

A Step in Right Direction

THE government's decision to institute welfare committees at the export processing zones in the country with representation from the employees and the employers is, in our view, a step in the right direction. So, we are heartened by the American Chamber of Commerce's call to the US government and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to back our government on this and put an end to the uncertainty over continuation of GSP for Bangladesh. When implemented, the arrangement would uphold labour rights and, at the same time, dispel doubts from the investors' minds over creation of Frankensteins in the name of trade unions.

Right from the start, the government has been in a dicey position, in the middle of two contrasting pulls. At one end, the US government, the ILO and AFL-CIO, the largest single labour organisation in the United States, want unconditional practice of trade unionism at the EPZs in accordance with the agreements signed in 1993 and 1995. At the other, the major stakeholders of the EPZs, investors from Japan and Korea, won't have anything to do with trade unions. The dilemma has been between the US withdrawal of the generalised system of preferences (GSP) on our products and a rollback of investment from Japan and Korea. It has been a lose-lose situation and deserved measured steps from the government to bring about a turn-around. The government may well have succeeded on that count.

A liberal democracy is professedly protective of the interests of the workers and thus, the dispute should not have arisen in the first place. Unfortunately, years of blatant politicisation and diabolically perverse trade unionism made a mockery of 'protecting the workers' rights'. The vile brand of trade unionism practised in the country has been beneficial to a handful of people and worked as their own stairway to material prosperity. While the unscrupulous few have fattened their wallets, the workers and, needless to say, the country's economy have inevitably borne the brunt.

The US government and AFL-CIO need to be appreciative of our constraints and look at the issue with dispassion and objectivity. They better listen to AmCham, which is aware of ground realities, stop arm-wrenching the government into implementing the agreements and endorse the mooted welfare committees.

No Looking Back for Biman Now

THE paralytic locking of horns between the management of Biman and its employees on the question of converting the state-owned airlines into Public Limited Company (PLC) has ended on a buoyantly harmonious note. The stand-off has been amicably settled. And what is extremely heartening to note is the formalisation of the terms of settlement through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between both sides.

The salient features of the accord sound novel, even path-breaking in our context. While Biman retains its status as corporation it will have a 'strategic partner' with 40 per cent of share of float to it under a World Bank aided privatisation plan. The radical part of it is the nine per cent share being earmarked for the employees, for the first time in the history of public sector corporations in the country. No employees will be declared surplus. As well as allaying the fear of losing job the whole lot of them are now being given a collective stake in the corporation. Both liabilities and profits will be shared by the workers depending upon how they had performed in a given financial year. This is an ace in the hole or chestnut in the fire that we have taken an unusually long time to draw. When employees are given a stake they are expected to work responsibly. For it is a 'deliver or perish,' 'punishment or reward' scenario for them.

Two other positive elements of the MOU are: (a) the employees will have a director of their own to represent them on the Biman board; and (b) they will be kept informed of the negotiations with any of the foreign airline bidding to be a strategic partner with Biman.

The MOU bears an eloquent testimony to the maturity of the workers and the flexibility of the management in Biman Bangladesh Airlines. These are worth emulating by other corporations in trouble. Rather than resting on the laurels of an accord Biman should now get its act together, improve its services with confidence in the future, and of course, implement the terms of the MOU to derive maximum benefit from it. Finding the right partner will be a crucial test that Biman must brace up to in right earnest.

Watch out for Flood

FLOOD situation in the country, especially in some northern districts, has turned serious over the past couple of days. Apart from loss of lives a huge number of people have been marooned in the affected five districts. The situation is further aggravated by erosion along the mighty Padma and Jamuna rivers which have devoured about a thousand homes and establishments, according to newspaper reports. Vast areas having been inundated in the upper catchment area of the Brahmaputra in Assam, the position downstream into Bangladesh is likely to deteriorate.

We would therefore like to raise caution for the government and its agencies to be in complete readiness for any eventuality. Let us not be caught napping when the real emergency appears. Rescue operation should start right now to move the already marooned people to higher and safer places in the five northern districts. Relief operations should also begin immediately to lessen the sufferings of the flood victims. Flood shelters have to be readied alongside food hand-outs and medicines. Make sure no one dies from starvation or malnutrition. Medical teams would need to be despatched to outlying areas on a short notice. All these measures and precautions must be taken well in time to attend to SOS calls when they start ringing.

Humility and Honesty: Great Virtues of Humanity

A few days ago, a big news came under a small headline, that too only in one or two publications. The report published related to the Prime Minister of New Zealand and his car. The car that transported the Prime Minister to a place was not spared by the traffic warden, who fined the head of government for parking his car in an unauthorized place.

About the same time, appeared the news that the driver of the British Home Minister, Jack Straw, was charged for speeding while transporting the Minister and was liable to lose his driving license. That the car was a police car and the driver was a policeman of the Special Branch did not prevent the traffic police from taking due action.

The reports may have little news value, but appear highly significant for more than one reason. Does not the Prime Minister of a rich and developed country enjoy immunity from such mundane matters as violation of traffic rules? May be, the Prime Minister did not have to pay the fine ultimately, but the fact of the matter is that in that country law had to take its own course and did not brook any obstacle on account of the position and power of the offender. Even the law of the same country must have envisaged immunity from prosecution for the Prime Minister in matters relating to any action during his legitimate discharge of functions. But knowledge of such right to immunity did not deter the warden to perform his or her own duties.

The slain Prime Minister of

What do we perceive of politicians of today? Politicians today, despite many notable exceptions, are generally seen as a group of people, who are more prone to fulfill their self-interests than to work for the common good of the people. In the matter of party mandate, they would try to work in such a way that their actions would be discriminatory, if not destructive, against other political parties. They would tend to use their prestigious office for personal aggrandizement, both for power and material benefits.

Sweden, Olof Palme, fell to the bullets of an assassin on his way home on foot with his wife following a theatrical performance. In the course of non-official business, the Swedish Prime Minister was normally seen to have shun state facilities, including transport, to which he was entitled. The great freedom fighter and founder of the Irish Republic, the late Eamon deValera, liked to travel on bicycle even after he became President. Many European and other leaders still like to use bike as a mode for short travels. I once attended a meeting on a social issue in Johannesburg in South Africa where the then Vice President (now President) Mbeki was the principal speaker. But there was no mention of Mbeki on the banner hung behind the rostrum, even though he was the Chief Guest. Several Ministers also came to the function absolutely unannounced and took their seats among the audience.

If we wish to travel far in the past, during the period of Khilafat Rashideen, the Great Caliph Umar, who ruled a vast empire, was seen to have travelled on camels sometimes with camel-boy seated on the camel and the Caliph doing the job of pulling the camel's rope as the camel-boy. Much later, the legendary Abbaside Caliph of Bagh-

dad, Haroun al Rashid, was made immortal, inter alia, on account of his habit of going out in disguise to get a first-hand knowledge about conditions of his subjects. This method of operation enabled him to punish the evil and reward the good.

What do we learn from these illustrations? Many things, pro-

without asking.

It is not practical to expect that our leaders to travel by bicycle; the question of camels does not arise in a country where camels are not available and when those are regarded by some as a religious animal, namely 'camel sharif'. Although General Ershad immediately after assuming state power in 1982 was seen to ride

became Prime Minister, the worst possible traffic jam has been experienced during her travels. Even a Minister chuckled while saying that his habit of going through red traffic lights should be interpreted as a small Ministerial privilege to which he considers himself to be entitled.

The question of violating traffic rules, causing great inconvenience and potential danger to the public in general, is not really the principal issue. The moot question is the extent to which state resources, government personnel and customary privileges are being abused by those who are in state power. During the period when we were young, in the late British and early Pakistan times, we looked upon politicians with great respect, admiration and pride. They were father figures, leaders of the society and trustworthy persons engaged, as per their ability, in work designed to promote interests of the people in general. They were normally goaded by some ideals or specific cause, besides being urged to fulfill their duties as mandated by their respective political parties and as per pledges made to their constituents.

What do we perceive of politicians of today? Politicians today, despite many notable exceptions, are generally seen as a group of people, who are more prone to

fulfill their self-interests than to work for the common good of the people. In the matter of party mandate, they would try to work in such a way that their actions would be discriminatory, if not destructive, against other political parties. They would tend to use their prestigious office for personal aggrandizement, both for power and material benefits. Difference between their past and present wealth is a matter that would raise many a eyebrow and give rise to numerous questions that are hardly difficult to answer. To be elected to a public office today, whether at national or local level, people say you need more money and muscle power. Many government officers are often swayed during elections, either by intimidation or enticement, to act illegally for promoting ruling party's interests.

Corruption has been endemic and pervaded the entire society. People feel more insecure for their life and property now than ever before. Business is down, unemployment is up. There is a feeling of utter disappointment and fright in the minds of people which is easily perceptible. In such a dismal portrayal of the present situation who can raise the people from the quagmire of despair and fear? They are the people themselves, who must muster enough courage and strength to guide their leaders to tread on the path of truth, honesty, dedication, humility and other human virtues. That is the only way for salvation, if not survival, of the nation.

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Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

vided we acknowledge these traits as human virtues worthy of pursuit. These characteristics show a commendable precept and practice of human equality irrespective of one's high and mighty position. These manifest an ardent desire for people not to abuse state resources and power which are, in fact, transitory. Above all, these teach the great human qualities of modesty, humility and compassion, which make people lofty and great in the eyes of beholders. Greatness, for them, does not need to be acquired; it is thrust upon them

bicycle to go to his office in Dhaka cantonment, the practice was discontinued soon after allowing photo opportunities. The late President Ziaur Rahman used to travel on foot for miles in villages, accompanied by his officers most of whom appeared to have followed the Chief under duress by subjecting themselves to serious physical discomfort. On the other hand, our Prime Minister promised not to stand on protocol to block traffic during her travels within the city when he would be Prime Minister. Alas, after she

LETTER FROM AMERICA

It is Not up to Yasir Arafat to Make Confessions on Jerusalem

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Who says Arafat has not compromised? The original Palestinian demand was for all of East Jerusalem. They have now agreed to cede control of the Jewish and the Armenian Quarters of East Jerusalem as well as the Western (Wailing) Wall to the Israelis. The Palestinians only want control over the Muslim and the Christian Quarters and the Haram Al-Sharif ("Temple Mount") compound.

day Saladin. To which a senior Rabbi at a New York Synagogue, David H. Lincoln, replied: "Yasir Arafat is greeted in Gaza as a new Saladin, and Israelis, including Mr. Oz, worry that he may indeed be so. But surely we should be celebrating this turn of events. Saladin was a noble (Kurdish) Islamic leader who issued a manifesto in 1190 inviting Jewish resettlement of Jerusalem, from which Jews had been expelled during the rule of the Crusaders. Jews everywhere have held Saladin in high esteem for his respect for holy places of our religion and for his encouragement for a resurgence of Jewish life in the area."

Who says Arafat has not compromised? The original Palestinian demand was for all of East Jerusalem. They have now agreed to cede control of the Jewish and the Armenian Quarters of East Jerusalem as well as the Western (Wailing) Wall to the Israelis. The Palestinians only want control over the Muslim and the Christian Quarters and the Haram Al-Sharif ("Temple Mount") compound. Let us not forget that a significant proportion of the Palestinian population, including Arafat's wife Suha and the Palestinian spokeswoman Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, are Christians.

The writer has first hand knowledge of how inconvenient it is for Muslims to enter and pray in the Haram Al-Sharif under Israeli sovereignty. As the writer and his family attempted to enter the compound three years ago, the Israeli soldiers that guard all the entrances asked us whether

we were Muslims. Then they demanded to see our passports. The local Muslims complain that it is difficult to enter the compound for all prayers; only during *Juma* and *Eid* prayers are all Muslims allowed free entry. As we found out, during *Juma* prayers the men pray at the Al Aqsa mosque and the women pray at the adjacent Dome of the Rock. The late Muhammad Assad, a renowned Muslim scholar of Austrian heritage, made an infallible argument why Jerusalem should be under Muslim control. Simply put, since only the Muslims revere Prophets Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them) equally, only they are religion-bound to protect all the holy sites that commemorate the three prophets. Yet the Jews want to control Haram Al-Sharif. Why?

Jews believe that the Haram Al-Sharif stands on the Temple Mount, Judaism's lost temple. As far as the writer knows there are no archaeological evidence of such a claim (a la Babri mosque and the birthplace of Ram). Jewish extremists do hope to some day build their temple on Haram Al-Sharif. In the 1980s, some Jewish extremists unsuccessfully attempted to blow up the Haram Al-Sharif at night. (That is why immediately after *Isha* prayer, these days everyone is escorted out of the Haram Al-Sharif compound by the Israeli soldiers.) Muslims of the world will not take kindly to such unholy dreams. Who can forget that Benjamin Netanyahu's opening of a tunnel under walls of the Haram Al-Sharif in 1996 almost triggered a war between

the Palestinians and the Israelis! Although the West and the Israelis may use Yasir Arafat as a punching bag, they will not be able to force him to concede the Haram Al-Sharif to Israeli sovereignty. It is not up to Yasir Arafat. It is up to the Muslim world. And how can the Muslim world give up Al Aqsa mosque ("the furthest mosque") without disobeying Allah (SWT) and the teachings of the holy Quran?

The most frightening episode of the Camp David occurred when Prime Minister Ehud Barak almost choked to death on a peanut! For forty seconds the Prime issues such as Jerusalem will be difficult, but not impossible to bridge. One idea that Presi-

dent Clinton floated was to build a bridge between the Palestinian areas and the Haram Al-Sharif so that the Palestinians did not have to go through Israeli checkpoints as they entered their holy places. If he can sign a deal, Prime Minister Barak will have a much better chance of getting it approved by the peace-prone Israeli public than by the fractious and dysfunctional Israeli parliament. President Clinton decessises such as Jerusalem will be difficult, but not impossible to bridge. One idea that Presi-

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President Clinton deserves praise for his mammoth effort at peace-making. The bad news for the President is that the centuries-old Palestinian-Jewish conflict does not lend itself to timelines. It is unlikely that the conflict will be resolved within five-and-a-half months that the President has remaining in office.

How off target pundits can be! Everyone forecast catastrophe if Barak and Arafat failed to make peace at Camp David. The reason they extended the summit was because they were afraid to return home empty-handed, the experts stressed. The sad truth is exactly the opposite. There will be a blood bath not after a summit's failure, but after a compromise-ridden agreement is signed!

A Hidden Agenda

by Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal

The policy-makers must realise that the question of estimating and proving the gas reserves is a matter of professional skill and understanding, not an issue of bureaucratic dispensation. Let's not confuse the difference between the two and let this country be not led to the path of disaster through wrong decisions.

RECENTLY, the media, quoting Indian Petroleum Ministry officials, came up with an interesting report on an on-shore gas transit originating in Iran and terminating in India. Earlier in April this year, sources in India expressed their concern because the military government in Pakistan was hesitant to allow a gas pipeline through the country's rugged terrain.

Apparently, there hasn't been any official communication either from Iran or from Pakistan. The story goes that the current military government of Pakistan has neither approved nor discarded the prospects for a safe passage of the would-be long-distance high-pressure gas pipeline through Pakistan. Rather, the attraction for high transit fees may have proved too tempting to resist for the shaky government. One spokesman from Pakistan, however, said that it was too early to say when construction of the pipeline would begin. As a third-party business, the issue has remained gaseous for nearly two years.

Interestingly, the report also reveals that there are plans for five pipelines to import oil and gas to India from the wells of central Asia, Myanmar and Bangladesh, besides Iran and Oman. If it is true, India is likely to become one of the largest Asian importers of hydrocarbons, probably by 2005.

Incidentally, India's existing proven reserves of natural gas alone is almost three times higher than the proven/recoverable reserves in Bangladesh. Prospects for finding more oil and gas onshore and offshore is very high because of higher geological potential and much higher rate of exploration in India. Yet, like the United States, India's major concern is also to conserve their own gas reserves from fast depletion. They seem to have slowed down their own production of gas and seriously seeking to import hydrocarbons from elsewhere. Bangladesh, too, is trying to address the most pressing problem at hand, which, at times, the international oil companies and their cronies do not take kindly.

In Bangladesh, a reasonably acceptable Reserve to Production

Ratio (R/P Ratio) of natural gas as a clean and efficient fuel for generation of electricity and feed stock for fertiliser continues to provide a positive window of opportunity for the present generation. However, one must be cautious about high production and higher depletion of gas, because natural gas is the only commercial energy source available in the country, which must be consumed judiciously. Wild guesses on gas reserves are floated without any valid scientific basis, which confuses the common citizens of the country.

Apparently, there is a number game going on. A section of vested interest groups patronise the 50 to 100 TCF number although the only authentic source in the country, i.e. Petrobranga, repeats itself by saying that the estimated reserves is less than 10 TCF! It is indeed a pity that the professional organisation has not made any serious attempt since 1989 to establish and improve the proven/recoverable number of natural gas as per international oil field practice. This is extremely necessary in the interest of the country to attract trade and investment and, above all, to bolster the image of the country.

It is however alleged that instead of finding a strong niche for the country's export promotion, secret attempts are made by the bureaucracy to export gas in the mode and manner prescribed by the international oil companies. Although a flurry of diplomatic communications is on between Dhaka and Washington over the visit of our prime minister to the United States, hopefully in the far end of the year, many Bangladeshis would now feel relieved because the self-styled Gas Export Promotion (GEP) chief has finally left Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's gas reserves position and Petrobranga's firm stand on a fixed number resembles a folklore about an innocent girl and her parents. During the process of negotiation for the girl's marriage, the parents informed the would-be bridegroom's family that the age of the girl was sixteen. Somehow the marriage negotiation failed. Almost five years later, the families met again. On an inquiry, an

uncle of the would-be bride's replied, in unequivocal terms, "She is sixteen and will remain so until she is married off."

Much to the dissatisfaction of the people of Bangladesh, the authorities in general and Petrobranga in particular did not make any serious attempt to go through the standard drill of pursuing the acceptable scientific practice and establish an affordable number on gas reserves for decision making. Rather, the situation has turned bad to worse in the absence of a firm number on gas reserves. Therefore, absolutely necessary is an immediate appraisal of natural gas initially in-place (GIIP) and commercially proven/recoverable reserves through internationally-reputed independent certifying companies and not through the United States Geological Survey (USGS) for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, the resource study by the USGS may continue as deskwork. But many still have a hunch that the current resource assessment study by the USGS has a 'hidden agenda' and the country might get entrapped if the government relies fully on the study. It is a pity that we don't take lessons from the success stories of Malaysia and Indonesia rather we talk about Bolivia or Argentina. Today Petrobranga of Malaysia and Pertamina of Indonesia have shown the path of economic developments for their respective countries through proper development and utilisation of hydrocarbon resources. It is indeed unfortunate that Petrobranga has not developed BAPEX with an open mind and has not allowed its own subsidiary outfit to exhibit their professional skills. The policy-makers must realise that the question of estimating and proving the gas reserves is a matter of professional skill and understanding, not an issue of bureaucratic dispensation. Let's not confuse the difference between the two and let this country be not led to the path of disaster through wrong decisions.

The author is a retired Additional Secretary to the Government and former chairman, Bangladesh Power Development Board.

To the Editor ...

Reforming the police

Sir, Although government has given all the emphasis on modernizing the police force, there seems to be a lot lacking in all respects. However, it has to be appreciated that there has been a very substantial raise in budget allocation for the police force in recent years. But has there been any substantial improvement in the performance of the police? In fact, there has been a marked deterioration in the service resulting in increased corruption, hijack, loot, extortion, rape, murder etc. Even in Dhaka City there have been increasing cases of assaulting of women including acid throwing but have the police been really serious to check all these?

There could be a number of factors behind the deterioration of law and order in the country but no one would deny that the role of police is one of them. Besides, the role of the political parties could also be reckoned as substantial. It is a fact that our police generally don't play the expected role but one of the main reasons of this negligence is they are not allowed to do so in many cases by powerful political elements. Besides, while the police reportedly blame the courts for letting off the criminals on bail, the latter blame baseless charges framed by the police and lack of evidence etc. All these boil down to a total lack of accountability on the part of the police as well as the lower judiciary including the

magistracy. They all seem to be non-challant about what the consequences would be due to their negligence and how the society at large is going to be harmed.

The need for accountability has to be stressed along with the need for training and professionalism. A policeman or a police sergeant/sub-inspector being given only six months' basic training and taught only bits of law leave him with a lot of confusion and he is not actually aware of what he should do. As such, the basic training for all including the police officers and junior officers should be a full one year as in the case of ASPs. Here again it has to be ensured that the selection and recruitment process are carried out objectively and not just for money as is generally alleged. Besides, training at various police institutes including 'Sarda' should be fair and the training should be so planned that everyone really passes all the tests/exams and none is passed for 'fees' as is the practice in many cases as reported in the newspapers.

The allegations that posting, training, promotion and even routine leave is not possible without money paid in advance for the same have to be disproved by setting examples to the contrary and not just refusing. Any average citizen's experience of going to a police station and meeting the officials there is still as unpleasant as it was ages ago. Why? What have all the brilliant stalwarts done to improve this

situation? Just asking to be good and honest while demanding huge routine revenue from each police station every month is not enough. But how long could a service continue to go on doing disservice to themselves as well the nation? Not only law and order, the whole nation's socio-economic development depends on the role of the police because no nation can prosper in a chaotic, lawless condition. It is time to wake up and bring dynamic leadership to change things for the better.

FAhmed
Dhaka

Why not accept the challenge?

Sir, Former president Ershad has publicly declared (DS, July 26), that if returned to power, his government would free the country from terrorism in three months, stop extortion in one month and remove traffic jam in one week.

Has the present government the will and the means to take up this challenge, without resorting to political excuses (as usual)? Most unlikely, from what the public has seen in four years of the current governance. As citizens of the country, we all seek deliverance from controllable evil through our government, and from uncontrollable evil through divine mercy.

AMA
Dhaka