

Directive to ADAB

THAT the government has a simplistic approach to city slums is a confirmed fact now. In a letter issued to the NGOs it has asked them to wind up from the slums and work with a government committee to rehabilitate the shanty-dwellers in the villages they had migrated from.

The government obviously persists in thinking that if the tap is switched off to the slum-dwellers in Dhaka, they will be forced to go back to their villages. In other words, if the urban conditions are rendered hostile for them they would make haste to return to their village homes — that seems to be the underlying thought. But by now their so-called homes might have vanished or most of them did not have any home to begin with when they had decided to leave their villages for Dhaka. Government's thinking appears to be devoid of any understanding as to why rural-urban migration occurs in the first place.

They came to the town simply because they had suffered river-erosion, indebtedness, destitution, pauperisation and, above all, had no work in the villages to make their both ends meet. Yes, some of them fell victim to criminal devices in the metropolis; but that is largely a perversity reflective of the curse of poverty stalking their lives every step of the way. So, rather than pushing them back to villages we urge the government to create such conditions in the rural areas as will pull or draw them to the villages and keep them there.

The government's push-back approach is entirely out of steps with the research findings on the economic, sociological and demographic factors associated with the rural-urban migration phenomenon. Our suggestion to the government would be that they sit down with the NGOs who have acquired enormous knowledge through their slum work and, if necessary bring to bear international experience on the agenda for a reverse migration from the urban centres to the rural areas. Nearer home, West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu has noticeably succeeded in magnetising the rural people to their places of domicile. The first job is to stop the daily influx into the cities and then we can embark on a gradual process of reverse migration to the villages. Create a "pull-factor" in the village before pushing them out of the city.

One-stop Help to Women

THE government's decision to set up two one-stop crisis centres for victims of violence among women is laudable. These planned centres, one each at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) are to come into being under the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) programme. The primary objective of these centres will be to provide adequate medical as well as legal help to the women victims of rape and other forms of violence. Hence these will need unfailing coordination and cooperation among the ministries of health, home, social welfare, information and women's affairs. The integrated programme is expected to improve treatment facilities and legal aid to the survivors of violence.

The report in The Daily Star on Saturday described the main goal of the exercise as providing women better access to the criminal and legal justice system of the country with particular emphasis on poor and insolvent women. This is a very important decision the government has taken to treat the wounds of victims of violence and rape. At present there is hardly any provision for compensation for or rehabilitation of the survivors of violence. The treatment available for rape and acid victims in the public health sector is sub-standard and reporting and investigation procedures appear to suffer from "lack of skills". The process of medical examination is delayed by the existing practice of requiring magistrate's order for examination. Further complications arise in obtaining medical certificates. All these will be taken care of simultaneously at the crisis centres where the on-duty police officer will file specific cases for investigation and whenever necessary the lawyers of legal aid agencies will make arrangements for obtaining court orders for the safe custody of survivors.

The most important aspect of the whole exercise will be the honesty and sincerity with which these centres will be operated.

Kudos to Janakantha

WITH Gunjan Shammanna (Honour to Men of Accomplishment) and Pratibha Shammanna (Honour to Men of Merit), the Daily Janakantha has indeed set a precedent in acknowledging those who have immensely contributed towards advancement of the society. As President Shahabuddin Ahmed observed at the award-giving ceremony on Saturday, these people "never retreated from discharging their responsibilities despite political chaos and social disorder". By honouring some of them, the popular Bangla daily has not only done itself proud but also the country's journalist community as a whole. Our heartfelt congratulations to the minds behind the move for performing the ennobling journalistic rite.

Recognition of contributions in the socio-cultural arena is certainly not our forte as a nation. The few state-sponsored awards there have often been shrouded in controversy, thanks to politicisation. While favouritism ruled nomination procedures, contributions of those who really dedicated their lives to the cause of their fellow beings have gone unsung, unheard. The President is right when he says, "if the conscious and judicious individuals are not properly evaluated, then there could be no expectation of creativity and free-thinking".

Thankfully, Janakantha has come forward. Certainly, more such avenues need to be created by the civil society for the recognition of talent and excellence in society. While extending our best wishes to Janakantha, we earnestly hope that not only newspapers but other institutions and business entities would also introduce their own awards to honour men and women of letters and exceptional merit.

Transit: A Matter of National Security

The international borders between the nations are sacred, sanctimonious and sacrosanct. They cannot be opened up for experimentation on transshipment or tampered for any other purpose. The sovereignty is the core value of national security for any country and the sanctity and the impregnability of the border is its first and foremost symbol.

clination for the grant of transit to India and it could be discernible only to keen observers. Since it came to power in 1996 the AL government had been subtly engaged in opinion building for the purpose. The promoters of the idea of going liberal on the question of transit — that included a group of intellectuals and academics — have been building up a notion of great virtues inherent in the transitional movements of commodities through our territories. They saw in transit a great economic boom and argued that even the country's sovereignty and security lay in an economically integrated subregion comprising of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and India's north-eastern states — whether one called it South Asia's North-East, a growth quadrangle or East Himalayan region.

Ignoring the geopolitical implication of the issue when the transit, transshipment or corridor have one and the same fundamental meaning in diluting the geographical barrier for India to its troubled north-east, they only highlighted geo-economic advantages which however had since been disputed by the critics. To vindicate their reasoning which are detached from the ground realities of South Asia they brought in the paradigms of European liberal-

ism, put up a romantic vision of 'great changes implicit in the globalisation' and also asked why should we lag behind.

However, the plethora of arguments built through the years did not quite click and the public remained by and large unconvinced. It is evident not only from anti-transit public opinion but also from equally huge counter-arguments found in the print media.

Yet a measure of anxiety



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

persists. Because the government has, at the same time, asked the Task Force to assess, among other things, the cost-benefit of the transit indicating that the issue may again come up for consideration and negotiation with the party concerned. But can any amount of benefit balance the national vital interest involved in the transit? It never does. So, the question of working out cost-benefit in this case is totally irrelevant. The nation's vital interest can never be negotiable — whatever may be its price.

The geography, among other factors, endows a nation with

certain advantage. It again puts a nation in disadvantage imposing restriction on its choices. The international boundary drawn in the subcontinent as a result of Sir Cyril Radcliffe's award in 1947 together with the vagaries of geography has now become sacrosanct irrespective of who draws what benefit from it and how. For example, the dispensation of the partition gave marked geopolitical advantage

opening in the sea in over-looked by India's blue water navy and our international water including the EEZ is opaque at best in absence of a maritime delineation. An unsavoury history, the cruel asymmetry and unkind geopolitics add to our enormous woes. Amidst these despairs Bangladesh enjoys a little geostrategic clout. Since our independence India obviously nourished hope that she would be gradually able to dilute this barrier to her advantage.

In consonance with the characteristic hostility between India and Pakistan the erstwhile East Pakistan could have been one of the sanctuaries for the north-eastern rebels. During the mid-fifties Dr Phizo, the rebel Naga leader was smuggled out to London through Dhaka. Soon after the liberation of Bangladesh Indian Army was allowed to flush out anti-Indian insurgents from Chittagong Hill Tracts. The present government, soon after coming to power, reached a mutual agreement with India not to harbour each other's insurgents in their respective territories. These positive developments for India since our Independence must have come as great relief to India exasperated with long years of insurgencies in her north-eastern states.

What more? Perhaps the In-

dians now want these advantages to be further expanded through some arrangements that will reduce the physical distance and difficulties for their commodities — and subsequently personnel — to their north eastern states where insurgencies have been raging for more than half a century. Obviously they require a firmer grip over these recalcitrant states. Can this Indian intention be entertained? While any talk on transit centers on this core intention, can that be negotiated at all?

We are a nation with few political leverage in our hand. Only our geography in relation to India's north east gives us some strategic clout. Can we afford to abdicate it? More importantly, can we be party to India's internal conflict in an area where her territories are disputed by China, another great neighbour? The Indians already have a tendency to take Bangladesh for granted in myriad bilateral interlocations. What will happen when we will be bereft of the only leverage in our hand?

The international borders between the nations are sacred, sanctimonious and sacrosanct. They cannot be opened up for experimentation on transshipment or tampered for any other purpose. The sovereignty is the core value of national security for any country and the sanctity and the impregnability of the border is its first and foremost symbol. As the core value of a nation is never negotiable, so is the border between the nations.

CORRUPTION, VIOLENCE AND INTOLERANCE

The Ever Revolving Legacies

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

Haughty observations and violence in public thoroughfares in the name of demonstration and protection have been keeping the atmosphere awfully charged to the continuous detriment of civic life and overall economic development. Only a changed scenario can salvage us from ruin.

WE are only three months away from the new millennium. All the developing countries, in the Third World in particular, are now busy giving finishing touches to their preparations for the challenges of the ensuing twenty-first century. A least developed country (LDC) like Bangladesh presents, however, a different scenario. Here, in spite of the urgency of the situation and the ever-surging global competitiveness, we are pitifully stuck up with the rignarole of political offensives and counter-offensives. We have proved, among others, that we are incapable of rising above self-interest even though we feign our hearts ache and bleed for the people. When in power we are the finest people on earth still nursing in our green memories the big and small promises we made to the electorate. But soon all our enthusiasm starts eroding. Our own individual interest gains the upper hand. Our huge election expenses met from personal resources look at us with an ominous countenance and staggering figures. Barring the exceptions among us — the members of parliament — who are often in a microscopic minority, the majority pay urgent attention to their crude plans of replenishment. Those who are more fortunate having seats in the three-tier cabinet obviously sustain lesser strains and the great majority of the members of parliament have to be happy with chairmanship of banks and other public sector institutions.

This is, in gist, the revolving episode in cyclic order that we have been used to, for quite a long time. The national development plan very often turns out to be inconsistent with the actual needs of different localities in the country. It has been lacking both uniformity and equity. Discriminatory dispensation of government funds for development has been a common feature. Members of Parliament belonging to the party in power have always been getting the upper hand. Where the electorate decisively voted for the opposition party, funds for development of those constituencies are not available. The whole population there is deprived invariably. Such a situation sets in a condition that the electorate seeking or awaiting basic development plans in their respective areas would have to make sure that they vote for the most potential party which would have greater chance to go to power.

Though unusual, there are instances where voters return-

ing an individual from more than one constituency remained utterly neglected and ignored for all practical purposes. There has been some revelation made by Jatiya Party Mizan-Manju faction south Ershad, being himself elected from five seats in the 1991 and 1996 general elections didn't do any development in the greater Rangpur district, even when he was in power for about a decade before 1991. In spite of that he continued to bag five seats in a row in the last two general elections, when, both the times, he was in jail. His apparent popularity was more an outcome of emotional attachments of the people of Rangpur district to their 'son of the soil' than born of any practical consideration. His party men exploited this situation very profusely, or rather cleverly that the voters couldn't have any opportunity to have a second thought.

Ershad's successor to the seat of administration so much personalized her adversaries that she was awkwardly vindictive to those constituencies where BNP candidates were rejected by the voters. In 1991 election her accession to power was in accompaniment of a natural disaster which did considerable damage to south and south-eastern Bangladesh. Those MPs belonging to BNP were given a cash amount of Tk 25,000 lakhs each for the relief work which, however, till date remains unaccounted for. Awami League or Jatiya Party MPs were left out from such receipt of public money under the Prime Minister's Relief Fund even when many of their areas were severely affected in the cyclone. Actually, such mental upkeeping of the leadership has so far continued to be agonizingly discriminatory. In the process of development, in the ultimate analysis it is a malaise born of an uncouth psychological manoeuvre perpetually abnegating the norms and principle of democratic governance. In consequence whereof the real benefits from development reach those whose representatives are in the government.

It is, however, heartening to observe that, by and large, the present government seems to have set in a departure from the tradition, expressing itself in favour of an equitable distribution of national wealth. That, to this end in view, the government's development plans have been worked out and are being implemented. But it has to be admitted that in the matter of

prioritization the areas ignored in the past had to be placed above others. Among them, the most badly dealt ones had been the districts in Khulna and Barisal divisions. This would not be grudging if development work in areas sparsely over other divisions go by the same pace. In fact, there has not been any complaint on this principle from any quarters, more particularly from the acknowledged strongholds of the present opposition parties. The government seems to have ensured that the local representatives of the political parties, irrespective of their party affiliation will be involved in development activities. This is rather a rare example of political tolerance and hence should be complemented.

Very often we take pride that we are a democracy. We have reasons to do that because, to achieve this state, at least politically, much blood was shed, many lives were lost. In spite of this we have not so far been able to show due respect to democratic values. Consequently, the type of democracy that we practise in our political arena is diametrically opposite to that faithfully and meticulously practiced in the western world, e.g. UK USA etc. Sometimes, we exclaim in utter frustration that we — our people — are unfit for democracy or for that matter, democratic rule. Some of us, even to this day, nurse fond memories of the military rule in Pakistan days when, according to them, things were more steady and disciplined. They forget that those were the days when we lived at gun points and under a constant spate of economic exploitation. Then too, the most favoured ones, though in a limited number, used to mint money or thrive upon corrupt means. Our eventual political emancipation could never have meant that we would continue living in the same scenario by multiplying the number only, yet limited to the most favoured few. In the name of democracy we had thus seen ourselves in transition through hypocrisy and on to autocracy again. It is not that we are unfit for democracy, rather, we are incapable of rising above self. In the process, we consider ourselves to be formidable while in power or even out of power.

We have, unfortunately, reached such a stage that the application of rule of law has almost become meaningless. In our gamble at amassing wealth when opportunities beacon around, very few of us are able

to command restraint. We prove ourselves to be really insatiable, even the wealth of the whole world would not quench our thirst. And when out of power, the bulk of our unearned income looks ominously at us. We are not easily unnerved because we know that this ugly part of our accumulated wealth would save our necks some day. The consequent proceedings against us by the Bureau of Anti-corruption, may or may not be at the instance of our successors in power, we anticipate, can drag us to the court of law. There too, we can have a show of our numerical strength whence we tell the world that it is political vindictiveness of the party in power and that the charges are false and concocted. We make the proceedings in court very difficult and hence get the benefits of long dates of hearing. Even our 'party cadres' caught by the police while 'in action' or in connection with past misdeeds, get our moral support to obtain their release. We keep on demanding their 'unconditional' release and threatening with 'dire consequence'. We cannot disown our 'boys' and let them alone!

Fortunately, breaking the long tradition, we have, to an extent, a different scenario. Although yet to be a full-throated declaration, the party in power now has been showing an amount of firmness in hauling up even those who profess loyalty to it. In the course, some Students League, Juba League and Awami League leaders and workers are now being proceeded against. This is perhaps, first time ever that the long hand of law has its real grip without any discrimination apparently. The courts of law or precisely, the Judiciary appears to have been enjoying some freedom from administrative interference. Even the leaders of the opposition, against whom there are cases of corruption and other criminal cases including alleged involvement in murders of opponents, are having respite by being at large on regular or anticipatory bail. In spite of the gentle breeze of tolerance at the instance of the government the acts of reciprocating are not at sight. On the contrary, haughty observations and violence in public thoroughfares in the name of demonstration and protection have been keeping the atmosphere awfully charged to the continuous detriment of civic life and overall economic development. Only a changed scenario can salvage us from ruin.

gift of the gab (and character assassination). It is a one-sided communication system and the politicians take advantage of the absence of two-way communication channel (dialogue is the very base of democracy). The latter is available in the parliament, but our politicians have stalled the development of good parliamentary practice. After nine years, the JS is a lame duck, which can neither squawk nor fly. Like the surface of the moon, only one side of [illiberal] democracy is visible. But the irony is that nobody, including our intellectuals, talk about it. Topical expediency is the style of the times. The social scientists can tell us what are the preconditions for bringing about change in political styles (if the politicians do not stall it).

A. Zabr, Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

The Perfect Grungy Fit

IT is time for our youth to go back to school. The parents' role is to buy children clothes. It's tougher than you think. Bloudin asked me to join him on this journey. His wife got mad at him when he criticized her for discussing shopping for clothes, so she said, "All right. Then you take him."

I was chosen to go along for support. Teenagers have definite taste when it comes to their clothes. Tim, Bloudin's son, led us into a store that had a wrecked Maserati in the window. The salesman offered to show Tim some pants.

Tim tried on a pair, came out of the dressing room and said, "they're not baggy enough. My pants have to look as though they're falling down."

I told Bloudin, "I didn't know baggy pants were in."

Tim said, "They're in if the cuffs fall over my shoes. The pants hide the shoes."

Tim came back wearing another pair of pants. Bloudin, who was getting itchy, said, "They look all right to me."

Tim shook his head and said, "You can't see the top of my underwear."

"Why do you want to do that?" I asked. "Because the girls are curious as to what kind of underwear someone is wearing. The waist is supposed to drop so the name on your briefs sticks out."

Bloudin said, "It sounds sick to me."

I said, "At least kids know what they want."

Tim finally found a pair of stone-washed pants that were baggy in front, revealing the name of his underwear in the back, and could be worn at all times with his shirttail hanging out.

It was an extra \$100 for a new pair of sneakers. Tim said the \$85 shoes were tacky and weren't worth trying on.

When we got home Mrs. Bloudin said, "What did you buy?" Bloudin proudly held up the pants.

"Oh dear," she said, "He has a pair exactly like that in the closet."

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OPINION

We Hope for Peace

Syed Waliullah

The other day a ruling party MP has been beaten up by his opponents within the party. Ershad Shikdar who gained unprecedented notoriety in all branches of heinous crime. Scores of students of the JU were violated reportedly by their fellow students belonging to the party in power. Public land is reportedly grabbed by powerful politicians, and their goons, be it a mosque property, a school play-ground, a park or river Buriganga, a private person's land or home.

These constitute only a part of innumerable nerve-wrecking law and order situation in the country. People, especially the businessmen, are not safe with their money, unless protective godfathers in power or associates of leaders in power is there for their safety and security but in lieu of extensive greasing. Nobody tolerates any opposition (right or wrong), whether in public or private lives.

Home, road and community lanes and by-lanes are not safe for people, school-going girls, shoppers, shopkeepers from brandishing knives, guns, bombs or acid. Why forget the ferocity with which raping cases are increasing throughout the country, inter and intra-party feud leading to cold-blooded murders.

Small and medium scale industries are closing down their establishments for their product cannot compete with the neighbouring country's imported and smuggled products. More products are smuggled into Bangladesh than that of the normal process of import. Again many of our products are of low quality, adulterated and dangerous for human consumption, forcing consumers to go for foreign goods, medicines and canned food.

Unemployment is a far cry. For a few dozens of openings,

there are thousands of applications. What is happening to the unemployed is anybody's guess. There is no concerted effort to arrest the burgeoning unemployment. Only lip-service.

What about our education system? If you want to educate your ward in a public school and prepare them for their annual and final exams, then you are bound to send your ward for taking tuition from your school teacher's private coaching centre. Private schools and colleges are there to educate your child at a heavy cost that few parents can afford. There is the practice of taking lacs of taka as contribution for the development of the school when you want to get your child admitted in a school. It does not matter whether your child is bright or dull. If you are able to meet the demand, then your child gets admission. What is happening to the poor but meritorious students? It is also anybody's guess.

Apart from this frightening situation there are three distinct groups of students that are coming out in the job market. They are the madrasah, the traditional Bengali medium and the English medium groups. Obviously the last group and those who can spend money for getting good formal education can successfully compete in the ever squeezing job market.

What has been described here are well known facts of our daily life, but we fake that they do not exist.

These facts seemed cinematic when the prime minister was shown on the television receiving the UNESCO award. There were all the reasons for her to get what she got, especially for the cause of education.

Hopefully, there will be peace in the country from now on.

To the Editor...

City-based economy

Sir, It has been noticed that Bangladesh's economic growth is only Dhaka-based. All the existing business units establish their productive sectors at outskirts of the city and not in the rural areas. Therefore, people living in villages don't get jobs and thus swarm in the city for living. This creates manifold problems. Presently, the number of people living in Dhaka is more than one crore, which is gradually increasing. This increasing population creates more pollution, housing problem, traffic congestion, and hampers our economy tremendously. We have to waste at least three hours everyday in the traffic jam, which means 1095 hours or forty-six days in a year.

All these problems are taking place because all the major business sectors are located in Dhaka city and not all over the country. If the productive sectors are decentralised it will lessen the problems of unemployment.

Socially responsible private sectors need to attract people in remote areas. Job facilities have to be equally distributed as it will provide living standards in the country. It opens up the prospect of reducing (and even eliminating) poverty without the necessity of income redistribution. This will also decrease unemployment and hence there will be a rise in the national income.

Rizwan Hussain Jabbar
A-Level Student
Dhanmondi Tutorial

Change in governance is urgent

Sir, Our political leaders have to do some soul-searching publicly to bring back public confidence in clean politics followed by transparent governance, to enable both to reach the take-off stage. In economics, this take-off stage of development is believed to start when the growth rate reaches seven per cent per annum. How to calculate the growth rate of clean politics? This is an interesting exercise for the political scientists.

While the educated class have the ability for opinion-formation, the illiterate and poverty-stricken masses are exposed to only one side of the political coin: rhetoric in public speeches, supported by the