

## Ban on TUs

Our highest commendation to the work done by the Task Force on Trade Unions in the Banking Sector. And we lend full support to the useful set of recommendations it has submitted to the Finance Minister within a pleasantly short span of time — a little over six months.

Never before the vicious role of degenerated trade unions was so thoroughly exposed as has been done by the Task Force with incontrovertible factual details. Their octopus-like grip around the respiratorial tract of the banking system has grown over the long haul with a common thread of pampering them into spoilt children running through governments since the inception of Bangladesh. Professional trade unionism thriving on conventional political patronage turned out to be chameleon — even worse than the earlier version — during the military or semi-military regimes. Even the vestigial moorings to principled trade unionism as part of political philosophies thus got cut off. The trend is continuing to this day.

The purpose of the TUs should have been the welfare of the employees and not the personal well-being of their office bearers. So, we are for a workers' representative structure, that is compatible with the designated role of the TUs, not an inch beyond that.

It would be ideal under the present circumstances to weed out the TU culture by completely banning it from the scene. Short of that, for pragmatic political reasons, the TU Task Force has recommended an alternative route to reaching that goal of disciplining the banking sector by adopting a gradualistic approach. Initially, there ought to be a three-year moratorium on TU activities, by declaring the NCBs as an emergency service sector. This is to get the necessary respite and ambience for refashioning the TUs in a way that they are not only defanged but also revitalised in a new form with a positive content.

Since this government made bold to form the Task Force in the first place, it should not be found wanting in political courage to implement its recommendations. Not a day be lost in initiating the process of ridding the nationalised banking sector of pernicious trade unionism.

## This Himalayan Backlog

The courts of law in the country are pressed down by a backlog of 700 thousand undisposed of cases. At the Supreme Court level alone there are about 87 thousand unresolved cases. This is a maddening situation. The Herculean auger stable was a far easier job to clean up. How many years the forty-odd high court judges would take to clear up this load of 87 thousand? If the per capita output is a fantastic 40 cases a year it would take them 54 years. It is highly likely that by the time these would be finished, cases about double this tremendous load would pile up. There must be a way out of this situation of reducing the state's insurance of justice to all to such a mindless farce.

The less said about the district and lower courts the better. As they are, these courts resemble asylums if not shambles. The inner reality of a 6.67 lakh pile of cases pending with these courts would push all sane people into the realm of the unreal and irrational. When wise people said justice delayed is justice denied, they did not know what that delay would amount to in Bangladesh. The mountainous backlog has robbed Bangladesh's system of justice of all meaning.

What remains of a state if justice is thus marginalised? From the emergence of the first states, the arrogation of coercive powers to itself was justified by a guarantee of justice. The highest form of state and governance — democracy — is wholly negated in the virtual absence of justice or judicial backlogs amount to. This huge and unjust piling up of cases is naturally a case of exponential accumulation over the years. Each successive government since the exit of British colonialism brushed aside the growing needs of judicial expansion. For about three decades the strength of the judicial manpower stood still. Incredible!

Law Minister Abdul Matin Khasru is an eminently sensible man. He knows the problem and believes that his government is all for doing something positive about it. But he seems not to have done his arithmetic right. Forced with that big a challenge he must start thinking big and convincing his leader and the colleagues that radical measures are needed here. Like doubling the capacity of the Supreme Court and tripling the whole judicial manpower before the end of the present term of the government. And setting up cells to sift backlog material and dispense with them in some summary manner acceptable to all.

## Make it Public

Nearly seven months after the Magurchara blow-out, information filters out in trickle that design flaws in drilling led to the disaster at the gas exploration site in the north eastern part of the country. A report in Thursday's issue of The Daily Star while referring to the probe committee's report on the June 15 explosion informed us of this. An independent fact finding mission's report, based on the data recorded 24 hours before the blow-out, also pointed out that the catastrophe took place not by chance but by avoidable human error.

Our question is why so late and why so fragmentary? Before we can go the whole hog in backing the government for full compensation from Occidental, the operating company, we need to know all the contents of the report. It is for its own interest and a commitment to democratic norm that the government should make the report public. Its claim for compensation would be richer for conviction if it carries the weight of public understanding and demand.

The inquiry committee had completed the report within two and a half months of the incident. It was then submitted to the government September last. Since then it has been lying idly with the authorities, with little or no sign of governmental activism. It should be remembered here that Magurchara is not a mono-dimensional disaster. It has, as the report says, caused great environmental disaster too. All these aspects have to come under the purview of any appraisal for compensation. And for that the report has to come out in full. We urge the government to divulge the report in its totality.

# Spectre that Haunts the Banking Sector

The present imperatives are, first, to contain the high-handedness of the unions and CBAs in the banking sector and, second, to arrest any future loan defaults. And both of these to happen require straight clear-cut steps...

THE recent report of the Task Force (TF) constituted to delve deeper into the trade union/CBA activities in the banking sector unveiled the spectre haunting the healthy growth of the sector. It may be noted here that the TF was formed against the backdrop of Reports hovering around anarchy in the sector, especially in the light of the recent rumpus in Bangladesh Bank.

The most shivery news that the report annexed (vide the Dainik Sangbad, 24-10-97) is about a CBA leader. His salary is only Tk 4000 a month (almost a poverty level income). "Poor" though, he rides a luxury AC car, moves with mobile phone. From 6-8-1995 to 21-4-1997 (21 months) he managed about Tk 22 lakh and deposited in a branch of his bank. And most of it has been deposited in cash! Reportedly, he drew take one lakh on average per month. The report further contends that some of the trade union leaders refuse to go up the ladder by accepting promotions. They tend to refuse the offer in writing. The economics is simple: trade unionism is more profitable and also powerful than getting promotion.

Information collected from eight banks appear to show that of the total staff in banks, 30 per cent do not do any work whatsoever. Some way or the other, those taking 'french leave' are connected with trade union activities. Bank wise, the proportions of not doing duties are as follows: Bangladesh Bank (22 per cent), Sonali Bank (89 per cent), Janata Bank (24 per cent), Krishi Bank (30 per cent). While existing laws tend to respect union or CBA activities

disconcertingly, they do not respect laws. "Even with regard to promotion and transfer at official levels, which is not under their (CBA) purview, they (CBA leaders) intervene and coerce the management. In such cases, they take bribe ranging from Tk 5,000 to Tk 20,000 from the official concerned." (The Daily Star, 18 May 1997). An enquiry into the activities of NCBs showed that CBAs administer parallel administration. For example, according to prevailing laws, only presidents and secretaries of CBAs cannot be transferred. But they managed to distribute



## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

the privilege to all the members of CBA.

By and large, the findings of the TF report sharply point to the spectres that haunt the vital sector to disturb smooth flow of financial blood in the body of the economy. Corruption, irregularities and display of muscle power tend to be the order of the day. Whereas, no action could be taken against them. Further, anarchy, bribe, shouting in premises have become a "culture" in the arena of our banking sector. The management is so helpless that they dare not touch the hair of those involved lest they are treated as lawless and transferred elsewhere by top brass. To substantiate this premise, the TF report cites one example. A trade union leader once physically

assaulted executive director and general manager to face a dismissal. But the next government reinstated him and the president of the country himself introduced the "hero" as his "younger brother" in a public meeting.

While the formation of the TF and preparation of the report in due time deserve special thanks, one could only expect the recommendations of the TF are sincerely considered by the government. A total of 18 valuable suggestions are provided in the report which, if duly considered and implemented, could

ing sector is loan defaults. The latest information on this count tend to show that about 83 per cent of the total industrial loan disbursed by the Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Sangstha (BSRS) is defaulted (Bhorer Kagoj, 26 February 1998). So much have been said over the years about defaults and defaulters that any comment on this would sound mere repetition. However, we are glad to note that there has been some progress in getting back some of them. One can only relate the above mentioned union/CBA activities with loan defaults also. The union/CBA leaders, in collusion with high ups, managed to get through some of the loans. They also manage to post their "people" at the helm of affairs of the banks to get the job done.

The present imperatives are, therefore, to contain the high-handedness of the unions and CBAs in the banking sector and second, to arrest any future loan defaults. Both of these to happen require three clear-cut steps: (a) a political commitment on the part of both government and opposition to shun unionism in banks and to that effect, initiate laws and regulations; (b) stop giving political shelter to those involved with such activities and (c) delink union and CBA from political colours i.e. no union or CBA (if at all they are allowed to operate) should use the name of any political party or political leader. To face the spectre haunting the banking sector, it is not only the government which should be asked to do the job, but it is we who should ask the government to do the job and extend our support.

# Instruments of Ill, and Other Frivolities

All I know is that gossip is an act of will. I know that though gossip often comes from harmless chatter, it can — and it usually always ends up — harming its victims more than it helps its perpetrators. I also know that gossip has become an insidious, almost everyday occurrence in our lives — so common, in fact, that some people might even fault me for discussing the subject on the "August" editorial pages of this serious newspaper.

But when to mischief mortals bend their will, How soon they find fit instruments of ill!

The Rape of the Lock, Alexander Pope 1688-1744.

IT is exceedingly tempting, that is part of the problem. "Have you heard the latest..." asks the voice on the telephone. It is, typically, a saccharine-sweet voice and a tone casual enough to be titillating. (I always fall for the tone.)

"I'm busy, you want to say at first. I actually don't have time to gossip. It's wrong to gossip." "You'll never believe this," the saccharine-sweet voice says, softly. "Really. Why not, it can't be that scandalous. What have they done now?"

"I don't know if I ought to tell you. Maybe you're right. It's wrong to gossip," Ms Saccharine suggests casually. And you're hooked. You put your calls on hold, tell your secretary to buzz off, shut the door and bury yourself in yet another exciting episode of the latest neck which the rumour mills of Dhaka's elite circles are churning out for genteel consumption.

No, I don't believe you. Really, is that what happened. I mean, who told you no, not her, how did she hear about it? Oh, I see, he told her and she told him and he told her and she told her and she told you. Yes. Quite right. That's right from the horse's mouth. Really, I am shocked.

"Don't tell anyone, you must promise me absolutely," Ms Saccharine murmurs. (She knows you know she doesn't expect you to keep it to yourself.)

You're lips sealed, you promise her solemnly. (Which means you'll spill the beans at the first opportunity.)

"Tell me, tell me! What did you hear..." demands this other woman at a social event the next day. You might call her a friend though she could also, on occasion, pass as your enemy, if you get my meaning.

Quite apart from which chameleon like characteristic, she has an unhealthy curiosity that could kill entire colonies of cats in one day.

So you tell her what you have heard on the telephone and she tells you what she has heard from her sources and the two of you proceed to add, reinforce, embellish and legitimise a tale of frivolous facts and petty insecurities that have the potential to dent if not actually damage the objects of your interest.

Potential, yes. But does gossip do any real harm, I wonder. When I am being flippancy (which is often) I trot out one of my favourite lines on the subject: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being

no one's private lives?" No, it is always based on unconfirmed allegations about someone, and it is always stated behind their back. It's like saying that someone is a thief, or a bad person, or is doing something terrible without actually having proof. People often believe gossip — they say, where there is smoke, there is fire. So you have to be careful what you repeat and what you believe about other people.

"Why do people gossip?" I guess, because they don't like the person they are gossiping about. Or because they don't have ethics. Maybe, people don't know they are gossiping, when they are gossiping.

"Do you gossip?" he asked after a few moments.

talked about, and that is not being talked about," wrote Oscar Wilde.

People usually laugh when I quote Wilde to them. Just as they also laugh about, and laugh off gossip, as though the practice of ill-will through anonymous, seemingly idle chatter, supposedly the particular pastime of women with nothing better to do in life, is all a big joke. But is it.

"What's gossip," my son once asked me. He was about 13 years old at the time.

Gossip is repeating silly, trivial things, things which don't matter. Frivolous fantasies. "So gossip is harmless?" Not really. It can be dangerous. If you're repeating something about a person's private life, for instance, something which isn't true, it could lead to other people getting hurt, to a scandal, and that can harm a lot of innocent people.

"Is gossip always about innocent people?"

I end recalling a mystic Urdu couplet which reads: "planning for the next 100 years, without knowing the morrow's fate".

AZ Dhaka.

Hoping for a clean city?

Sir, Spruce and vegetate territory is our long cherished dream. "It's a great aspiration" one can argue and say, how could it be possible? But my opinion is different from them. Although having been a sick country's inhabitants, if we try, cooperate and co-act with the government which is taking some pragmatic steps after assuming the throne, we can get a country of cleanliness.

But lots of negligence and sluggish doctrine have taken root in our minds. One can again argue that it's only the duty of our government, because we put them to power. Well no doubt, when someone violates the rule, it's the duty of the gov-

ernment to punish the person. But, what if it is the other way round...?

Md Shammi Shaif A-459 Khilgaon Tilpara, Dhaka

How much land does a man require?

Sir, A gruesome incident took place at Sharafshata of Rangunia in Chittagong which was reported in many newspapers on February 12, '98. Four brothers when went to lake possession of their land were attacked by their uncle and cousins with axes, daos and other lethal weapons, as a result three brothers died on the spot and one was seriously injured. It is so cruel that one has to gasp with horror and disbelief. I don't know how the family will bear such a tragedy — it is too shocking.

Unnatural greed for land and property perplexes me, wealth amassed by unscrupulous ways will never bring hap-

piness, one will have to pay for it some way or the other.

In this context a story which I read many years ago came to my mind.

After being shown a vast and beautiful land a man was told that he could become the owner of the land which he could cover up by walking from sunrise to sunset, but there is one condition, he must return to the starting point before sunset. The man started walking at sun rise but he became so greedy that he walked on and on, when at last he looked back there was much time left for the sunset and he was far away from the starting point. He started to run but it was a futile effort, from sheer exhaustion he dropped down dead before reaching the goal.

After that he needed only the small space to bury him. The story was named 'How much land does a man require'.

Nur Jahon East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

# A Triumph of Iraq's Diplomacy

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Iraq has diminished the influence of US and UNSCOM, introduced non-specialists to be added to UNSCOM teams investigating Iraq's presidential sites and actively involved the UN Secretary General in expediting the lifting of economic sanctions.

THE Agreement brokered by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan with the Iraqi Leadership on February 23, 1998 appeared to be one of the finest moments for Iraqi diplomacy. Though the deal opens the suspected chemical and biological weapon sites to unfettered inspection, the role of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) has been diminished by the terms of the deal. The UN experts now would be accompanied by diplomats representing the five Security Council members — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States. This would imply that the style of inspections by UNSCOM led by Mr. Richard Butler will undergo a change in a significant way. The gung-ho approach by UNSCOM is now over. A more moderate and sensitive approach would be replaced by a "search and destroy mentality" of the inspectors.

Iraq wanted to end the inspections by UNSCOM. They believe that after seven years UNSCOM should complete the job and economic sanctions should be lifted. Iraq believes that the inspection teams work for the US and its intelligence. Russia, China and France appear to take the view that the inspections by UNSCOM should not continue for ever.

The deal is essentially the agreement of Iraq to the unfettered access of inspection teams to locations what has been defined as eight "presidential sites". This Agreement does not apparently address the issue of other presidential properties not among the eight listed by Baghdad. Iraq could have agreed with this position with the envoy of Russia and France. But it did not. Why? There appears to be many reasons for such an approach.

Iraq wanted an agreement with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and not with an envoy representing a member of the Security Council. The UN represents the international community and Iraq wanted to demonstrate its respect to the international community by brokering a deal with the UN. Furthermore Mr. Annan had publicly suggested that the US should avoid humiliating Iraq. This statement reflected Mr. Annan's objectivity and neutrality on the issue. Prior to the visit of the Secretary General, Iraq made statements that the visit of the Secretary General would be productive and useful in diffusing the situation.

Iraq wanted to curb the in-

fluence of US and of the Chief Inspector of UNSCOM through the active role of the UN Secretary General. Now the deal that is made between the UN and Iraq undermines the central role of UNSCOM. Though Iraq apparently gave in on all points, it is unlikely the UNSCOM will return to where it was before this crisis.

Once the UN Secretary General's office is actively associated with the inspections of the sites, Iraq will have a much more leverage than before to initiate actions to lift the economic sanctions. Already the Secretary General was reported to have said that though there was no time-frame to end the inspections, it is assumed that there would be a reasonable time to complete the inspections in Iraq.

Iraq's agreement with Mr. Annan has boosted his profile as he has successfully averted a war in the Middle East. Obviously Mr. Annan is pleased about it and I expect he would take a more conciliatory approach to the inspections of sites. Moreover, the UN Secretary General is involved in approving the sale of Iraqi oil for humanitarian reasons and had successfully doubled the amount by the Security Council.

The stand-off had also exposed the double standard of US policy. Israel not only flouted Security Council resolutions but has in its possession nuclear arsenal. US accepts the conduct of Israel and the whole Arab world realised acutely the inconsistency of US policy in the Middle East. No Arab country was willing this time to allow its territory to the US for its military strikes against Iraq. The popularity of Iraq President had increased among the ordinary people in the Arab world.

In my view Iraq has achieved its purpose through this Agreement with the UN: it has diminished the influence of US and UNSCOM, introduced non-specialists to be added to UNSCOM teams investigating Iraq's presidential sites and actively involved the UN Secretary General in expediting the lifting of economic sanctions. The arguments of Russia, China and France that UN actions should not be based on the recommendations of Mr. Butler have been further strengthened. It is indeed a great triumph of Iraq's diplomacy.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## OPINION

# In Defense of Economics

by Munir Quddus

Economists try to measure economic progress objectively. One of the several measures of economic well-being is known as the gross domestic product (GDP) that roughly measures the total market value of all goods and services produced in the country over a year. In 1996 the GDP in Bangladesh was 32.1 billion dollars up from 14.3 billion dollars in 1975 (Bangladesh: Annual Economic Update, 1997; The World Bank). This is an inflation-adjusted increase of 124.5 per cent in roughly twenty years. Does this indicate that the nation in 1996 is more than twice as better off than it was in 1975? Or that the standard of living in Bangladesh has more than doubled over this period?

First, it is not just income that has increased over the period but also has the population. Specifically over this period, Bangladesh has grown by adding a net of 43 million citizens to its population, increasing from 75 million to 118 million, a 57 per cent increase. Therefore, the per capita income or the standard of living on average has increased by much less than the increase in total income. Nevertheless, compared to 1975 the per capita income-adjusted income has risen \$260 in 1996. Does this mean that every citizen in Bangladesh has benefited? Of course not.

This is an average measure and fails to account for the distribution of income. Many millions of individuals or even large groups within the total population may have suffered a decline in their living standards. The average must be interpreted with care. If you don't know how to swim and I tell you the average depth of this river is one foot, should you attempt to wade through the river? Better not. The average depth does not reveal that the river could be twenty-feet deep at places. Again, economic welfare is not necessarily the same as general welfare.

Besides these qualifications, a good economist will also tell you that there are other problems with the GDP measure. Using these indicators to compare across nations with very different price regimes would be less than ideal. Having said all this, objectively speaking, the total income (size of the pie) as well as the income per person in Bangladesh has increased since 1975.

The conditions Sabrina Rashid is referring to is best

explained by changes in inequality or the distribution of income and wealth in the country. Rising per capita income and even wealth is perfectly consistent with an increasing number of poor households.

A simple example: Suppose in a community there were 100 people in 1975 with 70 per cent below the poverty line. This means 70 people were poor in 1975. Today, if in the same community there are 200 people with only 50 per cent poor, then in some sense poverty has decreased (70 per cent to 50 per cent of the community, and that indicates progress) but on the other hand the number of poor have also increased from 70 to 100! But notice these numbers also indicate that in this hypothetical community the number of non-poor have also increased from 30 to 100. Whether this is progress or not becomes a somewhat philosophical question — whether the glass is half-full or half-empty.

Sabrina Rashid asks in exasperation why can't the brilliant economists solve our problems (in slightly different words)?

My retort: Why can't all the good medical doctors in Bangladesh like herself cure the sick in the country? She will agree that there are more sick people in Bangladesh today than in 1975. As a physician, she knows that a doctor can diagnose the illness (if at all the patient comes to the hospital, and millions are unable to do so), but they cannot cure the illness. That to some extent depends on the patient. Whether or not the sick can afford the medicine; and whether or not the sick accepts the doctors' advice and takes the medicine on time and as told.

The economy is as complex and as frustrating as humans. Just diagnosing the disease and prescribing the medicine will not cure the sick economy. According to Douglas North, a Nobel Prize winning economist, the causes of the poverty of nations and the solutions are well-known. However, there still remain many more poor nations and poor people than rich nations and people. Why? Because, the medicine economists prescribe is not accepted by the societies and their leaders. Poverty is not mainly an economic problem. Rather it is a social and above all political problem.

This is in response to some of the issues raised in Dr Sabrina Rashid's January 29 letter.