

Of Hunger and Nutrition

A plan for raising the nutritional status of our people by 329 kilocalories over the next three years has been taken up by the government. The current per head intake rate of 1950 kcal would be raised to 2279 kcal by the year 2000, if the programme proves a success. The programme is an operational part of the National Food and Nutrition Policy which was adopted by the government on Sunday.

The importance of our government deciding on an approach towards our problem number one, food and nutrition, cannot be overstressed. It is indeed a three-phase task. Growing enough foodstuff, seeing that society has universal access to enough food and ensuring that every person's food intake gives him or her optimum nutrition for a healthy and able life. The government must address itself to achieving headway in the first two in order to make a meaning of the last.

The plainest of the words pertinent to a nation's corporeal well-being is hunger. For centuries and even millennia, this our land and our people have been bedevilled by hunger. Asoka the Great asked the governor of Pundravardhana, now Mahasthan in Bogra, to tuck away some part of the year's grains output so as to tide over future famine conditions. And in the consecutive three famines following each other closely soon after annexation of Eastern India by the British East India Company perhaps more than half of the then population of Bengalees were killed. The worst such in one time, the Great 1943 Famine, took a toll of five million souls. This time food was there but gone out of the reach of the masses. A hefty, shockingly big share of our population go underfed or hungry for all of their life even now.

There are, however, some serious afflictions vitiating the health of even our posterity, which have little to do with hunger, iodine deficient food for one and vitamin-deficient foods for another. The first contributing to goitre and affected brain development and the second to blindness. A bellyful meal can be and often is protein-deficient threatening the nation's future with a snowballing number of morons. The nutrition policy and programme can be a big boon in these areas.

The nutrition issue indeed should come in a comprehensive package. We welcome this one element out of the bag and would eagerly wait for the other two — and equally ardently for even the bag which would dovetail the elements for the greatest good of the society.

R&H: Free for All

A powder keg-like situation is prevailing at the R&H Directorate in the wake of former Chief Engineer Mahtabuddin being replaced by Addl. Chief Engineer Moinuddin Ahmed. We are agnostic at the temerity of the vested quarters to indulge in open disobedience of government orders to that effect. Engineer Mahtabuddin despite his somewhat dubious distinction has very successfully garnered a support base within a record time of four months he had the contract with the government for serving as the R&H Chief Engineer to lay a claim for his continuance in office. A strong-arm tactic unheard of even by our standards of influence-peddling.

A decision at an ECNEC meet chaired by the PM to initiate investigation into some allegations of corruption against him got stalled purportedly because of intervention by some influential quarters. Bhorer Kagoj reports that he once lost job on charges of corruption, but got it back in 1977. Again in 1985 he had to quit on corruption charges but was reinstated in 1990 with an unflinching stroke of luck.

So much of a tutelage he has apparently grown around such a vast loyalist circle, with some influential quarters also reportedly trying to pressurise the government into keep him we have here some extraordinary syndrome to deal with. It is indeed very difficult to lend credence to such a magical convergence of factors, all for the sake of keeping just one person in position which is pretty much a straightforward administrative matter for a ministry to dispose of. We seek immediate clarifications on this subject from the ministry concerned.

Not a day should be lost in putting an end to the explosive environment created at the R&H offices by meetings and counter-meetings and processions and counter-processions by the Degree and Diploma Engineers and Workers-Employees Coordination Council on the one hand, which sought Mahtabuddin's removal and the Engineer Officers and Workers-Employees Oikya Forum which want him to stay. The forum has even threatened to obstruct river-crossing services. A professional directorate having to deal with a vital infrastructure must not be allowed to be a den of bickering by vested interests.

A Partial Remedy

City hawkers earlier dislodged from pavements and open spaces in some busy metropolitan enclaves have got themselves a two-day vending lease by virtue of weekly government holidays falling on Friday and Saturday. Their beleaguered languishment on the periphery of diminishing business meaning a loss to their livelihood-making opportunities coupled with a markedly reduced catering to the demands of low and middle-income groups, seems to have been partially remedied. And only fractionally — to build a little on the theme of "humanitarian grounds" that weighed with the DCC to allow the hawkers the two-day waiver on pavements and into the nooks of open spaces.

Admittedly, their going away from the footpaths and open corners that invariably kept extending into thoroughfares, helped streamline traffic in many an area and give the city a cleaner look, too. But the resultant imperative has been to relocate them suitably so as to enable them to earn a living without being banded off ceaselessly.

We have three suggestions to make. First, there ought to be an effort to get their names registered with the DCC. No matter how long the list grows, there must be a consolidated dossier on the hawkers, vendors and squatters possessed with the help of the local bazaar authorities. This could save them from free-for-all toll collection. Secondly, we need exclusive, earmarked business locations for them. Last but not the least, mobile vending should come extensively in vogue.

Forthcoming Budget and Exchange Rate Stability

Although it is true that a stability was maintained during the first half of the decade, but it did not translate into increased investment from abroad for other constraining factors. If exchange rate stability and investors confidence are restored, then it may be far cheaper to borrow from abroad at almost half the cost of domestic borrowing.

THE government's budgetary process is the single most important event at the beginning of the financial year determining the fate of the economy for the next 12 months. It is not the calendar year but one midway to the next. What can we expect from the forthcoming budget beginning 1 July 1997?

Given the movements of the macro-economic variables during the current fiscal year, one of the significant issues for consideration in the budgetary exercise is the foreign exchange rate. Until 1996, exchange rate stability was the order of the day. One US dollar was equal to Tk. 35.69 in 1990 (average annual rate) and it increased by only 15 per cent during the next years. The exchange rate stood at Tk. 40.86 to one US dollar in 1996. However, by April 1997, that is a period of 4 months only, value of taka depreciated by as much as 7 per cent and at this rate, taka is likely to be devalued by 15 per cent — a level of change achieved over the previous 6-year period.

Stability of the exchange rate is a key factor — determining the level and flow of direct foreign investment (DFI). Although it is true that such stability was maintained during the first half of the decade, but it did not translate into increased investment from abroad for other constraining factors. If exchange rate stability and investors confidence are restored, then it may be far cheaper to borrow from abroad at almost half the cost of domestic borrowing. As for example, if an investor borrowed US\$ 10 million in 1990 for in-

dustrial investment from a bank abroad at the prevailing rate of 6 per cent only for repayment over 3 to 5 years, then it would have been cheaper for him to do so, instead of borrowing the same amount from a local bank at 12 to 13 per cent rate of interest. The exchange rate used to be so stable.

Prospects of foreign investment have brightened in the recent past because of heightened prospects for investment in the energy sector; opening of new export processing zones, concerted efforts to seek investment for the textile sector and establish backward linkages to readymade garment (RMG) industry; and above all, vigorous initiatives towards privatisation. If DFI comes, domestic investment cannot remain far behind. In the midst of all these possibilities, if the exchange rate is not stable, foreign investors would be worried about their returns to equity and repatriation thereof, since he ultimately wishes to have his money back in currency other than taka. Domestic investors will be worried about the cost of imported machinery and equipment. At the present rate of depreciation, cost of imports including payments duties and taxes in the current year is likely to be around 15 per cent more than in 1996.

What are the fiscal implications of a stable foreign exchange rate? At present, import

duty on capital machinery and equipment amount to 7.5 per cent of the import value. The value-added tax (VAT) amounts to 15 per cent of the duty paid value. However, there are many items included within the total import for setting up any industry which have much higher rates of import duties. As a result, the total tax burden to the investor, contemplated at 23 per cent in total — but in reality it is much more than that. As for example, equipment for a telephone network may enjoy a

ported duty-free while the packaging materials for pasteurised liquid milk of local origin must be obtained after duties and taxes. Agricultural machinery and equipment can be imported duty free but any local manufacturer of power tillers must pay taxes on imported metals and materials. It is incredible but true that the existing tax structure often favours imports and penalise domestic industries.

The forthcoming budget opens an opportunity to ratio-

structure individually to each major export earning industry can augment their capacity to compete better in the international market. Budgetary support can also be provided through improvement of the infrastructure common to any particular export industry. For example, sea food export, in particular shrimps and prawns are going to be affected in the coming year due to the natural disaster last month. The industry require strong support through easy credit, rehabilitation subsidy, investment for the development of roads, embankments and other common facilities. Procurement of hides and skins by the leather industry should also be facilitated by providing various fiscal support. RMG industry is the key to export earnings and to what extent the industry's capacity can be augmented during the year is an important issue to be dealt with in the budget of 1997-98.

The real actors of development, in particular the various manufacturers are the key to export earnings. It is good to organise pre-budget sessions with economists and former finance ministry experts. More important, however, is sit with specific industry groups — listen to their problems and suggestions in order to design the appropriate set of fiscal actions to be incorporated in the budget. Ultimately, the purpose should be promotion of export-

led growth. South-east Asia is fast becoming a high-wage region which should improve our competitive position for export of labour-intensive manufactured goods and services. There is no reason why we should not experience as much as 20 per cent growth rate of export of these products. The internal factors which may facilitate export growth should also be taken into account. The Jamuna Bridge will open on 1st July 1998. The telephone network due to private sector investment will effectively develop throughout the country within the next two to three years.

The current energy shortage should be an agony of the past when private sector power plants come on stream within the next fiscal year. The impact of all these developments should be industrial decentralisation, provided government takes the initiative to set up industrial estates in the district towns, facilitate transport development and take care of other infrastructure requirements through a crash programme in the forthcoming budget.

Rapid growth of export earnings and direct foreign investment are the two best means not only to promote export-led growth of the economy but also sustain the value of Taka or confine its fluctuations within reasonable limits. This is a strategy well tested in all the success economies of the world today. The budget of 1997-98 is the best available means at the moment to implement the strategy in Bangladesh today.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

total tax rate of 23 per cent only but the hand sets without which the network is useless can be imported after paying an additional 20 per cent supplementary duty. Any reasonable size investor would also include automobile, in particular special purpose vehicles, as part of the investment package where the duty structure presupposes it to be a luxury import. In fact, such imports may be allowed as an incentive to investors by treating such vehicles as a part of machinery and equipment.

There are many such examples: milk powder is im-

portance of investment — foreign or domestic. This, in turn, will act as a cushion against deteriorating exchange rate, to an extent.

The rate of exchange is ultimately determined by the supply and demand of foreign exchange. Obviously, there is excess demand at present which is pulling up the dollar value of taka. Supply should correspondingly increase by taking all possible measures, including budgetary support, to increase export earnings. The budget, through gearing the tax

OPINION

New Weekly Holidays: A Decision by the Government of the Leaders, for the Leaders

by Dr Shahdeen Malik

SO we now have two days in a week as holidays. In exchange of the two days of holidays per week, all employees of government, semi-government and autonomous bodies and other related organisations such as banks etc., will have to be in their offices earlier, and leave later.

Is it good or bad? That is not the question! Of all the decisions of the government in recent months, this is surely the 'one' which affects the greatest number of people most directly and immediately.

Without squabbling over the exact figures, it can safely be said that the government currently employs more than one million people. There are many tens of thousands of employees in organisations, institutions and bodies who will be affected by this decision to change weekly holidays.

And then there are hundreds of thousands more whose life will directly be impacted upon by this decision, such as, rickshaw-pullers of Dhaka. By unofficial counts there are at least 300,000 rickshaws in Dhaka with at least 500,000 people working as rickshaw-pullers. There are many more thousands who depend on the rickshaw trade on a daily basis for their livelihood, including

roadside mechanics for repairing rickshaws, sellers of parts for rickshaws, all those thousands of food establishments which primarily cater for the rickshaw-pullers and so on.

Besides, other transport workers (bus, baby taxis and tempos, to name the most obvious ones); small pan-biri shops and food stalls which supply the daily needs of employees in the offices areas; and many more will surely lose their 'business' for one day of the week. The point is, in addition to the employees directly engaged by the government, semi-government and autonomous bodies, this decision affects hundreds of thousands of other people whose livelihood is linked to the people going to offices. For these other hundreds of thousands, two weekly holidays mean one day less of work. From now on, their trade will be at least three-fourths less on all Saturdays.

There are many more impacts and ramifications of this decision to change the weekly schedule. I don't think one can visualise any other government decision which affects lives of

hundreds of thousands so directly and immediately, except, perhaps, going to war with another country.

So, the issue is who decided on this change and how? Aren't we supposed to live in a democratic society? Doesn't democracy mean that people have to be consulted in matters which directly affect their lives? Aren't we, the people, supposed to have a say in issues which concern our collective well-being?

Democracy, needless to say, does not mean that all the people have to be consulted in each and every decision of the government. But how about the decisions which, as indicated above, impact upon the lives of so many hundreds of thousands of us?

I am not suggesting that the government ought to have organised a referendum or undertaken a huge exercise before changing the weekly holidays. But surely there are other ways and means to gauge the public opinion, involve the people in the decision-making process and fathom their reaction prior to the decision is made. There

could have been discussions, airing of opinions through the media; meetings; comments and reactions; and at least some empirical exercises to gauge the pros and cons and many other such manoeuvres to engage us in the decision-making process. We would then have known that a change in our weekly lifestyle is being contemplated by the government. We could have reacted, prepared ourselves for the change and be better informed. Above all, we would have been made part of a democratic society.

Without participation in the decision-making process we become part only of a democracy in which we do not have any say in matters which affect us. Consequently, it is a democracy of the leaders, by the leaders, for the leaders. Surely some leaders — 'democratic' or 'bureaucratic' — took this momentous decision for 'our good' and they did not think it necessary to involve us in this decision. As if they know best or at least that's the message they are conveying to us. And since that is the case, surely ours is a government by the leaders, of the leaders, for the leaders.

Did anyone have any inkling about this change in the weekly pattern of our lives? Surely not. In recent weeks, there were some discussions, comments and reactions regarding Friday as a weekly holiday, probably spurred by the Pakistani decision to change their weekly holiday. Individuals, business groups and organisations and many others voiced their opinions on this issue; a lot of us discussed the pros and cons formally and informally. But none had any prior notice that our democratic government was planning to drastically change our weekly holidays.

No prior information, no indication, no stock taking, no consultation, no open assessment of the goods and bads of such a decision. Nothing! Zilch!!

When a decision is taken which literally affects, irrespective of whether positively or negatively, lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people, then surely such a decision-making without consulting them symbolises not a democratic society but only an authoritarian one. Yes, there are occasional veneer and fa-

cade of democracy, of elections and of 'participation', but not in matters which directly, immediately and profoundly affect us.

We certainly have a tradition of rejecting decisions which have been taken without consulting us. In fact, we do have right to reject such a decision.

It seems that our decision makers, even if elected, do not have any clear notion of the necessity of inducting people in the decision-making process; of the conception that democracy does not only mean people's participation in the general elections, but also in all the major decisions transforming the state and the society. The modalities for involving the people in the decision-making process may be varied, some more inclusive than others, some direct, some indirect; and so forth. But the bottom line is that we, the people, have to be consulted. We must not be made to wait till the next general election. For, the harm done to the society by taking decisions without our participation may be so great that throwing the political party out of power in the next general election may not be the remedy enough.

The writer is an advocate and Advisor to Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust.

To the Editor...

Of Courtesy

Sir, I would like to draw your kind attention to two news items in your May 31 issue.

They read like this: "... Begum Zia distributed food among thousands..."

"In the evening the former prime minister..."

And then, in the same page: "After overnight stay at Tungipara, Hasina will return to the capital this afternoon."

I think a little courtesy would not cost much. FA Khan, Maghbar, Dhaka

Dear Reader, Thank you for your letter. You may not have read the entire news item. Normally, the popular name is used on second or third reference to the same person and the case in point was no exception. We have never been discourteous to anyone. — Editor

Private power comes in Bangladesh

Sir, I would like to congratulate Bangladesh Power Development Board, and simultaneously thank the ministry concerned to provide necessary support for having concluded recently, the first-ever power purchase agreements with two private power developers in respect of 200 MW power to be supplied by them from two barge-mounted power plants. This will usher in a new era in the history of electric power supply in this country. Private power was inevitable in the wake of withdrawal of official development assistance for power.

However, it is debatable whether our development partners were right to have taken such a hurried and unkind decision on Bangladesh.

In this connection, I would like to mention that it has been about three-and-a-half years since the submission of the report on power sector reforms by high-powered inter-ministerial committee that such an agreement could be signed. This could be shortened if the previous government would not have taken about a year to take decision on the aforesaid report. Whatever delays might have taken place in concluding the recent agreements, which were completely different from the

previous deals that the PDB was familiar with, I hope they would learn from the mistakes and conclude future agreements even faster.

There's still a long way to go before the country can have a reasonable load-generation balance. There are about 3.2 million consumers existing at present. Consumer connections have not been stopped, and therefore, load will further increase. We understand, there may be two more agreements concluded soon that would be able to supply another 200 MW by about the same time.

If three contracts could be concluded by the year end, 600 MW worth of gas turbine capacity could come on stream by the year 1999.

STS Mahmood, Retired Chairman, DESA, 264/6 Road, No 8A, West Dhanmandi, Dhaka-1209

Sorry, Biman; it's not that cheap!

Sir, On May 14, 1997 in Biman Bangladesh Airlines published its employment notice for the post of Trainee Officer in *The Daily Star*. Here they have tried to trap the big fishes with a minimum cost. May be they do not know the prevailing market price of an MBA or any body with three first class/divisions.

But they should know. As a leading organisation, they should not try to blackmail the brilliant students, capitalising their name and thus, daring to offer a farcical stipend of Tk 3,500 per month. Why don't they know that an MBA gets as much as Tk 30,000 per month as an initial salary even in this poor country? And that they don't have to wait for a time of three years and a half for a confirmed job?

We don't understand why Biman is trying to pull down the salary level. We wonder, if they really ever knew what the post 'Trainee officer' means to other organisations and what the requirements made by them really worth. On an average, an MBA student does spend about Tk 5000 per month. So why should they try to go for a benefit which is lower than their

cost? Why should they cast themselves into an uncertain life where one may not be absorbed as permanent employee even after a three and a half years' service?

Noyavi, Probash Monzil, Bazar Road, Savar, Dhaka-1340

Create some authors, please

Sir, Addition of literature page in *The Daily Star* is no doubt a commendable step. We really enjoy this section on every Saturday. Features, columns and write-ups on various issues give us tremendous pleasure. However, we have a feeling that something is missing in these pages. A novel written by an author of repute may be included in the said section.

As the authors of Bangladesh are not used to write novels/stories in foreign languages, such step will surely encourage them to come up with their writings which will give a different dimension to our literature. *The Daily Star* can do a lot in expediting this.

Saokot Hossain, Green Road, Dhaka-1205

Art and nudity

Sir, Naked portraits of women are common in almost every cinema poster. It seems to manifest what is going inside the cinema halls. Such nudity and bane photographs of women are detrimental to the character of our youth in every respect. From any religious or moral point of view, no sane person with sound conscience can give ethical support to such nudity. Art 'artist' recreation like cinema has enough potentials to do some good to the society by raising social awareness and by encouraging the youth to lead a praiseworthy life.

But the nakedness can only tickle the bad instinct of the youth and tempt them to commit rape to a greater extent. It will make a bad influence on every social evil. It will put an end to all the desirable appeals of cinema. Perhaps our movie-

makers are doing this to keep pace with the neighbouring country in which such nudity is widespread.

A cinema should be enriched with its own art, not with nakedness. To take the resort to nudity is to try to conceal the incompetence of the artists. I hope the people concerned will avoid such morally detrimental propensity and pour out the artistic qualities. Cinema should reflect the desire of the people of the country.

My earnest request to the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Information to have a vigilant eye on the matter.

Mahmud, Dhaka University, Dhaka

Democracy and Parliament

Sir, Do our political leaders believe in "As you sow, so you reap" or "Tit for tat"? The Awami League leaders say that the BNP leaders by their undemocratic and unparliamentary behaviour proved they want to make the Parliament inoperative to serve their vested purpose sacrificing the interest of the people. We the common people are at a loss to understand what happened to our 5th Parliament and what is going to transpire from our present 7th Parliament?

Time and again we wonder for whose wisdom, folly or wishful thinking day by day we are intoxicated and indulged in controversies.

OH Kabir, 6 Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

BBC Product Design Award

Sir, BBC has given 'BBC Product Design Award '96' to Baygen (a British Company) for their claim of a Free-play (without battery/electricity) Radio. But the papers suggest that the Baygen is not the first/true inventor of a Free-play Radio, rather it was a Bangladeshi invention in 1975, some 21 years ago. When the matter was raised to the BBC,

they replied "development of the Baygen Radio is not a BBC matter".

A question was placed to the conscience of the BBC: "Had it been the other way round i.e. a British invention in 1975, could you still have given a BBC Product Design Award '96 to a Bangladeshi company in 1996 and reply to the British inventor... not a BBC matter", vide a letter dt. 14-12-96, but no reply has yet been received.

In the meantime, office concerned in Bangladesh has given due recognition to the Bangladeshi invention of the Free-play Radio and wished its success both at home and abroad. On the directive of the Prime Minister's Secretariat, the High Commission of Bangladesh in UK has written on 12-12-96 to the Baygen itself on the issue of the right of innovation of the Free-play Radio. But it is not known, whether the Baygen has replied either.

Nazmul Huda, 38, Siddheswari Road, Dhaka-1217

Load-shedding in Khulna

Sir, Nowadays, load-shedding is a common phenomenon in Khulna, the industrial city. At present, there is hardly any area of the city, which is not affected by it. Without load-shedding there is no single hour.

It is true that electricity is the most urgent prerequisite to all developments. As an industrial city, the supply of power is very much essential in the city. But the industrial units located here are paralysed for the time-being due to load-shedding. Cinema houses, shops, factories, hospitals all are affected by it. In the meantime, production of many industries is hampered due to power failure.

Besides, frequent load-shedding hampers the study of the students especially who are examinees. It also increases many unsocial activities like theft, robbery, etc. In fact, load-shedding became a great problem to the dwellers of the city. So, necessary steps should be taken to solve this problem immediately.

Masum Billal, BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207

Private university

Sir, The Independent University (IU) is the third university, preceded by the North South and Darul Uloom universities to hold its convocation, amidst due solemnity. So far the number of students in a class is about thirty, as compared to more than a hundred students in the public universities. This enables the teachers to take individual care of the students, which is the strength of the private universities. But on the other hand, the fees at the private universities are beyond the reach of the middle-class and the guardians with limited incomes.

Private universities can only meaningfully survive if generous support and donations from the affluent and socially conscious people keep flowing in, as is the case of private universities in the developed countries. Unless such aid is received the doors of the private universities will remain confined only to the privileged few. The Chancellor has already urged the private universities to raise the percentage of seats for free tuition from five per cent to ten per cent, and this requires urgent consideration of the private universities.

Shahabuddin Mahtab, 51 Siddheswari Road, Dhaka-1217.

Mother Teresa

Sir, *The Daily Star* of March 15 has carried two items on the friend of humanity and the Nobel laureate Mother Teresa. One item was an editorial appreciating the role and contributions of the great lady and another was a photograph showing Mother Teresa and her successor Sister Nirmala greeting people at the Missionaries of Charity headquarters in Calcutta.

Meanwhile to Mother Teresa, retirement was out of the question as she said despite handing over the mantle of the leader of the order to her successor. Yes, we also trust that a person who dedicates his/her life to the service of the suffering humanity cannot take retirement but he/she serves the humanity for all time to come. M Zahidul Haque, BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207