

Rural Focus Bodes Well Post-flood Scene

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A Short-cut to Prosperity

The nation seems to be waking up to the need for study, research and mass production in the field of biotechnology. Better late than never.

Biology, the mother of all life sciences, is a purely descriptive discipline. But a broad stream of it, evolutionary biology offers insight into how man can intervene, for good or bad, in the life processes, mostly diachronically. Man's understanding of life and living organisms and his capacity for intervention underwent a sea-change with the works of Francis Crick, Jimmy Watson and Rose Franklin leading to the discovery of the double helical structure of DNA, the carrier of the blueprints of organic development. Molecular Biology was born. Biotechnology is wholly an interventionist technology built up on molecular biology.

Man is now arrived at a wonderful vista strewn with a million possibilities unimaginable decades back — and a ground very very dangerous and treacherous. With the coming of biotechnology man has now a growing capacity for affecting himself or herself organically, for good or bad with deep and challenging implications for society and human relationship. The possibility of cloning humans hides an iceberg of similar moral and social challenges.

With social and enlightened moral control deciding what courses it will take, biotechnology can usher in a revolution in medicine and agriculture, garden and livestock production reducing to cipher the threats of a booming world population. It is in this area that our poor and toddling nation can benefit from a humane biotechnological development.

Molecular Biology is a young science, if not the youngest. Our nation is yet to introduce it at even post-graduate level as standard course. While we are at one with all of the ten good points of recommendation made at Monday's roundtable we would still emphasize on the need for all the universities offering courses in molecular biology — the science from which biotechnology is derived.

Vigorous practice of biotechnology can be a short-cut to prosperity for Bangladesh — if other nations' possible abuse of it does not lead the planet to doom.

Early Polls

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent statement that the next general elections would be held in the year 2000, rather than March-April 2001, has come as a welcome surprise. Even though she has not clarified whether the polls would be held in the first quarter of 2000 (Jan-Mar) or the last (Oct-Dec), it would certainly be a novel experience in Bangladesh to see an incumbent government voluntarily relinquishing power earlier than legally necessary. Besides, the government would have to vacate office three months prior to the polls date and hand over power to a non-partisan caretaker government. All these mean that Hasina will be giving up power at least six months earlier than necessary.

The explanation offered by the prime minister deals with a constitutional provision (the 10th Amendment) related to 30 seats reserved for women in parliament. This provision would expire in 2000, unless extended through a two-thirds vote in the House. However, legal opinion does differ about whether this would cause the 30 women members of parliament to lose their seats. On the other hand, it may be that Hasina has chosen to go for early polls as a limited concession to the opposition which wants mid-term polls, or as a strategic move to pre-empt the BNP's street agitation.

Whatever the reasons may be, the prime minister has certainly taken a decision which has the potential to defuse tension and set the country on the road to greater stability. Although the prime minister's announcement does not meet the opposition's demand for mid-term polls, there is no reason why the BNP should be averse to the idea. The idea of mid-term polls never did appeal to the public imagination, since greater national interest demands that the elected government is allowed to complete its full five-year term. The BNP would do a great service to the nation and itself, if it expends its energy on organising for early polls, rather than continuing with the current strategy of street agitation.

Iraqis Caught in the Middle

Saddam Hussain has stepped back from another cliff-hanger by acquiescing in an unfettered resumption of UNSCOM and IAEA inspections of his weaponry installations stalled since August this year. His stakes are heavier and riskier than ever before. Backed by the threats of air strikes from the joint US-UK command that expressly retains the option of bombing Iraq without any notice served to Saddam if anything went wrong in terms of compliance on the ground, the UN teams have headed back to Baghdad to complete their mission. They will have to be given full access to sites they choose to inspect, documents they want to examine and above all the right to monitor compliance with all UN resolutions on the subject.

Within the constraints of his position Saddam has attempted to make a few points of his own. He has tried to project the US as a bully and rally Russia and France around him. He latched on to UN Secretary General's interceding role while all the time endeavouring to invoke world's sympathy for the victims of economic sanctions in Iraq.

But the odds against him this time are quite serious as both the US and UK have given to understand that they are looking for alternative leadership in Iraq.

As Saddam allows the inspections to proceed economic sanctions on the Iraqis must begin to be lifted. They cannot let the Iraqi people suffer anymore through their unmitigated tug of war.

It may well be too early to predict the turn of events in the countryside, especially in terms of food security and household income following the floods of July-September this year. But if the current trend is anything to go by, then the Prophets of Doom may well have to wait for another doomsday to prophesise about.

We are well past the dreaded month of Kartik, which is traditionally a period of food scarcity in the northwestern parts of the country. But the rumblings of famine, which many had anticipated for different reasons, failed to make themselves heard. There are pockets of exception, as would be expected in a year when the floods have hit both food production and employment opportunities hard.

A recently published travelogue from Kurigram, which the playwright Syed Shamsul Haq once called the most barren and poverty-stricken district of the country, alluded to existence of want more akin to famine. But such tales are too few and far between to even remotely constitute a picture. Even then, existence of such pockets should be enough to serve as a wake-up call for a government which otherwise appears determined to fight off the demon of famine — and exorcise the ghost of 1974 for all time to come.

The word 'famine' was often used in a rather too off-handed manner at the height of the floods. But there were indeed some factors that could be termed as "grounds" for the concern. One was the enormous loss of crops, eventually totalling 2.2 million tonnes in addition to the usual shortfall of 2.1 million tonnes. The second was a creeping doubt in the public's mind about whether the political leadership would be able to galvanise the civil administration to carry out effective relief and rehabilitation work. Third was the impact of the floods on the government's usually-wobbly revenue collection mechanism. The fourth was the poor state of foreign exchange re-

serves, which stood at around 1.6 billion US dollars before the floods.

All these did add up to present a fairly disturbing picture, even though some of the factors were more a matter of perception than substance. One such perception alluded to one of Awami League's less glorious legacies. Some recalled the famine of 1974 and wondered aloud whether the AL of 1998 would be able to handle the situation better. Others wondered whether the volatility in the political atmosphere had weakened the government's authority over the administrative machinery. There were also genuine reasons to worry about the AL's ability to rein-in overzealous partymen and ensure a fair distribution of relief goods and rehabilitation supports.

In short, the post-flood relief and rehabilitation scenario presented the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with an extraordinary challenge.

Nearly two months after the flood waters receded, the situation is being assessed against such critical problems, real or perceived. And as times go by, the government is looking increasingly on top of the job, dispelling most if not all of the immediate worries. Longer-term worries, naturally, would take a little longer to be dispelled or confirmed.

The word 'famine' has failed to claim a place on the pages of newspapers, except where snapshots from remote pockets are projected. The fear of epidemics appears to have gone as fast as it had come. However, some irregularities in the distribution of VGF (vulnerable group feeding) cards are being reported. But when 4.2 million such cards are being distributed, only a fool would expect 100 per cent fair distribution.

One of the more important

achievements of the government so far appears to be the discipline it has maintained in its macro-economic management. Despite the pressure of an additional 2.8 million tonnes of foodgrain imports including 1.8 million tonnes by the private sector, forex reserves are holding up pretty well. By early November, forex reserves actually climbed up to 1.9 billion US dollars, though these could come under more pressure in the months ahead. The government has certainly been helped by the injection of 138 million dollars by the International Monetary Fund. But such props for balance of payment would have come to naught had



The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

The government has been able to maintain the discipline that Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria has evidently brought to macro-economic management. One of the keys to maintaining a sound fiscal position is revenue collection. There is little doubt that the target for September has been missed, but the comforting news from the ministry of finance is that revenue collection at the height of the floods was similar to the level of the corresponding period in the previous fiscal. This may not sound much, but this has enabled the government to maintain the current size of the Annual Development Programme, through re-programming and reallocation of resources. The floods may have given

losses to agriculture in the shortest time possible and stimulating rural income through restoring production and generating income. In the short-term, there is no alternative to the VGF card system, which would provide free rations of food grains to those most in need. But, VGF is going to be wound down in the middle of December, because such feeding programmes for such a large segment of the population cannot continue indefinitely.

The next step would be the Food for Work and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programmes. These are traditional winter-time programmes, but the floods and loss of crops, employment and income have added a new dimension this year. Still, it does not appear that the government would significantly expand the scope of the FFW or VGD programmes this winter, nor increase rations.

The key to the effectiveness of the VGF, VGD and FFW is not the amount of foodgrain distributed, but that they reach those most in need and at the time of need. The crisis of 1974 left one important lesson for policy-makers to learn: that famines need not be caused by a lack of food in the country. Even when there is plenty in reserve and in the shops, people may still starve if they do not have the purchasing power to buy and consume the food. This particular lesson appears to have been learnt well.

The accent appears to be far more on crop rehabilitation and employment generation, than relief. The decision to allocate 3,200 crore taka towards agricultural loans, being disbursed through both public and private sector outlets, is an indication of the emphasis the government has placed on revival of agriculture.

There is a strong element of political resolve here. Accord-

ing to researchers who have surveyed loan disbursement in a number of flood-ravaged districts, incidence of corruption is far lower than during normal times. They say farmers seeking loans are also aware of their right to have their loans sanctioned and disbursed quickly and without the need to bribe officials or middlemen. Thanks to repeated announcements on television and radio, loan applicants and bank officials are equally aware of government warnings against delay and corruption in loan disbursement.

The government's decision to de-politicise the relief and rehabilitation programmes, by putting the civil administration in charge, rather than party leaders, has arguably been its most important and fruitful decision. Although the Bangladesh bureaucracy is not famous for its dynamism or efficiency, the men and women in the field are reportedly performing at a level higher than their normal station. This is what political resolve at the centre and public awareness at the grassroots can achieve.

The international community has supported the government well, but this support does not carry any unconditional seal of guarantee. In order to ensure the uninterrupted flow of such assistance, the government needs to demonstrate sound resource management and effective rehabilitation without the stench of corruption or political favouritism.

The task before the government, therefore, is to sustain the sense of urgency shown in the first two post-flood months. Losses from the floods have certainly been colossal, but these can be recovered sooner than people dared hope two months ago. On the other hand, any slackening of the rein, either in macro-economic management or rehabilitation programmes, due to pressure from vested interest groups, would surely sink the economy into far deeper trouble than the floods ever could.

Auguring Well for the Aggrieved

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

Whatever may be the ultimate outcome of all the unresolved cases referred to above, it can be said that the successful end of Bangabandhu murder case trial shall have set in a welcome augury for all the unfortunate survivors of the murdered. Their keen longing for justice now appears to be at sight.

SEMBLANCE of the Nuremberg trial, the trial proceedings of the Bangabandhu murder case has at long been concluded. The aggrieved nation had to wait for long 23 years, to see the case formally lodged. The Investigating Department CID had been painstakingly meticulous to tear apart the rusty tangles and eventually to frame chargesheet against over two scores of killers. Only five among them could be hauled up, fourteen being out of the country at the patronage of the governments between August 15, 1975 and June 1996. However, at least one of them, caught in Bangkok, Thailand, was ultimately extradited to Bangladesh preceded by hectic parleys and diplomatic endeavours ending up in the signing of an extradition Treaty between the two sovereign States in Dhaka early this year.

So, the ends of justice have been met. The learned District and Sessions Judge Kazi Golam Rasul pronounced his judgement. Fifteen of the accused were awarded death sentence — to be executed by firing squad. This mode of execution, when announced, was something unprecedented in any criminal case. Some eminent lawyers of the country expressed their reaction stating that there was no such provision in the Cr.Pc. The Judge had, however, kept an alternative in his judgement saying that in the event of any difficulty the traditional death by hanging could be resorted to.

Notwithstanding the difference of opinion in the air, the ordinary people must have been startled at such an unusual dispensation which, in their opinion, would go a long way to forewarn the future criminals on similar adventure. Be what it may, our attention would not escape the comment of an inmate of Late Col. Shayet's family expressing his unhappiness over the punishment awarded. He would rather be satisfied if the hideous criminals could be shipped down to death instead. It

is of course an emotional outburst of one whose dear one was brutally killed and hence not taken cognizance in a civilized society. Anyway, the long awaited trial and the award of death sentence to 15 of the accused have been widely acclaimed across the country. Besides Awami League and its different organs, some other political and socio-cultural organizations have expressed their satisfaction over the historic judgement. People of all walks of life, apparently with little or no political identity, too, received it with all praise and gratitude unto Allah that the sanctity of justice and the Rule of Law have been restored. Curiously enough, the observation to the press by the acting secretary general of BNP Ashraf Hossain in the face of the overwhelming public sentiment in favour, can again be dismissed as born of narrow-mindedness. He could not say that he had no comments instead of saying with strings "if the trial was done correctly then it was alright". So, that's how they would look at it and let them.

August 15, 1975 and November 8, 1998 — both the days will be remembered by the posterity for centuries, but never in the same breath. For, the first would rouse bitterness, hatred and universal condemnation while the second would remain in human memories as a unique date of judgement to protect humanity. The whole nation would now eagerly await the implementation of the sentence subject, however, to the results of the appeals that those now in custody are likely to prefer. On the other hand, the government has launched a vigorous and massive campaign round the world through diplomatic channels and also through Interpol to haul up the fugitives wherever they are. Concurrently, the Foreign Secretary Mustafaizur Rahman has made a dispassionate appeal to the member countries in the Commonwealth not to harbour the criminals in their countries and to help us in taking them into custody. How far such appeals and efforts would reap dividend only time will say or the response from the other governments in favour will determine.

Sheikh Hasina and her government have been openly committed to bring to books all the criminals who had been involved in several killings in the past, since August 15, 1975. Accordingly, the diabolic jail killings of November 3, 1975, Ziaur Rahman's death at the hands of some army personnel on May 30, 1981 in Chittagong Circuit House which was followed by the killing of General Manzur in custody, the hanging of Col. Taher and on demand from the opposition BNP the death of Siraj Sikder and secret killings by Sikder will now be re-investigated and formal court cases will be instituted.

In row now, the jail killing case of four national leaders will be on the dock sometime next month. Chargesheet has already been submitted to the Metropolitan Magistracy and accepted for hearing. Taheruddin Thakur — a former state minister, though absolved in Bangabandhu murder case has been a co-accused in the jail killing case and hence would remain behind the bars as long as the trial in the case does not conclude.

And in spite of the indifference of Begum Zia the case related to President General Zia's tragic death in 1981, has been revived at the express instance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Though the head of the Government has been, time and again, trying to induce a reply from Begum Zia on her coldness or disinterestedness in the trial, Sheikh Hasina, in her zeal and enthusiasm in the matter is yet to understand why. In fact, it would have been an absurd, ridiculous proposition from Begum Zia's point of view to seek justice from her political adversary. She would not, naturally like to enter into such a gamble that would have provided Sheikh Hasina some political gains in future. It's of no use to harp on the old tune. Somehow we can be sure that Sheikh Hasina wouldn't be able to provoke Begum Zia into saying anything on the subject. Instead, she would, in her usual stubborn attitude, remain non-committal.

JSD (Rob) and the near ones of late Col. Taher have got newer spurt subsequent to the judgement on Bangabandhu murder case. For long they had been holding Ziaur Rahman responsible for Taher's fate. They have been blaming the late President for betraying Col. Taher after being saved from the hostile army men bent upon killing him on November 7, 1975. Things are now shaping towards a formal legal proceeding and eventual trial of the culprits.

Whatever may be the ultimate outcome of all the unresolved cases referred to above, it can be said with full impunity

that the successful end of Bangabandhu murder case trial shall have set in a welcome augury for all the unfortunate survivors of the murdered. Their keen longing for justice now appears to be at sight. And away from the grotesque political vendetta or hasty struggle for power at the cost of human lives we cannot perhaps ignore the gruesome murder of four TV officials on November 7, 1975. The kins of the murdered also have signs of relief and satisfaction that they too are being offered the justice in the court of law at the instance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government. The CID has already gone into action to take the perpetrators of the crime to books. Five of the BTV staff have by

OPINION Negative Politics in Poor Countries

A Husnain

There is a general trend of practising negative politics in poor, under-developed and newly-emerging nations. Some of the reasons and limitations are well known and documented. Sometimes this trend continues or is maintained for decades, or even for couple of generations. With some affluence due to scattered and sporadic development, fresh imbalances are created, resulting in more distortions and unethical practices, especially at the upper levels of the society, where power and money tend to concentrate.

The centre of gravity goes up, causing unstable conditions. New and weak administrations are all the time grappling with the day to day problems, in an atmosphere of corruption and lawlessness, causing loss of concentration on development projects, thereby slowing these down. The growth rate struggles, and creeps up very slowly. Add national calamities from time to time, and the recurring exercises tend to start all over again from zero (note the economic effects of the recent cyclone in the some Central American states).

Bangladesh cannot claim the distinction of being exempted from these weak and undesirable trends. A child has to be a crawler, then a toddler before he can walk. Many factors are out of control in a changing political and economic environment. A sloping curve, rising or falling, is theoretically not a sign of stability. The curve has to flatten out at some stage, for a specific period, short or long, for proper assessment and review of the progress of a nation. The fall of the tiger countries in Asia also fall within the purview of the above symptoms. The diagnosis come later rather than early, before corrective actions could be set into motion — and that makes all the difference to the end result at specific monitoring points.

Recently some analysts in the local press have been cautioning Bangladesh to analyse carefully what happened to once prosperous Nigeria. Liter-

To the Editor...

There, we go ... Sir, Ever since Professor Amartya Sen received the Nobel prize, some economists in Bangladesh have been eulogistic — what a great economist Amartya Sen is!

The plethora of writings, as published in the newspapers, gives us an impression that these economists had so long kept mum over the achievements of Professor Sen until after the declaration of the award. It seems that they thought, speaking and writing about the achievements of Professor Sen had the risk of belittling their own status in the eyes of the world, or is it because they did not give a damn to what Professor Sen was? Now that the prize has been given to Professor Sen, it seems our economists found themselves in a fix. They have now seen to have no choice but to join the bandwagon. They did so and are still doing so as if they do not want to be left behind.

Thus, the Bengali dictum comes to my mind, 'Gaer Jugee Bhat Paina' until he proves to be an internationally recognised 'Jugee'.

Syed Waliullah
108 Pisciculture Housing Society Ltd.
Dhaka

Child malnutrition
Sir, According to the World Bank's latest country report on Bangladesh, child malnutrition

is the biggest silent crisis in the country. As per the report, 600 children die of malnutrition everyday.

The ministries and other government departments, which are engaged directly or indirectly in population planning and welfare activities, should undertake special projects for eradicating malnutrition by imparting non-formal education and by providing direct assistance to the people, especially to rural and urban poor.

The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) can also incorporate child nutrition and health care campaign in its extension activities.

The Dhaka Shishu Hospital (DSH) can also open and run a child nutrition advisory unit towards containing malnutrition.

Finally, the literate people including the students have to come forward to help eradicate the malnutrition problem from Bangladesh.

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

want her to appear for the test again.

The major crisis that surrounded the previous admission test has made us worried and wondering what will happen next time. BUET is too quiet on this issue and my personal inquires has not revealed anything substantial. I understand that the Chancellor had issued a directive that the next admission test procedure will be decided by a committee consisting of teachers (from Architecture Faculty, particularly those who had opposed the new system). If that is so, then the next test will be different.

As a concerned guardian, I and many others like me want to know from BUET authority what is going to happen so that the candidates may take necessary preparation.

Sayed Ahmed
Free School Street
Dhaka

Fantastic DCC
Sir, Over last two years DCC is bringing in an exciting various fantastic plans and programmes at the cost of huge wastage of public money.

It wasted a colossal amount of money on advertisement in the newspapers, radio and television on cleaning of garbage at night but all the time garbage is piled on the roads and streets and the garbage is removed only during day time when the public thoroughfares are crowded with

people and vehicular traffic and the sufferings of the city dwellers know no bounds due to obnoxious odour emitting from the garbage and halting of movement of traffic caused on account of blocking of the roads and streets by the DCC garbage truck parking.

DCC spoils lakhs of taka on purchase of so-called monstrous fishes for swallowing mosquito larvae in the dirty drains. It also spent huge amount of money buying spray machines which simply created very noisy sound like helicopter flying but never eradicated mosquitoes.

The DCC also constructed, huge military tank-like steel garbage bins and placed those haphazardly on the public thoroughfares obstructing the movement of traffic.

Most of the giant foot over-bridges built at the cost of crores of taka are left abandoned by the people as they are not well planned and not convenient for use.

Now we learn from different newspaper reports that DCC is introducing three mobile toilet vans in Dhaka city at a cost of about 48 lakh taka.

We are tired with DCC's fantastic plans and programmes on the one hand and the publicity stunt on the other.

O. H. Kabir
6, Hare Street,
Wart, Dhaka-1203