

Tribal Homecoming

Refugee problems throughout the world have been so very much bristling with political ramifications, both national and inter-state, that they had better be called ticking time-bombs or bottled in genii about to burst out through the bottleneck.

So, when we learn that 5000 tribal refugees of a total of nearly 50,000 sheltered in India, are to return home beginning from March 28 and thereby herald the first phase of a massive repatriation process, the sense of relief is palpably overwhelming. They have had a 11-year-long history of sanctuary-seeking in India which, it seems, is now coming to an end by virtue of only 11 days of negotiations in Agartala between the national committee and the tribal refugee leadership.

From this point of view, the outcome may look highly dramatic, but in the essence it is the major paradigm shift in the political atmospherics that has made all the difference this time around. There was even talk of wrapping up the refugee camps by authorities on the other side of the border. Although there has been a distracting international conference in Bangkok at the behest of disparate elements out of the blue, the Indian steadfastness to get it over with was a tower of strength for the denouement regarding the long-pending repatriation.

This is not to overlook, in any way, the diligence, skill and astuteness of the negotiating teams on both sides, all of which mattered so much at the operational level where the real inter-face took place. While complimenting them on their success, we urge both sides to implement the 20-point agreement whereby the homecoming of the refugees resumes, both in letter and spirit.

The interests of the Bangladeshi settlers should not encounter any form of 'reverse discrimination'; for, the very first point of the accord speaks of ensuring "security to life and property of every citizen of Bangladesh including the tribal refugees as per the Constitution and law of the land."

As the tribal refugees return to the CHT and see their traditional way of life not being impinged upon and their distinctive identity scrupulously respected, they will start feeling at home in the country of their birth.

An Early Warning

This year's International Women's Day had a message to absorb through the photo of the dreadfully disfigured face of a young girl on the front page of a leading Bangla daily. She was actually appealing to the Prime Minister to arrange for treatment abroad so that semblance of her natural looks and normalcy in her traumatised life can be retrieved from the eleven-month old nightmare of personal history. About a year ago the school girl from Kishoreganj had her face unrecognisably burnt by acid thrown on her face by a rejected Romeo.

Acid-throwing as a frightening social problem is making its foot-fall heard again. Before Ruma's appeal could get drowned two more young girls fell victim on the same day to the wrath of their aspiring lovers who threw acid on their faces and fled from the spots.

We understand that it is not easy to nab the acid throwing culprits at the spots for these are not tactless epitomes of blind rage but organised, cunning and coward criminals with sinister propensity like that of Shakespeare's Iago in that great tragedy of Moor. But the law is there to deal with acid throwers in the severest conceivable manner. To give credit to country's lawmakers, it deserves to be mentioned here that acid throwing as the worst kind of repression against women that some years ago shook the very foundations of society, marked a sudden thaw in the rate of incidence following the announcement of capital punishment for the convicts. Perhaps, social awareness, the most potent safeguard against a crime like acid throwing has not been at its sharpest in reacting to these incidents. We would do no favour to society by thinking that law would automatically take care of the criminals like acid throwers. Law is just as good as its enforcement. The sporadic incidents of acid throwing now filtering through the crowd of social problems on our newspapers are early warning of the return of a monster we were fancying to have bottled.

For a Change of Heart

The US veto of a European resolution at the UN Security Council seeking to reprimand Israel for its settlement plan in parts of east Jerusalem must have surprised Yasser Arafat. For, the latter in a recent visit to Washington paid audience to the US President Bill Clinton's explicit expression of a displeasure over Netanyahu's hell-bent attitude to have 65,000 housing units constructed for the Jews in the occupied land.

It is not exactly a bolt from the blue if one were to recapitulate the US track-record of handling critical threshold cases involving over-wrought Jewish passions and sentiments. But what the US veto seemed to be at odds with is the wonderful reception or the sympathetic hearing Yasser Arafat has just got in Washington, not only of his general view-points but specifically on the question of Jewish settlement and the status of Jerusalem. The European resolution had quite appropriately sought to react to the "alteration of facts on the ground" and the attempted preclusion of future talks on the status of Jerusalem.

The US peace-making bid cannot succeed if she chooses differ from its allies when the die is cast. While an emergency UN General Assembly session is planned by Arab diplomats to enable the ventilation of a global antipathy towards the Jewish settlement plan one craves for a genuine change of heart in the US over the Palestine homeland question.

Role of a Bureaucrat: Misconceptions and Misgivings

A permanent bureaucracy is an ever-lasting feature of any government without which there is no government. Government administration is by its very nature bureaucratic. However, being bureaucratic, in popular parlance, means delay and public harassment.

by an agency outside the government.

All sorts of incentives are being offered to set up large-scale industries while a dynamic and widespread programme for expansion of small- and medium-scale enterprises is yet to become operational. If there is one EPZ for Dhaka, then there should be similar industrial areas at all than headquarters with exactly the same facilities, incentives and something more in terms of opportunities for adoption of new technologies as well as skill development. Only then, government policies will tend to become responsive and it would become obligatory on the part of the bureaucracy to serve the interest of all, and not the few.

It is not only in the field of industrial development — programmes should be all comprehensive. Low-cost housing is more important than promoting construction of high-rise apartment blocks but the high cost of land have already pushed out the poor. Why not low-cost apartment blocks for the poor? Hand-tube-wells and pit latrines are more important than expensive WASA projects and rural roads should have as much priority as city boulevards — as wide as aircraft landing strips.

In a nutshell, two decisive principles must be established first: The government can do more by doing less, that is, government must give up all functions which can be carried out by agencies and organisations outside the government even at the cost of government subsidy for the poor and the needy; and, all government policies and programmes must take into account the benefits that can be secured for the poor — first and foremost.

A bureaucrat is trained and paid to effectively manage the government administration. Regardless of the party in power, the bureaucrat is supposed to continue in his or her assigned role as a functionary of the government. Since we do not ever wish to conceive of a situation of no government (like in Somalia), the officials must carry on their task at all times without any fear or favour to anybody. The political and other directives from the Minister will alter the policies, programmes, procedures — in fact, the entire management system of the government may be altered. The role of the bureaucrat will remain to give practical shape to the directives given by the political leadership.

Under the circumstances, how can he be a public servant or a service provider? In fact, he will recruit several servants from the public or ask the public to provide services to him.

And, the famous sentence in every government order to the effect that the order is being issued in the interest of public service often boils down to the interest of the so-called public servants themselves.

If money is involved in getting a job done, then it is a service which is not provided free or in the interest of public service. If in an office, entry of the public is restricted then the service provider's role is totally vitiated. Nobody can enter the secretariat building, neither there is any public information counter from where people can get the required information and if necessary, secure access to the official concerned.

Any government office building should have a ground-floor lobby and a reception/information counter. Any person may enter, give his/her identity, notify his intention, purpose of visit, whom he wishes to see etc., and the receptionist in turn inform the concerned official through the intercom, fix an appointment and if necessary issue the pass facilitating the entry. In many instances, no such visit may be necessary if it is for certain in-

formation only. The receptionist should be capable of fulfilling the purpose of the visit.

The sense of public service is totally absent in government administration. In fact, it was never there since the democratic transformation which should have been forcefully carried out, was never in the agenda of the government. The architecture of office buildings have remained as before — discouraging the public to remain away from even the outer perimeter wall of the secretariat building.

The misconceptions and

the government are privatised, people will get better services and this may include telephone, electricity, water supply, garbage disposal, postal services, schools and hospitals. Even agriculture extension, tax collection, various types of registration work etc., are also amenable to privatisation.

The first golden rule to bring about service-conscious administration and therefore responsive bureaucrats devoid of the misconceptions and misgivings, will be to cut down the role of government bureaucracy as far as possible. In the process,

pitals can be subsidised to enable them to render some amount of free or subsidised services and benefit those who need them most.

At present, benefits of government-paid services might be enjoyed by those who do not deserve them at all. Trucks are denied access to city roads during rush hours while their role for economic growth is of much greater importance than many other road users traveling in their luxury cars. Everyday, many pedestrians get killed while crossing the roads of Dhaka city since there are no fly-over. Vendors must get out of the pavements or rickshaws must be banned but there are no alternative plans for these poor people to earn a living. There should be more buses and less cars. May be cars should be banned and only rickshaws should ply if the government intends to pursue people-oriented policies.

The main point is a responsive and service-conscious government and therefore bureaucracy must, at all times, take into consideration the good of the poorest people. There is no low-cost housing programme of the government. A large part of the budget is currently being wasted to cover the losses of a bunch of state enterprises which could have been much more productively used for rural roads or irrigation programmes.

The best example is the skewed credit policy in favour of the rich where hardly anything gets repaid while the major microcredit programme for poverty alleviation is being run

misgivings about the role of bureaucracy is, therefore, related to the quality of administration. To what extent, political direction can transform the bureaucracy into a more responsive and service-conscious role is the major issue for consideration. The difference in the quality of service, to cite an example, will be obvious after a visit to a private bank branch followed by a similar visit to a government-run bank. Therefore, if the entire commercial banking sector is privatised, desired changes can be brought about in at least one segment of the administration. To extend the argument further, one may conclude that if all sorts of services presently carried out by

many bureaucrats should be seeking employment in the private sector since the size of the bureaucracy will also be reduced.

The government can do more by doing less. It sounds paradoxical but it is true. One may argue that it would increase the cost of services since private, as opposed to public services must be paid for. There is nothing called a free lunch and therefore one who cannot afford it will be denied of such services. However, when the quality of service is in question, the cost issue assumes a secondary position. It is better to have an expensive service rather than bad or no service at all. On the other hand, private schools and hos-

They're Queuing up to Join the Club

Yemen has applied to join the Commonwealth and Palestine is keen to come in when it achieves sovereignty. The Middle East is the only major region of the world without a seat at the Commonwealth table. But where is this rush leading the 53-member organisation? Derek Ingram of Gemini News Services examines the possibility of yet more countries coming in.

The expanding Commonwealth



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On top of that came the entry in 1995 of Mozambique, which was a Portuguese colony until independence in 1975 and had never been remotely connected with the British Empire.

Western Samoa was German until 1914 and then became a League of Nations mandate and later a UN trust territory under New Zealand. Namibia, known as South West Africa, was Ger-

man, then hijacked by South Africa. It was never a British colony.

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In fact, Palestine has a better claim to join the Commonwealth than several existing members. So does Yemen,

Advocates of the Commonwealth, pleased that it is becoming so popular, are now getting worried that it will become too big and unwieldy and lose some of its characteristics, such as its informality and ease of communication, with all countries administered in roughly the same system. It could become a mini-UN.

Egypt and the Sudan would have strong claims, since both were for long periods under British rule, though not actually colonies.

The trouble is that the British spread themselves so widely across the globe in imperial days that half the world can claim a historic connec-

tion.

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Above all, there is the importance of the common language, which means that at all levels there is never any need for interpreters and translators.

Already there are murmurings from Israel: If Palestine, why not us?

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ernment in Botswana.

There are other problems. The Commonwealth has not set down rules for the acceptance of new members. They have to agree to comply with the 1991 Harare Declaration which requires member countries to embrace democracy and human rights. More recently, further rules on 'just and honest' government have been added.

There is some anxiety that Cameroon has been let in while it still has a doubtful record on human rights and democracy. Mozambique came in because all southern African countries pressed for it at their Auckland summit in 1995. Some countries would have liked more time to consider the precedent that was being set.

Still in the wings are countries which have much greater claim on membership than some already in. Ireland is an obvious one. It would probably never have dropped out if, when it changed from dominion to republic status, there had been provision for a republic to stay in the Commonwealth.

The political change in Ireland came in April 1949 — only months before a formula was worked out whereby India remained a member as republic.

Many believe that it will eventually take up membership of the Commonwealth when the Ulster problem is finally resolved.

Myanmar is in a somewhat similar position. It, too, became a republic on independence in

OPINION

Freedom Struggle as Opposition Sees It

Aly Zaker

I am sure many of you readers' attention was drawn towards a statement of our former prime minister and now the Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia while speaking to some new entrants in her party. She said that we shall not let the Indian government throat the freedom struggle of India's north-eastern provinces as we support this freedom struggle.

She went on to say that since Bangladesh became free through struggle, it always stands by independence.

I was appalled to have read this statement, coming as it did, from the former prime minister. It meant that this was her party's officials stand when she was in power and it still is when she is out.

This means, by implication, that the BNP government had supported the armed insurgency in some of the north-eastern state of India despite its official relationship with India up front. So, when some power that be in the Indian government accused the then Bangladesh government of being an accomplice of the handful of insurgents in some of its states they were not far from being true. And if it is true, I dare say we were saved by the skin of our teeth.

We all know that in the present day world if a country wants to settle its accounts with its neighbours all it has to do is create an internal strife and keep fueling it. If the neighbour, wanting to create trouble, is more resourceful that its other neighbour, then it becomes even

To the Editor...

Save the turtle

Sir, During a recent visit to the Dhaka Zoo, Mirpur, I observed rare species of marine turtle, Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). The specimen at the Dhaka Zoo is a juvenile. This captive individual should be released as there are no existing facilities to rear marine turtles at the zoo. The specimen will simply die in a couple of weeks, as it is not eating anything. This has a very special feeding adaptation, feeding only on sea sponges and it is rather impossible to collect sponges from the sea and bring it to feed this individual.

Moreover, it will be a very expensive effort to do so. Further, this species is listed as an endangered species in the IUCN red data book and its present worldwide population is also very small.

This species has been found to nest in the Saint Martins Island of the Bay of Bengal. The nesting population in the island is 5 nests per year. This shows its rarity in the wild. It may be mentioned that CARINAM is carrying out a research and conservation programme in the island to save the marine turtles.

It is strongly urged to take necessary steps to release this marine turtle immediately.

We, therefore, hope that con-

to 8 tiers to get a decision or no decision at all.

These problems can easily be solved if we take stern measures. We can stop smoke emitting 3-wheelers or remove rickshaws to improve mobility.

We can reduce the tiers at the office by slashing down the number of people. But we are afraid of public reaction. In order to move fast, we must take some bold steps discarding all reaction.

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Solving problems

Sir, The World is moving fast, but we are not. I don't know what exactly the situation here in Dhaka. One cannot expect to reach his or her destination at their desired time whatever may be the mode of transport.

The person will be stranded in the road at least for some time due to traffic jam. Everyday each person is wasting at least 2/3 working hours on the road. The sum total of lost working hours of all working people in a day will be of millions of

people.

For a country like ours, isn't it too luxurious a state? Long holidays provide opportunity for misdeeds. A burning example is the Shimla death case in Chittagong (as published in the newspapers of 15th instant).

Another situation of similar nature is the absence of doctors

and nurses in the hospitals.

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