

Peace Dividend for CHT

THE implementation of the CHT Peace Accord was formally set in motion on May 27 this year with the installation of the 22-member interim regional council. Nearly one and a half years had been lost through intense negotiations over the controversial issue of representation from non-tribal settlers in the council. The peace process did not quite have a smooth start. Consequently, vital development issues were more or less ignored to the extent that it made the country's development partners rather tentative in their approach although at heart they must have been very serious.

Against this backdrop, the UNDP's plan for a series of workshops at district levels in the hill tracts to "have a consensus on development needs of the people, forge better understanding and build confidence" certainly indicates that things have finally started moving in the right direction. For any sustainable development programme, it is of foremost importance that there is a dialogue with the stakeholders about the contents of it. Besides, through articulation of problems and expectations, not only will they be part of the whole participatory process but also a reconciliatory environment will be created which, in the long run, will mitigate, and even eliminate, lingering disputes among different quarters.

Another positive development in this regard has been the UNDP-sponsored talks among the country's development partners themselves. Meeting of the donors' consultative committee with Shantu Larma, chairman of the RC, and other relevant ministries is the next in line. Besides, the UNDP Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific has already had talks with the CHT Affairs Minister and the State Minister for Law and Justice on matters relating to the setting up of a human rights commission and a human rights institute. Unfortunately though, developments so far have largely been donor-centred and activity at the government's end has been strangely subdued.

The CHT Accord is not the end, it is a means to an end. Until and unless the people in the region get its developmental dividend, the accord will remain a piece of paper. With the donors eager to pour money, what is needed, at this point of time, is an orchestrated effort, led by the government and, of course, the council, to make sure the wheels of development moved to fruition.

Police Atrocity Continues

THE night of June 25, 1999, will remain in the memory of the simple people of a far-flung sleepy village in Panchagarh perhaps as the most dreadful in their lives. On that fateful night a police Sub-inspector of Panchagarh thana along with his two accomplice constables virtually unleashed mediaeval barbarity on the villagers — men, women and children — on a matter that could have been just ignored. The wrath of the marauders fell on innocent women in particular who were members of a cooperative of the cluster village. They had sold a couple of trees to raise fund for purchase of fish fry for the cooperative. The police acting on instigation of a local tout summoned the villagers, particularly the women members of the cooperative and pounced on them in front of their family members as if in an orgy of savagery stripping them of their saris, manhandling at will and then trying to put them on police van by force. But as the villagers gathered in large numbers responding to the hue and cry of the victims the police left the scene in a haste but came back a day later to threaten the villagers of dire consequences if they talked of the incident to journalists. The police super did not take any action against the perpetrators even after four days of the occurrence. This report was published in a local Bangla daily on Tuesday last.

This is one of the many stories of police brutality and repression on women taking place across the country. The incidents are getting higher in number and consequent protests are being heard louder too, yet there is hardly any attempt to bring the culprits to book. But the most alarming trend is the silence maintained by major women's organisations when such an incident is reported in the press. When Moni Begum was stripped on the streets of Dhaka, there were a handful of women organisations that protested the police brutality. A distinct partisan trend can be observed among these organisations which are supposed to uphold dignity of women irrespective of their belonging to social strata. Unless this trend is reversed there may come a time when such partisan organisations can garner little or no support to their need. Consequently the struggle for women's emancipation will weaken to the defeat of the intent itself.

Ocalan's Fate

TURKEY may have reasons to applaud the court verdict of death sentence on Abdullah Ocalan, but the execution of Ocalan would lose a quaking effect on the Kurds, who have been fighting for their rights for the last seventy-five years. This Turkish "baby-killer", after all, is the "messiah of freedom" for the Kurdish people. A disillusionment is already seething among the Kurds in Turkey and in the Kurdish diaspora in Iran, Iraq and some western countries. Inter-communal clashes are predicted. An escalation of violence cannot be ruled out as a sequence of this lull of despair.

The court verdict, however, is still to be approved by Turkish parliament and the country's president, Suleyman Demirel. Yet, by putting Ocalan to death Turkey would lose the window of opportunity for a negotiated settlement with the Kurds. But the execution would breed complications, both nationally and internationally, which might in turn disrupt the country's socio-economic equilibrium beyond repair. Internationally, Turkey's position would be vulnerable as an would-be member of the EU. European leaders have already issued a united appeal warning Turkey that carrying out the death sentence could strain relations and jeopardise its already shaky prospects for joining the Union. And fearing violence, America, on the other hand, has closed down its embassy in Istanbul.

The government in Turkey should pay attention to these possible global repercussions for its own sake. We urge the Turkish authorities to commute the death sentence against Ocalan into life imprisonment and give negotiations a chance.

Debt Relief for Poor Nations

Transparency in policy making, removal of bureaucratic red tape and the presence of an attractive rate of return relative to risk would help the debtor countries in dealing with the debt problem.

SINCE the beginning of the debt crisis in the early 1980s, many developing countries have continued to find it difficult to meet their external debt-service obligations. The reasons are varied and numerous. They range from external shocks, such as deterioration in the terms of trade and adverse weather conditions to the lending policies of many creditors, including the provision of loans on commercial interest rates and short repayment periods. The lack of prudent debt-management policies by debtor countries as well as a flawed management of the currency composition of external debt have also contributed to the crisis.

While every country in the world, including the United States and Japan, owes money to someone, many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have struggled for years to repay only the interest on loans that are, in some cases, decades old. The total debt of the poorest nations in the world exceed 250 billion dollars, well beyond their capacity to service.

A UN report can be used to put the debt burden in perspective. In its 1997 report, the UNDP had said that governments in Africa alone, if relieved of their debt obligations, could use the funds to save the lives of millions of children by 2010.

Debt relief is not a panacea. However, it is a fact that many developed nations have already effectively written off debts owed to them, as they know developing countries simply don't have the funds to pay them off. Cancelling unpayable debts would provide an essential opportunity and foundation for development. It could end the downward spiral of economic degradation in many countries. The growing international political and public opinion in favour of greater debt relief suggests that faster and more substantial progress on the issue is inevitable.

The debts are mainly owed to three groups: western governments, global financial institutions, such as IMF, World Bank, and private lenders. As the volume of external debt has risen dramatically over the years, the lenders have initiated a series of rescheduling plans. But they have proved to be complicated and time-consuming. Despite several thousand rescheduling meetings over the last decade, there has not been any major dent on the debt problem. As the creditors used the rescheduling plan to delay the economic gain by shifting the debt down the line for repayment at a later date, the debtor countries found themselves thrown in a vicious cycle of increasing debt service and lower economic growth in real terms.

The plea for debt cancellation for the world's poorest countries has now become the common cause of a rapidly growing international movement. Not since the anti-apartheid movement campaigned against white rule in South Africa has a cause won such widespread support. This has forced international lenders to reassess their position.

In 1996, the World Bank and IMF introduced a framework to provide special assistance for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) that pursue IMF and World Bank imposed adjustment and reform programmes. Its aim, as explained by them, is to assist countries in attaining sustainable external debt levels within a reasonable period of time and without additional external support. They included a

group of 41 countries, mostly in Africa, in this initiative. Bangladesh is not in this group. According to this initiative, a country would be considered to achieve external debt sustainability if it is expected to be able to meet its current and future external debt-service obligations in full, without recourse to debt relief, rescheduling of debts, or the accumulation of arrears, and without unduly compromising economic growth.



Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

or more to 150 per cent. The target for the debt-government revenue ratio has been reduced from 280 per cent to 250 per cent for countries that export at least 30 per cent of their national income and raise 15 per cent in tax revenue.

In order to meet the cost of this debt relief, the G-7 countries have decided to sell up to 10 per cent of the IMF's 27 billion dollar gold reserves and reinvest the proceeds. A proportion of the yield will be used to fund the initiative.

However, even the proponents of this deal recognise that this relief arrangement is, at best, inadequate. Differences among the G-7 countries made the plan well short of a comprehensive debt relief programme.

France in particular expressed concern about shouldering a high share of the cost of any debt relief initiative. Italy and Japan were the least enthusiastic about extending the scheme. Britain, on the other hand, appeared to want to go further and offer more debt relief than any of the others.

The proponents of debt cancellation, on the other hand, believe that the deal did little to reduce the strict conditions attached to receiving the debt relief and that the deal will have little impact, if any, on the global debt situation. As an example, Mozambique, one of the few countries that have qualified for debt relief, stands to save only about 12 billion dollars a year on a debt service bill of about 108 billion dollars. But the country will still spend at least twice as much annually on debt service as on health, education, and other social services.

The G-7 initiative is based on the IMF and World Bank's HIPC initiative. But experience from the last few years have shown that the HIPC initiative has not been as successful as claimed. Only five countries from the initial list of forty-one have either received debt-relief or are scheduled to get one this year. By 2002, six years after the start of the programme, only seven countries will have been selected.

One problem with the HIPC programme is that the requirement to spend six years under IMF supervision before qualifying is far too long. A second problem is that while HIPC is designed to reduce debt to a sustainable level, the measure-

ment is based mainly on the ratio of service payments to export earnings instead of taking into account a country's absolute poverty. The measurement of sustainability should be based on real government expenditures — looking at how much is spent on debt service as compared to what is spent on, say, health, education, and poverty alleviation.

It is true that debt relief is not a panacea for all of the economic problems of the poor nations. Even if, hypothetically, all of the external debts of these countries are cancelled, most would still continue to need concessional external assistance.

The debtor countries must do their part in order to take advantage of the current situation. They must address the problems of governance, particularly as they influence investor confidence, such as the creation of necessary commercial code of conduct, functioning of judicial systems, and the effective application of the rule of law. Transparency in policy making, removal of bureaucratic red tape and the presence of an attractive rate of return relative to risk would help the debtor countries in dealing with the debt problem.

The real danger with the HIPC initiative is that people in poor countries are gradually feeling cheated because debt relief under this initiative is not providing the improved services for the poor that was promised. For the poor countries, the only viable answer might be a complete and immediate write-off. The international lenders should consider wiping out the existing external debt, and ring in the millennium by giving the developing nations a fresh start.

57 or 75 — There Should Be a Time to Say "I Quit"

In China, the ageing factor in key posts led to major retirements several years ago with new faces taking over charges. South Africa's President Nelson Mandela retired after serving one-term in favour of a chosen successor he had groomed to deal with the country's complex problems. Indeed, he was hailed.

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's announcement that she would retire from "active politics" on reaching the age of 57 or in 2004 is indeed significant in the context of Bangladesh, where the young with away waiting for the elder to call it a day.

Although, as monitored from BBC radio, she, now aged about 52, also left a room for doubt if she would really do so. She said "people generally retire at 57. You can assume, I would also retire at that age."

I will take it that she has said what she means and that it is a very wise decision. A decision that has many indications in the positive for herself and her party — the Awami League.

Just as a reminder to the readers, Sheikh Hasina was elected in June 1996, in the second democratic polls held since 1991 and before I go on I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister for even thinking on that line.

First, if she is again elected for a five-year term in the next scheduled polls in 2001, two things can happen: (a) she may continue to complete her tenure and (b) amend the constitution for a post of Deputy Prime Minister who takes over when she steps down reaching the age of 57. The third, which I can foresee is the demand from her party's rank and file not to do so.

Since these are all hypothesis, I think she would complete her tenure and could go on because of the third option. But, knowing her, I can only say at this point that she is a determined lady and usually gets what she wants. In that case it would be prudent on her part to retire at 57 as she has indicated or after completing her second tenure in office, setting a precedent.

The party leadership should also be asked to follow her steps, for some it should be quicker and for others gradually giving the helm to one elected by the party's rank and file. There is at least one member in her cabinet who is much talked about because of his age, but he reportedly wants to stay on for the 'perks' of being a minister.

Time changes, ideas change and leadership around the globe also change. New blood always is an infusion of new ideas, strength and of course the



In Fool's Paradise?

by Nadeem Qadir

power to negotiate in a changing world order. In China, the ageing factor in key posts led to major retirements several years ago with new faces taking over charges. South Africa's President Nelson Mandela retired after serving one-term in favour of a chosen successor he had groomed to deal with the country's complex problems. Indeed, he was hailed.

Many in Bangladesh still feel that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman should not have occupied any political post as president or prime minister as "Father of the Nation" meant more than all that. Maybe even the 1975 coup conspirators would not have thought of assassinating him fearing public reprisal. Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah

Khomeini remained the nation's guardian.

This helps the leaders to remain above all controversies and also they can monitor from outside the country's governance as well as every other development. Mandela said he would always be there to help, if needed, the new South African President Mbete. Khomeini did exactly that as long as he lived. The advantage of such moves are clear from the position they hold outside the power structure.

Sheikh Hasina by retiring from "active politics" means

On Sheikh Hasina's successor, she said that it was a choice to be made by the party's leadership and workers. History shows that in Asia the family matters.

The Gandhis in India and the Bhuttos in Pakistan are just easy examples. The new chief of India's Congress party Sonia Gandhi quit after some fellow party members questioned if a "foreigner" could lead India as the premier, but gave into pressures from the party's rank and file. However, it was seen by analysts more as a tactic both to gauge the situation and increase her popularity.

After 50 years in politics it should not be a difficult task for the Awami League to elect a dedicated person with charisma to lead it until the time another change is needed on principal of age or for facing new challenges.

The prime minister should stick to her decision and ensure that she remained a guardian of the party instead of getting embroiled in petty political matters, as she said in her speech launching Awami League's 50th Anniversary celebrations few days ago that "I have no craving for power. In my political life I have nothing to gain or lose personally. My only mission is to bring smile to the faces of the deprived multitude."

That expression is good enough to lead her party, and maybe the country, as a guardian through "non-active politics." I hope other politicians, including Begum Khaleda Zia, now about 54, and Hussain Muhammad Ershad, 69, could also think in similar lines to help the politics of dynamic and healthy politics as the bottom line is whether it is 57 or 75, there should be a time to say "I quit."

To the Editor...

Parliamentary adda!

Sir, I have almost given up listening to the debates in the parliament relayed on the radio or TV, for two basic reasons: the message is wrong, that is, finding fault with others, or passing on the buck — the issue at hand is not discussed in a normal and neutral manner or objectively; and, the style or mode of the delivery is not formal and in parliamentary language.

The Bengalees have a passion for adda; but unfortunately this get-it-out-of-the-system pastime has infiltrated into the business hours from the leisure hours. We are not a very formal society, as we are the victims of the tropics, an environmental malady. In the cold climate, people tend to keep indoors before fireplaces, whereas in the hot countries, the body heat has to be dissipated through ventilation of the skin or the gift of the gab (is it what the scientists call the Brownian movement, this mental itchiness in the poor countries?).

The Malaysians, with the tradition of nine kings in the background, have raised politeness in daily life to the level of an art — the lack of confrontation appears to be amazing to Bengalee visitors (although Malaysia is nearer to the Equator).

I have a solution which may not work — replace the microphone in the JS with files. Nothing verbal!

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

A city full of problems

Sir, For a pretty long time, eight million city dwellers of

Dhaka are beset with unbearable, excruciating, harrowing and heart-rending problems. Difficulties and hardship due to 1) electricity and 2) water crisis 3) road traffic jam and 4) piling of tons of garbage on the public roads and streets creating health hazard and pollution.

Several times our various authorities of different governments have announced many plans and programmes to provide the people with basic civic facilities and amenities but their activities and promises have proved to be a tale of failure.

Our authorities concerned have spent crores of Taka from the public exchequer for shifting the Central Bus Terminal from Fulbari to Gabtali, Mohakhali and Saidabad, constructed several foot bridges, and underground bus bridges, but they have failed to tame, discipline the rickshaw pullers, bus, truck drivers and floating hawkers and vendors on the public roads and streets.

The city is plunged into darkness due to load-shedding, people run helter-skelter for a bucket of water, the lifts in the sky high government offices and private apartment buildings do not operate, the life of the city dwellers is paralysed and the sufferings of the millions know no bounds. But who cares? Who is responsible for all these problems? Who is the competent authority to attend to the complaints and grievances of the members of the public? Why does not the competent authority work? Why is the competent authority sitting idle?

We wonder whether we are passing our days in the middle age or we are living in a

metropolitan city of 20th century?
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"Our Own Crony Capitalism"

Sir, The despatch from New Delhi by Praful Bidwai "Our Own Crony Capitalism" (DS June 21) was loaded with backdoor goodies at the upper governance level, and spiced with terms such as corporate-friendly policies and Committees (market Rs 500,000 crore), winking at left-handed patronization of huge subsidies.

If this is the typical pattern of doing official and unofficial business in poor countries which are 'developing' without bothering to maintain the figure of the LDCs may say goodbye to Westminster and quickly patronize our own crony capitalism and its offshoot, janata-capitalism. The expected and predicted pattern cannot be different under similar background and handicaps. That is where Bangladesh comes in for a friendly inspection.

But our "mass media is timid, and would hardly dare to write investigative reports in similar tone and depth; even conceding that the press freedom might be more accommodating within the world's largest democracy. It is difficult to control the power sector to the political sector (political system loss). The latter is more invisible and elusive, although some leakages see the light of the day (the PSCs, the defence purchases, the parochial land-grabbing scrambles, the ruthless politicization of the established institutions). In three years the situation has not improved, de-

pending on how 'situation' is defined and interpreted.

A Husnain
Dhaka

Pre-historic postal service

Sir, My experience with the Bangladesh Postal Service of the past few months is that this critical communication organ of the country is perhaps more suited to the speed of communications in pre-historic times.

A package of 3 books was sent from the USA by airmail to the Dhaka office of the NGO with which I work. The package was mailed on December 18, 1998 at the cost of \$40.48. The address is typed perfectly clearly and the US postal service customs form is attached and properly filled in. Two dates are clearly marked on the box after its arrival in Bangladesh: they are 26.12.98 and 28.12.98, indicating clearly the presence of the books in the country from that time. The workers of our NGO searched from the Mohammadpur post office and finally obtained the box on 8.3.99.

In this regard, I wrote to the Postmaster General, GPO, Dhaka on 16.3.99. Receiving no answer, I wrote again on April 12, 1999 to Postmaster General, GPO, Dhaka with copies this time to the Deputy Postmaster General, Dhaka City, North Division and Minister for Post and Telecommunications.

Not having received any answer to either letter from these distinguished persons (and having my own disappointing experience with the postal service), I have grown doubtful that my letters must not yet have been delivered.

William Christensen
HRD Consultant Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN



The Market Drag

AS the average age of the population rises, the nation's advertisers insist on appealing to the younger buyer. Television shows are judged successful in the Nielsen not by the numbers but by the age of the people watching. The folks flogging products want viewers to be in the lower age bracket, on the assumption the younger you are, the more money you will spend.

On Madison Avenue there is nothing but adoration for teenagers — the grungy people we don't know what to do without. The belief in business is that this segment of the population is what makes the economy go round.

There is only one thing wrong with this thinking. While it's true that the youth market is priority one, what the advertisers don't acknowledge is where the money comes from. It comes from the parents and older citizens the market researchers insist must be ignored. The people who finance the youth market, as far as the advertisers are concerned, don't exist.

What hurts more than anything is that the big spenders (a. k. a. youth market) have no idea what it costs to raise a family.

"Hey, Pop, can I have \$30 to go to the movies? That's \$10 for the tickets and \$20 for the popcorn."

"Money doesn't grow on trees."

"Do you want your children to be good consumers or a drag on the market?"

"Mommy, since your generation doesn't spend any money, could I have some of it to buy a bathing suit and a gallon of suntan oil?"

The word is not on Madison Avenue that everyone over 40 is a deadbeat. I have nothing against business making all its television shows for the young. Thank heavens those of us who can't handle the junk on television still know how to read a book. Besides, television commercials aren't as great as they are cracked up to be.

All I'm asking from business is that it acknowledge where the money comes from.

Perhaps at the end of the commercial a slug might be inserted with these words: "All funding for this beer has been provided by the parents for their children out of parental pension funds."

OPINION

My Children: The Strangers

Mohammed Uddin

Twenty-four years ago I left Bangladesh mainly for higher education. After completing education relatives forbade me to go back and they convinced me by mailing paper cutting of the terrible news of horrible campus life where I was supposed to return to fulfill my obligation of educating our youth. The dazzle of western-style mesmerized me and motivated me to look for an opportunity, and that's how I became entrenched in search of an American dream.

I am indeed grateful to America to give me the freedom and the opportunity to achieve all that. But now that I have every material thing that I need for this life I have a great pain piercing my mind day and night. To be frank I find that a part of my mind has gone terribly wrong.

When my children were growing up I didn't realize the melting pot concept. I used to be a progressive, liberal and open-minded person. I let my children grow with the wind. But while they were at their teens I realized that something went wrong somewhere. My children were disrespectfully, they adopted strange clothes, weird music and a horrible attitude. At first it appeared temporary, what we labeled as a phase and so it appeared cute to us. But it persisted and got worse. They turned out to be selfish and very individualistic. They were challenging us in everything — even if it was rational. Although progressive yet I had an eastern mind with the element of respect for the elders and affection for the youngsters.

Naturally, I should not expect all that from my offspring raised in this soil. It seems to me I had the best time of my family life when they were

young. The children have left the home for college and rarely they come back to visit us. They seem strangers to us.

Now I look back and try to find out what did we do to deserve this. I found that my wife and me are completely responsible for such an outcome. We are a working family and so we didn't give enough time to our children while they were growing up and naturally the day-care and the school essentially raised them. We didn't give them any moral and ethical teaching. We know a friend of ours whose children turned out to be of excellent manners and highly respectful to elders. Simply speaking they are adorable children. I am amazed to see that these children also turned out to be super-performer in their education as well. It seems that the mother of this family stayed home while the children were growing up and the parents would always take their children to the local Islamic centers. We used to mock them as fundamentalists but it looks like they did the right thing. Now I believe America has given us the freedom to do what is best for us. We have a choice to guide our families in the right direction.

When I read about the violent crimes committed by youths in the American schools I knew right away who should shoulder the primary responsibility for such crimes.

Children are born innocent and it is our responsibility as parents to give them love, affection and the best moral environment so that they can turn out to be kind, compassionate and responsible youth.