Dhaka, Sunday, April 30, 1995

Is Passport Saleable?

Is passport a saleable commodity? The answer obviously ought to be a big NO. But universal laws that protect the security and sanctity of the passport can get compromised in our country. A report carried in this newspaper yesterday gave a detailed description of how things go wrong or are made short shrift of while processing applications for passport or issuing the valuable document that bears our national identity. Right to passport is an individual prerogative of a citizen. The way this right has been undermined, thanks to a vested interest coterie, brings to the fore the unpleasant truth that the matter of fundamental privilege has been reduced to a matter of licence.

To get an international passport within specific periods, as the rules go, all one has to do is to submit fees that vary according to the stated urgency of the demands. But this normal process is hardly allowed to work. The reason is an awful rush which the brokers cash in on with a reckless abandon. While an ordinary mortal needs to be extremely lucky to get to the counter of the passport office and to have his passport issued with out much of a hassle, the procurement of a passport for money is the easiest of thing on earth. The brokers are the men who can work this wonder.

When shady deals like this can make a passport available to anybody, it exposes the vulnerability and the danger we invite for our national security. International terrorists and drug dealers can easily have their way and make good use of fake identities for illicit purposes at the cost of our national image. There is no doubt that the individual prerogative must not suffer in any way. But at the same time it is too dangerous to leave such an important matter to the virtual discretion of brokers.

What is needed is to completely do away with the brokers at any point of the issuance of passport. A foolproof passport book, as the authority claims, is going to be introduced soon with such a built-in security mark which cannot be tampered with. That is good news. Still better it would be if the information and passport records are fully and centrally computerised. This will help avoid mischief, duplication and other discrepancies. To do this the passport office must be manned and equipped adequately to cope with the growing pressure of demands.

Repatriation Bottle-neck

The repatriation of tribal refugees from India to Bangladesh has, it seems, hit a conceptual snag even though the process had made a headway in two phases under a concrete agreement signed by all concerned early last year. From February 15 to August 2, 1994, altogether 5195 Chakma refugees officially returned to the CHT comprising approximately one-ninth of the total number who await repatriation at the South Tripura refugee camps.

This flow through the normal channels having stopped since August last year, around six hundred refugees subsequently decided on their own, it is learnt, to cross the Ramgarh and Panchhari border over to the Bangladesh side. Earlier 677 refugees had also acted in the same way making up a total of 1277 tribals using their own discretion to trek back to the CHT. Visible human beings could not have been miscounted, so that the fact of a spate in their voluntary return seems incontestable. This, to our understanding, does little credit to the agreement and bears testimony to the home sickness of refugees encamped in Tripura to quickly return to Bangladesh, regardless of their leaders' vacillations.

The hitch seems to have developed in separating the chaff from the grain. More precisely it lies in the garbled approach adopted to the entire gamut of the issue. Repatriation, extension of ceasefire in the CHT and peace talks between the government and the PCJSS, the political arm of Shantibahini, need not be mixed up. Making progress in each conditional upon that in the other means undermining the importance and pressing nature of the humanitarian concern arising out of the unsettled fate of the refugees. It is also tantamount to keeping the seeds of trouble intact when these can be nipped having regard to the fact that the tribal leadership are committed to a constitutional solution of their political problem. And the Bangladesh side, with a democratic system working here, cannot be averse to political discussion with them. Meanwhile, the repatriation process should continue unhindered in pursuance of the existing agreement, with new issues and demands keeping out of its way.

Disaster in ROK

The Friday morning gas blast disaster at a subway construction site in the South Korean city of Teagu overtakes us with grief. It took a toll of 109 including 56 middle school students, on preliminary estimates which are bound to be surpassed after the last count is made of the trapped underground construction workers.

The impact of the explosion is gauged from the fact that steel sheets and beams, the former weighing 280 kilograms each, were thrown asunder 50 metres away and up atop buildings. What happened to tender human beings and

feather-weight cars is anybody's guess! By all accounts, carelessness caused it. A gas supply line leak resulting from welding work was cited as one possible reason for the explosion. It has also been reported that since excavators were at work on the construction site they could have accidentally holed up the gas line. Whatever may be the exact reason for the blast which we are sure will come to light soon, there would be lessons to draw for countries making use of their gas resource — from this disaster. We in particular have a lot to learn from the Korean catastrophe, specially in the wake of some gas leakage accidents we have been through lately. Looking at our own list of deaths and injuries sustained in these we feel naturally empathetic towards the friendly people of ROK in their present moments of sorrow. Our condolences to the families who have lost their near and dear ones in the gas explosion. Couldn't the gas pipelines be impervious to leaks?

Disturbing Signals from Sylhet: Are We Going to Give in to Fanaticism and Intolerance?

Our credulity is being over-taxed when we are asked to believe that an administration which could mobilize thousands of security forces to provide protection to Golam Azam's public meetings could not deploy the required police force to curb a few marauding hooligans. The identity of these anti-liberation elements is well known to the authorities.

steps? According to some reports, the deputy commissioner 'phoned Mr. Shamsur Rahman to tell him that the administration was unable to give him any assurance of protection. This is indeed a very serious matter. Was the deputy commissioner acting under instructions from the higher authorities or did he act on his own? If he acted on his own then he should be prepared to face the consequences of in competence and failure to discharge his duties. No one will believe that the anti-liberation forces in Sylhet have become so powerful that the security forces of the government are not strong enough to deal with them and curb their violent and illegal activities.

Our credulity is being overtaxed when we are asked to believe that an administration which could mobilize thou sands of security forces to pro vide protection to Golam Azam's public meetings could not deploy the required police force to curb a few marauding hooligans The identity of these anti-liberation elements is well known to the authorities. They are fully aware of the strength of these remnants of parties which have been resolutely and convincingly rejected by the people in the past. Without encouragement from powerful quarters these extremist elements could not have mounted the kind of attack that were reported by the press. It is the founder of BNP Gen. Zia who had brought these rejected elements from the closet and

rehabilitated them in the

of the eternal city likened the

event as an important occasion

linking the two ancient civi-

lizations! The Lord Mayor was

not wrong. The city father's

journey along with the

Bangladesh Foreign Minister

from the historic seat of

Campidoglio (the field of sor-

row) to the river side square in

country's politics. What hap pened in Sylhet is thus follow-

ing a familiar pattern. Poet Shamsur Rahman, one hardly needs to point out, is a source of the nation's pride. He is acknowledged today as the greatest living poet of Bangladesh. His name and fame has spread far beyond our national frontiers. Indeed he has become a symbol of our achievements in the field of literature. His poems are avidly

like, against communalism, bigotry and intolerance. He is no politician and does not belong to any political party but he did not compromise with military rulers. He had to sacrifice the security of a good job for the sake of his intellectual and literary freedom. Also a prolific and talented prose writer, he has been writing on social and political issues with profound insight. He is a torch-bearer of literary and in-

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria

read in West Bengal where he is held in high regard. His immortal poems on our Liberation Struggle are like precious gems which will continue to inspire the nation for generations to come. This article is not the occasion to evaluate the literary excellence of his poems and I am not qualified enough to pronounce on the quality of his work. But the touch of a genius is unmistakable when one reads even a few lines of his poetry. His words can go deep into our heart and reveal, in a flash, a reality which we may have been aware of only dimly.

His poems are widely read and loved by the people at all levels of the society. He combines in him both talent and character. He stands, rock-

tellectual freedom in the country. He is, beyond a shadow of doubt, one of our greatest national assets. He has been in poor health for quite some time. His eye sight has been affected by glaucoma. While the nation should be praying for his recovery and good health, it is an irony of fate that some of these fanatics have been in stigated. Believably by inter ested political quarters to declare him a murtad. How dare they behave as if they can pick and choose any body at their sweet will to pronounce their verdict on him? Who are these people and who has given

According to press reports.

Buchwald's them the right to declare any Muslim to be a murtad? Is it COLUMNI because he has been critical of the BNP government?

Rome-Dhaka Relations Affinity of Two Civilizations

by Waliur Rahman

When the city fathers of Rome decided in October 1991

to christen an important plaza and road in patrician

Parioli after Bangladesh, it was a relatively modest

affair. But the symbolism was not lost on the

Bangladesh Foreign Minister when the Lord Mayor of

→ IORGIO Bocca, one of witaly's best-known journalists, thought that Italians excelled in preserving their own private truths. But in public life they do well in maintaining double-entendre.

HE news from Sylhet

was most disturbing

The anti-liberation for-

ces there have had a field day.

They frustrated the initiative

taken by a cross section of the

people of Sylhet to give a

reception for poet Shamsur

Rahman. The fanatics there

have become so bold that they

master-minded a concerted

attack on the organizers of the

planned reception. The venue

of the organizing committee

where the preparatory mee-

ting was being held was

ransacked, several houses and

business establishments bel-

onging to the organizers were

attacked and more than a

dozen people including senior

leaders were physically ass-

aulted by them. As a result of

these murderous attacks and

mindless vandalism, the

reception had to be postponed.

a matter of shame for the

people of Sylhet but also a mat-

ter of deep concern to the en-

tire nation. Are we going to ac-

cept such assaults on our cul-

ture and on our freedom of

thought and expression? The

forces of reaction and obscu-

rantism are seemingly on the

rampage. One wonders if we

are witnessing the resurgence

of a new version of religious

inquisition in Bangladesh. We

have read in history how the

Christian churches in Europe

used to burn people at the

stake for disagreeing with the

orthodox Church doctri-

ne.Islam. however; is a religion

of peace. It has no established

Church. We take pride in our

spirit of tolerance. Yet the

incident which took place in

Sylhet might give the im-

pression that the forces of fa-

naticism and bigotry have en-

gulfed the society. But the re-

ality may be more complex

than what appears on the sur-

episode is the failure of the

administration to provide pro-

tection to the organizers of the

reception. Was it really a fail-

ure or refusal to take effective

The key factor in the

The ugly episode is not only

An admirer of Bocca for his anti-fascist philosophy, I humbly demur with his perception of his compatriots. If what he says is true about the Italians, it is true, mutatis mutandis, of all other nationalities. If the preservation of human dignity in the face of hostile power, be it temporal or otherwise, is to be the inherent urge, human being reacts almost the same way everywhere.

In the South Asian conti-

nent where a billion people get up everyday in search of basic necessity of life, one would come to realize in no time what one can achieve in life falls far short of expectations. The dilemma attached to the day to day life of a human being has been traced over the centuries in man's creative works — books, poems and paintings: but none, it seems to me, expressed it so well as the 14th century frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena in the vicinity of Rome. These frescoes are called - il Malgoverno, bad government and tt Buongoverno, good government; the bad government frescoe is filled with battles. corpses, ruins and destruction. The good government means ploughing by farmers, craftsmen creating artifacts, vineyards with grapes, and happy faces. These frescoes though created by an Italian, carry universal meaning. Lorenzetti's

All roads lead to Rome. While in Rome, we invariably imbibe the spirit of Rome that was, the classical Rome which gave us Law. Town Hall and Infrastructure: the three essential ingredients for a modern nation state.

quest is everybody's quest!

When the city fathers of Rome decided in October 1991 to christen an important plaza and road in patrician Parioli after Bangladesh, it was a relatively modest affair. But the symbolism was not lost on the Bangladesh Foreign Minister when the Lord Mayor

the eternal city likened the event as an important occasion linking the two ancient civilizations! Tutonic Germany in trade and economic relations with

a ceremonial motorcade was itself a re-creation of the tradition of Rome that was. It is no surprise, therefore, that Rome and Dhaka didn't take long to discover in each other the affinity of the two civilizations, one on the Tiber and the other on the Ganges. The paintings of Qamrul Hasan and Shahabuddin representing two modern day spiritus of Bengal can be likened to the two phases of Roman history: Whereas Lorenzetti's frescoes represented an eternal dilemma for mankind Michealangelo's figure of Lorenzo de Medici, seated on his tomb in the Medici Chapel in Florence, expresses the brooding melancholy of 16th century Italy. Shahabuddin brilliantly explored the Bengali psyche and used his brush to draw the vignette of the universality of the War of Liberation SO Michealangelo delineate in the Sistine Chapel, the coming of Apocalypse in the Last

Judgement. Guilio Andreotti, the last Renaissance man in Europe (the French politician Andre Malraux was the second, but last), did perform a historic responsibility as it were. He assisted Bangladesh, the new nation, with support of presidents Cossiga and Scalfaro, to find a place in Rome. The

contacts developed at such break-neck speed that within a course of five years, the Latin-Italy overtook Metropolitan Britain, Gaulic France and

politico-economic-cultural

Bangladesh. At one time Bangladesh export to Italy was equal to our total exports to France and England together! No mean achievement.

As legend goes the Roman

Caesars liked to see their ladies dressed in Gossomar thin Dhaka Muslin! The transparency accounted for better governance! In later days, the Venetians were importing Bengal spices through Bombay to preserve their precious export merchandise — meat. The Venetians were supplying meat to most of the kingdoms and principalities in Europe. Guilio Andreotti was ruminating history in an aside in the state banquet he hosted at the Palazzo Barberini honouring the Bangladesh leader. Guido Reni's immortal creation. Beatrice Cenci overlooking nearby created a perfect setting: transitoriness of our being. Modern Italian language has many words/phrases common with Bangla: both drew upon Sanskrit. As if to underline the umbilical link through Indo-European corridor, between the two countries, Amintore Fanfani, Guilio Andreotti, Calgeri, Bisinigani, senators, ministers, congressmen, defence personnel and the Roman elite — all converged in Grand Hotel on October 15, 1992, not far from Palazzo Margarita, the 2nd World War hub of Armistice, to greet the head of delegation of Bangladesh.

The location of the largest number of Bengalis in Italy. second only to Great Britain, underlines the ability of the great historic nation which is Italy, to absorb citizens of other countries. Doesn't it remind us of the heady days of the Roman Empire which welcomed in its fold the diverse and heterogeneous nationalities of other countries? This

eclecticism of the Roman Empire permitted us to have slave-turned-philosopher

Epictetus. Today, the expatriate Bengali community in Italy (about 30000) is remitting around 100 million dollars to Bangladesh. When there was a move in 1991 to deport some Bengalis, we moved fast and sensitive our friends, including Martelli, Minister in charge of Immigration. It worked. The Bengalis are working there to the full satisfaction of their employers and contributing to the economic growth of Italy, the 5th largest industrial power in the world.

In spite of the ongoing po-

litical crisis in Italy, their economy is not shrinking. Its growth has maintained the 2 trillion dollar mark - much above the UK. While the search for buon governo goes on, the Italians are surging ahead in every possible area of human endeavour. The outgoing Italian Ambassador in Dhaka Claudio Pacifico has very ably followed the footsteps set in motion by such mandarins of Roman diplomacy as Ruggiero. Bruno-Bottai, Saleo, Brunetti and Quaroni in sustaining the level of relationship with Bangladesh. His successor Ambassador Miniero would be equal to the task: he is no stranger to this land. The finest example of the

common effort of Dhaka and Rome, in spite of some constraints, both endogenus and exogenous, is the 91km Dinajpur-Panchagarh highway built with Italian donation. The announcement of emergency grant made on the podium of UN General Assembly in September 1988, following the devastating flooding in Bangladesh, now found expression in this road -- that runs athwart the strategic northwestern flank of Bangladesh. It is a good example of work of men of goodwill of the two continents. Luigi Berzini was correct in addressing Italians the very active, energetic, inventive, resourceful and spirited...' We Bengalis are also known to have similar attributes.

Claudio Pacifico ought not to forget to convey to the Italian leaders that we remem-

Running for Office ENE Korth was thinking of running for Congress. He sat at the kitchen table with h is wife Forsythia. "Financially I don't know if we can pull it off or not."

> His wife responded, "I'm sure we can. We'll just serve a cheaper Chardonnay during the O J Simpson trial. How much does a congressman make?"

Muslim renaissance in Bengal.

Those Maulanas who declared

Nazrul to be a Kafir have faded

from memory but Nazrul con-

tinues to shine ever brighter in

have no doubt in my mind that

the same fate will befall those

Sharnsur Rahman.

those who agitated against.

Shamsur Rahman are the rem-

nants of the moribund Muslim

League, the Nezame Islami.

Jamaate Islami, the Islami

Chhatra Shibir and Yubo

Command who ganged up to

launch these attacks. It is no

mystery as to who commands

the Yubo Command. One also

saw the names of previously

unknown bodies such as

Sahaba Sainik Parishad as the

gang leaders of these attacks.

Have the collaborators decided

to strike back openly? If so,

the freedom-loving people of

this country must take up the

This is not the first time

that the fanatics struck at a

great poet. In the twenties and

thirties decades they attacked

Kazi Nazrul Islam and declared

him to be a kafir. Fortunately.

the overwhelming majority of

the Muslim community of

Bengal did not take the "fatwa"

by these Maulanas seriously.

Far from boycotting Nazrul, the

Muslim community fell in love

with his poems, songs and

ghazais. He was himself secular

and non-communal in his out-

look and belief but his poems

and songs contributed to

challenge.

who are fulminating against

wall against free thought and

expression have ended as the

debris of history. Socrates was

made to drink hemlock poison

because his free thinking was

considered too disruptive of

the social order of ancient

Athens. Galileo was thrown

into prison and had to suffer

persecution because the

Church leaders of Italy thought

his theory that the earth re-

volves round the sun was

against the scriptures. So we

should take heart from the

lessons from the past. The fa-

natics of Sylhet have had their

day, thanks to the support

provided to them by the BNP

government. But the last laugh

will not be theirs. While they

will be consigned to the rub-

bish heap of history. Shamsur

Rahman will reign in the liter

ary world of Bangladesh as one

How can we, as a nation, re-

spond to the fanatics and other

assorted bigots? Surely not by

indulging in hooliganism as the

anti-liberation coalition in

Sylhet have done but by orga-

nizing a national reception for

Shamsur Rahman. That will

not only be a fitting response

to the Sylhet episode but also

the appropriate and well-de-

served tribute to our greatest

of our greatest poets.

Those who tried to erect a

the nation's cultural horizon.

"One hundred thirty-three thousand six hundred dollars a

"That should take care of our children's automobile insurance. The rest we'll draw out of our savings and whatever we

can get from selling the house." Forsythia said. "Wait, there's more. We have to allocate a large sum for legal fees.

"What legal fees?" "Anyone elected to Congress has to hire a lawyer to defend himself against a special prosecutor," Gene explained.

"But you haven't done anything," his wife protested. "You know that and I know that. But does the Ethics

Committee know it?" Gene said. Forsythia asked, "Does everybody elected to Congress need

a lawver?" "If you're smart, you'll hire one as soon as you are elected. You can be accused of anything as soon as you become a servant of the people. I have to set aside \$300 an hour for legal

"How can we pay that and still have enough money to open your election campaign?"

"I'm starting a legal defense fund the day I announce that I am running. I was hoping to get Lisa Ellen Goldberg to give a concert to pay for it.

"Are you sure that you want to run? You might get involved in a conflict-of-interest situation with a publishing tycoon, like Newt Gingrich did, and use up all you defense money during just one ethics complaint. Why don't you become a member of the Cabinet instead? Clinton's been after you to be his new Secretary of Commerce if Ron Brown doesn't make

"Do you know what it cost for a member of the Cabinet to hire a lawyer to defend himself against a special prosecutor?" Gene said. "Five hundred dollars an hour."

"But you're as clean as a hound's tooth," his wife declared. Gene said, "They'll find something — they always do."

"How can you ever be elected President if you don't win some other office first?" Forsythia asked.

"I've decided that I don't want to run for President. One sour real estate deal and the legal bills will drive us into bankruptcy. "Jut for fun - how much would it cost to defend yourself

against the special prosecutor if you became President?" "If you have to ask, you can't afford it."

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OPINION

More Focus on the NGOs A Husnain

There are more grey areas in the otherwise good activities of the NGOs (local and foreign) in Bangladesh in the development and social sectors than covered by S A M S Kibria in his column of April 23.

As he suggests, there may be a clear and transparent official Code of Conduct for the NGOs. This may be well publicised for public information. The monitoring and evaluation mechanisms may be explained publicly in the mass media both by the government and

I find that in my locality (Mohammadpur/Lalmatia area) a large number of new NGO signboards are coming up at regular intervals in front of eggs' who try to engage indithe residential area!). It means the NGO work is good business; and it is not difficult to get a new registration, especially in respect of the local NGOs (the registration of for eign NGOs must be an elaborate process). The 'experts' in these mushrooming NGO or ganisations also expect a piece of the pie in this supposedly multi-million dollar business The question of nepotism and backdoor business contacts naturally comes up for scrutiny and proper monitoring. Any foreign donor funding is carefully processed at both ends. It is assumed.

As for the 'rich' foreign NGOs operating here. I have read press reports questioning what percentage of the funds directly benefit the end target of a project, that is, the socially disadvantaged people for whom these poverty alleviation programmes are conducted For example, if 50 to 70 out of every 100 dollars are spent on office expenses and pay and allowances of the staff, then only a small percentage of the fund is actually spent on the field activity. Some agency may clar ify what is the (correct) average figure of the breakup per-

In every system, including the NGOs, there are some bad many buildings (and that too in rectly in some form of undesirable activities not in public interest (who defines it?) These may include political religious, or cultural overtones. Again the focus is on efficient feedback, monitoring, and assessment mechanisms. How much the public know about such issues and arrangements? There are many other

> topics for discussion and review. 'Open' seminars may be useful before drafting new amendments to the standing instructions or Code Let a sall be clear about the NGO is sit ties in the country and do away with the grey areas, as far as possible

Biman's Hajj flight

Sir. Biman Hajj flight leaves Dhaka at one am every night. That means Hajis would have no sleep that night. It is also learnt that return flight also has been planned to leave Jeddah at an equally inconvenient time. It is not understood why such odd time has been fixed. Is it designed to torture the Hajis? Otherwise there is no point in fixing such odd and inconvenient time. Why can't Biman Hajj flight leave Dhaka at a convenient time in the morning say nine or ten am so that Hajis can reach Jeddah in good time, finish immigration and other formalities and reach Mecca or Medinah be-

fore sunset.

If it is due to shortage of aircraft, then an aircraft can be chartered by Biman for this purpose. Present departure time only demonstrates that Biman authorities have little human consideration for the Hajis. Will the Parliamentary Committee on Ministry of Civil Aviation and the Ministry of Religious Affairs look into it?

Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury

Gas fire accidents

Sir. It is estimated that about four million people in Dhaka use natural gas for cooking their food and most

pipelines and burners etc are 20-30 years old. Unfortunately there is no authority whatsoever to make a routine check and surveillance of the gas connections and the equip-The Titas Gas Authority

gas equipment,

appears to be only concerned with installing new-connections with the help of approved contractors and labourers most of them are reported to be untrained and illiterate.

The Titas Gas Authority has taken no precautionary and preventive measures for the safety and security of the members of the public for use of the highly inflammable natu-

ral gas fuel.

As a result, due to ignorance and carelessness of the consumers of gas and also on account of dereliction of the concerned authorities two grievous fire mishaps have taken place in the city one after another at Rampura and Lalbagh.

Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Titas Gas Company Ltd and Fire Brigade to kindly take all steps including necessary surveillance, inspection, training and creating mass awareness to avoid gas fire aceidents in the future.

We would request the

OH Kabir

Dhaka-1203