

Mission to Tripura

A great deal of importance is attached to the forthcoming visit of a seven-member team of the National Committee on CHT (NCCHT) to the tribal refugee camps in the Indian state of Tripura. The reasons are not far to seek. It was quite an enigma as to how the resumption of repatriation in March under highly favourable political circumstances on both sides, which saw the return of 7000 refugees to Bangladesh, suddenly went off-course. The tribal refugee leadership in Tripura following a trip to the rehabilitation camps in Bangladesh waxed critical of the way the returnees were being re-settled in the CHT. This was obviously a matter of details, and not of principle. It was in pursuance of the 20-point agreement signed by the NCCHT and the Refugee Welfare Association in Tripura that the moribund process of repatriation resumed in March under the benign eyes of the PCJSS and the Tripura state government in India, to say nothing of Bangladesh government's goodwill for the returnees. Evidently, these could not have given cause for the Refugee Welfare Association in the Tripura camps, led by Upendra Lal Chakma, to ask for any further repatriation to be supervised by the UNHCR or ICRC, this virtually amounting to courting internationalisation of a purely bilateral matter.

So, both Upendra Lal Chakma and his men would have to be won back to the path of repatriation through the help of the septuagenarian Tripura Chief Minister Dasrath Deb Barma. The common run of refugees are quite eager to trek back to their home in Bangladesh, so that the persuasive efforts need primarily to be directed to the Chakma leadership in the refugee camps.

Expectations are rife that the Bangladesh delegation would not return empty-handed from Tripura. Bangladesh government had already formed a task force, headed by Kalparanjan Chakma, MP, to go into the complaints about non-implementation of the rehabilitation programme as a confidence builder. Secondly, the team is not only placed under Kalparanjan Chakma, a prominent tribal leader and MP but also includes as many as four tribals among seven members in all. Besides, it is PCJSS, the political wing of the Shantibahini which advised that a Bangladesh delegation be sent on a persuasion mission to Tripura.

Since successful repatriation is regarded as a potential impetus to peace on the hills, it will have to be ensured through the cooperation of all concerned.

Venue for Public Meeting

The ban on meetings, processions, etc around Baitul Mukarram Mosque comes as a great relief. This being the country's national mosque, its premises had better be reserved for religious functions and celebrations. Why should political meetings, rallies etc, mostly marked by a charged atmosphere or even violence, be allowed to mar the solemnity and sanctity of the place? We feel happy for this ban. Then we move to the wider question of whether political parties are not undermining people's rights by holding their meetings indiscriminately around some major inter-sections or on busy thoroughfares. Both the ruling party and the opposition are equally to blame for this practice. The way they take control of the roads in front of their party offices gives the impression that those are their private property.

This should end. In her "Face-the-People" programme over TV Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a commitment that she would designate Mayor Mohammad Hanif for identifying suitable places for public meetings. Clearly, the Bangabandhu Avenue, the Paltan area, and the roads in front of the Press Club are too busy for such meetings. So, there is a need for alternative venues for public meetings. We are not aware of any progress made in this regard. Is the issue forgotten?

A place like the southern tip of the old airport's runway can be made a permanent venue for public meetings. Then the vast tract on the northern side of Chandrima Uddyan where an international trade fair was held could perhaps be used for the purpose. What is needed is a political will to do the job.

A Railway Syndrome

Apparently nothing is wrong with Balabari rail station of Kushtia. Ticket-sale, luggage-booking, transaction of money, etc go on as they do at any other station of the country. But the Bhorer Kagoj has dug out a shocking story from this apparently business-as-usual situation. Wonder of wonders, Obaidul Haq Khaja has been giving proxy for as many as four station masters in succession and for the last three years. The mutual arrangement between him and the legally appointed four station masters entitled Khaja to 30 per cent of their salary and all the additional money collected through deals other than approved. The fake station master does his job enthusiastically, asserts he, because he has been assured of a legal appointment in the end.

Even without a permanent job, he has had every reason to be quite happy. In the 1996 audit of the station account, a discrepancy of Tk 200,000 was detected. Resultantly, it was Mozammel Hossain, the duly appointed station master, who was suspended. But Khaja could eat the cake and have it too without being accountable to the authority for his financial irregularities. His interests are clear, but what is so puzzling is all the four station masters' complicity in the whole game and their utter lack of interest in the job. Could all of them have more lucrative jobs other than the station masters'?

We do not know. But we know it for sure that all five involved here are party to a serious crime. By hiring Khaja for the job-sitting, the four station masters have made a mockery of service rules and regulations. And Khaja himself has acted as an imposter. Reportedly, higher authorities in the railways are aware of all this, but turn a blind eye to it because their palms are greased to buy the silence. Small though the incident is, it so poignantly reflects the dismal state of affairs in the railways.

Regulate Yourselves, Before Big Brother Steps In

The challenge before the country's garment manufacturers is simply enormous. Being in a country that is at a rudimentary stage of industrial development, they must adhere to the most modern working conditions and industrial relations, otherwise they will face problems in selling their products abroad.

MAKING money with conscience has always been a difficult job. Although both are essential ingredients or incentives for real life, often they clash head on, leaving one or the other badly impaired as a result. The country's booming garments industry seems to provide a prime example for that. Although profit margin in garments is perhaps the highest in the country, at least some garment manufacturers seem to care little about those people whose sweat brings them the profit.

No, no attempt is being made here to repeat the classic debate between the followers of Adam Smith or Karl Marx. Whatever happened to that debate, the fact remains that nothing can be produced without the sweat of the worker. No cotton will be transformed into yarn, no yarn will be altered into cloth, no cloth will take the shape of garments — unless the worker puts in his hand in the production process.

The garment manufacturers of the country — perhaps exhilarated by phenomenal success over the years — appears to have forgotten this simple fact. Thanks to their willful negligence to basic minimum safety measures in the sweat shops — so-called garments factories — at least 75 poor workers were killed in fire or stampede in last few years. At least 33 poor souls embraced brutal death in last one month alone.

Unfortunately, the problem does not stop here. Given the ex-

isting condition of most of the sweat shops, it can be safely inferred that similar fate must be awaiting for many others. According to a report, published in The Daily Star on August 1 last, most of the garments factories are housed in inappropriate structures. An overwhelming number of them do not have trained manpower to handle fire or even adequate exit facilities to let the workers run with their lives.

Many of the 2000 or so garment factories in and around the city use substandard electrical appliances, many of them operate with faulty power supply lines, and at least 50 per cent of these sweat shops simply don't have a license from the city fire authorities. According to another report, published on August 3 last, government officials claim that about 98 per cent of the garments factories don't meet safety standards.

No wonder, the country's top export earner — the garments factories — has literally been turned into death traps for largely uneducated female work force. These hapless creatures work religiously everyday — from dawn to dusk on a regular basis — without ever dreaming of proper working conditions or deserved payments. When fire breaks out, some are burnt to death, some are crushed in a

stampede and still others face death when they jump to the ground from multi-storied buildings.

No amount of foreign exchange earning can justify such a heartless treatment to the hapless garments workers. It is, therefore, encouraging to learn that the garments manufacturers have come up with a plan to provide insurance coverage to the country's more than one million garment workers

knows how long it will take for Bangladesh to do the same! Moreover, no more the garment manufacturers can make brisk profits by running sweat shops. There is no denying that such sweat shops were at the forefront of industrial revolutions both in the United Kingdom and the United States. But that was then, more than two hundred years ago. Today's world — which is a globalised village connected by information super-highway — will not tolerate that.

The country's garment manufacturers must understand that they produce for global markets and most of their goods end up in western countries. Western consumers were never more cautious in spending their money — they want to know how and where the goods are produced, what ingredients are used, where the profit goes, whether the sale, and who are the workers and how they are treated. They don't mind in spending couple of extra bucks for promoting a sustainable and humane development.

Therefore, the challenge before the country's garment manufacturers is simply enormous. Being in a country that is at a rudimentary stage of industrial development, they must adhere to the most modern

working conditions and industrial relations, otherwise they will face problems in selling their products abroad. Also, the garments manufacturers must understand that the nation will no more watch helplessly the deaths of innocent workers for their greed — they must be able to make money with conscience.

Above all, as the most successful segment of the private sector in the country, the garment manufacturers have a moral responsibility to set up appropriate standards for others to follow. Nothing could be better business decision for them than doing away with the life-threatening working conditions in the garments factories on an emergency basis. The failures of the garments manufacturers to regulate themselves will invariably invite government intervention into the sector. And once the big brother steps in, the rest will be history.

If history is any guide, whatever the big brother of the country — the bureaucracy — touches, it itself becomes history. Look at what happened to jute, textile and everything else that the bureaucracy controls. They have inconceivable ability to turn invaluable resources into worthless ashes. Don't let them destroy the country's hottest engine of economic growth. The garment manufacturers of the country have demonstrated in the past that they are up to the challenge, perhaps they will not fail the nation this time around.



by CAF Dowlah

within this week. Although its too little too late, nothing could be better news for the ill-fated garment workers of the country. The manufacturers also made commitments to build alternate staircases, install fire extinguishing equipment and fire evacuation drill, and to train the workers to vacate the factory quickly in case of fire.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that it is in the interest of the garment manufacturers themselves to make sure that all these commitments are implemented with religious

country.

The situation is indeed precarious for the garment manufacturers. Of course, many businesses kill people, but nowhere it is more spectacular than in this business. The cigarette and bidi producers, for example, are causing deaths to numerous people everyday. But they kill gradually — through slow poisoning. Advanced societies are taking them to task. In the United States, for example, cigarette producers are paying back billions of dollars of their ill-gotten wealth. God

New Pay-Scale: Political Expediency versus Economic Planning

by A R Shamsul Islam

Much of the new pay-scale is a product of political expediency. It can hardly be tuned to comprehensive economic planning. It may cost the interest of the downtrodden masses. Proportionate growth and priority growth may go on limbo.

TO pay a new enhanced pay to the government employees is a deal that was struck up during the stormy days of the political movement of 1996. Seemingly the final stroke of that movement was made by the employees of the secretariat who threw off their allegiance to the then ruling BNP government. They sided and then expressed solidarity with the movement. The plea that they held out for fraternizing with the political agitation, despite their being the employees of the republic, can hotly be debated over its tenability. And they were never shy and short of bagging some vaulting bargains as price of their help. Commitment, overt or covert, for a new pay-scale by the probable election winner Awami League is one glaring such.

The date to give effect to the new pay-scale is the result of another political expediency. The abrupt declaration of two days weekend holidays with new office timings triggered violent reactions, which the exponents of the reformatory change could not foresee, among the agitation prone employees of the secretariat. To placate them the prime minister announced

even before the report of the Pay Commission was to hand that the new pay-scale would be made effective from 1 July, 1997.

The recently passed budget for 1997-98 has kept earmarked an allocation of Taka 700 crore for implementation of the new pay-scale. The report of the Pay Commission was submitted to the Prime Minister who formed an evaluation committee asking it to submit report by 30 September, 1997.

However, the proposed pay structures have been made public through the newspapers. It is clearly double the existing pay benefits. What is the real amount required to meet the proposed pay-scale? The budgetary allocation of Taka 700 crore can only meet a part of it. It is assumed that an allocation of Taka 1200 crore as kept under unforeseen head of expenditures will be diverted toward meeting the proposed pay hike. The proposed pay-

scale is suggested to be implemented by phases. Former finance minister Saifur Rahman said that an additional Taka 502 crore would be needed annually to realise the proposed pay-scale. The other day the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, when asked in a radio, TV programme captioned under 'Desh Bashir Mukhomukhi', replied that Taka 400 crore more would be needed annually to materialise the proposed pay-scale. In that case, about fifty per cent of the revenue income will be dissipated by pays alone of the employees.

The whole issue involves some pertinent questions. First, where will the money come from? Certainly from new taxations. Second, what effects will it have on the economy of the country? Will inflation be promoted to a dangerous extent by the new pay-scale? Third, do the employees deserve the new pay-scale in terms of their efficiency and service to the people? Fourth, how far is it justified to give effect to the new pay-scale before performing the much needed reformation in the government administration and understating its strength?

These questions are to be meticulously weighed before arriving at final decision. The number of government employees in recent years has doubled. They are allegedly sluggish and corrupt.

They have no accountability, no transparency for their works. They harass the public and (as alleged) extort bribes from them. In the parliamentary budget sessions open questions were launched by the opposition legislators why would the people pay new taxes for the enhanced pay of the extortionist government employees? If they receive increased pay they must shun addition to bribe-taking. It is a view of a cynic that the government may not have any need to expend money for the pay of the employees. It can earn a lot instead by putting the govern-

ment posts to public auction where there will be no dearth of high bidders to purchase the posts! This is not acceptable. But acceptable is what torments the people have at the hands of the government employees to be led to make such a remark.

Opinions of the eminent economists of the country are worth observing. Prof Anisur Rahman says why the people will go to pay more taxes for a community whose service is at the lowest ebb. Mohammad Hossain, a member of the first Planning Commission of Bangladesh, asks why does the government go to make such expensive commitments abruptly without weighing the pros and cons? Such trend of lavish commitments on personal whims started from Ayub, Yahya, Zia, Ershad followed it. Wherever they had gone they made fat presidential commitments involving hundreds of crores of taka.

Awami League has come to power with people's mandate. It cannot afford to exercise arbitrary commitments. Former finance minister A M Muhiit condemned that the top heavy inefficient administration of the government could not be reformed because of the opposition of the bureaucrats. Another ex-minister for finance Syedur Rahman said that the amount needed for new pay-scale could be better used for poverty alleviation. The Pay Commission has also recommended for increasing revenue income and decreasing government expenditures. It has highlighted the degeneration of the government employees in matter of honesty, punctuality, dutifulness, morality etc.

The World Bank reports draw that the size of the government of Bangladesh has grown twofold since indepen-

dence without any corresponding increase in efficiency. Rather quite conversely it has resulted in aggravating the corruption and extortion by the government employees. The WB has, therefore, suggested that the government of our country should fold it up and limit its jurisdiction only to essential sectors and voluntarily transfer the rest of the sectors to the private. The government can thus afford to be best managed.

In fact and in all fairness, the amount needed to meet the new pay-scale could be much better used for the welfare of the millions of unfortunate lying below poverty lines. Alas, they do not have any bargaining bugbear like 'Union' to force the government to accept their demands!

Still the necessity of enhancing the pay of the government employees cannot be denied. This is to keep them above corruption and to add to their efficiency. But the justifications become muddy and mazed when the employees tend to be incorrigibly corrupt and service shy.

The nation now looks at what the evaluation committee will report on the Pay Commission's proposals. The government employees' expectancy and the people's bearing capacity should be brought to an equation. The seven-member evaluation committee headed by the cabinet secretary and comprising five secretaries of different ministries and one member of the Planning Commission cannot afford to remain unaware of the sentiments of the people. It would have been better off if the committee co-opted some economists, professionals, parliament members outside the gamut of the government administration.

Much of the new pay-scale is a product of political expediency. It can hardly be tuned to comprehensive economic planning. It may cost the interest of the downtrodden masses. Proportionate growth and priority growth may go on limbo.

The writer is retired Principal of Govt. Mahila College Pabna

To the Editor...

Non-transparency

Sir, A government press note said the name of Zia International Airport has not been changed. The next sentence (expected) was missing; that the name would not be changed by "Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government". Be crystal clear.

The ministers are instigating party workers of 'dangers' and 'evil designs' by religious activities. Vague and unprecise. Tell the public details of the dangers. Can't support AL without understanding!

Appeal to hungry Awami Leaguers, "starving" for 21 years — go slow on the long pending list. Avariciousness is not good.

A Citizen
Dhaka.

Magurchhara mystery

Sir, Is it an accident due to any act of Occidental Company, an act of sabotage or a gross negligence of duty by some government officials of our Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources?

It is very surprising and shocking that the authorities concerned could not put off the fire as yet which engulfed the Magurchhara gas field in the middle of June 1997.

We wonder how much gas have been burnt and wasted and what is the total amount of loss of natural resources incurred by this poor country?

Unfortunately so far, we have heard nothing concrete and authentic from any source about the fire. Why are the Occidental Company and our Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources maintaining a mysterious silence?

For the sake of accountability and transparency, we demand of our government to kindly publish a white paper on Magurchhara gas field disaster.

O K Habi
6, Hare Street
Wari, Dhaka-1203

"Misplaced Generosity"

Sir, I fully agree with the views expressed by Mr Kasem of Moghbazar published in your esteemed daily on 21st July, '97 under the above caption. Hats off to Mr Kasem for ventilating such an important issue at an appropriate moment.

In this context, may I be allowed to add one more point in order to make the issue more relevant for an open discussion by the learned readers. If our memory does not betray us, we can recall that a few months ago a teenage boy saved a passenger train from being derailed, saving lives of multitudes of people. For this act of bravery, the boy was rewarded with a handsome amount of two thousand taka.

It is undoubtedly an irony of fate that Mahboob, the ill-fated illegal traveller boarding in a wheel carriage of Biman met with the accident and succumbed death for his own fault has been compensated with one lakh taka which should have been paid to the boy who saved the lives of many, in recognition of his heroic deed. We do not know how long we shall have to wait to see these in order.

Md Abdul Momen
216/1 North Shajahanpur
Dhaka

Killing in police encounter

Sir, The newspaper on July 16 reported killings of two youths in the city. The stories run: one Nitu Singh (25), an alleged terrorist, freed from jail recently; of Uttar Maishandi under Sutrapur thana was forcibly picked up by some miscreants. He was then taken atop of a house where he (Nitu) was shot point blank in the head by the assassins. The victim died on the spot and the killers decamped safely. This is a case of cold blooded calculated first degree murder as well as a real 'statement of facts' on the ongoing terrorist activities of the country, particularly in the capital city.

The second story is that one Mithu (25), specific whereabouts not known, also an alleged extortionist was killed in encounter with the police at Shajahanpur in the city.

As reported, Mithu with five of his accomplices was engaged in the act of extortion on the spot. The police on duty being informed of the incident chased the extortionists in an attempt to rescue the victim, a businessman. Sensing the presence of the police, others decamped but Mithu in a desperate attempt opened fire at the police. The police returned the fire and a bullet hit Mithu's head causing his instant death on the spot.

The incident of killing in police encounter may remind some one of the infamous killings of hundred of youths, who were opposed to the political thoughts and beliefs of the then West Bengal administration; at the famous 'Maidan' in Calcutta in the early '70s. Hopefully, this is not an example like that killings in so-called encounters with the police.

We feel, the police too has some rules and regulations to follow in discharging their duties, particularly in the use of arms. Like the rule of boxing, 'not to blow below the belt', the police has also a rule not to fire to kill unless it is in self-defence.

In principle, the primary and foremost task of the police, as protector of life of the people and law enforcing agent, is to nab the violators of law, investigate into the case and send them (the offenders) to the courts of law for trial and justice.

The police cannot and should not act in contrary to the provisos of the law. Incidents of killing will debar all efforts to bring the offenders for trial under the law of the land. Nothing remains after death except to mourn the death by the victim's relations.

Would the Home Minister Major (ret'd) Rafiqul Islam please take a personal interest into the matter and see for himself that killing in encounter with the police does not repeat under any circumstances.

Anjan Pathak
Kulutola, Laxibazar
Dhaka.

Roads and DCC

Sir, The alien forces are even destroying the roads of Dhaka city! And what can our hard worked Mayor do being burdened with attending political rallies and having, they say, his picture taken for the press! During the BNP regime he was possibly not allowed to repair the city roads for two years although he did manage to collect the municipal taxes. To save him the hardships of his burden of duties I would invite him to visit for himself, among others, the Road No 19/A of Banani which provides the principal outlet of the entire Banani area to Kamal Ataturk Avenue and hundreds of vehicles use it daily.

He will see that this road is in such a condition that if a few more spots on it are dug up there will be no further scope for vehicular traffic on it and the Mayor and the City Corporation will be saved from the botheration of repairing and maintaining this road at least.

Kabiruddin Khan
Banani, Dhaka

Sheikh Hasina please be cautious

Sir, It seems a reckless and naked competition is going on amongst some of the cabinet members to appease the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. They are trying to change the name of many institutions/ organisations/ places after the name of Bangabandhu. They always seem to be busy in selling the name and fame of the father of the nation only to attract the sympathy and blessings of the Prime Minister. But such kind of activities are actually declining the image of Bangabandhu who is, above all, the father of the nation too. He has been remaining in the hearts of almost all Bangladeshis.

Although he was kept in exile for a long twenty-one years, yet his lovers never did forget him.

They brought him back after burying all evil designs of the reactionary forces. And Insha Allah the image of Bangabandhu will be transmitting on to generations after generation, and in this way Bangabandhu will remain for ever. However, I do not have any objections to any private initiatives in naming anything after him, which rather deserves appreciation.

And there are any other sons of the soil. Please try to remember them also. Every great person who sacrificed for the nation and/or who contributed to the cause of nation should be given due respect and should be remembered as well. I cordially appeal to the Prime Minister to please ask the authority to list out the great persons whose contributions deserve our due respect and appreciation, and pay homage to them by naming small institutions/streets/roads after their names.

M Sirajul Islam Molla
84/1, Mohakhali South,
Dhaka-1212

OPINION

Are We Civilised Road Users?

AR Choudhury

On 22nd July, '97 at 1500hrs, we went to Gazipur, by road, to attend a meeting. As we reached a spot after Cherag Ali Market, we saw long queue of vehicles waiting in the lane, which we followed. The opposite side was free, but there was hardly any traffic, one or two getting past us in a minute or so.

As we waited in the queue, we found few flashy car and hard top jeeps went ahead of us, following the road meant for opposite direction traffic, violating all norms. These vehicles after few minutes created a logjam, creating imbrogio in the entire length of the road, as far as we could see.

One of our fellow passengers went out of our car to find the root of the mess. There he found that a truck had an illegal attempt to overtake other vehicles proceeding along their own lane caused a small tangle. And other vehicles (cars, jeeps, and mini-buses), those rushed to that spot following wrong side, caused the further tangle. In a bid to get through earlier than others could.

No traffic police came to that spot. Whereas, observing such a disgusting scenario in that hot humid period, two middle-aged ordinary-looking men emerged from some where took law in their hand to undo that tangle. One of them stood in the middle of the road to stop further indiscipline. While the

other imposed the traffic rules and norms and marshalled those tangled vehicles till jammed traffic became normal (Home Minister may find here, sometimes taking law in hand by the public needed, when his force is not traceable or does not take initiative.

What we observed, in those cars and hard top jeeps, those passengers/operators appeared to be literate and from the well-off society, but none behaved, as they should have. To make us the civilised car riders, we needed a lesson from a real leader, who could infuse discipline in us. Political leaders! The way they have crossed each other's in the JS can hardly motivate others to become disciplined. Other elite and intelligentsia, those have chosen to become rich, by unfair way, also can't guide us much. I feel, as a last resort, we have only media which can play effective role to make us behave decently on the public road as vehicle user as well as road users.

I hope all the dailies would spare a small space, in their best way, to motivate the mass. If we remember well, few decades back, Singaporeans were not better than what we find now. As a per nation, must endeavour to utilise our all resources in most organised way to get the best out of least. Otherwise, poverty alleviation would be a fruitless job.