

A Clear Message

Chittagong has long been a forte of Jamaate Islami and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir. The militant face of these ferocious fanatics guising themselves as the defenders of Islam has time and again besmirched this port city of glorious tradition. But nothing like what happened there yesterday can be tracked down in the recent memory. The so-called Nasirbahi, an elusive gang of terrorists of Islami Chhatra Shibir took on law at Chandanpura as they got involved in a prolonged battle after the law enforcing agency made forays into their hideout.

What shakes one out of the apparent complacency about the cutting edge of growing militancy among the religious zealots in Bangladesh is the daring and the organised manner with which these Shibir cadres carried offensive against police. Reportedly only two sawn-off rifles were recovered from the spot after it was all over when the whole press claimed in unison that heavy and sophisticated weapons were used by the terrorists during the 'operation'. The bottomline is clear: law is fast losing grip on the outlaws and the sinister part of this is that the whole process has a certain invincibility about it because of its religious raiment. The account of Jamaat-Shibir's daring in attacking law enforcers and their relatively unscathed passage to safety with their arsenal is a loud enough message. There is hardly any scope to play down Jamaat-Shibir's increasing inclination to terrorism.

We welcome law enforcers' swoop in this old bastion of Jamaat-Shibir. The government, armed as it is with the moral sanction and conscience of the nation, must go on an all out offensive against these 'religious' terrorists. For that mere mobilisation of law enforcing agency will not do. The political parties irrespective of their ideological differences have to arrive at some sort of a common platform in the stand against the parties intent on using Islam as a tool to gain political mileage. After all it is because of the myopia and the striving for short term goals of the major political parties that the militancy of the zealots has reached this stage.

Take an unequivocal position, we urge them, when it comes to dealing with the fanatics and just stop liaising with them for any political gains that you may cast your eyes on.

Make It Work This Year

With the dry season approaching to put last year's flawed implementation of the Ganges water sharing treaty on a re-trial, the operational and insurmountable factors that caused the unintended disappointment over the accord's historic debut must begin to be addressed from now on.

We recall the impression we gathered from an Indian assurance when things had gone the wrong way that they would be unsparing in their efforts to prove that it was a one-time folly hardly likely to be repeated. For, we do not think the treaty is flawed in the essentials given that it was authored by the best hydrological brains available in the governments of the two countries. Granted a loophole or two could make a surprise appearance through the acid test of implementation, but with the provision of joint meetings available for just meeting that kind of a contingency the problem hardly strikes us as insurmountable. Whether it is unmonitored upper-riparian withdrawal or run-off or is indeed seepage before reaching Bangladesh territory or an engineering fault each one of these loose ends are capable of being firmed up.

The headwaters are in India. So, she has to take charge of the implementation of the accord while Bangladesh reinforces the process by jointly measuring the water levels at four points, two on either side and making sure to keep the public posted about the quanta of water cyclically made available to her. Transparency will be of the essence in the exercise of implementing the accord in full.

The signing of the Ganges water sharing treaty between India and Bangladesh has not only been lauded as a historic opening gambit for harnessing the water resources of the Eastern Himalayan rivers but also as a landmark in the goodwill exercise energetically undertaken between the two neighbouring countries. All of this will be put to jeopardy if there is another year of riddled implementation of the Ganges water sharing accord with Bangladesh at the receiving end of still unmitigated woes.

Morning Horror at Zoo

It was a study in horror on Tuesday when a four-year old full-grown Royal Bengal called Arjun caught child Zakir Hossain by the leg and, unable to take the whole body in as Zakir's head got stuck in the bars, tore away the body from the head.

This was a pure accident. But conditions were there to make accidents happen. In the grossly understaffed National Zoo, the caretaker of the tiger lair has now to look after four or five sheds of animals and was away at the moment to bring feed for Arjun. So there was none to prevent Zakir from going too close to the bars of Arjun's cage.

A newspaper suggested that expert zoologists go into the question. The zoo authorities have maintained that the young Arjun was born in The National Zoo and hadn't had the antecedents that lead to man eating. The question is still worth going into.

If we must have zoos we must have these in the form they are in the rest of the civilised world. The caged show is now outmoded and tigers and other predators are kept in the open, almost as in their natural habitat. In neighbouring India they are going over to this approach and the newfangled Bhuvaneshwar zoo is a fine example of that.

That will take time. In the meantime the security arrangements at the zoo must be beefed up and every shed manned properly at least for as long as there is a simple visitor there. The set-up must be needing a thorough overhauling.

We don't know how to console the bereaved parents.

Dream? Or, Do We Continue to Daydream?

What actions the two major political parties can take in a bid to remove the current predicament? Many solutions can be advanced. It is easy to preach, but difficult to practise. The hardliners on both sides are too active to allow the moderates to sway the pendulum in their favour.

important facets of our present political situation. Firstly, it proves that our leaders can still rise to the occasion and be thankful to each other, even in the midst of storms of mutual accusations and recriminations. Secondly, recognition of the act of a good deed by the principal political opponent testifies not only to the value judgement of the issue, but to the political courage it demonstrates. Thirdly, it demolishes the allegations that our leaders act mostly for the welfare of their own people and neglects to promote the well-being of the opponent. Finally, it encourages the optimist to nurture hopes for an eventual composition of differences and to usher in a better future for the nation.

The will and ability of our political leaders to show a good turn to one another do, therefore, exist. What is needed is to translate them into action. The public can then be reassured, repose some of the lost confidence in their leaders and look forward to the days ahead with some degree of hope and optimism. We may recall of few other incidents of similar nature.

Following the last Mayoral election in Dhaka city, a near unprecedented scene was witnessed. Having lost the election,

BNP's incumbent Mayor, Mirza Abbas, was seen feeding sweets to his victorious opponent, Awami League's Mohammad Hanif. The action marked a significant step, which brought the two arch rivals together. An atmosphere of peace and cooperation was generated and they buried their hatchet after a bitter fight in their quest for democracy.

Another instance may, perhaps, be cited when BNP Chair-



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

person Begum Khaleda Zia sent a bouquet of flowers congratulating the President of the Awami League Sheikh Hasina on her victory in the June 1996 election. I am sure similar other instances will be available which demonstrated the will and ability of our leaders to reiterate faith in democracy and their determination to work for it.

The present impasse in the political arena has been caused by the abstention of BNP legislators from the current session

of the Parliament. The BNP had come out with a list of demands to be met by the ruling party in order that meaningful and effective discussions can be held in the legislature. The Awami League insists that the issues relating to the demands and allegations can be best advanced on the floors of the Parliament. The BNP reports about discrimination against BNP legislators during the conduct of the Parliament's business. They are

deeply concerned about harassment, arrests on false charges as well as torture and killings of BNP leaders and workers. There is hardly any BNP legislator who has been spared of trumped-up charges and they had little time and desire to work in the Parliament, while remaining busy with matters relating to false police cases. A list of allegedly false cases has been furnished by the BNP to the government with the hope these will be withdrawn. The government response is yet

to come.

The bitter attitude of the opposition has since been accentuated further by another measure undertaken by the government. Street rallies and demonstrations have suddenly been banned. Places for holding political meetings and rallies have been made limited and earmarked in specified areas. Marching on platforms on streets have also been proscribed. One may note that it was the street rallies and marches staged in prohibited areas by the Awami League that made major contribution to the changeover of power in favour of the Awami League. What was proper and legitimate then is now forbidden and constitutes a sacrilege, according to the Awami League.

In the same vein, one may argue that the BNP is also resorting to the tactics which they themselves had condemned before, notwithstanding their claim to act under compulsion of circumstances. On the other hand, BNP deplores government policy of disrupting peaceful opposition rallies by way of actions by armed hoodlums followed by police action. Even gathering of people in front of their office to start an orderly procession was thwarted by police brutally and by violent means. BNP now

finds their peaceful and orderly means of voicing protests are being taken away forcibly by the government, hence their democratic rights are being denied.

What actions the two major political parties can take in a bid to remove the current predicament? Many solutions can be advanced. It is easy to preach, but difficult to practise. The hardliners on both sides are too active to allow the moderates to sway the pendulum in their favour. The BNP wants a congenial atmosphere to be established in order to instill confidence and generate cooperation by all, both inside and outside the Parliament. Some of the demands can perhaps be met more easily and others, representing substantive policy differences, may form part of subsequent discussions in a positive climate. But releasing those who had been arbitrarily detained and withdrawing charges against whom false cases have been instituted rank the first priority. Besides, what does prevent the government from rescinding the order of omitting the name of the late president from the Zia International Airport and restoring the bally bridge in its old place allowing people to go to Zia's maazar? There exist such other avoidable irritants removal of which will certainly pave the way to creating an atmosphere congenial to the solution of many of our current national problems.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Issues on Global Warming

"Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth, befalls all of the sons of the earth. This we know, the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth..."

ELEGANT from some 160 countries are meeting in Kyoto, Japan from Dec. 1-10 for a UN-sponsored conference on climate change, to work out an agreement among industrial nations on binding reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, principally carbon dioxide, by the year 2010, hoping to slow the rate of global warming. Some 2000 scientists appointed by the UN have already warned that it is necessary to reduce emissions by 50-70 per cent immediately, and to continue reductions in the future to preclude environmental disaster.

Most people are already aware of the implication of global climate change and the greenhouse effect. The composition of the earth's atmosphere is a primary determinant of the planet's temperature, which in turn establishes the conditions and limits for all life on earth. Without the heat trapping properties of so-called greenhouse gases, which make up more than 1 or 2% of the earth's atmosphere, the average surface temperature of the earth would be similar to that of Mars: -80 degrees Fahrenheit (-16 degrees Celsius).

The main greenhouse gases are water vapour (H₂O), carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and halocarbons (like CFC-11 and CFC-12). In computer based simulation models, rising concentrations of greenhouse gases nearly always produce an increase in the average temperature of the earth. Rising temperatures may, in turn, produce changes in weather and in the level of the oceans that might prove disruptive to current patterns of land use and human settlement, as well as to existing eco-systems.

Scientists warn that current trends in greenhouse gas emissions are likely to cause the average global temperature to increase by 3.5 degrees C over the next 100 years. As a result, global sea-level is expected to rise by 15 to 95 cm and climate zones to shift towards the poles by 150 to 550 km in the mid latitudes. Forests, deserts, range lands, and other unmanaged ecosystems would face new climatic stresses, as would human societies, health, and infrastructure.

Concern about the effects of rising atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases remained largely the province of atmospheric scientists and climatologists until the mid-1980s, when a series of international scientific workshops and conferences began to move

the topic onto the agenda of United Nations specialized agencies, particularly, the World Meteorological Office. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) was established under the auspices of the UN in late 1988, to accumulate available scientific research on climate change, and to provide advice to policymakers. A series of international conferences provided the impetus for an international treaty aimed at limiting the human impact on climate.

In December 1990, the UN established the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change (INCC). Beginning in 1991, the INCC hosted a series of negotiating sessions that culminated in the signing, by more than 160 countries, including the US, of the Framework Convention on Climate Change in Rio de Janeiro on May 4, 1992. The objective of this Rio treaty was to:

...achieve...stabilisation of the greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. The signatories are required to take steps to implement the objectives of the Conventions. These steps include, national commitment to prepare and submit for review national action plans and periodic national emissions inventories.

The goal of the Kyoto Conference is to accelerate the pace of international action under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Most importantly, developed countries will for the first time adopt legally binding targets and timetables for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions.

It is understandable perhaps that the US, being the world's single largest emitter of carbon dioxide and halocarbons, is at the centre of what is likely to be a trading market at Kyoto, where hard bargaining will take place among the three primary negotiating parties, US, Europe and Japan, on acceptable mandatory limits on gas emissions which necessarily also put ceiling on economic growth.

Each of the three parties have major differences in the level of reduction that is deemed acceptable to them.

POSTSCRIPT

Neeman A Sobhan

Japan has proposed a formula that effectively calls for most nations to cut emissions by 5 per cent from 1990 levels, while Europe is pressing for a 15 per cent reduction. The US has proposed merely limiting emissions to 1990 levels. In addition, Japan has criticised a European proposal aimed at allowing different European nations to achieve different reductions in emissions while committing Europe as a whole to a 15 per cent reduction. That proposal, which allows European nations with weaker economies to get by with smaller reductions, and in some cases higher emissions, would make it difficult to obtain the cooperation of developing nations in limiting their own emissions.

In fact, officials from developing nations attending an Asian Development Bank workshop in Manila on Friday, Nov 14, have said that developing countries in Asia are unwilling to accept proposals to cut emissions further than the targets that the Group of 77 and China (developing countries, including Bangladesh) are supporting which is 7.5 per cent by the year 2005 and 15 per cent by 2010, plus 35 per cent cuts by 2020.

"We (developing Asian countries) belong to the Group of 77 and China and the group has a strong position that no additional commitment should be introduced at the Kyoto conference," said Chueyaprasit, deputy secretary-general of Thailand's Office of Environmental Policy and Planning.

Although the economic costs of the reduction is a matter for concern in the newly emerging Asian countries, much more so than in the industrialised West, the nations of Asia and Pacific do need to be concerned about the potential effect on the region from climate change related shifts in patterns of storms, floods, droughts as well as rise in sea level. A case in point are the Members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)

who, threatened by sea-level rise, want a 20 per cent rollback by 2005.

The potential impact of climate change on Bangladesh would come from a definite trend toward increasing rainfall, which would be disastrous to a country of such low elevation. The consequences would be severe flooding. With a one metre rise in sea level, one-fifth of the nation's land and nearly 15 per cent of the population would be threatened by inundation. The Sundarbans, one of the world's richest mangrove forests, would disappear, leading to major loss in biodiversity, loss of a natural sink for greenhouse gases, and loss of biomass which is a major energy source in the country. The impact on the economy, as assessed in the Country Report of an 8 nation study funded by

ADB, would cost Bangladesh an annual loss of \$1 billion of GDP by 2010, \$5 billion by 2070. Quite realistically however, Dr. Kazi F. Jalal, ADB Chief of the office of the Environment says in the report's foreword that a challenge is devising a response to global concerns without hampering progress and growth in the Asian developing countries, who are understandably unwilling to sacrifice their economic goals for a problem largely caused elsewhere.

The report stresses more efficient energy technologies, up-to-date transportation systems, sustainable techniques for forestry and land use, and other "no regrets" options that may advance development without contributing to a critical global problem. In particular relation to Bangladesh, our policy makers must keep in mind that because of its low energy use and predominantly agricultural sources of greenhouse gases, emissions are less important than in many other participating countries at the Kyoto Con-

Indonesia's Environmental Peril

by ASM Nurunnabi

Across Indonesia, more than 30,000 people sought treatment for respiratory problems. In Singapore, similarly a large number of people were affected. In Kuala Lumpur, schools ordered the children to stay indoors. Embassies offered their staff an escape to Australia or any other place without smoke.

INDONESIA'S man-made fires were the result of spread of that country's oil-palm plantations. Satellite pictures have shown that most of the fires are involved in oil-palm plantations which were in the midst of frenzied expansion as international demand for palm-oil surged.

According to official estimates, fire so far swept through more than 80,000 hectares of land in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Irian Jaya. That's nothing compared to a 1982-83 blaze that wiped out more than 3.6 million hectares. But this year's debilitating smoke was sufficient to spark the declaration of a national disaster in early September last.

Observers say that the zeal to keep clearing land for plantations is difficult to extinguish. Last year, Indonesian exports of palm-oil and palm-oil products were worth more than \$1 billion, boosted by growing global consumption of palm-oil products. Official encouragement of the palm-oil industry is partly responsible for the plantation boom. Setting fire to the forest and bush is the cheapest, quickest way to clear land for plantations. Plantation development also serves the government's long-standing goal of relocating people from densely populated Java to the other islands. Official incentives include low-cost financing for estates where 80 per cent of the land belong to small holders transmigrants and 2 per cent to the companies engaged in oil-palm plantations.

The sad thing is that the large-scale fire creating noxious smoke take place every year. The cycle starts during the August dry season, Indonesian agricultural companies and small farmers set smoky fires to clear land. Neighbouring Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei suffer for a few days, then the September rains usually douse the flames for another year. But this year the rains came late, creating an unprecedented health emergency and confronting Southern Asian neighbours with their glaring inability to come up with a regional solution.

This year, at least, Indonesia conceded that its own shortcomings were partly to blame.

Indonesian President apologised to a meeting of regional environment ministers. The effects of the widespread haze took heavy tolls in terms of suffering for the affected people. Across Indonesia, more than 30,000 people sought treatment for respiratory problems. In Singapore, similarly a large number of people were affected. In Kuala Lumpur, schools ordered the children to stay indoors. Embassies offered their staff an escape to Australia or any other place without smoke.

The Malaysian Air Force seeded clouds to no effect. The Malaysians redirected their Air Force to fly water-bombing missions over the haze and they dispatched 1,200 fire-fighters aboard two naval ships to help Indonesia to cope with the mess. Japan sent water cannons, and the Philippines and Thailand also offered help as the smoke threatened their southern tourist resorts.

Like great stretches of Indonesia, the industrial city of Medan was shrouded in smoke from forest fire on 3rd October. Visibility was poor as an Indonesian plane with a large number of passengers attempted to land into a blanket of haze. The landing attempt resulted in a crash that killed all 234 passengers and crew members. The question arose: did the haze cause the worst air accident in Indonesia's history? Only a detailed investigation which was under way could determine that.

There was no doubt that the steps taken by some of the members of ASEAN for managing the smog crisis reflected the group's gospel of regional self-reliance. In taking the lead in this respect, Indonesia moved with unusual transparency. The environment and forestry ministries publicised the names of suspected companies and put out short TV spots slamming corporate irresponsibility. What most pleased the non-government organisations was that the government's new willingness to punish most of the corporate culprits rather than on the slash-and-burn farmers, as in previous years. "The fire is only a symptom of the takeover of people's land by big business," commented an environmentalist.

The smog which swept across Southeast Asia forest

fires in Indonesia clouded this year's 30th anniversary celebrations of the regional club, ASEAN. Behind all the hoopla about solidarity and cooperation, the acid air strained the consensual style of the nine-member group, and the principle of non-interference in members' domestic affairs.

Mounting anger in Malaysia and Singapore, where the health and livelihood of millions of people were threatened, had thrust ASEAN into uncharted territory. The crisis tested the skills of its leaders to set aside traditional ASEAN niceties and come up with measures to tackle the problem that transcended national boundaries.

The smoke, choking the region, prompted unusually blunt criticism of Indonesia from ASEAN countries that normally treat the group's largest member with deference. In Singapore and Malaysia — officials, the media and ordinary citizens charged that Indonesia had not done enough to stamp out the fires, which reportedly damaged 750,000 hectares of forest-land on the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan.

Over the past three decades, ASEAN has evolved from a diverse collection of countries with deep-seated hostilities into a security grouping with a powerful voice in international affairs. But the prolonged haze confronted ASEAN for the first time with a serious multilateral problem.

Smoke from Indonesian forest fires has engulfed the region in the past — in the early 1980s and again in 1994. After the 1994 episode, regional officials cobbled together an ASEAN Cooperation Plan on Transboundary Pollution. It outlined several proposals, including an agreement to exchange information and technology to prevent fires. But little happened since.

According to knowledgeable quarters, the best cure for such smogs would be to scale back ambitious plantation targets and revise land-use policies. There are, however, others who hold out hope that the plantation companies will stop burning and turn to other methods of land clearing. Until that happens, however, the neighbours should not hold their breath for a smog-free future.

To the Editor...

The guest birds

Sir, The guest birds will come in this month from the North Pole to Bangladesh. Their seasonal resorts in our country are the zoo, Jahangirnagar University area, certain lakes, bils and haors. We are supposed to be good hosts but when they come, we cruelly kill them. It is very indecent for us as civilised people.

To kill any guest bird is an offence internationally. But it has become a regular phenomenon to sell these birds on the roads of Dhaka city and in other places in the country. The authority concerned should take steps to save these guest birds and should make those zones safer for them.

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Fire blazers and quenchers

Sir, It is puzzling to read (DS front-page Nov 13) that to fight a fire in the Saver DEPZ, the fire engines had to rush from Mohammadpur and Tongi, miles away from the industrial site.

The EPZs are large enough areas (with raw and finished materials worth tens of crores of Taka) qualifying to have in-

dependent fire stations within or near the sites.

The absence of fire-fighting devices at the garment factories located in the residential areas in the Dhaka city is another sad story of negligence by the administration (fire-fighting is a public service — and compulsory).

In contrast, our politicians have the enviable reputation of being fire-brands. They can ignite, but not quench fires. The other night I was watching the TV proceedings of the JS during which the MPs were sermonising their own colleagues in the absence of the Opposition.

(Old) habits die hard.

A Zabr
Dhaka.

Attracting investors

Sir, It was so very considerate of Chairman, Security & Exchange Commission to have written a letter to the authorities concerned to ask institutional buyers to 'actively participate in the market in order to salvage it from a critical state. (According to an English daily dated November 16, 1997). As a very small investor, I appreciate the move but have the following comments to offer.

Investors — small, big or institutional perhaps come to the

market with only one motive i.e., to make profit. And this profit has to be necessarily more than the available guaranteed profit schemes like fixed deposits, ICB units etc. But earning of such profit is only possible when (a) dividend yields of the listed companies are more than the current fixed deposit rates and/or (b) demand for the listed shares are more than supply in the market for any reason. No investor would come to the market unless one or both of these conditions are met resulting in continuous fall of the index with no agency being able to do anything about it.

Perhaps it is quite clear from the above that if the market is to be revitalised then there are no options but to take, at the very least, the following steps:

a. To give sufficient incentives to the listed companies (for example, improved infrastructural facilities, further reduction in corporate tax etc) so that it is possible for those to give increased dividends.

b. To further reduce interest rates of secure investments like fixed deposits etc., to a level which may perhaps be marginally above the ongoing inflation rates.

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