

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 move 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 accomplices 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 sarees, 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 leave 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.

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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 some, 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.

An 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 2000.

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 op-

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.

portunity 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.

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from the debt burdens of the world's poorest countries. They agreed to cut the 71 billion US dollar poor country debt stock remaining after traditional relief arrangements by a further 27 billion dollars. Through forgiveness of aid-related loans, the cash value of debt will be reduced by a further 20 billion dollars. The package will reduce the target for countries' debt-export ratio from 200 per cent

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 portion 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.

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.

Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

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.

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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.

PRIIME 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 wither 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 when 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 prece-

dence.

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

power to negotiate in a changing world order.

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she would remain in politics, but without holding any official post and continue as a guide for her party. Which, I believe, would be the best choice for her.

The move would allow her to criss-cross the country to find out how the people are doing, what are they unhappy about and if her party leaders and workers were doing their task well.

She could also settle intra-party problems with greater ease, because she would be able to see things with a different set of glasses, not the one which she wears when in office and which is more often than not delivered by sycophants. She would not also be bound by too much of security "dos" and "don'ts" which often alienate leaders from everybody, except the exclusive few.

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 Mbeki. 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 growth 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 clime, 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 natural 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

metropolitan city of 20th century?

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street, Dhaka-1203

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 patronage 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 8, the LDCs may say goodbye to Westminster and quietly patronize our own cronies, patriots and its off-shoot, janata-capitalism. The expected and predicted pattern cannot be different under similar background and handicaps. That is where Bangladesh comes in for a technical 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 transfer of system loss from 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 29.12.98, 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 doubt that my letters must not yet have been delivered.

William Christensen
HRD Consultant Dhaka

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