

For a New Consumer Protection Law

Something very heartening happened on Saturday. A very neglected group, a group that is made up of everyone of us, suddenly came into the limelight. The consumers of Bangladesh was the focus of a very timely seminar organised by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry (DCCI) in collaboration with the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) and the Commerce Ministry. The seminar sought public views on the subject of enactment of a consumer protection law. There is no denying the fact that today consumers are at the mercy of a gang of dishonest producers of everyday consumer goods. Starting from canned edible items, to powdered spices to everyday toiletries like hair oil, soap and talcum powder, are all adulterated by some dishonest businessmen who are giving the whole consumer industry a bad name. Housewives recount hundreds of stories everyday of their being cheated. It is not only that the products are poor, quite often the consumers are being cheated in weight also.

Then there is the whole range of service industry where the consumer gets a very raw deal indeed. Take transport for example. When a city bus rider pays for a ticket, he or she may not get a seat; but he or she is at least entitled to a standing space, and a ride by a bus which conforms to some safety standards and capacity limit. How often do we see buses with all its windows totally broken, and passengers, especially those travelling with small kids, running the risk of falling out of the bus at a sharp turn. What about roof-riders? What protection do they have as consumers? And all of them are made to pay for the ride.

The point can be raised that what good will a new law do, if it is not implemented properly. There is merit in this argument. We already have a few consumer protection related laws, and some provisions of the Penal Code may also be used to protect the consumer. But for lack of use, and widespread ignorance about consumer protection norms, these laws remain only in the statute books. A new law will be just as ineffective as were the previous ones. But the question is, why is it that no legal action is taken against manufacturers of adulterated products? Here the government's role has been less than credible. There has been no effort by the authorities to periodically check the quality of products. Occasionally we used to hear of mobile courts that checked the quality of food of restaurants and punish owners who served substandard food. Even this has now become a rarity.

Thus the DCCI initiative comes at a propitious moment. But the question is, will the government add a little bite to its bark, and give a message that it means business? To start with, a standard control body should be set up, where consumer products could be authentically checked. A failing mark from such a body should lead to automatic cancellation of the licence of the producer.

Simultaneously with a strong legal framework, we should also build up a powerful consumer right awareness movement. We have to assert the fact that when we pay the marked price for an item, we have a right to receive a quality product. A purchase is a contract between the seller and the buyer, and both are legally bound to keep their respective sides of the bargain. Awareness of consumer rights will automatically lead to a warning for the manufacturers who cheat the people.

Right to safe and quality products is a human right. Just as we want an accountable government, so also we want accountable manufacturers. This accountability will reward the honest and efficient businessmen and weed out the unscrupulous ones.

A Despicable Act

On Saturday morning groups of Chittagong University students ransacked the Sholashahar railway station and later set it on fire. Those who came to resist them were given a good beating — of the 20 receiving injury, all of them railway employees. Three were admitted to hospital. The students went on the rampage after the train carrying them together with hundreds of university-bound pupils derailed. Although no one was reported hurt in the derailment, groups of students went on the chastising vision.

No one in his senses would condone the student action. When Shibir cadres at Rajshahi or Chittagong University mount violent operations on fellow students of differing persuasions or Dal and League students fight it out with firearms at Dhaka University, the unfortunate events can be explained by the fact that the armed young men were duly nurtured cadres or bullyboys of political parties far more than they were students. The intolerance of one cadre against the others can be understood in terms of not one of them affording to lower the guard for fear of being eliminated from the campus or even from life. But here at Sholashahar no armed cadre was taking on an opposed one. These were no cadre-members or three-quarters non-student roughnecks but students on their way to classes — and they ransacked the station? And then they set the building on fire? And then they beat up railway employees resisting them to protect public property? For no provocation on earth students, or for that matter any section of people other than regular gangs of recorded criminals, can set themselves on such a course of vile contemptible violence and abject disregard for the sanctity of public property and public duty. Their action cannot ever make the rail people desist from further derailing the 'student'-train, for the derailment was patently not an act of animosity against the students. Some people somewhere must have been responsible for this or for all derailments. But to track them down or the contributing technical faults and take corrective measures is a matter that will take time and, more importantly, persistence and patience. Bangladesh Railway is diseased all over its body and may be in its mind too. That makes it more difficult to set things right in the railways.

The students — we never mean all the students of that university or of the country as a whole — have shamed all wrong-doers of the nation and culprits harbouring only evil in their minds by mounting such a despicable act of violence. This must be one of the blackest days in the history of our student action. We denounce it roundly. There must be an end to such mindless violence if we want our students to return to a healthy frame of mind. There is danger in letting conflict rule the young minds instead of love and dreams.

Fresh Initiatives Needed to Revamp the Tea Sector

THE tea industry is talking of bleak days ahead. Global overproduction has depressed tea prices worldwide. Our tea producers are thus getting lower prices for the yield from their plantations. Looking at the volume of world tea output and trade, you see Bangladesh as only a marginal producer and exporter. In a way, our tea's current plight also brings to focus the vulnerability of marginal producers to the roller-coaster ride of world commodity prices.

Tea is an agroindustry. In our case, it had long been customary to attribute around sixty per cent of the operations for producing tea for the market, to agriculture and the balance to manufacturing. We do not have too many of rain-soaked hills which favour growing tea in this region. Still, we do have some 158 tea gardens. The total output seems to have expanded considerably over the past two decades. In the early seventies, output hovered just near about 30 million annually kgs. Now, in the early nineties, total output ranges between nearly 45 to 52 million kgs a year.

Over the last three years, a half or even more of tea produced had been exported. Still, that accounts for less than two per cent of our total export earnings. Set against a global export market of one billion kgs, even at recent our best (33 million kgs in '92-93) we are, as I said before, only a marginal performer. However, tea is also our favourite beverage, it provides incomes and jobs and earns foreign exchange — 41 million '92-93. Besides, tea has a tradition too.

To go by official statistics, the export price situation for

tea had been reasonably favourable in recent years till '90-91. A scan of ten-year period shows that the average export price was at its best in 1984-85 when it had reigned at Tk 60.37 per kg. There was a sharp downturn next year and the average export price plunged to Tk 32.63 per kg. As is usual with commodity price seesaw, the recovery started in '86-87. That year, the average export price for tea climbed to Tk 42.10 a kg and peaked at Tk 57.60 in '90-91. This was a spell of five good years. The downside resumed in '91-92 when the average price dropped to Tk 52.06 and then to Tk 48.29 per kg in '92-93. Last year, in '93-94, the average price more or less stagnated at Tk 49.10 a kg and exports dropped to 27.41 million kgs against a projection of 33 million kgs. This season, the average tea price is said to have fallen below Tk 43 a kg. Should tea producers then brace themselves for a spell of five bad years?

To survive in a regime of falling prices induced by a slump in the world market, what the tea industry needs to do most in the short run, is cost cutting. However, tea producers say that official policies had not been exactly helpful in this regard. At a time when tea prices had started slipping, the withdrawal of subsidy on fertilizer and insecticide since 1991-92, actually increased, the cost of production. They also contend that the price of imported tea chest, aluminium foil and other packing materials have risen. This year's budget measure for reducing import duty on tea chests from 60 per cent to 45 per cent would help a little but not that much.

Banks' lending rates is an-

other sore point with the tea producers. Raising tea for sale in the world market place entail operations which embrace agriculture, manufacturing and export. Banks lend money to different sectors at varying rates. Export financing rate is usually the most favourable of these to the borrower and that probably would suit tea producers best. However, near about half the tea produced is at times sold for domestic consumption and these transactions do not qualify for interest rates on exports. A composite lending rate for the tea sector tends to be higher

been put through earlier. To gauge from the rise in tea output in recent years, it would seem that the efforts brought some results. All the same, average yields still remain staggeringly low and the processing facilities largely antiquated. To be able to compete on the international market, the tea industry must bring down the cost of production. It needs to develop more scientific tea growing and harvesting techniques. Processing facilities need to be upgraded. Machinery facing obsolescence have to be replaced. In some of the competing countries, tea

sector. Of course, this would require substantial augmentation of the resources of this Fund. A part of the cess realised from the tea estates could also be placed with the Fund. A special window could be opened for the Fund to lend to the tea sector at concessional rates of interest. The tea industry should also be enabled to borrow directly from abroad and service the debt with its export earnings. Cost of such funds would be less than the rate of interest charged by domestic banks. Besides, the government should act as an intermediary for securing official development financing for the tea industry. For instance, the Asian Development Bank lends directly to the private sector. Government's intervention would help the tea industry gain access to such funding.

It was reported a couple of months back that India and Sri Lanka has initiated a move for formation of an international tea producers' forum to safeguard common interests. Bangladesh as well as three other tea exporting countries — Indonesia, Malawi and Uganda — were reported to have shown interest in joining the association. These six countries together account for about two-thirds of the world tea export market. Apparently, the proposed forum could not be launched yet mainly because of a tepid response from another key tea producing country — Kenya. Anyway, tea producers here should continue to support the move.

It seems that the cup that cheers also helps preserve life. Reports appearing in the news media a couple of months back said that researchers have found that drinking tea could reduce the risk of contracting cancer of the breast, colon and pancreas. A later report, appearing last month, says that tea inhibits formation of skin tumour as well. However, it is only black and green tea which have the inhibitory effect. So, if we wish tea to help us live longer, we would have to stop lacing the brew liberally with milk as we are wont to do now.

Ironically, the US contributes to Cuba's efforts to generate desperately needed hard currency, paying for the "use" of the base it took over at the beginning of the century.

Cuba's problems, however, are not confined to foreign capital, economic or political reforms. No matter what Castro's government do, the US will never accept a socialist state only 150 kilometres from its territory, and millions of kms. away from its own neo-colonial mentality.

Cuba, for its part, does not want to become another US-dependent territory such as Puerto Rico. Therefore, much to the dismay of many media intellectuals, the Cold War is not over yet; not in this part of the globe anyway.

LUIS TRICOT is a Chilean journalist specialising in Latin American affairs.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

than that for export financing and would not make the producers feel quite happy. Nor has the exchange rate been of much help lately.

One recognized way for the tea planters to supplement their incomes lies in diverting part of their land to produce whatever commands a better price. And the land is available. Out of a total area of nearly 1.14 lakh hectares of land leased out to the gardens, only about 48,000 hectares are said to be covered by actual tea plantation. Such measures would yield more income to the tea producers and help them balance their accounts in lean years. However, that would not be growing tea!

What the tea sector needs in the medium term is to spruce up the production process. Funded by overseas development assistance, a Tea Rehabilitation Project had

factories have automated production lines and have computerised control system to ensure consistent quality. Tea pickers even use power-driven leaf cutters.

For countering such high-pitched foreign competition, the tea sector needs to be revamped. There has to be radical improvement in crop yield and cost structure. As for mechanisation of the production line, the least that the industry should do is to update its machinery — drying and shredding machines — the lot. All these call for substantial investment and fresh initiatives in the area. Tea is in private hands and public investment by way of the Annual Development Programme will not flow into this sector. Nonetheless, the government could divert resources from the Export Development Fund for financing investments in the

Cuba Stands Alone against the World Media

Luis Tricot writes from Santiago

Despite daily television images of thousands fleeing Castro's failed revolution, a majority of Cubans have stayed on. Facing serious economic shortages they refuse to become a pawn in the Clinton-Castro impasse. As Washington and Havana discuss the fate of refugees, a Gemini News Service correspondent argues that it will take more than mere words to resolve the crisis.



against economic hardships and political oppression." The demonstrators stoned the police, broke glass windows and ransacked shops and hotels.

When such demonstrations take place anywhere else in the continent, they are called vandals, subversives or criminals, and heavily repressed by security forces.

Thousands of Cubans have crossed the Florida strait disappointed with socialism, but thousands of Mexicans cross the border every week escaping from poverty in their own country? Does the US administration and media brand the Mexican neo-liberal economic model as a failure?

The US encourage people to leave Cuba and then deny them entry visas, thus creating discontent amongst those who wish to emigrate. The under-claimed aim is to promote social upheaval.

The anti-Castro demonstration that erupted at Havana's seafront at the beginning of August, was immediately labelled by the US and Latin-American governments alike as a "democratic manifestation

Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil or Venezuela are too far away to set to sea and head north, otherwise, it would be flooded by millions of men and women escaping from capitalism."

For the Cubans the problem is not so much opting for either the socialist or the capitalist model, but of mere survival.

In a recent visit to Chile, Cuba's foreign minister, Roberto Robaina, said: "We haven't given up our project of social justice, our socialist project. We will preserve all of the revolution's conquests in the educational, health, science and sports fields. But, we have to adapt to the new times with dignity."

Cuban authorities are aware that they are standing all but alone against a largely hostile world. They have embarked upon economic reforms that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

Referring to the emigration crisis, a *Newsweek* article asserted that "Castro's latest

manoeuvres only revealed a weak hand." However, whatever the US media may say, the fact is that Castro forced Clinton to the negotiating table and made Washington change its policy towards the refugees. Those rescued at sea will no longer be granted automatic refugee status, but sent back to Cuba, to the US military base in Guantanamo Bay.

Nonetheless, 35 years after the start of the embargo, and five years after the collapse of the socialist bloc, Cuba is still waving the banner of socialism. In fact, highly placed Cuban sources believe that the worst is over.

The island has changed, the economy and society at large have changed, but millions of Cubans have stayed, because in spite of food and medicine shortages, lack of fuel, draughts and floods, the absence of basic items such as soap, shoes or clothes, they are still proud of their revolution and still support Castro.

This support stems partly from the Cubans deeply rooted sense of national dignity and anti-imperialist feeling, and partly due to the fact that, in spite of immense economic difficulties, not a single school or hospital has been closed down, not a single child has been deprived of his/her daily ration of milk. As Robaina put it, because of the crisis, "in Cuba there is no variety at the dining table, but in Latin America millions don't even have a table."

Referring to the emigration crisis, a *Newsweek* article asserted that "Castro's latest

banks and the constant shifting necessary at regular intervals, and passengers on these dreary trips could kill time by drafting the list themselves. The requirements of the female passengers are completely ignored! The launch operators never make demands for providing better public service! Man's enemy is man and the Authority, not machines and services!

Cuba, for its part, does not want to become another US-dependent territory such as Puerto Rico. Therefore, much to the dismay of many media intellectuals, the Cold War is not over yet; not in this part of the globe anyway.

LUIS TRICOT is a Chilean journalist specialising in Latin American affairs.

OPINION

Poor Inland Waterways Infrastructure

A Zabir

The recent launch accident in Chittagong river port in which 300 persons were feared drowned (press reports) once again confirmed that rescue vessels are not readily available at the major river ports/terminals. How many river Ghats have adequate emergency operation set-ups on semi-permanent basis available 24 hours round the clock? Such arrangements include river police, fire fighting barge, floating dispensary cum-field-hospital, and a small team of divers. As Robaina put it, because of the crisis, "in Cuba there is no variety at the dining table, but in Latin America millions don't even have a table."

In a deltaic region, the systematic development of infrastructure services in the inland waterways sector has to be accorded higher priority (it is easier to be good high and dry on the land). Two considerations predominate: the high density of passengers and goods (more than 50 per cent) carried by the river transport services, compared to the land services. The country boats without engines have big regulatory, monitoring, and safety problems, which are not being tackled with the priority deserved, even after decades of neglect and indifference.

With the spotlight on the new roads and bridges, the inland waterways sector is not getting the usual VIP attention. Many of the basic services are 'invisible' publicly. How many of our ministers care to travel using the slow-moving inland waterways transport when state helicopters are readily available? Senior public officials must travel through the river routes up to a certain hundred kilometres annually, just to get the feel of these journeys.

The publicity on the current successful projects are out of proportion, in the sense that the important invisible projects are not high-lighted by the speech-makers or the public.

The riverine traveller would like to see improvement in the following areas:

— the basic amenities at the river ghats. This is difficult to provide on a continuous basis in view of the erosion at the

problem which appears to be more serious than those that are corruption. We can turn our mere "population" into "man-power". We can eliminate, to a considerable extent, our poverty by proper utilization of our natural resources. And our awareness, social and governmental, can remove illiteracy.

These problems also seem to be decreasing day by day. But the problem that is corruption, is perhaps creeping upto the branches of the society.

Often our illiteracy is blamed as the prime cause for all ills. But for corruption, I think not illiteracy, rather "ill-literacy" is the main cause. For education makes one intelligent, but then if the educated person's aim is to amass money leaving morality aside, what else is it than "ill-utilisation" of intelligence? And it is there corruption easily creeps in.

Now-a-days corruption is there in every sphere of our society. It has become a disease.

Men of principle in the society, although very few, are not very hard to be found. For them and all others in the administration, it is time to stand and fight against corruption. Otherwise "corruption" in the industrialisation is grossly inadequate (compare with rest of Asia), parliament is non-functioning, law and order situation is apalling and so on and so forth. But the people who are supposed to provide the direction are seemingly oblivious to all these. Or, do they care to understand?

M A Haq
Green Road, Dhaka-1205

The stalemate

Sir, In the situation now prevailing in our national life has drawn attention from all exalted quarters. I have little to add to what are already appearing in available print media. I only pity myself that we have a very mediocre leadership who have no feeling for the country or the people whom they "pretend" to lead. They are busy taking care perhaps of their own interest.

Look at the situation all around! Almost all the educational institutions (colleges and universities) are closed, industrial production vis-a-vis the industrialisation is grossly inadequate (compare with rest of Asia), parliament is non-functioning, law and order situation is apalling and so on and so forth. But the people who are supposed to provide the direction are seemingly oblivious to all these. Or, do they care to understand?

M A Haq
Green Road, Dhaka-1205

regulatory practices. This list is also long and its implementation overdue. Why the passengers have to point out these deficiencies to the professionals who are paid to run the show?

This is what the potential foreign investors are complaining about: lack of basic adequate infrastructure in practically every sector. The administration is surely aware of the gigantic shortcomings and problems, but what irks is that proper overall pictures are