

Message from Kyoto: Climate of Discontent

by Ekram Kabir

The world has — and rightly so — reached a fundamentally new stage in the development of human civilisation, in which it is necessary to take responsibility for a recent but profound alteration in the relationship between the species and the planet.

AFTER an exhausting conference (December 1-10, '97) with several nights of little sleep the chairman of the third UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kyoto, Japan finally said the words that the delegates from 160 countries wanted to hear. To judge by the press photographs, they somewhat seemed too tired to hear what they were supposed to applaud:

An agreed upon overall emission reduction of about 5.2 per cent for the developed countries on 1990 levels by 2008-2012. This far below the 15 per cent reduction on 1990 levels by 2010 proposed at the conference by the European Union which all the more seemed a realistic and achievable target. It was feared that the rising concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the Earth's atmosphere would contribute to further climate change leading to billions of dollars worth of property damage, loss of human life, sea-level rise and extreme weather conditions that may damage tourism and agriculture. It will also accelerate the process of species' extinction and habitat loss.

Most people are now aware of the implications of global climate change and the greenhouse effect. The composition of the earth's atmosphere is a primary determinant of the planet's temperature, which in turn establishes the conditions and limits for all forms of life. Without the heat-trapping properties of greenhouse gases, which make up more than 1 or 2 per cent of the earth's atmosphere, the average surface temperature would be similar to that of Mars: -60 degrees Fahrenheit (-16 degrees Celsius). The main GHGs are water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and halo carbons (like CFC-11 and CFC-12).

The Japanese hosts, meanwhile, duly proclaimed the conference a success and other delegations were also keen to convey the same message up to a point, but there were reservations.

The US vice-president Al Gore's attendance at the conference, however, was an apparent sign of American commitment to the issue, to the process of negotiations that were under way

there. "We", the US vice-president reported to have said, "an extraordinary team of people committed to help work through the complex issues that are presented here." Yet for the US, there was unfinished business of what was called "emission trading", which, according to critics, would allow the rich countries to defy the protests from the others. In his speech to a ministerial meeting on December 8 last, Mr. Gore said he had instructed the US delegation to increase its negotiating flexibility in trying to reach a comprehensive plan that includes realistic reduction levels of GHG emissions by developed nations and meaningful participation of key developing countries like India, China, Brazil etc.

The Chinese delegation, for instance, was of many for the developing world to see this as a device for the US to avoid making cuts in GHGs. According to a World Bank report released in Washington on November 21, developing countries of South Asia contribute only marginally to the problem of global warming although this may change significantly with the rising population problem.

The countries of South Asia, which also includes Bangladesh, have contributed relatively little to climate change and per capita energy use remains extremely low compared to industrial coun-

tries, pointed out the Bank in the report.

But, according to the US, to help achieve GHGs reduction in the developing countries and to help the developed countries meet their targets through least cost reduction, America has spearheaded a number of joint implementation projects throughout the world with credit as a key element of Kyoto agreement. It is important to realise, said the US, that joint implementation with credit is the most innovative mechanism in any environmental agreement for the transfer of technology to developing countries.

Both domestically and internationally, the US has proposed "emissions trading" systems that harness the power of the marketplace to achieve reductions at the lowest possible cost. Whether or not agreement in Kyoto works in the future, the United States is committed to a comprehensive package of domestic measures to achieve significant emissions reductions. These include: five billion dollars in tax credits and research incentives; restructuring of our electricity market;

incentives for early action; industry by industry consultation; and stronger efficiency efforts by the federal government. This is a broad outline of the American proposals, as it said, both domestically and internationally, to address the problem of climate change.

While the industrialised countries at the conference were still debating what targets and timetables for GHG emission controls will become legally binding for all developed nations as part of a new climate change protocol, the US has proposed a target of cutting average emission levels in the period 2008 through 2012 back to 1990 levels.

On the other hand, the European Union (EU) has proposed a reduction of 15 per cent below 1990 levels by 2010. The EU delegate told at the conference that they came to Kyoto with a higher target and they would have liked the other parties to be more ambitious. Under the European plan, however, the 15 EU member-countries would set their own targets of greenhouse emissions — ranging from a 30 per cent reduction to a 40 per cent increase — so that the

Union as a whole would reduce emissions by 15 per cent by 2010 from the level of 1990.

But environmental groups were highly critical of the Kyoto deal and they regarded this agreement, according to Cyber agencies, as deeply flawed and there were so many loopholes that emissions are actually likely to increase and the process of global warming to continue unabated.

Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) — a Netherlands-based environmental fraternity — for example, said that the Kyoto Protocol agreed at the UN COP3 meeting on climate change will not slow down global warming. After 11 days of negotiations, governments have come up with a compromise deal that could in the early part of the next century even lead to emission increases because of a series of loopholes that remain in the final text. These loopholes include the provision for Russia to sell 'phantom' emissions with more energy-intensive economies such as the United States.

The highly compromised political deal done in Kyoto is largely attributable to the posi-

tion of America which was heavily influenced by fossil fuel and automobile industry interests. The failure to reach agreement led to the talks spilling into a session that ended in disarray as interpretation facilities were withdrawn.

Tony Juniper of FoEI has, reportedly, said: "Governments have delivered a deal but at present this is fatally compromised and riddled with loopholes. Millions of people worldwide will remain at risk from the social and economic upheaval that will accompany progressive global warming. There must be an urgent evaluation of what has been achieved here and early efforts to improve on this weak agreement. The acceptance of the need for more effective action by countries like the USA will be vital".

In the meantime, the American Senate has passed a resolution that it will not ratify a climate pact if the developing nations are not part of a global effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions. And, the developing countries continue to insist that they will take on no obligations to limit GHGs until the

industrialised nations act to reduce emissions.

The world has — and rightly so — reached a fundamentally new stage in the development of human civilisation, in which it is necessary to take responsibility for a recent but profound alteration in the relationship between the species and the planet. Because of the new technological power, in growing numbers, everybody now must pay careful attention to the consequences of what they are doing to the earth — especially to the atmosphere.

There are many parts of the Earth's ecological system that are also threatened by the increasingly harsh impact of thoughtless behaviour: the poisoning of too many places where people — especially the poor — live, and the deaths of too many children from polluted water and dirty air; the dangerous and unsustainable depletion of ocean fisheries; and the rapid destruction of critical habitats — rain forests, temperate forests, boreal forests, wetlands, coral reefs and other precious wildernesses of genetic variety upon which the future of humankind depends.

But the most vulnerable part of the earth's environment is the very thin layer of air clinging near to the surface of the planet, that people are now so carelessly filling with gaseous wastes. They are actually drastically changing the relation-

ship between the Earth and the Sun by trapping more solar radiation under this growing blanket of pollution that envelops the entire world.

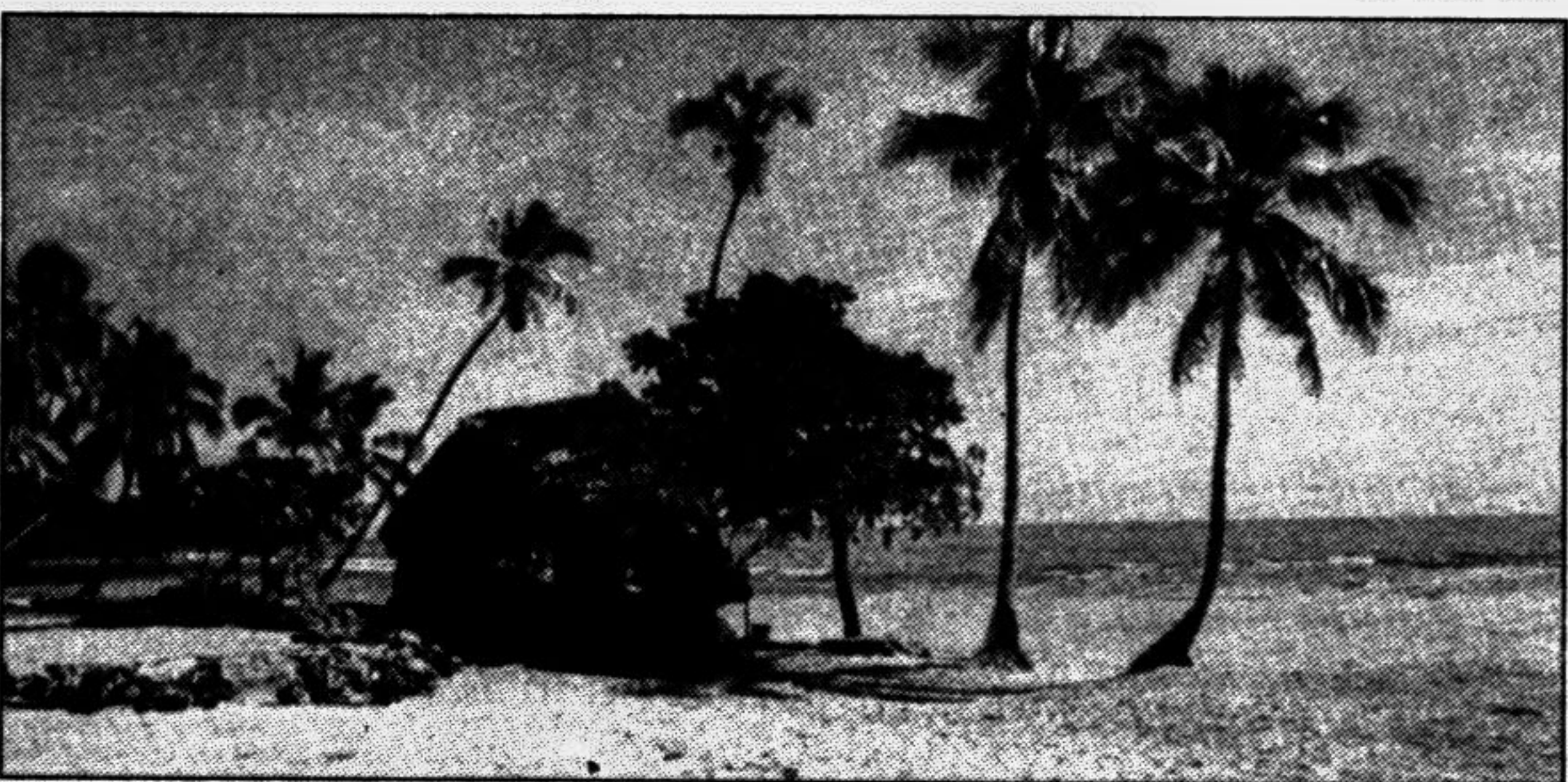
The extra heat, unable to escape, is beginning to change the global patterns of climate to which humans are accustomed, and to which they have adapted, according to scientists, over the last 10,000 years.

Very recently, it was learnt from scientists that this year, 1997, with only one day remaining, will be the hottest year since records have been kept. Indeed, nine of the 10 hottest years since the measurements began have come in the last 10 years. The trend is clear: the human consequences — and the economic costs — of failing to act are unthinkable.

The fundamental challenge now is to find out whether and how people can change their behaviours that are causing the problem. The first and most important task for developed countries is to hear the immediate needs of the developing world. The developed nations have learnt, as they have developed over the centuries, that the first priority of the developing countries is to pull their citizens out of poverty and build strong economies that will assure a better future. This is their right: it should not be denied.

There should not be any false divide regarding GHG cuts. Reducing poverty and protecting the earth's environment are both critical components of truly sustainable development. The rich nations have to forge a lasting partnership to achieve a better future which they are preaching. One key is to mobilise new investment in poorer countries to ensure that they have higher standards of living, with modern, clean and efficient technologies.

Every individual should always remember that earlier this century, a Scottish mountain climber, WH Murray, wrote: "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative... there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that is the moment one definitely commits oneself, providence moves, too."



Many islands in oceans may be submerged



Frequency and intensity of tropical storm may increase

THREE and half years ago, the winds of liberalisation were blowing strongly across the country. The idea was then mooted to convert the nation's largest commercial bank, the State Bank of India, as well as a number of other banks into corporate entities, and to have their shares sold openly in the stock exchanges. To quieten the misgivings of old-timers worried over letting go of State control over monetary resources in this manner, 51 per cent of the total equity of each bank, it was indicated, would continue to be held by the State.

Has the safeguard been effective at all? The government, rushing headlong to fulfil its commitment to liberalise the economy, had at the same time declared that upto 30 per cent of the equity of any corporate entity, including a bank institution, could be held by foreign citizens. As a result, close to a quarter of the total equity of the State Bank of India and of a number of other important banks, such as the Bank of Baroda, is reported to have passed to foreign hands. The consequences have indeed been far-reaching. During the past few

weeks, even as the Reserve Bank of India has been trying desperately to shore up the external value of the rupee against machinations launched by foreign speculators and kept buying rupees against dollars in the currency market, the State Bank of India was acting quite contrarily, selling rupees and buying dollars.

This extraordinary phenomenon is being sought to be explained in terms of demand-supply factors in the international currency market. With on-going globalisation, commercial banks are supposed to have freed themselves from narrow 'national' considerations and followed the market signals; in the circumstances, what a central bank regards as sound from the country's point of view could be easily brushed aside by individual commercial banks; so much so that the State Bank of India, the Bank of Baroda, etc. as sovereign market entities feel justified to go their own way and join international currency manipulators in manoeuvres that grievously harm the nation's cause. According to the point of view held by die-hard globalisers, national interests are an illusion.

The Season for Stock-taking

Dr Ashok Mitra writes from New Delhi

It is an unequal international economic order and devaluation to the extent the Indian rupee has been forced to undergo has brought the country very little benefit. Each act of devaluation cheapens Indian goods to foreigners, which is just another way of stating the fact that foreigners use the mechanics of currency value adjustments to intensify the rate of exploitation of the Indian people.

The pursuit of international market signals serves the nation the best over the long run. The forced depreciation of the rupee that is currently on, we will be told, is likely to make Indian goods more competitive internationally and thereby help promote the country's exports. Would it really do so? Since June 1995, the rupee has depreciated by more than 60 per cent compared to the dollar.

The impact of this depreciation on the country's exports has been perfunctory. After displaying some sort of a spurt for a couple of years, the rate of exports plummeted dramatically and has currently reached the level of near-stagnation. The World Trade Organisation, on paper assigned the task of en-

suring free trade between countries without the hindrance of tariffs and quantitative restrictions, has done little to help out the poorer nations, who continue to be at the receiving end of discriminatory treatment from the Western capitalist countries. The latter are able to find one pretext after another to prevent goods from the poorer countries from entering their markets. At the same time, they do not feel the least hesitant to demand that the poorer countries make their import regime as free as it can be so that their goods can freely enter the domestic market of the poorer economies.

It is an unequal international economic order and devaluation to the extent the Indian rupee has been forced to undergo has brought the country very little benefit. Each act of devaluation cheapens Indian goods to foreigners, which is just another way of stating the fact that foreigners use the mechanics of currency value adjustments to intensify the rate of exploitation of the Indian people. The foreign debt burden goes up in rupee terms, the cost of servicing this debt also there-fore mounts. No corresponding compensatory advantages to compensate for these losses are discernible. As it is quite obvious, the real trends of production and prices in the national economies are not the determinants of the exchange rates between different currencies; international money speculators decide these rates according to their whims.

The Indian Ministry of Finance, in awe of the International Monetary Fund, is yet to react independently to the recent developments. Certain things are however getting clearer with every day. A great deal can be said in favour of re-imposing a number of restrictions on short-term capital movements; otherwise we could end up losing whatever foreign exchange reserves we have managed to accumulate in the course of the past few years. It would also appear important to embark on an overall review of where liberalisation has led this country to. The rate of economic growth in the post-liberation phase is way below what it was in the eighties; the rate of capital formation is also down across-the-board. Our foreign

advisers and their domestic patrons have been in the habit of stressing the thesis that direct foreign investment will take care of our investment needs; the Indian community should therefore concentrate on consumption and more consumption, which would boost the demand for domestic manufactures. Direct foreign investment has now, however, begun to turn negative, while foreign goods are substituting Indian manufactures in the consumption schedule of affluent Indians. The rate of growth has slackened for both industry and agriculture since the commencement of liberalisation; but it has accelerated for the services sector. A company executive who used to earn Rs. 5,000 a month in the pre-1991 days is now able to demand and earn compensation to the extent of Rs. 100,000. Corporate salaries, in other words, are getting globalised. But a large part of this additionally accruing income is being spent on the acquisition of foreign goods and is therefore not available to stimulate demand for Indian manufactures. The boom in service income leaves the overwhelming mass of Indians as poor and impover-

ished as they have been all along. What is even worse is that has given a boost to economic inequalities which in turn is the progenitor of grave social disorder.

An endeavour is on to attribute these negative developments to political uncertainties reigning in the country. It is difficult to conceive a more outrageous formulation. The political turmoil India is going through has not and cannot be behind the meltdown of the world's stock exchanges and the tumultuous fluctuations in the international currency market. Nor can political instability now be the factor responsible for the decline in growth and investment spread during the preceding six years.

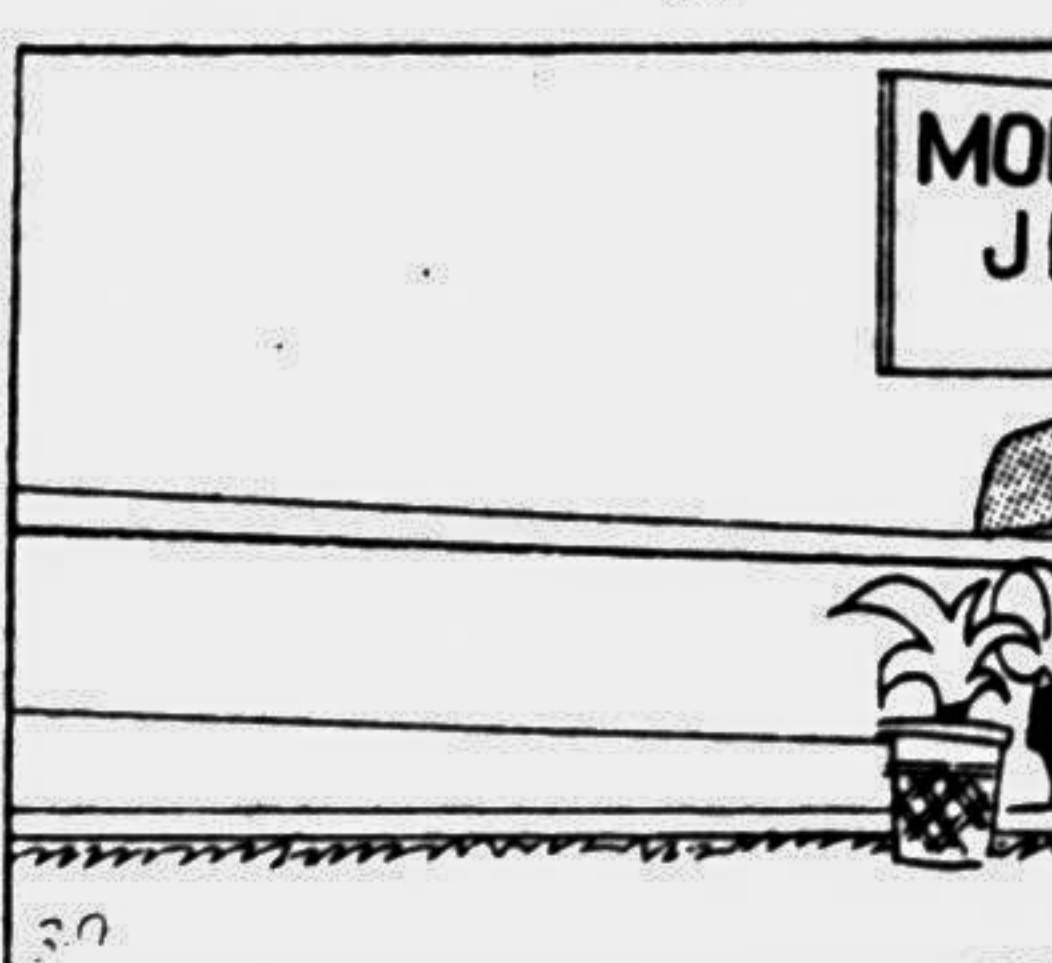
The confusion in the nation's capital is bound to resolve itself in some manner or other. Those who come to the helm of affairs, will, it is hoped, have the courage to expose the myths of creativity attributed to globalisation and liberalisation.

—Mridha
The author is a former Finance Minister of West Bengal and now a Member of Parliament.

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FPAB AGM held

The Annual General Meeting of Family Planning Association of Bangladesh (FPAB) was held at the Shaheed Moazzamuddin auditorium yesterday, reports UNB.

FPAB honorary General Secretary Dr Syeda Firoza Begum presented the annual report (1996-97) of the honorary Secretary General, said a press release.

The meeting also approved various issues including three-year planning (1997-99), workprogramme budget 1998 and appointment of auditor after discussion, said a press release.

Chaired by Dr Nileema Ibrahim, the meeting was participated by 71 councillors from different branches of FPAB.



A seminar on 'Role of religious leaders in prevention and control of AIDS' organised by the Development of Human Characters & Welfare Organisation (DHCWO) in association with Bangladesh AIDS Prevention and Control Project was held at a local hotel yesterday.

Dhaka to become mega city by turn of the century

The capital Dhaka is becoming a mega city by the turn of the century with its population rapidly increasing to 10 million, reports BSS.

A roundtable on the city's management was told yesterday that despite becoming rapidly expanded Dhaka's services remain those of provincial capital.

Held at the BRAC auditorium at Mohakhali, the roundtable on "Dhaka City Management Reform Pilot Project" was jointly organised by the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) and BRAC in association with the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Dr Saleemul Huq, who is the Executive Director of the BCAS, said the mounting problems of the Dhaka city are related to pollution, housing, electricity, water supply, sewerage, garbage collection transport as well as governance and finance. Dr Huq observed that these problems are becoming so acute that

this may choke the city at time. He emphasised the need for concerted efforts, involving all the stakeholders including the NGOs, private sectors, civil society groups and city dwellers from improving the situation.

JS Petition Committee meet held

Speaker Humayun Rashed Chowdhury has said people have given a comprehensive response to the Petition Committee of Jatiya Sangsad following a massive campaign about it, reports UNB.

His remark came from a meeting of the Petition Committee held with the Speaker, who is also the Chairman of the committee, in the chair. "A massive campaign was conducted on media so that the people can seize the opportunity to appeal to the Petition Committee," the Speaker told.

Death of architect: Condolence meet at BUET tomorrow

A condolence meeting will be held to mourn the premature death of architect Raziul Ahsan Khandakar on January one at 4:30 pm in the auditorium of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), reports BSS.

Institute of Architects has requested all its members and well-wishers of late Khandakar to attend the condolence meeting.

Obituary

Hazrat Maulana Mohammad Abdul Huq, a spiritual leader of Hadua at Nalchiti thana under Jhalakati district, died on Monday at Barisal Medical College Hospital at the age of 95, reports BSS.

Late Maulana Huq has left behind one daughter, four sons and a host of friends and followers to mourn his death. His eldest son, Abdul Mahab, is serving at Hadua Aleya Madrasa as its principal.

MSP urges govt to take steps for implementing CHT treaty

Muktijoddha Samannay Parishad (MSP) yesterday urged the government to take up clear, correct and firm steps for implementing the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty, reports BSS.

In a written statement delivered at a press conference, the Chairman and Secretary General of the MSP, Messrs Abir Ahad and SM Yunus Akbar described the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty as an epoch-making achievement of the present government.

They said that the peace accord on the one hand had upheld the basic human and fundamental rights of the people and opened up a new vista for establishing peace, stability, solidarity and socio-economic progress, on the others.

Directive to complete settlement work by 2000

State Minister for Land Alhaj Rashed Mosharrar has directed concerned authority to work with sincerity, honesty and team spirit to complete the country's settlement work positively by the year 2000, reports UNB.

The minister gave the directive in a review meeting on country's on-going settlement activities at the DGLR conference room in the city yesterday. The state minister chaired it.

Mosharrar said the government has taken up a vigorous step to remove all sorts of corruption and irregularities aiming to make a correct and fair land records.

Directive has already been given to the divisional commissioners to keep vigilance over the activities of settlement in the filed level, said the minister.

Renewal of TV, VCR, STVR licenses begins Thursday

The renewal of all residential televisions, VCRs, STVRs (Dish Antenna) licenses begins on Thursday, reports UNB.

According to an official handout, the licenses can be renewed from any branch of Janata Bank by January 31 without surcharge.

It said the old licences (not having validity till December 31, 1997) can be renewed by paying arrears fees and surcharges. The fees for the renewal of licenses have been fixed as follows: Black and White TV — Tk 200, colour TV — Tk 400, video cassette recorder — Tk 750, STVR (Dish Antenna) one line — Tk 2,000 and 2-10 line — Tk 10,000.

The commercial licenses can be renewed from the headquarters of Controller (License), Bangladesh Television at Ram-pura, the handout said.