

# For a Balanced Agricultural Development

by Dr Mushtaq Ahmed

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AGRICULTURE is the most vital sector of the economy in Bangladesh. It not only accounts for over sixty per cent of the gross domestic product but also over 80 per cent of the population are directly or indirectly dependent on it for their livelihood.

Over the past fifty years the part of the world now called Bangladesh has undergone a tremendous demographic upheaval. The population has doubled over this period and our food production, mainly rice has been barely able to keep pace with it. This has also made us overtly conscious about food security — mainly in terms of rice and wheat. Naturally the agriculture sector policies of the country remained directed towards facilitating the production of rice to the neglect of other crops.

Bangladesh for the first time in twenty-five years since independence is to produce record level of cereal this year. The production is expected to go beyond twenty million mark. This is no small achievement for the government which is in the office for such a short period of time and in view of the fact that of late the nation has been spending so much foreign exchange in importing cereals to bridge the food gap.

But to sustain this momentum we must also look at the causes of this successful harvest to strengthen those factors which contributed to it and remove those bottlenecks which would hold of are holding back from greater production and farm income.

Though the country shall be producing around 20 million metric tons of rice this year our progress has been rather unstable. The growth in the productivity of rice shows a declining trend. The production and productivity both remained unstable over the years. At times we achieved growth rates in excess of five per cent but the long term trend shows rather a slower rate — slightly over two per cent. This achievements in wheat production has been similarly unsteady. We have not really tried to analyze the reasons for this erratic pattern in the growth and development of our crops sector or failed to take note of whatever few goods studies that have been done on it.

The preponderance of our dependence on one crop has also created a mono-culture condition. One cereal crop after another has degraded the soil nutrient status. Pulse being a leguminous crop also helps in nitrogen fixation (builds up

natural nitrogen) in the soil. The acute fuel-wood crisis has led to severe shortage of biomass in the soil. The farmers and the rural households are forced to use as much as they can retrieve of the plants leaving little to go back into the soil. This lack of biomass in the soil in turn has reduced the fertilizer efficiency. Are we addressing these issues and the like in comprehensive manner?

As a potential crop for future development maize has the brightest outlook. Presently around a total of twenty-five thousand acres of land is cultivated with maize at different times of the year. In our situation with little biomass in the soil and the burgeoning demand for feed, fodder and fuel, maize holds exceptionally high likelihood of success. Emphasis should be put not only on research but also on extension and multiple use demonstrations to popularize the crop and make it acceptable to our population.

The contradictions in policies or policy conflicts between and within sectors are important impediments to a balanced growth of our agriculture. These relate to agriculture versus industry, crops versus livestock and poultry, crop preference, crops versus agro-forestry, finance and credit policy versus agriculture, trade policy versus agriculture, privatization and agriculture, surplus disposal (marketing) versus incentive structure, land use policy (keeping in view acute competition for land during the *rabī* season) and so forth.

We have gone forward a great deal with the privatization of the input delivery system to the farmers and changed the farm incentive structure as well. The increasingly market oriented government policies, as well as the expectations regarding their upcoming revisions are widely believed to have significant impact on the performance of the agriculture sector. The introduction of liberalization policies, decontrol and deregulation measures has exposed Bangladesh economy to challenges and opportunities in the context of new global economic order. With the high pace of exchange rate and trade liberalisation, domestic price (including those of farm inputs) will more closely reflect world market price. Also to be considered in this milieu is our comparative advantage in the pro-

duction of commodities like jute. This may not turn into competitiveness as comparative advantage and competitiveness are not necessarily mutually inclusive as we are already finding.

To maintain high productivity and high production levels, the farmer incentive structure has to be maintained in one form or another. Without assuring a profitable return to the farmers, sustaining the development impetus will not be possible. The recent high output of paddy could be attributed to maintaining a favourable price constellation of output to input prices and to the adequate supply of inputs. Additionally, there is a high degree of complementarity among the inputs of modern package. The actual level of use of any one factor depends on the use of other concomitant inputs. Many of the sources of previous growth have been unambiguously identified to be the improved varieties of seed, development and spread of irrigation and improved fertilizer use. We need to undertake

studies as to how the factors which were at the vanguard of earlier and present successes in foodgrain production can be resurrected and used to take forward our development and crop diversification efforts.

Irrigation is an important element in the modern agricultural production package. A shift from rainfed to an irrigated agriculture for obtaining reliable risk free output from farm investment requires good water use planning. There has been a decline in the rate of growth of irrigation in the country. Also the share of surface water irrigation to total irrigation coverage has declined from nearly fifty per cent to below thirty per cent in recent times. This points to the urgency of the need to reassess our irrigation needs and the actual water resources available for future agricultural usage. In this exercise, it is important to examine the future mode of irrigation to be promoted in the country. As it is reported, deep water welling or utilizing the deep aquifers is not only capital

intensive form of irrigation investment but are also uneconomical to operate.

Post harvest and marketing constraints have to be addressed as much as the production constraints in a successful planning for the overall development of agriculture. Insufficient market information and underdeveloped marketing skills among the farmers coupled with poor quality of market infrastructure are impediments to greater production. Overabundance of market intermediaries in this chain instead of assisting in the smooth reticulation of agricultural produce from producers to final consumers, in fact, causes unnecessary marketing bottlenecks with high cost associated with it. Inadequate infrastructure facilities lead not only to high marketing costs but adds to inefficiency and snags in the system. It is found that there is a high dependence on foreign seeds for many vegetable and other species of crops, the pesticides and chemical use for vegetable production is significantly

high — these are the gray areas in our effort to develop and diversify a safe and regenerative agriculture. The pesticide residue or trace elements will be important in screening for export eligibility of our agricultural produce and it is a matter of concern for general consumption at home as well as we all know how these elements enter into our food chain and affect our life support system.

Research and development appears to be adequate for rice in the country for the time being. Though research in stagnating yield and yield gap merits its attention. In a changing scenario we now need strong research and development networks for other crops and crop categories. We had the physical infrastructure for agricultural research for sometime now but it is only recently that the present government through far reaching reform has instilled a new life into this R&D system of agriculture called the NARS (national agricultural research system). Though only organiza-

tional in nature and a long way from the goal, it is a bold step in the right direction by the agriculture ministry. Proper manpower placement should be the next priority because the initiative at the top has to be backed up by people in these agencies.

The planning, monitoring and evaluation units of many of these institutions are manned only by physicists, horticulturists, breeders, entomologists and other non-economists or by untrained professionals. This is the broader reflection of what is happening in the national context in its apex agency. Results, not unexpectedly, are plans and programmes devoid of meaningful perceptions often filled with confusion in setting priorities. As a subset of such plans, the priorities are also clouded in the TAPP and development programmes which boil down into procuring some vehicles and equipment or their success is measured in some similar physical denominators only. The planning process and the manpower engaged in it are important and sooner we give attention to this aspect the better.

Government will do better by eliminating many of the redundant and non-performing organizations/departments within this system and build a system which is strong, stable and open — to be able to meet the challenges of the twenty-

first century. To provide a sustainable agriculture these organizations themselves have to be self-sustaining. Open competition as well as induction of competent is the only way to that sustainability.

The rural industrial base particularly agro-based industries have to be strengthened. Policies are needed to supply adequate credit to this abysmally undercapitalized sector of the economy where capital-labour ratio is very low. As is known there is a serious credit gap in the rural sector. Micro credit and NGO dependent development strategy should be broadened to be able to make any serious dent in this dire situation and to have the necessary impetus for leapfrogging in development. There is a great potential for improving the performance in this area and consequently improving farm income. The overall industrial (and its subset the rural industries) policies should be based on the conditions existing in these areas. A mature regenerative and a sustainable agriculture which will meet the needs of today and tomorrow cannot grow in isolation. A balanced policy framework which complements and helps in the prosperity of all other sectors is essential for agriculture to come to a full bloom.

The writer is Chief Scientific Officer and Head of Agricultural Economics Division, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute

# Democrats Turn the Screw on Sad Mr Palestine

THREE years after Yasser Arafat's triumphant return to Palestine, the struggle for democratic self-rule in the occupied territories is turning increasingly against his own regime.

It is all so different from 1 July, 1994, when his return was seen by local people as the beginning of the end of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the inauguration of Palestinian democracy.

But the occupation has not ended and the peace process is in limbo. The struggle against Arafat, the President of the Palestine National Authority, and his executive, is being waged by the 88-member elected Legislative Council, 70 independent Palestinian non-government organisations (NGOs) and various opposition figures and groups.

Yasser Arafat is under growing pressure, with the peace process stalled and rioting rocking the occupied territories. A Gemini News Service correspondent says he is caught between Israeli intransigence and the freedom struggle by Palestinians critical of his autocratic rule. Michael Jansen writes from Jerusalem

## Arafat's 30-year struggle

- 1964: Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) formed
- 1968: Yasser Arafat elected chairman
- 1970: After clashes with the Jordanian army, PLO is expelled by King Hussein and sets up HQ in Beirut
- 1974: Arab League recognises PLO as 'the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'. PLO granted observer status at UN General Assembly
- 1982: PLO withdraws from Beirut after Israeli invasion. HQ re-established in Tunis
- 1987: Intifada (Uprising) breaks out in occupied territories
- 1988: Palestine National Council proclaims an independent state in the occupied territories; Arafat, as its leader, is received by the UN General Assembly
- 1991: Arafat confirmed as President of Palestine and of the PLO
- 1994: Arafat returns to Palestine

Since the legislature first met in March 1996, its work has been obstructed by the executive.

One council member, Marwan Barghouti, who is secretary-general of Arafat's own Fateh movement in the West Bank, told Gemini News Service: "The executive does not respect or implement our decisions. Indeed, the 'Arafatocracy' ignores them and makes certain that ordinary people do not learn about council activities. The authority's official television station does not broadcast council debates and its security services press the media to play down the legislature's activities."

The most important legislation that Arafat has managed to block is the Basic Law, intended to regulate the self-rule government, provide for a separation of powers within the national authority and define basic human rights. He rightly fears it will curb his almost dictatorial powers. Ordinary Palestinians had little faith in their legislators until early this year when al-Quds educational TV began live broadcasts of council sessions. These transformed public perceptions. Viewers saw the legislature vigorously debating and sharply criticising the policies of the executive. But this win-

dow on democracy was not open long. Arafat's official TV channel jammed the broadcasts.

Then, on 20 May, as the legislature was preparing to raise the issue of corruption in the executive, the journalist and broadcaster in charge of the educational station, Daoud Kuttab, was detained for a week by Palestinian police in Ramallah. Al-Quds University, which owns the station, agreed to suspend council broadcasts in exchange for Kuttab's release.

However, the jamming and arrest backfired. The actions boosted the legislature's credibility and diminished Arafat's already-damaged public standing.

His attempts to obstruct the council's work have made its members more determined than ever to press ahead with the Basic Law.

Arafat is also resisted by NGOs, which refuse to submit to his control. From the Israeli occupation in 1967 until Arafat's return in 1994, about 200 Palestinian NGOs formed an administrative structure for civil society. These groups ran hospitals, schools, universities and national institutions. As they raised their own funds, they had a large degree of independence.

Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza counted

on NGOs to defend local "civil society" against the long-standing autocratic behaviour of Arafat and his entourage when they returned from the diaspora. But he managed to take over two-thirds of the NGOs and to channel their external funding through his corrupt administration.

The determination of the remaining 70 independent NGOs to resist takeover by Arafat was strengthened in May when it was reported that, during its first year of operation, the executive had wasted or embezzled \$326 million — or 40 per cent — of the Palestine authority's budget, which is largely funded by international donors.

Fateh members constitute the most important grouping pressing Arafat to adopt democratic norms. Marwan Barghouti says the movement has forced the president to reject any resumption of negotiations with Israel until work is halted on new Jewish settlements.

And, according to Dr Eyad Sarraj, chairman of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizen's Rights, public pressure has compelled Arafat to rein in his nine security services.

Instead of thousands of political detainees, there are now 150 from Islamic resistance

groups, and "torture is not now practised in Palestinian prisons", says Dr Sarraj, who was detained for two weeks in 1996 and tortured. "Ministers now make some attempt to explain their work to the public on television and there is movement towards a freer press."

However, the Palestinian struggle for democracy is hindered by the total support given to Arafat by Israel, the United States and the European Union. "Arafat is their man," says a critic from Hebron. "They accept whatever he does."

"His administration is corrupt from top to bottom and they know it. But his backers don't want to do anything to weaken him. Without money he is nothing because he rules by buying people. The donors' uncritical backing constitutes conspiracy," says the source, who has been harassed by Palestinian police.

It is a conspiracy of silence about corruption and human rights and a conspiracy to protect Arafat. Involving the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Israeli secret services. They'll keep him safe as long as he does what they want. And when he is no longer useful, they'll get rid of him."

The present sorry state of Palestinian democracy is a direct consequence of the sorry state of the peace process.

If the process had progressed with the gradual handover of almost all of the West Bank and Gaza, as the Oslo accords provided, Arafat would have been in a strong position today and would not have to marginalise the legislature or resort to repression to stay in power. But the Palestine authority has received full control over only three per cent of the West Bank and 60 per cent of Gaza.

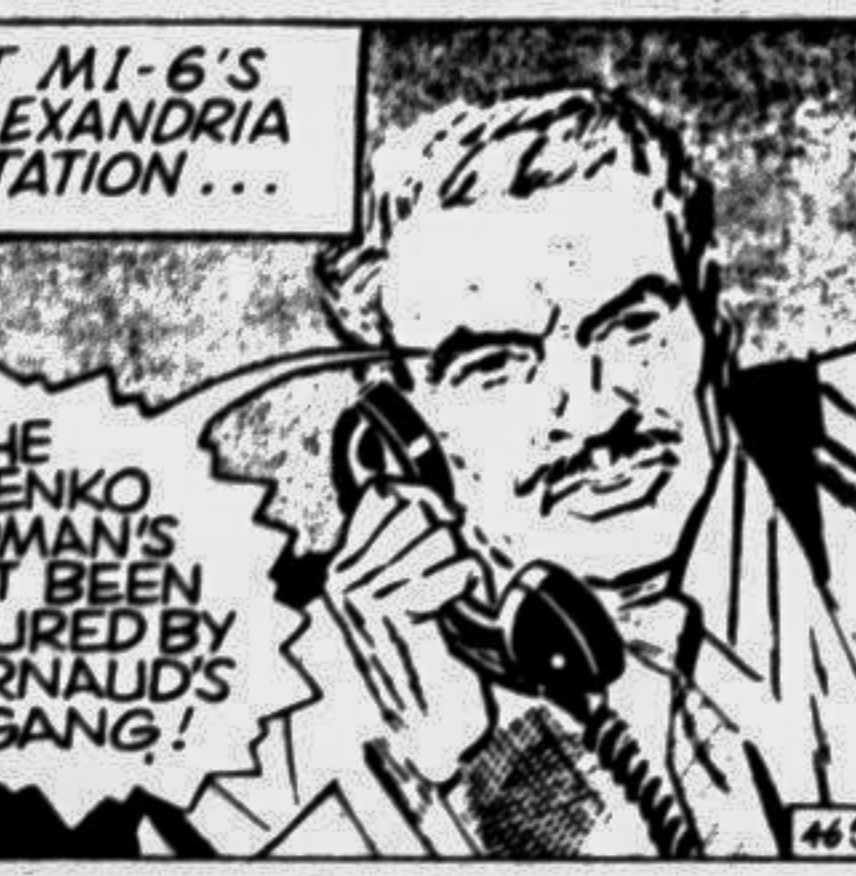
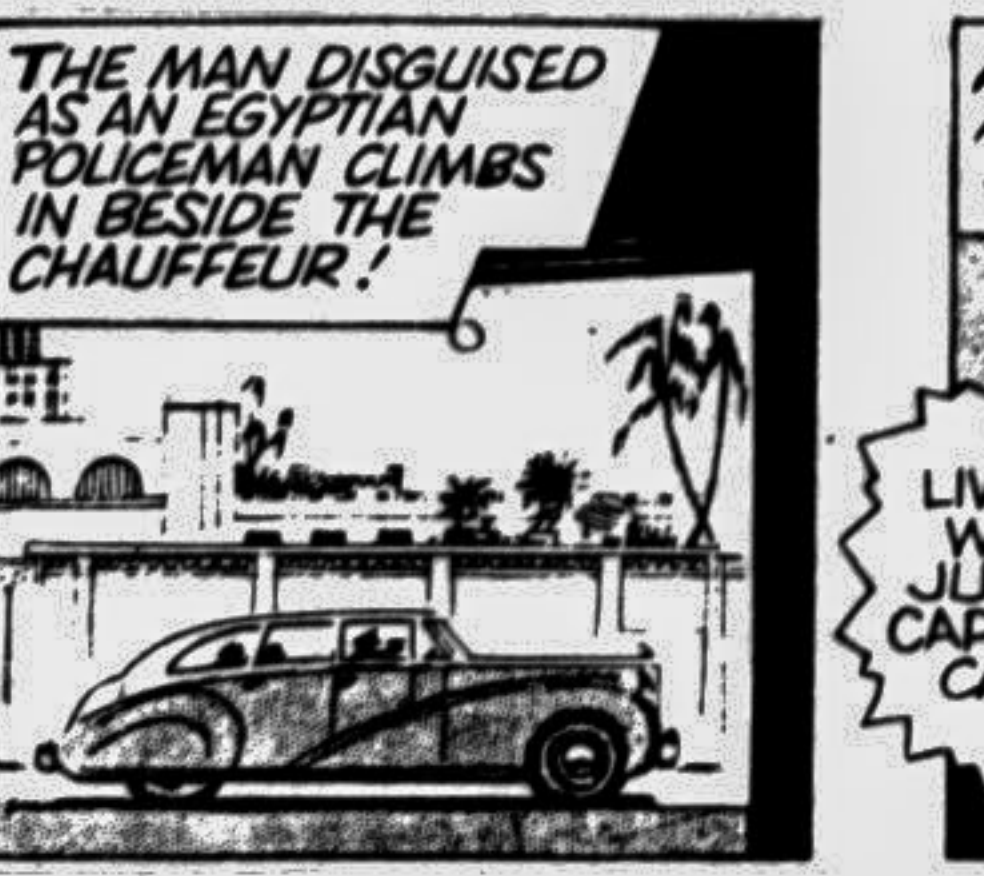
As Palestinian resentment has grown, Arafat's primary task has become to prevent violence against Israelis. Many Palestinians accuse him of acting like "Israel's policeman". But in this task he can go only so far while maintaining control and credibility.

The once-praised "Mr Palestine" has been reduced to a sad little man caught between the yearnings of his people for independence and democracy and Israel's determination to hang onto as much of the occupied territories as possible.

## Tom and Jerry



## James Bond



## Ex-child garment workers for more rights

Whereas in the past they continuously received orders — on folding clothes, snipping threads, sorting fabrics and speeding up their work — yesterday these children were given an opportunity to turn the requesting around and say what they thought should be done to improve their lives and build on the education they received following the signing by the BGMEA, UNICEF and ILO on July 4, 1995 of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to end child labour in the garment industry and increase learning opportunities for working children, says a UNICEF press release.

The recommendations came at the end of a day-long congress of former child garment workers held at the auditorium of the Shishu Academy in the city yesterday. Some sixty boys and girls took part in the congress sponsored by the UNICEF. They are among the more than 8,000 children now studying in different schools run by BRAC and GSS, two NGOs renowned for non-formal primary education programmes.

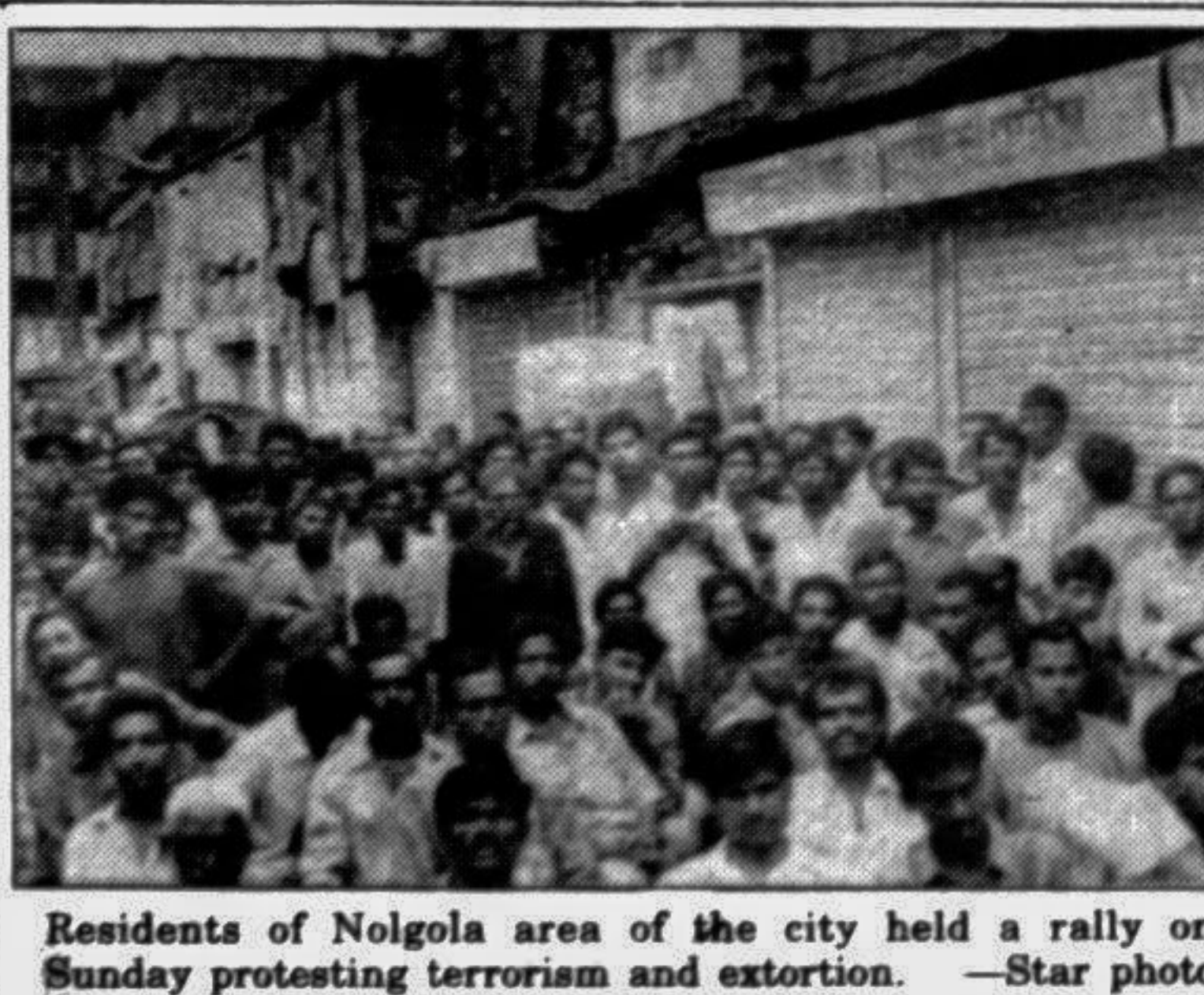
During the congress, the children aged between six to thirteen, analysed their past and present situations and identified their need for future. They also expressed their opinions by way of presenting groups songs, drama performances and drawings.

repression and unhealthy atmosphere. Others said that in addition to acquiring a school education, they had learnt how to "live in a healthy society with honour," as well as "become aware of health and the environment." But many said they still "need more rights to make their future better and live as worthy citizens."

Their recommendations included the "provision of free medical care, safe drinking water and proper sanitation facilities; the setting up of more schools, sports and physical exercise facilities; education

through recreational activities, exploring the talent of disadvantaged children and proper training for them, ensuring social security, arranging of jobs after completion of their education, construction of shelters for working child living in slums and establishment of a national organisation for deprived children.

The children will formally present their recommendations to the MOU signatories and the government at a function to be held at the Shishu Academy on July 4 in observance of the second anniversary of the signing of the MOU.



Residents of Nolgola area of the city held a rally on Sunday protesting terrorism and extortion. —Star photo

## Metropolitan

### A bridge over Rupsha—Key to development in Khulna

By Shahiduzzaman

enthusiast, said people of Khulna were not convinced that power lobby in Dhaka believes in an equitable development strategy and does not discriminate against any region.

There is a port, there are industries, there is a shrimp farming fast growing and the Sunderbans forest. Just a bridge would have worked a magic not only for the economy of this region but for the whole country," he said.

Meanwhile, in absence of a bridge, the Rupsha Ferry ghat is a terrible mess with a human sea competing with all kinds of transports from rickshaw vans to trucks.

"The pressure (on the ghat) is rising every day. Sometimes I wonder when this human sea is going to end. There are so many people mingling with so much of traffic," said Sabur Miah, a porter at the Rupsha ferry ghat, sipping tea at a nearby tea stall.

With road communication in nearby districts improving, movement of people to and from Khulna is growing. According to an estimate, population of Khulna is currently 16 lakh, swelling by another five lakh people who commute every day.

Khulna has long been a transit port for people of adjoining districts. The town has rail, bus and steamer communication with the rest of the country.

Khulna being the heart of the

economy of southern part of the country, thousands of people from nearby districts visit the town for trade and other businesses. Half of these short-time visitors cross the Rupsha river through this terminal point.

Thus the pressure mounts on Rupsha ghat everyday. A clerk at the ferry counter estimated that roughly five hundred motor vehicles and a thousand rickshaw vans, in addition to 200,000 people, cross the river through the terminal.

"I have worked in all major ferry terminals in the country, but pressure on Rupsha ghat is one of the highest. It is the busiest ghat after Aricha, Daulatdia and Nagarbari ghats. There is hardly any rest," said one ferry pilot.

"The way pressure is building, I think it will be impossible to tackle the ferry. A bridge on the Rupsha seems inevitable," he said.

The ferryman probably echoes the citizens of Khulna and nearby districts.

Surveys on the proposed bridge were fielded on several occasions since independence, but they ended halfway.

The present government too has promised to build the bridge, saying it means business, not tall talks.



Congestion at Rupsha ferry ghat. — News Network photo

Committee, which has planned a siege of Rupsha ghat on July 19 to demand early construction of the bridge with provision of railtracks.

"We want the government to act fast before it's too late," said A H Deldar Ahmed, a veteran lawyer of the city. — News Network.