

Dhaka, Sunday, July 20, 1997

Sounds Good

A report completed on June 30 by the Commission for Autonomy of Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television is expected to be submitted to the Prime Minister in the second week of this month. Before the full report is made public we have come to know by virtue of a report carried in this newspaper yesterday, the broad outlines or the main features of autonomy as recommended by the commission. We fully endorse the most significant of them which seeks to form a seven-member National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) with the responsibility of guiding the state-run electronic media. The country's President will be the appointing authority for the commission. There is also provision for opening up private TV and radio channels. But our immediate concern is how the state-run electronic media will operate.

Unless the details are available, we cannot make elaborate comments on the report. On the basis of information available so far, we express our satisfaction over the good work done by the autonomy commission, particularly its clear recommendation for not making the media subordinate to the information ministry. However, we feel that a few questions need to be answered. To which authority the NBC will be accountable — the President, Parliament or anyone else? What will be the funding mechanism like and whether the NBC will enjoy a statutory position? These issues are fundamental to ensuring legal or constitutional guarantees for the independence of the proposed NBC.

It is reported that only 50 copies of the report will be printed. Why not print more to be circulated extensively among the public or at least to make the report available to newspapers for wider circulation to generate greater public awareness on this topic? We suspect that some quarters — both within the media and outside of them — may not be particularly happy over the proposed changes. They will try to resist or stall the implementation of the report. We hope the government after due consideration goes full speed ahead in implementing the recommendation of the report.

For a Ring of Finality

The government is homing in on the loan default problem. This has been borne out lately by reports that the finance ministry is seriously considering World Bank proposals for what we see as a two-legged drive against hardened loan obligation shirkers. They are trying to make minced meat of Tk 12,000 crore owed to them by the banks.

The first strand on which the new stratagem is contemplated to rest consists in expanding the reach, power, functionality and effectiveness of the Money Loan Courts (MLCs). The plans are to have 64 MLCs in place of the present 19, one for each district, whole-timer judges to dispose of cases in courts exclusively meant to deal with money loan suits. The MLC laws need to be fine-tuned in the light of experiences gathered while handling default cases where decisive verdicts were not easy to reach.

The second line of action suggested by the World Bank as a complement to the legal process of loan recovery, or more precisely, as a separate accelerator for it, is the enactment of a law enabling the banks to liquidate collateral without filing a suit against the defaulter. In other words, the banks would be empowered to put mortgaged property on public auction. Any resistance to auction proceedings would render the offender liable for criminal case. Apart from the legal actions pictured, a certain moral pressure is also sought to be exerted on the defaulter by displaying a notice for auction on his premises for all to see, and by giving him the first opportunity to buy up the property. Wilful defaulters are likely to buckle under such pressures when put together and laid as a noose around them.

We endorse the suggestions proffered by the World Bank which are known to have been based on relevant laws in Sri Lanka and the USA. But for a desired effect, we believe, the local paradigm is to be kept in view having regard to the peculiarities of our default culture. The BSB and BSRs have had the legal cover to resort to public auction for recovering outstanding loans. Their experiences could give us a lead in providing adequate teeth and bite to our laws. We want this more to be serious with a ring of finality.

Touch of Mars

Mars, the dream planet for space scientists where life forms could not be ruled out in the shrouded mysteries of its environment has been reached at long last. The unmanned probe craft Pathfinder soft-landed on the surface of Mars on Friday at the end of an epic journey covering 497 million km from the Pasadena Jet Propulsion Centre in California, USA.

As it happens with any highly coveted space mission, there was a nail-biting four-hour wait before the conditions of the craft could be traced on the last leg of its journey. And then struck mankind's another hour of glory since the days of Sputnik and man's landing on the Moon as shouts of elation reverberated the mission control room at Pasadena.

Now the precious Buggy cargo with its powerful camera eye and sensor gears would beam information about Mars' environment and surface out to our good Earth.

Our congratulations to the US government on its success after twenty years of unrelenting efforts to reach Mars which coincided most appropriately also with the US National Day on July 4.

As we celebrate this great occasion of conquering vast distances in the space and marvel at the celestial feat, let us have an eye-level reappraisal of how we have acquitted of ourselves in our own planet. Our ground-level imperfections glare in the sunlight of our newer achievement.

Hong Kong: Setting of the British Sun?

WITH the handing over of Hong Kong back to China, the British Empire seems to have come full circle. The adventure that began with the Industrial Revolution of the sixteenth century has come to a close.

156 years of British rule that is a long time indeed. This was preceded by the Opium Wars, Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the gigantic Revolution in China culminating in the victory of the Communist party in 1949 and nearly half a century of patient waiting by the Revolutionary Government in Beijing.

In between there has been a lease agreement between China and Great Britain for 99 years. It is a measure of the maturity of the two sides that the frictions have never been allowed to spill over and finally the Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher signed the deal in 1984, whose fruit we witnessed live on TV in our homes the other day.

The pomp and circumstance surrounding this great event went like clock work although the western media particularly BBC, perhaps naturally, tried to inject information which really did not exist. Much was made of the arrival of Chinese troops including armoured carriers, ships and aircraft in Hong Kong on the eve of the departure of the British forces. Yet the fact is that after 156 years China was recovering her sovereignty over her territory.

Since the victory of the Communists led by Mao Zhe Dong in 1949 China has denounced the unequal treaties and the treaty ceding Hong Kong has been one of the most glaring. It is a measure of the maturity of the Chinese leadership that they have waited for half a century in order to obtain through patient negotiations the recovery of Hong Kong. Since Britain prefers by far divesting parts of her Empire through negotiations rather than confrontation, the chapter on Hong Kong has come to a close without leaving any bad taste.

If there was no bad taste the occasion was one of high drama. For the occasion no less than the inheritor to the British Throne Prince Charles made the trip by plane and after the ceremony of handing over sailed into the sunset on board Britannica with his Governor Chris Patten in tow. Chris Patten, his wife and daughters, Governor of Hong Kong for the last five years, moved by the farewell ceremonies on the verge of tears, are some of the unforgettable moments of handing back Hong Kong to China.

According to the agreement

With the handing over of Hong Kong Britain has said good bye to her Empire. Starting from the tiny British isles she annexed a great part of the universe so that she could proclaim justifiably that the sun never set on the British Empire.

between Britain and China, China will have full sovereignty over Hong Kong and will have responsibility for Foreign Affairs and Defense. On all other matters Hong Kong will enjoy autonomy for the next fifty years. It will be called the Special Administrative Region and will be administered by the Chinese appointed Chief Tung Chee Hwa. According to

points of friction between China and Britain, this potentially is the most important. Hwa mentioned May 1998 as a possible date for elections. One country — two systems, that is the slogan for Hong Kong. From the manner things are evolving inside China, the distinction appears to get blurred every passing day. Shanghai is appearing to match

China continues her march to recovering her sovereignty, the question of Taiwan will assume great importance. Taiwan, the new tiger, was of little importance until the arrival of Chiang Kai Shek, who fled from China after losing out to Communist forces led by Mao Zhe Dong. Chiang and his successors have established in Taiwan a system of Government that can be called a success story. China claims Taiwan as a part of her territory and the whole world has accorded diplomatic recognition to one China only. Whereas due to the vibrant economy of Taiwan, countries around the world have important trade relations with her, in order not to offend China, diplomatic relations with Taiwan have been held in abeyance. China has shown exemplary patience in the case of Hong Kong and since China takes a long view on international affairs, that patience will not be lacking in the case of Taiwan.

Speaking with David Frost Chee Hwa heavily underlined the fact that what was most important for China was the recovery of her sovereignty. Napoleon had said, 'when China wakes up the world will tremble'. Since the middle of the twentieth century, slowly but surely the giant is waking up. As we prepare to enter the 21st century we shall see how far Napoleon was right.

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



reports he enjoys complete confidence of the Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Hwa's handling of David Frost, the TV personality, is a sure sign that Zemin has made a very good choice as the first Chinese Chief in a delicate situation. While upholding China's right to post troops in Hong Kong, since it is Chinese territory, he declared the intention of the authorities to hold elections in view to have an assembly, which would not be composed of nominated representatives. Of all the minor

Hong Kong in every respect. The slogan of market economy is sweeping through China. It is an irreversible process. It is true that in terms of per capita income China is way behind Hong Kong, a symbol of the success of capitalism.

The outstanding points in the agreement leading to the adoption of the Basic Law are: 1) Hong Kong people will govern Hong Kong. 2) The Hong Kong courts will have jurisdiction over all cases except for acts of state such as defense and For-

ign Affairs; 3) The existing system of English Common Law shall be maintained in the Hong Kong SAR. 4) The Hong Kong SAR will issue its own passports; 5) In addition to Chinese English may also be used as an official language by the executive, legislature and judiciary.

With the handing over of Hong Kong Britain has said good bye to her Empire. Starting from the tiny British isles she annexed a great part of the universe so that she could proclaim justifiably that the sun never set on the British Empire. If the Empire has vanished the Commonwealth has emerged as a force to be reckoned with. The cement, the most important one, is the English language. Indeed this is the most important legacy of Britain to humanity. Today more people speak English than any other language and in almost all countries of the world this is the second language. It is the language of trade, commerce and world wide communication.

After Hong Kong what? Eyes will naturally be focused on Taiwan. It is true Britain has nothing to do with it. Yet as

To the Editor...

No R&D Culture

Sir, It is sad to read in the press the tear-jerker story of the environment in the Khulna Newspaper Mills. The story is familiar to the citizens and the government.

It is lack of: a) technical bias in policy-making and ministerial control, resulting in poor maintenance and R&D (research and development); b) administrative awareness and support at higher levels for maintenance work (the latter is invisible, but the lapses the whole nation can see immediately — the non-performance cannot be hidden); c) posting of wrong senior personnel in the SOEs (state-owned enterprises); using it as dumping ground for protection or marking time; and d) absence of culture of competitive R&D in the industrial sector, and no push from the top to keep ahead of competition, you have to be different, slightly or radically, visibly or invisibly.

The nation felt proud when the government gave the go-ahead for making paper from raw jute (indirect effect: to rejuvenate the stagnant jute market). After a couple of years we are now told that the R&D was allowed to bog down due to lack of administrative encouragement and backup. It is a pioneering field without competition, and the extra amount spent on R&D can be recovered within a short period. There is still time. How the JJO is helpful in this regard? The expertise can be pooled from the jute-producing countries, plus paper experts from the developed countries.

One thing is clear: the SOEs have to go, as the labour unions have been politicised. To curb corruption and human systems loss, tie-up with foreign companies will provide better monitoring and control towards a profitable operation. The industrial sector has to develop the standard culture or environment for increasing efficiency and profit. The motivation is: profit, non-loss, profit.

To ensure this, the first target is good governance at the government level. The state must be neutral in day to day operation, once the policy decision has been taken in the right spirit.

KNM is the victim of bad policy decisions and lax management, as elsewhere. It does not take a great deal of ingenuity to initiate BMRs at proper intervals.

Losing one's job as a deterrent must be very much visible in every establishment. Inefficient workers are not an asset anywhere, here, or in any part of the globe. Why any agency should protect them? How about trying 'Hire and Fire' policy in the public and semi-autonomous sectors for an experimental period, and then review the situation? Joblessness has nothing to do with complacency. The new budget laid stress on R&D.

A Zabar
Dhaka

Cellular telephone

Sir, Whether we call it a mobile phone, a gramophone or a cellular telephone it is all the same. These days more and more people are inclined to purchase the costly cellular telephone set to meet their long-standing urgent demand because cellular telephone set is available in plenty in the open market and one does not require to wait for years and to grease the palms of T&T staff for installation of a telephone set.

However the user/owner of a cellular telephone has to face great difficulties and hardships as the handling, operation and maintenance of 'new' cellular phone appear not so easy and smooth as those of 'habituated' T&T telephone set. Moreover, the monthly line rent and the rate per call on cellular phone are too much on the high side.

With a view to mitigating the suffering of the cellular phone users/owners and also improving the service we strongly feel that the authorities concerned may kindly take the following actions immediately:

- 1) The T&T Department and cellular telephone companies may cooperate and coordinate with each other for an improved and efficient service of cellular telephone.
- 2) The monthly line rent and the rate per call on cellular phone may be reduced by fifty per cent.
- 3) The cellular telephone companies may conduct a regular one-hour practical training course daily for the users/owners of cellular telephone in respect of basic operation, battery charging, message glossary and maintenance etc., etc.

O H Kabir
Wari, Dhaka-1203.

The Chinese Muslims

Sir, Chinese authorities are oppressing the sinking Muslims in total violation of freedom of speech and human rights. They have recently hanged 8 Muslim leaders. They should negotiate with the community and solve their problems with an openheart instead of killing and terrorising them.

Pressuring the people, depriving the Muslims of their rights, job opportunities and failure to maintain basic equity between Vighur and Han community must be abandoned. Why is the democratic world silent about this matter? Is it because China is a big power?

China authorities should tackle this with a democratic mind. I call upon the UN and OIC to give attention to this matter.

Md Amir Hossain
165, North Bashabo,
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One-day status

Sir, We are very happy and proud of being achieved the One-day International (ODI) status with nine others Test-playing nations in the recent annual conference of ICC in Lord's. It genuinely brings us great enthusiasm among us amidst some ongoing country-wide debates like 2-day weekly holiday, new pay scale, the 97-98 budget etc., and moreover our backbencher position in the sports arena.

But there are miles to go — we want to emerge as a full-fledged Test-playing nation in one bright morning. And maximum two years time is given to us in proving ourselves and to improve our cricket. So now is the time to start with great endeavour.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is naturally imposed with great responsibility to build up the country's cricket infrastructure and to search out our future youngsters with special care. In this regard, we would like to see first our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's pledge of a cricket stadium comes soon into effect.

Felicitations to our cricket heroes mainly whose triumph in the ICC trophy in April last has recognised us as one-day status nation!

Dr Tapas K Chakma
CDF Hospital
Shunshermugger Tea Estate
Shamshernagar, Moulvibazar

Income-tax for house and telephone

Sir, The budget for 1997-98 provides that any person of four Metropolitan areas, Divisional and District towns, owning a house over 1600 sq ft, of more than one storey, or a car or subscribing a telephone — must submit Income-Tax Return, whatever is his/her income. As per the existing provision, a house owned and fully occupied by the owner is exempt from both Income-Tax and Wealth-Tax. Such a person may not have any income or may have some income from other source, but not exceeding the taxable limit.

There are many old men and women, including retired persons living in the houses, which they may have built earlier or inherited. When such self-

owned and fully self-occupied houses are already exempt from tax, the question of filing of Income-Tax Returns for the same should not arise. May be the Finance Minister, in his speech has meant so. If however such persons are also required to submit IT Return, then the exemptions as above, granted on compassionate ground become meaningless and bothersome. Filing of Tax Return necessarily will entail correspondence, facing and replying to questions of tax officials and other botherations.

The Finance Minister will earn the gratitude of many concerned persons. If he would kindly consider this bonafide point and excludes such persons from compulsory filing of Income-Tax Returns.

Private Residential Telephones: Private residential telephone, nowadays, is an essential requirement in contacting police for help, fire-brigade, doctors and hospitals during emergencies, to give and receive both good and bad news to and from relatives and friends. It is by no means a luxury or indicator of one's income. A person earning Tk 3000 to 4000 a month can afford the average monthly bill of Tk 300 or so. Many people shun other expenditure to keep a private telephone.

May be there are people who have private residential phones and at the same time already paying Income-Tax for income in their professions, but it does not apply to many others who have private telephones but no income exceeding the taxable limit. If everyone, having a telephone, irrespective of whether it is in his workplace, office or residence, is compulsorily required to file Income-Tax Return, it would be a great cumbersome botheration for those, who have only private residential telephones.

It is therefore suggested that for all, office, workplace, professional chambers, clinics, shops, etc., filing of Tax Return should be compulsory — but Telephone subscribers of private and residential, should be exempted from this rather bothersome requirement. There should be a clear distinction between office/professional telephone and private telephone.

Kindly consider various aspects of the matter and exclude private residential telephone subscribers from the compulsory submission of IT Return.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Solar power politics?

Sir, It is heartening to learn that the western industrialised country such as Britain has come forward to invest in the rural solar power sector in the Third World. The Indian cooperation is also appreciated (India is a part of the SAARC, Quadrangle, and the Triangle — take your choice!).

There is a nagging uneasiness among the Asian observers that the industrialised bloc may be withholding transfer of small power to the developing countries, as ultimately it might upset the power balance after a couple of generations. The lowering of the population growth rates is also a source of worry to Japan and the West. On the other hand, the generous western aid on family or population planning (FP/PP) in the DCs and LDCs is understandable (HRD).

India and China are capable of launching big projects on solar power in the private sector in Asia, initially tied with the public sector. Power lies in the release of power, however paradoxical the statement might seem! Therefore, we Asians have to ensure that China and India are not kept apart by the imperialist powers. In the Muslim world, Iran and Iraq, the two potentially powerful nations are not allowed to rise and develop, thanks to Uncle Sam's fondness for nepheWS!

Let us have electronic solid-state solar candles to carry the message around!

A Husnat
Dhaka

OPINION

Saving the Railway

MR Choudhury

Two news items appeared in all major newspapers of the country on June 2nd, 1997. One news item informed that the Government of Bangladesh signed a loan agreement with the Government of South Korea under which South Korea would provide Bangladesh Railway (BR) a loan, equivalent to Taka 136 crore, for the purchase, from Korea, of 19 meter gauge diesel electric locomotives.

Anyone who has knowledge of BR locomotive situation knows that at present BR has a total locomotive holding of 286 locomotives of which 170 to 180 are available for service. About 40 to 50 of the rest of the 106 to 116 locomotives are awaiting condemnation due, mainly to, a decision to withdraw all Hungarian locomotives from service by the end of this century and also due to over-ageing of some other locomotives. The rest, that is, about 59 to 69 locomotives, are waiting to be repaired and put into service.

The question is: why is the Railway buying these 19 Korean locomotives when all these locomotives are awaiting repair? As far as we know, preliminary talks about Korean assistance to BR was held during the former prime minister Khaledda Zia's state visit to South Korea. This is now being finalised after about two years when some of the main conditions of BR has changed radically. BR has, in the meantime, received 21 German locomotives on a German grant and bought 10 Indian locomotives from GoB's cash foreign exchange which has resulted in creating an excess in the number of meter gauge locomotives.

Let us now look back to the history of locomotive acquisition of Bangladesh Railway. It started switching over to diesel locomotives from steam locomotives way back in the '50s. Over the years, it bought locomotives from various donor countries and acquired about 10 to 12 varieties of locomotives. By the time it completed its dieselisation process the number of spare parts created a nightmare situation for the stores and the stores management department because no step was taken to standardise one or two types of locomotives as was done in India. One reason behind this was the fact that most of those procurement were controlled more by the commission agents of the manufacturers than by any sane policy. In this same tradition, a supplier's loan taken from Hungary, back in the late '70s, for buying about 88 Hungarian diesel hydraulic locomotives when Bangladesh Railway

had no experience of running and maintaining that type of locomotives, caused maximum damage to BR and its rolling stock division.

That was a disastrous decision taken by Mr Abdul Alim, the then Communication Minister of late Ziaur Rahman. Very recently Col. Oli Ahmed, the Communication Minister of last BNP regime, committed another folly by buying 10 Indian locomotives with cash foreign exchange and entering into a most unusual maintenance contract. Performance of these locomotives and the 7-year maintenance contract have become a great headache for BR's mechanical department and of GoB. This, incidentally, throws some light on BNP's accusation about selling the country's interest to foreign countries! Decision to buy these unproven locomotives with hard-earned cash foreign exchange and signing of such a servile contract with a foreign company is probably the worst example of selling the interest of the country!

Now, by procuring these unproven Korean meter gauge locomotives, which the Railway does not require anyway, Mr Anwar Hossain, the present Communication Minister, is perhaps going to put the last nail to railway's coffin.

What baffles everyone is why this procurement when BR has more meter gauge locomotive than they require, without even taking the one awaiting repairs into account. With the possibility of having a dual gauge railway on the Jamuna Bridge there could be some argument in favour of buying broad gauge locomotives. But why meter gauge locomotives, when there is no shortage of them in the railways? The present or future traffic requirement of BR does not at all justify such acquisition? Such purchases, as everyone knows, serve the interest of none except that of the local commission agents.

In the past, their (the commission agents) tentacles reached everywhere, including the ERD. Do we have to conclude that the present government is no exception than the past governments as far as their thinking about the railways goes. Assuming that BR needs investment, why can't this loan be utilised for other assets like carriages and track materials which the railway need badly? Or is it a fact that since these locomotives would be bought under a development project, it is not necessary to work out the cost-benefit of such a purchase?

The way some investment projects are taken in hand in the railway leads one to believe in the myth that money squandered on ADP does not hurt anyone!

This brings us to the other news item of the day. It says that the first locomotive overhauled with Canadian assistance has been commissioned at Railway's Parbatipur workshops. Railways have built, at a cost of Taka 203 crore, one of the most modern workshops at Parbatipur where all major repairs to locomotives including the production of some good number of parts are supposed to take place. This workshop was commissioned in 1992. But until now, only 10 per cent capacity of that workshop has been utilised each year. Bangladesh Railway has not taken any step to make this workshop fully functional. Why such a big loan, which is being repaid at the cost of the tax payers, was taken from the Saudi Fund for Development, which is being repaid at the cost of the workshop is to remain idle? Why is the Railway so interested in buying locomotives when more than 50 locomotives can be repaired at a much lower cost? Why does Railway keep on buying all these new and unproven locomotives totally neglecting repairs and maintenance? Every now and then, if the Parbatipur workshop is given adequate fund and manpower, it is capable of repairing and maintaining the entire locomotive fleet of BR to an international standard. Not only this, the shop has excess capacity which can be used for overhauling and repairing locomotives from neighbouring countries besides providing jobs and developing skill in the country. That was the whole purpose behind setting up such a modern workshop at such a high cost.

These decisions to buy more locomotives at the cost of maintenance, incidentally, have become one of the major concerns of the donor community who are trying to help this Railway. Because it is common knowledge to them that such decisions have resulted in the virtual collapse of the mechanical department of BR and have brought this railway almost to a grinding halt.

I therefore fervently appeal, to the people of the country to save the Railway from the apathy of the government, from the mindless decisions of politicians and from the self-destructive choices of Railway bureaucracy. We need the railways in this country more than any other country in the world.

The writer is a retired railway employee.

Industrialisation and Environment

M Shamsuzoha Basunia

s to allocate more places for EPZs in the country. Local entrepreneurs are also not to be at rest. They are establishing and running various types of small and medium-scale industries like tannery, dyeing, ceramic, paper industries etc.

The slow pace towards industrialisation also slowly pushes us into various types of problems, related to environment. The environmental lives in the large water body around Dhaka EPZ are now into a vanishing edge. The available fishes are hardly edible due to aberrant taste and smell. However, once this large water body served a considerable quantity of fishes to the people of Savar and Dhaka. A dyeing and printing industry, near Bangladesh Krira Shikshaka Pratistan (BKSP), Savar, is discharging their effluents through the cultivable lands, resulting in destruction of the same. Many other dyeing industries around Savar thana and outskirts of Dhaka city are polluting the environment in the same way.

"Sustainable Development" and "Earth for Life" are the popular slogans of present time. Bangladesh celebrated the World Environment Day on

June 5, 1997 along with the whole world. Sustainable development, defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need, is the most costly process that mankind has ever met. However, we have to make people aware about our ecosystem and the environmental compartment in which we are living.

While Bangladesh has fallen to solve and manage many well-known problems like illiteracy, high growth rate of population, lack of healthcare system, inefficient education policy and combating grim atmosphere at the universities and colleges, unplanned urbanisation and traffic system etc., it would not be so easy to look after the environment of our areas, because naturally 'care for environment' is the next step of mankind. 'Live first then take care of environment' is the natural feeling prevailing still today.

We have to change our way of thinking and the government should do its best to make and implement the rules and regulations for the industries to work friendly with environment with the help of conscious and responsible persons, who really care.