Many Facets of Poverty-Environment Downspiral

by D L Mallick

ABOUT 50 per cent people in the developing countries live under the poverty line. Of them, 30 per cent live in the conditions of intolerable poverty. They live in highly vulnerable areas susceptible to land degradation, soil erosion, floods and other ecological disaster-prone localities and in the urban slums. It is true that the poor satisfy their short-term needs causing long-term depletion of natural resource bases and thus degrade physical environment. But they are naively blamed as the agents of environmental degradation though there are other agents for poverty and environment downspiral.

Population growth and overconsumption contribute to the overuse of natural resources and hence degrade the balance of physical environment causing serious anomalies in the social environment. Due to population pressure, joblessness, abject poverty situation, policy failure and institutional weakness, an increasing number of rural poor of the developing regions have to migrate to the cities resulting deformed urbanisation where the urban poor are again both the agents and victims of environmental degradation.

The size of the poor people living in abject poverty is growing fast and their position remains at the bottom strata in almost every society. They are powerless and they are the most vulnerable groups in terms of economic situation, societal and institutional setting. They do not have enough access to resources as well as credit facilities, rather in most cases, they are tied to a patron-client relationship which enhances the pauperisation process. They lack in skills and essential knowledge for resource management and technologies.

The existing government policies of most of the developing countries are in favour of a small elites while the masses are deprived and there is serious inequality among the social strata. Though some developing countries have achieved some sort of economic growth and social development, this remains partial, non-participatory and parasitic. Further, population growth, mismanagement of resources and unequal control of resources coupled with overconsumption of the North and a counterproductive development policies and process of the South are largely responsible for as poverty-environment downward spiral.

Demographic Dynamic and poverty-environment dilemma : The world's population reaches 5.6 billion in the mid 1990s. The annual growth rate is 1.7 per cent and the number of people added to the total each year is more than 90 million. About 75 per cent of the world population live in the developing countries and 50 per cent them are poor who are deprived of adequate food, shelter, education and basic healthcare. Even in the developed countries, there are about 100 million who are homeless, jobless and do not have social security, says a world development report. The increasing population

demand more resources, employment, education and social service which the most developing countries cannot afford and hence, the poverty situation aggravates. Population growth also increases the need for more livelihood for rural areas and this exerts additional direct pressure on natural resources. Countries with higher population growth rates have experienced faster conversion of land to agricultural uses, putting additional pressures on land and natural habitat.

The distribution of people between countryside and cities also has important implications for the types of stress placed on the environment. In 1990, most people lived in rural areas but by the year 2030, the opposite will be true while the urban population will be twice the size of rural population. The cities of the developing countries as a group will grow by 160 per cent over this period, whereas rural populations will grow by only 10 per cent, says a World Bank report. Thus, rural people and poverty are migrating to urbanites giving the poverty-environment crisis a bad shape.

Natural resources and poverty-environment crisis : Human existence on the earth depends directly and indirectly on natural resources. This is equally true for both the developed and developing countries. The eco-system of the earth has been disturbed by the long chains of commerce, industry and civil infrastructure that shape the life in the rich countries while for the poor countries, subsistence of the vast majority comes from the natural resources ie, food comes from the soil, water and forest, fuel from woods, fodder from pasture around the homesteads of the people.

Most people depend on the natural resources like land, water, forest etc., for their livelihood. As the population goes up, pressure on the natural resources mounts. The poor and disadvantaged group of people utilise all the potential of soil, forest, water, fisheries and human labour. The overexploitation of the natural resource bases, in turn, make them vulnerable economically and socially.

by he colonial domination and exploitation of the North. The developed countries made their economic progress in the 18th and 19th centuries at the cost of the resources of the today's underdeveloped countries. Colonial exploitation not only damaged the natural resources of the south but also damaged the social equity of the south. Another phenomena of the crisis which has aggravated environmental degradation is the trade imbalance and unequal growth of economies of the North and South. Moreover, armed conflicts of the past decades contributed to underdevelopment and backwardness of the South.

The societies of the developing countries are also disintegrated and stratified within themselves. About 80 per cent people lack resources, power and social support but a small section affluent people enjoy almost all the resources, power and status. They control about 80-90 per cent resources through state mechanism and patron-client relation. In such an unequal social system, the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer.

Consumption patterns and poverty-environment dilemma : Most of the world's rising environmental threats are byproducts of overconsumption and affluence of the North while the poverty of the South also intensifies ecological degradation as the poor people overexploit their resource bases to satisfy their urgent needs for subsistence ignoring the future. Due to overconsumption of the developed North, the majority Southern people remained malnourished and deformed physically, economically and socially. The modern industrialist economy has lead to the unprecedented use of energy and raw materials and they generate more pollution and wastes threatening the environment. The industrialised countries consume most of the world's energy and many other resources ignoring the developing countries' demand.

The present levels of certain kinds of consumption such as energy resources in industrialised countries have already given rise to serious environmental problems. The result is frequent natural calamities like floods, cyclone and drought worldwide. The developing countries are facing most consequences of environmental hazards which make them more victims and vulnerable to environmental threats. Thus, the overconsumption of the North indirectly aggravates the poverty-environment crisis of the South.

Social and institutional aspects : Most poverty comes from the social inequity and unequal distribution of wealth and economic benefits in the developing countries. Historical evidences say that poverty in the South was mainly caused

The limited access of the poor to wealth and infrastructure forced them to lack behind in the development process. The development process of these countries is not truly people-oriented and participatory. There are also donor's dominations and a small elites and civil-military bureaucrats eat up all the economic gains. Thus, the development process becomes parasitic.

The development efforts do not change the condition of the down-trodden masses and bottom-up development remains a far cry. True initiative are to be taken to remove the structured inequality and poverty from society, or otherwise, all development efforts and environment conservation movements will go in vain. Development efforts should have twin goal of poverty alleviation and environment conservation giving priority to the former because, reduction of poverty will take care of environment.

BCAS Feature

For them, no alternative to fuelwood available, but whither replenishment?
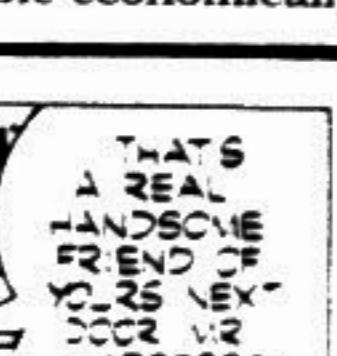
Internet : Where is Bangladesh?

Fayza Haq talks to Mary McPherson
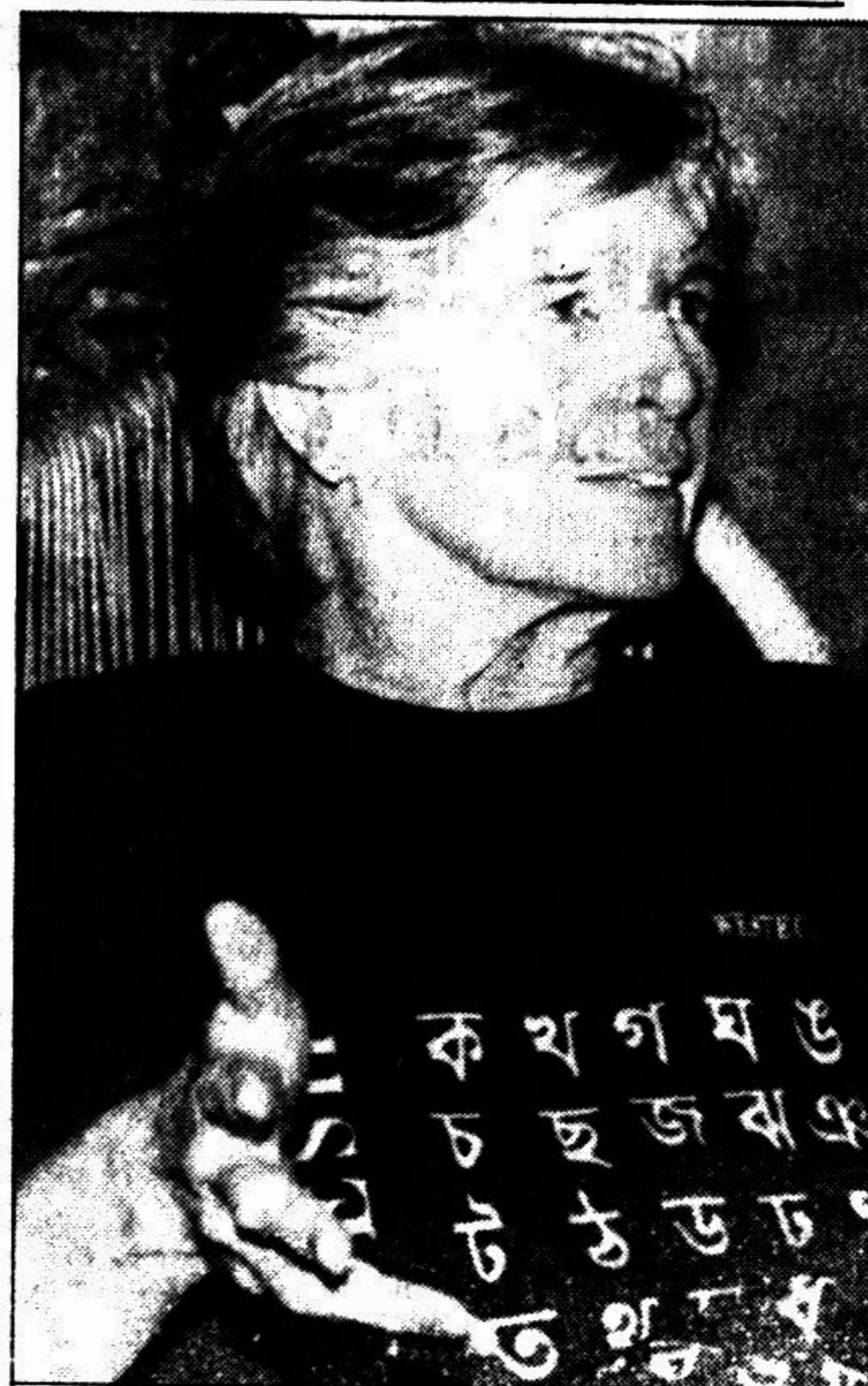
Mary Mcpherson, a UN volunteer computer expert from USA

MARY McPherson was here in Bangladesh for two years. Speaking about her two years, "My principal objective in serving Bangladesh was to computerise Export Promotion Bureau (EPB). Training in computer use has been given to Trade Information Centre and to EPB staff. I encouraged as many people as possible to participate in these classes. I did no 'programming'. There was no need for or advantage in having programmers sit and write complicated programmes. Training was given in the common off-the-shelf software packages available from every computer supplier. I gave instructions in Fox Pro and dBase (database) management, in Excel and Quattro Pro spreadsheet (including graphics) and Acc Pak accounting. I set up an E-mail system as soon as I arrived."

"Expansion of the Local Area Network has been tendered, but a bid has not yet been accepted for the hardware. I have been xeroxing country profiles for vertical files, duplicated for each regional Trade Information Centres who do not have computer access. At least they have some information in hand, should clients desire it in cities outside Dhaka. This is a stop-gap measure, until the regional offices get ISD lines and either fax or PCs, at which they can connect Dhaka EPB and the Trade Point, hopefully by the end of 1996."

Asked to talk about the Internet, Mary Quotes from Andrew Robinson who was a programme associate at the Ford Foundation, Dhaka. She said: "Not too long ago, computers were just machines, fancy calculators, good for data storage and mathematical processing. Today, computers are no longer machines. They are communication devices, like the telephone, only more sophisti-

cated. Information that is typed into a keyboard in San Francisco now instantly appears in Melbourne or wherever else you direct it.

"The largest computer network in the world is the Internet. It was first developed in '69, when four computers on the West Coast of USA were linked together as part of the US military's Advanced Research Project Agency. Today the Internet is estimated to link together over four crore computers through over 50 lakh 'host' computers based in over 110 countries.

"If you have access to a local Internet server you can log into the system through a modem connected to a telephone and communicate directly, in 'real time' with computer users all around the world. If I'm in India, for example, and I want to talk to someone in San Francisco, I can call him over this paying roughly $2.50 per minute. Or I can log him into the local Internet 'server' and 'talk' to him (or rather, type to him) through the computer for the price of a local phone (roughly .02 cents per minute).

"There are four kinds of files on the internet: 1) Text files, 2) Graphic files, 3) Sound files, 4) Video files. In this way, the Internet is a multi-media forum with over 40 million participants. Moving around the Internet, looking at the various files on different host machines and talking to different people all over the world can be very much like travelling in real life.

"This is how Internet can promote trade : If someone wants to know what Bangladeshi garments look like, you can share a graphic file of the latest fashion. If someone wants to know who to contact in Bangladesh regarding export products, you can leave a special file on the Internet that lists names and contact information."

Talking about how far Bangladesh had progressed in computer technology Mary says, "There is a lot of work going on. BANSDOC is trying to tie all the universities and research centres, the Library Association is trying to get a certain network going, the E-mail servers are talking to each other at the Internet length. That means they will be able to talk to the rest of the world. The universities and colleges will be computerised. I hear that people are

wanting their young children to get used to the computer. The children of the next generation will be more computer literate."

Dwelling on areas in which Bangladesh can use computers, Mary names trade, business, DCCI, the research libraries of the universities and government.

Talking about whether a poverty stricken country like ours can go paperless, she tresses, "You will eventually. Singapore did it, so why can't Bangladesh? It saves time, space, money. The only thing Bangladesh needs is a change of mindset. People have to give up the papers that protect them. Paper is hard to store. It has a lot of acids and it will disintegrate with time."

Asked if Bangladesh has the chance to develop a silicon valley like India, Mary replies, "I'm not a good person to judge that. On matters like that I make one guess and things go the other way. Somebody is going to do it but I'm not sure if it will be economic for Bangladesh. One of the things that worries me about Bangladesh is its quality control. So many people are living at a level that does not demand quality control. I hope I'm proved wrong."

Talking about if Bangladesh would benefit from Internet, Mary says decisively, "Oh, yes! if Bangladesh does not join in, it will be outside the loop of developed countries as regards communications and that is not good enough for this time in the century. You would be like a backward island waiting for the ship to come sometime. This is not a waste of money when in USA, soon, every student will have a computer of his own. Donors may give Bangladesh a computer here or there."

Mary was working with Motorola before coming to Dhaka from Arizona USA. She has been working with computers for 25 years. She hopes to keep in touch with Bangladesh through the E-mail. She hopes to keep learning more through the Internet.

Mary loved the rickshaws, jeeps, cars and buses in her stay of Bangladesh during her visits to parts of the country like Chittagong, Comilla, Dinajpur, and Khulna. She hopes to come back again to Bangladesh on a short term. She has a Ph D degree in environmental policy.

Why Cyberspace is Still a White Man's World

For a global communications system supposed to be blind to colour and gender, astonishingly few blacks and women are taking advantage of the new technology. Arlene Getz examines the trend for Gemini News Service.

VICTORIA Lee-Owens wants comment on *Night Smiles*, her sentimental poem about "soulful eyes liberating truth". The Creole Market is advertising its spicy foods. And Steve Walker is talking about being black and gay in the United States.

"My homosexuality, or more importantly, my decision to live my life as an openly gay man, does not make me any less black" says Walker. "I am as proud of my race and culture as anyone could possibly be, and I have no desire to be any less responsive to the concerns we face as African-Americans."

Walker also calls on the US media to present more positive images of black men. "Improper media portrayals lead whites to feel that we black men are genetically predetermined to commit murders, thefts, rapes and other crimes," he says. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

Three voices with very different messages, but one common thread : race in cyberspace. While the trio could have selected any one of thousands of forums on that global computer network known as the Internet, all chose NetNoir — an Afrocentric "site", or topic-based information library — to make their statements.

NetNoir (*noir* is French for black) offers a diverse mix for the thousands of on-line users who log into it each month. There are African folk tales about a mythical spider, Kwaku Anansi; a topical interview with South Africa's Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu about human rights abuses in Nigeria; and message boards inviting notices on topics ranging from

lost family to "black erotica".

Some of the messages, like one describing whites as genetically inferior and "afraid of all people of colour" focus exclusively on race. Others, however, are general discussion groups on sports, business and music. On one of the message boards offering discussion on topics ranging from affirmative action to gender and politics, the most popular subject was Caribbean Vacation Spots.

If the topics are so broad, why a special site for black users? The answer lies in an examination of who uses the Internet. For an electronic medium which is supposed to be oblivious to race and gender, the information superhighway is overwhelmingly dominated by white men.

Consider these statistics : North Americans are the biggest Internet users, with an estimated 3.4 million "host" computers linking the region to the network.

Next comes western Europe, with one million hosts. Compare those figures with Africa with its 27,000 hosts; Central and South America with 16,000; China — the world's most populous country — which has only 6,000 connected computers in September, and it is clear that industrialised countries comprise the electronic elite.

Yet even inside the technologically sophisticated US, women and blacks have been slow to stake their claim to the information age. Surveys suggest that women comprise, at most, a quarter of Internet users, while the proportion of "minorities" — which includes Hispanics Asians together with blacks — is believed to be about 15 per cent.

Discussing blacks only, trend-tracking firm Yankelovich Partners put the number of African-American on-line users at a mere nine per cent in October 1995.

American social commentators are speculating on the reasons for cyberspace remaining a white man's world.

One of the most frequently cited is that the on-line community tends to be populated by the wealthier and better-educated. While the average US household income is $42,400, the average for "connected" households is $65,800. Similarly, 69 per cent of subscriber households have college graduates compared with the 33 per cent national average.

Given that users have to spend at least $2,000 on the computer equipment and telephone modem required to link up to the Internet and given that a disproportionate number of the US poor is black, wealth may provide a partial explanation.

It does not, however, fully explain the exclusion of women or the country's substantial black middle class. A more subtle reason is that non-mainstream groups may not consider US computer bulletin boards and chat

rooms to be a welcoming environment.

Most Internet experts agree that women are more likely to be "flamed" — online jargon for being sent a rude message — than men. Harvard professor Frederick Schauer also noted in a recent university newsletter that electronic bulletin boards over-represented violence against women. "As long as this remains the case, then the discourse of the Internet may appear to many women more like an electronic locker room than the new democracy," he wrote.

Black users, too, may feel equally alienated in a society where deep racial divisions have been highlighted by cases such as the O J Simpson murder trial. Sites such as NetNoir are an attempt to correct this, but they are unlikely to do much to narrow the gap between the information haves and have-nots in the rest of the world.

ARLENE GETZ, a former southern Africa correspondent now based in Boston, US, writes a regular column on news from cyberspace. Her electronic mail address is aggetz@aol.com. She welcomes comments, but cannot guarantee replies to all.

James Bond
BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK

TOM and JERRY