

Green Jute Breakthrough

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia witnessing a presentation of commercial application of green jute early this week, a major breakthrough seems officially heralded in attaining diversification in the uses of jute. The personal initiative of the Industries Minister A M Zahiruddin Khan in bringing about the transformation is indeed noteworthy.

It's good that starting this year, all the four public sector pulp and paper mills in the country will be using jute as a raw material. Initially, the mills plan to use one lakh tons of green jute or the plant itself, in making pulp. However, by the next year, they could be lifting as much as two and a half lakh tons green jute for making pulp. This quantity represents roughly one-fourth of the total output of jute plants in the country. Use of such a substantial quantity in pulp manufacturing would not only significantly expand the utilisation of jute as an industrial raw material but would also open up new opportunities for improving the lot of the growers.

Green jute pulp has already been used successfully to produce high quality industrial grade brown paper. The domestic demand for such paper is now being met through imports. Marketing these papers could bring in substantial saving in imports. With further modifications and technological improvements, other high grade papers could be manufactured from jute pulp. This could open up prospects for expanding the country's export base.

Inadequate supplies of wood and bamboo have become a well-nigh perennial problem for the country's pulp and paper mills. The cost also has gone up gradually, raising the price of paper. It is heartening to hear that putting green jute to making pulp will bring the production cost of the mills down by as much as thirty per cent. And, the newspaper industry can look forward to getting ample supplies of quality newsprint at a fair price.

Use of jute in paper making is an environmentally friendly move too. The country's forest resources are being depleted fast. Reports keep on appearing that bamboo clusters are disappearing and forests are being denuded of trees. Depletion of forest resources continues to outstrip accretion. Lesser use of bamboo and wood in the paper manufacturing industry would bring a much needed respite to incremental denudation of the forest lands. Conversely, jute is a renewable resource. The country can grow more jute much quicker than rear more trees and bamboos.

The success achieved in diversification of the use of jute can possibly be replicated in other areas too. The energy sector provides a case in point. A serious energy crisis in the country by the year 2010 is being predicted due to the depletion of the existing natural gas resources. The government has set in motion efforts to renew these resources through urgent exploration and commissioning of additional gas and, if possible, oil fields. Exploration and use of coal mine is also high on the agenda. However, in the final analysis, these all are non-renewable sources of energy.

Exploration of new gas and oil fields no doubt is a national priority. However, efforts have also to be intensified to secure expanded and efficient use of other natural renewable sources of energy. It is encouraging to note that a recent high-level meeting on science and technology, presided over by the Prime Minister herself, has directed the concerned authorities to take steps for popularising mass use of solar stoves, improved ovens and encourage commercial use of bio-technology and bio-gas in the country.

Technological advances do not always come as unmix blessings. For instance, increased use of jute plants for making pulp could reduce the availability of jute sticks, a major source of energy in the countryside. Therefore, it is all the more necessary to accelerate increased use of bio-mass as a source of energy. As for the initiative itself for diversifying use of jute, let's hope that the results achieved will fully justify our high expectations.

Lucrative Farming, No Way

Hemp, unknown to peasants in general, is a very hardy plant needing practically no care for its thriving and fetching a pot of money. One such plant can bring in ten to 15 thousand Taka in a year. When the produce of only one plant, 2 to 3 kg of ganja or hashish or marijuana or whatever, reaches world market it would be sold for tens of thousands of dollars. The knowledge of this miracle crop has almost been lost to the peasants of Bangladesh. But a report published by The Daily Star on Monday says that hemp is being cultivated in about 125 villages of Jamalpur. Many farmers have gone over to the cultivation of this dangerous and internationally dreaded plant since 1989.

The report suggests that poverty had pushed farmers into such a bad thing. That means the cultivators know that they are not doing the right thing. But more urgent issues than sanctimonious ideas of right and wrong prevailed with them — together those are called requirements for survival. Our oriental and ancient way of life has for long been taking the hallucinogens produced by poppy and hemp plants in its stride, never letting this turn into social or human problems beyond desirable limits. However, as things now are globally, specially on the cultural plane, one has to agree with the view of the establishment of the North countries that drugs have indeed become a curse to humanity. It is as a token of our appreciation of that stand Bangladesh also fights the drug menace in its own way and according to its capacity.

Specially after the emergence of Bangladesh youth in this nation has gone over largely to drugs and mastani each promoting the other and both paced by unemployment and moral bankruptcy of their elders. What was a problem of only the western societies only the other day, has suddenly started to sap the vitality and vitiate the future of our nation. Drugs have become the pet and most widespread addiction of our youth. Over the years we did not produce any drug plant. The connection between farming hemp and a wholesale addiction to this is not convincing. Even then the Jamalpur farmers' short-cut to survival cannot in any way be condoned. There is no need for President Clinton to be led on to the knowledge of the Jamalpur hemp villages and invite a search-and-destroy mission by his task force. We should be able to persuade our farmers out of their lucrative cultivation using neither coercion nor punishment. For these means can only drive the dangerously paying farming underground in which case it would go beyond the power of ordinary administration to contain this.

THE end of the Cold War has removed the well known dividing lines between friends and foes. The picture today has become amorphous. The eagerness in Washington to shore up the fragile and tottering democratic political structure in Russia would have been unthinkable a decade ago. Yet that is what we see happening when President Clinton went out of his way to bolster the position of President Yeltsin against the threat posed by the ultranationalist Vladimir V Zhirinovskiy and other opponents of reform.

The collapse of the Warsaw Pact created a security vacuum in Eastern Europe. The obvious solution for these countries was to join the NATO and accordingly most of them have been working towards that goal. However, Russia has not taken a favourable view of this request. Initially it seemed to be flexible but it has become increasingly forthright in its opposition to the expansion of NATO membership by admitting its former allies. The European members of NATO could not take a strong or decisive position on the question. In fact most of them expected the Americans to take this policy decision on their behalf and President Bill Clinton has just done that.

Instead of admitting these countries as members, they have been conferred an intermediate status as Partners for Peace. This arrangement falls far short of full membership and the security guarantee that Poland and other East European countries wanted. But fears in the alliance about Russian sensitivities prevailed. Clinton and a number of other NATO leaders were adamant in defending their initiative. According to them, the Partnership for Peace offers

NATO Summit: The Zhirinovskiy Factor

Vladimir V Zhirinovskiy represents the anger and frustration of the ordinary Russian men and women about the economic and political mess that has been created by the reformist leaders of the government. This is what lies behind the uneasiness in East European countries. Their eagerness to join the NATO was clearly based on not only historical memories but on current concerns as well.

military cooperation and eventual membership of NATO. NATO's secretary general Mr Manfred Wormer went a step further in reassuring these countries when he said, "Our message to the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe has been equally consistent: We shall not leave you alone. We care about your security which is of direct and material concern to us." Mr Clinton was equally eager to stress the importance of the new arrangement and in order to emphasize its significance, he referred to the tragedy in Bosnia, describing the partnership as one that would be more important to the future shape of Europe "than whatever is or is not done with the tragedy of Bosnia at this late date."

Despite Clinton's remark quoted above, Bosnia haunted the summit. NATO's failure to deal with a military conflict right at its doorstep has created a credibility problem for the alliance. In order to appear strong and forceful the leaders declared, "We reaffirm our readiness to carry out air strikes if necessary to prevent the strangulation of Sarajevo, the safe areas and other threatened areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina." Such bold and ringing words seem to convince no one that NATO means business. It issued a similar warning in August last year which led to no military action. Two weeks have passed since the latest warning was issued but nothing has happened to

suggest that NATO forces will actually go into action against the Serbians. In any case, before they can start bombing the Serbian positions, they will have to get the approval of the North Atlantic Council as well as that of the UN Security Council. France seems to have recently joined the United States in demanding stronger action in Bosnia but others with significant number of troops in Bosnia are reluctant to act in

pressure from economic recession and high rate of unemployment, have been cutting down on their military budgets. There was a feeling all around that the good times had arrived and that there were large peace dividends to be reaped by the Western governments.

Unfortunately, it seems, this sense of relief was somewhat premature. New signals are coming from the East which require them to keep

situation. The economy, in particular, is a shambles.

The IMF prescription for the management of the economy has been a disaster. Privatization and other economic reforms, carried out too quickly, have clearly backfired. Caught between inflation and a widening budget deficit, the economy is unable to stay on course. The fight between Yeltsin and a conservative Parliament has further worsened the overall climate of politics in the country.

Against this background the parliamentary elections have produced an ultranationalist called Vladimir V Zhirinovskiy whose Liberal Democratic Party has gained one fourth of the seats. Mr Zhirinovskiy does not hide his ambitions. He wants to re-create the Empire. His sights appear to be not just on the former republics but even beyond. And he will not hesitate to use force to achieve his goals. His irresponsible remarks have already sent a shock wave through Europe.

For example, he suggested recently that a nuclear attack was the appropriate response to Germany's refusal to issue him a visa! Such a man may not always be taken seriously but he does lead one fourth of the members of the Parliament but what is more important, he represents the anger and frustration of the ordinary Russian men and women about the economic and political mess that has been created by the reformist leaders of the gov-

ernment. This is what lies behind the uneasiness in East European countries. Their eagerness to join the NATO was clearly based on not only historical memories but on current concerns as well.

The Western countries are clearly watching the situation warily. Russia with or without nuclear weapons is a threat and they will not dismantle NATO until they are sure about the developments in the East. The compromise formula of Partners for Peace is aimed at serving two purposes: it reassures Poland and other former Soviet satellite countries about their security. NATO is with them as a partner for their security. Secondly, it reassures Russia that the Western countries are not, once again, encircling Russia with the members of a military pact. One does not know if either of these purposes will be served by this clever device.

The Zhirinovskiy phenomenon is a creation of the economic and political turmoil of the country. Unless President Yeltsin and the Russian parliament are able to put the economy on the path to stability and progress and unless the causes of the current frustrations are removed, the support for someone like Mr Zhirinovskiy will not diminish.

Hitler, if one recalls German history, was also the product of a similar political and economic situation. The potential for danger is there and NATO may, after all, find the purpose for its existence in the threat posed by Russia. The only difference will be that the ideological veneer from both sides will be gone. The NATO summit may have thus paved the way for a new phase of global rivalry, without ideological pretensions.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

the absence of consensus on military action this month's NATO summit will go down as yet another abortive attempt to stop the aggression and genocide in Bosnia.

This failure may have very long term implications for the Islamic world where the fundamentalists influence is on the rise. However it is not Bosnia but the developments in Russia which are more likely to exercise a decisive influence in shaping the future of NATO.

There was widespread speculation, when the Soviet Union disintegrated and there was a world-wide retreat of communism, that NATO had lost its rationale. It was a military alliance with no one to be allied against. In fact, many Western governments, under

the NATO structure intact until the picture is clear. Meanwhile, the United States has been busy negotiating with Russia the phased reduction and destruction of the nuclear weapons deployed against each other. Both the countries have been trying to bring in line the former Soviet republics, notably Ukraine, which also have a stockpile of nuclear weapons.

However, the main problem in this peaceful and welcome process of eliminating the threat of nuclear holocaust is the failure of the Russian Federation to play its expected role. That vast country has been in a state of turmoil ever since the Soviet Empire came to an abrupt end. Neither the economy nor the political system has adjusted to the new

UN Rethinks Anti-Poverty Strategy for Asia

A new anti-poverty drive is about to be launched in a region that boasts of booming economies. Leah Makabenta of Inter Press Service reports from Kuala Lumpur.

THE Asia-Pacific region may have the distinction of having the world's most impressive economies — with growth doubling every 10 years — yet it has the most number of poor and illiterate people in the globe.

This situation has confounded experts at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the UN agency aiding Third World countries to build up their capacities for sustainable development.

But now the UNDP has hatched a major new programme to attack poverty in the Asia-Pacific region that will be different from other such initiatives in the past.

"The region has all the expertise, all the institutions, but what's wrong?" asks UNDP Asia-Pacific programmes division chief Sebastian Zacharia.

"This is what we're going to do," he says. "See what went wrong, what has been successful and how they can be adapted and tested in other areas. Because not all of them were failures, there were some good ones like Malaysia and South Korea."

The programme, scheduled for launching in May, will bring together the anti-poverty projects of the UNDP, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN Volunteers (UNV), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Asia and Pacific Development Centre (APDC).

Current estimates of abso-



lute poverty in the Asia-Pacific range from 800 million to about one billion people, with higher levels of poverty in the South Asian countries.

Despite the efforts of governments and assistance from UN agencies and multilateral donors, the results have been uneven.

The most successful ones have been those that thought about both aspects from the beginning, like Malaysia, where per capita income grew from US\$100 three decades ago to US\$3,000 today.

Even more impressive is South Korea where per capita income was US\$56 in the mid-

1960s. Today, it is US\$8,500.

The UNDP plans to look at the experience of these countries, learn from them and devise an integrated approach using a combination of policies that include decentralisation, using non-government and community-based organisations, provision of credit and

Still, the programme will have a special focus on the seven South Asian countries that account for a majority of the region's poor and will use ESCAP's seven sister districts' scheme.

This means one district in each of the South Asian countries will be chosen for development of what the UNDP calls a 'replicable' model.

Zacharia says every country has the eradication of poverty as their primary objective but they go about it in different ways. Some went the socialist path emphasising equity rather than growth. Others adopted the free market system, which pursued growth to the neglect of distribution.

One thing the UNDP will not be doing again is helping only the governments, says Zacharia. He explains that the agency's experience 'shows a top-down approach where the state takes the lead in development kills people's initiative.

The focus this time will be on participatory approaches, where the poor themselves through their own organisations have a say in the decisions that affect them.

He says, "We will promote what (has been called) civil society, non-government and community-based organisations that work at the grassroots level."

skills-and capacity-building. "Sometimes you don't need to re-invent the wheel," says Zacharia. "The Malaysian and South Korean experiences would be good to look at for other countries to benefit. There is so much information available and so fast it can't be disseminated."

He adds that while the UNDP already has programmes already operating on the national level in each country as well as a regional credit programme, this is the first time it is attempting a regional integrated and cohesive approach.

Other development experts have noted that an integrated approach is needed so various UN agencies and international organisations can coordinate their projects and avoid duplication and waste of resources.

"What we're finding now is that there are four things that are essential," says Zacharia. "One is micro-economic policies that are conducive to development and equitable distribution. Second is the institutional framework — decentralisation is essential if you are to have grassroots development."

Third is that the poor will remain poor unless they have access to credit," he continues. "And they must also have access to skills, not for the poor to start industrial conglomerates but for micro-enterprises."

But due to the limited resources available, countries to be covered will be selected according to "need and opportunity."

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.

Work as the first basic

Sir, The quiet changes the broadcast of CNN and BBC is bringing about in our attitudes, approaches and habits are felt, if not acknowledged, and today's comments are on one such programme on BBC TV centring on work (more specifically employment) as something very fundamental under the more embracing caption of 'Returning to the Basics'!

As economists battle with the spectre of persisting unemployment, the phenomenon is taking its toll for the simple reason that it is so closely connected to three core aspects of human life viz: crime, family life and disease. With continually being unemployed, an urge builds up in an individual to commit crimes ranging from hijacking — to rape — to murder, simply for the thrill of it and the escape from boredom that it often provides.

Unable to find his place in the general drift of life, the unemployed loses self-respect and worth so essential to healthy family life. Both his wife and children do not so much look up to him and even his sexual performance is hampered by reduced stimulation,

response and gratification.

A third effect of unemployment is the proneness to such diseases as blood-pressure, diabetes, heart-ailment etc. that a man doing no useful work is exposed to.

In conclusion, along with the government's encouragement to piety, as evidenced from the recently concluded Biswa Jtama at Tongi, there must be a determined drive by the same to provide everyone with employment. Right to work is basic. M Rahman

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'Saviour's return it was'

Sir, I congratulate you for your editorial of January 10 on Bangabandhu's homecoming which is bold, timely and thought-provoking. The return of Bangabandhu saved me and many others like me from mental torture and sufferings.

For unavoidable circumstances we could not get out of the country during the liberation war and had to serve the then government most unwillingly at the risk of our lives. We were the unfortunate government officers and staff. But when the Pak army surrendered leaving the country in utter

chaos we were about to lose our life and liberty. We did not commit any wrong. But the blanket threat was there that all of us who had stayed back and served the then government had the sword of suspicion hanging on their neck. Under such circumstances, everyone has to clear oneself from such suspicion. But who was to give us the time for deliberations?

Thus, when we were under such mental agonies we heard the news that Bangabandhu was coming. I remember it very clearly, even after twenty-one years, that we breathed the sigh of the greatest relief. "We are safe now" we shouted in one voice — Bangabandhu, the lion-hearted as he was, would definitely give us the opportunity to explain. Yes, he did pardon all of us who had served the then government during the war of liberation. The magnanimous Bangabandhu did not only (with the exception of a few extreme cases) retain these officers and staff, he also pardoned all others who had associated with the then govt. in any capacity. The judicial process was put to motion. Only those accused of committing rape, murder, and arson, were to be tried.

What a chaos and civil war could have emerged if Bangabandhu did not return at that critical time of our history. I shiver to remember. We feel for the sufferings of the people of Somalia, Bosnia, and many other countries. The sufferings of these peoples are persisting because of the absence of great leaders like Bangabandhu.

Today, I am no more in job. But those who have risen to

high positions, most of them, did not even dream of that in the context of the fifties and sixties. The collaborators and the politicians who sided with the then govt. were also rehabilitated by Bangabandhu.

The businessmen, the small-traders and the industrialists could not make any progress because of the presence of twenty-five big families in Pakistan. Now in Bangladesh their number has risen from zero to more than two hundred. All of them might better ponder, even for a moment, "whether we have given the man his due". Bangabandhu, in the true spirit of Islam and for that matter in the true spirit of all religions and humanity, had forgiven us and paved the way for our prosperity and fame.

We all will have to pay unless the record is made clear and the freedom fighters and their leaders are put on their right places. We might create posts of roving ambassadors for attracting investors but little investment is likely to arrive. Because the investors are human beings and they are also fair-minded and firm believers in the rule of law and justice. And we cannot hope for any consensus on any issue unless the rule of law is established in this country.

The judicial process has to be set in motion. One might say the process is already on. But what is the guarantee that it would not be reversed? That is why we have to correct our records. The murder of Bangabandhu, the jail-killing, and the many other killings which are persisting even today

have to be accounted for through the judicial process. The black indemnity Law has to be scrapped. It is a big spot on our character that criminals cannot be tried. We do not know who are the criminals. Only the courts can decide the guilt of an accused. Then what is the point in keeping this issue hanging on us which is blocking all other efforts?

There is no instance perhaps in any civilized country where the president is killed and the killing cannot be investigated and accused cannot be brought before the court of law. The investors also may fear that if one day any of them is pushed out by someone, such pushers may seek indemnity under such or another such law.

It is, therefore, time that the leaders, students, officers and staff, industrialists and businessmen — people from all walks of life, urge upon our MPs to scratch any such black law, including the Indemnity Law and put our country in the list of more honourable nations before it is too late, also for the sake of the posterity.

Khondkar Ataul Haque
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Valuable minerals

Sir, It took me more than twenty years to move from door to door of various authorities concerned to tell them and to convince them that huge deposits of valuable minerals known as 'black gold' are available in Cox's Bazar and other coastal areas of our country. Many of them asked me who I was, why I was interested in,

whether I was a scientist or a geologist and what was my foreign qualification. When told them about my background and findings of the valuable minerals they said that there were many scientists and geologists in the country and I had nothing to do with the minerals.

Months and years passed by. When again and again I explained to them, some of them claimed and argued that they had discovered the minerals in 1950s and 1960s but the minerals were not commercially viable.

When I insisted on and on about the commercial utilisation either in the public sector or in the private sector they kept a mum.

In the last week of December 1993, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has sanctioned a sum of Taka four crore for upgrading the Beach Sand Pilot Project of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission under the newly created Ministry of Science and Technology.

In the past the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources has wasted crores of Taka from the public exchequer for the beach sand valuable minerals 'black gold' of Cox's Bazar but they miserably failed to achieve any tangible result. Would now the Ministry of Science and Technology go on repeating the past mistakes?

I have been monitoring the deposits of the valuable minerals 'Black Gold' of Cox's Bazar for the last two decades. Those are getting thinner and thinner day by day and washed away by sea water and tidal bore. O H Kabir
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