

After the Aid Pledge

Bangladesh has received some good cheer and an advisory note from the Aid Club meet in Paris. We should be pleased with the outcome against the backdrop of talks about aid fatigue and our own weaknesses in terms of, principally, political uncertainties and the vulnerable public administration system.

In aid pledges what matters is the spirit with which these are made rather than an increase in the quantum of money or other forms of assistance promised. For, at the end of the day the reckoning is always in terms of how aid disbursement and utilisation fared. So, we need not get carried away by the fact that the pledge has exceeded expectations by some 10 million US dollar and it looks handsomely respectable at \$ 1.95 billion for the 1995-96 fiscal year.

This bit of chary note does not in any way dilute the basically wholesome outcome of the consortium meet: an appreciation of our being on the right track with the reform agenda and a strong support committed to the process. The low inflation, strength of taka and growth of savings, investments and exports have been much too obvious signs of successful macro-economic management to be missed. Even with all these positive trends our growth rate would nominally increase up to 5 per cent at the year-end as compared with 4.6 per cent during the last fiscal year. But we need a GDP growth at 7 per cent to bring any noticeable change in the poverty situation.

Acceleration of the growth process will be wishful thinking so long as political uncertainties reign supreme. The instability factor has gnawed away at the economic possibilities: national productivity decreased, especially in drought-induced conditions; the reforms process got slowed down; and investments, both local and foreign, could not pick up despite the otherwise attractive macro-economic signals repeatedly beamed by us.

In an election year, a premium would be placed on reforms in the sensitive category: subsidisation and retrenchment of surplus labour. Anyway, the government would do well to keep a firm control over fiscal management in view of expected inflationary pressures on the economy.

The declining trend in food aid is a soft patch. However, the GOB and the donor community are to 'monitor' the food situation in the short and medium terms. Let our preparations be adequate to tide over the impending production deficit.

Voters' List

Registration of voters in the country begins on May 25. While the issuance of identity cards to voters hangs fire, the urgency to prepare a fool-proof voters' list grows manifold. As reported, the method will be adopted for registration of voters will be a house-to-house visit by information collectors and identifiers to be followed by a similar visit made by supervisors and a final spot verification by assistant registration officers.

On the face of it, the three-step effort should do away with all the discrepancies and omissions that were known to have occurred in the previous voters' list. Let's learn from the past pitfalls. Many of them could not even note the names and other information correctly. These people often choose the most odd time possible — during office hours — to collect information when most of the eligible voters would be out of their homes. The result were horrendous: they ended up recording distorted, incomplete and wrong names and information. One common problem had been the omission of a few eligible voters in a family.

When such things happen, a large number of people find that they cannot exercise their right of franchise. These must be scrupulously avoided this time around since there is now a surging national consciousness for the elections to be comprehensively free and fair. The information collectors in particular should visit a particular area with prior public announcement made — at least a week in advance. This is to ensure the presence of as many prospective voters — or of those members of the family who can furnish the information correctly. The information collectors can choose easily mornings or afternoons when people are home in the towns or cities. But in villages, where everyone knows everyone, the job is to correctly enter the names of relevant information about the voters. Any manipulation or concoction should be severely dealt with.

Highway Robbery

When a treasury bench member expressed her concern over the high incidence of highway robberies in the House, the home minister came up with what he thought would be a solution to the problem. He intends to set up more police camps and deploy more police patrol cars. The existing figures for these are 23 and 11 respectively. The setting up of more police camps finds favour with us but these must be directed to avoid creating any hassle for the passengers in the form of frequent checking. As for patrol cars on highways, we are all for an increase in their number provided they would be well-equipped in terms of manpower and gadgets. Both the buses and the police cars must have sophisticated equipment to communicate between them if the special police measures is to be successful.

In this context the decision taken recently by the bus owners' association of one of the country's long routes to implement a few measures looks quite promising. Among other precautionary steps, they plan to instal a video system in the bus to keep an eye on all passengers; to stop picking up passengers at any point en route; and, if need be, would check on the bodies of passengers as they do before air journeys. These are practical measures that could drastically reduce the chance of highway robbery.

The law enforcers could find their job half done this way. If they just co-operate with the bus operators, road safety and security will dramatically improve. The important thing is to monitor the buses and also to provide on short notice police help whenever the vehicles smell the rat and send out an SOS. Since the bus owners have of their own volition decided to introduce a video system, they may be persuaded to instal a communication link with the highway police.

A usual one thought that show would melt and the valley of Kashmir would step into the normalcy of activity from sombre winter. Activity for the common man in the last five years has been nothing beyond eking out a living, buying the minimum and retiring home long before dark. The 5-year-long ding-dong battle between the security forces and militants has made him fitful, fatalistic and fearful. He stares vacantly at what was once his happy valley.

Today, he is simply tired — tired of guns, tired of rhetorics and tired of saviours. He sees no end to his ordeals. He has little faith on the promises India and Pakistan offer to change his future. The mundane things of life like food and fuel concern him more than high-flaunting economic package or gigantic employment scheme. If he could be left alone.

This winter, too, had been dreary. The bungling bureaucracy has not improved a bit. Power cuts were long and frequent. The administration, as usual, failed to regulate traffic at the 1100-foot-high Pirpanjal tunnel when the snowing was at its worst. This time 90 people lost their lives, many more than in previous years. Vehicles carrying basic necessities remained stranded for days.

Kashmir has often wondered what status it enjoyed as an integral part of India when New Delhi has not built even an all-weather road in the last 47 years to connect it with the rest of the country. Over the years, people have got injured to natural calamities, whether storm, flood or drought. But they still protest against man-made calamities, which are increasing season after season.

THE freelance pilot turned confidently to the International Red Cross officials and, gesturing towards the crates of dried food at the back of the aircraft, confided, "I knew you fellows would be here."

"How did you know?" asked Peter Walker, the organisation's director of the disaster and refugee policy.

"Because four months ago I was flying in Kalashnikovs — and after the guns, when the trouble has started, comes relief and aid."

The pilot was correct. Relief organisations such as the Red Cross are busier than ever, not just because there are more 'acts of God' — such as droughts and floods — but because most are partly 'acts of Man'.

In Walker's words, "Today there are hardly any natural disasters."

There are 56 wars underway, he says, compared with 34 in 1970. In 1993, the last year for which reliable figures are available, 250,000 people were killed by war, 17 million fled as refugees and perhaps 26 million were displaced in their own countries.

"Power, from the barrel of the cheap but effective automatic rifle, is one of the most potent factors shaping many people's lives today," he says. Violence makes a bad situation worse, sometimes turning difficulties into disasters, whether it is famine in Ethiopia or economic disruption in Azerbaijan.

Helping look after the disrupted millions are a plethora of humanitarian organisations, bringing in food and other supplies, running refugee camps, nursing the sick.

They have become very powerful — pushed to the fore by Western governments trying to avoid their own direct involvement. As a result, the relief agencies now also make political judgements and act as news agencies and diplomats, influencing policy and the international agenda and controlling huge amounts of money. The International

Effecting Peace in Kashmir

The question that is increasingly posed is whether the two sides are reaching anywhere: militants through sniping, ambushing or exploding bombs and the many-a-time-larger security forces through searches, brutalities and killings.

What is worrying them more is the ecological ruin that the unremitting hostilities are causing to the already disfigured valley. The Dal and Wullar lakes are shrinking, springs drying up and forests lessening by 2.8 per cent a year. A study has warned that their life line, the Jhelum, may deplete in water (the river, under the Indus water treaty, has been allotted to Pakistan).

The Kashmiris would have felt relieved — and recompensed — if the sprawling bureaucracy had attended to such hazards or the day-to-day harassments they face. But, to their bewilderment, entire government paraphernalia, from high-profile governor Krishna Rao to weight-throwing advisors and officials, is obsessed with one thing: security. It has come to mean more forces, more wayward firings and more violations of individual's basic rights.

There has been very little change in the style of governance, despite a plethora of reports on human rights violations. Interrogative centres function like torture chambers as before. The list of the untraced has only lengthened. And there is no comfort to the increasing number, going from pillar to post, to know the whereabouts of their dear ones or to complain against the excesses committed.

Indeed, Kashmir is in a bind, caught between the impiousness of New Delhi and the destroy-India attitude of

Islamabad. The security forces and militants are also entrapped in a no-win situation. Ministers and officials are exasperated, if not sick, of trading abuses at international forums.

The question that is increasingly posed is whether the two sides are reaching anywhere: militants through sniping, ambushing or exploding bombs and the many-a-time-larger security forces through searches, brutalities and killings. Is violence the only way out? Youthful Yasin

Let government take the initiative and declare ceasefire unilaterally. Militants should reciprocate. Human rights organisations and activists should supervise the ceasefire; they have experts among the sympathetic retired police officials for support.

Once the ceasefire is effected, elections should be held throughout the state — Jammu, the valley and the Ladakh — to allow people to choose their representatives. Presently, even the Hurriyat claims to speak for all when it

and Shabir Shah have assured so. The Kashmiri pandits, as the two leaders have emphasised, will return to their homes, being the warp and woof of the Kashmiri culture.

The elected representatives should also discuss among themselves the various options like Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's promise to give a status which is just short of independence, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Trieste-like arrangement. This is essential because the representatives will be holding discussions with New Delhi and Islamabad at same time.

Whether the Rao government likes it or not, India has conceded in the Shimla agreement that J and K is a dispute which is yet to be settled. No doubt, the Pakistan assistance to militants in the shape of arms, training and money has been proved conclusively. But its emphasis on human rights violations by the security forces while fighting militants has diverted the world's attention and internationalised the problem which hitherto lay dormant. In any case, no permanent solution is possible without involving Pakistan.

Logically, the Kashmir portion under Pakistan also comes within the exercise for settlement. That area should also have elections to choose its representatives and human rights organisations and activists in Pakistan should supervise such polls. Perhaps, at

some stage, the elected representatives of both J and K and the portions under Pakistan can meet to hammer out their differences and find out how far they can go together. But if this meeting precedes the negotiations in India, the entire process may get jumbled and probably defeated.

Now that the Rao government is in the midst of making changes in the state, it must revise its policy of suppression, which knows of no political rapprochement. An all-party conference to discuss Kashmir, however belated, is a welcome step because the consensus on the subject is necessary. The proposal may one day necessitate a constitutional amendment, requiring the support of two-thirds in both houses of parliament.

The starting point for discussion can be Article 370, which gave J and K a full say in all subjects except defence, foreign affairs and communication. Hari Singh, then the state ruler, mentioned only these three subjects in the instrument of accession. The J and K constituent assembly also went that far. The authority to change or dilute the assurances vests in the people of J and K, not the Indian Union, which they joined on that understanding.

It is possible that all the units of Jammu and Kashmir — the valley, Jammu and the Ladakh and portions under Pakistan — may not reach agreement among themselves. In that case, a particular unit can talk to both New Delhi and Islamabad for a settlement of its area, keeping the overall homogeneity in view. Even a small movement towards solution will evoke hope among the Kashmiris that the next winter will neither be long nor dark.

option might be to stand back and let one side win. Walker says "We can't do that." Apart from any other considerations, it is impossible to tell what will transpire: the situation might get worse. "The only working principle is to deliver life-giving assistance to those who need it most where they need it most."

It is good that some people may be fed as a result of relief organisations' emphasis on charitable works, de Waal argues, "but this is at the cost of addressing more fundamental political and human rights concerns. In the long run, more people will remain alive under more tolerable conditions if humanitarian relief is provided in a way that is consistent with basic human rights."

The Red Cross has a clear position because it has a carefully worked out set of operating principles and a strict mandate, and therefore avoids the core of de Waal's argument, which is that most relief agencies claim both to deliver 'neutral' relief and to support justice and participation — aims which de Waal says are probably incompatible.

De Waal says he welcomes counter-arguments but that most agencies are refusing to confront the issues he has raised. He attacks the "aura of sanctity" which has made it almost taboo to criticise NGO activities.

The debate must be opened up, he says: "There are major dilemmas that need to be addressed if relief operations in political emergencies are to become part of the solution, not to continue to be part of the problem."

A final point. When Walker was told by the pilot that relief cargoes invariably follow in the wake of the guns, he asked where current weapons flights were heading, since that would be an indicator of the next global hot-spot. The pilot replied: Northern Nigeria.

DANIEL NELSON is Editor of Gemini News Service.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Malik and Shabir Shah, who represent Kashmir's defiance, are against the cult of guns. They have repeatedly spoken against it. Yasin even claims to be Gandhian in approach. He has proved the efficacy of non-violence when through his fast he made mighty New Delhi withdraw its forces from around Hazratbal shrine.

Why not eschew violence when government, militants and others in Kashmir agree that there is no military solution to the problem. It has to be political, say, all shades of opinion. And no serious discussion is possible when the guns are booming. How to silence them to prepare the ground for negotiations should be the first step.

does not represent Kashmir, much less Jammu or the Ladakh. The elections, it should be declared beforehand by the Government of India, are meant to spot out representatives, not to revive the state assembly. No oral or written affidavit for loyalty to the constitution be sought and none given. These elections should also be supervised by human rights organisations and activists.

The elected representatives should first meet among themselves to agree on the structure the state should have. Because both Jammu and the Ladakh seek autonomy within the J and K. It is clear that the structure envisaged will be secular. Both Yasin Malik

Food First — or Priority for Politics?

Daniel Nelson writes from London

Relief workers in their four-wheel-drive vehicles, often flying pennants as though they were diplomats, are a common sight in many countries, a symbol of humanitarianism in action. Now, a critic has thrown down the gauntlet and challenged their work: "There is little in the last 15 years that relief agencies can look back upon with pride."

A century of violence

1816-1965: The 4 deadliest wars all occurred in the 20th century: First and Second World Wars, Japan-China, and Korea

1945-83: 20m deaths in 160 wars and major conflicts

1994: 56 wars

Biggest death toll from an international war in post-Napoleonic 19th century: 150,000 (Prussia-France)

Biggest death toll in 20th century: 54m (Second World War)

In 1945, wars killed one civilian for every 10 combatants. Today's conflicts kill 10 civilians for every soldier

The global human catastrophe unleashed by the Second World War, is the largest in history. Not the least tragic aspect, is that humanity has learned to live in a world in which killing, torture and mass exile have become everyday experiences - historian Eric Hobsbawm

Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies alone spend \$18 billion a year. Suddenly, the accountability of these agencies is being questioned. Are they really as helpful as their often simplistically emotive advertisements suggest? No, argues Alex de Waal of the London-based organisation, African Rights, who says that

"something has gone wrong in the whole relief business" and that "humanitarianism may turn out to be a political fashion whose day is past."

Humanitarianism, he argues, cannot fill a political void. In Rwanda, he says, relief organisations fudged the issue of genocide in relief — as a result of which "the genocidal army of the former government, now in exile, is fed by international food aid."

Earlier in the catastrophe, he argues, when the Rwanda Patriotic Front was advancing on Kigali, outsiders — ignoring the political dimension — called for a ceasefire: this would have left the guilty government in power, free to carry on with its policies. The calls overlooked the point that a Rwandan solution to the disaster was at hand — the military victory of the rebels.

Similarly, he says, the best result of the war in Ethiopia was not a ceasefire to take humanitarian relief across the battle-lines, but the defeat of the Mengistu Mariam government: "As the war came to an end, it became clear that the rebels' own humanitarian efforts — based on military advance and community mobilisation — were more effective than the standard international model of relief delivery."

It was lack of a political strategy that turned Operation Restore Hope in Somalia into a debacle, he says, and in Operation Lifeline Sudan ("a model for what the international community aspired to achieve in political emergencies"), relief is "prolonging the war, by constraining the military

strategies of each side, and contributing to stalemate."

Relief failures in Bosnia, he says, shows that the problem is worldwide rather than African:

"The UN and most of the established NGOs (non-governmental organisations) have recreated a set of donor-recipient relationships familiar to those who have witnessed their operations in Africa. Rather than seeing the Bosnian people as the essential resource to be mobilised in pursuit of solutions to political and humanitarian problems, the international organisations have presented themselves as controlling authorities, for whom the Bosnians are either passive recipients of largesse, or troublesome obstacles to the smooth operation of the international effort."

The skilled human resources in Bosnia have been neglected. As with Africans over many years, the Bosnians have found this surprising and humiliating."

The sentiments echo those of Francoise Bouchet-Saulnier of Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Frontiers), who has pointed out that UN resolutions on Iraq, Yugoslavia and Somalia referred to the protection of aid convoys but not the protection of the victims: "The civilian population is regarded solely as the recipient of aid... Preoccupation with logistics eclipses concern for human beings, as if soap or milk powder could prevent bombs from falling on hospitals, or generosity could offer protections against murder and expulsion."

To the argument that in situations like Rwanda the best

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.

Real Estate Development

Sir, Thank you very much for your editorial on 'Real Estate Development' (4th April, 1995). Your raising of the issue of quality construction by the developers while supporting their demand to reduce gain tax, stamp duties and registration cost was most appropriate.

To ensure quality construction a comprehensive building code should include a condition in sale deed that if any building becomes uninhabitable because of tilting on sides or development of cracks due to faulty foundation or construction or use of substandard material, within ten years of selling possession of any flat, then developers shall pay compensation to the buyers. If such a thing happens in the first year, then the whole of the sale price should be re-

turned. And if it occurs in the second year then nine-tenth; if it occurs in the third year eight-tenth, and in this way, if it happens in the tenth year, then one tenth of the sale price should be returned to the buyer.

Ghulam Kabir
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Oklahoma tragedy

Sir, The latest and the most sensational, most talked-about occurrence which has shaken the world and seized the global attention and sympathy for the American citizens, is the Oklahoma tragedy. US President Bill Clinton is deeply shocked as much as all the Americans in general and Oklahoma citizens in particular. There is no word of condemnation for the assailants of so heinous nature, which has blown off a big multi-storied Federal building

Homage to Satyajit Ray

Sir, The 28th April comes back once again to remind millions of Satyajit Ray fans of his 3rd death anniversary. On this day he left us three years ago. When Satyajit Ray died thousand of fans, film artists and intellectuals had gathered at his funeral to pay their homage to this great film-maker. Bangladeshis will not forget this legendary Bengali film-maker who is the first

Bengali ever to receive the Oscar award.

May we request BTV to telecast a full length Satyajit Ray movie on his 3rd death anniversary on Friday the 28th of April? When Satyajit Ray died in 1992, BTV had telecast "Pathar Panchali".

We thank BTV in advance.
Adib Reza
Paribagh House, Dhaka

Zahiruddin Khan

Sir, Mr Zahiruddin Khan resigned as Industries Minister more than a fortnight ago. He has shouldered the responsibility for the mismanagement in fertilizer distribution. This is an unprecedented example in this baby democracy. By doing so he has upheld the prestige of parliamentary democracy in this country. He was not an elected Member of the Parliament and was inducted into the Cabinet as a technocrat.

In 1956 Sir Anthony Eden, the then British Prime Minister had resigned taking full responsibility for Britain's debacle in the Suez war. In the early fifties, there took place a sensational train accident in India. On that issue the then Railway Minister of India, the late Rafi Ahmed Kidwai had

resigned. These great politicians had upheld the prestige of democratic system in their respective countries.

In our case, Mr Zahiruddin Khan has owned responsibility for mismanagement in fertilizer distribution. Was he actually responsible for the distribution mechanism? Future students of politics will perhaps dig out the actual fact. Mr Zahiruddin Khan, the non-MP minister, deserves congratulation for doing what an elected MP minister should have done. He has helped the limping democracy to feel proud for a while at least.

Karishma Rahman
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NGOs: A clarifications

Sir, This is in reference to Shah A M S Kibria's column titled "Non-Govt Organizations: Need for a National Policy", carried by The Daily Star on Sunday the 25th of April, 1995.

indeed exist in relation to foreign based and Bangladesh but foreign funded NGOs and their activities in Bangladesh. The NGO Affairs Bureau in the Prime Minister's Office set up in June 1990, has been entrusted with the task of Registration, Audit, Inspection, Appraisal and Approval of all NGO projects in Bangladesh as per the provisions of the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Ordinance, 1978.

The NGO Affairs Bureau located at Matshya Bhaban, 1 Park Avenue, Ramna, Dhaka has been extending one-stop facilitating service to the NGOs for over five years now and to our information the 895 overseas linked NGOs who stand registered with the Bureau have benefited from the facilitating and promotional approach followed by the Bureau in its official work. It may also be pointed out that currently there is no NGO cell functioning in the Economic Relations Division as claimed in the article. The need for such a cell has been obviated by the creation of the NGO Affairs Bureau.

M A Maman
Director General
NGO Affairs Bureau