeho is one such camp. The situation was heating up in the camps both inside and outside of that country.

The impression is that the troops actually were looking for a pretext. For some time the government was claiming that the camps sheltered militias loyal to the former government. The torrential rains gave the soldiers a hellish setting for carrying out the mass murder.

It appears that the two tribes are pursuing a depopulation programme against each other. Their frenzied vengeance will bring only unmitigated tragedy for the country, leaving neither of them a clear winner. Rwanda — or for that matter no country — can afford such senseless reprisals between two of its main communities.

Repatriation Success

The repatriation of Rohingya refugees, originally numbering as high as 2,50,877, to Myanmar has reached a near-conclusive phase. Eighty per cent of the registered refugees have already gone back to their country of domicile. Some 61,305 await repatriation. At the current rate of 10,000 trekking back to their homes each month, the process of their return to Myanmar will have been completed by October 1995.

Bangladesh foreign and relief ministries, UNHCR and Myanmar government have a full measure of our praise for their remarkable success in solving one of the biggest refugee problems of present times. The task was formidable. The Burmese military government whose persecution of the Rohingyas had led in 1992 to a creditable publicity-shy UNHCR is nonetheless singled out for a round of our applause for the crucial role they played on both sides of the border to facilitate the process of repatriation.

While the misgivings are now a matter of the past, certain minor problems — we would like to call them technical rather than operational problems — seem to be surfacing at this stage. For instance, a final head-count is necessitated to ascertain the exact number of refugees remaining to be repatriated. It is reported that some 10,000 have escaped from the relief camps over time melting into the local population.

Beating Heat

The hot spell is getting to be stickily excruciating. Much as we were mentally and physically conditioned, being sons and daughters of this Torrid Zone, to take in our stride salty heat about this time of the year our natural reserve of tolerance is now bursting at its seams.

The heat underlines another sense of denial. One is intrigued why on earth no private foreign companies are signing up MOUs for investment in our water sector when they are falling head over heels to do the same in the power sector!

Meanwhile, what are we to do with the increasingly stuccoed covered area of the city which radiates heat and conserves it as solid lead does never to cool off. Let's have more trees and a revival of an addition to the serpentine lakes that are mere shadows of their past now.

Fledgling SAPTA Getting Ready to Spread Wings?

To glean from reports appearing in the newspaper media, SAPTA — the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement — is stirring to life. The framework agreement signed at the seventh summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) held in Dhaka in April 1993, did not set a target date exactly for making SAPTA operational.

A pall of uncertainty hung over SAPTA till March this year. The proposed concessional trading arrangement to promote intra-regional trade among the SAARC countries seemed to be making only desultory progress if at all. The SAPTA framework agreement admits of both product-by-product approach and across-the-board tariff reduction in its modality for exchange of trade concessions.

An inter-governmental group (IGG) had been set up to provide the forum for these negotiations. Incidentally, SAPTA envisages exchange of tariff, para-tariff and non-tariff concessions for liberalising trade among the member countries. Tariff in this context simply means customs duties. Para-tariffs here cover only border charges and fees, other than customs duties, levied solely on imports.

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work agreement also prescribes a product-by-product approach for negotiating tariff preferences specifically at the initial stage. Thus, negotiating tariff concessions would have been IGG's primary concern.

IGG had been holding its not-too-frequent meetings in the member countries by turn. Apparently it was not making much of a headway. A crucial IGG meeting in Maldivé last year reportedly had ended inconclusively. At long last, the March IGG meeting in Pakistan seemed to have yielded a rich dividend. Differences were narrowed down. A convergence seemed to be emerging on contentious issues that held up progress in the past.

Customs duty rates in the SAARC region vary fairly widely. Average tariffs (1994) in Bangladesh stands at 26 per cent, 53 in India, 30 in Pakistan and 20 per cent in Sri Lanka. However, tariffs had been coming down. Average tariffs in Bangladesh in 1991 were 75 per cent, 128 in India, 66 in Pakistan and 25 per cent in Sri Lanka.

significant market access advantage in intra-regional trade for the SAPTA member countries who are running into deficits in regional trade. As it happens, tariffs of countries faced with trade deficits are already relatively low. Duty reduction at par with other SAPTA members will throw their markets wider open to competition from the region without granting them a comparable advantage in the surplus countries.

Then there is the issue of reciprocity in granting concessions. The framework agreement stipulates that the concessions agreed to under SAPTA will automatically be extended to all the member countries. Nonetheless, an exception has been made in respect of concessions extended exclusively to the least developed countries in the region.

deficits with some of its trading partners in the region. Naturally, Bangladesh would expect meaningful and non-reciprocal tariff cuts on its exportables from the more advanced importing countries in the region who enjoy surplus in bilateral trade. Let's hope that the SAPTA final package will take care of all that.

There are variables other than tariffs which go into making a country's products price competitive in the export market. It appears that subsidies have been kept out of the ambit of SAPTA. So had been other issues which have a bearing on export competitiveness such as foreign exchange regime, import policy, inflationary outlook, bank interest rates and so on.

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same, there could conceivably be a forum under the aegis of SAPTA for regular consultation on trends in these areas and for a review of tariff concessions to make them more meaningful and effective in promoting intra-regional trade.

Their avowed commitment to SAARC and SAPTA notwithstanding, some member countries continue to look outside the region to forge new trade links with other economic blocs. In point of fact, analysts had been inclined to blame the hitherto slow progress of SAPTA on Pakistan's ambivalence about the fledgling forum. Pakistan, it was averred, preferred to promote ECO — the Economic Cooperation Organisation. ECO groups Pakistan with Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and six Central Asian countries which were formerly Soviet republics. Well, ECO held its latest summit in Pakistan last month finalising, inter alia, the modality for implementing its own protocol on preferential tariff arrangements among the member states.

India, on her part, is ardently courting APEC — the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum — to win a seat in the club. APEC's diverse members include Australia, Brunel, Canada, Chile, China, Hong

Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States — all of them located along the Pacific rim. Together they account for around half of world production and 45 per cent of global trade. In its summit last year, APEC drew up an ambitious agenda for creating the world's largest area for free trade and investment by 2020. The problem for India is: in its 1993 summit APEC had put a three-year moratorium on new membership. For now, India is being told to open up its economy to the level of other APEC members. India asserts that its tariffs would be comparable to those of other countries in the region by 1996/97. By then the embargo on new APEC membership also would hopefully be lifted.

ALONG MY WAY S B Chaudhuri



neighbours apply comparably deeper cuts in customs duties. Possible trade diversion vis-à-vis exports from outside the region could bring some advantage of course, but that perhaps is not what SAPTA aims at.

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ing on export competitiveness such as foreign exchange regime, import policy, inflationary outlook, bank interest rates and so on. Exchange rates of the member countries vary. Current rates for one US dollar are roughly around 40 for taka; 31.50, 49.50, 31 and 48 for the Indian, Nepalese, Pakistani and Sri Lankan rupees respectively. Inflation is currently running roughly at 4.3% annually in Bangladesh, 11.5% in India, 14% in Pakistan and 8% in Sri Lanka.

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Australia played a pivotal role in the founding of APEC in 1989 and has now floated another straw in the wind. This time around, it is for forming an economic cooperation forum of the Indian Ocean rim nations. Australia is said to be calling a meeting of countries in and around the Indian Ocean for June next to explore ways for expanding trade, investment and economic cooperation in the region. The Bay of Bengal sits between us and the Indian Ocean. Nonetheless, the idea of an Indian Ocean forum for economic cooperation might offer possibilities to us for teaming up with countries outside the South Asian region as well.

Evolving Participatory Administration at the Local Level

by Mohammad Zakaria

Gram sarker may be a very sound expression as sarkar means government. So gram sarker means village government implying that power does not come from Dhaka rather grows in the villages.

duced by the colonialist administrators and it is a western industrial concept imposed in a different context. And those who introduced it had their image problem. Consequently the acceptability of the administrative structure, to crush locally evolved samaj/shalish structure, continued to be in question from the very inception. As the people could not accept it in a good way for the reasons mentioned above, it could never be made effective despite its change of names by almost all the successive regimes during Pakistan and Bangladesh days.

Participants also observed that previous shalish bench, samaj etc the institution that grew out of its own societal body worked well as this was built on felt societal need. Size/unit of operation was equally important. Village unit has to be the foundation. Union can be its extension with concrete administrative arrangement at thana/upazila level. For a country like Bangladesh integration of gram sarker with upazila type structure at the thana level may hopefully be the best option.

Villages are the social as well as emotional units. The village community is itself in a close interactional setting. Participation grows out of interaction. It never happened at the union level like at the village level. That is why the union parishad never emerged as 'parishad' rather dominated by the chairman — one person. Historically the persons running the union parishad have been the collaborators of external power holders far from

the village, including the colonialists of the olden days. They never derived their power from the people in the truest sense of the term. Obviously their mind set is not pro-people all the time often making unholy alliance with the external elements. Inevitably tourism emerged as a bitter element in the rural societal fabric. This should be delineated as a great obstacle in initiating democratic process in the village and union.

From this what we can logically infer is that we need to start from the unit where there were people oriented administration evolved and maintained by the people. As I mentioned earlier, these were samaj, shalish etc at the village level.

If we are sincerely interested in bottom up participatory administration, the village community has to be involved right from the planning phase. Question may crop up: how? This is no mere a dream rather already in practice at pilot level in villages in Jessore. Methodology has already been evolved for this. The village community must take leadership in taking their own plans to the thana level where there is a setup for providing services to the people. And democratic setup like the previous upazila could be better qualified to do the job as it was elected by the people. It had some legal entity. Agriculture, livestock, poultry, fishery, health, afforestation, education etc are the sectors

for which there are government departments at the thana level. The government officials could participate in the poverty alleviation process more efficiently. The other problem is: skills/services/inputs available at the thana level do not easily reach the doorsteps of the people in the surrounding villages as the officials are not reportable to the people but to their higher authorities at the district and the centre in Dhaka. Involvement of some elected personality like previous upazila chairman could be an answer to this problem. We are saying we have democracy. But democracy has to be defined in administrative context as well rather than confining it in elections alone.

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worked out where administrative organ, elected body and the people have their own duties and responsibilities. The triangle ensuring enough working space for these three elements need to be ensured. Time is ripe now to give democracy a birth sat the root — in the villages rather than repeated still births of democracy in the streets of Dhaka. For rural Bangladesh NGOs are the new reality. They have developed specific skill of working with people. They internalized the mechanism of service delivery in more efficient ways compared to their counterpart in the government administration. This NGO skill of working in the field has to

be integrated in the package. The most critical element in the union parishad is that it is the citadel of factional politics. Localised power structure swallows even the national political ideologies when these reach the villages. That the national political ideologies are distorted as factionalism is the greatest failure of our national politics. Factionalists know how to use national politics in their factional as well as family interest.

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power in the hands of the people could revolutionize our villages — nay the whole nation if piloted properly in a slow but steady process. They can do the miracle if we in the city remove ourselves from their path of liberated efforts. We are the obstacles in their own development process.

In order to make bottom up public administration successful participatory village planning may be a tool based on which the union parishad and thana administration can work. The challenge is, evolving democratic mechanism right at the village level. It gives a basis where people, government administration and the NGOs can work together.

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LOCAL level governance in Bangladesh had a good beginning during pre-colonial days. The rural people in the light of their own felt need, evolved samaj, shalish etc to look after their own affairs. They needed no external assistance to run and manage those organisations.

Britishers introduced union panchayat in the year 1870 as the lowest tier in public administration. During the last (1870-1995) 125 years, unfortunately, it grew with all the malnutrition. It is not yet a viable institution capable of serving the community. It could not yet blossom as a democratic organisation at the grassroots. But why?

A study team of five from the University of Dhaka devoted themselves to find why did it so happen, what else could happen and, most importantly, what are the options for the future. Seminars took place in Bagharpara Thana Parishad and Dhalgram Union Parishad in Jessore recently on public administration. The seminar was based on the last one year's study on Dhalgram union of Bagharpara by Prof Zarina, Dr. Arifin and Dr. Barman of the Dhaka University. Initial findings were presented in front of the local officials and the elected union parishad representatives and the NGO representatives.

Discussion mainly centered around union parishad. The participants mainly focused on the negatives of the union parishad, — more on problems less on solutions. All the union parishad chairmen and the members mentioned about the financial crisis of union parishad and failure in collecting taxes to run the union parishad. Question logically emanates why the people are not interested in paying taxes? What services do they get from the union parishad? If services received from the union council are considered useful why should they be unwilling to pay for it?

Participants observed that the union parishad was introduced

To the Editor...

Annual Report on Ministries

Sir, It is gratifying to know from the news media that the Annual Reports of the activities of different ministries and divisions during the 1993-94 financial year are well under preparation for presentation. As a citizen of the country, I sought quite a long time (2 or 3 years) back for the publication of such a report by each ministry every year. However, it is clear that a good beginning in this respect has been made. I also requested that a full-blown report on the activities of the Ershad regime ought to be published. Merely blaming Mr H M Ershad and his associates for looting the country is a statement of fact, but the reasons or the mechanism behind this fact would be much more revealing than the fact itself, in the interest of the country. It may be that such a report is well under preparation, because Barrister Abdus Salam Talukder, the BNP Secretary General and LGRD Minister promised sometime back, that a white paper (preferably a report) on the Ershad regime would be published. Both the functions

would be treated, I am sure, as a real democratic exercise for the present regime.

I would, however, request the government to release the reports for the earlier financial years also, for the sake of accountability and transparency of the government.

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NGOs

Sir, I must commend The Daily Star for publishing articles as interesting as Nina Chowdhury's piece titled "NGOs: The Miracle Cure?", which appeared on 10.4.95, and the follow-up article, "NGOs: What's the Flavour of the Month?" the next week. They made fascinating reading; and also pointed up the lack of critical questioning that exists where the correct appraisal of NGOs and their role in development is concerned. Her points were valid, and provided considerable food for thought, as well as a starting point for a more reasoned appraisal of NGOs. To me the Development page of The Daily Star has never been so interesting.

I am sure that Ms Chowdhury will receive any number of negative reviews for these pieces, not least from those who benefit from the nature and functioning of such NGOs. Nevertheless, I would like to thank her for these timely pieces, and to congratulate The Daily Star for publishing them, proving once again that it is fulfilling a newspaper's duty to investigate matters critically rather than playing it safe in order to win a popularity contest!

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Barbarous attack on circus party

Sir, We are deeply shocked and astounded by the barbarous action of some people against a circus party in Cox's Bazar on April 18, 1995 and we fully support the views expressed in your editorial on April 20. For Action, Prompt and Sharp.

It was stated that by the call of a so-called Moulana a group of people attacked the circus party, poured kerosene and set

fire to their tents and animal cages, which resulted in the loss of huge property and lives of many innocent animals. Many members of the party sustained injuries.

All over the world circus parties entertain people and it is looked upon as a harmless pastime. If the party had been guilty of staging vulgar show it could have been reported to the proper authority to take necessary actions, but to take law in one's own hand must not be tolerated.

Now-a-days we notice that some Moulanas are giving fatwas and taking law in their own hands, making life miserable for many. We urge the government to take immediate action and make it clear that no such activities would be looked upon as trifle. Persons guilty of the offence will be brought to justice.

I don't know what is happening to our society, people are being carried away by the slightest provocation and act most degradingly. Cruelty and hatred are taking the place of finer feelings.

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Mother Teresa : Succour to Sufferers

An Interview by Fayza Haq



1948 she founded her own order and soon adopted Indian citizenship too.

Concerned about the sufferers of leprosy and AIDS in the sub-continent, she has a centre for lepers near Anasol, India in a colony called Shantinagar. She was here in Bangladesh to lay the foundation for an old age home at Monipur, 50 kms north of Dhaka. This Old Home Rehabilitation Centre at Bishia Kuribari will accommodate 500 people. She patted me on the back, and advised me, "Go out among the poor people. You will find the reality there."

Mother Teresa believed her followers in Dhaka "were doing good work. They have made great improvements since '91 when I first came here. They are rehabilitating the down-trodden and the despised and these include the mentally deranged, the homeless vagrants and even those labelled as prostitutes."

Mother Teresa who has been honoured by various awards, such as the Nobel Peace Prize of 79, and the Padmashri of the Indian Government in 63, does not care greatly for these recognitions. She is more bothered about providing food and shelter for the 555 centres that she has set up all over the world.

It is not that she feels for the suffering and ailing among the Christians. "Every human being is a child of God to me — whether he be a Hindu, Muslim or Christian," she says.

Mother Teresa, who is against abortion like all strict Roman Catholics, has arranged for adoption of 3,000 children by childless couples.

Apart from working towards bringing comfort to AIDS and leprosy afflicted sufferers in Bangladesh, Mother Teresa's followers provide medical aid to any one who comes for help to the charitable institutions.

While in Dhaka, Mother Teresa launched the first floating hospital in the country, funded by Rotarians and French authorities. The octogenarian says, "I am ready to accept gifts from all quarters towards the cause of comforting the sufferers."