

Wrong Approach

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has adopted certain resolutions to square up to the snowballing GSP (Generalised System of Preference) crisis but not before differences within its ranks almost spoiled last Wednesday's emergency meeting.

BGMEA's attitude over the GSP issue smacks of the narrowness of tribal myopia. It is now threatening the government to be prepared to face the financial consequences should it cancel the false GSP certificates as demanded by the European Union. But what did it do to penalise the people who tampered with the international business standards and ethics? Nothing. If only they had upheld the business ethics and undertaken some rectifying measures the crisis would have not reached the present stage.

It is an utterly clannish impulse that has been at work behind BGMEA's position of not blaming its own members who have violated the GSP conditions. The fact that the RMG (Readymade Garment) sector has been such a great source of boost to our economy seemed to have gone almost unnoticed by BGMEA in its campaign against the cancellation of GSP certificates. Some of the utterances have bordered on irresponsibility that attempted, unsuccessfully though, to obliterate the importance of EU as a market for the local exporters.

On its part, government has not done anything worthwhile either to solve the crisis. The confounding procrastination over the problem makes one wonder what the Commerce ministry has been doing all this while to protect the national interest.

EU market is absolutely vital for RMG sector. We simply cannot allow our prospects to be jeopardised through the sheer moral depravity of some businessmen. Instead of indulging in irresponsible acts and utterances, BGMEA should do something immediately to punish those within the association who have brought the garment industry to such a disrepute.

Brain Drain Reviewed

With a pleasant departure from the conventional pattern of handling the brain drain problem participants at the fourth meeting of the National Council on Science and Technology came up with a suggestion for increased incentives to stop the exodus. The incentives are not necessarily to be monetary but ought to concern the creation of proper facilities and right environment for the best use of our talents. The meeting duly recognised this fact and has approached this problem from a completely new angle. It is wrong to think that all talented and promising young people always go abroad for money and luxurious living. Some of them simply do not have the working facilities to put their talent to meaningful use here.

While we rejoice over the new approach, we must concede that those who have not left the country out of their commitment and love for the country are yet to be offered a congenial atmosphere either for realising their potential or deriving the benefits it could for the country. Highly talented professionals from different disciplines could not be high achievers as well. The loss is both for the individual and for the country.

It is exactly in this context the issue of brain drain has to be evaluated. A society that does not know how to utilise its best brains is doomed to suffer. Social conflicts resulting from poverty, hunger and injustice may offer the right environment for producing poets and writers but hardly scientists of world stature. Physical science demands experiments and research. Resource constraint is often advanced as an excuse for not developing our own facilities. Which is not always the case. Misplaced political emphasis is no less to blame. It is time that this was corrected for developing facilities aimed to realise the potential of our local talents.

Death on Beach

The tragic death of two students of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology on the Cox's Bazar sea beach will perhaps be categorised as accidental. But this is not for the first time that holidaying people in this beach resort got stuck in quicksand and perished. The fact that such mishaps do not occur there every other day is no cause for smugness for the authority there. Almost every sea beach anywhere in the world have danger points and there is also mechanism to monitor them. So the practice is to mark the area with a prominently displayed note of caution.

Is there any such practice at the Cox's Bazar beach? We do not know. But we feel there is a need for seasonal monitoring of the danger zones of quicksand. How criminal it is not to warn the unsuspecting bathers or swimmers at a beach? Because it is a kind of business and there are two parties—the holiday makers and the authorities who offer the facilities there for money, such criminal negligence cannot be tolerated. If the resort authority did care for good business, they might have done the job better and efficiently.

One reason why Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation fails to take off is this 'could not care less' attitude. Such deaths will make people think twice before having a swim or even going to the beach. Does it help tourism? These are avoidable tragedies and all measures should be taken to end recurrence of such incidents.

A Blow against Human Rights

I am shocked to see the instances of excesses by the security forces either in the north-east or Kashmir. But what defence do I have when I find militants indulging in kidnapping and killings? With what face could I have joined the team to inquire into the excesses of the security forces when I have felt that ULFA has no compunction in killing the innocent?

WHY was Sanjay Ghosh killed? The story must be told if the country is to understand the nature of some movements which claim to represent the aspirations of the people. For, this nation is shamefully behind the times in its attitude towards the organisations parading as emancipators.

United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is one of them. Idealism animated it once. Young, dedicated boys and girls constituted the organisation. It made the point when it broke away from the All Assam Students Union (AASU) after compromising over the ousting of foreigners. 'Illegal Bangladeshis' entrants. (The Assamese-speaking population has been reduced to 35 per cent in the state).

In the last few years, ULFA has degenerated into a group of self-seekers, who have forsaken principles for privileges and power. They wield the gun to live well. The leaders wallow currently in the luxuries of five-star hotels in Thimphu, Bhutan. For that purpose, they extort money, kidnap people and kill the innocent. They may well be compared to Veerappan, who picks up persons from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to collect large ransom.

Human rights activists and many others have known ULFA as a body representing Assam's agony, its economic backwardness and political helplessness. They are aghast over its conversion into an organisation of terrorists, who seek obedience through threats and violence. Ghosh got under the ULFA skin because he did not agree to submit to their dictates.

A 38-year-old Gandhian, mild and soft-spoken, Ghosh shifted from Rajasthan after organising health centres to Assam a little more than one year ago. He selected the distant Majuli, an enclave in the midst of mighty Brahmaputra, for his voluntary work. ULFA used Majuli as one of its hideouts and would collect regularly a 'fee' from the population of 1.25 lakh.

Ghosh's arrival changed the scene. He strong together people of different convictions to fight against the ravages of Brahmaputra. He organised anti-flood

measures on voluntary basis. A few months ago he collected some 20,000 inhabitants of Majuli to build a stone wall to stem the river's fury.

This was the last straw on the back of infuriated contractors, who were hired by government every year to put up dykes to stop the flood water entering Majuli. The dykes would wash away because they were made of mud. The contractors made money and feared no punishment because of the heavy out they gave to ULFA.

It appears that somewhere along the line, the Majuli population stopped kow-towing before ULFA. They also refused to pay. Ghosh had made them bold and self-reliant. Tearing a leaf from Majuli's book, several parts of upper Assam, the ULFA's stronghold, were wanting to free themselves from the organisation's clutches.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Having faced a reverse in a place like Majuli, ULFA could not brook the idea of losing more ground. His elimination was considered necessary to stop the defiance from spreading. Whether he was killed soon after kidnapping, or later, is a matter of details. The fact is that ULFA paid no heed to the pleadings of human rights organisations in India and abroad. Some still hope against hope that he is living.

When Ghosh was in ULFA's custody, I went to Guwahati. I was under the impression that they would listen to my appeal for his release. I had lodged a strong protest against the brutality of the security forces against them and I expected them to reciprocate. I wrote in a daily paper that Ghosh was neither a RAW man nor a government agent.

In fact, the message I got after the writing appeared in print was positive. I was told Ghosh would be released in two or three days. In turn, I assured Ghosh's family, particularly

his wife and father, that Ghosh would be among them shortly.

I went wrong. I had not realised that the leaders had changed. How could I know that the opportunists were dangerous even when they used liberalism as their ladder, that it was their opportunism which would prevail, and not their liberalism. I was not surprised when I was told that they had stashed in a Bangladesh Bank Rs. 200 crore. The Sheikh Hasina government first froze their account but later released it under pressure from the opposition.

Why do liberal movements and their leaders change? Over the years, I have seen the best of agitations sinking to the level of squabbling crowd, fighting one another for positions and gains. Punjab Suba agitation was like any other movement of the Akalis, peaceful and digni-

fied. But as it got lengthened, it assumed the shape of insurgency with the demand for secession. The killing became the end. It unnecessarily gave the Sikh community a bad name. Similarly, the Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh, after having waged a class war of sorts, are now a mixed up lot, with less idealism and more opportunism. The underground Nagas kept their flag of revolt aloft for a long time. Again, it lost its clan because of indiscriminate killings, kidnapping and extortions. Phizo, towards the end of his life, wanted to talk to Indian leaders for a status within the country. At least, this is what Khodav-Yanthan, his old comrade-in-arms, told me in London soon after Phizo's death in 1990.

Probably, such is the fate of movements which stretch beyond a purpose and beyond a point of time. Anti-social elements join them. At some stage, leaders get exasperated and begin violence to attract attention. The innocent are the vic-

tims. Human rights activists will have to revise their opinion about them. They are those of terrorists. They may speak in the name of liberty. But they are authoritarian in their method and approach. They have no patience for another point of view. They use human rights organisations for their own purpose. Some among them have constituted front organisations in the name of human rights to peddle their case.

Take ULFA. They have floated the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti. Before the murder of Ghosh, the organisation invited human rights activists and their organisations to visit Assam to denounce the joint operation by the security forces. I am glad I did not respond. Their brutalities are no less galling than those by the security forces. What is the difference?

I am shocked to see the instances of excesses by the security forces either in the north-east or Kashmir. But what defence do I have when I find militants indulging in kidnapping and killings? With what face could I have joined the team to inquire into the excesses of the security forces when I have felt that ULFA has no compunction in killing the innocent? I am opposed to violence. I believe that wrong means will not lead to right results. This is no longer merely an ethical doctrine but a practical proposition.

Assam is not a problem but a poser. How do the youth get jobs when there are not enough avenues? Some in desperation take to the gun and some accept any employment which comes their way. On the other hand, the state has no resources to create jobs or improve the quality of life. But ULFA and its violence is no answer to the problem.

The Assamese are essentially the gentlemen, minding their own business. They have been horrified to know that some of their youth are being killed by both sides. They have a strong sense of fairness. The killing of Ghosh has offended their sensitivity. The ULFA should know this.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Computer Geniuses, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, Make Up

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

It is good to see two icons of the computer industry, work together, rather than against each other. Only good things can follow when two young geniuses combine their talent!

IN a stunning development that took the computer world by storm, arch rivals Bill Gates of Microsoft Corporation, and Steven Jobs of Apple Computers Inc. decided to bury the hatchet and join forces. The alliance could alter the map of the computer industry and help insure the survival of Apple Computers Inc., the upstart company, which ushered in the era of personal computing in the 1980s, but lately has fallen on hard times.

Microsoft will pump 150 million dollars into Apple, giving the struggling personal-computer maker badly needed breathing room. The deal gives Bill Gates a strategic edge in his battle to dominate the Internet. Microsoft wins the right to install its Web browser on all new Macintoshes, helping it outmanoeuvre rival Netscape Communications Corp.

Mr. Jobs announced the alliance to boos and gasps of disbelief from the Apple faithful at a large Macworld trade show in Boston. As Bill Gates's image loomed on the large teleconferencing screen, and he prepared to address the gathering, he too was soundly booed as he greeted the conference, "Good Morning!" Apple hardliners believe that Microsoft stole their operating system and installed it in their Windows software.

Steve Jobs, the Silicon Valley pioneer who co-founded Apple in his garage in 1976, also announced a sweeping overhaul of Apple's much-criticised Board of Directors. Gone are all but two directors, replaced with industry powerhouses: software tycoon Lawrence Ellison, chairman of the database giant Oracle Corp., Jerome York renowned for his cost-cutting skills as former chief financial officer of International Business Machines Corp., Bill Campbell, Chief Executive Officer of Intuit Corp., the leading producer of personal financial software, as well as Mr. Jobs himself.

Investors cheered the news, sending Apple's beleaguered stock up 33 per cent. The next day it went up another 11 per cent. But it will take far longer to see whether the moves help reverse a grave decline in Apple's world-wide market share, from double-digit figures just a few years ago to 3.8 per cent in this year's second quarter. The company remains in such dire condition that many retailers, software developers and customers have already given it up for dead.

Mr. Jobs revealed that he and Mr. Gates had agreed in pre-dawn hours to bury the hatchet after 12 years of enmity. Just a year ago, in a television interview, Mr. Jobs criticised Microsoft for producing "third rate products" and having "no taste."

Among the peace terms: Microsoft will pay Apple about \$100 million, on top of the \$150 million investment in Apple non-voting stock as a part of a cross-licensing deal the companies announced involving each other's technology.

In return, Apple won't renew a failed lawsuit alleging Microsoft stole its main asset, the elegant "look-and-feel" of its operating system software of its pioneering Macintosh computer. Microsoft agreed to modify its best-selling programs, including the immensely popular Microsoft Office package, to run on Apple's future operating system, code-named Rhapsody. In turn, Apple agreed to bundle Microsoft's software for browsing the Internet with its computers.

The agreement has several strategic implications. For starters, it may restore faith in Apple among developers and customers who have been deserting in hordes, giving it time until it can ship new products and develop new markets. More importantly, it firms Microsoft's increasingly powerful grips on the portals to the

Internet, where electronic commerce and publishing are expected to explode. Microsoft wants to milk future profits from facilitating the flow of goods and services over Internet, and in a few years, digital television.

Now, more than 95 per cent of all new computers — Apple's machines plus those that use Windows — will automatically display Microsoft's Internet browser and its "channels" of Internet information, advertising and entertainment, and they will all use Microsoft's proprietary technology for viewing Internet. Though Apple's market share has faded, Mac users account for a disproportionate number of Web cruisers, about 18 per cent of the total. The alliance, therefore, is a setback for Microsoft's other rivals, particularly Netscape, the current leader in Internet browser software, and Sun Microsystems, Inc., which has been promoting a software called Java as an alternative to Microsoft's best-selling Windows operating system.

Said Bill Gates in an interview: "We have a lot of customers who have a mix of PCs and Macs. The importance of the Mac is that it is the second most popular desktop machine."

The deal is a testament to one of the most powerful and charismatic personalities in business annals. Steve Jobs, who in 1985 was forced out of the company he founded, Apple, returned to the company this year as an advisor, after selling his private company, NeXT Software, Inc. to Apple. After the resignation under pressure last month of Apple's chief executive officer, Gilbert Amelio, Steve Jobs took over his company even though he had no official power.

In forging the deal, Steve Jobs played the role of diplomat, peacemaker, and master salesman. Indeed, Mr. Jobs needed all his charm to win

over the initially hostile Mac-world audience. "We have to let go of a few notions here," he said. "We have to let go of the notion that for Apple to win, Microsoft has to lose." After he finished his explanation of the deal, the audience were cheering.

Despite the euphoria, the alliance and the board changes do little to change to sole Apple's current problems. To find new customers, Mr. Jobs has to find some way to make its future operating system demonstrably superior to Microsoft's Windows. He has conceded in the past that the war on desktop software has been lost to Microsoft.

In his speech Mr. Jobs said little about new products, but promised to focus the company more narrowly on the education and desktop publishing markets.

Apple is likely to run its next operating system on Intel Corp.'s super-fast Pentium-chip microprocessors as well as its mainstay, the PowerPC chip from Motorola Inc., and IBM. It might also produce Intel-based servers, or host computers for networks.

It is good to see two icons of the computer industry, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, work together, rather than against each other. Only good things can follow when two young geniuses combine their talent!

When Bill Gates visited India recently, he was accorded reception due a head of a state. (One hopes he can do better than utilise Indians to produce coolie software!) Indeed, in the kingdom of computing, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are royalties. Heads of the state like to rub shoulders with them. A few months back, President Bill Clinton invited Bill Gates to play golf with him. Clinton tried to engage Gates in an intellectual discussion. According to published reports, Bill Gates did not engage!

ried on without fear. Our country is really unique in this aspect!

Dr Sarah Dhaka

Stamp it out!

Sir, The mailing of this letter was delayed as there is a shortage of two-taka stamps for a couple of months (I have used one-taka stamps).

While the Postal Department is unable to meet the routine daily demand of regular

stamps, new commemorative stamps are being issued at too frequent intervals, sometimes twice a month.

This is the problem with our society — imbalance in perception, and wishful thinking about the near future. Planning has to be based on reality. The cross-current in the society have to be polarised at the national level into one direction, which is forward, and backed 100 per cent by all voters. Stamp out the fissiparous dispositions!

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka 1205

Redefining Development

by Nilratan Halder

The basic point is empowerment of people. What we know of our own version of local government that has already been given a draft shape has also sought to ensure people's participation in the decisions on changing their lot.

A semi-government organisation, the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), of India conducted a countrywide survey on the quality of life of the people of that country. It has demolished the myth of development as presented through the official statistics. According to the government estimate, although 40 per cent of the population were below poverty line till 1987-88, by 1994-95 the figure had dropped to just 16.6 per cent. By any standard this is quite an achievement. Now compare this with the NCAER findings: 16 per cent people of India cannot spend three rupees a day and of the rest only 19 per cent have attained the stage of economic development to afford a daily expenditure of five rupees a day.

Official statistics in developing countries like India and Bangladesh may not always be concocted, but about poverty situation, literacy rate etc. various departments of the government are not averse to resorting to statistical jugglery. For example, in Bangladesh the percentage of people living below the poverty line has been put at 50 to 70 per cent of late. Only a couple of years back the literacy rate was at around 30 per cent (first 26 per cent was the accepted figure then it was elevated to 32 per cent) and now we are pleasantly surprised to know that the rate has gone up to the realm of 40 plus.

If we go by the Indian experience, we see how the government there has admitted the blown-up figures that are found to be inconsistent with the obtaining reality. The Indian Planning Commission has taken a important decision in this regard: it has declared that anyone in rural and urban areas having a monthly income below Rs 228 and Rs 264 respectively should be considered poor. If applied, this yardstick of development might still show that poverty level has remained undented yet.

Our situation is hardly likely to be any different. But unless an independent and reputed organisation or institute confirms it, we cannot contest the official figures. Now can it not be a most important subject for our research institutes or NGOs to find what percentage of our population can spend how much a day? The 16 per cent and 19 per cent of Indians who just manage to earn Rs 3 and Rs 5 respectively should have their counterparts here with, maybe, the ratio somewhat varying. The Indians are assessing their achievements on the occasion of their golden jubilee of independence. We also have under our belt a quarter century's independent harvest.

The question now being asked with greater emphasis all across the subcontinent is: if we have been able to place man at the centre of development. On the plus side, genuine progress has been made and that without the manipulation of statistical

data. The official position for India is quite flattering. It is the fourth largest economy in the world and in terms of industrial development it is ranked seventh. Now Bangladesh has no such things to boast and the purchasing power of a Rupee is definitely greater than Taka.

It is exactly in this context, we should look at the development of our country. India has the enviable distinction of enjoying uninterrupted democracy, except of course for a brief period of emergency. Unfortunately, we had been subjected to a long stretch of military rule before the country could even savour democracy in an independent Bangladesh with all its post-war travails. If the Indians in an environment of democracy have failed to establish socio-economic justice, what chance do we really stand in this regard? Such pessimism ought, naturally, to assail our minds as an instant reaction. Developments on the political front too are not very encouraging. But at least a very small fraction of political leadership and academicians are still fighting their way back.

In India 72nd and 73rd constitutional amendments effected in 1992 have come as a phenomenal achievement for common people. Under a three-tier local government system the provision seeks to ensure participatory development both at the village and municipality's ward levels. At least two mandatory village assemblies have to be held under the provision where villagers actively participate in the decision-making about the use of natural and social resources of the locality and also about the development projects to be taken up for their own benefits. The pet definition of development so far our politicians have advanced appears to be under threat.

Redefining development may however smack of political and social stunts. It seems here it is not the case. The basic point is empowerment of people. What we know of our own version of local government that has already been given a draft shape has also sought to ensure people's participation in the decisions on changing their lot. That would be a great job. For once people will not be subjected to imposition from above. If the process is given a constitutional shape, we still have hope for the country. Let the villagers themselves decide their priorities. Questions may be raised whether uneducated and unlettered people will be able to take responsible decisions. Fear not, they may surprise everybody by making education their first priority. Lopsided development has indeed misplaced the focus. Now let the people who have always remained at the periphery of development and decision-making, come forward to initiate a new process of their own development.

OPINION

Fuel Price Increase

Abu Imran

On 19.8.97, almost all the national dailies carried the news relating to abnormal increase in the fuel price (POL). According to the news, petrol would now sell at Tk 21 per litre and octane, Tk 23 in place of Tk 13.70 and Tk 14.65 respectively. The increase is roughly around 50 per cent which by any standard is too high to be acceptable, particularly because it will have a chain reaction and create a vicious circle of serious price-hike to affect the consumers very badly.

It is not understood as to why the price of POL has been increased now without consulting the law-makers. Perhaps a debate on the issue in the Parliament was necessary so that the opposition members could have also participated and contributed to arrive at consensus to avoid future complications. But it's said that whenever any government comes to power, they mostly ignore the Parliament and go their own way in arbitrary manner.

For instance, during BNP regime, gas price was increased substantially bypassing the Parliament. And incidentally, Awami League government is following same suit which is much more regretting because they claim to be more democratic and pro-people. I wonder how can an increase, and that too, by around 50 per cent in the energy sector (POL) help the cause of the people when they are already over-burdened with high prices of goods, commodities and services. Moreover, POL is considered as the main moving force of the economy.

An increase in this will have multiple chain increase in the prices of other goods and services which, as said before, will adversely affect the common people since the ultimate bur-

den would be shifted on their fragile shoulders. Earlier also, about five increases in the price of electricity was proposed, but thanks to the wisdom of the rulers that they could feel the pulse of the people and withdrew or withheld those.

Now as the price of POL has been substantially increased, it is normal that the people would resent it, and presumably even the major political parties would make it an issue, and hence, I have reasonable doubts that the increase would be easily accepted, rather rejected. Prudence therefore demands that the government withdraws the increase before a catastrophe sets in. Further, presumably, the price has been increased at the behest of the energy ministry, the minister concerned, therefore also, should be at least transferred to another ministry for his unwise suggestion and also for failing to address problems in his operative, for the highest leadership, systems loss and the Magurchara gasfield is still leaking causing tremendous loss.

If such is the situation, what is the justification of his minister'ship? It is very likely that his successor, if any, may succeed in addressing the problems. It may be mentioned that as per the dailies dated 20.8.97, the auto-rickshaws has went off the roads on 19.8.97 in protest against fuel price raise, there were demonstrations by various groups and the largest opposition, the BNP, has even threatened to go on strike on 24.8.97 if fuel price-hike was not withdrawn. The above signals are alarming — and therefore should be taken seriously. Perhaps that would be more expensive than the benefit, if any, derived from the fuel price increase.