

National textbook crisis

Comply with PM's Instructions

WE have repeatedly called for action to resolve the national textbook crisis. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) last year awarded the entire contract for 8.12 crore textbooks to three companies of the Beximco group. These companies failed to deliver on time. A fraction of the requirement was supplied eventually, but the bulk is still unavailable and pricing exceeds the NCTB limit. Late in the day, the Prime Minister stepped in and sent two letters to the Minister to take immediate legal action against the failed companies. We have categorically cautioned that the credibility of the Prime Minister's office is being damaged, but the Ministry still chooses to ignore the PM's explicit instructions.

Unauthorised notebooks, at arbitrarily set high prices, have meanwhile flooded the market. Now, retailers are selling textbooks on condition that the illegal notebooks are also purchased at the same time. Distribution of the textbooks has been restricted to Beximco-approved firms, curtailing their availability in the open market, so that book-sellers are extorting a double price from hapless guardians and their wards. Textbooks remain in short supply and the asking price is climbing daily. Until supply squares up with demand, coercive market practices will continue to muddy the waters.

We have already urged the NCTB and the Ministry of Education to follow the PM's directives. We do so again. Continued apathy and suspected collusion of vested interests in this scandal will have irreparable repercussions on the educational sector. We advise the Minister in particular that credence in the highest office is at stake.

Mosquitoes all over

DCC has to answer

IN the face of an increasing infestation of mosquitoes in the metropolis, Dhaka City Corporation's claim that it has 'contained' or 'controlled' the menace sounds as ludicrous as it is loud-mouthed. Whilst the swarming and droning mosquitoes after dusk wreak havoc on the domestic life of denizens compelling them to put off urgent chores they have begun to wonder whether living in the thickets of tropical forests wouldn't have been a better proposition after all.

The DCC's very appreciation of the problem is flawed. Its line of thinking seems to be that the destruction of larvae is all there to the fight against mosquitoes; never mind if their breeding grounds are left intact spawning the larvae anyway, especially in the dry season that is currently on. They also gloss over the fact that so long as the flying mosquitoes are there the procreation process cannot simply abate. The big natural water channels have atrophied a long ago, thanks to the proliferating human encroachment. As if that was not enough, we have had the formidable problem of surface drains and storm sewers being choked up by the invasive and indissoluble polybags.

So, the breeding of mosquitoes is inextricably linked to the overall degradation of the city's environment. To the extent that the DCC is responsible for garbage disposal it has a very basic environmental function to perform. Yes, the Department of Environment has a crucial role to play in the scheme of things but that does not lighten the DCC's burden of responsibility in any way. While we would like to see the two bodies coordinate in a planned bid to rid the city of the mosquito scourge, the DCC, in the meanwhile, must be made to account for the money it has spent on the so-called mosquito control drive.

Davos days

IKRAM SEHGAL *Writes from Karachi*

THIS year the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Annual Meeting 2001 urged participants to "Sustain Growth by Bridging the Divides". Olivero Toscani produced a stark and remarkable documentary as a graphic reminder of what the divide is, images of modern technological advances, space travel, aircraft, computers, etc superimposed by the drawn and haggard faces of the hungry, under-nourished, emaciated and the diseased, moving the assembled hard-bitten and (even some) callous to tears. To quote Dr Klaus Schwab, "business has to make a special contribution to the effort to establish a world where everybody - each global citizen - can live a dignified existence".

The principal themes at Davos this year were, viz (1) staying ahead of the Digital and Biotech Revolution (2) Advancing the Global Agenda (3) the Corporation of the 21st Century and its CEO (4) the World Economic Outlook (5) mapping out Regional Trends (6) Ethics and Values that shape Society, and last but not the least (7) the Potential within us. The diversity of issues represented a cross-section of the 60 or so subjects available to the participants. Traditionally DAVOS has a keynote speaker, this year it was the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, a frequent visitor as a UN functionary in previous DAVOS meetings. In his turn, Japanese PM Mori announced the corrective measures Japan has been taking for the last decade to ward off recession that could lead to economic apocalypse, not only for Japan but most of Asia's third world.

Conceivably the most comprehensive meeting of diverse disciplines and minds in the world, connecting ideas and people, DAVOS is usually many, many years ahead the rest of the world. Those who talked about commercializing the Internet in 1994 before it really started to make an impact on people's lives and the stock market returned to Davos in 1998 as millionaires many times over. The occasion is also famous for many one-to-one not-so-public discussions between those otherwise engaged in conflict, the Arafat-Shimon Peres, the Armenia-Azerbaijan meetings being some of them. Social and cultural leaders tend to test their ideas here before taking them to the world stage. Countries, corporations, organizations, individuals, etc all have benefited from their top leaders "connecting" in the six days at Davos every year in a true gathering of eagles.

Heads of State and Government of the third world actively engage in soliciting investment for their respective countries, cognizance of this tremendous opportunity to "connect" with leaders of countries and captains of industry and commerce, must be taken at the highest level by the nation's leadership. This super environment creates political and economic options that could be used to good advantage for the country. The Chief Ministers of India's States take turns visiting Davos. Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh had in previous years collared Bill Gates of Microsoft in Davos to invest heavily in his State, the partnership is already an ongoing success. This year Digvijay Singh of Madhya Pradesh was busy trying to emulate Andhra Pradesh in attracting foreign investment. Pakistan was officially represented this year (as was last year) by Ministers Shaukat Aziz and Altaf Saleem, long-time WEF members in their own individual capacities. One is grateful for the almighty that Pakistani officials with "stretched" limousines plying Davos' one road have not reappeared since 1995. The Minister do create awareness for Pakistan but despite their personal PR they are no substitute to having the head honcho in Davos. We must

AS I SEE IT

Recently elected President Vicente Fox of Mexico capped the DAVOS message this year, requesting the North to cooperate not only to bring the third world corrupt to justice but the laundered money back to the countries they belong so that they could be put to good use. The sum total of the DAVOS experience this year was that both individuals and corporations were cognizant that "Bridging the Divide" was extremely important for peace and harmony in a more equitable world.

correct this anomaly of not using the true potential of this great economic opportunity.

Since last year organized protest has been targeting Davos "robber barons," the 2000 or so elite who gather are said to own 80% of the world's wealth. Last year violent demonstrators damaged, among other places, a McDonalds restaurant. The WTO debate in Seattle and the IMF siege at Prague ensured that security was much tighter than last year, frustrated by their effort to force their way up the one road to Davos, Zurich took the brunt of the protestors' anger. With over 30 of the world's Heads of state and government, with almost every country represented at the very least by a Minister, with almost every head of major industrial, commercial and academic entities in the world at Davos etc security problems can become a nightmare. The organizers of the WEF had tried to accommodate the dissent by including at least 30 of the NGOs into regular

meetings of the WEF, in the crisis this turned out to be an exercise of the deaf for the time being as the WEF establishment and the NGOs clashed publicly. Dissenting points of view need to be debated, that is the only way to avoid confrontation becoming violent, however professional protesters have a habit of turning any détente into anarchy.

One of DAVOS' problems is adherence to NORTH themes rather than that of the SOUTH. In a Session about "Justice" entitled "You can run but you cannot hide" moderated by James Hoge of the "Council on Foreign Relations" with panelists including Chief Prosecutor International War Crimes Tribunal Ms Carla del Ponte and US Sen Orrin Hatch, concerns were raised that those who took part in genocide could go scot-free unless the agreement about International Criminal Court was ratified. Sen Hatch raised the question of sovereignty because of the possibility that those



PHOTO: AFP

South African President Thabo Mbeki, second from right, speaks to a panel about diseases caused by poverty, during the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum, Monday, Jan. 29, in Davos, Switzerland. From left: Gro Harlem Brundtland, director general of the World Health Organization; Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft; Rahul Bajaj, chairman of Bajaj Auto; and far right, Henry McKinnell, CEO of Pfizer.

OPINION

More than storm in a tea cup

ABUL M AHMAD

THE heady political leaders in Dhaka have to take notice, and respond more and more frequently, to the views of despair and frustration now coming across from the informed NRBs, about the detestable standard of political culture prevailing in Dhaka since the liberation of democracy in 1991, so loudly proclaimed by the netas. It is all in the air, without taking roots.

The Daily Star of Jan 20 carried two such gripe commentaries (adding to the local refrain), one from a Bangladeshi resident in Sydney, and the other from Boston. Thanks to the Internet websites, it is easy to

browse abroad the local newspapers via the satellite on the computer screen in the cosy atmosphere of one's bedroom. Distance puts on a perspective filter, and the leaders cannot escape the judgements, however crude, of those nameless citizens who do not hog the headlines (the local voters).

Some naive voters have the right to wonder how much time a political worker should devote to party work, and the rest for public service. For new or weaker political parties, political maintenance eats up a lot of time, leaving very little for the people's welfare, in spite of all the thundering before the mikes, grimaces, threats, gesticulations and rolling of

the red eyes (why hate fellow citizens?). Plain fact: the maintenance schedule of the political network is not working as indicated in the (primary) books. The secondary stage is skipped (the nation is too much in a hurry to take up the pending agendas); and at the tertiary stage (politics, as well as in the academia) all hell is let loose by the political godfathers and the siblings; who cannot shed the subliminal zamindari complex (on the way the country ought to be governed).

The other critical theme is the tendency to stick to dynasty rule. None is indispensable; change will bring about more changes, and the continuity of life has adjusted

accordingly. The two leaders have reasons to be concerned: after them, what? Vacuum, yes, but it invites cyclones to fill in the gap; and the world has enough experience of such ad hoc solutions (Africa is passing through this phase currently). Seamless transfer of internal power has to be cultivated, but this noble and well established practice has not yet started, or even been accepted mentally by both sides (the leaders and the followers). Therefore, the third force, the voters have to come in with their muted views.

The case for dynasty rule has weakened considerably (globally) in this fast age of information: the good

or bad news travels faster through the electronic grapevine than the official messages of coming manoeuvres. Also the generation gap has reduced as literacy figures go up at a faster rate (the influence of tradition weakness due to the closing of the communication gap), and the educated younger generation are changing careers, (the Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK are facing 10,000 vacancies for this very reason, DS news item).

The mobilisation within the target groups is much faster to thwart undemocratic impositions by despotic rulers. It means that the style of politics in the LDCs is changing, and those who ignore the signs have to

pay the price or compensation. The old have to yield to the new: it is evolution, not revolution.

The coming general elections is going to be crucial for a verdict on the political ideologies being cultivated in Dhaka today. Leadership needs ventilation for fresh air and ideas to circulate inside the political fortresses. Violence and black money are running the wheels of politics today. It cannot last, as it is not sustainable. The time for reckoning has arrived. Both the major political parties are in a hostile, confrontational mood. Therefore the display will be more than storm in a tea cup.

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

Cultural erosion

As a Bangladeshi living in the U.S. for nearly 15 years, I have noticed how our society has changed over the years. When I was home last December to celebrate Eid with my parents, I visited a dentist in Gulshan. While waiting for my turn, I couldn't help but overhear a fellow patient struggling on his cellphone to carry on a conversation in a language that is generally spoken in the country that surrounds ours. At first I assumed that he was talking to a person from our neighbouring country, but then he started talking in Bangla. It was obvious that he had failed miserably to make enough sense in his preferred language.

I remember those days when Bangla used to play second fiddle to English, and understandably so, English being the international language of trade and commerce. But never in my wildest imagination did I foresee a day when people in Bangladesh would talk as if they were auditioning to host an episode of "Kon Banega Crorepati".

It is a pity that the last bit of information I got before leaving home was from Zee TV. There were hundreds of people in the airport lounge but it seemed as if nobody gave a second thought to what struck me as a cultural invasion. To my fellow countrymen, I would like to say that it will truly be a shame if non-resident Bangladeshis like us have to keep our heritage alive. I ask them to notice before it's too late.

Babar A. Anwar
Texas, U.S.A

"Nightingale of India"

It was heartening to learn that Lata Mangeshkar, the Indian movie industry's most celebrated and

prolific female singer was conferred with the Bharat Ratna (Jewel of India) title on India's 50th Republic Day.

The nightingale of India has reigned supreme and ruled the music world for over fifty years. This unmatched crooner is a goddess in her country that has an ancient musical tradition and heritage. Her songs have cut through cultural barriers, transcended national boundaries and she has been showered with respect and veneration everywhere.

Generous to a fault, Lata said at the passing away of Pakistani Melody Queen Noor Jahan, "We listened to Noor Jahan in childhood and grew with her notes in mind --- I admire her so much as a singer that I can never be tired of hearing her songs."

From talent to fame, from fame to greatness this is the story of Lata. Singers like Lata and Noor Jahan have won the hearts of millions, with their sheer and inimitable brilliance creating distinguished legacies and careers. Their notes and songs have swayed young and old alike.

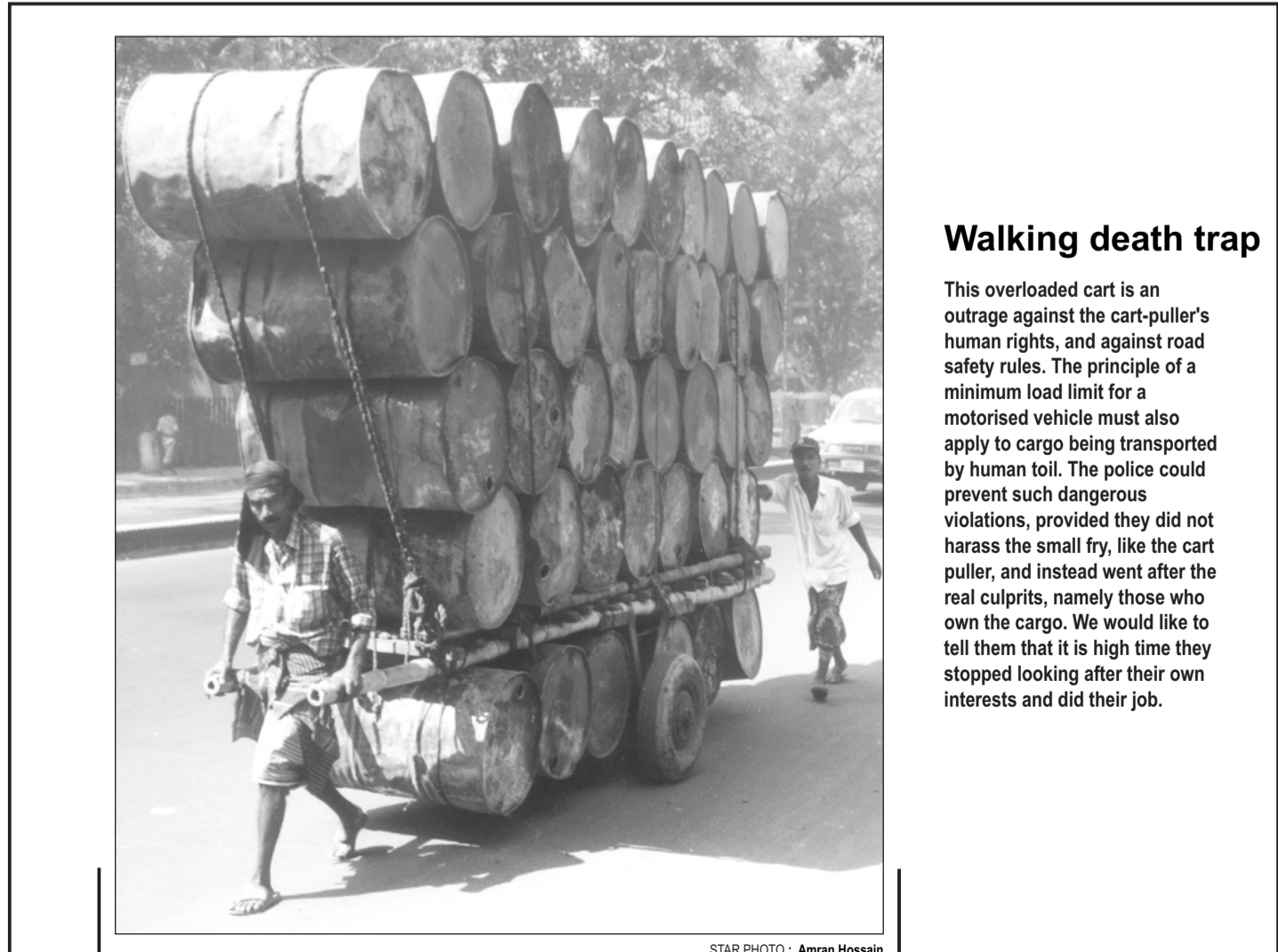
Robert Kader
Chittagong

Let's hold a referendum

By not attending the Jatiya Sangsad, (JS) the Opposition political have made the nation's legislature virtually redundant and the very parliamentary system an exercise in futility, yielding no constructive results for the governance of the country. An LDC state like ours cannot afford anymore experiment with the Westminster system of government. Instead we need a sort of quasi-presidential system that would suit the mentality of our

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.



STAR PHOTO: Anran Hossain

Walking death trap

This overloaded cart is an outrage against the cart-puller's human rights, and against road safety rules. The principle of a minimum load limit for a motorised vehicle must also apply to cargo being transported by human toil. The police could prevent such dangerous violations, provided they did not harass the small fry, like the cart puller, and instead went after the real culprits, namely those who own the cargo. We would like to tell them that it is high time they stopped looking after their own interests and did their job.

people.

Instead of successive elections, a referendum as to the system of government should precede the elections. The first election under the new system, as per verdict of the people, should be under the supervision of a neutral caretaker government, headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury
Dhaka.

Future prospects

I applaud your courage in publishing significant truths, even though these may present a negative picture of the administration. However, we are anxious to learn what, if anything, is being done by the administration on matters such as the reported Tk 50 crore revenue loss incurred in five years for which the NBR has sought permission for a probe, and others like this report. Our education system is deteriorating and we are concerned about the administration's actions in this regard.

At the same time, it is heartening to learn that the number of crimes dropped in 2000. I would like to thank the Ministry of Science & Technology for launching a "portal dedicated exclusively to Bangladesh". It is equally encouraging that there is significant progress in the export oriented sectors.

May I request your newspaper to focus on the prospects of students and migrants from our country in the international world, and the impact of the brain drain on Bangladesh.

Dr. Lailun Nahar
Dhaka

Courage to face

crisis

First, I would like to assure the bereaved families and friends of the Gujarat quake victims that God will comfort them without fail. Let me also assure the injured and the homeless people that God will see them through, no matter what their troubles are.

There have been many earthquakes, through the years, and here are some that I have found in published material: 200,000 died in 1920 in China; 150,000 in a quake and ensuing tidal wave in 1923 in Tokyo; 2,100 were killed in 1930 in Naples; more than 25,000 in 1935 in Quetta; some 30,000 killed in 1940 in Turkey; more than 1,500 in 1949 in Assam; approximately 2,000 in 1956 in Afghanistan; an estimated 20,000 killed in 1962 in Iran.

The frequency and destructiveness of earthquakes has increased in our times. There were 15 destructive earthquakes in 1st century A.D., 253 in the 16th century A.D. 640 in the 18th century A.D. and 2,119 destructive earthquakes in the 19th century A.D. According to the Bible, (Matthew 24:7), there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. As a result we live in fear and undoubtedly, we all need help to enjoy freedom from fear of the unknown. We need peace of mind, courage and hope, not to speak of guidance and direction from time to time. All this we can have freely from and in the person of Jesus Christ and through the Bible, the Book of Books. Those who open it will see for themselves how marvelously God speaks words of comfort and brings courage to our hearts.

Omar Luther King
Shillong, India