# The Baily Star

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### Bracing for the Morrow

Thanks to Dhaka's unfinished protection dam, the south-western parts of the city remain generally dry. But the basic services - electricity, water, gas, conservancy - are under tremendous strain. How long will these hold out? What happens if any one of these snaps? If electricity goes out can water flow to your flat? And what if gas pipes give in or the pumping stations go under water?

If the Dhaka protection dam gives in or water rises by another foot, have we thought about preparing for that? It seems all things are still within same tolerable limit of disaster failure, although those affected would not agree to that. This imagined limit may go bust any moment any day. Are we ready for such catastrophe?

We cannot say we have been thoughtful in filling up the waterways in the city — some hundred miles of these - and evicting the water bodies that gave Dhaka a romantic tint. This aspect of our foolishness has been talked about so much. But we go on as unreformed vandals keeping the job of excavating canals and ponds riddling our concrete jungle for some brighter members of our posterity.

Now to brace for the last horrifying week. The citizens cannot do a thing to help the water, gas and electricity services hold out against the extreme pressure of the coming week, if it is happily a week more of rising water. That is all for the governmental agencies and an able and unresting leadership of them all to do. Boats have been a key thing that has helped us sustain ourselves so far. Cannot the government do something to inject a kind of organization in their commercial exploita-

The ordinary man is plugging the breaches in the dams and bunds and building machas for their families and scouring the day-long for water and food. A third of our population is living as if in the Water World of Kevin Costner. The city-dweller of the still-dry parts is being constantly called upon to standby the distressed. How can he? How to do that? His eagerness has created a relief glut in the suburbs.

The present waters have very decidedly drowned our power of even imagining how our compatriots are fighting it out and what awaits them when the overwhelming waters would go. Devoid of imagination and sympathy — that is one way to keep sane. But what is the use of such sanity?

We can of course do a precious thing. If that comes to that and the whole of Dhaka goes under water — we can guard against becoming anarchic placing personal needs above everyone else's.

### Follow-up on SOS Call

The government's emergency relief programme with its massive international assistance component is currently undergoing a teething phase. It is not merely keeping in touch with the resident donor community in Dhaka that suffices but what is crucially imperative at this juncture is maintaining a flawless coordination with them as well. There has to be an agreed time-table for delivery of food aid in particular. Timeliness, it is admitted on all hands, is of the essence in emergency relief operations.

In his latest briefing session with donor community representatives in Dhaka, Finance Minister S A M S Kibria sought to carry two points with them: first, they must specify their commitments to the pipeline enabling the government thereby to adopt a holistic approach to food management under calamitous circumstances; secondly, the food aid has to be rushed to Bangladesh to make a meaning of the 'high priority shipment' presumably scheduled otherwise for materialisation in one and a half months' time.

The government for its part ought to place all the cards on the table by way of displaying complete transparency as far as perfecting the distribution system and determining the criteria and the areas of distribution are concerned.

We very much expect that in tune with the government's appeal, the ambassadors of donor countries and the resident chiefs of UN bodies and other multilateral agencies would spare no efforts with their home bases to ensure that the deliveries are made on an emergency footing. It strikes as a good idea that a few high-powered teams of special emissaries be sent out to select donor capitals and headquarters of important multilateral organisations to engage them in a dialogue for impressing the gravity of the situation and the urgency of our requirements upon them.

It is a matter of auspicious coincidence that the present Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs — Sergio Vierra de Mello — is an old friend of Bangladesh. He started his career as an official of UNHCR in the refugee camps of the Liberation War, and as such knows our people and of our development challenges very well. We hope that as a witness to and a great sympathiser of our freedom struggle he will personally take interest in the UN's effort to help us face our worst natural

## Last Thing Malaysia Needs

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed is at loggerheads with somebody he had groomed as his heir apparent, a person once widely believed to be taking over from him when the tough-talking leader left the stage. Anwar Ebrahim is what one would look in a successor — popular, charismatic and unquestionably able. Yet, the two have fallen out. Not unexpectedly the Western media is projecting the premier as the villain attributing Anwar's 'political assassination' to Mahathir's Suharto syndrome — the fallen Indonesian autocrat's tendency to humble anyone deemed as a threat to his absolute power. Why would Mahathir do that when he consciously chose a competent person like An-

war with an eye on Malaysia's future? After all it is the unity of vision of this dynamic duo which has helped Malaysia achieve some spectacular successes over the years. All on a sudden, what is it that threatens to skittle this inspirational South East Asian country from its growth path? It is true Mahathir's is a doctrinal mind but then all his conservatism, fierce nationalism is focused on Malaysia's ascent as an economic powerhouse of the region and few would contend that Mahathir's formula has so far proved right for his

country. We want an immediate denouement in the whole drama of tension. At a time when the region is in the grip of economic instability and recession, Malaysía has remained some sort of a lighthouse for its struggling neighbours. To allow personality clash within the leadership to disrupt this enviable status would be suicidal. Let good sense prevail sooner than later.

### The CHT, India and the Volatile Northeast

## Geopolitical Stakes for Bangladesh?

leaders charged that Prime against further insurgency, of Minister Sheikh Hasina's peace agreement with the one sort or the other, in the Shantibahini leader Shantu CHT, which has been confirmed by the scattered incidents of violence since the treaty was signed. The tribal leaders will need the government of ultimately New Delhi would Bangladesh (GOB) to enforce take over the hills! Those who their newly found authority. found fault with the settlement

AMPAIGNING against the Chittagong Hill Tracts

(CHT) accord, the top BNP

Larma was actually a surrender

to the Indian hegemony, and

some critics foreboded that

also alleged that Dhaka failed

to work out a deal with the

rebels before the Awami League

(AL) returned to power because

of New Delhi's sway over the

CHT separatists. But the AL

rejected such accusations, and

claimed that the Bangladesh-

Shantibahini compromise was

an innovative "landmark

achievement" that will bring

peace, prosperity, and improve

cational as a testation for the

lence, separatist revolt and mil-

itary reprisals reigned over the

northeastern states of India.

and from time to time, the In-

dian government blamed

Bangladesh for harbouring its

fleeing tribal rebels. All the

three districts of the CHT

shared common border with

India's states in the Northeast

whose separatists allegedly

took shelter in the forests when

chased by the Indian soldiers.

No question that India has an

undeniable security interest in

the political development of the

CHT, which is confirmed by

New Delhi's proxy hand behind

the peace arrangement between

the AL-led government and the

Since 1975 (after the assas

government), the

sination of Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman and overthrow of the

Bangladesh governments

headed by General Ziaur Rah-

man, General H M Ershad and

Khaleda Zia, respectively, are

accused of offering facilities to

the Pakistani military intelli-

gence to supply arms to the

northeastern dissidents. It is in

the Indian strategic interests

that the CHT tribal groups re-

main well disposed to New

Delhi, and do not coalesce with

the rebels from the seven

neighboring states. The CHT

rebel leader Shantu Larma,

known to be a protégé of New

Delhi, had the Indian blessing

to negotiate an "acceptable

peace settlement with

Bangladesh since the Awami

der Sheikh Hasina's leader

with the Chittagong district,

Bangladesh is at the threshold

of a regional framework of a

growing international trade

with the Indian Northeast

Burma (Myanmar), Nepal

Bhutan and Southeast Asia

But, on the other hand, with the

implementation of the peace

accord and the delegation of

more administrative powers to

the tribal leadership, the eco-

nomic, political and military

clout of Bangladesh in the CHI

will wane. Legacies of old fear

suspicion, rivalries and con-

flicts may baffle the compelling

forces of mutually beneficial

"geo-economics". Shantu

Larma cannot guarantee

Through the CHT combined

ship, after a 21-year hiatus.

dissident tribal leadership.

A vicious cycle of tribal vio-

The Northeast of India is the strategic vicinity of Bangladesh, and any future unraveling of insurgencies in the neighbouring Indian states can be dangerous to the security of the CHT in particular, and ominous for the territorial integrity of Bangladesh, as a whole. Halting future separatism of those Indian northeastern states spilling into the CHT will be at the heart of Bangladeshi long term strategic anxieties. According to the reported estimates, there were about 400,000 Indian soldiers in the seven states of the North-

Arguably, both New Delhi and Dhaka can cooperate on a common policy to prevent any possible unified separatist movement in the Northeast India and the CHT. However, any overt cooperation with India to suppress the northeastern dissidents is also fraught with dangers. Earlier this year, when by M Rashiduzzaman

tion to that conceptual framework of an insurgency. We canthe CHT separatism might, at some historical moment, change its course, and the secessionists could be driven by a new territorial configuration in the Northeast. It is not unrealistic to visualize that the CHTimbroglio may galvanize support to join an India-sponsored confederate entity of all the tribal states in the Northeast.

Tribal self-determination vs state's territorial integrity will be the core security challenge for Bangladesh in the future, and it may be difficult for all sides to agree on the same goals. Most observers are aware that a "powerful segment" of the Shantibahini opposed the accord, and several minor tribes have already rejected it for different reasons. Several newspapers in Bangladesh reported that a few of the dissenting Chakma rebel leaders were still based in India, and they had been organizing the Juma National Army, a shadowy armed movement, aimed at separating the CHT from Bangladesh. Since the peace agreement went

into effect, personal security

tribal authority and the international NGO activities in the region. Prime Minister Hasina and the Opposition leader Khaleda maintained a gulf of difference between themselves not only about the accord itself but the anticipated Indian role in the CHT in particular, and the Bangladeshi strategic interests in general. The right wing groups are even more hostile and uncompromising towards the peace deal, which, they feel, will not only jeopardize the Bengali settlers but also threaten the security of the entire region. Besides the AL, most liberal elite, human rights activists and the left-leaning groups support the compact and they will oppose any measure that will turn the clock back on

tlers' apprehension of the new

rekindle the insurgency. In dealing with any prolonged ethnic strife, the strategic confidence lies with the institutional and military capacity of the state confronting such

the CHT. However, an uncom-

promising treaty bashing by the

Bangladeshi opposition groups

may strengthen the hands of the militants in the CHT, and

the Shantibahni lactions may

depended on the water level in the river Karnaphuli that meanders through the CHT. Also the facilities of the port, industries. Chittagong city and the adjoining towns depended on the power generated by the hydroelectric capability situated in the CHT. The navigation and irrigation through the rivers Karnaphuli, Sangu, Matamuhuri, Halda, and their tributaries will also depend on the CHT. The economy, geography and living standard of the CHT and the entire Chittagong region are closely intertwined. and most of Chittagong and even parts of Noakhali districts are vulnerable if the CHT breaks away from Bangladesh or if a relentless insurgency threatens that region.

The huge quantity of known gas reserve and oil prospects in the CHT, in the northeast and southeast of the country has elevated Bangladesh as a prospective partner in the growing regional economy. But the seismic survey for oil and gas in the CHT cannot continue without peace and cooperation in the region. The Shantibahini harassment forced the Shell Oil Company to abandon its oil exploration in Bagaichari (CHT) in 1981. In 1984, the tribal in-

surgents kidnapped (and re-

leased after a ransom payment)

two experts of the Royal Dutch/Shell in March 1998.

the activists (allegedly the Hill

Students Council that opposed

the peace accord) seized (but

later released reportedly on

payment of ransom) two

Bangladeshi security guards,

employed by the United Merid-

the Bay of Bengal and the bor-

der areas may bring Bangladesh

in conflict with India and

Burma (Myanmar). With or

without the gas and oil

prospects in the region, the

Chittagong Port facilities have

gained a new importance for the

future, and Indian leaders have

already expressed desires to

utilize the Chittagong port lo-

gistics. Nepal and Bhutan, two

landlocked Himalayan king-

doms, are willing to expand

their trade with Bangladesh,

and make a greater use of her

port facilities. Calcutta, the

oldest port in eastern India, has

Exploration of gas and oil in

ian Corporation.

Shantibahini, the warring faction of the Chakmas, formally surrendered their arms, and promised to work through the civilian institutions created by the peace undertaking. The international community has also applauded the peaceful compromise, and the Bangladesh government has launched a campaign for economic assistance to develop the hill districts, and the UNDP recently held an international conference for planning future economic development of the CHT. Escalating secessionist activities and ethnic militancy cannot be met only by the military means, which had been tried in the region for the last two decades. Although we are not yet certain of its future unfolding and the intended as well as unintended side effects that will emerge, the peace settlement between the GOB and the rebels has offered a political tool to neutralize an armed rebellion. Notwithstanding the rival hyperbole between the government and the opposition over the treaty, both the BNP and the ruling Awami League are expected to share common concerns for national integrity, although they may not agree on the methods of dealing with the CHT crisis. The existence of the Bangladesh military and the

ment. The accord lays a

"foundation of peace" since the

border police in the CHT, though down sized, has a significant security worth since the government did not yield the operational control of the armed personnel to the RC. It will be a strategic advantage under the circumstances al though it may not be easy to ment and capacity of the armed services. There are government

owned reserve forests, hydroelectric power stations, telecommunication towers and numerous government properties to be protected. The presence of the military will facilitate protection for the innocent and peace loving hill dwellers who may be victimized and harassed by the criminals, fleeing rebels from India/Burma, illegal gun smugglers and drug dealers.

Finally, the CHT compact is a triangular partnership between Bangladesh, the Chakma-led Shantibahini and India as the absentee actor. Both diplomatically and strategically, the concurrence symbolizes a pro-Indian tilt, which New Delhi welcomes not only for acquiring a greater regional leverage, but also for having "friends" in the CHT preferably with the compliance from Dhaka or even without it. The treaty itself does not stem the potential for more separatist aspirations in the CHT, which may transmute the presumed harmony into a violent backlash. In many ways, the CHT accord is still an unfinished business, and its goals are still far from being achieved through the cooperation of all the actors concerned.

The author teaches Political

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the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) leader Anup Chetia was arrested in Bangladesh, his followers were threatening the Awami League government with severe consequences if their leader was handed over to the Indian authorities. Should Bangladesh actively collaborate with New Delhi in containing the tribal separatists, the deepening conflict could engulf the Chittagong Port, the industrial areas and even other parts of the country.

Embroiled by any future resumption of hostilities and a broader insurgency by the CHT separatists and the guerrilla groups from the neighboring northeastern states Bangladesh may be forced to seek New Delhi's help to put down the secessionists in the region. Or India might intervene on its own as a preemptive strike against CHT separatists joining with northeastern lighters seeking independence. It will place Bangladesh into a Sri Lanka-like situation when in July 1987. Colombo capitulated by inviting the Indian peacekeeping troops to maintain law and order against the Tamil rebels. Earlier this year when the BJP foreign policy advisor Ambassador Jha stated that India might be more involved in the ethnic conflicts of the neighboring countries many Bangladeshis viewed it

with fear and suspicion. A separatist campaign is a variable and changeable political phenomenon, and the CHI

tribal movement is no excep-

fears haunted the governmen representatives as well as the Shanitbahini leaders who signed the agreement. As ever before, the militant Chakmas refused to accede to anything less than full independence The Chakma activists might even use their newfangled institutional structure to drive a wedge between the Bengali inhabitants and catalyze it into a demand for their secession

from Bangladesh. In order to restrict the In dian rebels entering the CHT and also to discourage gunrunning and contain illicit drug trade, Bangladesh will possibly need more military and police in the area. Taking advantage of the porous border, unauthorized people have been alleged! entering into the CHT from In dia as well as Burma. Recently it has been reported that the Bangladesh authorities ar rested Mr. Deba Jamotia. prominent leader of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in the CHT. I appears that the treaty negotia tors did not pay much attention for the security of the southeastern part of the CHT where Bangladesh shares frontiers with India and Burma.

Key domestic factors that will influence the future sus tainability of the treaty include the differences between the mainstream political leaders. the militant tribal factions' defiance of the CHT agreement perceptions in different intellectual precincts. Bengali set-

challenges. Usually, the strongly institutionalized states manage such separatist conflicts better than the weakly institutionalized countries. Using its military power and state coercion against the separatists, and by harnessing its stronger political institutions. both at the centre and the periphery, India has been able to hold back, so far, most of its tribal, regional, ethnic, linguistic and religious conflicts, within its borders. Even without propelling themselves into a violent conflict, the new CHT institutions will further politicize the hill population, and possibly the inter-tribal as well as the Bengali-tribal relations will sour even though they already have a formal accord at hand. A highly politicized tribal community and growing inter-ethnic tensions in the backdrop of a weakly institutionalised state is a dangerous combination for Bangladesh Through the NGO activities in the three tribal districts, the CHT conflict is already internationalized beyond the immediate neighbouring countries.

The CHT, comprising three districts located between 21.25 and 23.45 North latitudes, and between 94:45 and 92.50 longitudes, has a total landmass of 13,181 square kilometers (5,089 square miles and about one/tenth of total Bangladesh territory). The strategic importance of the CHT is further underlined by the considerations and possibilities that the navigation of the Chittagong seaport

been on the decline, and Chittagong and Khulna are the future ports not only for Bangladesh, but also for the indian Northeast. Peace and stability in the CHT will go a long way to improve the logistical capacity and economic opportunities of the region. With the newly conceded

powers, the RC and three Dis-

trict Councils can define tribal

interests, goals and actions but

they are required to respect the

Bangladesh under the agree-

territorial integrity

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### The Asian Currency Crisis: What Went Wrong a number of countries allowed

True, there were some sceptics who regarded the claims of an Asian economic miracle as overstated and

argued that Asia was bound to run into diminishing returns eventually. But it would be fair to say that even

in early 1997 nobody suspected that such a calamity was remotely possible, although all of what are

AST week I was in Japan attending a conference on the currency crisis in Asia. Economists from various Asian and Western countries exchanged views on the current state of the crisis and the future outlook for the region. Although the participants differed in their analysis, one thing was clear. The crisis is having a farreaching impact, not only on the countries directly affected but also on the prospects for world economic growth and stability and on the international financial markets.

Unless some concrete steps are taken to reverse the existing economic malaise in Asia, it would definitely spread to other regions across the globe. Economic chaos in Russia and last week's stock market slump in the United States and Europe can only further this view.

In a two-part series, I would like to make an objective evaluation of this crisis discussing what might have gone wrong, what can be done to fix the immediate problems and, how similar crisis can be prevented in the future. This week's column is devoted in trying to understand the causes of the crisis. Next week, the policy responses of the IMF, Hong Kong's currency dilemma, and Mahathir Mohammad's dramatic steps to jumpstart the Malaysian economy will be

The financial turmoil in Asia is the third major crisis during the last decade. It followed the crisis in the European

and the Mexican peso crisis in 1994-95. However, unlike the previous two crises, the scale and depth of the Asian crisis has surprised everyone. One obvious reason for this is East and Southeast Asia's track record of economic success.

Given so many years of sustained economic performance. the obvious question is: how could events in Asia unfold as they did? True, there were some sceptics who regarded the claims of an Asian economic miracle as overstated and argued that Asia was bound to run into diminishing returns eventually. But it would be fair to say that even in early 1997 nobody suspected that such a calamity was remotely possible. although all of what are now described as the fundamental flaws of these economies were evident even then.

A great deal of effort has been devoted to trying to understand the causes of this crisis. One view is that there was nothing inherently wrong with East Asian economies. It was the sudden and mostly arbitrary shifts in market expectations and confidence, i.e., financial panic, and the wrong policy responses of the IMF and other international financial agents that caused the crisis.

An alternative view is that

Connecting the Dots, Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

systems were at the root of the crisis. These weaknesses were caused largely by the lack of incentives for effective risk management created by implicit or explicit government guarantees against failure.

While the two views are not mutually exclusive, their policy implications vary greatly. If a panic unrelated to fundamentals fully explains Asia's financial turmoil, reforms in the economic structure or in financial sector policy are not essen tial in planning the region's recovery. If, however, weaknesses in the financial sector were important contributors, reforms

are indeed essential. By the mid-1990s, several countries in Asia — using Japan's model of high savings, close cooperation of govern ment and private sector, high level of education, and exportoriented growth — had trans formed themselves from underdeveloped states to industrial giants. Hong Kong, Indonesia Malaysia, Singapore, South Ko-Monetary System in 1992-93 weaknesses in Asian financial rea, Taiwan, and Thailand be-

came the model for other devel oping countries to emulate. But while the model was efficient at catching the industrial giants in the West, it also led to a large number of structural weaknesses in these countries including, but not limited to, weakness in corporate governance arrangement, poor regulatory and supervisory arrangements in the financial sector, propensity to high indebtedness and over-leveraging in the business sector, lack of transparency at all levels, etc.

However, these structural deficiencies were present for many years and didn't prevent these countries from attaining the high level of economic growth since the 1960s. Hence, they cannot, by themselves, explain the crisis. Several common macroeconomic problems across the region can provide some missing pieces of the puz-

First, the high level of continued growth gave rise to a sense of optimism about these

now described as the fundamental flaws of these economies were evident even then. countries. Investors abroad considered them to be low-risk. well-run economies. As financial liberalisation opened up these markets to foreign investors, a rapid growth of net capital inflows took place. This led to obvious overheating in some economies as reflected in their large current account

deficits. Moreover, most of the capital inflows were short-term, unhedged, highly leveraged, and denominated in foreign currencies. Due to lax regulatory practices in the financial sectors in these countries, the capital inflow was used mostly to finance speculative investments in the real estate sector in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand and industrial sector in Korea. This led to excess-capacity, unsustainable increase in real estate prices, and low even negative, returns on in-

Moreover, there was a mismatch in the whole process the local lenders were borrowing short and lending long. The short-term nature of the capital inflow made the region vulnerable to any shift in credit condi-

Second, the countries in this region, for all practical purposes, pegged their currencies to the U.S. dollar. In nominal terms, the currencies were reasonably stable. However, the risk of overheating due to the capital inflow in the early 1990s raised questions about the sustainability of the exchange rate policy. Starting in mid-1995, dollar rose sharply against the yen. Given that Japan is one of the region's major export destination and also home of key competitors and investors, the region experienced an erosion of competitiveness in the international market. The rising low-cost export from China and the emerging bottlenecks in labour markets resulting in high real wages in several countries also

reduced competitiveness.
Third, the region got caught up in the global wave of financial liberalisation. However, in more cases than not, it had not been supported by adequate macroeconomic policies and structural reforms. Liberalisation measures were often partial and incoherent. For example, capital account opening in

ternational markets. This led to more liberal movement of short-term than long-term capital. Once the crisis broke, this turned out to be a major prob-Fourth, none of the structural problems discussed so far can explain the severity of the crisis. These countries have

banks, but not business enter-

prises, to borrow heavily in in-

thrived for years, despite weak financial systems and destabilising external events, such as, the oil shocks of the 1970s and the soaring dollar of the early 1980s. A big part of the explanation

for the severity of the crisis lies with the fickleness of external investors, who first behaved as if these Asian economies could do nothing wrong and, shortly thereafter, as if they could do nothing right. Net private capital flows to Indonesia. Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand jumped from about \$38 billion in 1994 to \$97 billion in 1996 to collapse to about minus \$12 billione minediate trigger to the crisis was the rise in U.S. interest rates in March 1997. International investors reassessed their prospects in several countries in the region, especially Thailand. The resulting portfolio adjustment led to an outflow of capital from Thailand leading to a depreciation of Thai baht in July, 1997. Given the low exchange rate risk, many local borrowers maintained open foreign exchange position. Their efforts to hedge or close these positions led to a further downward pressure on baht. This, in turn, increased the debt burden in terms of local cur-

The depreciation of baht created a domino effect. As foreign investors reassessed their portfolio composition, they found that the economic situation in several other neighbouring countries were similar to those in Thailand. This led to a contagion effect by exerting pressure on the currencies in Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines and other countries in the region. Markets panicked, exchange rates and equity markets overshot, and a round of competitive devaluation took place, as the resulting crisis engulfed the entire re-

This is first of a two-part article on Asian Currency Crisis. The second part will appear next week.

Experiences of the living memories

Sir. It seems that during the last two years we had been having experiences of a life-

We have had bitterest cold in the living memories', 'severest earthquake', 'unprecedented flood', 'unimaginable criminal acts' and 'road and rail accidents' in numbers much higher than ever before.

People have become afraid and distressed not knowing what is in store for them in the future. May the Almighty Allah save us from this sort of experiences in the coming days.

Nur Jahan East Nastrabad Chittagong

A good cup of tea

Sir. A cup of good tea is like breathing; there is nothing like it to start the day in Bangladesh, where each day has become a day for survival, thanks to over-activities on the flip side.

The tea finishing factories in Bangladesh have long back reverted to the CTC process; which means that good quality leaf tea, starting with OP, and ending with FOP and GFOP, are not marketed in the country, whether imported or local

made. The tea experts tell us that our soil, climate and the elevation of the tea gardens are not suitable for the cultivation of high quality tea. The export

demand for our tea is for blending, providing the bulk of the base for liquor or strength, and colour (the remaining minority percentage is adding high quality tea leaves for aroma and fragrance, which gives a particular brand the individuality and personality, which have made some brand names international favourites) In these days of free market,

the import of quality tea leaves should be allowed, at least for blending. The quip is that one has to go out of the country to enjoy a good cup of tea! Recently India allowed the import of tea in limited quantities. If we allow a similar arrangement, it would not affect 98 per cent of the local market; only those who can afford it will be willing to pay more for quality tea for

the table pot (not kitchen saucepan).

What is happening now is that passengers returning from abroad bring a packet of high quality tea as personal baggage. The multinational tea companies are aware of the implications and restrictions. The government may consult our local tea bodies how to bring some sunshine on the face of the discriminating tea lovers. It is not a big policy issue affecting all the tea drinkers in the country.

Tea is a part of life, and good tea provides the rapport and empathy for starting the day just right — a cup that cheers but not inebriate.

A Zabr Dhaka