

Useful Project

A 180 million US dollar project aimed at improving rural infrastructure is reportedly in the offing. This project is a follow-up of a similar one undertaken earlier. It is mainly focused on expansion and development of rural communication along with an extension of marketing facilities. So, here is a recognition of the need to invest in an area that has a tremendous potential to grow. Road communication improved considerably in the 80's but still there are many many miles to go before all people are reached at the farm or field level. This second phase of rural infrastructural development will not only help secure what was achieved in the first phase but also build upon it.

We are really heartened that the scheme has been developed as part of augmenting rural employment and thereby reducing poverty. Both concepts of investment and growth in the villages have so far touched the lives of rural poor only marginally. The lack of an adequate and effective transport and marketing network has remained a big handicap for agriculture. An absurd gap of prices between the point of production and that of consumption in cities and towns could only be explained by the inadequacies of the marketing network. This project not only seeks to drastically bring down the marketing costs but also aims for development of compatible facilities at the local-level growth centres on a participatory basis.

How will the local people participate in the project? They will have to make their contributions in building the infrastructure in their localities. That sounds quite realistic. Their involvement and the understanding that the facilities they are going to enjoy cannot be entirely free of cost will help instil in them a sense of responsibility to protect those. In the past quite a few set-ups or structures put in place by the government in rural areas crumbled due to neglect. The principle is to raise people's stake in what they use as public property. The fact that roads are leased among villagers for tree plantation is to receive the guarantee that both the road and the plants will survive mindless encroachment.

As for the implementation of the plan, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) has once again been given the responsibility. The World Bank, whose affiliate the International Development Association (IDA) is funding the major share of the cost, will monitor the project. So let us hope the overall rural infrastructure will receive a big shot in the arm.

EPZ in the North

Rather than ventilating grievances testily, the President of Rajshahi Chamber of Commerce and Industry Mohammad Ali Sarkar has, for a change that is so very welcome, aired some concrete suggestions for accelerating the development of our northern districts. Of foremost importance is his proposal for an export processing zone (EPZ) in that rather neglected region, the third one on the horizon after the Chittagong and Savar EPZs.

This may sound like an ambitious piece of advance thinking, but we are all for an EPZ in Rajshahi or thereabouts in not-too-distant a future. The north-western region lacks in direct access to a full-fledged sea port, Mongla being largely a secondary and largely underdeveloped entrepot. The area depends on an East-West interconnector for electricity. So far as gas is concerned, it is the eastern half again where it abounds. So basically if we decide in principle to have an EPZ for the northern part of the country what we should start looking for is the conversion of Mongla into a first rate port and the implementation of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge project on schedule. In-between it will be good to have one LP Gas plant in the area. There is some talk of the southern bay being endowed with a hydrocarbon reserve, let alone the Baropukuria coal mine deposit.

Although these are all in the womb of future there is an obvious element of time-bound certainty about them. So keeping that time-scale in mind, it should be possible to plan out an EPZ for the northern region and let the whole world know in advance about it inside of a year or so. Let's flag off Rajshahi, the silken city, on the global investment map with a self-contained prospectus widely distributed abroad through our overseas missions.

As investors get enlisted and the land is earmarked and developed for the EPZ, we shall be shortening the gestation period to that extent. It is time we set the ball rolling under an integrated plan following the footsteps of countries which planned ahead to succeed.

Nip it in the Bud

It seems the curse of acid-throwing is coming out of oblivion it had been consigned to after a persistently high incidence during the decade of eighties. A national Bangla daily reports that last Wednesday 13-year-old Alefa Banu of Jhenaigati Thana Sadar School in Jamalpur district was badly burned in the face when Sujan, 15, sprinkled it with acid out of dejection in his advances towards her. He had been making passes at the girl for days together with impunity.

Incurably unrequited infatuation gone completely hay-wire by the blinding jealousy of the girl's mental equanimity has been the most common cause for the driving rage to degenerate into a mind-boggling brutality in the end.

Thanks to the societal angst, mobilisation of social and human rights activists against the malady, and a law prescribing death penalty for the perpetrator, the scourge seemed to be on its way out. The Jamalpur incident is a dreadful reminder, however, of the lurking possibility of a return of this abominable crime if localised vigil is allowed to go by default. The culprit in every instance should be deterrently punished.

In Bangladesh it is the demonstration effect of the evil unchecked that breaks into a kind of flurry. Let acid-throwing be nipped in the bud.

To Redeem These Images

by Chandra Shekhar Das

The Prime Minister urged the members of the law enforcing agency, in the simplest of the terms, to nab criminals even if they are found to belong to her party. Armed with this green signal, a much more powerful weapon than any of those outdated rifles they use, the police should go for an all-out effort to improve the alarmingly deteriorating situation in the law and order sector.

IMAGES of urban experience in the last month or so have been disturbing, if not exactly terrifying. The reason for sounding rather apologetic about the second of the two adjectives used in describing Dhaka from the viewpoint of crime rate in the recent times, is the fear of being mithridatised by the comparative allusion of any south American city where criminal incidences are higher in rate and more diabolical and expansive in nature. Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital and an inexorably destined megacity in the demographic perspective makes a compelling case to be portrayed a hotbed of crime, simply on its late and lethal strength in criminal record.

What an assortment of social evils we have had in a week or two! Robbery in daylight at public places, house-break, muggers, misadventure ending in death caused by public wrath and lastly the mind-boggling escape of some convicts from the Central Jail. All form a very said commentary on the standard of contemporary life and time, and more importantly, on the law and order situation prevailing in the country.

The decade we are halfway through will be marked as the most checkered patch in the political history of Bangladesh since its emergence in 1971. From the conflict of dream and disillusionment many happenings took place, quite a few phenomena appeared by the uncharted course of futurity in the last five years though no less allusion deserving are the preceding twenty for sheer in-

consistency in pattern. From the heinously unethical act of jail-killing to the fairy tale enactment of elections under a non-party government for the revival of the anaesthetised democracy, we have had all for the delight of a connoisseur of diversity.

Through all these vicissitudes one thing has remained steady in pattern. Like population growth and the irreversible phenomena of rise in the price of any conceivable thing except human beings, crime has been on a seemingly unending trip to newer heights and newer dimensions. It is true that maintenance of a tolerable crime rate is not simply a case of the ineptitude of the law enforcing agency. Evidently there is more to it. The relatively poor record of guardians of the law in this country is so inextricably associated with the legacy of so many social curses. No one can ignore the indirect contribution of a huge and increasing population to the overall law and order situation. None can contest the most damaging and encouraging influence of our politics on the crime situation either. It will be quixotic to look for a day in future when Bangladesh will have overcome these problems and the law order situation will have the perfect ground to

score a perfect ten. That will be the day when pigs will fly. As a third world country we have to make the best of the worst.

Shorn of the accompanying and abetting agencies, law and order as a precondition of a modestly modern society has never been looked at in a newer prospective from the summit level. There have been visionary lip-services galore, though. With the revival of democracy in the truer sense way back in 1991 following BNP's ascension to power through elections under a caretaker government, the problems and weaknesses in the law enforcing agency started appearing more glaringly. It is probably a *sine qua non* that political guarantee of democracy will necessarily bring along enormous pressure on the whole system of law and order maintenance, should there be not any guarantee of economic well-being and educational upliftment. Unfortunately, an unprecedented rise in the criminal activities index failed to open the eyes of the previous government towards a meaningful and sincere look at the law and order situation. Not unlikely in a country plagued with a tradition of leadership which is myopic in essence and cross-the-bridge

as-it-comes-in practice. Happily enough the new government headed by the Awami League Chief Sheikh Hasina has until now showed every inclination of rising to every occasion of law and order may demand. Seemingly, she is prepared to do it at any cost. Immediately after assuming the control of country's executive lever, she was loud and clear in declaring law and order as one of the priorities in her party's agenda for running the government.

The most recent utterance up that street came last Wednesday. While visiting the police headquarters at Rajarbagh, the daughter of the political architect of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, went on to hit the headlines in a very significant manner, a manner significant for its forthrightness and its absence at this level before. The Prime Minister urged the members of the law enforcing agency, in the simplest of the terms, to nab criminals even if they are found to belong to her party. Armed with this green signal, a much more powerful weapon than any of those outdated rifles they use, the police should go for an all-out effort to improve the alarmingly deteriorating situation in the law and order sector.

The Prime Minister re-

called the supreme and trailblazing contribution of the police force in the War of Independence. It was a customary but effective button to press on. Because the job of police is to serve people and excellence in any service depends on idealism to a great extent. Hence, recalling the role of the police in 1971 was a good attempt to inject new doses of idealism.

But the functioning of the law enforcing agency at the optimum level is not ensured by idealism only. There is, between reality and dream, the larger-than-life presence of economics. For an optimistic start, focus has been shifted to this aspect. In-service incentive like death while being in duty has been earmarked at more sensible but never adequate compensation sum of Taka one lakh, a decision that came alongwith the announcement of doubling ration for police. These are only the beginnings of the reforms needed to help police win the place it should have in the public heart. There have been suggestions that most of the problems lie at the base of the pyramid that is at the lower level of the unit. By long-term and sustained research, the government should try to detect the causes contributing to the gradual tarnishing of the

image of a force. As in other sectors of administration, the apex of police is leading or has had until now, a relatively easy and charmed life. It is the groundings that have felt the drought of the hard times.

One of the jail escapees was nabbed, significantly on the day Prime Minister made her address at Rajarbagh. He shed light that looks like diluting the darkness in the heart of the sensational incident. According to that man, drill machines by which a tunnel was dug as it was dug by Edmund in the fictional world of Alexander Dumas' Count of Monte Cristo, were imported in the cell by bribing the jail guards. For Taka 70 only, the report reveals, the guards did the spade work, so to speak, for the escape of a group of hardened criminals. This is one incident that tells us about the ability of corruption to make shortwork of the long arm of the law.

Unless problems at the lower level of the law enforcing agency is dealt with in a pragmatic manner corruption will live and thrive and jail breakers will continue to have their way out like that. Man is born free but everywhere in chains. Until a world is created where Rousseau's lament and Shelley's optimism on the same issue can be fused to a sense of all embracing freedom for all men, men and women in the administration should go on doing something so that those who deserve to be in chains among us remain fettered and certainly not free like the jail breakers.

Challenges Before the Government: Needed Strict Enforcement of Laws

by Md Asadullah Khan

Nobody would ask the law enforcement personnel to jump to death, but how can a clear neglect of duty can be dismissed so easily or a simple suspension from services of personnel supposed to be responsible can be a remedy for such a gross indifference to duty?

AFTER the election victory of Awami League in the 12th June election, people were ecstatic. Virtually the whole country was cheering because polling was concluded without any major or violent disturbances. But if there was ample reason for celebration, there was also cause for concern.

For Sheikh Hasina, her installation as head of the government also ended a two decade long quest to vindicate the memory of her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was assassinated along with other members of the family in a 1975 coup engineered by some disloyal army officers.

Within just 15 days since Sheikh Hasina got the reins of the country, she announced some spectacular policy guidelines and directions that do not appear to be just cosmetic changes. It seems to have wide implications on the whole body politic of the nation and is likely to boost the morale of the people as well as economic activities that plummeted most during the last couple of years of turmoil.

Despite the fact that Sheikh Hasina got a clear mandate to run the government, she seemed well aware of the fragility of her position. While expressing her gratitude in her meeting with a cross-section of the citizenry, media people and in a public gathering in the Dhaka city, she struck a confident but sombre note. She declared, 'We are standing on the brink of a disaster, both economic and moral, but a whole generation is ready to launch constructive efforts to save the country. We will bring an end to hunger and degradation and malaises both moral and economic. We will rid the country of corruption and terrorism and will provide education, healthcare facilities and above all shelter over the heads of the homeless.'

But something ominous was still waiting on the wings. The new government's symbolic gesture to bury the hatchet in a trouble-ridden country has already won applause and praise from the citizens. People were almost gasping in a spasm of political violence and terrorist activities. With a lull for about three months in this orgy of violence, the cities of

the country are again rocked by a sudden surge of criminal activities. And the evidence accumulating for the last few weeks through the pages of the dailies is inescapable. However much the new prime minister might have wished to heal the country's political wounds, the series of debilitating attacks on different fronts, in different forms and directions must have left people gasping wider than ever.

The recent incidence of removal of the portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the Cabinet room of the Parliament House is a clear manifestation of naked defiance of authority of the government. People understand that the portrait was hung up after a decision to that effect was reached in the cabinet meeting. No body will deny or grudge portraits of other liberation war heroes being there, but the way Bangabandhu's portrait was removed supposedly at the instance of some over-zealous and charismatic politicians, puts all patriotic Bangladeshi citizens to shock. If there were Bangladeshis who have reservations about the role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in spearheading the liberation movement and leading the nation to freedom, then they must be groping in darkness, and the nation may have to pay a heavy price for shying away from this truth.

Most revealing, the episode has ended with the caretaker of the parliament building being brought to book, reportedly costing his services for the offense. Apparently he was made a scapegoat in the dramatic event. The event, of course, does not hurt the serious governance of the country but this unmistakably bears paramount significance and throws a challenge to an elected government that has just started working to undo the wrongs done in several sectors simply because of non-governance and seemingly, even for non-recognition of the spirit of the war of liberation.

The new government might

take one thing into consideration. Although the country had hit rock bottom, its people were willing to make painful sacrifices to regain the prosperity they had lost. After a lot of tumultuous events and turbulence during the past two years Sheikh Hasina, the new prime minister of an yet unsuccessful nation has made good pledges to the nation. Working with her apparently pragmatic Finance Minister and all too tactful Trade and Industries minister, Sheikh Hasina wants to cut government spending, privatise a slew of money losing state industries and bring in a sizable foreign investment. What she has to do first, perhaps for the first time in the financial sector of the country, is to force the affluent group to pay their taxes. This group even if they are earning a lot in trades and industries, have always evaded taxes through different tactics.

On the foreign policy front, the new government seems to be making some radical changes as demonstrated by its commitment to friendship with neighbours and respect for each other's sovereignty. The recent visit of the Indian Foreign Secretary, carrying a message of goodwill for the new government of Bangladesh ushers in a development in relations with our close neighbour. People recall with gratitude the enormous sacrifice, in both men and money, India had made along with our valiant freedom fighters in emancipating the country from the holocaust unleashed by the Pakistani forces against the unarmed civilians of Bangladesh. People, this time also feel that India can never hoodwink the fact that this country starved of its due right in Ganges waters from the Farakka. Hopefully, the two countries under the leadership of two new prime ministers are trying to resume relations ruptured in the meantime. Public confidence in politics and politicians which remained so low so long seems to have a chance to reach a new dimension. A long term prognosis may be favourable in

repairing the damage in relations of both the countries. People now wait to see the new government's success in stabilizing the economy and sustaining democracy. In recent times, there has been an escalation in the terrorist activities and a steep deterioration of law and order situation. Dacoity, looting and extortions in different areas of Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna have given a jolt to the confidence of the people who were rather pinning great hopes for a society shorn of violence and chaos after the change of government.

In some cases the attitude and inaction of the law enforcing agencies are also shocking. How come when the dacoity in the Chittagong market area in broad day light was going on for almost an hour, the ASI of Police who was reportedly on duty there and was certainly aware of the incident did not ask for re-enforcement from the nearby thana situated just within one kilometer of the place of occurrence? Nobody would ask the law enforcement personnel to jump to death, but how can a clear neglect of duty can be dismissed so easily or a simple suspension from services of personnel supposed to be responsible can be a remedy for such a gross indifference to duty?

People in the country felt greatly inspired when they heard the new Home Minister Major (Retd) Rafiqul Islam announce that a national conference on Law and Order incorporating people belonging to all walks of life would be held on July 20 with the objective of thrashing out a concrete line of action in striking at the root of the problem that plagues the society so much. It is at the same time heartening to learn that the Home Minister himself is monitoring the most sensitive files of terrorism-related cases. But people's patience is waning thin day by day. The best prescription, as pragmatists say, is to strike the rod when it is hot.

People also believe, as the Prime Minister said to a group

To the Editor...

Caustic soda : Custom duty and tariff value

Sir, The caustic soda solid is an important raw material for industries like textile, paper and soap. The finished product from these industries are essential commodities for all the people.

However, for last many years the National Board of Revenue, ignoring the above fact, has been fixing the tariff value at US\$ 480.00 per metric ton to collect Customs duty on caustic soda. The rate of duty is also high: 22.5% + VAT 15% + Development Surcharge 2.5% + AIT 2.5%. The total component of duty is 46%; that is to say the government is collecting Customs duty at US\$ 221.00 Tk (9,280.00) per metric ton of caustic soda.

Surprisingly, before four months, the National Board of Revenue discontinued assessment of Customs duty under the pre-shipment inspection (CRF) by approved agencies. The action of the authorities resulted in increase of caustic soda price by more than Tk 5,000.00 per metric ton. Before four months, the price of caustic soda was Tk 22,000.00 per metric ton. But now the price is Tk 27,500.00 per metric ton.

finished products such as textiles, papers, soap and detergent etc. are allowed for assessment of Customs duty under Pre-shipment Inspection (CRF). The result is flooding of market with these foreign finished products by few importers to make profit at the cost of local industries. The local industries cannot compete due to high Customs duty and high tariff value on the raw materials imported by them.

At present the Ministry of Finance and the National Board of Revenue are in the process of preparing budget for the year 1996-1997 to be presented by the government in the next session of the Parliament. I hope, the legacy of the past will be corrected by appropriate reduction of Customs duty and tariff value on most of the raw materials required by our local industries.

Abdul Wahab

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'Islamisation of Hill Tracts...'

Sir, I fully endorse the views expressed by Mohiuddin Ahmed in his article entitled 'Islamisation of the Hill Tracts: A Case of Majority Chauvinism,' which appeared on June 29 in The Daily Star.

Interestingly, the import of

the CHT have been deprived of their due rights in independent Bangladesh. The majority Bengali chauvinists always tried to make them Bengalees in the name of assimilation. Thus fear of being exterminated as a distinct national identity has deeply rooted in their minds.

Now secular Awami League is in power. We hope the government will pay due attention to their problems.

Let the hilly people live in their own land without any fear and with their own culture, heritage and lifestyle. After all these are the objects of pride for Bangladesh.

Finally, thanks to Mohiuddin Ahmed for his write-up.

Milton Chakma

Dhaka University

"Blowing one's own horn"

Sir, I would like to refer to the letter of Mr Aaidit Rahman in your daily on 14th July '96 under the heading "Blowing one's own horn". In the last sentence Mr Rahman has asked whether he had a national consensus on the subject. I do not know whether he will have the same or not but he has my support.

Nurul Basher

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