

Shrimp's Second Life

Our frozen shrimps that at one point seemed ominously destined to rot and reek in our own yard at the cost of our economic health have again won back the permission to travel across the water. Thanks to European Union for withdrawing the suspension to import it had earlier slapped on our fish products due to poor preservation and processing standard.

While the government owes EU thanks for relenting its hard-line on the export of Bangladeshi food products, we take this occasion to laud the ministerial activism that was responsible for turning the course of events on its head. There is no denying that the local authorities have really done a good job particularly in view of the alarming spread of the 'rejection virus'.

Although the crisis has been managed, there is hardly any room for complacency. In fact, we are left with a pretty longish spell for vigilance over repair work. We have failed to standardise the industry in the EU stipulated time of three months. Only six out of forty farms have reportedly met the EU requirement. So the people concerned would do themselves a favour by remembering that it is more of grace than qualification that has stopped our cake from being dough this time.

Keeping in mind the time it takes to regain trust in international business and the dunking our image takes as a nation in every situation like this, we suggest the government seek some long term measures regarding the export industry. Let's face it. Somewhere in our business psyche there is this dangerous, myopic and suicidal tendency to hoodwink the partner. It is there. In order to nip this temptation in the bud, the government has to evolve a mechanism, a mechanism that will play the role of a watchdog over export quality round the year. This will save lot of this eleventh hour salvation cost and most importantly national image. Meanwhile the upgrading job must go on relentlessly. We call the relevant department of the government to liaise with the frozen food exporters more professionally so that this standardisation task gets completed in the shortest possible time. And for the future it should start thinking immediately to have a mechanism in place that would control the quality round the year.

Why Substitute Education?

The subject of a BUP round-table held on Wednesday and participated by education luminaries was 'National Education Policy: Technical and Higher Education'. But many were the participants who thought it more urgent to tack on madrasah education and draw the attention of the nation to the nature and relevance of such a system of education.

The society has undoubtedly a need for specialised institutions offering courses in things religious, philosophical-theoretical, theological and expert skill and knowledge of practice and preaching. But this cannot be allowed to develop parallelly to general education. It is not expected that madrasahs will turn out scientists and economists, weathermen and mathematicians, anthropologists and sociologists, historians and geographers. General education does all this and more — prepares the pupil with an urge to know and do and an inspiration to become a fuller man.

But madrasah has its social use so it must be there but not at the cost of what has come to be recognised all over the world, specially the advanced nations, as education. In the schools of Japan, in the universities of US, in the institutes of France, it is more or less the same thing they are offering. Religious education is there too but imparted in seminaries and nunneries. Convents run by missionaries of different churches are not designed exclusively to produce nuns.

Indeed, whence came this bizarre idea of throwing the education of a new nation into an either/or choice between education and theological studies? The process, it not stopped and reversed right now, alone will be enough to pressuring the nation to a state of ignorance and incompetence.

To supply religious ministers that we need — imams and muezzins, quaries and the like — madrasah education should always be there but with a very focused curriculum and syllabus. Those interested in studying Arabic language and literature or the Islamic arts and architecture or the history of Islam (currently available as standard in most colleges and universities — and not in madrasahs), must go to the general institutions.

Spotlight on ADP

The National Economic Council (NEC) meeting, presided over by the Prime Minister on Wednesday, sounded upbeat on ADP implementation. Project approval rate has also improved over that of the corresponding period in the last fiscal year. The implication is that ADP implementation for the next five months has got a head-start by virtue of the speeded-up approval mechanism. Last year the development project complication picture was far from satisfactory and, during the first quarter of the current fiscal year the score-card equally remained lack lustre. Relative to all that, the performance has improved during the last three months presumably because of the constant hammering of the Prime Minister at the missing coordination between ministries.

The way in which revenue collection is lagging behind the target, the ADP is destined to be pruned for dearth of counterpart financing of aided projects. Under the circumstances, our strategy should be to concentrate on a shortened, compact list of projects and deliver on them flawlessly and conclusively. In the present aid climate, carry-over projects mean risking long-term deadlock, if not outright cancellation. This is because of the growing stringency about escalated costs applied by the donor community and multilateral financial institutions.

In ensuring that all goes well, the prime minister's directive to the officials that they simplify the processes of land requisition, procurement, appointment of contractors and fund releasing system must be heeded by them.

Delving into Recent Devaluation

The ultimate answer to our economic malaise lies elsewhere. The fragile financial sector with huge loan defaults, the most inefficient public sector units, irrational labour movements, socio-political environment inimical to investment — all tend to induce our growth and development.

THE latest devaluation of Taka sparked off sharp reactions from both sides of the aisle. As we all know, lowering the value of local currency (i.e. increase in the value of foreign currency or a rise in the exchange rate) is neither a new nor a novice device to jack up exports and trickle imports. The net outcome would depend on respective elasticities of demand and supply. Since independence, successive regimes in Bangladesh resorted to this important policy instrument, with varying degrees and frequencies, to ease the pressure on the foreign exchange market. Since the time Bangladesh opted for a managed float system, devaluation tends to visit us *albeit* frequently. The number of times our currency was devalued during BNP and Awami League regimes would drive home its indispensability as a tool to put foreign exchange market on an even keel. Why to then, horridness being unearthed by certain quarters in the event of the latest devaluation? Why is then this hue and cry?

Newspaper reports and remarks from concerned circles seem to be taken aback by the "sudden" and "sizeable" dose of devaluation. Suddenness is the most important attribute of a devaluation scheme to work worthily. Devaluation marks its presence — anywhere in the world — without earlier notice to avert any crisis that could spring from speculative behaviour. For example, a declared devaluation could cause

massive capital flight or create a panic in the market to hoard foreign currencies. So, an act that invariably has to be sudden, when occurs, should not sadden us. Was the recent devaluation "sizeable" or of big margin? Reportedly, the value of Taka against the dollar has been slashed by 85 paisa or by 1.9 per cent. Given that our competitor neighbouring countries (e.g. India, Pakistan) have already devalued their respective currencies by even a bigger margin, a mere two per cent devaluation should not sound high enough. Again, Indonesia — a competitor of Bangladesh in RMG exports — has already witnessed an almost 50 per cent devaluation to knock out its rivals in the international market. The question is not high or low dose, but the appropriate dose of devaluation to make the misaligned currency aligned to uphold the competitive edge in the international market.

The number of time devaluation has been resorted to during any particular regime (be it BNP's or Awami League's) should not be cited as instance of economic mismanagement and hence of major concern. This is, to us, utterly a useless exercise and a naive notion. Unfortunately, an ex-finance minister of Bangladesh, under whose stewardship the country faced a

number of devaluations, expressed his indignation over repeated devaluations to mould public opinion against such action. The basic premise should clearly be understood and unadorned: *Bangladesh is committed to continuous exchange rate adjustment.* Since we tend to pursue a managed float system, we come across occasional doses of devaluation. Had we pursued a freely floating system of exchange rate management

raised by the critics of the recent devaluation is whether Bangladesh would reap substantial gains (or gain at all) from such "sudden" and "sizeable" devaluation — on the plea that (a) there is little or no exportable surplus that Bangladesh could pour in the international foreign exchanges and (b) devaluation would cause prices of imported commodities, especially of industrial in-

reap home substantial benefits from the international market. Our present policy should be defensive in spirit and in action. We should tighten our seat belts so that landing and take off in international financial arena do not jerk us adversely. Our major concern should be to impart confidence with which to manage the exchange rate without major crisis. In that sense, the exchange rate policy so far espoused and orchestrated seem to have been successful as no major crisis SO FAR could hit our economy despite the whirlwind of exotic behaviour in the international financial market. As to argument (b) one cannot but be in agreement that there could be certain inflating effects in the economy. If devaluation tends to help us in terms of export earnings and remittances, the costs of the increased pains from additional inflation should be insignificant. (And, after all, we need to incur some costs of inflation to enjoy some benefits through spurring growth of the economy.)

While all said and done, we tend to share the view that exchange rate adjustment is not THE PANACEA for augmenting exports and downsizing imports. It is a short term intervention. As told earlier, the sum of the elasticities of demand for exports and that of

imports would determine the fate. Nor can we expect an impact of devaluation within 24 hrs or few weeks. The famous "J" wave tends to operate in the case of devaluation where the current account balance might deteriorate (instead of improving) to improve at a later stage say, after some months when economic agents will have successfully responded to the call of the devaluation. In the meantime, we should cast our sharp eyes on the movements of the real effective exchange rate (REER) so that changes in the basic parameters in our country and in other countries with which we trade are duly taken into cognizance. How can you benefit from a bush fire? Just maintain that year house is not affected by the ravage. Maintain status quo at the worst.

And lastly, the impacts of the imported inflation would also depend on supplementary policy instruments that a scheme of devaluation generally backed by.

The ultimate answer to our economic malaise lies elsewhere. The fragile financial sector with huge loan defaults, the most inefficient public sector units, irrational labour movements, socio-political environment inimical to investment — all tend to induce our growth and development. So long these are not properly addressed, the chances of having the boat rocked by international impacts of recent origin loom large. So, internal economic management should constitute the prime concern.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

system, we could probably have to swallow 365 devaluations in 365 days of the year! The exchange rate is related to the inflationary pressures built in at home and abroad. Since inflation appears to change most frequently, the resultant variation in the real exchange rate calls for continuous adjustment, *ipso facto*. Therefore, the degree of devaluation stands as a function of the inflationary situation in our country vis a vis our trading partner countries.

Another moot concern

puts, to rise to add to inflation. As to the first concern, we would like to present an old Bengalee saying: *Hati ghora galo tai bhera bole koto jolla* (where elephants and horses drown, the lamb measures the depth of water). While the whole world — especially the east and southeast Asian countries find their boats rocking with the financial turmoil gripping these economies, when even developed countries are scared over the global financial hazards, a country like Bangladesh can hardly relish to

The Other Echoes in the Garden...

What matters in my view is that every once in a while, I come across people who strike me as somewhat scared of facing reality, even as I also come across people who are open-minded, and secure and self-confident. Like this wonderful woman with shining eyes, who laughs with me, who laughs at me. At her own foibles, at mine, at the world around us. To laugh is to learn, I guess. She is serious as she tells me that I, too, must learn.

her otherwise warm, full lips tightly together, is the assumption I make that I am like any other settled individual in this land. That I can pursue my own profession, write, not a good one, but a writer all the same! and expect fairness of spirit, if not also of action.

"You're an outsider. Don't you get it?" a concerned citizen explains. "Doesn't matter what you say, it's who you are that matters!"

It's one thing to have self-confidence, she explains, but when you assume that you can waltz back into Bangladesh and start expressing your views, start commenting on various aspects of everyday life, in short start behaving as though you, too, belong — well, surprise, surprise. It isn't that simple. Don't get ideas above your station; remember who you are. If you have been out of this country for several years, you are not only different — you are stereotyped as being different. You're an outsider.

"Reckless. I think you're being quite reckless, writing all that stuff!" says another concerned citizen to me. Others add to it, suggesting in subtle and not-so-subtle terms where my allegiances ought to lie (to my own socio-economic class, for a start), and how I ought to (not) express myself. Or leave.

Or... what? That's when it comes to me, this somewhat wild idea — there ought to be a law against

people like me. And for a few moments, I imagine what it would be like... if we did pass a new law, enforcing controls on people who have not lived in Bangladesh for several years, and who not only come back looking as though they have done all right, but actually have the gumption to criticise our ways. These smart types, these Miss-Know-It-Alls, we'll show them what coming home

is all about, just wait and see. It could be done, you know. We'd have to give the new law a name and, though lots of options come to mind, the one I like best is the Don't Joke About Us. We're Fragile People Act of 1998. That name is comprehensive, yet simple and direct. It just about sums it all up, I think.

Naturally, once we had the name under our belt, we would have to define the crime itself. What exactly would constitute a crime under the Don't Joke About Us. We're Fragile People Act of 1998? Lots of acts, words and even inferences could get swept into the net, as it were, so we would have to be selective. And eventually, as far as I can

predict, it would all depend on who committed the crime, because that after all would be the purpose of the Act — to penalise a certain stereotypical person, or an "outsider" if they dared to step out of line.

An important detail which we would have to deal with, would be punishment. If someone were found guilty under this Act, what on earth would we do with them. The sensible thing

to do, perhaps, (if the Act itself might have any sensible connotations) would be to try and understand the root problem; prevention being the better part of the cure. Which means, if people did fall into this category, it would be prudent to engage in a dialogue with them.

But experience tells me this would not be an option. The kind of thinking which suggests that there ought to be a law against people like me, also suggests there ought to be one way to solve it. Shut 'em up; or send them out. Tell them to leave. So we don't hear about them. We don't know about them. End of story. End of problem.

That last option, needless to

say, appears to be the most extreme of measures and also surprisingly, quite tempting for the immigrant as well. Easy come, easy go. Secondary migration, the experts say, accounts for more than half of the world's migrant population. Which means that once you start moving, you keep moving. Back and forth, or round and round, physically or mentally or intellectually — it doesn't matter.

What matters in my view is that every once in a while, I come across people who strike me as somewhat unsure of themselves, even as I also come across people who are open-minded, and secure and self-confident. Like this wonderful woman with shining eyes, who laughs with me, who laughs at me. At her own foibles, at mine, at the world around us. To laugh is to learn, I guess. She is serious as she tells me that I, too, must learn.

Which is why, eventually, I abandon my wild idea. I don't think there ought to be a law against it. I don't think the Don't Joke About Us, We're Fragile People Act of 1998, is a good idea. It is a desperate idea. It fails to recognise the human imagination. It also fails to recognise reality.

Okay, so some people more obviously appear to be in motion. They are immigrants. They are hybrid, a bit of this and a bit of that. (As that guru of cultural origins, Homi Bhabha

puts it, they dwell in the tiny, overlapping chinks between cultures). But aren't we all in motion, one way or another...? Aren't we all energetic, creative, and even hybrid in some sort of way? Don't we all display some sort of hybrid counter-energy to whatever happens around us? Surely, there is more we have in common with each other, than we have not in common with each other... In the end, we have all got to learn from each other.

As the other guru of cultural origins, the remarkable Edward Said puts it, "No one today is any one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, White, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities."

Simple, solid stuff. That's why I like it. In other words, human history is about the connection between things, not about the things which separate us.

In the end, immigrant or outsider, long-time resident or newcomer, Eliot's advice can work for all of us. He says we have all simply got to listen. Reality consists of the "other echoes" (that) inhabit the garden. In my case — and yours too — our particular garden happens to be Bangladesh. I'm listening. Are you.

Almas Zakiuddin



Coming Home...

Almas Zakiuddin

To the Editor...

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

JS boycott

Sir, BNP the largest opposition party in Bangladesh, has been boycotting the JS sessions since 30 August last year on issues like not allowing them sufficient time to speak in the House, 'partisan attitude' of the speaker, belittling them in public mind through the electronic media etc. whether their grievances are justified or not, continued boycott of the sessions is definitely not supported by majority of the people. Just as the case was when AL did the same while in opposition.

But why is Sheikh Hasina now issuing occasional appeals to the opposition to come to Sangsad and discuss 'all issues' when she did not pay heed to similar appeals while in opposition? I am amused to read newspaper reports that Sheikh Hasina 'feels surprised' that the opposition is boycotting JS sessions 'without any issue'. Is it really so? However my question is: how long will this continue, or how to bring to an end this 'tit for tat' concept?

Prof K A Latif
Dhaka.

"Cement"

Sir, May I respond to the letter with the above heading appearing on January 25, 1998. The writer's suggestion, if heeded to will do damage to our cement industry. It will also give permanency to a negative culture prevailing in our industrial sphere. Instead we should analyse why the cost of products in our manufacturing units remain high in comparison with those elsewhere. We should remedy the cause not the effects. There may be many reasons for the high cost of production, some beyond the control of the entrepreneurs. Definitely most are not industries born with a heavy burden of over-invoicing

(artificial project cost and high loan capital), improper planning, conceived with wishful presumptions etc., will forever remain problem (sick?) projects. But many industries can be saved by experienced and educated professionals.

The concept of quality control management as practiced in industries all over the world should get a foothold in our country also. Not only quality, cost is also controlled when an organisation goes through a QC exercise. National fiscal policy also affects the economy of an industrial unit. Cement is sold at IRs 120-150 per bag in India, if my information is correct. It may be little higher when produced in our country with imported clinker, definitely not double, if high tariff on raw material, unreasonable tax structure etc., are responsible for such difference those should be removed.

But the owners should not be given scope for more profiteering by eliminating competition. Rampant practice of toll collection is also an element for cost escalation. Should we go for an easy way out and let the real ailments kept hidden and growing?

M.A. Haq
Dhaka 1205

Of colonels and expensive toys

Sir, Congratulations to Dr Shahdeen Malik for his well-researched piece "Can We Peep into the Shopping Bag?". His courage in writing this piece is particularly praiseworthy. Living in Dhaka and daring to criticise the value of lavish defence expenditures in a Third World country, Dr. Malik may soon receive midnight visits from the powers that be. Let us hope that those intimidatory efforts

do not blunt the power of his pen.

In his introduction, Dr. Malik writes of a novel called "No One Writes to the Colonel...". The book in question is actually a collection of short stories by Nobel Prize winning novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. "No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories" (El Coronel No Tiene Quien Le Escriba in Spanish) (Harper Collins, 1979). Coming from a rich tradition of Latin American literature (3 other such writers have received the Nobel Prize: Gabriel Mistral-1945, Miguel Angel Asturias-1967, Pablo Neruda-1971). Marquez's "magic-realist" fiction has often focused on dictators and corruption in the Americas. His "The Autumn of the Patriarch" was a portrait of a Latin American dictator and his impact on the people he tyrannises.

Marquez based his portrait on a composite of three leaders known for their cruelty and corruption: Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, Marcos Perez Jimenez of Venezuela and Anastasio Somoza Garcia of Nicaragua. Other similar books by him include the non-fiction "Chronicle of a Death in the House of General Pinochet". Library Journal once wrote about his books, "The characters are all too human, alternately humorous and tragic." Perhaps the last word best characterises Bangladesh's present plight with the runaway military budgets.

Naem Mohalemen
New York, USA

"Be Stern"

Sir, I cannot but quote some two lines from the above-captioned editorial published in The Daily Star on 13.1.98 to express my feelings about the past political act of previous opposition the present government sabotaging and destroying a purely democratically elected government.

"We must not forget that it was her party (PM's party-AL) that blatantly used the government servants for its own political goal towards the fag end of

BNP rule. She later rewarded those who took active part in that process."

Now, let our present PM realise how fierce the fire is!

Nur Hossain
151, Bangshal Road, Dhaka-1100.

"EPZ at Sylhet"

Sir, It refers to Mr Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury's letter appearing on January 17, 1998. Being a newly-created division in Bangladesh, Sylhet is one of the most potential distribution and commercial centre in the country. A large amount of foreign exchange is being deposited in the national exchequer by people of Sylhet living abroad in the form of remittance and other mode of investment. Many of them whom I met in my recent trip to UK and USA are keen to invest in the new division. Sylhet is well connected with Dhaka by road, rail and air and with Chittagong by road and rail. Road link will be upgraded if Ashugonj Bridge is constructed while air link with Chittagong is in the offing. This division having all facilities for trade and business and favourable investment criteria like Dhaka and Chittagong.

The government, recently has promulgated an ordinance of setting up of a private EPZ for local and expatriate investors. The people of Sylhet can take the maximum benefit out of this ordinance for setting up a private EPZ at Sylhet region. As a transport planner, I think if an Inland Container Depot (ICD) is set up at Srimangal, hub point of Sylhet in parallel with a private EPZ in the same point it would be rather economically and financially viable proposition for the investors of Sylhet region. The greatest economic benefit out of an ICD at Srimangal is the easy transportation of entire tea export of Sylhet valley where a block train can be introduced for transporting container to and from Chittagong port with a little custom formalities. Conversely the primary products of manufacturing units to set up an EPZ will easily be transported from Chittagong port to EPZ area with minimal cost of handling. Thus the objective of setting up

ICD as well as EPZ would be achieved to a great extent yielding huge revenue to the exchequer. To attract foreign investment of the region it would be worthwhile to set up an EPZ as well as ICD at Srimangal where easy access to rail, road and air is available. But nobody seems to pay attention to such an economic zone.

May I therefore request the people of Sylhet home and abroad to explore the possibility of setting up ICD as well as EPZ at Srimangal with priority to turn the new division into a special economic zone.

Hadi Hossain Babul
Chief, Planning,
Chittagong Port Authority,
Chittagong

Of Ph. Ds

Sir, The attention of the Chittagong University authority has been drawn to the editorial titled "Now Spurious Ph.Ds." which was published on January 10, 1998 — the real picture is depicted below:

That the University of Chittagong wrote a letter vide memo no 1593/p400/genl dt March 18, 1985 to His Excellency the High Commissioner of India based in Dhaka, to let the University of Chittagong know about the authenticity of D.Sc. as well as Ph.D degree conferred on certain scholars of the different universities of Bangladesh by the Vishwa Unnayan Sangshad situated at the Pityambar Bhavan of West Bengal, India and in an interim reply vide memo no Dace/End/32/3/85 dt 1st April 1985 to the same, the Education Advisor of the High Commissioner advised us that the office concerned of the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka, to let the matter and inform us about their findings later on. But, nothing so far has been received from them about the fact. On the other hand, in a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Vice-Chancellors of the Universities of Bangladesh held at the Bangladesh University Grants Commission on 17.11.1982 it was decided, ".....recognition to the Degrees obtained from such institutions bears no justification."

In this connection, it is worthwhile to mention that at present, no teacher of this university uses any such degree.

Besides, letters were also written to the Embassy of the former Soviet Union and universities concerned of the USSR when some teachers of this university were alleged to have obtained Ph.D from some of the universities of the then USSR. But no reply has so far been received from their end. It will not be out of place here to mention that there are teachers on employment at other universities of Bangladesh who had obtained Ph.D from the former USSR.

For your kind information, we would like to add that the University of Chittagong takes disciplinary action against any teacher/officer/employee whenever any specific charge is farmed against them after proper enquiry.

Dr M Shafiqul Alam
Deputy Registrar (Information)
Chittagong University, Chittagong.

Mosquitoes and rickshaws

Sir, Thousands of colourful rickshaws swarm, twist, turn and move erratically carrying the city dwellers from one place to another place throughout the day. And at night millions of black skinned mosquito mistresses enter into the houses of the people dancing and singing, and sucking the blood of men, women and children indiscriminately.

Before and after the election and now in office the present Mayor of DCC including many other good promises also vowed to eradicate the illegal rickshaws, eliminate the dreadful mosquitoes and to rehabilitate the hawkers and vendors. But it appears that the Mayor is more interested in political and un-economic activities than civic amenities and facilities to the people. Road traffic and cleaning of the garbage from the roads and streets have turned worse.

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street,
Ward, Dhaka-1203