

Too Many Dictators Around the Continent

by Ogen Kevin Aliro

As the world focuses on events in Europe and the Soviet Union as well as the Gulf crisis, Africa is getting less attention from the media, — and Africans suspect — from the governments of industrialised countries. The end of the Cold War is in danger of marginalising them. These changes plus the harder attitude of the West on conditions of aid have affected the politics of almost every country. Gemini News Service's correspondent, who is a journalist in Uganda, examines in two reports just how much real change is taking place.

Power-Game in New Delhi

While there is nothing surprising about the dissolution of the Indian parliament, paving the way for a mid-term national election, probably in May, there is indeed much concern, inside India and outside, as to how the world's most populous democracy will pass its latest test.

This concern stems from the fact that the latest development is the outcome of a cynical power-game that has been going on in New Delhi since the minority government of Chandra Shekhar took office just over four months ago, with the support of the Congress (I) of Rajiv Gandhi. Having earned the dubious satisfaction of bringing down the government of V.P. Singh, the bearded socialist leader did not mind running the administration on borrowed time. On the other hand, Mr Gandhi assumed that he would use the breathing space for the preparation for a fresh election held at his own convenience. Finally, there was L.K. Advani of the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who would not miss his chance of capitalising on the confusion created by other contenders for power.

In this power-game, none of the top-level politician has gained any respect or even marginal credibility from the press or the electorate of India. While Mr Gandhi has not quite fully explained why, if at all, his party had withdrawn its support once given to the Shekhar administration, there are also unanswered questions about circumstances surrounding the resignation of leader of the minority government. Some, if not all the contenders, have been trying to destabilise the situation and, in this respect, Mr Gandhi might have been the worst offender, as Mr Advani has charged.

On the face of it, the election provides the only way out of the stalemate, in the hope that a major party will emerge with a clear mandate to give the country a stable administration. However, there are serious doubts on this score. Mr Gandhi's Congress (I) probably has the best chance of winning a sizable number of seats, but few would give it a clear majority in a three-corner race, the other two being V.P. Singh's Janata and the BJP. A question mark also hangs over the splinter group led by Mr Shekhar. Attempts to forge electoral alliances will probably start any time. But, judging by recent events, these alliances are made to be broken at appropriate moments chosen by the uneasy partners.

If the chances of the election producing a clear winner look slim, prospects for a peaceful voting seem slimmer indeed. Here, the mounting concern centres on BJP's threat to use the Babri Masjid issue as a focal point in its campaign. It is not too late yet for Mr Advani to see the danger of conducting his party's campaign on such an outrageously communal platform. If the BJP leader refuses to change his course, opinion-makers in India, especially the liberal press, should urge upon the authorities, especially the President of India, to enforce a Code of Conduct on all parties, contesting the election, a Code that prohibits the use of communal issues in the campaign. No effort should be considered too big and no measure too harsh to prevent any breach of peace and communal harmony in India during the polls or later.

Justice for Kurds

The Kurds missed out on a historic opportunity in 1918. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, instead of forming a state of their own, the Kurds found themselves part of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Without a state of their own, and lacking in basic rights and autonomy in the various countries they found themselves in, the cultural, political and economic aspirations of the 25 million-strong Kurdish people remain unfulfilled.

The current and apparently successful uprising in northern Iraq has brought the Kurdish question back into the limelight again. The last alert also came from Iraq, after over 100,000 Kurds fled into Turkey to escape alleged chemical attacks by Baghdad's forces. Not surprisingly, world sympathy is now firmly on the side of Iraqi Kurds.

However, it would be quite wrong to single out Iraqi Kurds. There are 15 million Kurds in Turkey, as opposed to about four million in Iraq and five million in Iran. Battles have been going on for decades in all three countries. What has varied is the level of repression, and consequently the degree of resistance.

This is not to suggest that a Kurdish state should be set up forth-with. That would upset the regional balance, with unforeseeable consequences. Without an outlet to the sea, a Kurdish state would become totally dependent on goodwill of neighbours. Besides, Iraq, Turkey and Iran are most unlikely to agree to the dismemberment of their countries. And the various Kurdish guerrilla groups themselves have no plans for a Greater Kurdistan.

What we can indeed hope is that all the three states involved in the issue will consider the problem with sincerity and total honesty. Past practices of using various Kurdish groups as pawns in inter-regional power politics (in which Damascus has also been a keen player) should no longer be viewed as acceptable. A modest step has already been taken with Ankara's decision to allow international bodies to look into allegations of human rights abuses in Turkish Kurdistan. Regional autonomy for Kurdish areas within their respective states is an idea Ankara, Baghdad and Tehran should consider seriously. They should take the process a step further by allowing the autonomous regions to freely interact among themselves at the cultural, social and economic levels, thus allowing the Kurdish people as a whole to develop a sense of being, without jeopardising the territorial integrity of any country in the region.

DESPITE the changes in eastern Europe, 1991 finds many African countries still living under dictatorships, either in the form of military regimes or in the guise of the one-party state.

Except for cases where people have taken to the streets, the main cause of political change sweeping Africa remains the World Bank and Western powers that have made observance of human rights and political pluralism a condition for further aid.

Although the masses in Africa had long recognised the injustices of their governments, they could not until now express their views for fear of further repression — repression that came with the complicity of the West if it involved a "friendly" government.

France, for example, actively aided suppression of dissident movements in Francophone countries and provided intelligence on the exiled opposition to African secret police services.

The United States created Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire and nurtured Samuel Doe in Liberia. Britain and the US favoured Daniel arap Moi in Kenya. Neutral and peace-loving Sweden connived in the brutalities of SWAPO of Namibia in exile, never seriously questioning at the time the organisation's disregard for human rights.

Now, however, the Cold War is over and the superpowers see the need to keep tyrants in power.

The main danger is that political reforms being imposed on Africa may bring no greater prosperity. This, because, they are not being accompanied by Marshall Plan-type aid, such as is being directed towards eastern Europe, may produce increased short term political volatility.

Early in 1990, pro-democracy demonstrators, probably taking their cue from eastern Europe, rocked several African capitals, but did not have the dramatic effect of throwing out totalitarian regimes.

In February students in Ivory Coast began a wave of protests. They were joined by civil servants unhappy about President Houphouet-Boigny's 30 years of unbroken rule

since independence in 1960.

Houphouet saw the writing on the wall and held multi-party elections in November. They were won by his Parti Democratique de la Cote d'Ivoire amid allegations of massive vote-rigging.

In Zambia pressure for multi-party democracy mounted. President Kenneth Kaunda, who has led the country under his United National Independence Party (UNIP) since 1964, opposed the very idea, then grudgingly promised a referendum.

Harsh economic measures caused three days of violent riots and a campaign led by former UNIP Secretary-General Humphrey Mulemba and the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) gained such

momentum that Kaunda agreed without a referendum to restore a multi-party constitution. First elections under the new system are planned for October 1991.

Zambian demonstrations of up to 200,000 people were the first in Africa with crowds as large as those which gathered in Leipzig and Prague.

In Kenya and Zaire pro-democracy movements have been less successful. Mobutu announced in April he was introducing his own version of glasnost and multi-party democracy to replace 25 years of his one-man show. The parties were limited to three — the long-banned Union pour la Democratie et le Progress Social (UDPS), and two wings of his own Mouvement Populaire

de la Revolution (MPR), which he oddly divided into "hardliners" and "moderates."

All he has done since is not in line with the spirit of glasnost. When university students tried to protest, Mobutu sent in troops and students were reported killed. In recent months, Mobutu has been trying to integrate the UDPS into MPR, causing even more confusion.

In Kenya, the murder of Foreign Minister Robert Ouko produced demands for democratic reforms and pluralism. Demonstrators in Nairobi and Kisumu flashed the two-finger V sign, denoting support for a multi-party system.

US ambassador to Kenya Smith Hempstone criticised Moi's human rights record and warned that his government would in future concentrate its aid on countries that "nourish democratic institutions, defend human rights and practise multi-party democracy."

Former minister Kenneth Matiba and former Mayor of Nairobi Charles Rubia also called for free elections under a multi-party system. Lawyers, church leaders and others called on Moi to resign and end the monopoly of leadership by his Kenya African National Union (KANU), the only legal party in Kenya. Moi detained Matiba and Rubia, setting off the worst rioting in Kenya's independent history.

The newly published New African Yearbook* points out in its preface: "Kenya's pressing for democracy have not yet won any concessions from the government, but they had now received the formidable support of the West, including Kenya's two largest donors, the US and Britain...."

In November former Vice-President Oginga Odinga announced he was launching a new party to compete against KANU in future elections, but

Moi is still resisting popular calls for democratic pluralism.

Also resisting change is Ghana under Jerry Rawlings. The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) has ruled Ghana since his return to power on December 31, 1981. He insists that the district assemblies are democratic enough. The PNDC is under increasing pressure to hold a referendum or introduce a constitution allowing for democratic pluralism.

The situation in Mali is not different. Despite appeals for political pluralism from senior officials, trade unions, the press and the bar association, President Moussa Traore's Union Democratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM) has refused to liberalise.

Riots and demonstrations in the Congo, Togo, Benin, Sierra Leone, and the Central African Republic (CAR) have shaken the regimes, but not yet brought desired reforms.

In Sierra Leone, however, the next 12 months are likely to see great economic and political changes. President Joseph Momoh's sole All People's Congress (APC) has proposed an election soon, probably in May.

A special session of the APC Central Committee recently endorsed the need to "widen the political process to enhance wider participation therein." It proposed a constitutional review conference.

On October 15 pro-democracy protesters took to the streets in the Central African Republic (CAR) to challenge President Andrew Kolingba's military rule. Kolingba led a military coup in 1981 and imposed one-party rule seven months after voters had approved a multi-party constitution.

A major victim of events in eastern Europe was Ethiopia. In March President Mengistu Haile Mariam cited international changes to explain why

he was abandoning socialism. The sole Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), founded in 1984, has gone.

Its replacement, the Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party, is open to non-Marxists. Mengistu has also called for opposition groups to join talks that could lead to "political participations as organisations under an umbrella of unity."

Mengistu said that his aim was the survival of the Ethiopian state threatened by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The EPLF rejected the proposal as "irrelevant" and emphasised the only way to solve Ethiopia's problems was to offer the Eritreans the choice between independence and unity with Ethiopia. The political situation remains as explosive as ever.

In Somalia opposition mounted to President Siad Barre's 21-year rule. Anxiety over the country's worsening international image led government to announce a "temporary constitution", which will introduce a multi-party system. No date was promised for multi-party elections.

Barre's own survival is now threatened by the rebel Somali National Movement (SNM) and two other guerrilla groups.

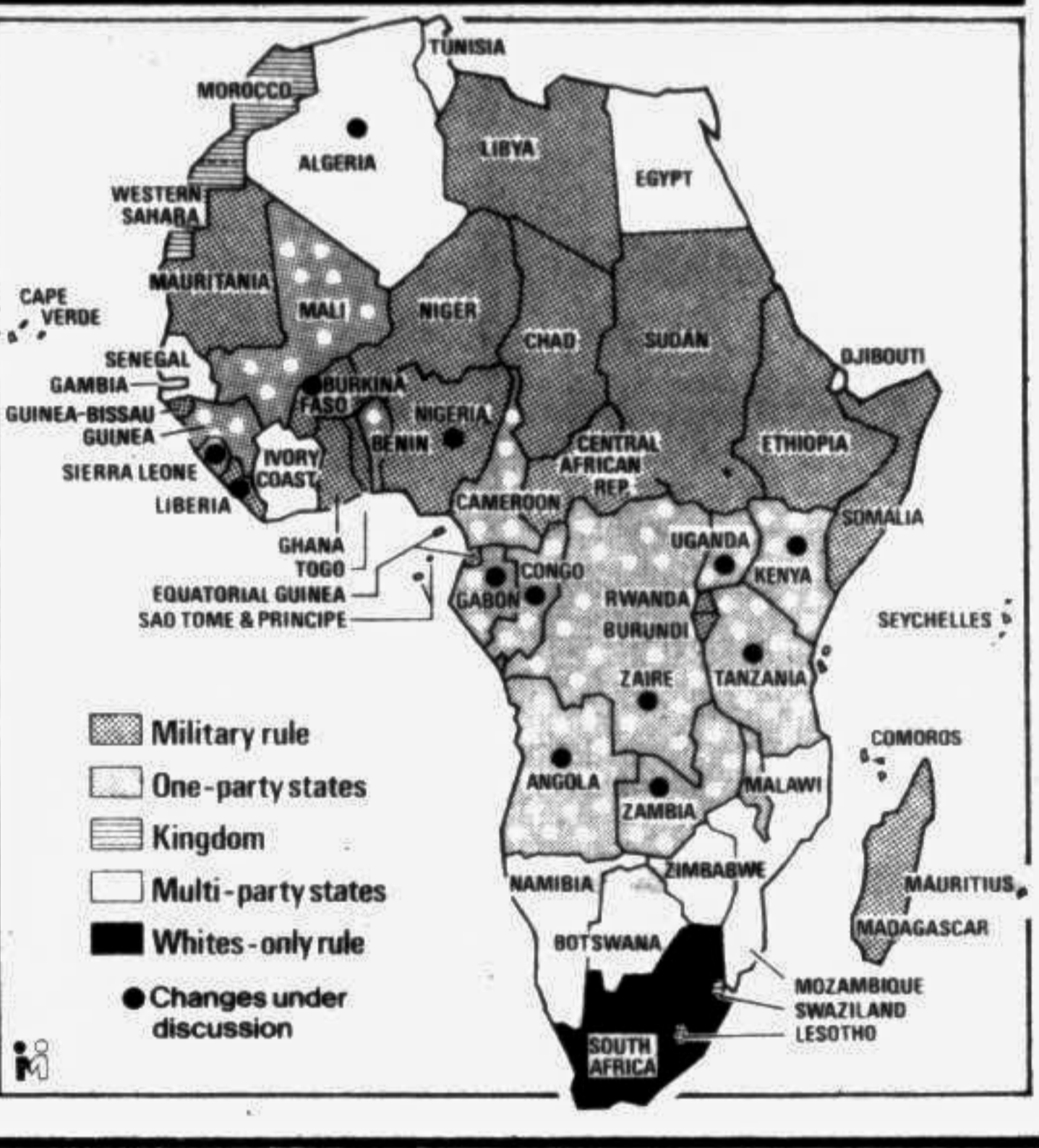
In Nigeria, the military government of President Ibrahim Babangida continues with its controversial plan to return the country to civilian rule in 1992 through the choice of only two parties, the National Republican Convention and the Social Democratic Party.

The two parties were specially created by the military government itself after rejecting all the three largest parties that were formed by the people themselves as "divisive and sectarian."

* New African Yearbook 1919-92, I.C. Publications, 69 Great Queen Street, London WC 2B 5AN.

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How Africa is ruled



Land Use Management Eases Landslide Threat

Harold Pieris writes from Colombo

LANDSLIDES create havoc in the hill country and the midland areas of this island nation.

In 1989, floods and landslides killed several people in the Central and Western provinces and injured several more while many houses were damaged or destroyed.

Thousands of families whose homes were threatened by landslides had to be given temporary shelter in temples, churches and schools. They returned home after the floods receded, only to wait until the next rains arrive.

In the last few years, construction and development increased logging in the hilly and midland areas of Sri Lanka. Forest cover was destroyed, resulting in heavy rains and floods which, together with the lack of soil cover, have made the hills susceptible to landslides.

All these should change, if all goes well with a programme to control landslides and assist planners on land use and management, particularly in hilly areas. The programme is a joint project of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and a government agency, the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO).

The project is designed to identify the cause of landslides and set out guidelines for land use in hilly areas, says Ms. Manel de Silva, UNDP programme officer.

For example, the programme will educate people to be vigilant about impending landslides. In certain areas, residents should be aware that 200 millimetres of rain within two or three days is a warning of floods and possible landslides.

Communities will be trained on what steps to take to avoid dangers posed by impending landslides and to mitigate the

effects of disasters. A study has started on 64 sites out of a possible 250 locations identified as landslide-prone.

The entire project is being executed through the UN Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), also known as "Habitat." The UNDP — the funding agency — will contribute over 37 million Sri Lankan rupees (US \$685,000) for equipment, training and experts.

The project is conducted through the Geotechnical Engineering Division of the NBRO. The division is equipped with a soil testing laboratory, and modern and sophisticated equipment, including a computer centre.

The NBRO itself was set up with UNDP assistance in 1984 to organise a comprehensive

building research programme to cater to the country's construction industry which recorded a phenomenal growth during the last thirteen years. Since 1986 the organisation has been involved in several fields including geotechnical engineering and environmental protection, which NBRO officials point out,

will see the compiling of landslide hazard maps of the two areas.

Researchers will identify areas in the two districts which are prone to landslides and will advise land use planners and government officials to desist from building in

these areas. In the long term it will be a saving both in money

and lives.

Depending on the success of the programme in these two districts the project will be expanded to other areas such as the Kegalle and the Ratnapura districts in the midland and the Kalutara district in the Western Province.

Steps have already been taken to set up landslide monitoring units in all these districts. These units are manned

by government officials and district staff. The village headmen will be given a comprehensive training on landslide and slope stability. Thus when cracks appear on the hills which are an early warning of impending landslides, they will be able to warn villagers and government officials of the danger.

The UNDP assisted project is considered vital in the country's battle against natural disasters.

The research will also be vital to the construction industry which accounts for eight per cent of Sri Lanka's gross domestic product, next only to agriculture, manufacturing and trade.

UNDP officials expect the project will eventually make officials more aware of the need to plan in a way that people at large are least affected by these natural disasters.

— Daphne Asia

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Rights of Palestinians

Sir, Iraq, Kuwait and rest of the world have now started paying the price of President Saddam Hussein's wrong action which caused serious economic and environmental breakdown. Earlier, people of the entire world tried to persuade the Iraqi leader that his cause for war was not genuine and it won't yield a good result. The bloody war staged by President Saddam actually provided the United States the opportunity to become champion. This time, the United States was very prompt to execute the UN resolution.

Meanwhile, President Bush is now talking about some solution to the long standing Palestinian problem. We sincerely hope that his words will be translated

into reality thereby compelling audacious Israel to accept the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and recognize the independent State of Palestine.

M. Zahidul Hoque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agriculture College, Dhaka-1207

Marriage registration fees

Sir, A recent report in the newspapers said that divorces are on rise in Netrokona, due to non-payment of dowry. The victims are naturally the women belonging to the lowest tier of the society. Since in most of the cases they are usually those whose marriages have not been registered, it is indeed sad that they are very helpless. The main reason for un-

registered marriages is that often the local Marriage Registrars charge more than the amount fixed by the government.

If a marriage is not registered then a woman cannot contest her husband's second marriage nor can she say anything even if he throws her out of the house, either for non-payment of dowry or any other reason.

We would urge the local bodies representing the government, to please look into the matter and try to redress it.

Tahmina Begum, Rajshahi

Disposables

Sir, With industrialisation have come many good as well as bad things in the society.

It has no doubt brought goods which mankind had never thought of before, like ready-made garments. Now unless we want to, we do not have to take the trouble of going to the tailor and ordering cloths, instead we get everything instantly.

With this comes the question of things disposable, for instance disposable syringe.

What we do not so readily realise is another very common object of use, a pen or more rightly called the ball-point. Now a days this does not need to be re-filled, instead, after it's ink is used up, it is just thrown away.

The good side is that we do not have to bother about buying a re-fill or the pen, as the pen itself costs as much as the re-fill.

We hope more and more of such things are produced and made available in the market for the benefit of the consumers.

Raj Rahman, Khulna

Faridabad roads in bad shape

Sir, Faridabad is a well-known residential area of Dhaka City. About 2 lac people live in this locality. But nowadays most of the roads of this locality are in very bad shape. Hari Charan Roy Road, Faridabad Lane,

Nabin Chandra Goswami Road, Dhalkanagar by pass, Lalmojon Podder Lane, I.G. Gate and Bahadurpur Lane are in a worn out condition. As a result, the people living here have been suffering much for want of modern communications facilities.

Due to the worsening condition of the roads the area is also lagging behind in the fields of trade, commerce, education etc. and the people of this place have lesser opportunity to enjoy the facilities of a city life. Moreover, the roads have developed hazardous potholes and cracked.

For obviating the miseries and sufferings of the people we urge upon the authorities concerned to take steps for early repair of the roads.

Mahbubuddin Chowdhury 17, Hari Charan Roy Road, Faridabad, Dhaka -1204.

Vegetables and summer

Sir, With the coming of summer and end of winter,

we feel that there is very little left, from which to choose, when we go for our kitchen shopping.

During winter a whole world of vegetables floods the market. It is these three months that we really feel great! Ah, vegetables! Nowadays even doctors advise people, generally those over 30, to have more vegetables, than fat and protein.

Vegetables are not only required by the old but also by the young. It prevents a number of diseases, helps a person, young or old, to keep fit.

Alas! when winter says goodbye, so do most of the vegetables.

I am talking only of our country. Since vegetables are not imported, they have to do with what we have locally.

I wish we would add vegetables to our list of imported items! Or, we may innovate ways to prolong their supply throughout summer.

Farhad Ahmed Dhanmondi.