

## Indian Ocean Rim

Preparations are afoot to have a cooperation forum among the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) countries. The ball was set rolling on March 29 in Mauritius with a meeting of seven countries — India, South Africa, Australia, Singapore, Oman and Kenya besides the host Mauritius. This has been followed up by a 'second track' meet in Perth, Australia, recording a much wider participation of 28 countries with Bangladesh having been represented by the FBCCI chief Salman F. Rahman at the private sector level and a designated official as observer to the moot. The second official meeting is expected to be held in March 1996.

We are for a broad-based participation in the next meet of the IOR countries leading to the widest possible membership access gained by the littoral states of the Indian Ocean to the upcoming cooperation forum.

For, surely the organisers of the move are not naive to overlook the wisdom of exploiting the full potential of cooperation among the IOR countries having complementarities to share despite their being at differing stages of economic growth. An exclusive club can prove to be counter-productive in an era of market globalisation and inter-weaving free trade cutting across, somewhat paradoxically, the various regional groupings originally formed for self-fending. No country which, by geographical definition, is eligible and also willing to be a member of the forum should be left out of it. For, this can create an avoidable distraction and impede the full blossoming of the organisation. Let it be uniquely wide-bodied.

Economic security concern can be a common denominator — a catalyst, so to say — among the countries of the region spontaneously binding themselves into grouping for vigorous cooperation. But if geopolitical security concerns have a primacy then differing perceptions of the same may stand in the way of forming a viable union.

The real possibility of Asia being the centre of global economic gravity in the early years of the next Century prompts the formation of the Indian Ocean Rim grouping at the soonest. But the SAARC, nearer home, and with much proven value to its credit already, cannot be allowed to wane through any lessened interest on the part of any of its member-states.

## Buses without Terminal

The removal of the unauthorised bus terminal at Fakirerpool on Sunday should not come as a surprise. Rather it is surprising to see that the authority took so much time to act.

The luxury buses that started running between Chittagong and Dhaka some years ago improved commutation on that route several notches up, bringing it, for the first time, to an international standard. But wonder of wonders, no one gave a serious thought to developing a matching terminal facility.

On this count the bus owners certainly have a responsibility but that is nothing compared with that of the authority which had issued licences for those buses under some specified terms and conditions. Reportedly, Tk 200 crore was invested by the private companies in the 500 or so buses that used the Fakirerpool terminal. It is absurd to think that the authorities turned a blind eye all these years to the illegal use of a place as a terminal instead of the one which was originally allotted to the operators. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (traffic division) complains at long last that they did not comply with the route permits, according to which they were supposed to be using Syedabad bus terminal.

The buses have proved both their utility and popularity. That the transport business is economically viable is clear from the growing fleet of the types of bus under review. The prospect looked bright from the very beginning. But unfortunately the terminal problem was not sorted out before pressing into service such a large fleet.

Syedabad bus terminal has certainly met a long-felt demand. But it is not adequately organised and equipped to be able to provide a terminal facility matching a high quality bus service. So chaotic and poorly provided, this terminal like the other two of the city, presents a frightening picture. What is needed is the development of an organised bus terminal with the basic facilities in it. If Syedabad bus terminal can be so developed the luxury bus operators should not be complaining. If not, another vantage point must be soon selected for the purpose.

## Ailing Railway

The Bangladesh Railway's (BR) malady is gradually exacerbating. There seems to be no cure in sight. The establishment's income fell by Tk 11 crore in the last fiscal year. Evidently the half-hearted measures one such being the golden hand-shake, — have produced little result. The BR is encumbered with a number of sickening developments. In addition to its infrastructural shortcomings the policy failings have been rather glaring.

Although a private company has been given the responsibility to sell tickets under a computer system, much of its old ways remain to gnaw at its very vitals. The railway's main perception is based on a wrong premise. The fact that it has focused on inter-city service is decidedly keeping bulk of the passengers away from train journey. The idea was mainly to check ticketless travel. On that score, the BR may have achieved some success but at the same time black-marketing of ticket could not be prevented. There are even allegations of involvement of a section of railway employees in spiriting away railway property — ranging from diesel to fan and other fixtures in the coaches.

So a few minor skin-deep operations will not do, the BR needs real surgery. It still has as large a staff strength as 43,000. And quite a number of them have little to do than enjoy the frequent pay raises. The railway may shrink but the overheads are going up every year. Largely because of the outmoded and old tracks, coaches and engines. Like keeping the passengers at bay the railway shies away from transporting goods. Recently, however, the BR seems to have become alive to this problem and has added 80 wagons to its fleet. The more passengers and goods the railway carries the better it will be for it as well as for the country.

THANKS to monumental levels of corruption and unbelievable proportions of inefficiency and wastage, the public sector — state-owned and managed enterprises and businesses — continues to incur a loss of Taka 20 billion a year. Such a hemorrhage on the economy cuts both ways — it puts an exceptionally high toll on the nation's scarce resources, and at the same time, by constraining growth of the private sector and diverting resources to more productive sectors, retards the overall growth of the economy.

Just how inefficient and wasteful are the public sector enterprises in Bangladesh? Take a few examples. In fiscal year 1993, the Power Development Board (PDB) and Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) incurred a net loss of Tk. 7.8 billion — revenues from more than 20 to 25 per cent of power produced between employees and customers. System loss in the state-controlled power sector now ranges between 35 to 40 per cent — compare this with 28 per cent in India, 15 per cent in Thailand, 24 per cent in Pakistan and 17 per cent in Sri Lanka. Net loss in Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) in fiscal year 1993 was Tk 3.7 billion — thanks to run-down equipment, over-priced raw material but stagnant export prices, and over-stuffing by more than 25 per cent. Over the past ten years, productivity in the country's jute mills declined by 4 per cent a year, while real wages increased by 4 per cent annually.

Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC) incurred a net loss of Tk 960 million in fiscal 1993 — thanks to extremely low labour productivity, over-stuffing by 15 per cent, low fixed prices and low capacity utilisation. European labour productivity in textiles is almost 40 times higher than that of Bangladesh — estimates for European textile mills are 18-20 kg of higher quality product per operator hour compared to 0.54 kg per operator hour in Bangladesh. Wages and salary costs in BTMC spinning mills range between 13-33 per cent, the corresponding figures is 9 per cent in Korea and 5 per cent in India.

Numerous such examples can be cited — as almost all the public enterprises in the country are

# The Burden of the State Sector on the Nation's Exchequer must be Reduced

Time has come for the nation to understand — in clearest possible terms — that sustenance of an ever-losing public sector is simply beyond its economic means.

## CROSSCURRENTS

by CAF Dowlah



overstuffed, inefficient, sick and corruption-ridden. Several authoritative studies indicate that at least 25 per cent of the employees in the category of "workers" and at least 54 per cent in the category of "officer and staff" are considered to be redundant in the public sector in today's Bangladesh. Overall, this sector employs only one per cent of the total labour force of the country. Currently, state enterprises occupy the top ten positions in the list of the largest defaulters with the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) and specialised development finance institutions (DFIs), Corporations, such as BJMC, BTMC and Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation (BSEC), which have almost 81 per cent workers and staff in the transport section, are on the top of the list of defaulters.

The losses incurred by the public sector enterprises are regularly covered by the government — directly through capital infusions/subsidies and indirectly through write-offs of banking credits — thereby exerting heavy pressures on the national exchequer, public finance, the private sector and on the overall growth prospects of the nation. In 1994, for example, the accumulated debts of the public sector stood at a staggering Tk 47 billion, of this Tk 29 billion relates to the jute sector alone. How long a poor country like Bangladesh can afford such a level of squandering of the nation's scarce resources for the sake of employment of less than one per cent of its labour force? How long can Bangladesh allow the public sector to continue economic distortions and misapplication of resources in the contemporary world of fierce competition?

Above all, what the current government — that hardly misses an opportunity to express its commitment to private sector-led economic growth — is doing to reverse the situation, to make the economy distortion free, to free the nation from the political-bureaucratic-labour union

nexus that thrives in an inefficient public sector dominated economy? It is simply unbelievable that only 12 public enterprises have so far been privatised under the leadership of the current government. If this trend continues then it will take more than seventy years to complete privatisation of about 225 enterprises now owned and managed by the public sector.

None should doubt that privatisation is an indispensable need of the day. No nation can ignore the call without risking permanent underdevelopment and backwardness. It has been proven — beyond any shred of doubt — that overwhelming dominance of the public sector in the economy creates far-reaching, often insurmountable economic distortions, results in misallo-

cation of scarce national resources and skewed distribution of economic well-being. Besides, strong theoretical justifications, the examples of two Germanys, two Koreas and the Eastern and Western Europes bear out such standpoints. Decades of experience with the public sector — in this country as well as around the world — quite convincingly demonstrate that running a business is not a business of the government.

Time has come for the nation to understand — in clearest possible terms — that sustenance of an ever-losing public sector is simply beyond its economic means. No nation can allow persistent inefficiencies,

## Gloom, Stills, Words and Half-truths

TELEVISION wherever available is perhaps the biggest home entertainment. Unfortunately for us, most often the BTV is casting a gloom on our home screens. On other occasions they encourage home-bleeding by screening written material with some tear-jerking background music. Stills of *Look Right and Left before you cross the road; Keep a bucket of water to douse a fire*, etc. etc to the accompaniment of discordant euphony has become routine for BTV when they can't think of anything to cast. If only someone could cast a spell on this Ram-pura media and transport them to Timbuktu. Of course, we have buckets in our living rooms, but that is to hold our tears. For, God's sake there are newspapers and magazines and billboards to show stills and tell us how to cross roads and douse our hot heads. If stills and music is the order of the day, why not hold Sabina Yasmeen's picture in one hand and press the cassette start button with the index finger of the other? That's a BTV production for you.

Haven't they seen the success of saline water, of tree plantation due to action-based publicity? More-

over, considering that a good portion of our viewers are illiterate, is it not insane to give them a screen full of letters? BTV would obviously be doing justice to its fee-payers if it used motion picture to encourage road safety, used some sort of action to portray anything at all.

On the eve of *Mahan Shaheed Dibash*, BTV flashes a monochromatic (B/W) route map which was supplied by some agency and from which it is impossible to decipher any-

thing. Considering that it is a very expensive colour channel, could not the BTV produce a coloured layout, if only for clarity? If they start now they have only (Oh! God! There's not enough time!) nine months to work with a set of pigments and a sheet of paper. That its news has hardly any credibility is a long-established aphorism. Only recently, when *Ishteshka* prayers for rain were organised at the Jatiya Eidgah, the newscasters in both Bangla and English read, without batting an

eyelid, that the *Ishteshka* prayers were offered in all (repeat all) the mosques of the country. This was definitely not true. Does the BTV have the mechanism to monitor all the mosques of Bangladesh? What did the musallis of those mosques where the prayers were not offered think of BTV? Gloom, stills, words and half-truths.

As soon as the *Ramadhan* moon is sighted, the BTV on-screen women (including newscasters) cover their heads with a



by Chintito

scarf or whatever. And, uncovers them with the announcement that the Holy month has ended and that the following day is Eid-ul-Fitr? If BTV believes that their women should wear a head gear for religious purposes, at least in Islam there is no scope for putting it on and off on a seasonal basis. If it is because of religious purposes, why does she not don the scarf when announcing that the following programme is the *Adhan*? Why play games with religion? Stick to your stills and music a la *panani*.

Despite the continuous supply of international football, cricket, sporting meets, etc on BTV and now in some homes via the satellite, the commentary and camera work on local football and cricket is pathetic. Perhaps some concessions may be awarded to the camera section for lack of equipment. But, can the experienced (10-20 years) commentators be forgiven for narrating (often contradicting) everything that the eye can see? While the viewers are eager to know what's happening off-the-screen and have a share of the analyses, the familiar voices continue to harp on who got the ball and with which foot he is kicking (alas! there's only two) and what colour jersey he is wearing and that the game being played is football.

Come on BTV! You have already lost a chunk of the urban market because of the dish antennae invasion. The rural market rests in peace because they don't have a television set. But, you are soon embarking on a project to catch the international market. Sob! We are concerned only because our national pride rests in what you screen, and, don't screen.

# Time for an International Inquiry into Nerve Gas Attack

Yoichi Shimatsu writes from Tokyo

As the official investigation into the March 20 nerve gas attack on Tokyo's subways enters its seventh week with no break in sight, the Japanese government needs to lift its information blackout on the case and open up its investigation to a global team of scientific, chemical warfare and terrorist experts.

THE gassing of the Tokyo subways has changed the international rules of terrorism forever. As the official investigation enters its seventh week with no apparent breakthrough, the time has come for the international community to demand a direct role in the inquiry.

For six decades the international taboo against nerve gas has been so powerful that no government, terrorist group or criminal syndicate has resorted to its use. It was generally understood that such an attack would be met by universal condemnation and an uncompromising response, leaving the assailant nowhere to hide. The sole exception was Iraq which became a pariah after gassing Kurdish rebels.

Yet the March 20 nerve-gas attack on the capital of a major industrial power has been treated as if it were a parochial crime. It wasn't. The nerve gas or the gas-producing technology came from abroad.

Foreigners were injured in the subways, some of them seriously. The chief suspect, members of the Aum Shinrikyo sect, has chapters abroad in Russia, Germany and the United States. Other possible suspects in the attack may have come from a foreign country.

Despite these facts, the Japanese government has imposed an information blackout on the case since March 20. Not a single foreign chemical-weapons expert, anti-terrorist expert or toxicologist has been consulted, nor has data been made available on-line or in published reports to overseas experts. No attempt has been made to involve international law-enforcement agencies including the Interpol or United Nations agencies in charge of monitoring

chemical weapons. This is all very strange because Japan does not maintain a chemical-weapons programme and has little expertise in the field. In fact, the only institution with such experience, the Self-Defense Force decontamination unit, has been kept out of the case. To date it has received no chemical samples retrieved from the attack for testing at its chemical-weapons analysis laboratory.

Meanwhile, arguments for internationalizing the inquiry are growing stronger.

Every country in the world has a stake in stopping future nerve-gas attacks against their urban populations. Nerve gas is a weapon of mass destruction; its deployment against rush-hour commuters is tantamount to mass mur-

der. The world community is entitled to demand hard data from the Japanese authorities about the case and organize an independent probe by an international team of experts.

International involvement could offer new leads into the now apparently dead-ended investigation. More than six weeks after the subway attack, the Japanese police have failed to convincingly link the crime to the Aum Shinrikyo sect and do not possess sufficient evidence to bring the case to court. The investigation has collapsed into a morass of mutual recriminations between the Japanese police and the Public Security Investigation Agency (Japan's FBI).

Suspicious are growing among veteran journalists, including investigative reporter Takashi Tachibana

who broke the Lockheed scandal, that the authorities are engaging in some sort of cover-up, either to hide mistakes made early on in the investigation or to forestall lines of inquiry that could prove embarrassing to the government.

The Japanese police have never assigned an official spokesman to speak to the press. All details concerning possible suspects or chemicals involved have been released through unofficial leaks to seven media organizations. These unofficial sources have often contradicted each other, indicating that some of the police sources are lying.

Some observers are now questioning whether in the rush to judgment, the police made the fatal error of focusing the probe solely on the cult, thereby allow-

ing the actual perpetrators of the attack to escape undetected, possibly to another country. Such suspicions have been reinforced by the conclusion of Japan's top organic chemists that sarin could not have been manufactured at the cult's ramshackle facilities.

Even as the government maintains its veil of secrecy, international pressure is needed to force it to open the case up to a team of global experts. The as-yet-unidentified attack team is in a position to hit wherever they choose.

Without the slightest scrap of information at hand, every city in the world now finds itself exposed to the same risk that Tokyo faces. The ramifications of the attack go far beyond Tokyo or Japan, and the world's governments need to acknowledge that. — PNS

PNS associate editor, Yoichi Shimatsu is editor of the Tokyo-based *Japan Times Weekly* which has played a leading role in investigating the attack.

## To the Editor...

### Muslim IPS and ICS officers

Sir, This has reference to the letter of Mr T A Khan, published in your daily on 10th June 1995. Mr M H Khan (father of Rear Admiral M H Khan), Mr Mohiuddin Ahmed (brother of Dr Amena Rahman Ph.D), Mr Alamgir Kabir and name of many other IPS officers should be recalled. Mr TIM Nurannabi Chowdhury, Mr KG Morshed and Mr Majibur Rahman (father of Ms Rokeya Kabir, and Ms Ruby Gaznabi — reputed social workers) were nominated ICS. Mr Majibur Rahman secured more marks in mathematics than Sir Ashotosh Mukherjee. So Sir Mukherjee recommended his name to the Viceroy of India for ICS job. He served in the judiciary department of Bengal.

Mr Akhtaruzzaman, son of late Mr A Majid, BCS

hailed from Vikrampur, Munshigonj. He stood 1st Class 1st in History from Presidency College, Calcutta. An Oxford Graduate he was the only ICS by competition. He is nephew of famous Oxford Blue former education minister of India Mr Humayun Kabir, Mr Alamgir Kabir, president of BIRDEM and Mr Akbar Kabir, minister of late Ziaur Rahman's cabinet. Mr Akhtaruzzaman opted for India in 1947 and served in West Bengal. He was unmarried and died in 1994.

In those days (British India), one had to go to England for appearing in ICS examination which in most cases, was not possible for middle class Bengali Muslim candidates. However, that was possible for rich punjabi Muslims.

Absana Begum 371, Outer Circular Road Dhaka.

### Highway blockades

Sir, It has become a fashion these days to create a blockade on the highways on any pretext. Let alone the hartal and blockade called by political parties and labour organisations, even local feuds starting from internal riffs-raffs of such parties or groups compel the non-partisan innocent public to face road blocks created on highways. On the Chittagong highway, Nizampur College front is one of such volatile spot where only few days back the road was blocked for release of a person under custody against whom reportedly there were as many as 10 cases. And this kept thousands of passengers including children, patients and aged and their vehicles stranded for hours.

Similarly, on June 5 reportedly as a fallout of local feuds in BNP the

Dhaka-Aricha highway was blocked for the release of an ex-upazilla chairman. Here also thousands of people alongwith their vehicles, trucks, buses and perishable cargo worth lakhs of taka were held up.

Question remains, under what norms and ethics thousands of people are made to suffer for one single person? Authorities must take severe action against such highhandedness of a few, generally musclemen, who are causing miseries to thousands of people for personal ego and gain. It is needless to mention that all roads and highways are owned by the people of Bangladesh and unless the interest of the majority is at stake on one has any right to disrupt free movement of people on these roads and highways.

A strong punitive action must be taken against such unlawful acts. Authorities

should take a very serious note and consider such activities as anti-people.

A K Khan Swamibagh, Dhaka.

### Pull up the errant leaders

Sir, As an educated middle-class citizen I am disappointed that our senior students do not pull up publicly the numerous so called political "leaders" who treat the electorate with contempt, and harangue them to agitate on silly and irrelevant issues for the sake of self or party interest.

The situation has come to a stage when nobody can control these misguided leaders who misguide others. They forget that self-interest shows and the sane section of the intelligentsia can understand the vested motives. These

selfish leaders harm the country and delay development efforts. We need another internal revolution to neutralize the non-genuine leaders, and render them powerless.

But the students who are political activists have been spoiled by these leaders with easy money and happy triggers. The public (audit) will have to take place at some time or other. When we can drive out the foreigners, then it is easier to corner these mastaans masquerading as leaders. The best time is before the next elections. Can we expect cooperation from the party in power, who are in charge of administering the country?

A Husnain Dhaka