

Why this Diversion?

Just when the defiant two decade-old problem of assimilating the hill tribes into the national mainstream seemed close to resolution...

The present crisis of confidence is completely out of rhyme with some 7000 tribal refugees having returned to the CHT during the March-April period...

All of this was possible because of an unprecedented positive political will having been shared in the right proportions by the Indian central government, Tripura state government, Bangladesh government, PCJSS and refugee leadership in India...

Evidently, some forces are making a last ditch effort to scuttle the process by raising new issues and introducing personality conflicts into the situation. The demand for enhancing the rehabilitation package beyond the incentives accepted under the 20-point accord...

Experience throughout the world shows that negotiated settlement goes in favour of everybody.

Dwindling Confidence

An opinion poll has shown 47 per cent of our people feel that neither AL nor BNP place national interest above party interest. Although the sampling of 118 is not broad enough to reflect with precision the strength behind some opinion, the CPD survey can be taken as indicating roughly the feeling of the nation on some politics-related questions...

Now why should a half of our nation believe that the two major parties are but an assemblage of self-seekers? These are the people who must have voted for either of these parties. Why have they come to hold such a lowly idea of the party they had voted for? The CPD poll would be a charming thing if it can set the parties to think about realistic answers to that poser.

One could be dismissive about such a showing in an opinion poll were it not driven further by another unflattering finding. Fifty-three per cent believe both the parties lack in sincerity about resolving the conflicts between them.

For Normalcy in DU

Dhaka University authorities' planned evacuation of the so-called rehabilitation of bona fide students will have assumed a shape by the time this leader sees the light of day. Hopefully for the better. But signs that have emerged so far following the decision taken at the Paribesh Parishad meeting do not hint at a quick release from the mire...

Neither JCD nor BCL — the two contributing parties and chief actors in the whole drama of Dhaka University's decline — has reportedly submitted the list of driven out students. This list is of seminal importance in any attempt to put the legitimate students in their rightful places.

Though we stand theoretically opposed to the idea of a role for student fronts in the administrative decisions of the university in the first place, the pragmatism in V C Azad Chowdhury's unabated efforts at involving various student bodies to solve DU's problems is too rooted in a refractory reality to be ignored.

THE government has unveiled the Fifth Five Year Plan by beating the drums, blitting the past and breaking all previous records of stimulating projections.

The total outlay proposed in the Plan is more than three times larger than that of the Fourth Plan (1990-95). About 74 per cent of the planned outlay is to be financed from the domestic sources, and the private sector is expected to contribute 57 per cent to it.

Never the nation achieved such a spectacular rate of growth, never the private sector played such a dominate role, never investment or savings rate had been so dramatic, and never domestic resources had been so decisive in the nation's history.

There is, however, nothing wrong to be ambitious or challenging. After all, how do you grow if you don't have the courage to dream. The problem, however, is that the basic function of the so-called Five Year Plans is not to provide the nation with poetic overflow of emotions, but to realistically forecast the nation's potentials and making achievable projections.

Fictions are Strangers than Facts

The business community must be re-energised, an enabling environment must be orchestrated, the badly shaken capital market must be rejuvenated, the mismanaged bank and credit sector must be revitalised, and above all, the country's bloated bureaucracy must be thoroughly overhauled.

Obviously, it will take several years for the nation to realise how realistic or fictional the framers of the Fifth Plan had been in coming up with such fascinating figures. But if the records of this nation's entire economic history is any guide, it can be safely inferred that most of the projections made in the Plan have little chance to be materialised.

The First Plan (1973-78), for example, had projected an annual growth rate of 5.5 per cent, but actually ended up with 4.0 per cent. Then the Two Year Plan (1978-80) had projected 5.6 per cent annual growth rate, but actually achieved 3.5 per cent.

That means, between 1973 and 1995, the nation achieved 3.97 per cent annual growth rate against the planned target of 5.34 per cent. In such a backdrop, achieving an annual growth rate of 7.3 per cent in next five years, as proposed in the Fifth Plan, would require almost doubling of the average rate of growth of the economy.

year of the Fifth Plan — does it look like that the country is making such a breakthrough? The other goals of the Fifth Plan are no less bewildering. The Plan, for example, intends to raise domestic savings to 15 per cent of GDP, but domestic savings averaged at less than 4.0 per cent of GDP between 1980 and 1995.

So is the case with the investment. The Plan intends to raise investment to 22 per cent of GDP, but the rate of investment averaged at 13.5 per cent between 1980 and 1995. The country's planners know it no less than others that nowhere the signs for higher growth is missing more spectacularly than in the arena of investment.

The Plan proposes 57 per cent of the total planned outlay to be financed by the private sector against 11 per cent in the First Plan, 16 per cent in the Two-Year Plan, 35.2 per cent in the Third Plan, and 44 per cent in the Fourth Plan.

But achieving that goal, under the existing economic environment in the country, will require nothing less than a herculean endeavour. Among others, the business community must be re-energised, an enabling environment must be orchestrated, the badly shaken capital market must be rejuvenated, the mismanaged bank and credit sector must be revitalised, and above all, the country's bloated bureaucracy

must be thoroughly overhauled. How many of these pre-conditions are in place in the country today?

Of course, the Fifth Plan is not alone in making outrageous projections or in disregarding the existing records or objective conditions of the economy. All the previous plans, as indicated above, made sweeping promises and all of them fell short in delivering those. Therefore, it doesn't really make sense in separating out the Fifth Plan alone for setting forth towering goals, although fact remains that it outshines all its precursors in promising unachievable goals.

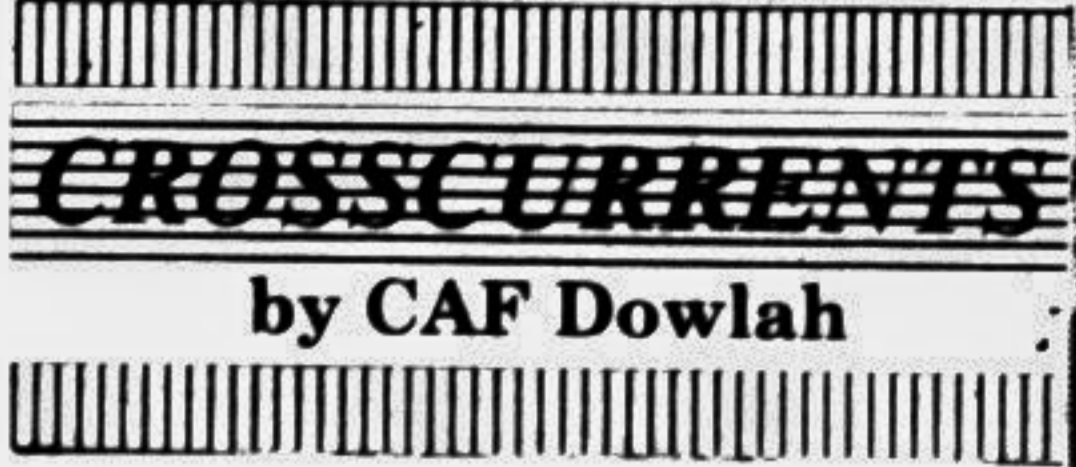
Fact of the matter is, planning itself is an exercise in futility. How can you plan billions of economic transactions — to be carried out by millions of people — for five years in a row? Living in a world of tumultuous economic, political and technological changes, how can you expect that the planners would know in advance appropriate solutions to all the problems that the nation would be encountering in next five years.

If these theoretical expostions seem difficult to comprehend, think of what happened to the so-called "planned economies." Could the former Soviet Union — the birth place

of planning — survive under the rubrics of central planning? Could planned economies of East Germany or North Korea keep pace with the growth and development in the "unplanned" economies of West Germany or South Korea? What happened to the planned economies of Eastern Europe compared to the market economies of Western Europe?

One can even compare India and Japan in this context. At the time of independence, India was remarkably richer than Japan. How the progress of these two countries compare today — while one moves steadfastly along the line of market economy and the other has long been discovering a middle way by religiously working on so-called Five Year Plans?

Therefore, the choice is clear — it is either market or planning — there is nothing in between. Numerous attempts were made to mix up — or mess up — these forces, that never worked. Those societies that learnt this faster, are growing faster — the matter is as simple as that. Therefore, time is now ripe for Bangladesh to learn from global experiences and to demolish the entire edifice of the planning itself. Otherwise, contradictory forces of planning and market will continue to impede the nation's growth, and the planners will continue to deliver fictions in the name of Five Year Plans.



CROSSCURRENTS by CAF Dowlah

Middle East Peace Process in Peril

by A S M Nurunnabi

Worried that the Middle East peace process is at stake, US Secretary of State, Madeline Albrite indicated that she might travel to the region to exhort Israel and the Palestinians to restore maximum security cooperation.

IN the last Israeli election, Netanyahu's victory cast a dark shadow on the Middle East peace process which took off from the Madrid peace conference of October 1991 when Arabs and Israelis met face to face for the first time as an inevitability in the backdrop of "new historic realities."

For the past five years, Israel concentrated on achieving peace with its Arab neighbours. Now a new climate of increased tensions with Arab states appears to have changed the whole situation. The change affects the whole gamut of Arab-Israeli relations.

There were some important events that were indicative of the growing process of deterioration in Arab-Israeli relations. In this context, mention may be made of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to go ahead with the 6,500-home Jewish settlement project in the Har Homa neighbourhood of East Jerusalem.

ahead with the settlement plan even it should jeopardise the peace process put on course at great pains by two of his immediate predecessors and the Palestinian leaders.

The status of East Jerusalem has been another explosive issue. It was not addressed in the accord signed between Israel and the PLO. But the understanding was that, in view of the highly charged emotional content of the issue, the status quo of the holy sites would be maintained. Jerusalem is the meeting ground of the three largest monotheistic faiths, namely Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Besides, under Palestinian-Israeli agreements and relevant UN resolutions, such issues as the states of Jerusalem, refugee settlements, pending border problems and economic cooperation were left for final decision at a later stage.

Thus the world body was unable to deter Netanyahu in his strong belief in brinkmanship which was ominously displayed in his barely disguised play of grabbing East Jerusalem with his design of establishing Jewish settlement.

Israel's intransigence, doggedness in pursuing its new settlement policy in spite of its world-wide condemnation and its utter disregard for the justice of the Palestinian cause — all contributed to the hardening of Palestinian feelings which found expression in some of the violent activities of Hamas, the Palestinian anti-peace political party. The derogatory poster on our Prophet (SM) by a female activists of Kach — a racist group outlawed recently by Israel — added fuel to the in-

flamed deep anti-Israeli sentiments of the Palestinians. The suicide bombings in a market in Jerusalem last week left about 15 dead and 170 injured is another violent incident expressing virulent disillusionment of the Palestinians with the Israeli policies.

Israel reacted to the latest incident by suspending peace talks and tax repayments. It has also barred West Bank and Gaza Palestinians from entering Israel and travelling between autonomous cities, threatening to re-enter the Palestinian self-rule areas to arrest militant suspects and demanded extradition of the Palestinian police chief.

Arafat termed such repressive measures as a declaration of war by Israel, not against terrorism, but the Palestinian people and their leadership. Though Palestinian authorities have begun to crack down on religious extremists with a number of arrests in Palestinian zones, Israel claims the action is not being conducted with "full intensity," a basic commitment, if the peace process is to be renewed.

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OPINION The Stagnant Telecom Sector

A Zabr

As a user of telecom facilities as an individual at home and as a group member in the office, a supplement on telecommunications published recently in the press provides useful background information not available in the daily papers. It is not clear why a go-slow policy is being adopted in the telecom sector (the same disease existed in the power sector).

The main-line monopoly is sought to be maintained, offering some marginal crumbs to the private cellular operators. There is no indication of changing over to all-wireless system to replace the old traditional wired/cable system, which is out of date and inefficient and extremely costly to maintain (the new policy may indicate the technology, besides going digital). The digital conversion project is also going too slow.

Of course, there is no money in the public exchequer — the investment or foreign funding won't come under the WTO operating umbrella. Today, market economies is symbolically digital, open (the private sector), and close (the public sector). Analogue (incremental) planning is out!

If the forthcoming national policy on telecoms is going to reflect the mindset as expressed by the BTB spokesmen, then the one million potential users during the next couple of years would be disappointed, and have to live with the long waiting lists as *tasbi*; and the vision of 'telephone on demand' would remain an elusive dream.

This is specially frustrating for two reasons: i) the government's tacit policy of doing business in telecoms services; and, ii) the reluctance of foreign investment in the public tele-

com sector. The Board is giving signals that it is unwilling to meet the increasing demands for interconnector circuits in the national network as demanded by the private cellular operators; with the lame and outdated excuse of going by the contract agreements. Emphasis in two areas is missing: a) the users' requirement for fast and efficient service (whether in the private or public sector); and b) facing squarely the supply and demand data against the time-scale.

The national policy must be user-friendly not BTB-friendly. If there is no sign of separate and independent telecom regulatory body (the Ministry cannot and should not do this job). It has taken many years by more than one regime to break through the shell of BTB resistance (nepotism and vested interest). BTB transparency is poor, and it appears that the government is not being properly advised. The effect of high-tech on economics and the users' reaction should be considered, especially when something can be done quickly and economically, but it is being delayed or stalled, on one pretext or other. The role of the government as a facilitator is being side-tracked in this sector, just because the small and inefficient Board can make a few bucks for the treasury.

The Supplement revealed that there are several grey areas and issues which have to be cleared to public satisfaction before the draft of the policy is finally announced (it is hoped the JS debates would not be bypassed).

When Politics is Positive

Our politics will never be the same again. The electronic media has changed the way the ordinary people look at our politicians, by the way they conduct themselves in the Parliament, as seen and heard over the television and the radio broadcasting networks.

So long it was the image of the politicians gathered mainly from the public meetings. The upper minority (the educated class) had the advantage of access to the print media, where the analyses and the commentaries were also available. The objective at the public meetings was more or less one-way: marketing the party; what the party could do for the country.

The job of how to do it is carried out in the *Jatiya Sangsad*. The electronic media exposed the political kitchen for the first time to the public view — the live relay on radio, which attracted tremendous audience, never experienced before in this medium in a developing country. The television taped broadcasts added the audio-visual dimension, to examine the poise and the standards of the members of the parliament. Thus this display became the meeting ground of the image and the reality. Truth is hard like the diamond, but flexible, if accepted; and bitter, if not.

The judgement evaluation toolkit of the voter was equipped with a new tool: watching the lawmaker at his work, developing and chiselling the image of the country (not forgetting his own). The MPs represented the society, and the society got a chance to look into this mirror. What the mirror said to Cicerella?

Information technology creates changes. The faster the communication, the greater the changes in the mores of a society. The politicians have no means to dodge this exposure, and must adapt to its consequences and implications. The voter and the politician come closer — for a closer look. The good and the bad points stand out more clearly.

quences and implications. The voter and the politician come closer — for a closer look. The good and the bad points stand out more clearly. Once again guru McLuhan confirmed his point: the medium changes the message (especially television). The audience outside the House have started playing to the distant gallery of their constituents.

That was the technique. What about the content? Democracy is on trial in many Third World countries; a world now brimming with newly-emerging nations. The birth-pangs can be acutely observed by the people, with hope and fear, across the globe.

Freedom of information brings, and creates, more transparency, better understanding, and deterrent self-discipline. Will the quality of politics improve in this information Age? It depends more on whom, the politicians or the people?

New types of interactions will be taking place with the closing of the communication gap. Public debate today is rising at a rate faster in a decade than it did in 50 years at the beginning of the century. The politicians have to be aware of the change in outlook, and respond accordingly, in time and substance. It has to be watched whether political miscalculations can overtake the rate of change of public opinion.

To the Editor

Filling of city lakes

Sir, Newspapers and people are crying out in agony against conversion of lakes into building areas. Green areas, parks and lakes are considered essential breathing spaces environmentally world over for cities of teeming population and to permit their destruction and misuse would be unpardonable. One of the earliest town planners of the then DIT and architect of the first Dhaka city master plan, Mr Khaled left the country in disgust in 1964 or so and settled in UK for reasons of wanton conversion of the parks and open spaces of Dhaka city into commercial/housing spots.

Instead of developing new building areas and preserving the naturally gifted lakes of the city, RAJUK is surprisingly involving itself in dubious deals against the environmental needs of the city. This process of "pukur churi" must stop in the interest of people. It is heartening to note that the Housing and Works Minister is doing something about it and I would also recall the public announcement of Mr Zillur Rahman last year that all the lakes of the city (and not just the Dhanmandi Lake) shall be cleaned and beautified.

Last week a conscientious gentleman circulated a letter to all the residents of Banani-Gulshan area under the heading 'Should We Remain Silent Spectators' quoting a news item published in your esteemed paper (by Shehab Ahmed) regarding handing over of Gulshan Lake to private developers. It would be desirable to formulate a joint thinking of the residents of the lake areas and clean environment lovers of the city

Leave no stone unreturned

Sir, Film star Salman Shah achieved popularity of a great magnitude in such a short time that it is really amazing. His unnatural death on 6th September last year was very shocking and an incident of great sorrow for the people of Bangladesh.

Police department declared that he had committed suicide, but from the very first Salman's parents did not agree and they had been insisting that their son will never take his own life, he had been murdered in a planned way and many people who had been following the case closely, share the same view.

Now, after so many months one Rizvi comes along narrating the brutal way in which Salman Shah was murdered and confessing he is one of the killers. The case took a dramatic turn and the Inspector General of Police referred film star Salman Shah's death case to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for further investigation. We hope and pray that CID will be able to unravel the mystery and do their utmost to bring out the truth. We trust that CID will not suppress anything to shield the Detective Branch of police who earlier had confirmed Salman Shah's death as suicide.

If they even think of doing such a thing, it would be a gross insult to humanity and mockery to justice. We earnestly request the police force to be sincere so that guilty persons get their due punishment and care also must be taken so that no innocent person becomes a victim.

Abdul Rashid, Vill. Birkot, P.S. Senbagh, Noakhali

The other side of the coin

Sir, For the last few days everybody is condemning a group of people who were unruly at a *milad mahfil*. All the papers, the TV and the radio are putting all the blame on these people. But did anybody bother to see the other side of the coin — why did these people behave as such, for they are Muslims too. No Muslim would do so, unless driven against the wall. And what drove them to such kind of misbehaviour, did anybody investigate? Those people perhaps don't have any voice to express it through radio, TV or papers, so I thought I should do so, as a relative of mine narrates the incidence to me. Incidentally, he was listening to this *mahfil* on radio, being broadcast directly from the function. The meek and anger of the people started when instead of praising the Prophet (SM), on whose honour the *mahfil* was, the speaker started praising a leader! And when he went on and on with it in spite of the protest, the people got more agitated, as they had gone there for a religious *mahfil* and not for a political gathering.

True, the crowd exceeded the limits of misbehaviour, but then, they shouldn't have been provoked, as most of them were probably illiterate people, who behaved as such. And, it's always fair to put both sides of the story in front of the people. That is justice.

A citizen, Dhaka