The Baily Star

Pounder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali Dhaka, Tuesday, December 3, 1996

Accept the Challenge

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken the BNP charge of repression and harassment very seriously. So much so that she took hefty chunks off her speech on the inaugural rally of silver jubilee celebrations of independence to talk about it. She challenged the opposition to cite any one case of a BNP activist being held without specific charge. Any number of such persons would be set free as soon as they are correctly named, she said.

The Prime Minister had also reacted very positively to the BNP stridency when soon after her return from Rome she knew BNP had moved the President on the point. She requested the President to himself go into the allegation and find out for himself the truth of the matter. The BNP reacted to this only by harping on their charge. What will the party do after the public challenge by the Prime Minister?

The opposition must not take time to prove that theirs is no irresponsible rhetoric. For the newspapers are reporting arrests of AL activists also and there is also news of AL elements being murdered. The question of who are being persecuted is getting more and more confused. In a matter of weeks the confusion will get worse if the BNP doesn't in the meantime address Hasina's moves and prove beyond doubt their charge.

If the opposition fails or doesn't care to substantiate its accusation all its cries of 'tiger, tiger' or selling the land out together with its sovereignty — weird as it is — will take a fatal beating. Notably, the Prime Minister took the lakhs in the Sunday meeting into confidence on the BNP cases against water, transit, electricity and Asian Highway. Rather than sounding rhetorical, the BNP would do well to respond to the Prime Minister's challenge on arrests not by repeating allegations but firmly basing them on facts and figures.

Towards SAFTA

The second round of trade discussion among SAARC countries has ended on a highly positive note. The negotiators of the seven member-countries of the regional body — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — came up with praiseworthy efforts in synchronising their positions to increase the number of the products coming under tariff concessions from 226 to about 1500. It is not only a milestone in the year-old history of SAPTA but also one in the annals of the regional body which has had more than its share of cynical observations for the lack of early dynamism.

Economic symbiosis is as much a reality as regional cooperation is in today's fast changing world. This is all the more applicable to the zone of South Asian nations that transact among themselves only 3.4 per cent of their global trade volume. It is a pity that at a time when especially, the South East Asian countries are vigorously discovering new realms of economic cooperation regionally, their neighbours are still working with the modalities to forge unity for mutual benefit.

It is however, better late than never to get started and the news from Kathmandu comes with an extra bit of optimism in this respect because India alone is reported to have offered tariff cuts on 900 items. The biggest member of the SAARC has agreed to go for a 10 to 15 per cent concession on these items. As the biggest and the most resourceful country in the South Asian belt from any point of view, India needs to build along such initiatives to free the SAARC from the stigma of an otiose association and elevate it to a worthy, weighty and effective one.

The encouraging achievement in the Himalayan Kingdom injects a new dynamism into the process of realising the goal of launching the South Asian Free Trade Area by 2005. If a progressive development upon the gains of the last meeting is ensured there is no reason why the SAFTA will not be a reality earlier than five years into the year two thousand.

A Suggestion to BTV

It will probably ask for a research of sorts to track when this saga of taking the mickey out of the viewers first began with the Bangladesh Television. It can be recalled readily and unsavourily though that the national electronic media on Sunday came up with something like that at a very interesting phase of a game of cricket it was telecasting live which evoked sighs of moaning, even undisguised annoyance from viewers.

Unless it is a purely entertainment one, a television channel will have news bulletins at the core of its programmes. BTV too is no exception. Its authorities probably have the most unenviable job of doing justice to all quarters having to work with a single channel where programmes are packed like sardines.

But Sunday's disruption of live telecast of a cricket match, that too at the final stage hammered home the necessity of being little sensible and flexible with the news hours. Particularly, during the winter, when live telecast of one or two domestic cricket matches is always on the cards, the idea of pushing one or two news bulletins out of any collision course should be entertained seriously. This measure can be thought of as a seasonal arrangement. The latest instance of leaving the viewers high and dry at a climactic stage of a live telecast is yet another reminder for a suitable adjustment.

Of Transits and Port Facilities

The request for facilities like transit or use of port should usually be entertained among the regional countries if they are innocuous and in mutual interest of the countries concerned. However, the case of India asking transit through Bangladesh is somewhat extra-ordinary because she is not one the landlocked countries which ordinarily qualify for the grant of transit, writes **Brig** (**Retd**) **M Abdul Hafiz**.

the geopolitical implication of the issue they tend to consider its geo-economic advantages and are fascinated by Gujral's estimate of Taka 2000 crore of revenue for Bangladesh only from opening up Chittagong port facilities. They also estimate a few hundred crore to a few thousand crore of Taka of annual revenue earning if a large scale overland transit is granted to India. According to them, the SAPTA of which Bangladesh is a signatory already envisages such transit and the proposed Asian Highway is, in any case, going to link up the countries and the continents providing trade network with similar facility given to each other. On the other hand, the detractors of the notion mostly from the opposition camps seem intoxicated with a heady brew of transit politics and have made a beeline in gaining some political mileage almost at no cost. In a blanket condemnation they have not only turned down the idea of transit, they also found in it a fresh conspiracy to enslave Bangladesh. Most of the problems arising out of the debate have however been due to our lack of information as to what kind of tran sit is in question. We have

has been a bizarre

experience to witness an

unusual furore over the

question of transit during the

recent months. The importance and urgency accorded to it have

indeed a tinge of mystery and

enigma. Because the question of

transit was never a major item

on our foreign policy agenda -

let alone its place and priority.

if at all, as a national issue -

although it could have existed

in the peripheries of numerous

policy discourses in the foreign office with regard to our bilat-

eral relationship with India. At

least from the hints dropped in

recent years by several Indians

of prominence it could be estab-

lished that India had profound

interest in a large scale transit

facilities through Bangladesh

for her turbulent North Eastern

States. The transit was learnt to

have been proposed first as the

part of a package in which

Nepal and Bhutan also would be

included and second, as a solu-

tion to huge imbalance in Indo-

Bangladesh trade relation.

Bangladesh embroiled in more

pressing issues both on domes-

tic and external fronts obvi-

ously put those proposals in the

backburner. Nevertheless both

former Finance Minister

Manmohan Singh and incum

bent External Affairs Minister

K Guiral during their visits re-

spectively in 1994 and 1996

sufficiently hinted at the grant

of Chittagong port facilities to

India to compensate for

Bangladesh's trade imbalance

with India. Sensing correctly

the priorities in Bangladesh I R

Guiral was during his visit both

cautious and benign when he

categorically mentioned that

his government did not intend

to link the question of transit

with the issue of water sharing

which emerged, over the years.

as the key issue of Indo

Bangladesh relations. He ap-

parently wanted to placate

Bangladeshi sentiments on

such linkage. Yet there rages an

animated discussion on the

subject of transit bringing it to

a feverish pitch as if all the na-

tion's problems and prospects

hinge to it. A myriad arguments

have already been piled up on

either side of the dividing line -

the pro-transit lobby and its

going liberal on the question of

transit to India have brought in

the paradigms of Europe and

North America to uphold the

virtue of trans-national move-

ments of commodities and per-

sonnel, seen in transit an eco-

nomic boom and also argued

that the country's sovereignty

and security significantly lay

in an economically integrated

and interdependent subregion

whether one calls it South-

Asian North-East or South

ern Himalayan region. Ignoring

Asia's growth triangle of East-

The promoters of the idea of

talked aplenty about it in absence of a clearcut context and the issue has seldom been placed in perspective as a clearly defined case. It is all the more intriguing because some kind of transit protocol is already been in place between Bangladesh and India and it was there right from Pakistan period when it was however suspended following 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. Limited wa ter/rail transit facilities were restored after the independence of Bangladesh and it continues till date. What additional facilities are required to be considered now? And what are their implication on our politics. economy and security? At least our public does not know if such facilities have at all been officially asked for As a result any debate on the subject has been speculative, erralic and irra-

A section of media academia and intelligentsia has marshalled interesting arguments in favour of transit most of which have unfortunately been mere hyperbole. It has advanced various explanation to justify its arguments which have little relation with the ground realities in South

Asia. The pro-transit lobby fondly talked about European liberalism and cooperation and put up a romantic vision of the great changes' taking place around the world and asked why should we be lagging behind. But then Europe traversed a long way from its custom union days of early fifties to the signing of Maastricht treaty. Also earlier. Europe went through phenomenal transformation for several centuries and was enriched by its Renaissance, the Great Enlightenments and Industrial Revolution. It witnessed great political developments of the dimension of French Revolution and evolved the concept of nation states. Through a long and turbulent process it has only now come to be the civilisational model for the present era. What happens in Europe is worth emulating but can they be achieved overnight in South Asia - virtually the backwater of the world? Can the econômic interaction of Europe including its highly sophisticated transnational movements of goods with computerised surveillance system be practiced in Indo-Bangladesh context with their state of economic communica tion and technological infrastructures? Can the political trust and understanding nour ishing European community be instantly infused in our inter

And the great changes around the world? Nothing has fundamentally changed as far as the nation's vital interests are concerned. Even in Europe debates as to the EC's future enlargement, security and monetary system vis a vis the member state's national interest seldom receded.

As regards the projected economic boom from the grant of transit and port facilities a modest question can be asked as to what does a nation do when it has no option of granting someone some kind of transit or port facility. A nation has to move entirely on its own steam If only the enormous bunglings that exist in various sectors of our economy can be straightened and streamlined the bait of transit revenue dangled before us would dim into insignificance. It is not much the question of geo-economy just now. For us it is essentially the question of good governance. For instance, if the pervasive smuggling that takes place across our border can be stopped even partially through a sociopolitical movement, the loan recovery can be effected in nationalised banks or the tax evasion can be curbed to some extent, our revenue earnings would shoot up manifold. On the contrary the ready money of transit revenue that is alluring many of us may prove illusory. Who can after all guarantee that there would not be another bunding there?

bungling there? I K Gujral's gesture was appreciated when he did not want to mix up transit with other bilateral issues. In that he spared water issue all right, but in a subtle manner he did the same mix-up with trade issue when he counselled us to consider the possibility of huge revenue earning from opening up Chittagong port to compensate for our loss in bilateral trade. The trade imbalance is by itself an issue in our bilateral relationship and ought not be rnixed up with transit or any other issue. It should be resolved on its own merit and find its own recipe for removing the existing imbalance. There have been talks in the past about the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers. joint venture in Bangladesh with buyback guarantee as well as import liberalisation from infant industry perspective. There has however been no

headway. Each one of this prescriptions holds enormous prospect for reducing trade imbalance. Why then linking it up with transit or port revenue?

Nevertheless, a blind opposition to transit to a neighbouring country is indeed foolhardly and cannot be a healthy attitude in international politics. Any such request from another country merits attention and due consideration. The geopolitical imperatives of the region call for the kind of cooperation implicit in the grant of such facility. The request for facilities like transit or use of port should usually be entertained among the regional countries if they are innocuous and in mutual interest of the countries concerned. However, the case of India asking transit through Bangladesh is somewhat extra-ordinary because she is not one the landlocked countries which ordinarily qualify for the grant of transit For India it is more a matter of convenience and strategic advantage. Even then her specific case should be heard, analysed and intensely debated in public forum. Once the public is adequately educated on the issue people should be left with the authority to decide.

importantly, the grant of these facilities presupposes the

trust and understanding which are, however, missing in our region. In an era of growing interdependence nations can be at times desperately dependent on each other. A transit through Bangladesh to her North East, if granted, would perhaps be extremely useful for India the way our share of the Ganges water could be a boom to our impoverished economy, hadn't its flow been obstructed by India. It is incredible that the country of India's greatness could be callously indifferent to the miseries of the millions in the lower Ganges basin in Bangladesh! India's water policy with Bangladesh for last quarter of a century has been anything but conducive to the creation of a political will - essential on both sides for a bold give and take. Is it in any way compatible that India would be asking for a large scale transit route/routes piercing through the heartland of Bangladesh while erecting barbed wire fencing around her? India's political leaders make blistering comments on the so-called Bangladesh emigrants' and its government pushes 'them' out to Bangladesh while expecting that Bangladesh would lav bare the whole length and breadth of the country for them and their goods. Does it work? What must precede the culture of transit and transitional free trade are trust and compassion for each other as well as their aspira tions and interests. Let us work for the first. The transit, port would auetc., facilities tomatically follow.

existence of certain political

ambiance and a level of mutual

IN MEMORIAM

End of a Good Man, a Kind Man, a Pleasant Man

by M M Rezaul Karim

breathed his last two nights ago at the CMH, with his near and dear ones by his bedside. By the standard of medical advancement of modern times, he died at an unripe age of 64. He suffered from diverse and complicated ailments for over a year and succumbed finally to dreaded cancer. His indomitable urge and firm determination to live longer kept the angel of death away for him for quite sometime.

of Khaleda Zia's government, a Home Minister in her late husband's government and as a prominent policy-maker of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, he made positive contributions to the society. The fact that he effectively held such coveted positions for so long was a glowing testimony to his ability and dependability as a leader.

A former Foreign Minister

People who had the opportunity to come in contact with Mostafizur Rahman liked him perhaps more as a man than as one who held high positions in state service. He was well-mannered and polite in his dealings with people; possibly his army background had something to do with it, besides acquisition of a natural trait of good upbringing. He was an affectionate father and worthy husband of a friendly and popular lady.



Sufia Rahman, who was a pillar of strength during his good and bad days.

Mostafizur Rahman was pleasant in his disposition and.

unlike some, was prone to lis-

tening to others' viewpoints. He was helpful to those who deserved help, and would not indulge in false promises. As a patron of sports, in his capacity as President of the Bangladesh Cricket Association and President of the Mohammedan Sporting Club, he endeared himself

to the youth as well.

Minister.

The news of Mostafiz's death cast a heavy shade of gloom over those who had known him. People poured in large numbers at the hospital, house, three janaja prayers and, finally, at the burial ground to pay last respects to the deceased. Notables included a host of diplomats and foreigners and a few government officials. Conspicuous was the absence of political leaders, who did not see eye to eye with his views, and the multitude of timid officials who had been direct beneficiaries through acts of the former

Perhaps, even death is too weak to overcome human debilities for some of us mortals. In any way. Mostafizur Rahman will be missed and fondly remembered in the society.

Jyoti Basu

Sir. The visit of Mr Jyoti
Basu to Bangladesh augers well
as he belongs to Bangladesh as
well; he traces his ancestry
from former East Bengal, now
Bangladesh. The Irish descendent Americans still feel a very
strong emotional attachment
for the country of their origin
and we feel Mr Basu must be
having a soft corner for this

The people of Bangladesh welcomes Jyoti Basu as one of its great sons. It is our appeal to the Prime Minister to grant honorary nationality of Bangladesh to the visiting Chief Minister of West Bengal as a gesture of goodwill from the people of Bangladesh for his endeavour to settle the Ganges water dispute. We feel a permanent settlement of Ganges water dispute to the satisfaction of both India and Bangladesh shall remove the only irritant in the relationship of both the

Al-Haj S M Khalid Chowdhury Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka

Making T&T corruption-free

Sir, Since The Daily Star is a paper dedicated entirely to the cause augmentation of public welfare in all walks of life. I. as usual, want to draw the attention of all concerned to the exploitative nature of the T&T people. A letter published on Friday (20-9-96) last is a vivid story told by a respectable senior citizen. They don't care whether someone is a lonely old lady, a retired public servant or an innocent businessman. No one can easily get a telephone line without paying heavily or waiting for years and this is public knowledge. We were told that due to the introduction of computers, false billing had been made difficult, but what about keeping a telephone line deliberately disconnected for months and billing the owner?

It is heartening to note that the government has decided to allow private telephone, agencies. Here again you would notice the so-called T&T unions will raise, as they did before too, objections, stage demon-strations and resort to strikes. What is needed is firm action and public support. All the parties and citizens should support government's firm action against the culprits who want to hold the society in ransom! That they will do all the wrong things and yet they cannot be challenged, is an untenable situation. The T&T - like many other public enterprises, including the PDB cannot show any profit because a lot of the revenue is looted out and the public exchequer is deprived. The new government - especially the present T&T Minister - will surely appreciate that if all these crimes are uprooted, the government revenue will go

up substantially and then it can undertake many public welfare activities without resorting to grants of any sort. There should be no compromise where public interest is concerned! And this is bound to brighten the image of the government and increase its transparency and augment public welfare which is the main commitment of the government.

Ahmed

Mosque for both the sexes

Sir. There is no denying that even in our present Muslim society. Muslim women are being deprived of many advantages (social as well as religious). In some religious practices, they have little access to perform their mandatory rituals and observances. To make my point would like to draw the attention to the fact that nowadays women are hardly permitted in the mosques even in the pursuit of their religious purposes. It has been taken for granted that women should say their fivetime prayers at home in privacy and they are not supposed to attend the congregations in the mosques.

But what we see in the fullfledged Madinan society at the time of the Prophet (PBUH) is quite reverse in this respect. It is a known fact that in that society women used to attend the mosques regularly. One selfevident Hadith will make it clear. Prophet (SM) said. "Do not prevent women from coming to the mosques" (Bukhari Hadith 815-824, 847). Even during the tenure of Omar (R) we see that an argumentation between Omar and a Muslim woman over Mohr (dowry) in marriage occurred inside the mosque. It seems to be unimaginable in our present society that a woman would involve herself in religious discussion in the

I think it is the consequence of a negative evolution brought about in Muslim society and in consequence the tradition of women prayers in mosque has come to an end. It has been resulted from the fear of 'fetna' i.e. women prayers in mosque might create sexual aberration in the society. But I would be glad enough to remind the Muslim scholars that it is Allah (SWT) who knows best and according to His vast and limitless knowledge. He has given us immutable decision, immutable principles and immutable laws. So we should not be scared about this particular kind of 'fetna' as Allah the Exalted makes it permissible for the women to attend the congregation in the mosque.

Unfortunately, this negative aspect regarding women has made a little impact in the Muslim society. It seems that

some so-called Muslim scholars regard women as "full of sin" and hence women are not allowed in the mosque. In fact, Islam basically makes no difference between the sexes. Allah says, "Verily I have exalted the bani-adam (children of Adam)." This "children of Adam" includes both sexes.

It is admittedly true that when a person resorts to mosque for religious preoccupation he/she gets divine inspiration especially when he/she listens to Friday sermons. But women are being deprived of this desirable spiritual advantage. So there should be a change in the present adverse situation and we should get to the Madinan full-fledged Islamic society at the time of Prophet (SM). The Muslim community should be sincere enough to accommodate women in the mosques for prayers and other religious practices.

Mahmudul Hasan English Department Dhaka University

Unauthorised encroachments on government land

Sir. I would like to draw the kind attention of the authorities of the departments concerned to the fact that Uttara Model Town is now being turned into a non-model town beyond its original blueprint on account of following reasons:

a. Unauthorised encroachments on the government land are going on in different sectors of Uttara by force.
 b. Uttara Lake is becoming a

centre of public nuisance.

c. Road constructions, drains, sanitation, etc., are now being hampered due to selfish consideration of the interested

quarters.

In the name of new construction activities, rubbish, litter and many other unhygienic materials are scattered here and there, limiting the movement of the people, and the beauty and charm of this Uttara Model Town. We earnestly request the authorities concerned to take up immediate steps to put an end to these illegal activities of the house-owners at Uttara.

Wealthy people do not bother about the rules and regulations of the land. If they are allowed to continue this practice, it would lead us to a disaster in the near future. On top of that, the absentee house-owners are like blood-suckers at Uttara evading government taxes and extorting high rents from the tenants who have been living under compelling situations for their existence. A high-powered committee should look into it and save the tenants from the hands of the house-owners. The sooner, the better.

A Citizen Ameer Complex, Uttara, Dhaka

OPINION

Silver Jubilee of Liberation: Longing for Belongings

Since long I have been thinking of saying something especially to two types our people: those who have successfully forgotten the history of the Liberation and secondly, those who are out to try — with all their heart — to forget. They are still out to create chaos and confusion with lot of lies — to arouse cheap sentiment and to exploit that to meet 'their' end.

But then time is flowing uninterrupted, unhesitant. The month of November has just plunged into the last month of the year and we find ourselves by the tumultuous shore of our great Liberation festival. We will finally celebrate the Silver Jubilee of one of the greatest occasions in world history happened in the year 1971. We will remember our glorious struggle and war which resulted in regaining our dignity and honour: our lives and belongings; our peace and security.

It must be a great festivity, no doubt. But I have some points to make the readers think. We just cannot decline the fact that India, our neighbouring country did everything it could with a view to making our Liberation easier and possible. Throughout the entire volume of the great history, story of its generous coopera-

Our demand, therefore, should be to ensure that we must not forget our friends in need, while we keep in mind that the government has already announced its willingness to invite them to join us in the ensuing occasion. We must share our rejoicing on this great occas-ion with our guests of honour.

Well, we have passed quite a long time in confusion and hesitation. Since the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — the great helmsman of the then imperilled nation we have just been ruled by the group of people who are morally divided into pro-liberation and anti-liberation factions. Naturally they failed miserably to guide us to grow a self-respected. self-sufficient nation. The original morale of Liberation was killed and buried with Bangabandhu. He is no more. But fortunately, the morale and inspiration has now awarded a

Khandker Mazharul Karim fresh birth like Phoenix. Now is about time we could take measures to rebuild that miserably injured inspiration and philosophy of our Liberation, establish afresh friendly relation with our neighbouring countries with earnest gratefulness and equal respect for each other. Our diplomatic ideal should now be honest, natural and humane. And why should we not long for these belongings - these invaluable treasures a free, modern person can be proud of? Our country, our people must

remain grateful to Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. We must remember her from the very core of our heart while the remembrance of the most vilious genocide will sure keep haunting us. What the great lady did for us was certainly a good lot more than she should have been expected to do politically, diplomatica-lly, and above all, militarilly. The new generation knows of her contribution to our independence. One may not know what a big risk she had to undergo. what a desperate move she had to make and what a fierce struggle she had to wage with many a contrary and disfavour It is not I, after all, who wrote the history, so who am I to erase it? Owing to this greatness we honoured the lady, as a symbol by constructing a stage in the Suhrawardi Uddyan where she delivered a lecture to tens of thousands of her honouring audience. But have you ever found any trivial sign of that complementary gift presented to her up there or elsewhere in the country since the bloody coup of 1975? You have not. It was crushed

Well. how and why should we have belittled ourselves with this silly ingratitude? What harm our gratefulness could have possibly done to our sovereignty and liberty? And in other words, what did we really achieve out of the arrogant pride and obstinate self-conceit? On this great occasion, therefore, it would not be wrong to urge upon that a personal representative of that great lady

be invited to join us. Let us be very frank about

our history. We did not give bat tle all by ourselves. Indian Army joined with us too. Thousands of Indian soldiers were killed on our land during the war. Why not another monument for those friends — those friends in need? Well, I don't think it would be any surprising proposition. We have grave vards and monuments of other foreign soldiers here in Bangladesh and I don't fired any hesitation in innocent monu ments of the heroes who sacrificed their lives to help us free our country from the barbarous foreign junta while we trake care of a number of the same of others. I should not ask what it was not done in the past. But I am quite sure our friends in the Indian Army who fought our war shoulder to shoulder should not have been rewarded with a mere flower or a trifling green co-

conut. They deserve a lot more. Whoever among the following great persons are still alive should be invited to join us in the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of our Liberation War and Independence: General Aurora General Oban, General Manekshaw and Lt. Col. H R Chakravarti (Commander of BSF 76 Battalior, posted then in Krishnanagar). \Ve would expect Inspector General Kesry Singh and Lt. Col. Megh Singh and Major BN Bhattacharya to come. We should as well invite Brig Limaya and Brig BC Pande. and all those friends from the training camps of Melaghor Dehradoon. Shillong. Naihati and so on.

Maybe some of them are no more in this world. But their kins and folks should be assured that they will remain very much alive in all our remembrance as long as we live, as long as Bangladesh's graceful flag in green and red hoists in the sky.

Finally may I ask whoever is immortal? Should we not all die some day? Must we die. But should we die without receiving in full our just belonging — our absolute truthfulness, heroic since rity and historic gratefulness? That is precisely the reason why I long, fervently long, for them — in the context of the greek Silver Jubilee of our Liberation.