

Rice Market Intervention

We have it on the authority of food minister Matia Chowdhury that 'hidden drought' at the time of flowering of Aman paddy has caused a foodgrains deficit this year, by a wider margin than faced by us in the previous years. The shortfall has not been quantified as yet, but we sense from the government's imitation of OMS operations, with 800 thousand metric tons held in stock, that it would be a fairly substantial market intervention. While the Food Ministry seems to have the capability of sustaining the open market sale of rice at the subsidised rate for four to five months, the duration might be shortened if wheat and Boro harvests are good in two to three months' time.

During the on-going first phase of OMS operations, it is observed that these have had a mixed effect on the prices. In the urban areas the price spiral has been only marginally checked but elsewhere in the mufassil towns prices have shot up in as many areas as these have either stabilised or gone down. Such rather confusing results from OMS will have to be analysed for a proper grasp of what is going wrong with the exercise before we think of extending the same to the thana or other outlying levels. For one thing, the dealers will have to be chosen very carefully, apolitically to be sure, so that those who are meant to be problem-solvers do not turn out to be poachers. For the other, OMS rice should not fall into the hands of those who are apt to sell it to others at a profit. If these things can not staved off the very purpose behind the exercise will have been defeated.

The government will have to keep an eye on hoarding. The argument that any regulatory move is a free market anachronism doesn't hold good here. Black-marketing being an extension of stocking-turned-hoarding needs to be stamped out, root and branch. Laws are there to use.

In a tell-tale revelation of how mercenaries are trying to cash in on our food shortage, a prominent Bangla daily reports that a ship containing 12 thousand metric tons, of rice allegedly unfit for human consumption and of Indian origin which was turned away by the South African and Nigerian port authorities is now at the outer anchorage of Chittagong port offloading in hot haste. We want a probe into this.

Biman's Weak Strongroom

Is there any type of corruption on earth that the national flag carrier is immune to? This week's bust up of a racket responsible for stealing traveller's cheques worth more than one million dollar from Biman's Strongroom has brought this question to the fore.

It was a Bangla daily that probably first tipped off the activity of a wicked web that over a considerable period of time was building fortunes at others' costs. The accusing finger then was pointed at some corrupt employees of the postal department and banks in league with whom some thugs were reportedly running the 'business'.

The focus has now widened if not shifted to an institution that nowadays deserves to be dubbed as a den of corruption for its sheer flair for giving birth to tales of inefficiency and malpractices. The question that readily leaps over our mind in this context is: how come a restricted and guarded place like the strongroom proves so weak that some corrupt people could steal things at will over such long period of time? It is obvious employees in charge of that section liaised with outsiders like that absconding Bank official in it.

The police have started the investigation and 'hopefully' the criminals will get their deserts as laid out in the laws of the land. But would this do any good to help us read the writing on the wall? That public institutions in this country have by and large dissipated into pockets of corruption and inefficiency. And why the public would foot the bill for misgovernance and maladministration? Will the people who have suffered in this TC scam get back their hard earned money? All this, we believe, point finger at one inexorable way out: Privatisation. Unless competition and accountability increase in the service sector, this kind of insensitivity to public sufferings would simply go on. The government would do well to take some policy initiative immediately to dismantle corrupt public sector behemoths like Biman if it has any care for the citizens who in the present circumstances run the risk of paying tax as well getting robbed as in this case.

Why Niggardly?

What is happening in the matter of shifting the Dhaka Central jail to some more spacious and also more humane venue is plainly shameful. The plans for the detention centre at Teghoria, Keraniganj, specially for pre-trial hajatis has been cancelled for unknown reason. The main jail to be built at Kashempur on 107 acres of land at a cost of 180 crore is, however, still an on-going project. But how? In the current fiscal only Tk 3 crore has been made available for the job. So when and how will the thing be completed? The cancelled Teghoria detention centre is now to be housed within the Kashempur complex making it a 302 crore Tk project. And when you start on a job with less than one per cent as seed-money you better not call it a job.

What is the size of the jail-inmates in comparison with the whole population. The percentage is minuscule. The good turn to these handful of people — criminal in the bargain — can wait to yield place to programmes affecting a bigger section of our people. Precisely the same kind of weird logic has traditionally been at the root of delaying the separation of the judiciary as well as reforming the entire judicial system.

It will be naive on the part of the government not to take up the jail programme in all earnestness. For this huge building programme is not going to cost the government a single paise. The RAJUK is to wholly defray the cost from the proceeds of auctioning the land that the present central jail occupies in the heart of the city. The nation will love to have the Kashempur jail ready in five years' time.

I have borrowed the title from a book by Theodore H Van Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernization*. One of the striking features of that revolution has been the emergence of a hierarchy of cultural standing in which the new-comers have been relegated to a position of recognized inferiority. At the top is the First World, essentially the West plus Japan. At the bottom is the group of least developed countries, sometimes called the Fourth World. In between are the Second World of the erstwhile Soviet bloc and the Third World, classified as less developed countries.

No doubt, the revolution has had a constructive effect on the poorer countries as far as life-expectancy and survival rates are concerned. But in the psychologically more important relative terms — in the ever more intensive comparison of wealth, power and human rights (including freedom from unmanageable external pressures) — their fortunes have declined. The powerful, the rich did as they would, and the powerless poor obeyed as they must. Political and economic decisions affecting their welfare were taken in the capitals of 'developed countries' by governments or by ubiquitous multinational corporations far richer than any number of developing countries combined.

Deeply rooted inequality between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' is unfortunately further accentuated within the poorer countries themselves. The disparities are a matter of public knowledge and the misery is there to see. The power-holders within nation-states embrace enthusiastically the rhetoric of human rights: All human being are born free and equal in human dignity and right. But taking their fullness of power for granted they, like their mentors, are not ready to confer a similar boon on those

whom they dominate with their jealously guarded political and cultural resources. Perhaps, equality in political power is not a human right particularly for the poor and the ignorant.

The argument, couched in the language of compassion, runs somewhat like this. The backward people, uninitiated as they are in the culture of modernization, do not know what they need. Therefore, the knowledgeable people with command over power and resources are obligated to think and act on their behalf. One wonders, however, how many countries and their elite really enable and empower the less endowed people to look after themselves? How many are willing to decentralize decision-making authority to the local community level? How many are ready to establish equitable land-holding and for that matter equitable access to information and knowledge? And how many can rightly claim to be giving incentives to the poor over the longer term?

Yet, as the Brundtland Commission concluded, the first prerequisite for development is a political system based on effective citizenship participation in decision-making. This participation must exist at the community level, the national level and at various levels in between. The Commission went further to declare that all people and people's group must have a right to participate in decisions, a right to information about their environments, and a right to redress in cases of environmental damage not of their own doing.

Unfortunately the large underclass, as it were, in many poor countries rarely have such rights. They are mute witnesses to the decimation of their envi-

ronment and the annihilation of their cultural and spiritual resources. But they have little or no access to outside resources and information. Forced into a complex web of social and power relations, they have seen the subjugation of their local knowledge without the benefit from new ideas. Community bond, which in earlier times had enabled them to cope with the business of living, however precarious it was, has been destroyed. Nor have they been given a sense of belonging to any alternative institution that can sustain them.

Alienated from their own

ability to articulate and formulate their own programmes for going ahead. Access to the means of production, namely the seed-capital, is critical for realizing the aspirations of the groups. Equally critical is the access to the means of thinking to fully grasp the complex power-relations into which they are inserted. For, they must create their own wisdom by incorporating the outside information, into their own and shared initiative, organic knowledge. Only thus they can design their own development path and establish a network of alliances both within and out-

venture to suggest the dissolution of the hierarchy. Knowledge may be in the interest of the poor — from the complex and the sophisticated to the simple and the locally relevant. This is not to imply that the poor peasant or the invisible woman in the countryside is more knowledgeable than others, but rather that he or she offers a viewpoint from below, a viewpoint that can help realign the development paradigms to the real order of things. As William Berry notes, "It is local knowledge that enables the farmers to master the intricate patterns in ordering his or her work within the overlapping cycles — human and natural, controllable and uncontrollable — of the life of a farm." A knowledge derived from direct experience of a labour process empowers the participants and gives them confidence.

Frontier knowledge is, no doubt, important, technological innovations and interventions are required, but not as a new form of domination by the wise and the expert. Creative technology requires firm grounding in ethics and reciprocity in its relationship with the people concerned. Creativity is a joint accomplishment of the social practice of the people and the expertise of the expert. Each is modified and illumined by the other. Only thus we can cooperate in the task of "creating common wisdom to match our sciences."

There have been, are and will be people who are committed to take positive action on behalf of the poor. The problem is that quite a few of them believe that they must be the executors of transformation. Paulo Friere says it all when he says, "These adherents of the people's cause often fall into a

type of generosity as malefic as that of the oppressor."

In the process, at the cost of repression in China told me: "Poor peasants individually are like peach blossoms in March. They are beautiful to look at, they are red; but one hailstorm and they are lost. They get into debt and become hired labour. If we work together for the common good, each one of us prospers. The urge for belonging and for continuity by the people, who have been isolated and fragmented, takes on a new base in cooperative togetherness. Latent subjectivity of the poor which has been brutally objectified by the various deployment of downward directed power, emerges through human relatedness. Subjectivity enlarges itself through intersubjectivity and becomes the birthing ground for creative action."

The more plural such organizations and solidarity groups are, the better are the possibilities that voices of the sub-merged groups can be heard and their subjugated knowledge, resurrected. Autonomous social movements, each respecting the right of the other, do forge alliances or establish equivalences within a country and across countries. Moreover, the possibility to hold a limited and partial perspective and the need to defend a space for a more immediate relevant effort may be both relevant and pragmatic for the oppressed who are scattered all over a country. Our hope, and I quote President Vaclav Havel, in the deepest and most powerful sense lies in the social movements from below and not in what is happening above. It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually try new things even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now.

The Burden of Development

Our hope, and I quote President Vaclav Havel, in the deepest and most powerful sense lies in the social movements from below and not in what is happening above.



Do I Dare!
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

traditional resource, they have not been incorporated into the dominant culture nor its supporting institutional framework. Deprived on both counts, they are unable to cope with the challenges of modernization as a creative opportunity.

Demobilized and isolated as they are, their creativity can only be unleashed if they are empowered with both material and knowledge-resources — not as supplicants but as stakeholders. A well-known example is the Grameen Bank's experience with the poor women in Bangladesh countryside. Outside intervention in the form of microcredit helped catalyse them into solidarity groups. It also established the limits to such interventions and the delicate balance between outside interventions and the group's

side their communities.

This is why BRAC's conscientization initiatives are so important to galvanize the dormant social energy of the oppressed groups. As Dr Amartya Sen points out, the economic reforms of 1997 in China was preceded by long-standing expansion of educational opportunities for the broad masses. Thus when the transition to market-economy took place, the majority population took advantage of and benefited from it. In contrast, the privileged few of some countries can and do take control of the liberalization process and market access. In fact, control over knowledge and information by the few can create the upperclass of the 'wise' and the underclass of the 'ignorant.'

In that context, I may even

OPINION

BANGLADESH-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

An Ordinary Arithmetic Working Extra-ordinarily

by A R Shamsul Islam

PROBABLY for the first time in a span as long as of 27 years since the break-up of the erstwhile Pakistan a Prime Minister of Pakistan declared that those responsible for the 'tragedy of 1971 would be punished. Maybe it is a diplomatic exuberance but certainly not a diplomatic blunder the likes of which not only divided Pakistan but also contributed to the stalling of the creation of undivided India.

Many of those adjudged as the creators of India may be fittingly called the architects for breaking India. It is the Himalayan blunders that massively contributed to dividing the subcontinent into two countries as India and Pakistan. As for example, the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 which was accepted by both the Congress and Muslim League broke up when, Jawaharlal Nehru said that its provisions were not inviolable and could be amended. Jinnah felt that the Congress adamancy to deprive the Muslims of their rights in the upcoming independent India was never to go and he rejected the Plan. Nehru himself frittered away a golden chance for undivided India to emerge which he so much wished.

As the partition of India was, as observed by many, so much the product of mistakes, so was the break up of Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif rightly said, "had the mandate of 1970 election

been accepted the history of this region would have been different."

There is an ordinary arithmetic that works extra-ordinarily in both the worlds of Bangladesh and Pakistan. The arithmetic is like this! Bangladeshis are either anti-Indian or anti-Pakistani. Both the nations, in large portions, seem to be gleefully riding this simple (simplicistic?) arithmetic.

Is history against any rapprochement between Pakistan and Bangladesh? There are gross acrimony of feelings between the two countries. But history is not beyond what man can create, though sometimes history immensely influences the actions of man. The Treaty of Versailles following the First World War was loaded with massive injustices perpetrated upon Germany. Hitler rose to tear it apart to wrest back honour for the glory-crazed Germans. Was he a creation of history? Or was the subsequent history that followed his creation? Maybe Sheikh Mujib's War of Liberation was a demand of history. History might have exacted a retribution on the West Pakistani junta who heaped up injustices and exploitations on the Bengalees. It is true history directs man. But that there are men who also direct the courses of history is not untrue as well.

Pakistanis are shrewd

judges of human psychology. They could bring the East Bengal Muslims under the fold of Pakistan movement during the rule of the British. The East Bengal Muslims were religious but not communal. Pakistan movement was based on religion sometimes being stretched to a point that bordered on fanaticism and communalism. Yet the Muslims of East Bengal drew under its banner. How could it so happen? At that time East Bengal was under an economic exploitation. The exploiters were mostly zamindars. Incidentally they were mostly Hindus. The exploited were the peasants. Coincidentally they were mostly Muslims. The West Pakistani leaders could see through this plight of the society. They capitalised the situation nicely to achieving their political ambitions.

But later they committed a blunder in attempting to crush the East Bengalees by an army crackdown. Maybe they are superb at moulding the forces of history to bringing fleshy bargains for them but pathetically poor at restrainedly enjoying these.

Nawaz Sharif comes up with high common sense. He feels that without sorting out outstanding problems like Kashmir fruitful trade relations between India and Pakistan are not practicable. That might

have bridled his enthusiasm in the Dhaka Tripartite Business Summit. Maybe equally he felt that existing problems between Bangladesh and Pakistan needed to be properly addressed to forging any meaningful bilateral relations between the two countries. He seems sincere to improve relations with Bangladesh. He is widely assumed that when Khaleda Zia met him in Dhaka he advised her to go to the Parliament. He has already committed repatriation of 932 families of stranded Pakistanis in three months. In all these respects he is far advanced than his predecessor Benazir Bhutto who publicly ironed the South Asian countries except India rather in a naive manner.

Sheikh Hasina showed a pull to break away from the strings of the past to strike a re-decision with Pakistan. It is against that ordinary arithmetic of Pakistan-Bangladesh tangle. She deserves high credit.

History urges we should learn its lessons. History finds we do not learn. So goes — The greatest lesson of history is that its teachings are not learnt by anybody." Let us see in future Bangladesh-Pakistan relations which of the two — history's urge or history's finding — wins.

The writer is retired Headmaster, Govt. Mohila College, Pabna.

To the Editor...

PM at the graveyard

Sir, It was Eid day, and like many we had gone to the Bani graveyard. To our awe, the scene over there was a strange one. Scores of police had secured the outside boundary and were deterring the common people from even going close to the walls of the graveyard!

Later we learnt that the PM was supposed to come and visit the graves of her family members who were killed in '75. Very understandable, that as a normal human being, she should have a very special soft corner for her loved ones. But what I failed to comprehend was why she, though for only a hour or two, should try to stop other people from doing the same. For, all of us naturally feel the same way about our own loved ones.

We were unaware of the restrictions earlier and had parked our car to pray from outside the graveyard. But a sergeant on a motor bike raced towards us and literally shoos us from there from the middle of our 'munazat'!

If the leaders fail to perceive the emotions and feelings behind such basic instincts, I'm not sure how they will ever succeed in understanding the unhappiness and woes of the people.

A Citizen
Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka-1205

Awesome Eid

Exodus and influx

Sir, Every year on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr thousands of city dwellers leave Dhaka for their different home districts and villages to attend the festival with their near and dear ones. They are however beset with many problems, difficulties and risks due to mismanaged transportation system, ticket sale of bus, motor launch, railway, steamer and air at exorbitant prices and illegal ways.

We wonder why there is no safety and security of life and property while travelling, why traffic rules are violated and how some unscrupulous elements continue their unlawful activities unabated without any resistance and legal action by the law enforcing agencies? Also on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr thousands of poor and destitute men, women and children pour into Dhaka from near and far places for collecting fitra, zakat and alms. They face terrible problems and hardships with regard to their food, shelter, drinking water and sanitation.

We are surprised and shocked why the Ministry of LGED, DCC, Zakat Board or Relief and Rehabilitation Department have so far failed to provide the poor and the destitutes with basic necessities like

temporary shelter, drinking water and sanitary facilities on humanitarian ground.

We strongly feel that handling of heavy exodus and influx of people and taking care of travellers and destitutes in Dhaka during Eid-ul-Fitr need special attention, service and supervision by our government.

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka

Grappling for prayer

Sir, The national mosque Baitul Mokarram has long been holding four Eid congregational prayers to accommodate the thousands of devotees. This is done so to facilitate the Eid prayers to all. The Islamic Foundation was indeed very thoughtful to consider the four congregations to the advantages of the early risers, devotees near by, those far away and for the late risers as well. Unfortunately, a great disparity also prevails during the congregations — for instance, while a congregation is still on, devotees of the next batch starts entering inside dragging along in search of better place. This seriously disturbs those already inside!

We would request the Islamic foundation to keep one main congregational prayer for both the Eids around 8 O'clock in the

morning which should be to the convenient of all. Arrangements should also be made for putting up Shamiana outside the mosque.

Khawja Viqar Moktuddin
Purana Pallan, Dhaka

Will the poor reach the rich?

Sir, While watching the TV report telecast by BTV recently covering this year's Eid-ul-Fitr shopping, the viewers could very well imagine and assess the gap between the rich and the poor in our society. A reporter when asked a senior citizen who was seen buying old clothes from a street shop for his three out of five children — why the latter was not buying new clothes?

"Because I am poor", honestly replied the senior citizen. On the other hand, while visiting a modern shop, the reporter enquired the price of a gorgeous attire kept on display which according to the shop-attendant was stood at more than Taka 60,000. The attendant also informed that an attire costing about Taka 27,000 had already been sold! Can we, dear readers, think more seriously to find ways for reducing the existing rich-poor gap in our country.

Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar,
Dhaka-1207.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

The Safe Skies

THERE is good news from your airlines. They plan to use computers that screen passengers to determine which ones should have their baggage examined for explosives. The system, which is obviously fool-proof or they wouldn't have bought it, has profiles of what types of passengers are most likely to cause havoc on an airplane. This method of screening the flying public could be an invasion of personal rights, but anyone who has bought an airline ticket knows that the carriers' computers never make mistakes. (Joke)

In the past, whenever I was about to take a flight, I was asked to produce photographic identification (a driver's license or a library card). Then I was asked if I had packed my bags myself, and if they had been solely in my possession at all times since I left the house.

Obviously, I always replied in the affirmative. The last time I did this the thought occurred to me — suppose, God forbid, a person had a false driver's license and perjured himself when he said that he had packed his own bags and even claimed they were in his possession at all times?

Now I am saying that a terrorist would do such a thing, but let's suppose for argument's sake that he did. How would the security people know if he was lying?

The people manning the security gates will tell you it has never happened. "We depend on the hijacker's honour code," one told me. "If anyone says that he packed his own bags and we later found out that he didn't, we would bar him from ever going through a metal detector again."

"But suppose he tried to go through security with an atomic bomb-laden bag given to him by another person at the airport?" "We have specially trained dogs to sniff out people who haven't packed their own bags. Only last week we caught a man whose wife had packed his bag for him. He told us that he had done it. While there was nothing dangerous in these bags, we decided to teach him a lesson by tying him to a baggage conveyor belt so that he'd miss his plane."

"I would have to fly if you weren't protecting me. Do you ever come across anyone whose driver's license has expired?"

"Once in a while. You know it's a capital offense to try to use identification that is no longer valid. We caught a passenger only last week who couldn't produce his license because it had been confiscated. It turned out he owed \$1,200 in parking fines. We couldn't let him through because we had no idea who he was. We made him return to traffic court and bring a photo ID back with him."

The other part of airline security that bothers me is that some metal detectors will not let out a signal even if you are carrying a steel frying pan. Others will go off if you only have a safety pin stuck on your underwear. Why the discrepancy? There is no answer. My own hunch is that it's the airlines' way of keeping terrorists guessing which detector to pass through.

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"Lest we forget"

Sir: Accept my thanks for the item under the above caption in *The Daily Star* of 14 December, 1997 remembering some of our martyred intellectuals who made the supreme sacrifice for the sake of our freedom during the War of Liberation.

I am, however, deeply disappointed to note that the name and photograph of Dr. Fazlur Rahman Khan, Senior Lecturer, Department of Soil Science, University of Dhaka who was brutally murdered by the Pakistani Army in the early hours

of 26 March, 1971 at his residence in the university staff quarters together with his nephew, All Ahsan Khan (Kanchan) are missing from the published write up.

I am sending a photocopy of some postal stamps issued by PT & T Department in memory of the martyred intellectuals which includes one stamp with the name and photograph of Dr. Fazlur Rahman Khan. A grateful nation will always remember all our martyred intellectuals without any omission. Dr. Engr. Abdul Matin Moghbar, Dhaka

