

People's right to know

Renewing the old, pledging the new

As we renew our pledge to be "An Independent Voice" we take on the additional commitment to fight for the "People's Right to Know."

Ten years ago we started on our uncertain but determined journey with the pledge of serving our readers "without fear or favour". We promised not only to be "An Independent Voice" but also a patriotic voice upholding the ideals of our Liberation War, a concerned voice for the poor, a conscientious voice for the oppressed, a voice of moderation in face of extreme provocation, of unity in the face of divisiveness, of national purpose in the face of directionless leadership, of constructive criticism and of building a democratic, just, productive and modern Bangladesh. We said in our first editorial that "we will be anything but neutral between good and evil, justice and injustice, right and wrong, regardless of positions assumed by political parties whether in power or in the opposition. No politician will be able to take this paper for granted; but no one will be given cause to doubt our fairness." To what extent we have succeeded only our readers can tell.

However, today we reiterate our original pledge to be "An Independent Voice". But with the change of time and the wind of democratisation that has swept the world we take on an additional pledge to fight for "People's Right to Know". Too much is still shrouded in official secrecy in this country. Though the Constitution gives us the right to know, yet practically nothing is made public on demand. Information continues to be imparted as and when it is the pleasure of the government to do so, and that also comes tailored to suit its propaganda purposes. There is no accountability in the real sense of the term anywhere in practice in our governmental structure. Forget the rights of individual citizens, the press as the Fourth Estate and as an integral part of democracy, is not given access to any information as a matter of practice. What goes in the name of occasional official 'press conferences' is an exercise in orchestrated information with very little scope for the independent journalists to play any role. The parliamentary sub-committees have begun this task in a limited sense. But as their sessions are not open to the press or to the public it does not serve the purpose of public's right to know. We pledge to fight for a Freedom of Information Act in line with the recommendation of the Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) and demand that this be made into an election pledge by the two major political parties.

From today "People's Right to Know" will form a part of our masthead to remind our readers about this inalienable right of their's. We consider this "Right" to lie at the centre of the process of accountability and transparency of any government. No administration how ever well meaning can match the rigour and discipline of the one which is governed by a law that makes it mandatory to inform the public about all its activities. The general public as the ultimate 'master' in a democracy must have access to everything that a government or a public functionary does. Except for special topics concerning national security, everything else must be in the public domain. This is the best guarantee against corruption, wastage, over spending, abuse of power, nepotism and inefficiency. We urge the rest of mass media, especially the press, to join us in this fight for "People's Right to Know."

HARUN UR RASHID

THE 31st annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, the Swiss Alpine ski resort near the Austrian border, will end today (January 30). Davos is not only high in altitude but also far away from Swiss cities and is an ideal place for discussions in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. One can say that it is a place far 'from the maddening crowd.'

The idea of the annual session of the World Economic Forum in Davos is to discuss in depth a few global contemporary economic issues. The Forum was initiated by a German academic Professor Klaus Schwab to provide an opportunity for 'head to head' meeting between world's political and business leaders. The meetings of the WEF during the '90s gained prestige and high profile in world affairs.

The participation in the meeting is by invitation only. Business leaders have to pay to attend the meeting. The fees are reported to be reasonably high. It always has attracted government leaders that in turn pull like magnets the business and corporate leaders to attend the meeting. It seems now that the standing of a business or corporation depends on whether its head/chief executive officer attends the WEF or not. Since it is an annual get-together for government and business leaders, they are able to exchange views on the burning economic issues of the day and the future direction of the world economy.

The WEF selects usually a theme for each annual session and is unique in the sense that the discussions are held in an informal manner and with candidness, followed by questions and answers. Often the questions from the audience are pointed and can become uncomfortable to the speakers.

This year 35 heads of government were reported to have been listed among 3,000 or more participants at the WEF. In 1990 Bangladesh's then Vice-President (in charge of industry ministry) participated in the meeting at the invitation of the WEF. This year the South African President Thabo Mbeki, the Director General of the World Trade Organisation, the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan and the Oil Minister of Saudi Arabia are the star participants. Last year President Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair attended the meeting. Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had been a regular participant in the meeting.

This year the meeting of the WEF is taking place in the backdrop of increasing uncertainty about the slowdown of the US economy that impacts on the global economy. The range of subjects included for discussion is varied and interesting, such as "Hard or soft landing;

If the WEF can sensitise the fact that business cannot operate without moral considerations and should provide a platform for bridge building between the haves and the have-nots, I would suggest that the WEF has scored a great success. The WEF meeting should be perceived not merely about economics but about development and human rights.

impact on the global economy" or "Quantum Physics might improve your life" or "how would Aristotle run your organisation?"

The WEF appears to be disappointed that no representative from the Bush administration was reported to be present at the meeting to discuss the pace of economic slowdown, the subject that attracted the prime attention of the participants this year. However, the WEF appears to be pleased that many non-governmental organisations including the heads of Greenpeace and Amnesty International attended the meeting. Their



Movers and shakers of the world's economy

participation helps to remove the impression that the WEF is an exclusive club for the rich and powerful.

It was reported that there were demonstrations at the meeting although the Swiss government mobilised 300 civilian police and up to 600 soldiers to deal with the demonstrations at the site. The demonstrations were staged reportedly against the primary motivation of profit of the multi-national corporations or businesses at the expense of all other considerations including the welfare of the population of the poor countries.

The critics say that year after year the WEF participants meet but there is hardly any change in the global

economic environment. They allege that the speakers usually make rhetorical statements and declare pious wishes at these meetings that have no impact on the ground. Some say that it is a huge gabfest and no concrete actions follow thereafter. The critics believe that the WEF ignores the issue of domination of the multi-nationals over the global economy to the detriment of the mass of world's population.

It is argued that globalisation of high-tech economy has been reducing the sovereign power of all nations in three distinct ways: a) trade liberalisation promotes

access of foreign products to local markets, with gradual elimination of indigenous products, b) de-regulation allows foreign capital in and out of a country without notice and c) exploitation of resources of developing countries, faster than nature can re-make or restore (experts say that every year the world burns as much fossil fuel as the earth produced in almost a million years).

It is alleged that globalisation has promoted a uniform operating system among nations and made national borders disappear. The competition has become so fierce that the industries of the developing

countries are unable to compete with those of giant corporations and as a result the indigenous industries gradually cease their existence. The global merger of wave of the past few years affecting banks, airlines, pharmaceuticals and many others has virtually created global monopoly and the people of the developing countries are being dictated to what they can eat, use or buy by the giant corporations.

Many accuse the WEF of being a silent spectator to the unfair structure of the world economy including those of the global trade and financial institutions. They believe that the WEF needs to address the underlying causes of poverty if it hopes to make a difference to the world's poorest countries. They strongly believe that globalisation must have a human face and the WEF needs to underscore the dimension of morality into globalisation of economy. In essence economy and ethics must go hand in hand.

There are certain fundamentals that have to be understood. Six billion people live on the planet now and three billion live on under \$2 dollars a day. And 1.2 billion live on under \$1 dollar a day. People in the developing world now number 4.8 billion and in the next 25 years there will be 2 billion more people coming onto the planet and virtually all of that 2 billion will live in the developing countries. The people of the world live as part of a global community. This is not some sort of strange philosophy this is reality. The issue of what happens in a country that is not doing well can influence in many ways a developed country, by civil wars, by immigration, by crime and by terrorism.

The critics of the policies of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) organised a simultaneous counter-meeting in Brazil on the same dates as the WEF meeting to give expressions to their thoughts on the negatives of globalisation. They want to send a message to the global institutions for new directions.

I would argue that the WEF may bring about through discussions at its annual meetings an understanding on the participants that effective and equitable economic structure and policies are to be developed on a global scale. Furthermore if the WEF can sensitise the fact that business cannot operate without moral considerations and should provide a platform for bridge building between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', I would suggest that the WEF has scored a great success. The WEF meeting should be perceived not merely about economics but about development and human rights.

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

The how and why behind the special supplement

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

Normally one would have expected this to be an explanatory head-piece to the 100-page pull-out Special Supplement that the readers are getting today alongside the daily issue. But we are making the exception of writing about the supplementary publication on this post-editorial page of our regular issue having been propelled to it by an overriding consideration, which is this: since some of the policy directions this paper is set to take from this point on after its tenth birth anniversary are reflected on the pages of the special supplement we have taken the opportunity of sharing a glimpse of those with our readers, quite relevantly we think, through these regular columns.

The fresh look or hue the newspaper takes on a new format from today itself also made it necessary that we spelled out the policy facet at some length here on the post-editorial page.

That said, we unwind on the supplement with a flashback going down the lane in order to enable the readers to grasp what went into its making. Last October we decided to adopt the Modernising Bangladesh theme amidst a popping of phrases like 'missing scientific temper' or 'our being stuck on the sidelines of global mainstream' for our special supplement to mark the tenth anniversary celebrations of this newspaper which begin today. We had to be clear in our mind from the very outset as to what the thrusts and contents of the supplement would be. This was needed to brief the writers about our requirements as clearly as we could so that

what eventually came out of the mill would be doing justice to the theme.

In a broad sense, the conceptual clarity was necessitated by the sheer vision of modernising a whole country its framework of attitudes and the systems of polity, governance, law, judiciary, education, technology, economy, banking, business, administration, environment and even foreign relations. The critical words were to visualise a pattern of emphases and put it on the road-map with our focus transfixed on it so as to be able to ensure an appropriate and fulsome treatment of that apparently unwieldy theme for the supplement.

We decided early in the day that it would be no use describing the failed shots taken at attitudinal or systemic reforms, because it will only add to the sum-total of despondency which has been too much of a psychic drag already on the nation's intellectual resources. Something original, novel and ground-breaking had to be derived from the supplement lest it made drab and purposeless reading.

We could not be hare-brained in visualising a modernity of the upstartish variety taking a jaunty flight away from the moorings of our heritage. We would settle for nothing short of substance in modernity rather than form.

As the modernising Bangladesh theme exercised our mind more and more and we began bouncing ideas with the writers by way of soliciting their contributions for the supplement, the true meaning of the conventional wise-cracks, such as, 'brain rotting, what remains of the body

and soul' or 'it is in the head that a battle is either lost or won' started impacting rather palpably on us. That was all very good, pertinent and edifying as well, but we refused to be entrapped in the lore of picturesque phraseologies. We just took a mental note of our extremely unscientific traits self-contentment with a minimalist ambition level, parochialism, clanishness, partisanism, fierce sense of self-righteousness, lack of consideration for others but violently sympathetic for accident victims, unsolicited heroics, everybody trying to be leader, none willing to be led and that was that. Then we moved on to improvise a way out of that spider's web. We knew that such negative attitudes could not be simply wished away by the antic of a magic wand; nothing short of a social reform movement could perhaps help us transform into a constructive frame of mind; but there, too, not without an incipient danger of some form of orthodoxy lurking at the corner.

To our understanding, most of our backwardness stems from the fact that unlike in the advanced parts of the world not necessarily in the far-out Europe or the USA but nearer home in South East Asia our thought-process and service delivery systems are heavily tilted towards the elite with the average man or woman basically dumped on the sidelines of national consciousness and dynamics. We need not elaborate on this point any more than merely highlighting the smug complacency frequently observed on the part of the power supply authority that so long as they kept supplying electricity to people who matter they could treat the hysterically

accused loadshedding in other areas with complete disdain and impunity. This instance of a raw deal to public good can be multiplied for most other areas of public service

And the average man's life can not get a break so long as we fail to improve the system, both in its composite manifestation as well as at the level of institutions which are either rotten to the core or just simply dysfunctional.

That's why we tried to have our specialist writers address the central problems in the political, electoral, economic, educational, healthcare and international arenas and suggest remedial actions in the light of insights they have gained over time into those critical domains.

Two of the other objectives that we set out to achieve through the special supplement related to: (a) giving enough reason for the youngsters to feel beholden to the country and not leave it in a huff; and (b) stirring up the imagination of expatriate Bangladeshi communities to invest more of their money and energy in the programmes designed for the upliftment of their homeland. A fusion between their interests and those of the local private enterprise will be most desirable. We are waiting for this to happen in the near future. Our efforts in bringing out the special 10th anniversary supplement will have succeeded if the goals we had set for ourselves through this undertaking would start bearing fruits sooner than later.

The author is Associate Editor, The Daily Star

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Promises, promises

Politicians don't suffer when there is a hartal, the poor do. Politicians have police escorts in front and behind their cars. But the masses have to ride rickshaws and even during the hartal, they have to find a way to do their daily shopping. The politicians have well stocked freezers, but people who are poor are not so lucky. Politics in Bangladesh is the worst politics I have ever seen. The Prime Minister was in power for five years during which time she has done nothing and now that elections are coming up, she is promising us the moon. Why has she not done all this until now and how can I believe that she will keep to her promise this time. I think it's time for us to avoid politicians Don't believe anything they promise.

Shahabuddin
Maryland, USA

Withdraw consultant

After the devastating cyclone of 1999, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) launched an extensive rehabilitation programme. The Coastal Embankment Rehabilitation Project (CERP) now forms the core of these efforts. The Bangladesh Water Development Board, responsible for the project, established Project Implementation Units in Chittagong. The Commission of the European Communities has appointed Jaakko Poyry Consulting OY (Finland) as the Consultants, in association with local consultants to assist in supervising the project.

The Expatriate consultant of CERP, has not been satisfactory professionally. The EU had to debar the NGO working in Sandwip,

because the consultant passed premature information to the EU. Forestation in one area has been disappearing in the absence of the NGO. The consultant has been giving donors inadequate and misleading information. All this is having a negative impact on project implementation. This project is very vital for the entire nation and the consultant should be withdrawn immediately without causing further damage.

Staff of BWDB
Bangladesh.

Honesty is the only policy

The government can improve the law and order situation by just being honest themselves and by not taking bribes, by refusing to take "ghush", that is all. They should think of the people and the same goes for the opposition. If they truly love Sonar Bangla, they will do so.

Tanvirul Islam
Kharkov, Ukraine

Glorify our national mosque

Baitul Mukarram is a Dhaka landmark that deserves better attention. The whole complex badly needs a facelift. The building needs refurbishing, the compound should be cleared of accumulated garbage and provision for regular cleaning of the premises should be ensured. Installation of spotlights will beautify the mosque as well as the entire area at night. More trees should be planted. The main gate should be made attractive and the parking lot removed from the front.

Surprisingly, an Islamic Book Fair is now held throughout the year

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Enforce traffic laws



STAR PHOTO : ANISUR RAHMAN

The warning is clear and explicit: Do not pass between the islands along the railway track. So how can these auto-rickshaws do exactly the opposite? Because there is nobody to catch them. We would like to know what is the point of putting up a warning sign if there is no one around to make sure it is observed? We ask the traffic police to fulfil a very basic requirement of their job: make sure traffic rules are enforced!

in makeshift stalls in front of the main gate of the mosque. A fair cannot be held throughout the year. It mars the beauty and sanctity of the mosque with its ungainly constructions. If such shops are at all necessary, they should be relocated. Baitul Muka-rum should not be used by a few book traders for commercial purposes.

Let us all make a serious effort to improve Baitul Mukarrum. Let us glorify our national mosque.

Noman Ali,
Dhaka.

Ban the banners

Banners are everywhere. Be it in the city parks, road islands, pavements, across the roads, in front of educational institutions, in residential areas and commercial districts.

Nobody appears to be concerned about the nuisance they pose. These old, tattered, outdated, discoloured banners and festoons give the entire area a dirty look. They often obliterate the address as well as the beauty of a building. Sometimes they pose a hindrance to normal movement of traffic. There appear to be no rules and regulations for proper display of these banners.

Some are in place for months on end One simply needs to hang a banner with courage and one is rewarded forever. Banners are visible everywhere with a few exceptions (like the cantonment area). That makes walking or driving through the cantonment so pleasant. It makes a visit to Singapore or Kuala Lumpur memorable, because these cities are clean and green.

To make the slogan 'Keep Dhaka City Clean and Green', meaningful, serious efforts should be made to deal with the banner nuisance.

The city fathers are not concerned. The Directorate of Enviro-

nment also has a responsibility to beautify the city. Strict enforcement of the law is the only answer to the solution.

City dweller,
Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Defamation Law

With reference to the recently passed bill in parliament whereby it is now unlawful to make any derogatory statements about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, I am not an expert in the constitution of the country but surely it must protect the right of an individual in a democratic country to criticise anyone as long as the comments are not defamatory. Then, of course, it is for the courts to decide whether that expression of freedom is indeed defamatory.

Bangabandhu was a great leader, the undisputed leader in the lead-up to the War of Independence but even he made mistakes, specially as an administrator. After his brutal assassination, it was some of his colleagues in the struggle for liberation who made far more derogatory remarks than anyone else. The unabated attempts to elevate him to something of a demi-god does nothing but reduce the giant personality of the man.

The United States courts have ruled that it is actually an expression of personal freedom to burn and trample on the flag of that country --- forget what one says of the head of state or founder father. As far as I am concerned, not even parliament has the right to take away the basic human right of freedom of expression. Surely, parliament has better business to conduct for the well being of the citizens of the country.

Concerned Citizen
Dhaka