

Employment Bank

Few government decisions impress people for their timeliness. But certainly this one has: setting up of the Employment Bank. Here is a financial institution at long last that promises to make some contribution in curing the country of the curse of unemployment.

The Employment Bank which was officially inaugurated Tuesday last by the PM would lend a one time capital of Taka 50000 to the deserving loanseeker. Unlike what is demanded by commercial banks the loanee won't be required to come up with any collateral or mortgage against the loan.

The vast population of unemployed youth is one of the major obstacles in Bangladesh's quest for economic emancipation. With so many young able hands idle or unbridled energy misspent it is no wonder Bangladesh over the years has found the going so tough.

As we hope the Employment Bank would make up for this long-felt absence we also counsel the authorities to emphasise on the strict adherence to its germinating objectives. Supervision should be kept under unflinching vigilance as should be the possible invasion of the unhealthy culture of favouritism at the cost of eligibility.

On to Rabi Crops

With Aus and Aman crop losses on the debit side, we are relying heavily on rabi crop cultivation to generate a reasonable level of agricultural income and help make both ends meet as nutritional supplements.

Large quantities of seeds for pulses, potatoes, wheat, oil, cauliflower, cabbage, beans, et al have been lost in the flood waters, sold out in distress, or eaten up depending upon the edibility of stuffs.

Under the current budgetary provisions we have a Tk 3200 crore accommodation for the peasants as farm loans which might not prove adequate in the end; so, the ceiling will have to be raised somewhat by scrounging money from other sources.

Dhaka University's seed-bed development project on a crash basis should provide a cue for organisations in public and private sectors to try this in their sparable lands and help build mini-seed banks.

Little Comfort for Rushdie

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami has said the death fatwa on writer Salman Rushdie was by now a lapsed matter. This comment was followed later by a government clarification to the effect that Tehran now had no intention to carry on with that fatwa.

Ayatollah Khomeini is long gone and the ten years of the fatwa has accrued nothing to Iran's relationship with the nations of Europe. Khatami was the first to see through the thing and to move away from the fatwa and its myriad spin-off.

Rushdie's security worries may not all be over with the Iranian assurance. For, the presence of Islamic militant groups could still impel attachment of special security detail to him.

RIVER is a medley of colours, images and alphabets. Sometimes it is dark, fierce and hungry like the python devouring everything on its way and across.

As the fury abates, the waves roll down the hill tops in gentle murmur. The river goes to the south. The cropland blossoms with the fragrance of alluvial soil.

Does agony have any alphabet, or does it have any sound? Perhaps like my mother reciting her blessings in soundless dew-drops with tears in her eyes.

A middle aged farmer rowed his tiny boat to where we were standing. His seedbed for Aman has been devastated. So he now ferries people across the 'beel' (water-body) for survival of his family and himself.

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To the Editor...

"Mending Ties"

Sir, This is with reference to the article "Mending Ties" by Pallab Bhattacharya in the editorial page dated Tuesday, 22nd September, 1998.

The stance adopted by India about Kashmir does not give much scope for the international community to play 'mediator'. It also cements the ground that the present government is firm in its views about the country's security.

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The best example is what I have seen during the prolonged period of a national disaster and almost utter despair. And that example is of our new generation's. Their parents, elder brothers and sisters had once gone to the front to liberate the country, to proclaim with their lives, that we are Bengalees and we are free.

again, the pair that helped him ploughing are infected with foot and mouth disease. There is no vaccine nearby nor can he afford to treat the animals.

Water has receded from his little land. He can still transplant late-variety Aman if he can get the seedlings. Yes, they are available, but at four times the normal cost.

No, this little advance is not going to be a gift. It will be a loan. After meeting the cost of production and consumption requirements for the family, the farmers will put aside the loan amount with a ten per cent interest after the harvest.

A question arises which is quite valid. What is the need for such fragmented and minuscule endeavour? It is no more than a dew-drop in a sea of hopelessness and despair.

There are some like me approaching the evening or night fall of our lives, some younger, may be in their post-noon or afternoon years. All are professionals. An economist, a sociologist, an agronomist, a livestock specialist, an ex-banker, or an ex-bureaucrat like me.

The question, as I have admitted already, is as natural as the morning and the evening. But when disaster has struck almost everywhere in Bangladesh, is there no value of the little efforts that these young women and men are making everywhere to unit with the most distressed people and embrace them as their own parents, elders, or brothers and sisters.

There is a further questions. How much can these isolated endeavours achieve? And that is what I am going to talk about. I shall also submit a rather modest proposal for my readers and for the comparatively affluent civil society at large to consider. But, to that I shall come later.

First, let me briefly sketch out the experiences in two other



Do! Dare! A Z M Obaidullah Khan

villages, similarly surrounded by the water-body of the 'beel' area. The name of one village in Namshulai Khalpar and of the other, Chapair, if one travels by a country-boat powered by a shallow-engine, it takes about 50 minutes from the Sraifalair Bazar School in Kaliakair Gir.

There also saw the silent agony and yet patient resilience of more than one hundred women and men — young, adolescent, and old. The young group who took us there prefers to remain nameless. The oldest among them, perhaps in his forties now, is a Professor in Dhaka University. Two others, who happen to be brothers, are medical graduates and are now internees for post-graduate degrees in medicine and surgery.

Twelve of us spared from our savings of the month what ever we could and carried with us a little over 160 or 170 bundles (may be more) of 5 kg rice. Some basic medicines for common diseases were also in our boat in charge of the two young doctors. Perhaps what we took that day would be less than adequate for a week's staple for the families that we served.

Many other compassionate professionals, doctors, business people, political workers, school, college and university students and field workers of different organisations have

similarly stood by their fellow human beings. They travel to the inaccessible areas day in and day out and when they come back home exhausted and still tireless, the only image that comes to my mind is of the song that we sang in our younger days. 'We shall overcome someday!'

And that brings me back to the second question and a modest proposal that I want to place before the comparatively afflu-

ent members of civil society in Bangladesh. The sketches that I have drawn earlier provides the perspective.

I do not have the exact statistics of the number of middle class or higher middle class families in the whole country. So let us take the case of Dhaka city. With a population of eight million people or roughly two million households, at least eight to ten per cent have earnings that can be spared, some, a little less, and some, much more.

If 200,000 such privileged families adopt 10 families each, roughly two million children women and men can aspire for an adequate if not a wholly decent life. Such adoption needs to be for a period extending up to ten years. The rationale is that if the girl or boy child is eight to ten years old at the time of adoption, he can look after the family from then onwards, provided they receive access to education and training.

This adoption will not be considered a charity. It is the moral duty of any socially responsible human being. There will be conditionalities for both the adopters and the adoptees. Those who have taken the responsibility for adoption must also provide necessary support for access to employment and income earning opportunities by the able bodied, and for access to education and health-care particularly for the young ones and the women in a family.

Let us not forget the wide network of socially responsible NGOs who are providing micro-credit and other support to the peer groups of the disadvantaged. Women members of Grameen have already shown that given the access to very lit-

tle capital, how enterprising they can be. Similar endeavours are being carried out by members of BRAC in pond culture, poultry rearing, dairy and even in contract production of high value exportable vegetables. Particularly impressive is BRAC's non-formal education programme and health and nutrition programme for mothers, children and the adolescents.

But the best example is what I have seen during the prolonged period of a national disaster and almost utter despair. And that example is of our new generation's. Their parents, elder brothers and sisters had once gone to the front to liberate the country, to proclaim with their lives, that we are Bengalees and we are free.

I shall end with some lines which I wrote quite some time back:

They live for love Like the fragrance of jasmine, Holding a blade of grass in their teeth They face death by fire Or death by water And penetrate the enemy-camp. Their limbs are broken Eyes torn away And still they sing 'We shall overcome someday.'

And when the time comes again These very young people Will hold a blade of grass in their teeth And go to the jasmine-vine Become flowers in love And fall down like petals of mercy 'that only gives and never receives.'

"Letter from America: Shame on You..."

Sir, Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed's scathing criticism of Naipaul and Rushdie (Letter from America — Shame on You, V S Naipaul, The Daily Star, September 22, 1998) appears to be written more in anger than in logic. One has every right to disagree with whatever is written by Naipaul and Rushdie but the language used by Dr Ahmed is far from civil. He calls Naipaul and Rushdie 'cultural and spiritual traitors'.

There was a general consensus that a serious confusion has been created throughout the paint industry regarding the definition of 'Retail Price' under Section 5 (3) of VAT Act, 1991.

The VAT collecting authorities have arbitrarily adopted a definition of 'Retail Price' which results in the manufacturer having to pay VAT on VAT.

It pains me to think that a respected Rhodes scholar writing in this vein. Dr Ahmed continues, 'Naipaul was touted as the best prose writer in the English language. One could also say in the same breath that Hitler was the best orator of his time!'

Finally, Dr Ahmed laments 'too bad, Mr Naipaul will not be there to witness it, but in the next hundred years or so the third world may change place with the first. My humble question — is Dr Ahmed so sure that he would be there?'

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"Shame on you..." Sir, Hats off to Dr Ahmed for his brilliant piece 'Shame on you, V S Naipaul'. It will make Mr Naipaul and Mr Rushdie search their souls, if they have got any left. They will certainly think twice before putting their pen to paper again.

Ehsanul Haq House #10 Rd #84 Gulshan, Dhaka

we stand, divided we fall. It's really beyond imagination as to why the PM is still hesitant to declare the state of emergency and take over total grip (without disturbing legitimate human rights) of the grave situation by forming an all-party relief committee — whereby she could in fact champion the cause and receive greater support and assistance from the whole world.

The PM and her parishad (cabinet colleagues) already made a great damage to the suffering humanity of Bangladesh by repeating their naive attitude (with shallow knowledge of the severity of damage) that they would not need outside help (what a bliss of ignorance!) but immediately had to come down to earth by appealing and begging help from the world community after realising that they could not handle the situation single handedly.

A F Rahman Dhaka

Thanks to BCB

Sir, We thank the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) for their timely and bold decision of changing the national captain. But it was beyond our imagination that Akram Khan would be dropped. It apparently may hurt the fans of Akram, but we think that it will bring good for our cricket.

A Husnain Dhaka

Grameen audacity

Sir, It seems that the Grameen Phone and Grameen Cybernet do not care to seem apologetic at all for their failure to keep up to their promises. The Grameen Phone has played the cat and mouse story for too long — bagging all the thousands of subscribers with promises and ending up that none can access BTB lines as of today. No apologies.

The Grameen Cybernet server breaks down for days together with no apologies. Crores of takas from innocent subscribers have gone into Grameen's account as security deposit for the Grameen Phone and Grameen Cybernet while subscribers are paying BTB for the phone connections every-time they dial Grameen but cannot establish connection to check their mails or go to a website.

Ahmed Ismail 18 Karwan Bazar Dhaka

"United we stand, divided we fall"

Sir, Thanks to the DS for initially advocating the necessity that a national emergency should be declared and publishing subsequent endorsement of readers like Neelima Islam (DS Sept. 11, '98) reckoning the voice of the people, for the state of emergency and the necessity to work together at this hour of national devastation of unprecedented magnitude.

She has rightly said 'united we stand, divided we fall'. It's really beyond imagination as to why the PM is still hesitant to declare the state of emergency and take over total grip (without disturbing legitimate human rights) of the grave situation by forming an all-party relief committee — whereby she could in fact champion the cause and receive greater support and assistance from the whole world.

trophy. Can't our ministers spare their cars for a day or two for use of our distinguished guests? O H Kabir 6, Hare Street Wari, Dhaka-1203.

Now VAT on VAT

Sir, An emergency meeting of the Bangladesh Paint Manufacturers' Association was held on 27-08-1998 at Elite House, Chittagong, and chaired by Mr T Karim, the president of the Association to discuss the implications of changes in the basis for the computation of VAT for the Paint Industry imposed by the Budget for FY '98-99, and as interpreted by the VAT collecting authorities.

Another point: Bangabandhu is above politics and political parties (otherwise there is no point in calling him BB). This is not even indirectly conceded by Awami League. More broad-minded accommodation would bring forth stronger unity in this homogeneous society.

AZ Dhaka

Flood and new cars

Sir, We are beset with century's biggest flood in our country wherein the miseries of the people are beyond description. On the one hand our Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made an appeal for international aid and assistance to help alleviate the woes and sufferings of the flood-affected people and on the other hand it has ordered purchase of fifteen executive wood cars at the price of which is Taka 25.5 lakh per car.

S M Enayetur Raheem Hons. in Applied Statistics ISRT, DU

Osmany blacked out?

Sir, A large percentage of the people of Bangladesh have beeneping with sorrow, especially during the anniversaries, that the Awami League appears to be reticent about mentioning the name of late Gen Osmany officially and unofficially, formally and informally; although it is careful not to criticise him openly.

There are many good quality cars available with our government transport pool which are being used by our ministers. The whole world is aware of our wretched economic condition and poor standard of living of our people. We wonder why should we play ducks and drakes and make a pretentious and ostentatious show during D-8 summit? Our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has rightly cancelled her visit to South Africa to attend NAM summit for cogent reason of flood catas-

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