

Accent on Rural Growth Centres

SLOWLY but surely slum-dwellers and urban destitutes are clambering up to that proportion of country's population who remain housed or have some roofs overhead. A survey recently conducted by Concern, Bangladesh in some major urban centers of the country has yielded appalling statistics about what must be regarded as a grossly distorted urbanization phenomenon. So asymmetrical it is that we have deliberately called it a phenomenon in place of 'a process' that would have suggested a modicum of normality about it, which of course is not the case here at all.

The survey highlights two facts as posing 'the gravest challenges' before the country: proliferation of slums to the extent of one-fourth of total urban population living in shanties; and secondly, as many as 26 million souls are complete destitutes at this point in time.

With the urban population growing at the rate of 6-7 per cent per annum, outstripping the national procreation rate of 1.6 per cent, the aggravation in terms of both growth of slums as well as spread of homelessness can only be extrapolated to the horror of all concerned.

An answer to those entirely dreadful prospects for worsening rich-poor gaps lies in triggering a reverse migration from the urban centres to the countryside or at least ensure that no further influx into the cities takes place to compound the situation. Without squandering our limited resource and energy on 'priorities' of questionable value, all bundled together as new "thrusters" being given to the rural sector, we have to concentrate on building tertiary growth centres so as to have people cling to them for a living. These will help hold the folks to the villages whilst giving a better alternative to slum livers for a return on to the rural lap.

Some latest studies have established the fact that a vast majority of people who had trekked to the urban areas would not have left their village homes at all if they were not driven by some kind of desperation. It is basically river erosion and indebtedness that rendered them landless to a point of even losing their ancestral homesteads. Since it is the basic psyche of our people not to leave their rural hearths and homes unless their backs are to the wall what we need to do is to develop clusters of growth centres within their easy reach.

It is absolutely necessary that we improve the living conditions of the slum-dwellers and the poor floating souls. But an upgradation of their conditions might encourage a fresh exodus from the rural areas. Such a dilemma can only be resolved if we have a vibrant rural economy to magnetise people to it on an enduring basis.

Invest in Traffic Management

IF one takes the pain to work out the ratio of traffic policemen to motorised and non-motorised vehicles plying in the capital, one would probably have the shock of his life, for the result would be something like one to 571. Put together with the fact that nearly 70 per cent of the force has no training in traffic maintenance, it would surely explain the sorry state of Dhaka's traffic system. The oddity of the whole situation points to years of indifference to the necessity for enhancement, both qualitative and quantitative, of the relevant department of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. There could be an intense debate over why successive governments have been so blasé over an aspect of crucial significance to city governance. Budget constraints have been a good pretext. The fact of the matter, however, is, traffic management has never quite received the importance it should have. As years went by, the problem snowballed from crisis to crisis.

Thrust on recruitment alone obviously does not hold the answer. Equal accent has to be put on personnel training as well. Basically, the situation calls for increased budgetary allocation to traffic department. The higher budgetary allocation to police for 2000-01 may prove inconsequential given the magnitude of the problem we are dealing with. Essentially, therefore, we need to inject money through other channels. Here, our development partners could be open to persuasion because they are well aware of the need for a vastly improved traffic management in the metropolis.

In the short term, however, we need to devise a means for optimal utilisation of our resources. We understand that a big chunk of the nearly 90,000-strong police force is engaged in escorting VIPs, talling processions, whenever and wherever there is one and whoever is in it, etc. Surely, the arrangement could be made more effective and efficient with some shuffling. The people at the top would best know how to do that. They have to act fast though, for time is something we don't have aplenty.

Campus Hot Again

DHAKA University campus has become hot again as soon as it opened after a long summer vacation. The eruption speaks for itself. A so-called Bagerhat group of the ruling party student front BCL ransacked the offices of a couple of student organisations visibly chagrined at the alleged kidnap and rape of a young woman on Wednesday night inside the campus. The young girl was taken away purportedly at gunpoint by a group of BCL activists alongwith two of her friends from the mall and later said to have been abused by the kidnappers. The news leaked out enraging the general students of the university who brought out processions protesting the incident of rape on the campus and demanding punishment for people responsible for it. Whereupon a group of BCL activists riding motorbikes followed the procession, intimidated the protesters and finally ransacked their offices at the DUCSU building. The Nagorik Samaj convener Dr. Kamal Hossain has demanded judicial probe into the incident, reports on which the university authority however called 'baseless and malicious.'

The highhandedness of so-called student activists cannot be condoned. It appears that this faction or that of the ruling party student wing is going berserk to disrupt peace and tranquillity on the campus much to the discomfort of thousands of students who give priority to their studies and future careers. The university authority must ensure proper academic atmosphere for the large majority of students while the ruling party stalwarts make it a point to rein in the wayward student elements.

Are the Wings of IMF being Clipped by a New Regional Monetary Body?

by Harun ur Rashid

Analysts believe that the concept of Asian Monetary Fund arose from the frustration of the East Asian countries over high-handedness of the IMF. . . Despite the mantra of globalisation sweeping across in all sectors of human activities, it appears that the East Asian countries have decided to think of regional solution through regionalism.

crisis-ridden countries. He argued that the tough fiscal policy imposed by IMF had actually worsened Asia's problems by constricting their struggling economies.

One of the biggest problems confronted by the East Asian countries during the crisis was the need to protect the poor from the worst effects of the financial collapse. It was argued that IMF had no answer to this problem. The US, on the other hand, advocated a market-based approach, despite growing concern from countries that this could not cope with the crisis.

Since then trade co-operation is growing among them and they are now moving into monetary areas and some observers say that it is a regional watershed. The situation is compared to that of Europe in the late 50s.

Although the East Asian countries have been getting back on their feet, the idea of an Asian Fund has gained new momentum. The East Asian financial think-tanks are drawn together by a powerful sense of post-crisis regionalism. There appears to be a new vigour in exploring regional arrangements in finance, trade and politics. At the time of crisis in 1997, people were sceptical about regional solutions. But now there seems to be a groundswell in favour of them.

ASEAN (the Association of South-East Asian Nations) for 30 years had a principle of non-interference in each other's affairs. But when the crisis which first commenced in Thailand spread over the whole region in 1997, the leaders came to realise that the internal monetary policy of a member-country could have a devastating effect on other economies in the region. They had learnt that one country's crisis was no longer a "remote fire" but would be a problem "next morning". The scrupulous observance of the principle of non-interference among ASEAN seems to have been discarded.

Japan first advanced this idea of AMF in 1997 while the economic crisis had hit hard East Asian countries. The proposed AMF would have a US\$100 billion with half the capital contributed by Japan and a Tokyo-based secretariat of 200-300 staff.

The US at the time vetoed the proposal. Analysts believe that the US feared that it would be a Japanese-run "slush fund" for buying political influence, handing money unconditionally to countries in economic crisis. Furthermore IMF would have marginal control on the economic policy of half of Asia and it was perceived that the influence of the US, the IMF's biggest shareholder, would tend to diminish over these countries.

Let us look at the scale of economy of the East Asian countries to appreciate the dawn of economic regionalism in East Asia.

Admittedly Japan dominates the economy of this region. Its annual output is worth US\$4.5 trillion, about half that of the US. Even after a decade of economic stagnation, Japan constitutes the world's second-biggest economy and twice the size of that of the next-ranked country, Germany. The rest of East Asia—the larger economies of China and South Korea, plus the 10 countries of ASEAN—has an annual output worth US\$2.1 trillion. The region's total economy of US\$6.6 trillion

means it accounts for about one-fifth of world's output.

The East Asian countries are getting closely integrated and collectively it is reported that 55 per cent per cent of all East Asian trade is with other East Asian countries, compared to only 30 per cent per cent in 1996. They seem to be working on agendas that would bring them more close to one another. In financial sector, the governments of East Asia agreed last May on the so-called *Chiang Mai Initiative*, a network of currency swaps between member countries to allow them greater liquidity in the event of crisis.

Analysts believe that the concept of Asian Monetary Fund arose from the frustration of the East Asian countries over high-handedness of the IMF. Some say that the most powerful person in Asia in 1997-98 was not an Asian or even a resident of Asia but the IMF's then managing Director, Mr. Michel Camdessus. Despite the mantra of globalisation sweeping across in all sectors of human activities, it appears that the East Asian countries have decided to think of regional solution through regionalism.

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POLITICS AND POLITICIANS

Time to Woo the Voters Once Again

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

The party in power appears to have been very happy with its achievements over the past four years. The opposition, on the contrary, dismisses it as a total failure. Who measures these two diametrically opposite claims? It is the people whom Sheikh Hasina implores for a second term. It is again the same people whom the combined opposition led by Begum Zia entreats to reject Awami League overwhelmingly.

It is difficult to imagine the earthly reasons that blocked Begum Zia from taking a positive stand. Even if she had agreed to sit with Sheikh Hasina it was not necessary that she would accept whatever the Prime Minister would have proposed. In fact, her right to disagree would not have been in jeopardy.

Sheikh Hasina must have taken umbrage at the behaviour of Begum Zia as she would have taken in last November with regard to her telephonic effort to talk to her. But she appeared to have withstood the shock and made a second attempt. This was followed by the effort of Finance Minister S A M Kibria with Mr Saifur Rahman of BNP. Things progressed well for some time and Saifur Rahman promised to present a list of BNP leaders who would meet their Awami League counterparts in a preparatory meeting before Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia could sit together to finalise a deal. Mr Saifur Rahman wanted Mr Kibria to wait for the list till his leader, then on tour to North Bengal returned to the city. Expectation at all quarters rose high because a solution was at sight.

To everyone's surprise Be-

gum Zia's speech at Kurigram in a public meeting instantly reversed the whole issue to square one. She didn't consider appointment of a CEC at that stage of any consequence. She would rather like to see Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina hand over power to a caretaker government. Then and only then she would see or consider the point of appointing a CEC. Significantly, she didn't say that she would sit with Sheikh Hasina to select one.

Things took a quicker turn. Sheikh Hasina recommended Mr Abu Sayeed, a retired Civil Servant and a former Home Secretary during Begum Zia's government, to the position of the Chief Election Commissioner. It was indeed a strange coincidence that Mr Sayeed hailed from Gopalganj and that triggered off yet another bone of contention for the opposition to brag upon. Instantly there was sporadic attempt from the opposition at establishing a relationship between Sheikh Hasina's family and Mr Abu Sayeed's. It was readily rebuffed from the party in power that the new Chief Election Commissioner was in fact related to Begum Zia herself. However, the dispute over it died down quietly. But the main issue of the appointment of CEC unilater-

ally by Sheikh Hasina, in spite of its being within her constitutional rights, kept the opposition busy.

Meanwhile, the Awami League government has completed four years of its five-year term on June 23, 2000. That day coincided with the foundation of Awami League. To celebrate both the occasions a council meeting of the party was organised at Paltan Maidan in the capital. And away in the arena of Jatiya Sangsad the opposition MPs led by Begum Zia attended the session for only 45 minutes. This brief visit was not to participate in the proceedings. It was rather a compelling situation that brought them there. They signed the attendance register and after Begum Zia made a five-minute speech they all left. The leader of the opposition was though not solicited, defended her and others' presence "to forestall the attempt by the government to bring some amendments to the constitution which would be anti-people, anti-country". Unfortunately, she didn't remember that any amendment to the constitution required 2/3rd majority votes which Awami League didn't have.

Perhaps she was more con-

cerned about the 'environment' in the Jatiya Sangsad which has been blocking her participation in the sessions for long. Among the numerous components of this 'environment' the opposition has been through complaining that they were not allowed to talk in the parliament. The statistics of time placed on the table by Speaker Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury gave a different picture to the contrary. Whatever may be the reason for their abstention from JS session, it would be for the overall national interest that the opposition benches participated in the current budget session and offered constructive suggestion on different proposals. Their continuous absence from Jatiya Sangsad is, in reality, adversely affecting their linkage with the electorates and hence, is likely to weaken their position in respective constituencies.

Prior to their brief appearance they had meeting of the MPs in the JS premises. There was a lot of heated debate on whether or not to attend the JS session. At one stage there was virtual scuffle among some members comprising those who thought their abstention was pointless and those who thought it was very right. However, their brief attendance was

evidently the only course to retain their seats in the parliament. The party in power took a critical view of it alleging that the opposition MPs could ill-afford to lose their seats and consequently the facilities they have been enjoying at the cost of the public exchequer without performing their role as elected representatives of the people.

In fact, such a critical view is gaining momentum with the voters too, who have been predominantly BNP supporters in 1996 election. Added to this, they are reported to have been unresponsive to the idea of seat-sharing with others three parties in the 4-party alliance. Because, they have genuine apprehensions that such sharing would even pose positive threats to many local leaders aspiring for party nomination in the next general election. On top of everything there is internal rift and clash within the party which often appear to be assuming unmanageable proportion. The party in power has too identical problems creating serious breaches along the party line.

The party in power appears to have been very happy with its achievements over the past four years. The opposition, on the contrary, dismisses it as a total failure. Who measures these two diametrically opposite claims? It is the people whom Sheikh Hasina implores for a second term. It is again the same people whom the combined opposition led by Begum Zia entreats to reject Awami League overwhelmingly. She has a firm conviction that the people will act on her words. All these are wishful thinking and the reality will only emerge after the election takes place. Till then we have got to command patience.

One Giant Step towards Reunification of Two Koreas

by AMM Shahabuddin

reuniting, after a long period of pains and miseries.

'The Sun is Rising'

The two-day summit ended on 14 June after signing two landmark agreements on reducing the 'cold war' between the two parts of the same country, bringing together divided families living in two Koreas since the Korean war of 1950-53, besides covering four broad areas including North-South reconciliation, cooperation and most importantly the move towards reunification of Korea. It was the most successful summit between the two 'hostile nations', paving the way for better days to come. After the successful conclusion of the summit, the South Korean President most emotionally declared: "The sun is rising at last for national reunification, reconciliation and peace."

Earlier, the South Korean media was loud in showering praise on the success of the Summit. The *Korean Times* compared the summit with the first landing of a man on the moon in 1969, and said it was "one small step for reconciliation, one giant leap for reunification." Thus the national mood in two Koreas in celebrat-

ing the success of the Summit, "is visibly vibrating with high hopes and expectations, as if a new nation has been born."

Tragic History of Colonial Rule

The Korean Peninsula has its own tragic history of colonial rule, when WW-II came to an end on 15 August 1945 after the German Army surrendered following Hitler's suicide. The two war-torn 'strange-bad-fellows' America and Russia parted their ways, creating the most vitriatic atmosphere of 'Cold War', perhaps a new concept in political scene. With the surrender of Japan by the end of August 1945, Korean Peninsula became free from Japanese colonial rule of over three decades. But unfortunately that newly gained freedom of Korea was short-lived as other 'wolves' were waiting there to grab it. When communist Russia was busy in pocketing the East European countries one by one as its 'satellites', America cast its eyes on the Far East. It first occupied Japan, making Gen. Mac Arthur, its 'de facto' king, leaving the Japanese Emperor as an ornamental showpiece. When Korea's 'new-born'

freedom was in its 'infancy', America entered the Korean peninsula with its forces in order to outwit Russia in its cold-war strategy.

But former Communist 'Raj' was also not sitting idle. It had earlier jumped on North Korea, while America was forging ahead, to drive them out. Meanwhile, Red Chinese forces, after ousting China's national leader Chiang Kaisek from the mainland, held their sway over whole of China. They now entered North Korea to assist Russian forces to oust the American forces from the Korean soil.

The Korean war lasted for three years from 1950 to 1953, when finally the north-south dividing line became the internationally recognised border between the two Koreas, which remained practically sealed for the last five decades and has just re-opened with new hopes and aspirations with the recently-concluded North-South Summit in Pongyung.

An Auspicious Beginning

America has 'produced' many 'strongmen' not only in the poor 'third-world' countries, but also in Europe and even in Russia after the breakup

of the former communist Soviet Union, the purpose being to carry their 'message' home at the right place, and at the right time. Such 'picked-up' and 'chosen' personalities are all familiar and known faces in the contemporary political history. We have seen them in Indonesia (General Suharto), in Cambodia (Gen Lon Nol), in the Philippines (Marcos), in Taiwan (Chiang Kaisek), in Vietnam (Ngo Dinh Diem), so on and so forth, but last, but not the least, in South Korea, an autocrat nationalist, Syngman Rhee who was later 'installed' in Seoul as President of South Korea, through, of course, a 'free and fair election'.

Earlier, American move to hold a general election under the supervision of UN officials failed, and they had to return to UN headquarters as communist North didn't allow that to happen. Since then communist rule has been heavily entrenched in the North and a pro-West Democratic government in the South.

Change in US Attitude A Hopeful Sign

Meanwhile, there has been a big 'breakthrough' in US attitude itself as manifested by the Republicans-dominated US House of Representatives, in close alliance with Democrat President Clinton, in granting China a Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR). That's a great relieving feature in the whole episode. As they say, "Honey catches more flies than vinegar". America is now turning to using 'honey' instead of 'vinegar' to achieve its objective to obtain a strong foothold in North Korea's consumer market. America has already gained a 'foothold' in North Korea with heavy food supplies and other necessities to feed the poverty-stricken population there.

Similar food assistance from South Korea is also supplementing the US supply. So when you 'depend' on somebody for feeding your hungry people,

you will have to be naturally obliged to him. Thus the equation is gradually coming to a meeting point and the storm seems to be coming to an end. "The darkest hour is just before the dawn," so goes the saying. Hence with the gradual receding to the 'darkest hour' in the momentous history of the Korean Peninsula, the 'dawn' is approaching fast. However, there is no such thing as "instant coffee" in politics. It takes its due course, and sometimes a lengthy course, for fruition. Rome was not built in a day. So was Berlin wall also not razed to the ground in a day, bringing the East and West Germany together again. It took long 20 years since the first summit of East-West German leaders held in 1970, for the Germans to reunite.

Hence the South Korean President warned and he did rightly so, that 'reconciliation' process will be a lengthy one. So the reunification process may take a much longer period. But the first summit has just ended with promises of reunion of the divided families, tension reduction and immediate cessation of ugly hate-campaign against each other. So it has taken off well and it may not take such a long period of 20 years as in the case of Germans; the much-desired reunification may be achieved much earlier than that.

Time has been definitely crying for a bold change. The earlier America, the only superpower in world now, realises this hard truth, the better it is for the much-beaten humanity as a whole. The Clinton administration has, undoubtedly, brought about a cooling down effect in North's anti-US stance through its soft-handed 'carrot, and not stick' policy. North Korea has already shelved its long-range missile policy and has agreed to build nuclear power with US cooperation. If successful in its new diplomacy in establishing the much-needed peace in the Korean Peninsula, leading ultimately to its reunification, it will be another feather in Clinton's cap, after the one he got in establishing permanent trade relations with China. Let morning show the bright and sunny day ahead.

The writer is a retired UN official

To the Editor ...

Management of the metropolis

Sir, The Daily Star devoted quite a number of pages spotlighting the mismanagement of Dhaka city. But as yet there is no response from the government (policy level) on this high-priority issue; including re-vamping up of the old, unworkable Rajuk structure (formerly Dhaka Improvement Trust of DIT); and replacing it with a modern, technical set-up with technocrats and modern management team. There are enough agencies from international agencies with surveys and appraisal reports. The Rajuk and DCC have to implement the projects and bring things down to routine level (the works cannot remain at project level

indefinitely); some local agency has to take over (without duplication of routine activities). It appears the current regime is not interested in poking this issue before the polls next year; because success would be issues which might bring quick PR return. Who will tackle the complex and unpleasant issues.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Stop politicising sport

Sir, I agree with the DS Sports Reporter (June 29) about the ruling party's extra keenness to usurp more than the credit due in political and non-political fields, when things go right,

and to beat the hell out of the opposition on negative trends.

This is due to distorted enforcement of discipline from the top, and lopsided self-evaluation, centering on the enlargement of the ego. The credit for the Jamuna Bridge was also hogged by the ruling party, sharing credit with none, although its contribution was only to deal with the opening ceremony (accidental coincidence). All functions should not be politicised.

Leaders should steer clear of pettiness, at least at the national level. Create inner space, for cultivating a more ventilating sporting spirit.

A Sport Fan
Dhaka