

A Case for Agriculture

It is welcome news that the ministry of agriculture and its subordinate bodies have planned to implement 35 projects costing Tk 252.62 crore with an aid component of Tk 136.35 crore during the current financial year. Equally heartening to know is the fact that 12 more such projects estimated to cost Tk 10.18 crore are in the pipeline. On top of them what promises to be an even more heart-warming and pragmatic, though somewhat belated, move is the Tk 126.7 crore rehabilitation programme for the flood and cyclone affected districts in the south of the country. The sense of optimism however will have to be ably matched by imaginative and down-to-earth planning for deriving the desired benefits.

In this regard we would like to make a few suggestions based on the government policy on agriculture concerning agricultural subsidy and credit system. According to a conservative estimate, agriculture, as a mainstay, still provides more than 60 per cent of our Gross National Product (GNP). Compared to the favourable treatment the industries receive in claiming credits, agriculture is simply meted out a harsh dealing. If the projects now decided upon and under consideration reverse that trend, they will be doubly welcome.

Yet we wish we could be enthusiastic enough about agriculture but for certain government measures. One of these measures concerns the withdrawal of subsidy from agricultural implements and inputs. How badly it will affect the country's effort towards becoming self-sufficient in food is yet to be measured. But it will be a colossal loss if the on-going impetus to production of more agricultural produces is brought to a premature stop. More, if the spill-over of this adverse effect continues to foul the newly taken up projects, a total disaster on the food front is what awaits us.

In this context, let us also focus our attention on a few other related issues. First, agro-based industries can be an answer to our perennial problem of huge unemployment and rural exodus towards cities and towns. Such industries in effect went into the making of the industrial base in Thailand, Malaysia and a few other South-East Asian countries. Another important issue deserves to be taken into consideration is a sound transport system for timely disposal of agricultural produces to markets. Admittedly, bad communication is responsible for a big gap in prices between the point of production and far-off places within the country causing loss to the growers and price-pinch to the consumers. So the issue of marketing the agricultural produces is one of the key factors in the whole package of production recipe. We sincerely hope all these aspects have been taken well care of before embarking on the grand projects.

Blacksmiths Need Attention

Getting the pulse of the nation can very reliably be felt by looking at the condition of the small producing communities. Big ones — such as farmers and weavers — are complicated things warranting laborious exertion and ending up in conclusions at best debatable. Look at the fishermen — and you will before long know all about the overall challenges to the society as also the kind of governance we are enjoying at the moment. Look at the potters — you will get very dependable socio-economic parameters. Now there is news that blacksmiths are in a bad shape in the areas of the bigger Kushtia district, specially around Chuadanga. This much of information should be eloquent enough for those that know about the place the blacksmiths occupy in the rural economic setting.

The blacksmiths of the area are giving up their age-old ancestral profession and centuries of skill and switching over to other livelihoods including begging, if that can be called as such. Why should the blacksmith's plight speak ill of the nation's economy even at the macro level? These people patiently forge agricultural implements and household appliances. When they cannot sell their manufactures out of charcoal fire and an anvil — there can be two explanations. There are less and less buyers because they haven't the money for that or that there are mass-produced daos and axes that sell cheaper. The first is ominous and the second case, if not that fearful, is all the same bad enough. The reason is you will need your blacksmith if only for keeping your implements in workable shape which the mills wouldn't. So kill him or drive him into other callings.

If the blacksmiths need a little support, where will they go? To the banks, that's the answer you would get in all of the civilised world — and not Bangladesh. But why? The failure of our bank services to reach up to the level of the individual blacksmith, in spite of the Grameen Bank there, puts the burden on the government which is hardly the best place for looking after the financial problems of small trades. Unless the banks are persuaded to play their proper role the government must of necessity look after the interest of the blacksmiths. This will be one sure good way to look after the national economy without needing to go for international conferences and big-hotels seminars and papers upon papers, extortative speeches after speeches.

AFTER defeating Spain in war at the end of the last century, the United States took control of Cuba but refused to assume its debts. The US argued that these debts had been illegitimately contracted by Spain to finance its repression of the Cuban people.

Since the debts had been incurred without Cuban consent, Washington declared that neither the US nor Cuba could be held liable for them. Spain protested but the US held firm, and creditors were never able to collect fully on their loans. A precedent was set which would later emerge in international law as the doctrine of "odious debts."

Today, as a debt crisis deepens in much of the developing world, a Canadian economist is calling on poor nations to do as the Americans did at the turn of the century: invoke the "odious debts" doctrine to repudiate much of the \$1.3 trillion in debt with which they are now saddled.

Patricia Adams, executive director of the Toronto think tank Probe International, argues in a just-published book that a large proportion of Third World debt is just as legally "odious" as the Cuban debts were: it was contracted by illegitimate regimes and put to uses that were not in the people's interest, and therefore cannot be legally binding on nations.

"The Third World should repudiate its debts," she writes, "not through appeals to charity but by recourse to due process of law."

"Declaring debts odious will compel the lenders — in order to recover some of the billions they've lost — to seek redress by suing, pursuing and, where possible, seizing the booty of the unrepresentative Third World elites which borrowed so recklessly in the name of their people."

"In so doing the lenders will be discouraging future elites from similar behaviour."

Third World Debt Not Legally Binding, Says Economist

by Alexander Norris

The debt crisis is deepening in Africa and still crushing most of Latin America and Asia. Now a Canadian economist has called on poor countries to invoke international law and repudiate much of their \$1.3 trillion burden. Her prescriptions sharply contrast with those of the World Bank, which has just called for a more conventional brand of debt relief.

More importantly, declaring debts odious will force lenders to be accountable for their mistakes, and ensure that they are never again repeated."

Adams's book — *Odious Debts: Loose Lending, Corruption and the Third World's Environmental Legacy* — recounts how corrupt Third World Elites, often with the complicity of international lenders, have used loans not to improve their nations' living standards, but to funnel billions of dollars into their own

pockets. It also explains how these regimes have indebted themselves to purchase arms with which to repress their citizens or, spurred on by World Bank advisers, to build ill-conceived megaprojects that have inflicted enormous environmental damage and destroyed once-vibrant, sustainable local economies.

Megaprojects financed by this careless lending have left the poor worse off than they were before, Adams suggests. For example, in Brazil, now the

world's most indebted nation, malnutrition actually became twice as widespread after two decades of runaway borrowing that it was in the early Sixties, affecting two-thirds of the population instead of one-third.

In short, says Adams, the banks' lending spree has exacted an enormous toll on the poor and their environment. Yet today, both are being made to pay even more as nations introduce harsh austerity programmes or plunder their natural wealth just to meet interest payments.

All this is particularly unjust, she suggests, when one considers that dictators such as Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaïre have skimmed so much from the loan proceeds that their personal wealth sometimes approaches their nations' total debts.

Adams's call for legal repudiation of odious debts comes as the World Bank — a body she blames for having fuelled the current crisis — releases its yearly debt tables. The accompanying report makes distressing reading.

It does identify a few "encouraging" developments. In 1991, three developing countries — Mexico, Chile and Venezuela — regained access to international capital markets by negotiating cuts in debt to commercial banks, while another two middle-in-

come countries, Egypt and Poland, had half their debt forgiven.

Overall, however, the report states that although the developing world's total debt grew more slowly in the last five years, it more than doubled over the decade — from \$582.8 billion in 1980 to \$1.28 trillion in 1990. This doubling looks benign only when compared with the Seventies, when banks, flush with oil-boom deposits, indulged in an even more reckless lending spree.

The Bank says arrears have rapidly built up as countries have been unable to make payments. Moreover, many of the poorest, most severely indebted countries — particularly in Africa — face an ever more bleak situation.

Uniquely among world regions, sub-Saharan Africa now owes more than it produces every year. Debt stocks which in 1980 stood at \$56 billion — then about a quarter of Africa's total gross national product — have steadily risen to \$174 billion in 1990 and now surpass the region's GNP by 11 per cent.

This deepening debt crisis has been exacerbated by a continued decline in commodity prices, Africa's main foreign-exchange earner.

Indeed, three countries — Mozambique, Somalia and Sudan — are in such a sorry predicament that even if the most far-reaching debt-relief

programmes now under discussion were adopted, these countries still would not earn enough from all their exports combined even to cover scheduled interest payments.

So what does the World Bank propose to do about the problem?

Essentially, it calls on lending and borrowing nations to negotiate a two-thirds reduction in debt along the lines first proposed in 1990 by John Major, then British Chancellor of the Exchequer. This proposal, it says, would cut debt payments to a level which most severely indebted nations could manage.

Adams contends that such a bailout would offer no long-term solution: "Asking Western taxpayers to relieve both lenders and borrowers, as all the bailout plans do," she writes, "will only breed cynicism and feed a decadent stereotype of the Third World."

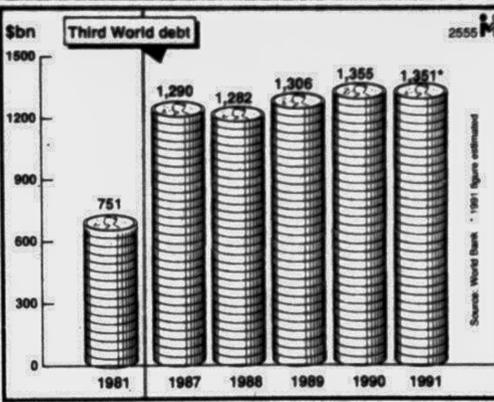
It will also teach elites in poor countries "that corruption pays," and signal to banks that they "need not concern themselves with the stability and legitimacy of those to whom they're lending."

DC Rao, director of the World Bank's international economics department, reacts just as coolly to Adams's proposals, warning that countries which act on them could scare away lenders whose financing they might later require. Before Adams's proposals can even be considered, he says, "one has to persuade the world that these are reasonable arguments."

Indeed, the debate boils down to a question of which option is more reasonable, and to whom. Should Western taxpayers be compelled to bail out the bank's bad loans to dictators, or should the corrupt elites who plundered the loans be brought to justice and forced to hand back what they stole?

— GEMINI NEWS
ALEXANDER NORRIS is a Canadian journalist with the Montreal Gazette.

Debt: the continuing crisis



Tribute to a Revolutionary

Moni Sing — a Man of the Masses

by Mozammel Husain

Moni Sing's first death anniversary passed on December 31 as silently as he passed away on the day a year ago. A leader and a politician true to his mission Moni Sing was a man of the masses.

since I could involved myself in the struggle for emancipation of my countrymen. And what else is so glorious as to keep oneself engaged in the struggle for real emancipation of the masses of people?"

But not a word of self-assertion can one find in his book which he wrote at the insistence of his close associates. Self-promotion was totally unknown to Moni Sing. Never did he term his autobiography as 'my political life' or 'my struggle' or even as 'reminiences'. Readers often get an impression that he was simply describing the struggle of the people and political events he had witnessed through a period of more than half a century, but do not miss to see how deeply the author was involved in every footstep of those struggles. In fact the struggles of the people of his time was reflected in the life of Moni Sing. He regarded people's struggle for emancipation as his own life struggle. He wanted to be a part of everyone. And here we identify him as a unique personality. This stemmed from the philosophy of his life from which he never deviated.

Moni Sing was one of the pioneers of the communist movement in the sub-continent and one of the founders of the Communist Party of Bangladesh in the late Forties.

Throughout the pre-liberation period the communist identity was really difficult to express. However, communists remained undaunted in the face of severe repression by the Pakistani rulers. Moni Sing who assumed the post of the Party's Secretary in 1951 withstood the ordeals and led his party in the struggle for full democratisation of policy against communalism, in the Language Movement and all subsequent movements leading towards national independence. The communists worked for the greatest possible participation of the toiling masses in the national movements.

Born in 1901 in a middle class family in Calcutta, Moni Sing joined the anti-British terrorist movement at the age of 14. Later on in the mid-20s he adopted Marxism which denounced secret terrorism and advocated organised mass revolutionary activities to establish a society free from exploitation.



After the hard earned experience of the labour movement at Metiabury in Calcutta during which he was jailed and interned for a few years in the early 30s, he came to Mymensingh and led the victorious peasants movement for eradication of the Tanka system (tax collection in kind irrespective of harvest). In this struggle he had to

fight against his own Zamindar uncle. He remained underground for 20 odd years at a stretch during the pre-liberation period.

In 1961 he secretly met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the two leaders decided for a joint struggle against military dictatorship of Ayub Khan. Following this meeting the militant student movement was unleashed unitedly by the then Students Union and Students League. This joint decision of the communist leader Moni Sing and nationalist leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman greatly influenced the future political movements of our country.

During the 60s the Communist Party began to grow under the leadership of late Mohammad Farhad, the former Party General Secretary and thousands of young Muslims were attracted to the Party. The present Party is being led by the leadership of that generation. Moni Sing was the Party President till 1987.

Moni Sing was serving time as a detainee in Rajshahi Jail when the Liberation War broke out following genocide started by Pakistani Army on the fateful night of March 25, 1971. Party comrades with people on upsurge broke jail to set free Moni Sing and the others.

During the War of Independence Moni Sing was a

member of the Consultative Committee of the Provisional Government. The unity of left and nationalist forces had its tremendous significance in the national advancement of Bangladesh.

For his ardent patriotism, selfless sacrifice all through his life, and the ordeals he went through, Moni Sing has won a place deep into the hearts of the people. The political standards he set, which are rare in the socio-political arena of Bangladesh has won him a distinct place. The human qualities he showed are those much expected of a political leader. Even his adversaries do not normally show any disrespect for Moni Sing.

A year has elapsed after Moni Sing's passing away. But this little dot of time was incredibly eventful to bring about big changes in the world. Many changes touch upon political belief and ideology upheld by Moni Sing throughout his life. Our country also witnessed the transition from dictatorship to democracy. The events in the past year in our country and in the world arena have both encouraging and discouraging phenomena. It is yet not the time to evaluate. People may differ. But change is the fact of life. And whatever may come about, man's duty to humanity, his fight for wellbeing of all, for justice and equality can not cease. The struggle will continue. In this struggle, for us and for the generations to come, there is and there will always be lessons to learn from a life led by men like Moni Sing.

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.

Khilgaon Taltala Market

Sir, The Dhaka City Corporation is realising regular rentals from the traders who have been allotted shops in the Khilgaon Taltala Supermarket and kutchha bazaar constructed some 5/6 years ago. But it is virtually depriving them of business in that matter livelihood by not constructing necessary roads to and through the market as yet.

Although the market is surrounded by populated localities, most of the residents do not have an access to it because there are not any link or approach roads except the one on its south.

Falling to sell their merchandise, vis-a-vis lesser and lesser number of customers, the traders are simply sustaining huge loss. The kutchha bazaar shopkeepers are the worst sufferers. Many of the shop holders even sold their property to invest in their venture, now they are about to go bankrupt.

All this is not because the market has no prospect, but because it has not the required

number of link and approach roads to facilitate access of customers.

Therefore, it is our earnest request to the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation to take the sufferings of the humble traders in cognisance and give them a chance to survive. It must not take very much time and money to construct a few link/approach roads on the market's west, north and east.

Dr. A. K. Saleh Uddin Ahmed, Md. Motaleb Hossain and others, Khilgaon Taltala City Corp Market, Dhaka.

Prostitutes lure girls

Sir, Of late much has been deliberated on the prostitutes in the media, and different fora. I share the views with a sympathy to those victims of our social behaviour. But the fact remains that not all are victims of the "ways" where "arms of society" are helpless. There are many being victimised in the way which is controllable.

It is often seen at the different bus and railway stations,

even in the heart of the city — at Gullistan busstand, that brothel holders or their agents, in the 'innocuous' garb of ladies keep a mark on woman passengers coming from the countryside. Whenever a girl is found without anyone accompanying her, they interrogate about her home, family, purpose of visit, destination etc. In the absence of any 'formidable' link to the girl's family or destination, they take the chance of luring her to their abode and then compel the unfortunate girl to 'accept' their 'trade'.

Such was a case as reported in the press recently — November 28 last: Two poor girls from Narsingdi came to Dhaka in search of jobs at any garments factory. They met a prostitute soon after they alighted from the bus at Gullistan. She assured them of 'the jobs' they were seeking and took them to "Kandu Patty." Later, on realisation of her intention, the awe-stricken girls cried and screamed and neighbours and police came to their help. But not always such victims could be rescued, and in the process are compelled to abide by the will of the brothel holder.

Therefore, I appeal to the highest authorities in the country to at least restrict the brothel holders and their agents within their compound area so that they may not get a chance to lure the poor girls further to the vicious circle.

This may also lead to a gradual containment of the vice.

Syed Muhammad Ali (Babul) New Elephant Road, Dhaka

"Letters to the editor"

Sir, Mr Zahidul Haque has very rightly pointed out in his letter of December 28 that the letters to the editor did not elicit proper actions. In 'good old days' of Raj, when things were systematic, it was a system with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to send a copy each of important clippings of letters and news items published in various newspapers to the concerned ministries and endorse the same to Governor General's/ President's/ Prime Minister's secretariat, as the case may be, for perusal. Concerned ministry used to take follow-up action till it was finalised. This practice continued long after they left us.

Some time in 1944 I remember to have made a complaint thru' the letters column of 'The Statesman', Calcutta, about a taxi driver having charged me an extra two rupees on his meter fare of Re. 1 and annas 10 from Sealdah station to Park Circus. In about a month's time there was a news item in the same newspaper that on complaint from a passenger the driver... of taxi No... was fined for charging two rupees extra on his meter fare and it was entered in his license. It will be too much to

expect that efficiency today but we will, nevertheless, expect some follow-up action to bring the culprit to book.

There should be someone in the Government to take care of our comments, suggestions and complaints. Moreover, it will lessen the burden on our busy Prime Minister who snatches away time for her Thursday visitors and hears their grievances. Most of the things can be sorted out if the copy of the clippings are endorsed to her for kind perusal. It is very heartening to know that initiative has been taken to form a Letter-writers Forum. We wish them success and good luck and we are very much looking forward to it.

A.M.F. Quadir Lalmita, Dhaka

"BUET situation"

Sir, I have read the letter titled "BUET situation" published in your daily on 25 December, wherein a guardian expressed his suggestion for compensating the affected teachers. I agreed with him that the BUET authorities should pay the compensation from a suitable fund. But his next suggestion is not logical, which rather meant that all the BUET students were responsible for the damaged. What type of suggestion it is? Did he know the occurrence? Some miscreants were responsible for that. He may be a well-wisher of our teachers,

but the students must not also be blamed altogether.

I suggest that BUET authorities may replenish the fund by levying a subscription of a reasonable amount per teacher.

A student Sher-e-Bangla Hall BUET, Dhaka.

New registration system

Sir, Concerning new registration system, for sale/transfer of immovable property, I on behalf of the overseas residents as well as in the interest of the people of our country in general am opposing the illogical, costly, discouraging process. I wonder what sense is there to have photograph and the presence of the purchaser.

I would like to request the present authorities to kindly rethink and reconsider the previous system in which the revenue of the government will certainly increase as much as double. I am confident.

Dabirul Islam Choudhury 20/21, Little Russell Street, London WC1