

Burden of Debts

The per capita debt obligation stood at US 124.2 in 1995-96 fiscal reflecting an increase by nineteen times from the bench-mark year 1973-74. It is creeping close to the per capita income estimated at US 240 or thereabouts. We are in a debt-trap that threatens to mortgage the country's economic future.

The national indebtedness figure released by the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance does not present a complete picture about this. For, as the ERD has very candidly pointed out, the total disbursement figure did not include credits from the IMF and some special borrowings by the Ministry of Food and Bangladesh Shipping Corporation. Moreover, assistance for defence, NGOs and some other private sector organisations has not been taken into account in estimating the obligations.

The drastic decline in the grants component of foreign aid package — from 90.5 per cent in 1971-72 to 46.8 per cent in 1995-96 — has brought about the manifold increase in debt-burden. There is going to be a further shrinkage in the inflow of grants given the fact that aid-givers are having to respond to competing requests for assistance from a large number of candidates in the new era of detente.

The noose tightens around us more and more not merely as we contract fresh loans but also because the debt service obligation keeps increasing owing to the expiry of grace periods and exchange rate fluctuations.

As a way out of this vicious circle we suggest that the wasteful public sector which accounts for much of this indebtedness be thoroughly streamlined. Disinvestment is the key word. Downsizing will be complementary. Rather than crying pitifully for having the debts written off, we need to look inwards and ensure efficient management of our enterprises.

SKOP's Strike Call

By the time this leader gets published, the Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) may have enforced its planned dawn-to-dusk industrial hartal today. Unless, of course, a last-minute understanding between it and the government has been reached either for the programme's cancellation or postponement. Given the background of the SKOP's demands in the light of agreements previously reached between the two sides, the members of the labour and employees' organisation may have some grievances. The government may have taken its time in responding to the situation created by the SKOP's ultimatum for action announced two months ago.

Without going into the merit of their demands generally, we would like to concentrate just on one of these because it stands out. This is the issue of disinvestment of public sector industries which the SKOP is opposing tooth and nail. Does it not amount to questioning the government policy — one that is also endorsed by the opposition and is decidedly a general global trend? When industrial production has been at its lowest, what right the trade union bodies have to hurt industrial productivity by strikes? In this context we can recall the offer Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has made about formation of co-operatives by the employees and taking over the disinvested industries. Why not think along the line, accept the offer, and help increase national productivity?

Since the SKOP has failed to show any interest in such a positive programme, should we assume that the labour unions are more inclined to throw their political weight around? This government came to power only a little over one year ago. Instead of co-operating with it, the SKOP seems to have opted for the conventional strike programme which, if pursued, is bound to cripple the industrial sector.

Virtue by Default?

Imagine a truck-load of boxes all stuffed with money suddenly hurtling all around with the vehicle eventually turning turtle at a busy bus stand. What will follow? People all around making desperate swoops at the boxes and each outdoing the other in the looting spree. Contemplating any different picture in the context of today's Bangladesh would be difficult. But for once the inevitable did not happen even though a truck did actually meet with an accident at Sherpur bus stand on its way to the Bangladesh Bank branch, Bogra from Sirajganj.

This incident should make us particularly happy and proud. Because judged against the backdrop of frequent petty types of mugging and the occasional dare-devil forays into well-protected buildings for big money this sounds heavenly. But don't get too much carried away. Although six of the 25 policemen and officials accompanying the valuable cargo were injured in the accident, others very much ruffled though they were still stood guard over the boxes. More cogently perhaps people were unaware of the contents of the boxes.

So the people present at Sherpur bus-stand do not earn the compliment, they are given one. But at least the virtue by default can be a beginning of the process. Are we ready to take the message that what is not earned should always be ignored? Haven't we come across stories where the protagonists have exemplarily called in all their energy and talent to be equal to one single good act accomplished by chance? That way too we can throw a challenge to ourselves. Not a bad idea indeed!

How Do You Separate the Wheat from the Chaff?

President's Speech at APCSF

PRESIDENT Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed made some serious remarks about the state of affairs in the country last week. His speech at the Second Assembly of the Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum (APCSF) in Dhaka had been sharply critical of almost all the major players of the society — the politicians, the intellectuals and the labour unions. Of course, everybody was not criticised equally, the bite was the hardest for the politicians.

The President accused the country's political parties of adopting any means — fair or foul — to capture state power, criticised educational institutions for evaporating education and moral values, blasted the business community for defaulting on bank loans and thereby disrupting the country's banking and financial system, and blamed the labour unions for seriously hindering the nation's industrial development.

The remaining constituencies of the society — the bureaucracy, the defence forces and the journalists — however, escaped his condemnation. Whether these forces are also responsible for the sad state of affairs in the country or they have nothing to do with the edifice for civil society — that the President had been talking about — remains unclear.

The observations made by the President are, however, so real, so true and so obvious that no knowledgeable person in the society can dispute with him. Nobody knows it more than the politicians themselves, that they don't hesitate to adopt any means to gain control of the

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state machinery. Perhaps that's why they don't trust each other too. Only few years ago, they held the whole nation hostage to make sure that their elections are supervised by somebody else — by caretaker government, to be precise.

Of course, the country lacks well developed political institutions. The political development of the country had been repeatedly disturbed by military expedients, often with enthusiastic collaboration of some of self-seeking politicians. The president rightly observes that the politicians use students, industrial work force and even religion for attaining their political objectives. No doubt these are mischievous things to do, and no sensible person can approve such conduct. The President, indeed, voiced the nation's conscience.

While blasting the business community for non-payment of heavy amounts of bank loans, the President brought to surface a very important fact by stating that the law of the land can't touch them as many of them themselves law-makers — belonging to both sides of the state power. By stating this publicly, the President draws attention to the very fundamentals of a civic society.

After all, if the lawmakers themselves don't care about the laws that they make, how can they expect the ordinary people to follow those? Moreover, if the laws of the land are not ap-

plicable to everybody equally and if some people always remain more equal than others, how a country can talk about building edifice for democratic governance or civil society?

But the President blames the private sector defaulters for disrupting the financial and banking system of the country without ever referring to the public sector defaulters who are responsible for draining out more than \$500 million each year from the nationalised banks. Why those defaulters

The President has been highly critical of the country's educational institutions for lacking congenial atmosphere for the pursuit of knowledge and moral values. He called upon the politicians not to involve the students in their power game. Just a few days ago, the President literally irked a section of intellectuals by calling for an amendment to the Dhaka University Ordinance, 1973. All these, again, are unquestionably the most patriotic things to do.

shamelessly and so meticulously.

Efforts must be made to stop senseless democratisation of the institutions of higher education that systematically discriminated against merit and talent, and to stop involvement of students in the political power game that routinely disrupts educational environment in the campuses. Nothing could be better contribution of the President to the nation than freeing the centres of higher learning from mobocracy — engineered by a segment of less-educated faculties, less-minded students and evil-minded politicians.

While the president deserves appreciation for raising such obvious national issues at the presidential level of discourse, perhaps it could have been much more appreciable if he could have also brought the powerful players like the bureaucracy, military forces and the press within the trajectory of his criticisms for the sad state of affairs in the country. Perhaps no discussion of civil society can be fruitful without ascertaining the roles of these institutions.

Among all these institutions, however, the presidential omission of the bureaucracy seems the most striking. It is widely believed that the country's bloated bureaucracy — neither the politicians, nor the work force, nor the defaulting businessmen — is the principal

enemy of the nation's economic progress or industrial development. Besides, almost everybody — except perhaps those in power — is vulnerable to the whims and caprices of the bureaucrats, is there any avenue for redressing bureaucratic injustices and highhandedness in the country?

It is, therefore, incomprehensible that the President forgot about the bureaucracy while talking about civil society in the country. After all, how can a civil society be built having such a powerful and abusive bureaucracy around? Moreover, how can the people be assured of life, liberty and property — the fundamentals of a civil society — if the police can arrest anybody, anywhere or at any time, without ever bothering about accountability or compensation? They just need a so-called tip-off to enter any house, spoil any show, stain any character and tarnish any image.

Of course, the politicians are 'crooks and corrupt'. But then, which segment of the society is less-corrupt, less-unscrupulous? Moreover, how do you separate the sheep from the goats in a society where almost each and every segment is feverishly engaged in grilling the people and grinding the nation's potentials. Given the current pace of the nation's progress, it will take twenty years for it to double its abysmal per capita income, and at least one hundred years to reach the level of the United States of 1930s, Japan of 1960s and Russia of 1980s. If segments of the nation are not digging holes in the ship, why is this ship sinking?



by CAF Dowlah

Every knowledgeable person in the country knows the extent of damage that has been done to the country's higher education by trade union-like democratisation of the university campuses. As a result, all public universities in the country are now not beds of politics — in most cases they are run by so-called faculties, it is often difficult to differentiate them from fulltime politicians. Pursuit of knowledge and excellence had been the prime victim of the whole process. Nowhere bad money drives good money out of circulation so proudly, so

will go scot-free while the private sector will take the whole wrath of the President? Why the government can't take any action against public sector defaulters — those government officials who run public enterprises and corporations as directors or chairpersons? What action did the government take against those bank officials who approved huge bank loans on the basis of faulty documents and mysterious collaterals? Why should the President forget those government officials while blaming the private sector defaulters?

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Are Only Christians Subjected to Religious Persecution?

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Any Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist nation that represses its religious minorities should be condemned equally in the strongest possible terms and punished.

LAST week, the US State Department released a report detailing the persecution of Christians all over the world. The former Secretary of State, William Christopher mandated in November, 1996 that such a report be released annually. China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran and Russia were specially singled out for persecuting the Christians. Sudan has been accused of forcibly converting animists and Christians to Islam, and Saudi Arabia for forbidding non-Muslims to worship. This effort has been followed by the US Christian right, and Zionists, eager to undermine US's Muslim allies.

The report is concerned solely about persecution of Christians. It has no time for the persecution of Muslims at the hands of Christian in Bosnia and Chechnya, by Jews in Palestine or by Hindus in Kashmir.

There is more. Although Christianity, world's dominant religion, is flourishing all over the world, Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Representative Frank Wolf of Virginia are sponsoring a bill in the US Congress to prevent the persecution of Christians! As though only the followers of the largest religion in the world, Christianity, need protection, not the rest of humanity?

The bill goes out of its way to prevent the persecution of the obscure Baha'i sect in Iran. And that gave it away! Clearly, the bill takes aim not only at 'rogue' Islamic nations, such as Iran and Iraq, but at staunch

US Islamic allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as well. The one-dimensional bill sheds crocodile tears for the persecution of Christians in communist China and several Muslim countries, yet remains unmoved by the much more violent recent persecution of Muslims in China.

Any foreign nation, including US allies, found violating the proposed Specter-Wolf bill will be severely punished with economic and political sanctions.

Sure, there are kudos to be won by appearing to champion the cause of the Christians, as Representative Lee Hamilton of Indiana admitted, and by pointing the finger at the Muslims — the West's favorite punching bag! Such hypocrisy, however, does not win one moral points. Indeed, if Senator Specter and Representative Wolf succeed in persuading their pals in Congress to enact unfair legislation against Muslim nations, it will deal a mortal blow to the vital interests of the US, as well to the tremendous reputation for fairness that the US enjoys throughout the world.

President Clinton should emphatically veto the bill in its current form.

When staunch supporters of Israel, such as Senator Specter and Representative Wolf, both of whom are Jewish, and well-

known Jewish activists, such as New York Times columnist A. M. Rosenthal, and Zionist Michael Horowitz, and Steve Emerson, the notorious producer of the infamous television documentary, 'Jihad in America', lead the fight to 'protect' the Christians, there is ample cause for skepticism! The real aim of these diehard supporters of Israel is to undermine the Muslim nations through this bill, so as to benefit their sacred cow, Israel!

Recently, in support of the supremacy of the Ten Commandments, a South Carolina School Board Member, Dr. Jordan, publicly exhorted Americans to 'screw the Buddhists and kill the Muslims'. Will the Specter-Wolf religious persecution bill protect the victims of such verbal religious persecution?

What about the Israeli woman, Ms. Tatiana Susskind, who depicted Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a pig writing the holy Quran, and plastered her 'paintings' all over Arab shops in Hebron? Should not Israel be censured, under the bill, for the sacrilege?

There is no way a Muslim can retaliate against what Ms. Susskind did. Muslims reverse all of God's prophets — Muhammad, Moses, Jacob and Christ, to name a few —

equally. Just because a Jew has insulted Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), does not mean that a Muslim can get even by saying something derogatory against Prophet Yakub (peace be upon him), whom the Jews hold dear. Since Christians and Jews do not count Prophet Muhammad as one of their prophets, someone like Ms. Susskind has no qualms about insulting him.

This incident has profound ramifications for the Middle East peace process. It clearly demonstrates that if in any future negotiations Jerusalem is to be an international city, open to all faiths, why Muslims and Muslims alone possess the required prophetic neutrality to look after all the Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy sites impartially.

Close to 90 per cent of the Americans are Christians;

Christians are clearly not persecuted in America. One thought that the job of the US Congress was to legislate laws for Americans. In an unprecedented departure from norms, the Specter-Wolf bill takes aim at foreign nations whose religion is not Christianity, and seeks to legislate their behaviour. It has to be up to America's satisfaction, or else!

Any Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist nation that represses its religious minorities should be condemned equally in the strongest possible terms and punished. Selective expression of moral outrage, and attempts to hijack the vital interests of the US for the benefit of any one group or nation by those in positions of power, are equally reprehensible.

Also last week, Canadian fishermen defied a court order

and continued to block an Alaska ferry, belonging to the US, from leaving a British Columbia Canada port. The Canadian fishermen accuse their US counterparts of catching salmon bound for Canadian rivers, and want stalled talks on the issue revived.

The relation between the US and Canada is so warm and peaceful that Americans find it extremely difficult to get mad at Canada. As though Canada is America's kid sister, whose idiosyncrasies are at best a matter of mild amusement. After all, what can the thoroughly civilized Canadians do except say, 'Carry on, you see that, I am not lawfully mad, eh?'

Had it been an Iraqi, North Korean or even a Mexican vessel blocking an American fishing boat, a US naval destroyer would have been steaming towards the area for a previously scheduled exercise.

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OPINION

Society Demands Justice in Seema Murder Case

A Hasib

When a crime is committed in a civil society, it is not only committed against the victim who suffers physically and mentally, but also committed against the very society itself. A case like this is usually filed as an FIR and recorded as GR case. It is usually accepted by the police for investigation as against an inquiry which is usually ordered by a magistrate in a CR case which is filed before the magistrate by an aggrieved individual. When, however, the police refuses to accept a serious case as a GR case, the aggrieved party may apply to the magistrate who may order for inquiry and report from the police. On receiving the report, the magistrate may record it as GR case. Moreover, a complaint case before a magistrate may be sent to the police and the police, after investigation, may start a GR case. There is no hard and fast rule and much depends on what the magistrate wants in his reference to the police. GR case may end in chargesheet or a final report. In a CR case, a summons, warrant or judicial inquiry may be ordered also.

This is purely for the general readers to understand the basic difference between a GR case and a CR case, an investigation and an inquiry. In a GR case i.e. state versus the accused, the complainant is simply a witness. State is the prosecutor, because the crime, as already stated, is committed against the society and the state's duty is to protect the society from crime and criminals. Since the crime is committed against the society, the individual who files a case like this cannot withdraw it. Only the state can do so.

Police, who acts on behalf of the society and the state, has a big responsibility in the investigation of a crime. His report may make or mar a serious case which is why people in civil society should voluntarily come forward to help the police to record a correct picture of the crime and the criminals. If the police and the citizen fail to do this, then crime will be committed, as is being done now rampantly, against all of us including the police. Recently, a dacoity was committed in the house of the OC of a Dhaka city police station. This shows the extent to which crime has escalated and the civil society col-

lapsed. The reason why people do not come forward to depose in a case is due to fear of the criminals. This fear has to be removed in order to get cooperation from the people to nab the criminals.

Our criminal law is based on English law where state/prosecution/complainant has to prove beyond reasonable doubt the guilt of the accused. In England and some other countries, the accused, if he has really committed a crime, usually pleads guilty when asked if he is guilty or not. In our country, there is hardly any accused who does so. His normal answer is 'not guilty'. Usually, his lawyer advises him to say so. The accused does not have to adduce any evidence to prove his innocence, because the law does not require it. The burden is on the State to bring evidence to prove his guilt even if he commits the crime in the darkness without being seen by anybody. The other advantage of the criminals in our society is that they get the benefit of doubt. No evidence of witnesses will be the same even if they have seen the commission of a crime. So if there is any discrepancy, the benefit goes to the accused and consequently he is acquitted. A lot of criminals get acquitted on benefit of doubt. Once acquitted, they become more desperate and dangerous for the society.

In some countries, it is the accused, and not the state who has to prove that he is not guilty of the crime charged with. Since in our society, most people are prone to telling lies when charged with some crime, we have to review our procedural law. For example, procedure may be amended to shift the burden of proof on to the accused to prove his innocence. What I mean is that something has to be done about our procedural law. Otherwise a time will come when it may be difficult to control the march of crime in the society.

In the Seema murder case, the four policemen were the accused, their colleague was the complainant and investigator, and again they were the witnesses. In this circumstance, the whole prosecution was made out to create not only doubt in the commission of the

crime but also to find guilt of the accused improbable. The trial judge was helpless. He, however, made some good observations. We praise him. We still have judges both in the lower and higher judiciary who live up to their oath to do justice without fear or favour. But I must say that the trial judge ought to have relied more on the circumstantial evidences than on the statements and the evidences of the believably biased police witnesses, for witnesses may lie but circumstances do not. And a criminal always leaves behind some circumstantial proof of his crime. In the present case a lot of such proofs were there for consideration by the judge. The trial judge ought to have considered all these circumstances in which Seema was brought to police custody, raped and killed. Seema was there, she was raped, she was killed — all this could not vanish in the air and in the good observation of the trial judge. If was nobody's case that Seema was killed by anybody else or in some other place. The place of occurrence was undisputed.

The Law Ministry is understood to have decided to file appeal against the order of acquittal of the four accused policemen. Since the evidences were too weak to warrant a conviction at the trial, an appeal to the High Court Division may help in vindicating the grievance of those different women's organisations, human rights bodies, NGOs, and other social thinkers aggrieved terribly by the acquittal verdict. From what I have read in the news media, the facts and circumstances of the case are such that, in the event of an appeal, the High Court may deem fit to send the case on remand for retrial after independent investigation. The four accused will then have to surrender to the court to face a trial over again. Society demands justice to be done not only in this case, it must be seen to have been done also in other such cases. Mere tall, talks about rule of law and human rights without their implementation will do us no good.

The writer is an ex-judge, and president of Rule of Law and Human Rights Implementation Council.

To the Editor...

Treatment of heart

Sir, I am writing this letter to the people of Bangladesh to whom I am greatly indebted. Their encouragement, recognition and love are the most powerful sentiments for a surgeon like me.

For the people who do know me, I would like to introduce myself as a social worker with the skill to operate on the heart. During my tenure at Calcutta I had the privilege of performing 7000 major heart surgeries. Majority of these patients are rich and are in a position to get the best possible medical care. Now I have taken a conscious decision to concentrate on the welfare of the common people, people who are unable to afford the cost of high technology heart operations. More than 90 per cent of Bangladesh and Indian population cannot afford the cost of heart treatment. To look after this category of patients we have created a heart hospital called Manipal Heart Foundation, in Bangalore.

Manipal Heart Foundation is a 450-bed heart hospital with eight operation theaters to perform 20 heart operations a day. Fifty per cent of the beds in this hospital are reserved for working class people. Patients with an income of less than Rs. 5,000/- can have major heart surgery done here for Rs. 75,000/- and an angiogram or cardiac catheterisation for Rs. 8,000/-. Children with heart disease from lower socio-economic strata can undergo any major heart operation for Rs. 55,000/-. I have been very lucky all along to have excellent doctors as my colleagues. We all share the same feelings for the people from lower socio-economic strata. All of them are happy to offer their service for these patients free of charge.

If any patient from Bangladesh would like to be treated at Manipal Heart Foundation, may kindly contact me at the address below.

We have arranged for the guest houses for patients and

their relatives costing Rs.250/- per day for a room shared by two people. We understand the inconvenience in arranging the blood donation. Any of the patient's relatives could donate two units of blood irrespective of the group. We shall help you to arrange the rest. We would also like to reaffirm that there are no extra charges for the surgery and angiogram. If the patient is extremely poor and not in a position to arrange for the required amount of money, we can arrange for some financial assistance from various welfare organisations of India.

I am not doing a business promotion exercise in requesting you to publish my letter. This is the only way I can reach the common man of Bangladesh. May be one day by the grace of God, people will not have to sell their farm land or house to have a heart operation.

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'Current' nets and fish crisis

Sir, For generations we Bangladeshis have taken cheap and abundant fish as granted. And until the recent past we enjoyed this blessing too. But now all of a sudden, fish has become expensive and scarce. Why fish, of all the things in the world? We can have scarcity of chicken, eggs, mutton or beef, that is acceptable. But why fish? Since we have got such a big source of it, at our disposal, it is simply unacceptable to us that we should have crisis of our favorite dish — fish. So something must be done before it is too late.

Now what are the factors responsible for this unnatural crisis. Is it the population

boom, leading to overfishing? If so, then God help us, because even now the educated middle-class or the majority think that one should at least have three or four children and not two, which our government has been preaching in vain for the last two decades. Not to mention the lower-income group which has no interest in family planning, whatsoever.

Another factor could be smuggling of fish across the border. If that is so, then we really are very unlucky that our government is incapable of controlling such a crime, and that our people are so unpatriotic that they think of only their own personal gains by carrying on with such a harmful trade as smuggling.

Another factor could be the latest trend of using 'current' fishing nets. These help to catch the baby fish or fish fries in huge quantity. Not allowing them to grow to adulthood and to breed. So the number of fish in the fishing grounds is automatically decreasing drastically. Strict measures should be taken to completely stop this practice. It is no use showing TV programmes to discourage it, obviously. Since the programmes are not seen by the fishermen and there is no need to listen, as their profit is more important to them. So law-enforcing agencies must come in to stop it. Anybody making, using or selling 'current' fishing nets should be punished severely.

Also anybody selling or buying fish fries should be punished. Only then can we bring the number of fish in our rivers back to normal. And hopefully the price will come down within the buying capacity of ordinary people and there will be abundance of fish in the market by the good old days, before this spiral of exorbitant price of fish sets in so that everybody will be able to enjoy eating cheap fish as before.

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