

Left in the Lurch

We feared as much. A survey has conclusively said that the nation's 300 thousand pupils of so-called KG schools are a prey to multifarious mental problems — and that with their natural development blocked by these schools they are becoming abnormal outsiders in the society and at home.

Or isn't it that we have known all this all along but, for strange reasons, have preferred silence to kicking up something and ending up with nothing better than acrimony? Perhaps we have failed to realise the stakes.

The survey directed by a competent educationalist and prominently published by one of our nation's leading dailies has blamed on these so-called KG schools the feeling of frustration and defeat and of other complex personality crisis problems the children in their early teens are suffering from.

Indeed, what can teachers not always well educated and universally lacking in training to handle the delicate age group, and engaged for paltry sums, can give to children — except disorientation and unhealthy attitudes to education and culture?

The 20,000 such schools that are there are possibly unique and uniform in that the 200,000 men and women involved in these as investors and employees hardly know how to teach children, far less what kindergarten means in terms of educational theory and philosophy.

One thought education was something very important with the government. The KGs are a very bad proof of that.

Chechen Scenario

The unhealed sore between separatist Chechens and Russian state authorities is bleeding profusely at the moment. Dudayev's gunmen are said to have started executing hostages held in the Russian village bordering Chechnya, according to Russian Interior Ministry sources.

Fresh military confrontation is in the air. Nor only have the Russian helicopter gunships droned menacingly over the Chechen rebel convoy, a column of Russian tanks were headed for the village.

Moscow is agitated along the political divide which is bristling with cries of fight with an eye to the presidential election in June. The ultra-nationalists' proclivity would be towards the old order of things rather than a shortened union of republics.

The military top-brass in Moscow and the Russian field commanders in Chechnya could be under a renewed pressure to be scowling at the Chechen rebels in anticipation of the presidential poll results.

At all events, Dudayev who had taken the extreme course to declare Chechnya independent from Russia in 1991 only expected to go by normal guerilla war methods: hit-and-run surprise attacks, hostage-taking as human shield, skirmishes and scattered showdowns, not just with the borders of Chechnya but into the Russian territory as well.

With casualties mounting in the war, both sides will grow a heavy stake in continuing the bloody confrontation ad infinitum. Widespread attribution will be the result. The process needs to be halted with fresh negotiations driven by a benign political will.

Unacceptable

Articulation of a genuine demand or grievance is a matter of right for the aggrieved. Nobody contests that. What however, can be thoroughly unacceptable is public suffering caused by street protests in pursuit of an exclusively academic demand that bring traffic to a standstill for any stretch of time.

Such was the scenario on Thursday on the Mirpur Road in front of Dhaka College. Students from various colleges converged to divert the vehicles from the road chagrined by a recent Education Ministry announcement that henceforth there would be a single set of questionnaire for the HSC examinations held by all the four education boards of the country.

The students want a reversion to the old system of holding the HSC examinations with each board setting its own questionnaire, something which the authorities suggest would be untenable now after their decision to admit students to higher courses solely on the criterion of marks obtained at the SSC and HSC examinations.

We are all for the uniformity of educational standards and opportunities, but are a strong votary for a change-over through consultation. At the same time, the students, as educated persons, cannot behave as irresponsibly as a mob does, especially when they have for to make their points of view heard.

SAPTA: From Frustrations to Hopes?

There is no doubt that the agreement hovering around SAPTA speaks of a "positive political will within the region to fortify their economic co-operation." Bangladesh, the architect of SAARC, has also been the ardent lover of a preferential trading arrangement.

THE launching of preferential free trade arrangements among SAARC nations (SAPTA) has, seemingly, put a long awaited hope to a fruition. With the birth of SAARC two decades back, it may be recalled, a great many expectations were aroused including expectation for the basic economic uplift of the people of this region.

On the list is 12, India 106 and Pakistan 35. The fact that Bangladesh has already walked a long way in terms of tariffs should give it little more scope to increase the number. According to available statistics, the intra-regional trade would rise from three billion dollars to 15 billion dollars by the year 2000 and the incremental share would flow from opening up of more trade caused by SAPTA.

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Bangladesh seemingly placed her in a relatively disadvantaged situation with the flood of cheaper goods from India. Now that India and Pakistan also agreed to lower their existing tariff barriers, Bangladesh should seize more opportunities of its trade expansion within

Could SAPTA eventually lead to the formation of SAPTA (South Asian Free Trade Association)? It would perhaps be too much to expect it now. Because, with political suspicions looming large around the corner, the implementation of SAPTA itself in true spirit might get a

litical gesture shown by the participating nations. There has always been an economic "misgiving" that preferential trading arrangements or a step towards free trade might adversely affect small nations like Bangladesh. Theoretically, it fails to sound realistic. Once protection levels (both tariff and non-tariff) are lowered, resources have to move according to the principle of comparative advantage.

cost of transport could be reduced substantially. SAPTA might end in diverting more trade than it intends to create. For Bangladesh especially, the development of infrastructure heavily warrants a reduction in the costs of telecommunication, electricity/gas or other communication costs. Necessary reform measure should immediately be undertaken to catch up with relatively more competitive sellers in the region.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



SAARC countries. It should, however, be noted that it is not the list of "commodities for which tariff reductions are needed, but the list of commodities with reduction should be those which are generally traded among SAARC nations. On this scene alone, it is being alleged that concessions were agreed upon on many commodities which do not occupy a substantial share in trade basket of SAARC countries.

few jolts. To go further beyond removing tariff barriers only, that is, to iron out the non-tariff barrier, more political wisdom needs to be thrown by the respective nations. The formation of a Free Trade Area would have to wait till bilateral political disputes are diminished or are promised to be grappled very soon. Nowhere in the world, regional economic co-operation survived and worked without sensible po-

The formation of SAPTA warrant further policy change in some other directions. For example, more resources need to be stipulated for education and skill training of Bangladeshi workers, if Bangladeshi products are expected to find outlets in SAARC countries. Second, SAARC nations need to harmonize the development of infrastructural facilities to pave ways for smooth transfer of commodities. Unless the

We, therefore, pin "some" hopes on the outcome of the SAPTA operation. It tends to open a new horizon in the arena of international trade among SAARC countries. To be confident of the outcome, political parleys should go hand in hand with economic parleys since nothing is likely to go right unless politics in the region is made straight. The ball, mostly, is in the courts of India and Pakistan.

Terrorism's Real Face

ONE are the days when the bad guys in spy thrillers were trench-coated communists. In the post-Cold War era they are often "Islamic fundamentalists" with twisted, evil minds that threaten the world's good people.

The paranoia has been misplaced. Proof of it are recent events including the November 4 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish radical and before it the Oklahoma bombing by a white cult member.

Rabin's killer was not a Jew-hating Arab, but a right-wing Israeli who decided the premier deserved to die because he was the principal architect of a peace process that would return Palestinians to their homeland.

And the powerful bomb that blew up a government building in Oklahoma City was not planted by Middle Eastern "terrorists" as a hysterical national press reported, but by far-right US

militia groups. Both event have unmasked the real face of terrorism, exposing as myth the oft-repeated theory that international terrorists are synonymous with Arabs and Muslims.

"Terrorism was the kind of thing that Arabs did to each other", said a report in the latest issue of Newsweek, adding: "In the Middle East, at least in the American mind, the face of terror is usually wrapped in a kaffiyeh (Arab headdress)".

Like after the Oklahoma bombing, fingers would have pointed at Palestinian groups opposed to the Middle East peace process if security forces had not pinned down Rabin's killer.

A week before the Israeli premier was gunned down, Dr Fathi Shakaki, the chief of the Islamic Jihad, one of the main resistance organisations in the occupied territories, was pumped with bullets by Israeli undercover agents on a beach in Malta.

Religious fanatics from the Middle East are always the first suspects in international terrorist acts, but as Mushahid Hussain of Inter Press Service explains from Islamabad, such stereotypes no longer apply.

Analysts note a pervasive double-standard in mainstream Western perception of the Middle East. Nothing Israel has ever done has been serious or shocking enough to attract widespread condemnation. Even the slaying of 29 Muslim worshippers during Friday prayers at a mosque in Hebron by an Israeli settler two years ago was just a blip in the international media.

And unfortunately for Rabin, Israeli intelligence was so busy keeping track of Islamic militant groups that it was not monitoring Jewish extremists or viewing them as a potential source of armed attack.

Just as US security services were shocked that the people responsible for the Oklahoma bombing were actually Christian fundamentalists and not their Islamic cousins. It is possible to get misled by your own propaganda.

But now there is no ignoring the fact of Jewish extremism. It has trained its guns on targets inside Israel — a point made by Rabin's widow in an interview a day after her husband's killing.

A seminar in Paris in October attended by Jewish and Muslim religious leaders and academics noted: "Religious fanaticism is responsible for more than 20 percent of international terrorist incidents and is largely responsi-

ble for the increasingly violent and ruthless nature of terrorism." The seminar referred to the escalation of terrorism "especially where religion is allied with nationalism — as in Bosnia, the Middle East or the Indian sub-continent."

Conservative Muslim scholars never tire of pointing out that Muslims are the victims of an aggressive fundamentalism that often uses force and terror as a weapon. The example of Bosnia is cited repeatedly to bolster the argument.

In ex-Yugoslavia, the Serbs have with no fear of recrimination pursued a policy of ethnic cleansing, including the use of rape as a weapon of war. At least 20,000 Bosnian Muslim women have been believed raped by Serbian soldiers and civilians.

And a recent report published in a British daily, said UN safe areas like Srebrenica and Zepa were allowed to fall in May 1995 even though there was no guarantee of

protection for their civilian population. The Serbs are believed to have executed some 8,000 Muslim men in Srebrenica alone.

Scholars say it is time the international media noted that the roots of international terrorism in today's world is essentially non-Muslim — however improbable that may seem to those steeped in the Western press.

Mainstream coverage of international acts of indiscriminate violence tends to invariably suggest "our people could not do such vile things, it has got to be Muslims or Arabs."

The global reality is that as recent events in the United States, the Middle East, Bosnia and South Asia show, Muslims have often been the victims of terrorism. Western governments need to ponder over how best to combat this threat of terrorism which has its roots within countries, rather than searching for seagoats in the Muslim World.

UNHCR at the Crossroads: Who's in the Driving Seat?

VOLUNTARY repatriation is recognised as the most desirable way of handling refugee problems. But the word 'desirable' pre-supposes that there has been a fundamental change in conditions in the country of origin. It is axiomatic that if there were no tangible change, or if it was only marginal, refugees could not be expected to return. Today's world presents, however, a disturbing number of cases where pressures to repatriate have grown even when the situation is less than optimal.

This obviously presents a policy dilemma for UNHCR, the international body charged with care and protection of refugees. How far has it accepted the new implications? A recent article by the organisation's Director of Protection Dennis McNamara "UN's Refugees Protection Agency is at a Crossroads" in International Herald Tribune, October 24, 1995, throws some light on the problem. However, in observing "..... international refugee protection..... is at a crossroads with states often sending mixed signals about what, should be done", it does not go far enough.

Refugees, states hosting refugees and non-governmental bodies concerned with their care, can also claim to be receiving mixed signals from UNHCR about today's voluntary repatriation and its implications for protective follow up.

Changing circumstances have clearly called into question UNHCR's traditional guideline regarding voluntary repatriation. They have even brought about a de facto change in its application in some operations. To the point where "voluntary" has become a euphemism for "no real alternative". The implications are serious both for UNHCR's main mandate, protection, and for the potential cost of future refugee operations.

Until the organisation places squarely before its member governments the circumstances provoking this switch in application and, the conclusions to be drawn therefrom, the miscommunication referred to in the above article will continue.

The issue can be simply stated. Voluntary repatriation is a cornerstone of UNHCR; it is even mentioned in the

Statute of the High Commissioner's Office. The provision is unequivocal. Repatriation should only be done voluntarily, in safety, and where the refugee is fully informed, pre-return, of conditions in his/her country of origin. The last point explicitly requires UNHCR to be satisfied there is a marked improvement in the home country in comparison with that provoking the exodus in the first place. Because returnees automatically lose their status as refugees on return to their homeland, this so-called certification of "new normality" by UNHCR is rightly seen as the guarantee sine qua non. If the change in circumstances is not observable, and unlikely to be durable, there would be no point in the refugee returning. But this also poses a problem. Must UNHCR wait passively for conditions to change or, given today's

draws, it may find itself either having to redefine "voluntary" repatriation or be party to pseudo-ethnic cleansing. UNHCR's possibilities for influencing the situation are somewhat limited. Neither country is a signatory to the key 1951 International Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol. In addition, the lapsing of the Memoranda of Understanding (MOU), that regulated UNHCR's relations with the two governments, further reduced whatever legal leverage the organisation had previously. More seriously, the UNHCR has since been excluded from the two governments' ongoing discussions on the refugee question.

The other dilemma, first raised with respect to the

Myanmar situation is not optimal, UNHCR believes that SLORC's permitting it to maintain a physical monitoring presence in the Arakan is a guarantee of good faith. The logic of this view has caused the organisation to actively promote the en masse return of refugees under its auspices. As an additional inducement, the organisation, though it is not concerned with long-term development per se, is actively seeking funding for projects to attempt to "anchor", economically, the returnees. But the question remains: what happens once repatriation is over, when UNHCR pulls out and can no longer be seen as a conduit for further largesse?

The point about adequate prior briefing remains con-

When the host government insists refugees must go, and when the numbers are such that traditional individual interviewing to assess voluntariness is logistically difficult, is it acceptable that UNHCR devises more accelerated procedures?

As already noted, returnees lose their refugee status on return. This means they fall under their own country's jurisdiction. In such cases, can UNHCR still claim to have a protection role? If so, how effective can it be? As the previously agreed MOU with the SLORC permitting UNHCR's presence in a monitoring role with free access to the returnees has lapsed, can UNHCR still claim a legal mandate in Myanmar? Can it really guarantee effectiveness, in such circumstances?

Clearly, it cannot. Ensuring adequate protection in the country of origin where a returnee once again becomes subject to its laws and legal institutions, is surely more a question for the UN Centre for Human Rights. In which case should not UNHCR feel bound, at least morally, to see that such oversight is set in place before relinquishing its protective refugee role?

When there is a stand-off, as is currently the case with the Rohingyas, what should UNHCR do? Consider offering a "cash sweetener" to the host government to resettle refugees who cannot or will not return? Or offer an incentive project package to persuade the government of the origin country to remove obstacles to full repatriation?

What if the authorities' attitude is a kin to playing poker with UNHCR? Seeing how high they can raise the stakes? Not an unreasonable hypothesis. In practice, a stalemate poses little problem for the governments concerned as UNHCR's presence guarantees continuing funding for refugee care and maintenance projects. Money that has been an important cash input into areas, on both sides, of extreme poverty.

The combined sum since the beginning of the operation together with the donor appeal for Myanmar already totals \$ 102 million. A considerable sum compared to UNHCR's Cambodian appeal of \$ 121 million for a much larger number of returnees. When there is such an impasse, and neither government has any real incentive to change the status quo, should UNHCR await donor fatigue or itself set a financial time limit?

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, recently posed a key question: "How do we seize the political impulse for solutions while retaining the humanitarian imperative for protection?" However, the refugee situation in Bangladesh (Rohingyas), in Nepal (Bhutanese), Mexico (Guatemalan) and, especially with Zaire (Rwandan), conclusively prove the extent to which the organisation is constrained by the government of the country in which it is operating.

UNHCR is renowned for its flexibility in being able to adapt to difficult situations in a state of flux. But what happens when, in responding to "the political impulse for solutions", it finds itself obliged to adopt a policy of expediency that calls into question long established international principles? When, by having to develop new criteria, it finds itself willy-nilly both judge and jury?

Without more clarity and guidance at member governments' level, UNHCR may continue to find itself "pig in the middle" and thus a convenient scapegoat to all those who ignore the new constraints it faces and adopt a holier-than-thou attitude.

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pressures, has it a new duty to try and promote the minimal change deemed acceptable? If so, who is the ultimate judge?

The Rohingyas refugees, a vulnerable Muslim minority who fled Buddhist Myanmar for Bangladesh, have now become a mini cause celebre. With UNHCR a seeming hostage to the current position, it also highlights an issue that has much wider implications.

Between end-1991 and mid-1992 some 250,000 refugees or more, fled Myanmar's Arakan peninsula and were given shelter on neighbouring Bangladesh territory. By November 1995, only around 52,000 refugees remain but they pose a potential problem for UNHCR which has, since mid-1992, accepted responsibility for assisting and organising their repatriation.

Bangladesh's policy, understandable in a poor densely populated country, was that all refugees should have been repatriated by end-1995. The necessary corollary is their total and speedy acceptance by Myanmar authorities, if by mid-1992, and the two sides remain obdurate, UNHCR could find itself "between a rock and a hard place." Put bluntly, unless the organisation with-

earlier repatriation of a substantial number of Rohingyas was whether refugees were really returning to a situation substantially different from that they escaped from and whether they were adequately briefed beforehand.

Important NGOs maintain, despite the freeing from house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the alleged ending of forced labour (really analogous to a tax that was universally applied throughout Myanmar), the background conditions for the Rohingyas refugees have not substantially improved. Myanmar is still ruled by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the military junta, and has yet to receive a clean bill from human rights organisations. For example, early last year, the UN special Rapporteur for Myanmar drew attention to the 1982 Citizenship Law that still has discriminatory effects on Muslim Rohingyas in the Arakan. The general impression is that "nothing much seems to have changed" between the circumstances underlying the refugee exodus and the situation today was also the view of a recent Economist article.

Nevertheless, UNHCR has taken the risk and gone ahead. While acknowledging

Findings later substantiated by the US Committee for Refugees, subsequent attempts at clarifications suggest a temporary blip in Communications between UNHCR and NGOs, its main implementing partners.

Rohingya refugees still in Bangladesh raise important issues of a broad nature for the future. They can be posed as a series of questions.

How can UNHCR hope to influence governments in a refugee operation when it has no legal instrument to hold them to? What happens when one government insists refugees must return (there being no 3rd country for resettlement), despite the firm principle of non-refoulement, (ie no forcible return), and the government of the country of origin drags its feet? How should UNHCR respond? Accept the authorities, rather than it and the refugees, decide the moment of their return?

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