

Banks and CBAs

If there was ever a clear cut formula for destroying the banking system of a country, then there is one in Bangladesh today. First we have the case of thousands of crores of taka given in loans in violation of the existing banking laws and practices. Then there is the case of a large number of bank defaulters — both circumstantial and wilful — who have made a mockery of the banks' loan giving process. Then there is the fact that government itself, which instead of being the most law abiding of all bodies, has become the banking system's biggest defaulter. And now we hear that CBAs (Collective Bargaining Agents) have so spread their tentacles all around that they are almost throttling the normal functions of all banks. Recently the finance ministry constituted a Task Force to report on the activities of CBAs in all nationalised commercial banks (NCBs). The report is far from complete yet the early findings, as reported in this newspaper yesterday, is frightening. By law, there should be only one CBA in each bank, located at the headquarters. The preliminary report has found that even branches of banks have their own CBAs with which bank managers hold regular meetings.

As we had said earlier, all this is frightening. No amount of financial reforms will succeed unless and until the role and power of CBAs are curbed, and that too drastically. For that we will need strong political will, simply because all CBAs have their political masters, traditionally from the ruling party. Will Sheikh Hasina's government have the stomach to be firm in this case? It will have to. We strongly urge the government to expedite the work of the Task Force and then give it the widest possible publicity so that our people can know how far beyond their normal role as the CBAs have gone. The postponement of the deadline of the Task Force report to February is a bad sign. We hope it is not the result of pressure from NCB unions and their CBAs. For if it is, then we might as well say good bye to reforms right away. Government must hold on to the February deadline, and encourage the Task Force to formulate its recommendations in accordance with their highest and unimpeded professional judgement. Once it's out, the government should mobilise public opinion to implement the recommendations in full. We pledge our support behind this reform process.

Pricing Roads?

It was inevitable. Pricing roads for city maintenance. From that point of view, the recommendation for a two-headed monetary imposition that a leading vernacular daily informed us yesterday is not a stark acquaintance with novelty. There was of course curiosity about the vehicles that would come under the purview of this new levying consideration and its rate.

The consultative group of the Dhaka City Transport Project, it is learnt, will seek a yearly toll of Taka 1,000 on every car, jeep, micro bus and truck plying on city roads under the head "capital city fee". Taka 350 has been mooted for vehicles with two-stroke engines. They will pay it as "air pollution fee". We welcome the recommendations in so far as they really make an impact on the infrastructural maintenance of the city roads. We suggest the authorities take a more discerning look in the matter by drawing a line between the vehicles that do more damage to the roads than others and ante up the fee on the more culpable types.

Lack of fund has been a perennial problem with the authorities in repairing the bruised and ribbed arterial network of the city. Belatedly though the Dhaka City Corporation has risen to the necessity of arranging fund for the work.

However good the idea may be it calls for both caution and a reviewing of the situation from a total perspective. Caution because we do not quite have a reassuring record when it comes to handling public money. After all it is the people who will have to foot the bill. Secondly, the authorities need to ensure the strict observance of laws. Air pollution fee is being banded about now. What stops the authorities from banning the polluting sources? We demand a total freeze on any further import of the notoriously gas-spewing two stroke engines. Then we have seen how people have made a farce of the whole idea of the so-called fitness certificates, thanks to the greasy ways of a section of people in the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority. A considerable proportion of the transports that ply on the city roads look, yes look — from broken or missing window pane to the dangerously fitted bodies on suspect chassis — woefully short of roadworthiness. Yet they ply. How? Before going ahead with the idea of road pricing or levying indirect tax on people, the authorities have to find answers to this question.

It's Nipping Cold

It is barely a week into Poush — first of the two months of Bengal's winter. But it is already quite cold by our tactile standard. It may provoke a wry smile in people with an intimate acquaintance with snowy chill but the fact of the matter is winter this year is more than a reality for Bangladesh, something that has not been the case in the past few years. While this is a welcome perception in these times of universal worry about global warming it also calls for the necessity of turning our attention to the plight of poor people particularly in the northern parts of the country and the unabated flow of death news in the last couple of days.

A Star report announces 14 deaths in two days. Cold bite is reported to have caused great affliction for people in the rural areas of Ishwardi, Panchagarh. There are other problems too. Heavy fog has resulted in disruption in all sorts of transport traffic. Aricha alone is grovelling under a vehicular load spanning over an expanse of 10-km.

Has the cold wave climaxed? Well, if this is Poush then experience says, we had better be prepared for colder days ahead. After all, no month has more proverbial association with cold than Maagh.

What should we do apart from urging the sun poetically to give a little bit of warmth to that shivering, unaccommodated tokai at the end of the alley? Quite a bit from our respective positions. We can collect and distribute our used, old warm clothes for those who are badly in need of them. It would not be a bad idea for the authorities to highlight the sufferings of the unprivileged people in the media and touch the altruistic chord in the hearts of those who are wealthy.

Challenge lies not in warping or even fancying to warp the characteristics of Nature but in bringing out the best in human nature to accommodate its various moods.

TRUE to his conviction that all powers grow out of the barrel of gun, Mao Tse Dong led his people's Army to victory in creating his People's Republic of China in 1949. Ever since China gave ample evidence of its military prowess. The Chinese wars of "human waves" during the early '50s awed even the Americans in Korea. Although China had in her "punitive war" in 1979, a bloody nose from Vietnam, the ignominy was erased with China's successful naval encounter with Vietnam a decade later. Nevertheless, China had seldom been oblivious of her military's holiness in a global equation. The revolutionaries of China were never wanting in their awareness about the breathtaking revolution that was taking place in military technology but they had little means either to catalyse or acquire that magic of the time.

One of the first few steps China took after her economic expansion from the late '70s was, therefore, to modernise her forces. By relying on the wealth generated from the country's rapid economic growth to acquire foreign equipment and technology, particularly from Russia, China's modernisation programme gave enormous respectability to once ragtag people's liberation army which scaled a new height of power and prestige in the wake of Tiananmen episode. But the Gulf War of 1991 and later in 1996 the posting of two US aircraft carrier in the strait of Taiwan to intimidate the Chinese had indeed a jarring effect on China's military plan-

Modernisation of China's Military

The Gulf War of 1991 and later in 1996 the posting of two US aircraft carriers in the strait of Taiwan to intimidate the Chinese had indeed a jarring effect on China's military planners. Both the events demonstrated in the most graphic term just how far behind China still was in terms of military technology.

ners. Both the events demonstrated in the most graphic term just how far behind China still was in terms of military technology. A post-Gulf war stock-taking of the country's military situation as well as emerging strategic milieu at the global level pushed China afresh for a rapid and expensive modernisation of China's military, including further nuclear testing and long range missile developments. The Chinese clearly understood that they would have to master the techniques demonstrated by the Americans if they were to pose credible threat of their own whether in the disputed areas of the South China Sea or in any eventual expedition to liberate Taiwan.

Many of the statements and threats of the Chinese leaders during Mao era could be dismissed as mere rhetoric for domestic consumption. But since the late 1980s Beijing's new band of leaders who are more of conservative nationalists than merely die-hard communists prove to be resolute in their urge for making China an international power and they seldom hid their intention. China's official position that its primary goal is to develop a world class economy is considered in western circles, only a step towards bringing China's overall power — its influential Chinese planner like General

Mi Zhenyu emphasises — at par with that of the United States. There are few doubts that China is rapidly becoming world's second most powerful nation. Yet China's accelerated military build up after her psychological reverses during Taiwan crisis is somewhat shrouded in ambivalence if not outright secrecy. But there are tell-tale indicators to find its still hazy contours.

Although China's official

The official budget also excludes nuclear weapons development and soldier's pension. When the Chinese purchased 72 SU-27 fighter jets from Russia in 1995 for about \$3.0bn the entire cost was covered by the state council and was not deemed a defence expenditure. The official budget also excludes the massive expenditure incurred by the research and development. Part of the funding for the development of nu-

clear weapons comes from the Ministry of Energy budget, and part of money for aircraft development comes from China's Ministry of Aeronautics and Astronautics Industries. Beijing also excludes proceeds from arms sale as well as income from business and industries owned and operated by the army. Moreover as much as 68 per cent of Chinese expenditure on soldiers' salaries to weapon system and supplies which PLA purchases at artificially low state dictated prices cost only a fraction of their equivalent values in Western

countries. Taking all these factors into account a conservative estimate of China's actual military expenditure would be at least the ten times the officially announced level. In other words, China's real defence budget amounts to a minimum of \$87bn per year, roughly one third that of the United States and 75 per cent more than Japan's.

Moreover the figure was 11.3 per cent higher in 1996 than in 1995 and 14.6 per cent higher in 1995 than in 1994. No other part of the Chinese government budget has increased at a rate anywhere near these figures. By all indications China is now engaged in one of the most extensive and rapid military modernisation programme in the world, one that has been accelerating in the recent times notwithstanding the toning down of her rhetoric which is, however, considered by the West as her tactical retreat to cast off the most of her current power build-ups. China's immediate goal now seems to be acquiring at least the capability of building up a credible Taiwan invasion force and capacity to sink American aircraft carrier, should the United States interfere militarily in China-Taiwan issue as it did last year.

China has already become the third largest nuclear power of the world having surpassed both Britain and France as early as in the '70s, and is only Asian country to deploy her nuclear weapons. Its aircrafts have since been acquiring airborne early warning technology in Europe and Israel and developing indigenous in-flight refuelling techniques to extend their range. Since the Taiwan episode it has concluded a deal with Russia to acquire two destroyers equipped with modern cruise missiles. In the past few years, China has acquired SU-27 fighter-bombers and Russian Kilo-class submarines. In the last several years, China has built 34 modern warships on its own and developed a fleet of M-9 and M-11 mobile launched missiles — already tested during Taiwan crisis. It has also expanded its rapid reaction force from 15,000 to 200,000 and built an airfield in the Parcel island and an early warning radar installation on Fierly Cross Reef in the Spartlys.



PERSPECTIVES by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

annual budget of \$8.7bn for defence spending — compared to \$265bn spent annually by the United States or even \$50bn spent by Japan — looks modest and innocuous, in reality according to almost every major study of Chinese military spending, it is several times higher than that of Beijing's official figure. For example, China's official budget does not include the cost of the country's People's Armed Police constituted mostly of former soldiers and is meant for service as a reserve force for any international conflict.

ter sharing treaty with India. Khaleda Zia was quoted by newspapers as telling supporters that the government had completed its "conspiracy" to handover the country's sovereignty to India and a "tough" action to overthrow the government would be launched. The BNP was contacted for consultation by the government, but did not respond as it was not done "formally".

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ical behaviour as an active and responsible opposition and for lack of intra-organizational discipline and proper leadership (Bangladesh) has so far failed to place itself in a more advantageous position than it currently holds.

The BNP I believe can join the government's success story if it believed that its continued pre-peace pact pressure had created an atmosphere where the Shanti Bahini felt it was necessary to quickly sign the pact, while the government was extra careful in framing the accord. That is constructive politics, by which BNP has more to gain than to lose if they decide against parliamentary debate or going to the court.

The hill tracts which has been termed a "disturbed area" would, with the careful implementation of treaty clauses, draw investors and tourists, bringing the tribesmen to Bangladesh's mainstream. So far they have been the "Raj" of the region with the military involved to overthrow that Raj. Now they would welcome their friends from other parts of Bangladesh. No need for military passes and guide or security to protect from insurgents.

Abraham Lincoln's famous quotes: "You can fool some of the people all the time and all the people some of the time, but you can't fool all the people all the time."

Yes, man lives with hope or else his survival would be at stake. Man is told to think positive to help him go forward. Let everyone give peace a chance in the hill tracts.

Give Peace a Chance in Chittagong Hill Tracts

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THE somber signing ceremony witnessed among other things an exchange of pleasantries between the leaders and officials from both sides. The significant were the "Namaste" from Jotindriya Bodhipriya Lama alias Shanti Bahini, the chief of Shanti Bahini political wing the Parbatya Chittagong Jana Sanghati Samity to Sheikh Hasina in a show of allegiance to the head of Bangladesh government. The other was Lama and old enemy Army Chief Lieutenant General M. Mahbubur Rahman shaking hands which signified both the military's support to the government move and an end to hostilities in the hill region.

At a brief press conference following the signing Sheikh Hasina acknowledged the contribution to the peace process of the past governments — the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). She also commented "Today a broken family has come together." Simple, but significant.

Signing a treaty is not easy and implementing it is even more difficult. But Sheikh Hasina is faced with a hostile opposition who has so far only labelled the treaty "unconstitutional" and "black," besides resorting to violent general strikes, which during her tenure, Khaleda Zia described as an "anti-state" activity. Sheikh Hasina was heaped with criticism for calling such large number of strikes.

Khaleda Zia at a press conference, more crowded by party supporters than journalists, the day after the pact was signed said, "We reject this treaty... it is a black treaty, illegal, unconstitutional and it compromises national sovereignty." Amid calls for strikes and party

leaders to join in street actions from supporters, she announced action plan agreed with her allies, including the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party, and said they would "go to court, if needed be, after a party committee scrutinized the treaty." Her claims and demands for scrapping the treaty would have been more acceptable had they came after the scrutiny.

The BNP should come out with its committee report and the government, to back its claim that Khaleda Zia's government had almost agreed to give autonomy to the tribesmen, publish the accord prepared by the BNP government to give us respite from a political war, which is possibly more of a war between the two traditional rivals than real politics.

But we are again faced with a two-day stoppage in the important port city of Chittagong and the sensitive hill districts of Khabarganj, Rangamati and Bandarban.

On her part, Sheikh Hasina been candid at her press conference in the gardens of her official Ganabhaban residence on December 7, 1997 and challenged the opposition to join a parliamentary debate to prove their points, including that the region has been "sold to India". But the BNP was yet to take a definite step to prove their point — either agreeing to a parliamentary debate or filing a writ in the court.

Constitutional experts have made their point — if BNP is unhappy they should go to the court if they dislike the parliament, but not street agitation, which analysts believe would be as fruitless as their past actions on other issues have proved, but might claim several more inno-

cent lives — TO PREVENT PEACE FROM COMING IN THE MONTH WHEN BANGLADESH EMERGED VICTORIOUS after a nine-month independence war! Well maybe it has been overlooked because of at least one of BNP's allies who never believed in Bangladesh.

The opposition has cried foul about the 25-year Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty signed in 1972 by the post-independence government of the country's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a "black treaty" and "slavery treaty." At her 1996 election campaign Khaleda Zia had said "if voted to power the shackles of slavery

will be broken." But the BNP ruled Bangladesh for over 10 years in two terms and did not scrap it. The treaty, which the Awami League had explained was essential for a new country for security reasons, died a natural death in March this year incidentally with Sheikh Hasina in power.

The treaty was never enforced, but was violated when one clause ensuring that neither country would allow its territory to be used for "any act that may cause military damage to or constitute a threat to the other party" when India harboured allowed insurgents Bangladesh allowed insurgents from Assam. The peace treaty with Shanti Bahini meterialised when the two sides agreed on similar terms, according to reliable sources.

Days after Sheikh Hasina's government signed the landmark 30-year Ganges river wa-

ter sharing treaty with India. Khaleda Zia was quoted by newspapers as telling supporters that the government had completed its "conspiracy" to handover the country's sovereignty to India and a "tough" action to overthrow the government would be launched. The BNP was contacted for consultation by the government, but did not respond as it was not done "formally".

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year after a two-year break, the BNP and its allies enforced a general strike in the hill districts assuming a peace treaty was at hand. And now we have seen violence in Chittagong in November, which if not properly handled by the government could have brought GRAVE DANGER to Bangladesh, and now the strikes. Two BNP members of parliament stayed away from the peace talks this time and Khaleda Zia labelled the tribal negotiators as "miscreants."

A major claim by the opposition has been the pact has "sown the seeds of secessionist movement elsewhere in Bangladesh." Experts, however differ. They said if India patronised any such move from any Bangladesh district, it would lose many of its states that border Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma.

What apparently has gone

IN FOOL'S PARADISE? by Nadeem Qadir

opment, prosperity in trade and commerce and welfare of the people without electricity of the people.

Since Awami League came to power, we have been constantly beset with irritant electric supply, load-shedding and power failures everywhere. Has the economic development of our country come to a standstill? If not, it is really amazing. If yes, why so?

We have been trying to attract and inviting foreign investment in our country. Are the foreign investors happy with us?

Our electricity crisis is a stark, bare and grim tragedy. Not a word of comment is necessary — the facts speak for themselves.

O H Kabir, 6, Hare Street, War, Dhaka-1203

Post office at Science Laboratory

Sir, Dhaka is the name of a busy town. As a citizen of capital city, we have to work very hard for living here. As far as I know in Central Road, Elephant Road, Mirpur Road, Babopura and Kataban areas, there is no post office except Newmarket and Hatirpul sub-branch. Why has Shahbag post office been closed? These areas are the middle of the city. Lakhs of people are living here. Important government offices, research centres, educational institutions and many kinds of business centres are situated here.

Newmarket post office is not only situated besides the main road, but also in a narrow area. We have to waste valuable time there. I am very much hopeful that the authority will look into the matter earnestly and take necessary action to set up a post office near the Science Laboratory police box or any suitable place.

Md Moshur Rahman 73/A-1, Central Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205.

No electricity, no development

Sir, No work, no pay. Similarly no electricity, no development. It is a universal truth that in the modern age no country can think of economic progress, any industrial devel-

To the Editor,

Clarification

Sir, My attention has been drawn to a news item that appeared under the caption "Repeal of all 'black laws' urged" in your esteemed daily's 10 December issue. Part of the statement attributed to me in that item is not quite correct. I did not question the rationality of Articles 141A and 141B of the Bangladesh Constitution; rather I quoted these Articles and the relevant provisions of the Bangladesh Penal Code as taking care of any state of emergency, offences against the state and activities prejudicial to the safety or sovereignty of the state.

In view of these provisions, I appealed to the present government to scrap the Special Powers Act from our statute book. I also did not suggest that the ruling party is taking undue advantage of the above Articles as quoted in the DS report. All I said in this connection was that the SPA was abused in the past and is liable to be abused.

Amanullah Khan Chairman United News of Bangladesh

Germs of Corruption in Human Societies

Sir, The write-up by Brigadier Hafiz published on 17 November 1997 in the DS drew my attention to the evil influence of corruption in our societies. Unfortunately, he did not mention the role of the intellectual elite in our societies in recent times. Since the germs of corruption are global in form and character, the word "corruption" is now a relative term. In my opinion, the corrupt intellectual elite conflicts with politics which is responsible for all ills of our national life.

When the dishonest intellectuals co-exist with the civil and

non-civil elements of population without questioning, it will surely pollute the circle of administration, business and politics to serve the evil motives of the corrupt intellectual elite for exploitation and use of the innocent masses to their advantages in real life.

Abul Ashraf Noor, Uttara, Dhaka

Frustrated holidays

Sir, The government has gone for 5-day week by changing its office timings from 9 am to 5 pm on working days. Others in the private sector followed suit and there appeared to be a uniformity in weekly holidays. Not many days passed thereafter the uniformity has given way to diversity. Private sector went back to its former office timings suiting their respective requirements — some observing Fridays as half-day and some Saturdays as half-day. Banking sector yielding to the pressure from the business community have started keeping some of their branches open on Saturdays while their other branches and the head office are enjoying two days holiday "Ek Jaytraye Bhinna Pal". Following the banks, the insurance companies have decided to work half-day on Saturdays.

NGOs and foreign missions have their own weekly holidays. Result being that it has become difficult now a days to keep track of weekly holidays of the various organisations working in the city. One has to keep a list of weekly holidays in various offices operating in the city eg. the city's shopping centre. Moreover, 9 am-1 pm office hours on Saturdays have deprived the employees the benefit of continuous one-and-a-half day weekly holiday.

It seems that the purpose of declaring two-day weekly holi-

OPINION Jitters in Asean Stocks

Dr F H Chowdhury

The leaders at the Asean summit in Kuala Lumpur issued a communique at the end of their 30th annual meeting which was also attended by China and Japan, not strictly the members of the club but nonetheless have been affected by the recent jitters in their stock markets. Following in the wake of the American economic summit of the countries of Asia Pacific Basin called by President Clinton, in an effort to emulate his earlier success in forming a trading zone of the US and its neighbouring countries, the Asean summit was a timely stock taking of the recent financial turmoil engulfing the whole Asean area.

The lasting scar left by the recent financial collapse of the so-called tiger economies of Asia, will take some time to heal. At first it started in Thailand, then spread around the areas affecting Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea. Their stock markets crashed within a matter of days to recover however gradually over the following months, though not entirely to their original level. Hong Kong was affected too, but fortunately for mainland China, the Hong Kong market bounced back and no lasting residual effect ensued.

Malaysia: Malaysia's mercurial Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammed 71 is nothing if not a controversial figure in the world of finance and politics. His acerbic comments on the economy in particular and the western countries in general, have at times been quoted out of context and affected Kuala Lumpur stock market at a difficult time in the phase of its economy. He is much more cautious now with his remarks and has wilfully refrained himself from any controversial remarks in his opening speech at the Asean summit. China and Japan too were represented in it as observers.

Korea having been in the hands of IMF for its economic