

Restore Its Dignity

Diplomatic passport or red passport as it is known has become a source of great irregularity and embarrassment. A Star report says that only 115 MPs of the current parliament have so far surrendered their green or general passports either at the time of receiving their red passports or at a later date. The figure is almost double in the case of MPs of the fifth parliament. What are we likely to conclude? Distinguished section of the citizenry or the people's representatives are becoming increasingly lawless?

Diplomatic passports as per the Vienna Convention are supposed to be issued to persons engaged in missions to serve or represent the country. However, the long list of people entitled to this privilege in Bangladesh suggests we have deviated from the original condition of the charter. As a sovereign country, we are perfectly within our rights to decide whom to confer this badge of privilege or whom not to. But the problem is every deviation from an international norm results in the reduction of the value or the status of a distinction or honour. More so, when people bestowed with that distinction fail to understand that certain practices that go with that privilege are absolutely sacrosanct. Their violation brings shame upon the nation, upon the country.

The fact that serious anomaly has been going on about the possession of two or more passports by VIPs recently came to public notice quite scandalously when a state Minister — a red passport holder, travelled with his green passport which he obviously did not return while collecting the red one.

This one reported incident brought to light the complete lack of coordination among the various relevant government agencies as regards the possible abuse of the diplomatic passport. Except the Consular Section of the Foreign Ministry — the issuing authority — no other ministry, neither Ministry of Home Affairs nor the Office of Passport and Immigration has any idea about the list of red passport holders. The glaring lack of professionalism and authenticity in the whole process becomes clear through anonymous confession of an official that Consular Section does not verify the particulars provided by the applicant.

We urge the government to restore and retain the dignity of the diplomatic passport. Whether it should review the criteria for a red passport is something that can wait for an exhaustive deliberation over a period of time. Meanwhile, both Foreign and Home Ministries should work fast and in tandem with Passport Office to monitor the proper use of red passports.

DU Dean Election

Normally we would not have felt the need to comment on the DU Dean Election. But the reason we do so is because it has been fought along political lines. As reported in most newspapers, of the seven posts, four have been won by the pro-BNP White panel and three by the pro-Awami League Blue panel. We have often decried our university students for being divided politically. But what we find equally reprehensible is that our university teachers should be so divided that they have to discharge an essentially university function on those lines!

Being a supporter of this or that political party on a personal basis is one thing. To bring that same politics into the affairs of the University is something quite different. As we have got more and more mired into politics, down and down has gone the academic standard of our universities.

Can anybody deny the vicious impact of party politics on all aspects of our academic life? If that be so, then why do we continue in this vein? One answer could be that our academicians have really lost sight of what pursuit of knowledge is all about.

We are not ready to accept that as an answer yet. But we must warn our teachers that their conduct, and their failure to create a strong moral resistance against the shameful slide in the standard of our higher education is increasingly leading us towards such a conclusion.

A Clear Message

The number of landless people in the country is rising alarmingly. The preliminary results of the census on agriculture released this weekend showed the landless holdings to have recorded a four per cent rise. A worrying sign when viewed against the fact that seventy per cent people of the country is directly or indirectly involved in agriculture and that it accounts for one third of our GDP.

The phenomenon of rootless farmers in Bangladesh has little more to do with a straightforward Malthusian interpretation of diminishing means of subsistence in the wake of unchecked population growth.

Rural Bangladesh is a study in time lag when it comes to land ownership. Despite the enactment of various laws since the days of colonial rule what we have in Bangladesh, in essence and effect, is a feudal or semi-feudal system that ensures the exploitation of the weak and the poor by the rich and mighty in gay abandon. Barring the abolition of zamindari system, there has hardly been any basic change.

Only the powerful landsharks are expanding their dominion under the present system. The credit financing system aimed at making the poor farmers self-reliant is hardly of any use because the agricultural labourers or the barga chashi have no land against which they can borrow money from financial institutions. So, it is an unending tale of exploitation for them by the land owners who treat them as serfs.

Matters are not helped by the fact that the government has no specific map as regards khaas land or the newly reclaimed tracts of land. Irregularity, corruption, nepotism in the allotment of government land lead to enormous casualties in the char or reclaimed areas every year. Real landless people remain ignored in the bargain.

The rise of landless population is not a mere rural problem. Cities specially Dhaka is already grovelling under the pressure of mass migration of rootless people from villages. It cannot be helped unless the means of subsistence are created and protected in the rural areas.

Not long ago a similar survey report showed that the calorie intake of people has gone down by 250 units in last 30 years. The present one is not very different in sending a clear message to those who shape people's future: the slogans of development have not taken us anywhere. The real Bangladesh or the rural Bangladesh is suffering as it used to suffer in the pre independence days.

Food Grain Situation Around the World

"Food security at the global level concerns whether the world's farmers and food system can provide twice or even three times as much food as today — at no higher real cost and do it in a manner that does not destroy the environment ... Each country should use its arable land and agricultural production potential to the fullest extent efficiently and without wasting resources."

THE XXIII conference of the International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE) was held in Sacramento, California from 10 to 16 August 1997. The conference theme "Food Security, Diversification and Resource Management: Refocusing the Role of Agriculture?" seemed timely and well tuned to the ongoing policy debates in all countries of the world. The conference ended with a great success that largely owes to the credible and dynamic leadership displayed by the association Vice President Programme. Joachim Von Braun and to the earnest endeavour of his team members like, Peter Hazell, J. B. Siebert, S. Johnson, W. J. Armbruster. Credit is also due to the host capital city Sacramento for making the stay of about 900 participants pleasant and purposeful.

The presidential address was given by R. L. Thompson on "Technology, Policy, and Trade: The Keys to Food Security and Environmental Protection". He addressed the problems of hunger and poverty in rural areas of the world, the growing need and demand for food and the potential of the world's farmers to produce an adequate quantity of food to feed the world population better than today at no higher real prices and without environmental damage. The main theme of Thompson's deliberations sprang from his experience of visit to 40 countries on all continents (but Antarctic) and extensive reading, observation and innumerable conversations with agricultural economists, government officials and well-informed observers.

According to Thompson, of the world's 5.8 billion people, an estimated 800 million suffer from hunger. There are, again, 1.3 billion people in the world who subsist on an income level of less than one US dollar. Different sources of estimates show that four quarters of the poor live in rural areas where the bulk eke out a living from farming. Half of these ill-fated half from less favoured areas. To understand the roots of the

problems of poverty and hunger in rural areas, it is important to recognize that no country in the world has solved the problems of rural poverty focusing exclusively on agriculture. Raising productivity in agriculture thereby reducing the real prices of food is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring food security. The sufficient condition is availability of purchasing power. And that could be created by offering off-farm employment opportunities.

In many of the developing countries migration to distant cities is considered to be an exit from poverty. Available information tell us that in 1990 there were four cities of over 10 million people and by 2010, the number would surge to 21 cities of this size and among these, 13 would fall in Asia. While growing urbanization would inevitably gear up migration, its speed could, perhaps, be slowed down through creating more attractive opportunities in rural areas. And that calls for a firm political commitment on the part of the governments in those crisis-prone countries to make larger investments in roads, communication, education, healthcare and putting the necessary precondition on the provision for employment and enterprise growth. Needless to mention here that a robust agricultural development strategy also presupposes those facilities.

The combined effects of population and income growth are likely to exert preponderant pressures on food consumption to make it double in the next three decades or so. "Food security at the global level concerns whether the world's farmers and food system can provide twice or even three times as much food as today — at no higher real cost and do it in a manner that does not destroy the environment ... Each country should use its arable land and agricultural production potential to the fullest extent efficiently and without wasting resources."

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Among the continents, Asia embraces a much larger fraction of the world's population than of its arable land. Much strides have been made in terms of investment in agricultural research and in education, rapid economic growth with faster pace of non-agricultural employment through the countryside. Dietary changes occurred *paripassu* rise in per capita income — with a fall in rice consumption and rise in wheat and non-cereal items. There have been significant growth in agricultural productivity but internal food produc-

cultural bias in public policy, depressed farm process due to dumped food aid, fragile rural infrastructure to discourage adoption of profitable improved technology. Conclusively, a faster economic growth could result in faster growth of food consumption and hence Africa is poised as a net food importer.

Western Europe witnessed large investment in agricultural research and relatively high price supports to alleviate agricultural productivity levels at international standards. European farmers were insulated from international price shocks. Agricultural production growth outpaced internal consumption to leave some exportable sur-

America can offer some hopes. If an economic development strategy is adopted which successfully increases the incomes of the millions of poor people, there will be a larger increase in demand for agricultural products within South America... this region is expected to have a much larger volume of agricultural exports to satisfy the growing import demand in Asia and other regions in the 21st century..."

Professor Thompson's general observations are: (a) in tandem with rapid population and income growth, there is evidence, a change in the structure of demand for food. In low income countries, rapid growth of non-cereal items, e.g. meat, fruits, vegetables, edible oils are surging while in high income countries, more of processed, packaged foods are being demanded. Thus the need to think agriculture as a part of total food system is important; (b) a bifurcation in the size of distribution of farms is occurring all over the world. We may soon reach the point where 20 per cent of the world's farms produce 80 per cent of the output while the other 80 per cent of the farms collectively grow only 20 per cent of the output. The high producing 20 per cent have high land-labour ratio and high capital-labour ratio. They are located in more favourable agro-climatic zones, adopt highly sophisticated management — financial, risk and marketing. The "unfortunate" 80 per cent producing 20 per cent are concentrated in areas of high population density, often in less agroclimatic zones with weak physical and human capital, less credit available. Without creating part- or full-time employment opportunities off the farm, there is little scope and hope for solving the problem of malnutrition and hunger in these areas. Given a better communication and other infrastructure facilities, for suc-

cessful rural economic development, these areas could set up important link between the agricultural and food markets; (c) rapid changes in the national agricultural policies are in the offing in many parts of the world. Greater reliance on market forces have been placed to reduce the role of the government. Nevertheless, the anti-agricultural bias in public policies still stays pervasive and much is needed to be done; (d) agricultural market is having a global span with larger fraction of world's agricultural output paving ways through international markets; (e) public concerns about protecting quality of environment looms larger now than before with hesitant move towards intensive agricultural practices. Some of the allegations are genuine while others are not. Bio-technology, which some environmental activists also criticize, has great potential not only to raise productivity but also to breed the resistance to diseases, insects and other pests, reducing the need for chemical controls."

An overview of world agricultural progress seems to suggest that there is a great deal of much higher productivity technology available in the world than is presently in use. There is substantial underinvestment in agricultural research relative to the need. There is, again, a discriminatory policy bias against agriculture. This does not call for introduction of distortionary subsidies to agriculture but the assurance to the farmers of a level playing field in which they are not asked to pay more for their inputs. And finally, the role of public investment in rural infrastructure, human capital and agricultural research, the existence of a legal code and fair judicial system to support an efficient marketing system should pave the way for more agricultural production. Agriculture can play a leading but not the last role in the alleviation of rural poverty. Non-farm sources of income associated with strong agricultural growth linkage seem to be the ultimate answer to the vicious circle of rural poverty.

tion capacity failed to keep pace with countries' food demand. Agricultural imports, particularly of food grains and protein meals to feed livestock and poultry rose in tandem, *ipso facto*. With an acutely adverse land-man ratio, the per capita income rise in Asia might warrant more imports from other parts of the world.

The most disconcerting event is that Africa stands out to be one continent (albeit, the only continent) with a declining per capita food production for the last three decades. Apparently, heavy weathering of its soils imposed a weak structure with very low nutrient content. Low annual rainfall is accompanied by quite high variance. Agricultural productivity is threatened by natural limitations. African agriculture is further dragged down by — underinvestment in agricultural research, a pronounced anti-rural or anti-agri-

plus at subsidies. However, price support levels have been reduced significantly in recent years. Furthermore, with environmental regulations in existence, the reduced intensity of input use adversely affected agricultural exports. By and large, the world might experience a fall in agricultural exports from Western Europe.

South America, with largest area of arable land, posits a brighter chance to feed world population without causing deforestation or other environmental damage. While the destruction of the Amazon rain forests receives great deal of media coverage, there is abundant non-arable land that can be brought into agricultural production in regions south of the Amazon. Although agricultural performance is still shy of the potential, with favourable land-man ratio and some of the world's most fertile soil, South

Let Bangladesh Not be South Asia's Algeria

Sheikh Hasina has made her position clear and in fact it is her government which has for the first time challenged the fundamentalist forces. I am sure everybody who fought or supported the independence war would stand by her in this crusade.

WE Bengalis have never been identified with any form of extremism, but mistakes of the past, and possibly of the present, are wrongfully portraying us as religious fanatics instead of secular. (Secularism being one of the pillars on which Bangladesh was founded).

This write-up comes amid signs of a dividing line being drawn by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her arch-political rival and chief of the Bangladesh Jatiyyatabdali Dal (popularly known as BNP) Khaleda Zia. The two leaders have not named any particular group, but it appears the premier described them as "anti-liberation forces" and her rival as "nationalist Islamic" ones.

One should not ignore the fact that the small Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) led by Shaukat Hadius Moulana Azizul Huq could gather thousands to rally round his call for mass prayers and anti-government rally at the Manik Mia Avenue on August 22. The government took the right step by allowing them to hold the rally there avoiding a possible confrontation with the veterans of Bangladesh's 1971 independence war.

Huq told his supporters, "They (the government) call us fundamentalists. Yes, we are Islamic fundamentalists." He also condemned the Shikha Chirontan at the Shuhrawardy Udyan — a mark of our independence Silver Jubilee — and threatened to destroy it amid a 24-hour vigilance by police.

The leaders of the secular Awami League government also made it clear during separate rallies of "pro-independence" groups that "anti-independence elements" would not be successful in their mission.

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad blamed Khaleda Zia and her party for instigating fundamentalism and communalism in the country.

Local Government Minister and Awami League Secretary General Zillur Rahman told the UNB recently, "We don't see any threat to democracy and secular forces. People have rejected the fanatics and the fundamentalists in the last general elections." He was referring to Jamaat-e-Islami's fall to three from 18 parliamentary seats in a span of five years.

To the Editor...

IT Return by car-owners

Sir, We have a family private car and the same is registered in the name of my wife, who is a full-time housewife and has/had no income of her own. The particulars of the same car is already detailed in the property statement as per the existing law of the land (which says that any property held in the name of one's wife/wives and minor children must be shown by the husband/father if they are non-assessee). This year's Finance Act, however, has asked car-owners *en masse*, without any qualification, to submit IT Returns. This is in some cases contrary to common sense as the declaration of the same in many cases are already shown in the property statement submitted by husbands.

I would, therefore, urge the relevant authorities to frame rules exempting housewives from filing IT Returns simply for having the family car registered

in their names, and of which declaration has already been made in their husband's return to the IT authorities. The filing of IT Return by non-earners will simply mean in such cases not only possible harassment of females of law-abiding decent families but would also unnecessarily increase the work-load and anxiety of the would-be assessees besides to no financial gain of the state.

Dr A M Aza
68, Azimpur Estate, Dhaka

Shattered happiness

Sir, We are deeply grieved by the incident at the Monno Ceramic Industries. The products of this industry made us proud, because at home and abroad these were highly praised. It held a prestigious position in foreign countries also. But no, something had to happen to shatter our happiness.

We heard that in British regime, thumbs were severed

from weavers of Muslin cloth, to destroy the pride of our country. We are now independent. Who could have started the upheaval which resulted in damaging Monno Ceramic Industries drastically? Are there persons who call themselves Bangladeshi, but welfare of the country is far from their hearts? Who truly love their country will try to uphold it in every sphere.

We urge Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to look into the matter and do whatever is there to be done to save the industry which boosted the image of Bangladesh. We hope she will not disappoint the people of the country.

Nur Jahan
East Nasirabad, Chittagong

A friend, indeed!

Sir, According to The Daily Star dated 20.7.97, Shantu Larma and his PCJSS delegation have went back to their

shelter, being their headquarters at Bishnupur in Tripura of India.

India is our biggest neighbouring country. She is our best friend. Her contribution towards our War of Liberation can never be forgotten. She gave shelter to crores of our people during the Liberation War.

This time also, India has proved herself as our best friend taking pains by giving shelter to Shantibhumi in her territory.

So what, though it goes against a sovereign and its small friendly country — Bangladesh?

Nur Hossain
151, Bangshal Road, Dhaka.

Crisis and crises

Sir, The bitter sufferings, hardships and pains of the eight million inhabitants of the metropolitan city of Dhaka due to constant road traffic jams, erratic electric supply and water

crisis are inexplicable.

We have the practical feel and encounter that we are making backward march instead of moving forward to overcome our acute and severe crises.

Unfortunately, it appears that the administration of our country, especially the LGRD Ministry, Home Ministry, DCC, DESA, WASA and DMP are not taking any interest or they are not taking any step with a view to do away with the long-standing grievances and complaints of the people. As a result, various crises and problems in the city are multiplying.

We would once again request our authorities concerned to wake up, not to dump civic facilities and amenities matters like piles of garbage and to do something nice practically to mitigate the sufferings of the people without further loss of time.

O H Kabir
Wari, Dhaka 1203

The man who died in the carriage

Sir, A letter writer (DS, July 21) has objected to the government donation of Taka one lakh to the family of a victim who died in the wheel compartment of a Biman plane. He appears to have a point. The stowaway illegally travelled in an authorised space.

Had he been arrested alive, the court might have convicted him. The donation could have been given privately by an individual or non-governmental agency (not officially by the State to an alleged offender). Ethics and moral implications come in.

Is there scope to reverse the decision? The money may not be taken back, but some other party may reimburse the transaction. The issue needs to be debated for clarification. It is an interesting precedent.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka