The Baily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. All Dhaka, Tuesday, December 10, 1996

WTO's Challenges

The World Trade Organisation's first ministerial conference that began in Singapore yesterday looked forward optimistically to a further opening of international markets. However, the optimism is not shared by all because the shadow of a controversy over the abuse of labour in some developing countries is yet to be dispelled. The issue in question is workers' rights which are not always respected in countries where industrialisation is at a low level and the supply of labour is more than required. The concern expressed over the abuse of workers' rights by some WTO members is not mere trade diplomacy; there are genuine reasons to get alarmed. At the same time western work ethics and values also would be too much to expect in industrially less developed countries.

Clearly, with the opening of international markets further, the countries with cheaper labour are expected to enjoy a slight edge over others. But their backwardness in terms of technology is likely to blunt that edge. So, there is no point forcing the developing countries to raise the labour standards to that of the western countries. This does not, however, rule out the fact that there is a compelling reason to gradually improve the working condition in factories of the developing countries and raise the overall labour standards. With the opening up of their markets, this is bound to happen. A break-neck speed will only bring the whole process to an abrupt halt besides being interpreted as being neo-protectionism. We suggest that a compromise formula be found out with the ILO acting as a mediator.

As for the implementation of the Uruguay Round (UR), this conference has a lot of issues to sort out and a good deal of reviews to do. The creation of the WTO was necessitated by a new set of realities. It is for the first time that the new body's performance so far will be brought under closer scrutiny. Today the world at large has accepted the virtue of free market economy and the initial tensions and frictions are not going to be nominal either. Labour dispute is just one of many a shockwave. Environment, investment, competitive trade policies — to name just a few — are on the line. An objective analysis and understanding of issues and realities in different economic settings alone will help resolve the problems and make way for a universally acceptable international economic order.

No More of This, Please

The newspaper stories on enslavement of students aged below 14 years at the Tasbidul Quran Mohissunnah Madrassah in Chittagong bear a fresh testimony to the abominable things that happen not-so-surreptitiously in the name of religion and religious education. Only last month a madrassah located not very far from the metropolis, had been exposed by a Bangla daily for having literally enchained a juvenile pupil from his feet upwards and we ran an editorial on that stopping short of venturing into any exponential or empirical exercise. But now we are genuinely suspicious of the pervasive nature of the trend with the Chittagong madrassah incident bringing to light the horrendous magnitude of medieval-type torture perpetrated on the pupils — they being put in iron fetters to prevent them from 'fleeing.' And why wouldn't they attempt to escape from a cauldron they were in when under the one-sided rules of the madrassah they and their guardians were preempted from raising any voice against the way the principal ran the madrassah?

Now, thankfully, the head of the so-called madrassah Maulana Saleh Ahmed and teacher Mohammad Waliullah have been arrested on charges of torture and 21 students have been rescued from the hell-fire. Nevertheless, it should be a shame on all concerned that the excesses continued with impunity for the last 15 years. The railway authorities who gave them lease of the land for building a madrassah never cared to find out whether the noble purpose for which they had done so was being served at all or not. Now, one gets to know that the boys came to shops nearby in shackles and had been taken to welders for enchaining them in the first place. How was the local community ignoring such obvious signs of wrongdoing?

Let's be deferential to the Human Rights Day which is just ahead of us and to the UN Charter of Children's Rights and be unforgiving to those who trample these.

Rather tell-tale

This is how perhaps sometimes the windmill of truth stirs into revolving by a fortuitous nudge of a breeze. A BSS-circulated news item published in our paper on December 5 revealed that share certificates and cash worth Tk 9,20,000 belonging to one Joynul Abedin, a CID employee, and which were allegedly stolen by Mohammad Jasim (30), have since been recovered by Motijheel police. The report adds that both are residents of Motijheel AGB Colony. While Jasim has been arrested by the police with the valuables in his possession at Paridas Road in an early dawn swoop and could still be blabbing a self defensive version of his own, no less of an onus lies on the owner of share the certificates worth about Tk 800,000 and Tk 1,20,000 in cash to explain how he amassed such wealthsomething out of proportion to his conceivable sources of income.

Since a case has been registered with the Motijheel police in connection with the recovery of the share certificates and the cash, an extended investigation into the origin of the acquisitions is expected to be carried out.

As for government employees there has been circular from the relevant authorities forbidding kerb-market trading or trading generally by members of their families. Not all the kith and kin of government employees can be dubbed as 'dependents' so that their right to legitimate business cannot be impinged upon.

The Strategy for Privatization

The options for privatization are several. The opportunities are varied and many. Unfortunately, we seem to have remained confined to the policy debate in workshops which are shops only and hardly any work. Privatization is now well accepted. Government has no business to be in business. There is no need for any debate on the subject.

management companies. This is understandable since Government has no capacity to run hotels or better its capacity should be utilized for other much more important purposes. On the other hand. Madhyapara hard Rock Mining Project should also have followed exactly the same policy as suggested for the coal mining

From the above, the first strategy and the easiest to adopt for privatization will be do not repeat do not create any new or additional public enterprise with government management. The expansion of the sector corporations must stop forthwith Instead, a variety of financing arrangements may be adopted to involve private capital as well as private management from the very beginning of a new project which is commercial in nature. Why should BCIC be allowed or encouraged to invest in new fertilizer factories. The policy should be to enable private capital to flow in and build such industries. If local entrepreneurs are too shy due to lack of any relevant experience, invite investors from abroad who are in abundant supply and looking for attractive opportunities anywhere in the world Even the barren rocks of the Moon have now be come hospitable for investment given the right opportunities for the purpose Why not

In particular, investment in energy, mining and other natu-

Bangladesh?

ral resources are particularly of significant attraction to large investment houses and specialized companies abroad. Therefore, in case of drilling. transmission and distribution of natural gas, oil refinery, mining, cement plants, chemical industries based on natural resources, for example, natural gas and electricity generation and distribution where new investments are involved should all be vigorously promoted in the private sector only and this

more efficient and therefore if would be reasonable to assume that government subsidy will be reduced if private sector could be increasingly associated with management of enterprises. Eventually, it will be possible to divest a part of the enterprise through the stock market and through this process, the entire company could be privatized. There is a bull running in the two stock exchanges of the country and now is the time to undertake the large-scale unloading of government holdings



ment; even where public funds are included, private management must be ensured at all

The second strategy for privatization would be expansion of the scope for private management. The government tried to auction off many public enterprises but attractive offers were not received. This is be cause investments involved were too big to be attractive in the context of current Bangladesh situation If that is so, then government may encourage private management against attractive fees. After all, the basic assumption is that private management is far

in companies which are run ning well at present.

In case of public utilities, for example power plants or urban water supply schemes, institutional innovations, which are appropriate to the occasion. may also be conceived. At present, government has allowed only private power generation. which means that the tyranny of the linemen will continue there will be illegal connections and government will continue to suffer losses due to so-called system loss. A way out of this inefficient arrangement will be to promote small scale power generation and distribution by private companies An ideal ex-

ample in this respect is provided by a pioneering entrepreneur of Hatya island who has put up two small power generators along with distribution lines, charging at a flat rate from each household for five to six hours of power supply in the evening. Thus instead of huge investment through REB, it may be appropriate to consider small scale power companies supplying to small rural towns. thana headquarters or clusters of villages where generation and distribution of electricity are fully integrated. It may also be feasible to allow electricity generation by individual industries who in addition to meeting their own needs, also fulfill requirements of adjoining neighbourhoods. Following the same principles, small scale urban water supply systems can also be developed. This is particularly feasible for thana towns or suburban areas linked to real estate development by the private sector

Not all industries owned by the government can be privatized. There are enterprises which are inherently bad business. There is no point in running them for incurring continuous losses. These should be closed down with immediate effect. An important part of the privatization strategy must be to abandon bad business and the sooner it is done, the better for all of us.

The recent government decision to award mobile cellular telephone business to three

privatization. However, it does not establish an efficient management of the major telephone operator. The Bangladesh Telephone Board which is entirely owned by the government. Similarly, private bus operators are thriving while public bus company, BRTC is stagnating as usual. So government must subsidize public buses. An important condition for these entities to be eventually privatized will be to convert them into public companies, registered under the Companies Act 1994 and therefore not subject to usual government control but operating under conditions which are the same as a private limited company. This will imply that both the telephone and bus companies are subject to the same conditions for credit or taxes as private operators. They may become bankrupt and must close their shops. On the other hand, there are good possibilities that such public companies might seek private cooperation and divest part of their shares through public offerings. This would be privatization through reform and development. It is a solution which deserves to be examined in depth by the government.

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cant development in the field of

The options for privatization are several. The opportunities are varied and many. Unfortunately, we seem to have remained confined to the policy debate in workshops which are shops only and hardly any work Privatization is now well accepted. Government has no business to be in business. There is no need for any debate on the subject. How to do it is the question to be answered yet.

nied with seriousness but not

Prime Minister's India Visit and the Water Issue

Going by the age-old dictum, it is always better to be an optimist unless the pessimism is

 INALLY, Bangladesh and India are on the verge of signing an agreement on the vexed issue of sharing the water of the Ganges Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visits India for three days from Tuesday and is scheduled to have talks with her Indian counterpart H.D. Deve Gowda on Tuesday. The visit is expected to produce the signing of the accord on the Ganges water and in all probability water resources ministers of the two countries would sign the agreement on behalf of their respective governments. All eyes are set on the details of the accord, which will come in for severe introspection by different quarters. Pros and cons of the agreement which is in the offing will be weighed and will be analysed in varying inter-

pretations.

recent world bank report

on privatization stated

I that in case of a govern-

ment-owned coal mine in

Turkey, the Government might

be better off to import coal and

pay the miners to stay at home.

I am sure that such instances of

government savings will not be

rare in Bangladesh. But of

greater immediate concern is to

avoid creation of new loss

making public sector

enterprises. I would not suggest

that all government enterprises

would inevitably make no

profit. However, the propensity

to incur loss is also quite

significant. It would therefore

be prudent to adopt policies that

minimize the huge volume of

subsidy which every year is

funneled out of the government

Turkish coal mine immediately

reminded me of the

Barapukuria Coal Mining

Project. Through foreign assis-

tance, the work is going on now

to eventually develop a huge

public sector enterprise where

10,000 miners will be extract-

ing coal - a vital energy re-

source for the country. But once

it is a public enterprise, it would

be difficult if not impossible to

privatize it later on. Therefore

it should have been started as

either a private enterprise with

entirely private investment or a

mixed public-private enterprise

if the required investment

funds were not available. In any

case the management should

have been in the private sector

from the very first day of the

Barapukuria coal mining pro-

ject. There is nothing new about

it. The two five star hotels of

Dhaka are one hundred per cent

owned by government but the

entire management (100 per

cent) of them are with private

The dismal story of the

budget.

Not surprisingly, any treaty on such a crucial matter like sharing the water of the Ganges will be scrutinised and the national interest within the context of the accord will be assessed. No doubt, the essential parameters of the proposed accord are already not unknown but the entire issue covering the different aspects of the treaty are yet to be learnt. It is presumed that all the details have not been fully sorted out even at the stage when the accord is widely expected to be signed. This too is not unusual since final touches will be given to the accord till the moment it is signed and it is natural given the complexities involved in the subject - both political and technical. The quantum of water to be shared, the length of the accord, its short and long term components, the gurantee

clauses, machanism to monitor the flow of the water through the Farakka Barrage etc., form the basic parameters of the agreement on the issue and, un deniably, the focus of all activi ties in the national level is now the visit of the Prime Minister

to India and the water issue.

While the nation is celebrating the Silver Jubilee of liberation in a carnival-like atmosphere, the attention from this exhilirating scenario will be now shifted to New Delhi for at least these three days for obvious reasons since the importance of the visit of the Prime Minister to India is much more than an ordinary visit at bilateral plane. Sheikh Hasina, eversince her coming to power on June 23 this year, had been to some countries both at bilateral and multilateral context. She had been first to Saudi Arabia essentially on a religious trip which was followed up by first official visit to China and then the Prime Minister was in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session and lately to Rome to attend the World Food Summit. Arguably, all these visits were important - both considering the countries she visited and the reasons for the trips. Nevertheless, the visit to the immediate neighbour is seen with much greater interest in the political, diplomatic and other circles at both home and abroad. The importance is understandable. Relationship

with the immediate big neigh bour is both important and sensitive. The Farakka issue is the catalyst of discord in the bi lateral ties and consequently the tenor of the bilateral rela tions largely depends on this

proven. About the water issue too, one may go by the spirit of this

proverb, writes Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury.

Dhaka has other bilateral disputes with India but they are of minor nature. Once this major irritant is tackled, policy makers in both the countries could heave a sigh of relief since the issue casts a big shadow on the whole relationship. When viewed from this perspective. the seriousness to find a solution of the problem that vitally affects Bangladesh's interest is generally welcome. If there is no effort, evidently there will be no results. However, it is expected that people of the country will not have the impression that the issue has been clinched in haste. Seriousness is desireable as long as the ultimate outcome also falls in the same pattern. And, many issues which are rather innocuous in nature can be debated upon for political and diplomatic polemics but as far as this country is concerned, the water issue can not afford it. Going by the age-old dictum, it is always better to be an optimist unless the pessimism is proven. About the water issue too, one may go by the spirit of this proverb.

As the two neighbours are close to reaching an agreement on the contentious issue of sharing the water of the com-

mon river Ganges, it is relevant to give a short background of the genesis of the discord The origin of the Ganges water sharing dispute dates back to the Pakistan days when the Indian government though of con structing the Farakka Barrage to divert water from the Ganges into the Bhagirathi-Hoogly through a feeder canal in the dry season in order to improve the navigability of the Calcutta port. The then Pakistan gov ernment and Indian govern ment discussed the issue but failed to resolve anything on this while the two countries had succeeded in signing accord on the Indus Basin Teaty in 1960. There was no progress on the Farakka Barrage which was completed in 1970.

After the independence, the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission was established in 1972 and its objectives implicitly recognised Farakka as an item of discussion. The joint declaration of the prime ministers of the two countries in May 1974, recognised that the two countries would find a mutually acceptable settlement of the Farakka problem before the barrage is commissioned. The seriousness of the matter remained at the top of Bangladesh's interest in its dealings with India and hence were the accords of 1974 and at later stage in 1977. After the expiry of the five-year accord signed in 1977, the two countries agreed for a two-yearly

memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 1982 and then another MOU in 1985 for three-year period. All sharing arrangements came to an end in May, 1988. Many meetings between the two countries took place at various levels but the impasse continued Lower riparian Bangladesh is automatically the sufferer in the process and India also recognised the need for this country receiving water of the Ganges. Former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao said after a meeting with his the then Bangladesh counterpart Begum Khaleda Zia during the last SAARC summit in the Indian capital that India cannot want its neighbour Bangladesh starve of water. But the water was not forthcoming.

A flurry of activities since two new governments took over in New Delhi and Dhaka saw the current situation where two sides are signing an accord on the issue. The visit of Indian foreign secretary Salman Haider as the special envoy of prime minister Deve Gowda here, the visit of Indian external affairs minister I.K. Gujral to Dhaka, our foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad's visit to both New Delhi and Calcutta, water resources minister Abdur Razzak's visit to the Indian capital and finally, the visit of West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu only recently to this country paved the way for the condition that exists at present All these moves were accompa-

without controversy at times Expectedly, this is a high politi cal issue and major political forces here will obviously give vent to their views on the subject. Even in India and more interestingly, in West Bengal this issue draws varying opinions involving the rival political parties. Incidentally, the West Bengal chief minister. apart from being in a position of enjoying a big clout in the present united front government at the federal government in India which his Communist Party of India (CPM) supports. has a say on the water issue since his state has also a stake on the matter. Mr. Basu while enjoying river cruise here in the Buriganga-Dhaleswari and Meglina in a nostalgic mood since the surroundings were once familiar to him - he being from a small nearby hamlet "Barudi", - must had been embroiled in the future characteristics of the accord between Bangladesh and India on the water issue. As the Chief Minister of an Indian component state, which has say and stake on the Ganges water issue. he appeared to have facilitated the efforts for a solution of the

The accord between the two countries on the matter is more than essential for Bangladesh protecting its all possible interest. The progress has been made in good spirit and not cloaked in mistrust. One can only hope that the final signing of the agreement will reflect this spirit and the lower riperian feels that it has been given a good treatment by its host in New Delhi, which is in the up-

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.

"Ensure justice for all"

Sir. The letter published in The Daily Star dated 4.12.96 under the heading "Ensure justice for all" is baseless and selfmotivated. This has also defamed the police to an extent. Mrs Akhter Jahan and her daughters have not been repressed by us. It may also be stated that we, Didar Mandal and Abdul Latif, had no connection with the law enforcing agency and we have not threatened Mrs Akhter Jahan, her husband late Mubarak Ali Mandal, Rafiqul Islam, husband of her second daughter, of Vill. Tarakandi, P.S. Dhunat, District Bogra. Mrs Akhter Jahan is not living sleepless nights either, rather she is living in her house in peace with her daughter. We have no greed on their property, rather in spite of having our share with them we never asked for that share and they are enjoying our shares as well and we have not even raised any objection. We have never tried to kill her second daughter's husband. Rafiqui Islam. It has been a long time we have not seen him. He is living in Dhaka, about 250 kilometers away from our address, and he is serving there. We have rather been defamed in the eye of the society for publishing such letter. We are not mastans and were never under shelter of any political party and never committed any 'mastani'. We invite Rashida Begum — the letter writer — to investigate the matter on the

spot on the basis of her com-

plaints. We tend to believe that

what has been mentioned in the

published letter is not actually known to her. Therefore, we condemn the context as false,

baseless and self-motivated. Md Didar Mandal

and Md Abdul Latif Vill Tarakandi, P S Dhunat,

District Bogra

"Cutting down tress" Sir. The corespondent (DS. letters, Dec 7) appears to be unduly concerned about the cutting down of the tress in Suhrawardy Uddyan, to make the huge open space more useful for a variety of public uses (no permanent buildings or inhabi-

Even if 50 per cent of the small plantations are removed (for replantation elsewhere; not destroyed), to clear blocks of areas for specific public community activities, the rest tree coverage/gardens would remain. In fact the density of the latter could be increased.

The fact is that this huge lung of Dhaka is hardly being "used" at all. Now that the Victory Memorial/Monument is coming up there, the experts will properly plan the use of the Uddyan.

Dhaka

Delay in Results

Sir. Delay in publishing the results of any examination is undesirable. Such delays create frustration among the examinees, enhance anxiety of guardians and generate dissatisfaction in the society.

The Degree examinations results of 1995 under the National

University was published eight months after the examination.

This delay was unprecedented.

The Degree examination of 1996 of National University commenced on Nov 9, 1996 which will end on December 30. 1996. About 2 lakh 12 thousand 733 students are appearing at BSc (Pass), 44,765 at BSS (Pass), 36 at B Music and rest are appearing at BA (Pass) examinations. The number of students appearing at the examinations is not so big to cause unusual de-

lay in publishing the results. We hope, the results will be published within 90 days which means by the end of March 1997. Our humble request to the government is to look into the matter.

Md Shamsul Haq Azimpur Road, Dhaka-1205

DCC needs service

improvement

Sir, Jack of all trades and master of none, the DCC has been poking its nose in every civic affair of the city like water supply, sewage, gas line, telephone, electricity and even in the polity of the country. DCC is now reportedly planning to run public buses. Unfortunately the Corporation has always been failing in discharging its duties and responsibilities diligently

and efficiently. We are surprised at the various ostentatious and pretentious activities of DCC. We hear loud voices of DCC using noisemaking spray machine for evicting mosquitoes from the city. We are also told that demon fishes are released in the dirty drains to devour the "forefathers and the future generation" of mosquitoes

DCC has placed and displayed yellow dustbins on the public thoroughfares here and there in a haphazard manner obstructing traffic movement. The original garbage corners and dustbin sites have been encroached upon and occupied by hawkers and vendors of the

The exterior of Dhaka City Corporation headquarters looks superb and majestic but the works and functions in the interior of the mammoth building are perhaps horrible which

need to be improved. We would like to request the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation to kindly look into the matter of improvement.

O H Kabir Wari, Dhaka-1203

Acting on intuition

Sir, This refers to the letter published in The Daily Star on December 5, 1996 under the heading "Acting on intuition" written by Nur Jahan of East Nasirabad, Chittagong who is one of the notable and frequent letter writers.

I fully endorse her views when she says, "in intelligence, judgment and commonsense women are not inferior to men in any way". But I humbly differ when she opines in general that males are not well-wishers of females. I know a number of women, a few of them person ally, who agree that they are deeply indebted to either their lather or husband or even brothers for their success.

Are they not among the males? It is true men are often the causes of many frustrations and woes in this male-dominated restless society. But I reiterate that, leaving aside a few exceptions, men are always the well-wishers of women and vice versa, and I believe this bliss of reciprocality has kept this horror-stricken world still habit-

Perceivel Hill, Chatteswary Road, Chittagong

Syed A Mayeed

Commitment!

Sir, When my mother wanted to have our TV repaired. she received an information from the company — someone would come between noon and 5 pm. However when no one arrived by 4 pm, my mother be-

came impatient and called the company again and said: "I am waiting. Anyway, could you narrow down the timeframe

"Of course," the phonekeeper replied. "he will be there between now and 5 pm."

Mostafa Sohel Banani, Dhaka-1213

little?

Prisoners

Sir, Often we read of overcrowding in different jails of the country, specially in the Dhaka Central Jail. Sometimes back it was heard that due to overcrowding hundreds of prisoners are to be freed soon from different jails. But probably it never came into effect. Negligence by the authority have created an inhuman atmosphere there, prisoners suffering from

deadly diseases, etc. Probably our jails are an example where the simplest of human right laws are being broken beyond imagination. In developed countries where none can be arrested without a specific warrant, here instances show people spending decades in jail without trial.

In the developed countries there are Family Benefits in cash for every prisoner given to the prisoner's family in his absence. In this regard our country is an exception. When one enters behind the bars, nobody anymore cares for his family. The entire family has to undergo a severe test of survival. Because of poverty, often members of a prisoner's family get engaged in different crimes. When the prisoner's son gets no job because of his father's identity, the young boy finding no alternative becomes a toll-collector. As a prisoner's daughter the innocent girl remains unmarried and finding no other job one day often loses her way in the forbidden lanes of the red-light area.

After a historical parliamentary election, a majority

Awami League has won power. They would certainly bring many good things for the nation and already has brought some. It is an earnest request to the Prime Minister to look into

the welfare of the prisoners and

immediately introduce a Pris-

oners' Family Benefit Fund. SA Mansur(Pappu) House-23, Rd-18, Sector-7. Uttara M/T. Dhaka

VAT on telephone

Sir. I am a telephone subscriber. I like to draw the attention of the minister in charge of T&T Board to the following Presently all the telephone subscribers are paying VAT of 15 per cent on the total bill. The cost of monthly telephone line rent is Tk 150 only. I do not un derstand as to why VAT is charged and calculated on the telephone line rent while preparing the bill. Why the amount of Tk 22.50 is added with the total bill? Why the customers should pay VAT on the lines? If logical, we are ready to pay VAT on the total calls. VAT charged by the authority on the line rent is illogical. This VAT on the line rent is not found in

It may be mentioned here that the Ershad government imposed 5 per cent Jamuna sur charge on the telephone bill to raise fund for the construction of the Jamuna Bridge. Subsequently. BNP government withdrew this surcharge but again, very tactfully, imposed 15 per cent VAT, on telephone line rent. This tantamounts to serving old wine in a new bottle The present government should take corrective mea sures to withdraw VAT on tele phone lines and help the cus tomers save money, for other important investments

any country of the world

S Z Panna 17/12 Jakir Hossain Road Mohammadpur Dhaka