The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Wednesday, January 17, 1995. Stunning Indifference

Another last hour for political consensus on elections has slipped away. Even the miracle is left with little chance to happen. When the election schedule was changed for the second time a few days back, we had warned against frittering away the precious respite adding that it would amount to crossing the point of no-return. So, here are the major political parties now deeply frozen in their respective positions. One time too many we are hitching our another last hope to providence for saving democracy in the country. But since God saves those who save themselves we are reiterating our call for holding a political roundtable urgently — even now.

The entire nation's feeling of being unled has hardened to a point of tearless grief, and even bitterness. In sufferance have the people waited for something to happen that will save them further sufferance born of still prolonged political uncertainties. They feel wronged not only by the irresolute political leadership but also by the fact that despite the collective wisdom of the nation's intelligentsia and the last-ditch diplomatic good offices being at play, the impasse proved unyielding.

There will be a post-mortem on the intent and conduct of political parties but on available evidence both sides seem equally blameworthy. And the degree here hardly matters. The BNP's tenacious insistence on keeping within the bounds of the Constitution should have obliged the party to time the announcement of its concessions to the opposition keeping in clear view the constitutional timetable for the process of election. They procrastinated till the very end at the crucial turns of event begetting in the process delayed response from the opposition in an unceasing cat-and-mouse game. The other implication that many people read into this is that the BNP was not after all attaching that much value to fully contested elections as their public posturing otherwise suggested. The opposition sounded somewhat discordant in its seriousness for a political understand-

The opposition will take a long time sloughing off the effect of their not putting the ultimate trust in the public for demanding justice against rigged election, if there would be one.

Well Done

The reopening of four hawkers' markets at Fulbaria in just seven weeks' time after they had been consumed by a devastating fire is a performance in a class of its own. It could not have been accomplished but for the seriousness of purpose and commitment brought to bear on the job. In fact, the high-performing task has been a result of cooperation between the government and the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). Now here is an example of what miracle can be brought about if all the parties involved in something do their job sincerely and professionally, undistracted by political consideration of any sort.

We are happy to know that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Mayor Mohammad Hanif have commended each other for initiatives taken both at the personal and official levels. We felicitate them both. Certainly both had their eyes on the goodwill such a job, accomplished in record time, will generate. In an election year in particular such a consideration cannot be overlooked. But it is still important that both sides took a forward-looking view. It is better to compete with rivals in positive contributions that go a long way in serving people's interests rather than creating an impasse at the expense of people's suffer-

The reconstruction of Bangabazar and three other markets must be seen as a sterling success against the backdrop of our general failure to deliver in various other areas. This is also a proof that we are capable of performing better. What is lacking is the political will, sincerity and love for the people and the country. Politics ought to be for the people, not just the fulfilment of a few partisan agenda at the cost of national interests. An example of nice spirit of cooperation has been set, let us hope this will be extended to other areas of our national life.

Market Networking

Two news items concerning perishable goods have drawn our attention. One published in a Bangla daily says that carrot sells four to five kgs a taka; and the other published in this newspaper estimates that perishable items worth Tk 1 crore are now rotting inside the trucks stranded at the Aricha ghat. The two news items bring to the fore a common economic ill our agricultural produces suffer from: the lack of a marketing network.

As the largest sector in our economy, agricultural production has been picking up but in the absence of dependable marketing facilities this could not be translated into dividends for the growers. There is a wide gap between the cost of production and the price paid at the consumer level. A disproportionately high transportation cost is often responsible for such price variations. No economy can develop without taking adequate care of the allied areas. Transportation and market networking are two such vital areas.

That the farmers are deprived of a reasonable price for their produce is a serious disincentive to growth. When truck-loads of vegetables rot at Aricha, farmers have to sell these at a throw-away price. Consumers in Dhaka and elsewhere have to bear an extra bit of pinch. So, there is a need for an alternative and effective transportation system for the perishable goods. Essentially, the country must plan for an efficient market network.

Review of Bangladesh's Development

A Bold Initiative by CPD

If the daily loss due to strikes and hartals is US\$80 million, then potentially we have lost 100 dollars per capita in 1995. No doubt the figures are not very accurate but a much more factual analysis should be immediately carried out.

continue to be externally influenced but must not be entirely foreign driven. IRBD should enable us to bring about this necessary change. It can never be achieved through slogans and processions in the streets of Dhaka. On the other hand, World

HE Centre for Policy

ative institutional devel-

opment in order to enhance

our indigenous capacity to

think for ourselves. Over the

years, the dependency syn-

drome has deepened so

much in our mind that we

even failed to realize the

state of our own national

economic and social health.

The external dependency

forced us to accept whatever

was dished out through the

brown cover publications

from 1818 H Street, Wash-

ington DC. Incredibly enough,

we got used to spoon feeding

and acted as told. However,

we must not blame the World

Bank for that. We have been

fairly consistent in not doing

our home work and the Bank

kept on feeding us with stud-

ies and analyses which they

(not us) thought were appro-

Bangladesh's development

(IRBD), has, for the first

time, initiated a bold depar-

ture - an indigenous alterna-

tive - to the Country Eco-

nomic Memorandum (CEM)

of the World Bank. Each year.

the Paris meeting of the

Bangladesh Aid Consortium

determines the fate of the

Annual Development Pro-

gramme and discussions

there are heavily influenced

by the CEM. Will it remain so

or the publication.

"Experiences with Economic

Reform: A Review of

Bangladesh's Development".

should alter the prevailing

has launched and it deserves

not only our heartiest con-

gratulations but strong and

steadfast support in order to

establish the basic principle

that we must speak for our-

selves and no one else. The

broad conclusions of IRBD or

CEM might not be strikingly

different; but this is not the

point at all. The annual re-

view that CPD would under-

take should, among others,

establish the sovereign right

of an independent nation to

review its national economic

and social health and deter-

mine its future course of ac-

tion which no doubt would

ARLY in the morning

of Monday Jan 15.

1996. Russian forces

surrounding Chechen rebels

holding hostages in the

village of Pervomaiskaya on

the borders of Chechnya and

Dagestan, opened a general

assault. The infantry/armour

charge was preceded by an

artillery barrage and rocket-

firing by helicopter gunships.

On the TV screens one could

hear the thump/crump of

desolate landscape was lit

with a slow burning fire and

smoke swirled from a num-

ber of huts. Outnumbered

almost 100 to 1, outgunned

many times more than that,

many will remain to surren-

der alive, then again not

the Chechen history of resis-

was also never in doubt.

It is a big battle that CPD

perceptions?

dependent review

Now CPD, through its in-

priate to our needs.

Dialogue, CPD, has

been a highly innov-

Bank should welcome the initiative. It is presently doing the work by default and IRBD would assist downsizing of the Bank's huge organisation. However, the most important contribution of the independent review should be debates and discussions which ought to follow not in Paris but within the country. It is the dialogue on development that must be promoted. We must be made fully aware of our own predicaments. People must think of the problems and opportunities through greater self-reliance and declining external dependence.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue so far has remained a very small organization while the independent review every year would be a monumental task calling for a cadre of professional staff members working on a full time basis. I hope resources of the Centre will make this possible. The eminent national experts, associated with the first IRBD, would no doubt continue to make their contributions but their advisory role on an ad hoc basis cannot obviate the need for the large volume of staff work essential for the independent

The review itself have been exhaustive, thorough and revealing. As a result, the book published eventually by University Press Limited, includes 470 pages of excellent reading material. However, its bulk might deter others from going through the pages. The overview chapter provides a summary review; in spite of it, a World Bank

style executive summary would have been worthwhile. After all, flattery through imi-

tation can do no harm. The most revealing finding of the survey is that the GDP growth rate remained below 5 per cent per annum during the last 12 years in spite of intensive policy reforms. However this was no fault of the reforms. There were other factors beyond economics which did not allow investments to be made and we are all too aware of the political situation of the

The agricultural sector remains largely unaffected by hartal culture. Therefore, decline in rice production during the last two years is definitely a matter of serious concern. The review further mentioned that in 1993-94 both output and price of rice had fallen simultaneously. Given the inelasticity of demand, how could a decline in production co-exist with falling prices? This was an extraordinary development and called for some addi-

tional explanation since rice



Window on Asia

country during the last two calendar years. If the reforms were combined with political stability like in Malaysia, I am quite positive. Bangladesh by December 1995 would have been classified as one of the Dynamic Asian Economies, in short, DAEs. However, our political leaders are determined to keep us poor, perhaps make us poorer. A businessman of Dhaka told me on 31st December that he managed to keep his business open for only 160 days in 1995. In the DAEs, it is usually 300 days and 900 shifts every year. Thus we lost 47 per cent of valuable work opportunities. We are doomed unless we ourselves decide to reverse the trend. The IRBD must not refrain from reviewing the brutal realities of life and work in Bangladesh today. If the daily loss due to strikes and hartals is US\$80 million, then potentially we have lost 100 dollars per capita in 1995. No doubt the figures are not very accurate but a much more factual anal-

ysis should be immediately

carried out by CPD.

dominates not only the crop subsector but the entire agriculture economy, so much so that promising growth of livestock, fishery and nonrice crops would not be able to generate a sizeable impact on the total sectoral growth rate within the short run of a year or two. The downturn as explained in the review was due to reduced outputs from Aman '94 followed by Boro '95 because of drought. At the same time, adjoining West Bengal enjoyed bumper crops. This is indicative of the prospects of minimising drought-induced crop disasters and in future reviews, a comparison with West Bengal agriculture should be useful to the purpose. The other factor that has not been considered is the lack of quality paddy seeds. In the late 1980s, there had been phenomenal expansion of boro cultivation in Bangladesh Surprisingly enough, no corresponding development in terms of a modern seed in dustry has taken place so far. The next IRBD should give adequate attention to this all

important input. The revised IRBD estimates clearly show that industrial production also failed to come up with high rates of growth - comparable to DAEs - and if garment factories were excluded from growth rate estimates, there seemed to be hardly any improvement from the 1980s. Most spokesmen of the private sector had been correctly talking about problems of industrial sickness and stagnation in investment throughout the 1990s. The review should have been enthusiastic about the role of the private sector. The problems with the loss ridden public sector, utter failure of the Government at privatization and tyranny of the Customs Authorities were and still are factors giving rise to such endurable industrial stagnation. Unfortunately, these issues find no place in

the review. In this connection. I wish to refer to certain specific findings of the Review. First, the finding that "Surge in term loan disbursement is hardly comparable to the growth in capital imports' should be viewed against the fact that a significant part of those loans constitute local capital costs such as land and building, utilities, taxes, C&F costs etc. Secondly, the IRBD's survey of new industries does not give rise to any assured optimism. However, to what extent the sample was representative and whether the tarnished records of past industrial lending influenced the course of the survey? Also. the hidden cost of investment in the form of bribes and protection money are very real and cannot be ignored from such an analysis. Under the circumstances, if 51 per cent of the units were found operational, then it is an improvement over the

poor records of 1980s. A realistic assessment is called for since levels of either efficiency or honesty cannot be enhanced overnight.

This leaves the service sector which is fast turning into the mainstay of GDP growth. However, the Review should make it clear that service sector is practically no sector at all. It is basically the residual of everything left behind after all feasible inclusions to the other two sectors - agriculture and industry - have been made. It is like a spoiled broth, prepared by too many cooks. The service sector needs to be broken down into subsectors like trade, transport, construction etc., and only then, meaningful sectoral growth can come to light.

The most disconcerting

revelation seems to be the

finding based on available evidence that there had hardly been any alleviation of poverty in the 1990s. This would imply that fairly widespread efforts of Grameen Bank and NGOs failed to make any headway or at least decelerate the vicious downward spiral. The Review is cautious in its conclusions. The fact remains that it did not cover the vast efforts outside the ADP of the Government to generate income and employment for the poorest. It is now fairly well established that there are numerous instances. where the starving rural poor have at least secured their basic minimum access to a cereal based sufficiency. Why in terms of national aggregates, a positive outcome is yet to emerge — remains a big question.

In conclusion, I will again repeat that the review is a remarkable accomplishment for Bangladesh and by Bangladeshis. In the light of the observations made above, the next Review may be a tripartite effort of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh representing the NGO sector and the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries representing the private sec-

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Sabres of Paradise

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

earlier successful raid led by Shamyl Basayev across the Chechen border in middrawn them away from the hospital with a number of talse promises, the Russians encircled the convoy away from the Chechen border in the village of Pervomaiskaya shells and mortars, one could in Dagestan. With the make out scurrying Russian Chechens determined to get personnel in the snow. The to freedom or die in the attempt, killing the hostages if need be, and the Russians equally determined not to allow the Chechens to escape. the situation had to come to a cut off from all supplies and head. Since most of the hostages were Dagestani and support, the outcome cannot be in doubt. Probably by the not Russians, it made it easier for the Russians to time this goes into print, the Chechens would have gone gamble their lives in an atdown in a hail of fire. Not tempt to overcome the Chechen resistance but at a tremendous cost to Chechens and Dagestani lives as well as much quarter is likely to be to the Russian troops. To given by the Russians. Given quote BBC, "the Russians have solved their moral tance over hundreds of years. dilemma by maintaining that the failure of the Russians despite overwhelming force terrorism must be punished to overcome them quickly whatever the cost to innocent human lives". Since almost all the hostages were The confrontation had started a few days ago when a Dagestani and Muslim, this

Chechen raiding party of must have helped their deciabout 100-150 persons led by sion-making process. The last time around, de-Salman Rudayev, the son-inspite the overwhelming sulaw of Chechen leader General Dudayev, stormed a hosperiority in firepower, the Russians failed in their atpital in Dagestan, taking over 2000 hostages, emulating an tempt to overpower the

1995. This time, having Chechens, the result was a they were being subjected to bloody fiasco for them alongwith severe embarrassment. In the subsequent negotiations, Russian PM Chernomyrdin was forced on prime time TV to agree to some Chechen demands. It may be remembered that Dudayev has already lost a sonin-law in action, a son has been badly wounded. The Russians having suffered hundreds of casualties, they were forced to allow the entire raiding party to return to Chechnya alongwith a screen of hostages and an escort of Russian troops and helicopters melting away from them in the night as soon as they entered the mountains. Smarting under that humiliation, the Russians were in no mood to give way in the present exercise. To be fair, this time President Boris Yeltsin has been caught in a no-win position. On the one hand are the conservatives and nationalists led by Zhironovsky and the members of the Duma demanding that Chechens be brought to heel, on the other world public opinion looks askance at loss of innocent civilian lives in hostage situations. The hard-liners in the military were keen to overcome the embarrassment

on prime time media by a ragtag small bunch of guerillas. Having had a taste of guerillas in Muslim Afghanistan, in Tajikistan and the unfinished campaign in Muslim Chechnya, the Russian military hierarchy were hell-bent on proving their manhood against Muslims dissidents at Russian tutelage, the desolate village of Pervomaiskaya become a symbolic point of carnage. Over the past few days, the Russians accomplished a deliberate military build-up in the area, the assault being postponed only till they had an overwhelming military superiority. Far removed from the hot sands of Karbala, another Karbala came into offing, this time in the cold desolate stretches of Dagestan, only a week away from the holy month of Ramazan. Unfortunately for Russians, Muslims have a firm belief in rising from the ashes after every Karbala, obviously the Chechens take this to heart.

While we can never countenance terrorism in any form, what are the choices open for freedom-loving people when their hearth and home is subjected to death

and destruction in the manner Chechnya has been at Russian hand for over a year now? Chechens (and Dagestanis) are a freedom-loving people of long-standing. Their almost mythical spiritual leader, Imam Shamyl, fought the Russians for over 30 years almost 150 years ago. Forced into captivity by overwhelming numbers Imam Shamyl and his entire family remained in internal exile in Russia as an "honoured" guest of the Tzar. the Russian empire remaining in awe of this dreaded enemy. Many a Russian general came to grief at the hands of his galloping horsemen, their freedom obtained at the point of their sabres. Their refusal to surrender to any odds can best be captured in the Song of Hamzad, a typical Chechen war song, "How hot the day; only our swords to shade us! How thick the smoke,

how dark the night, only our guns to light us! Oh birds, fly home-wards! Give our greeting to our sis-

Tell them our only mourners will be ravens: our only dirge, the howling hun-

gry wolves. Tell them we died, sword in hand, in the land of the Gaiour, where the ravens

peck out our eyes and the

Though the mayor is try-

ing to imply that he is press-

ing for the manifold demands

for our sake, we, the people

of Chittagong do not support

these agitation programmes

and think it unreasonable and

untimely. He is constantly

saying that the present gov-

ernment has not done any-

really so?

thing for Chittagong, but is it

a separate education board, a

full-fledged television station.

Chittagong Airport has be-

come an international one, a

most sophisticated railway

terminal has been con-

structed, Chittagong Stock

Exchange has gone into op-

eration and foundation had

been laid for World Trade

Centre, in addition roads,

highways and bridges have

Every now and then, Chit-

wolves tear our flesh. (courtesy "The Sabres of Paradise" by Leslie Blanch) Not many people know that Imam Shamyl is buried in Jannat-al-Baggi in Madina. History has shown it is

difficult to subdue those who

love freedom beyond their lives. The Chechens are such a people. In the last year they have lost hundreds of thousands of lives but again this is a part of their tragic history. Many times, the entire population has been uprooted most recently in this century by the excesses of Stalin and half a century apart by Marshal Pavel Grachev. Everytime the Chechens have come back to their land and their struggle has gone on. The loss of Salman Rudayev and his hundred or so companions will not act as a restraint but a spur to more such raiding parties in this their latest continuing saga against the Russian hegemony. The Chechens have repeatedly threatened to take their war to the Russian homeland. If the lessons of history are of any importance, the Russians (and the rest of the world) should not take this threat lightly. Though Gronzy is badly devastated, the Russians would do well to read the signs on the walls of that burning city and give back the Chechens their freedom. unconditionally. One thing is certain, the future of Boris Yeltsin as a Russian leader of any credibility lies in the ashes of Pervomaiskaya.

Photo exhibition on birds

Sir, I found it hearty to note that a photo exhibition on local birds by the nature lover photographer Monowar Ahmed began on 5th January. at the National Museum in Dhaka.

Undoubtedly birds which are important elements of nature have made the nature more charming. There is a close relation between trees and birds because trees are their abodes. But trees are being felled in excess for firewood and other businesses. So the question arises, where will the birds live? Furthermore, birds are being killed wantonly by poachers and hunters. As a result, some species are becoming extinct from this country in particular and the world in general and so natural imbalance is badly becom-

This type of photo exhibition, a very good and praiseworthy initiative, draws our attention to all living things including birds which are friends of human beings. Moreover, it introduces the birds of various species and their habitat to the viewers. Therefore, the VC of

Dhaka University Prof Ema-

ing more apparent.

juddin Ahmed, the bird scientist Prof Kazi Z Hussain, the talented photojournalist Monwar Ahmed and National Museum authority deserve our praise for their role and effort to attract not only our eyes but also conscience to the captivating beauty of

M Ariful Alam Arif BBA, 3rd Year. Khulna University

Tailoring our 'meetings'...

Sir, Go to see a key official, the PA/PS (highly responsibility-conscious personnel) would politely or sometimes impolitely say -"Sir meetingae achhen" (Sir is in the meeting). Visitors who came all the way perhaps to tell the sir about an injustice or to discuss an important issue or an urgent organisational matter, would very politely enquire — when the meeting will end? The answer usually is: "It is not known to me. After this, Sir

has another meeting!" Meeting is of course essential for resolving issues and taking decisions but if we spend most of the time in meetings, then when would we implement the outcome

of the meetings? Meanwhile it is unfortu-

nate that the formalities to meet a key official in our country which is running under a democratic government have become too lengthy and complicated. Naturally question arises - key-officials for whom, for what?

So I solemnly pray — "O, Heaven! Help us in tailoring our 'meetings' to suit our poor size.

M Zahidul Haque Asstt Prof BAI, Dhaka

Bangabazar fire

Sir, In the consequence of the devastating fire at Bangabazar about 2500 shops and goods worth crores of Taka have been burnt to ashes and hundreds of traders have lost all that they had.

It is however heartening to see that within a short time the Bangabazar is being rebuilt anew from the scratch, and the market, hopefully, will be reopened and commissioned soon.

We do not know what precautionary measures the authorities concerned have taken to avoid recurrence of such fire accidents in future. We feel that a water reser-

voir may be built underground near the market preferably at the western side of Usmani Udyan to meet the emergency requirement of the vicinity including Gulistan, Nawabpur,

and Thatari Bazar. We would also suggest that instead of ordinary and loose electric wiring all the shops at Bangabazar may be fitted with superior quality wire with special care.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203

BNP-bashing

Sir. I have become a bemused reader of 'On the Record' columnist's patient and persistent BNP-bashing. My eloquence is limited to one sentence : the nation's

plight could have been worse. The solution seems simple one of the Begum's has to

A Husnain Dhaka

CCC mayor

Sir, Your editorial 'Ctg

Mayor's Posturing published

on January 2, 1996 is very

observant and we thank you

mayor complains that the 'stepson'?

also been constructed.

present government is acting like a 'stepmother', but we tend to think otherwise: is it he, who is acting like a Éven a dim-wit person would wonder why these

government whose term

tagong City Corporation (CCC)

almost finished as the next general election is only a matter of days away. In the name of people's demands. the mayor is resorting to ways which are rather making us ashamed and outraged. If he really puts barricade against movement of goods from Chittagong as threatened, it will be a severe blow to our economy.

As the mayor is a promi-Chittagong is going to have nent leader of the opposition political party, people have a feeling that he is doing it to create a chaos and with exist ing political unrest they are not ready to take anymore.

> Chittagong has become a very unhealthy city, with clogged drains, overflowing dustbins, and with mosquito menace. People are feeling very uncomfortable and irri tated. But it seems that our mayor has no time to notice these things as he is rather busy to contrive ways to make people more uneasy.

We hope he will become sensible and act as his position demands and thus earn back people's respect.

demands are pressed upon a Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong