

The OAU and African Renaissance : Openings for Bangladesh

by Dr Abul Kalam

Africa's untapped resources offer tremendous opportunities for shared investment of the Bangladeshi entrepreneurs. Some of the Bangladeshi primary produce, semi-finished commodities and finished consumer-oriented products (some of which are world-class) would find easy access to African markets

AFRICA is re-awakened. It is no longer the dark continent, as it was often deemed. Like most other parts of the Third World, Africa also went through a process of imperial scramble for possession, colonization and exploitation. Since the 1950s the winds of independence had swept through the continent. But Africa had an additional agony, that of Apartheid. It had traumatized Africa for over five decades. In the meantime, Africa went through a process of political regeneration, anti-colonial struggle, liberation, non-alignment, and soul-searching through its continental entity of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Yet Africa, for much of the past few decades, was perhaps more an object, rather a subject of international relations. It was affected by the vicious legacies of colonialism and marginalised under the shadow of big power chauvinism. Apartheid and Cold War. It had little role to play in global affairs.

Apartheid is currently a matter of history. The leader of the erstwhile anti-apartheid movement in Africa, acclaimed world-wide for his perspective and vision, Nelson Mandela, has emerged a role player, mediating in the continent's civil strife and has earned a reputa-

tion for his "go-between" role in Africa's conflict situations. Once again, Africa seems re-awakened to a new reality. Mandela, symbolizing the vision of a new Africa, has been welcomed and honoured as a state-guest in many of the world's capitals. Among others, Bangladesh was also a long-standing candidate to receive and honour the South African liberation hero, to which he is well-entitled. Eventually he came to Bangladesh on a very sombre occasion, the day of silver jubilee celebration of the country's independence, perhaps also to soothe the sagging popularity and fledgling morale of our persuasive Prime Minister.

As Africa looks toward a new future, legacies of autocracy and conflict, disharmony and disease, hunger and poverty continue to haunt Africa and constrain its progress. Yet the African leaders have set themselves to stake the claim of their continent to be a major player on the world stage. As they met in Harare (4-5th June) in the 33rd annual summit of the 53-nation Organization of African Unity (OAU), they seemed determined to shake off their image as "wretched onlooker." African leaders are unwilling to accept the view that "Africa is an insignificant partner in international politi-

cal and economic relations." Africa currently looks beyond colonial legacies, Apartheid and Cold War intrusion. The search is on for a new destiny: it is time for a political and economic renaissance in Africa. Like the rest of the Third World, Africa no longer can ignore the call for democracy and development, human rights and accountability.

The new African renaissance has both internal as well as international implications. Internally, Africa seems poised to take a greater responsibility, to quote Mandela, "for her woes and use the immense collective wisdom it possesses to make reality of the idea of the African renaissance." At the political level, it may mean greater commitment to democratic practice and accountability, political accommodation of the dissenting forces, and sensitivity toward human rights. All this would mean overcoming the Africa's age-old problems of military coups and conflicts. Efforts have been underway to find permanent peace in the feuding countries such as Sierra

Leone and Somalia, Angola and Liberia. Economically, efforts to form an African economic community has also been revamped.

Externally, the new Africa also wishes to assert her right to be an equal partner in world affairs. An African renaissance internationally thus contemplates that, again to quote Mandela, "Africa refuses to be passive onlooker in a changing world, [a] hapless victim to modern machinations by the forces historically responsible for her woes." To place the African view in positive terms, Africa wants two seats, with veto powers, in an expanded Security Council of the United Nations. With the two seats the African leaders want to take into account the interests of both Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arabic-speaking north. The African leaders are in no mood to compromise on their demand for veto powers, as a OAU dignity has equated "a seat without veto powers to a castrated bull."

Certainly, not all that they desire or wish are "moonshine and roses." The election of

Ghana's Kofi Annan to the much-cherished position of the UN Secretary-General after Egypt's Boutros Boutros Ghali gave Africa a renewed confidence. The ultimate defeat of the old imperial colonialists as well as neo-colonialists in the form of Apartheid added further potency to Africa's growing world aspirations. Africa's old colonial and neo-colonial nightmare may be over. Africa saw the change of the old guards, and new African faces have come to international limelight. Kofi Annan or Nelson Mandela may symbolize the hopes of a new African renaissance, but the internal aspirations are plagued by the continent's age-old legacies and problems, whereas the international aspirations are subject to a global consensus. As it appears, the current permanent members of the UN Security

Council balk at the idea of giving veto powers to the developing countries of the Third World, be it India or Indonesia, Brazil or South Africa. Already Germany and Japan have been pushing hard to join the rank; what seems certain that Africa's insistence in similar privileges will make the bid by the economic colossus of Europe and Asia more difficult.

Africa, despite its current stance of renaissance, has to go a long way towards resurgence. Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and now Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) look like critical patients awaiting surgery. Nigeria, Sudan and Congo are still "non-functioning giants" of Africa. Southern Africa, emerging from long struggle against imperial exploitation and Apartheid, offers a ray of hope for Africa's future. Opportunities for devel-

opment there provide additional growth potential, especially in the countries where peace has been restored, like Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, as Rumi Khan wrote (The Daily Star, 10 June 1997). Currently facing the challenges of democracy through consensus, South Africa alone is undergoing the tests of freedom, while at the same time upholding the responsibilities of freedom.

As Africa adjusts itself to global change and reform there gets momentum, opportunities for countries such as ours loom large. Africa's desire to expand its multilevel ties with fellow developing countries are well-known. Bangladesh's expected participation in the groups such as D-8 and the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) would offer her the necessary openings for being a partner in Africa's development. It has an established cultural affinity with Africa's north and also has had a consistently broad political comradeship with the rest. Having served in Africa's peacekeeping in many an instance, Bangladesh shares the aspira-

tions of the African renaissance more than other nations.

Moreover, Africa's untapped resources offer tremendous opportunities for shared investment of the Bangladeshi entrepreneurs. Some of the Bangladeshi primary produce, semi-finished commodities and finished consumer-oriented products (some of which are world-class) would find easy access to African markets. Bangladesh's NGO experience in community development with gender participation is of unique order, attracting the attention even of the developed world and that would be a welcome experience for much of Africa to replicate. Relationships at the level of business may thus be fruitfully extended to micro-level social experiences of both Bangladesh and its African partners. It seems imperative that Bangladesh should look beyond the conflictual environment of its neighbourhood to a wider horizon that would benefit her people in material terms as well as in world outlook.

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Earth Summit+5 Ends with Little Progress on Environmental Issues

Judy Aita writes from UN HQ

AFTER five days of speeches from international leaders and weeks of intense negotiations, the General Assembly special session on the environment ended June 28 without much agreement on how to put into practice protective measures adopted five years ago.

Negotiators were also unable to come up with a separate statement expressing a political commitment to action on the environment. Razali Ismail, president of the assembly called the overall result "pretty sobering." But, he added, the session was "a very honest attempt" that did not "try to sweep things under the carpet, to put a gloss on something that is not there." This special session was known as Earth Summit+5 because it came five years after the unprecedented gathering of world leaders in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for a summit on the environment.

The failure to agree on a political statement sent a message, Razali said, that "underlines how difficult it is to try to encapsulate issues, when over five years you have not had enough progress." But Razali said at a press conference that he did not consider the session a failure. "For the first time we are honest enough to recognize the limitations of our promises, our political commitments and our continuing inability to meet the targets in the international context," he said.

The special session was able to document called "The Program for Further Implementa-

tion of Agenda 21." It called on governments to follow through on the ambitious plan of action (known as Agenda 21) adopted at the Rio Earth Summit.

At Rio in 1992 "we reached the zenith of our enthusiasm and commitment to sustainable development and the environment," Razali said. "Since then, many other things have come our way which have distracted our attentions from that... A sense of parochialism has spread over much of the developed world that has affected the willingness of those countries to make available funds, resources, ODA (official development assistance), technology transfers, all kinds of things."

What is needed now, the president said, is for non-governmental organizations to pressure governments.

He acknowledged that in some cases developing nations also blocked agreement. Developing countries had "a sense of being aggrieved" because some of the promises of the past five years were not kept. Therefore, he said, they were not in a very agreeable mood. During the five-day summit, delegates heard from 198 speakers that included President Clinton and 41 other heads of state and 44 environment ministers. Over 160 UN member-nations participated along with 34 others groups, including UN agencies and non-governmental organizations representing women, indigenous people, farmers, trade unions, the private sector and youth.

One youth representative, a

14-year-old from Sierra Leone, told the assembly to "give young people hope in a benighted world where we seem to be sleep-walking into the 21st Century without a map or a candle."

President Clinton's address on June 26 brought a mixed reaction from delegations and private groups looking to the United States to provide strong leadership on some of the critical issues facing the planet, especially on limiting the emission of greenhouse gases that warm Earth and could significantly change the planet's climate.

Clinton said that "the science is clear and compelling: we humans are changing the global climate and 'no nation can evade its responsibility to confront' the problem. Applauding the European leaders' push for agreement on a 15 per cent reduction by 2010 when the countries that have signed the current climate change treaty meet in Kyoto, Japan in December, Clinton stopped short of making any US commitment. This was not unexpected, but disappointing to environmental groups nevertheless.

"We will work with our people—and we will bring to Kyoto a strong American commitment to realistic and binding limits that will significantly reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases," he said.

"We must all do our part—industrial nations that emit the largest quantities of greenhouse gases and developing nations whose emissions are growing

rapidly," Clinton said.

Here in the United States, we must do better. With 4 per cent of the world's population, we produce 20 per cent of its greenhouse gases. Frankly our record since Rio is not sufficient... So we must do better, and we will," the president promised.

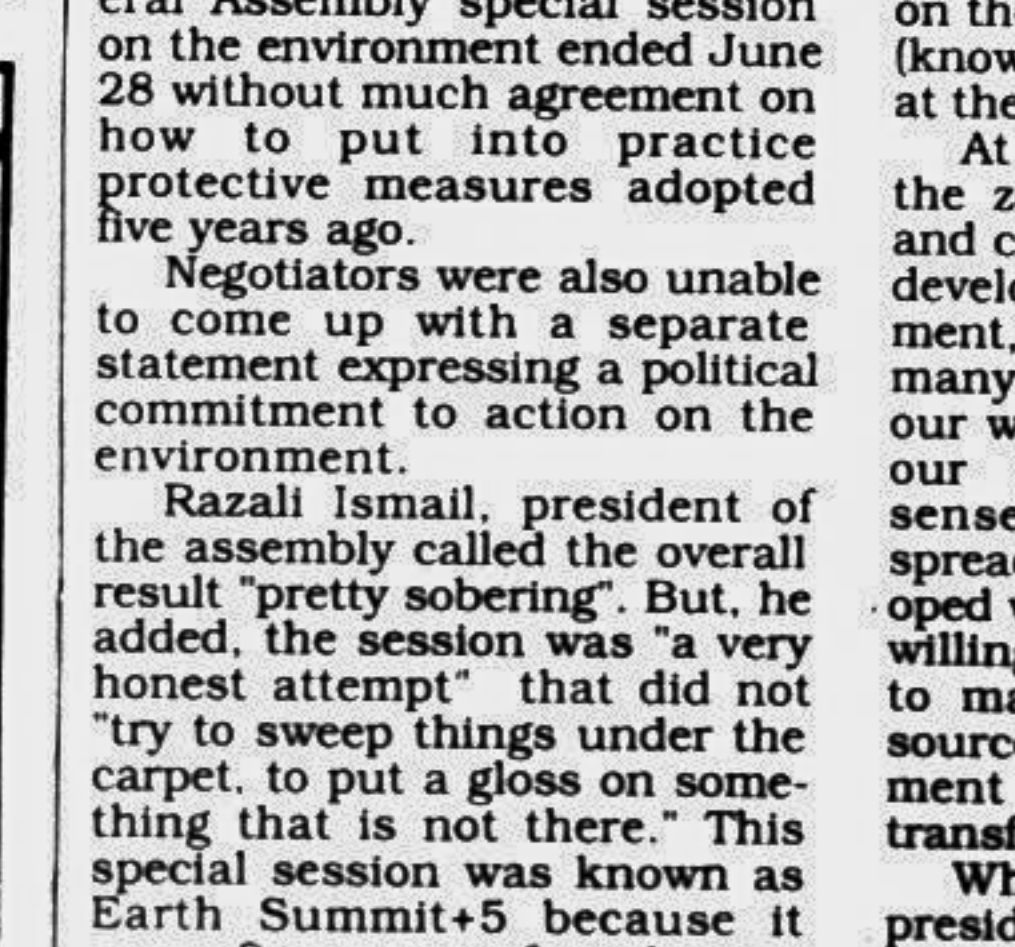
In adopting "The Program for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21" in the early hours of June 28, delegations agreed to hold another comprehensive review in 2002. But the program contained no concrete steps for cutting greenhouse gas emissions, protecting forests, increasing aid to developing countries or dealing with toxic chemicals.

The program did not state the position of many countries on greenhouse gases was still unclear. It also recognized that there was widespread, but not universal, agreement that it would be necessary to consider legally binding targets for emissions of these gases by developed and East European countries by specific dates, such as 2005, 2010 or 2020.

On forests, the session recommended that governments work through an ad hoc, open-ended forum toward a consensus for a treaty or other international arrangement to preserve the world's forests. The text stressed the need to move toward sustainable patterns of production, distribution and use of energy. It also called for the transfer of energy technology to developing countries.

The writer is USIA United Nations Correspondent

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HERE and THERE

Rickshaw Sramik League

Dhaka City Rickshaw Sramik League (DCRSL) yesterday thanked the rickshawpullers for pulling rickshaws in the city streets defying eight-hour haral call given by the BNP, reports BSS.

In a joint statement Mohammad Montu and M Mujibur Rahman, president and general secretary respectively of DCRSL, said that the Awami League government adopted a budget for relief and rehabilitation of the poor the opposition BNP could not reconcile to it. They alleged the opposition BNP wanted to leave the country as hostage to terrorists and toll collectors.

Social Welfare Officers Assoc

Bangladesh Social Welfare Officers Association yesterday expressed its gratitude to the government for upgrading 480 officers of the Social Welfare Directorate into the class one post, reports BSS.

In a statement M Abdus Samad, president of the association, said the order about the upgrading of the officers of Social Welfare Directorate was supposed to be issued four years ago. But he said, the order was delayed due to various administrative complexities.

The president of the association said the long standing demand of the social welfare off-

cers was met by the sincere efforts of the state minister in charge of the Ministry of Social Welfare.

He said the upgrading of the social welfare officers would help them contribute to the socio-economic development of the distressed, unemployed, orphans and the retarded as well as the implementation of the poverty alleviation programme as pledged by the Prime Minister.

The president said that the members of the association would play a pioneering role in successfully implementing the programmes of the government.

Clarification by ISPR

Attention of the army headquarters has been drawn to the reports published in a section of the press about the recovery of rocket launcher from the city's Arambagh area, an ISPR press release said yesterday, reports BSS.

The press release said the reports about the power and characteristics of the recovered rocket launcher are not true. In fact, it said, the army did not issue any statement in any newspapers in this regard.

The press release said the publishing of this kind of misleading statement or remark without the consent of the concerned department or officials could not be desirable for the sake of keeping the army above all controversies.

Rly has 15000 surplus manpower, JS told

After shedding some 20,000 workforce through the so-called golden handshake programme a few years back, the Bangladesh Railway still has about 15,000 surplus manpower, reports UNB.

The government has appointed a consultant to ascertain the requirement of manpower for the national railway with its existing network. Communications Minister Anwar Hossain told Parliament yesterday.

Replying to a question from Abdul Latif Mirza of the Awami League, the minister said the number of officials and employees of the railway was reduced from 65,000 to 45,000 now.

But the railway still has about 15,000 additional manpower, he said, adding that the consultant would assess the actual manpower need of the railway department considering its existing network.

Hossain, in this regard, lauded a step of the previous BNP government to stop overtime benefit for the third and fourth class employees of the railway, saying it was a good job done by the BNP.

The railway had to spend Tk 10-15 crore a year to pay overtime bills in the past despite its surplus workforce. He said the railway department arranges overtime duty whenever it needs.

Replying to another question from Jinal Abedin Hazari (AL), the minister said the government has a plan to convert the 320-kilometre Dhaka-Chittagong rail route into a double-line one.

Of the line, 120 kilometres have already been converted into double line and construction of double line between Tongi and Bhairab Bazar on the route is now under process, he said.

He said the 64-kilometre line will cost Tk 200 crore, including Tk 76 crore in foreign exchange. A German consultant has submitted his report on the feasibility of the double line on the route in July last year.

The project will be started when the necessary foreign assistance is available, he said.

Replying to ABM Abul Kashem of the Awami League, Hossain informed that the government had a plan to construct new rail roads in Gazipur, Tangail, Narsingdi, Kishoreganj,

Cox's Bazar, Khulna and Bagerhat districts.

The country has presently 2,706.01 kilometres of railways, he added.

The minister replied to Jafrul Islam Chowdhury of the BNP that Bangladesh Railway has earned a revenue income of Tk 355 crore against its revenue expenditure of Tk 358.83 crore till May of fiscal 1996-97.

It is expected that the Railway will register a profit of over Tk 3 crore at the end of the fiscal, he said. The balance sheet of the Railway for the financial year is yet to be completed.

Replying to Abul Kalam Azad of the Awami League, the minister informed that construction of rail tracks on the Jamuna Bridge would be started next December.

BSCIC industrial estate to be set up in each district by '98

The government will set up Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) industrial estate in each district by 1998, and in all thanas in phases, reports BSS.

Commerce and Industries Minister Tofael Ahmed said this in the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday while speaking on a resolution moved by the BNP legislator Shamsuzzaman Dudu.

He said the government had taken decision to establish some 77 BSCIC industrial estates, 44 of which have already been set up.

Referring to a meeting held on December 17, 1995, the minister said it had decided to set up more BSCIC industrial estates instead of one in each divisional headquarters.

Tofael Ahmed sought cooperation of all, irrespective of party affiliation, to carry forward the government plan for industrialisation.

Eight members from both the ruling and opposition benches spoke on the resolution demanding establishment of industrial estates in their respective thanas.

Later, Shamsuzzaman Dudu withdrew his resolution following the statement of the minister.

Metropolitan

Envoy hosts dinner in Tokyo

Hasina recalls Japan's support during Liberation War

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attended a dinner, hosted by Bangladesh Ambassador to Japan Rashed Ahmed, in Tokyo last night, reports BSS.

Prince and Princess Hitachi attended the dinner, held at the Imperial Hotel Tokyo. A cross section of Japanese elite and the business leaders also attended.

Members of the Prime Minister's entourage, including Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury, as well as official of the Bangladesh Embassy were also present.

The Prime Minister exchanged greetings with the guests and enquired about their welfare.

Briefly speaking on the occasion, Sheikh Hasina said she was happy to be in Japan on the occasion of the silver jubilee of diplomatic relations between Japan and Bangladesh. She re-

called Japan's contribution to the Liberation War of Bangladesh as well as helping Bangladesh in her infrastructural development and rehabilitation since the post-liberation days.

Referring to Japan's recognition to Bangladesh on February 10, 1972, Sheikh Hasina said that this recognition at the time of consolidating our independence and sovereignty had helped us significantly. She also referred to the visit of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Japan in 1973 which 'ushered in a new era of our bilateral relations'.

She particularly recalled with gratitude the outstanding contributions of the then Prime Minister of Japan late Sato, foreign Minister late Fukuda and late Hayakawa, who had supported the cause of our liberation. She also recalled the role of the intellectuals and distinguished personal-

ities of Japan who had assisted our Liberation War in various ways. "I remember with gratitude the role of Japanese media in favour of our Liberation War...we will never forget the contribution of school students who donated their tiffin money for the cause of the independence of Bangladesh," she said.

Before the dinner, a short film on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with special reference to his historic March 7 speech as well as his visit to Japan in 1973, was shown.

Another report adds: Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had a breakfast meeting with Moteo Hayakawa, widow of Hayakawa, at her hotel suite in Tokyo yesterday.

Hayakawa, the founder president of Japan-Bangladesh Friendship Association, had played a pioneering role in fostering the relationship between Bangladesh and Japan.

Prof Tsuyoshi Nava was also present.

Bangladeshis in HK accord reception to Samad Azad

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad met Bangladeshis in Hong Kong at a reception hosted in his honour by the consul-general yesterday, according to a message received here, reports BSS.

He enquired about their welfare.

Later, he explained the policies of free market economy and privatisation of SOEs that the present government was pursuing.

Azad said the continuing political stability in the country already attracted a substantial quantum of foreign investment during the last one year.

He also mentioned the incentive package on investment including the laws that were passed creating private export processing zones in Bangladesh.

While appreciating their contribution to the national economy, he encouraged them to invest in Bangladesh and act as envoys of the country to entice foreign investors.

He also attended a reception hosted by Prince Charles in the Royal Yacht Britannia.

The Foreign Minister Wednesday met some investors from Hong Kong and Malaysia, who expressed willingness to invest in bridges and highways in Bangladesh.

Later, during a dinner hosted in his honour by consul-general Badiuzzaman Khan at the Hong Kong Football Club, the Foreign Minister met Sir Gordon Wu, owner of Consolidated Electric Power Asia (CEPA) and Hopewell Holdings.

Police recovered the body and sent it to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

—Star photo

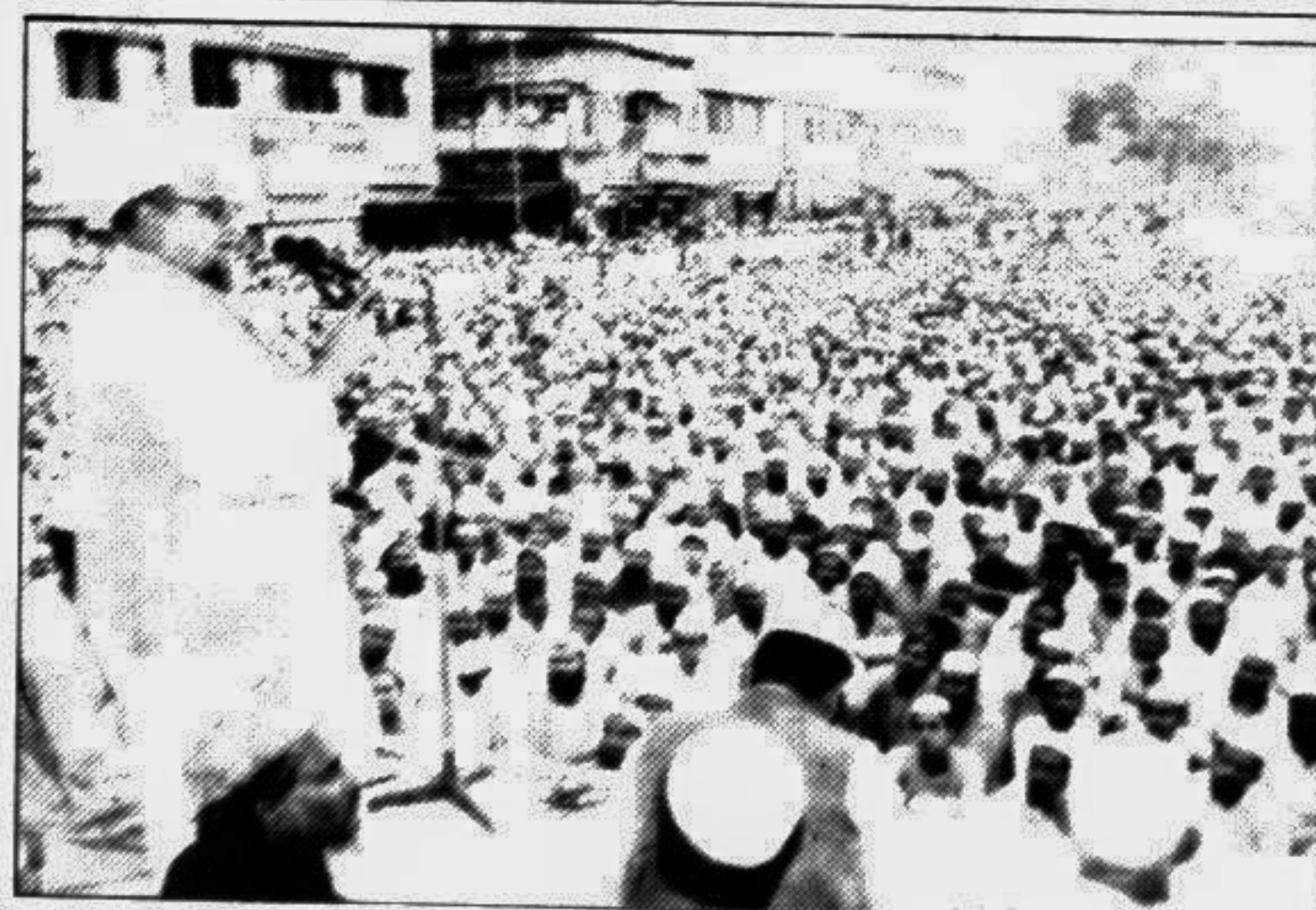
One allegedly commits suicide

A housewife reportedly committed suicide at her residence at Baddanagar under Lalbagh police station in the city yesterday.

Nadia Begum, wife of one Bashir Ahmed, was found hanging from a ceiling fan hook early yesterday.

Police recovered the body and sent it to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

—Star photo



Islami Oikya Jote held a protest rally at the south gate of Baitul Mokarram Mosque yesterday. —Star photo



Prizes were distributed among the winners of a poster contest for children, organised by the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) in observance of World Population Day '97, at the Shishu Academy auditorium yesterday. —Star photo