

National Conference Due

Home Minister Major (Retd) Rafiqul Islam has shown a rare degree of sensitivity to the portfolio he holds. During his return from Tungipara the other day, he gave his insight to some journalists in an informal chat with them as to how he wanted to run his ministry. He is in favour of treating criminals as individuals all of whose character flaws may not have been hereditary. Terrorists might have had in many cases such reasons as social deprivation and family troubles behind their choices of wrong ways of life. The home minister is considerate enough to give the wayward a chance to return to normal life.

This is not a radical idea as such, but for a minister in charge of home affairs to think in this line is really something new. When the initiative comes from none other than the home ministry it is bound to have a special significance for the terrorists. Hopefully, many will feel inspired to avail of the opportunity — provided that there is a guarantee of their safe conduct, and for their security — both financial and social as well.

So here is a hint of a qualitative change in administration the home minister is talking about. The emphasis is on the reform of character. This however does not rule out strong measures to deal with crimes and criminals of incorrigible kinds. In fact, the administration that keeps open the process for correction has a greater right to get tough with criminals.

The home minister's focus is on a more humane and civilised society. The minister is aware of police excesses and the legal loopholes for some of them to thrive on. So he has made it a point to instruct policemen to behave well with all and to take special care in dealing with women and children. The minister sees the acute need for some legal reforms to improve upon the colonial legacy. He has in mind the important ingredient of governance — the police-public relations.

We find all this extremely encouraging. Now we would like to suggest that before the home ministry actually gets on with the business, let him call for a national conference on all the issues involved in the maintenance of law and order. This conference should include representatives from the opposition, former inspectors general of police, legal experts, human rights and women activists, prominent advocates of children's rights will have to be there at the conference. This meeting of minds, to be followed by open public debate will help formulate right policies in this vital area.

Much-awaited Push

The G-7, nicknamed 'rich men's club', has shown an increased understanding for the plight of the world's 40 poorest countries at its Lyon summit this year. The group of the seven leading industrial democracies in the world adopted a package of debt-relief measures for the LDCs. This is featured by: a) going beyond a two-thirds write-off of the bilateral debts; and b) subsidisation of the relief coming largely through the use of IMF resources. In other words, both bilateral and multilateral options are taken to ease the accumulated debt burden of the world's most impoverished nations.

The sympathetic tone and temper of the move is perceptible in the official recognition of the differing impacts of globalisation on countries in varying stages of development. While it yields instant benefits to the rich nations, countries with the least competitive advantages in terms of technology, trade and investment, tend, by contrast, to be marginalised under globalisation. Inequalities grow during the adjustment phase. That the poor countries' trial over the teething time has received a consideration of the leaders of super-rich nations is, to our mind, the most pleasing aspect of the outcome of G-7 summitry.

Highly welcome as the steps to write off the debts of the poorest countries are, they would have had a fuller sigh of relief if the level of ODA flow to them were upped by the industrial nations of the world simultaneously. In fact, the Official Development Assistance as percentage of their GNP has only declined in collective terms. A greater transfusion of development funds into the poor economies would have lessened their very need for borrowing money on stiff terms from the developed world. Rather than periodically going through the motions of writing off the debts in a charitable fashion, why not make the missing critical investment to help the poorest countries to their feet?

Stem Speculations

Hopefully, BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia would formalise her status as the Opposition Leader in Parliament by taking oath as MP sooner than later. This is so much expected of her that none needs be surprised if it takes place today.

Her delay in taking oath has admittedly been a matter of animated suspense and, therefore, of some speculation, even though BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has spared no efforts to explain it away.

"She was said to be sick, and has had difficulty in deciding which one of the five seats she had won in the June 12 elections she would retain. Now that she is back to party meetings she has obviously recovered from her illness and should be in a position to take oath."

Begum Zia is the opposition leader for the whole country anyway, so how does it matter which of the constituencies she vacates for the by-elections and which one she keeps to formally represent? It does not reflect very well on the party hierarchy that so much time has elapsed in hesitancy to give advice to Begum Zia on the point. Yes, there must have been pressures from the constituencies she had won in not to drop anyone of them, but that is exactly where her top party aides come in to play a role.

Begum Zia needs taking the oath immediately to put the sneaking speculations to rest.

NEMAP: Moving from Participatory Planning to Participatory Implementation

by Dr Saleemul Huq

THE National Environmental Management Action Plan (NEMAP) has been published recently by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MOEF) and is currently being distributed and shared with all the stakeholders who were consulted in its preparation. This is being done through a series of workshops in different regions with the grassroots participants who had given their inputs during the planning phase as well as with different professional groups such as journalists, lawyers, researchers and industries (both public and private sector).

Already a number of regional and professional group workshops have been held and their results will be discussed in a national level workshop to be held within the next month or so. The purpose of these workshops is to: i) disseminate the NEMAP document to all the relevant stakeholders, ii) report back to the original participants in the consultative phase to let them judge whether their inputs have actually been taken into account or not, and iii) to ascertain the interest of the different stakeholders in being involved in the implementation of NEMAP and if so, then how their involvement can be ensured.

At the same time the different government agencies and ministries are being stimulated to look for opportunities for them to ensure that environmental issues are taken into account in their own activities, either through ongoing activities or by developing new activities as identified by NEMAP. The results of the workshops and sharing of the NEMAP document so far has already given a few interesting lessons to indicate how the implementation can be made in a participatory manner which are discussed below.

Grassroots and NGO Participants: The grassroots participants organised through the NGOs who were brought together and presented with the NEMAP document reacted very positively to the very fact that they were invited to be given the results of their earlier participation. This in itself was perceived to be a novel exercise as they did not really have much expectation of ever seeing the final product of their earlier consultation. On the issue of whether their concerns were incorporated or not their general feeling was that the language of the NEMAP document was still too technocratic and cryptic and

did not specify in enough detail the issues they had identified, although they acknowledged that most of their concerns had been addressed in a more general way.

On the issue of their participation in future implementation of NEMAP there was an extremely positive response and the challenge now would be to ensure their active participation in implementation of NEMAP.

Industries: Both the public and private sector industries have expressed a positive and mature attitude to taking some responsibility for ensuring a clean environment. However, they have a number of legitimate concerns about unnecessary draconian measures which put an unbearable economic cost on them for compliance. The way forward seems to be to engage in a constructive dialogue on a sector by sector basis (e.g. fertiliser industries, cement industries, tanneries, textiles industries, etc) to develop environmental guidelines including needs for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs).

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Initial Environmental Examinations (IEEs) and Environmental Quality Standards (EQS).

There is also a role for promotional activities within the private sector in areas such as clean technology development, waste management, renewable energy (such as solar, wind and biomass) all of which have potential scope for commercial development and profits for the private sector while improving the environment at the same time.

Training, Education and Awareness: One of the major cross-cutting themes that came out of the NEMAP exercise was the need for more training, education and awareness-raising on environmental issues. However, the interesting aspect about the need for awareness raising was that people were generally quite aware about environmental issues and problems and did not need any more general messages on environment. What they needed was specific information on what they could, or should do which went be-

yond mere slogans to plant more trees. The challenge ahead, therefore, is to prepare and disseminate specific information for ordinary citizens to empower them to become active agents in improving environmental conditions around them.

Similarly, in the area of education and training there was a strong desire to incorporate environmental messages of a more practical type into the curricula at all levels ranging from the NGO informal schools, to primary, secondary and tertiary levels as well as on-the-job training for people already working in government and non-government sectors who need some environmental training. The interesting aspect of the education and training issue was the level of enthusiasm reflected by both the students as well as teaching professionals. The aim, will, therefore, have to be to incorporate environmental nature into all levels of education in the country. This is no doubt a lengthy and arduous task but in the long run, may be the most effective.

Government Agencies: The

NEMAP exercise has been initiated and guided by the MOEF with the involvement of all relevant government ministries, NGOs, educationists, private sector, lawyers, and other professional groups. It is therefore, only natural that the MOEF would continue to play the leading role in ensuring the implementation of NEMAP. However, it is neither possible nor desirable for the MOEF to take sole responsibility for implementing all aspects of NEMAP. Rather its role is to implement key activities relating to monitoring of NEMAP activities, addressing some of the cross sectoral policy issues, address the international environmental issues (together with the Foreign Ministry and other national subject experts) and oversee the dissemination activities during the implementation phase of NEMAP.

Thus the role of MOEF, rather than being the conductor of a symphony orchestra where every single instrument and musician has to play exactly as per their prescribed music sheet, is more in the nature of the leader of a jazz band where every musician is free to play their own way within the general theme of the musical score.

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SAARC, SAPTA, SADF: Names of the Game for a Viable Alliance

by AFG Mohiuddin

IN 1950s when the US was suffering from a disease called 'Facilities' (the word was used by US Ambassador, Chester Bowles), countries were goaded to form groups to protect themselves from ideological threats or territorial invasions. But with the end of the Cold War, the groupings transformed into fora of economic development. Such groupings are now the building blocks to the emerging world order. If GATT's Uruguay Round of negotiations has sown the seed of One World, these fora will hasten germination of the seed into a big tree to be called the USW (United States of the World) or, in branches to be named after individual countries of the world. The villain will, however, stand in the way. But the world will move ahead to form one single nation that would know no hunger, no war and no exploitation.

One of the building blocks to form One World is the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprising of one-fifth of the world population spreading over the seven countries of South Asia — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Although born late (1985), it is set to catch up with other regional alliances of the world. The European Union (EU) is the ideal trend-setter and all regional groupings will logically end up in such integration. Following the suit, the seven nations of South Asia established the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) during their seventh summit held in Dhaka on 11 April, 1993 to exchange trade concessions among the member-states. They have further conceived that this 'arrangement' will transform into the SAARC Free Trade Area (SAFTA) preferably by the year 2000, but not later than 2005. Most of the regional alliances will, by then, develop into free trade areas and the post-Uruguay Round trade liberalisation efforts will remove barriers of trade between the nations of the world.

In this backdrop, the degree of economic power that a regional grouping will wield will determine their progress in the community of nations. Question, therefore, arises: What economic power the SAARC will be by the turn of the century? It all depends on how SAPTA and SAFTA will fair.

SAPTA became operational

on 7 December 1995 with 10-100 per cent tariff reductions on 226 items — India to reduce tariff on 106 items, Pakistan on 18, Sri Lanka on 31, the Maldives on 18, Nepal on 14, Bangladesh on 12 and Bhutan on 10 items. The items may be as many as 5,500. The tariff reductions cover items which account for only about 1 per cent of the regional trade. It is just the beginning. Decision has already been taken to extend the list to the maximum possible extent to make substantial progress in beginning SAPTA within the agreed time frame.

The first ever SAARC Commerce Ministers meeting held in New Delhi on January 8 and 9, 1996 agreed that the second round of trade negotiations of the inter-governmental group (IGG) on trade liberalisation should concentrate on removal of all para-tariff, non-tariff and other trade control barriers within specific timeframes. The commerce ministers also felt that the IGG should consider adoption of sectoral and across-the-board approaches in addition to the product-by-product tariff reductions to accelerate progress.

The agreement on SAPTA provided for trade liberalisation in accordance with any or a combination of the bases: product-by-product basis; across-the-board tariff reductions; sectoral basis; and direct trade measures.

SAARC countries agreed to negotiate tariff preferences initially on a product-by-product basis. The political will to go ahead is not lacking. With the launching of the South Asian Development Fund (SADF) on 17 June 1996 from its present headquarters at the ICB office in Dhaka, SAARC got another boost to move forward. But critics have doubts about the efficacy of SAPTA, because of the reason that the tradeables between the countries are mostly not complementary to each other and they compete in most cases in the world market. Only India has the edge over all other member-states of SAARC. Trade deficit with India is, therefore, widening. Among the SAARC countries, the greatest trade deficit with

India is of Bangladesh. It was 422 million US dollars in 1993 as against 37 million in 1986. This deficit will continue to rise if we do not take some pragmatic steps to balance our trade with India. The steps may be as follows:

1) We should allow Indian goods to transit through Bangladesh. The transit fee that we would earn will offset the trade deficit to some extent.

2) We should join the missing links of our railway lines with those of India not only to facilitate transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh, but also to enable us to reduce our cost of importing goods from India.

3) We should set up industries along the eastern border of Bangladesh to produce those goods which are in demand across the border and can be exported cheap compared to those of India.

4) We should set up clinics and educational institutions under joint ventures with Indians and allow Indian doctors, technicians and teachers

ment in SAPTA. Direct trade measures are conducive to promoting mutual trade of Contracting States such as long and medium-term contracts containing import and supply commitments in respect of specific products, buy back arrangements, state trading operations, and government and public procurement.

9) As the founding force of SAARC, Bangladesh should ensure full implementation of SAPTA in the quickest possible time so that the launching of SAPTA is not delayed beyond the year 2000. The Minister for Internal and External Trade, Commerce and Food of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka rightly said in his inaugural address at the first meeting of the IGG in Colombo on 14 March 1996, "Preferential trading arrangements are a primary and a loose form of economic co-operation, which is somewhat outdated. Today what is in vogue is free trade areas or even higher stages of economic integration such as customs unions or common mar-

ket. We clearly see such advanced and mature economic integration arrangements both in the developed and developing worlds, which have been functioning successfully over the years. Therefore, this meeting, which is only a stepping stone for the SAPTA has to take courageous decisions for the full implementation of SAPTA components, namely tariffs, para-tariff, not tariff measures and direct trade measures."

10) The Executive Committee of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industries (SCCI) which held its sixth meeting on 20 June 1996 under the chairmanship of Salman F. Rahman should adopt a master plan of joint ventures between the entrepreneurs of the SAARC countries, keeping in view the complementarity of each others' needs and capabilities. We should avail of the full benefits of the SADF which held its first meeting at Dhaka on June 17-18, 1996 under the chairmanship of Khairul Huda, the Managing Director of ICB and the first chairman of the SADF govern-

ment board by taking regional projects with India and Nepal to harness water resources to our mutual advantage. By raising adequate funds from domestic sources and international institutions like the World Bank and ADB, SADF can create water reservoirs in Nepal to augment flows in the Ganges/Padma during the winter and produce enough hydal power all through the year to feed Bangladesh and India.

12) We should endeavour to make a viable food security system under the SAARC so that we can drastically lower our requirement of maintaining a big stock of foodgrains. The "SAARC Food Security Stock" should be maintained at such level and in such manner that any member-country requiring supply of foodgrains get it in 15 days time. Immediately after the cyclone of 29 April 1991, Bangladesh received 40,000 tons of wheat from the "SAARC Food Fund".

Critics say that in the face of disquieting bilateral problems like the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan, water-sharing problem be-

meeting regarding the Indian military exercise and it was decided that the two countries would sign a non-aggression agreement to get rid of the fear of military aggression on each other. During the founding SAARC summit at Dhaka in December, 1985 and at the second Summit at Bangalore, Rajiv Gandhi and General Zia-ul-Haq, the then President of Pakistan, held informal meetings between them and decided that they would not attack on each other's nuclear installations and would solve bilateral problems by mutual discussion.

These are ample examples of goodwill that are created in SAARC summits offering opportunities of understanding and united stand both at home and abroad. The seventh SAARC summit held at Dhaka on 10 April, 1993 decided to stand unitedly in international fora on such issues as would enhance the international profile of South Asia and would enable the member-countries to articulate their position on them more effectively. Pursuant to this decision, collective positions were formulated by the seven nations and were presented at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in March 1995 and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September, 1995.

Bringing all the heads of State or government to the discussion table every year is no mean achievement of the SAARC. Excepting G-7, no alliance perhaps could bring their heads of state or government together so frequently than the SAARC. The seven nations ASEAN could bring their heads of state or government together only 5 times during their 28 years of assistance. The heads of state or government of the 22-nation Arab League could not meet in 6 years since Iraq annexed Kuwait on August 2, 1990. They met only on 22 June 1996 in Cairo for a two-day summit, but they excluded Iraq keeping a vacant chair for them in the venue of the conference.

Some say SAARC is slow. Perhaps it is but it is steady. And who does not know that slow and steady wins the race?

The writer is a Joint Secretary to the Government of Bangladesh.

To the Editor...

I dream of a country...

Sir, I take the opportunity to inform you that on an unscheduled programme of 9th June 1996, I was able to witness the show "Shabinaye Jante Chai" organised by the Bangladesh Television and Radio Bangladesh. This was an epoch-making change in the programme of TV for the purpose of democratisation of the parliamentary system of election which, at the same time, will justify the necessity of autonomy of Radio and TV in this country. Moreover, this sort of impartial programmes will bring a silent revolution for eradication of social nuisance and reconstruction of its structure in the country.

I am sure that for the sake of public interest, the notable process of questioning on various issues adopted by you including columnist Abed Khan, Matur Rahman, Atiqur Rahman, man and others before the different political leaders is, no doubt, a praise-worthy attempt.

Particularly, it is to be noted with interest that the questions asked to the BNP leaders have definitely exposed their theory of power politics in this country with special emphasis on the distortion of real historical events of Bangladesh, suppressing fun-

damental ideas and the theme of the Freedom Movement, unkind disregard to the patriotic zeal of the leaders, conspiracy on fair politics, indulgence on hooliganism and unauthorised arms proliferation, expansion of social corruption and abrupt misuse of power in every sphere of our society under a democratic government. I am of the opinion that the general mass will realise the background of power politics of a ruling party by this programme.

In fact, while the questions were being asked during the programme on the TV, I could not check my tears, at the age of 60 which has prompted me to write this letter. I pray to Allah that all of you would do well to find out the truth through your journalistic approach which will enrich you highly in our country.

Syed Abdul Baqui
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Winning an election is no victory

Sir, The waves of congratulation, presently engulfing those who won the elections for seats in the Seventh Par-

liament, have given rise to a sense of euphoria in the country without a basis.

It must not be forgotten that a person who wins an election, does it by one or a combination of several qualities such as popularity, eloquence, organisational capability, plans and programmes called manifesto, money power, muscle power, family or parental lineage, etc. Promises made with eloquence or emotion often work as magic — sometimes called charisma.

Congratulations are pouring in on the winners of elections just like the winners of games. But winning an election is not always a victory. It only means that the winner occupies a slot of position and the actual game starts after he or she takes oath as a member of the parliament (MP). Whether he or she achieves victory or condemnation as an MP, will depend on how he or she performs or plays the game during the five years of his or her membership. If the person is honest, sincere and renders services for the people of the country in general and his or her constituency in particular, the MP will earn their gratitude. If he or she fails to perform as he promised, persecutes people or abets in persecution, the person is cursed. It is very simple.

Winning an election places a big burden of responsibility on the winner. Most people think winning an election by a person gives him/her a passport to high position and life. Yes, it does. But at the same time, it clears the way for many to earn damnation. We have seen in our lifetime what happens sometimes to those who were once high and mighty.

Without any reservation, this writer wishes best to all those who won the elections, irrespective of their parties, and prays that they serve the people of this country instead of becoming their rulers.

Mohammad Yusuf
4/2 Zikatala
Dhaka

Pension at old age

Sir, Both the Awami League chief and BNP chairperson continued to pledge for old age pension while they were seeking votes at the JS election of June '96. It is a socialist approach. If we look back to our history we will see that with the introduction of national pay and service commission after Liberation, sector corporation employees were deprived drastically as their pay and benefits were curtailed hiring pay scales with govern-

ment pensionable jobs. Thus sector corporation employees got pay in government scale but they were not entitled to pension. The total benefits on retirement in the form of gratuity, provident fund etc., is not even equal to benefits received by identical employees of government on retirement. Leaving aside the question of life-long pension, let the incoming do something for the senior citizens as promised!

Ahmed Alam
14 Estation Garden
Dhaka

Money-making

Sir, A number of articles continue to be published in various dailies regularly regarding money-making by abusing political positions in India as unearthed by CBI. Several cabinet ministers resigned, some have been arrested while the former Prime Minister's son Probhabar Rao is being interrogated in connection with Rupee 133 crore urea fertiliser import scandal. In this context enough preaching on urea distribution scandal involving money-making of around Tk 500 crore continued to be debated in Jatiya Sangsad and outside during BNP regime.

Even a lone private JS member tabled a bill seeking asset declaration of JS mem-

bers during Jatiya Party rule but the JS member was honoured through appointment of chairman of a public sector bank. Under the above backdrop set the incoming government do something concrete so as to confiscate those black money generated illegally by urea scandal or similar other money-making machines or so.

Ahmed Alam
14 Estation Garden
Dhaka

For a healthy environment

Sir, Recently certain road-repairing organisation had set-up furnaces to melt coal tar in the residential areas and in front of residential houses. The smoke and pungent smell produced by the furnaces had caused serious sufferings to the residents especially to the asthma patients.

May I request the concerned authority to please take necessary measures so that such furnaces may not be erected in the residential areas and in front of the houses in order to ensure a healthy environment?

M Zahidul Haque
Agst Prof. BAI, Dhaka.