

Mess at Aricha

Dhaka's road communication of the country with as many as 36 northern and southern districts of the country has been suspended to ease the congestion at Aricha ghat. With about 4,000 vehicles — trucks and buses — stranded at the ghat, the log-jam was intractable enough to call for a drastic measure. It seems, however, that trucks have been excluded from the three-day suspension to allow them to ferry goods across the river. That is the least the authority could do.

Although this may come as a relief to the thousands of stuck-up passengers, helpers and drivers who find them in a horrendous situation with no basic facilities around, the problem of communication stands no chance of being solved in the near future. Instead, the scenario looks graver still as railway communications between the eastern and northern parts of the country have got snapped. An alternative mode of transportation — even if it meant a round-about journey — is therefore out of the question.

Suspension of bus service means a great rush of people and goods immediately after it is waived. But at this time of the year one only expects a fall in the water levels of the rivers Padma and Jamuna. Already the ferryboats are forced to carry half their capacity to avoid hazards. In the coming days of leaner flows some ferryboats might run aground altogether.

So what is the government's contingency plan to cope with the problem? Perishable items, stuffed in trucks, which are worth two crore taka and waiting to be ferried from the Daulatdia and Nagarbari ghats to the Aricha ghat have already started rotting. More will get rotten if some drastic and effective measures are not taken. The sheer size of the economic loss and the human suffering calls for the government to come out with a definite plan to mitigate these. How long it will take to restore the normal flow of traffic at both ends of Jamuna and Padma? Now all sorts of casualties are on the card. Even a dredger has been hit by a ferry boat and rendered out of order.

These are bound to happen since the problems were not addressed under any sound plan. In the immediate term though, there is a need for providing the stranded passengers with food, drinking water and other facilities.

For Peace in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan government troops are said to be within a striking distance of establishing sway over Jaffna — albeit in a purely military sense — after more than six weeks of their offensive against the LTTE stronghold. The possibility of a showdown is not entirely ruled out as yet. Although the Tamil rebels and their supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran have escaped the pincer attack and gone into hiding it is their hit-and-run guerrilla tactic that remains a long-term worry for the government.

The very adoption of a military option means that peace is at a discount during the campaign in the very least. Although Kumaratunga's hands were apparently forced into it after her offer of autonomy to the LTTE failed to wean them away from the path of confrontation, here she is now already having to grapple with the fallout of a military offensive that may linger indefinitely. Distrust is growing between the Tamils and the Sinhals with the people of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu being worked up by the Sri Lankan government's action in Jaffna. A refugee exodus has been triggered. The military situation is affecting the delivery of succour to the people of Jaffna by international organisations. For security and strategic reasons, government forces are trying to hold the refugees in camps so as to prevent them crowding into Colombo. Kumaratunga's government has been drawing a flak for the press censorship it has taken recourse to. The human rights organisations are keeping their antenna high.

We do not want even the remotest chance of a resumption of peace talks wrecked in the once-tranquil island country. In a very predictable reaction to the government's military operations, the Tamil leadership has made clear that so long as the occupation of Jaffna is not vacated they would not sit for any dialogue whatsoever. Our appeal to both sides is this: do realise the fact that casualties have a way of increasing the stake in a war. So wisdom lies in avoiding these sooner than later.

Good Work

Demra police have set an example of a tremendous demonstrative value. On Thursday morning, they rescued six teenage girls from a bus at Jatrabari. The girls were on their way to Dhaka, accompanied by five persons, to fall pell-mell into a trap allegedly laid out by a recruiting agency at Banani.

It is still unclear whether the police acted on a tip-off or on instant suspicion. But the confident manner in which they swooped upon the bus, and took the girls and their so-called guardians into custody bespeaks availability of advance information with the police. So, the credit, in the first place, goes to the informer if there was any, for having done a social good. Of course, the promptitude of the police action is to be lauded for what it is worth.

Those who fall prey to the evil designs of traffickers must draw the right message from the incident. In the present case, the guardians seem to have been either personally bribed or were so lured by the prospects of money to be earned by their wards in Malaysia that they did not even mind throwing the poor girls to the wolves. Or they were plainly gullible.

The so-called recruiting agency which received Tk 20,000 from each family in initial fees for their 'service' has reportedly made good their escape. Unless their identity is verified, the whole truth will not be revealed.

Nigeria and Myanmar: Struggle for Democracy Continues

One very interesting fall-out of the post-cold war world order is the end of the era of military dictators. These dictators, it may be recalled, were tolerated and even supported, by the great powers as bulwarks against advancing communism.

THE end of the Cold War has initiated far-reaching changes in the world. Yesterday's enemies are friends today. The rivalry between two unfriendly camps led by two competing super powers no longer casts a shadow over the entire range of international relations. Military alliances appear to be superfluous these days. In fact, they are desperately searching for new rationales to justify their existence. Admittedly, new flash points and new areas of tension have emerged and new alignments of power are taking shape. Trade and economic blocs have created new constellations of states with a new kind of rivalry. But no one can deny that it is the new international environment which has made it possible to negotiate peaceful settlement of some of the most intractable problems such as the ones in South Africa and the Middle East.

One very interesting fall-out of the post-cold war world order is the end of the era of military dictators. These dictators, it may be recalled, were tolerated and even supported, by the great powers as bulwarks against advancing communism. Latin America, in particular, was the happy hunting ground of these brutal rulers who always assumed power on the promise of holding election and restoring democratic system. Many newly independent Asian and African countries fell victim to these men on horse back who loved to appear as the nation's saviour. Gen Ayub Khan and Gen Ziaul Huq of Pakistan, Gen Park of South Korea, Gen Ne Win of Burma, Gen Soeharto of Indonesia and Gen Zia and Gen Ershad of Bangladesh were some of the most well-known Asian military autocrats who received

western approval and support because they aligned themselves with them against what they perceived to be the menace of the Soviet bloc. Fortunately, those days are gone. Obviously there is no need to nurture these military strongmen as loyal soldiers for the so-called free world. The change began in Latin America and gradually spread to Asia and Africa. In fact, most of the Asian dictators have either died or retired but Africa, regrettably, has a long way to go to rid the continent of these anti-democratic elements.

Nigerian strongman Gen Sani Abacha stands out like a sore thumb. According to a Washington Post editorial, "General Abacha has been in the thick of it all. There has not been a coup in Nigeria in the past 20 years in which he did not have a hand. In addition to living well at his nation's expense, he loves power and its use, even when it causes hurt to his countrymen. Under the general's rule, greed and corruption have continued unbound, democracy has been trifled with, and his nation of 100 million has experienced its worst anguish since the Biafra war ended a quarter century ago."

The whole world watched with horror when Nigerian playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were executed without proper trial. "Lord take my soul, but the struggle continues" were said to be the famous playwright's final words before he died on November 10, blind-folded and dangling from a rope.

It is a sign of the changed international environment

that no one, except his henchmen, tried to defend the dictator on political, strategic or any other ground. The condemnation was universal. The Commonwealth suspended Nigeria, saying that the country faced expulsion in two years if the country fails to carry out democratic reforms. The United States withdrew its ambassador from Lagos and the European Union followed suit.

The Washington Post editorial said, "A regime as poisonous as General Abacha's deserves isolation. The only Nigeria to be granted access

strengthened the grip of the military on the country. Some western countries including Japan are reportedly normalizing economic relations with Myanmar. Is it because of the vast natural resources of Myanmar? Or, is it because the junta is genuinely changing towards a more moderate and democratic system?

Some apologists for the junta like to believe the latter but recent events have shattered their belief. After Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from six years of imprisonment, international observers felt encouraged to

the military a permanent role in Burmese politics."

Nobel Peace prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has given enough evidence of her reasonableness and moderation throughout her political career. But the patience of this most brave but patient lady has been exhausted. She has finally decided to defy the military government's plans to entrench the military in the government of the country. On November 29 she declared that her party, the National League for Democracy, would boycott the military-run constitutional convention. The move was her most direct challenge to the junta since she was freed last July. "The people of Burma are very united in thinking that the national convention is not heading toward democracy," she said in announcing the boycott. "I do not think there is as yet any evidence that the people of Burma support this national convention." The boycott met with an ominous response from the military who issued a statement accusing the National League for Democracy of trying to disrupt the national convention in hopes of replacing it "with a convention they would be able to dominate as they like." The junta gave a stern warning to the party by saying that the decision to boycott the convention was "totally forsaking and going against the national interests."

The boycott by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party removes any veneer of legitimacy from the convention which was convened by the junta two years ago to enshrine the military's role in the

country's constitution. It may be recalled here that the junta which calls itself the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) refused to hand over power to the National League for Democracy headed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi when that party won eighty per cent of the seats in the parliament. Instead, the junta unleashed a reign of terror, killed thousands of protesters and incarcerated the leaders including the leader of the victorious party, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The boycott has once again set the stage for a confrontation between the military junta and the National League for Democracy. Explaining the reasons for the boycott she said, "The authorities did not at any time show any willingness to talk to the National League for Democracy as the winning party of the 1990 elections. They keep saying that the national convention is a substitute for dialogue. I do not think they can say that any longer."

No one doubts the courage of this charismatic lady, the daughter of U Aung San, the hero of Myanmar's liberation war, who seem to symbolise the democratic aspirations of the Burmese people.

While the struggle for democracy continues, what will be the position of the champion of democracy in the western world? Will they follow the ASEAN countries in pampering the junta? Will they strengthen the hands of the army generals by enlarging trade and investment? Will the suppliers of arms continue making money at the cost of the Burmese people's basic human rights? These are the tough questions that must be answered in the coming weeks and months as the people's struggle moves into a new phase.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



to international markets and forums should be one that is moving swiftly toward civilian rule and that shows respect for human rights norms. That disqualifies the murderous Abacha regime on all counts." Though the British and United States governments made it known that they were considering different options to put pressure on Gen Abacha's regime, his brutal grip does not seem to have been loosened by these rather polite steps.

While the Nigerian military regime stands condemned by the international community, the Myanmar military junta seems to be doing rather well. The ASEAN countries policy of "constructive engagement" toward Myanmar has actually

hope that a new era may be beginning in Myanmar. Madame Suu Kyi, on her part, repeatedly called for negotiation with the junta, saying she was anxious to avoid any possibility of a repetition of the violence in 1988 when thousands of her supporters were gunned down in a military crackdown. "We do not want to call the people onto the streets," she said. "We have always said that we are prepared to have dialogue at any time," she declared. But the generals have not responded to her pleas, pushing ahead instead with, as the New York Times said, "a stage-managed constitutional convention in which delegates mostly hand-picked by the military are drafting a constitution that guarantees

Whither 'Integration' for the Disabled?

by Shahnaz Begum

OF late emphasis has been put on to the term 'integration' as one of the key objectives of development. Much has been said about integration and, in particular, social integration. We feel that without integration we will not be able to fully achieve our goals. But sadly we find that the system of integration that we are practicing is itself creating disintegration or, to look at it the other way, impeding our desired integration.

The following is an attempt to clarify how far we are from integration and what a long way we have to go in order to reach integration: Throughout the year we observe many special days designed to heighten awareness on particular issues. In the context, for the last four years, 3rd December has been declared International Disability Day and has been observed around the world.

How We Observe

Each year the government (Social Welfare Directorate of the Ministry of Social Welfare) observes seven international days concerning seven different events. International disability day is one of these seven days. Just like last year, our Government is observing the International Disability Day jointly with the organizations working for the persons with disability. In this programme the directorate has not even thought to invite at least the parents of the disabled persons to participate in the rally.

The government has decided that each specific day will be observed only by organizations working in the field designated. An effect of

this is that people now consider each of these days as events for participation only by the specific organizations working for that cause, or for people who receive some benefit from those organizations.

Where is Integration?

There is a common factor which links all of us and that is that everybody on this earth is in some way working for the betterment of human beings around the world. We are rendering our services to humanity in general. To simplify our services we are working on different micro levels, but this does not mean that people or organizations working in one micro sector do not have the right to know, or have nothing to comment on, something beyond their working area. It does not mean that they do not need to know what the human rights day is for, what the children's day is for etc. After all, isn't one service to humanity just the same as another in its overall goal — dedication to the development of our shared earth?

I will try to focus on one area, that is, I will try to show how, being a part of our society, persons with disabilities have been isolated from the greater society, from their own society.

Social Integration

One striking aspect of the break-up of social integrity e.g. the exclusion of people with disability, is as old as human civilization. From time immemorial disintegration of people with disabilities was

practiced by the disabled people's own community. In other words, able members of the society began to discriminate against the socio-economic, cultural and political life of the people with disabilities. And the ultimate result of this malpractice was the silent break-up of the integration of society. Given such a backdrop, different programmes embarked on, both by government and non-government institutions, for alleviating poverty in Bangladesh without including all of the people, and in particular excluding a certain percentage of the total population of the country i.e. people with disabilities (according to the World Health Organization 10% of Bangladeshis are suffering from some sort of disability) only aggravates the situation.

Realizing this situation SARPV began working jointly with other organizations to fight for the provision of opportunities and to promote empowerment of people with disabilities. In doing this it utilized regular and required support from like minded people and organizations. From its very inception, SARPV has had to start combating against the existing nature of social attitude regarding the people with disabilities. At present more than 55 organizations are working side by side for the betterment of people with disabilities.

But to achieve the goal of equalization of opportunities for all, as enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, various forms of state interven-

tion such as a direct and supportive role i.e. active participation of the state itself in every aspect, should be started from now. However, state intervention is necessary for redefining the mode of production and ensuring social justice for the people with disabilities.

Although there are now many organizations working in the field of disability and much has been achieved, much more can and must be done. This can be seen by comparing the ratio of organizations working for people with disabilities with the level of improvement in living standards of this section of the population. Another striking feature is that these organizations are working alone, whereas, in order to have a greater impact, they should be looking to link disability issues with existing programmes within other development organizations and institutions run by both GOs and NGOs. However, very little focus has, in fact, been given to this issue. We can, though, take encouragement from the fact that this process has at least started gradually to evolve. Thus, the continuous struggle by the people with disabilities for their right of self-determination has begun to lead towards their social integration. This will have the effect of furthering the national interest of achieving sustainable development.

The class structure of Bangladesh society is very complicated. This complicated class structure is inter-related primarily with economic and social attitudes of

the community at large. Therefore, in this context, there is a strong necessity for creating a model for the development of the people with disabilities. This particularly applies to the Bangladesh context, but also in general in developing countries, which have witnessed the worst extent of disabilities in comparison with the experience in developed countries.

This is also true for the developed countries of the world. There is no indication that, in these countries, full integration of persons with disability has been achieved. In many of these countries there is evidence that persons with disabilities are pressing their demands for their full integration in the broader society.

In Bangladesh the isolated way the organizations working for the disabled persons operate does not tend to produce actual and meaningful integration. The question of integration or disintegration of the persons with disability in the mainstream of society is also very complicated, but, at the same time, is quite an interesting phenomenon. The problem of disintegration of persons with disability in our society should be viewed and measured, as well as evaluated, as a part of the historical process of societal development. It should not be evaluated in terms of the present position of disabled persons in society, in the family and also in the institution-based rehabilitation process. The process of integration and disintegration of persons with disability includes a mixture of the his-

torical background to our society and existing practices within the area of disability.

Conclusion

I would like to make an appeal to everyone to think about the process of integration. To me, observance of special issue days is a good way to let everyone (outside our own particular field of experience) know the situation within our field: our strengths, our direction, our weaknesses, our will to seek help from others and our willingness to try and help others according to our own capacity and strength.

From my position in an organization working for the disabled (Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable — SARPV), I can see that organizations need to directly involve able members of the family containing a disabled person. This would produce a more effective and realistic, and above all integrated, process for the development of the disabled. These organizations need to consider the full implications of this approach in order to achieve active participation from the family, and avoid half hearted and wasteful experiences. At the same time we also need to think about the barriers to integrate within our existing activities and how we can remove them. It may even be necessary to ask ourselves whether we have ever thought of our work from this perspective, whether we have taken any steps to remove these barriers and if not, what we want to achieve by observing disability day or similar days.

To the Editor

Renew Spirit of '71

Sir, We are entering into a new year which for the people of Bangladesh should be a time to renew their pledge to appreciate, love and protect the nationhood they attained, at a heavy cost after a glorious War of Liberation in 1971. As we enter the 25th year of our celebration of the birth of Bangladesh, it is time for each and everyone to reflect upon the past and look toward the future. We all must tally our personal score card and that of the nation.

Those of us fortunate to be what we should compare notes with the millions of those who have not made it. We must be honest with ourselves and our beloved nation. We have to take the responsibility of a matured nation. We are no longer the teens of 1971 when we grabbed a gun or whatever we could find and rushed off to defend our motherland. At that time, our cause was liberation at any cost. Today with same zeal we must think of progress, stability and economic strength.

As we cross 25 years milestone and enter the 21st century, we cannot shy away from the global responsibility to be at par with other nations. We must learn to depend on ourselves and not continue to be a burden to others. We must not look outward for help and assistance, we have to learn to look within ourselves. We are a great nation. We have a rich heritage. Let it not go to waste. Like a phoenix let us rise from our ashes. Akku Chowdhury Banani, Dhaka

Politics of 'Carrom'

Sir, A few days back we saw on the front page of your daily a photograph of a game known as 'carrom' being played between Prof Badruduza Chowdhury of BNP and Abdus Samad Azad of the Awami League. On the playing board (carrom), so far we saw in the photograph, most of the whites were pocketed, while a number of blacks were on the board. One of them must have tried his best to hit the blacks by the

striker but failed to be successful.

It seemed to us that blacks were the symbols of poor, ill-fated day labourers, rickshaw-pullers etc. who were always hit by the politicians due to hartals and whites, the upper class, mostly keep themselves in safer places. Players care a little for the black ones.

Many thanks for the organizers of the game to make it highly symbolic, meaningful and thought-provoking. Motius Samad Chowdhury Phulatala Tea Estate, Sylhet

Creation of provinces

Sir, In Bangladesh most of the state affairs are controlled centrally from the country's capital located in Dhaka. As things stand today major portion of development activities are concentrated in Dhaka and Chittagong. North Bengal and South Bengal are relatively neglected areas with no visible development activities. Hence, it is felt that may be our six administrative di-

visions could be converted into six provinces for smooth and equitable development of the entire country. It may not be out of place to mention here that Malaysia's population is less than half of Bangladesh. Despite that they have a number of provinces. Pakistan with similar size of population is also having four provinces. So there is no reason why we should not have six provinces. This will enable people to have greater participation in national development and other activities.

There is no doubt that this will be resisted by most politicians who stand to gain from centralised control. But the country belongs to the people and their interest should be supreme. The proposed provinces should be given sufficient regional autonomy and control over their resources so that they can undertake and implement development activities without inference from the centre. Of course, national defence, foreign affairs, trade and commerce, currency etc., should be left with the

centre. Some sort of federal structure should developed so that the squabbling and corrupt politicians cannot inflict any more damage to the country.

Mrs. Momtaz Jahan Fulbari, Sylhet

To our political leaders

Sir, I am sure that people from all over the country share the same view which was expressed in these columns of your esteemed newspaper on November 19, 1995 under the heading 'Relaxed hartal'. It is amazing that the opposition political parties, who in the past did not hesitate to impose hartals on the days significant for our country, like some special event taking place or some foreign dignitaries visiting, and thus placing us in an awkward situation, thought it fit to relax hartal for the West Indies under-19 cricket team. But, of course, not for the welfare of the country and its suffering multitude. I think, Prime Minister

Begum Khaleda Zia would have gladly agreed to hold the general election under a caretaker government if there had been provision for it in the Constitution. Why should not she, as she herself came to power, through an election held under a caretaker government? On the other hand it puzzles me why Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina is demanding caretaker government, for the last general election was held under such one but she did not accept it as free and fair. Time is running out, they must reach a compromise before the country plunges into a total darkness. Already law and order has deteriorated considerably, violent and criminal incidents have increased alarmingly. We are passing through a very difficult time. But it is a pity that our leaders, ignoring all these, are engaged in an unnecessary conflict. We urge them to shun this disquieting politics and work jointly for the sake of their country and its people. Nur Jahan East Nastrabad, Chittagong