

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 Shammanana (Honour to Men of Accomplishment) and Pratibha Shammanana (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 heartiest 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 transhipment 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.

THE Awami League government in a cabinet meeting on 28 July last took a decision to examine the possibility of allowing India the transhipment of her commodities to the country's north eastern states through Bangladesh. The decision sparked off a controversy which has now snowballed into a major debate before the government. It came as a godsend opportunity for the opposition parties who were hungering for an issue to build up their agitational programme against the government. They thoroughly exploited the emotion of a section of the public which was averse to any idea of such deal with India. Intoxicated with a heady brew of transit politics the opposition activists have now upgraded their agitation to be that for an 'oust the government' movement with the issue of transit now becoming a secondary one in its maze. They have also been able to push the government on the defensive at least on the transit issue.

On the part of the government it played bizarre hide and seek with the public without ever making its stand on the issue transparent. Its leaders found it expedient to put the blame on the opposition alleging that it was the BNP which agreed to such arrangement by signing the trade agreement of 1980 and later the SAPTA. Apparently it preferred to hide behind what the BNP did or did not do and lacked the moral courage to own up its decision.

However, there had been a pattern suggesting the AL's in-

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, transhipment or corridor have one and the same fundamental meaning 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

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 Radcliff'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 overlooked 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 geopolitical 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 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 insurrections in her north-eastern states.

Surrounded by India on three sides we also suffer from a restricted choice in our geopolitical manoeuvrability. Our

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 insurrections 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 interlocutions. 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 transhipment 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.

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 nation's 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

to India vis-a-vis her neighbours. She enjoys enviable position with regard to her control of the international rivers flowing from the Himalayas through India. The advantage accrued from it provides India permanent political leverage over the neighbouring countries. India made full use of it from time to time to twist us to be in her line and we could do precious little in this regard in spite of the safeguards of international laws and conventions.

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What more? Perhaps the In-



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 for 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 salesmen 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 business, 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.

Apart from this frightening situation there are three distinct groups of students that are coming out in the job market. They are the madrassah, 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 peace.

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 the means of achieving higher living standard 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.

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

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).

A. Zabir, Dhaka

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.

Rizwan Hussain Jabbar, A Level Student, Dhanmondi Tutorial