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**Agricultural Rehab**

Rehabilitating the country's flood-ravaged agriculture sector is definitely a big challenge ahead of us. The other day Finance Minister apprised the donors of the situation revealing a likely food shortage of 9.5 lakh MT. With flood showing no signs of an abatement quickly enough, the donors' commonsensical response about redirecting funds from some of the other projects under consideration must have been a great relief for a worried S A M S Kibria. The donors' assistance notwithstanding, it is still a colossal challenge for the government. Crops worth Taka 700 crore on four lakh hectares have already been damaged. Alarmingly but not unexpectedly the worst affected has been rice. Although Aush, the summer rice, has borne the brunt of the flood most, other varieties like Aman would not really escape the scourge given that it might rain up to mid-September. In fact, apart from jute which went relatively unscathed no other agricultural produce has survived the seemingly relentless onslaught of this year's flood.

In order to revive this vast dominion of destruction government needs to have a comprehensive agriculture rehabilitation programme. It has already taken up a Taka eight crore 12 lakh recovery programme. Marginal and small farmers are to be helped in cultivating transplanted Aman, Boro rice, wheat, vegetables and pulses.

But government must remain wide awake to the fact that its distribution policy holds key to the successful recuperation bid in the agriculture sector. We learn Thana level committees led by MPs and district level committees with local ministers will supervise and monitor the programme. Inefficiency in ensuring irrigation, distribution of seeds, fertilisers will jeopardise the whole recovery process. This has to be guarded against at any cost. It will be a good idea for the authorities to stick to the course of traditional practice in this respect — involving the community leaders regardless of their party affiliations to streamline the distribution system. The bottomline is the authorities would do well to enter the recovery operations only after having thoroughly checked on the logistics position. Highest state of preparedness has to be mentioned to make sure footsteps of a famine heard when the waters recede and the trail of devastation appears with all its severity.

**Push-back Mentality**

The unfortunate refrain from across the border regarding the so-called illegal Bangladeshi immigrants shows no sign of abatement. Before we could digest an earlier news about the West Bengal government having termed 17 as Bangladeshis amongst the 300 recently expelled by the Maharashtra government from Mumbai comes another shocker — quite a bolt from the blue. A news emanates from the friendly neighbouring state of West Bengal that some 10 lakh Bangladeshis have today illegally taken residence there.

Although a push-back threat has not been held out to us in specific terms, the thought that the word 'deportation' has been uttered a few times there is rather hurtful to our sensibilities. Little surprise, this bogey in India has led to a focused inter-ministerial meeting on the subject in Dhaka. And we are entirely in agreement with the statement issued by our foreign office spokesman: who said, "Push-back is not a legal procedure; and if they suspect anybody as Bangladeshi they have to follow internationally accepted norms and procedures for repatriation." Given India's vast diplomatic experience no one expects her to be unilateral in such a sensitive matter.

The stark fact is all these statistical exercises are being undertaken and hyped since the BJP's induction into power as a major partner in the ruling coalition government of India. It has otherwise professed friendship to Bangladesh; but how that noble objective is going to be fulfilled when an unnecessary pressure is being put on the Bangladesh government by whipping up a 'deportation' frenzy in India? We ask, whose interest is being served by all this? Certainly Indo-Bangla relationship wouldn't benefit from it.

**Electronic Commerce**

This is essentially the age of Internet. From simple personal communication to huge corporate deal there is hardly anything that this super duper global electronic communication club has not facilitated as nothing before. It is not only fast, but so cheap as well. Bangladesh is no stranger to it. But unfortunately its commercial interest has not been served by this marvel in the telecommunications sector in the way it should have been.

Pierre Landell Mills, the country director of the World Bank reminded of this appalling reality while speaking in a workshop Thursday last. There is no doubt Internet will be a determining factor in the global trade order of the new millennium. A lot depends on Bangladesh's chances of making any headway in the world business on whether it can make optimal use of its access to the electronic communication network. In fact, Bangladesh, as Mr. Mills pointed out, can do a world of good to its power of wooing foreign investors by using the Net to highlight its strength like cheap labour. It is difficult to overestimate the choice. Problems in the telecommunications field have always come to serve as a downer to the entrepreneurial enthusiasm in this country. Internet should assist in a big way to offset that problem. It is good to know that the government is alive to its role in removing the hindrances in this area. But there is no room for mistaking it as a one-off exercise. It is a matter of constant vigil, a matter of being relentlessly connected with the process of evolution of the information technology as the "Millennium Bug" would suggest. It takes almost no time to switch from one mode of technology to the other. The challenge is worth taking up.

As my column comes out today, my daughter is out being winging her way to her college in the States. Thanks to e-mail, our dialogue will continue, but sometimes we would like to hear her voice. There, we have to be careful. The international tariff of BTB is rather steep. In fact, rate structure in Bangladesh has involved cross-subsidization of local service by international and long-distance segments. An international call to UK costs (\$ 1.50 per minute). It is six times higher than a call originating in the UK.

But there is hope. The other day I went to the opening of an on-line Internet service. There, I called a number in US through the Internet and the cost per minute was 10 cents. The once-for-all capital cost for an user is just the headset for listening to the other side.

One can even have conference calls with very few accessories, beyond the personal computer itself. But my personal difficulties and future hopes aside, the current international tariff rates impede Bangladesh's participation in the global marketplace.

Also, both the quantity and quality of telecommunications facilities are critical for speeding up exports and attracting foreign investment.

Let us look at the state of the art in this sector in Bangladesh today. There is a yawning gap between demand and availability. Ninety-two per cent, of an installed capacity of 321,000 lines are in service. The telephone density is 0.26 lines per 100 people compared to 2.5 in Thailand, 2.1 in Pakistan, 1.0 in both India and Sri Lanka and 0.5 in Nepal.

In Bangladesh, one may have to wait for ten years for a new connection. As for quality of service the less said the better. According to a report two out of ten local calls are completed. Annual average complaint rate is 50 for every 100 lines. Again, unless one has strong connections with the up-

per echelons in authority any complain is a waste of time and energy. And what about the installation charge for a new line? It costs \$450 compared to \$ 60 in India and \$ 99 in Pakistan.

Another dismal feature of our telecommunications network is its overwhelmingly urban character. More than 75 per cent of our people live in the countryside. But they are poor and powerless. Who cares if they remain isolated from the centres of power? Grameen phone does care and the government's encouragement to the introduction of radio-based cellular telephone networks must be applauded. This measure of bringing in private operators has already ushered in an element of competition. They have to vie for market share to remain profitable.

What are the future needs if telecommunications sub-sector if it is to support a 7-8 per cent annual GDP growth-rate? I go back to my main source of this write-up, namely, *Bangladesh 2020: A Long Run Perspective Study*. Here, my quote is verbatim.

At the end of this century, the total requirements of telephones (assuming annual average growth rate of GDP of 6.0 per cent) is nearly 1.5 million. Currently, there are 500,000 telephones in the country (BTB + Private). Planned target of BTB is about 600,000 telephones by 1997 and 900,000 by 2000. With private operators providing another 100,000 line units in 2000, there will still be unmet demand of nearly 500,000. Even this expansion in private provision of telephones will greatly depend on BTB's ability to provide inter-connectivity. With one million telephones by 2000, telephone penetration will still be less than 10 per 1000 population. — still



amongst the lowest in the world.

The table gives the minimum projections for telephone penetration per 1000 population. The high growth scenario requires the placement of over eight million lines by 2020. Either way, it is important that supporting infrastructure like adequate number of circuits and long distance channels be provided alongside for effective operation of access lines.

**Table: Projection of ALIS/1000 population**

Year	Conservative ALIS	No. of Lines required	High growth ALIS	No. of Lines required
1997	5.7	700,000	5.7	700,000
2000	10	1,200,000	15	1,837,500
2010	15	2,160,000	25	3,150,000
2020	25	4,125,000	50	8,250,000

The challenge is daunting. Can it be met? As an unabashed optimist, my answers is yes. Now that the wind of democracy is prevailing in Bangladesh, I fail to understand why basic telecommunications facility as a human right cannot be recognized and advanced by a people's government. The first and most essential transition that has to be made is the transition from monopoly to market.

In the past, both in the developed and developing countries the name of the game was state monopoly. The rationale has been the massive start up investment cost for wiring millions of consumers and scores of cities and maintaining the same. Comparative advantage

of economy of scale was invoked. But with the advent of digital and cellular technology that rationale is no longer valid. Being small has little disadvantage in cost while competition brings about major improvements in management efficiency and consumer services. So in country after country we have seen dismantling of state-monopolies of private enterprise complement-

ing public sector endeavours and where appropriate replacing them. Again, I go back to my source-material *Bangladesh 2020* and I echo the assertion there:

Bangladesh must not lag behind in adapting to new technology by creating a facilitating environment where private operators can step in to meet the growing demands for cellular phones and myriad other value added activities. It also calls for investing telecom infrastructure: digital systems, fiber-optic cables and adequate number of channels for international communications. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has been by

passed by two important links that will significantly reduce costs and improve quality of international telephone traffic: (a) the \$2 billion 2 x 5 Gbps Fiberoptic Line Around the Globe (FLAG), to be commissioned in September 1997, and (b) \$1.2 billion 2 x 10 Gbps SeaMeWe 3, due for commissioning in December 1998. This could turn out to be a serious setback for future international communication.

From Bangladesh, affecting our export capabilities when competing countries like India are on the link. An appropriate future strategy for Bangladesh would be to involve its private sector in making costly investment in telecommunications infrastructure on BOO/BOT basis. Otherwise, our exporters will be at a disadvantage, since it will cost them more to connect potential buyers in the global marketplace.

Our government has already embraced some aspects of institutional reforms in the case of cellular phones. It is urgent now that Bangladesh Telephone and Telegraph Board (BTB) is converted into an autonomous organization run on a fully commercial basis, while to increase network size and efficiency certain functions are contracted out to private operators. This has been done in Thailand.

The eventual goal, however, will have to be corporatization and privatization of BTB, "so that it gains the capacity as a progressive organization to meet the immediate challenges in the sector and, as competition works to meet the long-term challenges of a fast-growing Bangladesh. Also, experiences from other countries, particularly where telephone penetration is low, point to certain advantages of early entrance of new players, operating

on equal terms with the incumbent state owned organization. They can provide more telephone lines, spur better performance from BTB and reduce the inordinate burden of regulations. It must be mentioned here that the new players in the market need access to the network.

In that context, rough and ready norms for revenue sharing between different components of the network can be adopted. The government has recently launched an effort to attract foreign investment. There is no shortage of international interest. If the state provides the appropriate framework, also bold steps need to be taken to fully opening the field to private investors and operators.

Telecommunications scenario is changing fast all over the world. Spectacular advances in telecommunications and computer technology are forcing governments to change. We cannot lag behind. The World Telecommunications Development Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina in March 1994 cited five key principles for development of the sector, namely private investment, competition, a flexible regulatory framework, open access, and universal service.

The objectives for such principles will be to increase the sectoral efficiency and service quality, creation of funds for expansion, meeting the demands for new technology, provide necessary infrastructure support for the development of entire economy through the formation of a National Information Infrastructure and to cooperate with all the countries of the world in the creation of a Global Information Infrastructure.

Let us not forget, the information super highway is already panning us by. Shall we deprive our own children, our flesh of flesh and bone of bones, a place in the sun?

I have borrowed extensively from the relevant section of the document, *Bangladesh 2020: A Long Term Perspective Study*.

**To the Editor...**

**Our banking image abroad**

Sir, It was sad to read about the forthcoming closing of the Sonali Bank branches in England, as decided by the Bank of England. The high powered delegation from Dhaka could not cut much ice, as per press reports.

Our banking sector is in shambles at home, and now we learn that the virus has been exported abroad, enhancing the negative image, backed by the loan-defaulter culture for years together. It will be a tough undertaking by our Ministry of Finance to clean the administration and set into motion a credible culture of reforms. The images in other sectors is none too good the stock exchange, bureaucracy, police, and the tagged judiciary.

Where do we start, and where do we end up, and when? Time and tide wait for none. For 27 years we have been patching a muddy waters. We need a large number of specialists who are experts in cleaning systems. The foreign consultants can assist, but cannot get the feel (gut feeling) of the local subtle practices, and the local authority need a lot of whole-hearted backing to remove the debris, as other professions are involved, directly, indirectly, honestly, or otherwise.

The Ministry of Finance cannot work in isolation. It will need the backing of the whole nation.

How?  
Alif Zabr  
Dhaka

**Israel's decision to expand Jerusalem**

Sir, The recent decision taken by Israel to expand the boundary of Jerusalem will surely aggravate the present tense situation in that region. As the status of the city of Jerusalem is yet to be determined, there is no question of expanding its territory. It will be violation of the Oslo agreement. To expand the city means importing more Jew from the West and creating trouble in the region. Since the inception of the problem, Israel has been behaving like a recalcitrant and creating new problems one after another.

It is an open secret that there is certainly a hidden power that is backing Israel; otherwise Israel could never show such an obstinate attitude towards the international community and dare not break the international law so often. The Muslim world should not depend on the western powers regarding this issue, rather they should tackle the situation by themselves.

Mahmudul Hasan  
Dhaka University

**Water-purifying tablet: Not for free**

Sir, While almost the whole country is under the grip of flood, millions of people are marooned and the health authority is rightly advising the people to use drinking water with water purifying tablet.

We regret to say that water-purifying tablet is hardly available in the market, in the medical shops and drug stores.

We would like to request the authorities concerned for free distribution of water purifying tablets among the flood-affected people and also to ensure availability of plenty of water-purifying tablets like OR saline

in ordinary shops and medical stores at reasonable price throughout the country.

O. H. Kabir  
Dhaka-1203

**PM's linguistic skill**

Sir, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave an interview to Star TV which was telecast by Star Plus on the 8th of August, titled 'Ek Din Ek Jeevan'.

The PM is said to have put a pre-condition in his response to questions she will reply in Bangla so that her people understood what she said. It was an unpleasant surprise to find the PM talk in Hindi from time to time, may be to show her linguistic skill in that language. How many of our, I mean her, people really understood what she said? Was it not proper for her to speak in pure Bangla during the whole interview without sprinkling it with a language not our own if the intention was for the common people of this country to follow?

It was interesting to note that the interviewing lady from a Hindi-speaking country avoided putting questions in Hindi.

Monica Parveen  
New DOHS  
Dhaka-1212

**Bangladesh Police Association**

Sir, Associations of factory workers, transport workers, students, garment workers and businessmen are understandable, but not police.

What is this Bangladesh Police Association with the IGP as its president? Why should there be at all an 'ASSOCIATION' of serving people in a disciplined uniformed force, when there is laid down rules and procedures of conduct? Would anybody accept an 'Association' of similar nature in BDR or defence forces?

How such redundant 'associations' cause confusion and often harm was seen in the horrifying actions of a leading bureaucrat hacking at the root of good order and discipline who became a 'mancha-pasand'.

Babul Mia  
House 26-F, Rd-11  
Banani, Dhaka

**To protect the relics**

Sir, The editorial titled "To Protect The Relics" in the DS on 19 July, 1998 was very timely indeed. For lack of care and interest in preserving the relics, what is left would soon perish from our vision and conservation, which is a matter of great regret.



In the West the school children are taught the values of conservation through guided tours and expeditions to the

important places of historical significance for inculcating the spirit of national pride and the sense of patriotism.

Unfortunately in our country, history lessons are not properly taught to the students for which they tend to be indifferent to the old values.

In many parts of our country historical relics of value are being smuggled out tarnishing the glorious past of our country. It is now high time for the government to take immediate steps to formulate a policy to preserve the relics for the noble cause of national pride.

Abul Ashraf Noor  
Uttara, Dhaka.

**Transport accessibility and women**

Sir, A woman and her young daughter, passengers in a DC-10 taking off from Dhaka to London and another woman with her young son in a rickshaw negotiating the congested streets of Dhaka would seem to have little in common but both are fulfilling a basic demand in transport. These random patterns of personal movements reflect the influences of mobility and accessibility levels. The real meaning of mobility or true goal of transport is access. Mobility levels and constraints upon the extent to which particular journeys are made depend upon factors such as financial resources and upon the range of transport facilities that are available.

There is often a mistaken assumption by planners that men and women have equal power and control over resources. It is also assumed that a household consists of a male breadwinner and a woman homemaker, when in reality 10-12 per cent of the households in Bangladesh are headed by women. The productive work that women do as earners and in community management such as organising the provision of basic services and education are also underestimated. For all these reasons, women's requirements are frequently ignored by transport planners. It has to be understood that women travel less than men do in part, because current transport provision makes too difficult for them to travel more.

There are also cultural impediments to greater mobility for women in Bangladesh. In the rural areas women bear the brunt of haulage, whether of fuel, water or babies, yet they are often excluded from utilising any technological assistance with these tasks even in using such as a simple equipment as a cart.

The provision of transport may have its own part to play in changing attitudes. It is necessary to remove the bias that currently provides inadequate transport for women. Much can be achieved by the way of a 'gender-aware' planning process.

Daniel Rabbani  
21 New Eskaton Rd.  
Dhaka-1000

**Regulation of private hospitals**

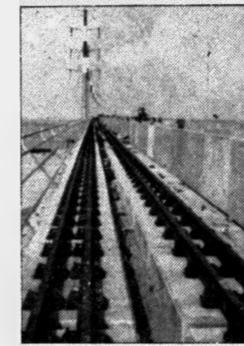
Sir, The Administration appears to be going slow on announcing and on implementation of the regulations or code of practice of medical hospitals/clinics and medical test labs. The service is poor and the charges high. Extensive media publicity

will curb malpractices and irregularities. At one clinic a lady told me she has to do her duty from 8AM to 8PM daily without any weekly day off. The Labour Ministry/HR NGOs and other monitoring bodies have to keep a watch to curb malpractices.

Abul M Ahmad  
Dhaka.

**Railway track on the BJMB**

Sir, Railway track on the BJMB is not being properly utilised now. Only one or two passenger trains are running between certain destinations. At present, last station is "Bangabandhu Bridge East". No goods train is running nor it is possible to run, as it will be costlier to take goods from the East Station. Carrying goods by train is still cheaper. But the track has not been connected with Dhaka-Chittagong Section. It is not known when the same will be connected.



But if it is not connected at an early date, the railway will incur a huge loss. The track has been constructed after acquiring a big area of land which cost a huge amount of money. The track itself has cost a lot. I don't understand how the railway will collect back such huge amount keeping the track underutilised.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury  
General Manager  
Agrani Bank, Rajshahi

**Guardianless Consumers**

Sir, Due to sharp devaluation in Pakistan, India and the Asian Tiger countries, the retail process of imported goods should come down, but it has not thanks to the oligopoly of local importers and middlemen. How the government or the relevant agencies are monitoring the markets for the benefit of the consumers? One example in the local medicine sector was pointed out in DS front-page on Aug 11.

Ministers should talk more about the activities of their ministries and attached departments than waste time on a lot of political garbage, recycled many times by different packers of the political industry. Yes, in our country, politics is a big business and industry, with many back doors go to Mohammadpur Town Hall market to get some idea of the chaos and rackets prevailing there).

As a citizen, I rarely see signs of good work of the powerful and highly popular representatives at the retail level (traffic control, fair prices, QC) of the PEOPLES GOVERNMENT publicised so much by the state media. An invitation: Come

down and mix with us and let us go shopping together, to size up on the state of the state!

AZ  
Dhaka

**It's unfortunate**

Sir, The SAARC summit has recently been held in Colombo. Now the question is has it brought about a congenial atmosphere of relationship among the countries as it was expected? I am sorry to notice that the meeting failed to mitigate the tension prevailing in the subcontinent.

It is certain that our Prime Minister has confabulated with the Indian Prime Minister. We expected this to be fruitful. But our notion was wrong. It is India's allegation that uncountable Bangladeshis are illegally living in India. So they want to send them back to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has been denying the presence of any Bangladeshi in India since the issue was put forward by India. It is because of the communal prejudice of the Indian people they want to drive away the Bengali-speaking Muslims from their country.

It is unfortunate..

S M Ali Aqqas  
Dhaka University

**Police meet PM**

Sir, Since a judicial enquiry was on, the police officials could have seen the Prime Minister and higher ups later, as the enquiry report would likely have embraced many aspects of police administration for improvement as revealed by the Rubel case.

Now different groups will start issuing conflicting types of statements and recommendations to the government, hampering unbiased assessment. Those who like to make representations, should go through proper channel and prescribed procedure.

A Concerned Citizen  
Dhaka

**Payment of bills**

Sir, People need to pay bills for electricity, water, gas, telephone and instalment of house building loan. In most of these cases payment is to be made through different banks. Hence for five bills one needs to go to five different banks. As there is a huge rush in each bank one needs to go to the banks on five different days a month. So expenditure for conveyance is also to be made five times.

If in one bank all the bills could be paid through cheque, then problems will be much less and huge unnecessary expenditure in man-day and conveyance can be saved.

Total number of consumers of a locality may be divided for several banks.

AFM Moeenul Islam  
Chandganj R/A, Chittagong

**Arbitrary excavation**

Sir, Without any notice the entire area leading from Bhanga Press to Banah Patti is being excavated/dugged by some people on the pretext of Dhaka DC's order, which we have not been informed earlier what so ever. This alarming situation is affecting hundreds of inhabitants of the locality, who are

mostly uneducated and afraid of notifying the government.

The situation prevailing here is due to absence of appropriate authority. Police is silent to whom ordinary people have easy access.

Md Halim Miah  
Shekhdi  
Dhaka

**Doctors**

Sir, Medical profession is a noble profession and the doctors in general are believed to adhere to strict principles. But what some of the doctors in the country are doing in the name of medical practice has nothing to do with morality or ethics.

In the first place, all the medical practitioners are not found to follow the same rules of procedure regarding the fees they charge from their patients. While some physicians charge fifty per cent of their original fees on subsequent visits as a norm, others act according to their will; I know one psychiatrist who takes the full amount of his fees on each appointment.

In the second place, there exists, among many doctors, a typical attitude of not referring cases to another doctor. Even among some specialists of different branches, the mindset is there. The patients wait till the point of exhaustion and then themselves seek someone else's advice. This is unethical.

What is more horrendous is the sheer commercial attitude and outlook of the medical practitioners. According to a recent report carried out in the DS, doctors are involved in "give and take" business with the diagnostic centres which puts their honesty and integrity in question.

Among many malpractices of the physicians, what concerns us most is, often female patients or attendants of patients are not safe from the hands of some unscrupulous doctors.

Mohammad Anwaruzzaman  
168/6, Green Road, Dhaka-1205

**Poor taste**

Sir, The birthday "Rhapsodies" of a Shady Birthday and Other Things" written by Mahjabeen Ahmad Mimi published in DS on August 15th is neither Journalism nor creative writing. It is simply an exercise of bad taste.

My vote has never been cast for either BNP or Awami League as I firmly believe that both the parties are just "the two sides of the same coin." Both these parties are incapable of leading our nation to true paths of progress and development.

Both the ladies heading these two parties are forever having joy-rides to world capital with a minimum entourage of fifty or more at the public's expense though we are the world's second poorest country. Oh! travesty!

I am not an admirer of Khaleda Zia and believe that she made many political blunders and has patronized "goons" and musclemen. But one thing has to be acknowledged that she herself was a Muktijudha having been interned by the Pak forces in Dhaka Cantonment during the War of Liberation. Secondly she never compromised with General Ershad the illegal dictator and was the leading force behind the downfall of military oligarchism and the return to democratic institutions in Bangladesh. To quibble about her birthdate in rather silly and infantile.

Bilquis Afzal  
Dhaka