

SAARC Action Plan

We are heartened to see SAARC information ministers' conference taking note of some of the recommendations made in this column on the eve of the first-ever meeting of this kind. The 18-point action plan which was announced Sunday last to mark the conclusion of the two-day event contained some of the suggestions we put forward to help SAARC play an effectual role in increasing information flow among the member countries. The official inclusion of 'doables' like free flow of newspapers, periodicals, books and other publications and reduction of postal rates for media transmission and information materials as well as greater and easier mobility of media people within the SAARC countries is a clear reflection of this realisation.

A lot depends on how effectively information ministers can push their respective governments to work along the suggestions included in the Dhaka Declaration. The onus is on them all the more because function of information ministries in this region has so far been rather contrary to the spirit of democracy. How can a region that with the exception of Bhutan embraced democracy as a governing political system can have information ministries whose prime object is to control and coerce the media for government propaganda and not to ensure free flow of public information? We are convinced this governmental mindset to use its information ministry as a mechanism for twisting the arm of independent press or media in general remains the greatest obstacle on the way to meaningful and genuine democratic practice. With governments so loud and generous in proclaiming their pledge to democracy it was perhaps not waxing too much in robust optimism to expect this conference to link free flow of information across the region to a qualitative improvement in the flow of information within the respective countries. Unfortunately that has not been the case. Nevertheless, even if the action plan is implemented with sincerity things are bound to look up. Perhaps then, in the improved reality of tomorrow, what we are demanding so passionately today would not seem as too much for powers that be.

Stop a Repeat Gaibandha

The Gaibandha liquor tragedy, killing about 80, was a real scary thing. But who did it scare as a matter of fact? The surviving addicts in Gaibandha to be sure. Besides those, who?

Very unfortunately, the reality is somewhat different. A national daily has reported that in a slum in Hazaribagh, the tannery zone of Dhaka, four persons were taken seriously ill after drinking country liquor or *Bangla Maud*, possibly garnered with rectified spirit, on Saturday night. The drug control people reacted sharply and raiding possible drinking dens in the Hazaribagh area, they seized 2000 litres of alcoholic drinks very likely to contain poison in whatever quantum.

This is fantastic. This business as usual after Gaibandha! Dhaka, specially the city's police and drug administration should have joined to make it immune to liquor poisoning after about a dozen had died of the same not far ago. Gaibandha should have emboldened their resolve to prevent any repetition. And now this news of liquor poisoning and the hefty haul. Scandalous to say the least.

If little Gaibandha chalked up a tally of four score dead to boozing, what can be the toll in Dhaka if that strikes this 8-million-plus city? One thought that as brewing liquor was illegal in Bangladesh, it was done in the underground and catered to a small clientele around each brewing cell. The Gaibandha tragedy has proved this wrong. Clients there very evidently ran into hundreds, all patronising three pharmacies. When the drug control men would haul up 2000 litres of *Bangla* in one raid on one area, the admirers of this drink in the city should be counted in tens of thousands. If something goes wrong here, either by a mixture of methanol or whatever, the toll would be staggering.

That must be stopped at all cost. The police know very well about these brewing dens for many in that force allegedly get regular protection money from the denwallahs. If the police want, they can break up all of these. If this course is not found wholly advisable — for where will the addict go — police can always keep close watch on the situation and respond very quickly to any looming disaster. They can keep the thing under control, if they want to do so.

Please, sirs, will yourself to effectively prevent liquor poisoning in the city.

A Glimmer of Hope?

One readily greets the staging of the first-ever direct talks between the Taliban Islamic militia and the opposition northern alliance in Islamabad under the joint auspices of the UN and the OIC. That such fiercely warring sides could be brought across the negotiations table with a calm reported from the frontlines near Kabul is itself a big achievement.

But what is of greater significance to us is the combined diplomacy of the UN, OIC, US and Pakistan that has made it happen. We would like this to develop into a neutral third party intervention robustly cognisant of the basic development needs and democratic aspirations of the Afghan people. We have been a consistent votary of a spearheading role for the UN. With the OIC coming in as a catalytic force, an element of persuasion has been added to the over-all approach to Afghan problem.

In such a highly factious situation taking sides will not help matters at all. Only a democratic election in Afghanistan holds the key to peace in that region torn to pieces through 18 years of unabated civil war. The pandering to a militant theocracy and the warlordship obsessions fed on intrusive weapon supplies stigmatised by poppy trade will only make things inexorably worse. Can't there be a government of national reconciliation in Afghanistan attending to its pressing humanitarian agenda and preparing the desultory people for a national election in the near future?

Is There a Shortfall in Revenue?

by Ali Ahmed

If the persons engaged in the administration of revenue suffer from a sense of hopelessness, and are not properly enthused and motivated, they will either wallow in corruption or, at the very best, suffer from a sense of utter dejection.

Year 1994-95, collection stood at Taka 10,522.56 crore. The same for the year 1995-96 stood at Taka 11,370.06 crore, registering an actual increase of 8.05 per cent. Again, actual collection for the fiscal year 1996-97 stood at Taka 12,503.25 crore registering an increase of 9.97 per cent over previous year's collection. And, as has already been shown, till March '98, the increase has been 10.43 per cent over the same period of last fiscal year's collection.

It would therefore appear that growth of revenue in the nineties is around 10 per cent. This fares comfortably well vis-à-vis the growth in the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). At the fixed market price of 1984-85, the yearly growth of GDP in Bangladesh has always been below 5 per cent except in 1983-84 and 1989-90 when it was 5.4 per cent and 6.6 per cent, respectively. In the fiscal years 1995-96 and 1996-97, however, this growth has, respectively, been 5.3 per cent and 5.7 per cent. The growth of the same in the fiscal year 1997-98 is likely to be more or less in the same region. Of this 5.7 per cent growth of GDP in the preceding fiscal year, the contribution of agriculture, a sector largely outside the tax-net, was 6.0 per cent and that of manufacturing only 3.3 per cent. In the face of all these, an actual collection of taxes of Taka 9,711.95 crore till March, '98 of the current fiscal year against Taka 8,794.46 crore for the same period of the previous fiscal year, showing a growth of 10.43 per cent cannot, in fact, be termed as a shortfall.

Should we then sit back and relax, and do nothing except our routine job? Not at all. If we continue at the current rate of development with a slightly more than 5 per cent growth in GDP, it will take us another twenty years or so to double the present unenviable per capita income of around 260.00 US dollars. If we want to get out of the abyss of poverty, more growth has to be attained with a much higher level of investment. And in the face of an ever-dwindling inflow of investible funds from foreign sources, reliance has mainly to be placed on domestic sources for supply of the needed investments to achieve the desired accelerated growth of the economy.

Voluntary savings form an important component of capital formation providing funds for investment. Poor economies naturally have a negligible

margin of savings, and are therefore hard put to it to provide any significant amount of investible funds for a quick economic growth.

According to a 1988 Asian Development Bank survey, savings rate as percentage of GDP for Bangladesh for the period from 1980-81 to 1984-85 was just 2.0 per cent, whereas the same for the same period for India was 22.6 per cent, for Nepal 7.9 per cent, and for Pakistan 4.8 per cent. This rate for Bangladesh for the fiscal year 1995-96 has risen to 7.8 per cent. In fact, comparable figures for the quoted countries could not be made available, although it is not difficult to assume that their imbalance with Bangladesh in this respect continues to persist. It is quite interesting to note that although these countries are more or less in the same economic bracket with a largely similar socio-cultural background, the great difference in the rate of savings with Bangladesh and Pakistan on the one hand and the rest of the regional countries, on the other, would make it a rather challenging subject of culture-economic study.

The most important tool available at the command of the government to mobilise domestic resources for development and other activities is taxation. Although we have already had a brief preview of the state of our taxation at the beginning of this article, a further analysis of the same from some other very relevant points of view would as well be in the fitness of things. In any country, total taxes collected in a particular year and expressed as a percentage of its gross domestic product for the same period is called its tax/GDP ratio. A higher ratio of taxes compared to GDP obviously means a better tax effort and more contribution of its people to the state for the latter's development and other activities.

Now, for Bangladesh, starting very low in the initial years after liberation, tax/GDP ratio has come up to 9-10 in the late nineties. In the preceding fiscal year of 1996-97, tax/GDP ratio for the country stood at 9.40 and after downsizing the estimated tax receipt for the current year's budget, this ratio is expected to remain more or less static. As we have seen in an earlier section of this article, tax revenue grows roughly at a rate of 8.9 per cent annually, whereas the economy has been growing at 5.3 per cent to 5.7 per cent. If the present trend con-

tinues, the tax/GDP ratio will not substantially alter in the foreseeable future. But this has to change if we mean to change the lot of the people of this country. When our tax/GDP ratio is around 9 or 10, the same for Sri Lanka is around 19, for India 17, for Nepal 12-13 and for Pakistan, also in the same region. This simply means that, except for Bhutan, ours is the least taxed country in the region, and one of the lowest taxed in the world.

If this poor tax/GDP ratio has to be improved, and improved remarkably, so as to make it comparable at least to those of the regional countries, then a mere ambitious target-setting without concomitant policy-changes will be of no avail. To reach the desired direct taxes preponderate over indirect ones. But that situation may still be too far away for Bangladesh. We may have to live with the preponderance of indirect taxes (84.78 per cent of all taxes in 1995-96) for some more time to come. But the relative importance of their different kinds is bound to change due to various internal and external circumstances. The current trend of global trade liberalisation and coming down of tariff walls is bound to gradually reduce the relative importance of customs duties in the overall tax revenues of the country. Thus, although customs duties formed an impressive 32.09 per cent of the total tax revenue for 1996-97 and 34.72 per cent till March, '98 of the fiscal year 1997-98, this share is bound to decline in the years ahead. A very happy situation would be its substitution by direct taxes. But, as already noted, that may still be a long time in coming.

The Value Added Tax (VAT), introduced in the fiscal year 1991-92, is proving a good revenue earner with its internal earning forming 25.34 per cent of total tax revenue in 1996-97, and 23.98 per cent till March of the current fiscal year. While this is quite good, it still leaves much to be desired. Although our tax base is narrow because of the small size of the economy, the legal base, i.e. the areas covered under law for both direct taxes and VAT, may now be said to be optimum. But the gap between the potential and the actual revenue on both these accounts is believed to be wide, how wide can at best be an intelligent guesswork, since a quantification whether in absolute or in percentage terms is practically impossible to make. An IMF mission to Hungary, commissioned to do exactly that came out with a computed figure of potential and actual VAT. But there were so many ifs and buts and post-and-pre-suppositions, that the final results, at least to this writer, appeared not far beyond a very intelligent guess. Be that as it may, every one would surely agree that the revenue lost through leakage is quite substantial, and there cannot be a difference of opinion regarding the fact that it must be plugged as a plugged soon. But how to do that is the crux of the problem.

Whenever there is a question of augmentation of tax revenue or plugging its leakage, suggestions would almost invariably be pouring forth from all sides for the so-called tax reforms. After introduction of VAT and much liberalisation and simplification of the procedure of direct taxes, one feels constrained to note, there is no wide scope left for reform in taxes, although a little bit of trimming here and tuning there can always be undertaken, as is regularly done. If we want to substantially alter the tax/GDP ratio in our economy without which there probably would not be the much-hoped-for breakthrough towards the path of economic development, we must in right earnest take up administrative reforms. If this contemplated reform ends up as a half-hearted attempt at weeding out a corrupt element here and stubbing out an inefficient official there, the results would not be something to write home about.

As has already been noted, the scope of potential tax revenue has been optimised. What now remains to be done to translate this potential into actual tax receipts is to properly enthuse the people engaged in the efforts of collection of taxes. A fresh and dispassionate look at our bureaucratic administrative structure is needed and a bold political initiative has to

be undertaken to usher in the long overdue reforms in administration. Training, especially for such a technical job as enforcement of tax laws, is of course very urgently needed. But what is more important is motivation of the personnel of tax administration. Calling names is unimaginative and betrays a lamentable lack of vision, a quality essential in leaders. In many of the western countries, including USA, tax officials are provided with higher pay and emoluments compared to their peers in other services. If that is not possible in our socio-economic situation, these officials should at least be provided with equality of opportunity available to others in other services. It may sound strange, but the truth is that the tax officials do not have as easy an access to at least some others, if they have any access at all to posts where state policies are formulated. These obstructionism by one class of bureaucrats against another should be removed by bold and imaginative political leadership.

Why should we forget that the civil structure of bureaucratic administration created by the British in India was principally to collect and administer land revenue, then the most important source of state finances, and all subsequent status and powers were conferred on that administration only to bolster them and to strengthen their hands for revenue administration? The fountain-head of revenue, through historical process, has shifted from land to other places, but administration has not been properly reared in line with the changes. So, all these anomalies and disturbances. We may take lessons from neighbouring India and Pakistan in this regard. If the persons engaged in the administration of revenue suffer from a sense of hopelessness, and are not properly enthused and motivated, they will either wallow in corruption or, at the very best, suffer from a sense of utter dejection. Neither of the states is helpful to a good revenue administration.

The author is a Commissioner of Customs, Excise and VAT, Govt. of Bangladesh.

Stark Visage of Cruelty

by Chandra Shekhar Das

THE press last week was in a mood of enthused investigation as a human rights organisation rescued Sohag, an eight-year-old boy employed in a city house as a domestic help, in miserable condition. Beaten with paranoiac zest over a month, the minor boy was an epitome of man's cruelty on man.

Sohag was everybody's favourite punching bag in that house. Everybody starting from the mistress of the house to her 16-year-old daughter tortured the poor little kid who was brought from his village home in Comilla about two months ago. Falling for that traditional option in order to keep the body and soul together proved to be the biggest curse of the life of a boy whom his parents so fondly named Sohag, Bengali for loving care. Sohag is almost paralysed today. Nobody knows if the boy would ever be able to live a normal physical or mental life, so violent and crippling the nature of torture has been.

What really astounds one is the range of cruelty and its amazingly equal distribution in all members of the family Sohag came to assist. Some of the horrific details, which Sohag has let out while struggling to recover from the nightmare

grotesqueness which become manifest in the behaviour of its members. There is no denying our society is caught in a welter of transitional dynamics with new values replacing the old ones. Time hallowed institutions collapsing as the stream of new conceptions, definitions of life are bombarding our consciousness. But can any shift, any change identify cruelty of that measure? If the world of our values has experienced radical change, it has also seen growing awareness in certain areas of our consciousness.

It is true that these are early days of our awareness in human rights issues and the trend of such inhuman social behaviour must have been always there under the lid with our newfound consciousness making a clamouring discovery of them by the reason the fight against this abomination has not begun yet is our failure to commit ourselves socially.

Tale of torture unearthed from the 888 Shahidbag should be fought socially. Law must take its own course but unless a social commitment is there, this is a lost cause. Because at every other urban dwelling there lives a Sohag as live demons like Mrs. Hussain and her children. What is worse, a

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of human barbarity in the safety of the police custody, would have even appeared a marvel to Nazi imagination of torturing the captives.

There are instances of unimaginable cruelty by the lady of the house. Her kitchen implement was reportedly put in the boy's anus for 'dirtying the floor'. The amazon woman whose husband lives in the States has probably damaged Sohag's male organ beyond repair by landing vicious kicks on his scrotum.

For sheer cruelty Sabiha Hussain's children have done their mother proud. Her eldest son — 20-year-old Sumon (a classic case of misnomer indeed) broke one of Sohag's hands by wringing it as when a woman does his clothes for some equally trivial or baseless peccadilloes. The 16-year-old daughter, youngest in the line was not far behind either in the passion for torturing somebody at their mercy. But for sheer wantonness none can beat what imon, the younger son did to Sohag. Apparently a cricket buff, this student of Notre Dame College reportedly used the boy as a ball for his batting practice sessions. In his sadistic appreciation of this noble game he used to describe the softer swipes of the willow at the boy's body as boundaries or fours and the harder ones as overboundaries or sixes, naturally. What can possibly be the motive for such collective frenzy of bestiality? What can set such a mindless campaign of perverted persecution in motion?

Perhaps it was Gramsci who once wrote something to the effect that a society when going through a phase of transition churns up great deal of

lot of those who scream hoarse for human rights back home are no better than Mrs. Hussain — perhaps worse in some cases.

It is indeed very sad that except the concerned human rights organisation we have not heard the voices of many other similar organisations. Why? Internal rivalry? These organisations will do their existential cause a favour if they can put away their rivalry and network among themselves to mobilise support for clamping some sort of social sentence apart from providing all sorts of legal assistance to the victim. Society has to think up something like the condemnatory measure we see in Nathaniel Hawthorn's *Scarlet Letter* in order to expose the culprits to the rest of the world.

Sabiha Hossain and her children should be made to do penance for what they have done. And this cannot be prayer in a secluded religious place. It should be active, physically demanding service. All members of the family — the three children and the mother — should be put through a minimum of five years of mandatory service to the community. While unlearning hate and learning love they should carry the label of their sin against humanity.

Notre Dame College, the institution where one of the boys of this cursed family study can play a pioneering role in starting this process of shedding sin through service. Expelling a student who has failed so miserably as a human being should be a palpable temptation, but an even better idea would be to make him involve in some mandatory service activity.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Electricity in northern Bengal

Sir, Loadshedding is continuing since long in Pabna. Almost everyday from evening till 9 pm the town is under loadshedding. So the town-dwellers have to depend on lanterns and candles to carry out their daily activities. The worst affected are the school and college going students. There is loadshedding during daytime also. Similar is the case with almost all towns of northern Bengal.

After the independence, the policy makers decided to install power station on the eastern part of Bangladesh and to supply the required electricity to the western part through the inter-connector. This has not been fulfilled.

On the other hand whenever there is shortfall in generation of electricity the western part suffered most. Due to this the industries has not developed in the region. Now an agreement is under finalisation with India to supply electricity to our western part through 230 double circuit transmission line between Krishnanagar and Ishwardi.

It may be mentioned that there is shortage of electricity in the West Bengal by about 150 MW alone. So a feeling is growing amongst the people of northern Bengal that there should be no more dependency on others for electricity. They demand that the power station to be installed and capacity of old power station augmented in the region viz. Barapukuria, Thakurgaon, Bheramara, Ruppur.

Serajul Islam
Rd#39, House # 31
Gulshan, Dhaka 1212

A poverty-free world

Sir, The write-up by Prof Muhammad Yunus — 'A Poverty-Free World' — published on 2 April, 1998 was a very controversial one on account of the changing trend of economics as social science in understanding the greedy and dishonest business people all over the world. His contention of new economics text-books with self-conscious efforts towards the democratic framework of quality management of a finance is not acceptable to the dishonest intellectuals who rule politics and administration in present times.

Individual family is the smallest unit of economic ac-

tivity. When poverty prevails in many parts of the world in our times, no one can deny the truth that poverty is the result of the economic failure of state-policy and attitude problem of the village money lenders since the days of the concept of economics as social science. Prof Yunus, the inventor of Grameen credit system, would one day realise that the micro-credit system was also not free from the danger of collapse in terms of economics.

The apparent village solvency through the Grameen Bank would not last long because of the far-reaching impact of family debt in the rural Bangladesh upon poverty-laden world.

Abul Ashraf Noor
House # 9, Road #4,
Sector #5, Uttara, Dhaka

No judges!

Sir, Does anybody care that there is no judge in at least two courts of the Dhaka Sessions Court for the past several months? Everybody knows that the pressure of work in Dhaka courts is much greater than in other district courts. Moreover, there should be more court people to be posted in Dhaka. As such it is not understood why these posts are kept vacant? In fact, such a situation gives rise to malpractices and corruption. The litigant public then become dependent on the manipulations of peshkars and lawyers!

Kabir Ahmed
79, Shantinagar, Dhaka

Customers and banks

Sir, It is true how unbelievably rude the staff and cashiers within the bank could actually be. Mr. Mohiuddin portrayed a very true picture in 'The lady at the bank' in the DS (29.03.98). Though the cashiers in the government banks are worse, the private ones aren't that better off either. Couple of years back a colleague of mine was insulted in a private bank in Gulshan I because the cashier expected my colleague to open his account with an approximate sum of 'a few lakhs' but was extremely rude when he produced a measly 3000. Maybe the management ought to teach their staff that the 'Customers are ALWAYS right'. Maybe disciplinary

measures should be brought upon those who are anything but courteous. The entire bank officials in Janata Bank of Mirpur should be reprimanded for their abusive attitude towards a harmless lady and Mr. Mohiuddin too. How long are we to stay back and witness these in silence?

Masroor Ahmed Deepak
Dhaka

Two-day holiday is a luxury

Sir, With one of the lowest rate of productivity of our manpower and frequent hartals, we do not know the actual reason why the government has added an extra day to the weekly holiday. We read news reports on ministers' surprise visits to many government offices, where they express their dissatisfaction over the efficiency of the government servants.

In fact, all the government offices are like that. We are yet to come across any person who would say that government offices are now better run. They are a brigade of lazy people who believe in no-work-but-enough money.

In this context, the two-day weekend for a poor country like ours is nothing but a luxury which is causing a great harm to our economy.

Md Faridur Rahman
645, Surja Sen Hall
Dhaka University
Dhaka: 1000

"None would be allowed..."

Sir, This in reaction to Barrister Moudud Ahmed's recent comment that "None will be allowed to speak if BNP is denied floor in JS".

I have never expected a comment like this from someone who is a Barrister by profession. What can we expect from ordinary citizens then — those who have absolutely no idea about the laws of the land?

Nobody in the Parliament can speak overriding the Rules of Procedure. You cannot speak in the House by dint of your muscle! If government party does not allow the opposition to speak, then there are lawful ways to protest such violations. You cannot justify your violation of norms by pointing to others' alleged violations. When the law of the land will fail and we will lose. Nobody will win.

I think the Speaker showed extreme patience and accommodation to the BNP provocation. The Speaker could have expelled the angry MPs from the House! But he didn't. In the Order of Precedence, the position of the Speaker is far above than any of the position of the

MPs. To perceive what BNP MPs have done, for example, imagine a real-life scenario, where an Assistant Secretary is throwing papers at a Secretary's face, or an ASP is showing shoes to the IGP, or a second Lieutenant is questioning a Major General's decision on his face. See, that is not how a society works!

It is wrong for the BNP to think that it can win the confidence of the general mass by showing its muscle! BNP should apologise to the Speaker and to the nation immediately. Any attempt to justify the vandalism inside the House will only jeopardise its credibility further. April 15 indeed was a bad day for our nascent parliamentary democracy. The sooner BNP realises that the better our future will become.

Mohammad Bari
Arlington, Texas, USA

CNN and BBC programmes

Sir, It's been long since BTV stopped telecasting CNN and BBC programmes. When people can't rely on our own electronic media coverage, they want to listen to CNN and BBC news.

These two 24-hour channels are considered as the world's most reliable and up-to-date channels. BTV was previously telecasting CNN and BBC programmes at 7-11.30 am and 2-3 pm — but now why the large number of viewers are being deprived of getting comprehensive world news? If there is any problem, has the authority so far taken the initiatives to solve that? Why are BTV officials not revealing the mystery to its viewers?

Md Abdur Rahim Shohel
Dept. of Mass Communication
and Journalism
University of Dhaka

Foreign Service

Sir, Recently while replying to a question in the Parliament, Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad said that the government will seek the opposition opinion in formulating a policy on appointing people for diplomatic assignments from outside the foreign service cadre.

We sincerely hope that a pragmatic policy will soon be formulated as assured by the Foreign Minister with a view to appoint genuine and efficient persons in diplomatic posts from among all the officers serving under government, semi government, and autonomous institutions.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar,
Dhaka:1207