

## The new Mayor should make a difference

Wish him Godspeed

**S**ADEQUE Hossain Khoka, the new Mayor of Dhaka is in the saddle. He does so amidst a high degree of expectation that the metropolis will see some change in terms of quality of life for the denizens. The expectation is not without a heavy dose of desperation born of former mayor Hanif's eight barren years. For a quantitative transformation the city does not have to depend on municipal leadership; it takes place of its own momentum propelled by population pressure, extension of habitat and expansion of communication network. But for qualitative changes we require a Mayor with vision, commitment and energy.

It is basically the soul of the metropolis made up of the yearning for good living conditions that is being put in the hands of the new mayor. As if to fit the bill as far as his credentials go, Khoka brings to bear on the job his sporting dynamism, youthful vitality, a son-of-the-city attachment to Dhaka and, above all, a natural flair to stay at the top of the popularity chart. The thought of losing out on popular affection is something he dreads genuinely. That is, he will be both preemptive of and responsive to criticism -- in the first instance by delivering goods and in the second by responding to complaints with promptitude.

Theoretically, his personal qualities of head and heart might stand him in good stead; but practically at the end of the day, it will take performance to justify his virtually uncontested election to mayorship.

There are two sets of agenda that one visualises Khoka will have to address as he takes the plunge: first, securing enough power and coordinating authority to himself, preferably as the head of a city government. The concept of a self-contained municipal authority for Dhaka along the lines existent in all big metropolises entered national discourse a long time ago -- thanks to former mayor Hanif's advocacy. Awami League endorsed the idea in principle. In reality, however, it could stretch as far as having an apex committee headed by LGRD minister and co-chaired by the then mayor Hanif. This became dysfunctional on account of fragmentation of authority at the very top. The fact remains though, there is the potential for a consensus to be forged with the Opposition on the issue since Sadeque Hossain Khoka has said he would pursue the city government agenda most fervently.

Evidently, the organisational agenda belongs to a category that warrants change in the framework of law. So, this is basically a long-term perspective and also the one which Hanif had used as an excuse for most of his failures. Admittedly, Khoka starts from a vantage point compared with Hanif because in the present case the ruling party and the incumbent mayor are BNP. That way, city government looks like a real possibility; even so, the required legislative step in this behalf will have to be taken in a foolproof way based on a comparative study of the municipal set-ups elsewhere. So, it's going to be a long look at various models before we adopt one.

What we are trying to drive at is there's so much the new mayor can do by law and Constitution under the existing circumstances. He must have the motivation, will, imagination and the right order of priorities to exercise such powers to the fullest of their effectiveness. In this context, we would like to spell out an imperative but a doable order of priorities for him. This newspaper's mind has been tangibly exercised over the points at issue for a long time.

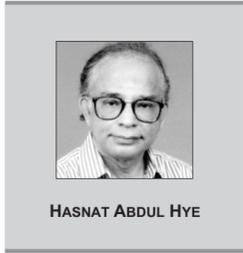
Khoka's first task will be to undertake a cleanliness drive that scrupulously avoids the past pitfalls like the oversized metallic bins which occupy most of the road-space and spill garbage rather than containing it. The whole city is plastered with graffiti that needs erasing on pain of punitive action. And, the commercial hoardings and bill boards are seen all over the city in an unhealthy number. A cap should be put on renewal of contracts there. Allotment of new advertisement slots needs to be linked to the rules of spacing.

The city roads that were cut open and, left gaping, hazardous and insufferably unmotorable are crying for immediate attention. Many people had hoped that with the change of government the pot-holed streets will be levelled. But several months down the line, this has not happened. The new mayor should get the job done without fail. Simultaneously, he must take up a park reclamation project to restore breathing spaces to a choked city life.

Over all, our advice to Sadeque Hossain Khoka would be that he set specific time-bound goals for himself. In order to be properly launched on the job he should call a meeting of the urban experts and have them suggest a composite list of medium- and long-term agenda as a road-map for him. What needs to be done in the immediate term must be known to him.

The mayor has to succeed from day one to take a firm grip of his onerous responsibilities. We wish him Godspeed.

## Oxfam's new front



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

**O**XFAM is one of the few international charities that enjoys a commendable track record in developing countries. Through short-term relief and sustained programme intervention it has both addressed emergencies and sought to alleviate poverty on long term basis. But if participating in disaster management has not been difficult, poverty alleviation has proved to be an uphill task. Measures to alleviate poverty have inevitably led to the realization that there is more to the problem than at first meets the eye. It is, therefore, not surprising that Oxfam has identified national and international causes in which the problem is rooted and being ramified. Because of its convoluted nature and multi-layered existence poverty is so intractable as a problem.

Among the development theories there is a powerful, though not universally accepted, strand according to which underdevelopment and poverty of third-world countries resulted from the centre-periphery relationships between the colonisers and the colonised. It is argued that though colonialism breathed its last long ago its legacy survives. As its new incarnation, the architecture of international trade is held responsible for the impoverishment of and poverty in developing countries. Through trade there is a net transfer of resources from the poor to the rich countries, just as it was under colonialism, with the difference that in this new relationship almost all developing countries are enmeshed. On the basis of empirical findings Raul Prebisch, presiding over Economic Commis-

sion on Latin America in the Fifties, was the first to point out that the terms of international trade favoured the developed industrialized countries over the primary goods producing semi-industrialized countries. Samir Amin, an economist from Africa, described this phenomenon as the outcome of 'unequal exchange'. The problem has now been compounded by issues of market access.

Arguably, Oxfam is not a politi-

cally oriented and ideologically motivated organization. Its agenda of humanitarian relief and welfare has not been nurtured by the theory of 'development of underdevelopment'. But in updating its strategy it has not been able to avoid getting involved with political economy that pervades international economic relations. On the basis of its experiences of working in developing countries the organization has come to the conclusion that poverty alleviation cannot be sustained without a fair aid and trade regime. As a prominent member in the coalition of charities, Jubilee 2000, Oxfam successfully campaigned for debt reduction, which benefitted at least for twenty heavily indebted poor countries. In the recently concluded summit for poverty alleviation in Monterrey, Mexico, its advocacy was both for greater flow of official aid and reduction of debt burden for the benefit of poor countries.

Alongside aid, Oxfam has turned its attention to international trade highlighting latter's linkages with economic growth and poverty. It has not taken long for the organization to realize that the international economic order as represented by trade awareness creation and action. It highlights the exploitative and unfair trading regime which benefits the rich countries disproportionately and causes immiseration of the poor. This structured and systematic campaign is intellectually more coherent than the street protests of the anti-globalisers. In fact organizations like Oxfam and coalition like International Forum for Globalization and the League for Revolutionary Communist International offer a bridge between street demonstrations and multi-lateral bodies like WTO. They are trying to broker a compromise between views and policies at two extremes. Their goal is to salvage globalization by giving it a human face and humane motivation. Oxfam's opening up of this new front should be seen as a continuation of its original commitment to help the poor and alleviate poverty.

According to the Oxfam report 5 per cent of the poorest in the world lost one fourth of their income between 1988 and 1993. During the same period the income of the richest five per cent of world's population rose by 12 per cent. In respect of trade, out of 100 dollars earned through international trade 97 dollars accrue to the rich and middle

income countries whereas only 3 per cent goes to the low income countries. Forty per cent of world's population live in low income countries but they account for only 3 per cent of world's trade. The developing countries lose US \$ 1 billion every year due to unfair and unequal trade with the rich countries. If countries in Africa, South Asia and Latin America can increase their share in world export by only 1 per cent about 130 million people can rise above poverty level.

developing countries and their abysmally low benefit from it has been analysed. It has been pointed out that at the heart of inequity lies double standard used by the rich countries in trade matters. For example, tariff imposed an export from developing countries is four times higher than that on exports of rich countries. As no effective international mechanism is in operation developing countries producing primary products chronically suffer from declining and unstable prices.

but also renders their markets into happy hunting grounds for dumping. The sudden liberalization of trade and de-regulation of their economies under pressure from rich countries and the multilateral agencies have brought fewer benefits and in most cases not enough to compensate for the losses suffered through these 'reforms'.

Like the deleterious effects of the prevailing trading regime, as illustrated by facts and figures in the Oxfam report, analysis of the causes and effects is also not unfamiliar. But it is important to repeat the litany of woes suffered by the developing countries because these are not caused by nature and are in many cases due to greed, self-serving interests and shortsightedness. For very practical reasons the campaign for fair and equitable international economic order including trade has to highlight the causes with their implications again and again. Out of the three justifications for the campaign mentioned by Oxfam the most important is the one that bears on enlightened self-interest. It is not only on moral ground but in consideration of their own long term interests also that rich countries have to modify process of globalization, particularly trade, in such a way that there are no losers even in the short run. The modifications, including "safety-net" measures, should be easy to bring about because these involve nothing more than removal or mitigation of the egregious causes which are within control of countries. All that is required is political will based on farsightedness.

The campaign for a fair and equitable trade regime is destined to gain momentum because the danger of pursuing narrow national interests by the rich countries leaving the poor countries behind has never been more stark than at present. Oxfam's opening of the new front could not have come sooner. The poor and their friends in both the developing and rich countries should love this side of Oxfam.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

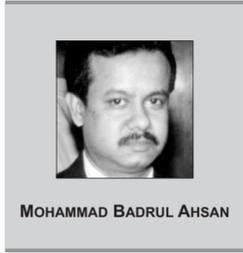
The campaign for a fair and equitable trade regime is destined to gain momentum because the danger of pursuing narrow national interests by the rich countries leaving the poor countries behind has never been more stark than at present. Oxfam's opening of the new front could not have come sooner. The poor and their friends in both the developing and rich countries should love this side of Oxfam.

Again, the above facts and figures are not startling because these are already known in some form or other. What makes their revelation significant is the juncture at which world trade is poised at present. After being sleepless in Seattle a new round of talks started half-heartedly in Doha. It is fated to be carried on in future, more or less tumultuously, till agreements are reached among the 144 member countries. The time is apposite and propitious for highlighting the inequities in the international trade regime. The fact that the campaign is being spearheaded by a renowned world charity like Oxfam adds strength to the argument for fair trade. Finally, the attempt to forge a coalition among national and international organizations bodes well for the success of the concerned campaign. It may be mentioned that the demand for the much publicized new international economic order using the same arguments (but different figures) in the Seventies foundered in the absence of a formidable alliance between like-minded organizations of the north and the south.

In the Oxfam report the causes for measly share in world trade by

The report mentions that since 1997 the price of coffee has declined by 70 per cent for which the producers have incurred a loss of \$ 80 million to date. At micro level exploitative employment conditions by multi nationals deprive the workers and growers from fair wages and prices. The forces of globalization putting premium on direct foreign investment allow multinationals to continue exploitation with impunity. Far from taking measures against this unfair practice, the rich countries have been keen on applying rules on employment and environment to trade involving goods from developing countries for the protection of their domestic producers. This in effect puts up non-tariff barriers to exports from developing countries at the same time as the rich countries keep up pressure on pricing open their markets under liberalization programme. Among other instances of double standard subsidized agriculture in rich countries has been identified as a major contributory factor in the aggravation of poverty in the primary goods producing countries. Forcing the developing countries to withdraw subsidy not only makes their agricultural produce non-competitive

## Sound of silence



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**F**OR fifteen years, they absorbed the silence between them, living under the same roof without saying a word to each other. They communicated through their children, friends, relatives and domestic helps, eaten at the same table, entertained guests in the same living room, rode the same car but slept in separate bedrooms. For fifteen years, each lived in the isolation of another's company, separated in togetherness, divided in the union of marriage.

Anyone visiting them for the first time would be impressed that two people were so close that one could read the mind of another. They walked together to the door to receive and see off their guests; one picked up where the other left off in the conversation; and one finished speaking just before the other needed to start. They would look articulate and harmonized as if one soul operated from two different bodies, as if two instruments were orchestrated to produce one single music.

Then they would return to the

same silence, which kept them together for last fifteen years. She says she couldn't stay in this marriage if she had to talk to him, and he says it would have been painful if he had to listen to everything she wished to tell. Their children, friends and relatives struggled to hold them together with the futility of a bridge connecting two receding shores.

Only a very few people knew why they stopped talking, and some of them wondered how two people falling in love to get married, drifted apart for so long. He drank his

children, friends and servants. In this manner, two hearts went on spinning in the whirl of despair until they forgot if they were married to love or hate.

The children grew up as unfortunate wedge between their contending parents, absorbing the pathos of their silence from tender age. They tried to patch up between their parents by threatening to leave the house or boycott them. But the parents reassured the children that they were the only reason why one still withstood the shadow of

distance, which encroached upon the space between them.

Friends often advised that they had either made up their differences or considered divorce instead of stewing in the juice of this ruinous marriage. But neither agreed to do either as if it was the concentrated purpose of one's life to persecute another. The contradiction baffled others that this couple lived together to live apart, that each of them suffered to hurt the other, one's pain bringing joy for another.

When their daughter ran away

relatives and servants tried to dissuade her, telling her that life was short and one must never harbour so much hatred in one's heart.

For days she remained distraught, tears rolling down her eyes like a stream that flooded its shores. People close to her tried to comfort her, wondering why she should feel so dejected if he was going to leave her after the long silence. She said nothing but wept bitterly for several days, and then said that he could go without the children.

Over the next few weeks they haggled over the children, neither agreeing to budge from respective position. Mediators shuttled between them, everyone hoping that the deadlock between a man and his wife was finally going to be resolved. The wife said the children were the only things she ever got out of her marriage, and he said that the children were why he went through fifteen years of hell.

Each claimed that life would be unbearable without the children, but they failed to reach an understanding for many months. A family friend advised the children not to agree to go with either of the parents because that would force them to negotiate with each other. He amusingly told the children that it was an art of love to hide it from others. Their parents went one step ahead and hid it from each other. There was sound in the silence between them, which they couldn't suffer for fifteen years had there been not love between them.

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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sorrow and smoked away its fumes; she sulked over her bitterness and fretted in its gloom. Each suffered under another's nose as if the best way to hate a lover was to see that he was hurt beyond hope.

When she fell sick, he was not allowed to visit her, and he didn't expect her to visit him if he ever fell sick. When the children became ill, they sat at their beds to keep watch night after night in the same room, each pretending that the other didn't exist. Each consulted the doctor in the presence of both, and then discussed his diagnosis through

another. The products of love between a man and a woman lived in the uneasy tension of their mutual hatred in a broken home held together by nothing but a single roof over them.

Thus the silence and the children grew up together in the house where the parents outwore each other. They never argued or fought in fifteen years, all their discords absorbed in the disquietude of the silence, which hung between them. In fifteen years, each never asked the whereabouts of other, neglect and indifference perpetuating the

with an unsuitable man, the husband suddenly felt the urge to talk to his wife. He blamed it on the silence, which must have created a vacuum in children who needed to go out of the house to find love. But the wife refused to talk and renewed her vow of silence, warning through a friend that she did not mind losing everything to see him burn in hell.

When the daughter got divorced by the end of the year, the husband wanted to talk to his wife again. She refused to talk and renewed her vow of silence once more, this time uttering even sterner words of

Relatives who knew that he had suffered for fifteen years encouraged him to go through with his decision. Friends sided with the wife and pleaded with him to give it a chance few more years since he had already waited that long.

From one mouth to another, his decision reached her ears, and she roared that she was never going to let that happen. She promised to bring out his life in drops of pain, to keep him in her stranglehold until he breathed his last. Only way he could leave her life was by being stretched on a bier, she screamed. Friends,

## OPINION

## 'Murky way to millions'

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

**T**HE Daily Star staffer has done a laudable job by publishing a piece of investigative report on how a metre reader of the Titas Gas has become a millionaire almost overnight by resorting to corrupt practices. And he has done it with impunity. But by all means this is not a solitary and isolated case and it is certain that there is no dearth of such instances of indulging in corruption by the employees of the government and state owned enterprises.

Now question can be raised if Mahbubur Rahman, the metre reader, should alone be exposed, blamed and taken to task for his indulging in corruption? Are we also not responsible for allowing him to do corruption with impunity? Did the community play its proper role in this case? No. From the report it is seen that he made his fortune by tampering gas metres of the industries located in Narayanganj, Munshigonj and Narsingdi areas. He also provided by-pass connections to industrial units obviously in return for

monetary considerations. The Daily Star staffer would have done a greater service if he could mention the names of the industrial enterprises along with their owners who connived with the metre reader for gaining direct benefit. Surely the metre reader did not compel the industrial owners to join him in his illegal and corrupt activities. But, most likely, it was the other way round. They must have held out allurements in the form of fat cash incentives to the metre reader and it was difficult for a low paid employee like him to check the temptation. The Daily Star has not hesitated to publish everything in details including the modus operandi of Mahbubur Rahman, his antecedents, his life profile, his property, etc. Then why the report is silent about the identity of the owners of the industries? Is it not necessary to expose and punish those who induced Mahbub to indulge in corruption?

It is difficult to believe that Mahbubur Rahman's corruption was not known to his higher ups in

the Titas Gas but none dared to initiate any action against him. Is there none in the Titas Gas possessing a minimum amount of moral courage to raise his voice against this kind of corruption prevailing among its employees? Will it be too drastic a comment to say that many people in Titas Gas was in league with each other in making it a thoroughly corrupt and inefficient organization? The extent of 'system loss' and pilferage of gas, as the report reveals, is indicative of prevalence of very widespread corruption at all levels of the Titas Gas and metre reader Mahbub is a mere member of the gang who are ruling there. Any body having an insight and experience in the working of our government and its various agencies will admit that without the support, active or tacit, of the higher-ups it would not have been possible on the part of Mahbub to run his business of corruption on such a scale unhindered. So the charges of corruption levelled against Mahbub should equally be brought against those who were responsible to

supervise and monitor his performance.

The report states that the police succumbed to political pressure when Mahbub was arrested while trying to fly to Singapore illegally. What was his source of strength? If he was being protected by a politician then the name of the politician should also have been flashed in the newspaper so that the people can know who are responsible for the society to rot. Why Mahbub alone should take the blame? It is not known whether his activities have ever been brought to the notice of the Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BAC). Since Mahbubur Rahman proved very powerful everywhere, as the report goes, the story would, probably, not have been different had the BAC been operating to bring him to task. It is futile to expect anything from the police because for one reason or the other they no longer are in a position to perform their duty.

There is a standing system, obligatory on all public servants, to declare their assets. But this is

rarely done and the government totally overlooks when its servants live beyond their known source of income. There is hardly any instance that a public servant has been made to declare his assets and any one has been punished for living beyond means. Might be, this is because we all, both those who will declare their assets and those who will examine them and sit over judgement, are in possession of assets beyond our known sources of income.

This reminds me a famous saying of Professor Robert Klitgard of the University of Natal-- "When in a society, the shameless triumphs, when the abuser is admired, when principles end and only opportunism prevails, when the insolent rule and the people tolerate it, when everything becomes corrupt but the majority is quiet because their slice is waiting, when so many 'whens' unite, perhaps, it is time to review our activities, re-evaluate those around us, and return to ourselves."

M. Hafizuddin Khan is Ex-CAAG

## Where to go for security...?

MOHAMMED IDRIS

**M**OST of the literate people eagerly wait for the hawkers to deliver the newspaper so that they could read it over a cup of morning tea and it is a great treat indeed. But it has now become a horrendous experience as one needs to pick up courage to look at the front page of the dailies which is replete with reports of numerous murders, rapes and other hair raising crimes being committed everyday, that run the chill down one's spine making him/her think if there was any place under the sun in Bangladesh where one could go for security of life, let alone property!

I should like to remind our Prime Minister that her party-led alliance was voted to power because people were sick and tired of breakdown of law and order during the immediate past government. Therefore, they wanted to change the horse. But far from the situation being better, it has taken an ugly spectrum in such a fashion that the government machinery has become either

captive in the hands of the outlaws or is manned by inefficient people.

People are no longer interested in listening of plans and programmes for curbing corruption, but now only want to see action which seem to have become illusive. May I take leave to say that the sand of time is running out and if the government does not wake up, it will simply regret the opportunity of proving a good governance given to it.

We would only urge our Prime Minister not to be soft even with her cabinet as one feels that she might have given some inefficient cabinet colleagues and officials a long rope; but no more because enough is enough.

And first thing first. The law and order situation must be improved and a sense of security must prevail in the minds of the people who want it to be first and foremost before building bridges and monuments. In order to accomplish this heavy task, the law enforcement agency, if necessary, should be recast by removing the corrupt and inefficient members

without any loss of time. We need a 'supercop' like who has been called after nine years of retirement to act as adviser to the Gujarat government in India which failed to control the riot in Ahmedabad as the police were found soft and partisan. Please call up such dedicated and efficient professional police and civil bureaucrats to save the image of the government which has dipped very low. The recent remarks made by the Home Minister on the law and order situation are regrettable and it left an impression on all that the serious crisis caused by incidents of crime and perpetrating criminals is being taken as a part of life. A minister or a government official or even a citizen should be careful of what he says and in what context.

Last of all, I take leave to say that passing the buck on the other will not help redress the situation obtaining in the country. Therefore, please do not fail to understand what is happening on the ground and come to grip with it firmly while there is still time.