

Ban on Trade Unionism

The government's prohibition of all forms of trade union activity in Bangladesh Bank has been generally well-received. The rather extraordinary move seems to have been prompted by the riotous turn of events at the central bank last week. But this was the unstoppable culmination of a haemorrhagic attrition the institution has suffered through rival trade unionism topped off by CBA tyranny over the long haul.

The fact of the matter is that CBAs have for a long time ceased to be dedicated to the service of the workers and staff members; instead these have been veritably self-serving to a point where they stand thoroughly exposed today to all and sundry. The government's task force on trade union activity has found out the reckless abandon with which CBA omissions and commissions have occurred in the Nationalised Commercial Banks. A quarter of the total salaried workforce in the NCBs do not work at all, a highly demoralising swipe for thousands of their colleagues who have to earn a livelihood by the sweat of their brow. Such unduly privileged job-holders furthermore enjoy running parallel administrations in the banks with all the paraphernalia and having the say in most matters including even disbursement of loans, as reported in certain news papers lately. All of this would call for an extension of the ban on trade union activity to the entire nationalised commercial banking sector.

Basically the trade union laws are flawed rendering an instrument for the safeguard of labour rights and welfare completely vulnerable to internal corruption and intrusive political influences. The present laws tend to foment rival trade unionism by stipulating that any one party getting a minimum of 33 per cent of the labour vote can be recognised as a CBA. For the sake of healthy trade unionism in the country, we urge the government to reform the relevant laws in consultation with the ILO and other appropriate institutions, both at home and abroad. Until then trade union activities may remain suspended in all the NCBs. Simultaneously, in greater public interest, the government should also think of releasing an investigative report on the assets position of the trade union leaders.

Hardly a Matter of Law

With Eid shopping picking up tempo, Dhaka has turned into a nightmare for anybody with a mind to pace along its roads. Assortment of vehicles — both motorised and non-motorised keeps streets of arterial significance occupied from morning to late into the night. There is no way out of Dhaka's traffic gridlock these days even if it is a matter of life and death. Admittedly, it is not the sheer number of vehicles that is responsible for poor traffic mobility. Rather it is their variety which stifles mobility and creates congestion. Like their shapes, the pace of vehicles on Dhaka streets vary starkly.

What makes one worried about the situation is that the authorities seem to be as much indifferent as the man in the street. More than starvation of ideas, it seems to be a case of weakness of the will on their part. A Daily Star report on Saturday last quoted a senior police official having observed that absence of laws against NMV (non-motorised vehicles) renders law enforcers' job well nigh impossible.

While the police official's point goes a long way in evoking sympathy over the impossibility of his community's job, it does not hold as good when it comes to life-like situation. True, the 1983 ordinance does not have any room for legal measure against NMV, but would it, if there were any, have made a miraculous difference? Not much, we are afraid.

The real problem or challenge lies in checking the arrival of new rickshaws on the roads — stopping the issuance of fake licences. No law or road rule will make any difference unless the generative source is plugged. This we think is more of a management crisis—a crisis due to lack of coordination among relevant government agencies and ministries—than a legalistic one. Dhaka City Corporation, the licensing authority will have to take a firm stance on the issue of new licences.

Only a strong political will goaded by an unflinching commitment to Dhaka's future can make any difference.

Twosome Tragedy

It was early Friday morning. First lights of dawn were yet to show up. And there was no fog on or around the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Kutumbapur or the Kinsmen's Village is in Chandina, Comilla. There appears a fully laden bus but on unsteady a tread as a completely drunk man. And hits head-on a truck coming from the Chittagong side. The bus, hit very hard, falls into the wayside ditch. Seven die on the spot and three die later in hospitals. Half a hundred get injured, most of them seriously.

But this crime-induced tragedy differs from all earlier such. And this very much is the first incident in which a bus has met with both dacoity and collision at the same time.

The Hajiganj bound bus had among its passengers from Dhaka a gang of dacoits. As the bus approached Kutumbapur the dacoits bared their fangs. Unfortunately for all, meeting resistance from the driver they stabbed the driver first. And the bus started swaying without control. In the meantime the rest of the gang had snatched as much as they could from the passengers. But the victims and culprits both came to grief in the end and at the same time.

Road accidents are eminently preventable things — but only to an extent and over a long time frame. Dacoity, however, can be fought more effectively and with a sharp focus. And the bus dacoits do not enjoy the levities of the automobiles act. From the injured and surviving dacoits it should be easy to track down the whole gang. And they should be made to pay not only for dacoity and violent crime but also murder of ten.

The police record against bus dacoits is not bright. Let this brighten up without delay. Meanwhile, will the bus operators start taking care about getting a foolproof check on the passengers. It should not be difficult to pass through a security sieve some sixty people.

THE Asian currency crisis has entered its seventh month amid new speculations that the currency meltdown will worsen in the coming weeks. The United States and its economic allies as well as the donor agencies, specially IMF, have come up with standard bailout packages calling for expelling crony capitalism, rescheduling loans, reducing trade barriers, and privatising state companies. IMF's prescription for the troubled economies in the region also include banking reforms, increased transparency in government policy-making and implementation, and market liberalisation.

The crisis in individual countries and IMF's response has now become routine. As an economy starts to plunge, IMF introduces a bailout package. But the local currency — whether it is baht, won, or rupiah — continues its free fall triggering further IMF bailouts. The declining currency reduces wages and global buying power of the country's citizens, lowers the income of the exporting industries facing inelastic demand while raising the liability to foreign banks.

Some of the IMF policy prescriptions are, of course, necessary. However, the immediate concern should be to stabilise the exchange rate. The financial crisis has devalued many of the region's currencies by more than fifty per cent although the price level in these countries haven't yet increased by that proportion. For instance, the price of the US dollar in Indonesia is up by more than 200 per cent. The monthly inflation rate in only December measured 3 per cent triggering a buying spree among consumers. If the Indonesian rupiah stays at current levels, the economy will register a 200 per cent inflation rate over the next two years.

Given the potential catastrophe awaiting these countries, they should use whatever resources are available to stop devaluation of individual currencies, such as, baht, rupiah, or won. This can be achieved by restricting the supply of money in response to currency weakness. In other words, reduce the

Stop Devaluation

Dr A R Chowdhury writes from Canada

"... If you try to cure a hunchback with a hammer, you cure the hunchback but kill the man."

— Korean proverb

supply of money to match its shrinking demand. IMF's bailout package has avoided this simple route and instead prescribed sterilised currency inflows and outflows.

The case of Indonesia stands out in this regard. In September, as Indonesia switched from its fixed to the flexible exchange rate system, the demand for rupiah declined overnight by about 50 per cent. Yet IMF guidelines called for a gradual increase in money supply which led to additional capital flight out of the rupiah, and thus further devaluation.

Two recent examples can be given in support of my argument that devaluation is harmful for the Asian countries. During the 1994 Latin American currency crisis, Mexico and Argentina went the two different directions. Mexico devalued its currency by more than 50 per cent and received a financial bailout from the international community. Argentina, on the

other hand, withstood the attack on its currency using international aid to stop runs on its banks.

Events since the crisis show the varying effects of their policies. Argentina's GDP has grown by about 15 per cent since 1994; while Mexico's 1997 GDP is still below its 1994 level in real terms. The Mexican peso has devalued by more than 120 per cent against the US dollar since 1994 while its price index over the same period rose by 122 per cent. The increase in price level in Argentina, on the other hand, has been much more modest.

The success of the Argentina approach can be attributed to its decision, in 1991, to set up a currency board, to end years of spiral inflation. The currency board gives its monetary authority a tool not enjoyed by any other central bank — an automatic and theoretically unassailable mechanism for keeping exchange rate stability — no matter how high interest

rates must go. Instead of playing with the exchange rate, the government pegs its money to some other currency, e.g., US dollar. The local currency is fully convertible and its supply is backed by dollar reserve. Under this system, attempt to redeem local currency for dollar leads to an automatic decline in the supply of local currency thus providing a clear signal to the market.

The second example brings us close to home. The recent performance of Hong Kong compared to the other affected countries in the region — Indonesia, Korea, and Thailand. Despite the wave of currency devaluation that has swept through these three countries, only the Hong Kong dollar has clung on to its peg to the US dollar. This may be attributed to the presence of a currency board in Hong Kong, while the other three countries decided to float their currency. The currency board helped Hong Kong defend its currency while most around

it fell. For the other Asian countries nervously sitting on the sidelines, the Argentina and Hong Kong approach will provide a superior tool in facing any speculative currency attack. These countries should either set up a currency board or simply let their central bank select an exchange rate and defend it. This would be a simple policy of changing domestic money supply in order to match the demand for money and to keep constant the country's foreign exchange rate.

This method will, of course, lead to some short-term costs — higher internal interest rate, slower economic growth, and higher bank failures. But these costs are in all likelihood lower than if a devaluation inflation takes hold.

The IMF insists that its bailout package are well-designed and constructive. However, they violate one of the fundamental economic principles by ignoring the direct causal connection between devaluation and inflation.

The author is a Professor of Economics at Marquette University, Wisconsin, USA.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

A Question of Etiquette in Politics

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Good manners, are an indication of good breeding and should be a prerequisite in any field of human endeavour, including politics

This is what makes this country so humble, yet so mighty.

Good manners, such as Clinton's, are an indication of good breeding and should be a prerequisite in any field of human endeavour, including politics. In a sphere where the exercise of power holds sway, it is not always easy to be civil, our politicians tell us. That is a lame excuse. If the politicians represent the people, and people are civilized, so should the politicians be.

People should also treat politicians with respect. In civilized countries they do. Former British Prime Minister Edward Heath was a life long bachelor. Yet, no one ever made a public joke about his celibacy. In a nation whose Prime Ministers are predominantly Oxford graduates, John Major did not attend college, and would have

been the butt of many "ignorant" jokes in many a society. Not in Britain. Things of personal nature, where a person, even a Prime Minister could be hurt, are never discussed in a civilized society. The turbulent world of politics is no exception.

Former United States President Ronald Reagan was not the smartest of Presidents. A second rate Hollywood actor, who actually said that if he were more successful in Hollywood he would never have entered politics, Reagan revealed in reciting famous Hollywood one liners: "Make my day!", "Over my dead body!" In public however, no intellectual would ever question President Reagan's intellectual capacity.

The Press, too, operates under a set of strict guidelines. As Eleanor Roosevelt was spanning the globe, US President Franklin

Roosevelt was consorting with another woman. The woman at President Roosevelt's death bed was not Eleanor! The Press knew about all this, but during those days a politician's personal life was off limit to the Press. President Kennedy too benefited from the Press's self-imposed censorship. During the Presidential campaign of 1960, the Press was fully aware of Senator Kennedy's philandering. Yet, neither they nor the Republican candidate Richard Nixon made an issue of it.

Rules of engagement change in the Press, as in the politics. Democratic Presidential candidate Senator Gary Hart was a victim of the changed rules in 1988. He dared the Press to explore his extra-marital affairs. They did — complete with the photograph of a woman sitting on his lap atop a yacht appropriately named, "Mon-

key Business" — destroying his Presidential aspirations in the process. The Press was operating under a different set of rules. These days they are relentless in the pursuit of scandals. And the politicians know about it. Just ask Bill Clinton. However, the Press has not abandoned civility.

It seems unseemly for someone to say all the good things about himself or herself, even if it is true. In his hey days, heavyweight boxing legend Muhammad Ali used to say, "I am the Greatest!" Although it was a ploy to attract attention and sell tickets, the problem with that statement was that Muhammad Ali's case, it was true! He was the Greatest. Therefore, that announcement of himself was a little off. Fortunately, after Ali embraced Islam, he abandoned the bravado and

called "Allah, the Greatest." Once, during a speech recounting India's independence, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi heaped profuse praise on Mahatma Gandhi and just about everyone else. One person conspicuously missing from receiving her accolade was Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru — her father, and after Mahatma Gandhi, India's greatest statesman. That deliberate omission did not reduce the stature of Jawaharlal and Indira in the eyes of the Indian public, it only enhanced it!

One of the concerns that Bangladeshis had about our two leading ladies becoming Prime Ministers was the vengeance factor. After all, one had lost her husband, and the other her entire family to the assassins' bullets. People worried about what kind of retribution they might exact on assuming the ultimate power. What they might do in the name of their husband and father. Fortunately, the fears were unfounded. Khaleda Zia, as a matter of fact, did very little to enhance the name of her husband, during her tenure as Prime Minister. One wishes one could say the same about Sheikh Hasina, whose father, as the founding father of Bangladesh, needs no promoting. It is a question of etiquette.

WORLD LEPROSY DAY

Efforts Towards Building a Leprosy-Free Bangladesh

by Dr A K Md Ahsan Ali

It is our hope that Bangladesh will be able to achieve the Leprosy elimination goal by the year 2000, provided the political will and support.

It is estimated that Bangladesh presently has about 40,000 leprosy cases remaining to be detected. This gives a current prevalence of approximately 3.3 per 10,000 population.

The modern Multi-Drug Treatment (MDT) has revolutionised the Leprosy treatment and a complete CURE is assured in all cases at all stages. Though MDT was introduced in Bangladesh in a phased manner in about 100 endemic thanas since 1985, it is only in November, '93 that the project "Further Development of TB & Leprosy Control Services" (funds from Govt of Bangladesh, World Bank, IDA, Govt of Netherlands & technical assistance from WHO) started MDT implementation in a systematic and organised manner.

Though it is a combined TB and Leprosy project, it was decided that Leprosy expansion will proceed faster than TB in order to achieve the elimination goal.

The WHO has targeted LEPROSY for ELIMINATION as a Public Health Problem i.e. to reduce prevalence of the disease to less than 1 case per 10,000 population, by the year 2000. This means that in Bangladesh, the prevalence has to be reduced from the present 3.3/10,000 to less than 1/10,000 within the next 2 years.

Goal and Objectives: The Goal of the National programme is the Elimination of Leprosy as a public health problem i.e. prevalence 1/10,000 population by the year 2000.

In order to achieve the elimination goal, the National Programme has set the following objectives:

a) To provide countrywide MDT facility with thana as the peripheral unit by the end of 1995. It was proposed to establish a total of 600 MDT facilities (units) countrywide.

b) To detect over 85 per cent of the estimated cases within 5 years of MDT implementation.

c) To provide MDT to all registered cases.

d) To achieve over 85 per cent Treatment Completion (cure) rates.

e) To reduce deformity rate (grade 2) among new cases to less than 5 per cent within 5 years of project implementation (21.4 per cent in 1993).

Main Strategies

a) Integration of Leprosy control into the general health services of the country, in combination with TB control.

b) To provide WHO-recommended fixed duration MDT to all registered leprosy cases.

c) Intensive information, education, communication (IEC) activities to promote case detection, case holding and awareness in the community.

d) Training of general health staff, NGO staff, general medical practitioners, community volunteers and other target groups.

e) Involvement and strengthening of collaboration with NGOs in MDT implementation.

f) Development of an effective referral network.

g) Development of a simple and effective system of monitoring and supervision.

h) Involvement and participation of all sections of the community in the leprosy elimination activities.

Achievements as of 31 December 1997

Countrywide Expansion of MDT Facilities with Thana as the peripheral unit: The thana is the Sub-district administrative unit in Bangladesh. Each

thana has an average population of 200,000 and is catered by a Thana Health Complex (THC) with outpatient and inpatient facilities (31 beds).

It was proposed to establish a total of 600 MDT facilities or units as follows:

i. One each in 460 thanas (sub-district): 460

ii. One each in 103 Municipalities, including 60 (out of 64) district HQ towns (the remaining 4 are Metros): 103

iii. Thirty-seven units corresponding to 37 police thanas of 4 metropolitan cities — Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna: 37

iv. The total is: 600

By the beginning of 1996, All 600 Treatment Centres were established. This means that at least one Medical Officer and all the field staff are trained in leprosy and adequate stocks of leprosy drugs are available in all the centres.

It was decided to retain thana as the peripheral unit because it is easily accessible to the majority of patients for the monthly reporting to receive the supervised doses.

Thus the objective of countrywide expansion and geographical coverage and accessibility of MDT to all communities and areas has been achieved.

Training and Human Resource Development

The programme has given high priority to Training and Human Resource Development. Over a period of 4 years, commencing July 1993, over 30,000 general health and leprosy staff of various categories from the central, divisional, district and thana level have received training in leprosy and MDT implementation.

Since 1995, training was decentralised to the district and the thana level and the NGOs were also involved in conducting the training. It is observed that substantially more numbers could be trained and training becomes more cost-effective, when it is decentralised.

National Guidelines

With the aim of uniformly applying the planned strategies and activities countrywide and to follow a standard system of implementation a technical and operational National Guideline entitled "Technical Guide and Operational Manual for Leprosy Control in Bangladesh" was developed and distributed to programme managers at all levels in 1994.

A revised edition of the guideline was printed and distributed in 1996 and third edition is under printing and is due for distribution shortly.

In the first half of 1997, a total of 5,516 new cases have been detected of whom 2,067 (40 per cent) are MB and 3,449 (60 per cent) are PB. Countrywide, a total of 34,934 new cases were registered for MDT and 34,445 cases completed MDT from January 1993 to December 1996.

The male/female ratio among new cases in 1996 was 1.0:6 and the child rate among new cases was 15.85 per cent.

MDT Coverage and Treatment Completion (Cure) Rates

Since 1994, all registered cases are provided with MDT. Thus the MDT coverage of regis-

tered cases is 100 per cent in Bangladesh, for the past 4 years.

The cumulative number of MDT completed cases: From 1985 to December 1996: 70,063. From 1985 to December 1992: 35,618; From January 1993 to Dec 1996: 34,445.

A cohort analysis of 4,657 Pauci-bacillary (PB) patients registered between April 1995 and March 1996, show that 4,318 out of 4,657 patients have satisfactorily completed their treatment, giving a cure rate of 92.7 per cent.

A similar analysis of 2,575 Multi-bacillary (MB) patients registered in 1993/94, shows a Cure rate of 82.9 per cent, which is marginally short of the objective of 85 per cent Cure rate. The MB cohorts related to patients registered prior to the intensification of leprosy activities under the present project.

The number Relapses after MDT recorded in Bangladesh is extremely low — less than 0.2 per cent of the total cases detected in 1996, thus proving the potency and efficacy of MDT.

WHO-funded Special Activities

Special Action Projects for Elimination of Leprosy (SAPEL) in Difficult Areas: The National Leprosy Programme in Bangladesh submitted a SAPEL proposal for the 3 districts of Chittagong, Hill Tracts, WHO approved the proposal initially for one district-Rangamati.

As per the proposal, village level volunteers are being utilised to deliver MDT, since patients have problems of access and transport to reach health centres in these districts.

The SAPEL project is operating in Rangamati district since the beginning of 1997 and will be extended to Bandarban and Khagrachhari districts in 1998.

Leprosy Elimination Campaigns (LECs): WHO had initially allocated funds for 14 campaigns in 14 districts. However, we requested funds for implementing LECs countrywide, since the criteria prescribed for LEC applied to all the 64 districts. We are grateful to WHO for accepting our proposal for conducting LECs countrywide.

It was proposed to organise LECs in 21 districts in 1997. However due to various reasons, the campaigns could be fully completed in only 8 of the 21 districts and are expected to be completed in the remaining 13 districts by February 1998.

In the meanwhile, WHO has proposed to organise a nationwide Leprosy Elimination Campaign (N-LEC) in October 1998, in view of the need to accelerate detection of the remaining hidden and backlog cases and initiate their treatment. This Na-

tional Leprosy Awareness and Case Detection Campaign will be organised for one week with the involvement of about 80,000 health workers and volunteers from both the government and NGO sectors countrywide.

Workshops for Medical/Nursing College Teachers and Seminars for Internes and Final-year Medical Students: Under the WHO regular budget for 1996/97 it was proposed to organise workshops for medical/nursing college teachers and seminars for internes/students. The aim of the workshops is to update the leprosy knowledge/skills of medical/nursing college faculty, improve the quality of leprosy teaching and improve the leprosy knowledge/skills of the future doctors/nurses, specially in early case-detection and MDT implementation.

We have completed this very useful activity in 13 Medical and 4 Nursing Colleges so far. A total of 502 medical/nursing faculty members and 1484 students/internes have been covered.

Monitoring Supervision

Since the programme is now operating throughout the country, there is need to improve and strengthen the monitoring/supervision at all levels. We are aware that more attention is required in this area.

Independent Evaluation: The First Independent Evaluation of the National Leprosy Programme was performed recently i.e. 14-24 Sept 1997. The evaluation teams have identified the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the programme and made useful recommendations, which are bound to receive due attention and action by the government and the national programme.

Combined TB/Leprosy Programme: The national programme is a combined TB and Leprosy Control Programme with a minimal vertical set-up for both diseases, operated through the general health services of the country.

By combining the two mycobacterial diseases, the efforts to control these two major health problems of Bangladesh have been complementary and cost-effective.

Achievement of the Leprosy Elimination Goal: It is our hope that Bangladesh will be able to achieve the Leprosy elimination goal by the year 2000, provided the political will and support is sustained and the various activities especially those directed towards case detection, case holding, prompt treatment and community awareness are intensified in the next two years.

The achievement of this noble goal naturally requires the support from all sections of the community at every level.

The writer is Project Director, Further Development of TB and Leprosy Control Services in Bangladesh

To the Editor...

Cement

Sir, Reportedly, annual total consumption of gray portland cement in Bangladesh is about three million tons. Out of this, hardly one-third is locally produced cement, it would not affect the consumers much because cost of cement is a very small fraction of the total cost of any construction project. Hopefully, the authorities concerned would give due consideration to the suggestion.

Farhat S A Roomy House No 477, Road No 32, New DOHS, Dhaka-1206

Governance

Sir, Although more than four hundred years have passed by, Hazrat Ali's (RA) letter on administrative policy remains true and shining as ever (this was addressed to Malik Ashtar, Governor Designate

of Egypt). The policy letter is a document proclaiming the supremacy of the highest human values. Though hundreds of years have passed since Hazrat Ali's (RA) letter was written, its principles can be applied today in the public administration/industrial/commercial sectors. If the guidelines were followed the darkness which has now enveloped the whole society could be lifted.

Every conscientious citizen, in whichever field he/she may be working, has a compulsive duty to the country. The all-pervasive unrest and difficulties we are now faced with need our total national effort, of the government, of the opposition, the intelligentsia and the men and women in the street.

Shahabuddin Mahtab 51, Siddheswari Road Dhaka 1217

War! Again?

Sir, Again the same issues have come up, either change the weapon's inspection team members or we shall stop the inspection. It has been said that the number of US and British members within the team outweigh the other countries.

From the very beginning, France was against the US. Then came the Middle East and presently Russia wants to send their aircraft instead of the US spy plane U2. Now the US is in a fix. Okay, maybe France and Russia has some economic reasons behind this anti-US feelings, but aren't these the only way we can prevent an all-out war?

Masroor Ahmed Deepak Dhaka