

UP Polls Flagged off

All eyes are cast on UP polls beginning today and set to cover the entire month of December in an electrifying national extravaganza of local popularity contests. We might as well call these re-matches in the rural power or influence structure. So that while they are non-party elections constitutionally and officially they have not been bereft of partisan tones either.

Horizontally at the popular level though, the elections will be demonstrative of an inner urging of a five-crore-plus-sized electorate to herald an important tier of a participatory self-government system. How the first day's elections to 380 UPs pass off will be operatively most crucial for the whole process covering 4318 union parishads and staggered over the rest of December. We have had a track-record of armed, lethal and widespread violence marking the run-off to the elections. Hopefully all the steam stands let off today as the candidates and their supporters respectfully await the local verdict in their constituencies. These elections hold a universal appeal and stakes in them are so high that the local people can be relied upon to be keeping vigil on the groups on. In order that such guarding over the shoulders does not stray into violative eruptions the administration would have to depend upon the elaborate security precautions taken at the behest of the Election Commission.

The candidates and their followers need to abide by the Code of Conduct enunciated by the EC — and right through the immediate aftermath of the announcement of results.

The opposition BNP has never tired of openly suspecting that the UP elections are bound to be 'rigged', as if nurturing a ground for agitation against results if these did not go their way.

Let their post-election reactions be based on facts rather than prejudice. The ruling party's responsibility is even greater to make it a point that these are the freest and fairest of all UP elections held so far.

The supreme importance of UP elections lies in their being held under a well-visualised four-tier local self-government system. And in an epoch-making change envisaged to the rural power structure three of the nine UP seats will be occupied by women. In a revolutionary jump to female participation and empowerment, 45,013 women candidates are contesting 12,954 posts reserved for them, apart from their candidacy for the general seats.

Chittagong Violence Again

Has death set its dominion in Chittagong? Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia pays this important port city a visit and we have three people dead. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina follows suit and death news echoes with the same intensity. The pain at the latest spree of these irreparable losses is felt all the more when you know that they were eminently avoidable. After Thursday's gunfight between armed cadres of BCL and JCD that left three dead and the subsequent nerve-fraying rumour thanks to the BNP hardliners, there was fight in the air in Chittagong and even a fool could understand that if perchance the two parties stood on a collision course, there would be blood shed again. That the BNP was in a bellicose mood and itching for a fight became crystal-clear when it called for a hartal on Saturday, a day on which ruling Awami League had, earlier announced a public meeting. So BNP's call for a hartal for whatever reasons was disaster by choice and by no means by accident.

The AL, too had no insignificant share in the responsibility for Saturday's violence and death. If it cared a whit for human lives and property, the AL could have avoided the occasion for muscle flexing by stepping back and altering its own programme. Logic rich with experience can be poured to justify the AL stand of going ahead with the programme of public meeting but the fact of the matter is concern for human life and property took the back seat when weighed against the question of party's so-called face-saving concern. A shift in the programme would have meant a loss of the party's face, a defeat to the rivals — was the so-called rationale.

In its essence there is no difference in the attitude of the two behemoths of our political arena. They have both abjectly surrendered to the hardline cliques within their parties. By locking horns on Saturday both the parties have proved how very little concern for public welfare features on their agenda.

We are worried and we have registered it earlier in this column. By their pettiness, immaturity and belligerence the politicians are taking the country to a point from where we doubt if they themselves know whether a return is possible, at all. Yet we feel, there is still time to turn things around, and the nation will cheer the party that will show the way.

BGMEA Charter

In the clamour of the just died down GSP crisis what got drowned very easily about country's garments industry is a long endured failure to understand its problems in their totality and to remove them. That possibility, it seems, has been put on the course of affirmative action as the forum of country's premier export industry BGMEA placed a 25 point charter yesterday demanding its implementation by the end of this year. Understandably the focus of the recommendations in the charter is on financial matters with the formation of a bank exclusively for the this sector and uninterrupted port facilities at their core.

A cabinet committee with the Prime Minister as its head has been proposed in this respect. It is immaterial who heads the committee. The crying need of the hour is the viewing of the whole gamut of problems plaguing the industry and adoption of effective measures accordingly. Whatever healing touches the industry has had so far have all been stop gap ones in nature; indeed it has been crisis management all along.

The industry-owners, some of whose lives have been a study in magical transformation in wealthiness, have been deplorably insensitive to the welfare of their workers. The garment factory workers are awfully ill paid and badly provided for when it comes to minimum amenities and matters like skills training and more, importantly, safety.

So while it was timely of the BGMEA to have deadlines the government about an initiative for some major infrastructural overhauling it was also time for themselves to pull up their socks a bit in terms of responsibility.

ADB's Seminar on Emerging Asia Issues that Trouble the Region

"Just as the story of the Asian Miracle was much hyped, that of the Asian debacle is much exaggerated. Following an inevitable period of adjustment and restructuring, I am confident that Asian economies will bounce back."

— P Chidambaram, Finance Minister of India

THE Asian Development Bank (ADB) has just held its South Asia regional seminar last week in New Delhi on its recently published (July 1997, second printing) study on "Emerging Asia: Changes and Challenges". Although ironically the timing of the seminar (November 24-25) coincided with occurrences of severe financial crises in the "Asian Miracle" countries and their neighbouring areas as well as with political turmoils in the major South Asian countries, from the points of view of the quality of papers presented, dignitaries participated, critical issues raised and the seriousness of discussions followed, it was undoubtedly a successful seminar. It has provoked thoughts on, and increased awareness of, a number of issues that are troubling these regions.

However, in spite of the deep uncertainty engendered by recent turmoils in the East and the South East Asian markets and the resulting fear of the future of these economies, there was an underlying consensus, as it were, among participants on some basic issues like the need for openness, trade reforms, proper sequencing of liberalisations, adoption of right policy package, careful management of economic policies, dovetailing of environmental dimensions into economic policies, control of corruption and democracy and good governance.

But there were also issues like the effects of short-term capital inflows into portfolio investments and their transmission through the real sector. Tobin Tax on capital inflows, "gradualism" versus "big bang" approach to reform measures, capital account convertibility, choice of optimal set of control tools in macro-management and the appropriateness of regional blocs in the globalised system on which country experiences and hence the opinions of various participants differed. This points to the need for further research and future policy interactions among the analysts and policy makers of these countries.

Differences in Country Experiences

In the keynote address, the Indian Finance Minister Mr. P. Chidambaram expressed the view: "Just as the story of the Asian Miracle was much hyped, that of the Asian debacle is much exaggerated. Following an inevitable period of adjustment and restructuring, I am confident that Asian economies will bounce back". By way of exuding confidence, as it were, he has described the recent currency and banking crises as "asset-price bubbles" which have gone bust, but according to him: "All Asian countries seem to have credible strategies in place to deal with the ongoing turmoil. There will be some pain associated with adjustments for a short period, and Asian economies are resilient enough to endure that pain."

It is good to hear such a reassuring and confident voice on the present situation in the East and the South East Asian economies, which has now become a source of worries to the policy makers in the major industrialised countries of the world, but one is somewhat skeptical of the "credible strategies" that he is talking about. One doesn't see any such strategies in place in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan whose reserves have been falling and are inadequate to meet the minimum of three months' import bills and hence are in negotiations with the IMF for loans. Further, the banking sectors of these countries are in deep troubles, not to mention the state of their stock markets. It seems India has such "credible strategies" in place due to which its exports are doing well and its reserves are growing. But one doesn't hear of any such "credible strategies" in the case of the troubled East and the South East Asian economies either. One observes that these countries are now busy in appealing to the IMF for amounts of bail-out loans much larger than what they have been given so far.

Furthermore, the proposed Asian Foreign Exchange Fund, a concept developed by these

countries including Japan some months ago, to help themselves out while in trouble outside of the IMF loan system has fizzled out a couple of weeks ago. In any case, it is good to hear from the Indian Finance Minister that since the liberalisation measures of 1991, Indian economy has been growing over the last few years at the rate of 7 per cent per year and he thinks that it is going to increase to 8 per cent in the next few years. Hopefully, India achieves such a high growth rate and is able to sustain it for a reasonably long period.

The papers presented by scholars from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea have some interesting findings and were enlightening to all the participants of the seminar. Professor I. J. Azis of Indonesia has pointed out that Indonesia followed an anti-commonsensical "sequence of liberalisation". First it adopted an open capital account system in the early 1970s, then it liberalised the financial sector in 1983 and then it liberalised the trade sector in 1986, whereas the rational, or the common-sense driven, way of sequencing the liberalisation measures should have been exactly the opposite.

This reverse way of liberalising the economy did considerable harm to the economy as a whole. Capital has been flowing out of India without any let or hindrance since the early 1970s. Note that it was a beneficiary of the oil-price boom of the early 1970s but that boom lasted only up

to 1983-84. However, strangely enough, as Professor Azis has pointed out, Indonesia's reverse liberalisation was acclaimed by the World Bank, and the OECD countries as a success story. There is a need for further research on the motivation for such a "reverse" liberalisation in Indonesia and its beneficiaries. Professor Jomo K.S. of Malaysia has pointed out that in the 1970s, Malaysia went for large scale state intervention in industrial development which continued up to mid-1980s and thereby has been lumped with a large number of industries which have turned inefficient.

Partial deregulation started since 1986, but all state-owned industries have not been privatised yet and, as a result, a huge amount of annual subsidy is maintained by the government through its budget. It is the same story that one sees in Bangladesh and in many other countries of this sub-continent. However, it has encouraged foreign direct investment, especially in export sector some of which have been successful in promoting exports. Development of Palm oil is such an example. It had also allowed portfolio investment which, in recent months, faced a debacle. The Malaysian Prime Minister was found to be bitterly angry against the foreign speculators. It is not in a dire state because of its rich natural and financial resources, healthy exports, small population, and reasonably high rate of growth. Professor Euu M. Kim of South Korea has pointed out that the sequence of currency depreciation and the stock-market plunge in recent months has forced the government to request the IMF for a stand-by loan of \$20 billion whereas specialists estimate that it will need about \$60-\$70 billion in resolving its immediate financial crisis.

Such a crisis in such a fast growing country has come about due to the following factors: Extensive state intervention, delayed and limited liberalisation plans after the initial stage of economic growth during which the fledgling private sector needed support, heavy reliance on debt financing of big businesses, government dictated generous loans to business houses upholding the philosophy of politics first and economics later, and labour militancy in their wage push demand since the late 1980s to compensate the past repression of their wages. Heavy debt burdens and high wage increases seem to be the sources of South Korea's current economic troubles.

Next week, the author writes more on this subject.

Children Living in a World with AIDS

In Quest of Safe Haven for Them

by Dr Shah Md Mahfuzur Rahman

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) a global public health problem, is caused by a virus — Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). The virus interferes with the defence system of the body, exposing the victim to a number of opportunistic infections, disorders or unusual cancers, leading to death.

How do Children Get HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS threat to the young child is closely associated with HIV infection in women. Around 90 per cent of the children who become infected under the age of 15 years acquire virus from their HIV-positive mothers during pregnancy, child birth and during breast feeding in some instances. In mother-to-child transmission, the risk is more in the developing countries — due to depressed immune status, poor nutrition, complications in pregnancy and child birth (as most of the deliveries are attended by unskilled/untrained aids) and breast feeding practice which is, by and large, a norm in the developing countries.

Pervading Situation

UNAIDS — the United Nations joint programme on HIV/AIDS estimates that more than 30 million people worldwide are living with HIV. Earlier it was estimated that over 40 per cent of total cases are women. About 16,000 people are infected daily and among those infected only one in ten knows it.

At the end of 1996, the total number of HIV infected children under 15 years of age was 830,000; of them, only in 1996 four lakh children were newly infected. It is feared that by the end of 1997, one million children of the age group will be living with HIV, over 90 per cent of them in the developing countries.

Everyday, 100 children around the world die from AIDS. In 1996, the disease took

away lives of 1.5 million people, of them 350,000 were children.

Impact on Health and Development

Over the past decades, the situation of child health and development was promoted markedly spearheaded by low cost elementary, protective measures like immunization, oral dehydration therapy and others. As AIDS spreads, it threatens to undermine this achievement. The US Bureau of the Census has predicted that by the year 2010, if the spread of HIV is not contained, AIDS may increase infant mortality by as much as 75 per cent and under-5 child mortality by more than 100 per cent in those regions most affected by the disease.

Children are not only infected by HIV, they are also affected. It is estimated that 9 million under-15 years age group children had lost their mothers to AIDS by mid 1996.

Children orphaned by AIDS face social isolation, economic hardship, and are at risk of losing their property rights and rights to inheritance, denial of access to schooling and health care. In this respect girl children may be at a further disadvantage.

Even children who are neither infected nor orphaned, are affected by the societal, cultural and economic fall out from the epidemic in hard-hit communities and countries.

Furthermore, the costs of HIV/AIDS (consisting direct costs of treatment, control and prevention, and indirect costs arising from loss of productivity and income) are pressing to reduce expenditure on health and other social sector services as well as worsening income distribution of people.

How to Overcome

In a bid to overcome the existing situation — the children and AIDS, we should respect their rights; including those guaranteed under the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child. Children must be

come everybody's responsibility.

Following measures are needed to be followed to prevent HIV/AIDS for making the world safer for children —

— Practice of safer sex by the parents.

— Avoid sharing needles and syringes or other instruments.

— Use sterilized needles, syringes and instruments. When you have used a needle bend it and throw it away.

— Ensure that hospital practices, blood and blood products, and hypodermic needles used in preventive health campaign are consistently HIV free.

— Keep the topic of HIV/AIDS well in the public — and disseminate correct information to dispel stigma.

— Children's right to life, survival and development should be guaranteed.

— Children should have access to HIV/AIDS prevention education, information and to the means of prevention both in school and out of school.

— Measures should be taken to remove social, cultural, political or religious barriers that block children's access to these.

— Children with HIV/AIDS should have access to health care services and programmes as well as socio-cultural and recreational activities.

— Measures should be taken to prevent child trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation and abuse, drug abuse and other harmful practices.

— Special programmes should be taken for the street children or children separated from their families.

— Women with HIV not to be pregnant.

— Empowering women to develop control over their sexual life or the sexual life of their husbands outside marriage.

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Middle East Peace Talks

The Oslo Process : To be Restarted or Redesigned?

"Before step-by-step release of tension and necessary confidence-building in Israeli-Palestinian case, both the sides had jumped into the 'peace process' without having clarified workable objectives and expected to wrest that clarity from the process itself."

THE declaration of principles signed by Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel at the White House on September 13, 1993 has since been dead for all of its intents and purposes. It has increasingly become now a document that reflects neither reality nor probability. However, the accord secretly hammered out at Oslo before the historic declaration and the process to implement its provisions limped forward for some time. They too broke down from the beginning of this year after four years of travails to make peace in the region. Severely jolted by repeated suicide bombings by Palestinian extremists and harsh reprisals by Israel the resultant stalemate in the peace talk illustrates just how ineffectual the so-called Oslo accord has become.

It was in this backdrop that the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Middle East in her first ever trip to the region after taking over the State Department. After eight mostly placid months on the job Madeleine, a straight talking realist faced in her early-September visit the toughest challenge as Secretary of State: reversing the dangerous skid in Arab-Israeli relations. In fact, in her bid to revive the stalled peace process she was going through the litmus test of her mediatory diplomacy in one of the trickiest conflicts of the contemporary history. Till her visit, considered to be the last resort in unravelling the current deadlock, all eyes were eagerly fixed on Madeleine with an eerie mix of optimism and scepticism — optimism that she would be able to rescue the Oslo process from collapse, scepticism as to how much unbiased could she remain given the fact the US had after all been a guaranteed ally of Israel. As it was feared her visit dashed the hopes of peace promoter on either side and reinforced the doubt about her credibility to play an honest broker in the mediation.

Whatever it required to bring the Israeli-Palestinian peace process back on the rail, by all reckoning, Madeleine Albright did not have that. Instead, the Secretary of State in her recent visit was both impolitic and unfair in failing to identify the original provocation for West Asia's current crisis. Although Ms Albright counselled Mr Netanyahu, who had of late been short on international compliments, to refrain from unilateral actions on sensitive issues of negotiation, she was more severe with Yasser Arafat even while arguing that both sides were responsible for the current mess. Her arguments conveniently ignored Israeli provocations which by then took the form of confiscating Arab lands, demolishing their homes and brusque to brutal searches with impounding of identity cards of Palestinians — apart from continuing Jewish settlements in the West Bank and withholding troops withdrawals from lands now given under Palestinian control.

This was in spite of the fact that both President Ezer Weizman of Israel and the widow of the slain Prime Minister Rabin had been candid in holding Netanyahu guilty of drawing the first blood. Where Ms Albright revealed her bias in most blatant form was insisting that Arafat search and destroy the "infrastructure of terrorism" in the Palestinian area ignoring the fact that the PLO leader did not as yet have a sovereign entity to rule over and suffered from acute limitations in his authority.

Apparently, Ms Albright failed to make much headway in floundering peace talk in Middle East. Yet the process has been kept alive like a comatose patient on life support. It is now obvious that the Middle East peace process may stagger on, but the Oslo accord will never yield its desired fruit. Amidst such pessimism, there are genuine soul-searchings as to what could have gone wrong with Oslo accord as well as its process over last four years? For most people around the world, the peace in West Asia is an overwhelming imperative — Oslo or no Oslo. Yet there are people who would like to carry forward the Oslo process by removing its flaws, if any. For them it is not merely the question of re-starting the Oslo process, it is more the question of redesigning it. But why?

The major fallacy was that the Oslo agreement took as its model the Camp David for which a step-by-step approach was devised twenty-five years ago soon after fourth Arab-Israeli war. It rightly set aside such issues as borders, definition of peace and security arrangements to remove the legacy of past acrimony. Eventually, Egypt followed by Jordan gained enough confidence to make formal peace along pro-67 lines because it was a deal struck among the sovereign countries with well defined international borders. The same was not true about the relations between Israelis and Palestinians although contentious issues like borders, statehood, precise security arrangement and the status of Jerusalem were set aside also in the Oslo agreement of 1993.

It was also envisaged that the phased Israeli withdrawal would turn over Israeli occupied territory to PLO control until talks for a final settlement would start several years hence. But the similarity of approach abruptly ended there and the analogy proved illusory. Because before step-

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