The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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Depoliticise the TUs

'Our society, lorded over more politically than can be good for it, is a behemoth deaf and blind and heeds not words of caution and wisdom. Shahabuddin Ahmed's words invent nothing and reveal nothing. That is where the beauty of his pronouncements lies. These are always statement of the obvious, may be what is too much obvious. The politician does not stand against what the President says in his charged public utterances but dismisses his urgings as boyscoutishly impractical. The inner reason for rejection is there has always been some basic admonition of the politicians in every Shahabuddin speech. The politician cannot ply his trade in the usual manner if he starts to care for the President's points.

On Monday President Shahabuddin spoke at a seminar on grooming managers for the new century. He said industrial management gave way to anarchy as early as in the first years of independence. Managers were named on political considerations and management boiled down to carrying out political behests.

The President on this occasion ambled to new ground when he took up the case of trade unions and CBAs. Together with ridding industrial management, education and financing, appointment and transfer and promotion completely of partisan political influence, he called for depoliticising trade unions and CBAs. The two have over the years of independence become populist-looking mafias bent on turning industrial houses and semi-government service organisations into very obliging agencies giving to the mafiosi inconceivably big pots of money and perennial sources of power - while the bodies contracted debilitating diseases and the workers languished in want and squalor.

This must change. But Shahabuddin says not through banning trade unionism. That can't be done. Trade unions must become trade unions and not lackeys of this or that political party. The worker's interest and nothing besides, should be their concern. And worker's interest depends on the health of his workshop. TUs should work exclusively for better benefits, better production per worker and better organisation.

Thank you again, Mr. President.

IT Holds the Answer

The headline of a front page item in yesterday's Daily Star summed up the message: The time is more than ripe for Bangladesh to plan and push if she is really looking for inspiration from the Information Technology (IT) sector for its fragile economy. In fact, one can hardly overestimate the need for realising the great economic potential in the IT sector underscored freshly in a seminar organised jointly by The Daily Star and Young Entrepreneurs and Professionals Forum Monday last.

This is essentially the age of information technology and we are at the threshold of IT consciousness. To its credit the government has showed a commendable alacrity in recognising its responsibilities. Computer has been included in the thrust area of its policies followed by reduction in its import duty. We now counsel it to concentrate on human resources development through a broad-based computer education programme. It has been frequently mentioned that there is a huge global market for skilled computer professionals and Bangladesh can do its economy a world of favour by cashing in on this demand. To do that it has to have institutions that will churn out professionals. But mere setting up of schools or training centres will not turn Bangladesh into an able supplying source of professionals. We have to ensure quality too. Obviously this will call for generous and specific budgetary allocations. Apart from playing its own facilitating role, the government has to inspire a massive private sector participation in the educating process. There has to be rapid replicating instances of NIIT and Aptech.

IT is one sector that really holds promise for a resource-constrained country like Bangladesh. Unlike other fields it does not require great economic strength or status to steal a march over others. Mind you, it is Bangalore and not any western city that has earned the distinction of being known as the second Silicon Valley. The natural aptitude of the people in southern India which contributed to the revolutionary rise of an Indian city into a computer haven like the original in the US is not much missed in our people too. All we need to do is to harness the potential properly. The rest will fall in place automatically.

Stormy Build-up

Iran was planning a military exercise with 70,000 soldiers along her eastern border with Afghanistan. The proposed show of strength has not been conceived with an eye to any 'confrontation' with the Talibans, according to the BBC World Service quoting sources in Tehran but is nonetheless believed to have been influenced by recent events in Afghanistan. Iran's protégé northern alliance is on a retreat from a successful onslaught by the fundamentalist Talibans up in the north and the official Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani has been forced out by those militants as well. Apart from these developments what has really boiled Tehran's tempers is the untraceability of eleven Iranian diplomats since the storming of Mazar-e-Sharif by the Taliban forces on August 8.

There is a Shia-Sunni angle to such a patently confrontationist outlook. On an extended plane, conflict of interests simmers between Iran and Pakistan with the latter being widely viewed as materially backing the fundamentalist Taliban cause for quite some time now. Pakistan has denied this but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's reported announcement in the parliament that the country would adopt Quranic and Shariat laws could strengthen the above impression in certain circles.

That region is really hotting up calling for powerfully mandated mediation efforts to end the suicidal divisiveness in Afghanistan.

Russia Needs Bold Leadership

Amid growing demands for Yeltsin's resignation, the government hastily concluded an agreement with the Communist bloc in Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma. Under this agreement, Yeltsin agreed to give up portions of the almost-dictatorial powers of the Russian presidency.

AST week on this page I wrote about the impending danger facing the Russian economy. During the last few days, things have taken a turn for the worse. The continuing in control of his fate. The fact market meltdown in Russia has been like a giant tornado ripping through a movie set - once the glitzy facades are blown away, what's left isn't pretty.

Russia's deepening financial crisis has come closer to toppling Boris Yeltsin from power as the new prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, struggled to keep the country's economy from collapse. Amid growing demands for Yeltsin's resignation, the government hastily concluded an agreement with the Communist bloc in Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma. Under this agreement, Yeltsin agreed to give up portions of the almost-dictatorial powers of the Russian presidency. This concession marked a major defeat for the generally autocratic but freemarket political ideology that has kept Yeltsin in power for seven years.

However, the agreement which aimed at easing the confirmation of Chernomyrdin as prime minister fell apart only hours after it was hammered out. The failure to agree on confirming Chernomyrdin makes it highly unlikely that he will win quick parliamentary endorsement and thus threatens to leave the country without a stable government. This would divert attention from a financial crisis that has sent the country reeling.

There has been a growing speculation among political observers that Yeltsin is no longer

THE Bangladesh Television

subject of harassment and

cruelty against females in this

country. It was heartening to

hear young students

interviewed saying clearly what

they thought of the causes and

remedies. That was in contrast

to the sentiments and despair

subjected to cruel and harsh

treatment. Cultural, social, and

religious beliefs and norms of-

ten support these practices.

Preference for male children,

neglect of girls' and women's

education and health, restric-

tion of their movement and of

access to various services - all

of these have a cumulative effect

putting females at a disad-

vantage and keeping them weak

and vulnerable. Yet it is an is-

sue that should concern women

as well as men. Cruelty against

women is only one symptom of

a deeper social disease. And the

disease is so deep that being

sorry or sentimental is no rem-

children should be dealt a very

firm and determined response.

The State as well as the civil so-

ciety must send unmistakably

clear signals against all forms

of social crime, but particularly

crime against women and chil-

dren. Pious protests without

tangible action will prove fu-

tile. Endless seminars, proces-

sions, parades in defence of

civil liberties are short-lived

agitation. Action speaks louder

than intentions. In the short or

immediate term, there is very

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Violence against women and

Women and girls are often

expressed by intellectuals.

(BTV) recently aired a

short programme on the

that he had been forced to at gravated their own problems.

least negotiate some of his powers with the Communist-dominated parliament only goes to further this view. The Communists, who want to renationalise industry, increase social spending, and reestablish control of the economy, are gaining popularity at the expense of Yeltsin. And so is Chernomyrdin. Although Yeltsin has taken great pains to portray Chernomyrdin as a subordinate and not a pretender to his chair, detractors are saying that Chernomyrdin is "just about all

sia and the abyss." The deflationary pressures that were seen last year in Asia is, in large part, responsible for Russia's economic woes. The Asian currency crisis and its fallout not only discouraged investment in all emerging markets, it also reduced the price of oil, which accounts for almost

half of Russia's export earnings.

standing between Mother Rus-

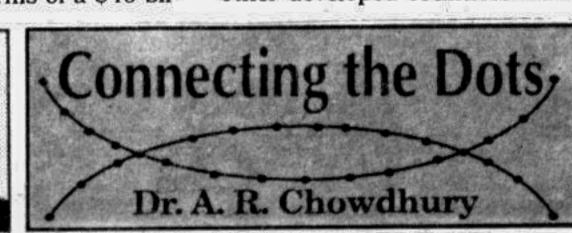
Last week, Russia's central bank, with a depleted foreign exchange reserve, abandoned its defense of the rouble and announced a three month payment moratorium on debt owed to foreigners. This led to a steep plunge in the value of rouble which fell by about 50 per cent within a week. Rouble's fall has devalued the assets of many Russian banks pushing them to the brink of insolvency. At the same time, efforts by these banks to acquire dollars to protect themselves against future depreciation have only ag-

The banks have for years gambled heavily on short-term domestic debt that is now in default. Nervous depositors are lining up to withdraw their money, leaving the banks scrambling to find a way out of this liquidity crunch.

With a view to balance the interest of foreign investors with its own need for cash and political support, the Chernomyrdin government announced the terms of a \$40 bil-

in the economic collapse. Russia's worsening financial crisis has taken a heavy toll on

global equity markets. The RTS stock index in Russia has fallen to a record low, pushing its decline for the year to more than 80 per cent. Some estimates show that the value of all corporate stocks in Russia has dropped more than six fold this year. The Dow Jones industrial average took its biggest hit of the year, falling about 5 per cent in a single day. Markets in other developed countries were



lion debt restructuring plan. Under this plan, holders of Russian bonds maturing by the end of next year will be able to trade in their bonds for a number of new securities, all of which mature much later and yield less.

The announcement has led to a sense of disappointment among foreign investors, who hold more than \$11 billion of these bonds, as many of them will suffer substantial losses. Gorge Soros, the controversial US financier, who has been one of the most active foreign investors in Russia has claimed to have lost more than \$2 billion

also down by as much as 5 per cent; while emerging markets saw even higher fall in prices.

Shares in foreign banks that have significant exposures to Russia through loans and investments in bonds and other assets have also been affected. However, despite the Russian exposure, a default crisis among these banks is not imminent as most of their lending in Russia are guaranteed by the western governments.

The situation in Russia would definitely add a little more deflationary pressure to the western economies, although I do not see any chance

for these economies to fall into recession. The market fundamentals in most of these countries are good. However, it is possible that if investors in these countries panic, their fears can lead to an economic decline. An excessively sour market can become a self-ful-

filling prophecy. A particularly frightening aspect to the financial crisis that has pounced on Russia is the passivity of the Russian and the world leaders in the face of it. The complexity of the crisis makes this inaction understandable, but no less disturbing or defensible.

Chernomyrdin tried to sound upbeat about it all this week, saying that the situation in the country is difficult but manageable. He claimed to have a plan to rescue the economy. but until now he has provided no specifics.

Any concrete decision taken by Chernomyrdin would affect three interest groups : foreign investors, who want to cut their losses; Russia's vulnerable banks, suffering a liquidity crunch; and ordinary Russians, who already are hit by a rouble devaluation and non-payment of arrear wages. The situation resembles a zero-sum game more money for any one group would mean less for the others. Admittedly, Chernomyrdin

faces a political problem that is as big as Russia itself. He has to somehow mollify diverse and powerful interests: Communists who dominate the Russian

parliament; Russia's financial leaders; foreign lenders including the IMF; and Russia's own economic reformers. In navigating these waters, Chernomyrdin is not getting much help from Yeltsin, who has come under intense pressure to

Equally dismal and dangerous has been the absence of leadership from the world leaders, especially the G-7 leaders. They seem baffled by developments in Russia. Instead of providing sharp-edged answers, they have provided little but sound bites and truisms, an example being the US State Department assertion that "policies are more important than personalities."

Later this week, Clinton is scheduled to have a summit meeting with Yeltsin. Both leaders are fighting for their political life. It is unlikely that any bold step to face the economic crisis would come out from this meeting. After the recent intervention in the foreign exchange market for yen where the United States spent about \$2 billion, the US policy makers are in no mood to make similar moves to shore up the value of rouble.

Long term financial health for Russia, or any other country, requires sound economic policies combined with strict, consistent enforcement of banking and other laws. Financial health also requires leadership at home and wise counsel from abroad - something it isn't getting. Hence the need for a new leadership to steer Russia from the verge of an economic collapse is more urgent than

We Need to be More Than Sorry or Sentimental

by Dr. M. Zakir Husain

Endless seminars, processions, parades in defence of civil liberties are short-lived agitation. Action speaks louder than intentions. In the short or immediate term, there is very good reason to set up well trained and capable squads of neighbourhood vigilantes to deal a deterrent blow to the social outlaws and obscurantist adventurers.

adventurers. Swift and sure retribution will demonstrate civil society's uncompromising and unmistakable will to act.

Yes, some may fear it will create a parallel faw enforcing mechanism which could clash with existing agency. It could also create new forms of tyranny. To some it may even sound as a dangerous step. But the present confidence in police system being what it is - and seemingly for good reason there is enough of security gap in public life that cannot be ignored. Voluntary action by the civil society is one such step to bridge the gap and generate some confidence and security. Indeed, it may not be the best solution.

But what else in the short term? The search for the best is often the enemy of the pragmatic course. A disease as malignant as this one indeed needs strong medicine, strong enough to deter. The risks are calculated and confinable while benefits are within grasp and almost immediate. Of course, such voluntary groups of neighbourhood security must be kept well above party and parochial affiliations but introduced only with wide participation and acceptance of people in neighbourhoods they protect.

Civil society in Bangladesh is not the monopoly of few intellectuals only. Grassroots representative groups are also parts of the civil society; they

need to be vocal but also need to be empowered such that they compensate the lack of capacity of the individual to act in defence of her/his civil freedom and security of life and limb. Well intentioned debates and deliberations will be of little consequence and give no tangible result.

A clear expression of the will to act from the civil society is required while the State prepares adequate interventions to redeem its pledges for public security and rule of law. Murder in police custody, rape of women in offices, dowry related murder of women are no ordinary or isolated events. These should evoke serious attention by established government; noted and acted upon by the cabinet of Ministers, and decisions effectively and publicly implemented. Where is the public accountability of law enforcing agencies which are maintained at public expense? All civil servants are paid from public money at tax payers' expense; rather than being accountable to the public the State officials seem to hold the members of the public hostage to arbitrary threats and punishments. This is a travesty of good governance and public account-

People of Bangladesh is general and the young and educated in particular inherit a largely secular tradition. That is a big asset. The lines of class and

caste distinction are either very thin or do not exist; society is largely imbued with egalitarian ethos though there is a certain divide between the educated and the illiterate. But there has been a seductive propaganda that stokes fundamentalist intolerance especially among the vouth and keeps the poor and weak under a spell of ignorance of their rights. But time and again, the people have generally shown little following of obscurantism and scant support to

the neo fascist groups. Yet, being essentially gullible and vulnerable to dogmatic gospels propagated by well funded zealots, there is a threat that the forces of orthodoxy and intolerance will try to win a substantial following among those who are dissatisfied with the present order. There is seething discontent and frustration due to widespread lack of employment and equality of opportunity for social advancement. Much of the violence is the result of loss of hope in future especially among the young and unemployed. Without removing discontent and discontent and despair and restoring hope and faith, delinquency and crime cannot be significantly reduced.

That is why, the State has a special duty to come down heavily on all anti-social forces including particularly those that masquerade under fundamentalist or obscurantist facades

but seek to keep the women and the weak under bondage. The militancy of these forces must. when needed, be met with State power. But that may not be adequate or universally available. The civil society can, and should not fail to send a very strong message to the delinquents, deviants and decadent streak that plague the society. The civil society must respond with effective mechanisms to secure civic freedom and security especially for the women and the weaker sections. At the same time, it will be necessary to wrest the initiative away from those who are in fact accomplices to social crimes and expose their misdeeds.

Crime against women is a symptom of an underlying social morbidity. Thus, some long term structural remedies are necessary to strike at the root of this disease. Female education and employment of females in greater numbers will reduce excessive dependence of women on men and raise the status of women; glorification of women in literature and folk lore will not be allowed as a ploy to keep them subjugated in the name of social or cultural traditions. Physical security of women has to be ensured by vigilance and cultural; education.

Women in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar feel safe and secure on the street, in bus and work place unlike their sisters in Bangladesh. That is the

result of a cultivated cultural norm and accepted social conduct of respecting women as much as due to higher female education and employment. Emancipation of women and assertion of their rights may take time to materialise but let that not become an excuse to indefinitely postpone present actions that bring visible improvements.

Let us not deceive ourselves or become lulled into complacency with ad hoc or isolated examples of giving women exalted and high positions. What is needed is the advancement of women as an integral part of establishing a more just and equitable social and economic order. That is a tall order and will take all the political will and commitment that a democratic governance and society can muster. But without being a part of the whole, women's advancement and social security may be a mirage dressed in some gender or feminist agenda. That sort of programme unfortunately has a very short and a perilous half life.

To recapitulate, for the present, there is no substitute for effective and prompt State actions that are seen and believed, in order to restore the much needed confidence in public mind. Side by side, there is need for grassroots social mobilisation for example volunteer groups engaged in neighbourhood security vigilance. All in all, social crimes must be made extremely painful and costly both to those who indulge and those who indirectly promote these. As regards violence against women, it is not for the women alone but equally, if not more, for the men to deliver the message as well as the remedy.

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.

The BTV and the flood

Sir, Suddenly the BTV is flooding us with news and visuals of the flood. This strangely coincides with the decision of the government to beg for international help. What was the BTV doing during the last 50 days or so when the print media was crying hoarse about the devastations of the flood?

The sycophants at the BTV have done enough damage to the image (if there was any) of the government.

A Citizen

Dhaka Thanks Mr. Kabir

Sir, The wonderful letter from Mr O.H. Kabir published in the DS on 22 August, '98 is a unique reflection of his deep love for the country. It has drawn my attention to an urgency for regeneration through purging by means of elimination of corrupt and dishonest people who are close to power. To me whichever party comes to power matters less. What matters most is the strong will of our leaders to do good to the common people.

I believe in proper action and not in big talks. The only way open to us is now purging through peaceful means of eliminating corrupt and dishonest men and women to save the country from being destroyed in the name of NGOs and the other organisations. In terms of money and materials a huge loss of creative energies and efforts have been taking

Let us explore the possibilities of securing foreign assistance to help develop our country. There is no dearth of honest people and experts here. As soon as law and order improves, it will make a new horizon of development and progress.

May Allah bless us with his gifts of vision and courage to create a better Bangladesh for the present and future genera-

Abul Ashraf Noor house #9, Road #4 Sector #5, Uttara Dhaka-1230

Water pollution

Sir. The sewerage system of Khilgaon and its adjacent areas has completely collapsed due to clogging of the underground pipes. As a result raw sewerage are oozing out of manholes due to overflowing which are directly pouring into roadside drains. Sewerage connections of most of the houses are opened to the roadside drains. With the advent of flood sewerage discharges from above sources are directly mixing with the surrounding water surfaces of those areas and thus seriously polluting the same.

Natural colour of the engulfing flood water has been turned to blackish due to mixing with sewerage water and emitting obnoxious smell. Flood affected people are the worst victims who are to move here and there after crossing such polluted water. All types of aquatic organisms are wiped out

It is pity that under such faulty sewerage system Dhaka WASA has been realizing sewerage charges equivalent to water charges. In a democratic country how can the government realise such direct revenue without rendering any services in exchange thereof?

M A Jalil 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

'Leaving' the ground floor?

Sir, I am writing on behalf of my beloved and respected widow mother who has been living in East Raja Bazar, Dhaka for 30 years. There is serious health hazard/sufferings of the community of East Raja Bazar adjacent to Pantha Path and, which has been an ongoing disaster for

more than last five years. There is a disastrous sewerage problem in East Raja Bazar adjacent to Pantha Path under Ward number 40. This particular area get flooded with sewage couple of times a year and it has been occurring for more than last five years. This sewage would flood the ground floor and which would compel the residents to leave the ground floor for months. The underground water tank would be under the sewage water. And that is the source of water to use and drink. I cannot think people can live at that living con-

dition. But unfortunately my mother has been living at that condition with the local community for years. This year again the same disaster occurred couple of weeks ago and still sewage water is stagnant around our house. This time it went further worse. The ground floor of my mother's house collapsed due to water pressure.

All this disasters are due to a very simple cause i.e. local sewerage pipe line has not been connected to the main sewerage pipe line in Pantha Path. My mother lodged complaint several times to different authorities which resulted nothing other than her frustration and sufferings. As a professional

chartered engineer of Australia, I don't think it is a difficult problem to be solved. It can be done in few days. All it needs to recognize the problem, find the solution and execute the deci-

just cannot believe there

could have such sufferings as my mother going through in the 21st century because of the negligence of some officials. wonder what part of the earth we are living in where people's welfare are not considered. My mother would have expected better living conditions under

G Azmol 51 Rockley Avenue Baulkham Hills NSW 2153 Australia

the present leadership.

Sunset rule: Male

oppression? Sir, I would like to thank you for your timely editorial on the recent happenings of JU. You have rightly pointed out that JU authorities in the past have not been able to stand by the grievances of their students.

I also appreciate one of your comments that read, "...sorting to measures like the imposition of the sunset rule will amount to diverting attention from the principal crime". In this connection I would like to put forward another dimension. That is, it has been many times that JU authorities have resorted to such heinous measures whenever a problem occurred, be it a rape, kidnap, physical or verbal abuse.

It not only diverted attention but also justified such crimes by personifying the victim's personal or moral conduct. What I would like to mention here precisely is that imposition of sunset rule has been a politics of authority and there is no reason to believe that these institutional measures were innocent by nature. Rather I would like to put it this way that this is one character of institutional sexism/male oppression of which we often don't have a good insight.

Let it be clear by now that this personification and sorting out has something to do with politics.

Sumon Mahmud Department of Anthropology, JU

Bold Clinton and Beautiful Monica

Sir, Illegal sexual relationship, nudity, strip-tease, lesbianism, prostitution and abortion are trifling and frivolous matters and day-to-day affairs in Europe and America.

We cannot blame US President Bill Clinton single-handedly for his inappropriate physical relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

But we strongly feel that the great office of the President of the United States of America does not deserve such fit and justify it. Rather the US presidency should detest, loathe and hate such immoral acts.

President Bill Clinton may have boldly spoken the truth. admitted his guilt and sought an apology for the wrong he has done but for the sake of splendid and colossal name, fame, image, honour and prestige which the United States enjoys worldwide President Bill Clinton should do more to erase the black spot which he has created on the US presidency and save the people of the United States from shame and disgrace.

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

Smuggled sugar

Sir, In order to meet country's shortfall of sugar, about two lakh tons are smuggled into the country from India through the border. Despite being a food item it is smuggled by hiding inside railway toilets and under passengers seats etc. This consumable item smuggled sugar is

transported in the most unhygienic way where every possibilities of contamination by the germs of various diseases exist which is undoubtedly a serious health hazards for the con-

At present about two lakh tons of sugar is imported by Sugar Corporation by paying highest tariff rate (80% approx). Although all concerned are well aware of smuggling of Indian sugar, no step has been taken to curb it. If four lakh tons is allowed to import and the present tariff is reduced to 50 per cent it is possible to fix the retail price of imported sugar between Tk 22-24 per kg. Since price is the only factor of smuggling sugar. the above measure will certainly stop it.

M A Jalil 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

TV weather reports

Sir, The Met Office is not feeding (via fax) the BTV properly on the daily news and graphics (the latter are not difficult to produce with the help

of computer). As a viewer I would like the following information: i) a Sat map of the country showing the weather pattern, clouds, and the fronts (as seen on the BBC; Dhaka has several sat images available); ii) areas of heavy rainfall during the last 24 hours (only the forecast is broadcast); iii) the changing flooded areas (shaded); iv) high river water marks of the important rivers (going up or down). Graphics are easy to visualise. Make the presentation easier for the viewers, where the

means are available. The Flood Control department can coordinate with the Met Office to present an integrated picture to the public (at present bureaucratic gaps). There is always lack of integration in news from the government departments.

A Zabr