

For Peace in CHT

The negotiations that began yesterday between the National Committee on Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Shantibahini are important for a number of reasons. Of cardinal significance is, of course, the fact that these represent the first formal meeting between the Awami League government and the Shantibahini. In a new political environment marked by an improvement in Indo-Bangla relations, expectations have increased for an early settlement of the hill tracts problem. The Shantibahini should find more receptive ears than ever before and feel encouraged to make a deal with the new government here.

However, it is the government of Sheikh Hasina which has got a good opportunity to redeem its pledge for a political solution to the long-standing issue. Given that hill people are the only ethnic minority of the country we should have been able to solve their problem to the mutual satisfaction of both sides much earlier. Let us admit, we were not quite adequately sensitive to these minority people's special identity including their culture, individuality and economic well-being. Time has come for us to recognise their special status but most certainly within the framework of our national sovereignty and the country's Constitution. This realisation must not only dawn on our political leadership but also on the hill people who can no longer carry on their insurgency programme without affecting the chances of peace which have brightened in the new political environment. At this point, can we plead for a strong Indian backing for the peace process? Let the Indian leadership put pressure on the Shantibahini to come to a negotiated settlement with us.

Finally, we strongly feel like commenting on the way the negotiations had been conducted so far. In the light of the previous 19 meetings — all held somewhat perfunctorily — we suggest that this meeting should be open-ended, in-depth and targeted towards a result. The meeting must take into cognizance all the intricate tangles and opposing views for a thorough discussion thereon and must continue until and unless a solution, satisfying to both parties, is found.

Free Trade in South Asia

Some high hopes for an early launch of a free trade zone in South Asia have emanated from the just-concluded SAARC foreign ministers' meet in New Delhi. Indian Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda and Foreign Minister I K Gujral are optimistic it could start functioning in 1998, two years ahead of the target date 2000 AD. The upbeat rests on the fact that within a year or so, as many as 2000 items have been put on the agreed list for tariff reduction across the region. Intra-regional tariffs have to come down to almost the zero level for free trade zone to be a reality in South Asia.

But unshackling of trade barriers would take much more than merely drawing up a common list of items eligible for concessional tariffs. The operational nitty-gritties will have to be taken care of in order that the process of conversion from SAPTA to SAFTA is quickened.

There are certain basic handicaps to freer trading in South Asia that need to be eliminated if we are to contemplate achieving anything approximating the level of trade or investment cooperation reached in the EU or ASEAN. First and foremost, it must be realised that the slashing of tariffs at a flat concessionary rate does not by itself make the disparity-laden tariff structures of SAARC countries equitable to each other. For instance, India has reportedly imposed 45 per cent tariff on yarn import under SAPTA as against a paltry 7.5 per cent levied by Bangladesh. At some risk to her indigenous industrial development but in keeping with the SAARC spirit, Bangladesh has outdone other countries in bringing down her tariff wall. So long as stronger economies like India and Pakistan do not lead the way — as between themselves and with respect to other economies — in lowering the tariff or non-tariff barriers, the real impetus to free trade in South Asia would be missing. There should not be any fear that goods from a strong economy could swamp the market of a smaller economy.

The SAARC countries are more keen to exchange dollars and pounds than their own currencies. This will have to be taken up in due course. But, in the meanwhile, transit of goods needs to be smoother and faster between trading partners; and there ought to be unhindered movement of business people from one country to another. The inter-governmental group (IGG), set up to facilitate the transition to SAFTA, is expected to look into the problems and clear the course for free trade in the region.

Highway Insecurity

There has been a sharp rise in the incidence of dacoity on night coaches. The pattern suggests that inter-district gangsters have shifted their focus from habitats to highways.

They could appear as armed bandits all of a sudden on a highway at the dead of night, way-lay a vehicle, and sweep the passengers clean of their belongings, both in cash and kind. Or, they might have masqueraded as passengers till such time as they reached a deserted place of their choice to pounce upon the unsuspecting co-travellers. It is the latter that happened on Friday night at Takerhat where the Barisal-bound coach from Dhaka was ordered to stop by bandits who till then had travelled incognito. They not only robbed the passengers of their possessions valued at Tk 10 lakh but also inflicted wounds on 28 of the 55 passengers on board.

In an eye-opening development, police on Thursday night picked up seven notorious dacoits at the Gabtali terminal who were seated as passengers on a coach about to leave for Sathkira. The police obviously acted on a tip-off — and, therefore, fortuitously. Their surveillance needs to be more organised so as to encompass the terminals and the coaches alike. Let lists of wanted persons be made available to the coach service operators all over the country and the previous practice of placing armed personnel inside each of the night coaches revived.

It took almost twenty years for Bangladesh to move away from a completely controlled economy to a liberalised market economy and adopt the strategy of export-led growth. Although the country has paid a heavy price by sticking to those inward-looking policies for so long, it is gratifying to see that the country's policy makers have eventually been able to take the right set decisions on economic policies.

However, just the adoption of a strategy of development is not enough, it has to be backed up by other supporting measures. Such measures were introduced in the early nineties in the form of drastic tariff reduction, import liberalisation, dismantling of internal controls and substantial tax and financial sector reforms. These have created a favourable environment and incentives for faster growth. The economy especially the private sector has responded positively to these incentives. The data in Table I support this observation.

A quick glance at the table shows that by all important indicators, the economy has progressed substantially during the early nineties. However, what is more important is to appreciate that the Export-Led strategy and the package of supporting measures have created an outward-looking attitude among the country's exporters and industrialists. They are learning to improve the quality of their products to satisfy the taste of their foreign buyers, compete with other suppliers in the world, penetrate the world market with their products, and introduce cost-cutting measures and new technology in their production and management processes which are the key factors in their drive for efficiency and survival in the market.

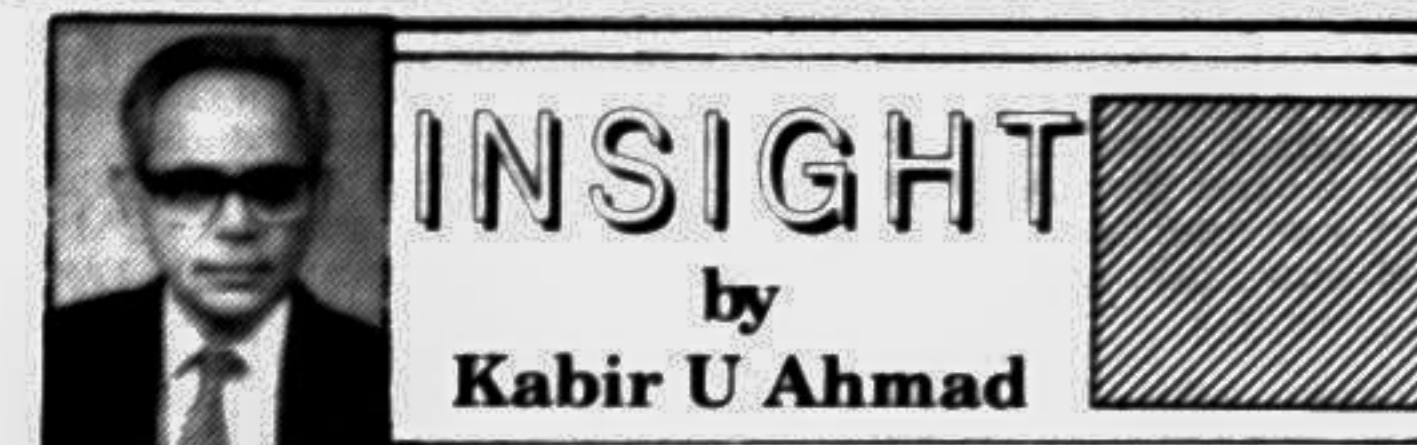
Export-led Growth and Regional Trading Bloc

Let Bangladesh stay in the present framework of SAPTA and try to increase her exports to India by extracting some meaningful trade concessions so as to improve her trade balance with India. But trying to make a big deal out of SAFTA in an effort to increase her domestic rate of development through rapid export growth to SAFTA may eventually be frustrated.

Further, they are also learning the importance of backward linkage through which exporters are creating additional employment and income opportunities for the unemployed labour force in the country.

These are the strong points of the export-led growth process of an economy. Although there is still a lot to be done to remove the barriers to trade and internal industrial efficiency, it is heartening to see that the new government instead of coiling back to its old ideological position has been gradually accepting this strategy of development and trying to improve upon it.

The question that troubles one is whether at this critical stage of gathering development momentum through open trade with the outside world, a deep entanglement in a Regional



INSIGHT by Kabir U Ahmad

Trade Bloc (SAFTA) is going to help the objective of speedier growth of Bangladesh economy. This needs careful analysis.

Bangladesh and SAPTA
It is well-known to all interested observers that the total trade (taking both exports and imports) within the SAARC countries, or what is known as Intra-SAARC trade, comes to only about 3 per cent of the SAARC countries total trade

with the rest of the world. However, the most serious issue is the state of Bangladesh's trade pattern with the SAARC countries, especially with India.

Look at the following table of data.

Three observations should be made in the first place. Bangladesh's total exports to all SAARC countries has been declining and has reached a level of about 3 per cent of her total exports to the world while her imports has been increasing from around 4 per cent in 1983/84 to about 12 per cent in 1993/94. In the second place, Bangladesh's exports to India has been growing at a dismal rate especially in recent years while its imports from India has been growing at a rapid rate of about 8 per cent a year.

Bangladesh and SAFTA

Since Bangladesh's prospects for high rate of exports to South Asian countries especially India is very limited and this region as a whole is a slow growing region compared to the East Asian and other regions of the world, it would be much better for Bangladesh to keep herself open to world trade and not commit herself to SAFTA. Bangladesh seems to have a better export prospect in the

Table — I: Macro-Economic Indicators

Item	1980-84 (average)	1990-91	1994-95
GDP growth rate (%)	3.1	3.4	4.4
Per capita GDP (in US\$)	145	213	247
Domestic Saving	1.6	4.1	7.7
Gross Investment	14.4	11.5	16.6
Total Revenue	8.9	9.6	12.1
Total Expenditure	18.4	16.4	19.2
Exports	5.4	7.3	12.0
Imports	18.3	15.0	20.2
Current Account			
Balance	-9.9	-4.2	-3.5
Rate of Inflation (based on Dhaka CPI)	13.4	8.9	5.2
Foreign Reserves		890	3070

Bangladesh Economic Review, 1996, Statistical Appendix, page-3. (Domestic Saving, Gross Investment, Total Expenditure, Exports and Imports are all expressed as per cents of GDP).

Table — II: Bangladesh Trade Pattern (in US\$)

Item	1980	1990	1994
Bangladesh's Exports to SAARC Countries	68.5	60.5	60.6
Bangladesh's Imports from SAARC Countries	96.2	249.9	625
Bangladesh's Exports to India	8	21.7	26
Bangladesh's Imports from India	56.6	170.3	486
Bangladesh's Trade Balance with India	-47.6	-148.6	-403

Political Turmoil Engulfs Rump Yugoslavia

In the light of past records, Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic should have been the most hated man in former Yugoslavia. ASM Nurunnabi explains the entire situation.

RUMP Yugoslavia now consists of only Serbia and Montenegro. The truncated state of the nation resulted from the blighted war in Bosnia with its accompanying after-effects in corruption and impoverishment. Half the population reportedly remained unemployed and the inflation rate ran very high. Though some relief was provided by the lifting of international economic sanctions following the signing of the Dayton peace accord in November last year, no tangible improvement in the overall situation was witnessed.

In the light of his past record, Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic should have been the most hated man in Yugoslavia. The ethnic conflict he helped to ignite in Bosnia managed to kill 200,000 people, uprooted millions and maimed thousands. Following the devastation of the national economy, Milosevic's old dream of a Greater Serbia lay in tatters. Despite this litany of woes, Milosevic managed so long to remain the most popular politician of that country.

Now it might be an enigma how a man, who drove his country to the brink, could be able to maintain the high-profile image. According to observers, this was possible on account of several factors. First, he counted on Washington's backing and clamped down on political opposition. He was further able to bring about a change in his erstwhile unfavourable image by steadily purging government ranks of nationalist

hardliners no longer useful to him. He also blamed the war in Bosnia on blood-thirsty paramilitary organisations over which he had no control.

As a result, within a short time, he had managed to transform himself from a warmonger to a peacemaker. There was also a trick, according to observers, which helped him to pull it off. Trying to employ every means at his disposal, he used his absolute control over TV to convince people that he was the helpful element in lifting of the UN economic sanctions against Yugoslavia. He also went about making sure that disenchanted members of the electorate were placated by payment to the pensioners who were denied such benefit for months. In June last, the government revamped the election laws to make it more difficult for small opposition parties to succeed. That tactic, however, backfired when four of the most popular opposition parties formed a coalition against Milosevic.

All this has posed a big challenge to the political future of Milosevic. For several weeks, the protests, some of which were huge, virtually paralysed the centre of Belgrade, the capital city, and some other big cities. Serbia's opposition parties, who were apparently to spend more time at each other's throats than at Milosevic's, at last put aside mutual antipathy

to protest against Milosevic's attempt to rob them of victories, which saw Milosevic's loss of 15 out of Serbia's 18 biggest towns — including Belgrade. More than 150,000 protesters thronged the streets of Belgrade in continuing efforts to drive out Milosevic, with the opposition pledge to set up its own authorities in towns.

Initially, Milosevic hoped that the protests would fizzle out. Though massive, the demonstrations failed to provoke the Serbian leader, who had been restrained probably because he was under the watchful eye of Western governments. Riot-clad special forces stopped protesters from marching towards Milosevic's residence, but they only watched the students as they hurled rocks at the windows of the state television building and the office of the state newspaper — the president's major instruments of power.

At first, Milosevic's chief tactic was to muffle the opposition media. Radio signals from the main opposition radio station were jammed when there was any mention of the demonstrations. State television, the country's primary news source, largely ignored the unrest. But the Belgrade's independent radio station B-92, which gave wide coverage to the protests that began following the cancellation of municipal elections, was declared illegal and closed down. Shortly afterwards, ra-

dio index, the Belgrade students' radio station, which also reported on the protests, was similarly shut. Meanwhile, the Belgrade Electoral Commission questioned the legal procedure by which the election results were cancelled.

At first the protesters demanded only that the election results be recognised. Later, as opposition leaders began demanding Milosevic's resignation, the tenor of the rallies changed, reflecting a deeper sense of disenchantment with life in postwar Serbia. Former Yugoslav foreign minister, Ilija Djukic, now in opposition, warned that time was running out for a peaceful and to the sternest challenge Milosevic has faced since taking power nine years ago.

The United States, in the light of later developments, sought to step up pressure on Milosevic by urging its European allies to join in an economic boycott of his government. The US State Department reiterated an earlier statement warning Belgrade authorities not to use force against the protesters. In this connection, it was declared that the US 'reserves the right' to ask the United Nations to re-impose full economic sanctions against Serbia. The US further stated 'there is a transparent effort to

take the steam out of the opposition's protests. He even tried fighting his foes with an unusual weapon: silence. While thousands of students rallied outside his office doors, Milosevic was not there.

Subsequently, trade unions in Serbia threatened to go on strike, escalating daily demonstrations against Milosevic. Observers felt that a union strike could dramatically strengthen the ongoing protests against the Serbian president. The political situation further deteriorated when the opposition formed a shadow government and a state council ready to replace Milosevic and to call new elections. The opposition leadership said that the alternative government would take effect if Milosevic continues to refuse to recognise victories in the Serbian city elections. The opposition leaders also planned to boycott the opening of federal parliament amid spirited anti-government demonstrations.

Meanwhile, the Serbian Supreme Court, in a later development, upheld Milosevic's hold on Belgrade's local government despite weeks of protests in the city's streets. The move pushed foes into a more determined effort to drive Milosevic from power. The court did not give reasons for its ruling.

Although the conflict was deepening, it appeared that Milosevic was more likely to be headed for a long struggle of tactics and politics than turning police loose on demonstrators.

To the Editor...

Misleading film on Star TV!

Sir, On 8 December '96 last the Star TV network televised a short documentary on our Liberation War in Star News of Star Plus channel. In that film it was shown that the Indian Army — not the Mitrabahini as we used to know — came to liberate Bangladesh from the Pakistani Army when the latter made offence against them on the western frontier on the first leg of December 1971. The Pakistani force, after a short war, surrendered to the Indian Army — again not to the Mitrabahini — on 16 of December '71.

It was also shown that the victor i.e. Indian forces — like any other occupation force — hoisted the tri-colour Indian flag on the soil of this country. What is supposed to imply by this propaganda? That we did not have any government of our own at that time? That we did not have an armed force to represent ourselves? That there were no national flag of our own to hoist? That the Indian Army defeated the Pakis and went back to their home and nothing was done by our Mukti-Joddhas?

Will our foreign office look into the matter and record their protest against such humiliations and take necessary measures to correct the misleading information? This should be done for our nation's sake, otherwise the whole world will start believing such distorted history.

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Bus needed

Sir, Few years back Sirajganj Government College was upgraded to a university college. From many different places in Sirajganj a good number of students come here to study. Two many of them, due to lack of facilities and support from their families and provision of accommodation from the college, have to attend classes by public

buses plying on three routes. But they often fail to attend classes because of various problems occurring with the bus operators. So the government is earnestly requested to immediately sanction at least three buses for the students of this university college.

Afsana Chowdhury Eny
S S Road, Sirajganj

Kuldip Nayar and Kashmir issue

Sir, I have read several books and articles written by Mr Kuldip Nayar, a renowned columnist, writer and a diplomat of India, specially on Kashmir issues.

Kashmir is perhaps the greatest man-made global problem created by India, causing loss of lives and sufferings to millions of Kashmiris. India was partitioned on two nation theory. Muslim majority areas went to Pakistan, and rest to India. Soon after partition, India sent her forces and conquered Hyderabad, the largest Indian state, before its Muslim ruler could fix up his mind and on the day when M A Jinnah died. Same was the case with Junagarh and many other princely states. About eighty per cent Kashmiris were Muslims. Ruler was a Hindu. Chief Minister was a Muslim. After the fall of Hyderabad, Junagarh and many other states, the Pathan militia moved to occupy Kashmir. India went to the United Nations, begged for a halt of war in Kashmir and agreed to honour the UN resolution.

At the request of UN, Pathan militia stopped war, and the UN passed a resolution to hold a plebiscite in Kashmir. Meanwhile, India sent her troops to Kashmir and occupied two-thirds of it, and conveniently forgot to honour their promise and support to the Kashmiri families and provision of accommodation from the college, have to attend classes by public

money on arms build-up than on public development projects for the last 45 years.

Had India honoured her commitment given to UN, then perhaps there would have been no problem with Kashmir. We are fully aware that Mr Kuldip Nayar is a veteran columnist, a writer and also a diplomat. We have noticed that he has been writing in The Daily Star on various issues. I enjoy his writings. But with regret, I must say that Mr Nayar is trying to mislead or misguide the readers about Kashmir. He is rather trying to deviate from facts.

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Post Box needed

Sir, We the dwellers of Dakshin Khan Bazar and its surrounding areas, having a population of over 10 (ten) thousand have been suffering badly for want of a Post Box. The nearest post boxes are one-and-a-half kilometres away at Ashkonia in the south-west and half kilometre north from the bazar. There are a primary school, a girls' school and college and two other private schools surrounding the bazar. Unfortunately, there is not a single Post Box at the crowded bazar area or any place near to it.

The need for Post Boxes at Dakshin Khan Bazar, Naddapara, Gowair cannot be bypassed in view of settlement of a huge number of educated 'probashi' families living in and around the bazar and thickly-populated areas of Naddapara and Gowair. The number of shops, private offices, engineering workshops etc., has increased 10 times over the past two years.

Will the postal authorities rise to the needs of the people's demand?
M A Rub
Director, Gono Bikash Sangstha
Utara, Dhaka

OPINION

As I Observe It

Shamsher A Chowdhury

I come of a family of teachers, dramatists, stage actors, actresses, proponents of political theories and so on so forth. The family as a whole has been an all time ardent advocate of democratic systems both in its conceptual and practical applications. In Bangladesh, the period beginning the 1990s has therefore been a period of special concern and interest to me.

Although I do sincerely believe that the emerging of the current party in power is truly the beginning of democratic processes in the country, with the exception of the brief spell between 1972 through 1975, I am, however, aware that there are and will be those who would like to differ with me. They are welcome to their opinions. However if it is of any solace to any one I would like to point out that I do not believe in partisan politics in any of its form. I do not hold brief for either the ruling party or the opposition.

However, the truth of it all is that this is my country and anything that goes on here interests me and hence I have been closely observing the deeds and 'activities' of the government in power. The foregoing paragraphs are therefore purely my personal observation not aimed at glorifying or vilifying any one or any action thereof.

It has been about six months since the ruling party has taken over the reins of the government. In all fairness it must be said that the government of today has amply demonstrated its will and determination in institutionalising democratic norms and practices. It has certainly made tangible beginnings in democratising the process of decision making in various tiers of corporate and civil administration. Not only that, within its party affiliates a kind of tolerance has been displayed even to voices of dissent. All this may feel good and do set the trends which are all but welcome and desirable.

The danger, however, is twofold. Firstly, it may lead to complacency in our manage-

ment approach and result in losing sight of the real core issues of development action. Secondly, we may continue to confine ourselves to this and this alone.

One has to remember that feeling good is one thing and doing good is another. We have but little time. Five years is not too long a stretch of time considering the nature and complexity of issues to be addressed. Much time has been lost in re-alignment of democracy, working out strategies for bringing to book the misdeeds of the previous government, recounting/recollecting the past glory, rewriting the country's history so on and so forth.

I am not saying that these are pointless and have no meaning or of no positive ramifications. I am positive that there is a need for these too. Be that as it may, one also has to consider the extent of its relevance to hard core public interests.

We have indeed spent much valuable time in what is described in political language 'hunting of ghosts.'

Time has come for some real actions on the ground. As I say it I am aware of the fact that it is easier said than done. Not only that it may even raise some eyebrows, some criticisms both positive and negative, even cause some tremors amongst dissidents and others. But then that is the realism in the world of active management. There are innumerable matters which the government need to act upon. Some of these are long-term based which can only be initiated now and may take as long as a decade before final results can emerge. There are those which we can deal forthwith. These are mostly in the public welfare sectors and the like.

Whatever happened to 'eliminating terrorism? What happened to waterlogging in the

outside world than in the South Asian region. Let Bangladesh stay in the present framework of SAPTA and try to increase her exports to India by extracting some meaningful trade concessions so as to improve her trade balance with India. But trying to make a big deal out of SAFTA in an effort to increase her domestic rate of development through rapid export growth to SAFTA may eventually be frustrated.

Bangladesh has now reached a critical stage of export growth with the outside world which has the potentiality of triggering off the country's economic break-through which should be promoted further and not hindered by entering into a Free Trade Arrangement with countries which cannot offer the same prospect. Bangladesh, therefore, should concentrate on boosting her trade further with the outside world without hindrance of any kind.

Let me conclude by saying a word about myself in case people misinterpret my views in the present political climate. I have fought for Bangladesh independence from 1962 to 1971 in London by writing, publishing and speaking without mincing my words on the need for her independence. Leadership of both the position and the opposition benches in the Parliament who are perfectly aware of my role in independence movement, I am not an anti-Indian, and I believe that Bangladesh will have to maintain a good neighbourly relationship with India for her own survival. But Bangladesh, which is now slowly coming out of a prolonged period of economic stagnation, must have the vision and courage to look after her own long-term interests.