

## The Potato SOS

There is an SOS from the potato growers and the potato keepers. The new potato crop is ready to sweep market in another month's time. But of past year's yield there are 11 lakh tons unsold potatoes cluttering the cold storages of the nation. What can be done to this stock? It will be immoral for much of this to be dumped live as we do with a danger of famine dangling perpetually over the society. But more importantly, such a quantity cannot easily be thrown into the rivers. For that would pollute the rivers. It can neither be released at a price that will be less than its carrying cost to the market. In fact, clearing and cleaning the storages to accommodate the new crop has become a proposition beyond the capacity of the owners of these.

The charm of potato cultivation is that it can offer at least five times the starch and other food value that rice will give over any specified area. Wonder crop it is in every sense; potato is our best guarantee for food security.

The problem is neither with potato or its apparent over-production. A people's taste and food habit is a very inflexible thing. The Bengalees are eating potato for more years than the Americans where, in the land that gave the crop to the world, it was strongly believed that eating potato led to mental derangement. Even after all these years the Bengalees take it only as *anj-torkari* and not as any staple like the cereals. The problem lies there. The Bengalee is still to innovate any *pitha* out of potato. Besides there are certain unfounded health taboos preventing its becoming a popular food. Much has to be done to change this both by governmental and social initiative.

Some intelligent suggestions have been given by the cold storage owners. To avert a very injurious outcome they have asked of the government and the banks some small help which should be made available to them without delay. They have urged the government and industry to seriously go for other uses of potato such as industrial starch etc. But the best way out of food glut is export, which they have mentioned but as a failed venture.

No, potato has a very promising prospect as an export item. Three big markets are waiting to import potato: Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka. The only problem that has to be overcome to enter these markets with strength is quality. Mainly quality of the packing. We recommend that a number of reputed export houses be given the chance to make a good landing on those three neighbours who eat more potato than they grow. And we can hardly afford to foul up in this also as we have done with shrimp.

## To Curb Road Accidents

The number of road accidents has nearly doubled in nine months. It was time BRTA spoke. It has and we welcome the decisions it has taken.

Any decision is only as good as its implementation. Lamination is likely to scale down unauthorised fake licenses but it has to be made sure that lamination as a defence is not breached by acts of forgery. Pasting fitness stickers on the windshields run the same risk of ineffectiveness unless there is an expansive and efficient monitoring mechanism.

It should be observed here that our concern about accidental deaths is rather too heavily tilted towards buses as the culprits. Overloading of buses is definitely the most potent factor but the trucks are equally culpable. Any random survey would show that there is hardly any truck in Bangladesh that plies with its stipulated load of five tonnes. Seven is the minimum before which it would not move. Besides, there has to be serious change in the legal tone about road accidents. The interpretation of law vis-à-vis road accidents is grossly disrespectful to human lives. It is not the traditional concept of accident that accounts for deaths on the roads in Bangladesh. It is the collective indifference to the basics of road rules including driver's training, his fatigue level, roadworthiness of the vehicle that combinedly give rise to the endless tales of major road accidents. It is murder if not by design then definitely by indifference.

Being understaffed as the Star report informs us is not BRTA's only problem. Evidently it is also suffering from a long running problem with the law enforcing agency about owning responsibility of faulty vehicles. BRTA can only take decisions; it cannot ensure their observation, something which has to be monitored by members of the law enforcing agency. This is the level where all good intentions tend to come unstuck mainly. This calls for teething of the law enforcing agency both from logistical point of view as well as training.

We counsel the government to take initiative to ensure enhanced and effective cooperation between BRTA and law enforcing agency. Opinion can be sought from experts and people involved in transport business in order to bring change in a drama which is essentially of human callousness.

## Lacustrine Consciousness

Visuals published in Saturday's issue of a leading Bengali vernacular daily served a poignant reminder of what little effect our professed concern about city's lakes has really had on them. Devoured by man's spiralling need for dwelling places and choked by the piling burden of filth and refuse, these lovely waterways that once contributed so much to the aesthetics, water management facility of the city are crawling to slow but sure death. The pictures showed how heaps of rubbish are being dumped daily at the Gulshan Lake making light of authorities' sense of responsibility so perfunctorily demonstrated in the mute sign-board at one side.

Years of indifference and thoughtless urbanisation has killed lakes around Dhaka.

Time has come for an integrated and sincere approach about reviving city's waterways. This awareness is not only necessary to make a sight for sore eyes but also to keep the city free from waterlogging. The depleting water table of the city will be better off for that.

The Daily Star has so far run a solo awareness campaign. Our concentrated focus on the sad state of the Dhanmondi Lake has triggered off encouraging signs of consciousness. But mere consciousness of the city dwellers cannot stop the pollution of the lakes. The city authorities have to adopt measures speeded in strictness and seriousness.

The performance of the Dhaka City corporation in this regard has been poor to say the least. Its awareness as the picture showed is literally stuck at the level of hanging or staking a notice board.

# Outcomes of Bangladesh Aid Group Meeting

Although there is a visible reduction of 12 per cent in the proposed aid, the Aid Group has committed to the level that it did last year. From this point of view, it is not a major blow to the government's expectations.

THIS year's Bangladesh Aid Group meeting had some unique aspects: for the first time since 1973 the Aid Group Meeting has been held in Dhaka rather than in the salubrious and relaxing environment of Paris city, the amount of aid commitment for next year has been marginally slashed to \$1.9 billion (a 12 per cent cut) from \$2.17 billion that the government had requested for, and for the first time since its independence the Aid Group has given the country a slap on its face. The implications of these should be looked into somewhat more carefully.

The government media gave quite a bit of publicity for holding the Aid Group Meeting (AGM) in Dhaka at their own request. The credit for persuading the donors (who might have a different motivation to come which is discussed further below) to hold the AGM in Dhaka certainly goes to the government. At a time when the country's foreign exchange reserve is under some stress, it is commendable that instead of the government delegation spending its hard currency to attend the AGM in Paris it was able to make the donors spend their hard currencies to come to Dhaka. Incidentally, it would be interesting to know whether the expenses of attending such meetings by the donors eventually become the liability of the recipient country. This is a small point of information that an outside analyst would like to know.

However, the more important aspect of holding this meeting in Dhaka was psychological. It aroused some, if not great, expectations of receiving a bonus in the form of large aid bonanza, or at least the amount that the government wanted. Further, one expected that after seeing the successes of aid utilisation in Bangladesh, the donors gave strong approval, or blessings with promises of greater commitments in future, that would have given the government a

powerful political-moral boost to continue with the policies it has been following. That would have improved its political image in the country. To everyone's dismay, neither of these expectations has been fulfilled.

One, of course, must not make too much of the cut in donors' aid commitment for next year. Although there is a visible reduction of 12 per cent in the proposed aid, the Aid Group has committed to the level that it did last year. From this point of view, it is not a major blow to the government's expectations. Its proposal for a higher amount may have been used as a bargaining chip on the table at the time of negotiation. If that is what the government wanted, then one has to say that it has been a successful strategy. But if the government got what it wanted, then the political fall out of that would have been to show to the voters that it had the donor community strongly behind them. That hasn't happened.

However, the important point here is to note carefully what has been happening to the annual aid commitment and utilisation or disbursement rates. Although the annual commitment rate is about \$1.9-\$2.0 billion, the disbursement/utilisation rate has been in the range of \$1.4-\$1.5 billion a year. Over the last two/three years, the utilisation rate has definitely slowed down somewhat with has attracted the attention of the donors. The irony is that at a time when there is a widespread clamour for downsizing the government because it has become oversized and utterly inefficient, after the completion of some projects, the short-term employees were retained by the government on a full time and regular basis making the size of the government larger still. These have become subject of critical analyses lately (including in this column) but no rational deci-

sion has been taken by the government.

On top of it, there has been an expensive pay award for the government employees and officers which is overshooting the target budget expenditures. All in all, if inefficiency in implementation grows slowly but steadily, then there is hardly any pride in raising the level of aid commitment annually.

### Donors' Joint Statement on the State of Politics

The most surprising outcome of this year's AGM is the unusual step that donors have taken by issuing a statement on

will respect the call of the Honourable President of Bangladesh for tolerance and accommodation in the interests of the country as a whole and settle their differences in parliament, and not by violence." Some observations on these issues are in order.

In the first place, although the statement of the donors is not a warning to the political leaders of the country as such, there is a clear sense of fear of the future and a disapproval of what the government and the opposition have been doing in their confrontational politics. They advised the politicians to listen to what the "Honourable

President of the country" has been telling them to do. Every Bengali/Bangladeshi should understand that when some outsiders are telling in blunt language what the leaders of an independent country should be doing, it is not only beneath the dignity and self-respect of these leaders but also a blow to the sense of independence, sovereignty and respectable image of the country. This is a national humiliation.

What have the ordinary citizens who have fought for the independence of the country and are struggling to make two ends meet have done to earn this humiliation? Conscience and decency require that politicians should answer this question. In the second place, the blame for such downgrading of national self-respect cannot be placed only on the door of the opposition party. They are cer-

tainly to be blamed for calling hartals but the government has an equal responsibility in creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation for dialogue both inside and outside the Parliament. The events of 1994-96 were examples of forcible overthrow of the elected government even before Magura by-election took place which are being repeated by the present opposition activities.

Who gives the politicians the right to push the people to deaths and injuries through

private properties, uproot railway lines, close down ports, trade and industries which deprive millions of employees of their daily livelihood?

If such activities continue to take place every two to three years, then the entire socio-economic fabric will be destroyed soon. There will be no future for the country. There is a need for a final solution to such irresponsible acts by an agreed method. In the third place, no government seems to be able to control law and order but they are bent on using the law enforcement agencies in beating up the opposition on the streets. This attitude comes from a spirit of vengeance and control of opposition by terror tactics which are externalisation of autocratic and anti-democratic values of the people in power. Democratic institutions cannot be built on such values. Talking of democracy and abuse of state power are antithetical and hypocritical in nature. This writer has been writing on these issues over the last four years in this column. More recently articles under the titles "Where is the Country Heading For?" and "How is the Country Rated Abroad?" would be enlightening to the readers.

Incidentally, the donors' statement is just a confirmation of what have been analysed in the last article. Finally, the donors perhaps agreed to come

to Dhaka to attend the AGM to take the opportunity to tell the politicians of the country sitting in their own capital what mistakes they were committing. Certainly, telling them what they had to say in Dhaka was far more effective than if it was said in Paris.

**President Shahabuddin's Advice to the Politicians**

The country as a whole owes a debt to President Shahabuddin Ahmed for courageously telling the politicians about the repeated mistakes that they have been committing all along. Hopefully his advice and guidance would be taken seriously by politicians of both sides of the parliament and would be acted upon. Perhaps, it would be fitting for the President to try to develop a constructive dialogue between the two sides and bring them closer to an agreement on developing appropriate *modus operandi* for successful practice of democracy in the country.

There are good, sincere and honest people on both sides of the parliament who might respond to such ideas and who may exercise some pressure on their leaders to come to agree on developing such rules of behaviour in and outside the parliament.

A quarter of a century has

passed in the politics of killing, murder and corruption. The country has been driven to the pit. There is a dire need for reversing this self-destructive trend of activities in the country. Justice and fair play have to prevail at every level of the society. The highly respected President is in a unique position to take some initiatives in this direction.

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## INSIGHT

by  
Kabir U Ahmad

the state of political confrontations between the two major political parties of the country. Usually, donors remain silent on the politics of a recipient country or at best express a quiet concern about it to the leaders in private. But this year it has openly expressed its concerns and deep anxiety with an undertone of disapproval in a signed statement which was circulated to the press. In a blunt statement it said, "The present confrontation between the current government and the opposition appears to be ushering in a new cycle of violence, intimidation and instability." Further, "Violence in the universities, which is condoned and even encouraged by political parties is another manifestation of this climate of intolerance." "The development partners sincerely hope that all members of political parties

will respect the call of the Honourable President of Bangladesh for tolerance and accommodation in the interests of the country as a whole and settle their differences in parliament, and not by violence." Some observations on these issues are in order.

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## LETTER FROM AMERICA

### America's Obsession with Physical Fitness, Sports and Winning

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Eisenhower played "too much golf" according to his critics; Kennedy played football, before injuring his back, Nixon had a bowling alley installed in the White House, Ford was more interested in golf than in the Presidency, Carter was a very fast jogger, Reagan went horse riding, Bush was a slow jogger, and Clinton is a golfer-jogger.

Letters sometimes referred to as "very silly!"

Americans play to win. If you tell someone you played tennis, more likely than not you will be counter-asked: "Did you win?" The expression, "he is a winner", has connotations of virility and invincibility. A "loser", on the other hand, is a pathetic figure, symbolising what is wrong with humanity. America takes its sports very seriously. If it were to seriously get into soccer (Major League soccer is in its infancy), within ten years it could be world cup contender.

Americans don't just enjoy sports vicariously. They are active participants. There is no age limit for participation in sports. Recently, a 92-year-old man participated in the New York City Marathon. On a given morning, afternoon or evening, jogging is a common sight on any street in America.

One in every 100,000 Americans is a marathoner. Marathoning is an intellectual sport: over half the marathoners are college graduates. The enthusiasm is infectious. In Bangladesh, the writer would have never dreamt of taking up marathoning in his forties. Uninhibited in the USA, he did. And completed four New York City Marathons (26.2 miles run) between 1992-95. The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the marathon is fascinating. Hundreds of runners from all over the world participate in the New

York City marathon. Roughly, a third are women - physically trim, highly educated and very attractive women! In this year's New York City marathon held on November 2, Kenya's John Kigwe won among the men, and Switzerland's Franziska Rochat-Moser among the women.

These days, America amply rewards its sports heroes. Basketball superstar, Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls earns 35 million dollars a year. Golf phenom Tiger Woods has signed contracts with sponsors Nike, Titleist and American Express worth over 100 million dollars. Virtually every professional basketball player is a millionaire. Things were not as favourable for sportsmen always.

Professional sportsmen earned very little money in the old days. Promoters exploited them to the fullest, robbing them of all their earnings. Joe Louis, the legendary "Brown Bomber", and after Muhammad Ali, the greatest heavyweight boxing Champion of the world was broke when he retired. In his last years, he worked as an usher in a Las Vegas casino.

Muhammad Ali changed all that. He realised that people paid money to see him fight, not the promoters promote. Therefore, he demanded that he, not the promoters, should get most of the money. On a non-competitive level, it is a corporate sport. If one wants to do it.

Except for American football, all championship series are best of seven matches. If a team wins four in a row, the series is over. The other three games are not played. Imagine, a five match cricket test series concluding after one team wins the first three!

In England, class is associated with sports. The working class fans go for football; cricket is the sport of the upper class. In America, all sports are fair game for everyone. The only exception is golf. On a non-competitive level, it is a corporate sport. If one wants to do it.

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