

Where It Hurts

Sometimes the World Bank's portrayal of grim pictures of the South Asian economies is thought to be condescending because of its prescriptive or exhortative theme. But when such a depiction would be corroborated by a study or two within the country reported on by the WB then, of course, it has a vindicated credibility that cannot be shrugged off. We believe in this category falls the WB's latest warning signal to Bangladesh that she break out of the low growth trap or face the unsavoury prospect of more than 30 per cent of her labour force going unemployed by 2000 AD.

While we were on a higher growth track in 1994-95 — at 5 per cent or thereabouts of the GDP — the Economic Review Report for that year reveals some structural deficiencies in the pattern of growth. The industrial sector grew more than agriculture and within the fold of industries it is the small industries which attained very low growth. The industrial sector as a whole grew by 10 per cent in 1994-95 from 2.4 per cent in 1990-91. In stark contrast, agriculture which has traditionally been the biggest employer of people declined during the same period from a negligible growth rate of 1.6 per cent to a worrying figure of 0.2 per cent. The much-vaunted employability of the small scale industries which were said to have been bank-rolled substantially also, could not stand up in good stead; for, it grew at only 5 per cent against the big industries' 13 per cent growth rate, a big leap from 2 per cent in 1990-91. Thus there is a vast scope to utilise the potential of the small scale and cottage industries in generating employment in the rural areas.

The World Bank report indicates a continuing fall in the real wages, both in the farming as well as the manufacturing sector during the 1971-90 period. There has been a modest rise in the real wages though over the last few years; but this trend cannot be sustained if the GDP growth rate stagnates or nominally increases.

A shrinkage in the job market induces the employers to dictate low wages to job-seekers. The trend takes no time to catch on and the real wages fall. Consequently the purchasing power declines. So, a worsening employment situation has the negative element in it to bring us down from our 56th position in the global ranking of nations in terms of the purchasing power parity (PPP).

We are yet to find any major political party making an issue of the country's severe unemployment problem in the same manner as they cry hoarse on other questions. It is time they did so. A robust approach to the issue will win them votes and save the country from socio-political destabilisation.

Defusing Heat in Desert

Records say the Arab states are not often in the best of terms. When it comes to neighbourly relations, only a few enjoy each other's trust and unreserved support. That is one reason why Israel, a common enemy of the countries in the region, was able to inflict some humiliating defeats on them. In the Middle East's volatile politics, issues and pretexts have never been in short supply to ignite the incendiary. The latest one concerns the attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's life, as he was heading for attending the OAU (Organisation of African Unity) meet in Addis Ababa.

Immediately after returning from Ethiopia — no question of joining the meet — Mubarak fired his first salvoes of verbal attack followed by a few more rounds, linking Sudan with the assassination attempt. The Sudanese response was no less stinging. Naturally what has followed is a war preparation. Reports have it that Egypt has started massing troops on Sudanese border. Forces from both sides were even engaged in a brief encounter in the Halaib triangle, a bone of contention between the two countries for decades.

We cannot ascertain the veracity of the Egyptian accusation that Sudan is involved in the assassination attempt. But linking the government of Sudan with the heinous act is a serious allegation. Accusing Sudanese Islamic leader Hassan al-Turabi is one thing and bringing the charge against Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir is a completely different matter. Sudanese Government may not be in a state of war with the radical Muslims headed by Turabi, but there is hardly any reason to think that it is not opposed to the Islamic militancy. Mubarak has taken it as a crusade against the hardline Muslims in his country. On that score, both governments' interests should have found a common ground and they could evolve a joint strategy to fight off the threat from the radical Muslims.

Now the renewed border tension threatens the fragile peace in the region because in case of a war, countries there will most likely take sides or provide support to either of the parties. That will be fully exploited by the religious fundamentalist groups, vying for state power in both countries, to their advantage. So instead of resorting to war of words — which has the potential to plunge them into a deadly war — both governments should cooperate with each other to trace out the culprits who made the attempt on the Egyptian president's life in Ethiopia. We urge restraint in that volatile region.

Fine-tuning the Squads

The special motorbike squads of forty police sergeants teamed up in twenty-pairs have recorded an impressive-looking tally of law enforcement in the metropolis during the month of June. Whizzing through the length and breadth of 15 police stations on two shifts between 8 am and 10 pm daily, they reportedly ended up filing 3107 cases, searching altogether 10,748 vehicles, towing 290 of them to police stations, arresting 338 persons and recovering stolen transports and assorted goods including two revolvers.

The citizens are generally appreciative of the ideas of speed and visibility with which these squads started their work as vigilantes. But judging by some media and public reactions to the manner in which they have acquitted themselves so far, there have been two suggestions preferred for their all-round effectiveness. Firstly, the squads need to operate on a third shift after 10 pm at night when most crimes are committed. Second, it is necessary for the superior police officers to ensure that there are no arbitrary arrests or any harassment in the name of speedy law enforcement. The sergeants are reasonably educated and responsible officers in the police hierarchy so that they are not expected to overstep limits in any way.

The numbers of searches, seizures and arrests made in a month's time appear to be on the high side. Over the next month the figures should go down because of the demonstration effect. If this doesn't happen then something must be wrong somewhere.

Our suggestion is let the police authorities encourage SOS calls to their control room seeking help of these roving squads. This may run parallel to the vigil by patrolling police sergeants

FIFTY years ago, on 26 June 1945, the Charter of the United Nations was signed in San Francisco. The historic document was hailed at the time as the beginning of a new chapter in human history when peace and prosperity will be within the reach of every nation and when war will be a bad memory of the past. In the euphoric days following the end of World War II nothing seemed to be beyond mankind's grasp. The language used by the victorious Allies in the Charter reflected their mood; it began with the ringing words, "We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... It should be a sobering thought for us all that even in fifty years the vision of a world without war is still a distant dream, all these years the scourge of war has been constantly with us. Did the United Nations make any difference in maintaining peace? Did it accelerate the pace of economic and social development? What are its achievements and failures? As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UN an attempt to seek answers to these questions may be in order.

In today's column I propose to look at the political role of the UN focusing primarily on its peace-keeping and peace making activities. Next week I will write about the UN's role in the field of economic and social development including its contributions in dealing with humanitarian issues. The term United Nations is often used by different people to mean different things. Some people mean by the term only the core organization with the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Secretariat as the main organs. Others include the entire UN family encompassing all the specialized agencies such as the ILO, UNESCO, WHO and FAO and a large number of agencies and entities operating

"At critical flash points — the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, three Middle East wars and the war in Afghanistan — the United Nations bought time and eased face-saving retreats." —New York Times

within the broad UN umbrella. To my mind both descriptions are correct, one has to see the context to understand the precise meaning of the term. In evaluating the UN one has to look at the totality of the picture to fully appreciate the value and significance of its contributions.

In terms of the number of peace-keeping missions the UN has an impressive record. During the last half a century, the UN deployed more than 35 peacekeeping forces and observer missions. There are presently 16 active peacekeeping forces in operation. Similarly, since 1945, the UN has been credited with negotiating 172 peaceful settlements that have ended regional conflicts. Recent cases include an end to the Iran-Iraq war, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and an end to civil war in El Salvador. The UN has used quiet diplomacy to avert over 80 imminent wars. No one can question the UN's decisive influence in hastening the process of decolonization. Indeed the organization has played a pivotal role in bringing about the independence in 80 countries that are now among its member states.

The list of achievements is indeed long if one goes by the number of operations but popular perception about the UN is not based on the number of peacekeeping missions or on its success in keeping peace in a troubled region but on its failure to maintain peace. When war breaks out in spite of strenuous effort by the Security Council, the UN is seen to have failed. The fact that a particular war might have been prolonged or a conflict might have been much wider in scope without the intervention of the UN is not given any importance. If war is averted as a result of UN efforts, the credit is often claimed by the great powers.

In fact, there are instances when the UN has been used as a punching bag by the great powers to hide their own failures or frustrations. The Bosnian war is a perfect example to illustrate the point. But before going into an evaluation of its role in maintaining peace and security one should look at some of the fundamental geo-political factors which conditioned the UN.

The Cold War commenced almost from the moment of UN's birth. The Security Council was invested with the

Council, the principal organ for maintaining peace, was paralyzed by veto or the threat of veto.

Apart from the Cold War which severely limited the scope of UN peacekeeping role, certain other developments influenced the attitude of the great powers — especially that of the United States and other Western powers — towards the world body. For example, the Middle East conflict had a negative impact on the overall image of the UN and its capacity to act effectively. The Arab

national economic order, launched by the Third World developing countries, also influenced Western perceptions about the UN. Though established by the Western countries and funded by them, they felt that they were losing control over it.

I have singled out just a few of the basic factors which militated against the UN both in terms of its operational effectiveness and its image of impartiality. Often it was starved of funds by the great powers in order to enforce their will. President Reagan, supported by a Congress which made no secret of its dislike for the UN, used the budgetary weapon to make it behave. In fact, throughout the eighties, the US routinely withheld funds to the UN and often published lists to show how many states had voted against them either in the Security Council or in the General Assembly. Other great powers including the Soviet Union also sought to use the UN as an instrument to promote their national interests. The success of the UN, to go to war against Iraqi aggression is the direct consequence of the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the global scene. The Russian delegate cooperated with the Western powers in the Security Council and there was thus no veto to block the decision.

Even a brief analysis of UN's history during the last five decades clearly shows that the popular perceptions about the success or failure of the UN is based on unfair assumptions. UN cannot succeed if the great powers do not extend their support to it. Fair-minded people around the world believe that the Muslims of Bosnia are not getting the protection from the UN that they deserve. They blame the UN for this failure but in reality it is the great powers who pull the UN's strings and who control its operations who should be

blamed. But even well informed Western newspapers come up with comments denigrating the UN rather than assigning responsibility to those who are responsible for the spineless and unjust policies being pursued in this troubled region.

The UN has not had, in truth, a fair opportunity to act in the area of peacekeeping and peacemaking as the Charter envisaged. Of course it had its value even under the Cold War constraints. As the 'New York' Times said, "At critical flash points — the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, three Middle East wars and the war in Afghanistan — the United Nations bought time and eased face-saving retreats." There have been outstanding examples of success in recent years such as South Africa, Namibia and Cambodia but in most of these cases the UN could make progress only when the Cold War had either ended or lost its steam. In looking at the UN at fifty, one should not lose sight of these underlying factors which exercised a decisive influence on its activities. The New York Times editorial candidly admitted the point when it said, "In reality, all major powers, and especially the United States, are unwilling to promote ambitious military operations when vital interests are visibly not at risk — a reality too often blurred in lofty rhetoric." In celebrating the 50th anniversary of the world body it may be wise to reflect on how the Charter can be implemented in letter and spirit. Selective implementation of the Charter to serve only the interests of a few powerful states will erode its moral strength and reduce it to the status of a tool in their hands. The UN is too important for peace and prosperity of the human race to be viewed simply in terms of narrow national interests. Let this golden jubilee of the United Nations be an occasion to re dedicate ourselves to the noble ideals, values and goals enshrined in the Charter.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



power and responsibility of maintaining peace but it was rendered largely non-functional by the split in the Council along the Cold War configuration. Application of veto rather than consensus became the dominant factor in the work of the Security Council. Thus the most important organ of the UN, the one given the specific task of dealing with international security and questions of war and peace was unable to act due to the application of veto by those who wielded this formidable weapon to block all action and decision of the Council. So who is to be blamed? Is it the UN or the Cold War? It must be recognized that it was the conflict between the great powers who put their political and ideological agenda ahead of the goals of the Charter that was responsible for the failure of the UN to act when action was needed. Thus much of the criticism of the UN as the "talk shop" is ill-judged or motivated. The Security

and Islamic states in general and the Palestinian people in particular, succeeded in enlisting the support of the Non-Aligned Movement in their struggle against Israel. Such a political alignment led to numerous situations in which most of the Afro-Asian countries voted en bloc against Israel both in the General Assembly and the Security Council. As a staunch defender of Israeli security interests the United States felt obliged to vote in favour of Israel. In the Security Council this meant frequent application of veto and in the General Assembly it meant voting against the non-aligned countries. As a result of this recurrent voting pattern, the perception developed in the United States that the UN was working against American interests. Not only the news media but even the political and academic circles believed that the UN was not only biased against Israel but even against Western interests. The campaign on the new inter-

What to Do with the Planning Commission?

...the Planning Commission has become not only anachronistic but also a pain in the neck for government sponsored development activities, and this cannot obviously go on for long.

Making Government Work

by Analyst

of new vehicles or posts. Consequently, inordinate delays take place, and since most projects in Bangladesh are still donor-funded, the Bangladesh government is losing credibility with the donor community. Since "aid fatigue" among donors is now the order of the day, such delays in project processing can only be tolerated at one's peril. It is not that we do not have competent officers in the Planning Commission. But the system perhaps does not allow them to use their planning expertise. Maybe over the years, some also have been rusted by the existing system.

Another problem faced by the Planning Commission for quite some time is that at the level of Members, it has become an instrument to phase out senior civil servants about to retire or to console those who cannot be given a posting to Ministries for one reason or the other. For many years now, there has not been any lateral entry at this level. The implication is that with a posting of this kind, they generally turn into either "Mr No" or "Mr Delay" for project proposals they receive. There is also the peculiarly uneasy relationship between the Planning Commission and the Planning Ministry. All told, the Planning Commission has become not only

anachronistic but also a pain in the neck for government sponsored development activities, and this cannot obviously go on for long.

It is against this background that policy planners at the highest level should be encouraged to think radically on the future of the Planning Commission. I would like to propose a number of steps in this regard. Firstly, the government should formally abolish the Planning Commission and the Planning Division. In that case, IMED should be placed in the PM's Office and the Statistics Division should be under the Finance Ministry. Secondly, Planning Cells in all Ministries should be greatly strengthened, drawing officers from the Planning Commission. In a parliamentary democratic set up, the Ministry is where ultimately action lies. It is here that politics is turned into economics. But at present the planning machinery available there for giving a proper shape to this process is rather weak and hence this suggestion. The Ministries should have much more powers and be allowed to process and approve all projects relating to

their respective ambits of activities, except those requiring more than, say, Tk 50 crore. They would obviously have to hold inter-ministerial meetings, involving the Ministry of Finance, ERD and other relevant organizations, in approving projects. The Ministries would negotiate with the donors through the ERD as they do now. In case of any unresolved inter-ministerial differences, the PM would act as the final arbiter.

Thirdly, very large projects (i.e. requiring more than Tk 50 crore) should be handled by a small NEC Secretariate located in the Finance Ministry. These projects would be decided in the NEC meetings after the usual scrutiny and inter-ministerial meetings initiated by the Secretariate.

Fourthly, after placement in the strengthened Planning Cells of the Ministries and the NEC Secretariate, the remaining Economic Cadre officers should be absorbed in IMED and the Statistics Division.

Finally, they should be amalgamated with BCS (Admin) cadre, and future recruitment to the Economic Cadre should be discontinued. This

would, in fact, give the existing BCS (Economic) officers a greater exposure to the implementation process. Subsequent vacancies in Planning Cells of the Ministries, NEC Cell, IMED and the Statistics Division should be filled in by existing officers from various cadres with adequate background in Economics, Statistics, Sociology, Science, Agri-

culture, Engineering, Medicine, etc. and a good training in planning techniques.

These suggestions, if put into practice, should bring about dynamism in development project processing, and at the same time solve the personnel problem almost painlessly. However, if we procrastinate, we may one day have on our hands an impossible situation where all hell will be let loose, and wholesale retrenchment rather than redeployment will be the only way out. As they say, "A stitch in time, saves nine."

OPINION Making Dhaka Operational

A Humain

The planning exercise comprises at least three distinct areas: (a) maintain the current overloaded services and run it with minimum breakdown; (b) introduce ad hoc crash programmes/projects to supplement the overloaded services to the residents of the metropolis; and, (c) draw up the master plan for the city to cater for the next 10 to 25 years. One central controlling agency for the city is impractical from the administrative point of view, as pointed out by Mr Md Nurul Islam (June 16); but coordination and cooperation can be raised to optimum level through a central Control Room mechanism.

Certain do's and don'ts have to be enforced. The urban migration has to be made unattractive. Use the other divisional headquarters and dispersal, for business and official administration. Too many decisions are taken in Dhaka (centralisation). Decentralisation has to be an open policy. For this, the administrative reorganisation has to be carried out quickly (too slow progress at present). The local self-government policies have to be practical to discourage frequent trips to the district and divisional HQs and the metropolis. The present administration is not working urgently on this issue. Urbanisation will increase with development, and rise in the standard of living (later, suburban living becomes popular, depending on the public amenities available).

Although business activities are picking up in the rural area due to the official policy of business and loan incentives, the infrastructure and linkage services have to be geared to a much higher level at a much faster rate than at present (road, transport, communication, power, housing, storage, marketing, distribution, etc).

Urban migration in the developing countries is a global problem, and plenty of studies have been made, which are accessible to the local planners (through the UN agencies). The central metropoli-

tan planning agency (if it exists at all) has to be supported and backed up on top priority basis; and its deliberations may be widely publicised through seminars and the mass media, for continued feedback. This feedback has to be updated at regular intervals (not difficult with computerization).

The cycle rickshaws are going to ply on the roads for many more years. Therefore there should be a separate lane for non-mechanised vehicles. If the bicycle could be so popular in China, then what is wrong with the other DCs?

The provision of satellite towns around Dhaka is a must (ring system). Its success will depend on the mass rapid transport system (MRT). The latter looks attractive on paper, but clearing the congested parts of the city for the installation of MRT is beset with many physical, technical, and human problems. Dhaka city must have fast entry and exit points (transportation system).

Alongside, it may be remembered that too many high-rise buildings in Dhaka create congestion and higher density (people and vehicles). The evils of vertical living may be reviewed carefully as per data available in the industrialized countries (including the psychological effect of living out of contact with the "mother" earth — man was not designed to live without his feet touching the soil).

Another point not discussed often is that Dhaka was basically an academic city (university town). Like Oxford and Cambridge, the educational facilities at tertiary level may be shifted outside Dhaka, or additions/expansion not encouraged. There are too many students in the metropolis. The politicians may not like it, but it is good for political stability. Should we be always fighting politically, or do something for the country, as also for ourselves? I have not come into this world to serve the interest of the politicians!

To the Editor...

"Architecture sans Humanity"

Sir, I thank Mr Munirul Haque for his letter (25 June) in response to my abovementioned piece. One need not be an architect to be affronted by the increasingly unpleasant physical profile of Dhaka. It is a city I happy to be very fond of and, where many citizens may privately grumble, my choice was to place a few criticisms on the table to a group of people who appear to be partly responsible for its current mien.

Given the nature of our city's growth, with its burgeoning population, the geographical constraints on horizontal expansion and a demanding nouveau riche with its own peculiar interpretations of taste, architects may be construed to be simply acting "in response to the demands of the market." Giving the punters what they want, so to speak. This view suggests that architects do not perform out of any genuine control or authority over their work, either as individuals or as a profession. But is this enough, or even acceptable, for such an influential, privileged and relatively well-educated group of people,

whose works have such a tremendous bearing on the lives of the rest of us? It suggests to me an abdication of social duty because the demands of the market and the needs of the community are quite different.

There is no harm in having pride in one's own profession, though one must always guard against it ossifying into cloistered, detached confidence. A long and illustrious career in architecture, which includes both merit from and standing amongst co-professionals, does not presuppose the worth of what actually matters — their buildings. Professional status is an unreliable measure of social value, as the moral obloquy of much contemporary architecture amply testifies.

Perhaps it would be fitting to conclude with the words of an architect. I had the good fortune to know Professor Cho Padamee during his time at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College, London (headed by Peter Cook). He placed the point far better than I have been able to do subsequently. He said: "The complete architect should be a philosopher, a social activist, a revolution-

ary. Most are much less than this and the worst amongst them become respected pillars of the establishment."

Abdul Hannan
Dhaka-1205

Why more nuclear bombs?

Sir, The nuclear policy of big five nuclear powers — the USA, the UK, France, Russia and China — is shrouded with mystery and suspense. Only in May 1995 they unitedly campaigned for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

But by this time China has already exploded a nuclear bomb. France has declared that she would make nuclear tests for her security. The USA is also contemplating to make some nuclear 'experiments'. And of course Russia and the UK would not be left behind them.

It is reported that Israel possesses more than two hundred nuclear bombs. India and Pakistan have admitted that they can manufacture nuclear bombs. South Korea, Iran, Belgium, Argentina and South

Africa are reportedly making nuclear bombs. Former Yugoslavia now Serbia is trying to procure atom bomb from Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the USA cleverly took over possession of all nuclear weapons from Ukraine and Kazakhstan. For whom all the nuclear weapons are meant?

Should Germany and Japan, the two rising powers of Europe and Asia respectively, be sitting idle sucking their thumbs?

Above all it is very interesting that UNSC economic sanctions against Iraq continue unabated because some western circles doubt that Iraq is also capable of making nuclear bombs.

What would the five big nuclear powers do with their stockpiles of thousands of nuclear weapons? Destroy the entire human race because of their failure to resolve manifold socio-economic and political problems of the world peacefully and to meet their own selfish ends?

We fail to understand the abracadabra or the ABC of politics of the nuclear powers.

OH Kabir
Dhaka-1203