The Baily Star Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

The Beacon

Dhaka, Friday, July 18, 1997

Twelfth Rabi-ul-Awal is eternalised in the continuum of mankind's history being the date of both advent and demise of the Prophet of Islam Hazrat Muhammad (SM), but for whose beacon world civilisation, as admitted on all hands, would have been poorer. Islam in its pristine form with its powerful messages of Tauhid, peace and societal harmony lifted the Beduin ignoramuses from a morass of superstitions and hedonic pleasureseeking principle they had steeped into since the days of their ancestors in the hoary past. It was delivering a whole race of fiercely infighting tribes and clans from the tunnels of blinding darkness to the lighted path of self-enlightenment on which the streams of material living and spiritual pursuit combined in perfect unison of thought and action.

The very fact of bringing them up to a rational way of life together with his statecraft in relation to neighbouring communities and states wielded a transcending influence on human affairs undimmed by mankind's civilizational marches.

But whither the Muslim Ummah he so assiduously laid the foundation for, and in his life-time saw its scaffolding grow? The Ummah is riven today by internecine conflicts, ideological bi- and trifurcating and fundamentalist militancy, so much so that the creation of just and fair societies within several Muslim countries looks a far cry. Furthermore, their collective wealth is being of little use to their growth in concert and their voice is feebly heard in terms of defending the oppressed communities, be they in Asia or Africa.

A fair just and tolerant society in its internal and external manifestation would be the most fitting tribute to the memories of Rasulullah. Looking at our own selves, we are appalled by the dehumanising tenor and texture becoming so much a part and parcel of Bangladesh society today. Let the sterling qualities of the Prophet (SM) guide us through such a dark patch of degeneracy into the light of human decency.

Factory Tragedy Again

The tragic death of nine employees in a devastating fire at two garments factories housed in an underconstruction building on Mazar Road, Mirpur shows once again that no lesson was learnt from similar mishaps recorded in recent years. Reports say that the staircase of the seven-storey building is so narrow that even the fire brigade people had great difficulty climbing the steps. Unbelievably, there were no fire extinguishing cylinders in the factories. This is the height of callousness on the part of the factory owners. We are appalled to see that the garments factory managements' consideration for profit in general has so far got the better of their best concern for the employees safety.

In this connection the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing and Exporting Association (BGMEA) must share the blame for not pressing for a minimum safety standard in all the factories enlisted with it. Similarly, the government also has failed in its supervisory role. Either this must have been totally absent or has been compromised for graft. After a series of fire incidents in garments factories, a set of recommendations was put forward that included among others: a) double exits, b) keeping the staircases clear for all the time and, c) keeping the gates unlocked during the working hours. Why have all these suggestions been ignored?

That our nascent but thriving garments industry needed a few concessions to maintain its competitive edge in the international market initially may have precluded a harsh criticism of its safety drawbacks. But this should no longer hold good. We now realise that the industry has reached a stage where it has no scope for even slightly contravening with safety rules and put at risk the lives of hundreds of employees. We object to the setting up of garments factories in any building anywhere in the city. Such factories must be specially designed to have the required safety gadgets and standard structural lay-outs. Can we then suggest that the garments factories move to a special zone rather than being huddled in insufficient spaces or on narrow lanes.

Fight Against Arsenic

A WHO-organised consultation meeting held in New Delhi has come up with a set of recommendations for tackling the problem of arsenic contamination. Apart from suggesting immediate treatment for people affected by arsenic poisoning, it calls for providing safe water or identifying sources of such water for people in the arsenic-prone areas. Experts have acknowledged a few water treatment methods developed domestically to free water from arsenic. Their request for WHO assistance to test the efficacy of those methods is worth considering.

What could, however, prove decisive in our fight against arsenic contamination is the setting up of a national reference laboratory for testing the quality of water through a comprehensive site investigation. Water samples have to be collected from all over the country for measuring their arsenic content. The experts rightly recommend for developing a database on arsenic in drinking water. On the basis of this, the need for drinking water in different areas could be assessed and remedial measures taken. This is key to a management information system.

So the government must move fast to tackle this problem. Hydrological surveys, as suggested, might help identify underground aquifers free from arsenic contamination. The government with help from UN agencies should take up such projects because they are beyond the capacity of private individuals.

CHT Peace Talks: Chips are Down

The fifth round of peace talks has seen the scaling down of the agenda from 'signing' to 'discussing' the

draft accord. And at the end of it what we see is a referral syndrome on the part of the PCJSS in its

Dealer prospects for our hills which add a refreshing contour to our plainland topography seem tantalisingly close yet afar. The fifth round of negotiations for striking a peace deal between the National Committee on CHT affairs and the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity is headed for end-

ing on an inconclusive note. The much-touted outcome of the previous round of talks that a 'consensus' has been reached on 'all points' of discord and all that was left to be done was to put signatures on a draft accord has been somewhat belied. Perhaps, there was a signal for it in the smile that PCJSS leader Bodhipriya Larma wore in an apparently nodding gesture to what national committee chief Abul Hasnat Abdullah had to say by way announcing the auspicious breakthrough to the press. The stream of geniality on his face obviously fell short of a clear-cut public affirmation by Larma that he really was going along with the views of Abdullah.

The agenda for the fifth round sounded complicated with new moot points thrown

in and fresh conditions attached to the signing of a deal by the PCJSS which has turned out to be indistinguishable from the Shantibahini. Constitutional guarantees have been sought for the regional council and the district councils with total authority vested in terms of levying taxes and adminis-

tering law and order. Proportionate representation of Bengali settlers on such councils was previously spurned by the tribal leadership and lately in a reformed package submitted to Bangladeshi negotiator they have even rejected the idea that settlers could be elected vice-chairmen to these bodies.

It is surmised by some people that PCJSS may well have decided not to sign a peace deal before the several cases lying with the High Court relating to the legal tenability of government nominated temporary hill district councils are disposed of. Also BNP leader of Khagrachhari Abdul Wadud Bhutyan has

the killings and uprooting of

under the 40 years of Congress

rule that the states had to break

away from it. They were bound

to turn to the parties which

would give them a sense of

identity. The process has begun.

Andhra Pradesh has Telugu De-

sam, Assam, the Asom Gana

Parishad, Haryana, the

Haryana Vikas Party, Punjab,

the Akali Dal, Maharashtra,

the Shiv Sena and Tamil Nadu.

controls only one big state, that

is, Madhya Pradesh, and two

medium states, Orissa and Hi-

machal Pradesh, besides a few

peripheral territories. Simi

larly, the BJP holds only one

medium state. Rajasthan, and

one small state. Delhi. In Pun-

jab. Haryana and Maharashtra.

it is only a junior partner in the

Akali Dal, HVP and Shiv Sena-

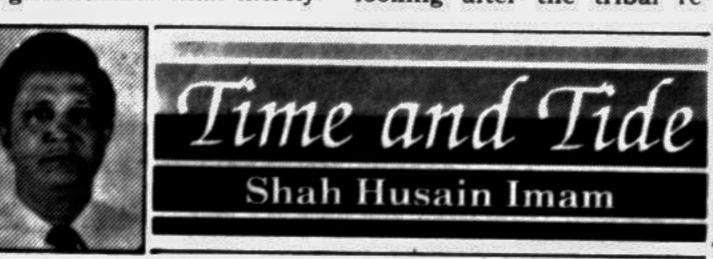
Come to think of it, Congress

the DMK.

Still the centralism was so

open wish to have the draft accord deliberated upon and vetted by its various affiliated groups. challenged the reservation of the post of district council chairman for the tribals in the High Court. The progress on this case is also being closely watched by the tribal community, as reported in a leading Bangla daily. The government has gone further than merely

Tripura over the rehabilitation of refugees recently repatriated to Bangladesh. A refugee leaders delegation from Tripura of late went back after a trip to the CHT camps and made some adverse comments on how the Bangladesh authorities were looking after the tribal re-



allowing the tribals to become chairmen of the hill district councils; it has, as a matter of fact, even agreed to reserve the chairmanship of the Regional Council for a tribal.

The peace deal has been apparently made contingent upon the satisfaction of the tribal refugee leadership camped in

turnees. They sent copies of their observations to foreign missions and international organisations seeking their help in having the rehabilitation process in the CHT supervised

by the UNHCR or ICRC. There had been an earlier discordant instance of some tribal leaders attending an in-

ternational ethnic relations conference in Bangkok much to the dismay of Bangladeshi negotiators in Dhaka.

The dissenters of the hill students front are rallying round a new stratagem for internationalising the tribal question in a bid to deflect the bilateral peace process off course. But could they have spearheaded the move without an encouragement from some senior leaders of the extremist mould within the Shan-

tibahini? Incidentally, a pahart student faction reportedly has linked up with an Arakan communist group in Myanmar.

The government has ruled out any involvement of UNHCR with refugee rehabilitation process in Bangladesh on the ground that the UN body hasn't been overseeing the conditions of refugees at the source in the Indian camps anyway, the government of that neighbouring country having refused them access. But a stronger argument

against this move would be for Bangladesh government to plainly say that its proven bonafides on refugee rehabilitation has been unnecessarily questioned for purely tactical reasons by those who do not across the CHT.

wish olive branch to spread The fifth round of peace talks has seen the scaling down of the agenda from 'signing' to 'discussing' the draft accord. And at the end of it what we see is a referral syndrome on the part of the PCJSS in its open wish to have the draft accord deliberated upon and vetted by

There are two ways of looking at this development: one, the routing of the draft accord through the conduit of the militants could ensure its implementation on adoption; and two, the process of reaching an agreement might, on the other hand, procrastinate ad infini-

its various affiliated groups.

Our hope is the first possibility will be realised and the world would know that the writ of PCJSS extends over the various constituent groups of the Shantibahini.

Regionalism Replaces Anti-Congressism

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Apart from regionalism, one other development in Indian politics is that anti-Congressism is no more once again underlines the new reality of Indian porelevant. The United Front has stayed in power — first Prime Minister Deve Gowda and now Prime Minister litics: anti-centralism. What-Inder Gujral — because of Congress support. After forming his party, Laloo Prasad Yadav said what was wrong in seeking the Congress backing for retaining his government.

ever its nomenclature. Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal is a regional party confined to Bihar. New Delhi Sena-led Maharashtra witness seems to understand the mea motivated violence against ssage it gives. Muslims. The Sri Krishna In any other circumstances, commission report, yet to be there would not have been republished, is said to have put the responsibility on the administration and has referred to conspiratorial moves behind

luctance to dismiss Laloo Prasad Yadav from the Bihar chief ministership, particularly after the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had chargesheeted him in the fodder scam. But his ultimatum that dictatorial and so monopolistic he would fight even from jail made the Centre think twice because his capacity to do mischief in the state is real. (The communists wanted to oust him, not dismiss because they are against invoking Article 356, which gives the Centre powers to intervene). Intelligence agencies have

reported to New Delhi that if it came to Laloo's dismissal, the army would be required to effect it. And their assessment is that he can foment an open rebellion in nearly half of Bihar, 27 districts out of 59, with the police intentionally watching from the sideline. Indeed, this is a disconcerting scenario, which the Centre has allowed to develop. A timely action could have averted confrontation.

This means that regionalism can at times take an ugly turn. Not long ago did the Shiv

led coalition ministries, respectively, while in Uttar Pradesh it commands majority of legislators in the Mayawati-led coali-

The Left front has been since long confined only to three states - West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, while the Janata Dal is restricted to Karnataka. Bihar is a question mark. Moreover, there are scores of

influential regional parties op-

erating in various states, de-

manding the formation of new

ethnic states out of the existing

ones, such as, Jharkhand Party

in areas of Bihar, Orissa and

West Bengal, Gorkha League in

Darjeeling, Bodoland Party in

demanding the formation of the

states of Telengana, Vidarbha

Uttarkhand and Chhatisgarh

(MP); different tribal groups asking for state-level status to

their respective areas, besides

Sikkim Democratic Front in

Various regional groups are

Assam.

Sikkim, SP in Haryana, BSP and SP in Uttar Pradesh and RPI in Maharashtra. Yet the process of the regionalisation of parties has to go a long way before reaching a phase of ma-

The experiment in 1989 under Prime Minister VP Singh did not succeed because the parties supported his government from outside. After the 1996

election, the situation has

changed. Now the parties sup-

porting the government, except

the CPI (M), are also part of the

government. Deve Gowda fell

not because any constituent of

the UF challenged him but be-

cause the outside support of

Congress was withdrawn. Inder

Gujral continues to have the UF

Laloo wants to join the United

Front in his new carnation. The

opposition of the original

Janata Dal is understandable

The problem he faces is that

constituents behind him.

because Laloo has split it so as to establish his own identity. The solution to this problem is that the UF should not bother how a particular party functions from within, its concern should be that the party has representation in the UF. Gujral has scrupulously followed this principle by not asking Laloo's nominees to quit the

central cabinet. What is at stake is really the basic principle of regionalism. the say of the state parties at Centre. So long as it is honoured, the UF will function; otherwise, it will break into pieces. The United Front rule shows that regional parties have asserted themselves. In the last one year, the power focus has begun shifting to the states. The inter-state council has never been so active before in delineating powers of the Centre and the States. Several chief ministers have gone on record as saying — for example West Bengal - that they had never received such substantial financial shares from the Centre as they have since the formation of the United Front gov-

ernment. The royalty to Assan on oil and to Bihar on coal has been enhanced because the decision at New Delhi is guided by the regional parties constituting the Front

Belatedly, the all-India parties are awakening to the clout that the regional parties have developed. In fact, the main reason why the two major political parties, Congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party, have shied away from a mid-term poll is the risk of losing to regional parties. They feel that the voters have been increasingly attracted to regional parties because these have come to represent their cultural ethos and linguistic sentiments. People in different parties of the

is too distant.

The way the people have voted in the Lok Sabha elections from 1989 indicates that they have not expressed their preference for any single party. The BJP, the largest group in the lower house, secured only 23.9 per cent of the total votes cast and less than one-third of the Lok Sabha seats - 161 out of the 543 contested ones. Other political parties were way

Congress, the National Front and the Left Front, which have developed an understanding to keep the BJP out, did not have secularism as their election plank. This was posterior to the polls. Therefore, they too cannot say that there was togetherness against communal forces. If at all, the voters have preferred local parties to the ones with the countrywide of-

Apart from regionalism, one other development in Indian politics is that anti-Congressism is no more relevant. The United Front has stayed in power - first Prime Minister Deve Gowda and now Prime Minister Inder Gujral — because of Congress support. After forming his party. Laloo Prasad Yadav said what was wrong in seeking the Congress backing for retaining his government. Mulayam Singh Yadav of Samajwadi Party has report-

edly reached an understanding with Congress to fight against the BSP-BJP combine in UP in the next election. (The BSP may, however, go it alone).

The ousting of anti-Congressism or the owning of regionalism does not mean that politics in India is getting over distortions. Events may force that to happen. The United Front came to adopt the common minimum programme. when the rationale of anti-BJPism did not provide an answer to several questions and compulsions. The future alignment may also be on the same lines. This is a welcome development for coalition politics, which seems to stare the country in the face. And for good many years.

Toxic pesticides being imported due to faulty ban order

Sir, We refer to the above report which was printed July 16 in your esteemed newspaper. As the largest crop. protection organisation in Bangladesh and in the world, this report may impact our credibility.

As the report does not identify the companies involved in importing synthetic pyrethroids, we Novartis, categorically deny being involved in the import of synthetic pyrethroids since the ban on the import of these products was imposed in March 1996 by the Government of Bangladesh. Our last imports were prior to March 1996. In fact, our principal had to bear losses due to cancellation of confirmed orders for our brand of synthetic pyrethroid due to this ban.

While there is quite a bit of confusion on the issue of synthetic pyrethroids, our stands is that the ban should be lifted given the benefits of using synthetic pyrethroids in agriculture. The withdrawal of the ban on use of synthetic pyrethroids against mosquitoes is a positive step in the right direction. We hope the authorities concerned will lift the ban as soon as possible for the use of synthetic pyrethroids in agriculture.

Sarwar Ahmed Executive Director Novartis Crop Protection Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka 1209.

Taking responsibility

Sir. The biggest problem with our leaders is that they don't want to take any responsibility of the things going wrong during their rule. They must always remember that "the captain of the ship is entirely responsible for the safety of the ship and for whatever goes on in the ship, good or bad." Even President Nelson Mandela pointed this out in his speech given here on his recent visit. He said that the government must take complete responsibility of whatever goes wrong during its rule. It should never put the blame on any other party or the previous government. He also pointed out that the problems must be discussed with other parties, however small they may be. Another thing that he said, think, was promises made to the people must be honoured.

All these are very good and wise points, and necessary for a good democracy. But sadly enough all are lacking in this regard in our country. There's no harm in taking good advice from learned and experienced

man like him. Coming back to the point of taking responsibility. A relative of mine and an MP of the present government, said, the

other day, to me that all these problems of water, electricity, garbage, crime etc., are there because the people are lazy and not good - they don't work; it's not the government's fault in any way. But the question is: while this same group of people were always there in this country, why have the problems cropped up now in such magnanimity. Why are the newspapers now full of criminal reports like never before. Crimes are being committed even in broad day light, but nobody gets caught or is punished in an exemplary way, so that, it is not repeated again. If the government doesn't want to take responsibility of this, who will? If someone responsible is unable to control crime, then he should resign so that a capable person can do it. But something must be done quickly to crub the dacoities, robberies, murders, acid throwing, hijacking and rapes, before the situation gets out of hand, and more peo-

ple suffer. He also suggested that there should be a system of hiring and firing, as in the western countries, when one doesn't perform his duties properly. That is indeed needed because man by nature, or rather we Bengalees by nature, are lazy, careless and tardy and more so when we get a chance and know that there won't be any punishment or the risk of losing job. Therefore, the system of punishment should be more rigorous, so that people take their duties seriously.

To check tardiness, there should be this system of everybody having a card which he puts into a machine on arriving at the office and when leaving. The time gets printed on the card. At the end of the month, everybody's card is checked by the boss. This system is prevailing in the western countries. It won't be very difficult to start it in our country too, when all kinds of machines and computers are now available here. It will be a boon for our economy. if people work full-time everyday.

Dr Sarah Dhaka

Polluted Dhaka city

Sir, A letter (Polluted Dhaka city) by Mr M A Jalil (DS-27 June '97) has appeared in this column. I have appreciated it, but felt pity. I am also appreciating DS's efforts of publishing it. But factually, who cares for all these write-ups! I remember the initiative, "Save Dhaka Campaign" which was organised at your end, and supported by scouts and other volunteers. It was a crusade against pollution and to turn Dhaka into a city with livable environment. At that time, DS brought all

heads under one roof and across

the table to open their mind and put their cards on the table to Save Dhaka, but some of the participants' excuse was, nothing can be done under that government.

Now, we have our apparently the most democratically elected government. Why then the pollution is on the rise and endangering urban life? If I narrate my recent visit to DoE and the experience, then I hope it won't offend anyone.

DoE is a multi-storied palatial ceramic brick building (near Bangladesh Betar) at Agargaon. As one enters the approach road from the main and observes his right (dumped garbage), and his left (shanties), he will obviously feel that he is not going to a good environment. Next to the gate of DoE. there exists a make-shift office of a particular political party of that ward in the lap of shanties Inside DoE area, one will find an uncared huge lawn around, but full of bushes, as if, a perfect environment for jungle animals. Beside the car portico of DG (DoE), there is a wide pond. It is better not look at that sight. In that water body a good yielding cat fish cultivation could have been possible, but instead, under the nose of DoE, shanties and open latrines are on the increase. If anyone visits any one section of the directorate building, it will immediately come to this mind that the 'who cares' culture strongly prevails here.

After 21 years (probably for the first time), a politically renowned lady has taken over the Ministry of Forest and Environment. It was expected that within a year, some revolutionary solution of environment problems would emerge; but is it there? At the exchequer's expense, the minister recently visited abroad and enjoyed the environment of that country. Back home, she should have spared some time to see the environment of her own domain (DoE). I wish her all the success for her words and work. I think. it is high time for our government to get out of the honeymoon and get going to suit the action to the word. Otherwise the DS's efforts and Mr Jalil's cry, in their own ways, won't affect much unless 'who cares' attitude of the government functionaries are thoroughly pruned away.

A R Choudhury Uttara, Dhaka

Saving the Railway

Sir, I read with interest 'Saving the Railway' which appeared in your paper (Opinion, July 6, 1997). While fully in agreement with the writer, a retired railway employee, I could feel the anguish and frustration of Mr Chowdhury at seeing his old organisation being destroyed. What, however, has interested

me is the writer's appeal in the last paragraph of the write-up. He seemed to have lost faith in everyone about doing anything and appealed directly to the people of the country to save the railways from, I quote, "the apathy of the government, from the mindless decisions of the politicians and from the selfdestructive choice of the

railway bureaucracy." This brings us to the basic issue: is the railway worth saving? Has the railway a future in this country? I am absolutely sure that it has. With a population-density of more than 850 people per square kilometer, it will be impossible for us to build any more roads for the simple reason that we don't have enough land. When one freight train can transport what it takes 200 trucks to carry, it is suicidal on our part to think of any mode of transport other than the railways for our future long and medium haul transport. But the only catch in this logic is: the railway, operating at the present level of inefficiency and mismanagement, cannot deliver

the goods. This brings us again to the writer's agony. Who, in this country, can do something to save the railway? I am thinking about someone at the political level, who, whatever our unhappy writer may think, is ultimately the representative of the people. He brings out one interesting point. It is like this: two BNP ministers have done maximum damage to the railway. And now, the present minister, who is a JP man, is poised to put the "last nail to Railway's coffin." Why can't we hope now that someone from Awami League would appear as the saviour!

There is a historical reason for such thinking on my part. Railway was one of the worst affected organisations during our War of Liberation. It suffered massive destruction in the nine months of war. But it is to the credit of the then Awami League government and railwaymen that within two to three years of liberation the entire railway was put back to normal operation. I still remember the day when Bangabandhu inaugurated the Bhairab Bridge and through-train ran between Dhaka and Chittagong first time after the War of Liberation. It was a glorious and proud

moment for the railway. Why can't Bangabandhu's daughter restore that lost pride and glory and save the railway once again like her father did? Is it expecting too much from her and her party after what the BNP and JP politicians did to this railway in last 21 years and doing even today by imposing their "mindless decisions" on it.

M K Rahman Road-5. Sector-3 Uttara. Dhaka

OPINION

country also feel that New Delhi

Balanced Development of Road, Rail and Water Routes

The roads in Bangladesh dehandsome profit for many veloped in a satisfactory mandecades (passengers and goods).

ner during the last few decades. as successive regimes accorded visible priority to this sector. It cost a lot of human and technical effort and money, as this deltaic region is crisscrossed with hundreds of rivers and thousands of canals; needing an abnormally high percentage of bridges and culverts per running mile; and millions of tons of earth filling to keep long stretches of the road network above the usual flood levels. The capital and maintenance costs are very high for this region. Road embankments resist the flow of waters and cause drainage problems, another

Both the road and inland water transport systems have to be developed in a balanced due to graft, lack of sense of manner. Now the users prefer the roads for faster communication, as the other sectors, rail and inland waterways, have not yet seen the surge of comparative development, to compete with the road transport. A user should have ideally have equal choice in the three modes.

maintenance headache for an-

other ministry.

But develop in what ratio? The IWT sector should not receive step-motherly treatment vis-a-vis land surface transport systems (roads, railways); as a large percentage of points in the country can be reached cheaply using water transport (starting with the country boats, followed

by the powered boats) While new roads provide the glamourous demonstration to the state planners, the neglected railways are needlessly being bled to a slow death, for no scientific or economic reasons. With the high density of population in Bangladesh (approaching 1000 per sq km). and private car ownership at economically low level, the railway will continue to provide

The systems loss in BR is human and not economic or technical. The Malaysian railways was reported to have been offered for sale for one dollar only, but there were no bidders (population 16 million at that time, and concentrated in the coastal areas). The situation in Bangladesh is quite different

The Asian transit system might

in the near future. Railways have traditionally been operated by the state universally. Now the government can let a private consortium operate it, keeping a minority state share (for coordination. and land and infrastructure facilities); as the public sector is morally and mentally incapable of operating and maintain BR. duty and responsibility, and absence of financial accountability (sarkar ka maal darya may dhaal). The well developed rail workshop at Saidpur is an asset (as is the Machine Tools Factory at Gazipur).

A time will come in the next couple of decades when the roads would be choked with traffic, and people would seek faster way of travelling by train There has to be a parallel to the Asian Highway, namely the Asian Railway, with the potentiality of travelling from Singapore to Moscow, and further West. India and Pakistan have well-maintained railway sys-

There is no excuse for creat ing a gap in Bangladesh. A fresh feasibility study by UN agencies may provide a glimmer of hope for this neglected railway sector. This policy neglect and indifference does not appear to have any justification, in a region with the highest density of population in the