

A Most Welcome Stand

In a most welcome move the government has reiterated, with convincing resolution, that the new rules abolishing the question bank system of the last four years, would stay. The growing countrywide agitation by school students for the restoration of the question bank made it imperative for the government to put its foot down — and for once say no and mean it. This is the way to govern. And how one wishes that government action manifested the same resolution on the side of the just and right in the matter of college and university students.

The students are hurt that the greasy course would not anymore be theirs just to slither across. For not only the question bank — the fantastic passing machine — is out, they must now score pass marks separately in each half of a paper's objective and essay-type parts and get at least 18 out of 50 in one of them. This is both unfair and unkind, they feel. Can they be faulted for feeling so? The examinations have always been tilted to make the examinees feel comfortable with the question papers. Forget question bank, questions were for decades made in so much a predictable fashion that students needed only to commit to memory answers to a set of less than 12 questions — the answers being always available as notes from teachers, together with the suggestions. For many years students never needed to read the text-books and understand and be able to write a single sentence either in Bangla or English correctly and on his or her own. All they were required for good sailing is to memorise the few answers or carry the notes to the centre and copy them. The question bank was all too transparent a way for thrusting success on the undeserving. The prevailing long practised norms of paper-setting are but another kind of question bank, may be even worse. When will this go and the student be required to read and learn, understand and truly answer?

On the happy occasion of the government's taking a correct and firm stand, we reiterate that the student is not to blame either for his or her bad showing or for the talent of beating the exams. The teachers haven't for long been teaching and schools administering and the boards wanting that the student read and learn and become knowledgeable and capable of expression, both in speech and writing.

A Nice Japanese Plan

There is a robust economic sense for us to have special economic zones in the port city of Chittagong with enthusiastic support from a select few industrially advanced Asian giants.

Japan, the largest donor of economic assistance to Bangladesh and our traditional well-wisher, has had a standing offer to set up an exclusive economic zone for herself in Chittagong.

Japan mixes her Oriental emotion with hard-headed business acumen going back to its history, legends and traditions. Thus, when she opts for something and pursues it with visible initiatives one will be only foolish not to read her convictions into such an investment of energy and money.

According to a study, financed and completed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), we have a thorough-bred Japanese plan aimed at creating a Tk 374-crore Special Economic Zone in the port city of Chittagong by 2005 AD. The report projects benefits of 45,000 new jobs, 4 billion US dollar in trade income and Tk 676.7 crore in local revenues over the period between 1995 and 2005. The year 2010 will see the doubling of per capita national income. By virtue of the SEZ in Chittagong itself the per capita income is to increase by 100 per cent in 10 years. Obviously, the massive export orientation of the project guarantees the qualitative aspect of selection of industries to be set up with the Japanese seasoned knowledge of global market-place.

Before taking a plunge the Japanese have a way of making sure about the shape of things to come which, we are sure, can't be a mismatch with our interests.

The whole idea behind having a special economic zone is to equip it with the needed operational facilities and living conveniences. From this standpoint, the Japanese suggestions for new crossings over Karnaphuli, an improvement in the services of Chittagong Port, an addition of a deep sea port to it, a better water and sewerage system for Chittagong and tourism development in Kaptai and Cox's Bazar, strike a responsive chord in us.

The Tubewell Story

We are almost entirely reliant on the tubewell as a source of pure drinking water supply in 68,000 villages of Bangladesh. In fact, there is an extraordinary reason why we are latching on to it so very much. Tubewells do have the realisable prospect of advancing the cause of "health for all" within a foreseeable future — not rhetorically, by 2000 AD, to be sure — when other ingredients of good health like domiciliary medicare and containment of insecticide pollution are proving to be disappointingly slow in the countryside.

Tubewell coverage, in accompaniment with the spread of water-sealed latrines, holds the key to a radical improvement in the appalling health conditions of our rural masses. There is a well-programmed and targeted sanitation plan in operation with the crucial support complement of the UNICEF. But our understanding in respect of water supply coverage is that the Public Health Engineering Deptt. is lacking in a contingency plan to repair the unworkable tubewells whose number is growing by the day. Yes, the floods have choked up many a-deep and shallow tubewell but even without these seasonal vagaries we do have a large number of them lying idle all the year round.

A mufassil news item says it all. As many as 4,000 tubewells have remained unusable for a long time in the eleven southern districts of Barisal division alone. The Public Health Engineering Deptt. cites the reason for this being the irreplacability of the PVC pipes used for sinking the tubewells originally. The question is: Why something that cannot be substituted for or otherwise mended, was used at all in the first place?

FOR quite some time, we have been hearing a great deal about "aid fatigue". Donors, we are being reminded on every possible occasion, are tired of pouring their tax-payers' money into the begging bowls of the poor countries. Even our Finance Minister, on his return from the last Paris Aid Consortium meeting informed the nation that the official development assistance (ODA) — popular synonym for which is "foreign aid" — is going to be drastically reduced in the coming years.

Frankly, I don't think that such a development should be considered as an unmitigated disaster. By this time, we should have learnt that what really matters is the quality of foreign aid we receive, not the quantity. If the reduction in quantity makes our policy makers, both at the political and bureaucratic levels, more conscious about quality and thus more selective, surely that should be most welcome.

Most of us — politicians, officials, academics, journalists and the men-in-the-street — tend to use the term "foreign aid" rather loosely, even perhaps too generously. All goods and services, regardless of their usefulness or quality, procured with the finances — again regardless of the terms and conditions, provided by any foreign government on multilateral organisation, is considered as "foreign aid". Some time even assistance from foreign NGOs or like "Save the Children Fund" or activities financed by private organisations like Ford Foundation are also termed foreign aid. Few of us even bother to ask and find out who are the real beneficiaries, both within the country and the donor country or agency of any such aid package, what it is costing as now and going to cost in the future, how relevant it is to our needs and how efficiently it has been put together. The question whether we can really afford such "generosity" in every case largely remain unasked and unanswered.

The pertinent question is why our political masters —

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democratic, pseudo-democratic or autocratic — bureaucrats, technocrats and public in general display such indifference or acquiescence or even enthusiastic support for many projects and programmes of little relevance which at the same time are poorly designed, poorly equipped and poorly implemented. There is no universally applicable answer. The reasons vary from class to class, group to group and person to person.

Some of the past regimes in Bangladesh having no political legitimacy, used the quantum of foreign aid, regardless of quality, and the member of donors as the substitutes for the same and hoped that such indications of international acceptance would enhance their internal political credibility. Some of the individuals at the top with more illusions of grandeur and inflated ego than knowledge or good sense could be beguiled by smooth talking sales people and their local agents into promoting and accepting projects of high visibility without any consideration to their suitability or relevance to our conditions. To some officials, it was a measure of their efficiency, and the ability to line-up more "aid" could be an end in itself. To many local sponsors, within the government both at political and bureaucratic/technocratic levels and outside with commercial interests, these could be cases of not very enlightened self-interest in the shape of kick-backs, commissions, foreign trips, jobs for them or their own.

Then there are political lobbies promoting "friendship" with particular countries, and at the same ensuring that they benefit from the so-called "friendship", even if the people of Bangladesh loses in the process. Procurements or purchases, however useless or on terms however adverse would be

guised as "aid", and justified more or less on the sole ground of enhancing friendly relations. Since the later part of the seventies, the most effective "friendship" lobbies have been those of China and Pakistan. (Yes, Pakistan is also a "donor" country — agreements for Pakistani "aid" to purchase ships in the last days of Ershad and sugar mill machinery by the present democratic regime are prime examples). The remaining others involved in the process would be plain ignorant, foolish, callous or averse to taking any risk of offending powerful promoters of specific projects both within and outside the government. The

same. My objective is much more modest and, I hope, pragmatic. I would venture to identify some of the major pitfalls and the ways to avoid the same.

In my experience, a project with a substantial procurement package under tied bilateral "aid" — whether in the shape of loan or even grant — is more likely than not to fall under the category of useless or worse than useless. Same is true for many of such commodity aid packages. Such "aid" basically constitute a transfer of funds from the taxpayers of the donor country to the private companies of the same country, channelled through

another "aided" project in the name of rehabilitation, balancing and modernization. Meanwhile the aid provided in the shape of loan to pay the usually inflated price has to be repaid along with interest. Sources of new material or market for the finished product identified in the feasibility study disappear like mirages. The net result is that the project operations can never reach the break-even stage, not to speak of profitability.

Almost all industrial projects in Bangladesh set up under bilateral aid fall under this category. North Bengal Paper Mills, Sylhet Pulp Mills, both the TSP factories, Chittagong Dry Dock, General Electrical Manufacturing Plant, Chittagong Steel Mills are some of the examples of such projects. However, the place of honour among the projects of such nature must go to the Machine Tool Factory. It is worth a detailed case study which I hope to undertake sometime in the future.

The same is true in case many purchases and procurements for infrastructure development from tied sources. Examples are ocean-going vessels for the Shipping Corporation, ferries and ships of BIWTA, cranes for the ports, power plants and so on.

Even if such "aid" is received in the shape of grant, that may not be necessarily considered as innocuous. Once procured, resources are constantly diverted for their manning, operation and maintenance with little to show in return.

There is very little motivation or opportunity for such chicaneries in case the multilateral aid agencies. There the major problem is incompetent appraisal resulting in inappropriate project selection and then design by the agency staff and consultants employed there. The process is quite often abetted by the

lack of ability and application on the part of our own officials. The result may be a project — overdesigned, unnecessarily costly, and ultimately more harmful than beneficial. Various multi-million dollar projects undertaken during the last four decades for irrigation and flood control may be cited as appropriate examples. According to an evaluation made under the flood action plan (FAP) studies, nearly half of such projects failed to deliver the promised benefits. Many such projects abound in other sectors.

The catch is that a project may fail due to deficiencies in the appraisal and design imposed by the donor agency, yet the loan has to be duly repaid. Often good money has to be thrown away with little result, in futile efforts to rectify earlier mistakes.

In dealing with such projects and programmes by these agencies, the government faces a situation in which not only the priorities are set by the donor but also there is a threat, if not always explicit, that no money would be forthcoming if there is any departure from the scope, design and implementation modalities set down by the donor. In such a situation we almost invariably succumb despite our well-founded reservations.

In stating the foregoing, it is far from my intention to imply that all foreign aid is useless or redundant or harmful. There have been a number of aided projects and programmes which met the priority needs of the country efficiently and effectively. All these made significant contributions to the development process. But there must be as many, if not more, aided projects and programmes which are worthless or worse. It is time we learn to discriminate between genuinely relevant, effective and efficient "aid" and the other kind. Our political masters, technocrats and bureaucrats must learn to say "No, thank you" to the donors when it is necessary and appropriate.



Another Voice
Kazi Fazlur Rahman

few demurring would be overruled, and some time, even punished. The result is that Bangladesh have had many more useless or worse than useless "aided" projects and programmes than most other aid receiving countries, at least in the Asia-Pacific region.

The total numbers individuals belonging to all the above categories responsible for saddling the country with so many aid projects should be far less than one-tenth of one per cent of the total population of Bangladesh. Yet, it is the entire population, in some cases not only those living but also those yet to be born, who will have to pay the price for all their follies, foibles and in some cases outright fraudulent practices.

Bangladesh, as it were. In this process, a part of the money is likely to stick to the hands of the local agents, promoters and sponsors. Otherwise, Bangladesh can be almost incidental to the process — at least in the worst of such cases. The rationale for the "aid" is often no better than a ruse. A feasibility study might have been conducted by consultants — from the donor country, even by the suppliers or their associates. I don't recall, in all my years dealing with such projects, any such study ever concluding that the particular project is not feasible!

A large number of such projects turn into white elephants — a running sore on the national economy. Machinery and equipment break down because these are outdated or even secondhand and worn-out. Spares become too expensive or even unavailable. It would then be an appropriate candidate for

West's Resolve Can Save Bosnia

by Nilratan Halder

The unfolding drama of the war front is equally matched by West's hypocrisy, bluff and deception on the political front as well. That the UN mission in Bosnia has virtually failed owes to such dirty politics.

AFTER Srebrenica it was Zepa. Now Bihac is about to fall. All the while the United Nations Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) or the rapid reaction forces could do nothing. The UNPROFOR's position was untenable from the beginning any way. The Contact Group's meet in London on July 21 raised the hope that the West would at last keep its contact with history. But to describe the meet correctly, the Contact Group began with a bang but ended in a whimper. The reaction forces have been deployed in Gorazde with heavy weapons but of the remaining four safe areas, they had no mission in the other three. Even the reaction force is not responsible for protecting civilian population in that enclave.

Just at the moment the Serbs are about to take over Bihac, the war in Bosnia has taken a new twist. The Croats have stepped in. They have already captured two Serbian towns Grahovo and Glamoc and are pushing further north. The Croat forces' involvement in the war follows a definite plan. As an ally of the Bosnian government the Croats have stepped up their offensive. But that is only on the face of it. They also have their own calculations. Their main aim is to isolate the Croatian Serbs from their stronghold of Knin and to gain lost territory. The Croat offensive against the Serbs has widened the spectra of war in the Balkan region, thus runs the arguments of most of the Western experts. Some of them obviously fear that this will bring Yugoslavia into the war. That it has the potential to drag in other

parties, including big powers, and in turn lead into a wider conflagration cannot be ruled out.

The unfolding drama of the war front is equally matched by West's hypocrisy, bluff and deception on the political front as well. That the UN mission in Bosnia has virtually failed owes to such dirty politics. Ever since the declaration of independence by former Yugoslav provinces, Croatia and Bosnia have been the worst sufferers. Yet between the two it is Bosnia that has been subjected to all kinds of bizarre atrocities. The Bosnian Serbs resorted to a programme of ethnic cleansing, knowing full well that they constituted 31 per cent of the Bosnian population as against 44 per cent of the Muslims. After capturing Srebrenica and Zepa, the marauding Serbs went for the same systematic genocide. In Zepa they have looted the enclave before setting the houses on fire.

All the while the West is talking of a diplomatic solution to the crisis. On the one hand the US Senate overwhelmingly votes for lifting the arms embargo on Bosnia and on the other the British and French governments threaten to pull out their troops. Lifting arms embargo does not instantly solve the Bosnian government's need

for heavy weapons. But time is running out for it. And there is no guarantee that even if the US lifts the embargo, the Security Council will agree on the point. While that uncertainty lingers with President Clinton still opposing the idea, the Serbs make their territorial advances.

They may not attack Gorazde and Sarajevo as yet but they are determined to take over Bihac and perhaps Tuzla. Yet Gorazde is what appears to be strategically most important for them for launching the final campaign.

The Serbs are reaping rich amidst the West's confusion and differences in their policy towards Bosnia. The reaction force may indeed bring in some qualitative change in the war if it comes under Serb attack. Whatever the motive may be, Croatia's involvement in the war at this point will be a really moral boost as well as some practical help for the Bosnian Muslims. The Serb forces' concentrated attack will somehow get dissipated. It will give the Bosnian government some time too for preparation and procurement of heavy weapons which they desperately need. The Muslim countries which have expressed their desire to break the embargo on moral and legal grounds will be able to reach the help.

When rest of the world is

taking a standing humiliation, Croatia has come forward to help the beleaguered Bosnians. The Serbs have considered it an aggression and the West find in it the seed of spill-over. But what does it want then? It will neither fight for the Bosnians — both to protect lives and safeguard territories — nor allow others to do the job. Even the humanitarian service — they claim to be their primary responsibility — is proving to be a hoax. With more and more people getting displaced they are finding the job impossible to perform. However, their job has never been easy. The UNPROFOR or the reaction force do not exactly know how to open up a route to Sarajevo for the relief convoy. But subjecting the Bosnian Muslims to an outside tragedy and trauma through a show or pretence of protection — which has now been cruelly exposed after the fall of two safe havens — the West has made a mismatch of the whole UN operation in Bosnia. Their lack of resolve amounts to nothing short of condoning the crime.

Russia has threatened to supply arms to the Serbs if America does so. We do not know whether the threat will work. It will be a sad day for the US if it really backed out in the face of such a threat. After all it is not Breznev's Soviet Union, once a super-

power, that could look eyeball to eyeball with the US. Economically crippled, physically truncated and unsupported by its eastern allies, Russia can hardly afford to be an open supporter. Particularly when France and Britain remain steadfast in

their friendship with the US and Japan and Germany do not make any extra concession to Russia. Things would not have come to such a pass, had the West shown its resolve and used economic leverage on Russia. Today Russia has got some ground under its feet but not firm enough to dislodge others of superpower status — both in economic and military senses. Please do exert the pressure that will work to bring an end to the greatest human tragedy of the fag end of this century.

Art
Buchwald's
COLUMN

Pray Tell

I have been praying for some time that school prayer would not become a major issue in the 1996 presidential campaign. But it doesn't look as if my prayers will be answered.

Every potential Republican candidate seems to be running on a ticket of promising a constitutional amendment to put prayer back in the classroom. Not wishing to appear irreverent, President Clinton now says that there is nothing in the Constitution forbidding prayer in the nation's public schools.

One of the reasons that this whole issue makes me uncomfortable is that, while this country is becoming more and more diverse in its religious beliefs, it is also becoming more intolerant.

The major religions are easily defined and there appears to be no problem in allowing children with those beliefs to recite their prayers. It's the minority religions which could be in trouble.

I know a family named Zoloff who belong to a religious group known as the "Tumbleweeds." Mr Zoloff told me his concerns that his children may face persecution because their religion is not part of the mainstream.

"Why is that?" I asked.
"We believe that the Water Buffalo created the universe. Because it is the greatest of all creatures and the provider of all earthly gifts, we address our prayers to him."

"I don't see anything wrong with that," I said.
"You may not, but the kids from Judeo-Christian backgrounds do and they either make fun of my children or, worse, they beat them up. One day in class the children were asked to describe what they thought the Supreme Being looked like. When my son said that He looked like a Water Buffalo, the teacher hit him over the head with a book."

"Why do you think the teacher got so upset?"
"Because, when it comes to religious worship, people often feel threatened by those of different faiths. They believe so strongly in their own God that they are even prepared to kill others from worshipping to a different one."

Looking at what's happening in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Israel, Russia and India — and that's just a few.
By Officially allowing prayer in the classroom, the US political leaders are planting the seeds of religious persecution in this country."

"That's all well and good, but how does somebody get elected President if they don't advocate prayer in schools?"

"The presidential candidates who are pushing prayer don't want any religious prayer — they want Christian prayer, because that's where the votes are. They go ape when they hear someone praying to a Water Buffalo. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they specifically forbid Water Buffalo worship when they write the constitutional amendment."

"I can see how you might feel at risk. Maybe president Clinton wasn't really thinking about what he said."

"What else is new?"
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To the Editor...

Mockery with medical education?

Sir, Medical education in the country has been subjected to criticism. This is all the more when health care system is a matter of dissatisfaction, not to the patients alone but also to the physicians. And physicians, the key-persons are nothing but the product of the medical education system. But medical education had never been a subject of despotic adventurism as it has become now. What is going on is nothing but a mockery with the medical education.

First of all, let me clarify that I am in no way opposed to medical education at the private level. But what is seen now is a mushroom growth or rather cropping up of spurious medical colleges. A number of authorities have to accord recognition to set up a medical college. Whether any authority at all exists seems to be a question. Declaration of a medical college with enrollment of students has become almost an everyday affair. The most alarming allegation is that the about-to-retire medical college and university teachers are reportedly too willing to grant recognition as it may ensure them a profitable position after retirement. A number of retired teachers have had their names enrolled as teachers in a number of private medical colleges. Local general practitioners are also said to be coaxed to have their names on the teachers' list.

Leaving aside having a full-fledged hospital, many a private medical college does not have its own campus, and often not even a physical infrastructure exists. Many don't have the dissection halls, laboratories, museums to even start any class. It seems they don't need these to obtain a recognition, what is all required is a rented house. Such private medical colleges, in fact, many not be able to have them recognised as a high school from any

secondary school education authority.

The country is not facing any dearth of physicians, and definitely no rationale exists to have an impoverished medical college. The total amount of finance made available by all the private medical colleges together is not even equivalent to that of a single government medical college. If the claim is service to the people, then a modernised private hospital may be set up. So why a private medical college? Are we to allow any unscrupulous business with medical education?

I appeal to all concerned to stop playing with medical education. Let there be a national planning for medical education. Medical, Engineering, Agriculture and all higher education should be under strict discipline and supervision. Final recognition of such institutions should be done by the cabinet so that government shoulders the responsibilities. Only care must be taken that red-

tapism does not deter a genuine endeavour.

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Incidental fare for officials

Sir, Government officials travelling by train on official duty are entitled to an incidental fare equivalent to one ticket to meet the incidental expenses of the journey. High officials are entitled to travel by air. When they travel by air, they get one day's daily allowance only instead of the incidental fare. But they have to incur similar incidental expenses. So depriving them of incidental fare is unjust and unethical.

May I therefore, request the Ministry of Finance to allow the incidental fare also to high officials in the interest of justice and fair play.

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