

Save the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans are sick. This should not be news to the intelligentsia of this land. In fact, the 6,000 square-mile forest has been dying for long. The crucial question is: has it reached the point of no return? Or the process can be reversed and the forest started on the way to recovery — even now.

These questions, however, may shrink into merely academics having little impact on the bigger questions of Bangladesh's physical survival. The root of the looming big tragedy lies in the fact that the literate people in general and even the informed ones here do not care much about the fate of the Sundarbans. The forest has been going waste for so long and yet the danger it poses for this country hasn't been perceived even by the government.

It seems there is lately a flicker of light in the dismal picture. British scientists and British funding have made it possible to undertake a three-year project to understand the top-dying disease of the Sundarbans mangroves which has already affected 40 per cent of all trees in the forest. The project is targeted mainly to test the hypothesis that the top of the Sundarbans trees is dying as a consequence of global warming adding to the level of the world ocean through the melting of the polar ice deposit.

The project, however, would also try to understand how Bangladesh can face a possible defoliation of its southern shores and fight falling off into the seas, literally. And, as a part of the project, manpower is being initiated into the specifics of the special kind of forest management this would warrant. A very encouraging act in a very hopeless situation.

The mangroves in the Sundarbans, the highest concentration of such in the world, are holding Bangladesh from being eaten up by sea water. Long before the mangroves give in fully to the rising saline sea water, man has been destroying the forest, driven by land hunger and sheer greed. The crime of denuding large tracts of it for timber has lately been joined by the equally, if not more criminal digging of shrimp ponds. The government has sat smug while the Sundarbans were being strangled.

This must stop and the society must start caring about the Sundarbans. To save the forest many more of such projects would be needed and permanent set-ups created for constant conservation work. Nature in Bangladesh is a prey to man's ignorance, petty selfishness and shameless greed. For Bangladesh to live, this must change.

Policy for Privatisation

The present Awami League government, contrary to notions that are yet to go into full obsolescence, is in a more advantageous position than its predecessor BNP in matters of taking forward the stalled privatisation programme.

First of all, from a left-of-centre belief in a strong nationalised sector, the party is a convinced convert to privatisation of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) after giving them a last chance to be viable. The fact that a grace period is being given to some of the public sector units does not detract from the Awami League government's express recommitment to disinvestment since its induction into power. Second, with the party's experience in labour unionism it should be able to relate to the various CBAs better. Third, the Awami League government's return to power after 21 years has had a healthy, balancing effect on the somewhat unidirectional thinking pattern in the bureaucracy. Governmental deregulation and services reorganisation may be easier.

Since there are as many as 150 SOEs and utility service units it would have been far from realistic to have aimed for wholesale privatisation — and over-night. But again phase-wise disinvestment of state-owned industries or utilities need not be confused with any slow-down in the process which, in any case, has only stagnated thus far. The approach ought to be geared for the doing the job well and doing it firmly with a multiplying effect.

The process has basically foundered on the rock of attempted disinvestment of only loss-incurring units, bloated valuation of their assets and rigid terms and conditions for any take-over bid. Such dampers should be on the exit course as the government makes a fresh list of disinvestible and retainable units and do the needful on them. The Awami League government's public position regarding privatisation, on which it also seeks the cooperation of the opposition in the parliament, is fairly well-known. All that is needed now is to draw up a privatisation policy and declare it for the investors' guidance.

Special Courts

Within some weeks of the government's constituting ten special courts to take up cases of repression of women and children we get the news that these have started functioning since last week. The sheer speed of the happenings speaks volumes of the dire straits in which the recorded cases of atrocities upon women and children have been without a verdict returned on them for years or justice done even to the memory of a victim like in the *Yasmin* episode.

Laws with new teeth, repeated media pointers to delays in handling the cases of abuse, eagle-eyed vigil of the women's and children's rights groups have been of little avail before the coiled intricacies of the criminal procedure code. Then again, this is applied by overburdened courts all the time creaking under pressure.

The special courts functioning with the exclusive jurisdiction of trying cases of repression will be able to deliver justice at the quickest and thereby serve as a deterrent against their proliferation. Such courts' very presence can help ward off human rights violations and miscarriages of justice through *fatwabazi*.

While we greet the government on the good beginning made by it in the redressal of injustice our womenfolk and children have been prey to, we like to urge them to set up one such court in each district taking the total to 64.

Diplomatic Pirouette on Northern Iraq

Of all the countries holding Kurdish population Turkey figures on top with nearly 15 million. It is therefore natural that Turkey should have an effective voice in the negotiations determining the fate of the Kurds.

ROBERT Pelletrau, US Assistant Secretary of State left Ankara on 23 October, 1996 after brokering a Cease Fire Agreement with the help of Turkey between the leaders of two Kurdish rival factions, Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Talabani had extensive meetings in Ankara on the 22nd and gave his guarded consent to a Cease Fire, which will hopefully be announced now.

Talabani met formally Turkish Foreign Minister Tansu Ciller and signalled his readiness for a Cease Fire. He is also reported to have agreed in his talks with Ciller to give a place in the future administration to the Turkmen in Northern Iraq. Talabani was reported to have agreed to the Turkish demands for assistance in not allowing the territory of Northern Iraq to the PKK guerrillas. Turkish

security forces have been engaged in a murderous war against PKK guerrillas for the last 12 years which has cost nearly 20,000 lives on both sides. To assuage US feelings, Talabani was reported to have agreed to sever links with Iran.

It has been widely reported that Talabani managed to recapture Suleymaniyah from his rival Barzani with the assistance of Iran.

Earlier last week Pelletrau held talks in the Turkish border town of Silopi with Massoud Barzani. Barzani had entered the Turkish town from the Iraqi border. The talks were attended by a Senior Turkish official. Pelletrau presented with Barzani with identical formula for Cease Fire along with severance of links with Iraq. Barzani is reported to have agreed and gave assurances



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

to Turkey concerning the activities of the PKK guerrillas.

Along with Barzani and Talabani a new player Isin Celebi, the leader of the Turkmen, has entered the field. It is Turkish insistence that has brought this about. Turkish help in evacuating CIA sponsored Kurdish spies, numbering more than 2,000 from Northern Iraq, has played a significant part in enhancing the Turkish role in the current diplomatic manoeuvres surrounding the question of Kurds

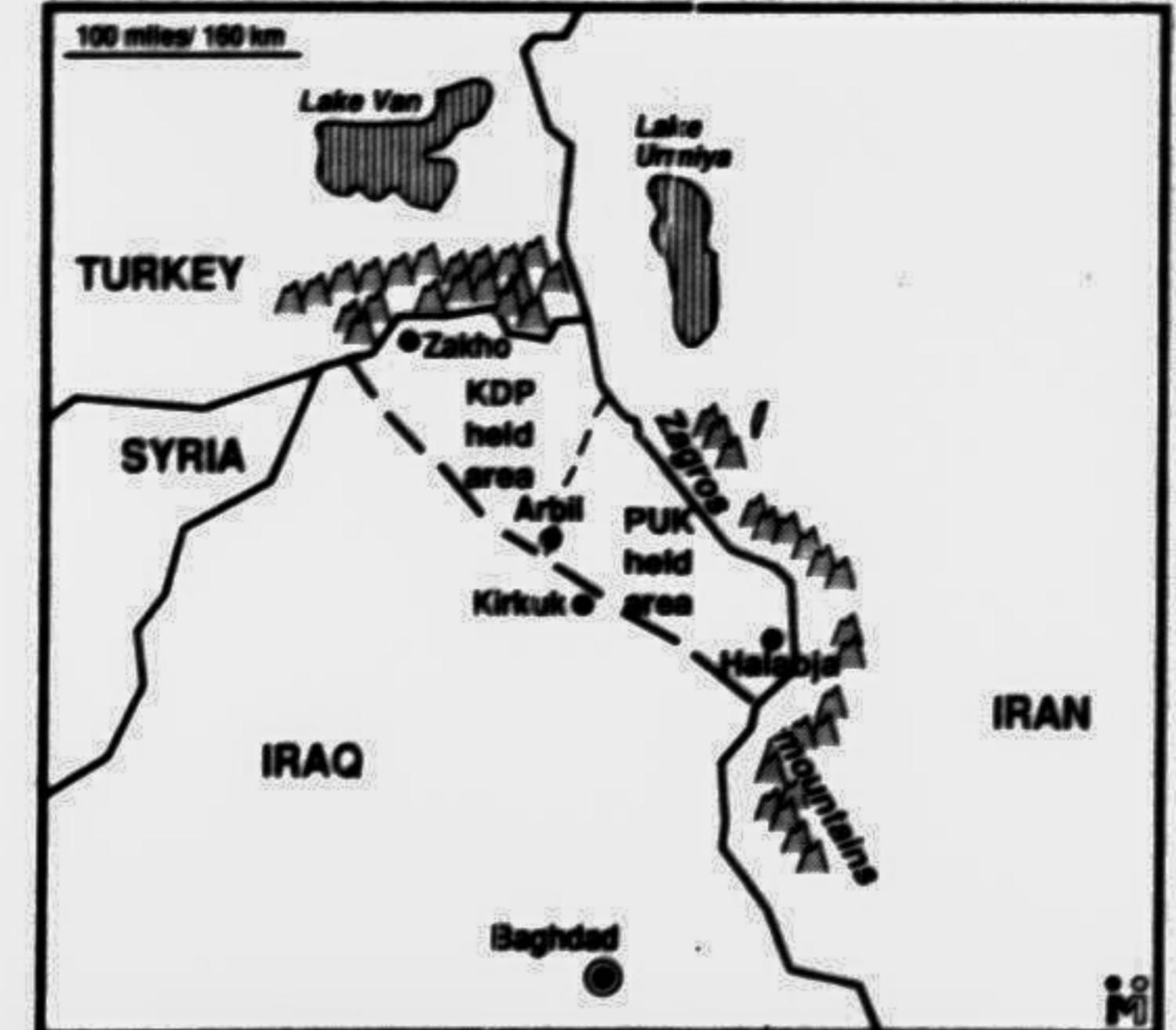
of Northern Iraq. As late as 22nd October a fresh batch of 608 Peshmerga CIA agents flew from the southern Turkish town of Adana to Guam.

Regarding Turkish role in the intricate negotiations, Ankara daily 'Daily News' commented editorially. 'Conditions are ripe for winning back both Barzani and Talabani. Turkey can end the senseless fighting between the Iraqi Kurds and rescue both leaders from the clutches of Baghdad and Tehran.' The editorial concluded. 'Now we have a chance to bury the past and open a new chapter with the Iraqi Kurdish leaders. The benefits will be mutual.' Foreign Editor Sami Kohen writing under the caption 'Ebb and Flow in Northern Iraq' in the large circulation *Milliyet* pointed out that Washington had managed to persuade Barzani and Talabani to hold talks 'under US auspices' and warned them to 'stay away from Iraq and Iran.' He pointed out that the aim of the talks was to set up a provisional administration. Kohen pointed out that the latest developments 'have pushed Turkey in the foreground and the talks are being held on Turkish soil' and concluded, 'these days Turkey's views and interests are in line

with the US offensive.' With the holding of the talks between the two Kurdish leaders Barzani and Talabani on the one side and the US and Turkey on the other side, the first big step towards a Cease Fire has been taken. The diplomatic initiative taken by the US has matched with the ebbing of the fratricidal war. Of all the countries holding Kurdish population Turkey figures on top with nearly 15 million. It is therefore natural that Turkey should have an effective voice in the negotiations determining the fate of the Kurds.

The latest round of talks definitely indicates that a page has been turned and fighting is to be replaced by hard bargaining at the diplomatic table.

Kurds' rival enclaves



To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Miss World contest

Sir, Interestingly, it is being observed from a news item that numerous feminist organisations including the Hindu nationalist and revivalist groups have been consistently protesting the holding of Miss World contest scheduled in the Indian city of Bangalore, on the ground that staging of such programme which also followed by a colourful parade programme of the semi-nude beautiful young girls is a serious threat to their values and culture, although beauty contests in India is a very regular event that is being held in their different cities. One women group has already vowed to carry out a suicide programme to stop the alleged unhealthy show of blind imitation of western culture.

My heartfelt congrats to those feminist and revivalist groups for their laudable and bold role they are playing so far. At the same time, my humble question to them, what would be their expression and profession as regards to the daily semi nude dances and shows that performed and displayed by their Bollywood super-duper film stars like Sridevi, Madhuri Dixit, Kishore Kapoor, Mamta Kulkarni and others, who are also famous all over the world for their exciting dances. Is it not nudity? Is it not the blind imitation of what their leaders called as western culture? It seems that their alleged leaders do not watch or aren't aware about the nudity of the Bombay filmdom. Much bewilderment is the recent partan remarks of Mr Bal Thackeray, who is famous for advocating Hindu theocracy and a good friend of the promoter of the said show, and recently whose party has blasted a leading Indian Muslim Artist named Maqbul Fida Hussain for the painting of a Hindu goddess. Is it not double standard? However, it is to mention here that the India's super-model girls now converted to Hindi film stars. But in occasions — when Susmita and Aishwarya won beauty contests — we did not hear about any objection raised by the feminist or revivalist groups.

Mr Thackeray may deserved to be commended for saying that "their people would be very fortunate to see the most beautiful women of the world, if the show staged in their country".

R A Choudhury
Uttara-Dhaka

US-Israel axis

Sir, At this hour of great tragedy, trial and tribulations, we express our empathy, unflinching support and solidarity with our Palestinian brethren who have been relentlessly struggling for their human rights, freedom and democracy from the Israeli atrocity for over last five decades.

We strongly condemn the outrage and violence, short-sighted policy, arrogance and transience of Israeli Prime Minister for blocking Middle East peace accord 'Land for peace', building illegal settlements and opening an underground passage near the Al-Aqsa Mosque sparking fire and fury and shedding the blood of hundreds of Muslims.

We are very much surprised and shocked why the US envoy at the UN Madeleine Albright is always reluctant to denounce Israeli violation of human rights, breach of international law and UN resolution, illegal occupation of Palestine, and Southern Lebanon and Syrian Golan Heights?

We wonder where to the US-Israel axis leading the Middle East?

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Excellent Idea Poor Show!

Sir, This is a short note to place on record my sincere appreciation of your commentary 'Excellent Idea Poor Show' which was published in your esteemed daily on Thursday, 3rd October, 1996. It was no doubt a sensible reaction to BTV's programme "Sabinayee Giggash" telecast in the evening of Tuesday, the 1st October, 1996. I am happy to say that you echoed the voice of thousands of silent TV viewers who equally waited to hear from the Prime Minister nothing but the whole truth. They are as much disappointed as you were. Although I will not accuse the Prime Minister for resorting to any lies, yet I will say that it did not matter what she said. What came out prominently is what she did not say. It was undoubtedly an exercise in shocking silence on vital issues.

No doubt you tried to find fault with BTV, Ministry of Information and finally the Prime Minister's secretariat (manned by not her real well-wishers but mainly sycophants). But can the Prime Minister wash off her hands from the blunder she committed in spearheading a programme 'signifying nothing'? She may not be the producer, but she was the protagonist — the star of the show. Indeed, what an opportunity she missed!

If you want to blame only the bureaucrats, I think you are not fair. If the programme was successful, it is not the organisers who would have got the credit. The Prime Minister would have not only taken it but also used it to gain political mileage.

You called the programme

Who'll make the capital's traffic orderly?

Sir, I feel, to maintain the Capital as a capital, the government has some responsibilities. That's why, it has formed RAJUK, DCC, DMP, WASA, DESA, BTTB and the like with more authority and power to keep Dhaka as an standard capital, and also as a model city of the country. But, if an alien lands in this city, then he will find the capital as an orphan. He would also have doubts on the capability of the government to control the city's administration.

On the traffic disorder of Dhaka, conscious editors and elite took initiatives to draw the attention of the authorities concerned. One of such venture is DS's "Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka" campaign, organised by Mr. Mahin Anam, Bangladesh Scouts and BUET. True, the society didn't expect from them (DCC, RAJUK, DMP etc) to turn the "traffic jungle" into "traffic heaven" by a magic wand. But what they hoped was at least an application of traffic law strictly on all to array the "traffic jungle". No doubt, it is desirable to have "Flyovers" and "Freeways". But these will need time and money to come into reality. Until then, shouldn't we try all possible

You called the programme

ways (with available means) to root out the causes of *Long Jams* in the city? In fact, if such a trend of disorderly traffic continues, then no matter how many Flyovers/Freeways are built in the city, won't come to any help. A vivid example can be seen near ZIA, where poor traffic discipline, a magnificent walk bridge and passengers waiting shelters are not used by road users.

So, my questions are: a) Why the traffic laws are not strictly enforced on all road users, to make them disciplined? b) Why then our rickshaws aren't made to follow in line (if needed be) by providing a 3' high lane-barrier all along, on both side of the roads, to contain rickshaw with in it) in the rickshaw-lane? c) Why aren't rickshaws made to wait in orderly style in designated stands? d) Why maximum accident makers — mini-busses/buses are allowed to stop recklessly on the road, to stop picking up hanging passengers? e) Why mini-busses are allowed to carry more passengers than their capacity? f) Why bus-stops are near road crossings (usually a dense traffic spot) to add more bottlenecks to traffic movement? g) As space is available, why a wider traffic circle cannot be made near Hotel Sonargaon and the like places to ease present congestion?

A R Choudhury
Uttara-Dhaka

Short on Action

Sir, Thank you very much for your editorial published on 24.10.96 under the caption 'Short on Action'. You have rightly said that we also need to step up our vigilance against the use of mastas as hirings and ensure a much stricter enforcement of the law, so that no one — no matter how rich or powerful he may be — can evade it.

I also read the letter published in your esteemed daily on 17.10.96 under the caption 'Muggers at Narayanganj'. In that letter the writer has mentioned about an influential politician who created pressure on police to release the muggers. Though the government has taken certain steps for it, yet nothing has been done against that influential politician. Because of the fact that politician belongs to ruling party. The people of Narayanganj know it very well that this politician rarely comes to the police station to file a case.

If government, in my opinion, can take any action against this person, it is needless to say, 'terrorist activities' in Narayanganj will be stopped forever. Will our government take any action against this politician?

Mujib Rahman
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On purchase of power from India

Sir, There may be reasons to purchase power from India if the feasibility study, as has been undertaken by the government, recommends it. But the issue must be examined very carefully. At the moment the purchase of power from India may seem very lucrative in terms of its potentials for solving our problems of load-shedding and inadequate power supplies to the industries. But what will happen if India suddenly stops the supply because of unfavourable twists in the political atmosphere in the future or become of our unwillingness to pay higher power rates which India may compell us to do?

If that happens, shall we not again plunge into the darkness and be forced to close down the industries? Recently a situation like this has occurred in Uganda and Kenya. Most of the Kenya's power requirements are met by Uganda. Now Uganda has suddenly increased the power rates. Kenya says it cannot afford that. As a result a crisis has developed in the relationship between these two countries. May be Uganda will have to yield because it is a landlocked country and needs export facilities through Kenya. So in my opinion it is best to be really independent in matters like power. Let us generate all our necessary power ourselves using our available gas and coal.

Mrs U Khattoni
Dhaka

OPINION

Of Trial and Justice

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