

Streamlining fish export

A ban on the export of frog legs introduced in 1989 is being violated by unscrupulous traders in a way that simply defies all business ethics and practices. A report carried yesterday by this journal gives in detail the dishonest and illegal practices resorted to by businessmen putting at risk the country's reputation as a genuine and dependable supplier of fish products, shrimp in particular. Taking advantage of the extremely low price of frog legs due to the ban, a section of the businessmen is collecting the item in violation of the country's law for export. Devoid of any ethical sense, these traders have been smuggling out frog legs in shrimp cartons by re-routing them through third countries. Quite ingenious!

Another worrying fact is that these fake traders are managing all the requisite documents—mostly forged—at different points of the export route for exporting underweight and underweight consignments to stay in the business with a definite edge over the genuine exporters of the items, according to a source at the Bangladesh Frozen Food Exporters Association (BFFEA). The implications of all these developments are too dreadful to imagine. By compromising the business ethics and quality of the exportable, these traders are causing grievous damages to the country's position as an exporter in the world market, on the one hand, and also to the fragile environment of the land, on the other. On both these counts, we will end up as a great loser.

First the serious threat to our position as an exporter in the international market. Evidently, it is a clear case of cheating. When we need more than anyone else to establish our credibility as an exporter, it is indeed sad to leave enough scope for the bad businessmen to enjoy a field day. Once the credibility is lost in the international market, our fish products are fated to rot. Private entrepreneurship or not, no business can permanently thrive on cheating, contravening of business ethics and practices. Today's international market is very tough on such subjects and even a single slip can prove awfully damaging. The Chernobyl accident and its consequent impacts on the dairy products in Europe may be a necessary guide to the possible outcome.

Then the indiscriminate catching of frogs poses a serious threat to our ecology. The reason why the export of frog legs was banned is still very much valid and it will continue to be as long as frogs are caught from natural habitats. The need for maintaining a certain number of frogs in fields and wilderness has been seen as an established factor. That a frog eats as much insects daily as can be equal to its body weight makes a strong case for preserving them in their natural settings. Frogs are however as much an exportable item as they ever were. If they are so, they need some investment in line with pisciculture, chicken farming etc.

This points to the fact that not everything on the fish front has been well taken care of. The need for a policy covering the breeding to final stage of export is strongly felt. When the investment is sound, all the processes involved in the earning from fish export have also to be streamlined to cope with the challenge. Ill-gotten profits prompt manipulation of the business practices and such practices thrive in the absence of a sound policy. In the context of today's environmental hazards, economic and ecological considerations should be integrated in the formulation of such policies.

Smoke-free Revolution

These are difficult times for Cuba and its long-serving president Fidel Castro. Since 1959, when a small band of young revolutionaries led by Castro and an Argentine doctor named Ernesto Che Guevara overthrew the universally-hated, Washington-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista, this island-nation of nine million has gone through a remarkable transformation under extremely adverse conditions. The three-decade old economic blockade imposed by the United States has deprived Cuba of easy access to world markets, normal trading opportunities and its share of the aid flow. Cuba has also had to utilise much of the aid given by the former Soviet bloc to maintain a large and well-equipped standing army and air force in order to meet a real threat of invasion from the USA lying just 90 miles across the Caribbean Sea.

Such severe handicaps have not, however, deterred Castro from pursuing socialist and anti-imperialist policies at home and abroad. His policies have certainly not produced a society that can be called prosperous by Western standards, nor one which can claim to have given its citizens political freedom or human rights as understood by most people in the world. Yet, revolutionary Cuba has succeeded in eradicating many of the evils that afflict most developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Cubans today enjoy what is possibly the best health care system in the developing world; literacy rate among its people is comparable to developed countries; hunger and abject poverty, so widespread in other parts of the Third World, are hardly visible even to the most critical, searching eyes. The Cuban system, despite being a totalitarian and often repressive one, has achieved a great deal for the improvement of the quality of the people's lives. But that system, and by extension Castro's leadership, now face an even more severe test.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Cuba's economic cushion has disappeared. It can no longer rely on Moscow to provide aid, cheap fuel or buy its products which others still boycott under US pressure. Politically, a new pro-democracy movement is trying to gain momentum in Havana, aided by exiles living in USA and dealt with, so far, quite harshly by the communist regime.

In order to ride out the economic storm, Castro has put the country under a "green regime", with maximum emphasis on fuel conservation and use of manual transport such as bicycles. It has already caught the imagination of environmentalists around the world, but how far it will succeed in the industrial age is another matter. It is obvious that Castro's environment-friendly policies have been forced on him by economic necessities. The survival of the communist party's 33-year old rule depends on its ability to sustain Cuba's steady climb upwards on the human development index. Castro's smoke-free, green revolution may have heavy touches of romanticism attached to it, as did his violent one in 1959. But the real challenge lies in whether such a bold, yet untested and unproven, approach will be able to meet the Cuban people's political and economic expectations, which are far higher today than they were 30 years ago.

In Reshaping Their Relations, New Delhi and Dhaka Can Learn Much from South East Asia

None of his little-quoted remarks, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore once said, "your closest neighbour is not necessarily your best friend".

This observation by the former Prime Minister of the city republic, now a powerful senior minister of the government, was undoubtedly in relation to the island's two populous mighty neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia. With both Malay-dominated, Muslim majority countries, the predominantly Chinese Singapore has had uneasy, somewhat tense, relationship, until the mid-sixties. This is now only a part of history of the region.

Looking back, analysts say that Lee's remark, quoted above, was anything but a grim warning. It was only meant to put the reality of Singapore's position—geographic, political and economic—in the proper perspective.

Besides, as an expert in the University of Singapore once put to this writer, "If Lee said that your closest neighbour may not be your best friend, he did not say that it cannot be your good friend."

In fact, this is precisely what has happened in the relationship between Singapore and its partners in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), especially between the city republic and two of its immediate neighbours. They have been in good relations, perhaps in excellent relations, since August, 1965 when Singapore emerged as an independent republic after two-year long membership in the Federation of Malaysia as a component state.

Since then, over the past 27 years, the three neighbours—Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia—have reshaped their relations, bilateral and multilateral, on a firm, businesslike and pragmatic basis. There have been issues and problems in their relations, such as the supply of water from Malaysia to Singapore, the entry of illegal Indonesian workers into Malaysia and smuggling between the city republic and the outlying Indonesian islands. But none has been allowed to get out of hand.

Now that, with the state visit paid to India by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, Dhaka and New Delhi have set the stage for a new begin-

ning in their ties, one wonders if there is much we can learn from the way the three Southeast Asian countries have handled their relationships at different levels.

My answer is in the affirmative. Without taking the Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia relationship as a model as such, our two governments here can draw several lessons from the ASEAN region.

True, our scenarios are different, based on separate unique historical processes. Here, one cannot also ignore the fact that pragmatic Chinese and mild-mannered Malays find it easier to work towards a mutually beneficial relationship than the volatile, almost aggressive, people of South Asia.

This is where the role of leadership, with the policies it lays down together with the working style for the administration, has a decisive place. If this was not so, all three countries would have been at loggerheads on many issues, perhaps with ethnic conflicts causing havoc in Malaysia and Singapore.

It is a question of approach consciously developed by leaders of the three countries and then handed down to the respective civil service. This is what we call the political will that provides the guidance to the bureaucracy—not the other way around.

One essential ingredient in the approach lies in the ability of political leaders to tackle "some difficulties", a phrase commonly used in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, at an early stage, before they develop into a problem or a crisis, instead of turning them into public issues. The approach may also be based on personal dialogue between senior ministers of the governments concerned, perhaps during a golf match followed by a quiet lunch. This is not an imaginary situation. This is precisely what happened in the late sixties when the two deputy prime ministers of Singapore and Malaysia, Goh Keng Swee and the

late Mohammad Ismail, got together for golf at Johore and sorted out a couple of their bilateral problems. It is said, they reached an impasse on one which was later resolved by their prime ministers, again at the golf course.

The approach works well for three inter-related reasons. First, politicians avoid using an issue that may affect bilateral relations with a neighbour for domestic political gain. Secondly, in recognition of the sensitive nature of relationship existing among the three countries, some kind of national consensus exists in all three as frequent exchanges of visits among ministers of the three countries, some private ones, which enable their governments to maintain their dialogue, away from media exposure and burra-

an important factor when one of them is dealing with a third country. This explains why Singapore took a long time in establishing full diplomatic ties with China, making it known to all concerned that it would make the move only after Indonesia which had been extremely critical of Beijing on ideological grounds had set up its mission in the Chinese capital. As a predominantly Chinese state, Singapore did not want to be misunderstood by Jakarta by jumping the gun.

When I brought this up, with an official of the Chinese Foreign Minister during one of my last visits to Beijing, I was told, quite correctly, "This is the ASEAN way of doing things, which is absolutely correct."

Unfortunately, this is not the way in South Asia. Governments in SAARC countries would seldom go beyond routine formalities in informing one another of their individual moves vis a vis third countries. In most cases, they would maintain discreet silence. How much did Dhaka know of Islamabad's policy directions on Afghanistan, at various stages? How much did India tell Pakistan of its proposed military exercise with the United States? Was Bangladesh told well in advance that India would sign a water-sharing treaty with Nepal, by either New Delhi or Kathmandu?

In short, in sharp contrast to what we see in Southeast Asia, countries in this region suffer from poor communication, political and economic, among themselves, frequent breakdown in dialogue at the highest level, a lack of genuine interest in the ministries of foreign affairs to treat envoys from SAARC countries with special considerations.

We are yet to know more about the so-called beginning that has been made in Dhaka-Delhi relations as a result of the visit of Begum Zia to India. I, for one, believe that a new beginning has indeed been made. What is important is to define it, put in the necessary ingredients and to ensure that the beginning leads to a process of change. Here, the government in New Delhi and Dhaka will gain much by taking a few useful lessons from South East Asia.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

cratic interferences.

This writer, then working in Singapore, gained an insight into the system in 1971. I was then on a visit to Kuala Lumpur on an assignment when we heard what seemed like an unexpected announcement about the split of the Malaysian Singapore Airlines (MSA) into two separate services. For five years, since the city republic had left Malaysia, MSA had remained a joint venture.

Asked by my Singapore paper to file a report in a matter of hours, I went to the Malaysian Foreign Ministry for a briefing which was readily arranged.

During the briefing, the officer explained the situation and all the reasons for the split in a calm dispassionate manner, giving the background and financial implications from the two perspectives, Malaysia's and that of Singapore. He did not predict a disaster for the Singapore Airlines which was determined to enter the highly competitive field of international air travel. I still remember his concluding remark: "Instead of one good airline, you will have two."

The respect for sensitivities of neighbours, especially on external issues, often emerges as

Tobacco-free Workplaces : Safer and Healthier

by N Islam

In a poor country like Bangladesh subnutrition or malnutrition is a national problem. It is a common phenomenon among the low income groups to which many of our workers belong. Whatever they may earn it is much less than their needs... Smoking in these workers is an added risk let alone aggravated deficiency in family budget due to the misdirected fund for tobacco.

THE rate of smoking in the developing countries is now on the increase and by now it has surpassed that in the developed world. For example, the smoking rates are 30—40 per cent among males and 20—40 per cent among females in the developed countries while the corresponding rates in the developing countries are 40—60 per cent and 2—10 per cent respectively.

For Bangladesh the situation is far worse. Among the males the smoking rate here is 60—70 per cent while in females this is 20—30 per cent. Even more unfortunate is that the lower the income the higher is the rate of smoking. About 80 per cent of our rickshaw pullers smoke. Labourers and other low paid working groups smoke more than the educated rich. The theme for the World No-Tobacco Day 1992 is Tobacco-Free Workplaces : Safer and Healthier. In this article the hazards of smoking in workplaces are discussed in order to bring home some facts which shall explain the force behind the theme and hopefully encourage appropriate action.

It is now definitely known that the risk of smoking is not limited to the smoker himself. You are not safe even if you do not smoke. When someone smokes around you or in your room or workplace you are a passive smoker. Smoking pollutes environment and tobacco smoke is surprisingly the most common pollutant of the indoor air in the developed countries. In the developing countries the situation can therefore be well imagined. Health aspects of industrial regulation is weak and many industries large or small do not observe even the minimum

regulation or standard here. Beside, filters used in normal ventilation and air-conditioning systems cannot remove most of the noxious agents from tobacco smoke in the environment. Consequently the environment becomes polluted with noxious agents and it is not as safe as it should be.

Around 4000 compounds have been identified in tobacco smoke some of which are highly toxic and can be found in the workplaces also. A worker who smokes therefore would receive these hazardous substances from both the sources with added risk. For example, the workers in textile printing, hide preservation, hospitals and laboratories or those engaged in embalming are exposed to formaldehyde. Those working in petrochemicals, rubber industry or who work with adhesives solvents or in vapour, furniture finishing are exposed to benzene. These industries are associated with the increased incidence of chronic respiratory diseases notable among which is chronic bronchitis.

Airborne asbestos is the best example for one hazard aggravating the other due to additive effect of smoking. This was recognised as a cause of lung cancer almost a century ago, way back in 1908. About 80 years later a study in 1979 covering 12000 workers exposed to asbestos showed the 272 of them died of lung

cancer of whom 268 were smokers and only four were non-smokers. Smokers have 80 times more risk for developing lung cancer than those who are not exposed to either hazard viz. asbestos or tobacco.

In workplaces generating silica dust e.g. rock drilling, grinding stone polishing or chipping, smoking adds to the risk and increases the prevalence of chronic obstructive lung diseases.

Similarly it has been found that smoking increases the risk of developing byssinosis, an industrial lung disease among textile industry workers. This is of particular concern for our sugar mill workers as dusts from sugarcane can lead to development of byssinosis.

Carbon monoxide is one of the important toxic agents in tobacco. Garage workers, fire-fighters, foundry employees and workers in gas and coke are also exposed to this gas. This binds with haemoglobin, the carrier of oxygen and thus interferes with oxygen supply to the body tissues creating a critical situation in people who are grossly anaemic and yet smoke. Reduced quantity of haemoglobin in these cases is an impediment to their oxygen supply. When carbon monoxide from smoking makes that limited haemoglobin ineffective for carrying oxygen the organs suffer and the situation becomes worse.

In a poor country like

Bangladesh subnutrition or malnutrition is a national problem. It is a common phenomenon among the low income groups to which many of our workers belong. Whatever they may earn it is much less than their needs because of the higher cost of living and greater demand by increasing family size due to lack of planning. Anaemia is as such one of the commonest problems. Smoking in these workers is an added risk let alone aggravated deficiency in family budget due to the misdirected fund for tobacco.

We hardly realise that most people spend major part of their time in their workplaces and therefore exposure to environmental hazard for a prolonged period poses serious threat.

From all that have been mentioned it is clear that smoking at workplaces is hazardous and this is more so for a developing country like Bangladesh. The picture should not however be considered all that gloomy. We have examples before us and these are our hopes.

In the world today over 40 countries have introduced national legislation controlling smoking in some places. These are in both public and private sectors. Number of countries prohibiting smoking in government offices is increasing. Particular attention has been given to health care centres,

health institutions and also to schools.

In Bangladesh the Ministry of Health has issued instruction to health institutions to keep the environment tobacco-free while Ministry of Education has included articles on health hazards of smoking in school textbooks. The Ministry of Railways and Communication are contemplating to increase the space for non-smokers by reducing that for smokers to minimum with an automate air of making the transports tobacco-free. Bangladesh is a no-smoking zone. Several schools have been declared tobacco-free and some colleges have earned the credit. At least one media centre (UNB) is tobacco free and in one Press Club office (Chittagong) smoking is prohibited.

In Bhutan several districts and many government offices including the Ministry of Health have been declared smoke-free.

In the words of Dr U Ko Ko, Regional Director, WHO south-East Asia Region : "Despite these efforts, however, tobacco continues to take a heavy toll of innocent lives. According to available estimates, tobacco kills at least three million people each year world-wide. Used in smokeless form, either for chewing, snuff taking etc, tobacco is a major cause of oral cancer mostly in countries in the Indian sub-continent where the habit is widespread.

Apart from these direct health risks, many industrial, forest and residential fires are attributable to smoking materials, causing immeasurable loss in terms of socio-economic development. Unless concerted action is taken by the community and high-level commitments it would be a long way to go before the tobacco menace is curbed let alone reaching the goal of tobacco-free world."

To quote Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, Director General of the WHO : "In 1992 World No-Tobacco Day is dedicated to the right of workers to exercise their skills in the cleanest possible atmosphere, unpolluted by tobacco smoke and free from the stress and bad feeling that conflict, between smokers and non-smokers in a closed workplace, can generate. The disease and mortality risks associated with smoking and passive smoking are compelling and it is no longer necessary to demonstrate the economic effects of smoking in terms of medical costs, absenteeism, reduced productivity, industrial accidents and fires... The human, public health and economic consequences of smoking at work make its prohibition a priority in preventive health policy, for public health and for occupational health and safety. On this World No-Tobacco Day, 31st May 1992, let us work together towards 'tobacco-free workplaces' in a bid for safer and healthier employment."

We in Bangladesh have an obligation to work together to attain this goal.

(The writer, a national professor, has been internationally recognised as a crusader of anti-smoking campaign.)

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.

No waiting room!

Sir, Every morning as I go to work I see about 25 young women sitting in groups on the roadside of a small back alley in the Kakrail area. On rainy days these women take shelter in nearby residences like the Circuit House. They are mothers whose children go to Will's Little Flower School on Kakrail Road. They live too far away to make it economical both timewise and moneywise to return to their homes and again come back to pick up their children. Their appeal for a waiting room to the school authority has gone unheard.

It is a crying shame that a well-established and prestigious school like Will's Little Flower is unable to provide any space in their impressive school compound for the handful of mothers who are temporarily reduced to a "homeless" status while their children are in school.

Would the situation have been different if fathers had to

do the waiting? Or would not fathers do any waiting because their time is too valuable?

Shamim Hamid
Convener, BIDS Forum for Gender Studies

Father Timm

Sir, A few people have compared Father Timm to Mr Golem Azam and have demanded his expulsion from Bangladesh. They probably do not realise that Mr Golem is a political personality who had worked against the creation of Bangladesh but Father Timm is a non-political person who has lived in Bangladesh for the last 40 years has always served the cause of humanity in Bangladesh. Whenever he heard of any distress or during any natural calamity he had rushed to the people's side irrespective of cast, creed, religion to share their sorrow and help mitigate their sufferings.

Father Timm has always tried to help the oppressed and deprived, by reporting mis-deeds

with a view to attracting the attention of the authorities so that help and justice can reach those who require it. He had risked his life many a time during the Liberation War. He has lost two of his colleagues Fr Richard Novak and Fr Evans who were both well known for their service to the poor and oppressed and were therefore perhaps killed by the Pakistani forces. But the death of two of his colleagues could not stop Fr Timm from upholding the just cause.

Father Timm's contribution towards our country's education and sports is also very significant. I just hope that the innocent people of our country will not be misled by the vested quarters. May the Almighty forgive those who tried to stain the portrait of a man who has forsaken the earthly pleasures and has devoted his life for the people of Bangladesh.

A Bangladeshi

Their excellencies?

Sir, They came, they played conquered the hearts of Bangladeshis. Regardless of their domain of representation, Ambassadors in Sports (AIS)—a London-based multinational football team—impressed local sports maniacs in Dhaka recently.

Their manoeuvres on and off field have certainly worked wonders to those who confronted or cooperated with them, as they play their ambassadorial game right.

Mottowise, it is not merely football they are out to promote, it is a message they are trying to get across—a universal message about sports and beyond.

Never mind the odds, their interactions in specially brightened dark did tighten the knots of multinational ties. Sporting diplomacy, of course; Ambassadors Extraordinary!

M Rahman
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Upgrading the BRRI

Sir, The Bangladesh River Research Institute appears to be doing a fine job, according to recent press reports. It is undertaking research assignments for clients abroad, and thereby earning foreign exchange.

There are very few organisations of this type in this part of the world. BRRI could possibly undertake research work for or in other developing countries in Asia, if it be upgraded to the status of a regional agency, duly supported by UN and other international bodies.

Rightly, this institution is

located in one of the largest deltaic regions of the world. Therefore the scope and activities of BRRI should match the huge dimensions of the topography of the area (for example, two billion tons of silt carried annually); not to speak of the devastating cyclones and tidal surges, on which more data are needed. The association/collaboration of similar agencies in the Amazon and Nile deltas might minimise duplicate R&D activities.

A Mawaz
Dhaka

Rashdi comes home!

Sir, A pleasant surprise indeed to find a profile of Mumtaz Rashdi in your boxed column Dhaka Day by Day. Rahat Fahmida's brief interview with the visiting lady has the focus on the latter's preoccupation with social work in Sindh, the homeland of her husband, Late Peer Ali Rashdi. The write-up also touches at her interest in archaeology, her association with newspapers, her fondness for her grand children and her relationship with our great Sher-e-Bangla.

But what Rahat Fahmida has missed to mention is Mumtaz Rashdi's contribution to the cultural activities in Dhaka. In the early 50's Mumtaz Rashdi was a student of the

Department of English at Dhaka University and was popularly known as Lily Khan. In those days when the fervour for the new fangled Islamic state of Pakistan was quite fresh and strong, Mumtaz Lily Khan was one of the three girls who broke the traditional taboo for co-acting on a public stage. I do remember having witnessed one such play—Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice", which was staged at the Mahub Ali Institute in the railway yard.

Mumtaz Lily Khan played the role of "Nerissa" while Munimunnessa and Nadera Chowdhury portrayed the characters of "Portia" and "Jessica" respectively.

In the male characters Abdul Matin and Sayeed Ahmed were among others. Shaheed Munier Chowdhury was also associated with the production of the play. Though an English play, the staging of it was a break-through in the history of our dramatic performance for many reasons.

A reference to Mumtaz Lily Khan's cultural activities as a student could make your item more interesting. If asked, Mumtaz Lily Khan, I believe, could tell a lot about it.

N.M.
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