

NEW YEAR SPECIAL

FOCUS

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

by Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

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scholars? So, have we made progress? You bet we have.

In fact, in this century that saw us progress more rapidly technologically than perhaps all previous centuries combined, we also slaughtered more humans than previous butchers had ever dreamed possible.

For evidence, we don't need to go too far. During our own liberation war in 1971, people were lined up and made to run over open ground into waves of machine gun fire. Others were forced to stand at the edge of mass open graves as they listened to the gun bolts sliding back behind them. Entire villages were set ablaze as if they were medieval torches. Thousands were allowed to starve to death while thousands more were marched into something the 20th century can surely call its own: the human death factory.

Too many of us still too often exhibit a callous disregard for life. Maybe part of it is because our individual lives are short, and that despite all our technological trappings, we aren't so

different from our forebears. We find our joys and sorrows in the moments of our daily lives, just as they did. And we don't always learn what we should, just as they didn't.

The problem as we move into the new millennium, however, is that our certain order will become more precarious than ever and that the day after tomorrow may be far different from the day before yesterday. So this is as good a time as any to take a look forward.

One hundred years ago, many people living at the end of another century believed themselves at the pinnacle of civilisation. They believed more progress had been made in their century than in the previous nineteen hundred years combined. And they were right. Some even had the good sense to worry that those developments could lead to devastating consequences in the coming century. They were right, too.

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LET THERE BE LIGHT
IN EVERYONE'S LIFE

Star photo by A.K.M Mohsin

A Few Thoughts for the New Year

by Harun ur Rashid

It seems certain: for a country like Bangladesh to thrive in the age of information technology, its citizens must be flexible, skilled, creative, cosmopolitan and preferably conversant in English... It is desirable that one may approach the New Year with optimism. Nothing is easy in this world. One hopes that the future will be marked with a strong underpinning of fairness and justice in all human activities.

events of public importance will occur during 2001.

First, the New Year ushers in an election year. Given the political temperature of major political parties in the country it would be an exhilarating year. Whenever it may be held the election will be a hotly contested one. With the election, comes the "big money" that will play a major role during the election campaign. In the US one Senate candidate in New Jersey spent about US\$57 million dollars to win the recent election. In Bangladesh the amount that will be spent will pale into insignificance compared to that spent in the US. But in the Bangladesh context it will be 'big money'.

Political campaigners, like military generals, always prepare for the campaign on the basis of the endlessly re-examined lessons of the previous one. The professionals will maintain that a winning campaign is all about better organisation, stricter discipline, and never being knocked off course by the media, events or opponents. Election campaign often is ruthless and controlling and the professionals believe that this is the only way to win an election. Female voters are likely to be targeted this time because their participation in the election is believed to be much higher in numbers than that of the males. The ultimate jury of course, is the voter.

The only way to get election advertising across the country is to pay for the pamphlets and banners of a political party, image building of the candidate and "hire" the supporters. Many poor people earn more money during election campaign and they look forward to it. For many candidates, the political press is seen either as an enemy or a friend. Much of the campaign may be directed to woo the print media by a political party.

Second, the matter that is likely to attract the attention during 2001 appears to be the fate of the condemned prisoners who were found guilty in the Fusesome murder of Bangabandhu. The case is yet to be heard by a Third Judge in the High Court and then by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. Almost every one is under suspense about the final outcome.

Third, the Non-Aligned Summit will be held in Dhaka. This has been a great honour for Bangladesh. More than 100 heads of state/government are likely to participate the conference to re-define the directions

of the Movement for the 21st century. Dhaka will be the focus of the media of the world during the conference.

In world affairs, it is argued that there are more unknowns under US foreign policy of the Bush Presidency. There is a view that tensions may increase in the Middle East and in Asia-Pacific region. It is believed that both incoming Secretary of State, General Colin Powell (63) and National Security Adviser, Ms. Condoleezza Rice (46) are inclined to see things in black and white.

It is reported that General Powell (a Gulf War hero) warned Iraqi President that the new administration would work to "re-energise" sanctions against Baghdad and was prepared to "confront" the Iraqi leader. Dr. Rice sees China as a "potential threat" to stability in the Asia-Pacific region and in her view the new administration should never be afraid to face Beijing when "our interests collide". It is argued that Clinton administration's strategic engagement with China had confused and alienated Washington's regional allies (Japan is reportedly one of them).

Both Powell and Rice are in favour of the need for a missile defence shield and if it is pursued, Russia and a few European countries that are opposed to it may see deterioration of friendly relations in the Trans Atlantic alliance.

In South Asia, India is likely to gain much from Bush's foreign policy. India will be perceived as a counter-weight to China by the US. Therefore it is likely that US-India strategic relations will be much closer than before. India's growing strength will be galling to Pakistan and a regional arms race may begin. Arms race means to ask the tax payers for more money to produce or procure more lethal weapons systems, ignoring the poverty alleviation programmes. This might put the South Asian region in a tense, fluid and unpredictable situation, already it remains volatile because of the Kashmir dispute.

In Africa, the cycle of violence may not abate in Congo, Sierra Leone and Angola. The initiative of peace keeping force by the UN may decline because of the paucity of UN funds. There is a view that under the new administration of the US, even humanitarian assistance may be rejected unless there appears to be a "clear American interest" at stake. US intervention in

such crisis could be rare.

In many situations the UN suffers from inaction because of its shortage of funds. It is to be seen whether the Congress under the Bush administration pays the outstanding debt to the UN. There is a view that the Bush administration may intervene without UN's approval if the situation is perceived to be of national interest to the US. Many in the new administration appear to be of the view that what is good for America is good for the rest of the world.

On the "bread and butter" issue, there will be an insistence to commence the global trade talks under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by the developed countries. The talks will attract the protesters who perceive that WTO is a vehicle for corporate hegemony and under WTO rules trade is not fair. Reduction of the causes of global warming will increasingly be an issue for all nations and the non-governmental organisations will press for an agreed formula to implement the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Globalisation invokes four "mantras": free trade, deregulation, privatisation and "commodification" (meaning that even the genetic basis of life can be bought and sold). The economic benefits of globalisation have not reached all countries. Some argue that globalisation is a techno-trap and the supporters of it do not want mobility of labour but only capital around the world. The New Year may see more entrenched position for and against globalisation. However economically, service industries underpinned by information technology and telecommunications will continue to dominate the world.

There will be emphasis on the protection of human rights. Promotion of dignity of a human being will continue to be the guiding principle for all nations, at least in public. Instability, violence and rebellion stem from the actions of those who ignore or scorn human rights. Strategies, such as opportunity, empowerment and security from poor people's vulnerability (sickness, crop failure, natural disasters etc) will be dish out as recipe to developing countries by the aid giving agencies.

It seems certain: for a country including Bangladesh to thrive in the age of information technology, its citizens must be flexible, skilled, creative, cosmopolitan and preferably conversant in English.

As the saying goes whatever will be will be in 2001 and therefore it is desirable that one may approach the New Year with optimism. Nothing is easy in this world. One hopes that the future will be marked with a strong underpinning of fairness and justice in all human activities.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Bangladesh : The Year in Retrospect

by Mansoor Mamoon

Standing at the threshold of 2001 Bangladeshis will naturally be thinking how the New Year will fare for the country. In all probability it will be a litmus test for the survival of democracy in Bangladesh. The year 2001 is the election year and much will depend on how fairly and peacefully the hustings are conducted.

signal to the import-based fragile economy. In foreign relations, however, Bangladesh's spectacular gains are that for the second time it occupied its seat as a non-permanent member in the United Nations Security Council and President Clinton as the first US President undertook a brief visit to Dhaka and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a return official visit. To the jubilation of the cricket-loving masses Bangladesh got its much-vaunted test playing status.

Virtually throughout the year the conflict between the Executive and the higher Judiciary centering the appeal on the death reference of Bangladesh's founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman murder case had been the talk of the country. The conflict persisted from the beginning of the year when judges felt embarrassed to hear the appeal to the end when the High Court division of the Supreme Court gave a split verdict. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's remark in course of an interview with BBC Bangla Service that criminals get shelter of the judiciary agitated the highest professional body of the lawyers who filed a contempt case against her and the High Court asked the PM to be cautious in passing such sweeping remarks against the judiciary.

Judiciary also attracted public attention due to resignation of two High Court judges. For the first time in the annals of Bangladesh a judge had to tender his resignation centring a tape scandal in which he alleged to have telephonic conversation with former President and Jatiya Party Chief H M Ershad over the issue of bail in a corruption case. The other judge (Justice Kazi Shafi Uddin Ahmed) resigned in protest against superseding him and elevating his juniors to the Appellate Division blaming the incidence as 'an example of politicisation of the judiciary'. The Judiciary also came into conflict with the country's print media and contempt cases were filed against several national dailies for what has been termed as 'contemptuous reporting'. Concerns were voiced from both

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