

CSM: A Test Case

GIVEN the colossal liability of Tk 1,100 crore and the unpalatable proposition of adding nearly two crore more every month as workers' salaries and allowances during the projected two-year period for BMRE, the decision for a mass lay-off at the Chittagong Steel Mills seems to have been the only logical way out for the government. It not only does give the government the much-needed breathing space to direct its efforts towards revival of the dying establishment, but also opens up the passage for direct foreign investment. However, the way the government has gone about the task of implementing the decision appears somewhat amateurish. Prevailing tension at the mills bears a strong testimony to it.

That the decision is part of the national policy for disinvestment and not a move to stifle trade unionism is a fact that appears to have not been adequately projected before the workers. Consultation with workers' union leaders, a pre-requisite under these circumstances, it seems, has not been properly done. The workers' resistance against the government move suggests that either the safety net offered to them is considered inadequate by them or they are averse to privatisation in general. The government has to devise a way to avert the ominous prospect of a showdown between the law-enforcers and the striking workers through a meaningful process of dialogue. In doing that it must also take into account that there are people lurking to engineer a law and order situation at the mills.

The Chittagong Steel Mills is a test case for the government's disinvestment programme. If we can weather the storm of workers' resistance and make it viable under a completely new set-up following the much-needed BMRE, an example will have been set for more joint venture projects in the country. It holds the potential to be turned into an efficacious plant. The issue of foreign investment for BMRE in exchange for certain percentage of shares should be settled without much dithering. On the whole, the revival of Chittagong Steel Mills should be treated as a top-priority undertaking. Rejuvenation of the CSM can give a shot in the arm of such ailing units as the Machine Tools Factory and even the Adamjee Jute Mills.

Peak-hour Shutout

THE acceptance of demands of the striking employees of BTV by the State Minister for Information for officially shutting out package programmes, though temporarily, during the peak hours is not a decision in the right direction. This was possibly the most important demand of the agitating non-gazetted employees of the BTV to which the State Minister and the TV highups have surrendered without weighing the consequences of such a decision in the long run.

Since its inception in 1964, BTV has produced a number of interesting and high-class programmes apart from being the partisan mouthpiece of the ruling elite. Till today this vital electronic medium is very rightly accused of being the megaphone of the party in power, in spite of their election pledge to allow autonomy to Radio and Television. There has been lot of complaints from the viewers against the low standard of the programmes telecast by BTV in recent times. Perhaps BTV has forgotten they don't enjoy complete monopoly anymore. Since the skies of Bangladesh have been opened up for satellite channels, discerning viewers have started comparing BTV's programmes with those. Most of the programmes of these stations are prepared by private companies which are known as 'package programmes'. Though late, the trade has also picked up in Bangladesh and we have now a number of houses producing programmes for BTV and satellite channels. Still in its infancy, top class productions should not be expected from them. But that does not mean they will be discouraged. This is a new area and a number of entrepreneurs have come forward with money and expertise and invested in men and material. They are offering not only programmes liked by viewers but also fair competition to the BTV producers to come up with better productions.

This is good competition from which both the BTV and the viewers will benefit. Why should the viewers be compelled to watch sub-standard programmes produced by BTV? Shutting out the package programmes in the peak hours will do harm to the BTV and the private entrepreneurs and the millions of viewers in particular will suffer. This is safeguarding the interest of public servants at the cost of private initiatives in a free economy. We strongly urge the ministry concerned to rethink their decision and find out solutions beneficial for all three parties — the BTV employees, the package producers and, above all, the viewers.

Uproot Druglords

THERE'S a malignant mesh of drug bazaar destroying the country's core — the youth. The news of increasing number of drug addicts once again drives home the message that our aggravating law and order situation is showing little sign of improvement. The Department of Narcotics Control estimates that about 240 drug merchants in the capital city are netting Taka 1.2 million every day by selling phensidyl alone, not to speak of other stuff. It is outrageous that despite all the information required to swoop down on and uproot these merchants of death they are yet to be contained. Authority's ledger records 160 dens in the city and it also has the full knowledge about the border points through which phensidyl worth Taka 2.6 million is smuggled daily into Bangladesh. But the reported incidents concerning this dirty trade always went undetected.

The underlying note is dreadful. Apart from healthcare strain on the addicts, mostly youths, the society becomes exposed to criminal activities like mugging, extortion, toll collection etc. The druglords often with chequered history escape either allegedly in connivance with the law enforcers or through the loopholes of the law itself. Reportedly, the police are singularly lacking in commitment in addressing this issue that has already assumed a dangerous proportion. The apparent negligence only speaks of the establishment's unwillingness or inability to perceive the consequences.

Inaction against these law-breakers is bound to have long term negative effect on our people at large. We don't want any more casualties and regrets. While we want the drug abusers to correct themselves with the help of non-governmental efforts, we urge upon the government machinery to act with integrity to uproot the druglords from the country and save the nation from an impending scourge of anaesthesia.

What is Sovereignty?

Our politicians are interested in securing the charity for the people so that they can be tied down to the begging bowl for the rest of their lives or at least until the next election time. No politician has ever launched a micro-credit programme even within their constituency so that the poorest may become less poor within three years and not remain poor at all within another two years. Please note that the tenure of a member of Parliament is five years.

WHAT is sovereignty? Political parties in the Opposition are relentlessly pursuing the thesis that government through its policies is deliberately subverting the sovereignty of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. After the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) peace agreement, it was even alleged that the south-eastern segment of the country had been sold away to another country. The loose talks often made it so simple. It appeared to be exactly the same as buying and selling of land, if not selling of animals in the open cattle market.

We all know very well that everything has remained as it is. Our borders remain intact. There have been no unauthorized intrusion except for smugglers. Peace has prevailed all over the hill tracts. In fact, incidence of arson or terrorism in general have been more rampant in the capital city than anywhere in the hill tracts during the recent months. However the ardent patriots of opposition political parties cannot rest in peace since they are not in power. It is necessary for them to keep the dead but politically highly sensitive issue like freedom and sovereignty very much alive and kicking in public mind so that repeated slogan mongering at public gatherings and meetings can swiftly inflame public mind against their opponents.

This in fact has been the pattern of politics ever since the partition of 1947. The Pakistan Muslim League during the election of 1954, was loudly preaching that unless they continue to remain in power, we will lose our Pakistani identity. So even at the cost of speaking a foreign language (Urdu), misrule and exploitation, we must tolerate the party in power. Otherwise we lose our sovereignty and therefore everything else.

History has proved that we have gained everything and lost nothing so far. The aftermath of the partition of 1947 is fully known. We had jumped from the frying pan to the open fire of oppression and exploitation.

The victory of December 1971 truly established the sovereign state and therefore the independence of the people of this country. Curiously enough, those who were against the sovereign and independent Bangladesh in 1971, are now most vocal and concerned about the loss of sovereignty in 1990s. What happened in the meantime for such dramatic transformation or perhaps they have remained as they were before in which case we may conclude that they are actually referring to the truncating of Pakistan till today.

There is no need to be unduly concerned with this small vanishing breed. It is far more important to realize the true meaning of sovereignty and to what extent we have realized it since December 1971. We must appreciate that what we had achieved was only political sovereignty followed by a democratic government, rights of the people to vote, freedom of the press etc. These are basic and fundamental and we should be proud of our achievements.

But this is not all. A country where the majority of the people are poor, in fact very poor, is neither free nor sovereign. To a hungry man or woman, freedom as we possess today has hardly any meaning. This is what our political leaders must fully realize. No other country is going to take us over. They should rest in peace and tranquillity over this issue. What is necessary is to fully appreciate the agonizing reality of how people live and survive. They are neither free nor sovereign.

At the same time, it is very difficult to believe that political leaders do not appreciate the overwhelming poverty of the country since they are seeing thousands of malnourished people, almost daily, in course of their frequent loud marches and huge public meetings. Seeing is believing. Perhaps it is not true since the poor are so many

and politicians have given up the hopes, if they had any, of poverty alleviation. They are convinced that nothing substantial can perhaps be done by them. Therefore, it is better to focus on few highly sensitive issues which should inflame the passion of the people and in the process win their support during the next election. People are poor. They will continue to remain poor. What the politicians can do? It is very unfortunate. But their role is to win elections and grab the power of the state authority. At best they would donate some money, may be lots of money to charity so that the beggars' bowls do not remain empty — at least during the campaign days just before the national election.

The skeptics also suggest that it may be better for politicians to paint a false image of sovereignty for the mass of the people and realize solid political gains. The conditions of mass poverty is not at stake. Getting the vote is the real issue. Since India is a big neighbour next door, it is not difficult to fan up the fear of sovereignty at stake as a profitable vote catcher. Hitler became the all-mighty dictator for a fairly long time by convincing people that

Germany no longer belongs to Germans. It has been taken over by the Jews. They run the economy. History may repeat itself. So Bangladesh may also be taken over by non-Bangladeshis. Vote for me and save the country. Indeed, it is an excellent vote catcher. The innocent people can be easily hoodwinked.

I think the time has now come to vigorously pursue an honest campaign and bring to light the hidden agenda of the politicians behind all their sovereignty in danger campaigns as well as their utter lack of interest in pursuing a genuine anti-poverty programme. People should be told and convinced that politicians are determined to keep us poor since it serves their interest. If people are poor, their aspirations will remain limited. They will not have the energy to protest all the wrong doings of the politicians. They will remain subservient if only they just manage to keep their body and soul together. Nothing more. Therefore small amounts of charity is an excellent way to enable them just to survive. The vulnerable group feeding programme also has no positive effect after the food have been digested within couple of hours.

There is a Chinese proverb which says: "Give a man a fish, he will eat it for a day; teach a man how to fish, he will eat for the rest of his life." Our politicians are interested in securing the charity for the people so that they can be tied down to the begging bowl for the rest of their lives or at least until the next election time. No politician has ever launched a micro-credit programme even within their constituency so that the poorest may become less poor within three years and not remain poor at all within another two years. Please note that the tenure of a member of Parliament is five years. It is possible to substantially alleviate poverty in each of the 300 constituencies of the country, if members of the Parliament themselves sponsor three hundred Grameen Banks out of their own resources since it would not cost more than the amount they had to spend and win the election. Moreover, support from Bangladesh Bank can be secured; it is not charity but credit which is repaid by the poor.

This will definitely lead to the achievement of economic sovereignty and the true freedom. Unfortunately, our politicians are not interested in the realization of true sovereignty. It may not ensure them the votes. Quite a few members of the Grameen Bank are now members and chairpersons of Union Councils. In future, they may be elected to Upazilla Parishad and eventually to the parliament. Thus new leaders may emerge from the grassroots. What would then happen to existing politicians?

Another important issue appears to be the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Iran considers the Taliban's brand of Islam as medieval. Iran was almost on the brink of a war late last year when Taliban soldiers killed Iranian diplomats while occupying the northern city of it appears that Mazar-i-Sharif. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia became cool to the Taliban leadership after it allowed the refugee Osama bin Laden to operate terrorist activities against the US embassy in East Africa. Iran might discuss with Saudi Arabia to put pressure on the Taliban to implement the power-sharing agreement in Afghanistan with its opponent, Northern Alliance concluded in March this year under the auspices of the UN.

Another issue of discussion appears to be Iraq, a neighbour of Iran with whom Iran had to wage war for 10 years. At present Iraq is under the UN sanctions as the West is not satisfied with Iraq's destruction of biological and chemical weapons. The UN inspection team is barred from Iraq after the US launched air strikes in mid-December. Furthermore Iran and Saudi Arabia might discuss the presence of troops from Islamic countries in Kosovo once the Muslim Albanian refugees are able to return to their land under international protection.

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An Appraisal of President Khatami's Visit to Saudi Arabia

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Iran's growing military strength and increasing diplomatic interaction with the European countries cannot be ignored in the region.

PRESIDENT Mohammad Khatami of Iran has paid a visit to Saudi Arabia and Qatar in recent days and the visit is very significant in repairing the often tumultuous relations between Arab countries and Iran. The very fact that Iranian President met with the Saudi Arabia's King during the visit appears to reflect the warming of relations with the most important Arab country in the region. The visit has to be seen in the background of its lowest state of bilateral relations in 1987 when the Saudi Arabian security forces resorted to firing upon the Iranian nationals who publicly demonstrated against Saudi Arabia while performing Hajj.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran was seen as a threat to the regimes in Arab countries in the Gulf region as Iran was perceived to be exporting the Islamic revolution in the region. Furthermore Iran is a Shi'ite-dominated country while the Arab countries in the region are dominated by Sunnis. A serious distrust developed between Iran and the regional Arab countries when Iraq fought war with Iran. The UAE still considers Iran as a threat to peace because Iran holds on to a few of the UAE-claimed islands in the Gulf.

The change in the bilateral relations began to unfold when Mr. Khatami was elected as the President in Iran in May, 1997. He was known to differ in his views with the conservatives of the country. He was able to bring fresh and liberal ideas in governing the country. He wanted to turn Iran into a free and transparent government, accountable to his people. The first thaw in relations with Arab countries came when Iran held the Islamic Conference Summit on 9th of December, 1997 in which all the heads of states/governments of Arab countries including Chairman Yasser Arafat attended.

The ice was broken and everyone perceived that Iran under the new President would be no threat to the security and stability of their regimes. Al-

though Iran initially had reservations to the peace deal (Oslo Accord of 1993) with Israel by the Palestinian leader, it now appears to have reconciled with the view that if the Palestinian people want that way, Iran would not create any difficulty in the implementation of the peace accord.

Iran is holding at present the prestigious position of the Chairperson of the Islamic Conference and in that capacity Iran has the responsibility of coordinating policy with the issues confronting the Islamic countries. One of the weaknesses of the solidarity of the Islamic countries appears to be the wide differing opinions between the conservative and moderate countries on the strategy to be pursued in the interest of Muslim community. A few Islamic countries hold the view that the peace deal with Israel does not derive any benefit to the Palestinian people including the refugees in Lebanon and in other countries. They feel that the issue of Palestine refugees has been sidelined and furthermore Chairman Arafat should not have concluded a separate deal with Israel while Israel continues to occupy other Arab lands after the 1967 War.

Added to this is the growing influence of the West in the region after the 1990 Gulf War and the hard-line attitude of Israel. Iran has proposed a regional dialogue pact with the Arab countries for the security in the Gulf in place of being at present under the western defence umbrella. Apparently this idea has evoked a cool reception in the region. During the visit Iran's President might take the opportunity to explain further the regional defence security architecture with Saudi leaders.

Iran's common bond with Saudi Arabia is that both are major oil-producing countries and the low price of oil in the international market is a concern for both. Iran and Saudi Arabia are members of OPEC and recently their joint support for the reduction of quota of oil

under OPEC formula has led to the modest rise of oil price. This is an area where the cooperation of both countries will have an impact on the price of oil in the market.

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The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva.

Limping Industries Limit Growth

The industrial sector needs a jerk... limping industrial growth limits overall economic growth. Proper politics, policies and premises — all need to be knitted together for a limping growth to jump up.

THE fountain of wealth of the wealthy nations of today — so it is said — receives the perennial flow from trade in manufactures. Manufacturing is considered to be the key to increased employment, income and standard of living. About three-fourths of the world's merchandise trade is reported to be dominated by manufactures and the tariff wall against trade in manufactures had been at the top of all agenda pertaining to international trade. Again, 'export-led' growth strategy emerged in the backdrop of the lack of adequate purchasing power in domestic market as well as in the presence of pervasive inefficiency in a protected regime. It is now widely recognised, however, that the successes of the export-led development strategy is contingent upon the development of a viable manufacturing sector.

Such important manufacturing sector in Bangladesh is limping, so to say. Over the last quarter of a century, the economy of Bangladesh has gone through a slow rather erratic structural transformation. Public sector mainly led the nation's industrialisation efforts. Although it reigned supreme in the absence of a clear-cut vision for the future, some of the premises upon which the policies were made turned out to be wrong. For example, heavy doses of industrial finance took place under the umbrella of specialised financial institutions on the notion that it was the lack of credit that constrained industrialisation efforts. More often than not, credit flows were dictated more by political considerations than by economic rate of returns. The concomitant consequences are clear. 'Industrialists' got rich while industries got sick. Massive amounts of loans were defaulted, the economy was almost destined for a de-industrialisation. The share of manufacturing sector limped from 9 per cent in 1973 to only 11.12 per cent at present. Again, whatever silver lining appears on the horizon of the industrial front derives its most from ready-made garments (RMG) with heavy import dependence and lower value addition.

The bleak scenario begot in the backdrop of a vast pool of easily trainable manpower resources and the prevalence of a relatively low wage level. To make things worse, the weak base of technology, lack of dynamic entrepreneurship, managerial expertise and developed workforce played the devastating role. The Fifth Five Year Plan is poised to raise the share of manufacturing to about 13 per cent of GDP by the terminal year of the plan. Is the target achievable?

The answer to the aforesaid question would hinge much on the crucial and logical transformation of the economy needed for an acceleration of the pace of industrialisation. There are many contributing factors to that targeted transformation but allow me to cite a few: a necessary enabling environment, an upbeat efficiency of the private sector so that it can compete in the global market, and a well sequenced and timed liberalised trade regime.

The necessary enabling environment springs mainly from political stability, credibility of policies, de-regulations and privatization. The efficiency of the economy needed for an acceleration of the pace of industrialisation. There are many contributing factors to that targeted transformation but allow me to cite a few: a necessary enabling environment, an upbeat efficiency of the private sector so that it can compete in the global market, and a well sequenced and timed liberalised trade regime.

To the Editor...

Trees are true friends

Sir, Why are we our own enemies? Why do we hurt ourselves and our country without any thought or remorse even? Is something really wrong with us? Are we not capable of understanding what is good for us and our country too? Or is it that we just don't care as long as our selfish needs and motives are fulfilled? Why then are we systematically clearing our forests and our greenery? Twenty-five per cent of the land of a country should optimally be covered by forests and here we are destroying our own country by cutting down hundreds of trees each day. There is a forest department on which lakhs of tax-payers' money is spent. But still then the country is denuded of its forest reserves with each passing day. Newspapers are rife with such reports. But no action at all is taken.

Because who cares? It is obvious that some people are fattening their money bags and bank balances at the cost of our poor country. Instead of planting and protecting trees some are doing just the opposite. No case is filed against them, nobody cries out against this wrong. Why are we so quiet and so devoid of feelings? If we remain so we'll have to pay dearly for it one day. The process has started: desertification, drought, of floods, of loosing rich surface soil and finally part of the country will go under water. May be then our eyes will open and the culprits responsible for plundering our forests will be brought to book, but then it will be too late. For once the environment is damaged it is lost forever. In western countries when trees have to be felled to widen a road even, and not for personal gains as in our country, the local people climb up the trees and just sit there, perched on its branches like birds! In Saudi Arabia if they have turned parts of their desert green only by planting trees and here we are doing just the opposite to the gift that God has bestowed upon us, so generously. Why?

Don't we understand our own good and bad? Why are we so blinded by greed? We are only hurting ourselves in the long run. We, our children and our children are going to suffer not any outsider. It is indeed heartening to see that a DU Professor and some students have at last come to their city's rescue from this tree slaughtering campaign.

Dr. Sabrina G. Rashid, Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka.

A critical test for NATO

Sir, After more than a month of its air campaign, NATO has made us believe it has been a success. But it has a little evidence to substantiate that claim: ethnic cleansing was more brutal and swift, misery and indignity of nearly a million Kosovars rose manifold. No one denies NATO has mighty military power, but

clency of the private sector in competing with the world market would be determined partly by these policies and also partly by developing human resource base. A timely tuned liberalized trade regime is a sine qua non for export oriented industrialisation. A liberalised trade regime helps to keep costs of production down on the one hand and promotes adoption of new technology on the other.

In the newly floated industrial policy, some of the issues seem to have been given serious thoughts. The policy pronounces a private sector-led export-oriented industrial growth keeping in view the imperatives of the global market. That special attention to be given to small and rural based industries with the assurance of necessary support services is a laudable statement. A firm political commitment is also enshrined therein. Thrust sectors have rightly been identified with due disposition of incentive schemes.

But a paper of policy intent as it is, the success of the new industrial policy would depend to a large degree on the enabling environment for the growth of industries in this country. Among the determinants of political stability and political consensus on the ways and means of industrialisation, we can only hope that major political parties with avowed objective of a market economy — would see that such consensus is on board. The country has already lapsed a large part of the opportunities available for industrialisation. Welcoming moves are in sight also. For example, establishment of Rin Adalat, placing loan defaulters under the judgement of the court etc. seem to have dawned on to signal the demise of loan defaulting culture. It is expected that in the future we would expect much of 'quality' rather than 'quantity' investments.

The industrial sector needs a jerk, with the view in mind of course, that a limping industrial growth limits overall economic growth. Proper politics, policies and premises — all need to be knitted together for a limping growth to jump up. Unfortunately, while policies and premises have seemingly gone on shore, politics is drowning in the deep sea. It is high time that we get rid of wrong politics before we seek our industries to be right.

The Fifth Five Year Plan Document (page 300) rightly remarked on the role of the public vs. private sector — an irritant debate that has been on for many years. 'Generally, the public sector will be more visible through policy and institutional support rather than investment in the industrial sector through ADPs. The public sector inputs will be provided mainly through right policies, institutional and infrastructural support, legal forms and good governance... The government does not intend to invest in new industrial capacity creation excepting in such areas where the private sector will not be forthcoming...'. We can only hope that good words on good governance as espoused in the plan document are turned into good deeds and with no loss of time.

(e) An intellectual is a person who relies on intellect not on feeling or emotion. (f) An intellectual is a person professionally engaged in mental labour. (g) An intellectual is a person who is not too late for NATO to change its course, take the bull by the horn in Kosovo, and engage the thugs on rampage headlong if NATO is to reverse the ethnic cleansing they have vowed to do. Nothing short of that will absolve NATO. Time is running out. All the rhetoric unless backed by action on the ground will prove not only futile and empty but also cowardly and hypocritical.

If the Kosovar deportees cannot return soon, they may never regain their homes and lands which no doubt will have been appropriated by Serb settlers very soon. Then there may well be a Kosovo Diaspora scattered all over Europe and parts of the USA even, a people dispossessed of their homes, lands, and identity, the sentiments in Europe will wane, fatigue will set in; there will be international amnesia though the light of return will have been kept burning. There is a Palestinian Diaspora engaged in a long frustrating struggle making enormous sacrifices. Who will give the Kosovars an "Israel" and where?

Zakir Husain Dhaka.

Need for political reconciliation

Sir, According to Election Commission, Upazilla election will be held in July. But if this election is held without the support and participation of the major opposition parties it would suffer from credibility crisis. Actually validity of any political institution will come under question if it is formed without the participation of the main political stream. We should remember that democracy is to negotiate and compromise. So for the sake of democracy it is not too late to initiate dialogue and discussion with the opposition.

K H Alam, Bawani, Dhaka.

Need for political reconciliation

Sir, I would like to use this column for the 5th time to draw the kind attention of the authority concerned to the deplorable condition of the link-road which connects Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (Krishi College), Agricultural Training Institute (ATI), at a far Planning Commission to Mirpur road at college gate. This link-road is also used by doctors, nurses and patients of the Suhrawardy Hospital Complex. During the rainy season the sufferings of this road users multiply. Rickshaw-pullers and auto-rickshaw drivers charge extra-money to travel through the road. Would the authorities concerned please look into the matter and take appropriate action at the earliest?

Mostafa Sohel, Dhaka.

Drawing attention, again

Sir, In our country, quite often we come across different statements of a group of intellectuals either hailing or condemning some incidents or happenings. I, like many others, have become confused at the contradictory nature of these statements which led me to consult a dictionary to find out the actual meaning of the word 'intellectual' and it is defined as: (a) An intellectual possesses or shows notable mental capacity. (b) An intellectual is guided or developed by or relying on

M Zahidul Haque, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207.

Role of Intellectuals