The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Thursday, February 4, 1999

Trade Cooperation Anathema

Bangladesh has set an example in trade liberalisation. The fact that she is an LDC has not deterred her at all from being a forerunner among nations in the South Asia region in terms of living up to the WTO free trade prescriptions. She had brought down her tariff and non-tariff walls most drastically with the result that her home-work was more than done perhaps towards fulfilling the requirement of SAPTA which is regarded as a precursor of SAFTA. But Bangladesh has evidently ploughed a lonely furrow there; because countries of the region especially India with whom we have the largest quantum of trade, followed by that with Pakistan, have not reciprocated Bangladesh's open door policy despite being stronger economies. This has led to a highly asymmetrical trade relationship with India in particular. On the industrial plane, our entrepreneurs have never ceased to be critical of the lack of a level playing field vis-vis Indian imports. Such one-way traffic cannot help investment either.

Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed in a meeting with his SAARC colleagues in the capital Tuesday dilated on the discriminatory trade regimes Bangladesh faces in the region and brought into a sharp focus their adverse impact on Bangladesh economy. Tofail Ahmed gave the most convincing statistics todate: Bangladesh procures 18 per cent of its imports from the SAARC nations while it gets merely 1.7 per cent market access to them. The poor Bangladesh economy is the destination of around half of all intra-regional imports. This hardly provides the right grist to the mill of regional economic cooperation.

The situation is worse confounded by the fact that there have been strictly bilateral zero-tariff accords between India and Nepal as well as between India and Sri Lanka which might slow down progress on SAPTA or SAFTA.

There is talk of inter-regional trade; but so long as we fail to streamline intra-region trade there obviously cannot be any meaningful trading between SAARC and other regional groupings.

Educational Rot

President Shahabuddin Ahmed has been dismayed by the extreme moral degradation at the educational institutions of the country. His frustrations have been so deep that he has asked for 'stern punishment' for the wrong-doers. He felt that 'moral erosion can no longer be stopped by sermons or advice'. His observations came at the National Education Conference in the city Tuesday. He has not only touched upon the immoral and criminal aspects of the problems but has also suggested possible measures to stem the rot in the most vital sector of our national life. It must have been very painful for him to recount an incident of a government college where teachers realised huge amount of money from students and then started fighting for the 'booty'. If teachers, who are supposed to be engaged in the noble profession of preparing the future leaders of the country fall easy prey to moral turpitude then who do we turn to? The recent scandals in JU and DU have rocked the country's conscience and laid bare the injury in social fabric that had long been swept under the carpet.

The President has also pointed his finger at the horrible state of primary education, specially the abominable activities of many teachers who cheat both the students and the government. He was absolutely right in suggesting punitive measures against the offenders to stop recurrence of such incidents. We wholeheartedly support the President in his efforts to rid the educational institutions of corruption and malpractice. We also strongly endorse his suggestion to form a local committee in each primary school for running it, including passing of salary bills of teachers. That way the teachers will be made accountable to the committee. Unless this vital sector is disciplined, there is little hope for the nation. The government must listen to his timely advice and act immediately.

What a Start!

Only seven players turned up on the first day of the residential camp at the BKSP. The rest of the 30 selected for preliminary trials, except former national skipper Minhazul Abedin and Al-Shahriar, had good reasons — premier league preoccupations. Why Gordon Greenidge and his deputies stayed away is anybody's guess. Maybe, they knew they wouldn't have a full quorum. What a start to the country's preparation for its maiden participation in the World Cup! What a way for the Bangladesh Cricket Board to show their organisational ineptitude!

With the premier division cricket league nearing completion — the league ends February 11 — it is obvious that the players' focus will be more on the remaining matches; the board officials have also been advised to reschedule training programme accordingly. However, for reasons only they know best, they decided to go ahead with their own plans. True, they have deadlines to meet — according to ICC regulations, they have to submit names of the final 15 to the organisers before March 15. Nevertheless, such a stumble at the starting block sends a wrong signal to the millions of country's cricket lovers. There is little chance, according to most, that the training session would get into full swing before the league ends. The board should have known better.

The players have also set a bad precedent. The nation's prestige should have been given priority over their respective club's interest. By winning the ICC Trophy and a berth in the World Cup, they have certainly brightened the country's image. The people are grateful, but they expect more. Not the World Cup though, they want them to fight like tigers. Monday's mishap raises an ominous question — are they serious enough to start with?

Miracle Unmade: Lessons for Bangladesh

→ lived in Bangkok and witnessed unfolding of the Asian Miracle. The physical manifestation of economic growth was absolutely fabulous. The increasing number of cars, high-rise buildings, glittering five-star hotels, vast shopping malls and rapidly expanding suburban Bangkok with housing and factory development on a grand scale, ensured continuity of the boomtime economy. When I left Bangkok in August 1996. nobody thought the economy

would collapse so soon and the

crisis deepen so much in so short a time. The media first came out with reports of financial crisis originating from the current account deficit. The exchange rate could not remain stable any longer. Within a short time and in spite of massive intervention by the Central Bank, value of one US dollar went up to as much as 50 Thai Baht double the pre-crisis rate. The shattered confidence was the beginning as the media reported, and like forest fire it spread rapidly burning down everything on its path. Only the charred remains are now visible - empty office buildings,

closed shopping malls and un-

employed millions. The sudden fury of the economic turmoil caught everybody by surprise. Economic downturns are not unknown but the phenomenal speed of the decline in the so-called miracle economy was a new phenomenon altogether. It began with the currency losing its exchange value first slowly and then at a rapid pace. Intervention in the money market by the Central Bank failed to prevent the huge decline. Obviously, foreign investors initial concerns quickly developed into panic and portfolio investors started to leave the market as fast as possible, regardless of losses they suffered as a result. Stock market is the barometer of the economy. Confidence in the economy began to fade away with falling exchange rates and outflow of

This is all history now. The economy has reached the rock bottom but unemployment and bankrupt business are deepening into ever more brutal realities. Today, survival from one day to the next is the real issue to millions. The dreams are all gone like rain drops on a desert and nobody talks of economic

OR 15 years (1981-1996), I The economic turmoil in South-east Asia, particularly Thailand, has certain valuable lessons for Bangladesh. The export-led growth strategy still remains a sound policy and it must be pursued relentlessly and not only in the garments but involve other industries where Bangladesh has considerable potential; for example, leather, plastic, ceramics and other labour-intensive manufactured goods and services.

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flow of external capital is of critical importance. If it is direct foreign investment (DFI) and such investments result in additional manufacturing capacity, then it is safe and sound for the economy in general. If such foreign funds are for speculative purposes or devoted to portfolio investment, then consequent instabilities in case of confidence failure should be taken into account. After all, it cannot be an everlasting winwin situation in a market economy which over time tends to move in a cyclical direction. A continuous linear growth may last some time, may be a long time, but not for all times to

come. In Thailand, the high growth process was too much externalised in terms of production for export through foreign investment and borrowing. Export-led growth came under heavy pressure from increases in domestic wage rates since conditions of near full employment were prevailing in the economy and the focus of export remained cheap labour-inten-

sive goods and services. In Bangladesh context, growth should be internalised as well. Real wages rates must keep on increasing as rewards for high growth tend to get distributed widely among the working population but such

Window on Asia **Shahed Latif**

gains should be translated in to human capital development, so that exports are enabled to become more technology and knowledge intensive in the long run. Even after two decades of intensive growth, Thai economy flourished on exports of textile, leather, food products and labour-intensive tourism.

As the economy grows, it must climb up the technology ladder - manufacturing goods and services at increasing levels of sophistication. In Bangladesh with 150 million consumers, this would result into the creation of a huge domestic market simultaneously with exports to the global market. No doubt, in a free market there should not be any distinction but domestic market in inherently more stable where benefits of growth are immediately realised.

Another drawback of the Thai development was low domestic savings rate and there was no urge for its_increase since foreign borrowings were abundantly available. In other words, foreign savings substituted for domestic savings. Reliance on own resources lays a much more stable foundation for development. Even compared to other developing countries, notably India. savings rate in Bangladesh is fairly low. Thus there are potentials for increasing private savings through effective institutions and instruments. On the other hand, prospects for public savings are enormous. Reduction for subsidies now wasted on loss-ridden public enterprise alone can enhance public sav-

ings by Tk 2500 crore. In Thailand, the budget did not feature such huge subsidy expenditures; since public power utilities, water supply agencies, Thai international State Railway of Thailand and such other mostly infrastruc-

ture related state-owned enterprises are not only financially viable, those are capable of raising their own funds through bonds floated abroad. On the other hand, manufacturing enterprises are in the private sector. Even toll highway, container ports and such other huge infrastructure projects are now being financed by private

Bangladesh, unlike Thailand of miracle days, is not rated as an attractive location for large scale foreign private investment; so that instability induced through sudden withdrawal or diminution of such capital flows do not arise. At the same time, without an appreciable increase in foreign capital inflows, the desired rate

of growth cannot be achieved. This is because, along with foreign funds, technology and appropriate management input also flow into the country. But if reliance on foreign capital is overwhelming, in particular, if foreign borrowings and not foreign equity holdings become the prime mover of rapid economic growth, then the long-term stability of such externally dominated growth process may be called into question.

The export-led growth is obviously dependent on foreign demand. If the value added from manufacturing is substantial and market is largely domestic. economic growth would tend to be more stable, but such conditions are not consistent with resource endowments of a country like Thailand, where energy, for example, is practically all imported and therefore rapid economic growth was sustained through current account deficits due to massive inflow of foreign borrowings. Bangladesh is lucky from this

point of view. If correct government policy

support is forthcoming, energy resources of the country can greatly assist in maintaining a stable current account position both through enhanced export earnings and heavily reduced demand for imported energy resources. Combine this with reduced budget subsidy by privatising state-owned enterprises. The third item in the Agenda would be emergence of Bangladesh as an attractive destination for foreign investment. This may even fulfill the conditions for miracle growth of the economy though at the same time, planting the seeds of instability, as happened before in Thailand. A liberal market economy must grow to justify itself and no economy can grow ever after. What is required is fine tuning of economic polices and programmes.

The most recent experience of the world's largest economy. enjoying its longest period of growth, have clearly established that technology is the corner stone of sustainable economic growth. Focus of our public investment, in order to realise stable economic growth, ought to be on human development. The economic miracle has become a distant mirage in Thailand. That does not mean it cannot recur again, particularly in a country endowed with enormous human potentials as well as huge energy resources.

Retirement Age of Supreme Court Judges

Prof S C Saha

had the privilege of going through an article written by Mr Ahammad Ali, an Advocate of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and a former Vice-Chairman of the Bangladesh Bar Council, published in the July issue of the Bangladesh Legal Decisions (BLD). Since the theme of the article refers to the higher judiciary of our country and affects an important field of our national life for more than one reasons, it deserves the attention of the Government, the opposition as well as the intellectuals.

Public servants in our country retire from service on attaining 57 years of age whereas the Supreme Court Judges, of both the Appellate Division and the High Court Division, retire on attaining 65 years. Apparently, this appears to be grossly discriminating and serves as an eye-sore for many, the uncritical public ordinarily leaning support to such a view. But if one looks at this paradox from a practical point of view, such misgiving withers away in no time and scepticism gives way to appreciation of the service rendered by the learned Judges

of the apex Court of the country. We know from our practical experience that most of the Judges of the Supreme Court are selected from among the practising Advocates and Barristers having good standing at the Bar and wide experience gathered from a considerable length of practice. When they are called to the Bench, they usually have attained 54/55 years of age and they hardly get 10 years' service life, too short a period to compensate the professional loss built up over decades of hardlabour. In spite of all the social glamour attached to the job. many successful practitioners refuse to accept the call mostly for short term of duration of service and partly because of fi-

nancial constraint. Those who are selected from the judiciary by way of promotion from District Judges and law officials of superior standing, also get the call of elevation to the Bench at about the same

age. The result is that they also do not usually get more than 10 years to act as Supreme Court Judges. Of these ten years, two years are spent as additional Judges, with the result that they do not ordinarily get more than eight years of service. Thus the Supreme Court Judges enter into service at an age when other Government servants retire from service. This is why the service of a Supreme Court Judge is regulated and conditioned by factors uncommon to the other services of the Repub-

While the government servants acquire retirement and pension benefits after at least 25 years of service, the Supreme Court Judges acquire pension and retirement benefits and completion of only eight years of service. The nature of the job and other practical considerations account for this apparent divergence. In spite of all these it is being increasingly felt and recognised by all concerned that there has been a consistent dearth of prospects for recruitment to the Bench at the Supreme Court level.

With a progressive fall in standards in different fields of national life, there has been naturally, a corresponding fall in the standard in the legal profession, invariably telling upon the standard of the judiciary. It is, of course, still a satisfaction for us that our judiciary, particularly the higher judiciary, is being widely acclaimed by even the most advanced countries of the world as demonstrating a high-degree of independence and legal acumen. But with the retirement of most of the Senior Judges of the Appellate Division with in, say, two years from new, a great vacuum may be created at the highest level of the judiciary, which, many think, is difficult to fill up. The High Court Division may also be affected in absence of the senior most and experienced Judges in the process.

In view of the fact that most of the retired Judges of the Supreme Court are being given re-employment by the government in various quasi-judicial

posts, which are likely to continue as of necessity, it is indirectly admitted that the Hon'ble Judges even after retirement on attaining 65 years of age are physically and, mentally fit to shoulder responsibility of important state assignments. In the process, the retired Supreme Court Judges, in addition to their pension, which is equivalent to full pay, get additional remuneration out of the new assignment. When this is the position, why do not we have them for a few more years as Supreme Court Judges at the existing financial involvement but with better maturity and greater expertise and experience of service?

With the advance of science

and technology, the average longevity has increased considerably and Bangladesh is no exception to it. In the United States of America, a High Court Judge never retires. While in England and other European countries a High Court Judge retires on attaining 75 years of age. To keep pace with the development of the society and the increasing need for experienced and qualitative service of the judiciary thereof, we can easily enhance the age limit of our Supreme Court Judges from 65 years to 70. However, if on attainment of 65 years of age, a Judge of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh wishes to go on retirement with usual retirement benefits, he may be allowed to do so, but if he wants to continue in service and is found physically and mentally fit to continue as a Supreme Court Judge, he should be allowed to continue till he attains the age of 70 years. Let us ponder over this important issue with an open mind.

Hon'ble President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, himself a former Chief Justice of Bangladesh, who is widely regarded as the conscience-keeper of the nation may be consulted and his valued opinion sought in the context of the realities. The good offices of the leading lawyers of the Bar may be favourably utilised.

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.

Wasting agri-land

Sir, While country's population has been increasing at geometric progression (1.8 per cent) arable land is squeezing drastically. If the present trend of land grabing goes unabated then within the next decade there will be acute scarcity of cultivable land to feed 130 million people and the country shall have to be fully dependent on imported food grains; process of which has already been started. In the following ways agricultural land is being grabed for non-agricultural

- 1) After every natural calamity, in order to feed the affected people test relief and food-for-work programme are launched mainly to construct new roads and embankments wherein agricultural lands are grabed in a large scale. New roads are being constructed here and there which are not at all necessary and will not bring any economic benefits.

2) Uncontrolled acquisition of land by Government agencies as well as purchasing by private parties for multiple purposes create pressure on agricultural land. There is tendency to acquire more land than the actual requirements. Almost all the cities of the country have long boundary fences for demarcation of acquired land inside of which a small area is found under structure.

Every year a large number of brickfields are set up throughout the country to meet the growing demand for construction works. Any land once used for brickfield becomes permanently unfit for crop cul-

4) Unplanned tree plantation by the side of rural roads in creating hindrance in cultivating the lands adjacent to roads Due to exhaustive nature of trees particularly of eucaliptas. and in abcence of sun light crops cannot be grown in thou-

5) For the construction of government staff quarters fresh lands are acquired in and around the district towns. M A Jalil 372/B, Khilgaon Dhaka

More healing or more wounds?

Sir, An Islamic terrorist group's attack on poet Shamshur Rahman at his residence is a new chapter and phase in the ideological politics of Bangladesh. The omen is disturbing, and cannot be suppressed easily or quietly, because it appears to be planned and deliberately provoking. The others in the hit list (BBC report) are said to be Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Sufia Kamal and Taslima Nasreen.

The Awami League appears to be getting isolated at a critical period, and is unlikely to get any moral support from the Islamic world on the so-called 'secularism' issue. The polarity

in local national politics is getting sharp and focussed, and the different viewpoints can neither be suppressed nor washed away. These have to be faced, and the long-hanging issues should no longer be kept pending after three decades of indecisions. Debatable national issues cause loss of time, energy,

money and lives. How long are we going to continue this senseless wrangling decade after decade? Face civil disobedience movement (violence with loss of life) or sit across the table for peaceful understanding? Provocations from different fronts will inflame the situation. The politicians can play a leading role in restoring peace, but they appear to be in time-

wrap since independence. Can

they take on serious responsibilities without further provocation? Political terrorism is not new; now it has arrived in Bangladesh. It is difficult to stop it, as even President Clinton has found to his dismay More than 80 per cent of the Bangladeshi citizens are Muslims, and the majority view cannot be ignored by any group. however powerful or 'popular' they are. The issues here are ruled by the heart (feeling) and not by the head (rationality,

logic). Therefore the sensitivity Let the pending issues be settled peacefully once and for all. National fatigue is a dangerous symptom, and has lingering effects. More healing or more A Husnain

For Peace and Humanity At long last the western gov-

ernments are getting the pinch for their brethren. Showing and proving to everybody how narrow their feelings for humanity are and how empty their slogans were. They only feel for and respond to the call when the humanity affected happens to be their own! Then they react promptly and effectively even if the sufferings under gone by their fellow brothers is only trifle compared to the massive, inhuman, outrageous sufferings inflicted upon others by their own brothers. Aren't their brethren most inhuman and cruel of all? We need only to go back a few decades down the history lane to find out what their brethren had done to others, numbering not in tens but in millions and are still at it with their blessings.

How the innocent Jews were massacred in millions by none others than the brothers of those who are at it still today. Were they ever punished properly for this genocide? If they truly believe in what they preach that theirs is a religion of peace and sacrifice, then why do they just stand and watch but

never stop or punish the cruel amongst them - those who are still busy massacring in a most barbarous manner in this 21st century. Only because they, who are smaller and therefore weaker differ from them in belief. How can the whole western world just sit and watch these cold-blooded murders in an equally cold-blooded way? Probably because it is their own brothers who are doing this and they silently and quietly agree with those uncivilized killers to eliminate all Muslims from Europe and to keep it clean just as Hitler wanted to clean Germany of Jews. Why? Christians in Spain massacred hundreds of thousands of Muslims; they did the same to Hindus and Muslims in Indo-Pak Sub-continent to keep their empire. They still are doing the same in Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo. So history is witness that they are the ones who did and still do the most killings. Others have just followed their example in a very small scale compared to theirs.

But now a new problem has cropped up, the Christians are being murdered in India. So now they voice their concern over the wave of attacks on their fellow brethren. Question is how does it now feel when the tables are turned on you? Don't forget this feeling when your brethren kill others similarly So that you may act promptly and effectively for peace and humanity before it is too late and too many innocent people suffer and die in your brothers'

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Price of petroleum

Sir, In 1997 the governmen suddenly increased the price of petroleum by 50 per cent in one go putting forward the reason that international price of oil had soared. At that time the international price was around USD 18 per barrel and was showing a downward trend Prior to that, price was USD 25 per barrel in the previous January when the domestic price of petroleum remained un-

The price hike by the government was not, therefore, justified and a wave of protests was voiced through the national dailies including the DS. A television show was put up where ministers and the secretary of the ministry concerned appeared trying to justify the ac-

The government monopoly in the oil import and distributions is open to serious questioning and gives rise to serious anomalies. The argument put forwards is that the government must not incur loss (even in business) and hence the price adjustment is always upward.

Now that international oil price has hit an all time low (as low as USD 10 per barrel), we would like the same government functionaries to tell us why the domestic price of petroleum should not be decreased proportionately. Or does the government intend to amass fabulous profit at the cost of ordinary people and the sagging economy.

A F M Rahman Dhaka

"The Practice and Control of Hartal"

ECENTLY I found an article captioned article ▲ The Practice and Control of Hartal by Prof Mobashsher Ali, DS-Jan 8) very interesting. In fact any news/views on hartal attracts my attention. First, it gives an early warning of an upcoming hartal, secondly it educates me on hartals. After research, Prof Mobashsher has presented us the origin of word hartal in one way. But during jonoganer hartal ('95-'96), another celebrated professor, Mr Mumtazuddin Ahmed wrote in his column of a leading vernacular national daily, that during Pathan period a yellow flag (harital) was used to be hoisted at market place to mark the market as closed. Prof Mumtaz concluded that the word hartal was derived from there. Now two gurus may use their lines to update

the depth of their research. Whatever may be the origin of the democratic right, for the word "strike" the Webster elaborates 'stoppage of work to enforce demand. The oxford also gives same idea for this word. But in describing 'hartal is a civil disobedience' as mentioned in the article, the writer probably has mixed up the word with M K Ghandhi's Ashohojog Andolon which was quite different from what we practice now (from Ahimsa to Himsa). For the word "Civil-Disobedience" the Oxford explains, "organized refusal to obey laws (esp as part of political campaign)" Now if Prof Mobashsher has picked up this term for hartal, and suggested some rules and regulation (who would frame for whom!) by saying, "it might be accepted as a proper means of protest, but with certain rules and regulation", then probably this would contradict with the

theme of 'civil disobedience'. In the article, Islam has been praised for regulating slavery

A R Choudhury in a subtle way, but the protest rally organized by the Islamic Chhatra Andolon against public misery (due to misrule, price rise, terrorism, etc.) in a disciplined way forming neat line and rank meaning no harm to anyone (one chanting slogans) has not been appreciated. During Pak period we used to register protests like this. In the beginning of Language Movement. hartal was observed that way too. Order for violating Sec-144 was no more a hartal, but a revolt against administration.

Afterwards hartals were ob-

served in many ethical and unethical ways. In hartals, for no rhyme or reasons, some quarters (unidentified) started damaging public and private property. Gherao-jalao type 'democratic right' is not unknown to us. So, it is from us, the truck/bus even rickshaw drivers have learnt it. Now for any charge against them and if anyone tries to bring them to the book, then there is a gherao barricade of street/highway and that remains till release of the offender. Picket means workers, or group of workers. stationed at the gates of a factory, dockyard, etc. during a strike, to try to persuade others not to go to work, but physical assault in the name of picketing has perhaps started recently During the last Jonoganer Hartal, a passersby was stripped of by picketers. What a taste of 'democratic right' we have demonstrated! In our hartal culture, daily innovative ideas are added which no other advanced countries can think of. Gono-curfew was declared as a democratic right. Won't it be used in future as a tool, as and when politicians will find it advantageous to them .

Of late another culture linked with hartal started in this country. It has almost become a democratic right of the

ruling party. It looks like hartal (our style) against a hartal. Anti-hartal

rally/demonstration led by MP/Minister in an encountering fashion, is an innovative idea indeed. The public, after facing picketers of hartalists, when again face the anti-hartalists, they feel like simply sandwiched.

Earlier, probably for such interference, the hartalists elongated the hartal. Who observe such hartal? Of course, we try to, as our safety is at stake, our dignity and honour remain uncertain at the disposal of political goons (I need not elaborate it here, all political leaders know them well). None can find the top leader of 'hartalists' and the top leader of anti-hartalists on the ground to see for themselves what is happening to the mass, but after hartal both dramatically thank the mass. One for observing, another for not observing, as if such mockery is unknown to the mass.

If one asks a government servant and garments worker what hartal is, their honest answer would say what democratic right they enjoy: One starts at dead of night to reach office before hartal. The other can't dare at night, but dread at day light to reach her work place taking life-risk at each step. Everyone feels to get out of this culture, but how much consistent are our politicians in words and deeds?

If PM vows there won't be any hartal in future in this country, then why her party does not put up a bill in the House! This problem would remain, until we can sweep out too many over ripen as well immatured bunch of politicians in the helm. If hartal is a king maker, then think, actually who they are who really made it possible.