

Railway Land Dispossessed

THE revelation that more than 1,460 acres of Bangladesh Railway (BR) land have been expropriated by the Ministry of Works, the Army and the deputy commissioners' offices and influential individuals or groups may not be startling but is shocking for sure. Appallingly, a state-run establishment is vulnerable to unlawful act. Even worse, the perpetrators, by and large, are part of the government structure. The way things are—the three-member parliamentary committee set up “to recommend measures for immediate recovery and utilisation of the occupied lands” having only met once in almost a year since its inception on August 31 last year—chances that the Railway would get back the lands look slim, indeed.

Incidences of expropriation, encroachment and usurpation have otherwise become commonplace in the country's socio-economic life. Often people with favourable political and financial dispositions have been at the wrong side of the law. While the trend has marked an alarming rise, making a mockery of rule of law, intricate and at times painfully slow judicial procedures have indirectly favoured the wrong-doers. In our view, land ownership is central to land management, and instances of expropriation, in reality, lead to social injustice and lawlessness, thereby rendering imperative urgent government action towards rectification.

Having said this, we would like to draw the government's attention to Bangladesh Railway's ownership of some 62,000 acres of land country-wide which is anomalous, to say the least, given the immensely incongruous ratio of population to available land. With a daunting demographic challenge, the government must rethink its land management strategy. Optimum use of available land is the priority of the hour. To that end Railway land should also be included in the country's development plans. In this regard, we eagerly await the parliamentary committee's recommendations on matters related to alleged expropriation plus prospective avenues for revenue generation through commercial use of railway lands.

Repatriation Just One Step Away

THE main bulk of Rohingyas who took shelter in Bangladesh late in 1991 fleeing persecution by the then Burmese authorities has gone back to Myanmar. Out of the total influx of a quarter of a million, 230,000 are back in Myanmar. They have rebuilt their lives and living peacefully in their country of origin. They provide an example of being the beneficiary of one of the most successful repatriation exercises conducted between two states under the benign eyes and support of the UNHCR in the contemporary world. The governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar and the UNHCR deserve our congratulation on having all but finished the process.

Only 21,305 refugees are left in two camps in Bangladesh awaiting repatriation to Myanmar. With 7,208 having been already cleared for entry into that neighbouring country, effectively, we are now talking about the return of some 14,000 refugees. Yangon is not readily agreeable to receiving them saying that they 'are not residents' of Myanmar. It is worthwhile to note that although the authorities in Yangon officially applied a brake on repatriation in July 1997 they have not been altogether unresponsive to Bangladesh's subsequent requests to take back their remaining citizens with us. For instance, the process was resumed in November the following year with 300 more returnees accepted by Myanmar. Even last week a batch of 15 Rohingyas trekked back to the other side. This speaks of a certain inherent flexibility of Yangon's approach to the unfinished task.

This is where our hope lies for breaking the ice when Myanmar Foreign Minister U Win Wung visits Bangladesh on July 17. It should be possible for us to convince the Myanmar minister that compared with the massive return of refugees already effected through their courtesy only a trickle now remains to be greeted at their end. It is just a matter of 'going the extra mile' on their part, as the UNHCR Resident Representative in Dhaka Wilbert Van Hovel implored Myanmar to do in an interview with The Daily Star published on Saturday.

The fate of 21,000-plus Rohingya refugees can not be allowed to hang in the balance in view of a combination of factors characterising the unfinished agenda: humanitarianism, dictates of good neighbourliness and the UNHCR's compulsion to attend to other burgeoning refugees problems in the world.

Death Again from Stampede!

TWO garment workers met with tragic death at a factory at Gazipur Friday morning. Electrical short circuit caused a spark on the ground floor of a six-story building housing a number of factories. As it happens with such accidents the workers scurried for safety but in the absence of fire exits about a thousand workers took the stairs down. In the ensuing stampede a number of them lost their steps and were trampled by panicky colleagues. Some of them went up the roof of the building and started to climb down the ropes hanging from the roof. Unaccustomed, hands gave in and they fell flat on the ground. Eye witnesses said Aleya Begum and Subarna Papiya died from their fall, others were injured. About 50 of these workers were injured.

This is for the umpteenth time that such a tragedy has struck the garments sector. Much has also been written for providing safety to the workers stressing the need for multiple exits and fire extinguishers but to no avail.

The workers are mostly simple womenfolk whose skill and dexterity have contributed tremendously to the growth of this sector in the national economy. Yet they remain in the backwaters, uncared for. The BGMEA has been very vocal about the problems of the industry, but has it ever tried to improve the working conditions or wages of its workers? The answer has to be in the negative. We ask for adequate compensation for those who died and were injured in the accident.

Opportunity for Peace: Arabs and Israelis Mustn't Miss It

Above all it's peace for the Arabs and Israelis and they have to accept the reality and work for it. Others can only help. They need to travel back some four thousand years to see that their root is the same and they are distant cousins. Therefore, they are destined to live together as neighbours.

talks with the second largest party Likud. It was evident that it would be impossible to strike a deal with Rightist Likud and particularly so when the party is now headed, though temporarily, by the most hawkish of the hawks Ariel Sharon. When the negotiations with Likud failed Barak had to choose the next ultra-orthodox party, Shaas. Though he has a boyish face, he was a tough General with his background as the former Chief of Staff of Israeli Army.

However, Barak's personal soft nature seemed to attract admiration of many. His overwhelming personal election victory also clearly reflected Israeli people's keen desire to go for acceptable solution of national problems — a country terribly divided over religious ethnic and social issues and also for comprehensive peace with the neighbours with appropriate security arrangement. All these made Barak's work somewhat easier even with ultra-orthodox party like Shaas. He ultimately signed agreements with seven parties to form the government and the coalition gave him 75-member strength in 120-member Knesset.

The general reaction is that Barak's 18-member cabinet is 'dovish' and it will not be difficult for Ehud Barak to line up his cabinet behind him on peace agreements. The most interesting for the Arabs and particularly for the Palestinians was the appointment of David Levy as the Foreign Minister. He is known for his liberal views on "trading land for peace" and also his interest in "moving negotiations forward to resume negotiations with Palestinians and Syrians." Indeed, Palestinian Authority welcomed the appointment of

David Levy as the Foreign Minister.

The over all picture that emerges at least from the present situation is that it is not only the cabinet that Barak can line up for peace with Arabs, he could indeed line up a great majority of Israelis behind him for a peace deal that will ensure security to Israelis, probably the quantum of land exchanged for achieving such peace will not pose any serious problem. The land has never provided any peace and security to Israelis; indeed, occupied land has all along been a source of catastrophe for them. The occupation for over 15-years of 15-mile-deep land strip into South Lebanon which was declared as

Clinton. The major issue is the implementation of the Wye Agreement which Netanyahu put into the cold storage. The full implementation of the Wye Agreement will release another 10 per cent (about 3 per cent was released earlier thus making the total 13.1% under Wye Accord) of the occupied land into the hands of Palestinian Authority.

As Ehud Barak is the Prime Minister now the order for pull out under Wye Accord is imminent. As various reports indicate the Generals have already met and started to work on the pull out plan. The implementation of the Wye Accord will pave the way for starting the "final sta-

stage though Netanyahu halted it since December 1998.

Arafat must also be well prepared to start the negotiations for which he needs to put his house in order. Apart from disension in his own National Council members he has to tackle Hamas and strike a deal with them. They must come to an agreement with Arafat with the assurance that there will be no further violence against Israel as both parties are now ready to work for peace. What Arafat has to offer to Hamas for this is his internal matter, but he must take Hamas into confidence and it must be agreed that all forms of violence must stop to give the peace a chance. Only violence-free environment can strengthen the hands of Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat and also of the other regional leaders for ultimate peace. Ehud Barak has already said very categorically that all must work for an arrangement for coexistence, freedom, prosperity and good neighbourliness.

Hafez Al Assad has already indicated rather strongly his desire to work with Ehud Barak for peace. The negotiations on Golan Heights progressed satisfactorily during Yitzhak Rabin's time and it is expected that Barak will pick it up from there. It seems that Assad is also prepared to move along that line. The issue of Golan is again rather sensitive and tricky. Israel is vulnerable in terms of security unless a firm security arrangement between Syria and Israel can be worked out which must be supervised and guaranteed by the US and EU, and particularly by the US.

If Golan problem is solved satisfactorily, South Lebanon solution would follow automatically though Assad would have to deal with Iranian Hezbollah

in a way Arafat would deal with Hamas. The task would be somewhat easier as Barak has already promised to bring back his forces from South Lebanon within one year. With Assad's support Barak may make it even faster.

While everything and every one may be ready in the Middle-East, the direct support of the US and particularly of President Clinton would be absolutely necessary to make things work. Now it's a unique opportunity for the US to take full advantage of the new and right political environment in Israel.

President Clinton may like to use the remaining period of his presidency to establish peace in the M-E. With the charged situation peace appears within reach but to grab it President Clinton will have to run an extra mile which he is absolutely capable of doing. He has done it before including his marathon race in the Wye Plantation and that also with a very reluctant runner. This time it has to be beyond Wye and probably in the barren desert but with all good runners. The world will be there to acclaim the success. Let M-E peace be the last glorious star of his presidency.

But above all it's peace for the Arabs and Israelis and they have to accept realities and work for it. Others can only help. They need to travel back some four thousand years to see that their root is same and they are the distant cousins. Therefore, they are destined to live together as neighbours. It's one piece of land on which two homes are to be built. Divide the land equitably and honourably so that one does not build home on another's land. It's the rarest and probably the best opportunity for Arabs and the Israelis have now to work out a durable peace. The window of opportunity is indeed wide open. If Arabs and Israelis cannot work out a peaceful settlement now, peace may not visit the Middle-East ever.

Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

the self security zone was responsible for the death of scores of Israeli army men and civilians. Ehud Barak declared immediately after his election victory that he would withdraw from South Lebanon within one year. There was no protest from any quarter in Israel. This gives Ehud Barak the positive signal that land exchange for peace is a reality which Israel must accept to achieve peace.

Ehud Barak has already spoken to Yasser Arafat and it seems that with David Levy as Foreign Minister the revival of the peace process would not have to wait long. He seems set to meet Arafat as early as next Sunday. He also would meet President Mubarak and King Abdullah soon before he goes to Washington to meet President

tus talks. There are several serious issues — the most important of which is — that Jerusalem are set to appear in the final status talks and obviously it will not at all be easy to deal with them. But one can have some hope because Barak's government carry clear mandate to deal with the Arabs in terms of "land for peace".

Prime Minister Barak's statement in the Knesset clearly indicate that Israel is now ready for peace negotiations and indeed for peace with its Arab neighbours. Now it is up to the Arabs and particularly the Palestinians and Syrians to seize the opportunity and come forward with flexible and open mind to negotiate and strike a deal. Of course the negotiations with Palestinians are advanced

East Timor's Future Stands at a Crossroads

by ASM Nurunnabi

At least 35 nations offered to support the UN-supervised ballot in East Timor, but the United Nations and the United States have remained deeply concerned that continuing violence could obstruct the vote. The UN Secretary-General again demanded that militia groups stop fighting and lay down their arms well before the August 8 ballot, saying the action is one of the key security conditions for voting to go ahead. He also called for the redeployment of Indonesian military forces and immediate prosecution of all those inciting or threatening to use violence.

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The historic agreement that has been reached between Indonesia and Portugal will allow the Timorese to decide whether they want to remain part of Indonesia or become independent. To quickly establish the UN presence in East Timor, the UN Secretary-General said he had opened a trust fund for contributions from member states.

Australia made the first contribution of 10 million Australian dollars, equal to 7 million US dollars. Portuguese government made a contribution of 10 million US dollars. Other 36 nations including the European Union members and other supportive nations made no specific pledges but wanted details of what was needed.

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 not merely an autonomous province within Indonesia. Tension soared in East Timor since January 27, when Indonesian President B.J. Habibie raised the prospect of giving the territory independence as early as July next year. Although the vast majority of the 830,000 Timorese want to go it alone, Indonesian settlers and some sections of Timorese fear they will be targeted for reprisals if the Indonesian

army pulls out.

What was behind Indonesia's surprise decision to offer East Timor independence? It was felt that President Habibie recognised that East Timor has been a huge economic burden and a political liability for Indonesia. When Portugal withdrew from East Timor in 1975, it was thereafter invaded by Indonesia which annexed it. Except a few countries, this integration was not recognised by the UN. East Timor's colonial power, Portugal, continued to demand that the status of the territory should be determined by an act of self-determination.

The announcement by President Habibie to allow the province to go its own way surprised not only his armed forces but also his cabinet ministers. There appeared an undercurrent of unrest against the declared policy of the President on East Timor. Judging by the mood on the ground, most Timorese choose independence. That frightens the significant minority of people who have stood with Indonesia. They have benefited handsomely under Indonesian rule and have everything to lose. Many of them fought pro-independence leadership of Fretilin in the civil war that erupted before the Indonesian invasion and fear being at the mercy of their old enemies.

Those fears aside, the key variable for peace will be the behaviour of the Indonesian military in the coming months. The armed forces, or Abri, have had expected to hand in the territory since the invasion. Intelligence operatives have penetrated most segments of society and the military has a record of using civilians to sow fear or in-

timidate citizens into supporting Indonesia.

Given that track record, many East Timorese fear the military will play on existing divisions to undermine the independence process. Many have grown alarmed by the military's recruitment and training of pro-integration civilian guards, or wantra, in the past three months — a recruitment drive that was boosted by 1,000 new entrants in early February last. The military has no pretensions to arming anybody but pro-integrationists, and acknowledges that part of its intention is to help them protect themselves against what it calls "terrorists". But for the most part, the East Timor military command and the central government insist the new militia are part of a national programme to provide extra security during the country's June general elections. Many residents fear that the Wantra (pro-integration civilian guards) have been mustered to limit East Timor's chances of a peaceful transition. The military dismisses the accusations. Abri adheres to human rights and sticks to central government policy. Our role is to protect the people," said the army's second in command on the ground in East Timor.

Independence supporters and Catholic leaders like Nobel Peace Prize Winner Bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo didn't buy the self-defence line, pointing out that the larger, better-equipped Indonesian military is more than a match for Fretilin.

In some quarters pessimists feel there is no guarantee of a fair and free autonomy ballot in East Timor despite Indone-

sia's commitment "to disarm warring factions in the bloodied territory ahead of a ballot on August 8. More violence seems certain as doubts intensify as to whether Jakarta can rein in those loyalist militias responsible for dozens of deaths recently. Such violent clashes between two groups resulting in some death casualties is still continuing."

Australia revealed lately, after talks with Habibie in Bali, that the UN autonomy package included a clause committing Indonesia to disarm warring militias in East Timor. The Australian Prime Minister said he was confident Indonesia would honour its commitment to disarm pro-Jakarta and pro-independence groups to ensure an open ballot.

While analysts and diplomats say an overwhelming majority of East Timorese would reject the autonomy plan in favour of independence, some warned they will not get another chance if they are intimidated out of a free and fair vote on August 8. There are, however, many pitfalls in the run-up to the August vote. As in Belfast or Jerusalem, there is a tangle of tragic histories that many people struggle to put behind them. But the key difference from those troubled cities is that East Timor's divide doesn't break down along religious or tribal lines. In Dili, the lines between the two camps are crossed very day, with political opponents attending church together, doing business together and occasionally living together.

Though many in East Timor are clinging to hopes that those communal ties will help prevent more bloodletting as they

take their first steps towards independence, it's clear the province's short-term stability is in Abri's hands. After 23 years of well-documented extrajudicial killings and torture by the army, the local population isn't relying on its good faith.

A politics professor at East Timor University who's trying to promote reconciliation said, "After 23 years of abuse responsibility (the military establishment) have a moral to see that the transition is peaceful, but will they?"

There is a perception in some quarters that if violence continues in East Timor, the UN-supervised ballot cannot take place in August. A section of East Timorese supported by a section of armed forces believe that if the ballot can be delayed in East Timor till the Presidential election due after the national election, the existing policy on East Timor may undergo change under a new President.

The passions of the pro-integrationists and pro-independence groups are running high. According to observers, 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 also a view the irreconcilable differences between the two sides may lead to the division of East Timor. The western side may remain with Indonesia and the eastern part may be allowed to become independent.

In the backdrop of the existing situation, international observers tend to feel that whatever be the fate of East Timor, peace and stability is imperative in the territory and violence will be in no one's interests. The UN may be allowed to go ahead with supervising the ballot of the East Timorese enabling them to decide whether they would vote for autonomy or independence. Indonesian leadership may, however, be given credit for their wise policy in allowing East Timorese to exercise the right of self-determination under UN supervision, whatever may be the possible hazards for such policy.

To the Editor...

Call sport, 'sport'

Sir, I was not only surprised but also wondering what made the heading "Under 19 Cricket Team" appropriate.

The team which left for Singapore, appeared to be comprised of men and not boys. This is certainly a bad example, encouraging our younger generation to play with the rules while making crucial decisions. Now, where would this added corruption lead us to, when there is so much malpractice and corruption in every sphere of our activity? As a conscious citizen, therefore, I am prompted to appeal that for heaven's sake please do not inject this poison into the arena of sports.

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Chittagong: A doomed city

Sir, The happenings in and around the city of Ctg in the last few days will compel any sensible person to ask whether it's a "disaster area". Such is the extent of disturbances to businesses, industries and even movement on the roads that it

seems any group can create any type of hindrance at any place or time to try to realise any type of demand. The overall situation seems totally out of control but no one seems to care.

There have been road barricades, hartals, transport strikes, threats from toll-collectors, gangbattles, and what not, within a span of only a week. All of these have peaked with the arrest of a senior leader of BCL belonging to the present Awami League Government. The followers of this leader have called for a wildcat 12-hour hartal in Chittagong on 7 July demanding his release. So, actually the student faction of a ruling party has called for a hartal! This is really historical! It is, as if, the Awami Chhatra League is out to teach a lesson to the Awami League! This is clearly the outcome of our political parties "using" the armed cadres for years.

While the government is trying to put on a show of their neutrality by arresting one of their own leaders, they have miserably failed to foil the attempts of their own trouble-mongers. The Ctg unit of AL has denied their responsibility by simply saying that the persons who have called for the 7 July hartal do not have any relation

with the AL and that such persons are just trying to "use" the name of AL.

While AL is playing this type of hide and seek, damages are being inflicted on the general peoples' lives and properties. Isn't there anything the government should do? How and from whom can the citizens of Ctg expect some help? Is this city doomed forever?

An Anxious Observer
Chittagong

Rainy (dreadful) days

Sir, Now is the rainy season, i.e., months of Ashar and Shaban. Most dailies and weeklies are now carrying out write-ups depicting feelings and emotions of noted literary personalities about our rich season — "Barsha".

Even though no one approached me to record my feelings on Barsha I would like to volunteer. My feelings for this season is that — every morning I feel devastated to pass through the link-road from College-gate to our Institute i.e. Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (Krishi College) which is now full of mud, rain water, garbage, etc. If I could have our Communica-

tion Minister as my companion on a Rickshaw journey through the link-road the latter could see and feel for himself its deplorable condition!

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Unparliamentary

Sir, The way the Commerce Minister lashed the Leader of the Opposition in the JS the other day was unparliamentary, to say the least. Many depend too much on the power and influence of their natural talents, including eloquence and oratory.

Indirectly, such misuse is a weakness because it is a trap of temptation laid in the way of life, and it is an indirect divine test. There are other tools for relevant applications.

AZ
Dhaka

Why this deterioration?

Sir, Despite the outrage of the public against the police force for their inhuman be-

haviour, police atrocity is going on in a massive scale. Innocent persons are becoming victims to their ruthlessness and, it seems that they are to harass innocent persons instead of real culprits.

On March 21, 99 police reportedly arrested Kamal Sheikh from Tepakohla, Kamal Faridpur on charge of the murder of one Moksed. The murdered person's father Golam Ali filed a case in which one Kamal's name was mentioned whose father's name was mentioned as unknown and who hailed from the village Gopalpur. When Moksed's father heard that an innocent person had been arrested, he immediately informed the police in a written statement that his son's assassin is not the arrested person, the murderer's father's name is Wahab Mollah.

Most unusually even then the police did not release Kamal Sheikh! Kamal losing all hope and from utter humiliation set fire on himself on June 21 and died on June 25. To prove his innocence he had to take his own life. We are agast and feel deep sorrow for his family, who will happen to them. What occurred only because police had to procure a murderer to prove their efficiency some-

how or other.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Islamic University

Sir, The Islamic University in Kushtia was established for producing Islamic scholars and making the university one of the highest seats of learning and research, especially in Islamic Studies etc. But of late, it is being noticed with grave concern that the university has become a den of terrorists, anti-Islamic elements and heavily politicised. As a result, the academic environment as well as the intellectual pursuit are being hampered.

It is learnt that three more departments like Muslim Philosophy, Comparative Religion and Fikh were supposed to be opened but the decision was cancelled on the pretext of inadequacy of class rooms etc. This is really unfortunate. It seems un-Islamic and anti-Islamic elements in and outside the university are out to destroy the very image of the highest seat of Islamic learning in the country.

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