

PM's Late Admission

EVEN my recommendation does not work in the face of bribery in getting a job," so lamented Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the parliament on Monday as she talked about the pervasive presence of corruption in "every sphere of national life". We appreciate her candour. However, one must admit, the very timing of her articulation — less than a year remains of her tenure — smacks of electoral motive rather than any intention of a crusade against corruption. Otherwise, how would her government explain its almost arrogant indifference in the face of growing concern amongst the people and displeasure amongst the development partners over widespread corruption? Was corruption not on top of the agenda at this year's meeting of the Bangladesh Development Forum in Paris? Nevertheless, we want to believe that her realisation, belated though, would initiate a vigorous move to rid the entire system of corruption. True, very little is left of her government's term; however, we are dealing with an issue that is not partisan and that doesn't run the risk of being discarded with the change of guard. Besides, corruption would not simply disappear overnight; we need to wage a sustained war to eliminate the vice that has thrived on years of indifference.

We are fully in agreement with the Leader of the House when she said, "corruption and irregularity pervaded the entire system — from an orderly right up to the top brass." She is also justified in her concern over poor standard of healthcare and education induced by corruption, and widespread terrorism. In our view, the root of all these ills is embedded in our national politics. Politics, as Centre for Policy Dialogue's Independent Review of Bangladesh Development puts it, has truly become an investment, with commercial consideration given precedence over ideological interest. Overwhelming money motive has drawn political leaders and activists into business deals, tenders and what not. Consequent question of control resulted in injection of terrorists into politics. Education, healthcare, etc have just fallen in line.

The Prime Minister has rightly pointed out that "the ghost itself lies in the mustard seeds" meaning, we suppose, the problem lies in governance. Our politics needs to be exorcised first. Both the ruling and the opposition parties have equal role to play to put our politics back on ideological track, far away from lure of lucre.

An Amusing Suggestion

CHIEF of Army Staff Lt Gen Mustafizur Rahman has suggested that the capital be shifted to a place like Joydevpur. The general made his suggestion in an interview with the BBC Bangla Service on Sunday in reaction to a proposal by Japanese experts to shift Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka University and the Secretariat from the city to ease off traffic congestion and improve its environment. The Chief of Army Staff termed the proposal to shift the cantonment as unrealistic and expensive. The cantonment grew up in 50 years and it would be quite costly to shift it from its present location. To shift all the three establishments elsewhere would involve huge amount of money. The money could be better utilised by shifting the capital to a new place, he opined.

The general surely knows the history of the establishment and growth of the present cantonment, spread over a vast area of primeland from Tejgaon to Kurmitola. During the early days of Pakistan some of the offices of the 16th Division stationed in the then East Pakistan were housed in kutcha barracks at the old High Court premises. Later as the structures of World War II around Tejgaon airport were renovated and new facilities developed, the Dhaka Cantonment gradually took shape in its present site. In those days Tejgaon was a far off place from the city centre, which was obviously the Gulistan area, and Kurmitola was almost an hour's bus ride from the city.

But times have changed and so have the looks and character of this sprawling metropolis of about 10 million residents. Can shifting of the capital (we are not sure what Gen Mustafiz meant by it) be easier and solve the problem? How many ministries, divisions, directorates, semi-government and autonomous bodies, subordinate offices and the courts and related establishments have to be shifted remains anybody's guess. And what about hundreds of thousands of officers and employees of the government who live in Dhaka? Will they attend office at Joydevpur from Dhaka every day? The cost of shifting the capital will be enormous by any stretch of imagination and the exercise will take years to complete even if we build expressways and run bullet trains between Dhaka and Joydevpur for the officegoers and hundreds of others frequenting the government offices.

We believe Dhaka has an older history than the cantonment and shifting of the capital will be much more costlier and time consuming.

Erosion of Human Resource

WHEN the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations results gave us a severe jolt last month with the percentage of failed candidates far outstripping that of the successful ones, we called it a national waste, stopping just short of dubbing it as a bottomless education basket. We argued that more than 60 per cent students who had failed the exams may well have flunked the test of life. They only inflated the list of the dejected from the previous year's examinations and would be only too lucky to be absorbed at any higher tier of learning. As for those who had come out with flying colours there are not too many places for them at the educational institutions to berth in anyway. Only barring those few hundreds who were placed in the first division and above category the others on the 'successful' list hardly stand any chance to enter the portals of good colleges.

As if to add to that list of dejected young men and women we now have the very sordid tale of forty-two thousand students who cannot appear at the admission tests at all owing to their disqualification as 'referred' candidates for having failed in one subject at the last SSC examinations. Technically, they have a 'pass status' but they will not be eligible for admission to higher classes until they have cleared the subject they flunked in.

We reiterate our suggestion for introducing a two-tier terminal stage in the education system, one after the SSC level and thence after the HSC level for straining out students who shall be eligible for higher education and those who must drop out to join the vocational stream. That approach holds the answer to the continuing waste of human resources which we can ill afford.

Kashmir Issue — Back Again

By taking a firm stand on the question of autonomy for Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah has opened the Pandora's box. His move apparently will touch a sympathetic chord in the hearts of Kashmiris.

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



Clinton arranged the deal with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan. It ended badly for Nawaz Sharif for the Pakistan armed forces launched a whispering campaign against him and ultimately overthrew him through a military coup.



Farooq Abdullah: Autonomy — again.

Marshal Ayub Khan in 1964, I witnessed secretive military preparations in the high hills near Murree, which eventually culminated in the war of 1965. Yet in 1964 a thaw had set in between India and Pakistan following the death of Indian Prime Minister Nehru. President Ayub Khan had initiated some heart warming gestures towards India. They were frustrated by the intelligence outfit of Pakistan. In a similar fashion the Lahore spirit between India and Pakistan was frustrated by Kargil, adventure.

The latest development in Kashmir, namely the forceful appearance on the stage by Kashmir leader Farooq Abdullah, brings a new element in the picture. Farooq Abdullah is the son of the charismatic leader of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah — the Lion of Kashmir. He had been an undisputed leader of the people of Kashmir and titled the balance in favour of India in 1948. He extracted some major concessions from Prime Minister Nehru — namely, a special status for Kashmir. This was the agreement of 1953. I recall that in 1964 President Ayub Khan tried an opening with Sheikh Abdullah and had invited him to Pakistan. The initiative was nipped in the bud — once again by the intelligence agency of Pakistan.

With the passage of time a trend has set in for closer integration of Kashmir into the Indian fold. Since the Kashmiris have never shown much appetite for agitation or violence, the situation has remained relatively calm. On the Azad Kashmir front, it has remained tightly tied with

Pakistan. By proposing the re-division of Kashmir to its 1953 dis-empowerment, Farooq Abdullah is really trying to put the clock back. Meanwhile much water has flown down the bridge.

After initial confusion on the Indian side, the establishment has returned to its position — status quo ante. The Indian authorities are not prepared to hear any talk on autonomy — which they describe a first step towards secession and a whole chain of uncontrollable events. For instance the Assam Chief Minister Prafulla Mohanata is waxing eloquent on the question of autonomy for his area as well. The military regime in Pakistan is sitting rightly assessing the situation. Yet she cannot but be concerned for any rising of temperature in the vale of Kashmir is bound to reach Azad Kashmir as well.

What about China? She must be watching developments within Kashmir with great interest, for she has geographical and historical ties with the area. The important ties between China, and Pakistan, arising out of necessity of the time, seems to have been largely diluted. In the Kargil crisis China lent the weight of her voice in favour of a negotiated settlement.

By taking a firm stand on the question of autonomy for Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah has opened the Pandora's box. His move apparently will touch a sympathetic chord in the hearts of Kashmiris. In the long struggle of Kashmir dating back to more than half a century, the voice of the people of Kashmir has rarely been heard. Does the cry for autonomy by Farooq Abdullah signify a material change in the situation? Or is it a case of summer madness, evaporating with monsoon rains?

LETTER FROM EUROPE

All That Glitters Is Not Gold

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam writes from Madrid

More people are borrowing money to invest in the stock market. The continuously rising share prices make people feel wealthier than what they really are, hence the spending spree on consumer goods. In the US, the current account deficit has risen to a record 4.0 per cent of the GDP ... The crucial question is: What will happen if the share prices take a sharp dive?

THE Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Paris, France) and the Bank for International Settlements (Basle, Switzerland) have recently published two independent reports on world economic outlook for 2000 and beyond.

The OECD report paints an unusually rosy picture of the economic outlook for its twenty-nine member countries and some non-member countries as well. It revises its previous forecast for European Union's growth for 2000, from 2.8 per cent to 3.4 per cent. While the OECD will grow during the same period by an average of 4 per cent, the United States will surpass that figure and grow by an incredible 4.9 per cent. Spain, with its 4.3 per cent growth is expected to do better than most other European countries. Japan will be the only country among the highly industrialised nations of the world, whose prospects do not look good. While it will have a modest growth of 1.7 per cent, its unemployment rate will go up to 4.8 per cent. Its exports are showing signs of recovery but the internal consumption has not yet picked up.

Although, in some member countries inflation will raise its ugly head again (Spain: 3.7 per cent), in most others it will be contained to give an average of 2.1 per cent for the European Union.

Even the unemployment rate will get better. While Spain will have an unemployment rate of 14.1 per cent (the worst in the OECD), the average for the European Union will not exceed 6.3 per cent. In the United States, in spite of high economic growth (annualised 5.4 per cent in the first quarter of 2000) and relatively high inflation (annualised 3.9 per cent in the same period), unemployment in 2000, according to the OECD, will be held at only 4.0

per cent. The Bank for International Settlements (BIS) uses more or less the same data for its research on the economic outlook yet it reaches a rather different conclusion. In its opinion, although the current situation looks good, the future may hold unpleasant surprises. While the OECD report is very optimistic, the BIS report emphasises caution in its forecasts. It asks us not to ignore the danger signals. It insists on the need to rein in the excessive demand growth. It is worried about the overvaluation of certain assets, particularly that of stocks and shares. People, in its opinion, have been led to have a false sense of well-being and are spending income which they have not yet earned. It is a fictitious situation — a bubble, which may burst with unpredictable and, perhaps, dire consequences. It says that it is not a figment of its imagination. In order to prove its point, the BIS gives examples. The crisis in 1992 of the European Monetary System, the Tequila crisis in 1994 and 1995, the Far Eastern crisis in 1997 and the crises in the Russian Federation and Brazil in 1998 are some of the examples of economic crises that the world has gone through recently. This is true that the world economic system has been successful in recuperating stability in a relatively short period of time without great sacrifice. But the fear is that if we keep flouting the fundamentals of economics, the big bang may hit us one day so unexpectedly that it may create a major economic catastrophe in the form of a world-wide recession like that of 1929.

The BIS criticises the leveraged buy-out system. Instead of creating wealth, what it eventually does is asset-stripping. Also there is too much speculative activity in the information technology sector. Some of the recent cross-border acquisitions and mergers, lend support to this view.

After reading these two reports, one may wonder how two prestigious international organisations can draw so different conclusions from more or less the same data. Why are their readings of the situation so different? Well, a bit of background information might help us to puzzle out the causes of this difference. At the end of the Second World War, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation was set up by the Americans basically to distribute Marshall Aid among the European countries. But it also had two other objectives and they were to modernise the European economies and liberalise European trade and payments. Once its initial objectives were achieved, it was formally superseded in 1961 by the present Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. At the beginning it had only twenty members (eighteen European countries plus the United States of America and Canada). Today, there are twenty-nine members which

include Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Its primary objective is also much more ambitious — to achieve the highest possible economic growth, employment and standard of living in its member countries. It is also concerned with the flow of long-term funds to developing countries.

Although it has a Council (where often ministers of member countries sit and deliberate), an Executive committee and a huge staff, it is essentially a consultative assembly albeit a very prestigious and influential one. It is an opinion builder. It tries to influence government decisions by publishing numerous reports and by organising seminars and conferences.

On the other hand, the Bank for International Settlements is a financial institution which came into existence with very different objectives. After the end of the First World War, the allied powers encountered considerable difficulty in organising and channelling German reparations to the recipient countries. In 1930, they founded the Bank for International Settlements to supervise and organise the transfer of German reparations to the recipient countries. It became

an institution for co-operation among the central banks of the countries involved. Unlike the OECD, where often politicians represent their countries, only the governors of the central banks represent their countries in the board of the Bank for International Settlements. Gradually it also became a centre for economic and monetary research. Although its reports do not get as much publicity as those of the OECD, they are studied with extreme care by businessmen and governments because they portray the economic situation from a different perspective, i.e. the perspective of the central bankers, who play an independent role in most countries. (There was a faint hope among the founders of the bank that one day it might evolve into a world central bank.)

But the Second World War, the rise of the United States as the world's most powerful economic power, the establishment of the IMF and the IBRD changed the position of this Basle based bank completely. Its liquidation (as recommended at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944) was avoided at the last minute by its appointment as an agent of the OEEC. Although it now merely works as an agent of the European Monetary Co-operation Fund (part of the EEC), its professional reputation remains intact.

The BIS, however, is not alone in emitting these danger signals. There are many economists and financial ex-

perts on both sides of the Atlantic, who are unhappy about the stock market boom, particularly about the unprecedented surge in technology stocks. In their opinion, the share prices are overvalued, which is potentially dangerous for the economy.

More people are borrowing money to invest in the stock market. The continuously rising share prices make people feel wealthier than what they really are, hence the spending spree on consumer goods. In the US, the current-account deficit has risen to a record 4.0 per cent of the GDP. According to figures published by the US Department of Commerce, the trade deficit is increasing at an alarming rate because of accelerated consumer spending. People have become used to a false sense of wealth. Everything is based on asset values, which according to some experts may turn out to be fictitious. The crucial question is: What will happen if the share prices take a sharp dive?

Cautionary notes have also been sounded about the relative importance of the Internet in the so-called technology revolution. Internet enthusiasts compare it with inventions such as electricity, the steam engine and the telephone. I, myself, am very enthusiastic about the Internet, but do not get carried away by the recent mergers in this field, which, in my opinion, are wildly speculative and because of which a few financial sharks have made a killing. I also think that disproportionate media coverage of this phenomenon has aroused too much expectation among the would-be investors pushing share prices sky-high in this sector.

Finally, in my opinion, the OECD's enthusiastic role in promoting economic growth in its member countries is undeniable but the words of caution from the BIS also deserve to be weighed very carefully.

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Dhaka city: Relocation exercises

Sir, Japanese technical and aid assistance are welcome in solving the problems of overcrowded and over-congested Dhaka metropolis (DS July 5); as the Japanese experts solved the huge problems of Tokyo, one of the largest cities in the world. However, the administrative and infrastructural climate in an LDC is quite different.

Relocation has been tentatively proposed for several public centres such as the Dhaka Cantonment (to Savar), the Secretariat and the DU complex. In this connection it may be pointed out that the shifting of Dhaka Central Jail from the old part of the city is taking too long; as also the quick construction of the bridge nearby over the Buriganga (for connecting Zinjirra). Speedy completion of both these projects would greatly ease the traffic situation in the older part of Dhaka, which is the wholesale business zone of the city.

The shifting of Dhaka Cantonment to Savar has one weakness: there is a single road link (built on embankment) between Dhaka and Savar, with vast water bodies (low-lying ar-

reas) on both sides. Cutting, blocking or controlling this strategic road will block transportation completely, as the alternative existing route to the metropolis via Kabirpur and Tongi is too round about, unless another (military) road is available across the airport area. But the Dhaka Cantonment area can be partly vacated in phased programmes, opening alternative public routes to the airport from the city, reducing the load on the existing Airport Road.

The shifting of the Secretariat may not lighten the traffic pattern in the area, as the existing buildings (a huge complex of high-rise buildings) would be occupied by other users (for example, by the thousands of NGOs relocated from the residential zone, releasing more flats for residential rentals). The city needs a couple of more commercial areas like Motijheel/Dilkusha, in addition to the immediate creation of Garment villages outside the municipal zone (on defunct SOE land) in the greater Dhaka area, thereby releasing several thousand residential buildings.

The proposal for more double-decker buses may be examined carefully, to reduce the road surface density and the passenger density inside the buses. In fact, surface traffic

should be reduced through subway or elevated transportation and circular rail systems. Vertical utilisation of space is all right; so why not consider going underground (if the soil conditions are right, and there is no possibility of caving in due to excessive withdrawal of underground waters by the deep tube wells). The Saidabad water project may be accorded higher priority, under the circumstances.

The shifting of the Dhaka University is necessary also, to avoid political pollution; to obtain a distance ratio similar to that between London-Oxford. The Women's University may be retained at the existing site (reduced spread), and the boys may enjoy living with nature within commuting distance!

A Husnain Dhaka

in want of money the lives of the workers have become miserable.

We sympathise with the workers for their hardship but in no way we could accept their mode of protest. Earlier, they had taken similar steps and for this people suffered a lot. The worker's dispute is with the jute mill authorities then why should common people be victimised who have no part in the episode? The workers have no right to disrupt the activities of general public and we condemn the decision of setting up barricades.

We therefore, hope that the workers would act sensibly and at the same time we demand that the jute mill authorities settle the issue promptly. Why should common people suffer for their inconsiderate actions?

Nur Jahan Chittagong

Why should common people suffer?

Sir, From reports published in different newspapers, we have learnt that the workers of three jute mills — Mokbulur Rahman Jute Mill, Anowara Jute Mill and Kashed Jute Mill situated at Sitakunda, Chittagong have given ultimatum to the mill authorities that if their salaries which are due for a long period are not paid within July 17, 2000, they will put up barricades on railroads and highways for indefinite period from July 18. They further disclosed that after repeated assurances, the mill authorities failed to keep their words and

Stand-off at Chittagong port

Sir, How is it that the government cannot control the Chittagong port workers? Who is running Chittagong? The ruling party could control almost everything, except this port (the country's only major port, and a lifeline). And now the government's decision on the setting up of a private US container terminal is being disregarded even by the party chiefs of the city. Then there is continuous disruption of work on one plea or another. Who are the instigators?

This is going on for too long a period. The government must ensure transparency, and that too, before the next poll. Cer-

A MA Dhaka

JS sociology

Sir, The opposition is being advised to return in the parliament, away from street politics. But inside the House, we see MPs delivering speeches in the same old style as if addressing public meetings: thundering voice (the PA system can control volume), wild gesticulating of the arms, face and the eyes; and the stance not at all friendly or benevolent.

Why such belligerency — whom are they fighting? Not the other elected representatives of the people? Proper outward respect should be shown at peer level. If they are so strict on principle, why so many floor crossings during season (and out of season)? If a politician individually feels insecure, how can he ensure parliamentary security in his constituency? In the artificial zeal to support the party, the politicians exceed the norms of decency.

We need a new style of politics, and a new breed of politicians, who can live with the opponents right next door.

Frustrated Voter Dhaka

Road in bad shape

Sir, The road running between Islamabagh and Sabujbhang at a distance of one-

kilometre north side from the zero point of Moulvibazar district headquarters along Sylhet-Sreemangal-Dhaka Avenue is in deplorable condition. With several potholes and ditches on the lanes and water sewerage with retention walls, the road has not only turned narrow, risky and hazardous but the state has also become precarious with damages of the retention wall at the entry point from the main Avenue. As a result, even two rickshaws cannot cross each other from the opposite sides — not to speak of other vehicles. The road has acquired much importance due to establishment of a 50-bed 5-storied hospital — Badrun Nessa Private Hospital, at the mouth of Islamabagh. The road actually divides the two areas — Islamabagh and Sabujbhang from the south side of the hospital — where the road divides and runs to the south traversing Islamabagh and Sabujbhang residential area in the north touching the hospital porch. It is unfortunate that such an important road connecting a hospital is not being repaired and renovated.

Under the circumstances, we request the District Commissioner, Moulvibazar to extend his good office so that necessary steps are taken regarding the issue. At the same time, we also demand that the road be named Badrunessa Hospital Road; after the founder of the hospital, Badrunessa.

Will the authorities concerned look into the matter and do the needful?

M. A. Rub Islamabagh Road, Moulvibazar