

Police Perversity

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Sunday asked a deputation of the Bangladesh Police Association to stop incidents like Rubel murder. As if a parent was asking her wayward son to stop smoking. But PM was tactful and phrased her admonition in a way that couldn't hurt the police top-brass. They were asked to take 'all necessary steps so that incidents like killing of Rubel did not take place in future'. And what the PM could do but to tell them to reform so as to stop repetition of Rubel style torture?

The moot question is, can the police reform all by itself? There are two sides to the question. The police force is pervasively corrupt. And the tortures and abuse of office they indulge in issue from corruption. As proverbially coal cannot be healed of its blackness, the police cannot be a dependably honest and professional organisation as long as all of the myriad things that allure and fare them to corruption do not cease to operate. Mere pious wishing to be rid of bad practice and become a good lad cannot make police improve their ways. The second half of the question: is the police empowered to do all that will be required to discipline them into something they ideally should have been? The key to the police problems is, let us capitalise for emphasis, POLICE REFORMS. This will require a lot of head scratching on the part of a lot of stalwarts leading to enactment of new laws and a restructuring of the force as also adoption of new justifications for a civil coercive wing of the government. Nothing short of this will work.

What is the government doing about this supremely important, and urgent, need of our state and society? There is yet no sign that government is, even after all that has happened to Rubel and his predecessor occupants of the police torture cells, is moving towards police reforms. Why? How does it serve government or society to have a state within the state with the illegitimate one out to consume the state of the people?

Whereas the top 31 police officers who called on the Prime Minister should axiomatically act as setting standards to the rest of the force by strict abidance by professionalism, the Police Association deputation used the occasion to purposefully talk of politically impregnated issues. If a conspiracy is there to set police and people apart and one against the other in the wake of the annulment of the Indemnity Ordinance, that is a matter for Prime Minister to know in detail as soon as the police scented it — as an essential part of official government function. Why is the police topbrass telling the PM about it in a non-professional meet with the express content of bon homie?

Well, this is another fine and yet painful proof of the policemen's unreformed unprofessional ways about their service which is absolutely unacceptable. So much so that this one act alone of attempting to beguile no less a person than the head executive of the state should morally disqualify them from the policeman's job.

Doctors' Ultimatum

Government hospitals have a notorious tradition of living with chronic managerial crisis. An ultimatum served yesterday by internes of the eight government medical colleges indicate that tradition might get a new lease of life if the government and the resident doctors of hospitals cannot have their differences resolved soon. The internes agitating under the banner of Young Doctors' Council threatened the government with strike for indefinite period of time if it does not get a move on to meet their six-point demand within the next two weeks. Their main demand is, raise in their pay. Some of the other demands include, introduction of a guideline for employment of the new doctors in the clinics, abundant supply of drugs and other goods in hospitals, appointment of more doctors in government hospitals, durable solution of the accommodation problem of the internes and introduction of referral system. We do not know if all the demands would be deemed acceptable by the government but from what we have learnt from the newspapers majority of them sound pretty reasonable. But that is looking far too ahead at this instant. The order of the moment is government sit with the representatives of the agitating doctors immediately. Half the problems will be solved if the two parties can have a cordial discussion over the problem. The government would do well to listen to the disgruntled doctors sooner than later.

We have seen in the past how by not reacting sincerely and quickly enough while dealing with the demand of various professional groups, governments allowed simple problems to go out of hands. While we urge the authorities to brook no delay in this matter, we counsel the internes to drop strike as a tool of protest from their agenda. They must think up and use other means to get across their grievance. They must not forget that if they stay away from work they will increase the sufferings of the patients which they are pledged-bound not to do.

Good Tidings

This comes as a boost for our sagging morale at a time when rule of law is fast becoming an increasingly alien notion. A murder case has been restarted after 25 long years. Gopalganj has been witness to this remarkable revival of a risqué case. Just when it seemed the cry for justice about the murder of four young men — Waliur Rahman, Kamalesh, Bishnupada and Lutfur — has died down in the labyrinth of our tortuous and tardy legal system, in came an order from the High Court to bring the case back to life. It duly began yesterday.

Waliur, Kamalesh, Bishnupada and Lutfur were freedomfighters with active involvement in left politics. On March 10, 1973 while returning from electoral work for the upcoming parliamentary elections, the group of four was allegedly butchered by one Hemayetuddin Ahmed. Apparently political rivalry was the reason behind this gruesome multiple murder. A case was filed on the basis of dying declaration of Lutfur, the lone man to survive the assault on the spot only to succumb to his injuries later. Since then it had been a fate of delay and drift for this sensational murder case.

Understandably lot of political strings were attached to it and clearly there had been attempts to 'kill' the case. There was every sign that the case was going nowhere and was all set to end up in the long queue of numerous untracked untried political murders in the country's judicial annals. But to the delight of every sentient and law abiding citizen that has not been the case.

Bangladesh-India Trade Relations: Some Recent Pronouncements

by Mahfuzur Rahman

It would be quite unwise to belittle the importance and geo-economic significance of Bangladesh's trade with India. Countries naturally trade with their neighbours and, other things remaining the same, they trade more with their neighbours than with other countries.

SOME recent statements of the Commerce Minister, Mr Tofail Ahmed, on South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAFTA), South Asian Free Trade Arrangement (SAFTA), Indo-Bangladesh trade relationships and trade liberalisation have been rather confusing. Speaking at a seminar on promotion of exports to India (The Daily Star, July 27, 1998), he hit out against import liberalisation by the previous government, alleged trade barriers in India, the large imbalance in trade of Bangladesh with its giant neighbour and the "40 per cent value addition" requirement for Bangladeshi exports to SAARC countries in order to be eligible for duty free treatment under SAPTA. The confusion may be traced to incomplete reporting in the press. But there may be more to it than that.

At a time when the global economy is becoming more open, it is curious to find the minister for commerce himself lamenting trade liberalisation already undertaken. One does not have to hold any brief for the previous government to see the need for freeing trade or lauding steps already taken in that direction. Mr Ahmed lambastes the previous government for reducing the maximum Bangladesh tariff from 350 per cent to 48 per cent. The average tariff in industrial countries is one-tenth of the latter figure. Moreover, in the present context, India too has liberalised trade, as have many other developing countries.

How do the degree and pattern of trade liberalisation in the two countries compare? Is it possible that Indian barriers to exports from Bangladesh are all high while obstacles to Indian

exports to Bangladesh are immaterial for trade between the two countries? Is not mutual reduction of barriers precisely the objective of all negotiations to set up a preferential or free trade area? Supply constraints to exports can be at least as important as demand constraints. Have Bangladesh entrepreneurs done enough to seek markets in India? These and numerous other questions arise and while some of the answers are clear others need critical examination in any discussion on regional trading arrangements. Instead of glossing over hard questions, political leaders should show the discriminating public that they know their economic onions well.

The trade deficit of Bangladesh with India is certainly large. But by itself it should not be worrying. No country needs to keep all its bilateral trade relations in balance. It is the overall balance with the rest of the world that matters. For Bangladesh, as for most developing countries, the overall balance is a large negative and that is how the country imports capital and thus meets the need for investment that cannot be financed by domestic savings alone. Even a very large trade imbalance with a particular country is not generally a matter of concern. The huge trade deficit of the United

States with Japan has been a perpetual source of irritation of Americans, specially the politicians of that country. Many economists consider that reaction plainly silly.

None the less, if a persistently large trade deficit with India is a matter of concern for policy makers in Bangladesh, the remedy should be sought in increasing the competitiveness of Bangladeshi products, familiarizing Indian consumers with these products as well as through mutual reduction of trade barriers between the two countries. Meanwhile, such mercantilist notions as that a bilateral trade deficit is necessarily evil or that India is "milking" the benefits of a trade surplus with Bangladesh (the commerce ministers words) should be discarded. The ultimate beneficiary of liberal trade is the consumer. If Bangladeshi consumers, like consumers anywhere else, prefer imported goods they do so for good reason: to them the imported goods are better or cheaper than domestic products, though fascination with anything foreign does play a role in shaping consumer preference. In formulating trade policy the interest of the consumer should be the primary consideration.

It is also unhealthy as well as illogical to put much stress

on obtaining non-reciprocal free access to foreign markets in the context of regional economic integration. The commerce minister laments the 40 per cent value addition requirement for Bangladeshi products for duty-free entry into India (and Pakistan and Sri Lanka). But regional trading arrangements are basically a matter of reciprocal action among equal partners. This is very unlike the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) under which developed countries give preferential treatment to imports from eligible developing countries, without demanding reciprocity. It makes no sense to rely on duty-free access to Indian markets for reduction of trade deficits unless this is also reciprocated by Bangladesh. Regional co-operation is not a one-way street.

The 40 per cent value addition point is enthusiastically taken up by Kabir U Ahmad (The Daily Star, August 2). He goes even further and appears to place the main burden of guilt for the trade deficit of Bangladesh on this particular requirement for duty-free import. To quote him! "There is hardly an export item (except items like jute) which has 40 per cent value addition." Therefore [stress is mine] Bangladesh cannot export suf-

ficient amount of manufactured or semi-manufactured products to India to eliminate the deficits. It is hard to believe he means this. If zero tariff is the main requirement of growth of exports, one wonders how international trade takes place at all in a world still strewn with tariff walls and other obstacles. His arguments here look all the more strange because a few lines later he points out, correctly, that non-tariff barriers are bigger obstacles to trade with India than tariff barriers.

I firmly believe that truly multilateral trade liberalisation is superior to bilateral or regional trading arrangements. Regional trading arrangements involve a maze of discriminatory rules and regulations that distort trade in a 'spaghetti bowl' system in the words of Jagdish Bhagwati, the eminent economist. It would have been better for the world economy if

they did not exist. But they are a fact of the today. Preferential trade areas have mushroomed in recent years. Not all of them work well and many exist only on paper. But some of these arrangements have helped liberalise trade and investment flows. SAFTA can similarly be useful. But it would not be a disaster if it failed.

On the other hand, it would be quite unwise to belittle the importance and geo-economic significance of Bangladesh's trade with India. Countries naturally trade with their neighbours and, other things remaining the same, they trade more with their neighbours than with other countries. Undoubtedly, border trade reflects certain comparative advantage of the partner countries and confers economic benefits on both. Such considerations apply to Indo-Bangladesh trade as well and should not be brushed aside, as Kabir U Ahmad seems to do. Bangladesh's ability to compete in rich industrial countries and other fast growing countries, is of critical importance. Her ability to compete with (and in) India is also important. SAFTA or an SAFTA.

The writer is an economist with a long career with the United Nations, New York.

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.

Foreign currency bank account

Sir, Many of our people maintain local currency bank accounts. What is the harm if we also have foreign currency bank accounts in our country?

Foreign exchange deposit in our Bangladesh Bank has always been insufficient and unsatisfactory. This has compelled our authorities to attempt to devalue our currency off and on in the name of exporting our goods and commodities at a cheaper price and help earning more and more foreign exchange. But on the contrary, devaluation has always made an adverse effect on our economy and it has enhanced the sufferings of our people. This is because of the fact that ours is a purely import-oriented economy. We are totally dependent on importing huge quantity of foreign goods and commodities, food grains, machinery and what not, and we are also required to make repayment of colossal amount of foreign loans in foreign exchange every year. As such our Bangladesh Bank is left empty with foreign exchange deposit.

We strongly feel that in order to increase foreign exchange deposit in our country our Ministry of Finance and Bangladesh Bank may allow our industrialists, businessmen and the members of the public to open separate foreign exchange deposit account in different banks of our country.

The foreign exchange may be deposited either in US Dollar or in UK Pound Sterling and this would be handled carefully i.e. deposited/withdrawn under certain rules and regulations to be framed by a committee of financial experts, bankers and economists of the country.

O H Kabir, 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

The current scene

Sir, The overall socio-political scenario of the country, if not bad, is not very good. The power shortage problem seems to have improved somewhat due to the personal initiative of the PM which implies that without her personal intervention and efforts things don't generally move in the right direction.

The whole world's curiosity about oil and gas in Bangladesh sparked some hopes for a happy turn-around but there are fears of some foulplay as well as over-shooting the target resulting in possible ending of the gas reserves quickly and making the country poorer by paying for the gas in cash foreign exchange at current world market rate while gaining nothing for the national exchequer.

The law and order situation which improved temporarily due possibly to the world cup pre-occupation has again deteriorated. Women are being tortured to death and children abused ruthlessly. Here again it looks like being only the Home Minister's own business and everyone else is spending care-free time.

The economy is not faring as well as it is expected. A moderate dose of depreciation is likely to boost the exports temporarily and worsen the price situation. Imports are not growing apparently because of cautious lending and poor industrial activity. Wage earners' remittances which used to be 12 to

15 per cent even the other day are now by less than even one per cent. Lack of confidence, expectation of a further devaluation and may be diversion through hundi are responsible for this trend. We have, therefore, to encourage our expatriate workers to send more money. Although our Foreign Minister often speaks of economic diplomacy, his staff abroad in different missions have so far failed to establish a single instance of motivating our people to go abroad and earn.

Nevertheless, the most important thing at home is good law and order. No strikes but more work which and only which can move us forward successfully. Otherwise loss of production and power failure will aggravate the already deteriorating price situation at a time when the whole country is faced with the problem of on-rush of flood waters.

A Rahman, 164, Fakirpur, Dhaka

Nurses at the hospitals

Sir, Recently, I took my father to a reputed government hospital, got him admitted and helplessly noticed the insouciant behaviour of nurses. Most of them are insincere to the patient having no cordiality and somehow discharge their duties.

I received the worst shock when I got humiliated at the sarcastic remarks of those persons. How dare they make insulting remarks to the patient and his/her guardians? They are appointed here to do a noble job and a patient's improvement depends specially on attendants' encouragement.

It's also shocking but true that nurses sometimes impose arrogant tone even on the doctors. In some cases they don't waver to sell medicine served from the hospital in the black market. They don't even hesitate to sleep now and then ignoring their duties.

Arun Kumar Biswas, Dept. of English, DU

Bankruptcy and productivity

Sir, Recently, an announcement was made relating to the formation of a National Wages and Productivity Commission. For unknown reasons, nominations to the positions in the commission have not yet been made. Apparently, the commission is meant for raising the wages of the workers of the public sector enterprises after a close examination of labour productivity in these enterprises. As we know, most of these enterprises are running a loss, and that too for a long time. It is time that these enterprises are declared bankrupt.

There is also an impression that workers alone are responsible for labour productivity and therefore wages only should be linked to productivity. I would like to suggest some points several issues for consideration of the newly set-up commission, while they link wages to productivity.

a) Labour productivity is largely and basically a management function. b) Unless the management of an enterprise is capable of simultaneously earning profit, paying taxes, raising wages and

expanding or diversifying product and market, the labour productivity is bound to be low or negative. The management must at least bring the enterprise to break-even point before the issue of labour productivity can be considered.

c) The owners of private sector enterprises are enjoying undue concessions, defaulting bank loans and spending enterprise funds for personal and family luxuries and simultaneously manipulating records to show huge losses, for avoiding taxes, withholding dividends, freezing worker wages, and securing more loan from the banks should be allowed to go bankrupt. The Wages and Productivity Commission should be authorized to initiate the process of liquidation.

For enterprises in the public sector incurring huge losses, the State should liquidate their assets and settle the claims of creditors including those of labour and the environment. For reading about the thousands of sick industries in the private sector, in their cases also, they should be declared bankrupt and the claims settled through sale of assets.

This measure may involve many enterprises and may entail substantial loss of employment to start with. But, this is absolutely essential and this should have been done long ago. The issue of linking wages with productivity will be a useless exercise if inefficient and unviable enterprises are allowed to operate. The commission should, therefore, be assigned dual responsibility — one, to declare the deserving enterprises bankrupt and the other, to assess productivity situation in the viable and other enterprises operating at break-even point, so that wages of workers and management officials including those in the ministries and corporations can be linked to productivity. Once the commission has succeeded in identifying the enterprises, that deserve to be declared bankrupt, it will be able to start with a clean slate and should concentrate on giving guidelines on permissible limit of drawings by owners from enterprise funds, payment of taxes, calculation of profit, meeting unliquidated obligations such as bank loans, promoters' target and wages and working conditions. If the commission can achieve this for even 200 enterprises, it will be a big achievement for the economy.

A M A H Siddiqui, 66, Central Road, Dhaka

Returning the coin

Sir, As an 'experienced' citizen of this God-forsaken country (hope not), I am afraid the release of the draft(?) of the new national education policy of the government will see the immediate eruption of several political controversies, to which the citizens have become accustomed since the two mighty Begums have been controlling the destiny of the nation since the early '90s. There are precedents (CHT, Farakka and others).

When our politicians cannot concur even at the national level, then one might ask the pertinent question: what is the point of being a Bangladeshi and be proud of it? I have just been reading a letter from a Bangladeshi in Australia who became an Australian citizen as he was fed up with the law and order situation in Bangladesh. Now the Rubel case indicates Bangladesh may be becoming a police state. We are watching whether the AL tears are crocodile's or otherwise. The MP has to act tough with this derailed nation.

What is the pointer? The warring and feuding politicians are driving the citizens crazy. Politicisation of sectors and services (BUET, education,

campus violence, police, civil service, NCBS SOEs) is causing havoc in the social and administrative fields.

The reverse cycle will start immediately after the change of the political regime. This is becoming an obnoxious vicious cycle, and only the people can smash up these repeated cycles of non-development. We have to get out of it. How? The concurrence on the Educational Policy is a part of the game indicated above, and it is not an isolated case. The politicians are talk tough, why can't we citizens return the coin?

A Zabr, Dhaka

On raising tuition fees

Sir, I appreciate the step taken by the Dhaka University authority to raise tuition fees. I believe that every student is capable of paying the fees (even if it's increased). Even those who are financially handicapped are also capable in my belief. For, they earn a handsome amount of money through private tuitions.

Now, my demand is, the authority would have to utilise the money for the betterment of the university. They have to ensure us that the teachers won't work with consultancy firms leaving their duties behind. The teachers would have to take classes properly. They have to modernise the university and I hope the authority will help the students with the access to the internet.

Kismet, Mohsin Hall, DU

Plastic bags

Sir, It is very sad to see how blind the learned and the conscious people of our society are when it comes to non-biodegradable products.

"Say No to Plastic Bags" in the opinion column (24.7.98) by Munira Khan is there to waken us up. Items like plastic bags, plastic ball point pens, plastic water bottles etc., will simply close up our country without doing any favours. Ms Khan was right in pointing out that these plastic items have a very less life span of usefulness. Therefore it spends most of its life being happily dumped everywhere without decomposing.

The manufacturers of these will never stop as there is demand. So it is up to us the users, to open our eyes and force the manufacturers to stop produce these rubbish.

Shagar, Dhaka

A new axe

Sir, I would first like to convey my heart-felt sympathy to Rubel's family. As human beings, we are given the right to live, the right to free speech and freedom of expression. No one can take that away from us. But when certain authorities gang up on a lone individual and systematically execute him, it not only belittles us, it takes away our rights as free humans.

Recent actions by the police department have brought a new axe down to its head. All the reproach they are receiving should move them to do some serious soul-searching. However, repugnance and hatred for the police will not help in solving future such incidents. We the people should unite and prevent such tragedies from taking place again. The police should remember that people power is strong enough to move mountains.

Let Rubel's death be a lesson to us all.

Yaser, Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN



Soccer Diplomacy

IT was the most glorious day in Iran's history — even bigger than taking American hostages after the revolution. The Iranian soccer team beat the United States, 2-1, in the World Cup. According to reports, people in Tehran went crazy, shooting off guns and fireworks and honking their horns.

For most countries, winning in World Cup soccer is the next best thing to fighting in a war.

Fortunately, not many people in the United States give a damn. Soccer is not the spectator sport in this country that croquet is. For most US football fans, it's a big yawn.

It is not generally known, but the CIA has a soccer bureau devoted to ways of using the sport as a method of furthering US foreign policy.

Flip Ray Jr., the chief, told me, "Iran proves once again you can win more by losing at soccer than by sending in the 6th Fleet to nuke countries in the Middle East."

"Take the game Iran won against the United States. After it was over the Iranians were full of joy. It was the first time they had anything good to say about our country. Here are satellite photos of Iranians crying with happiness in the streets."

"The rapprochement with Iran didn't cost us a dime if you don't count what we spent to send our team by Virgin Air."

Then what you are saying you would like to do is send the US soccer players to every country with which we are having serious problems," I said.

"Yes, provided that we lose. We want matches with North Korea, Cuba, Yugoslavia and Congo. We want our players to throw every game as long as it will keep the peace."

"We didn't throw the game to Iran, did we?"

Flip grinned. "You don't think we couldn't beat a third-class team like the Iranians if we wanted to? Do you know how many times the Americans failed to score when they could have?"

"Oh dear, we threw the game."

"It's top secret. We told our people in the locker room that if they threw the game against Iran we'd let them beat Brazil."

"And they all agreed?"

"They did when they found out that if they lost all their games they would get to meet with Vice President Gore in Washington."

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OPINION

Shades of Craze

Ashfaqur Rahman

Being called a colourful person no longer means that someone is debasing your character or that your life style is under any kind of discussion. It is a perfectly harmless and non-analytical statement that draws evidence from the physical appearance. After all, you cannot expect people not to notice you when you hit resembling a traffic signal. Colours have captured everyone's imagination. From blazing yellows and roaring reds to baby pinks and electric blues, the sheer range and variety boggle the mind. And if you think that this sudden craze with colours is restricted just to clothes, then you certainly need your eyes checked. How else would you explain seeing a blue-haired beauty when you have gone for a harmless drink in the neighbourhood pub? And no the spirit content cannot be blamed for what appears to be an apparition as in the same glance you also drink in green nail polish and bronze lipstick. Does not say much for colour coordination, but it does make you sit up and notice and wonder about the wearer's personality.

People want to express themselves. This sudden fondness for all things colourful can be attributed to the fact that products are available in various hues. And products here again encompass nail polishes, eye-shadows, garments, shoes and in fact every thing else which a person needs.

Gone are the days, when being formally dressed meant wearing a sedate suit or an elegant chiffon sari. Now, for a night in town, the requisite grab is anything that is bold in colour, and bolder the better. Coloured hair is the current rage. In a roomful of people, every second mop of hair deviates from the traditional black or grey to the trendier blonde or brown. Some have streaked or highlighted their hair, while the braver of the lot go in for a complete change of colour which belies the fact that once upon a time they too had raven locks. There is a sudden awareness among people about all the wonderful things they can do to their hair without it actually disappearing from their heads.

I talked to one model. Who said, "People have realised now

that colour is not bad for their hair. Hair colour has become a part of fashion and people use it to express their personality."

The importance of hair has always been undermined. Of late, there is a strong realisation of what all can be done with it. It is not just the crowning glory. It's the face as well. And hands and feet and anything that is on view. The safe browns are being replaced with bold maroons, fashionable violets. Women want glamour but with a difference. And it is not just models who are following this trend, but everyone.

Contact lenses have not been left far behind either. Lenses, which initially had the task of enhancing vision, now do more than just that. They enhance the way you look. No wonder one sees perfectly Bangladesh-looking black haired with light green eyes. No, the parentage is not under question here, it's just coloured contact lenses. An optician says, "It is a misconception that coloured lenses are harmful to the eye. They are also numbered and they function just as good as the normal lenses."

Though it is acceptable to be fashion conscious, one wonders at the sheer sensibility of looking at the world through unnaturally blue eyes. But green and blue lenses though are no competition for hazel brown and grey ones.

Initially, this too was predominantly used by models and stars, but now lesser mortals have mastered enough courage to go for an eyelid. And how? Where fire-engine red nail polish was once considered bold beyond belief, check out what's on the market now. One has to feel right about what one is wearing or the look which one is sporting to make it look right. We have to be able to carry it off. So, attitude does matter. And attitude seems to be spreading. People had an orthodox mentality, but things are changing. We have to understand that the advertising agencies are quite orthodox and restrained in their outlook. So before you go all multicolour, keep your job requirements and specifications in mind. Otherwise, go right ahead and give that rainbow a run for its worth.