

President Speaks

President Bhaswara's assertion that he will definitely do whatever is in his power, within the Constitution, to resolve the present political crisis, is reassuring to a point. Finally he said something publicly about the crisis and his possible role in it. The question is when will he act? It does not have to be a big bang affair, where he tries to bring the PM and the opposition together. His actions can be very subtle and behind the scene, maintaining the Constitutional limitations and the high dignity of his office. A lot of time has already been wasted. What we are left with are a last few critical days. His answer "Is it so?" to the question that the nation expects a lot from him at this crucial hour, speaks, at best, of an extremely inefficient information feed-back system at Bangabhaban or, at worst, of a desire to deliberately ignore the most severe constitutional and political crisis that we have ever faced. When he says he is reading up on all major Constitutions of the world, after having read every line of ours, he sounds like the doctor who reads all medical books for the best medicine for his patient, but by the time he is ready to administer his 'ideal' medicine, the patient is dead.

While urging an active role by the President, there has never been even the remotest suggestion that he should go beyond the Constitution. In fact he must uphold it both in letter and spirit. What we are afraid of is that he is upholding the Constitution only in its letter and not in its spirit. As we understand it, the spirit of the Constitution is ensuring the supremacy of the WILL of the people. This is best ensured in a democracy and through a parliament, and whose best representation comes from a free and fair election. All of this now stands threatened. The last parliament became inoperative more than two years ago. Opposition MPs, — all 147 of them — resigned exactly one year ago. The validity of that action was upheld by the Supreme Court six months ago. All through this dark period, President did not express even a word of concern. As a solution eluded us, and as we veered towards more and more violence, putting at risk our most fundamental civic and political rights, our President closeted himself in a magnificent isolation.

Now that he has finally committed himself to do something, he should do it in time that the nation can benefit out of his efforts. President's biggest mistake so far has been that he has grossly underestimated the MORAL AUTHORITY of his office. It is time that he corrects it.

Into a Difficult Hole

A broad selection of our leaders of education met on Wednesday to take an overview of education in the last five years. They dwelt on diverse aspects of our educational situation and contentions at times tended to clash and conflict. But certain truths emerged incontrovertibly out of even contrary observations.

Yes, enrolment has gone up at the base, even if the figures offered by government apologists are highly suspect. So is heartening the spurt in female student enrolment. Drop-out rate has come down if not up to anyone's expectation. These gains are offset by population gains of the nation. The absolute number of illiterates have gone up despite percentage increases in literacy.

Student strength gain has largely been rendered meaningless in the absence of matching rise in teacher and school strength.

The situation in its quantitative parameters is untenable enough. Qualitatively it has been a near disaster over these last years. Supervision and monitoring is unknown in Bangladesh education — that is enough to dismiss the micro-level student-teacher situation at the individual stage. The far more manageable macro-level aspects of structuring and evaluation, policy and content-determination has been hopelessly bungled owing to corruption and abusing education for narrow parochial gains in politics.

But all these failings together pale before the divisiveness of the spreading madrasa education, which is already eating up an inconceivably big part of the total educational outlay, producing unproductive manpower, whose role in pushing us into the 21st century is at best questionable. It would be difficult to come out of this hole even if good sense dawns upon the government.

Repeal Film Act '80

The best way for us to celebrate the centenary of cinema is to repeal the Film Society Control Act of 1980. The simple reason for this demand is that the Act is out of date. When we are watching international films through Star TV and others, nearly 24 hours a day, the role and purpose of the present Act is, as can be imagined, neither possible and far from desirable. We must realise that the world has radically changed in the last decade or so. This change is going to be far more dramatic in the next few years. Of this process of becoming a part of the Global Village, cinema can and will be an essential part. If we want benefit from the cultures of other countries, and put out our own for the people of other countries to see, admire and learn from, then we must give due importance to the medium of cinema as a cultural expression. For the proper growth of cinema we must have a legal framework that permits creative work. Coupled with this we must also have facilities for the benefit of film makers. We fully endorse the views expressed by speakers at a seminar organised by Bangladesh Federation of Film Societies in observance of World Film Centenary.

Point raised by poet Shamsur Rahman about the import of quality film is extremely important. There is virtually no screening of Oscar winning films in Bangladesh. If we can see films of it then why can't they be released in regular cinema halls? Cinema today has become an extremely powerful medium of expression, creative art and of culture. Unless we understand it and promote, we will remain in the backwaters of the Global Village.

Whither Security Council Reform?

by Abdul Hannan

WHITHER Security Council Reforms? By all indications it is going to wither in the vines. The two-day debate on Security Council Reforms held recently in the UN General Assembly ended inconclusively without any consensus, thanks to the disunity, warped thinking, flawed perception and lack of vision of the third world developing countries in a mad rush to have a seat in the table of the rich and powerful in the exclusive club of the privileged in the 15-member Security Council.

There were confused messages in the debate. While some wanted expansion of the Security Council to 20 members, others to 30. Many wanted to increase the rotating members. The United States wanted to add another 5 permanent members including West Germany and Japan and one each from the three regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America; others wanted to do away with the veto power of the existing 5 permanent members — United States, Britain, France, Russia and China. Besides the 5 permanent members, the Security Council at present comprise 10 rotating members elected for 2 years term based on regional representation.

West Germany and Japan, the two economic power houses whose financial contribution to the UN rank second only to America, hitherto left out in the cold as political dwarfs to suffer retribution as enemies in the second world war, asserted their right to be on board the Security Council as permanent members regardless of their infamously record of massive human rights violation during the war, acknowledged by public apology recently by the Japanese Prime Minister and the persistent shadow of guilt by the new generation of Germans for the Nazi crimes against humanity. Yet, fifty years must be judged too short a period to expiate one's sins and be elevated to the Security Council as a permanent member one's economic clout and leverage not withstanding. Others who joined the fray to become permanent members of the proposed enlarged council are India, Brazil, Nigeria, Argentina, Egypt and Indonesia.

Yet, many of these countries do not have very enviable credentials of human rights, democracy, rule of law or good neighbourly relations. India has staked its claim to permanent membership of the Security Council on the strength of what it describes as its demographic weight and democratic record. However, many oppose India's candidature and point their accusing fingers to India for its dismal human rights record of brutal suppression of movements in Kashmir, Punjab and Assam, its persecution of Muslim minorities by riots at lucid intervals and not too good neighbourly relations.

Every body says no to Nigeria's candidature as they denounce the judicial murder of writer turned human rights activist Ken Saro Wiwa and his eight compatriots by

acter of the existing power structure of the Security Council, nor will it necessarily make the Council more responsible to the challenges of the 21st century. Bangladesh delegates in their statements both in the General Assembly debate and at the special session of inter Parliamentary Council on 'reinforcing and democratising the structure of international cooperation' held at the UN headquarters sent mixed signals about representation of small countries in the Security Council and the question of veto power of the 5 permanent members. The Security Council is a club of the rich and mighty and the wish for permanent membership in the Council by the small countries is a chase for shadow and fantasy and not reality. The spin

ry Council, the international emergency number, often procrastinated, showed ambivalence and indecision and suffered paralysis of will and intention. The situation in Bosnia was allowed to slide dangerously into a killing field as it was not of immediate concern to the major powers. The Security Council, the vainglorious fire brigade often reached the scene to collect the debris of death and destruction and not to extinguish fire. Nobody knows how many lives might have been saved from massacre in Rwanda if the UN responded faster. Yet the resolve and political will of the international community, euphemism for the five permanent members, can make a real difference. Finally, the intervention by the leadership of the United States to

While there was languid response to Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran and the UN was unmoved when Indonesia goblied up East Timor in 1975, the Security Council vetoed a majority resolution calling upon Britain to pull out of Falkland Islands under British occupation claimed and invaded by Argentina in 1982. The UN arms embargo imposed in 1991 against all states of former Yugoslavia gave heavily armed Serb rebels an overwhelming military advantage over the Bosnian Serbs. The oil embargo on Iraq suspected to possess chemical and biological weapons programme, continues unabated causing humanitarian sufferings on account of shortage of food and medicine. But the UN has turned a deaf ear to demands by president Mandela

is an accident of history and many not be appropriate today. In a post cold war era of cultural diversity, UN will be increasingly called upon to respond to the challenge of tackling the scattered debris of the landscape of separatist tendencies and ethnic and sectarian disputes within artificial states. The council is suffering from organizational sclerosis and must be corrected in order for the UN to be effective, efficient and trust worthy.

The privilege of veto power is an anachronism, a residue of the imperial past and inconsistent with charter's enunciated principles of universalism of membership — one member, one vote and sovereign equality of all states, and should be removed. Consensus and not veto should be the modus operandi of the council. Multilateralism and cooperative endeavour have a special authority because they are cooperative. But the West is reluctant to relinquish power and authority and is sceptical of the recurrence of what they describe as the "theater of the absurd" and the "tyranny of the majority" in the General Assembly. This is a short-sighted policy.

In an age of interdependence and emerging globalization, the fates of the rich and poor are inextricably linked together. Instability and turmoil in one corner of the globe inevitably affects the other. Passengers traveling in the first class in an airlines will not be safe if there is a bomb in the economy class at the rear. Time is ticking. In times of crises, UN is our last hope and refuge. It cannot and will not fail. The big powers bound by their proud tradition of democracy, cultured liberalism and values of freedom and human dignity must act anchored in logic, common sense and decency and not expediency to realise the vision of a new world order. The loss of confidence and trust in the UN caused by dashed hopes and failed promises, must be rebuilt to restore its moral authority. The big powers owe it to the world because they are the founding fathers of the UN and because they are big.

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The main contentious issue is not the expansion of the Security Council but how the Council can effectively act as an impartial mediator in conflict resolution

the Kangaroo Court of the Nigerian military ruler, General Sani Abacha. The International Community is critical of Indonesia's human right record in East Timor, former Portuguese Colony, invaded and annexed by Indonesia in 1975. Many look back with horror at the grisly killings and disappearances of tens of thousands of political dissidents under the 7-year rule of military junta in Argentina before the restoration of democracy in 1983. Newspapers abound in reports of police brutalities against the fundamentalist opposition in Egypt.

If such were the quality of potential arrivals in the Security Council as permanent members, we had better do without clamouring for expansion for redressing the damage of geographical imbalance in the Security Council and reconcile with the status quo with some modifications.

The main contentious issue is not the expansion of the Security Council but how the Council can effectively act as an impartial mediator in conflict resolution. Expansion of the Council, let alone by increasing the number of rotating members, will not make any fundamental difference to the nature and char-

acters of the existing power structure of the Security Council, nor will it necessarily make the Council more responsible to the challenges of the 21st century. Bangladesh delegates in their statements both in the General Assembly debate and at the special session of inter Parliamentary Council on 'reinforcing and democratising the structure of international cooperation' held at the UN headquarters sent mixed signals about representation of small countries in the Security Council and the question of veto power of the 5 permanent members. The Security Council is a club of the rich and mighty and the wish for permanent membership in the Council by the small countries is a chase for shadow and fantasy and not reality. The spin

negotiate a peace accord on Bosnia has proved that they can make a difference, albeit after millions of lives had been lost and many innocents destroyed. Some aggressions and misbehaviour in the Council's book are much worse than others. The intervention by the Security Council has often been selective and of double standards. The Council did not do anything to force the military ruler at Nigeria to hand over power to the jailed leader Moshood Abiola, the winner the 1993 presidential election. Nor did it take any action to force the military junta of Myanmar to restore democracy by handing over power to the popularly elected pro democracy leader and noble peace prize winner, Daw Aung San Sun Kyi. Yet, the Security Council sent a multinational force to vacate Iraqi aggression in Kuwait and organized the military campaign 'operation uphold democracy' to oust the Haitian strong man Raul Cenras to cede power to the popularly elected leader Jean Bertrand Aristide. But then, Haiti is a different matter. America will brook no "wrong doing" or "impotence" as was described by Theodore Roosevelt in its backyard or "near abroad".

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The Council must be more transparent and accountable to be trustworthy. The big powers believe that the UN should be seen and not heard. Out of more than eighty Security Council resolution on Bosnia, not more than a dozen were adopted in open debates of the council. The reference to "conspiracy plotting faces", in the Security Council by Brian Urquhart, a highly regarded former senior UN peace official in his introduction to a book "A Global Affair", may confirm the suspicion about the secretive operation of the council. A new UN must re-equip and redraw its charter in order to be relevant to expectation and challenges of 21st century. The charter which is not sacrosanct and inviolable must be amended. The congenial weakness of the Security Council is endemic in the command and control of the power structure of the Security Council rooted in the geo-politics of 1945 when the 5 permanent members were the victors of the Second World War. The first world propriety of 1945

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Economics of Mastani: Extending the Analysis

by Nasreen Khundker

It is necessary to change the political parameters, both in terms of power and the rents that power bestows. Otherwise, the earnings from this unproductive sector cannot compete with the earnings from productive employment

RECENTLY, a new and interesting category has been added to the domain of economic analysis in this country, by respectable and senior economists such as Dr Anisur Rahman and Dr R H Khandker (See for instance, "Economics of Mastani: A Light-hearted Analysis" and references thereof in The Daily Star, December 19, 1995). The category is "mastani." Unfortunately, no English synonym has been used for this term, reflecting perhaps the uniqueness of the phenomenon it describes to the present socio-economic context of our country. In any case, I hope that the reality changes so that the term does not transfer itself from everyday usage to economics textbooks. That would indeed be sad. But while the usage of the term continues, I want to follow my peers and add a few words to extend the analysis of the phenomenon of "mastani," hoping that all our contributions are simply an aside to the, more serious pursuit of knowledge on economic issues.

Dr R H Khandker's mood in analysing "mastani" is a jocular one, though he occasionally lapses into more serious thought. Anisur Rahman is definitely serious. Both have had some say in the past, albeit for a brief period, in shaping the affairs of our country. Both have also recently returned to the country after completing impor-

tant assignments abroad, and are puzzled at the turn of events have taken in the nation. I too am caught between these two moods, jocular and serious. Perhaps it is the irony of the situation and disbelief, which accounts for our hesitancy.

In any case, the present discourse has brought home to me a few facts, which I have known from my student days, but which gets reinforced from time to time. First, economics as a discipline cannot get us very far unless we borrow from other social sciences such as political science and sociology. Second, and perhaps Prof. Anisur Rahman will agree with me on this point, transfers and distribution has not received as important a place in economic analysis as it deserves. On the first point, I may add that "mastani" is not simply a service or a disservice, to be added or deducted from the National Accounts. It is both a sociological and political phenomenon. Again, I would like to differ with Mr Golam Kibria, that "mastani" is primarily explained by high youth unemployment rates. The missing factor in their analysis is patronage. Mastans, as we have come to hear of them (let me hastily add that I too do not know them

personally, but merely rely on hearsay), are of different kinds. Some may be purely "political mastans"; and some may be better described as "economic mastans." Either variety, I am told, cannot exist without some degree of patronage. It therefore boils down to a struggle for power. "Mastans" are a power base for others higher up in the social/political/economic hierarchy. Again, I do not have any hard fact to boost my argument, but merely rely on what I have heard. The unemployed are usually defined by National Income statisticians as those who were actively seeking employment in the reference period. By this definition, "mastans" are not unemployed. They are unproductively employed. They receive retainer fees and various benefits from their patrons. Perhaps, they serve the same role in society as the retinues of feudal lords did, in older times. To reduce "mastani" therefore, it is not enough to reduce the unemployment rate of the youth. It is necessary to change the political parameters, both in terms of power and the rents that power bestows. Otherwise, the earnings from this unproductive sector cannot compete with the earnings

from productive employment. I agree, however, that better employment opportunities can increase the range of options for some engaged in this business, and we can get a marginal shift from one sector to another (As you can see, I am well versed in Marshallian analysis). We should also bring in sociological parameters such as rising expectations, uncertainty about the future, necessity of realising short-term gains etc. in really understanding the phenomenon of mastani.

I now dwell on the issue of distribution and transfer. Some transfers are perfectly legal, such as the unemployment benefits and old-age pensions in richer societies. Illegal transfers in the form of bribes and payoffs are also known in poor and rich societies alike. The transfers we are concerned with are probably coerced transfers. In any case, economic analysis should pay more attention to distributional issues. Because if the distribution is skewed, or if there are not enough legal transfers, illegal transactions (of both varieties) will continue to plague us. At this point, I am getting the uncomfortable feeling that Pierre Landau Mills is shaking his head in disagreement (How can we leave

out donor representatives from any analysis about the future of our nation?). To him of course it all boils down to growth and lack of privatisation. But then he and I went to different schools. My question to him is: how can we downsize government and yet have a separate ministry for privatisation? Perhaps, he is one step ahead of me, and is really talking about redistribution within government. This also reminds me of R H Khandker's reference to pollution. I once mentioned to Pierre in a seminar that privatisation policies have led to increased pollution in Dhaka, by multiplying the number of privately-owned motorized vehicles. He probably did not see my point. However, I agree that organizational issues and ownership structures are important. "Mastani" we know, is definitely a private sector business. Yet my peers like R H Khandker are of the opinion that this does not promote economic efficiency. In fact,

it may very well generate negative externalities, decelerating the growth process. So, it seems that efficiency is not simply a matter of privatisation. However, patrons of mastani may not always be in the private sector. Goes to show how complex social issues really are. As a last point, I want to mention that having a Planning Commission should give us some dignity and sense of self-respect that we are indeed a sovereign nation, so that efficiency may not be the only desirable goal.

I get the feeling that it is time to conclude this short piece. At this point however, I want to shake off my irony. After all, I am a teacher. I come into contact with the youth every day. I see eager faces in my classrooms. Some of them have been bringing out journals and engaging in very good economic analysis. Most manage to find productive employment once they graduate. All they need is a little bit of hope. Why can't this nation harness the tremendous power of its youth?

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To the Editor

Casual remark costs

Sir, An individual when placed in a position should not say whatever he or she likes, and should be careful that nothing irrelevant is uttered.

Sometime back, it was learnt from newspaper reports that Sheikh Hasina had said that if she went to power, she would not show herself on the TV screen. Can she say so candidly? As an eminent leader of the public she should have known that when appointed President or Prime Minister of a country one does not remain an ordinary individual. He or she becomes a symbol of the nation and as required by necessity he or she may have to appear publicly and cannot remain confined in office. Even one's own electorate may require him or her to appear on the

TV screen. Will one then be able to avoid it? Then why make such an announcement in advance, which may have to be revoked?

She also said that the people did not vote Khaleda Zia for Prime Minister-ship. She was elected merely an MP. It is very much true. But the fact is that Begum Zia through constitutional process has become the Prime Minister. Is anybody directly elected as Prime Minister? Is there any such provision in the country's Constitution? It is better to call spade a spade.

F M Rahman 114, Uttara, Dhaka

Bangladeshis in Middle East

Sir, It has been observed that Bangladeshis are treated

most inhumanly in almost all the Middle-East countries including Saudi Arabia where a large number of our people go for the divine attraction of the two holy places, Makkah and Madina. Behaviour of the Middle East people towards the Bangladeshis is indecent and humiliating. My own experience as well as that of others who happen to visit or stay in the Middle-East is more or less the same. The Middle-East people prefer and treat better people from non-Muslims countries. It is a shame that they look down upon fellow Muslims while entreating before the West-erners.

I myself have witnessed the outrageous behaviour they meted out to poor Bangladeshis at airports and other places, sometimes openly scolding them as

'beggars'. Islam disallows and discourages vanity which most of our Middle-East fellow Muslims seem to practice most fervently. Do they know that they were even economically worse than the Bangladeshis only half a century or so back? Do they know that the Bangladeshis by and large, are far superior as Muslims in so far as the Islamic spirit is concerned?

It is a pity that they don't mend their manners nor do our authorities firmly point this out. I call upon all Muslim envoys in Dhaka to look into the matter of systematic harassment of Bangladeshis in their countries for immediate reversal of the trend.

Faruquddin Ahmed Minio Road Dhaka

OPINION

Purulia Imbroglia

Sekandar Ali

The air-dropping of arms and ammunitions in the West Bengal village of Purulia has raised many eyebrows.

Certain sources have tried to suggest that the arms cartons were prepared in Bangladesh, hence the name of Rajendrapur!

As a concerned citizen, I am a bit amused to see such accusation: If the government of Bangladesh really was involved in this gun-running why should they put the name of Rajendrapur on the cartons. Further the government of Bangladesh does not have any interest in fomenting trouble in Eastern Indian states. They have a full agenda — the agenda of developing the country and enhancing the quality of life of its 120 million people.

It appears that some country's intelligence agencies were caught on the wrong foot because the clandestine operation did not work according to plan.

Bangladesh has enough problems of its own. The country has an election on hand and organising a clandestine operation would need a gigantic logistics apparatus and that too from Phuket to Karachi! This could be a fit subject for some military experts to clarify. May be the Govt of India would be in a better position to clarify after hearings in the court are over. The crew members should be able to throw more light on the whole operation.

Some observers suspect that the arms were dropped for the religious cult sect Ananda Marg; a group that was against the Communist Govt of Jyoti Bose. In the seventies this group reportedly organised terrorist acts against the Provincial Govt of West Bengal as well as against the Central Govt at Delhi.

All eyes are now set on the Bombay court — to know the true story — if it is ever revealed.