

A Welcome Decision

The garments manufacturers have done the inconceivable. On Wednesday the president of BGMEA, the association for all of Bangladesh's export-only garments houses, made the unilateral declaration that by Oct 31 of this year, they would totally eliminate employing child labour in their shops. The radical and rather sudden and surprising step deserves all the commendation in the world as it also awaits the next best thing to happen in the industry: a hundred per cent execution of the decision. By the assertions made by the BGMEA chief it is clear the organisation is quite serious about this and a mechanism to ensure that the ban would continue effectively without any cheating attempts has also been indicated.

Now that the big step has been taken, one would like to know what was the size of the garments industry's stake in continuing with child labour. Children come handy only because of cheaper wage. How much would that accrue to an industry employing much more than a million with children constituting at best 5 per cent of them? The difference is negligible. The BGMEA has done a wise thing to jettison what is internationally a criminal practice. One hopes this would stand our garments exports in good stead with the international importers.

What will happen to the axed children? After all they don't come to play in the garments holes. What will happen to their families which they have been supporting? If the number is indeed what BGMEA claims it to be — between 8 and 10 thousand — cannot the government and the NGOs come forward with some good Samaritan package proposal of vocational education and stipends? If the government is earnest the BGMEA could be persuaded to contribute to the funding of the package.

One fervent appeal to the BGMEA. Many of the sacked children will become eligible to employment as adults in three, four or five years' time. If the association makes a list of all terminated children, they can very well give priority of recruitment to those on the list when the time comes. This they can do without going into expenses. So please do it. Together with that please be good enough to give the children a goodly parting parcel. Didn't the tiny ones contribute their mite to the prosperity of the garments industry?

Fighting Drugs

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has rightly pointed to the growing threat of drug addiction to our society. It is a fact — although rarely admitted — that this curse of modern time has been grossly underestimated here. Its cancerous spread in society has failed to shock us as much as it should and generate the response that might help fight the rot. The Prime Minister's concern — as expressed at a function in the city — has unfortunately found hardly any reflection in the government policy. Narcotic drugs cannot be so easily available if the administration is tough on the substances' illegal import. As far as the production of the local varieties are concerned, it is far too limited to pose any threat on a national scale. It is the clandestine import of drugs that is a real headache.

Reportedly, with the lessening of the Golden Triangle's importance and Pakistan entering into the map of international drug network in a big way, Bangladesh has become a convenient route for the substances' shipment. Had the country been just a route, the matter would have been confined to law and order situation. Its social implication would not be so perilous if the country did not by now turn into a destination as well. We all know it already has become an end point and with it the law situation has further exacerbated. Abuse of drugs cannot be free from a whole range of crimes. That is what has exactly happened in our society and the policy-makers and planners are turning a blind eye to the social ill made worse by economic compulsions.

Evidently, the drug menace has to be fought on two fronts. On social and law and order fronts. Plugging the point of entrance is the important task. To do that trained men and sophisticated equipment are necessary. In this campaign we certainly can seek help from developed countries jealously carrying on their own battle against drugs. Because such joint actions help both. Then an effective social campaign against addiction can keep the young generation away from this destructive habit. Even then such efforts cannot be enough to completely root out its presence, because unemployment, frustration and lack of healthy entertainment are issues connected with the habit. Gradually these issues must be addressed both on family and social levels if the fight against drugs is to be successful.

New-look Cox's Bazar

Cox's Bazar is going to transform into a more livable town than it was in the past, thanks to the Cox's Bazar Healthy Town Programme. It is a programme the World Health Organisation (WHO) undertakes to complete in different countries. Conceived in 1984 and launched two years later, this programme takes into account the health status of the citizens of a town or city. However, health is understood as a state of social, physical, mental and environmental well-being of the people. Considering the town's importance as a tourist spot, Cox's Bazar was never up to the expectation of foreign or local visitors. Now that situation may change. That is really welcome news.

The WHO knows how to raise the quality of health of people. If the organisation concentrates its attention to a particular place or a small town like Cox's Bazar, things are definitely going to improve. That the town has most of the time discouraged visitors from coming in hordes to the longest beach in the world was no riddle. So the WHO's attempt to give a push to the town's health status may be indeed helpful to increase the tourists' flow there. But this is a continuous and long-term process. The WHO can only give a nice start to it. The process has to be ultimately carried on by the people of the town.

It is exactly at this point the participation of the town's citizens arise. If they are aware of the extra effort needed to meet the standard of foreign visitors, the town can truly attract more and more tourists. That our tourism has not developed in any desirable manner owes to the casual approach to the subject. Apart from facilities of international standard, what is needed is the presentation of our local culture and tradition in a pleasant way. Cox's Bazar will have its physical facilities but let it be culturally colourful also. That will help develop tourism there.

INDIA does not have much to talk about when it comes to relations with its neighbouring countries, either Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. But it should have had something to say at least on Nepal. Both have open borders, more than 80 per cent of the population is Hindu, and there is a cultural affinity going back to hundreds of years.

The lack of equation was, however, perceptible when Nepal Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari had a round of discussions with Indian leaders at New Delhi earlier in the month. He expressed his unhappiness over Nepal's 1950 treaty of peace and friendship with India. But when asked which portions did he object to, he could not spell them out. Maybe, he did not want to do so at the first meeting.

Whether he had not made up his mind or whether he was diffident to express is not the point. The real issue is whether there is a special relationship between New Delhi and Kathmandu, just as there is between London and Washington. Had there been one, full-fledged discussion on the treaty would not have been deferred. In fact, the need would not have arisen because there would not have been any point of difference.

Indeed, it was a shot-gun treaty. In 1950, China had occupied Tibet, forcing the Dalai Lama to flee. The Ranas were then ruling over Nepal. Exposed as India was in the Himalayas, it secured a treaty which could not have been but unequal at that time.

Nepal: A Test for Neighbourliness

New Delhi's role in Nepal's security, without that country's concurrence, smacks of dictation. It means that India's interests — and perceptions — take precedence over Nepal's. This cannot be acceptable to a sovereign country.

Adhikari's objection to the "security umbrella concept" is understandable. But the Ministry of External Affairs is at a loss to make out what he is trying to convey. It tells me that there is no such thing as the "security umbrella concept" and that it has been mentioned for the first time since 1966. That may be so. But the question is whether New Delhi harbours the intention that the concept conveys and whether the treaty in 1950 suggests such a concept without explicitly saying so.

One thought that the withdrawal of military advisory group from Kathmandu some years ago would have removed the last vestige of India's tutelage over Nepal's defence. Apparently, it is not so. New Delhi is quite right when it told Adhikari that he should let it know if and when Kathmandu hauls through India the weapons bought abroad. But New Delhi's role in Nepal's security, without that country's concurrence, smacks of dictation. It means that India's interests — and perceptions — take precedence over Nepal's. This cannot be acceptable to a sovereign country.

Just as Adhikari is sensitive to his country's security requirements, he should be equally responsive to India's compulsions. He should appreciate why it cannot afford to allow transit facilities from Chittagong, a Bangladesh port, because the road runs too near the chicken neck, the militarily strategic point in the north-east. Bhutan, which has the facility is a protectorate, it has entrusted defence to India.

One other point which seems to have irritated New Delhi is Adhikari's statement that he wants to be a bridge between India and China. Firstly, relations between the two countries are so amiable that no outside assistance is required. Some other forces in Kathmandu had tried to indulge in such grandiose ideas at one time or the other. That has created such a wall that it has been difficult to demolish. Secondly, the word 'bridge' is part of the cold war lexicon. New Delhi also fancied to play that role at one time. The scenario has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is understandable that the countries, however small,

should expect to be treated sovereign, at par. But that they should try to project their importance on the basis of strategy is something trite. Such considerations ceased to matter when the confrontation between the eastern and western blocs ended. Adhikari, as a head of communist coalition, should understand it more than others. The two prime ministers discussed everything under the sun, but not the lessening

Adhikari's demand for the revision of the 1950 treaty has been the questioning of Darjeeling's status by Subash Geishing of the Gorkha National Liberation Front. The latter believes that the British left in 1947 without determining the future of Darjeeling. According to him, the annulment of the 1950 treaty would break New Delhi's ties with the territory, meaning thereby that the treaty governs Darjeeling's links with India. Adhikari has characterised it as 'wild thinking' and has emphasised that Darjeeling is part of India. But Geishing organised a few days ago a two-day bandh to protest against the discussion on the 1950 treaty without associating the people of Darjeeling. This is ominous for the future.

This comical aspect should not, however, come in the way of the treaty's revision. Let us be clear what India's interests are. We do not want the territory to be used against us. Adhikari has given an assurance on that. So much so, he has cancelled even a meeting at Kathmandu of leaders of Jammu and Kashmir, both of whom had agreed to build reservoirs of water at the Himalayas so that there is a regular supply of water in UP, Bihar and Bangladesh. One comical fallout of

of water in the Ganges. There is too much outtake, legal and illegal, and this leaves little water for the tail-end Bangladesh, where farmers suffer during March, April and part of May due to scarcity of water, which the Farakha barrage still diverts to flush the Hoogly. Whether it is serving the purpose is a matter to study. But Nepal and India could have agreed to build reservoirs of water at the Himalayas so that there is a regular supply of water in UP, Bihar and Bangladesh. One comical fallout of

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Iran Embargo Serves No Purpose

Using Iran as an all-purpose distraction for US ills is neither good diplomacy nor good domestic strategy, argues William O-Beeman an anthropologist at Brown University who lived and worked for close to a decade in Iran.

PROVIDENCE — Domestic politics usually drives foreign policy, a principle President Clinton illustrated all too clearly a few days back when he announced a US economic embargo of Iran. The embargo will have little or no effect on Iranians other than to make them madder at the US. But it will let Clinton steal a march on conservative Republicans through yet another round of jingoistic bashing of a so-called rogue regime.

American goods will still find their way to Iran through third parties, and Iranian oil will still find its way to world markets. The United States, until now Iran's number one world trade partner, will still rank among its top three or four trade partners through the offices of independent subsidiaries and third-party traders.

The stated purpose of the embargo is to "isolate Iran" as an "inspiration and paymaster to terrorists." Just how an economic embargo will translate into getting Iran to reform its policies is unclear. If the same logic is at work here as in previous embargoes, the lack of American consumer goods or a slightly reduced cash flow will presumably

cause the Iranian populace to rise up and either depose their leaders or force them to abandon policies that displease Washington.

Even if Iranian leaders wanted to comply with the Clinton administration's desires, they could not. All Iran experts know — as do Clinton's own Middle East specialists — that the Iranian government is not in control of the darker elements in its midst that provide limited financial and tactical support for terrorist groups. To try to reign in these groups would be political suicide. The outcome could well be an even more hostile set of leaders in Tehran with even more extreme views.

But the real target of the embargo is an American public still trying to come to terms with the specter of home-grown terrorism. Roundly criticized for suggesting that conservative talk show hosts might have created the climate of hate that fostered such action, Clinton has now reverted to scapegoating foreign terrorists — the lowest common denominator in public thinking about terrorism.

And who is safer to attack than Iran, already demonized by four successive presidencies? The White House misses

no opportunity to swat at Tehran even when it winds up contradicting itself. Thus in April the Clinton administration objected to Russia selling nuclear power technology to the Iranians for fear it would be used for nuclear weapons. Yet, it recommended the sale of the same nuclear power generating facilities to North Korea on grounds that they had little chance of being used in weapons manufacture.

Clinton's choice of venue for announcing the embargo — an April 30 World Jewish Congress dinner honoring Jewish holocaust survivors — implied a link between the massacre of Jews and other minorities in World War II and Iran's purported actions today. While the comparison is preposterous, it will undoubtedly fan anti-Iranian sentiment for many Americans.

By staging the embargo announcement at the World Jewish Congress, the Clinton administration was clearly appealing to financial interests who support Israel. But this also represents a false reality. Iran is geographically too distant and lacks the resources or transportation lines to carry on even a short engagement with Israel. Its surrogates in the region are likewise on match for

the Israeli army. The occasional sabre rattling coming from Tehran is primarily a way to throw a sop to Iran's own radical elements.

On the other hand, as the Secretaries of Commerce, Energy and the Treasury have pointed out, the embargo will hurt American workers and trade interests. All three have flatly opposed the idea of an embargo in recent months.

The United States must eventually repair its relations with Iran. Mutual economic and defense interests in the region make this imperative. To acquire real leverage over Iran, however, America must once more ally itself with Iranian economic and political interests — something it cannot achieve while enforcing an economic embargo. At the same time, to have real leverage over the American electorate, the President needs to establish programmes of real substance for which Iran bashing is no substitute.

In sum, using Iran as an all-purpose distraction for whatever ails the nation at a given time is neither good diplomacy nor good domestic political strategy.

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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.

Violence against women

Sir, On April 18, 1995, I came across an article under the caption "Violence against women" in a newspaper. It says, "According to 1992 US Senate Judiciary Committee report, in the US, one woman is physically abused every eight seconds and one is raped every six minutes. Spouse abuse is more common in the US than automobile accidents, mugging and cancer deaths combined." I wonder what sort of a picture would unveil if survey were conducted in our country. The article quotes, a parliamentarian in Papua New Guinea, who, taking part in a debate on wife bashing, went as far as to say, "wife beating is an accepted custom. We are wasting our time debating this issue." We are outraged by this comment and afraid that may be other men also share the same opinion.

It was the custom in our society, the husband to be the earner and the wife to look after home and children, though nowadays it is changing and many women have ventured out into the world and doing very well. But, still it is the women, who are doing all the household chores. In the morning the wife has to make the breakfast, make the children ready for school, see to the tidying up of the house, while the husband takes a leisurely bath and reads the newspaper. This is the common picture, except those who are quite well off and can afford servants, then also it is

the wife who has to see to the smooth running of the household.

In spite of all these the husband acts as if he is the master, he can do anything he wishes but the wife must never displease him in anyway.

Men are physically stronger than women and the main reason behind their cruelty and injustice is, they are taking the full advantage of it.

In the article a shocking aspect of life was disclosed. In Peru, a study found 90 per cent of the young mothers to be rape victims, often as a result of assault by a stepfather or other close relatives. In Costa Rica 95 per cent of pregnant clients under 15 at a hospital were found to be incest victims.

I don't know what to say about these unspeakable crimes done by our so-called masters?

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

Fatwabazi

Sir, Bangladesh is a land of religious moderates. But in recent years a few irresponsible self-styled clerics committed such crime that the internationally reputed News Week, in its 3rd week April 95, issue carried article about Islamic radicals in Bangladesh. Ironically the article had been published in conjunction with the visit of the first lady of USA who appreciated the work of Grameen Bank and some NGOs here. The burning of a circus party including trained animals

in Cox's Bazar, the stoning and beating of women in different parts of the country and resisting the activities of NGO's by Fatwa mongers have already branded Bangladesh as a land of Islamic fundamentalists.

Some of our overenthusiastic clerics committed such mistakes and caused irreparable damage to the Muslim community in the past also. When the British snatched power from Muslim rulers in the 18th century, mullahs issued Fatwas: not to learn English, not work under the British government and not make trade link with them. The Muslim community obeyed the mullahs and gradually, lost their jobs, trade, property, became illiterate, ignorant and backward. If Sir Syed Ahmed had not intervened, subsequently, the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent would have been completely obliterated. The Muslims, the rulers of Indian sub-continent for 500 years before the British snatched power in collusion with some Mirzajars, were thus reduced to virtual paupers by some fatwabazis. They come to the scene from time to time perhaps only to cause suffering to fellow people.

When the Muslims obeyed the mullahs, and were virtually obliterated, the Hindu grabbed the opportunity and learned English, the language of the rulers, worked and traded with them and specially taking 'contracts' for collecting 'taxes' under Lord Cornwallis. Permanent settlement became rich. This new-found fortune gave them unlimited opportunity to gain supremacy in the society in education, science, literature, art, music culture.

So, Fatwabazi should be stopped immediately. The so called clerics also should be obliged to join the work force to earn their livelihood.

Mohammad S. Islam Barani, Dhaka 1213

SAARC

Sir, During the last ten years, SAARC has held as many as eight summit meetings. But except for pomp and show, feast and festivals enjoyed by SAARC leaders, long speeches and promises made by them, the 1000 people of the SAARC countries have not been benefited at all, so to say. Seemingly the SAARC and SAARC summits have proved useless and fruitless for any noble purpose in South Asia.

Once again mammoth India which apparently dominates and controls SAARC has not budged an inch to resolve any of the many bilateral problems she faces with smaller SAARC members or vice versa. New Delhi has been successful to come out with flying colours from the summit making promises and assurances as usual to solve all the contentious bilateral issues in the near future.

But India's attraction of 'near future' always looks like the proverbial carrot hung from a long stick being carried majestically by the Prime Minister of India while rest of the SAARC leaders march behind him.

We do not underestimate the importance of SAARC. But we have a meaningful SAARC. May be thus as usual like ASEAN (South China) only then we may have a face-giant India, and we may be able to solve our problems with the world.

Let the SAARC leaders realise the fact and the truth and take necessary steps? Better late than never. Necessity is the mother of invention.

O. J. Kabir Dhaka-1203

Art Buchwald's COLUMN



Help!

WASHINGTON, DC, has decided not to allot any money for the repair of roads and bridges this year. It's a wise decision. If you want to save your city money, and not have anyone alarmed about it, the best thing to do is to refuse to repair the bridges. No one bothers to look at the underside of a structure unless he lives there.

One of my best friends in Washington is Gibson, who sleeps on the banks of the Potomac River.

"Did you know that all the bridges in Washington are falling down?" he whispered.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked.

"I didn't hear it. Every time I go to sleep a piece of concrete falls on my head. Camping out under a bridge these days is not as much fun as it used to be."

"I said, 'Do you think it's dangerous?'"

"Well, I'm not an engineer, but when I hear an eight-wheeler barreling overhead I get on my knees and ask the Lord to keep it from crashing down onto the embankment."

"Does anyone else know what terrible shape our bridges are in?" Gibson responded. "Oh, they know, all right. I was sacking out the other day when the mayor and his aide came down to look at the underside of the bridge."

"The mayor said, 'Don't tell the public, it will only frighten Virginia commuters.'"

"The aide asked, 'Suppose the bridge falls into the river?'"

"Then you can issue a statement."

"The aide said, 'What do I tell them?'"

"That it was caused by an act of God or two cement trucks, whichever came first."

"I went over to them in hopes of getting a dollar, and the mayor said, 'The city's broke. I can't afford to give you a dollar. My reputation as a fiscally responsible administrator is at stake.'"

"I said, 'If you don't tell the people that London Bridge is falling down — or its equivalent in the capital of the United States — I am going to tip off Connie Chung, or her equivalent.'"

"So the mayor took out a dollar and placed it in my paper cup just as another piece of cement came crashing down."

"I asked Gibson, 'If your lips are sealed, why tell me about what's going on?'"

"I figure that if I told you you'd give me a dollar, too. When you sleep under a dangerous structure, two bucks are better than one."

"Thank heavens you can see the structural damage from your sleeping bag or none of us would have any idea how much the city was saving in bridge repairs."

Gibson said, "Frankly, I haven't felt safe since the District went broke. Even now when I hear a bicycle pass overhead I have an urge to jump in the river."

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OPINION

The Anniversary Bug

A Husnain

Why are we so anniversary-prone? Frequently the top headline of the Radio Bangladesh and BTB news is some anniversary or other. Why this news item cannot come towards the end of the news bulletin (in most cases)? We read the same messages (drafted by ghost scribes), hear the same speeches, are reminded through the same platitudes, the same 'urgings', and we forget everything the very day after. We wait for the next anniversary after a few days, and the same blah blah rituals repeated.

How many anniversaries the BBC or CNN include in their daily news bulletins (even in the Home service)? Why, most of the Days have to be headline news? How the nation is improving by placing so much accent on the ritual of anniversaries? This Day, that Day — but what are we doing every day? That is what counts — step by step, not jump starts once a year.

How frequently the developed nations are observing serious 'thousands of anniversary Days in their long historical calendar? We are a newly developing nation in a few decades (excluding the colonial age and the present

black money. That is the reason why he has invited investment to his country. Since his model is West Bengal and guru state chief minister Jyoti Basu, Adhikari is pragmatic.

The Nepal prime minister will himself realise, if he has not already done after visiting New Delhi, that the relationship with India depends more on pragmatism than upon strident demands. It is a process which, if followed honestly and diligently, will give results. New Delhi should help the process which delivers results, not drive Nepal to a point of disgust and exasperation. The treaty is not important, the understanding is.

The bottomline is good relations. Whatever the cost, it is worth paying. India will gain in the long run. Once there is a breakthrough with Kathmandu, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh will follow, probably in that order. The message will go round that New Delhi is willing to compromise and accommodate. Its image at present is not that good.

With Pakistan, we will need all the patience and tact. The SAARC summit in New Delhi in the first week of May was an opportunity for India and Pakistan to break the ice. Gestures go a long way in impressing upon even the most intractable that it takes two to make peace and two to make war.

What needs to be reiterated is, to quote Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, that "we should conclude not something high falutin like a treaty, but an agreement either in a joint communique or in some other document to the extent that we will settle our disputes by peaceful means and not by war."