

## Getting at the root of Smuggling

Reports carried often enough in our dailies and periodicals catalogue the various items that figure most prominently in cross-border smuggling. What emerges is an overwhelming preference here for Indian sarees and a number of consumer items of daily use while *hilsha* fish and some electronic goods are in demand on the other side of the border. A report from Kishoreganj carried in this paper yesterday has detailed commodities of almost every description that have flooded the markets in and around the district.

Kishoreganj alone is not vulnerable to this clandestine business, the border districts, almost without any exception, have been for a long time now. Much as the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) or other law enforcing agency may be asked to prevent smuggling across the border, there is hardly any chance of the drive culminating in a success. The reason is plain and simple: as long as there is demand for certain items which are available and, even cheaper, from across the border, the latter are likely to fill the vacuum — legally or otherwise. If the domestic need cannot be met and competitively so — people in need and with money to spare will look for sources capable of meeting the need, means notwithstanding.

This is what has exactly happened in the case of Indo-Bangladesh cross-border smuggling. It is not for nothing that the smuggling of cow has been given a sort of legal cover to avoid further turmoil. The compulsion that has been responsible for the move is understandable: we are lagging behind in raising cattle in adequate numbers to match our domestic consumption and, no source other than the Indian one looked as convenient to readily respond to the need.

There is no doubt our agricultural policy suffers from a myopic vision in that it has stressed the need for producing cereals so that our shortage of different varieties of pulse, oil seeds, spices, including onion and garlic, is considerable, whether we admit it or not. The traders and businessmen take full advantage of this situation and the arbitrary price hikes they succeed in manipulating through distortion of market forces from time to time hit the consumers hard. It is from this point that smuggling business starts thriving.

Today no less than 20 per cent of our economy gets channelled into black marketing. There is no denying the fact that geographic contiguity has been responsible for smuggling between India and Bangladesh. This would have been the natural outcome, no matter which country or countries were our neighbours in as close a proximity as India is.

Admittedly, our industrialists and traders here enjoy protection and, theoretically have a monopoly market. But they face the senseless competition from smuggled goods. Therefore, the problem has to be addressed on two fronts — production and delivery. Agriculture, industrial and fiscal policies need retuning to enable us to compete with foreign farmers and companies. The sooner it happens the better. Only then the concept of free market economy will benefit us through practical implementation. If others can produce commodities cheap, we ought to do so to stay in the competition.

## A Tragic Disappearance

January 30 two decades and a year ago was the day Zahir Raihan went out in search of his missing elder brother Shahidullah Kaiser. And he never returned. It is a black spot on the administration of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that nothing came out about his disappearance in the following three years. That even an inkling of anything helping track what indeed happened hasn't either been uncovered by governments over the next eighteen years is a non-poser largely because the society's expectations from the successive governments have differed very basically. Zahir Raihan's indelible imprint on the history of the emergence of this new nation-state has much to do with how he viewed the question of liberation and what he thought of the outlook of the initial years of independence. His conviction in the victory of the Liberation War stands vindicated as his idea of the challenges of a post-liberation backlash of the defeated forces of communalism. What Zahir believed to be the truth and died digging out was a harrowing armed conspiracy against the fledgling democracy. Did Bangabandhu choose to look the other way knowing the truth of the thing and mindful of not shaking it into a bloody recoil for which the nation was not prepared?

These speculations have largely been rendered into academic exercise of little import by subsequent political developments. What wouldn't ever diminish is the story of Zahir's unexcelled patriotism during the Liberation War and undaunted courage with which he faced privations and other challenges, largely invited by himself. During the war his achievements as a war hero takes on extra shining halo when seen and appreciated as coming from a writer and film-maker. His task was made the more difficult when some top-brass of the government-in-exile chose not to find in him a comrade. In spite of total non-cooperation from the government, he directed and produced three immortal documentaries on the Liberation War costing the government coffers next to nothing. He headed the very effective Liberation Council of Bangladesh intellectuals which had as its subsidiary the Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha.

Zahir sold the projection rights of his film Jibon Theke Neya to Indian exhibitors giving the proceeds to the government's war fund and to the welfare of artists of different media joining the Liberation War. This he did at a time when he was finding it hard to rent a house for his family.

In the evening of January 29 some of his best loved ones met him and urged him caution. He was madly delving into dangerous cloak-and-dagger things in a very fluid law and order situation setting his near ones to worry to no end. But Zahir was made of a different mould. He cared very little for his own security and prized his duties and emotions above everything else. He went reportedly to search for his brilliant brother kidnapped by Al-Badr and Al-Shams. He was possibly led into a well-laid trap by some voice inspiring his confidence. With him went very valuable findings pertaining to conspiracy against the victory of December 16.

We gratefully remember the great hero, the best of our film pioneers and a very fine writer of fictions.

# Rural Life Insurance could Promote Social Security

The government may find itself hard put to build up a social security system for an aging and incapacitated rural population. However, it can encourage private initiatives there. And annuities and life insurance coverage could be one way of spreading the benefits of economic security to the countryside.

WHENEVER we talk of social security by way of severance pay, unemployment benefit and old age pension, we usually think only of the urban population and industrial labour. The rural population seldom figure in our calculations. We take it that the farmer has his home, land and the children to look after him.

This is not to say that the villagers do not benefit from the country's social welfare programme. The rural population's access to improved health care, sanitation, education, is expanding. New modes of income generating activities are being introduced in the countryside to promote the rural economy. The list could be lengthened by counting in rural electrification, roads and bridges, irrigation facilities and the like. All these can be seen as adding to the welfare of the rural population.

Hopefully, the outlay on welfare and the investment in infrastructure will, some day, improve the quality of the villager's life. Meanwhile, the villager's way of life also would be changing. The process may have started already. For a better future, he should rear lesser number of children. This means he may not have sons to look after him when he grows old. Besides, as his children would get education, they would probably leave the village anyway. Things might have been different if living in rural areas held attractions for the new generation. Such prospects, if at all, seem to be a long way off.

All in all, the villager would be less sure of traditional ways of support from the members of his own family during his waning days. He would look for assurances of economic security for the time when his capacity to earn would diminish due to old age infirmity or physical disability otherwise.

Thoughts on care for an elderly and unproductive rural

population may seem far-fetched now. With economic prosperity, the phenomenon of an aging population appeared in the advanced societies in the West years ago. In Asia, despite the traditionally closed nature of the society, Japan also uses migrant labour now. The aging problem is surfacing among the newly industrialising nations in East Asia too. People have better education, enjoy a higher standard of living. They also live longer, have fewer children. Singapore rewards mothers bearing more children. Malaysia, South Korea, admit migrant labour.

Paradoxically, poverty itself can help family planning gain wider acceptance. An improved level of education would hasten the process by creating an increased awareness. Side by side, a better health care system will let people live longer. And hopefully, some day we would attain higher economic growth and see the face of prosperity. By then, the society would have had already factored in the variables that go into the making of the phenomenon of an aging population. Given this scenario, the aging problem could very well emerge simultaneously with growing prosperity. Need to care for the elderly could even precede, rather than follow, affluence. In retrospect, talks of social security for an aged and inactive rural population would not sound so outlandish then.

Assuming that the traditional social support system of the family taking care of the elderly has also been eroded by then, can the state build up an alternate safety net rapidly? That perhaps would be too much to expect. Besides, the economics of an elaborate social security system run by the state are increasingly being

questioned even in the West. Over the years, governments in the advanced economies have set up an extensive social security network for the elderly which includes medical care, pension and homes for the senior citizens. However, these welfare spendings have also been increasing the burden on their budgets. Caught in a recession, they are being led to a debate on cutting social welfare programmes. They are also aware of the devastating impact of reduction in social welfare spending on public opinion and its political fallout. They now face a harsh trade-

off between slashing welfare expenditure and raising taxes. The government in this country may find itself hard put to build up a social security system for an aging and incapacitated rural population. However, it can at least encourage private initiatives for extending social security benefits to the rural community. Annuities and life insurance coverage could be counted as one way of spreading the benefits of economic security to the countryside. The difference will be that the rural people would buy security with own resources. The state will not bear the direct responsibility for providing this form of security. However, it can create the necessary conditions for the private sector insurers to extend their operations in the rural areas.

## ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

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As it is, private sector insurance companies would be reluctant to extend their oper-

ations to the rural areas. Savers in urban areas tend to have a steady and predictable source of income. Collection of premium from them is easier. The size of policies in rural areas would generally be smaller. Insurance companies would also need to expand their administrative set-up significantly to cover rural population. All these would increase their administrative cost and reduce profitability. The risks assumed by insurer might also seem to be higher, particularly in consideration of the limitations on the availability of health care facilities in rural

areas. The insurer would be inclined to charge a higher premium which would reduce the attractiveness of the proposition to prospective buyer of an insurance policy. Given this background, it is indeed encouraging to find that a private sector life insurance company (Delta Life) had already been operating in the countryside for six years now through its Rural Insurance Scheme (Grameen Bima). The premium earned from rural insurance in 1988, the first year of operation, came to a paltry five lakh taka. In 1992, the figure rose to eighty-six lakh taka and for 1993, the premium earnings are expected to have reached one and a half crore taka. The amount is still not much. However, it does bear an indication that rural insurance is spreading. The initiative can be read as a major break-through in the field of extending insurance coverage

to the rural population. Still in an experimental stage this scheme for rural insurance now covers thirty-one districts of the country, albeit partially. The size of the policy is relatively small. The sum assured can be as low as five thousand taka and the ceiling is twenty-five thousand taka. The minimum policy term is five years. The maximum twenty-five years. Premium is collected weekly. A point of difference with the normal mode of conducting insurance business is that the premium is collected not by agents but by local functionaries of the venture. Recruited exclusively locally, the remunerations of these functionaries have been linked broadly to the amount of premium realised in a given period.

In fact, an accent on participatory management is very much a distinguishing feature of this initiative. Committees consisting of the representatives of the policy holders are set up locally. It is, in fact, these committees who run the affairs of a particular insurance unit. The idea, it seems, is to create self-administered units under these committees to manage their own insurance business. Eventually, self-reliant units could emerge this way.

Life insurance covers the risk of death and disability of the insured. The business of insurance draws its sustenance from the savings of the policy holders. The insured enters into a contractual obligation with the insurer to pay the premium at stated intervals. If he survives, he gets hold of not only the amount assured but also a share of the profit generated through the investment of the premium funds by the insurer. The insured, on his part, has to save money to be

able to pay the premium at the stipulated time. Life insurance thus promotes saving over a medium or long term. The scheme for rural insurance would undoubtedly encourage saving among the policy holders. However, the scheme has an added feature to promote savings in the rural areas. Unlike the normal practice in insurance business to retain a portion of the profits from the company's operations, for payment of dividend among the shareholders, the rural insurance scheme would distribute the entire profit among the policy-holders. It also extends loans to the policy-holders for financing income generating activities in the rural economy. It is the concerned local committee which decides who should get the loan and for what purpose. The loan recovery rate is said to be eighty per cent on average.

The Grameen Bank model is now being replicated all over the world. The Grameen Bank also needed active support of the government to start off. A special law was framed to allow for its operation. The central bank also extended financial support to the institution, at least in its initial stage. If not for anything else, at least for ensuring success of a private sector venture for bringing the benefit of social security to the rural population, the Grameen Bima project merits support and encouragement. An appropriate legal framework could be created to permit rural insurance to operate smoothly. May be, the insurers could be helped to establish linkage with a bank to maintain and expand its loan programme for the policy-holders. In these and other ways, the state could encourage extension of rural insurance by the private sector companies. Life insurance could then take hold in the countryside, bringing a measure of social security to the rural population.

## Mexican Political Pot Begins to Boil over

John Ross writes from Mexico City

President Carlos Salinas of Mexico has chosen 43-year-old Luis Donaldo Colosio to succeed him. As the standard bearer of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party he is sure to win the presidential election. The President's critics say his handpicked successor will ensure that Salinas continues to wield real power. The US also supports Colosio's candidature as he is seen best suited to implement Nafta which came into force on January 1.



LUIS DONALDO COLOSIO  
President-elect

(congressional representative and senator from Sonora) in two decades to lead his party into presidential elections. Ever since Salinas headed the budget ministry, Colosio has been his protégé. He was PRI campaign manager during the 1988 balloting and graduated to the presidency of his party after Salinas took the top post.

From 1989 to 1992, Colosio captained the ruling party into questionable electoral victories in such opposition strongholds as Michoacán, Guerrero, Guanajuato, and San Luis Potosí, and was credited with restoring the PRI's two-thirds

majority in the 1991 legislative elections. He is not loved by his political opponents.

Colosio is a thief of elections, declares PRD president Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. In 1992, Colosio was chosen to head the newly reformulated Secretary of Social Development with jurisdiction over urban planning, the environment, and the \$2.6 billion "Solidarity" public works programme. Detractors charge that the money was spent to ensure fresh PRI electoral triumphs.

A political wag quipped to the New York Times: "That money would have been a bad investment if Colosio hadn't been nominated." The PRI candidate was born in Magdalena de Kino, 70 miles from Arizona in the Sonoran desert and the US and Mexican press hail as "a man of the border" at a time when Mexicans have officially been transformed into North Americans by virtue of the free trade treaty with the US and Canada.

Colosio is being called a "Clintonesque" lookalike and predictions are made that the 1994 campaign will more than ever resemble a US election. US-style TV debates between the three leading candidates are already on track.

One El Financiero columnist called the candidate Salinas' "yes man" with little capacity for original thinking. During the Nafta negotiations, he publicly misstated Mexico's bargaining posture.

In public, Colosio is a hearty, congenial politician. He has established a reputation for being brusque in private. Two people he gets along with well enough are Salinas and the President's close adviser, Jose Cordoba Montoya. Salinas — and Cordoba — will be the real powers, governing through their handpicked proxy, says Luis Javier Garrido, constitutional expert at Mexico's Autonomous University.

Guaranteeing continuation of policy has been a historical preoccupation of outgoing Mexican presidents since 1929. Yet no president has ever successfully prevented his successor from putting his own stamp

on the nation.

Garrido points out that Salinas leaves office as Mexico's youngest ex-president and will be politically vigorous for decades to come. The outgoing president is barred from running for re-election. With constitutional modifications, he could even seek the presidency again in six years.

The choice of Colosio apparently pleased Mexico's new senior trading partner. The US State Department was at pains to congratulate him publicly. White House press secretary Deedee Meyers referred to Colosio as "Mexico's next president." Cardenas wrote an angry letter to President Bill Clinton, challenging the statement as "an intervention in Mexican politics." The selection of Colosio did not please everyone in PRI ruling circles. Manuel Camacho Solis, considered the most democratically inclined of

the four main contenders for the nomination resigned as the unelected mayor of Mexico City and bitterly refused to join the traditional kissing of hands of the candidate.

Forty-eight hours later, Camacho was appointed foreign minister and, if Colosio wins, appears destined for ambassadorial exile.

When Al Gore flew into Mexico City to celebrate the passage of the Nafta he apologised to 10,000 PRI-invited business leaders for comparing the trade treaty with Mexico to the US purchase of Louisiana.

His slip happened during a heated pre-ratification debate with Texas billionaire Ross Perot. It stirred sensitivities here over sovereignty. Gore also invited Latin American leaders to a 1994 Washington summit expected to extend Nafta throughout the continent.

During the protracted Nafta debate in the US, the Clinton administration argued that the treaty will give the White House the leverage to democratise Mexico's authoritarian political system. Opponents say Nafta has simply consolidated PRI rule into the next century.

— GEMINI NEWS

JOHN ROSS is a freelance journalist based in San Francisco specialising in Latin America.

## OPINION

### Impressions of a 'Visitor'

Prof M B Yunus

As a Bangladeshi residing in the USA for nearly 20 years, I always experience a feeling of exhilaration in visiting Bangladesh. There is something about the land, the rivers and the serene rural life that draws me back to this wonderful part of the world from time to time.

Compared with my previous visit ten years ago, I noted many positive changes in Bangladesh during a recent visit, the most significant of these being the establishment of democracy. Democracy, I believe, is an essential ingredient for meaningful progress in a society in a humane way. And, there were tangible gains. Several excellent industry-based products, garments and china plates for example, have earned both foreign currency and recognition. I observed increased mechanization and people were better fed. Projected self-sufficiency in food in the near future is a most remarkable and proud achievement for a country which was called a "bottomless basket" not too long ago.

To be sure, nothing has changed in many areas. Some people remain dishonest, irresponsible, lazy and selfish; life for many citizens remain unsafe and fearful amidst a constant threat of murder and terrorism; and many places remain repugnant dirty. The country has failed to provide the most basic and the most important needs of its citizens in a civilized society, namely, protection of life and justice in the court of law. These should be the topmost priority of the present govern-

ment.

As a physician, I would like to focus on two health related issues — the omnipresent dirt and cigarette smoking. There was obnoxious filth everywhere — office buildings and hospitals, dwelling houses and their surroundings, streets and squares. It seemed that the Bengalees and launched a dirty campaign against their historic sense of aesthetics, artistic inclinations and tidiness. Dirt, of course, is a recognized source of infection and environmental pollution. It is a particular hazard for health which is already compromised by enormous overcrowding, among other factors, in Bangladesh. I returned home everyday from the city centre with pocketfuls of garbage pieces, only because garbage containers were very rarely seen, if at all. The cities should provide aesthetically attractive containers for scrap and rubbish at short distances with little cost and spearhead an educational campaign against dirt, filth, littering and spitting.

Perhaps the most obscene scene in Bangladesh is the public display of cigarette advertisements everywhere. Tobacco smoking as well as passive inhalation of cigarette smoke are one of the most important and preventable causes of death and disability. Bangladesh will face an unprecedented and month health crisis from cigarette smoking in the near future as the population ages; billions of Takas will be lost and millions of productive human lives will be wasted

Most industrialized nations have banned cigarette advertising in the streets and other common public places. The foreign tobacco companies, battered in their own countries by vastly reduced cigarette smoking, must not be allowed to deliverately prey on valuable lives and fragile economy of poor nations like Bangladesh. As a matter of urgency, Bangladesh must take every effort to completely eliminate cigarette smoking by a target date.

I wish to end with an optimistic note. I think Bangladesh can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. A degree of national confidence, patriotism, optimism and a willingness of a selective breed of people to work selflessly for the progress of the nation are new phenomenon. The present democratic government seems committed to such vital programs as population control, literacy and the right of women. The opposition party must act in a responsible manner to support these and other important plans. All must work together towards a common goal of progress, and each individual must do his or her share for the common good of the community and the nation. Bangladesh is blessed with special advantage of having a homogeneous and highly intelligent group of people. What Bangladesh needs is leadership and collective commitment of its people to make the country one of the greatest in the world.

The writer is a resident of the USA and is working in the Department of Medicine, University of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria.

## To the Editor...

### Forest tree saplings

Sir, This refers to the letter of Mr M Zahidul Haque, Asstt. Professor, BAI which appeared in The Daily Star on January 14, under the caption — "Forest tree saplings."

I fully endorse the views expressed by our teacher. There is indeed a great scope for exporting forest tree saplings including Green Saplings from our country. What is needed is to produce huge number of saplings in the country and explore international market for these. This will not only help us in earning foreign exchange but will also ensure Bangladesh's contribution in the global environmental conservation.

I hope the relevant authority would undertake projects with the help of Agriculture and Forest graduates for raising sufficient number of forest tree saplings for export.

Nusrat Jahan Shimmie

3rd Year B. Sc. Ag. (Hons.), BAI, Dhaka

### BTV's 'Manobad-hikar'

Sir, We're rather shocked and surprised to witness, on BTV's 'Manobadhikar' (Human Right) programme, telecast on January 14, the manner in which the learned BCS Administration Association's

members have compelled the genuine occupants on a land to vacate and then started construction on the said land ignoring even court's injunction. We are, however, looking forward to hearing the clarifications, from BCS Administration Association on the TV report. It was informed by the compere that the Secretary General of the BCS (Administration) Association could not accept BTV's invitation to defend the Association's action with the land due to his heavy preoccupations.

M Zahidul Haque  
Assistant Professor  
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### Is NATO decision a farce?

Sir, Punished and beaten mercilessly for independence, the gravely wounded and bruised body of Bosnia-Herzegovina lies flat in the centre of a glittering and fabulous Europe. The body should immediately be taken under the intensive care of the United Nations or it may well meet a burial in Sarajevo where the sun of western civilisation is setting in.

For the last twenty-one months London, Paris, Bonn and Washington have been simply issuing warnings and threatening military actions

but they did not fire a single shot against the Serbs.

Surprisingly, immediately after the 16-country NATO summit held in Brussels, which, among others, were attended by the US President, French President, UK Premier and German Chancellor, the controversial Serb leader Radovan Karadzic declared that Sarajevo would be the future capital of the Bosnian Serbs, and the Serb shelling on Sarajevo from the surrounding hills still continues.

Is the NATO decision of air strike against the Serbs to prevent the strangulation of Sarajevo a farce?

We wonder why the USA does not issue an ultimatum to Radovan Karadzic with date and time to vacate Bosnia like she did to Saddam Hossain in 1991 to vacate Kuwait.

O H Kabir  
Dhaka 1203

### Reader's request

Sir, I should be grateful if any reader of The Daily Star in possession of old issues of NEW VALUES, a journal published from 1949 to 1966, would kindly communicate with the undersigned.

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