

## Inflexibility Helps None

Government party spokesman Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Nasim appears to have uttered the last word about BNP's demand for scrapping the CHT accord. There is no scope whatsoever for annulling the pact. But the BNP, he goes on to add, is free to record its objections to the accord when a draft bill on the subject is routed through the select committee and discussed threadbare in parliament. By the very nature of the accord which has been signed between two parties, the government of Bangladesh and the PCJSS as the representative body of the tribal community, it does not seem open to amendment.

To this apparently catch 22 situation BNP has registered its own signal contributions by making the scrapping of CHT accord an absolute point of no return; for, they have pronounced their return to the parliament being entirely contingent upon rescinding the agreement. For all we know, BNP is opposed to certain provisions of the accord and, therefore, one is intrigued by the fact of their having asked for a wholesale annullment of it.

Both sides are getting frozen in their respective positions, we believe, largely because of negative vibrations and wrong signals being continually traded between them. For a change they need to be imbued with a sense of urgency born of the realisation that bipartisan cooperation and informed public participation are key to the accord's implementation and preservation.

In our view there is so much to discuss about in the CHT accord when : (a) the provisions the BNP finds unacceptable can be delineated from those to which the party may not have objections; (b) the ruling party can try to allay the apprehensions of the opposition on the 'negative points'; and (c) failing which, they can invoke the interpretative jurisdiction of the Supreme Court with a prior understanding that its verdict will be accepted, regardless of its going for or against any party. That is how we should go about it at this critical juncture of our parliamentary democracy.

Every time a Jatiya Sangsad session is about to open, a predictable pattern of governmental activism sets in to draw the opposition into the parliament: Some telephone calls, sending out of errands and feelers etc. which never congeal into a stimulus for dialogue. The situation is far too grave now for any half-hearted reconciliatory gesture from the government side. Efforts have to be sincere and serious.

## Travesty of a Library

Last Monday's Star report about Dhaka University library forms a sad commentary on the standard and atmosphere of learning in the premier seat of education in the country. Not the first and neither the last to come out from the bag of illus once glorious 'academia' is laden with, this is one of the most nauseating thing to experience because it reeks such criminal indifference towards intellectual nourishment by people whose *raison d'être* is all about keeping it in the best possible shape.

What sort of a library is that which releases journals and periodicals for general perusal after four or five years of entry? Is it that difficult to update even various UN journals and annual reports? Is it a library or a bonded warehouse?

How does it sound in the backdrop of authorities' apathy to general students' need that books disappear regularly from the so called rare section? Since only the teachers and the researchers have access to the is section does not this phenomenon of 'periodic disappearance' suggest that some of the teachers and researchers are wanting in integrity? Can one make light of this by referring to a Twain-esque streak?

Not all problems are hard to detect though. One of the more tangible, mentioned by the librarian himself is fund shortage. We fail to understand how a repository of knowledge and information can suffer from fund shortage if people concerned are serious about its value.

The truth is, something is badly rotten in the Dhaka University library. It is likely to be a combination of evils ranging from fund shortage to administrative flaw. We suggest a committee comprising senior teachers be formed immediately to look into the matter. A ready suggestion for helping this ailing storehouse of knowledge could be to consult the wisdom lying in the more organised specimens in the city, like the British Council and USIS libraries. There cannot be any compromise on the state of libraries.

## Still in 19th Century

This was text-book worker oppression but long gone out of fashion. About 2000 workers of these garment establishments were holding a meeting on Monday at Kaliganj to protest non-payment of salaries for months. Suddenly, a big gang of goons hired by the *maliks* swooped upon them beating with lethal weapons whoever they could get. Thirty workers were badly injured and at least one and probably three were killed in the beat-up.

It has taken modern civilisation centuries to come to the enlightened industrial relations or labour-employer equations that now reign in all of the developed nations. This did not come as an act of benevolence or philanthropy. And perhaps not even only through radical action mounted by the workers. Increase in the quantum and quality of production raking in higher profits from growing sales depended basically on unbroken and disciplined labour turned in by willing workers satisfied by an equanimous sharing in the enterprise's development.

The Kaliganj entrepreneurs are too much in the Nineteenth Century to realise that on their own. And they must suffer for their backwardness. The raid on the workers was a violent crime. Its connection with industrial relations makes its more urgent that the attackers and their pay masters be both punished with all the harshness allowed in law.

# A Prognosis for Bangladesh at 50

by Manzoor Ahmed

*Either the people and leaders of Bangladesh will face the challenges and seize the opportunities to create the future that the nation wants or it will drift passively and listlessly towards a catastrophe in the making. The choice is ours and the choice is now.*

**A**T the approach of a new year, and soon a new century, one's thoughts turn to prognosticating and stocktaking. There is much to be said for a "vision 2020" exercise — an effort to develop a scenario for the future that we desire, so that we can embark collectively as a nation on the "art of the possible" to make this future happen.

What will Bangladesh be like in the year 2020, when it will be at the threshold of 50 as an independent country? Some things are easy to visualize. The already crowded land will have to support at least half as many people — the total number rising to over 180 million. The megalopolis of Dhaka will be an urban conglomeration of perhaps 30 million souls. The teeming population and the growth of roads and bridges spanning the watery barriers will fill, with man-made structures and human habitations, the disappearing distances among large and small urban centres. The traditional urban-rural divide will pretty much disappear, turning the whole country into a continuous urban and semiurban complex.

Will this mega-complex be the single largest concentration of abject human misery in the world? almost 200 million people barely eking out an animal-like physical survival? A pitiful mass of humanity existing without a modicum of human dignity? A tiny elite who have amassed fabulous wealth preying upon rest of society, living in small fortress-like enclaves surrounded by a sea of poverty and separated from it by high walls with watch towers and armed guards? A chaotic horde of humanity choking in pollution, fume and filth in a sprawling slum spread in all directions, but sprinkled with a few islets of modernity?

Or, will it be a civilised, tolerant and humane society, purposefully moving into the 21st century? Will it be a polity of

people, not rich by international standards, but making steady progress towards prosperity — having doubled the size of its economic production in each of the previous two decades and sharing this growth equitably among all, meeting the basic needs in education, health and other essential services for all? A society that has reduced the proportion of people under the "poverty line" dramatically and has expanded the opportunities and choices for human development for all citizens? A country in which the democratic tradition and institutions have taken firm roots and the process of political discourse and decision-making unifies the people in facing the challenges of the new century?

International experience of the recent decades tells us that either scenario is entirely possible? The little tiger economies of East Asia as well as giant China have quadrupled their per capita GNP in the last quarter century. The industrialising countries of South-east Asia — Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand — as well as China have managed to bring down the numbers of people in poverty to around 10 per cent during the same period. Despite the much publicised recent market turmoil in East Asia, the economic foundation these countries have built remains a solid and enduring achievement. These countries also have made strides towards building a democratic society, although guilty on this score. It is too much to expect at this time that the main political parties will take a longer term view in determining their political agenda. But can Bangladesh avert the nightmare scenario of the future if the country continues to live from day-to-day in a supreme existential disdain for any thought of the tomorrow? A nonpartisan initiative by academics and opinion leaders to visualize the future

we wish for ourselves and the consequences of inaction and mis-action needs to begin in earnest.

**STRENGTHENING THE DEMOCRATIC POLITY AND NURTURING THE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS:** While representative or electoral democracy exists in the country, there is a long way to go before the institutions and behaviour pattern of a democratic society are firmly established. The essential elements of a democratic culture that are nascent or nonexistent include: the rule of law buttressed by a truly independent judiciary, conditions for a free press and neutral public media, accountable and responsible governance, participatory and transparent decision-making at all levels of government, and control of corruption in government. The enormous challenges of development can be met and people's energy can be mobilised only when the credibility of and confidence in the governance process are created.

**MANAGING THE RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE:** The globalised nature of the economy that every country faces today offers great challenges and unprecedented opportunities. There are new possibilities for countries with a low-cost workforce with adaptable skills and basic physical infrastructure. The necessary condition for taking advantage of the opportunities is to establish and abide by the rules of the game for investment, finance, market and trade. The global market is also unforgiving in meting out punishments when the rules are not understood or ignored. The drainage

of a hundred billion dollars from the national financial system in outstanding loan default — three times of the GNP — cannot inspire much confidence of national and international investors in the management of the national economy or the rules of the game. This order of hemorrhage cannot continue without bringing the nation's economy to a collapse. There has to be a national consensus on establishing the basic rules of the game for managing the market and enforcing them with determination.

**NURTURING HUMAN RESOURCES:** People are potentially the most abundant of our resources if their productive capacities can be fully developed and put to use. Universal primary education in the shortest possible time, universal secondary education in the foreseeable future, a major expansion of vocational and technical education that is fully responsive to the changing needs of the market, universal access to primary healthcare and a major improvement of the nutrition status of children are the essential ingredients for turning the population into productive human resources.

The comparative advantage of cheap labour is an advantage only when the conditions are met to put the workforce into productive use.

**CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE:** The future of the small, crowded and ecologically fragile corner of the landmass south of the Himalayas that is Bangladesh is inextricably linked with the fate of the rest of South Asia. For its economic prosperity,

for protection and sustainable exploitation of its natural resources, and to face up to the intense competition of the global market, Bangladesh must adopt a regional geo-political perspective.

India, the neighbour with an overwhelming presence, is a reality that Bangladesh cannot escape. A narrow, politically motivated and irrationally sentimental approach to interaction with India cannot serve present and future interest of Bangladesh. It must be an active team player in the region, pursuing multilateral and bilateral relationships with its neighbours and encouraging a forward-looking regional view in the common interest of all the people in South Asia.

**WIDE APPLICATION OF THE GREEN-ACCOUNTING PRINCIPLE:** The limit to the carrying capacity of the over-crowded land and the vulnerability of a large part of the country on the coastal belt to the effects of global warming make it an imperative for Bangladesh to be particularly sensitive to environmental concerns. Bangladesh must assess systematically the impact on renewable and non-renewable natural resources and the implications for the human habitat of all economic development policies and programmes. Bangladesh also needs to be a strong and articulate voice in the international environmental arena.

For example, for vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, it is myopic and self-defeating to take the position that the developing world has no obligation to act on reducing global warming.

Either the people and leaders of Bangladesh will face the challenges and seize the opportunities to create the future that the nation wants or it will drift passively and listlessly towards a catastrophe in the making. The choice is ours and the choice is now.

## Thailand's New Government Stirs Hopes

by A S M Nurunnabi

*A prominent spokesman of the new ruling Democratic Party, promised that the Chuan government would be honest with the people about what the cost of recovery will be and the costs will be evenly distributed.*

In any case, observers felt that the new prime minister needed to display more resolve than his predecessor, in view of the seriousness of Thailand's economic slump. The Thai baht had slipped more than 40 per cent against the US dollar. The stock market reached the lowest levels in memory. Among other signs of the slump was that domestic spending was plummeting. Reflecting that slump, Toyota of Japan announced that it would halt production at its two Thai assembly plants until at least the end of the year. The head of a regional group in Singapore opined: "Next year will be one of negative growth. There will be a recession, lay-offs and unemployment rising."

The International Monetary Fund's \$17.2 billion rescue package may seem inadequate for the purpose. In this context, the IMF indicated that it was not satisfied with the manner in which it was previously agreed by Bangkok that the reforming financial measures would be carried out. The widespread apprehension was that many Thai leaders in government and opposition have personal interests in the delinquent finance companies and banks; hence a natural reluctance to discipline them. So the warning signs were ignored and remedies postponed. In view of the resultant situation, the IMF Managing Director remarked: "If our package hasn't worked so far, it is because of the difficulty the political partners are having in agreeing on the future of the country."

On the overall political situation that was prevailing in the country, one commentator remarked that "forming a new government in that country was like picking sides for an elementary school football match; all the players know each other, having been through the drill before and usually end up picking over who would get to play

what position". For a few days, politicians huddled in meetings all over Bangkok. The horse-trading left observers confused about who would come out on top.

In the end, Chuan Leekpai won backing from parliamentarians who heeded the public sentiment for a new government. He and his cabinet reportedly carried considerable respect among Bangkok's business community and international financiers. But, as analysts think, the new coalition government headed by Chuan still must work with the same political structure and the coalition which would comprise rival parties, might consequently be a shaky one as each component would be trying to score political points. Of course, under the new constitution passed in September last, there would be efforts to end vote-buying and patronage endemic to Thai politics. However, many in the country appeared eager to put the new reform system to test.

Observers of the Thai political scene were of the view that it was hard to tell if anybody in Thailand outside of the elite political circles cared which of the current crop of leaders was in charge. The prevailing trend of pessimism appeared to be the result of the feeling that "with money, you can do anything in Thailand". Serious observers, therefore, felt that it's those without money — and their numbers will be growing — that the country's leaders need to worry about. The unemployment situation has no immediate prospect of getting better, because it has been lately predicted that 300,000 workers would lose jobs this year, swelling the unemployment ranks — to 1.3 million — by 23 per cent.

That is the kind of situation that would make Chuan's job difficult. A prominent spokesman of the new ruling

Democratic Party, however, promised that the Chuan government would be "honest with the people about what the cost of recovery will be and the costs will be evenly distributed".

As a result, any country's economic performance depends a great deal on the rest of the world.

As exports is the propulsive force for any country to prosper, I think we simply cannot advocate any policy toward restricted or closed economy. Even from the recent history, we can see that all the emerging Asian tiger economies followed the way of export-led development. To establish the fact that why do we need an open market economy, first we need to accept the simple logic that if we do not let the other countries enter our market we cannot possibly expect them to pave theirs for us. In the present-day world if we look around, we will see various treaties such as GATT in EU, SAFTA in South Asian region, GSP treaty — all supporting the very fact of mutual trade and benefits. All are meant to ensure the free and uninhibited flow of goods among various countries, which make the whole world one economic entity.

Secondly, if the domestic industries are nurtured under protection, if they are not exposed to competition, if they are not exposed to better and efficient management skills, then they will never achieve world standard. There will never be any urge to improve on the ground that whatever they produce locally consumer has to buy it.

Thirdly, if the prices of imported goods are distorted by imposing heavy burden of tariff and quota, then our products outside will face similar treatment. As a result, our external sector will be severely affected and so will be other macro variables and our country will face a serious setback.

In the whole scenario 'exchange rate management' plays a crucial role. If the import price is pegged at an artificially low level, only in that case the future of our industry will be at stake. So the government has to act sensibly. The free flow of goods should not be a one-way traffic and we should pay more attention ensuring free flow of raw materials and intermediary goods rather than finished commodity.

The concept itself was never intended to be nefarious for any country. It was us, our people with vested interest who might have used it to our benefits and have stricken public sentiment. Whereas other developed countries are coming in our country for investment because of low-cost labour and an abundance of raw materials, then why can't we use our potential efficiently and produce world standard products? Being a poor nation, we have to be extra cautious and sensible in our talks and deeds. If we don't make the right decision now, we will never be able to prepare ourselves for the next millennium.

## "Healing Moral Wounds"

Abu Imran

I refer to Mr Abu Faisal's letter (Star, 24-12-97) on the captioned subject.

Mr Abu Faisal deserves congratulations for his timely suggestion to check moral decadence which has deeply penetrated in all spheres of our society in general and affected the younger generation in particular.

The reason is not far to seek. Primarily it is because of being away from the religious teaching which among other things give highest priority to moral and ethical values. Unfortunately, our educational system lacks this. And more regrettably instead of giving some thought to include it into the syllabi at all levels (primary to higher), attempts are being made to erase religious studies from the education system.

This has to be countered and action taken to introduce religious subject in the syllabi as suggested in the letter. Children even at a very tender age are overburdened with so many subjects that they can't even carry the whole lot of books/khatas — they need someone to help them with these up to school. If they can be bothered with so many necessary and even unnecessary things, dropping something from the whole list, inclusion of religious subject can be well taken care of. This will help

posters suggest that they appear in shorts and there are many more which I don't even want to describe in words. If anyone has any doubt about my views, he may kindly like to move around cinema halls or walls of the main thoroughfares to find out the truth. Recently, I came across one such display in an ad 'Praner Cheyo Priyo'. There are many like this.

In this regard, it can be mentioned here that previously it was said that Bangladesh was a low prevalence AIDS country since the detected HIV/AIDS patients over the last 10 years were nearly less than 90. But a recent observation made by the Project Director of the National AIDS Prevention and Control Committee was alarming. He observed that there could be even 100,000 HIV/AIDS positive cases if detected from blood screening. I'm subject to correction. But the scenario is like that. AIDS as we know has no remedy — so only the prevention is the remedy. For prevention, nothing short of religious and moral education is more appropriate than any other things.

In the above backdrop, it's high time that Mr Abu Faisal's suggestions to include religious and moral education in the schools/colleges/universities be implemented.

## To the Editor...

### "Commotion in the cadres"

Sir, I give you my heartfelt thanks for your editorial with the above headline published on 28th Dec. 1997. We are observing with anxiety that the democratically elected governments are openly taking side with a particular cadre by giving it undue advantage again and again and by showing total negligence to other cadres. We never observed such things even during the regime of autocrat government. The last government tiltation came out when it upgraded the 329 posts of a particular cadre. This has automatically utterly aggravated the members of other cadres.

May I please note down the sequences of such upgradation since 1994? In that year, the government upgraded district-level posts of nine engineering cadres by rejecting the demand of other cadres. In the same year, the government again upgraded the selection-grade posts of some particular cadres only thus again depriving the remaining majority cadres.

Then a serious anomaly was prevailing in the cadre services and the representatives of Prokrishi-BCS liaison committee called on the then PM Begum Zia and the then leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina and requested them to remove

the anomalies of the cadre services by giving equal advantage to all. Both of them gave positive assurance.

But to our utter surprise the government of Begum Zia again in 1995 sanctioned 50 per cent senior selection grade for BCS (Admn) and BCS (Police) cadres only. Later on BCS (Judiciary) compelled the government to sanction the same for them by filing a writ petition in the High Court. Other cadres are still deprived of that facility.

The representatives of other cadres time and again called upon the them PM but with no result. The present PM, the then leader of the opposition, assured the representatives, even after she came to power, that the existing inequalities in the cadre services will be removed very shortly and no new inequalities will be created. All these assurances were published in the national dailies. But what happened? Today, we are not only astonished, but we have become stoned by seeing the recent decision of the government. Instead of solving the previous problems of other cadres, her government again created a new inequality by giving another bonus to her dearest cadre only.

Who are responsible for the terrorists acts in colleges and universities? Who are giving them shelter ignoring all human responsibilities? Isn't the government supreme authority to eradicate terrorism? But allowing humanity to remain in the dark, our government seems indifferent to terrorists and terrorism on the campuses. The recent JU incident is one example that can be cited.

The last news is that she has assured the BCS (Police) cadre to give them the same bonus when they pressed her

government. Again other cadres have been deprived. The government seems to be keen to please the members BCS (Admn) and BCS (Police). Then what conclusion should we come?