

Dr. Victor Hao Li, President of the EWC, came to Dhaka on a three-day visit early this week. He met our Education Minister Dr. A. Majeed Khan, addressed a reception of the EWC Alumni Association members and talked to high Government officials. In this interview with Times staffer A. U. M. FAKHRUDDIN he answers some questions about education and related issues.

Mass education must for development

The East West Center (EWC) is an educational institution located in Honolulu, Hawaii. Established in 1960 by the United States Congress, the Center works to 'promote better relations and understanding among the nations of Asia, the Pacific and the United States through cooperative study, training and research.'

The Center today is engaged with some 60 countries and territories in a region extending from the subcontinent eastward through Asia to Japan and from Australia across the Pacific to the United States each year, two-third of its nearly 2,000 participants come from Asian and Pacific nations one-third from United States.

The Center is a nonprofit educational corporation. Its international Board of Governors includes members from the United States, Asia and the Pacific. The Center's major source of funding is an annual US Congressional appropriation, additional financial contributions have come from 21 Asian and Pacific governments and from numerous private foundations, public agencies corporations and individuals.

Situated on the University of Hawaii's Manoa Campus the Center's facilities include a 300-office building housing research and administrative offices for the international staff of 250 three residence halls for participants and a conference center with meeting rooms.

Multidisciplinary teams of specialists addressing major problems of international concern work within the Center's five research institutes—Resource Systems, Population Environment and Policy Culture Learning and Communication. With a wide embrace, the Center brings together academic, governmental civic business and media leaders from throughout the region to join with staff teams in identifying and examining core issues and devising possible solutions.

Related programme offices include: the Pacific Islands Development Program which organizes applied research projects in many fields in response to the requests of island leaders; Centerwide Programs which address broad issues of economic and social development; international relations and economics education and a range of concerns in the humanities and Open Grants which provides flexible educational programmes for graduate students working in fields not directly linked to

the problem-oriented institutes.

EWC research projects are selected through a continuing examination of regional needs that involves Center staff and specialists from many nations.

Scores of conferences and workshops held annually in Hawaii and throughout the region bring together both information and people in order to share experience, knowledge and advice. To convert research results into practical action the Center strives to bring new findings and alternative approaches directly to the attention of private and public decision-makers. EWC projects have involved or reached policy-makers at all levels and have resulted in hundreds of books, articles, manuals and bibliographies, generating new ideas proposals and policies.

Within the past 23 years, more than 30,000 men and women—over 20,000 from Asia and the Pacific and more than 10,000 from the United States—have participated in East-West Center programmes including presidents, cabinet members, governors, scholars, educators, business leaders, journalists, scientists and creative artists.

B.T.: The East-West center deals with many disciplines, and researches on various aspects of life, say from culture to technology, of the regions it covers. Well, as you have visited some developing countries, do you find any major loopholes in the education system and economic planning in these countries?

Dr. V. H. Li: In fact I have been mostly looking how our programmes at the East-West Center in Hawaii feel the needs and the priorities of the countries that we work with. One of the things I learn on this trip for example is that there is in the South Asian region a very great emphasis on rural development. Relatively speaking, we do not do as much of that as could be of interest to the countries of South Asia. So, what we would try to consider after I return to Honolulu will be the rural development side.

As you have wanted to know about, perhaps I cannot talk much about the loopholes in planning in the countries I visited.

B.T.: Do you have any comment to make on the performance of the students and researchers from Bangladesh at the EWC?

Dr. Li: Three or four years ago the number of people—

both students and researchers—coming from Bangladesh had declined. A new system of application and nomination of students was started in Bangladesh a few years ago and we have got some promising students. Thus the number of students is climbing up again.

On the researchers' side we have not gotten a lot of people from Bangladesh, at least for the last two years. One of the difficulties that appears to be is that we have not adequately publicised of our programme opportunities to the people in your country.

B.T.: We belong to the poverty belt of Asia. Does EWC have any positive plan or survival programme of studies exclusively for the LDCs?

Dr. Li: We have considerable interest in strengthening and expanding our programme with the LDCs. Until now the strength of our programme is concentrated on East and South East Asia, and last of all on the Subcontinent. The part of the purpose of my visit here is to learn more about the conditions and the priorities of the Subcontinent and thereby educate myself so that we can see how to expand our programmes.

We do run into some difficulties in trying to expand our programmes. For example, I mentioned earlier that we have not been very successful in communicating our programme plans to people here. We have been more successful in other countries, of South East Asia. That is because in those countries we are able to write directly to colleagues in governments and universities, tell them of our plans, invite them to our programmes and in that manner we can make some programme planning together. In Bangladesh—and indeed in much of the Subcontinent—the applicants approach through a government agency, and we have to rely on their processing the matters.

B.T.: We gather you produced a film sponsored by Culture Learning Institute of the EWC. How would you evaluate the activities of the Institute?

Dr. Li: That particular Institute, I think, has not done as good work as some of the other institutes, particularly population, resource systems and environment and policy which have done very well indeed. One of the subjects that we have been underskipping now is to try to consider



DR. VICTOR HAO LI: "We in the EWC are really very interested in expanding our programmes so that these are suitable for the needs and priorities of Bangladesh."

ably strengthen our work in the cultural areas.

B.T.: What should in your opinion be the basic education policy in a developing country having given circumstances as in Bangladesh?

Dr. Li: In my opinion the emphasis should be primarily on broad mass education. Unless people in the rural areas reach a certain degree of literacy and general education, their development would be greatly impeded. Therefore unless there is some familiarity with little bit of basic science and certainly literacy, so that instructions regarding the operation of a machine can be made understood. Family planning, again, calls for serious attention and people should be informed of the urgency of the issue and of how to take effective measures. For this one shall have to read some instruction books and this is where the question of mass education comes in. Because there is always a limit to what a government or any other action can do by itself. Thus the need for a good substantial primary education cannot be over-emphasised.

B.T.: Education irrelevant to social needs is said to be unproductive. What is your opinion?

Dr. Li: In developing as well as in developed countries in our times there is a great deal of emphasis on the study of science and technology. Obviously the benefits of science and technology are tangible. In that sense studying these subjects may appear relevant. Contrarily, cultural studies may not help construct a bridge on a river. Nevertheless these have enormous importance in the life of a people. Some people may start studying poetry, and I think that may not help them become rich. Results of science and technology are easy to see. But the humanities and fine arts deal with the questions of the values and of the spirit that are physically not very much visible. Even then one cannot ignore the importance of these because without the arts and humanities a country becomes spiritually poor.

B.T.: What, in your opinion, should be the most important and priority task for tangible socio-economic development of the poorer Third World countries of the world?

Dr. Li: The long-term objective should obviously be education because that is what builds the foundation of development in various sector.

As for the short-term, agriculture should be given utmost importance. Over the years research institutes have developed HYV rice seeds and the poorer countries need them urgently. Again, the question of implementation is tied to the former one of education. In the ultimate analysis, education must be above all other considerations. Laboratory results can only reach the target audience if it is educated and enlightened enough.

B.T.: Further to the casual mention in your last evening speech of an 'east-east centre', is it possible to concentrate on an intensive research to find out some solution to the eastern underdeveloped countries?

Dr. Li: That's what we should try to do. But the EWC is a very small institution, and therefore the number of problems that we can try to undertake to find solutions for are necessarily very limited. Our total budget for the year is 20 million US dollar. On the one hand that is quite a bit of money, but on the other hand, when compared to the UNDP and the USAID spending we are very small.

Consequently, what the Center has to do is to pick a manageable number of problems and projects of priority. As I said until now we take projects that are quite suitable arising in East and South East Asia. A number of people have raised the importance of rural development, and that is clearly an important issue of highest priority here. At the same time that is an issue which can be called gigantic.

B.T.: ...Because most of the people of the world live in villages.

Dr. Li: Of course. Therefore

the problems of villages are very large indeed. For instance to raise the per capita income of rural people by even 10 dollars is a very big task. So we have to make the both ends meet and select issues that can be managed easily.

B.T.: Considering the spread of micro computers (Atari, Apple, Texas Instruments and so on) in the developed world that are capable of teaching children at home, an education page editor on an Australian daily (Geoff Maslen) commented that the traditional form of schooling was "in its death throes". Would you please elaborate the cause and effects of this situation? How do you view the future of these electronic tutors?

Dr. Li: My very young children play with these electronic computers at home and in that process they can learn. Thus these have their importance. On the other side I cannot make myself believe that these machines will replace people or the teachers of my children.

This is because machines do not convey feelings or values or intensity or commitment. If these wonderful machines really replace the teachers then I think the whole education system will be bankrupt.

However, these micro-computers can supplement or complement to human teaching; and there lies its usefulness. Again these expensive machines may not be widely used in countries outside the developed ones. But audiovisual method of education through VCR is quite effective. In developing countries of the world where the greater majority of the people have no literacy, these portable battery operated machines can go a long way in disseminating information regarding agriculture, housing, health care, hygiene, family planning and many other basic things of life.

B.T.: What is your impression about the Bangladesh tour? Do you have any message?

Dr. Li: We in the EWC are really very interested in expanding our programmes so that these are suitable for the needs and priorities of Bangladesh. In order to do that we need the active participation of our colleagues and friends in this country, because they know best what are your needs and priorities. The more we will come in contact the better will be our programmes. There may be wonderful agreement as also disagreement in these programmes, but that helps remarkably because we can talk openly.

As regards my impression of Bangladesh, my view will be like one flying over this enormously flat country with thickly clustered villages populated by many people. Here, therefore, agriculture must receive the highest priority. Given proper attention to rural development, I think Bangladesh will flourish into a prosperous country.