

Welcome to Li Peng

We are happy to greet in our midst Li Peng, Chairman of the National People's Congress of China and the second most important personage in the Chinese leadership structure after President Jiang Zemin.

Sheikh Hasina on her assumption of office as Prime Minister of the country chose Beijing as the destination of her first trip abroad, indicating thereby the importance her government, which came to power after a time-lag of 22 years, accorded to friendship with China.

Though Li Peng's trip to Bangladesh is seen as a goodwill bilateral visit materialising on the last leg of his 6-nation odyssey, which had taken him to Turkey, Greece, Syria and Pakistan already, it cannot be entirely devoid of some regional and international significance.

Our trade gap with China is substantial; Dhaka's import from China was worth 690 million US dollars in 1997-98 as compared with her export to that country amounting to 68 million dollars only.

Agni-II, Why?

India once again digresses from the peaceful path in its pursuit of nuclear supremacy. Testfire of Agni-II effectively intensifies the frenzied Indo-Pak nuclear arms race thereby nullifying the spirit of the Lahore Declaration adopted by the two prime ministers recently.

India's present leadership appears to be acting more out of political, rather than strategic considerations. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government seems inclined to use its nuclear programmes whenever it finds itself in the throes of political uncertainty.

Both China and India, and also Pakistan, are forces to be reckoned with, not for their respective military strength alone, but also for the size of their economies. The sooner the tension generated by the testfire of Agni-II dissipates, the better it is for the region.

Back Gear

The world is eagerly awaiting passage into the next millennium, but here in Bangladesh we are desperately trying to go back in time.

A front page photograph in Prothom Alo on Monday showed a couple of housewives bargaining with the shopkeepers for an almost antiquated item in city life, known as 'hurricane', (lantern to be precise). The explanation is quite obvious in these days of massive loadshedding.

How can we be oblivious of the romantic atmosphere that is so often created by loadshedding? Talking love in dim light despite the sweltering heat, is almost a forgotten art.

I intend to conclude my discussion on SMEs today. In the last piece (16/3/99) I talked about supply side factors of information, skill, credit, and technology.

The road network in Bangladesh is now fairly well developed, covering different parts of the country, although there are certain areas which remain inadequately/poorly served by road connections.

Shortage is often a problem. But a more serious problem is the corrupt behaviour of the people responsible for sanctioning/installing these services. This is a problem that in fact cuts across all segments and levels of public administration.

The small enterprises generally use domestically produced raw materials. Therefore, there is often a strong linkage with agriculture, but, unfortunately, this has not been exploited in any significant way through appropriate promotional measures.

Moreover, there are cases of anomalies in the tariff structure, with raw materials charged higher rates compared to those imposed on finished products in the production of which those imported materials are used.

On the demand side, one issue relates to the slow growth and highly unequal distribution of income. The poor are left

Spotlight on SMEs
Conducive Policy and Socio-political Environment Needed

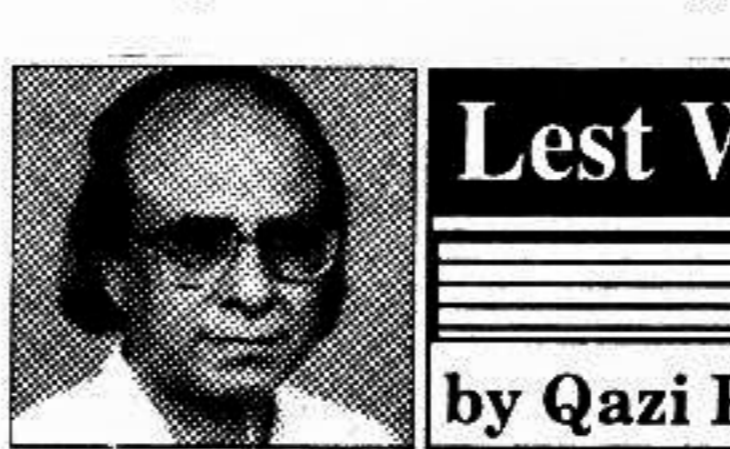
Pervasive loan default in the business and industrial sectors is a serious problem. Surely, there are those who cannot repay the money because of genuine difficulties faced in starting up or running their enterprises. But there are others whose default may be intentional and contrived.

with little money after meeting their food requirements. The consumption patterns of the richer segments of society, certainly from urban areas but also from rural areas, are oriented to foreign goods.

In fact, that precipitous import liberalisation without first taking action preparatory to liberalisation (APL) has created a seriously disadvantageous situation for the domestic SMEs, particularly the small enterprises.

The pace and pattern of liberalisation should have been so designed in Bangladesh, as also in other countries in a similar situation, as to allow the domestic enterprises to make necessary preparations in terms of raising the efficiency to compete better with imports.

favouring a protectionist regime. The argument is in favour of creating a level playing field for the domestic enterprises vis-a-vis imports.



Lest We Forget ... by Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad

corruption in public administration has been raised earlier. At the same time, pervasive loan default in the business and industrial sectors is a serious problem.

two parties directly involved (i.e. the loan giving agencies and the creditors) as well as the economy of the country.

To assist SME, particularly of small enterprise, development in Bangladesh in accordance with the large potential that such enterprises hold, one important factor is institutional support in terms of promotional and facilitating services, which may be provided by the public or private sector institutions.

Association of Small and Cottage Industries of Bangladesh (NASCIB), which, as the name suggests, is concerned with small enterprises, not with medium enterprises. Also, there are as many as 152 trade associations in the country.

A study conducted by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) has found that existing associations and bodies do not provide services to the entrepreneurs effectively.

A major focus of the trade associations and bodies should be to gather information regarding existing and potential markets and advise entrepreneurs regarding products and their qualities which are in demand now or can be in demand in future.

Breaking the Ice in a 'Civilised' Parliament

Let the country have a chance to see live debate between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, which, if we are blessed, could lead to a direct contact and "break the ice" between the two leaders.

THE Jatiya Sangshad Bhaban stands out in its architectural beauty. Louis I. Kahn's mastermind made it beautifully elegant for the very august members of the Bangladesh parliament.

Visitors to this crowded city are taken to enjoy the man-made lake and the greenery around it. In summer, specially when the heat is unbearable and made worse by power cuts, the verdure and the long stretches of stairs of the Parliament are the favorite spots for Dhakaites.

Now its air is regular outing site for families tied with the traditional Chatpatti vendors along with the newer mobile fast food shops converging to sell their stuff.

Farooq Sobhan's office were regularly getting lost. I told my friends that I was not wrong years ago when I thought people might get lost unless one was regular visitor or keeping marks to find the right way.

The chamber, according to psychiatrists, with its green carpet and chairs have a cooling effect on the people sitting around the speaker's podium. However, I guess we needed even greener pasture for our lawmakers as they lose their head so often.

was yet to compromise with the West on missile proliferation talks. The first session of a Bangladesh government was held in this architectural wonder, our Jatiya Sangshad Bhaban, on February 15, 1982 and was abruptly cut short on March 2 amid an unstable political scenario.



In Fool's Paradise by Nadeem Qadir

saving' coup, although bloodless, on March 24 by the then army chief Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad. Ironically, Mr. Ershad, his wife and brothers are all members of the seventh parliament elected in June 1996.

er who served under President Abdur Rahman Biswas and then under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in The Daily Star was enough for the Bengalis to understand (and the gossips that followed) what could happen in the days ahead.

If one goes around the roadside tea stalls crowded with people listening to the parliamentary debate, I wonder how many would skip the idea of becoming a politician.

Why can't they (MPs) at least remain cool inside such a beautiful place instead of always trying to fight each other out? asked one roadside tea stall owner. "If they (children) hear them (MPs) speak so awfully and abusively, what will they learn?" was his other question, to which I had no answer.

The Awami League, while in opposition between 1991 and 1996, eventually resigned from the fifth parliament, which was widely criticized. But, now it appears the present opposition too is planning to follow suit.

Both the leaders and all the MPs in the parliament should know that the electorate wants to hear from them as they evaluate the bickering politicians. Accusing each other by using "unfriendly" language or issuing statements does not help the country.

To the Editor...

Illegal electric connection

Sir, With the passing of time country's overall power supply situation does not improve rather in some zones it has drastically deteriorated.

In Dhaka city illegal connections are given to slum dwellers and roadside shops. While for a domestic power connection DESA ask for a number of official documents like ownership, holding tax etc., but in case of roadside shops and slum houses what kind of document DESA collects from them?

setting up numbers of mobile courts. These courts should visit different parts of the city after dusk in order to detect the illegal power users. Similarly mobile power court should be formed in the districts.

then failed to convert it to a win. Our fielding and bowling looked like those of a junior under-18 team. No one accuses our team of lacking experience and skills, but why should the players lack a winning spirit, confidence, alertness, and aggressive bowling - especially on home ground with all the support from the gallery.

It appears rather strange, if it is true, that our Cricket Board is more busy toying with the idea of getting Bangladesh the test status rather than with serious home work to get the team off its miserable performance.

It is not more important to raise a world class team before aspiring to enter into the test league?

Bangladesh cricket in World Cup

Sir, For those with keen interest in cricket, the performance by Bangladesh team caused great pain and disappointment. It's painful to see how thoughtless, unplanned and tactless our team was; it battled with spirit (though it could have made many more runs) against Zimbabwe but

Academy. These are days of very tough contest in the world of sports and cricket is no exception. Excellence is a prized commodity. And excellence does not come with mere wishes and day dreams; it comes through disciplined and hard toil.

Dr M Zakir Husain 4/4/1-b, Block-a, Lalmita, Dhaka-1007

A pleasant surprise!

Sir, The report titled 'Sycophants work up works minister' published in the DS on March 19 is very interesting. It described how the new minister for Works and Housing reacted to the reception given to him by the employees at Purta Bhaban under the Works Ministry.

Do we spend billions in elections or do we spend more than 60,000 Taka, approximately daily to run the house built at an approximate cost of 1.5 billion Taka, to get that kind of behavior from our lawmakers?

Nur Jahan Chittagong

Transparent BTV!

Sir, The 'Anti-autocracy Day', observed on March 30 by some sections of the politicians and citizens, was elaborately publicised over the BTV in an over-long documentary programme, followed by a well-written press report.

position to this Anti-autocratic Day to present the side of the story. It is a lame excuse that BTV is denied access to such contacts. All news items, local or foreign, are not available first hand; hence BTV could have creeded the other side of the story from other sources (without camera coverage); or denied this time slot to the allotted organisers, to be fair and objective. But the electronic media is controlled by the regime, hence the explanation for this type of frequent one-sided presentations is obvious to all levels of the citizens, because the action is very 'transparent', no doubt about it!

How long this 'democratic hypocrisy' will continue in the name of 'fathers' and 'godfathers'? Even the souls of deceased persons who return to their Maker are not allowed to rest in peace by the super-active politicians. How much they have taken the country forward in 28 years is known to all. Why these all-powerful politicians were shunted out by 'outsiders' for long 16 years is also not properly explained by them, as it was due to their political weakness in not being able to guard their own fortress.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka