

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, July 30, 1999

What are We Getting Out of It?

THE government of Bangladesh has agreed in principle to allow trans-shipment of Indian goods overland through Bangladesh, not to any third country, but from one part of that neighbouring country to her another part. Evidently, this goes far beyond the limited facility India has had through Bangladesh's waterways since 1980. The implementation of the new decision has not been placed within any specific time-frame but a planned approach has all the same been adopted to it. A joint committee is to work out the operational details after the needed roads and other infrastructure facilities required are put in place.

Aside from the fact that we are in the thick of globalisation, the prospects for the Trans-Asian Highway and Railway to link us up with the continental Asia create a stupendous economic rationale for us to be a part of the process rather than being isolationist to it. In that overall context, the inevitability of transit of goods and passengers overland between different countries cannot be in question so that we regard the trans-shipment-related concession accorded to India as being an advance step in that direction.

We note that in the official news-breaking announcement the predicative phrase reads: "giving priority to Bangladesh's economic interests." And Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed went to the extent of saying in what appears to be a historical allusion to past governments' initiation of it, "this time, Bangladesh's interests will be protected more than were proposed in the 1980 and 1990 deals." In the light of that assurance the government owes it to the people to let them know all the benefits expected to accrue from the new trans-shipment accord.

Understandably, this will have spin-off effects in terms of revenue earning for Bangladesh. The movement of goods between the two countries could be freer too, and that is where the hopes are pinned on as far as the bilateral trade and SAFTA accords are concerned. But do these things go far enough in safeguarding Bangladesh's interests? That is the question we have to find a convincing answer to. To our best understanding, the movement of Indian goods through Bangladesh territory will be an example in preferential treatment accorded to any country in the world. Here, what is visualised is not that the goods of the first country are passing through a second country to reach their destination in a third country; rather it is internal trade between point 'A' and point 'B' of the same country, only that this will be operated via Bangladesh with the help of Bangladeshi transports. So, this is not transit in the conventional tri-lateral sense but a special case of a bilateral deal with India.

That being the resonance from it, the question that automatically crops up is: what are we getting in return for this major concession being given to India? Obviously, the revenue collection alone cannot be enough of a bargain; for, what has been persistently at issue between the two countries is the huge trade imbalance suffered by Bangladesh to the detriment of its industrial future. There has to be an equitable inter-penetration of markets between the two countries, robustly assisted by zero-tariff access of Bangladeshi goods in India on a non-reciprocal basis, and Indian investments in Bangladesh with buy-back arrangements designed to tide over the yawning trade deficits.

Friday Mailbox

Dis (connection)

Sir, Recently, finding my telephone out of order, I lodged a complaint and after two days the lineman checked and informed me that the disconnection was due to non-payment of bill. I am very particular about timely payment. So I sent my son with a bundle of paid bills to the office concerned where he was told that the bill of the month of March, '99 has not been paid. He showed the copy of the paid bill. Its issue date was 18th April; the last date of payment was 9th May, and I paid on 28th April, i.e. 9 days ahead of the last date. The line was then restored after 7 days.

Titas, DMC, BRTA, WASA and other revenue earning organisations, give wide publicity through newspapers, TV etc., before imposing any penalty for non-payment of bill. It is not understood why the telephone department which can contact subscribers instantly through telephone, should go for arbitrary disconnection without verifying the actual position. To save the innocent subscribers from the inconvenience and waste of time in running between offices and officials and the department from the revenue/loss during the period of disconnection, the telephone department may consider issuing a directive that no telephone will be disconnected without ascertaining the actual position from the subscriber or giving him or her a chance to show relevant papers in support of payment.

Khairol Anam Khan
Dhaka

Selflessness

Sir, I don't understand the meaning of 'private practice given by our brilliant doctors'. I am sure that our doctors have learnt a lot from unselfless service of Mother Teresa. But I don't think they treat the patients in the way Mother Teresa treated. They consider their patients nothing more than 'guinea-pigs'. The patients are to pay high fees whenever they need to see the doctor.

We know most of the government officers don't want to work after or before their 'labourious' duty hours, and that's why the government created an option for two-day holiday for their recreation.

But it is completely opposite as far as the doctors are concerned. Most of them are engaged in private practice after their duty hours. May be, they are more 'energetic' than other professionals.

So, I request the PM to increase the duty hours for our 'energetic' physicians and increase their salaries accordingly.

An Anxious Citizen
Dhaka

Save us

Sir, We draw the attention of the supervisor and principal of the Commerce College, Khulna who are responsible for the well-being of about 200 students residing in the college Hostel at 49, South Central Road, Khulna, and who reacted in a totally non-committal and disinterested way, regarding the deplorable situation of the hostel.

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.

BNP's Third Road March
A Peaceful Political Tool Stands Test of Time

The road march appeared to be a highly successful operation by the opposition ... This was a grand public relations exercise of major political parties and constituted a welcome process of peaceful democratic movement. It was popular, productive, non-violent and caused no harm to the economy.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

that some other leaders also spoke, the heaviest burden had to be borne by the BNP Chairperson. She had to speak at every assembly, whether it was a well-scheduled meeting, which were about two dozens in number, or spontaneous but numerous gatherings of onlookers lined up on both sides of the street, waiting with a bundle of curiosity, eagerness and tolerance. It was a matter of profound admiration that the BNP Chairperson withstood such a difficult physical core for so long boldly, manifesting unflinching determination and physical tolerance.

To the opposition, the road march in general, notwithstanding some minor incidents, was a thumping success. It was, indeed, a matter of great interest to all and of profound satisfaction for the opposition to watch men, women and children in groups of tens and hundreds, braving scorching heat, waited patiently to get a glimpse of the BNP Chairperson and to enjoy the most unfamiliar scene of a big motorcycle. Many of them were carrying small bundles of paddy sheaves to wave support, some others had flowers and threw petals to inmates of cars and quite a few offered fruits and drinks to passengers. One could, however,

hear some murmur of dissatisfaction among some organisers to the effect that the road gatherings would have been even more profuse had they received the final go ahead signal a little earlier. It may be recalled that the BNP and the Alliance high command vacillated about holding the programme as scheduled till the last moment due to fear of rains marring it.

Let us examine whether the opposition's claim of success is justified.

What were the major objectives of the road march and whether these have been realised or not? The principal objective of the road march, according to Begum Zia herself, was to bring home to the general public en route of the motorcycle Awami League's total failure to govern the country and to elicit popular support to generate pressure on the government to resign and hold a

rallying rise in prices of essential goods; uneconomically low prices of jute for farmers in contrast to election pledge; loss of purchasing power of people; intense problems of unemployment; blatant examples of nepotism and favouritism in distribution of Rajuk plots; corruption in various contracts, lack of transparency in MIG-29 purchase deal; ascending pace of inflation due to recurring devaluation; low foreign exchange reserve; collapse of stock exchange and the share scam; crisis of liquidity in banks and heavy borrowing of funds by government due to lower revenue earnings; stagnation of domestic and foreign net investment; reduced production in industrial sector; intense suffering of people, trade and industry due to record and continued shortage of electricity, gas and water; flooding of Indian goods through legal and illegal means; rendering Bangladesh a colonial market of India; granting India a corridor through Bangladesh; conclusion of unequal and unjust treaties; pursuit of a foreign policy subservient to that of a foreign power; and so on and so forth.

As for the broken pledges of the Awami League, speakers took up first the issue of repeal

of the Special Power's Act. Despite the demand for all black laws forming the core of the ruling party's manifesto before election, Prime Minister publicly reneged the pledge, terming the black act necessary for running statecraft. The file relating to granting of autonomy to state-run radio and television is gathering dust in file cabinet. The issue of separation of judiciary from the executive is not being all talked about now. Instead of redeeming oft-repeated pledges, the government set out to work on issues to which they had assigned no priority before.

The road march appeared to be a highly successful operation by the opposition not merely for reasons mentioned above. This was a grand public relations exercise of major political parties and constituted a welcome process of peaceful democratic movement. It was popular, productive, non-violent and caused no harm to the economy. Besides, this established a direct and almost a personal link between political leaders and the people in far corners of the land. Most of the people there, under normal circumstances, would never have dreamt of meeting, not to speak of being implored and even flattened, by so many of national leaders coming together on their homestead. Of course, the centre of attraction was the BNP Chairperson and to see her or talk to her was a dream realised for most of those people, their hunger and pains for the long wait gone forever.

Socio-Political Scenario: Not a Happy Round-up

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

SHould the people wanted BNP back to power. As usual, the BNP chairperson argued that the sovereignty of the country was not safe in the hands of the present government. It had to be ousted from power immediately and to accomplish this task she asked the party workers and leaders to sink their differences and to upbeat the party activities in right earnestness. At this point of time we had another road march programme which BNP and other parties in the 'jote' have just accomplished. This was earlier deferred due perhaps to inadequate fund mobilization in the first place and other reasons.

Internal feud in party leadership, hitherto kept in low profile, is now over-exposed. Both BNP and the Awami League are being severely affected due to such awful rifts in the district level. By a closer examination of the intriguing situation it has transpired that

mutual antagonism has its root in the high command of the respective party. Such exposure also came directly from Manzur Ahsan Munshi, a BNP MP from Comilla recently. As a sequel to the decision of the party high command to dissolve local committee and to install a controversial person like one Abu Taher, Mr Munshi had tendered his resignation from party primary membership and was half-way through to submit his letter of resignation to the speaker of Jatiya Sangsad to relinquish his parliamentary membership. The Chairperson Begum Zia however exercised wisdom reversing the decision to install Abu Taher in the district committee and also dissolving the new committee as demanded by Mr Munshi. He withdrew his resignation.

Maj (retd) Akhteruzzaman had innumerable but specific grievances against some leaders in the upper echelon and also against party decision on hartal. He didn't go to the extent of resigning though he had a lot of drum-beating. The top leadership took advantage of his lack of courage catching him off-guard. He was severely admonished, his party membership was suspended for one year, evidently as a corrective measure, and his seat in the Jatiya Sangsad was relegated from fourth row to the last. In spite of his initial loud grumbling he had to swallow the bitter pill.

For the present, the Awami League high command has been grossly engaged with similar rifts within the party ranks. The most intriguing and embarrassing one has been with

lious Abdul Kader Siddiqui, Bir Uttam and party MP from Basail, Tangail. His open castigation of the party chief and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and some of the ministers in the cabinet has been the talk of the day. He appears to be undaunted by his ouster from the party. Meantime, he is busy in public meetings being organized by apparently a faction of freedom fighters and their new generation followers. At different places he faced resistance from the other faction when bomb blasts and gun shots has been a common feature. Meanwhile, his followers held a protest march in Dhaka on the other day.

Most recently we had another dimension of a conflict in Awami League at Jamalpur.

This time, the news was the

clash of interest between two

ministers of state Rashed

Mosharraf and Moulana Nurul

Alam of Land and Religious

Affairs ministry respectively. The Moulana appeared to have with him four MPs of the district while Rashed Mosharraf none as of now. Moulana-group has declared the land minister of state persona non-grata in Jamalpur district committee of Awami League for some alleged highhanded activities on his part.

Armed clash between different factions of the student and youth fronts of all the parties has also been a very dangerous game being played, ostensibly by remote control of similar feud in the upper and uppermost rungs of the respective party

leadership. Reports of fatal clash appear almost everyday in newspapers. No immediate and tangible solution to such a ghastly episode is in sight. The combing operation in south-eastern region appears to have achieved some amount of success but not so much that could be worthy of mention. True that 40/50 thousand alleged criminals have been rounded up but the ratio of arms recovery from them so far has not been significant. The only redeeming or encouraging aspect in this operation has been the response of the terrorists to Home Minister's call to surrender. In the process, about 700 men of different groups laid down over 500 arms on July 24, 1999 at Kushtia stadium. All others, who are yet to follow, have been given a final date of July 30, after which the unresponsive ones would be combed out and ruthlessly dealt with. This was the ultimatum given by the avowed Home Minister Mohammad Nasim. But, in the meantime, we have had another intriguing report about rehabilitation of a good number of these ex-hooligans in the Ansars. It is true that the government cannot go back on its commitment but the hurried manner it is being done would perhaps deserve a careful re-thinking. An analogy can be drawn here. A tiger in the jungle having tasted blood of other animals and human beings cannot be tamed overnight. Similarly, these men who had been used to killing anyone coming on their way, almost playfully, would

take quite some time to debrif themselves and revert to normal life.

A full-length rehabilitation programme, in this case, could be undertaken by the Ministry of Social Welfare in collaboration with a panel of eminent psychiatrists, psychologists, social scientists and economists. Upon their recommendation these men may be suitably rehabilitated. In any case, it may prove disastrous to employ them in any armed services for obvious reasons. This important point can be given a serious thinking before it is too late for the government. Let not the government frustrate its good intention by any faulty step.

Lastly about the ensuing City Corporation and Upazila elections. The BNP and other opposition parties have put up a condition to hold these elections under a caretaker government or else they would not participate. The government has already said no to it. It may be recalled that the June-1996 election was held under a caretaker government led by former Chief Justice Habibur Rahman. Mr Abdur Rahman Biswas was then the President. BNP was decisively defeated but it could not, till date, relish such defeat. Even today we hear that BNP victory was hijacked by Awami League. We remember that the election proceedings was watched on the spot by a huge number of international and national observers. It was reported to be the best ever in a Third World country in the news media world over. Initially BNP raised a row in

spect of a few constituencies/voting centres but subsequently they could not file objection nor pursued the matter with the Election Tribunal for redress. They didn't do so obviously due to the weaknesses in their contention. They are, however, indifferent to the adverse reflection that such overture may have on the caretaker government headed by no less a person than the most uncompromising former Chief Justice Habibur Rahman. So, ordinarily asking for a caretaker government again irrespective of its being for City Corporation and Upazila elections would appear preposterous. Who would give them a guarantee that such caretaker government (assuming that it is there on board) would be ultimately able to ensure a result to suit their pleasure?

BNP participated in a number of by-elections under the present government in which a majority of seats went in their favour. And yet they grudged Awami League's victory in a few other constituencies — some marginally. Their demand for a caretaker government to hold election to local bodies is, besides being unconstitutional, a very expensive proposition. The tax payers' money cannot be both legally and ethically squandered on such a gamble. We hope they would have an objective re-thinking and participate in the City Corporation and Upazila elections reposing their unqualified trust in the assurance already given by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government for an absolutely fair election.

Why Prostitution?

An Old Trade with a New Face

by Salma Ali

Once again I like to turn the public attention to the multi-faceted aspects of prostitution in our country. In 'Concerns Over Tarbazaan', I expressed my reservations about the urgency with which the government has pursued the rehabilitation programme for the prostitutes and the repercussions of such a rash action. The government never takes such quick action in any matter, it does not have the capacity to do so. Why then this fast measure against this cause. Is that if anyone's interest being particularly served? Where are these unfortunate women being taken in the name of rehabilitation — places which may be worse than jails? I think it is time that we looked beyond the manifestations of the flesh trade and analyzed the issues underlying its flourishing practice. In the midst of the chaotic outrage being poured forth regarding this matter, it may be that a vital question has till now been ignored: 'Why are these women engaged in a profession like prostitution?' The first place? This disturbing query gives rise to the next issue: 'Who and what are responsible for the continuation of the flesh trade?'.

Experience in our line of work has exposed a consistent portrait of the backgrounds of these women, their histories and the circumstances behind their engaging in such a profession. More than poverty itself, factors such as child marriages, polygamy, fragmented families, abuse of stepmothers who sometimes are willing parties in selling young women and children, physical and sexual abuse by family members and neighbours, incest, illicit relationships resulting in pregnancies are all responsible for the continued existence of prostitution. In addition many women end up in brothels being enticed to the city with the promise of jobs or promise of marriage. The former are of course sold to brothel-owners; the latter share the same fate or fall into the hands of touts when they are abandoned by their husbands

and lovers in the city. There is plenty of reasons to believe that hotels where these women are abandoned often work in close liaison with touts who move in to take them away to brothels. The fact that many of these unfortunate women have been victims of abuse in the past put them in a position where they believe that except for brothels, there is no other place for them. The lack of self-esteem and the social stigma they bear combine to create an indifference on the part of these women which makes the work of the touts easier. In the recent survey carried out by the government many girls in the brothels stated that they had chosen the profession on their own. But our experience has shown that when the girls are interviewed repeatedly they come out with the truth that they have been forced into this profession. Not even 5 per cent of the girls have willingly taken to this profession.

The underlying factors behind why prostitution exists on such a large scale in this country operate at two levels. The first, which operates at the grass roots level is outlined above. The second which exists as a far more dangerous and complex net with varied manifestations works from the top-down level. In the discussion about prostitution and its eradication, we seem to forget that the responsibility to create and maintain a stable civil society does not lie solely on the shoulders of these women. The clients themselves have a significant role to play. In recruiting young girls and working with brothels, it is clear that there is a high demand for the existence and expansion of the flesh trade from students of

universities in the country, businessmen and other members of the community. Are they not liable to be held responsible for their actions and practices especially when 75 per cent of the clients demand minor girls who are forced into prostitution in the first place? How is the system to deal with the clients of these brothels who come from the upper strata of the society and who create and sustain the demand for minors?

Garment factories too has unfortunately, rendered the workers and their families more vulnerable to the world of forced prostitution and trafficking. There has been little work done in order to protect the unsupervised minor girls in slum areas, and there has been no effort made to ensure the safety of the young girls who do work in the garment industries and who often fall prey to the wandering touts working for brothels and traffickers. Moreover, there is an influx of unemployed young men who form a section of the organised groups of 'dalals' to lure women with the offers of more lucrative jobs or entice them with promises of marriage and sell them to brothels around the city. Recently there is an influx of a new form of recruitment and this takes place in busstands and railway stations. The billboards in these places are filled with offers of lucrative jobs and vocational training. Although some of them might be true, an increasing number of these advertisements are posted by agents working for brothels and they move around these terminals looking for young women who might be interested in such an offer and

approach them with promises of good jobs.

All the above examples clearly highlight a systematic failure of our administrative infrastructure to cope with the issues of security which is the main reason why women and young children are easy victims. In this context, the work or lack thereof of the law-enforcing agencies is an issue of grave concern. My experience has shown that there is a level of professionalism involved in the recruitment of minors and young girls which also includes law-enforcement agencies especially the police. Women like Parveen Akhter whom BNWLA has reported that when they file a complaint with the local police about forced prostitution, some officers actually tell them to return to their profession or promise them means through which they can become brothel-owners themselves. The issue of safe custody too is a matter of grave concern. Innocent children and young women are often kept with criminals in the name of safety in jail and it is from there that many recruiters release them and take them to different brothels.

Although the objective of BNWLA is to prevent minor prostitution, and my concern lies with young girls who are victims of circumstances, I remain confused as to whether closing down of prostitution as a trade is possible. Personally speaking, I want this profession to end. Although I am working towards providing legal action and facilities for the ultimate reintegration of these unfortunate lives into society, I believe that unless the government begins to address those who are truly responsible, that is the clients, the touts, the corrupt officials involved and the organized networks, forced prostitution will continue to exist in this country.

The writer is Executive Director, BNWLA

Akhas
Shahjalal University

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.