

The Ganga Treaty in Operation

by Ramaswamy R Iyer

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THE historic Ganga Waters Treaty with Bangladesh has completed the first lean season on 31 May 1997. During this period some problems have been encountered. There is a widespread impression in Bangladesh that the Treaty has not worked well in the first season. To avoid a recurrence of this next year, it is necessary to understand what happened this year and why.

Low Flows

The most important problem was the occurrence of low flows soon after the Treaty went into operation. This was a normal hydrological phenomenon; it has happened before and will happen again. Nor was this particularly bad year: there have been past years in which the flows had fallen to lower levels and for longer periods. If the flows fall below 50000 cusecs (as they did in the last ten days of March this year), Article II (iii) of the Treaty provides for immediate consultations on an emergency basis. There are three possible courses to choose from: (a) a simple 50:50 sharing; (b) maintaining the mandatory 35000 cusecs to either side in alternate 10-day periods, as per the Treaty, leaving the residue, however low, to the other side; or (c) moderating the 35000 cusecs to either side in such a way that the other side gets not less than, say, 15000 cusecs. An understanding on this matter should be reached quickly and firmly put in place through a supplementary MOU, so that when the problem of low flows occurs again the two sides will know exactly what to do.

It may be added that there is no evidence so far that increased upstream uses have led to a significant reduction in the

flows at Farakka, compared to the flows last jointly determined in the seventies. Understandable apprehensions in Bangladesh in this regard lead to anxious inquiries as to how the Government of India proposes to regulate upstream uses, but such inquiries are not very useful, and could set alarm bells ringing in UP and Bihar. This is a sensitive matter which should be left to the Government of India. The proper course would be to wait for the first review of the working of the Treaty (after 5 years or after 2 years as the case may be) and then see whether the Government of India has fulfilled its undertaking to make every effort to protect the flows at Farakka (Article II (ii)).

Zig-zag Pattern

The pattern of sharing (35000 cusecs to either side in alternate 10-day periods between 11 March and 10 May) means a sharp variation in flows from one 10-day period to the next. There is a safety problem here: a drastic drop in the water level in the feeder canal on the Indian side, if carried out rapidly, could lead to a collapse of the canal sides. Engineers on both sides seem to accept this. It appears that the zig-zag pattern of sharing laid down in the Treaty, which was intended as a solution to a political problem, is fraught with some physical risk and may need to be moderated in the interest of safety. In the absence of an understanding between the two countries, there was an unfortunate mud-dle this year. A gradual reduc-

tion in the canal level in the interest of safety resulted in a shortfall in the releases to Bangladesh in the first ten days of April, and led to charges of violations of the Treaty. In the very next 10-day period India drew much less than its entitlement under the Treaty with a view to compensating Bangladesh fully for the shortfall which had occurred in the previous 10-day period; this was done in four days. However, there is clearly a need for an early inter-governmental understanding on this matter.

Farakka-Hardinge Bridge Discrepancy

The third problem is a puzzling discrepancy (quite substantial) between the quantum of water released at Farakka and the quantum arriving at Hardinge Bridge. If we take the observations at Farakka and Hardinge Bridge as reasonably reliable (as they are jointly monitored), and if there is no significant abstraction of water in between (as seems to be agreed by the two sides), then it appears probable that the river water is finding its way into underground aquifers in Bangladesh. This is merely a hypothesis, which needs to be examined; and there may be other factors at work. It is understood that the Joint Committee is setting up an expert team to examine this matter comprehensively. It is necessary to do this very quickly so that unwarranted suspicions are eliminated.

Gorai Problem

There is one more problem which needs to be briefly referred to, namely, the Gorai off-take problem in Bangladesh. The off-take point has been sited up, and over the years a massive barrier has come up which prevents the entry of the waters of the Ganges into this stream, leading to problems downstream (loss of irrigation, salinity incursion, etc.) this has nothing to do with Farakka; the problem ante-dates Farakka. The Treaty is not going to solve this problem, because even 35000 cusecs will not be enough for the purpose: it is only when the flow is of the order of 70000 cusecs that the waters of the Ganges can enter the Gorai. The answer to this problem is partly extensive dredging and partly the construction of the Ganges Barrage which will head up the waters and enable them to enter the Gorai.

Bangladeshi Perceptions.

On an overall view, the position would seem to be that the Treaty has worked reasonably well in the first lean season, except for a very brief slip-up. However, as mentioned earlier, perceptions in Bangladesh are quite different. Several factors have combined to produce this result. First, what is actually received by Bangladesh should be compared with what the Treaty provides for in terms of the Annexure I formula; when it is compared instead with the av-

erage flows given by way of illustration in Annexure II, treating these as 'expected' flows, wrong conclusions are bound to follow.

Secondly, the shortfall in Bangladesh's share in the first ten-day period of April (which should not have happened) arose out of a concern for safety, and a prompt attempt was made to compensate for the shortfall. This is not known to the people either in India or in Bangladesh; nor do they know that twice in the lean season India moderated its own withdrawals and released a little more water to Bangladesh, and that in the period as a whole Bangladesh got slightly more water than its share strictly in terms of the Treaty.

Thirdly, the fact that the discrepancy between releases at Farakka and arrivals at Hardinge Bridge is a complex matter needing a scientific study has not been explained to the people; they are therefore ready to be persuaded by the opponents of the Treaty that they are being short-changed at Farakka.

Fourthly, the fact that the Gorai off-take problem is essentially an internal one needing remedial action in Bangladesh is not widely known.

Those four factors have together tended to sow the seeds of suspicion; and the seeds have fallen on fertile ground. Because of longstanding emotional attitudes towards India, there was a predisposition on the part of many to be negative towards the Treaty. As soon as problems emerged, the latent negativism came to the fore: the immediate and visceral tendency was to find explanations in terms of Indian wrong-doing. This was rendered easier by the absence of official information about the operation of the Treaty. The greatest enemy of the Treaty (and of India's own fair image) is the classification of information.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset, the Treaty was a historic one, an achievement in which both Governments can take pride. It is the responsibility of the Government of India to ensure that its obligations are scrupulously discharged; that of the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that negativism towards the Treaty is scrupulously avoided by its own officials and representatives, and negativism on the part of others quickly countered; and that of the intellectuals and opinion-makers in the two countries to correct errors and provide explanations, so as to allay suspicions and misperceptions before the infection spreads and weakens the Treaty, and with it the relationship between the two countries.

The author, a senior member of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, India, is involved in the tri-country study of Ganges-Brahmaputra-Basin Project covering Bangladesh, India and Nepal. He was the secretary, Ministry of Irrigation in India during the 80s. Mr. Iyer has been closely involved, at both the official and unofficial levels, in negotiations on the water issue between Bangladesh and India.

ENVIRONMENT

The Myth of Forests, Forests, Forests

The recent "Second Earth Summit" once again placed great emphasis on the importance of maintaining the world's rainforests for global survival. For Gemini News Service, a professor of ecology from London University challenges what he says is the flawed science behind this emphasis on forests. Prof Philip Stott writes from London

TOO many scientists and "green" organisations continue to peddle the myth that we need rainforests for the survival of the planet.

This is far from the truth. The myth is essentially political in origin and reflects the views of the United States and Europe rather than the genuine agenda of the developing world.

Many people believe the rainforests are a last Eden, a pure refuge that has existed unaltered for 60 million years. The truth is that because of climate changes during the last ice Age, most rainforests are less than 18,000 years old.

In the Malaysian peninsula, for example, there was a breakdown of the great monsoonal systems that bring rain to the area and this led to the spread of savanna grassland vegetation and animals.

The rainforests are further regarded as the most complex and biodiverse systems on earth. Defining such concepts is inherently difficult, but complexity and diversity are shared by many ecosystems, from the open scrubby fynbos of the South African Cape to coral reefs and the deep oceans. The rainforests are nothing special: the oceans are far more significant for our survival.

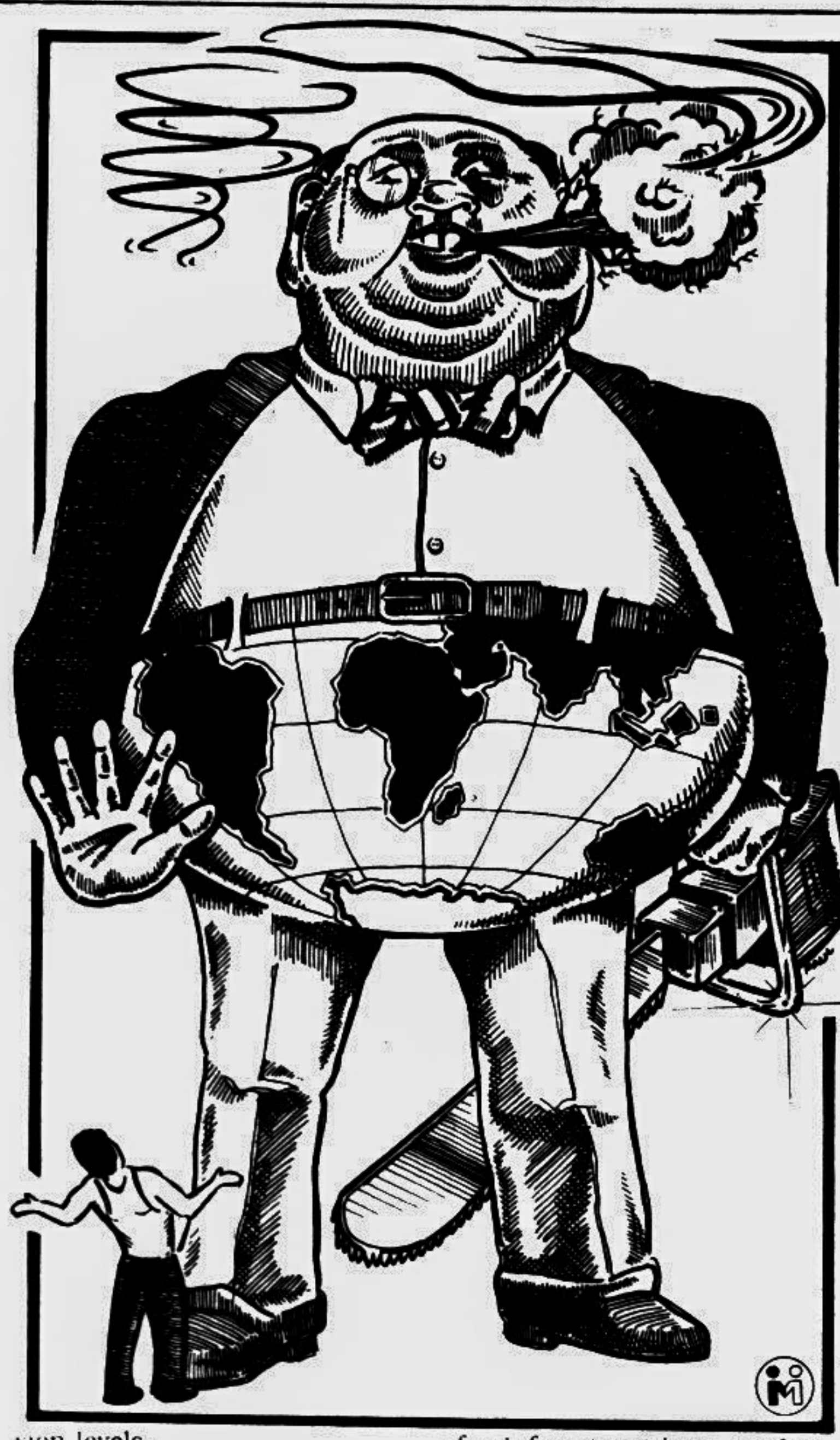
People also see the cutting and burning of rainforests as a key factor in enhancing global warming. This is patently ridiculous: the tropics have always experienced cycles of burning (through lightning strikes, underground fires, hominids and so on), and though trees store carbon — a contributor to "global warming" — when you remove them you do not replace carbon storage by no carbon storage. Some of the ecosystems that replace forests are even more effective in storing carbon.

But the key point is the immorality of such a viewpoint: if enhanced global warming were a problem, which I doubt, then its causes would lie entirely in the industrialisation of the countries of the North over the last 150 years. Climate changes constantly, and in all directions.

Similarly, the rainforests are not the "lungs of the world." The heat and wetness ensure that leaves, twigs, branches and animals decompose quickly, and as a result many rainforests use up more oxygen than they give out.

There is also much nonsense written about tropical forests and soil erosion — with the floods in India and Bangladesh, for example, blamed for deforestation in the high Himalayas.

The erosion rates, there, however, simply reflect the fact that the Indian tectonic plate (one of the Earth's geological regions) is continuing to move north, pushing up the mountains, creating normal erosion. Replacing the trees by well-managed agricultural terraces can actually reduce these ero-



sion levels.

Finally, the rainforests are only a very small part of the tropics, sub-tropics and mediterranean areas of the world. One-fifth of the land surface of the Earth comprises open savanna grasslands with their scattered trees and shrubs; 50 per cent of the world's population live in monsoonal lands; and in southern Africa, less than one per cent of the land is naturally forested. Yet the ecology texts of the North all stress forest, forest, forest.

The rainforests are therefore no more ecologically important than were the mixed deciduous forests of Europe, which were largely cleared by 1700, or those of the north-eastern United States, cut down by the early 1800s. Have these regions suffered drastically from this loss of forest? Of course not: they house the richest countries in the world.

So the true problem is not the maintenance of rainforests but the ecological, economic, social and political value and sustainability of the systems which replace them. Nobody is arguing for the mass "mining"

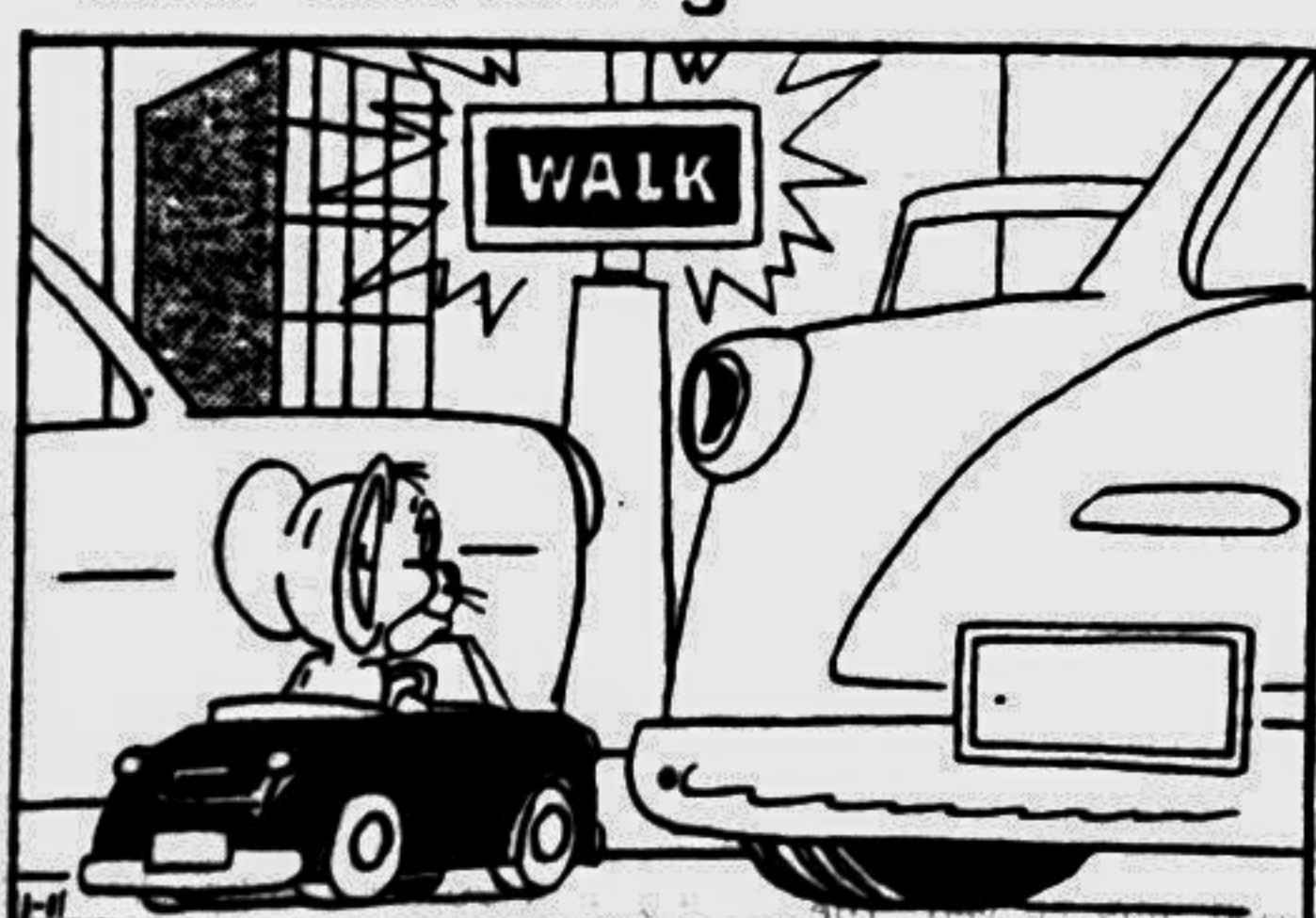
of rainforests without productive replacement systems. However, humans have always advanced by turning the forests into new, sustainable systems, one of the greatest of which, for example, was the wet field rice system of Asia.

The focus on rainforests thus comes from the North, from a tradition of a classical "Golden Age" and a Christian tradition viewing the rainforests as the last, pure, untouched Eden, from guilt at the clearance of its own forests, but above all from an agenda which aims to keep "colonial" control of the South by whatever means possible.

And if scientists can persuade governments that rainforests are crucial to survival, there is a chance of getting that ever-elusive cash for scientific research.

We do not need rainforests. We may wish to keep some, but that has to be argued, case by case, like everything else. The basic need is for development to take place on sound ecological principles that suit the South and not just the whims of the comfortable North.

Tom and Jerry



IAN FLEMING'S James Bond



DRAWN BY JOHN McLUSKY



Metropolitan

Dhanmondi losing its residential flavour

The road begins with two community centres standing side by side, garish gates and lights vying for attention. Next to these imposing structures comes a coaching centre for school and college students. Perhaps their pupils come from the next building — a college named after a prestigious educational institution of the West.

A few small shops and 'variety stores' break the line, followed by a car sales centre. Its neighbours are a consultancy firm and an office of a certain government department.

On the other side of the road, Save the Children Fund of the US has its offices, huddled next to a renowned construction company. Next to this is a hospital and a diagnostic centre. A few residential houses have managed to wedge themselves in here and there.

This is Road 9A of Dhanmondi Residential Area. This road perhaps best typifies the plight of this once exclusive residential area.

Chief Engineer of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) was quite abrupt about the matter. "It is RAJUK's responsibility." But the city's development authority, RAJUK, is nonchalant. They point back at DCC. "The City Corporation acts on its own accord," says an official of RAJUK. "They don't ask RAJUK's permission for anything. They even constructed their own Nagar Bhaban without consulting us at all."

"Why should we consult RAJUK?" retorts a senior official of DCC's Engineering Department. "DCC has been here long before RAJUK. We have never taken permission from anyone over the past 30 years and are not about to begin it now."

Thus the blame makes its rounds from one shoulder to the other in the carousel of government organisations. In the meantime, the city's residential areas become more and more commercialised. Plot allocation in Dhan-

mondi Residential Area began in 1960 though this actually took off in 1965. The total number of plots presently in Dhanmondi Residential Area is 1,047. The commercialisation of the area has been particularly rapid and palpable over the past couple of years.

"This place will simply no longer be livable," says an irate Farida Khanum, housewife and resident of the area whose house directly faces a sprawling clinic. "The roads are always jammed, horns are blaring and then there is the wailing of the ambulance siren."

Hospitals and clinics are particularly objectionable to the residents of the area. The hospital authorities have no qualms whatsoever in disposing of their waste by burning the air with a rancid stench, rendering the environment completely unhygienic. Repeated complaints simply fall on deaf ears.

The homeowners themselves are lured by higher rents to let out their premises to commercial organisations rather than as private residences. "Not only do we get higher rent from offices and commercial institutions," a landlady of the area defends herself, "but also it's much less of a hassle."

At present in Dhanmondi there are over 300 commercial organisations, 36 NGOs, 18 government offices, one foreign diplomatic mission, five cultural centres of foreign diplomatic mission, 12 markets and 207 shops, 58 clinics, 13 colleges, 73 schools, one hospital, four clubs, four rest houses, 27 community centres, eleven Chinese restaurants and 31 fast food shops.

The government has no specific policy to prevent the commercialisation of residential areas. Zakir Hussain, RAJUK's planning expert, says when the owners submit their plans for approval, they always submit

Donation

By Staff Correspondent. Ashfaq Nazma Foundation, a non-government organisation, came forward with financial assistance responding to an appeal for help to save a child's life.

The Foundation donated Taka 5,000 and prayed for early recovery of Alif Khandaker, aged three, now suffering from thalassemia disease.

Alif's father, Khandaker Saiful Azam, a computer operator at The Daily Star, appealed for help from philanthropist, individuals and organisations to meet his medical expenditure.

Dutch minister visits BRAC project

The visiting Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk, yesterday visited some BRAC projects at Korolia in Tangail, reports UMB.

During the visit, the Netherlands minister talked to rural women who are undertaking Human Rights and Legal Education course arranged by the NGO.

The minister was accompanied by his wife and some members of his entourage.

Attack in Miladun Nabi function condemned

The International Pen-pals Club, voluntary youth organisation in Bangladesh, yesterday strongly condemned the attack in the Eid-e-Miladun Nabi function and disavowed the President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed by the anti-liberation fundamentalist forces at an Islamic Foundation Function recently, reports BSS.

President and general secretary of the Pen-pals Club, Mahabuddin Chowdhury and Md Sharif, in a joint statement urged the government to take stern measures against the culprits.

They said, Islamic Foundation was founded with a noble objective, but it was made a sanctuary of the anti-liberation and fundamentalist forces.

SKOP's 8-pt demand

Leaders hold meet with Mannan

State Minister for Labour and Manpower M A Mannan yesterday sought cooperation of the labour leaders for keeping congenial atmosphere for production in industries, reports BSS.

He was talking to the leaders of SKOP at a meeting held in the conference room of the Labour and Manpower Ministry, an official handout said.

The meeting, presided over by the state minister, openly discussed the eight-point demand of the SKOP and reached a consensus to continue discussion for fulfilment of the demands.

At the beginning, an obituary resolution was adopted at the deaths of workers in a devastating fire at Rahman and Rahman Garments at Mirpur recently.

Labour and Manpower Secretary Ahsan Ali Sarker, Joint Secretary Daud Uddin Zaman Chowdhury, Director MAS Talukder, Chief Inspector Mahbub Hossain and SKOP leaders Abdus Salam Khan, Ahsanullah Master MP, Abul Bashir, Shah Mohammad Abu Jafar, Nurul Islam, Dr Wazudul Islam Khan, Abdullah Sarker, Shirin

Akhtar, Mokhelesur Rahman, Tofazzel Hossain, Belayet Hossain, Shafigur Rahman Majumder, Protab Uddin Ahmed, Mesbah Uddin Ahmed and Iqbal Majumder were present at the meeting.

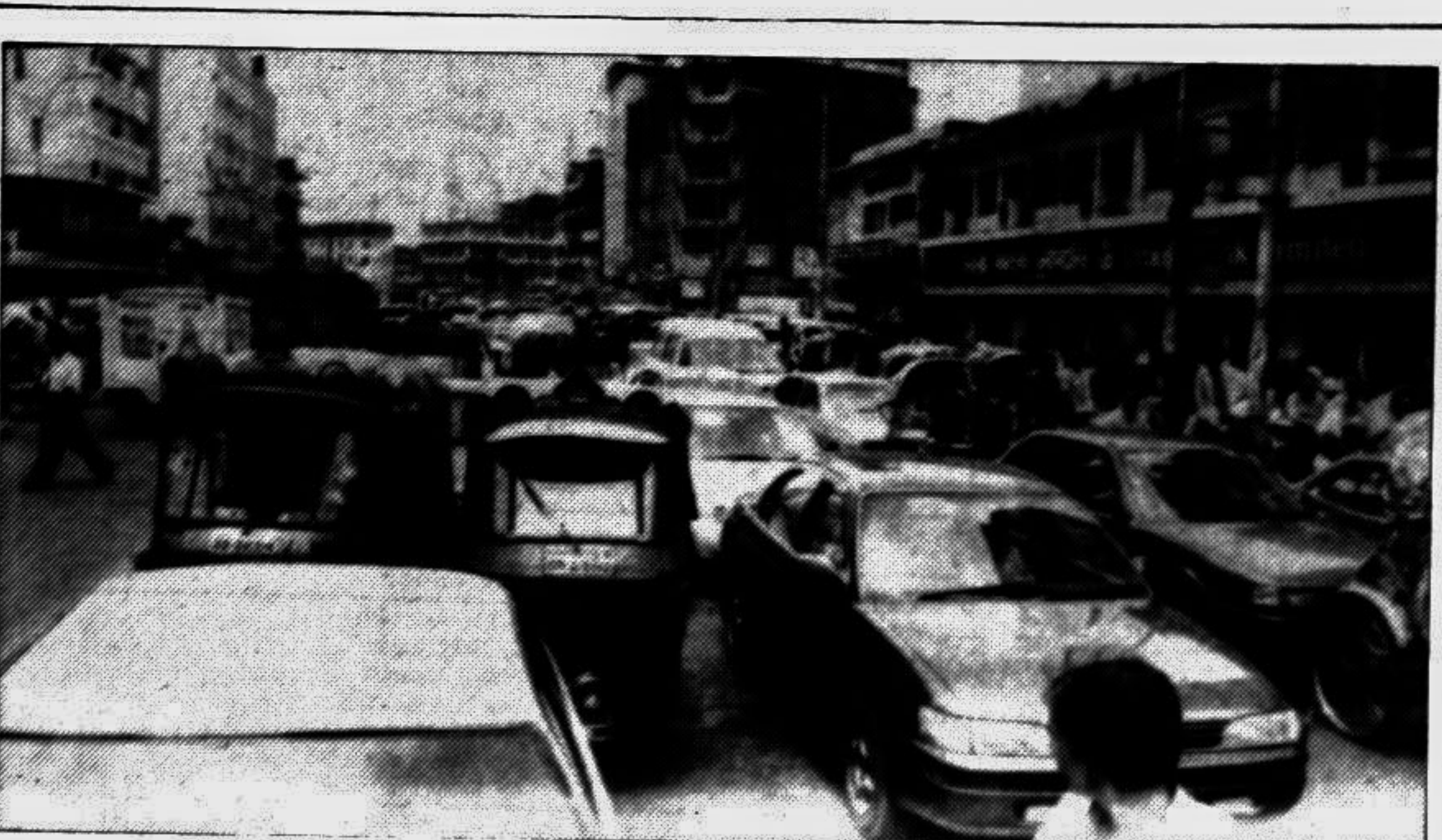
DMC unit of BCL blames JCD

Leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League (S-P), Dhaka Medical College Union, yesterday held Jatiyatabadi Chhatra (JCD) responsible for bringing out a provocative and militant procession on the campus with an intention to foil the Dhaka Medical College Students Union (DMCSU) election, scheduled to be held on August 7, reports BSS.



Bangladesh Chhatra League brought out a procession on DU campus yesterday protesting increase in admission and other fees.

— Star photo



A scene of traffic jam in Motijheel area yesterday.

— Star photo