

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 fag-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 prosecutions — because they pay — and getting free newspaper space.

What then is the future of these annual visitors? These birds are not only good intercontinental fliers, 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 disadvantageous 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 are 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 — thought King Hussein worthy of accompanying Yitzhak Rabin on a ticker-tape around Times Square. Most welcomed Yasser 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 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 denunciations 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 the 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

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'.

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 the Nobel Peace awards while criticising 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 a 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 roam around with loaded weapons amidst the unarmed Palestinians. Israeli officials barely hide such facts. 'We have retained power in the Territories', General Danny Rothchild 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 paralyzing 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.

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 food, 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, geotextiles, curtains, blankets, shopping bags, handicrafts, jute composites have future potentiality.

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.

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 material 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 BJRI has started work on jute geotextile.

Utilization of byproduct: An estimated 0.5 million mt of

green leaves are produced in 0.5-0.6 million hectare of land and are left over in the field. This has a fertilizer value and is recycled to the land. The added nutrients measure up to the equivalent of about 25174 mt of urea, 3733 mt of TSP, 2733 mt of MP, 38080 mt of gypsum and 30545 mt of dolomite, 360 mt of ferrous sulphate, 160 mt of magnesium sulphate and 33 mt of zinc sulphate. The young jute leaves contain 18-22% protein. So 80,000 tons of protein can be extracted from jute leaves!

Biogas

It has been revealed that the gas produced during rotting contains 50-60% methane which is a useful source of energy that can be burnt for household and industrial use.

Utilization of Waste

For maximum utilization of low grade fibres and to make jute products cost-effective, a method has been developed for the production and application of enzyme to improve low grade

jute and cuttings. Some jute wastes are now being used for making various products.

Waste management: Management of industrial, municipal, and agricultural wastes is a global problem. According to EC's recent regulations on packaging, current overall disposal of wastes is about 60% land filled, 20% incinerated and only 20% recycled. They want it should be 10% land filled, 20% incinerated and 60% recycled and the balance 10% is a reduction/prevention target.

All jute products are biodegradable in two years' time and degradation can be enhanced by biochemical means without causing any pollution to the environment.

Biomass-fuel

Due to increase in population Bangladesh needs increased supply of food and fuel. Moreover, increased need for housing and fuel consumption are also creating deforestation. Removal of tree covers within the agricultural areas; extraction of root biomass; gradual

shift to more ecologically damaging fuel collection practices, such as increased use of crop residue and dung, divert valuable nutrients and organic matter away from the soil. As the price of the fuel-wood is high, many people cannot afford to buy the barest minimum of the total biomass fuels. Agricultural residues, woodfuels, and animal dung contribute 66.3%, 17.5%, 16.2% of total biomass fuels respectively.

It may not be out of place to mention that in the energy sector, out of total biomass fuel production of the country, plant residue constitutes 18.8 million mt to which jute stick contributes two million mt alone which comes out to be 10%.

Conclusion

Jute occupies only 3.5% of the cropped area for 120 days. Yet jute can play a vital role to supply biomass to ensure the supply of raw materials for the following utility areas: (1) Fibre for conventional as well as diversified uses; (2) Jute stick for fuel, fencing, low cost housing materials; (3) Wood substitute for furniture; (4) Raw material for paper and pulp — thus reducing the current trend of deforestation; (5) Jute leaf is a rich vegetable due to its high content of protein and vitamins; (6) It removes 1.2 tons of carbon-dioxide from the atmosphere for each ton of the fibre produced.

So jute is friendly to environment from production to end uses.

The writer is Chief Scientific Officer, Bangladesh Jute Research Institute. The article was selected for presentation at 'Bio Resources '94' organised by La Rocco, USA October 3-7 in Bangalore, India.

TABLE 1

World Production and Export of Jute

	PRODUCTION (1993/94) 000 m.t.	EXPORT (a) (1993) 000 m.t.
WORLD	2,968.50 (100%)	1,273.80 (100%)
BANGLADESH	783.00 (26.37%)	799.70 (62.78%)
CHINA	650.00 (21.89%)	80.10 (6.28%)
INDIA	1,224.00 (41.23%)	217.90 (17.10%)
NEPAL	10.00 (0.33%)	10.70 (0.84%)
THAILAND	134.00 (4.51%)	65.00 (5.10%)
REST OF WORLD	167.50 (5.64%)	100.40 (7.88%)

Note: (a) Quantity by weight, expressed in raw jute equivalents.

Source: FAO, Jute, Kenaf and allied fibres, June 1994, CCP: JU/ST/94/1

TABLE 2

Total Land Area of Jute and Allied Fibre and Their Biomass Production in Five Major Jute Producing Countries.

	Area * (000ha)	Fibre 000 m.t.	Leaves 000 m.t.	Sticks 000 m.t.
Bangladesh	500	885	443	2,045
China	270	619	425	2,404
India	890	1,332	668	3,077
Nepal	8.8	10	11	34
Thailand	115.6	176	148	617

* Source: FAO, Jute, Kenaf and allied fibres, December 1993, CCP: JU/GS/93/4.

** Calculated from Dempsey Jame M. Fibre crops, 1975, A University of Florida book.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Mosquitoes are coming!

Sir, With the advent of winter and start of tourist season huge number of mosquitoes have started coming to the capital of Bangladesh, the metropolitan city of Dhaka. Is it following the slogan of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation — our national tourist organisation — 'Visit Bangladesh Before Tourists Come'?

For the mosquitoes Dhaka has a special charm to visit. There is no barrier of formalities. Food and lodging are free. There are plenty of abodes (breeding places) to increase their population (ofcourse, the recently held UN Conference on Population in Cairo also can not do anything here when DCC itself is unable).

In winter millions of mosquitoes come to Dhaka. All our dwelling rooms fill with these humming intruders (or guests?) and they fill their bellies with our fresh blood so helplessly served to them! Perhaps they find it more tasteful than that of other humans (we're city dwellers, afterall). Unfortunately Dhaka City Corporation has not taken

any step as yet for the eradication of mosquitoes except making a few publicity stunt and propaganda. It is reported that the population of Dhaka has reached 85 million this year. So there must be more mosquitoes now than earlier. Isn't it imperative for DCC to take increased measures to combat this influx?

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Dowry

Sir, There was an exceptional news published in your esteemed daily on Friday, October 14. The news was not that the girl committed suicide; this is not unusual. The news was that a young girl, Minno Duggal, a school teacher in Delhi, refused to give her hand on a matrimonial bargain. Bravo! I congratulate her. Minno Duggal refused to marry just before an hour to matrimonial ceremony. The refusal was in the glare of the ceremony with the bold announcement: 'To-day's marriage cancelled due to dowry demands. Inconvenience regretted.'

The groom's parents were

not satisfied even with a large amount of dowry which the bride's parents had agreed to give. The groom demanded more on the wedding day. This should be condemned. And I convey the bride my heartiest congratulations for her act of bravery as we know that a Hindu girl has an opportune moment for nuptial tie — the *lagna*, decided by the priest. Unless the marriage takes place according to dogma, the bride has no alternative but to lead a measurable life throughout. But the brave Minno Duggal had the courage to break the taboo of the society to vindicate that women are also human beings just like men.

The incident strikes us as it is not unfamiliar in Bangladesh. In our country, as we turn the pages of newspapers we find the news of death of young girls as a result of torture by the husbands and near relatives.

In our society who have the capacity to fulfill the demands; accept them without any protest? Even in highly educated family, the tradition of dowry is maintained to show the higher social status, affecting ultimately the society at large. And the brides who have no capacity to fulfill the demands are physically and mentally tortured every day. As a result we have news of what is called 'unnatural death' of the poor girls. Society must emerge out from the eclipsed state. My question is to the grooms — the young men in

society — why are they guided by the whims of the elders? Why don't they resolve that they would marry only to get a life partner, a friend, also a guide and over all a lover?

Naushaba Akhter
English Department,
University of Dhaka

"Between the Lines"

Sir, I hardly miss reading Kuldip Nayar's column 'Between the Lines'.

In his article 'Polls are the End, Not Seshan' published in your October 21 issue, he mentions about the book 'A Postman Rings Twice' and describes it as one of the best-sellers in the fifties.

If I am not mistaken the book is entitled 'A Postman Always Rings Twice' and it was published in the midst of the Second World War. The book was also made into a film by Metro Golden Mayers (MGM) just after the war ended, starring the 'sweater girl' Turner and John Garfield, both of whom have passed into the great beyond.

Robert Kader
34 Mehdiabagh, Chittagong

Our role in averting social crisis

Sir, It is all very well for sociologists and psychologists to analyse and reflect on the reason for 'Rise in serious crimes: reflection of a society in deep crisis' (Masud H Khan, DS October 23). But nobody mentions (1) how adult movies are loaned to youngsters by

video shop owners; (2) how come such movies are kept on shop shelves in the first place and (3) what such movies have to do with our society? If there are government restriction on sale of alcohol, there should be restriction not only on sale of such movies but on their import. These movies have nothing to do with our culture. Loan of adult movies to youngsters should be a seriously punishable crime.

Free market is a good concept but surely has to be adapted to one's society. When Bangladesh makes excellent tooth paste, the sale and advertisement of, say, Indonesian tooth paste seem almost anti-national. But of course in our society there is no check on traders who reign the day with tantalising advertisement of foreign chocolates and covert advertisement of even porno videos inside video shops. I am sure there are many mothers like myself who feel embarrassed to take a young child into these shops lest they start pointing to the indecent pictures on top of video cassette covers. All parents should protest and force the government to stop import of indecent video movies.

I must also say I find some pictures in the newspapers. A case in point is the picture of a painting in a British museum depicting a rape scene in war-torn Bosnia. Can any one tell me how I explain to an 8-9 year-old the meaning of that picture? It was also particularly distressing for myself as

first thing in the morning. Usually distressing scenes in western media are not easily within reach of children and TV viewing adult movies are only aired after 9 or 10 pm. Views of scantily dressed women often in your 'off the record' column are also of bad taste to me.

Dr Zeba I Seraj
University of Dhaka

Group activities

Sir, Group activities are essential for bringing about social and economic development. One of the main characteristics of group dynamics is to ensure participation of each and every member of the group into their own welfare and development. But it is now evident in many cases that most groups are controlled by only a few 'master-minded' group members who dominate all the group decisions and actions. If we take the example of political groups, it would be evident that sometimes, due to the whimsical decision of a few influential and powerful group leaders, the entire group suffers and often diverts to negative actions which is suicidal to group interests.

I think, to keep any group — political, developmental, cultural whatsoever, in perfect order, the group leader and resource persons should carefully be selected or elected by the group members.

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof, BAI, Dhaka