

Dhaka, Saturday, November 27, 1999

Hi-tech Hoodlums

AVAILABLE figures at the Home Ministry on crime and terrorism over the last ten months certainly put a question-mark on the government's claim of an improved law and order situation in the country. Every indicator, meaning thereby incidence of murder, rape, abduction, extortion, highway robbery and smuggling, shows a marked rise in crime rates over those in the corresponding period of last year. This is despite a much-publicised country-wide combing operation carried out by the police. The message is very clear: the state apparatus has failed to arrest, let alone reverse, the alarming upward trend of criminal and terrorist activities. Disturbingly still, the law-enforcing agency appears to be squarely outmanoeuvred by the criminals due to the latter's access to and use of high-tech communications devices and sophisticated weaponry. As one high-up candidly confessed to this paper, the police, with their outdated weapon and transport system, do not simply stand a chance against the crime cartel equipped with "cellular phones, high-speed vehicles and different types of sophisticated firearms including AK-47."

Admittedly, although heaps of scorn and criticism have been showered on the police, there hasn't been much tangible progress towards upgrading their conditions in terms of skill acquisition and logistical support. Whereas criminals are reported to have sophisticated weapons and high-tech electronic gadgets at their disposal, the police still have to make do with antiquated firearms like the 303 rifles and shotguns. Their mobility is also limited, thanks to a decidedly poor transport pool. In plain and simple terms, ours is a police force replete with myriads of systemic loopholes. Therefore, the first step towards having any impact on the crime scenario should be enhancement of the law enforcers' capacity to deal with crimes.

To restrict the criminal elements' access to sophisticated weaponry and high-tech electronic gadget, there should be double-barrelled operation involving different intelligence networks, defence personnel and the police. First, smuggling of such devices should be put an end to and then recover what may have already sneaked into the country. In this regard, there should also be constant interaction with other countries in the region to find out whether there exists any international racket. Law and order situation has already assumed ominous proportions and if not addressed immediately may well go out of hand.

Hartals Galore

THE month of November has been a boon for those who believe in the philosophy of less work and full pay. We have enjoyed fifteen days without work in this dying month of November including the hartal on Thursday last. The opposition alliance had imposed six days of hartals with the remainder nine days coming from a linkage to week-end and other holidays.

In February this year precious 14 working days were lost due to hartal. We have always been against hartal since the present ruling party started this culture when in the opposition. The tit-for-tat tactic adopted by the opposition BNP and its allies may have very little impact on the government of the day but the brunt, as always, is being borne by innocent millions of the country. By their 173 days of such negative action during 1994-95 the AL could not dislodge the government of Khaleda Zia and like-wise we believe another 173 days of hartal by the BNP and its allies will fail to remove the present government of Sheikh Hasina. Perhaps the political leaders of the country have to shut their eyes to the deteriorating social and economic conditions of the country, especially those prevailing in the rural areas. This mad race for power only speaks about their selfishness in total disregard of the well-being of those people to whom they are supposed to owe their positions. Small businessmen and petty shopkeepers, day-labourers, rickshaw-pullers and operators of autorickshaws, buses, trucks, and riverine transports are the worst sufferers. So are the commuters and travellers.

In the midst of all these hardships to the poor wrought by hartals, a section of their affluent compatriots find it rewarding and relaxing to travel outside the country by way of escapism. They splurge spending foreign currency for shopping and sight-seeing. Have we ever thought of attracting our neighbours to spend in our country on their holidays? Perhaps it is time we did so for a change.

Artificial Fuel Oil Crisis

THE administration is probably failing to measure the after-effects of the strike called by Rajshahi Division Oil Distributors' and Tank Lorry Owners' Association (RDODTLOA). The suffering in public life has been colossal since the distributors and tank lorry owners ceased to lift fuel oil from November 20. Strike at 165 filling stations of the sixteen districts in the country's north has resulted in non-availability of motor fuel and other combustible materials with their prices sky-rocketing. The unscrupulous traders have not obviously been sitting idle selling gasoline in the black market that only aggravated the situation. This certainly sends sorrowful signals about the economy given the reality of the country's extensive dependency on the road-transport sector.

However, in trying to resolve the impasse, representatives of the RDODTLOA met the Additional Divisional Commissioner, Rajshahi on Wednesday and put forward their three-point demands. These involved "deployment of army and BDR personnel at the Baghabari depot, preventing illegal activities by Baghabari-based workers' associations, and finally fixing a uniform oil price at all the depots." Now, these grievances do not sound irrational nor are these beyond redressal. All that is needed now is a serious and sincere approach on the part of the authorities concerned to solve the artificial fuel crisis in northern parts of Bangladesh. It has already hurt the economy of the region very badly, so that we demand an immediate intervention of the government before it gets worse.

Agricultural Commercialisation and Related Impacts

Commercialisation of agriculture is the key to agricultural development. Any government should see that farmers have incentives to produce for the market since commercialisation raises productivity, enhances income and adds to household's nutrition. Technological progress, better roads and ports, suitable legal system and property rights etc. constitute the core of commercialisation.

"High risks of farm households in poverty and high transaction costs are the basic reason for high prevalence of subsistence farming. Policy must, during the coming decades — when subsistence farming will be phased out in many low-income countries due to development progress — facilitate a transition which benefits the poor and does not unduly replace (old) subsistence related production risks with (new) market and policy failure risks, the profiles of which the poor small holder may be much less in a position to estimate?"

But commercialisation is not always a panacea. Even with well-functioning factor and product markets some poor might be lost from the market. For example, a farmer might incur loss from more marketing supply if the demand for the product remains inelastic. Supply more and get less in terms of prices — agricultural treadmill as it is called — is always a reality. However, if consumers' welfare is included, the treadmill effects could be diffused to a great extent.

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tent, on the farm for home consumption. And finally, commercialisation of agriculture, is not identical with commercialisation of rural economy."

There are mainly three factors that contribute to increased commercialisation e.g. (a) the availability of new technologies; (b) investment in infrastructure and (c) policies for market creation. "Increased commercialisation can occur without technological change but technological change without increased commercialisation seems unlikely because the increased use of purchased inputs and specialization are inherent elements of most technological innovations in agricultural production." While technological change tend to raise total factor productivity, commercialisation goes to get the gains from specialization. They are complementary to each other and more in a reinforcing way to propel productivity and production.

On a theoretical setting, a number of hypotheses can be derived about a household's decision making processes once the "market risk" factor is introduced to the model. Following J von Braun the hypotheses could be as follows: (a) Risks-averse farmers tend to maintain subsistence produc-

tion much above the level required (optimal level) with a view to keeping themselves away from the risk of market failure; (b) Improved infrastructural facilities and an increase in the profitability of marketing would reduce the incentives for subsistence farming and (c) a rise in households' total resources would lead to a fall in the motivation to subsistence crops.

on whether the agricultural processing is labour or capital intensive. But, by and large, a respective rise in the share of hired labour seems to have been the rule of the game in commercial farming as espoused by the experiences of Gambia, Guatemala and Philippines.

Second, barring few exceptions, commercialisation had caused direct income effects which were further comple-

Beneath the Surface
by Abdul Bayes

What impacts does commercialisation of agriculture impart? First, it can affect the level and structure of employment. "Changes may take place in the use of hired labour versus family labour and in the distribution of family labour by gender. For example, empirical evidences tend to show that increased commercialisation of agriculture with higher labour demand expanded employment level by 45-56 per cent in some African countries. The degree of additional employment generation would, however, depend

mented by indirect income effects through forward and backward linkages. The indirect impacts followed the demand for goods and services from direct income beneficiaries. Third, "increased household income hypothetically permits households to respond in a number of ways that may favour nutritional improvement: more food may be acquired, workloads may be reduced and, thereby, child care improved; household sanitation and housing environments may be enhanced and thereby

The Country Must Know

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country. Still, she could not win.

The failure of Sharif or earlier civilian rulers does not suggest that the Pakistanis love military rule. Musharraf should not be under any such illusion. They applaud him because he has promised to clean up the country and carry out reforms like decentralisation. His promise of accountability will, however, carry more weight if he initiates action, not only against corrupt civilians but also corrupt military men.

It is more than a coincidence that no army, air force or naval official has been arraigned for corruption since the foundation of Pakistan.

This does not, in any way, give legal sanction to the military regime. Even a referendum, which Musharraf has hinted at to determine the people's backing, is not a real test. Fear will play on the minds of people. Pakistan has gone through it!

General Ayub Khan was elected President against Fatima Jinnah, sister of the Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan. She was a venerable lady, deeply respected throughout the

Musharraf should have noted that New Delhi has not

reacted to the military takeover beyond saying that it was 'concerned' over such a situation in a neighbouring country. Not a word has been said about democracy being throttled once again in Pakistan. This is in sharp contrast to India's comment after the first military coup which took place in Pakistan on October 8, 1958.

I was then in the press gallery of the Lok Sabha. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was in his seat when a note was handed over to him informing that Ayub Khan had taken over the administration in Pakistan. He got up from his seat in the midst of the proceedings to announce that it was naked military dictatorship in Pakistan. He was a democrat. It was hard for him to reconcile him

self to a person who had not come to power through the ballot box.

The BJP-led government has been overcautious. It had all the justification to throw caution to the winds because it was Musharraf who hatched and executed the plan to attack India in Kargil. Still the most reprehensible thing he did was to end the process of conciliation which was set in motion after the Lahore Declaration.

It is no more a secret. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has confirmed in an interview that there were backdoor negotiations between India and Pakistan on Kashmir and that they had the official blessing. Editor R K Mishra and former Pakistan foreign secretary Niaz A Naik were the messengers, who carried the brief to New Delhi and Islamabad, and tried to broker an agreement.

Vajpayee has also said for the first time that the two countries were "nearing a solution." Understandably, he has not spelled out the terms which he was discussing with Sharif. If they were "nearing a solution" it was a breakthrough in a 52-year-old impasse. This is what people in the two countries and beyond have been longing for.

Who sabotaged the process? Naik's remarks, which a leading Pakistani daily in Urdu, *Jang*, published after the Kargil operation gives a clue. He said: "The programme and the informal diplomacy which could

have led to resolution of the Kashmir dispute by September-October this year was derailed by Kargil." Naik goes on to add: "There was no coordination between the armed forces and the civilian leadership."

What it means is that the two countries would have crossed the biggest hurdle in Indo-Pak relations if the Kargil intrusion or the military establishment had not come in the way. Naik's interview to the BBC at the end of June when the unilateral withdrawal from the Kargil heights was in progress, confirms it. He said that "Vajpayee's message to me was that if the situation is resolved as quickly as possible, then the process which he had started along with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif can easily be resumed and accelerated."

This indicates that either Sharif did not know about Kargil at all or had very scanty information about it. Defence Minister George Fernandes' initial statement was right that Sharif was not aware of the Kargil operation. Probably, Sharif communicated his lack of knowledge to New Delhi. That may be the reason why Fernandes made the second statement that if the Pakistani forces were to withdraw, there would be no firing at the retreating troops.

It was not difficult to add two and two. What Sharif did was not to the liking of the army, neither the "nearing" to solution nor the withdrawal of troops and the *mujahideen* from Kargil. He had to pay the price. A knowledgeable top military officer in India has put it succinctly: "No Prime Minister in Pakistan will now ever dare to settle Kashmir knowing the fate of Nawaz Sharif."

It was nothing unusual if

Sharif had not been told about the Kargil intrusion. General Ayub was in the dark on infiltration in Kashmir in 1964, called Operation Gibraltar. His information secretary, Altaf Gauhar, in an article in *The Nation*, said: "While Ayub Khan was determined not to embark on any military operation in Kashmir, Aziz Ahmed and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were preparing a plan to launch a commando operation in Kashmir with the help of the Inter-Services Intelligence. Ayub, who was in Swat knew little about these developments. The GHQ was sending him reports to suggest that Operation Gibraltar was making progress."

New Delhi should now take the nation into confidence and tell what happened. Mishra undertook five trips to Pakistan and Naik visited India six times. Still nothing is known officially. The matter was raised in the Raja Sabha. But foreign minister Jaswant Singh, who wound up the discussion on the President's Address, did not throw any light in his reply. In truth, it reflects the government's disregard for parliament because it does not consider it necessary to take the house into confidence.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kulidip Nayar writes from New Delhi

leges and universities.

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To the opposition leader

Sir, An open letter to the leader of the opposition (DS, Nov. 19) is an excellent article. I hope the BNP leaders will change their present policy. Now it seems that BNP is trying to convince people that it is pledge bound to shed the last drop of their blood to uphold the country's integrity and sovereignty. They think that they can force Awami League government to resign and for that they are calling hartals very frequently. Suppose the government resigns right now and general election is held under a new chief election commissioner, can BNP be able to get majority seats to form government? I am afraid majority of farmers will not cast vote in favour of BNP. Farmers are afraid of fertilizer black marketing during BNP rule. Fertilizer worth Tk 250 per bag were sold at Tk. 1200 all over Bangladesh. BNP for example lost their hold in Mymensingh due to fertilizer crisis and so lost their maximum seats which it was holding. AL has made the biggest gain here.

BNP lost popularity in rural areas due to their inefficiency in handling many serious problems of rural people. Farmers want availability of fertilizers, seeds, insecticides, Joan for agriculture and diesel to run water pumps. BNP government while in power failed miserably to address these problems. AL government in this respect is found quite successful. They have built up their image to rural people. There is no doubt that BNP has a very strong student wing. Previously students used to play a vital role to bring political party to come in power. Now that situation doesn't exist. It is the village people who matter in politics. Nobody become popular by calling frequent hartals. Hartals don't stop farmers to work in agricultural fields. Farmers elected 250 MPs from rural areas. There is no hartal in those areas. BNP leaders should go to the rural people and convince them that if they are voted to power they will ensure availability of agricultural inputs at a cheap rate than the present AL government. If it fails then they would not come in power.

Rizwan Hussain Jabbar
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O'Level marks

Sir, In recent years, English medium schools have become an alternative schooling system in our country. The examinations of O'Level and A'Level are conducted by the British Council. The marks are given in the grade system, i.e. A, B, C, D, E and F.

This system creates a problem when the students try to enter colleges and universities of Bangladesh because most of these institutions require percentage-marking system. Different educational institutions of our country interpret the grade marks in different ways and often there is a confusion over the percentage transcription of the grades.

I would like to appeal to the British Council so that they

publish the percentage transcription of the grades for the convenience of the students seeking admission in our

In a few days, the World Trade Organisation will hold a summit in Seattle. Some 150,000 protesters are going to take to the streets to denounce the WTO and globalisation as unaligned evils.

The protesters might want to talk to the workers of Sri Lanka first, because what you find here is a rather amoral view of globalisation — an awareness that it is as much a vehicle for developing countries to escape poverty as it is a vehicle for them to be exploited.

Let's start with Sri Lanka's biggest concern about globalisation. At the Ministry of Industrial Development is a sign that says: "The year 2005 is only 60 months away. What are you doing to get ready?" The developed nations of the world are terrified about year 2000 bug that could make all their computers stop, but for poor developing countries it is 2005 that matters — the year when their computing machines could stop.

A global Multi-Fiber Arrangement sets quotas on exactly how many clothes every developing country can sell in US and EU markets. The quotas are the lifeblood of countries like Bangladesh, China, Vietnam, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. By 2005 all the quotas will be phased out, which is going to trigger a Darwinian free-for-all to sell clothes to the United States and Europe.

Sri Lankan textile workers mostly women 18 and older, work in this modern, air-conditioned sewing factories. The workday is eight hours and is intense. Each woman has to stitch so many garments per minute. Wages are about \$80 to \$100 a

month, the average here, and there is a waiting list for jobs. In terms of working conditions, this factory is world-class, and it's not alone here.

The only way we can survive against China and Bangladesh after 2005 is if we build long-term relationships with the big global brand retailers," explains Mr Aleman, "and those brand retailers are now demanding not only better prices and quality, but better conditions for workers." And they are demanding that not because they suddenly became socially conscious, but because American consumers are demanding it, thanks to recent anti-sweatshop campaigns.

Working conditions have improved not because Sri Lanka has put up walls against globalisation, but because in today's global economy Sri Lanka must tie itself to Western retailers to survive. And the more it does that, the more its factory standards have to meet the values of Western consumers.

There are still plenty of sweatshops, and the Seattle protesters should go after them by targeting the specific retailers who use them, but not by targeting globalisation. That is stupid, not only because globalisation is inevitable, but also because, if managed properly, it can be an effective tool to lift labour standards around the world.

The Seattle protesters need to understand that. The people of Sri Lanka already do.

Courtesy: The New York Times/IHT

need to make a profit, but just keep people employed," said Mahesh Hirdaramani, a textile maker. "It means they can sell at any price. And once there are no quotas anymore to protect our market share, China could undersell us everywhere."

To deal with the China threat, textile companies are trying to move up the quality ladder. "We can't be the low-end producers anymore," says Mahesh Aleman, another manufacturer. "Bangladesh and China will run circles around us. So we are focusing on better quality, so retailers will want to stick with us. And we are working to make ourselves more valuable to the retailers by actually designing clothes ourselves."

In the past, the retailers designed the garment and we had to show them we could make it. Now we have to design more things ourselves, get the fabrics, and then show that retailers can get the whole package from us. We have to become more than just tailors to survive."

I visited Mr Aleman's factory, which makes underwear for Victoria's Secret. Located in the small tropical village of Pannala, the factory is completely computerised and will soon be linked by Internet to the Victoria's Secret chain to handle e-commerce.

About 1,400 employees, mostly women 18 and older, work in this modern, air-conditioned sewing factories. The workday is eight hours and is intense. Each woman has to stitch so many garments per minute. Wages are