

Famine or Not?

The drought-hit northern parts of the country are making regular news. Alarming though most pieces of the news are, the government has taken a line of deliberate opposition to their contention. Somehow or other the news pieces themselves have been made controversial. The point of contention is whether there exists a famine situation in the country's north. The government is categorical that none in the areas concerned have died of starvation. It does however admit that diarrhoea has claimed scores of lives in the affected areas. Well, the official version is only partially correct, because it is easy to prove the cause of death as something other than starvation when the victims have eaten things not to qualify as food in their desperate hunger and had fallen sick.

On the other side, the newspapers are regularly carrying reports with pictures of emaciated bodies. Both food and employment are in short supply in those regions and people with no past records of looking for alms are now crowding the towns and turning to begging. A few political leaders, including Dr Kamal Hossain of Ganotantri Party, on returning from a visit to the affected north have pleaded for declaring the region as a distress area. This plea has fallen on deaf ears. The administration on its part insists that it is trying to help mitigate the suffering of the people there through relief and rehabilitation programmes of its own.

That the government programmes are inadequate — almost a drop in the desert — has been reported and through this column we also expressed our concern over the inadequacy of both relief efforts and rehabilitation programmes. It is in such a situation that an MP opened a free food centre serving the hungry populace with prepared dishes. We assume there are a few other such private initiatives to save the lives of the distressed people. But all those cannot cope with the growing number of the starving people, and for long. One or two have already closed down for lack of funds.

In such a situation, the hungry people have hardly anyone to turn to and places to go to. On the other hand, the government's 'hush hush' policy has not allowed the people's plight there to be properly projected. One bad effect of this is that aid and assistance both from within the country or from outside are hard to come by. In this age of media glare, the northern region's desperate situation has largely been ignored.

So the government is taking a position that is doubly obstructing the aid and assistance to the people of the affected north. Is the reason political? If so, it is a bad one. The reasoning also is somewhat faulty. Admitting the truth can never be discrediting. The fact is that the country's rice production has suffered a mini setback and that does not or should not tell on the government's capability for governance. In a resource-poor country, any dislocation is bound to have some effect. If internal resource is enough to cope with the emergency, well and good. If not, what is the harm in sending the message to anyone who cares to listen? Even this can be of tremendous help to the affected people.

The Guest Birds

Our hearts do leap up when we behold a flock of guest birds in the sky. And then they fall down with a thud. How many of the birds caught by The Daily Star staff photographer on Friday would return next year to their Bangladesh station? Not many. Bangladesh of the 20th century tag-end has effected a change in the inexorable and unchanging ways of nature, change that would harm Bangladesh more than it would nature, for nature knows neither weal nor woe. The same day the photograph was published big city thoroughfares were in the evening lashed by cries of sh-e-e-k-a-r, faceless blokes hawking ducks come from Siberia.

Many of the birds on The Daily Star photograph, rather than return to their habitat in summer, would go down the gullet of the delicacy-hungry urban ogres in our country. In spite of television pieces admonishing against bird-catching, the sale of guest birds is on the rise. In spite of specific government measures against this, the wanton catching and selling of birds is prospering. The government is very evidently convinced of the cause of the birds but it can hardly enforce a prohibition when the human components of government bureaucrats and policemen and ministers and parliamentarians are unable to forego the pleasures of tasting the flesh of a Siberian duck.

It is not that a campaign is not being prosecuted against bird molestation. But it is yielding results less than the anti-smoking campaign is doing. This campaign is faring may be as fairly as the campaign against prosecution of women. What do these comparisons point to? Whenever any issue involves the society in a very individual-based way, reforms are invariably very bad bets. Everyone wants the other people's children to be reformed while his or her own ones grow into flirts and mastans. The principled collective stand is all for taking out processions — because they pay — and getting free newspaper space.

What then is the future of these annual visitors? These birds are not only good intercontinental flers, they are very sensitive and take offence so easily and remember the dangers of a clime and communicate following generations. Coming for wintering they do not particularly enjoy the big people's kitchen specially from the disadvantaged position in a frying pan. The government is as helpless in this matter as it exactly is in the case of smoking vehicles — almost all of the government vehicles being guilty of belching black smoke.

No doubt, it will take time. It took decades to instil in the social mind an inhibition about tree felling. But now this inhibition is catching on perceptibly enough. Birds, then again the transitory ones, are far remoter than one's very own trees to evoke any sense of closeness and concern in our people. If one has to think of them lovingly, one would be needed first to think of the chicken in the yard lovingly too. Very difficult indeed, particularly in a land of loving beef eaters. It would doubtlessly take time. In the mean time what do we do? A strict and wholesale ban is worth less than nothing if it is not enforceable. The bird ban is unenforceable with the administration as it is, as also with the society as it is. Could there be a midway — more enforceable and less strict? We would suggest the government take such a course, a course that would discourage guest-bird eating — effectively.

ORDINARY Americans were more concerned last week about the economy than they were about 'peace-making' and atrocities in the Middle East. Popular indicators gave cause for anxiety. By the week's end the stocks bell-weather Dow Jones average fell 20 points in a single day, and the dollar slipped against the Japanese yen to its lowest level since World War II. The media, by contrast, remained obsessed with the Middle East. For three weeks schizophrenia has filled newspapers and the air waves — exalted and optimistic today; outraged and hortatory tomorrow. Most — the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal among them — though King Hussein worthy of accompanying Yitzhak Rabin on a ticker-tape around Times Square. Most welcomed Yasir Arafat sharing the Nobel prize with Rabin while emphasizing Arafat's responsibility as an enforcer of 'peace'. And all praised Clinton's stop in Damascus pressure to the Syrian president to make more concessions to Israel.

There were harsh denunciations of 'Islamic terrorists' disturbing the good order with a shoot out in Jerusalem, the kidnapping of Corporal Nahshon Waxman, and the bombing of a passenger bus in Tel Aviv which killed 21 passengers and wounded many more. As one would expect, the language of these denunciation was unsparring, and merciless pursuit of the 'fundamentalists' was recommended. The killing by Israeli artillery of children and other civilians in Lebanon was reported, very briefly and without comment. The most strident and influential of the media pundits — A M Rosenthal, William Safire, Charles Krauthammer, George

Will — saw in these human tragedies an opportunity to push their pro-Israeli agendas. 'Confronting terrorists means confronting their masters,' wrote Rosenthal in his New York Times column of October 21, 1994. 'Iran supplies the money, guns, and explosives, and Syria the haven and training grounds.' His recommendation: get Iran, pressure Syria.

Only rarely does any one point to the other facts which underlie the continuing violence in the Middle East. On scanning 10 dailies and two TV channels for three weeks I found two exceptions — an editorial in the Christian Science Monitor and a reader's letter to the New York Times. They are noteworthy for underlining the news and views that are excluded from the media and official perspectives on the Middle Eastern conflict and the 'peace process'.

'Peace, not firmly anchored in justice is slippery...' began the editorial entitled 'Peace Prize Ironies' in the Christian Science Monitor of October 17. '... To understand what Arafat is honoured for we must look at what he signed, and the long slide it represents from the Palestinian claim for a homeland... Before 1974, Palestinians wanted a democratic, secular state for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. In 1974 the PLO accepted a two-state solution — one for Jews, one for Palestinians. They would get the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem; Israeli withdrawal and mutual recognition. This was supported by countless UN resolutions and a

world consensus... The Palestinians would accept 22% of their country under the old British mandate. (The terms of the 1991 Madrid Peace allowed PLO sovereignty after five years.)'

'Now it is apparent that on the White House lawn in 1993 Arafat signed a deal allowing him to police Gaza and Jericho. That's it! The Oslo Accords do not give Palestinians West Bank, Jerusalem, or even sovereignty... In short, Arafat won the Nobel Prize for accepting what is essentially a tribal reservation in Israel. He started with a state. He ended with limited self rule.'

Meanwhile, the Oslo Accords are helping erase 45 years of UN resolutions on Palestinian rights. The Arab world yawns. Hamas waits.'

A similar analysis has not appeared in other American dailies. The New York Times, home now to the most virulent Islam and Arab haters, including Safire and Rosenthal, praised Arafat's failure to control the 'fundamentalists'. There was no dissenting viewpoint. Only Rachelle Marshall, a Californian who is active in a peaceable Christian community, the Quakers, challenged this view in letter. It is to its credit I suppose that the Times which has so far suppressed some 300 Middle East related letters by Noam Chomsky, a renowned American intellectual, did on October 21 print Ms Marshall's letter.

She recalled that in 1973 the Nobel Peace prize was awarded to Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, the Vietnamese diplomat who refused the prize on grounds that the war had not yet ended. United States troops were still occupying his country, and killing by both sides was still continuing. Whereupon she notes that while major Arab countries have made 'strides' in making peace with Israel, the bomb which exploded in Tel Aviv 'reminds us that for most Palestinians and Israelis there is still no peace.' Read on:

'The people of Gaza are shut off by an electronic fence whose gates are controlled by Israel. Some 4000 Israeli settlers occupy one-third of the land, while 850,000 Palestinians are crowded into the rest, suffering from 50 per cent unemployment because most of those who worked as day labourers in Israel are now cut off from jobs.'

'Thousands of Palestinians remain in Israeli prisons, where the torture of suspects continues. Israel is building new settlements in East Jerusalem and its western suburbs, changing the demography of what has been for centuries the center of Palestinian society and culture... Although the Declaration of Principles agreed to by Israel and PLO provided for negotiations on Jerusalem's final status, Israeli leaders insist the city must remain under Israeli control.' 'Israeli troops occupy all but a tiny portion of the West

Bank, and for the Palestinians, the rigors of military occupation have not eased: Even before the killing of Cpt. Nahshon Waxman, the peace process was at standstill. The elections the Oslo Agreement calls for have been postponed because Mr Rabin insists that only a small executive council, may be elected and that peace agreement's opponents not be candidates... Mr Rabin's demands are a recipe for civil war, not peace. They also reflect a double standard, since he would not exclude from Israeli elections the extremists who call him a traitor for dealing with the Palestine Liberation Organization.'

'Until the peace prize ceases to be a piece of paper and results in justice for Palestinians, there will be no security for the people of Israel, and the honour will remain a hollow one.'

I may add a few footnotes to these declarations of truth, facts which find no space in the 'free' American press, nor an acknowledgment in official declarations — theirs or ours. During the year following the Oslo agreement 80,000 dunums of Palestinian lands has been confiscated by Israel in Jerusalem alone. In addition, the city's Arab population continues to be strangled economically and administratively as Israel tightens the noose around Arab neighbourhoods. Israel has total control over Palestine's most precious resource — water — and continues to divert it from Arab to Jewish use. Arabs are subject

to humiliating treatment on a daily basis at the hands of Israeli forces and Jewish settlers who ram around with loaded weapons amidst the unarmed Palestinians. Israeli officials barely hide such facts.

'We have retained power in the Territories', General Danny Rothschild told reporters recently. When asked about the powers of Palestinian National Authority he said they were limited to providing 'services to residents'. Yet, none of these facts are reported in the western, and, for that matter, non-western, media.

The Times and the Monitor are likely soon to publish Zionist protests against the unique letter and rare editorial. Yet, those whose minds are not closed by blind belief or paralysing conformity, were shown, however briefly, some light at the end of the dark tunnel in which the media and the governments of Israel and America have enclosed the Palestinian people's unending tragedy. Ms Marshall and the Monitor's editorial writer have held a candle also for us to see the shame of what passes for 'free' journalism, and reflect on the consequences of Arab and Muslim governments' surrender to the United States. But we are only at the beginning of this latter, perhaps larger tragedy.

The writer is an eminent scholar of contemporary affairs and regular commentator on current events. His column is regularly published in several newspapers in the Middle East and Pakistan. He is the author of several books also. He is currently teaching at the Hampshire College in the USA. He has sent this article to us by fax.

Candles at the Tunnel's End

by Eqbal Ahmad

world consensus... The

Palestinians would accept 22% of

their country under the old

British mandate. (The terms

of the 1991 Madrid Peace

allowed PLO sovereignty after

five years.)'

'Now it is apparent that on

the White House lawn in 1993

Arafat signed a deal allowing

him to police Gaza and

Jericho. That's it! The

Oslo Accords do not give

Palestinians West Bank,

Jerusalem, or even

sovereignty... In short,

Arafat won the Nobel

Prize for accepting

what is essentially a

tribal reservation in

Israel. He started with

a state. He ended with

limited self rule.'

'The people of Gaza are

shut off by an electronic

fence whose gates are

controlled by Israel.

Some 4000 Israeli

settlers occupy one-third

of the land, while 850,000

Palestinians are crowded

into the rest, suffering

from 50 per cent unem

ployment because most

of those who worked as

day labourers in Israel

are now cut off from jobs.'

'Until the peace prize

ceases to be a piece of

paper and results in

justice for Palestinians,

there will be no security

for the people of Israel,

and the honour will

remain a hollow one.'

Biomass of Jute — Economically Beneficial, Friendly to Environment

by Dr Ghulam Mohiuddin

In rural areas of Bangladesh, where more than 80 per cent of the people live, biomass plays a very important role and has different kinds of uses. It is used as fuel, fodder, organic manure, building material and raw material for industries. Different types of biomass compete with, or are complementary to, one another for end uses. For example, the rice grain is used for human consumption, bran is used as feed, straw is used as fodder and the other remnants are used as fuel or organic manure or raw material for low cost housing.

This paper deals with biomass production of jute and its use as a sustainable raw material friendly to environment.

Jute and kenaf are annual cash crops for small scale and marginal farmers. About 12 million families are dependent on these crops for cash money and fuel. Almost equal number of people are engaged in jute industry, and trade and transport of jute. By-products of jute such as leaves and sticks are used as vegetables, fuel and low cost structural materials.

Production of Jute
In the northern hemisphere, jute cultivation stretches mainly from 16°46'N in Myanmar to 27°28'N in India. The crop responds favourably to temperatures ranging from 18° — 30°C, high relative humidity of 72 to 84%, average annual rain fall of 1500mm or more having at least 250mm during the months of March, April and May. Each.

About 90% of jute and allied fibre (kenaf) are grown in Bangladesh, China, India, Nepal and Thailand (Table 1). Jute is normally harvested after 120

days and about 200 man days per hectare are required for pre and post harvest operations. Total land area used for jute and allied fibres and their biomass production is shown in Table 2.

Jute Goods

Conventional products : The main traditional uses of jute and allied fibres are in the packaging market as cloth, sacks and bags. Some diversified products such as carpets, soft luggage, decorative fabrics including wall covers, geo-textiles, curtains, blankets, shopping bags, handicrafts, jute composites have future potential.

Pulp material : Some kenaf based paper mills have been set up in France, USA and Thailand. In Bangladesh efforts are now being made to produce initially 25,000 metric tons of pulp from green jute plants. In India about 18,000 tons of jute and jute waste is now being consumed in the paper industry.

Utilization of byproduct : A jute stick which is about 2.1

to 3.4 times the amount of fibre has wide application as fuel wood, low cost structural material, and industrial raw materials for cardboard and thinner furniture planks.

Geotextiles : Geotextiles can be broadly defined as permeable textiles used in conjunction with soil, rock or other related engineering materials as an integral part of a manmade product. Geotextiles are now finding applications in stabilisation, reinforcement, containment, drainage, filtration, protection and separation of soil. There are a number of geotextiles of which jute geotextile is one.

Since it is a field of civil engineering it is expected that civil engineering department of BUET must be involved in doing R&D activities on jute geotextile and their participation elsewhere is a must for the development of this product. It may also be noted that one commercial organisation in collaboration with BJMC and BRTC has started work on jute geotextile.

Utilization of byproduct : An estimated 0.5 million mt of

TABLE 1

World Production and Export of Jute

	PRODUCTION (1993/94)	EXPORT (a) (1993)
000 m.t.	000 m.t.	

<tbl_r cells="3" ix="5" maxcspan="1"