

For a Silicon Valley

Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed has said an information technology village will be set up by the government at Savar. Is that a pledge or an assurance? We take it as a piece of information and express our sense of elation for nothing could be more timely and more aptly answering to the national need of the hour.

This is one in many laudable things the government has been doing to the cause of information technology to advance in Bangladesh. Most of what the JRC committee recommended have been accepted and a well-equipped PC now costs exactly half or even less than it used to just a year back. One is encouraged by the government's enthusiasm in the matter to hope that before long it will be made mandatory for all secondary schools to offer courses in computer handling as an optional subject for SSC exams. The nation needs very badly to be computer literate even as it progresses towards universal literacy.

Information technology is making ground in Bangladesh under government patronage. But at what pace? May be compared to other activities in the country this has been doing good. But this is far too less than is demanded by international development in the field. Because of a strange lethargy to pick up the challenge in right time and pace, we have already missed the golden data-entry business of the industrial west. We don't know if we can ever again catch it.

Has Minister Tofail Ahmed a Silicon Valley Bangladesh style on his mind? If he is planning for something more modest, there isn't any need to look at Bangalore, the recognised second Silicon Valley in the world. And look at Chandra Babu Naidu's fantastic run to beat Bangalore and make Chennai one of the world capitals of information technology. If we want to, we can take a cue from him and involve in our IT venture world leaders of the field. Think big is a clue to success in this business.

Admittedly we haven't a computer buff of Naidu's order in our cabinet. Still we can do it if we can set our mind on the speed with which the IT village must be set up. We must steer clear of the usual bureaucratic snail's pace if we mean business. There should not be shortage of talent. Wanted is only a leadership that can dare. And deliver.

Justice for ME Peace

Ever since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1947, peace has been a mighty scarce commodity in the eastern Mediterranean region. The principal reason for this has been the raw deal that was dished out to the Arab population of Palestine, in order to redress the wrongs done to the Jewish people over the centuries. The wars that followed were certainly a cause of great concern, but hardly surprising because peace can only be ensured, if justice is seen to be done to all. Even after Palestine leader Yasser Arafat and Israel's former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reached across the divide to begin the process of establishing justice and peace in 1995, it suffered a jolt early last year when Israel's new hard-line leader Benjamin Netanyahu put on the brakes.

It now seems that the leaders of the region have, through the bitter experiences of the past five decades, finally come to grips with reality. Israeli leaders are slowly but inexorably coming to the realisation that peace for the Jewish people cannot be ensured without justice for the Palestinians. And Palestinian leaders have also accepted the fact that, if they want the Statehood that their people so keenly desire, then they have to show considerations and some tireless work by US President Bill Clinton have once again set the peace train on the right track, through the signing of a new agreement on Sunday.

What the world needs to see now is greater determination to implement the Arafat-Netanyahu agreement. The Palestinian Authority has committed itself to stamp out anti-Israeli terrorism in its area. But Israel is also pledge-bound to accelerate the process of land transfer to Palestinians. Both Israel and the US would do well to remember that peace in the region depends wholly on the establishment of justice for Palestinians. This means the entire peace-building process has to be seen to lead to the establishment of a Palestine State. Arafat has gone a long way to accept Israel's right to exist within secure borders, and now it is Israel's turn to accept Palestinian people's right to statehood. Only that can ensure lasting peace in the Fertile Crescent.

Barbarity at Rauzan

We are aghast. We do not know how to condemn this barbarity. For two nights local and known terrorists in west Goshchi village of Rauzan in Chittagong raised visions of hell as they raped two teenage girls from Jaldaspara (fishermen's ghetto) in public with the local administration and police turning a blind eye to this monstrous nightly orgy. The criminals did not stop after dragging out one girl from her home and gang-raping her on the night of October 18. They came back next night to let loose their libidinal perversion on the daughter of the victim's uncle — another teenager — because the previous night, the uncle tried to protect his fatherless niece from the predators.

Is this what we wanted and won our independence for? To have our women raped at will by our criminals and the fathers of the victims mutely witnessing the ultimate dishonour of the mind and body of their children? What is worse in this terrible tale of utter violation of citizens' right is the inactivity of the police and local administration. Let alone going after the criminals, police says one press report, refused to accept a case even after five days of the incidents.

It is not that police do not know the criminals. Perhaps they know them too well. It is clear they have easy access to the powers of corridor as the report of their working as the musclemen of a local MP would suggest. While it adds to our increasing sense of insecurity it also shows how deep and far criminalisation has gone in our politics, and how blurred political lines can be when it comes to the patronisation of criminals. There is no doubt the goons who are indulging in criminal activities with the blessing of an Awami League leader today did the same under a BNP leader yesterday.

Pray as we for an end to this vicious cycle, we condemn the incident and the police inactivity and demand immediate and exemplary punishment of the criminals and the members of the law enforcing agency who did not discharge their duties.

The Self-defeating Politics of Religion

Most analysts believe that the Islamisation move may boomerang on Sharif and worsen the government's political isolation. According to Maleeha Lodhi, editor of The News, "While the extremist religious parties which are up in arms against the administration will not be placated by his (Sharif's) Islamic rhetoric, the move will further alienate the liberal section of society. He will end up with the worst of both worlds."

denude the legislature of all powers. All along the politicians faced the supremacy of bureaucrats during the early days of Pakistan. Then there was a great divide also between the centrists and the autonomists. While the country bled incessantly from the festering wounds of such dissensions the military slipped into the slot of power and continued till 1988 with Bhutto interregnum of the seventies.

Interestingly, for all power struggles in Pakistan the religion of Islam had been the convenient weapon of the contenders. In common perception Pakistan — the product of two nation theory — was already an Islamic State although the country's founding father Mr. MA Jinnah very much wanted to make it a modern secular democracy. The first assault on Jinnah's vision of Pakistan was mounted by Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan, the country's first Prime Minister when he produced Objective Resolution as a set of Basic Principles for constitutional making. The resolution heavily loaded with the precepts of Islam was conceived as a measure to suppress the debate generated by a clash of interest between those who wanted to centralise the power and those with regional aspirations. Obviously he as well as the successive rulers of Pakistan made the mistake of seeking refuge in religion without addressing the people's genuine aspirations.

In 1956 Pakistan was formally declared an 'Islamic Republic' — the first of its kind in the world at that time. Under its first constitution the government was already vested with power to ensure that Muslims live in accordance with fundamental principles of Islam. Ayub Khan, confident of his unchallenged power base dis-

posed with the Islamic label in his 1962 constitution. Although the requirements of enabling the Muslims of Pakistan to order their lives according to their faith were fully met in 1973 constitution, ZA Bhutto went steps further to Islamise Pakistan presumably to silence his opponents in conservative camp. It was however Ziaul Huq who undertook the mission with all earnestness and presented his plans to theocratic state with his usually strident slogan of Islamisation. General Zia established Federal Shariat Court and made Objective Resolution the substantive part of the constitu-

tion. Lacking legitimacy as a ruler his purpose was to undermine the constitutional basis of the federation and put it under the edicts of the clerics of his own choosing. It would thus be seen that Pakistan was almost over-Islamised by the time Zia was killed in a mysterious plane crash.

In retrospect, Pakistan's Islamisation programmes seldom served the cause of Islam even if it served the purpose of the rulers for whom Islam had been a convenient tool for seizing, consolidating and legitimising power. It is otherwise a great idea to promote the cause of Islam which has actually gifted the mankind with the concept of democracy, equality, egalitarianism, and social justice. But the manner in which the Islamisation took place in Pakistan did not in any way further the glory of the creed. The Pakistani rulers used it

only as an antidote against ensuing crisis. As a result any further attempt to Islamise has now become synonymous with danger signal for the country. So, when Mr Nawaz Sharif, the incumbent Prime Minister, attempts to further Islamise Pakistan through CA-15 (Constitutional Amendment No.15) it is pointer to the country's deepening political and socioeconomic crisis and can be seen as a desperate gimmick by a besieged leader to marshal absolute power to deal with the crisis.

But can Sharif do it? Unfortunately his problems are too pervasive to be contained by a

simple sweep of Islamisation. Worse still, the problems are mostly inherited and accumulated over long period of time. Known to be a "Zia protégé Sharif himself suffered from his mentor's eighth amendment of the constitution. In post-Zia democratic experimentation the constant dispute was over the role of the presidency — and behind the scene. The powerful army dismissed four elected governments in seven years resulting in declining public confidence both in politicians and in the state's capacity to find answers to their problems. It was amply reflected by lowest ever voter turnout in 1997 election. The perception that the main political parties are primarily concerned with political intrigues than practical policy making has gravely undermined respect for the National Assembly as a forum for public debate. Pak-

istani politicians have sullied their reputations both at home and abroad with their records of infighting. Today despite continued tension with India, repercussions of Afghan conflict and looming shadow of nuclear face off, the external threat for Pakistan is less severe than the country's internal fault-lines. In the meantime the sectarian strife, which is likely to exacerbate after CA-15, has gone out of control and Karachi's ethnic violence continues to remain in boil.

Pakistan's biggest problem at the moment is, however, that of economic management which in fact reflect the weakness of its political structure. The political game of patronage, manoeuvres and counter-maneuvres has taken priority over long-term policy making. The country's financial problems are deep-seated going well beyond the failings of this or that administration. Successful Pakistani governments have been unable to contain annual budget deficits partly, because of low tax base with less than one per cent of population paying the tax. Even the registered tax payers do not pay the full amount because bribes to tax inspectors afford them heavy discount. Similar procedures apply to the payments for services. Until recently there was no tax on agricultural assets because the feudal lords who constitute the country's political elite were in a position to use their political influence to avoid it.

If the government lacks sufficient revenue income it can, in theory, limit expenditure but in practice it could not do so. The defence budget — a quarter of government expenditure — remains sacrosanct. The large amount dedicated to defence and debt repayment leaves Pakistan with limited fund for de-

velopment expenditure. It is thus no wonder that the Human Development Report 1996 showed Pakistan as the 134th out of 174 countries in a composite index that combined such factors as life expectancy, adult literacy and education. The government's inability to collect sufficient revenue compels it to borrow heavily from both domestic and international lenders. By now the external debt alone has reached the figure of almost \$ 30 billion. To make things worse a pervasive graft culture persists with Pakistan ranking it 53rd out of 54 countries in Transparency International's survey of the business perception of corruption. Also the security crisis in Karachi, the country's financial capital providing 60 per cent of state revenues is a serious hurdle for any economic recovery.

These are only a few of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's problems. Can mere mealy-mouthed talk of Islam bail him out of the crisis? All the major political parties from the right wing Jamaat-e-Islami to main opposition Pakistan People's Party, have rejected CA-15 as a gimmick and suspect it as a plan to establish autocracy in the country. Most analysts believe that the Islamisation move may boomerang on Sharif and worsen the government's political isolation. According to Maleeha Lodhi, editor of The News, "While the extremist religious parties which are up in arms against the administration will not be placated by his (Sharif's) Islamic rhetoric, the move will further alienate the liberal section of society. He will end up with the worst of both worlds."

The fear of Hindu domination once united the Pakistanis. To confront the recalcitrant Bengalis — the Punjabis, Pathans and Muhajirs could easily sink their differences. With no such compulsions existing anymore it is only by addressing the hard issues of the polity that a ruler in Pakistan now can make them follow his edicts.

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

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Voodoo Policies or Noora Kushti?

Searching Questions, Ambiguous Answers

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WITH the postponement of the visit of the IMF Mission to Pakistan, for all intents and purposes the economic battle lines seem to have been drawn with Pakistan heading pell mell into default. Already being labelled as an international basket case, it seems we have no choice but to unilaterally declare a debt moratorium. Within the grace period of a series of small defaults, we seem to be resorting to populist rhetoric to provide answers to the many questions that have arisen to bedevil this country. Because of the looming recession worldwide, temporarily arrested by lowering of interest rates by the US, Pakistan does not figure prominently on international economic radar screens, others being more vital to western interests. A recent article in TIME magazine clearly documented changing western perceptions vis-a-vis the continued integrity of a country once acknowledged as the cornerstone of US policy in the region, to its present outcast status as opposed to the interests of India.

On a whole range of issues, political, social and economic, Pakistan is under severe pressure. Unfortunately instead of addressing the issues, Mian Nawaz Sharif seems to be adopting a confrontationalist course, this is a deliberate policy that could well be a smoke-screen. Is all this for real or are we the witnesses to an elaborate "sting" operation? There is growing suspicion (and uneasiness) that an agreement of sorts may have been reached with IMF on the basis of a secret commitment on CTBT, that all this bluster is meant to mobilise domestic public opinion. Whatever, this head-on policy has worsened investor's last remaining confidence in Pakistan's economy, they have been pulling out of blue-chip stocks even, leaving Pakistan teeter-

ing on the brink of economic catastrophe. Could this also be a ploy for raking in short-term profits? Maybe we are reading too much into conspiracy theories.

Eighteen months into his rule, the PM has thankfully discovered Karachi, the linchpin of economic activity in Pakistan. The worsening law and order situation has actively contributed to economic apocalypse and general depression among the intelligentsia and the elite of the city. When the PM very rightly supported a suggestion by prominent concerned citizens for Metropolitan Police in Karachi, the bureaucracy promptly tried to shoot it down point-by-point. In a Catch-22 situation, how can they afford to give up power that ensures systematic chaos and confusion, that in turn allows them to rule the roost in the name of law and order without any check and balance? Not surprising, while the whole exercise is still a zero sum game, it has given a PR photo-opportunity to the PM to "show his concern for the people of Karachi". The Rs.24 billion economic package will certainly be of indirect benefit to Karachiites in the sense of easing the transportation/communication problems for the benefit of those up-country but what Karachi needs is direct government investment in creating more jobs, both in the public and private sectors in the fields of education, health, transportation, electricity, water, sewerage, gas, roads and other community-oriented socio-economic infra-structure. What Karachi badly needs is local self-government. For such an elaborate scheme to be suc-

cessful one needs not only political will and the money to back that will but also an honesty of purpose and dedicated approach.

Unfortunately we are sadly bereft of these attributes. So unless we can come up with a miracle, — the immediate and long-term prognosis is bad for the country. With contempt we noted when Kissinger labelled Bangladesh an international basket case, in the space of one day (May 28) we have gone into two different directions, we became a nuclear power, sort of, and simultaneously commenced our journey down the

road to economic ruin. The PM recently addressed the doyens of the business community in the Federation House, Karachi and asked them to mobilise US\$ 5 billion deposits. The PM would be better off chasing straws in the wind. When he suggested that 1000 businessmen should come forward with US\$ 5 million each, a certain uneasiness was discernible in their ranks, so the PM amended it to 5000 persons investing US\$ 1 million each, the assembled economic and industrial elite visibly snickered. This is a community whose greed for money mostly transcends national spirit in any form, their patriotic enthusiasm is contained in rhetoric not in deeds. Did they react pos-

itively when one of the first initiatives by the Mian Nawaz Sharif regime in 1997 was to halve the amount of taxes and duties and then halve it again? What was their gut reaction to a commendable "supply-sided" attempt to re-invigorate the economy viz (1) lowering the tax burden on entrepreneurs, (2) bringing cost of manufactured products down so as to enhance consumer purchases and (3) encouraging the entrepreneurs to pay their legitimate dues? Not one single business brought prices down, they simply added the difference as a bonus to their profits and continued to

falling on his sword.

In normal circumstances our only option in the present default situation is to declare a debt moratorium and live with the consequences which would mean a further blow to the solar plexus of the economy. While debt moratorium may be the only answer left to all the economic questions, it may set off a chain reaction of events not conducive to economic revival. There has to be a well planned cohesive plan to offset the effects of the negative fallout and it has to be implemented in letter and spirit. Unfortunately we have a very fragmented and disjointed economic team that makes recommendations having no relevance to the situation on the ground. When taking calculated risks that may well jeopardise the security and integrity of the nation, one has to be fully confident of one's own prowess and abilities or else be in the knowledge of such trade secrets that we, the citizens, lack. One cannot keep on playing Russian Roulette-Pakistani style with the nation's destiny (in Russian Roulette you put one bullet in the revolver and leave five chambers empty, in the Pakistani version you put five bullets in the revolver and leave one chamber empty).

In the run-up to the US Presidential primaries in 1980, Bush called candidate Reagan's supply-sided policies as "voodoo economics". He later lived to eat his words when he became President Reagan's VP. For the moment we are desperately hoping that instead of "voodoo policies", GOP is really playing an elaborate game of "Noora Kushti" and everything will come out alright. If in case we are really pursuing "voodoo policies" in earnest without a "Noora-Kushti" fall-back arrangement, then we are in far worse trouble than we can imagine.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

road to economic ruin.

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pay a fraction of taxes as they always have done. And what about their venomous reaction to General Sales Tax (GST)? There are least 20000 businesses in our country capable of paying income/wealth taxes annually of the Rupee equivalent of US\$ 1 million and above, i.e. a cool US\$ 20 billion, the PM should have simply told them to pay their dues — or else! According to some estimates, Pakistanis (including some of these businessmen), have as much as between US\$ 75-90 billion stashed away in foreign banks, the PM would be naive to even think that this hard-bitten greedy lot will ever part with even a fraction of their ill-gotten gains.

force might have been working on a number of references. I will suggest them that they work on a reference as to why the farmers are reluctant to grow sugarcane despite very attractive cane price which is highest in the world. They also should visit the farmers of some mills zones.

M A Jallil, 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

An Anxious Observer, Dhaka

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.

This has to stop

Sir, After facing the most devastating flood in the history of Bangladesh, when everyone is trying hard to rebuild everything, opposition party BNP and its allies called for two hartals! What a shame! I wonder what is going on in the minds of the BNP leadership. In the past we have seen them calling hartals on many senseless issues such as, somebody in Israel made some sick remarks about our Prophet (SM), and BNP called a hartal in Bangladesh. This has to stop. This is not the way the largest opposition party should carry out their responsibilities. M Russel Islam, Dhaka

Now, who is responsible?

Sir, One can easily realise, how shocked a mother could be when she sees, "it would have been better if my daughter had died in the bomb blast instead of living with both the wrists blown off". Yes, it is about Runa, an eight-year-old child who was the victim of an inci-

dent during the BNP called hartal that blown off both of her wrists.

Who is responsible for the tragic incident of little Runa? The government or the opposition parties which called the hartal? Had the hartal not been called, Runa would not have lost her wrists. We request our leaders of the opposition parties, not to go for protest like hartals in gully grounds. The government should not, also, provide any opportunity for the opposition parties to call such programmes. They should be more liberal.

Now will anybody come forward with their helping hands for Runa's treatment? S M Enayetur Raheem, Applied Statistics, ISKT, DU

Secured criminals

Sir, The university campuses of the country seem to have become places where anyone can do anything with the assurance of going scot-free. We have already seen various version of misdeeds (such as killing, fighting) taking place

in different campuses. Recently at JU, the already long list became longer with the addition of one of the most inhuman and heinous crimes conceivable the incidents of rapes.

The ruling party must translate their words into deeds, the absence of which is the most horrible lapse in our political culture. If political affiliation eventually ensures the security of the criminals and let these beasts go unpunished, then we shall have to pay the price with our blood. Shamim Ahsan, 64/M RK Mission Road, Gopbagh, Dhaka-1203

Sugar industry

Sir, Country's sugar industry having 16 running mills is in a deplorable state which incurs about Tk 40 crore annual loss. Followings may be identified as major constraints for such loss. There is acute shortage of raw cane to run the mills during crushing season which is very short (90-120 days) comparing to world's major sugar-producing countries. This is due to poor yield of sugarcane (15 tons per acre) against 50 tons in our neighbouring countries. Poor germination, unbalanced and low use of balanced fertiliser, lack of proper irrigation, pest attack and timely inter-cultural operation are the major reasons for such low yield. Though the cane price is the highest in Bangladesh but due to lack of extension services to

motivate the farmers they do not take much interest in growing sugarcane. Besides cumbersome loan procedures and untimely lifting of canes from field discourage the growers for sugarcane cultivation.

Corruption throughout the purchasing process of numerous items to run the mills and in disposing of mills products adversely affect the cost of sugar production. Sugar mills of the country used to run for only a few months (90-120 days) but the mill authorities are to maintain full strength of the staff for all sections although some of the sections would have been run by seasonal staff. As a result all the mills are burdened with excess staff. It is roughly estimated that 8000 excess staff are in the payroll of the mills. These staff are mainly responsible for unrest, inefficient management and administrative problems in the mills. Sugar industry is research based where continuous research programme for developing new improved varieties should be undertaken. For want of improved varieties of sugar recovery percentage of our sugarcane is only 8 per cent comparing to 12 per cent of the neighbouring countries.

Recently the government has set up a task force consisting of MPs, high officials of sugar corporation and chairman of BARC who are supposed to recommend the ways and means to save the sugar industry from further deterioration. The task

force might have been working on a number of references. I will suggest them that they work on a reference as to why the farmers are reluctant to grow sugarcane despite very attractive cane price which is highest in the world. They also should visit the farmers of some mills zones.

M A Jallil, 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

EPZ fever

Sir, Has anyone stopped to think or calculate what our country is getting out of the activities of mismanaged companies or an EPZ as a whole, for that matter? It is alleged that big foreign companies, at the same time, act as supplier from their native country, manufacturer/exporter in Bangladesh and as well as being the buyer in another foreign country, say USA.

It is also alleged that the inputs are imported into Bangladesh by over-invoicing and exports are going out of Bangladesh per under-invoicing — thus foreign currency is actually being gained by the native country of the foreign company.

Is it deemed to be a solution to industrialisation and development of this country by giving too much privilege to foreigners inside protected areas of EPZs while the common business people outside such zones are in total despair due to unfavourable situations for

M Ali, Dhaka