

Priorities for Women

The NGO Forum, held in Huairou, 60 kilometers from the venue of the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing, came to an end on Friday. Often termed as raucous and ill-organised, the forum, however, got much less interested in distractions than was initially expected. Its achievement can be encapsulated into what is called the Beijing Platform for Action that seeks to frame and enforce laws guaranteeing for women equal rights to economy and resources and full control over reproductive health.

These are obviously contentious issues as zealots and vested interest groups often stand in the way of coming to grips with them. Clearly, women have pinpointed the areas where their rights are cruelly curtailed. The aim is to bring an end to the socio-political-economic marginalisation process that places women at an in-built disadvantage.

The sheer number of participants at the forum — as many as 30,000 — gave an idea of the extent of the grassroots level representation as well as of the growing awareness of women about the secondary role they have been forced into. Both the field-level experiences and the international clouts they enjoy have given the voluntary organisations a prerogative for championing women's issues that are often ignored or put on the back-burner by the governments world over, particularly in the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. So, it is not surprising that the NGOs having to do with women's causes are demanding a greater say in matters of individual governments' policy formulation relating to women's well-being.

The NGO Forum has rightly vowed to work as a watch-body to monitor progress achieved by the respective governments in the implementation of the provisions of the Beijing Platform for Action. We would like them to work in concert and not in disharmony from this point onwards.

The key issues also correspond with the 12 critical areas the UN has identified for the action programme. The main thrust is on gender equality. The forum has expressed its hope that the women's conference will outline a clear agenda for the achievement of sexual equality in the next 10 years. It wants to keep the pressure on. That is the best way of achieving women's rightful place in society.

Power in Pipeline?

We are not falling behind our regional colleagues in signing MOUs with prestigious transnational companies to establish power plants in the country. The Energy Ministry has shown a dynamic streak by negotiating 10 memoranda of understanding with the foreign private power developers within a remarkably short period of time. But our congratulations to them would necessarily be tentative at this stage because the MOUs being what they are — letters of intent, for all practical purposes — have a long way to go before finally hitting the ground.

There are three key elements to the MOUs that must be combinedly redeemed to the satisfaction of both sides for the project-work to begin in earnest. First, in quite a few cases, the locations have to be decided upon. Secondly, since gas-fired plants are envisioned, a steady supply of the hydrocarbon has to be ensured at an agreed price to the foreign private companies by the Power Development Board. It is quite possible — and desirable, too — that some of the plants are being visualised with an eye to future discoveries of gas for which again we have signed MOUs with foreign companies given to gas and oil explorations. Thirdly, implementation of the projects will hinge on Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) of which the critical feature is going to be the fixation of power tariff. The utility rate bears social implications which no government of the day can trifle with. At the same time, unless there are assured incentives and a reasonable margin of profitability for the foreign companies they would not take the plunge. We are expecting that when the chips are down there would be a judicious blend of the interests of both sides.

Subject to the fulfilment of its time-bound part requirements, the MOUs will either be on course or be thrown off the rails. On the one side are the private companies accustomed to a high degree efficiency and, on the other, we have the government agency like the Energy Ministry or the PDB which has to speed up things.

Far from Healthy

Once what was Dhaka University's forte has now become its weak-point. Modelled originally on the British residential system of higher learning, the DU is now a faint replica of its former self. Its systemic mainstay — which is its string of residential halls — is now creaking under the pressure of far too many inmates than there are berths for.

The broad statistics sound appalling enough, to say nothing of the micro-level shock therapy. Of the 29,000 students enrolled with the DU, approximately 17,400, who hail from the outlying districts, need to be billeted somewhere in the capital city. Since 12,000 among them are crowding into some 8,000 seats there are in the 14 residential halls — 11 for male and 3 for female students — as many as 5,400 are evidently putting up with their relatives or in make-shift abodes, of one kind or another. All this works out to 2-3 students huddling in a single dormitory seat and quite a few squatting on the floor of, perhaps, a room. As for female students, there are 1,700 seats to 2,500 actual inmates.

These conjure up very unhealthy living conditions and a counter-productive environment for learning, constructive thinking and creative work at the halls.

Private sector involvement in setting up rooming houses for students, popularisation of the paying guest system and government's hands-on policy to construct more halls could go a long way in solving the accommodation problem of the students. Meanwhile, seat allotment has to be rationalised strictly on need basis, bereft of partisanship.

Is the Government's Constitutional Mandate to Govern Still Valid?

THE question posed above has arisen out of some observations made by Lord Weatherill, the former Speaker of the British Parliament. He came to Bangladesh at the invitation of the Centre for Analysis and Choice to attend a seminar. The Centre should be thanked for inviting such an outstanding expert on parliamentary democracy. A conservative MP who represented his constituents in the British Parliament for over twenty years, he also had the distinction of presiding over this ancient, prestigious and successful Parliament of the world for more than a decade. His views and observations are based both on vast academic knowledge as well as long experience. Having opted for the parliamentary system, we in Bangladesh would be well advised to listen to him carefully.

One was deeply touched by his moving words when he said, "Freedom... is a very fragile flower... Bear in mind that it is far easier to lose our freedoms than to regain them." We should have no difficulty in appreciating the truth of this remark because we did lose our freedom a number of times to ambitious men who conspired to undermine the democratic political structure of the country. We had to struggle hard every time to get back our freedom. Given our history of repeated military rule, we ought to be doubly sensitive to his wise words. Autocratic rulers, having usurped power, subverted the demo-

Begum Zia did not realize the irony in her participation at the Beijing conference on women. Her silence and refusal even to express sympathy at the brutal murder of an helpless girl while in the care of the police is the harshest indictment of her government. Any lingering illusion of accountability of the so-called democratic government was removed in one stroke. This government was afraid to face the wrath of the people of Dinajpur.

cratic institutions to secure their power. Parliament was turned into a pliable instrument — a rubber stamp — to serve the interests of the autocratic rulers.

Lord Weatherill, in the course of an interview, made a number of significant points which deserve to be considered carefully. Commenting on the current status of the parliament, he said, "Unfortunately, parliament in Bangladesh is not functioning because it lacks the essential ingredient of opposition." The 75-year old veteran of British politics believes that without the presence of the opposition the parliament cannot function. Obviously, he has raised a basic question about the legal status of the parliament and its capacity to fulfil the functions entrusted to it under the constitution. Now, let us see what the prime minister Begum Zia said in her public speech on 1 September. As reported by an English daily, she said, "We are in the government. In Parliament and on the streets and where not. We will leave no room from them (the opposition)." This is how the Prime Minister wants to practice parliamentary democracy. She does not want to leave any room for the opposition, neither in the parliament nor on the street. Lord Weatherill could not

be more explicit when he said, "The government is governing but the parliament as such is not functioning... if there is no opposition, parliament is not functioning factually." Since, according to such an authority on parliamentary system, our parliament is not functioning, one may justifiably ask: On what authority is the government governing? Is it not the parliament, in a par-

liamentary system, which provides the legal mandate to the government? A foreign expert, only after a few days' stay in Bangladesh, has so quickly grasped the key issue of the crisis but our constitutional experts, I regret to say, seem to have missed this vital point in all these months. One may not doubt the sincerity of the lawyers who came up with different formulae for finding a solution but these legal experts would have better utilized their time and talent by explaining to the nation the

fundamental point of principle in a parliamentary democracy, namely, that a parliament cannot legally function without the opposition and that when the parliament's legal status is impaired, the government loses its constitutional mandate to govern. Under those circumstances an appeal to the electorate is the only way to re-establish the legality of the government.

follow the rigorous British system. Instead he felt that in Bangladesh the MPs should be able to question the Prime Minister at least once a week. Have we had even one such question hour in the last four and a half year of BNP rule? Just to illustrate the point, when the tragic event of Dinajpur sent a shock wave through the nation and there was widespread concern and anguish at the death of an innocent girl, did the head of government utter a single word to either to explain to the nation what had gone wrong in Dinajpur or to reassure them about the steps being taken by the government? No, she was, as usual, mum. Instead, a disgraceful press note was issued which was so full of lies that instead of clarifying the situation, it aggravated the crisis. In fact, it damaged the prestige and credibility of the government. Begum Zia did not realize the irony in her participation at the Beijing conference on women. Her silence and refusal even to express sympathy at the brutal murder of an helpless girl while in the care of the police is the harshest indictment of her government. Any lingering illusion of accountability of the so-called democratic government was removed in one stroke. This

government was afraid to face the wrath of the people of Dinajpur.

Lord Weatherill believes that the Parliament is not functioning in Bangladesh because the basic requirement of a parliamentary system, namely, the presence of the opposition, is missing. But even in strict constitutional terms, the rump Parliament does not meet the requirements of the constitution. For example, under article 52 (4) of the constitution the motion for the impeachment of the president requires the votes of "not less than two-thirds of the total number of members". Since this parliament does not have two-thirds of the total number of members, it is unable to fulfill the duty entrusted to it by the constitution. Similarly, the provisions of article 142 on the amendment of the Constitution cannot be carried out by this parliament because the required number of members are not there. The rump parliament's legal capacity to perform its assigned tasks is severely impaired. I would have expected our constitutional experts would pronounce themselves on an issue on which the political stability of the country depends. While the Prime Minister is saying again and again she was wedded to the Constitution, she is ignoring the fact that her regime has lost its constitutional mandate to govern the country. It is a sad commentary on the alertness of the lawyers and intellectuals of this country.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



We have all talked about the "accountability" of the government. One of the most important ways in which the principle of accountability is implemented is for the head of government to give answers to questions put to him or her by the members of the parliament. In the British system, according to Lord Weatherill, the Leader of the House attends the question hour in the House twice a week but the distinguished former Speaker believes that as an young democracy Bangladesh does not have to

misery. Along with this, unchecked population growth, all-pervasive illiteracy, unemployment of the educated youth force and absence of health care and nutritional deficiency of the populace coupled with declining standard of living have plagued the whole nation.

Japan's Rise as an Economic Superpower: Can this Work as a Model to Inspire Us?

by Md Asadullah Khan

Industrial plant was in ashes. But today, Japan is the second most powerful economy in the free world with its trillion-dollar-a-year industrial machine that accounts for 10 per cent of the world's output.

Business and government have welded together in Japan to form a monolithic power house bent on overrunning world markets. People outside Japan are wondering if industrial policy is the main force behind the country's economic power. True it is that government assistance has helped Japanese industries such as computer-chips and machine tools, but has little impact on many others. The electronics industry bursting with more than 600 companies are hotly competitive. More than 7000 firms manufacture textiles and more than 100 make machine tools. Japan has nine auto manufacturers, while the US has only four domestic ones. Japanese companies are renowned for copying western products, but they devote as much energy to imitating and overriding one another. To cite an example, Sony that brought out the walkman in 1979 has now eleven different walkman models, the latest being water and said resistant for use at the beach. On the other side, Minolta has brought out a 35 mm automatic focus camera with a voice synthesizer that announces when a flash is needed or a film has run out. The nine Japanese companies that make video cassette recorders has so far unveiled more than 60 new models. Akio Morita, Co-Founder of Sony says "The nature of business is to make your own product obsolete. If we don't do it ourselves, we know our competitors will do it for us. That is why we always try to come up with something new. That is our incentive, our driving force." Breakneck competition makes information a precious commodity. Japanese companies comb mountains of scientific literature for hints of technological advances. Engineers are as familiar with the rival's product line as with their own. Whenever a firm puts out a new model, rivals immediately disassemble it to analyse its parts. Before leaping into a foreign market, they painstakingly reconnoiter the competition, consumer tastes and cultural pitfalls. They like to know everything about the people and companies they do business with. So says San Francisco banker Gardner Jacobs of his dealings with

Japanese: "They kept my pedigree in a little black book. They knew how many kids I had and where I lived and even they knew what colour shorts I wore."

The Japanese learn to compete early in life. Starting from kindergarten, they run a brutal educational gauntlet that gradually separates winners from losers. Young Japanese who join large corporations learn to set aside that kind of competitiveness in favour of cooperation and consensus. Members of the team share information and skills for the greater good of the company. As a result, the work place becomes something like a harmonious home. Most Japanese spend their entire career with a single company and develop an intense loyalty that can be stronger than family ties. A Japanese diplomat in New York recalls what happened when his brother joined Mitsubishi Corporation, the giant trading company: Mitsubishi competitors became his enemies even more so than the Soviet Union. The desire to beat the opposition for the glory of his company is a powerful force that motivates the Japanese worker.

It is really awesome to see how a country like Japan lacking fossil fuel and any other natural resources, can reach the pinnacle of glory in respect of industrial development such as auto manufacture, iron and steel industry, chemicals, shipbuilding, computers, textile manufactures and electronic goods.

Japan gets its oil through a floating pipe line, a long convoy of super tankers that stretches 6500 miles from the Persian Gulf through the strait of Malacca into the South China Sea and finally to Japanese ports. From those tankers and others pour 99.8 per cent of the country's oil and about 70 per cent of the total energy needs. Besides, Japan imports 90 per cent of its natural gas and 82 per cent of its coal. The whole edifice of Japanese prosperity is built on those foreign energy sources. The country passed through wrenching re-adjustment after the first oil price hike in 1973-74 when the price of crude rose in less than a year from about \$2 to more than \$11 per bbl. Japan's economy teetered at that time. Factories closed, unemployment rose, inflation zoomed. But when the second energy shock hit in 1979, when OPEC increased prices from \$13 to \$24 per bbl in the

Even with that astounding success, the government continues to press ahead with a policy to promote alternatives to imported oil. Nuclear plants now provide about 12 per cent of Japan's electric power. The country has at present 23 nuclear plants in operation and several more are planned or under construction. Liquefied natural gas (LNG) meets about 18 per cent of total energy needs, hydro-electricity about 20 per cent and coal about 3 per cent. Oil burning thermal plants provide about 47 per cent of electricity at present. The country has lowered its dependence on imported oil for energy needs from about 80.3 per cent in 1972 to about 60 per cent.

The Japanese post-war economic miracle is astounding. Precisely speaking, Japan is a fascinating success, as a business and as a society. It is prosperous and famously homogenous, safe and civil bound together by a social contract that is startlingly effective.

Japan is a model to be followed, envied and admired by all the developing countries like Bangladesh in the Third World. Recalling with pride and jubilation, only three decades ago, this country of ours seemed to be on the brink of a triumphant new era. As the country shook loose from the exploitation of the Pakistani rulers, our leaders fired with patriotic zeal and nationalistic fervour, roused their jubilant countrymen with visions of prosperity and democracy. But while Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia have moved towards those goals, in Bangladesh the hopes of early 1971 have collapsed into political feuds, violence, religious bigotry and extremist movement, corruption, poverty and despair. Nowhere has the political infighting and feuds resulting in the disintegration of the social fabric been more than here, where years of neglect, deteriorating law and order situation, strikes and hartals and non-functioning of the mills and factories, pilferage of state properties culminated in some of the deepest human

misery. Along with this, unchecked population growth, all-pervasive illiteracy, unemployment of the educated youth force and absence of health care and nutritional deficiency of the populace coupled with declining standard of living have plagued the whole nation.

The nation is now paying the price of inaction, lack of motivation and guidance, exploitation of the masses by the privileged group, absence of work-culture and work-ethic and repeated military take-over that throttled the growth of democratic culture. Some of the extremist groups, with no respect for human suffering and misery have fostered and worsened tensions and the country is slowly sinking into a sort of blood bath.

Unlike Japan where crime and violence, social tensions and gangsterism are totally non-existent, this country of ours, led by cynical leadership has heightened tensions and deepened poverty. The state here is seen as a vehicle for personal

gain. There has never been an understanding that the country must survive and that aspect is bigger than all of us. Successive military regimes created kleptocracies that siphoned resources from the crumbling infrastructure and installed an ethos of corruption from high level bureaucrats to the lowest functionaries.

Frighteningly, the chaos in the country, lack of consensus on national issues, lack of priority to national development criteria threaten to spread instability and carnage in an already fragile region.

Is it not possible that in such a bewildering situation Japan's governance of the state and business can be a model for us when our latest experiment in democracy is heading for a fiasco? Sadly enough, the only freedoms democracy has brought us are the freedoms to tell lies, to abuse and kill opponents, to loot, and plunder with impunity and to bribe and to be bribed.

We have rather proven to the world that in a poverty stricken Third World country where votes and members of Parliament are purchasable commodities and the overwhelming majority of people are illiterate, democracy, unfortunately, is another name for anarchy.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Wrong Number

MARTHA'S VINEYARD — The cellular telephone, once the instrument of the city, is now a must for people on vacation. Many of my friends on Martha's Vineyard would not think of going to the beach or the golf course without one.

I was on the beach with Jack Neylan when he said, "Is this great, or is this great? There is nothing like lying on a sand dune away from civilization and listening to the waves and having a warm, cloudless sky slowly toasting your body. I think I'll call my broker."

I took his cellular phone out of his sandwich bag and dialed New York. Then he started yelling, "What do you mean CBS fell a quarter of a point? You told me it was going to go up when Westinghouse made its move. So you made a mistake — I don't like brokers who make a mistake. Listen, I want you to sell my Philip Morris and put me into nonsmoking Walt Disney bonds. And get back to me to confirm the order. I'm on the Lucy Vincent Beach, 10 beach towels from Alan Dershowitz."

The next day I went out on the Farm Neck golf course with Charley Freud. He swung at a ball and hit it into the sand trap. Charley reached into his bag and pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" I asked him. "I'm calling my psychiatrist. He told me the moment I was going to get a bogey to get in touch with him. This is the third time I've gone into a sand trap this week. I don't want to live anymore."

"You're lucky you have that phone," I said. "Otherwise, instead of calling a doctor, you would go into the water hole and drown yourself."

He spoke into the receiver. "Doctor, it's Charley. I went into the sand trap again. I can't get underneath the ball when I use my seven iron. I'm going to throw myself in front of an electric golf cart."

Charley continued, "You told the golf would stop me from having anxiety attacks. It's just the opposite. Every time I tee up I can't breathe... Yes, I did take one Prozac on the third hole, but when I got to the seventh it had worn off... I don't care if you think that my hitting the ball into a sand trap is a way of getting even with my domineering mother. I just want to get on the fairway and go to sleep."

The worst example I have seen of cellular phone abuse was Betsy Bennett. She had the phone attached to her tennis shorts, and just before she served she ordered groceries from the store and checked on her baby-sitter. When we changed courts she even called her mother in New Jersey.

None of us has the guts to ask her to stop using the phone while we're playing. As she told us early in the season — if she couldn't get her telephoning done while playing tennis, she wouldn't have a vacation at all.

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To the Editor...

To save Chandpur

Sir, At present cc blocks are used to save Chandpur from river erosion. But this process is practically of no use as these blocks when thrown in water lose weight and as such are easily carried away by the current. In order to harness the furious onslaught of river current on Chandpur town, old rail bogies filled with rocks should be rolled down to the river banks near Chandpur town immediately.

Simultaneously works for diverting the flow of river Padma from present eastward flow towards south at about 5 to 10 miles west of Chandpur by dredging and or construction of groin should be taken up in a big way. The two rivers have already devoured vast land area south and south-west of Chandpur during the last fifty years.

Mohammed S Islam
Banani, Dhaka

Job-hunting Lions

Over 100 "Fake Lions" of Bangladesh sent back home by South Korea recently have not only tainted this nation's image but have also undermined the ethics of the reputed organization as have done tremendous damage to all other charity bodies. Never mind the purpose of their travel; the apparent racketed adventure turned futile in a short while exposing a probable deep-rooted corruption ring as the prime

suspect. The total gang power connecting the nation's wealthy high-ups, as hinted by those short-lived Lions, remains to be public, while all other organizations, especially with humanitarian services based on high-moral motto and dedication and glittering records of sacrifice and generosity, should obviously come under the purview of a thorough investigation. M Roman Muneer/singh