

Woes of Migrant Workers

There seems no end to the misery of migrant Bangladeshi workers. Only last Thursday we wrote in these columns about the plight of workers at the BMET, Dhaka and we write again on a poignant story published in The Daily Star the same day. In the absence of adequate employment opportunity at home a large number of local youths — educated, half educated, skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled — try for jobs in the developing and developed countries in Asia and Europe. They are required to apply for jobs through authorised recruiting agents, and most of them have to do this through a class of touts known as middlemen who usually cheat the simple and ordinary job-seekers before they are even introduced to the recruiting agents. Their tale of woe starts right with the touch of the touts.

Often the job-seekers are made to pay a lot of money for ordinary jobs which are neither secured nor well-paid. Examples are not few where the breach of contract by the agent and/or the middlemen was detected when the time for payment arrived. The example of Singapore has been cited by Dr Meheraj, one of the two teachers of National University of Singapore while talking to The Daily Star reporter. Similar examples can be cited about other countries also as thousands of Bangladeshi workers are cheated by the organised gang of middlemen and their principals in Singapore. Another way of cheating these simpletons is the fake or tampered travel and employment documents that normally land them in trouble on arrival at Singapore. The racket has grown so vicious that visa restrictions have been imposed on Bangladeshi passport holders by the Singapore government out of exasperation. This has not only made travel to Singapore difficult but also created an adverse impression about Bangladesh.

We thank the two Bangladeshi teachers from Singapore for their initiative and drive in finding out a solution to this vexing problem. We believe they have been able to forge some sort of unity among the BMET, NGOs and the local press for promoting awareness among the migrant workers about these problems. The suggestion for a separate queue at the ZIA for migrant workers is thoughtful and its acceptance by the PM is praiseworthy. BMET as the concerned organisation for migrant workers of the country should play a more positive and active role in safeguarding the interest of the migrant workers who form an important class of our work force.

Still-born Peace in Feni

Less than two days after the ruling and opposition parties had agreed upon a truce, Feni was rocked once again with unnerving yet familiar crackles of gunshots and explosives. The latest flare-up followed arrests of two leaders of Jubo Dal, front organisation of BNP, and entailed familiar rituals of political violence — putting barricades on the highway, setting a public bus ablaze, damaging other motorised vehicles, rampaging shops, trading gunshots, exploding home-made bombs and crackers, so on and so forth.

We are sorry at the demise of good senses in the politicians and, at the same time, are outraged by their devil-may-dare attitude towards the law of the land. The face-off between ruling party legislator Joyanal Abedin Hajari and local BNP leader Joyanal Abedin has had the Feni residents reel in a reign of terror over the last couple of years. In their frenzied attempt to get control over the whole, the two leaders have actually been held hostage to their whims. While police, inadequately equipped and, perhaps handicapped by the involvement of a ruling party MP, have helplessly witnessed armed goons indulge in the orgy of killing and getting killed, the central leaders in both ranks have been inexplicably indifferent. Indifference, in this case, suggests, more than anything, approval.

The violence stemming from the two Joynals should be put to an end. The local administration-brokered truce between the two parties has proved to be fragile. The government, especially the Ministry of Home Affairs, should realise now is the time to clamp down on the armed goons before the matter goes out of hand. On the other hand, there should be intervention from both AL and BNP central leadership. In the name of party politics, the fierce Feni foes have already gone too far. It is time to put them under a tight leash. Otherwise the whole affair would go simply out of control, for both the government and the opposition.

Drugs and Dues

The news about Sir Salimullah Medical College & Mitford Hospital running without any essential drugs, including life-saving ones, for the last two months once again reveals the disheartening status of the country's health- and medicare services system. Lack of supply of about two hundred such medicines for more than eight weeks sends dreary signals to patients who depend on this hospital located in the old part of Dhaka city. And that patients undergoing surgery are left on their own to buy drugs which are vital from stores outside the hospital premises is another dreadful worry. This proves inefficiency of the medical administration in the country.

The absence of essential drugs reportedly originates from financial mismanagement of the hospital authority, the health directorate of the government and Essential Drug Company Limited (EDCL), the firm that provides pharmaceutical products to the government-run hospitals. On the one hand, EDCL has held up their supply to Mitford Hospital which owed quite a large amount of money to the former; and on the other, cash sanctioned for this hospital by the financial wing of the health directorate is not sufficient to resume this supply immediately. The apparent lack of co-ordination and financing among these authorities are affecting the patients.

This asymmetrical anomaly must not be allowed to continue. The health directorate should evaluate whether there is a need to raise budget allocations for the hospitals, the hospital concerned should be more cautious about handling drugs so that these don't find way illegally into the stores outside the hospital, and EDCL is expected to be more flexible about supplying medicine so that no patient aches in absence of a 'pathedrine'.

Bangladesh: Better than Its Reputation!

It is imperative that along with economic reforms, we also embark on reforms in the realm of our political practices... Let Bangladesh step into the next century with a far better image than it has now.

political relations between Bangladesh and Germany continued to grow good, helpful and trusting without the latter having any interest in power politics or geo-strategic interests. Again, Germany had already emerged as the second largest export destination of Bangladesh (USD 516 million in 1997/98) and the trade balance is tilted towards Bangladesh. Analysts attribute this growing exports to regular participation in trade fairs and Bangladesh's good marketing strategies. However, German direct investments to Bangladesh is modest to account for about DM 23 million during 1991-95. The existing cultural ties between these two countries continue to grow vigorous. Another statistics tend to indicate that some 200 German visitors to land Bangladesh annually, spending ten nights on average as against seven by other foreign tourists. With suitable promotional exercises, Bangladesh is perceived as enjoying a good potential for tourism, particularly with respect to German arrivals.

A German certificate about Bangladesh could be valuable for the most important reason that, as it is said, a dollar in the EU pocket claims 30 cents from the German pocket. Germany is the most powerful country in the club called EU and is heading for its rotational presidency from January 1, 1999.

As I mentioned before, the souvenir contains contributions from famous German citizens. Some of them held important positions in policy making process, some are still holding senior level chairs. It has also one economic report from the Deutsche Bank — one of the prime banks of modern times. Their combined impressions about the "image haunting" country called Bangladesh appears to be positive and conducive to growing expectations.

ation of liberalised trade and industrial policies, the wide horizon of natural resource exploration etc. The negative aspects highlighted were: political instability marked by increasing number of strikes and violent political clashes, a long period of military rule, inefficient administration, fragile banking sector and other constraints restricting the emergence of a healthy business and trade environment in Bangladesh.

By and large, the German



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

For example, all the contributors (e.g. R. Morbach, MN Haber, Prof. Dr. Metzner and Dr. F. Schlender) provided a succinct summary of events pertaining to Bangladesh: past, present and future. The positive developments that were mentioned include, among other things, increased production of food-grains, the reduction in population growth rate from 3 per cent in 1970s to about 2 per cent now, the mobilization of women through Grameen Bank, BRAC and other NGOs, the introduction of compulsory school attendance, the continu-

contributors in the souvenir tend to speak of a hopeful future of a country that was once considered by the World Bank as a "hopeless case" and of a country for which the western world foresaw no future: "when left to itself, (Bangladesh) could not survive long because of its high density of population and insufficient natural resources. It had no basis for survival." However, as one of the authors remarked, "this country, in spite of all certainly legitimate criticisms about its political conditions and its inefficient public administration has

brought about social, economic and also political developments and in various sectors has achieved remarkable successes which have made it a respected partner (not only) in the so called Third World but also in the international state community."

R. Morbach, a retired Director of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development comments: "Bangladesh has proved that it can take in hand its own problems and try to solve them and not giving in to its misfortunes, only trust in the help of others and Allah... In my opinion, after having followed the development of Bangladesh over 25 years, I have come to the conclusion: Bangladesh is better than its reputation!"

To add to Morbach's comments, one needs to note that the recent management efficiency that Bangladesh displayed in facing the worst flood of the century that rendered half of the country's land under water for more than two months — to negate the forecasts of a famine also helped elevate its image outside. The resilience of the people, the continuity of economic policies, the consensus on the ideology of a relatively free economy etc. helped Bangladesh cover extra mileage in its search for lost image.

However, the barrier that still seems to slow the journey

is the political culture that we have been brewing over the years. While I was visiting many places, I had to encounter this question about political culture. It is imperative that along with economic reforms, we also embark on reforms in the realm of our political practices. The ongoing pyromaniacal politics unless stopped would raze all our hopes and aspirations. Let Bangladesh step into the next century with a far better image than it has now. Bad image deters development while a good image expedites it.

The famous London School of Economics Think Tank found that the "world list" of the happiest people is led by the people in Bangladesh — a country of 120 million people with per capita income of \$250 and half of them groaning under poverty. The Germans where I am now land on position 42 from 54th country. The conclusion is, money does not make you happy. I do not know whether Bangladeshis would find this report eulogising. My personal view is that money still matters to make our people happy since the marginal utility of money to us is much higher than of those we are compared with. And to make money, you need to have investment, employment and good environment. Once again, Bangladesh has the potentiality to have them all once it departs from its long tradition of inward looking strategies. We may not be the happiest people on earth now but we are determined to be so in the near future. But let us build our image.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

"Desert Fox," Appropriately Named after a Nazi Field Marshal!

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Iraq should take heart. Eventually, "The Desert Fox" Rommel, "people's marshal" (Volksmarschall) met his match in British Field Marshal Montgomery, at the Battle of Al-Alamayn in Egypt, in 1942.

IN their haste to punish Saddam Hussein, Britain and America allowed a grievous Freudian slip. They named the operation "Desert Fox," the nickname of Nazi Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Rommel, "The Desert Fox," (Der Wustenfuchs" in German), so named because of his audacious and surprise attacks, was a wild desert strategist who gave the British army fits in North Africa. Recent Anglo-American bombing of Iraq, unauthorized by the UN Security Council, was not much more noble than the Nazi operations in Europe during World War II. Unfortunately for the attackers, having gone to the well once too often, they are now beginning to come up dry. It is Saddam, not they, who has the world's ear and sympathy now.

Perhaps the Yanks and the Brits have taken Rabindranath's famous words literally, and completely out of context: if no one responds to your call, go it alone. Rabindranath's "go it alone" was a much higher calling than the unauthorized and unilateral bombing of a long vanquished foe. Just as Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent movement exposed British Raj's moral bankruptcy by absorbing their blows without fighting back, Iraq's moral

stock is in steep climb, just as the bombers are in steep decline in the aftermath of the latest bombing. Sooner or later Britain and America has to come to grips with the painful fact that they do not rule the world. They cannot continue to use the UN when it suits them, and ignore it when it does not. If Britain and America can make a mockery of the United Nations Security Council resolutions, why should Iraq punish itself by honouring them. For that matter, neither should any other nation that believes in basic human decency.

There is a fallacy, accepted as the truth, abroad as well as in some quarters here in America, that President Clinton ordered the bombing of Iraq to influence the impeachment hearings against him. Not quite. America is not a dictatorship. The President cannot bomb a popular target — and bombing of Iraq remains popular — to divert attention away from his personal woes. The decisions are made at a lower level. Typically, National Security chief Sandy Berger's security apparatus and Defense Secretary William Cohen would meet with the heads of the armed forces and recommend a course of action, which

would be forwarded to the President for approval. In this particular case, it was the dictator of UNSCOM, Richard Butler — the one who loves Iraqi blood — who triggered the chain reaction by stating that Iraq was under non-compliance. It is true that President Clinton was too happy to approve the bombing. Still, he knew, as did the whole nation, that was not going to change one single impeachment vote. It did not.

On the positive side, thanks to President Clinton's pre-bombing speech, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan got free publicity in the USA and the rest of the world this year. We had a ready answer to colleague's question: "When does Ramadan start?" "When the bombing stops!" we would reply. President Clinton's speech was educational — that it's wrong to bomb the Muslims during Ramadan; but all right to obliterate them during Shaban and Shawwal.

The Iraqis were not amused though. For over eight years they have allowed spies under the UN umbrella to operate freely on the Iraqi soil and air space. All they have got in exchange is "oil for food" programme, with the majority of the proceeds going to those who the UN believe should be "com-

pensated." As the latest air strikes have vividly demonstrated, Iraqis remain vulnerable to the deadly whims of racists like Richard Butler. The Iraqis' message is loud and clear — eight years of inhumanity is enough. Either lift the sanctions, or get out of our land, our air. With the latter in mind, they are beginning to challenge the planes enforcing the "No Fly Zone" which encompasses most of Iraq. Expect the tit for tat to continue ad infinitum.

Saddam Hussein is the West's best friend. In any discussion on Iraq, Saddam, his (ghostly) weapons of mass destruction and his (imaginary) "threats to neighbours" dominate the conversation. Any mention of UN sanctions-sponsored killing of Iraqi children and civilians draw the ire from those who formulate foreign policy or talk about it. It is astonishing to see the supposedly "free" western Press completely toe the official line when it comes to destroying the people of Iraq.

Iraq should take heart. Eventually, "The Desert Fox" Rommel, "people's marshal" (Volksmarschall) met his match in British Field Marshal Montgomery, at the Battle of Al-Alamayn in Egypt, in 1942.

To the Editor...

Conscious culprits

Sir, The reports on the violent actions taken recently in Dhaka University by the so-called "Conscious Students" against the anti-sexual harassment protesters fill me with concern.

It should be obvious to anyone that ensuring a safe environment for the thousands of women who study at DU is much more important than shallow concerns about the reputation of the institution. And yet violence under any pretext has become acceptable practice in DU. The culprits among the "Conscious Students" should be immediately expelled from the university.

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"What's wrong in BD?"

Sir, I would like to respond to Mr M Mahmood's letter (DS Dec 14), telling the readers about his gut feeling that the Awami League would do well to do some soul-searching to ponder on the paradox why Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is not accepted by all political parties as the Father of the Nation, unlike Jinnah and Mahatma Gandhi in Pakistan and India respectively.

It must be remembered that different political parties have also their power bases in millions of supporters, and that AL got only about one-third (37 per cent) of the votes during the last general election.

Sheikh Mujib has to be seen in two different roles separately: one as the father of Awami League, and the other as Bangabandhu, the Father of the Nation. The trouble and problem arise when these two aspects are seen together, as AL is propagating. AL must give non-Awami Leaguers a chance to accept Bangabandhu, without losing their face. No pre-conditions please, as the acceptable is

entirely voluntary, and on personal, individual basis in the last detail.

For example, I have heard drawing-room conversations which go like this: a citizen might say: "I accept Bangabandhu, but cannot support the AL or the present Awami League." Or, "I am a supporter of another political party (not AL). I have respect for Bangabandhu as the liberator of the country, but I have serious reservations about his role as administrator during 1972-75."

Another angle: "I accept Bangabandhu, but later I should not be pointed out as an Awami League supporter." Awami League has to face these issues squarely. Imposition would be resented.

Sheikh Mujib as Bangabandhu and Sheikh Mujib as the AL leader are quite different issues. Suppose Bangabandhu had been a non-Awami Leaguer and had belonged to some political party, then how today's Awami League would have reacted to this non-AL Bangabandhu? Not accept him?

Besides politics, there is personal individual psychology, and mass psychology. Every issue should not be seen wholly 100 per cent through political eyes only. The message to AL is: do not cling to the national Bangabandhu who is above political parties, and do not usurp the manager's role, and tell the people what to do and what not to do. Propose a national partyless body to look after Bangabandhu. Make some sacrifice. Who wants a sectarian Bangabandhu?

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

DU's dark spot

Sir, It is a pity that a teacher of Dhaka University has allegedly sexually harassed a female student. In protest, the male and the female students formed "human chain" on 20-12-98 to draw the attention of the university teachers and the

civil society for legal action against the teacher concerned. If it is proven true after investigation, it would mark a dark spot in the excellence of the University of Dhaka for time to come.

Parents and guardians fully support the students who should also be treated as the protector of the sanctity of the University. We, as concerned parents, look forward to seeing an early action.

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The 1943 Bengal Famine

Sir, This topic has hit the headlines since A K Sen won the Nobel Prize, as some of his theoretical findings are based on the study of these famine conditions.

On the other hand, it is well established that this famine was deliberately masterminded and operated by the British to impede the advance of Subhas Bose's army (INA) into Bengal via Burma for the liberation of India (the freedom was signed in 1947, after the Quit India movement and end of WW II).

The Japanese had already reached the Chittagong border and had occupied Burma and parts of north east India, and were bombing the Kidderpore docks, as we saw from our rooftop. It was deliberate man-made famine planned in the military way; an inhuman act of genocide, but the term was not in fashion then.

In 1971 we saw another genocide during our War of Liberation. It is a pity that we cannot handle our freedom in the interest of the deprived even after passing through two holocausts of genocide. It reveals another aspect of the Bengalee character: we have the resilience to come through and out of the "bottomless basket", rest assured. Today the gold in our heart is tainted; may be we

need some more borax to turn it into guinea gold! Where are our goldsmiths?

I was then a young man anchored in Calcutta, and travelled during the wartime with our family to different districts of Bengal with father during his posting in the Civil Service. Living contemporaries can come up with graphic descriptions.

Atif Zabr
Dhaka

Deadly incinerators

Sir, The report published in The Daily Star on 23rd December '98 'Deadly ways of disposing hospital waste' is really the last straw.

We are outraged and appalled by the news that the government has purchased five incinerators for the country's two biggest hospitals, three for Dhaka Medical College Hospital and two for Chittagong. Many environmental groups including the Greenpeace and the US-based Health Care Without Harm have pointed out that it is very unfortunate, something discarded in the developed countries has found its market in a developing nation like Bangladesh. They also pointed out that incineration is a polluting technology, emitting toxic smoke which is very harmful to health. The incinerators that have been procured for the hospitals can cause significant negative impact on the environment, mainly from extremely toxic dioxin and furans during incineration.

The government must (immediately) give orders not to use these incinerators and find other ways to dispose the waste of the hospitals.

Nur Jahan
East Nasirabad,
Chittagong

UN Weapons Chief Defends His Role

Farhan Haq writes from UN

THE UN's chief weapons inspector, Richard Butler, on Dec 24 defended his role in criticising Iraq's attitude towards disarmament efforts amid objections from many nations that this report prompted the US airstrikes on Iraq.

Butler, chair of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), angrily denied allegations that he coordinated with US officials the tough conclusions of his Tuesday report blaming Iraq for lack of cooperation with the weapons inspectors.

The Australian diplomat also denied allegations that the report's release was timed to coincide with US preparations for an attack on Iraq. He said, he had promised several weeks ago to report to the UN Security Council by Dec. 15 on Baghdad's cooperation with weapons inspectors and had kept that schedule.

He added that the report "was based on the experts of UNSCOM. It danced to no-one's tune."

Yet the UNSCOM chief, who has often been taken to task by Iraq and its allies for his blunt criticism of the Baghdad leadership, is facing a strong challenge to his job amid charges that his report provided a pretext for the US attack.

According to media reports, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov blamed Butler, not Iraq, for the standoff over weapons inspections and has called for his dismissal.

Chinese Ambassador Qin Huasun blasted Butler's report as "one-sided", while observers at a heated Security Council session Wednesday reported Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov as commenting after the US attack that Butler's report had "done its work."

According to Amnesty International, some 30 Iraqis are believed to have been killed in the first night of US bombing. US forces fired Tomahawk Cruise missiles at Iraq for a second consecutive night from Thursday through the early hours of Friday.

Significantly, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who has defended Butler in the past, was silent about his weapons chief's fate in the aftermath of the US bombing. Annan on Monday had defended Butler's blunt

style by noting that "he has a rather difficult job" and is "only human."

Yet UN sources say Annan is privately angry that Butler consulted extensively with US diplomats about the report before informing the secretary-general and the Security Council about it or about his decision to withdraw UNSCOM inspectors from Iraq.

Annan confirmed that Butler decided to pull out the UN inspectors Tuesday night after being advised by US officials. Butler said he withdrew his inspectors because Iraq was hindering them from accomplishing any effective work.

The Washington Post on Thursday cited sources who claim Butler "engaged in extensive consultations at the American UN mission (in New York), causing some speculation that he had toughened the report in response to American suggestions."

Butler criticised allegations that he could have adjusted his conclusions to satisfy the United States or any party, saying that he took full responsibility for his report. But there are many signs that Butler — who met with US officials in a "secure room" in the New York mission on Monday — may have given the United States an early tip-off to his findings.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Israeli media Thursday that US President Bill Clinton informed him before leaving Israel of Tuesday, about UNSCOM's tough report and the prospect of a US attack on Iraq. However, Clinton's departure occurred hours before the United Nations even announced that Butler had delivered his final report to Annan late Tuesday afternoon in New York.

UN officials have not commented on the Australian official's but few believe Iraq will ever let Butler back in the country following the attacks.

Although Butler vowed to continue his work and said he would be willing to return to Iraq if it cooperates with UNSCOM, speculation is rising at the United Nations that the attacks have ended UNSCOM's work in Baghdad and with it, Butler's tenure.

IPS/APP

Iraq Aims Flak at Sanctions Regime

by Paul Cowan

IT LOOKS like bravado — but it isn't. Iraq's decision to use its anti-aircraft systems against Allied planes patrolling the two "no-fly" zones just days after being pounded by cruise missiles and "smart" bombs is a carefully calculated political move.

Baghdad knows that its successes will be limited and the losses of anti-aircraft equipment will be heavy (so do the gunners, which may explain why the flak British aircraft saw on Friday [Dec 25] was so badly aimed) but that doesn't matter. The objective is not to win back control of the skies, which Saddam Hussein knows he cannot do. Instead, the Iraqi leader wants to use high-profile but small-scale incidents to deepen all the divisions which were created by the four days of US-UK attacks.

And the divisions now seem to be even deeper than had been predicted. On Sunday, representatives of 16 Arab parliaments — most of which have at best an advisory role — condemned the air strikes and called for efforts to lift the sanctions.

On Monday, a gathering of Arab foreign ministers called for this week to discuss the attacks was postponed for almost

a month, apparently in recognition of the fact that it would merely highlight differences between Arab countries instead of producing a united front. The exchange of fire between Iraqi AA batteries and Allied planes on the same day led to renewed calls from Russia for a political solution to the problem. And on Tuesday Iraq continued to stoke controversy by claiming that its air defences had shot down a Western warplane — a claim which even if not true, guarantees continuing media coverage of the incident throughout the Arab world and beyond. Baghdad appears to calculate that it now has a serious chance of blowing some holes in the economic blockade imposed by the UN, but it must keep the crisis on the boil in order to increase public pressure on any governments that are wavering — Russia being the most important possibility.

The loss of a few anti-aircraft batteries and the deaths of a score of soldiers would be a negligible price for the Iraqi regime to pay if it could break the sanctions regime.

The writer is a journalist based in the Arabian Gulf. —Courtesy: Gulf Times