

## Rethinking in Leather Sector

We are well known in the international market as an exporter of leather. According to a study presented at a recently concluded seminar, Bangladesh earned US dollars 16 crore and 71 lakh during 1993-94 period. All this is good news. However, the bad news is that we are giving up the prospect of a far greater export earning by not processing this raw leather, and producing leather goods, whose international market value is far higher than what we get now. According to the same report, the share of leather goods last year was only US dollars 2 crore and 50 lakh out of the aforementioned total. So the question is, why are we not moving from leather to finished leather products? This is not for the first time that this question has been raised. So what are the factors that are holding us back from moving in the direction that seems so obvious?

The answer is, lack of government policy. Given the fact that leather is one of our traditional export items, we naturally hoped that our government would formulate a detailed policy — and that also on a priority basis — for production and export of leather. But that was a wishful thinking. A lack of comprehensive government policy on promoting this vital, and an industry that has very high potential is having its toll on the economy. As a result we continue to be exporter only of leather, and that also of the wet blue kind, which has very little value addition. The bulk of the value addition is done abroad, depriving us of a far larger possible earning.

In the areas we can hope to attract foreign investment, leather is definitely among the top. In this regard the government should immediately sit with the private sector and chalk out a comprehensive strategy as to how best we can attract foreign investment. The recently held seminar suggested the relocation of the leather industry, and putting all of them in an industrial zone. We fully endorse this idea and feel that such a move will help to attract foreign investment in our existing industries, and also encourage joint ventures. In addition, there is the question of pollution and related environmental hazards. A separate industrial zone, more or less in line with our EPZs, with its special labour laws, improved roads and telecommunication facilities will definitely give a big boost to this potentially lucrative industry.

It goes without saying that just relocation will not do. We have to improve our quality, and also be innovative and upto date with global trends in fashion to able to get a share of the world market. The bottom line is, increased investment and infusion of the latest technology which, in turn, is dependent on infusion of new capital. We commend the Export Promotion Bureau for organising this seminar which gives a very good start to the process of policy formulation. We urge the EPB to take immediate follow-up actions on some of the very useful suggestions made in the seminar. We recommend a joint government and private sector effort behind our leather industry. There are not too many other fields where the potential is as good as in leather. Let us give this sector the priority that it deserves — and do so immediately.

## Getting the Act together for Rwanda

Two campaigns with a single appeal have been making their rounds among the Rwandan refugees in Goma on the Zairean border: that they trek back home in Rwanda. Set afloat by the international relief agencies at work there, as well as by the Rwandan Patriotic Front government, which seems to have the initiative in Kigali now, the message rings as no music to the refugees. Because among them are political fugitives in the person of beleaguered Hutu military men and government functionaries doing their own campaigning of de-persuading their compatriot tribesmen not to risk a return.

Wafting through whatever is left of their auditory senses in the enfeebled bodies, cast adrift in a virtually dead sea of humanity, the appeal to go back home for a time failed to nudge them. But there are reasons to believe that it has started working now. At any rate, that is the only alternative they are left with. The humanitarian aid workers find themselves incapacitated by the growing scale of the tragedy being compounded by the minute with deaths from cholera, starvation and hardship in what is a catch-22 situation.

Even the returnees have had cholera stalking them as fifty thousand are said to have died in Rwanda. Some watchers of the scenario tend to regard the RPF's reassurance to the refugees that they can go back and pick up their lives without fear as being somewhat negative by their express resolve to punish the culprits among the Hutus. An RPF spokesman explained away the apparent duality of the assurance — retribution syndrome saying that they have to stave off a regrouping of the beleaguered forces anyhow. So it is the confidence-building measures that are of seminal importance.

That being the internal situation in Rwanda, the world community needs to get their act together as quickly as possible to help the teeming refugees in a trance back on their feet, back to their country and back to their normal lives — settled and secure. So that they are able to work it out with the Tutsis in a spirit of mutual reconciliation that is not altogether alien to some countries of the African continent featured by multi-tribe existence. Tribes have lived together in Africa for centuries but for occasional foreign intervention on the wrong side which polarised the situation. And at times when a benign international approach had been called for it appeared to be long in coming with a false hope nursed that the so called "tribal war" ending, it would be time for action. This tendency has grown especially after the fall of communism and the end of camp politics. Realpolitik had had its compulsions then of prompting the presence of one bloc in a trouble spot ahead of the other. This is no longer valid today.

Anyhow, it is good tiding that the US forces and the British units have already flown into Kigali to ensure relief supplies to the displaced two million among the eight million Rwandans there are. ICDDR,B doctors from Bangladesh are going to help fight cholera as a token of aid. President Clinton is moving the Congress for a 320 million dollar relief package which, with the addition of replenished aid from the UNHCR, should fit the bill. Then through the mechanism of the United Nations, beefed up by its forces, it should be possible to help Rwanda back on its political feet. Essentially, however, there has to be an African solution to an African problem.

**T**HIS year's observance of World No-Tobacco Day in the country yielded a spate of data on smoking. Citing a World Health Organization (WHO) survey, the local media reported that 71 per cent of the population smoked. That places the number of smokers in the country roughly at 80 million. We are also told that 20 per cent women in the country smoked. Relying on another survey conducted by Adhunik, an anti-tobacco organization, the media reported that 20 per cent of school and college students were smokers. And among the labourers, as high as 90 per cent smoked. Overall, smokers by far outnumber non-smokers in the country and their number is growing. Still, despite their majority, smokers these days seem to maintain a low profile — as if on the defensive.

Do the smokers too then realise that they are smoking themselves to death? Well, the statistics roll by in a blur to suggest that death is waiting just around the corner to pounce on the smoker. The annual worldwide death toll from tobacco-related diseases is said to be around 3 million now. There are dire forecasts that the number would more than triple over the next two decades or so.

Or, could it be that the smokers are not on the defensive at all? Rather, they are bearing all the fulminations against tobacco fumes with dignity — may be, even with a bit of stoicism. After all, since the very first day they started smoking, they knew that it was not good for health. Death, in any case, is inevitable and it does not spare the non-smoker also. Why then forego the sensation of pleasure that tobacco induces. To the inveterate smoker, the snatches of transient release from the daily grind perhaps appear as more alluring than the

## Smokers at Bay : Could Cigarette be a Drug?

promise of a healthier, longer life.

Be that as it may, the society at large now accepts that smoking is injurious to health and is putting up damage-control measures. The commonest approach is to raise the cost of smoking. Governments do it by levying high taxes on tobacco products. However, it does not always work. Some people may cut down on smoking because of high costs but usually there are others to take up the slack. In our case, taxes on tobacco products are indeed high but the number of smokers continue to grow. At times, prohibitive taxation also encourages illegal trade. Turning to our case again, high rate of duties on imported cigarettes makes it uneconomical to bring the item through open trade channels for marketing at home. Nonetheless, foreign cigarettes are freely available in the market. What is happening is that cigarettes are being smuggled into the country. A smuggler does not have to pay import duties and so he can market his ware at a reasonable price. It could be argued on purely economic considerations that had the duty rate been lowered, cigarette would have been imported openly. The authorities would have been in a better position to monitor these imports. Conceivably, the authorities might have been able even to persuade the importers to reduce the flow imports. Well, these are all conjectures really. Reducing duties on cigarettes would perhaps be viewed as a sacrilege.

Almost everywhere, cigarette packets also carry statutory warnings to the effect that smoking is injurious to health. Anti-smoking activists in this country, however, say that the health warning is largely ineffective in our case.

Not all the smokers buy cigarette in packets. Many buy just one or two sticks at a time. They thus don't have an occasion to read the warning printed on the packet. Nor would all of them be literate enough to read the warning. Then again, smokers in rural areas and among the labourers, usually prefer *bidi*. However, it is said that *bidi* packs don't carry the usual health warning. It's also a question if health warnings on *bidi* packs would really serve any useful purpose at all. After all, how many of the smokers of *bidi* can read fine prints?

yourself and yet are involuntarily inhaling the fume being exhaled by smokers nearby. Such passive smoking also is dangerous for health, experts say. Remember the adage *ghraneno ordho bhojorono?* Smelling food is halfway to eating it. Well, it would seem that our forebearers were quite wise in such matters!

The campaign against tobacco has also taken the form of banning cigarette advertisement from state-run radio, television, public transports and on billboards. However, sceptics say that all that the ban has achieved is merely

recent non-tobacco acquisitions cover such diverse fields as insurance business. However, profits from tobacco continue to dominate their earnings.

Governments, on the other hand, could extend controls on the manufacture of tobacco products further. The US Food and Drug Administration is said to be considering the regulation of cigarettes as drugs. This would allow for additional controls, including regulating the level of nicotine in cigarettes. Addictiveness of nicotine is at the centre of this issue. The tobacco industry maintains that nicotine is not addictive. Most others don't agree. However, it is generally conceded that the addictiveness of nicotine is not as lethal in the short run as narcotics. Nicotine is cumulatively harmful while hard drugs are more immediately dangerous. Any way, the controversy over smoking appears to have entered a new phase. If it really turns out that cigarettes come to be classified as drugs, then the authorities would be in a position to mandate lower nicotine content in cigarette, to reduce its addictiveness and health hazard. May be, some day in the future, all that the smokers are left with will be nicotine-free cigarettes.

Smoking grows worldwide because of increased tobacco consumption in developing countries. In point of fact, smoking in the United States and Western Europe is declining steadily at an annual rate of about one per cent. However, smoking is increasing at a much faster rate in the third world, particularly in Asia which contains 60 per cent of the total global population. According to tobacco industry projections cited by the WHO, the Asian cigarette market should expand by 33 per cent

by the year 2000. Researchers attribute the growth in cigarette consumption to increasing prosperity — especially in East Asia — and changes in social mores. More people can now afford to smoke cigarettes. As for the society, the teenagers have grown bolder and women often look upon smoking as a sign of their emancipation. Anti-tobacco activists also ascribe some of the blame for the upsurge in smoking in Asia to the US trade policy. In the name of free trade, the United States pried open markets in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand to import of foreign-brand cigarettes from the mid-1980s. Foreign cigarettes have now acquired a status symbol in such countries. Overall, smoking carries a premium.

**I**T'S not disease alone that stalks a smoker. Death claims a smoker for other tobacco-related reasons too. International Herald Tribune reports the death of a man in Michigan, USA, when his cigarette ignited fumes, causing an explosion, in a bathroom where he was using gasoline to clean tar off his clothing and arms. I cite this incident from a far-off place because it made news worldwide. At home, there are plenty of instances of cigarette butts and *bidi* stubs causing fire and death. Then there is the incident at a Japanese railroad station, also reported in the same newspaper. A man had lit a cigarette in a non-smoking area. An office worker found himself alongside the smoker on the platform. He had first elbowed the smoker in protest. Then, fearing a counterattack, the office worker kicked the smoker — a housepainter — in the face and neck. The smoker fell, fatally fracturing his skull. And so died a smoker — from a kick not intended to kill.

## ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

Another favoured way of damage-control is to prohibit or restrict smoking in public places. According to a foreign agency reports, in this region, Singapore has gone farthest in this area. Smoking in the city-state is banned in restaurants, supermarkets, departmental stores, fast food outlets, cinemas and public toilets. Likewise, smoking is prohibited in indoor sports arenas, libraries, government offices, hospitals and clinics, public transports. Smoking, says the report, is tolerated in homes and private motor vehicles. And it is frowned upon but not disallowed yet in private offices and clubs. Well, other countries have not gone all that far. However, restrictions on smoking in public buildings are resorted to in many a country. One reason for this, what has come to be branded as passive smoking. In other words, you are not smoking

help the cigarette industry save the money it would have otherwise spent in advertisements!

Cigarette making is a 50 billion dollar-a-year business world-wide. Starting from raising the tobacco leaf to its processing, the industry is a major provider of jobs. The high level of tobacco taxes makes cigarette manufacturing an important source of revenue to governments everywhere. All these considerations render it difficult for governments to find a correct configuration of policy mixes in dealing with tobacco-related issues. For now at least, policy prescriptions seem to aim at curtailing tobacco consumption rather than stamping it out altogether.

In recent years, world's major tobacco companies also have embarked on an aggressive policy of diversification. They are branching out to food and beverage industries. Their

## Coffee and Cognac with the Sheep's-blood General

Fons Tuinstra writes from Terter, Azerbaijan

*Though forgotten by the world's media, people are still dying in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia and officers who once fought side-by-side in the Soviet army now try to kill each other. A Gemini News Service correspondent finds that the company of one of the commanders — "I am the king in this area" — is as unpredictable as the front line.*

have confidence in me. As a General, you have to join your men in the front line."

Although a ceasefire is temporarily in force, Armenian snipers are active. In the military hospital, we meet several seriously injured people. "One hit and you are away," shrugs Orugov.

The General orders soldiers to escort us to the front. We drive in a convoy at suddenly changing speeds to present a harder target for snipers and after 30 minutes the vehicles slow and the General points to an area of trees a few miles away — "the Armenian lines."

With a small walky-talky he listens to Armenian radio-traffic and speaks to the enemy. "I told them we were getting foreign guests and asked them to hold their fire," he says. "The same thing we do if people from the Red Cross are visiting the front."

Orugov studied at the military academy with the man who is now his arch-rival across the lines. "We were all close friends in St Petersburg, Armenians and Azeris alike," he says. But now, says the General, the contact is only by radio and is strictly businesslike: "We negotiate for the release of hostages, that's all."

The front line does not im-

press. Small tanks, some artillery and many trenches give it a World War One feel. Soldiers carry Kalashnikovs and a few anti-tank grenades. There are no signs of war on the way there, except for an Azerbaijani anti-aircraft tank, which is redundant against an enemy with no planes. Azerbaijan itself has only two MiGs, and one has been grounded following the crash of the other.

At the first of many toasts that evening in the village to Terter, scene of heavy fighting a few months ago, the General praises our brave behaviour. A great distance away, shells explode in a sinister rhythm. The General, looking deep into the eyes of our female interpreter, decides it is time for some of his poems to praise "all those who are waiting for us back home."

That night proves to be more dangerous than a visit to the front. Orugov, who has had a lot to drink, insists he wants to escort me, the interpreter and almost all the area's military staff and civil authorities to our sleeping places. We quickly realise there is no point arguing with him. "I am the king in this area," he says. "I can do whatever I want." The fast-moving convoy ig-



General Orugov: 'I am the King'

**A**ZERBAJANI commander General Elbrus Orugov surveys the slaughtered sheep, dabs his fingers in the blood and daubs my forehead: "That will give you protection against the Armenians."

Welcome to the front line in the war between former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Though the war has virtually been forgotten by the world's media, Orugov is a memorable figure. A career soldier, he never married. At the age of 37, he is wedded to the army. He started as a 14-year-old cadet in a St Petersburg military academy: "Not because I liked the war. There was no war in those days. It was mainly for the prestige."

But the General has since experienced more than his share of war. He fought for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. To illustrate, he gives a loud scream, makes fast movements and kills imaginary enemies.

Now, the enemy is Armenia and is all too real. In the past year Armenia has occupied 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territory, and claim the Baku authorities, depopulated and mined it. More than 20,000 civilians have lost their lives and one million more are on the run.

Although most Azerbaijanis express support for the struggle against Armenia, serving in a losing army is not popular. In the past six months, the government has appealed three times to deserting conscripts to return to their units. In the streets of Baku are many youngsters who skipped draft by bribing the authorities.

But for the General, war is serious business. "My soldiers

## To the Editor...

### Darkness on Eliot Bridge

Sir, The Eliot Bridge of Sirajgonj town, popularly known as Boro pool is an important link of communication. Not only that it is kept busy by the day but also at night. Also the cinema audience and the passengers coming from different places by bus, train or launch cross this bridge.

So, it is necessary to arrange sufficient light on it at night. It is regrettable that in spite of the presence of a lamp post there, the light on the bridge is quite insufficient. Shrouded by darkness the passers-by cross the bridge. It is, therefore, not much surprising when people are attacked by hijackers or face other accidents.

So the authorities concerned would be advised to kindly manage sufficient light on the bridge.

Mohmuda Khantun Shathi  
Jubily Bagan Lane, Sirajgonj

### Blasphemy punishable?

Sir, Engr Md Saifur Rahman wants clarification on certain points of his confusion (Star 25-7-94). I am not a theologian but have the following clarification to offer as my opinion:

\* The holy Prophet (SA) of Islam and the caliphs that followed him declared and fought wars against those who protested against his sayings,

the Quranic dictates. In the wars many were killed and many defeated ones changed their minds about those sayings and accepted Islam.

\* 'Murtads' were fought openly in wars.

\* About not killing of the father by Abdullah bin Ubayy, exact reference of the Quran is not given. So, clarification is not possible.

\* Blasphemy Law exists in many countries including the USA. Any one found openly speaking against any religion is charged by the US Law.

\* Islam allows freedom of speech and expression as long as the speech and the expression are not directed against Islam and the basis of Islam.

The above, I hope, will clear the confusion of Mr Engr Saifur Rahman.

A religious man

### Hartal

Sir, 'Hartals' no longer imply the spontaneous display of protest. 'Hartals' have been relegated to a scarecrow which is literally stuffed with explosives to frighten people away from their work-place. They have become occasions for the daily wage-earners to starve, and for the affluent to stay home, enjoy a video programme and a big lunch.

From the day the date of a 'hartal' is announced, the

prices of essentials show a tentative rise, and on the hartal day and the day preceding it, and the day following, every consumer has to pay at least one to two taka more for every essential item. It perhaps gives an ideal opportunity for some unscrupulous traders to reap a windfall as crisis, either political or natural, generally opens a golden path for some big business houses to make money more than is normally expected.

Unless the down fall of a government is desired vehemently and immediately, 'hartals' should be discarded by all the political parties.

Another thing that is to be resolved by all the parties is that no other organisations except a political one should have the right to call a 'hartal'. Violent 'hartal' can never be part of a democratic culture. What we are doing now in the name of democracy is rather raking a ripe crop field to harvest no grains.

I can't help question the wisdom of AL leadership as they seem to have been made victims of the tricks of some young boys beguiled by some young men.

"Simple Simon  
Went to fish a whale  
All the water he had,  
Was in his mothers' pail."

Mohammed Abdul Mutalib,  
House No. 74, Rd 14 (old)  
Dhanmondi.

## OPINION

### "Attack on NGOs" and "Foreign Relations"

I am a regular reader of 'The Daily Star' and I have no hesitation to say that I had so long been enjoying it. I started subscribing the paper, when I felt that it reflected an independent stance in respect of its publication articles, particularly on political issues. But it pained me to find the contents of the two write-ups of your esteemed columnist Shah AMS Kibria. The article entitled "Who is Attacking NGOs and Why?" was published on July 10, and the other one entitled "Foreign Relations: BNP's Invisible Achievements", on July 17. Having praised the activities of NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC and some others for their laudable work in the field of education and alleviation of poverty amongst rural community the writer could not resist the temptation of maligning the leading political party of the country, BNP and its founder President, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, although this was most irrelevant and uncalled for in the context of the subject discussed. I quote a couple of sentences penned down by the writer: "It was President Ziaur Rahman, who altered the basic character of the State and legitimized religion-based political parties. It was he who allowed the return of Gholam Azam to Bangladesh. He not only rehabilitated many Razakars, but it was during his tenure that a well-known collaborator was appointed the prime minister of the country..." It is also perhaps no surprise that reactionary religious forces under another BNP Government led by his wife, feel strong enough and bold enough to mount these attacks on the nation's efforts to shake off the shackles of poverty and backwardness.

Any casual reader of the above remarks of the columnist will be convinced how unjustified and out-of-place these unsavoury comments are. Everyone knows that the present BNP Government is committed to countrywide expansion of its education programme, specially among the village school-going girls (for whom a good deal of incentives have been declared through free studentships and stipends) and also to alleviation of poverty amongst the rural poor through various programmes sponsored both by the government agencies and the NGOs.

Now coming the question of alleged encouragement to Jamaat-e-Islami. It is now crystal clear who is hobnobbing with this religion-based political party to achieve their end. People know that it is the Awami League which is working hand-in-hand from the same platform, in trying to strengthen its agitations for a so-called 'caretaker government' for future Parliament elections. It does not require further clarification to prove why Jamaat is now feeling more encouraged and bold to be openly involved in fatwa-based agitation and attacks on NGOs. Nor is it necessary now to remind people who pardoned the Razakars initially.

### T Hussain

The article published on July 17 was captioned "Foreign Relations: BNP's Invisible Achievements". The writer is undoubtedly a veteran diplomat and as such, he has taken a free hand in castigating the foreign policy achievements of the present government, often sarcastically. Having gone through the entire write-up, I did not find any sincere word of appreciation for anything done by the BNP Government in this sphere. I have no intention of writing anything in refuting what Mr Kibria has said regarding the interview of The Daily Star with the Honble Foreign Minister.

But with all humility, I can not help mentioning that the present government's success in resolving the "Tin Bigha" issue is remarkable. I have some personal knowledge how baffling this issue was. The dispute originated from the quest

tion of handing over of half of Berubari to us, according to our international award, under which its sovereignty belonged to erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The terms of the International Award were binding on both India and Pakistan, India had to accept this position after all the legal squabbles in the Indian Courts finally ended in favour of East Pakistan. But in the implementation process, the other side wouldn't yield for one reason or the other. But after independence of Bangladesh, in course of a summit meeting between the heads of two governments, Bangladesh agreed to give up its sovereignty on southern Berubari, in exchange of Tin Bigha corridor to be given in perpetual lease to Bangladesh. This actually amounts to ceding of our territory to India in lieu of perpetual lease of the territory covered by the said corridor in our favour. But this political deal was not given effect to simultaneously. In fact, what Bangladesh did was to hurriedly ratify its part of the deal i.e. to handover south Berubari to India. But India dilly-dallied for years to handover the Tin Bigha corridor in fulfillment of their part of the agreement. So, it was a one sided implementation of the bilateral agreement; and this was long before the 1975 change over. However, it must go to the credit of the present BNP government to come to our workable arrangement with India (in spite of violent agitation on the part of the residents of West Bengal) by which thousands of residents of the two enclaves Dahagram and Angorpota are now having easy communication with mainland Bangladesh. This is indeed a milestone in our foreign policy success.

I am not going to comment on the other issues discussed in the aforesaid article. I simply want to say that the observations made therein appear to be absolutely partisan in nature and, true to his salt, the writer had done his part well.