

# The Pope Walks into the Mexican Snakepit

The visit of Mexico by Pope John Paul II comes at a time when tensions are high within the Mexican church hierarchy. Gemini News Service reports that conservative bishops and liberation theologians are taking vastly different approaches to key human rights issues in the country. John Ross writes from Mexico City

DR Asuncion Garcia Samper, an anthropologist, is certain that she knows just where to find the missing bones of Juan Diego, the mythical Aztec noble to whom the Virgin of Guadalupe first revealed herself in 1531.

However, Dr Garcia tried with little success to obtain the necessary permits from the officially atheist Mexican government to begin digging for the bones ahead of Pope John Paul II's visit to Mexico.

Presentation of the bones would have clinched the Indian's canonisation during the Papal visit, said Father Enrique Salazar, director of the Guadalupe Centre.

Canonisation of Juan Diego was not the state reason for the Pope's fourth visit here, but it certainly was a sub-text. High on the Pontiff's itinerary: a meeting with Latin America's bishops at the basilica built in honour of the Dark Madonna, under which the bones are thought to be interred.

Officially, the Holy Father was to bless the conclusions of the Synod of the Americas, which sets the agenda of the Roman Catholic Church in North and South America for the coming millennium. By addressing the continent in the basilica, the Pope implicitly honours the supremacy of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who won Mexico's Indians to the Church and is considered the cornerstone of the evangelisation of the Americas.

Most of Mexico's Roman Catholics — usually given as 90 per cent of the 96 million population — fervently believe in the existence of Juan Diego. But whether John Paul would eventually elevate him to saintly status — with or without the bones — remains highly speculative. Debate over his historical existence has sputtered on here for years. No mention of the Indian is actually recorded until well into the 17th century and a garment with the supposed imprint of the Virgin proved to be hand-painted.

But tensions in the Church hierarchy are not limited to Juan Diego's bones. Within the Mexican Bishops Conference (CEM) relations between conservative members and the remaining handful of liberationist bishops seem as icy as ever. A key sore spot is the con-

servative attempt to rid the CEM of pesky liberation theologians.

The Vatican has campaigned to oust 73-year-old Arturo Lona, long-time bishop of Tehuantepec on the Oaxacan isthmus and a staunch defender of the Indians of the region.

The late Bartolome Carrasco, emeritus bishop of Oaxaca and an outspoken voice for the poor, was pushed aside by a coadjutor in 1993.

In 1996 Bishop Samuel Ruiz was assigned a coadjutor to neutralise the radical bent of the San Cristobal diocese. In his last years as shepherd of his flock, Ruiz remains under constant attack from both the Mexican government and his own church hierarchy. President Ernesto Zedillo last summer accused the Bishop of fomenting "the theology of violence." However, Raul Vera, who will soon succeed Ruiz, has shown himself forthright in the defence of the Mayan peoples.

As if such conspicuous back-

stabbing was not doing enough to disaffect the faithful, the Mexican Church continues to lose substantial ground to the Protestant (largely evangelical) denominations. They have gathered so much strength in some regions they are talking of formulating a political party.

According to Cardinal Iniguez, the Roman Catholic Church stands to lose 30 per cent of its followers to the Protestants in the first years of the new century.

Flustered by Protestant inroads, chiefly in the southeast of the country, the hierarchy counter-attacks with an evangelisation programme funded by business people tied to the Jesuit movement Opus Dei.

Still another headache for the CEM, which seeks better relations with the government, is a shrill anti-abortion group of catholic zealots who relentlessly attack public officials for "murdering babies" by providing government abortion help and for advocating homosexu-

ality through condom giveaways.

The Mexican snakepit into which the Pope has plunged extends far beyond the ecclesiastical realm. It is the advent of an intensely political year in which the major parties will name their presidential nominees.

One man expected to be nominated, Mexico City chief of government Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, hosts the Pope in the capital. Cardenas, a Mason, flew off to the Vatican in October to discuss security arrangements with the Pope and his staff.

The photo opportunity upstaged outgoing Zedillo and was sharply criticised as political opportunism by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party and the right-of-centre National Action Party, which is thought to have deep support within the clerical community.

Zedillo remains a devout neo-liberal whose economic policies have been disastrous for Mexico's poor. Both the Pontiff and the Latin American Bishops Conference have movingly bemoaned the social deprivations inflicted by the free market on the continent's poorest citizens.

Human rights, which the Pope staunchly defended in his New Year's message, are another touchy subject. Zedillo's human rights record has been under fire by international non-governmental organisations, particularly in Italy.

The Pope has displayed a continuing support for Latin America's indigenous peoples. In an effort to discourage him from uttering the dread word Chiapas in public pronouncements in Mexico, Zedillo dispatched Chiapas peace coordinator Emilio Rabasa to Rome.

The massacre of 45 people in Chiapas on 22 December 1997, the closing of 40 churches and chapels causes the most problems between Church and State.

The Vatican has sometimes been suggested as a mediator between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Mexican government, although Zedillo strenuously opposes international intervention in the long-simmering conflict.

The writer is author of *Totipot's People*, a novel of the Mexican cataclysm. He was not invited to accompany the Pope on his visit.



POPE JOHN PAUL II Visiting Mexico

# Facing the Major Challenge in Basic and Continuing Education

by Md Waliul Islam

The curricula and syllabi of the secondary and primary school courses have to be modified and modernized to suit the present day need of the society. Technical and vocational courses are to be incorporated along with the conventional courses.

THE main problem of Bangladesh is its population. The total land and other available resources are not sufficient to support this huge concentration of people. As such most of them are suffering from poverty, hunger, diseases and illiteracy. To improve the situation resource mobilization is necessary to bring back the balance between population and its GDP growth. For resource mobilization, along with harnessing of natural resources, human resource development can play a very important role. Here lies the real challenge in the field of education to convert the huge chunk of human burden into human resources. Studies and researches showed that people having basic and continued education up to secondary level are the vital part of this resource. In case of Bangladesh, it has been revealed that 40 per cent of the children belonging to five to eleven years age group never go to school and 60 per cent of those who initially enter into the elementary school do not continue their studies and leave the school within very short time.

So in the process of human resource development the greatest challenge is imparting the basic and continuing education. And the most important factor that influences (in the negative) the challenge is the poverty of the people.

In the process of calculation of unit cost of any type of education, three main components are considered: (1) Institutional cost, (2) Student's cost and (3) Opportunity cost. First two do not require any explanation, because they are self-explanatory. But the third one needs explanation: 'Oppor-

tunity cost or income foregone by the students, while they study, equals to the amount of money they would have earned had they not attended the institutions'. Higher the level of education higher is the opportunity cost. At the elementary level opportunity cost component is zero, because the children of five to eleven years age group are not supposed to engage themselves in any income generating activities that might provide some financial support to their parents or guardians. But the opportunity cost at the level of primary education is not zero in case of Bangladesh, though, according to theory, it was supposed to be zero, as in the case of developed countries where research studies were conducted.

The opportunity cost for any level of education is the student cost that comes directly on the parents or guardians. The poverty-stricken people of Bangladesh cannot sacrifice the opportunity cost of education — a financial loss due to the reason that the time their wards spend in schools, could otherwise be utilized for economic activities that could bring, directly or indirectly, some financial benefit to them. As such the majority of poor parents do not show any interest to send their children to school. Even some parents, who initially send their children to school, within a very short time, when they realize about their financial loss, stop sending their wards to the school and thus increase the bulk of the drop-out problem in the system of basic and continuing education.

To face this challenge (dropout vis-a-vis poverty) in

the field of human resource development the authorities concerned must keep in mind the hard fact that poverty and basic education are inter-related. So mere universalisation of primary education through constitutional provision and enactment of law for compulsory primary education for every citizen will not solve the problem of basic and continuing education. On the contrary some pragmatic and realistic steps should be taken so that the poor and distressed parents and guardians become interested to send their children to the schools. In this regard, to create the interest, properly identified poor and distressed parents and guardians may be provided with some material incentives for their school-going children, which they will consider as compensation against the loss they incur due to their children's absence — in some form of economic activities that they could perform during their school hours.

This incentive scheme could be a positive step towards solving the problem of basic and continuing education of the country. On this count Bangladesh Government is implementing two projects — "Food for Education" for primary education and "Stipend for Female Secondary School students" which, despite drawbacks and misuses, are giving encouraging results in terms of eradicating illiteracy and increasing the ratio of female education. Mainly it is the fundamental responsibility of the state to educate its citizens up to secondary level of education, to turn them into productive manpower. Investment on this count will not go in vain because it is now universally ac-

cepted that expenditure on education is good investment. From the studies, it has been revealed that national productivity of a country is very high when most of its citizens are educated up to secondary level.

Moreover, in addition to the incentive scheme for the distressed parents, the curricula and syllabi of the secondary and primary school courses have to be modified and modernized to suit the present day need of the society. Technical and vocational courses are to be incorporated along with the conventional courses of the primary and secondary level education, so that students coming out from those system of education could acquire some vocational and technical skill, which would help them adapt mode of livelihood. Moreover addition of technical and vocational courses will attract and create interest among the students to get themselves admitted to schools and continue their studies.

Successful implementation of these steps will help us face the major challenge in the field of basic and continuing education. However, all these steps to improve the prevailing situation will go in vain, if strict and close monitoring is not adopted at all levels. In this context national and international NGOs may be involved to supervise and monitor the activities relating to identification of poor and distressed parents and in the process of distribution of financial or material help to the enlisted parents or guardians.

The writer is ex-Deputy Chief (Planning), Ministry of Education.

by Jim Davis



# A Curiosity Called 'Car'

by Sonia Kristy

Fifteen years back it was definitely an occasion for a middle-class family to celebrate. At that time, private car drew the line between the upper and middle class. Now fifteen years later, car is no longer the signature of the upper class.

I WAS a tiny tot then, a student of class two, but still I remember that day in the early eighties to the minutest of details. Every member of my family was excited like anything. Friends and relatives were invited over. My brother and I were curious and, at the same time, thrilled.

My mother had this huge smile written all over her face. We waited in anticipation. Something ecstatic was about to happen. My father was to bring the car he had bought home. A private automobile of our own. We were about to cross the middle-class boundary into the world of the rich and the aristocrat.

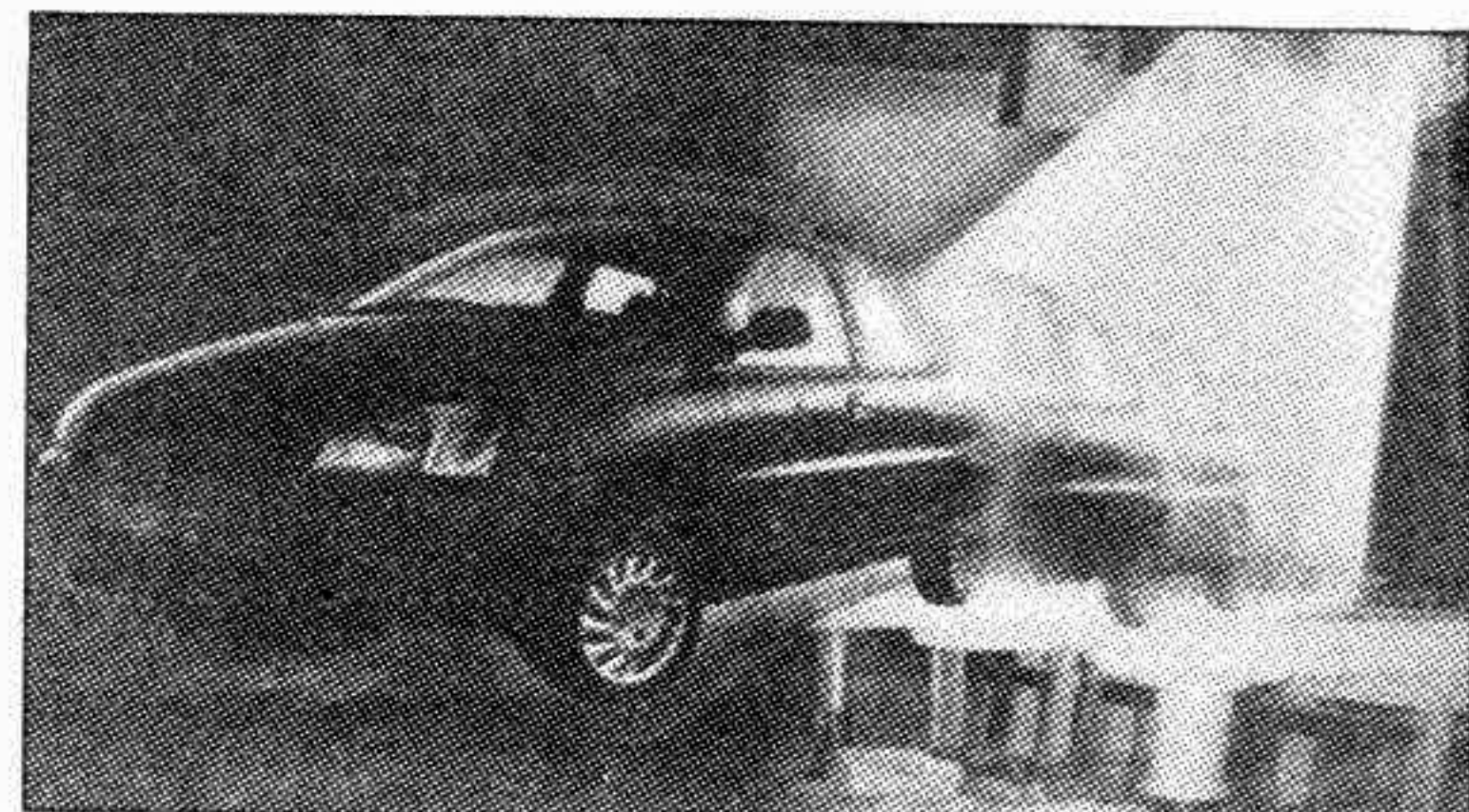
Fifteen years back it was definitely an occasion for a middle-class family to celebrate. At that time, private car drew the line between the upper and middle class. Now fifteen years later, a university student, am seriously entertaining the thought of buying a car, albeit with financial assistance from my parents. Car is no longer the signature of the upper class.

There began a discernible change in our automobile culture from the early nineties and it became pronounced when the BNP government reduced to the minimum duty on imported

cars in its last budget. Chittagong Port and all the car centres in the country were filled with imported automobiles. That was the period when along with the rich, the middle class also started buying cars. And why not, you could buy a station wagon for two hundred to two hundred fifty thousand taka.

Even in the late eighties, there were only a few car centres in the capital. Now there are scores of them in Kakrail and Dhammond — Car Port, Car Impo, Haq's Bay, Tizarah Wah Amanah Car Centre (I don't have the slightest idea what the name means), Bismillah Car Centre (The owner must be a very pious man), Lion Auto, Falcon Auto Ltd and so many others. The increasing number of these centres can only be compared to the neighbourhood video-cassette libraries. The only difference is that you can rent a video cassette for only twenty bucks and you need a couple of lakhs to buy a car.

The streets of Dhaka are no longer filled with three-wheelers — manual and automated. There are sedans, sports cars, jeeps, micro buses and what not. Toyota doesn't rule in this part of the world any more. There are Honda, Hyundai, Nissan, Mitsubishi, you name it.



What's your preference? Auto-gear or manual?

There is even one Mercedes Benz sales centre in the city.

Along with other changes the variety of customers and their choices have also changed. Businessmen are interested in buying four-wheel drives like Nissan Patrol, Mitsubishi Pajero, Isuzu Trooper etc. For family purpose there is station wagon. For personal use there are Toyota Starlet, Carina. The young generation crave for sports cars.

Although there are various automobiles on the streets of Dhaka, white seems to be the preference when it comes to choosing colour, quite an anomaly considering the psyche of the Dhakaites, who have a predilection to shocking colours. One reason behind the white mania is that it almost mandatory for the government establishment to buy white cars. The other, a more compelling one, is that white cars sell cheaper, at least ten thousand taka than those in

other colours. Most of the cars are imported from Japan. The Japanese, the Americans and the other western buyers don't prefer white cars that much. Therefore white cars are exported to countries like Bangladesh at a reduced price. So, indirectly western world dictates our preference over colours.

Though the present government has increased tax over imported cars, it has become almost a necessity to possess an automobile. Bank loans at flexible rates have made buying cars easier. Nevertheless, there has been a decline in the market. Centres, who used to sell seven cars a week only a couple of years back, now sell seven in a month. The dealers aren't worried, though. They say, the middle class has developed a habit of moving around in cars. The automobile culture has certainly settled down in the country.

# Marriage Made Easy

by Masroor Ahmed Deepak

ONE of the most fascinating Bengali customs is marriage. We tend to make this procedure, which is one of the important events in one's life; the most complicated yet attractive customs known to us. Yet, marriage still is a top priority in our society. As far as our society goes, arranged marriage is still considered to be top of the list. As ours is a very parent dominating and conservative society, anything apart from arranged marriage cannot be tolerated, is very much not encouraged to consider a taboo instead. Those who are brave enough and deviate from this noble path are labeled an outcast and very much looked down upon. If there are any bumps along the route of a love marriage, then automatically the guilty party are forced to hear comments as "we told you so", "you see what happens when you do not listen to elders", "without your parents blessings what can you expect", etc. Therefore the Bengali love marriage society tends to work as hard as they can not to jeopardize their extremely sensitive marriage life. But today I shall not discuss about love marriage (as that will definitely attract all the fundamentalist groups but discuss on the lines of a typical arranged marriage instead.

When a man or a woman is physically, mentally, financially or academically matured enough, then one is a prime candidate for marriage. As parents are highly ineffi-

cient to sign the matrimony contract for their own children, therefore outside mediation is necessary. This is the place where mediators (ghataks) spring up from all walks of life. These mediators normally range from family members, friends, neighbours or even well wishers. Sometimes meditations as such can be more troublesome and complicated than the peace talks between Palestine and Israel. The first part of this extremely long voyage begins from the matchmakers. The needy party gets hold of this group and has a heart to heart chat with them. This is when a huge list is drawn up. It contains the "conditions" from the other party. Matchmakers then start searching for the good matches. Numerous cutting, pasting and editing is performed. At this stage of the "draft" the best ones are drawn up. The top ten choices are paid a visit from the proposition is put forward. The typical conversation between a matchmaker and a lottery won girl's mother somewhat goes on like this: Matchmaker: My, what a wonderful daughter you have. She looks great. Just like her mother (notice the extremely clever flattery). What is your name again Ma? Mother of the girl: You are so-o-o sweet. Yes, her name is Rose. Remember the name in Titanic (so this family is ultra-modern). Matchmaker: Rose ma, come to uncle. Yes, she is extremely precious.

What nice eyes you have? What long hair you have? What class are you in now?

Mother of girl: She is in class nine (notice the girl never answers). She is a good student too. Only this year she became 7th (from the top or the bottom it remains a mystery). Matchmaker: Well, the thing is I was wondering whether or not you are ready for her marriage. As you very well know, good parties are very hard to come by (the same lecture was given to the boy's side too). Now a way you never know what might happen (a gloom my look and a sigh help at this stage). The society is going to the drains. Besides it is better to marry our children off at a tender age, that way you can mould the other side the way it suits you (again, the same lecture was given to the boy's side). This is how a typical conversation takes place before a marriage proposal and "contract" is drawn out.

Though it might sound simple enough, in some cases a solid agreement can take months to reach. First, side A is made aware of side B's intention. Even before the idea is allowed to thaw, the matchmaker quickly lets side B know that the other party (Side A) is strongly considering the proposition and is about to go forward. "Of course there are more propositions in the pipeline" — statements as such can definitely quicken the process from

both sides. Slight exaggeration of the party's qualities is highly recommended. Only slight though, because too much can surely hang the matchmaker later on. When both parties are warmed up, then the matchmaker has to go through more trouble. This is the most sensitive part in the world of matchmaking. Most of the propositions fall apart at this position. Therefore "following up" of the deal is hugely advised. When both the parties are even remotely interested, then the shopping list is drawn up. "Who shall give what to whom?" is a very important consideration. The upper middle class and the rich folks consider this an opportunity to show off as much as possible. The same procedure is seen during the Eid-ul-Azha season when it comes to the purchase of sacrificial animals. The only relevance between these 2 occasions is both of them are highly recommended in our Holy Book.

Match making theory is extremely pre-historic and discarded from most of the civilized countries in the world. Yet there was much noticed in our country. The reason for that is simple enough. As mentioned before, in a conservative country as ours, this process is highly efficient. In a match making marriage, a couple has no other alternative but to know their partners intimately as quickly as possible. This surely increases the bond and improves relationship a great deal.

# US-type Media Games

by Anil Agarwal

THE manner in which the media reports intergovernmental environmental conferences is unbelievably biased and distorted, which means that independent and informed public opinion can never be built on contentious environmental issues. Given the fact that international environmental treaties along with trade negotiations, have today become a critical element of global diplomacy, this is indeed a very serious matter.

As I had to leave Buenos Aires a few days before the end of the climate change conference for the US, I carefully scanned leading publications like the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek* to find out what they were saying in this highly contentious meeting. Having been a journalist in Indian newspapers, I know how many news reports are straight handouts from the government's Press Information Bureau.

But these so-called 'international papers' were absolutely no different. Their reports were nothing more than a total parroting of the US perspective. They read as if there was no dispute between the US and the European Union (EU) or between the US and the Group of 77 (G-77) and China. And even to the minor extent that these disputes were mentioned, they were painted as insane and inconsequential. As a result, the US media was making no effort to help the US public understand the issues confronting the globe in dealing with what is going to be the world's biggest environmental problem.

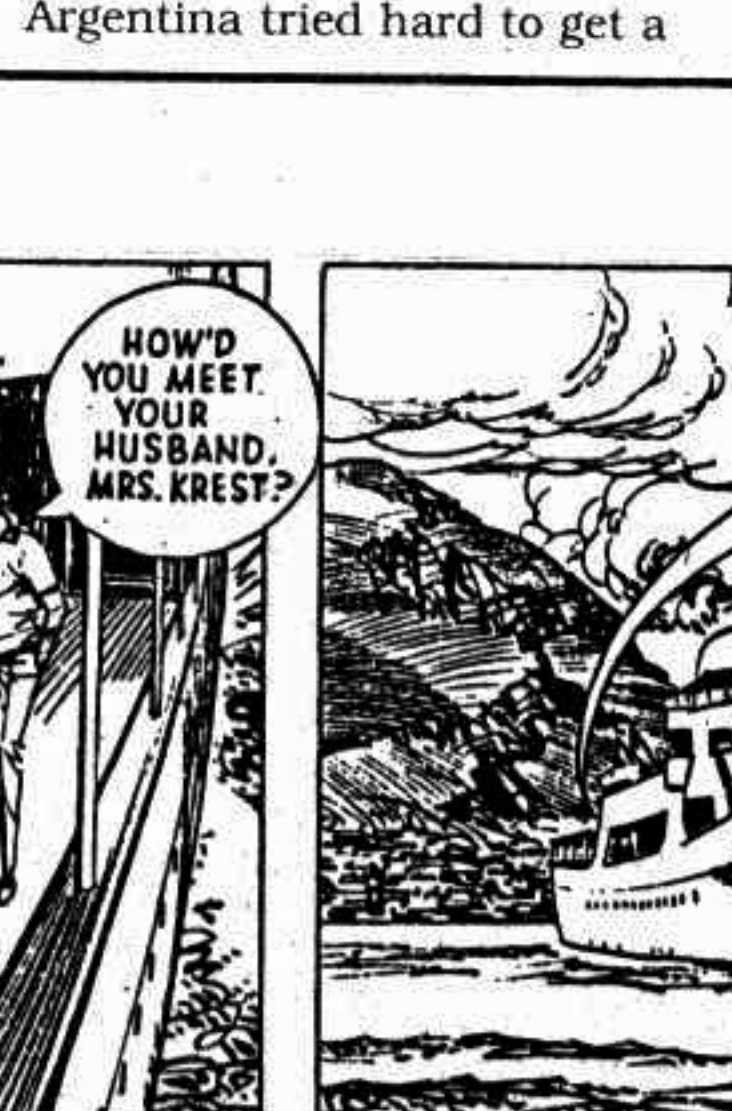
For instance, every US newspaper praised the two renegade developing nations, Argentina and Kazakhstan, for taking on 'voluntary commitments' for reducing carbon emissions without pointing out once that they were strongly criticised in Buenos Aires for breaking the unity of the developing world.



These two countries were held up as paragons of environmental virtue in the US press — as nations which were very worried about their contribution to global environmental harm, which is nothing but a total lie. Both these countries have no interest whatsoever in the global environment. They were only trying to earn brownie points with the US government in return for political and economic gain because the US was the only industrialised country holding up the entire process by arguing that it will not ratify the Kyoto Protocol unless developing countries also take on commitments.

Not one European country agreed with the US on this issue. Unfortunately, the Kyoto Protocol cannot go into operation until two countries, the US and its partner Russia sign the protocol. Everybody, thus, strongly felt in Kyoto that USA was holding the entire global process to ransom with its insistence on developing country participation, which is not even a condition in the Kyoto Protocol.

Argentina tried hard to get a discussion going on 'voluntary commitments' but its proposal was literally shouted out of the conference. Argentina had promised to 'deliver' a large number of Latin American countries to the US with promises for voluntary commitments but finally failed to find a single ally from the region.



The US newspapers made no effort even to point out the basics of the debate in Buenos Aires except painting all arguments as bogus. Essentially, the Buenos Aires meet was split between three groups. The US, the most powerful nation, constituted one group, and its biggest concern was 'economic effectiveness' of the Kyoto Protocol; in other words, the cost of meeting its emissions reduction commitments. It wants to reduce emissions in developing countries where reduction costs are far cheaper, to meet its own targets through emissions trading mechanisms.

But the second group in Buenos Aires, the EU, heavily influenced by the region's green parties, felt that this would destroy the 'ecological effectiveness' of the Kyoto Protocol, in other words, the protocol would not prevent global warming. It was therefore arguing that there must be limits on how much emissions industrialised countries can buy from developing countries. The third group, the G-77 and China, was on the other hand saying that it has already been agreed that industrialised

nations would take the lead in cutting emissions; if the agreement was to go overboard then there was a need to look at the 'social effectiveness' of the Kyoto Protocol. In other words, a decision needs to be taken on 'equitable entitlements' for the benefits of the atmosphere which would provide a long-term, equitable framework for dealing with the global warming problem.

But, forget it, none of these 'powerful papers' once mentioned the EU position or the G-77 position. The general impression given to the reader was that every opposition to the US was simply nonsense — borne out of anti-US sentiments.

Public opinion in the US will be vital to solving the global warming problem because it is not the Clinton-Gore administration which is really against action on global warming within the US. It is the US Congress which has been convinced by the powerful automobile-oil industry lobby that global warming is not even a scientifically correct issue. It is pressurising the US administration to refuse ratification of the Kyoto Protocol unless developing countries sign it, too.

But does the mature US public, which did not agree with the impeachment of president Clinton despite his affair with Monica Lewinsky, agree with the US Congress that industrialised countries should not take action until developing countries also join?

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