

Why Transport Strike?

On the first day of the 48-hour transport strike called by the Sarak Paribahan Samik Federation one transport worker was killed, more than 100 others, including passengers, were injured — 10 of them seriously. There were series of clashes between the supporters of the strike and those of opposing transport organisations. This once again brings to the fore the inevitable question of anarchic development we are fast plunging into, thanks to the administrative stoicism. Impressions from almost every sector are aplenty that no one has the slightest qualms to take law in his own hands. There is a general tendency to settle score through organised terrorism or anarchy. And all this by default of the government.

We do not question the right to strike or other peaceful means of demonstration. But certainly use of violence, use of force and other intimidatory means often resorted to in the name of strikes, hartals and demonstrations. If striking is a democratic right, opposing the move is as much a fundamental option. But neither side has the right to impose on each other its own decision. It is exactly at this point the striking transport workers have infringed upon the non-striking workers' rights. They have not only burnt two buses but also damaged about 25 others. Reportedly the police stood silent spectators and intervened only after hours of clashes.

The police action is symbolic of the wait-and-see policy of the government. When such is the law enforcers' stoic response to running battles, it is futile to expect responsible behaviour from striking or opposing employees. Otherwise, how can one explain the 48-hour transport strike that has caught the general public off guard. Before going for such a lengthy programme, there is a need for coming through several stages and exercises, none of which was done this time. Surprisingly, no prior warnings or notices were even issued. But conventional wisdom says that such public services cannot be delinked from responsibilities to the users. That principle has long been a casualty with the administration not doing its part of the job properly. To revive the order and restore confidence in the administrative ability, the government must come clean on the issue and act promptly. It needs to be tough as well. Long accumulated garbage has to be get rid of from the system. Can the government rise up to the challenge?

A Growing Threat to Health

There was a time in the Pakistani colonial span when the so-called Chinese eateries spread over Dhaka city. In recent years video shops have proliferated all over the city in the same fashion. The way diagnostic centres and hospitals and clinics are sprouting everywhere in the town, this new growth may in no time beat the earlier fads hollow — in terms of number of joints as also of size of investment. One knows only too well that the spread of diagnostic centres or plain pathological labs are a phenomenon very close to the mushrooming of coaching centres. In the former case physicians and surgeons have struck a gold mine to supplement their fabulous but regular earning. In the latter teachers and even students have devised a new mechanism to fleece students caught up in the admission ordeal. It is foolish therefore to be waximpressed by the growth of any apparently helpful enterprise.

Nothing illustrates the point better than the growth of the privately owned and run clinics and hospitals. While there is no way of guaranteeing that a spurt in hospital bed numbers to even twofold the present city capacity, inclusive of government facilities, would at all mean more people would get their money's worth of medical care, there is literally no end to the problems this will create. For one thing this will blow up the as yet unaddressed albeit very serious problem of disposal of hospital waste.

Hospital services have so long been exclusively a government enterprise. There was as such no problem in getting the hospitals to abide by instructions government felt were necessary in the interest of national medicare. It is strange yet true that neither the government nor hospital administrations on their own did devise any acceptable way of hospital waste disposal. Now with the radical growth of hospital treatment in the private sector the waste problem is sure to pose a serious threat to the health of all residing in this megacity. Hospital waste is very special in that most of these are contaminated stuff very easily polluting and infecting the city's water and atmosphere.

The government needs to formulate an exhaustive and failsafe policy in the matter and in an urgent manner.

Science Projects by the Thousand

About three thousand research projects on science and technology are going on in 61 research organisations under 15 ministries. That is some extraordinary news. But coming from no less an important functionary than a minister of state, it must be true. Coming to think of it, it seems to be quite possible that government conducts so much of scientific research. With each project entailing a cost of say Tk 5 lakh on an average the whole undertaking would cost Tk 1.5 billion. We never knew government spent so much money on application of science. Very encouraging indeed.

From water management and meteorology to that oldest of all composite sciences — agriculture — there are vast areas calling for scientific research. And the overall need must be gigantic. For the government to correctly respond to this need, projects could be drawn by the tens of thousands. But before we can appreciate the position of government commitment in relation to the need for such research we must be told of what constitutes a project. And we are also very interested to know what happens to these projects and how are their end-results garnered.

There seems to be an absolute indifference inside the government about letting the people know of the government's thinking and activity involving the question of bringing the benefits of modern science to society. This nation is still steeped in anti-science prejudice and obscurantism of the weirdest kind. One way of avoiding being bogged down under its weight is to go for science in a bigger way and make our people aware of such exertions.

THE crisis in fertilizer, if it is a crisis, need some explanation. The farm-level scarcity of fertilizer in the boro planting season, directly implied that the demand was so much in excess of supply at that particular point of time, that prices shot up like nobody's business and farmers became so desperate that they were forced to take the law in their own hands.

Fertilizer godowns and trucks were looted; dealers beaten up — these were the unusual incidents reported by newspapers. This is simply because fertilizer today is food (tomorrow). We must (Government included) realize that fertilizer riots and food riots are two sides of the same gramophone record. It is the tune of fire on both sides and if the desire is to make some quick money, the chances are that it would turn (burn) black due to the same fire.

The crisis in fertilizer cannot be explained by the lack of availability of fertilizer in the country. According to government statistics, domestic production of fertilizer increased from less than a million tons seven years back (1986/87) to near-around three million tons by the end of the last fiscal year. All told, it was an almost three-fold expansion. In fact, we never had it so good and with effect from last year, fertilizer export amounted to around half a million tons. Given the export surplus, how come there was a domestic shortage of urea in particular just before the boro season when demand is usually at the highest level? There was nothing uncertain about the prevailing situation. Fertilizer consumption has always been seasonal and being aware of the situation, perhaps the clever traders were trying to create an artificial scarcity so that profits could be made at the cost of poor farmers. After all, it is a free market — isn't it? It is a free market no doubt, but definitely not a free-for-all market and this was the point, farmers compelled to make through all the incidents of looting and beating.

Price Reduction

It is interesting to note that the official issue price of fertilizer was Tk 4.725 per ton in 1992/93. In the following year,

it was reduced by 14 per cent and in the current fiscal year, further reduction of 9 per cent have been made through administrative order — not induced by the market. This is because between now and the same time last year, international prices have considerably increased. From our own exports of urea fertilizers, Government's estimates show that in the current year, export earnings per unit would increase by as much as 24 per cent as compared to last year. It is therefore all the more difficult to understand why and for what reason, overall domestic prices, officially administered at the factory gates, were deliberately dropped by as much as 20 per cent within last two years.

At the same time, farmers suffered. They paid much more, often more than double, the factory price. Therefore, someone or few in-between the producer that is the government and farmers made lots of money. According to my estimates, at least half a million tons of urea was involved and a profit of at least Tk 4,000 per ton would mean a colossal amount of 200 crore taka was secured by newly appointed dealers. This is blood money to say the least, and one day very soon, those who made it must also pay for it in the same way. In the meantime, I do hope that the Income Tax authorities would obtain the list of dealers, how much they had received from urea fertilizer factories, thereafter easily calculate the bloody profits and secure the rightful share in taxes. At least that part might be ploughed back for the welfare of the farmers. Or am I out of my mind to expect such welfare notions from the Income Tax department?

It is beyond any rational explanation why the price of urea was brought down to only US\$ 93/ton while the international market price was at least 40 per cent higher than that. No where else fertilizer business

The Daily Star has launched a campaign entitled "Save Dhaka" with the intention to focus on different aspects of the capital which is besieged with numerous problems affecting the civic life. Is it significant that The Daily Star has thought fit to launch a campaign to save Dhaka, but not Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal, Sylhet, Mymensingh to name a few other urban settlements? Apparently it is only the capital and no other urban area that has reached the level of development which requires "Saving". The crux of the problem is the retarded growth of other urban settlements compared with the excessive development of the capital. We should wake up to the truth that the capital cannot be saved unless we 'save' other urban areas, and also rural areas. In short, to save the capital, save Bangladesh first! Our priorities should be reoriented.

Urbanization is a result of industrialization. In that sense urban areas are heroic engines of growth not only in creating skills and wealth for the nation but also generating employment for migrants from rural areas. On the other hand, these urban centres have also generated the most brutal and inhuman living conditions with large sections of the citizens living in squatter settlements and slums, leading to abject degradation of human life. The capital, where business enterprises, government institutions, service centres and national as well as international organisations are located, expands its boundaries and accommodates the ever-growing size of population which the

existing infrastructure is unable to sustain.

No technological innovation or better municipal management can effect a remedy to the ills of urbanization. The solution lies in balanced development of the whole country. In the words of M N Buch, Vice-chairman of the Indian National Commission of Urbanization, (Illustrated Weekly of India, July 1990) there should be an 'urban-rural continuum'. He suggests major development inputs into agriculture, irrigation and rural power supply. As additional surpluses in agricultural production accumulates, demands for processing, marketing and transporting these to nearby towns are created. Part of the rural population find employment in these non-farming jobs. Simultaneously, processing towns, marketing towns and small towns are generated. Rural populations do not have to go to the capital in search of jobs; they can go to small and medium sized towns nearer their home.

MN Buch strongly suggested that Govt must intervene in the field of economics. A laissez-faire policy can neither be allowed to operate in economic field nor in the field of urban development so long as a weak society has to face semi monopolistic entrepreneurs. Without Govt intervention, large cities which enjoy economies of scale, would go on attracting entrepreneurs. To achieve decentralised industrial locations, MN Buch suggests:

1. There should be a distinct interlinkage between a town and its rural catchment.
2. Development opportuni-

To the Editor...

US Veto

Sir, We did not expect it. But the USA did it and her Ambassador Madeleine Albright vetoed a UN resolution calling on Israel to rescind the expropriation of Arab land in Jerusalem. We are stunned and shocked.

Israel has not suffered anything rather, she has gained her belligerency. On the contrary the USA has lost her image and goodwill worldwide at the cost of Tel Aviv.

Israeli expropriation of 53 hectares (130 acres) of land (though halted) in East Jerusalem is very much in contravention to Article 49 of the fourth Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949. UN resolution 242 of November 22, 1967, UN resolution 338 of October 22, 1973 and Israeli-PLO peace accord signed in White House, Washington DC on September 13, 1993.

Let the people of Asia, Europe and Africa look into this delicate issue seriously for the sake of dispensation of justice and world peace.

We wonder whether the USA is changing its colour after the end of the cold war

by imposing and threatening economic/trade sanction against Iraq, Libya, Iran, China, Japan etc vetoing UN resolution and trying to seclude and ostracise herself from world politics and economics or she is making a futile attempt to dominate the world by dint of her military and economic strength.

O H Kabir
Dhaka

"On the Record"

Sir, As a regular reader of the Star, very hesitatingly, I would like to draw attention to the political tone of the column, "On the Record", which is otherwise smoothly written by an experienced commentator. But his political affiliation shows. One could hide it, or display it openly — in fact the stance may be cleared, so that the readers know where the writer stands. No beating about the bush, or playing pussy cat.

Criticism or comment depends on the merit of a case, regardless of the political or other origin. The esteemed writer never appears to be critical of the omissions and



Window on Asia

Shahed Loin

appeared so profitable. Then dealerships were all changed who just sold the fertilizers to the exporters/dealers for a quick profit. This is how 200 crore taka was secured.

Subsidy

In the midst of this desperate situation, the opposition leader created a new fiasco by declaring her intention to subsidize fertilizer sales.

Rest assured, farmers will never get the benefit of such subsidy. The case of preferential access to such benefits is all too well known and after great deal of efforts, subsidies were withdrawn. The problem is simply one of bad intentions.

It powerful individuals are allowed to suck the blood of our poor farmers, then no subsidy will help. There must be rule

of law and a government which will go all out to protect the interests of poor farmers.

It may be recalled that subsidies were originally introduced in order to promote fertilizer consumption in the country. The product was not known to the farmers. Now there is no such problem. The promotional stage is effectively over. Now the problem is to make such inputs available on time and in adequate quantities. Given the size of our farms, millions of farmers demand fertilizer in small quantities, spread out all over the country. Moreover, the demand is not uniform all throughout the year while its

production is hardly variable over time. Hence large stocks need to be maintained which cost money. On the other hand, export or smuggling across the border might tend to be preferable instead of building up the large scale private inventory. Therefore, fertilizer marketing is a difficult venture. Since the priority is to meet domestic demand first, need for appropriate planning and, if need be, market intervention by the Government cannot be ruled out for all times to come. This should not however be difficult since supply and production are largely under public sector control.

A crisis in fertilizer is the prelude to crisis in food. Let us all endeavour to overcome the crisis as fast as possible and identify the fertilizer profit makers to the Income Tax authorities. At least through them, some of the national losses could be made up in good time.

Bangalee's Short Memory

THE urbane Bangalee is a man of many parts. He dresses like the Europeans, he follows the BBC, he drives a Japanese car, he relishes Chinese meals, he loves to watch Hindi videos; he swoons over the Pakistani/Indian cricketers. But, then where is the Bangalee in him?

A foreign journalist reporting during the Liberation War described you and me and other Bangalees as 'short, dark and talkative'. That does not necessarily mean that if you are tall, fair and terse you risk losing your citizenship.

Actually, the Bangalee is true to his character only in his own home. There, clad in his lungi he uses his hand to have his meals, perhaps with his feet drawn under him while sitting on a chair. In his own house, he hardly speaks; he communicates through grunts and groans. But, just let the phone ring and he instantly transforms into the suave international being that he is. He speaks in terms of dollars, plans a night out at this new Korean restaurant, and hangs up with a melodious

ba-bye. The British would have done this nation a world of good had they taken with them their administrative, judiciary, education, etc. systems and only left behind their sense of punctuality. This is one area where the Bangalee has repeatedly faltered, but, let be hold! we have enriched the very English dictionary with such words as 'Eightish'.

meaning anywhere from eight o'clock to midnight. It is now expected that the Chief Guest will be always late. It is also permissible that he will make an eloquent apology. The good side of all this is, however late you may be, you can never be 'late' for any occasion. The cake was supposed to be cut at 5 o'clock, but we are still waiting at Eightish because some Pupa has not yet arrived show, that some people are more Bangalee than you.

The BBC need not have

bothered to broadcast News in special (actually, dead slow) English for our benefit. It is almost insulting. By the time the newscaster says 'Prime Minister J. S. M. A. J. O. R. you have already avoided being run over by three different Japanese cars. As for the makers of these vehicles, we could have done well with their sense of perseverance and sense of duty. It is still too

der, the carpet any suggestions of bringing to book the culprits at home and abroad opposing our liberation. On the contrary, some of us have conveniently forgotten everything that happened before 1971, have taken to speaking Urdu and even supporting the Pakistan cricket team on Bangladesh soil, etc etc. The same Bangalee will find it hard to imagine Israelis cheering a Palestinian Football Team or Mandela twisting his tongue to speak in French with Chirac.

However, by and large, deep inside Bangalees are true nationalists. With our past record during the Language Movement of 1952, the Mass Movement of 1969 and the Liberation War, there is no room to underestimate nationalism. We have always risen to the occasion.

In the meantime, why not laze around a bit in blue jeans, grab a pizza over the counter, devour the boat-like dossas and mughlai parathas. After all, being Bangalee in mind, body and soul, we can resort to such luxuries as sampling all things exotic.

OPINION

"Save Dhaka" Campaign

Nurul Islam

ties are equitably created throughout the country so that only generation becomes truly decentralized.

3. By providing positive inputs in a large number of centres alternative migration targets would be created and the pressure on the larger cities would thereby reduce.

In an editorial on September 26, 1992, The Daily Star voiced the same opinion. It suggested that moving most of the labour intensive industries to interiors taking advantages of better road communication, waterways and network of rural electric supply, hierarchy of small, medium, and large towns away from the capital can be ensured. Asian Development Review 1994 vol 12 No 1 reports that economic development strategy of Sri Lanka focused on import substitution of agriculture, primarily in rice which is produced by peasant farmers. This led to a major investment to improve peasant agriculture and to expand rice cultivation. Large agricultural settlements were established in sparsely populated regions. These policies mitigated some of the push factors that might have produced a larger rural to urban migration. So all shades of opinion agree that investment in agriculture and locating industries in the interior are the only proved remedy for overcoming the ills of urbanization.

The notion of 'green belt' may go against the natural sense of justice, because a person owning land in the 'green belt' would be deprived of the increase of property value enjoyed by his neighbour. The principle of 'greatest good of the greatest number' would apply here. However, some consideration may be shown to these people in the matter of ownership of residential/commercial/industrial plots in the adjacent towns on preferential basis.

In 1994, population of

Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi, the four regional towns were respectively 80 lakhs, 25 lakhs, 10.5 lakhs and 6 lakhs. That is Dhaka is 3.2 times, 7.7 times, and 13.3 times as populous as Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi. The population of each city increased by about 6 per cent per year since 1991. When we compare this with the growth rate of some of the cities in the developed world we find that population of Tokyo/Yokohama and New York remains constant whereas in the case of London, Rhine-Ruhr, and Osaka, it actually falls.

City	1980	2000
Tokyo/Yokohama	170 lakhs	171 lakhs
New York	156 lakhs	145 lakhs
London	100 lakhs	81 lakhs
Rhine-Ruhr	93 lakhs	86 lakhs
Osaka	80 lakhs	77 lakhs

Here are examples worthy of emulation. I have heard that most of the regional level offices have been shifted out of London; so its population has decreased. We could try the same. Everything need not be piled up in the capital. Chittagongians complain that politicians only pay lip service when they described Chittagong as the commercial capital. Shifting of head offices of all financial organisations, including scheduled banks and insurance companies to Chittagong is suggested by them. Other directorates, corporations, research institutes etc may be shifted to other suitable towns. I would like to point out that Netherlands is a country whose capital The Hague accommodates the Parliament but the ministries are all functioning from Amsterdam.

Recently we have witnessed another reversal of the decentralization policy. High Court Divisions were established in several towns of Bangladesh, besides Dhaka. After a few years, Govt shifted them back to Dhaka. I feel that presence of a High Court Division in a town would add prestige to it and serve as a nucleus for future growth.

Lastly, I have some down-to-earth suggestion about 'saving' Dhaka. There is no gainsaying that Dhaka has enormous advantage. A public servant strives hard to get a posting at Dhaka, and resists as strenuously a transfer away from Dhaka. Even if one leaves Dhaka, he leaves his family behind. Even retired persons are lingering in Dhaka. Let us create some disincentive for Dhaka. Young persons are expected to go and serve in rural areas after they have received higher education in big towns. They deserve some incentive to bear with the rural life.

Most of the retired persons were uprooted from their surroundings since they passed matriculation. They have to be provided with roots. It may be a welcome idea if housing estates are developed in thana towns and retired persons are allotted plots there. The brain drain from rural areas can be partly restored thereby. The presence of these people may have a sobering influence on the thana level organisations.

And if nothing succeeds in saving Dhaka, then the final solution would be to shift the capital from Dhaka!

The writer is Retd Addl. Chief Engineer Housing and Settlements

who will not get my vote come election time.

I am eagerly waiting for Mr Kibria to enlighten us on the British Citizen's Charter. May I propose we too try and draft a People's Charter of our own. It may not work today but maybe our children or our children's children will benefit someday.

Waqif Islam
Dhanmandi, Dhaka

UN failure and morality

UN failure and morality Sir, Nowadays it is being observed that the success of many UN activities, lacking in moral and human approach, is facing severe criticism and question for its failure in achieving goals. Now time has come to realise that no efforts for social and human resource development activities on the globe can bring about expected success in absence of morality and humanity. It reminds us of the outcome of UN summits at Rio de Janeiro, Cairo and Copenhagen which drastically disheartened the whole world population.

None can deny that morality

is the ultimate solution to the crucial problems of the contemporary world like AIDS, poverty, violation of human rights, environment pollution, terrorism, drug abuse, oppression on women, social injustice etc. In this context a timely proposal from Bangladesh, viz "A Proposal to the United Nations on Moral Development Approach: A New World Order for Peace" was placed at the United Nations.

With a view to ensuring durable peace, discipline and social justice everywhere on the globe, the United Nations and its member states must come forward to consider and implement this timely and unique proposal for universal moral development programme.

Thus we the common people of the world wish to remind the UN and its member states of the mystery of the failure of the most UN efforts. We believe that today or tomorrow an all-out movement will start throughout the world on this universal moral development.

M Fazal Shakil
Station Road, Dhanpur

The PM and road block

Sir, I thoroughly enjoyed Mr S A M S Kibria's bold and immensely important article on People's Rights last Sunday. We need more and more of such articles to help us, breathe in this almost suffocating atmosphere.

The other evening I was taking a rickshaw ride from Kakrail to Segun Bagicha. Just as my rickshaw turned the corner of the Shilpakala Academy a few policemen standing there rudely called out "no rickshaws on this road, turn away". The rickshaw came

to a dead halt. I asked one of them "why not rickshaws on this street?" The PM is visiting the Shilpakala Academy" came the quick reply. "So what? does that give you the right to harass us like this?" Another policeman intervened, "Sir, this is our duty..." I gave up with a disgusted look and asked the rickshawpuller to take the detour around Topkhana Road.

Seething with unvented anger I recollected Mr Kibria's article about the oppressive way our elected PM blocks off all roads when she chooses to move about town.

But what about this case, she was inside giving nice lectures on poetry and Nazrul and having her photographs taken on taxpayers money. While outside one cannot use the road on a rickshaw! What do her security advisers think? That people who threaten PM's security will ride on rickshaws?

Anyways, I feel affronted. My rights have been trampled on and I had to pay extra in terms of takas and time. Who do I go to for recompense? Just for the records, guess