

Make Polls a Success

Although there has been an overt attempt by some quarters to draw undue attention to the by-election to Manikganj-3 constituency due tomorrow, the Election Commission (EC), the candidates themselves and their respective political parties have so far given a good account of themselves. Particularly the EC has conducted the pre-polls affairs in a most admirable manner. An Election Enquiry Committee constituted on May 29 has performed its job perhaps to everyone's satisfaction. At least that is the impression. Nobody has till now faulted it for its performance in respect of monitoring and investigation. We are happy that the EC has kept its cool and did not react nervously at any point and thus was not a party to any kind of political hypertension that could be used by detractors. The EC has reprimanded — and quite rightly so — the candidates of the three main political parties for violation of election rules or codes.

We strongly feel that the good work done so far must not be allowed to go waste through a rash move or an act of indiscretion by any of the parties involved. Well, we do not sound it like a warning, but given the country's political history and culture we must stay cautioned. The political parties in general and the ruling party more particularly should be extra alert about the fall-outs of any attempt to influence the outcome of the election in their favour. If the intense campaign by the three main candidates could be carried out without any violence, there is no reason why they should give in to temptation of going extra ways to get the voters' verdict in their favour. The best way is to look at the polls, after so much hard work, in a dispassionate manner.

We urge the political parties to ask themselves one vital question: how big is the stake in this by-election? Does the whole world come crumbling on your head if you lose the seat? It makes little difference to the treasury bench in particular whether it loses or wins in Manikganj. A loss should not be seen in any way as a measure of its declining popularity. The opposition can similarly refrain from working itself up too much with a preserve-or-perish ring to their concern. The more important thing is to put the by-election in its appropriate context and allow the election process and the nation to triumph. If the Magura election is any guide, we cannot afford any such retrogressive step at the moment. Let the EC conduct the polls fairly, smoothly and firmly.

Chance of a Life-time

We regard the mumblings of discord heard from the factious student elements of Shantibahini on the periphery of the mainstream tribal urge for reconciliation in the CHT as the birth pang of a peace deal that awaits signing on July 14.

This is, however, not to get unfocused on the moves underway to subvert the peace process that is so close to yielding an accord between the National Committee on CHT Affairs and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS). Nor can we easily overlook opposition political party's stand-off on this issue and its strident approach to the AL government's handling of the sovereignty issue and undermined the rights of settlers in the plainland. There is also confusion in the public mind as to what has really transpired through the negotiations between the national committee and the PCJSS. Only four rounds of talks between the AL government and the Shantibahini representatives have clinched a 'consensus on all points' in contrast to 22 rounds of negotiations undertaken during the two preceding governments since the early eighties. Those rounds of talks might have failed to yield conclusive results, but they bore their imprints on the peace process anyhow, something which the government needs to tell the opposition to place its headway in a historical perspective.

The government must not make any bones about the details of understanding reached between the national committee and the tribal leadership; because, we believe, it has been in the right so far as protecting the fundamental interests of Bangladesh go: territorial integrity, rights of the tribal people and those of Bengali settlers. The basic concerns of the tribal population such as devotion of powers, their flourishing as a distinct ethnic entity and their inalienable rights to land ownership have been duly addressed.

In fact, we lend a strong voice to the cause of peace as pursued by the government of Bangladesh and the sheet-anchor in tribal leadership that the PCJSS under Santu Lama happens to be. This is a chance of a life-time for peace in the CHT. We implore our tribal compatriots to make use of it without ado.

Thanks to Tokyo

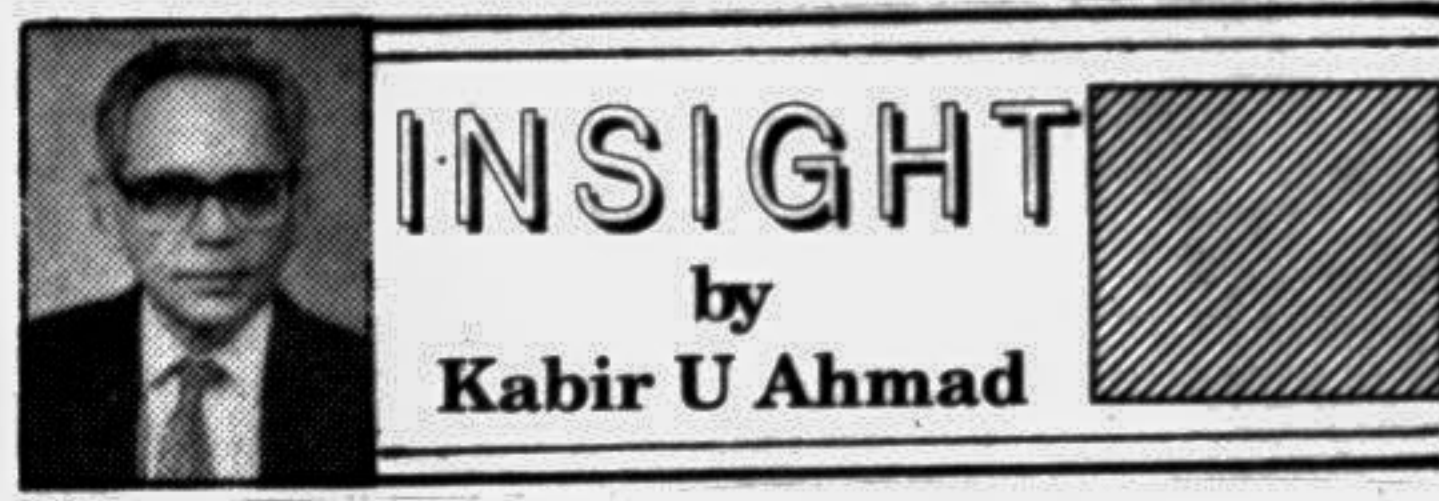
We note that as a shot in the arm of Tokyo-Dhaka ties Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Bangladesh has been resumed after a two-year freeze that literally gave us a heartache so far. Japan being traditionally the largest development partner for us in bilateral terms, we are greatly relieved at her change of heart which has been prompted in no small measure, so we learn with an extra bit of satisfaction, by our toning up of the project implementation machinery.

The fresh ODA package '97 worth Tk 587 crore comes to three vital areas: Jamuna Bridge Access Roads Project, Paksey Bridge Construction Project and Narayanganj-Narsingdi Flood Protection and Irrigation (Engineering Services) Project. It is not the amount of money that matters but the sense of prioritisation underlying the choice of projects and the terms in which the loans are being offered that are worthy of instant applause. On completion of the Jamuna Multi-purpose Bridge there will be a cascading increase in traffic all around. The Access Roads Project is designed to cope with the changing dimension of transport loads that stares us in the face. We might need flyovers to cross suitable points for tolerably reduced traffic on the ground level. Paksey Bridge will help remove some transportation bottlenecks between the Southwest and the Northwest areas.

These long-duration, low-interest soft loans generally without any strings attached to procurement of materials bode well for the country's infrastructural development.

Human Resource Development in the Budget

Everyone understands the importance of the availability of skilled human beings in the industrial development of Bangladesh. This is particularly important when the country has to survive in stiff competition with others in the emerging globalised market economy which is only just a few years away.



INSIGHT
by
Kabir U Ahmad

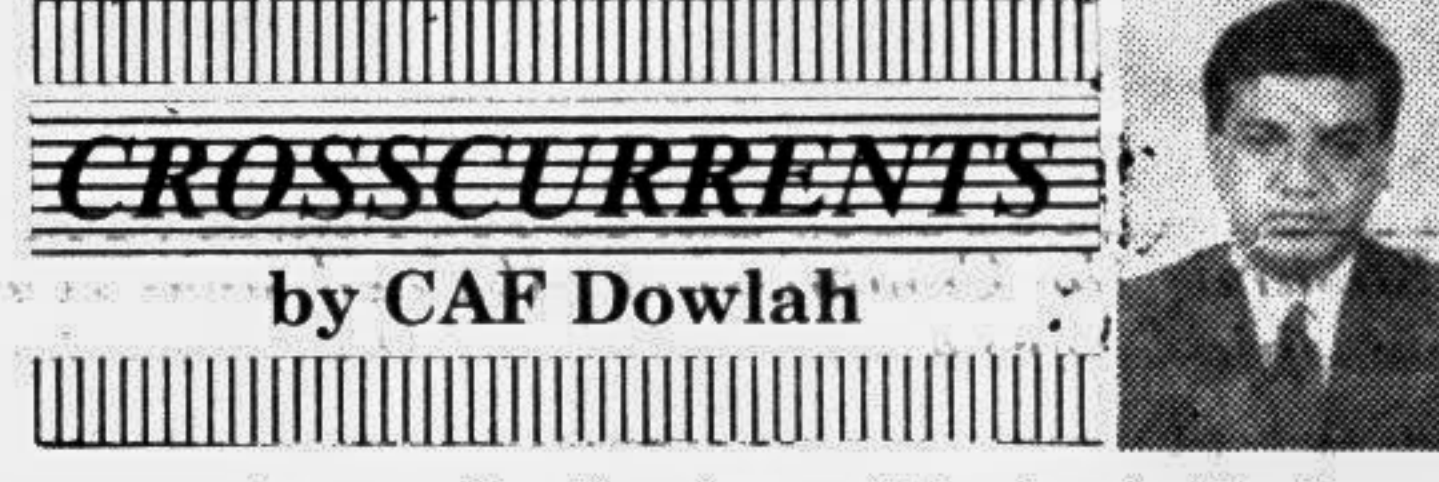
pointed out above, the "large population of Bangladesh" does not seem to be "the most hidden precious resource" right now unless there is a vast improvement in their health, education, attitudes and work-ethics. Financially, the allocation of Tk 12 crore to support scientific research is too small an amount to make any difference in what they are doing now. There are about 12 research institutes like Atomic Energy Research Institute, Industrial Research Institute, Agricultural Research Council, Jute Research Insti-

tute, Tea Research Institute, Silk Research Institute and Sugarcane Research Institute etc., existing for decades but produced precious little results. There are some good quality researchers in some of these institutes, but to improve the productivity of these Institutes, there is a need for better quality researchers with better pay and work environment. Money is only one problem, not all. **Budget Allocations to HRD** As rightly emphasised by the FM, the most important subjects that need to be promoted

Table with 5 columns: HRD Allocations in the Budget (TK in Crore), 1997-98 (B.E.), 1996-97 (R.E.), 1995-96 (R.E.), 1994-95 (Actual). Rows include Education, Health & Family Plan, Total HRD, etc.

Too Many Priorities, Too Many Contradictions and Too Much Concerns for Revenue

The framers of this budget seem to have failed to understand that they cannot solve all the problems of the nation — or meet all the commitments of the ruling party — by one single budget.



CROSSCURRENTS
by CAF Dowlah

government pay-scale. Almost every knowledgeable observer has indicated that implementation of the pay-scale would take about Taka 20 billion. Moreover, the pay-hike, along with its spiral effects on the private sector and multiplier effects on the economy, is bound to cost much more than the anticipated amount. If the government wants to show the additional expenditures in the revised budget next year? Why this hide and seek game? Why not let the nation know the real cost of the proposed pay-hike implementation, now?

could be absorbed by the economy more easily than can be anticipated under the current system. Some of the revenue proposals proposed in the budget have already generated considerable controversies — fortunately, in both aspects of the power corridor. First of all, the budget proposes for widening up of the income tax net in the country. It's a shame that in a country of about 120 million people, only about half-a-million people pay income tax. Bangladesh may be a poor nation, but, by all indications, it has several million rich people. The society has every right to bring them under the income tax net. But this proposal should be backed up by appropriate measures to streamline the country's extremely corrupt and inefficient tax administration. Until that happens, few will be willing to expose themselves to the rent-seeking net of the tax collectors. Why not recast the country's archaic income tax law system so that very citizen with specified minimum income — no matter whether employed by the government or business — must file income tax return voluntarily by a specified date every year? The proposal to broaden the application of VAT, however, comes with a baggage of misgivings. VAT is essentially a re-

To the Editor...

Weekly holiday in the Postal Department Sir, We welcome the government's announcement that all educational institutions, government and private, will observe one-day weekly holiday on Friday. The students will sigh a relief as they were very distressed by the announcement of two-day holiday. As it is, students usually suffer because classes are suspended many times throughout the year for different reasons, two-day weekly holiday would have been an added burden. A press release of the Labour Ministry on June 15, 1997 said the new weekly holiday and office time would not be applicable to the organisations under Factory Act and the Shop and Establishment Act of 1965. Postal department is a very important one, and for every establishment it is essential. So, two-day weekly holiday in that department will have a negative impact on every sector including people's personal spheres. We urge the government to consider the matter seriously and re-introduce one-day weekly holiday in the Postal Department. We hope and trust that the government will not waste time taking decision about an issue of national interest. Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

Group of D-8 Sir, It is a tremendous achievement of the present government and personal triumph of the Prime Minister on the diplomatic front to form the D-8. The formation of the D-8 is a positive and a very effective step in the right direction in regional grouping which is very much going to further the needs of the under-developed countries. In this region, SAARC has miserably failed to achieve its objective and has no significant contribution in the field of cohesive economic development and has outlived its utility. The inclusion of India, Thailand, the Philippines and Sri Lanka shall contribute substantially towards the development specifically in this region as it has countries in the varied stages of economic development from highly industrial Malaysia to agrarian Bangladesh. In Bangladesh there is potential natural resources to be tapped. The group of Eight is going to play a very positive role in making balanced development within the ambit of the region concerned backed by other regional groupings. The amalgamation of different countries with rich cultural heritage shall enrich the development of socio-cultural life of the countries concerned. The people of this region must try to understand the religion so that they might understand each other better without any bias or superstition which usually keeps them apart. Al-Haj SM Khalid Chowdhury Dhaka. D-8 Sir, At least, the distance runners of Bangladesh, Nigeria, Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan and Iran have received an accolade as they assembled together in the historic city of Istanbul. The fact is that the formation of D-8 is a milestone for 800 million Muslims living far away from each other in different continents of Asia, Europe and Africa to gear up common thinking, friendship, progress and prosperity for them. Our heartfelt congratulations to President Suharto of Indonesia, President Demirel of Turkey, President Ali Rafsanjani of Iran, Prime Minister Erbakan of Turkey, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and Mohathir Mohammad of Malaysia. We are further inspired and encouraged to know that the next summit of D-8 would be held in Dhaka in November 1998. With Malaysia as emerging tiger of South Asia, oil-rich Iran, powerful Indonesia, Egypt as leader of the Arab League,

allowed you to go out for your needs." Shahera and Tahera 119, North Bashaboo Dhaka-1214. Brothels Sir, About 250 prostitutes were evicted from Kundupatti brothel. We appreciate the moral outrage as expressed by the local people for getting rid of living nearby a den of sex trade. Prostitution can never be a profession like smuggling, that, dacoity etc. Prostitution is a curse — a great trouble for the society — for the rights and dignity of women. A lot of illegal activities like drug trade, criminal activities and forcing minor girls into prostitution take place in the brothels. However, eradication of prostitution must be done through proper planning by the government. They must be rehabilitated in a proper way, otherwise the problem will remain. The government should take proper steps for those distressed women and some rich people of society also must give attention to this matter. Why are they delaying so much in this crucial matter? Md Amir Hossain 165, North Bashaboo Dhaka-1214. Ideal Muslim women Sir, The idea that Muslim women are confined to their homes is quite wrong. It is even incorrect to say that Islam prefers women to stay in-doors all the time. On the contrary, it is mandatory for a woman to learn, and permissible for her to go out to work. Misunderstandings on this point may have arisen from incorrect understanding of a verse in the Qur'an which says, "Stay in your homes and do not bedevil yourselves as in the days of ignorance...." This verse, addressed to the wives of the prophet in particular, but also to all other pious women, simply advises women to stay at home if there is no good reason to go out. It suggests that it is better to stay in-doors and concentrate on making warm and happy household than to go out for no particular purpose. Conclusive proof that women are not required to stay in-doors at all times comes from a saying of the Prophet (SAWS), who said, "Allah has