

The Northern Limbo

Feuds in the road transportation sector of 16 districts in northern Bangladesh have cut a swathe of immobility across the economic hinterland of the country. Movement of people and goods has come to a standstill within that large tract of a region. Moreover, supplies of merchandise to other areas and to the ports have been ruptured at a flow-time for farm products. Read with the on-and-off slow-downs at Chittagong and Mongla ports and the growing season for political hartals, the road transport limbo in a northern Bangladesh comes as a reinforced paralytic stroke on the national economy.

The pattern casts an ominous shadow on the economy. This has to be defused and rolled back into normalcy and vibrancy by stepping back from largely localised fomentation, irresponsibility and unprofessionalism in the sensitive infrastructural sectors. For its part, the government would have to rethink policies that have been hands-on yet slanted or reactive to developments unfriendly to it.

It has been a long, endless story of feuding labour unionism in the transport sector trading on the miseries of people who cannot do without mobility. No less contributive to the irresolution of problems has been the phlegmatic indifference of the local authorities to the initial rumblings of troubles. Their attitude seems to be that it has to make news with casualties to top it off, nudge the authorities in Dhaka and ruffle them into making phone calls issuing directives to the district authorities. While the issue is elevated thus in pedigree the ground situation has become infinitely more complicated.

In the present case, the northern region committee of the Road Transport Workers' Federation has called for an indefinite strike in protest against a newly-formed breakaway committee of the truck workers' federation. From Monday no buses, coaches and trucks have plied. When some BRTC buses ventured out the motor workers' fell on them in an ugly demonstration of wrath. The services were stopped. Besides, in Rajshahi, sneaky minibus and authorickshaw operators have been charging three times the normal fare from commuters.

The ministries of communication and home should intervene in the matter before it deteriorates into a full-scale law and order problem.

Save Ideal School

It is really unfortunate that a reputed educational institution like Motijheel Ideal School and College has been in a state of administrative stupor for so long. We share the anxiety of the guardians of its six thousand students whose annual examinations fell through after having got off smoothly due to the recalcitrance of its dismissed principal who, with a notice, precluded all exams until 'harassment' were stopped against him. By doing that Mr Rahman, who has been accused of misappropriation of the school's donation fund by an enquiry committee of the education ministry, is holding a major educational institution hostage to his whims. This is not only unethical but illegal also. He should understand that it does no good to justice nor to the public image of the institution to have pictures of its newly-designated principal being refused entry into the office published across the pages of newspapers. He simply cannot link his own sense of injustice with the future of so many students. Let Mr. Rahman be advised for the good of all that he should stop exercising his obstructive influence against resumption of the normal activities of the institution immediately and let the new principal take over without any further delay. Alongside, we suggest that an independent enquiry committee be formed to probe the matter and by its neutral pursuance either establish or dismiss the charges against Mr. Rahman. It is this instead of an ego ride he has taken the whole school on that Mr. Rahman should have gone for if he is so confident about his dissociation from alleged corruption.

We feel there are lessons to be learnt in the Ideal school imbroglio around Mr. Rahman. Most of the educational institutions of the country if delved deep into the interior of their financial management would reveal quite a few skeletons in their cupboards. In order to establish transparency and accountability in the educational institutions the education ministry should lay down specific stipulations about yearly auditing and follow them up with monitoring.

Death of a Virtuoso

Few have the versatility, the wanderlust with which Khan Ata roamed around the world of our arts with elan and aplomb for fifty years. He was such an amazing all in one: film maker, actor, music director, playwright, lyricist, newscaster, poet. He was a delightful departure from the rather mawkish concept of hero in this part of the world. The unmistakable ruggedness of his features, the moist warmth and slightly nasal yet immensely rich voice of his all combined into such an exceptional presence on the celluloid. The great sense of loyalty, patriotism and sacrifice that Khan Ata made so inescapably vivid in *Nawab Sirajoddowla*, is that visual experience forgettable? For that matter who can forget his portrayal of a rebel husband in *Jibon Thekey Neya*?

The beauty of every filmic venture Khan Ata associated himself with was that it was never bereft of message that was uniquely relevant to his time and society. His role as a loving teacher trying and succeeding in reforming a band of his derailed students in the topsy-turvy reality of country that had just won freedom in *Aabaar Tora Manush Haw* still awaits replication on the silver screen.

He was a truly cultured man, a man relentlessly driven by his own aesthetic imagination. If death has taken away this one of the few sources of originality in our filmdom our music world has been equally poorer. His was a great mind and ears for the classical stream of music. His was such a magnificent stay against the cacophony of confusion that we have around in the name of music.

In his death we have lost a mohican in whom tradition and modernity lived in such enviable harmony.

US-Iraq Stand-off: Who Won?

Arms supply is a trade that has been thriving and would continue to thrive. Many UN members are themselves producers of weapons of mass destruction and therefore morally do not have the right to stop others doing so.

of any nationality till expulsion matter was solved politically, and redoubled his effort by redeploying the available inspectors to the suspected areas. Instead UNSCOM Chief got involved politically on the question of nationalities and thus compromised his neutral position. Indeed, he had very little to do with political matters except keeping the Secretary General informed.

In any case, the expulsion of American inspectors of UNSCOM by Iraq created serious tension in the Gulf. The US went for full military build up in the Gulf by sending aircraft carriers with fighters like F-15, F-16, B-1 bombers, stealth fighters, etc. The US position was that 'We are pursuing the diplomatic route to resolve the issue, but we are doing it from the position of strength'. Therefore, the military build up went unabated. Mrs Albright also said, 'As President Clinton has said, Iraq must not be allowed to threaten the world through development of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons...'. Though too much military power blurs a nation's diplomatic vision, work was, however, continuing on both sides to ease the stand-off between US and Iraq. Mrs Albright being a sophisticated lady and having considerable knowledge of the inner reactions of the Arabs on possible US military strike against Iraq, played somewhat sobering role though she went ahead with strong rhetoric against Saddam. She, however, got the full picture of the Arab position in Doha conference. Even Kuwait opposed military action against Iraqi people. Practically all Arab countries advised against another strike

against Iraq. Security Council was seriously divided on the issue of another war in the Gulf though Britain as usual supported. Russia, France and China gave clear signal to the US that they did not have stomach for another Gulf war. Though each country has its own political and commercial agenda in the Middle East, overall negative reaction of the Arabs on this issue worked fairly well. Mrs Albright's round-the-clock diplomacy and her late night meeting in Geneva with the representatives of the permanent members of the Security

and humanitarian approach. The attitude that sanction should continue as long as Saddam is there is wrong. This attitude will ultimately destroy a nation. If US and its allies are bent upon seeing change in the top most political leadership of Iraq, sanction is doing exactly the opposite. It is antagonizing the Iraqi people and sanction is indeed turning the Iraqi population against the West and particularly the US. Though it can be said safely that a vast majority of Iraqi people want an immediate change in their leadership, they have no means to do it. Sanction and bombing

put forward by President Clinton remains valid, why not unite world opinion against Saddam and create a consensus among nations supplying such weapons or materials for production of such weapons so that Saddam remains permanently barred from collecting those weapons?

As the unfortunate events are unfolding one tends to ask whether US and its allies had any sort of planning at all on Saddam when they attacked Iraq and defeated him. Why did they not press on, enter Baghdad and remove him? If their policy at that time was to keep Saddam to thwart the expansion of Iran then why should they now punish Iraqi people and that also for such a long time?

Moreover, does it take seven years to complete the detection and destruction of such weapons and their production capabilities? Would the world conscience support such an open ended programme which ultimately affects a nation? Time has come for the UN Security Council to review Gulf war cease-fire resolutions with a view to fixing the time limit for UNSCOM. If necessary, number of inspectors should be increased on the basis of equitable distribution of nationalities so that the work could be completed within an agreed time-frame.

Moreover, totally defanging Saddam is neither possible nor desirable. Iraq is a vast territory and can hide something somewhere. The world body must also seriously see that Iraq does not become totally defenceless thus giving the known enemy or enemies

chance to walk into Iraq. After all Israel has nuclear and possibly other weapons of mass destruction about which UN Security Council never enquired and according to the West, Iran is not far from having them. If some countries are allowed to have them for defence and on the plea of 'deterrence', Iraq as a sovereign country also has the right to have them. However, for the purpose of removing the 'wrong hand' different and pragmatic approach is necessary. Instead of punishing the Iraqi people who have already been suffering under Saddam, they should have been taken into confidence. There is still time and hence review of the present policy is called for. While UNSCOM continues its work with the help of a bigger inspection team with greater efficiency, a time frame should, however, be set for completion of the work. Inspection and sanctions cannot continue for an indefinite period. This will certainly lead to the death of a nation.

With the collapse of Soviet Union the world became unipolar. It seems that the strength of the US as superpower was not properly and strategically utilized; indeed US vision of the world politics got blurred in several areas. This became acute in the ME because of its undue bias in favour of Israel. This gave the opportunity to Russia to return in its original Soviet style to the ME. As it seems, the world is gradually returning to bipolar political game. As Russia has come as a saviour of one of the Arab countries, the US is clearly seen as the protector of Israel. The picture that the US sees and the stories it hears in some of the palaces are certainly different from those in the streets of Arab world and hence the present turn around. The US must cultivate enough flexibilities before it loses its entire control.



Spotlight on Middle East
Muslehuddin Ahmad

Council by cutting short her visit to India and Pakistan and altogether shelving Bangladesh visit brought a temporary end to the dangerous stand-off between the US and Iraq. Of course, Russia played the critical role as Primakov worked on Saddam with some assurances for easing sanctions which led to Saddam's climb down on the issue. The US said 'there is no deal, there is no concession'. Yes, no deal, no concession; but apparently there was some kind of assurances from Russia and some other members on the question of sanctions — at least to reconsider this under certain conditions.

Indeed, it is high time for the UNSC to look into the question of sanction with objectivity

and not advance the process either: indeed they would retard it. Serious rethinking in the matter by the world body is called for.

UNSC should realise that Iraq could be temporarily freed or near-free on such weapons but there are many countries including some of the UN members which would be prepared to supply to Iraq everything for building up such weapons of mass destruction. Arms supply is a trade that has been thriving and would continue to thrive. Many UN members are themselves producers of weapons of mass destruction and therefore morally do not have the right to stop others doing so. However, as the question of falling these weapons in the 'wrong hand' as

Of Lesser Gods: We and Our Street Children

Those of us who really do not want to walk past our vagabond child population, should organise our own groups and make this issue central to our lives. Otherwise we cannot buy our Roshomalai and eat it too, without guilt that is!

STEP children is how they could be viewed, and 'Tokai' is the fond appellation given to these children, bred on the streets of a society whose attitude towards them is one of studied indifference. In her article 'Children Of A Lesser God', Amaal Zakiuddin, has, with humour, left us with an important question: is indifference, though reprehensible, a more acceptable social attitude than the half-baked concern and merely 'intellectual' curiosity of those of us who regard this social issue more to jump start our social conscience and write a 'tongue-in-cheek' article or two for newspapers, than with any intention or desire to explore and solve this burgeoning problem?

Mira Nair's award winning 1988 film *Salaam Bombay!* has I think, unintentionally, done a disservice to society. By creating a false charm and glamour around this social problem, it has generated a fashionable interest about a layer of society, who need much more than our momentary and self-conscious compassion.

The citizens of Dhaka don't just need to be shown the incredible social problems they live with; they need to be shown

how to solve them. I think any discourse, however amusingly presented, that merely describes the existence of a problem, be it the question of street children or the ubiquitous but invisible one of corruption, would be merely overstating the obvious. Because the visible 'pathos' of the particular problem of street workers and vagabonds — having to do with children — has an inherent pliancy and charm, this is the most approachable and human

POSTSCRIPT

Neeman A Sobhan

of all the myriad social ills, that the lay social worker or observer is tempted to pick up as an easy way to assuage his moral need to show that he cares.

But the road to caring is paved with more than good intentions. We need commitment and organisation to attack it. We need to be fully aware of the roots of the problem and take into account the broader issues of poverty underlying this social phenomenon. And then we have to apply social and politi-

cal pressure on the government, on society and on ourselves to solve this problem.

Rita Panicker, director of Butterflies, a New Delhi-based private organisation that champions the cause of street children and child workers in her country, says that what we need is 'concern that goes beyond sympathy, to the point of feeling anger and shame, and therefore wanting to do something... If not there is no point talking about it.' I mention her

able and complacent middle class — to want to be part of the solution to the problems. It is not enough to be entertained, or informed, we need to be jolted out of our complacency. Ms. Zakiuddin has with her wit and pithy style, re-buffed our attentions on the 'invisible' children of the streets. We hope we will hear more from her and other writers, about how we the privileged members of civil society can train ourselves to care enough to do something about them so that we are no longer in complicity with the gods who spawned these children.

We need to know about, and to promote and actively support, organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, that work with issues of street children. Those of us who really do not want to walk past our vagabond child population, should organise our own groups and make this issue central to our lives. Otherwise we cannot buy our *Roshomalai* and eat it too, without guilt that is!

What was it that George Bernard Shaw said in the *Devil's Disciple*: 'The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them; that is the essence of inhumanity.'

To the Editor...

Why only Iraq?

Sir, I do not understand why UN arms inspections should continue their inspection for so long, and why embargo on Iraqi people should remain for such a long time. It is time to end it.

I also fail to understand why the US should bring such a big armed force in the Gulf region. This is not a decent way to do things for a superpower. I request the UN to complete its arms inspections in next one or two months by the inspectors of Asian and African countries. This can easily resolve the issue.

Iraq is not the only country holding supposedly arms of destruction. Other countries are also holding such arms. Many countries have gone to war in the last 50 years. Then what is the special offense to Iraq only? I hope the UN and the US will follow a reasonable course and not start another war.

M Rezaul A Bhuiyan
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Violence in Chittagong

It refers to the recently published editorial titled 'Violence in Chittagong'. The editorial was very critical of the government for not taking action through the police force during the Chittagong incident. I agree that it is the government's prime responsibility to ensure the well-being and safety of its citizens and to implement law and order. However, I cannot help but sympathise for the government in this regard because I believe the issue is a double-edged sword.

When the government does not take action during episodes of violence, we (rightfully) criticise it. When the government does take action, we complain of police brutality and the major opposition party inevitably makes a statement the very

same day that the government is harassing its party workers and that it has resorted to making political arrests. The issue of political arrests is one of the reasons that the mainstream opposition refuses to attend Parliament.

My opinion is that if a person commits a crime or act of violence in the name of politics, the person should be arrested whether the nomenclature of the arrest is 'political' or not. In addition, if the opposition pleases not to attend Parliament because its workers are being arrested for endangering the lives of other citizens, then I believe the country would be in a better position by not having these people in Parliament and thereby not having them take part in the legislative process.

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(By e-mail)
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Living in the past

Sir, Under a law enacted in 1951 (or in 1949?), a foreign sea-man is required to count his hair and to declare its quantity or number, type and colour etc., to a Bangladesh immigration officer so that he can issue a Special Landing Permit to the sailor who may visit our country for a brief period of time.

I assume that the aforesaid requirement must have been thought of and made into law by some whimsical people of the past, but I fail to understand how could this stupid condition still be maintained?

I do not think that the aforesaid requirement of law could ever be implemented by anyone, but its retention by our government prompts me to ask: are we still living in a period of ignorance and are we being ruled over by some people who wish to ensure that we always remain shadowed by our

thoughts and beliefs of the past?

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Aliens on US soil

Sir, Ever since Christopher Columbus discovered North America centuries ago the new-found land welcomed people all over the world belonging to diverse nations, culture, colour, religion and ethnicity. The vast expanse of fertile land, human-friendly climate and abundant mineral resources proved an El Dorado for the teeming settlers. Soon the land what is now USA became a melting pot of all kinds of civilisation, culture and beliefs the immigrants brought with them. Over the centuries, the new-found land not only yielded rich harvest of spectacular material progress by dint of sheer hard labour of the settlers a new culture emerged fusing into one kaleidoscopic nationhood.

Today's USA is but a sum total of tears and sweat of the immigrants citing an example nowhere in the world to be found. Americans nurtured the best fruits of human civilisation like human rights, democracy, social justice et al and enshrined them in their Constitution. The enlightened concern for human rights and utilisation of human resources explains why the US have proved a haven for the talented, laborious and persecuted from the rest of the world. The process even after more than a couple of centuries is on in the shape of opportunities offered to aliens like OP-I, DV-97, 98, 99 etc.

Basic tools of a nation's development lie in the quality of human resources another name of which is skill. We understand there are millions of aliens in the US (more than million Bangladeshi included) many of

whom are highly skilled labour like accountants, engineers and doctors aspiring for American nationality. US Senate's move to deport illegal but highly skilled aliens on one hand and inviting aspiring immigrants by means of world-wide lottery on the other requiring entrants nothing like basic skill, formal/informal education and age which are so vital, makes the American ethos difficult to comprehend.

Screening can best be done of the existing aliens on US soil who are already contributing to US economy in various ways and, required quota filled up before launching global lottery procedure. This will not only spare many an alien untold hardship and threat of separation four family members but will also be in consonance with cherished American tenets of human right, liberty and justice.

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Tax Identification Number

Sir, National Board of Revenue advertised in various Dhaka newspapers in August this year that TIN shall be issued to new income-tax assesses within a week from their date of application, but it is most unfortunate that new assesses submitted their application for TIN along with their income-tax returns on 14th-15th September, 1997 have not yet received TIN in spite of their personal *tabdils* in tax offices, and it is understood that the TIN applications are still pending to NBR's office for months together.

Will the chairman of NBR kindly look into the matter for expeditious issue of TIN?
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Art Buchwald's COLUMN



Reviewing the Critics

UNDER the Truth-in-Columning Act, I must confess that I attended opening night of the new Broadway show 'The Scarlet Pimpernel' with two free tickets. It was a glitzy event, and everyone was full of optimism — and fear.

To be perfectly honest, I liked the show. I liked the performances, I liked the sets, I liked the music, and I liked the book. As I sat in the audience I said to myself, 'Now this is theater, and I don't have to lie to anybody that I liked it.'

When I was leaving, a TV person stuck a mike in my face and asked me what I thought of the show. I said, 'I liked it very much, I enjoyed myself, and I'm going to bring my children.'

Then I went off to the cast party where everything was free — and I liked that, too. I might mention that everybody I talked to during the evening felt the same way I did, and there must have been a thousand people at the party.

The next morning I woke up and purchased *The New York Times*, *New York Post* and *New York Daily News*. All three critics hated the show. Nobody liked the book or the music or anything about 'Pimpernel.' They really beat up on it with nightsticks.

I immediately began to question my own judgement. How could I like something that all three New York papers hated? What right did I have to enjoy a musical that these distinguished critics spat on?

I called Andy Stacks and said, 'Did you see the reviews of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*? What do you think?' His response was, 'I hated it, too.'

'But last night at the party you told me that you loved it.' 'A person can change his mind,' he said.

'Is it possible that you didn't know whether you liked it or not until the critics decided if it was worthwhile?' 'It's possible but very unlikely. I have a mind of my own. It so happens that these critics wouldn't be any use unless they knew what was good or bad for us.'

'They're only three people. The producers deserve a bigger sampling than that when someone puts US\$ 10 million into a show.'

If the critics didn't know more than the rest of us, they'd all be up ladders changing lightbulbs on Broadway.'

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OPINION

Violence Against Women

It makes me sick when I read in the newspapers about our police personnel — the people who are supposed to be the upholders of the law — themselves trample it. I know many people will say that those are the exceptions and police personnel in general do uphold the law, but I have 'my' doubts. It seems to me to be the other way around.

Just refer to page 9 (column 4) of the DS dt. 15-11-97. The news item says, 'All policemen of Galachapia, Thana (withdrawn). The barbaric incident of August 25 last makes my stomach turn-over. And it happened in broad day-light! After all the investigation and outrage voiced by the people, what steps did the Home Ministry take, that too after 3 months? They just withdrew the ASI and 4 constables from Patuakhali district and transferred them to Chittagong range! What a farce! Is this called punishment? Just transfers? And why only an ASI? What about the OC of that Thana? Didn't he had to share some of the blame? After all, the crime was committed in broad day-light and an OC is supposed to be the chief of a Thana. Will the authority concerned or some readers enlighten me?

I was going through the article by A H Monjurul Kabir on 'Violence Against Women: to Resist is Our Constitutional Obligation' (DS of 16-11-97). Here I take the liberty to quote some of the writer's sentences: 'Another notable feature of violence against women that deserves special attention is the active participation of the law-enforcers e.g., the police in various heinous acts of violence against women. The tragic

death of Yasmin of Dinajpur reminds us how uncivilised the police system we have.' Mr Kabir continues, and I quote again: 'The honourable discharge on July 13, 1997 of four policemen charged with the rape of Seema Chowdhury once again amply pointed out the inherent flaws of the justice delivery system and lack of gender sensitisation. Again the Parliamentary Committee Report on the mysterious death of Seema Chowdhury crystallises the absence of gender sensitisation among the members of parliament.'

Here I would like to ask a question to the authorities concerned: what has happened to the review of the case? Again I have to quote Mr Kabir: 'The government servants belonging to almost all departments and agencies concerned clearly lack in gender sensitisation. The sheer male bias in the thoughts and action of the government personnel makes women vulnerable in many ways.' See! something has to be done right now.

Then, the editorial in the DS of 18-11-97, on 'Sea Resort Insecurity', where the newly-weds on a honeymoon trip found themselves in a nightmare. I agree with what has been written, but the sentence which really makes me sick was that 'a police inspector, reportedly intervened and tried to intimidate the couple into hushing up the matter.' Doesn't it make one feel like throwing up? Some police inspector! What sort of training did he undergo at the police academy?

Jerry