

# Indonesia's Policy towards East Timor

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

**There is a fear that the independence of East Timor may result in a huge displacement of people from the territory. This is not surprising considering many non-East Timorese live in the territory and feel threatened by the pro-independence movement. They fear that an independent Timor would disrupt their social and economic future.**

ON Friday (24 April) the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia and Portugal were able to sign an agreement in New York on autonomy to the Indonesian 27th province, East Timor, under the supervision of the UN sometime in July. This agreement was preceded by an earlier peace deal last week between the pro-integrationists and pro-independence groups in the capital of East Timor, Dili, under the guidance of General Wiranto, Defence Minister and head of the armed services in Indonesia. The Dili agreement was aimed at stopping the armed violence between the two groups in East Timor.

The pro-integrationists do not want East Timor to secede from Indonesia while the pro-independence groups want East Timor to be a separate independent state and merely an autonomous province within Indonesia. Last January President Habibie of Indonesia made it clear that if the East Timorese did not support autonomy, they could have independence.

President Habibie has recognised that East Timor has been a huge economic burden and a political liability for Indonesia. With the end of the Cold War the threat of communism in South East Asian region has evaporated. East Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and was annexed to

it by 1976. Except a few countries, this integration was not recognised by the UN. Although East Timor's colonial power, Portugal's position has always been compromised by the accusation that it abandoned East Timor in 1975 it continued to demand that the status of the territory should be determined by an act of self-determination.

Why violence in East Timor? It is reported that President Habibie's announcement to allow the province to go its own way surprised not only his armed forces but also his Cabinet Ministers. They were not prepared to this 180 degree policy change on East Timor by their new and interim President. The Indonesian parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held in June and the Presidential election in November. There is a view that President Habibie may not be elected to his present position.

There appears to be a subterranean murmur against the declared policy of the President on East Timor. There is a fear

that the independence of East Timor may result in a huge displacement of people from the territory. This is not surprising considering many non-East Timorese live in the territory and feel threatened by the pro-independence movement. They fear that an independent Timor would disrupt their social and economic future.

For example, a Javanese who has settled in East Timor will flee to Java. A Sumatran may return to Sumatra. Furthermore it is reported that a section of armed forces loyal to the former disgraced General Prabowo, son-in-law of former President Suharto, are not comfortable with the policy of President Habibie and support the status quo of East Timor. There are allegations that the pro-integrationists were armed by this section of armed forces and a blood bath followed between the two opposing groups in East Timor in recent days.

A few of the political leaders raised doubts on the declared policy of the President. The Presidential candidate Ms.

Megawati Sukarnoputri (daughter of first President Sukarno) was known to have publicly declared against the independence of East Timor. There is a view that if East Timor is allowed to become independent, Irian Jaya and Aceh (the northern part of Sumatra) may follow suit destabilising the territorial integrity of Indonesia comprising more than 13 thousand islands. Indonesia has moved from being a strong state to a weak state because of its economic crisis. Patterns of authority are under great stress at present.

There is a perception that if violence continues in East Timor, the UN-supervised ballot (almost half a million ballot papers with 250,000 polling booths) cannot take place in July. A section of East Timorese supported by a section of armed forces believe that the ballot can be delayed in East Timor till the Presidential election, the existing policy on East Timor may undergo change under the new Presi-

dent. The UN has ruled out peace keeping force in East Timor since Indonesia does not agree to it. For good reasons, Indonesia does not want to abandon its responsibility for the security and peace in the territory.

The passions of the pro-integrationists and pro-independence groups run high. There is no disguising the fact that with both sides in East Timor preparing for fight, not reconciliation, there is likely to be violent acts in the territory. There is a view that the irreconcilable differences between the pro-integrationists and pro-independence groups may lead to the division of East Timor. The western part will remain with Indonesia and the eastern part may be allowed to become independent.

Conclusion: Whatever is the fate of East Timor, peace and stability is imperative in the territory and violence is no one's interests. Let the UN supervise the ballot of the East Timorese and it up to them to vote either for autonomy or independence. Indonesian leadership must be credited for their wise and democratic policy in allowing the East Timorese to exercise the right of self-determination. I wish such policy could be followed by the leaders of other countries in the case of territorial disputes.

# In Memory of Nazrul Islam

by M M Rezaul Karim

LOSING a friend, colleague and compatriot is no longer strange to many of us, now that we are on the threshold of that twilight zone where one awaits to accept the inevitable. It is a dreadful thought, but a stark reality. Former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador Nazrul Islam's passing away this week fills one with much sadness and brings to the fore realisation of the inescapable destiny.

Nazrul Islam led a full life. He had a brilliant educational career, professionally he reached the peak as a civil servant and assumed a place in the society which is envied by many. The solid foundation his father had helped build for him in his childhood, with the possession of an incisive mind, always aided him in later life. The art he had acquired of making a lucid and analytical presentation, backed by a sharp memory, of complex situation or issue in a simplified manner earned him profuse admiration.

Besides serving as Foreign Secretary, he acted as resident

responsible for channelling government and World Bank funds to principal NGOs. He was made a member of the Advisory Council of the BNP and later a member of the Foreign Service Reforms Committee. He was adored in his native area of Narsingdi for the numerous development and welfare oriented projects undertaken at his initiative.



eral other countries. Following retirement, he became Chairman of the Pall Karma Shikha, Shangshta, the apex body for poverty alleviation re-

retirement, he became Chairman of the Pall Karma Shikha, Shangshta, the apex body for poverty alleviation re-

Nazrul was an all-round sportsman to reckon with. Even a short while ago, he would win a match against a more than average tennis player. He was equally adept in badminton, table tennis, snooker and chess. To a stranger, Nazrul could have appeared reserved and sometimes even abrasive. But, within the hard shell he had a soft core and owned a heart of childlike simplicity, unfathomable affection and much compassion. It is well-known to his near and dear ones, His wife Shahnaz, daughter Nadia and members of his family as well as his friends and close associates will always hold dearly in their hearts the cherished memory of Nazrul Islam.

# Land Rights Movement A Concrete Step towards Sustainable Development

by Moinul Haque and Sohel Ibne Ali

ANGLADESH is an agrarian country. Most of its people are socially, economically and even politically dependent on agriculture. But Bangladesh remains as one of the poorest countries despite having the most fertile soil in the world. Poverty is endemic with nearly 80 per cent of the population living in conditions of absolute poverty. Among them 67 per cent are landless and 83 per cent are still living in villages. They are out and out related to land but possess no land and no production implements. As a result their poverty continues and the country is still dependent on external aid and imported food.

Agriculture remains as the major source of employment, but that is very much traditional. A few landlords control the major portion of cultivable land and most of the farmers work either as labour or sharecroppers. Thousands of acres of land are virtually government owned 'khas land'. According to the government rules and regulations landless people have right to own these lands but due to their unawareness and lack of information in this regard as well as they having no unity among themselves with a loud voice to be heard, they could not establish access to these lands. Most of the khas lands are unauthorisedly occupied by so called landlords. According to an unofficial figure there are 13 lakh acres of khas lands in our country.

As we are aware, 80 per cent of the people are engaged in agriculture, which is the major sector of productivity in

which has been fighting with the issue of establishing the rights of the landless poor over khas land for a long time has achieved a remarkable success in its effort in Pabna and Sirajganj districts. It believes that the pre-condition of development is establishment of rights and ownership of the sons of the soil over the resources and that the development of landless poor is only possible through establishment of this right. There are a lot of khas lands in the northern part of Bangladesh. As yet the organisation has identified 11,994 acres of khas land in its working area and succeeded in distributing 1705 acres of that and other public resources among the organised landless poor after a long struggle and movement at Ghugudha Beel and nearby places in Pabna district. Still it has been continuing a strong land movement organisation the landless poor to recover and distribute the identified public resources.

Now the land movement has turned into a social movement towards creating a gender equity based, democratic and fair society where the hitherto pariah poor people would be able to participate in local power structure. As a result of this social movement not only the landless farmers are benefited but also fishermen, weavers, cobblers and the poor in other trades as well as the victims of river erosion are accruing the share. And it has happened because of the civil society's assistance. Besides, Samata is also playing an active role in the movement of tribes to establish their rights

(February, 1997) organisation, but its representatives were working within Samata's network where experience shows that to establish the land rights of poor and landless people a series of activities have to be undergone such as form grassroots mobilisation to policy level lobbying and advocacy. As said, the organisation has been working with 40 NGOs in 11 districts of northern Bangladesh and has identified 66,487 acres of khas land in its working areas. According to government laws khas land would be distributed among the landless people for 99 years as a permanent lease. But they are not getting this useful resource despite having legal rights. Besides, there are 9941 khas ponds, 15008 other khas water bodies, 8226 acres of abandoned property, 3619 acres of river created land and 3,000 acres of unused land of Bangladesh Water Development Board, Roads & Highways Department and Bangladesh Railway. The organisation looks forward to establish the rights of landless farmers and fishermen over these khas lands and water bodies with assistance from network members.

In the meantime they have formed 'Thana Land Distribution Committee' at respective thanas and submitted 4,530 applications to the Thana Land Office for permanent lease of 12,677 acres of khas land. Besides, members have distributed 622.51 acres of khas land on one year lease and 57 acres on permanent lease among the organised landless poor. There are a number of



Organising the landless: Mass rally at Pabna

Bangladesh, but own only 5 per cent of total resources of the country. Statistics show that, in 1971 the number of landless people comprised only 31 per cent whereas in 1997 it rose to 67.43 per cent and this landlessness has assumed a growing trend. Landless people work on others' land. An obvious result is that they are deprived of the right and opportunity to economical, social, political, material and human resources. This deprived group is huge in number and constitute the largest minority in Bangladesh. Poverty is increasing parallelly with the increasing landlessness because the economy of this country mainly depends on the land productivity. That's why a huge number of village people are migrating to cities in the hope of some jobs and thus survival. But, in the process they are carrying poverty to cities and are exploited which is one of the main reasons of the growing rate of murder, kidnap, robbery and also terrorism in the urban scenario.

However, Samata, a non-governmental organisation over their land. It may be mentioned that this land movement has been constitutionally approved by the government. So it is now the responsibility of the greater civil society to create pressure group which is badly needed to implement this land rights law.

This land as well as social movement has been spreading in other northern parts of Bangladesh through a network of 40 local NGOs namely Land Network for Development (LAND). LAND members are implementing land and agriculture reform as much as they can through which at least a section of landless people are moving towards establishing their rights and a fair society at the grassroots level. Isolation and poverty are causes that hamper the democratic system as well as deter the development process of the country. That is why there is the need for development of this largest minority of the country. But this intervention again needs a greater solidarity among the people who may be the beneficiary as well as who believe in this issue.

The aim is also to build up a sound and healthy and pollution free environment. In conclusion it may be recalled that our great leader AK Fazul Huq also dreamt of an exploitation free healthy society of people with equal rights. During his time the slogan of the movement was 'Land for Jami Jami' (Land belongs to him who holds the plough) — a movement to establish the right of the landless farmers over the land. Let us realise the dream of the great leader with our sincere efforts.

# Preserving the Buddhist Sites in Bangladesh

by Dulal Kanti Barua

ANGLADESH has a vast treasure-house of Buddhist places and objects of interest. Mainamati, a gorgeous panorama of many archaeological sites and prosperous trading centre of art and culture. Sompur Vihar at Paharpur in Naogaon district, the largest single monument in the sub-continent; Jagaddal Vihar and the surrounding area known as Ramboti in ancient times, the capital city of latest Pala empire; Mahastangarh, the place which is associated with Buddha's serene presence; Sitakot Vihar in Dinajpur, token of one thousand five hundred years of Bengali architecture. All these as well as Bhasu Vihar in Bogra, the fine monastery where world famous Chinese traveller Yuan Chwang stayed and wondered to see its architectural beauty; Bajroyagine in Dhaka, the birth place of Asia's most dignified scholar Atish Dipankara and many others left unexcavated or undiscovered like Pandit Vihar in Chittagong, certainly deserve to become interesting spots of tourism. Besides, not only the ruins but also salvages such as Buddha images and antiques found elsewhere in the country, various Buddhist tribes and communities and their cultural activities and festivities, Buddhist temples, pagodas and Vihars etc. can also be attractive to many. In may parts of the world even a single object of beauty, a single site or a cultural festival is drawing numerous visitors, tourists or pilgrims. Baisabi celebration by tribals in Chittagong Hill Tracks, Sangraven festival (water festival) of the Rakhaine community in Cox's Bazar and others can become things of joy for many people if these are encouraged and nourished. Besides, some antiques like magnificent Buddha images and other objects found here and there in the country can attract not only simple visitors or tourists but also explores, thinkers, historians of various nationalities because these (images and objects) also testify very high knowledge of technology, architecture, arts, culture and aesthetic sense achieved by the Bengalis more than thousand years ago.

If we look around the world we can see the places of Buddhist significance are renowned with people of different languages and colours, and the trend of attraction towards these places is not decreasing but increasing day by day.

These might be many reasons. Some of these are: Buddhism believes in the equality and welfare of all men. So any man has easy access to these places. There is no religious, social or superstitious barrier against it. Many people came to the calm and merciful Buddha to get rid of their frustration, anxiety, stress, boredom, sorrow, pain and fatigue for some moments.

The tranquil and serene environment of Buddhist places also draws many peace lovers. For sight sees these places are existing because every Buddhist site has its uniqueness. Every temple or Vihar or Pagoda and Buddha image are made according to the custom, heritage and tradition of the respective society. So the visitors or tourists can know and taste different cultures, traditions, manners and heritages through these places and things. One fundamental reason behind growing trend of attraction towards Buddhist places is the renewed study and research of Buddhist philosophy and religion throughout the world. Professor G Tuice of Rome University says: 'Buddhism is a living religion not only a living religion but one that gives signs of a fresh vitality and impulse. The interest it arouses in the west, is not merely scientific but also spiritual; it appears that Buddhism has something to say in the troubled times when so many moral and religious values are collapsing'. According to another renowned scholar, Peter D Santina: 'In Europe generally, the attitude towards Buddhism is that it is very advanced, very rational and very sophisticated.' (Fundamentals of Buddhism)

Places and objects of Buddhist interest in Bangladesh are so immense, significant, unique and special that they can build up a prosperous tourism industry in the country. If only two sites, Mainamati and Paharpur are properly developed and widely opened for the public they can help grow both domestic and international tourism. Most of the people of our country still do not know what these things and places really signify. They do not know that they inherit a rich tradition of a high civilisation and Mainamati, Paharpur and other sites of interest are standing as symbols of that vivid history of powerful and sovereign Bengali dynasties stretching from 6th to 12th cen-

tury has been unearthed. Mainamati was the domain of the Bangali dynasties. Many of those rulers could establish supremacy over a large area of this region — the Bengali rulers of Khodga, Rata, Deva and Chandra dynasties. The Bengali Pala rulers founded a vast empire extending from today's Bangladesh to the western border of modern Pakistan and ruled for four hundred years. Sompuri Vihar stands as the token of their highest power as well as glory.

In those periods a high civilisation with all its aspects flourished in this part of the world. Most eminent scholars of Asia Atish Dipankara, Silabhadra and Santa Raksit etc were born in this is now Bangladesh. Silabhadra was the chancellor of the great Nalanda University and Atish Dipankara, the chancellor of Vikramasila University. The history of Buddhism in Bangladesh and the surrounding region is also very interesting. The places of Buddhist interest represent this interesting history. A new form of Buddhism flourished in those periods with the influence of the climate and environment of this region. Mahayana sect of Buddhism developed in Mahayana. Bajrayana, Kalachakrayan and Sahajayana giving birth to a flood of new thinking and creativity. The mystic Bhooh, Yogochari Nath, Sahajia and many other communities of Bangladesh and West Bengal are said to be offshoots of this forms of Buddhism. The Bajrayana and Kalachakrayana forms of Buddhism are still followed by the people of Tibet, Mongolia, some eastern parts of Russia and by some sects of Korea and Japan. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate the Dalai Lama who is one of the preceptors of this form has a great number of followers in the west particularly in the United States. It is noteworthy that Atish Dipankara was one the propagators of these forms in Buddhism, so Bangladesh is the place of revival of a philosophy which is followed by a large number of people in the world.

Therefore Bangladesh specially the birth place of Atish Dipankara, Bajrayasine can become a centre of pilgrimage which can draw tourists and pilgrims from the richest countries like America and Japan.

There is a legend that the Buddha left his footprint at present day Mohastangarh, the ancient Pundranagar, in Bogra district. We know that in Sri Lanka the Buddha's footprint, the Sripada is enchanted by pilgrims, visitors and tourists of different countries everyday. Historical documents show that Chinese traveller Yuan Chwang was enchanted to be at Bhasu Vihar in Bogra and stayed there for many days during the course of his extensive tour of the sub-continent from 635 AD to 637 AD. So these places can charm historians, explorers and researchers.

Recently West Bengal in India has introduced a special train service named Bouddha Parikrama, Pakistat is protecting and preserving with care its heritage of Buddhist civilisation. But Bangladesh seems to have ignored its invaluable treasure. One instance will be enough to prove this general allegation. Paharpur, one of the wonders of the sub-continent, has been enlisted by UNESCO as a world heritage and a number of movements of numerous people, has been left forlorn and forsaken. There is no easy road, rail or air link with the site of this great monument. The road condition from Joypurhat to Paharpur is deplorable and even there is no regular bus service. There is no government arrangements to attract the tourists not even those who come from abroad, nor any guide to take around and tell what this monument is all about. There are no other facilities like hotel or motel to stay or shops to buy necessities. The whole area wears a deserted look by sunset and becomes an insecure place.

Mainamati which includes about 30 archeological sites has not yet been broadly opened to the public. Except four or five sites, most of them remain under Bangladesh Army occupation and the rest is occupied by vested quarters. If there is sincere plan this Mainamati can easily be turned into an extensive centre of tourism. There are reports that many sites of tourist attraction in Cox's Bazar and some other places have happy grounds of miscreants, decoits, thieves and drunkards etc. There are allegations that Archeological Department has very few progressive and broad minded servants.

So, these above and other factors show that Buddhist circuit can hold up a great prospect of tourism in Bangladesh or can offer an enormous vitality to it. Even this circuit itself can build up a great tourism industry. Only honest efforts are needed to turn such dream into reality. If a nation ignores its glorious past, it cannot stand on a solid foundation. If the people of a country are conscious of their glorious tradition and heritage, they can help flourish a domestic tourism. If domestic tourism does not develop, international tourism cannot thrive in a country.

Now agreeing with views of many visitors and tourists we can make some suggestions aiming at saving this invaluable treasure from ruin and keeping the sites enjoyable for tourists and visitors.

- (1) First of all people should be made familiar with their bright past through regular and wide publicity in media like radio, television and newspapers etc. Children should know about these in their compulsory subjects from the primary stage.
- (2) Secondly, immediate and concrete steps must be taken to protect and preserve these assets.
- (3) Thirdly, strong security should prevail there so that every tourist spot can become a safe haven for visitors and tourists.
- (4) Fourthly, facilities of transport, communication, lodging, catering and others should be made easy, cheap and available. There should be regular bus services with those places. Direct road, rail or air link with these sites should be established.
- (5) Fifthly, every tourist centre should have learned tourist guides or books who or which can provide all information the visitors want to know.
- (6) Sixthly, there should be broad plans and bold steps to open up all sites of Mainamati and make it an extensive centre of tourism.
- (7) Seventhly, some restoration works of ancient places, objects and antiques are needed. Many terra-cotta plaques of Paharpur and Salban Vihar have been destroyed, and many excellent Buddha images and objects are reported to have been stolen or smuggled out. There should be sincere efforts to restore them.

# Wetlands and World Water Crisis

Maricel Sequeira writes from San Jose

THE ramifications of the current world-wide water shortage should persuade politicians in the 21st century to incorporate the issue of wetlands into their priorities, say environmental experts. The question will be up for discussion at the 7th meeting of the Ramsar Convention on wetlands, scheduled to take place here May 10-18, along with the overhaul problem of a lack of water and a possible food crisis. The congress will bring together some 1,500 government representatives, scientists and non-governmental organisations from all over the world. The 130 member states of the treaty signed in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar will be broadening their scope of work, which until now has focused on the defence of wetlands as the habitat of a wide variety of species, according to conference organisers.

Dalmar Blasco, secretary general of the office of the United Nations that is developing the principles of the Convention, said that, by taking on the issue of water, the aim is to encourage member states to guarantee the quantity and quality of the water they need for their existence.

'It is necessary to raise awareness about the very important role that wetlands play in the replenishment of water sources,' Blasco said. He said that 'historically, wetlands have had a very bad image, because they are considered to be inhospitable places plagued with mosquitoes and dangerous animals — leading to the disappearance of almost 90 per cent of such areas.' Still, he added, 'in the past decades, this tendency has been reversed itself.'

This shift in attitude was made possible thanks to scientific studies which, in the past 40 years, have demonstrated the importance of wetlands in human life. The proof of this positive change is the growth of the 'Ramsar list', which has registered some 1,000 wetlands protected by member states of the Convention. At the San Jose meeting, participants will discuss a technical document that will ensure these numbers do not increase in a disorganised way and without a specific target, explained Blasco. Costa Rica's Vice President Elizabeth Odio, said she did not expect any arguments during the meeting here as 'nobody is going to question the need to protect water.' Nevertheless, she anticipated that in the future there

may be conflicts, as the need emerges to consider water a resource with a price. Scientists from several countries have been trying for years to find a system that will allow them to establish a market value on certain functions and services concerning ecosystems, such as the case of the wetlands. Work in safeguarding water supplies against major storms and replenishing subterranean water also need to be upgraded. A group of researchers calculated the value of the wetlands around the world at 33 billion dollars a year, according to a document of the Ramsar Convention. Of that amount, 19 billion dollars correspond to what is generated by goods and services provided by the wetlands systems, which demonstrates their great importance.

Some experts have criticised what they think is an excessive interest in putting a price on something which does not have monetary value. Those who disagree with that position say that is the only way that those in positions of power will understand the urgency of protecting natural resources. Another aspect that will get the attention of governments around the world is the incidence of eco-systems on the imminent water crisis. The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) predicted that in the year 2025 almost 20 per cent of the world population will suffer from problems of water shortage. The organisation's prediction report for the 21st century, published recently, says that there are currently 29 countries that suffer from moderate to serious water shortages. — JRS/APS

