

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 return.

Wafting through whatever is left of their auditory senses in their 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 negated 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 re-grouping 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 troublespot 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.

THIS 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 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 invertebrate smoker, the snatches of transient release from the daily grind perhaps appear as more alluring than the

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.

Another favoured way of damage-control is to prohibit or restrict smoking in public places. According to a foreign agency report, 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 is, what has come to be branded as passive smoking. In other words, you are no smoking

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 sacrifice.

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yourself and yet are involuntarily inhaling the fume being exhaled by smokers nearby. Such passive smoking is also dangerous for health, experts say. Remember the adage *gharaner ordho bhojonong?* Smelling food is halfway to eating it. Well, it would seem that our forebears 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 cigarette 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 no-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 did a smoker — from a kick not intended to kill.

nores road blocks and most other traffic on the road.

The next morning Orugov presides over a breakfast with beer in the garden of the Tertter city hall. The building and garden, complete with sauna and pool table, date from the time communist officials took good care of themselves. Facilities are still good. "What do you want?" asks the General. "Coffee, Cognac, Cigarettes?"

A strange atmosphere prevails. A fountain tinkles. Birds sing. Orugov and other officers talk about the violence which threatens this peaceful place.

A sergeant brings more beer. "Don't think we drink every day that much," a colonel apologises. "Alcohol is out of the question at the front. We only drink when we have visitors or when it is somebody's birthday." He pauses. "Although, if nobody has a birthday we sometimes find another reason."

FONS TUINSTRA is a Dutch journalist specialising in development issues.

Coffee and Cognac with the Sheep's-blood General

Fons Tuinstra writes from Tertter, 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 man, 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 the same 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 impress.

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 Tertter, 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 ignites.

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General Orugov:
"I am the King"

OPINION

"Attack on NGOs" and "Foreign Relations"

T Hussain

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 to 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 character of the State and legitimised 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 rule 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, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, who allowed the return of Gholam Azam to Bangladesh. He not only rehabilitated many Razakars, but it was during his rule 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, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, who allowed the return of Gholam Azam to Bangladesh. He not only rehabilitated many Razakars, but it was during his rule 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, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, who allowed the return of Gholam Azam to Bangladesh. He not only rehabilitated many Razakars, but it was during his rule 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, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, who allowed the return of Gholam Azam to Bangladesh. He not only rehabilitated many Razakars, but it was during his rule 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, Shahid President Ziaur Rahman, who allowed the return of Gholam Azam to Bangladesh. He not only rehabilitated many Razakars, but it was during his rule that a well-known collaborator was appointed the prime minister of the country ...