

## Food Alert

The post-flood food situation has been the major source of concern for both the government and society at large. So far, the government appears content with its damage-limitation exercise. There have been no reports of famine or serious food shortages in any part of the country. It would appear that the government's vulnerable group feeding programme has helped those most at risk to tide over the immediate impact of the floods. However, it would be extremely dangerous for the government to assume that everything is fine. There are grounds to believe that the situation may not be as rosy as it appears, or as stable as the government would like the public to believe.

A senior official of the International Rice Research Institute has sounded just such an alert in an interview published in this paper on Friday. The point made was that the shortfall in the aman crop, as a direct result of the floods, would make itself felt through the next three to four months. The picture on the ground also tells a less-than-glowing story. Despite the government's intervention through open market sales (OMS), the price of rice has not come down substantially. It is most likely that the government does not possess either the budgetary resources or the logistics to make a real dent in market prices. There may even be debate over whether price of rice should be brought down, since a price below production cost could deter farmers from growing paddy. However, given the lack of employment opportunities in the countryside, there is little doubt that the government's holding operations need to continue for longer than may have been thought necessary.

The critical thing for the government to do now is to remain vigilant. Any lapse into complacency, resulting from a false sense of security or misinformation by sycophants, could spell disaster. Over the next three to four months, it would be vital that intervention tools such as the vulnerable group development (VGD) and food for work programmes are effective. In addition, the enhanced agricultural credit disbursement programme also needs to be monitored closely. All these are likely to put pressure on the management aspects of the economy, but the priority should be to ensure adequate income at the rural household level through employment opportunities, and availability of rice through imports and speedy distribution of food aid.

## Access to PC Meetings

Following limited television coverage of parliamentary sittings, public appetite has grown for greater knowledge of how the Jatiya Sangsad works and the elected representatives of various constituents of it are faring. This has been regarded by most people as an instruction in democracy at work, whatever may be the degree of disappointment one encountered in the process.

Happily for the media people, this general-type JS exposure with a time-limit on it that one saw slotted over BTV may now have a new, far more enriching dimension to it. For the first time perhaps, we have come pretty close to seeing that limited and somewhat controversial information dissemination exercise being replaced by a transparent view being offered of the working of the parliamentary committees.

The ball has been set rolling by none other than intrepid Suranji Sengupta who as chairman of the parliamentary committee on law ministry has held out an open invitation to the pressmen to attend all the meetings of the committee he heads. Quickly on the heels, S M Akram who chairs the rather sensitive public accounts committee has purportedly endorsed Sengupta's generous offer, thereby apparently stirring the placid waters of the parliament's inner world girdled by the cold corridors of the lake-side Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. Sengupta says in support of journalistic access to his meetings that a parliamentary committee has the power to regulate its own procedure and thereby allow it. But some other committee heads tend to differ saying that an amendment will be needed to the Rules of Procedure because the latter envisages "the sittings of a committee to be held in private."

Ever since the non-minister MPs have started heading the JS committees the latter have become more representative and potent bodies. The AL government has marked a departure from practice there. The ruling party is expected to do the same to give the newsmen an access to JS committee meetings.

## The Deadly Bacteria

It appears from the revelation of experts that there is hardly anybody left in Bangladesh who is safe from a particular type of abdominal disease that can lead to many other severe ailments, according to a report in this paper yesterday. If 90 per cent of adults and 80 per cent of children under five years of age are infected with this bacteria then the state of the health of our nation can easily be understood. The bacteria known as Helicobacter Pylori in medical parlance which is responsible for peptic ulcer generally is so powerful that experts warn of dire consequences of recurrent peptic ulcer leading to cancer of the stomach. This is alarming news, especially for a country like ours where even primary medicare does not reach a vast majority, not to speak of specialised treatment for deadly diseases.

The Swiss expert to the seminar titled 'Management of Peptic Ulcer — What is New?' Prof Niklaus Gyr disclosed that as many as 15 million people in Bangladesh have been suffering from peptic ulcer and related diseases. The experts also claimed that 60 per cent of the world population are infected with the bacteria that affects people from childhood. This is thoroughly depressing as Prof Mahmud Hasan, General Secretary of Bangladesh Gastro-enterology Society, has pointed out that 'the organism will persist lifelong unless eradicated'. The silver-lining in the cloud is the suggestion of remedial measures and diagnostic process by Prof Hasan. All the same we will impress upon the government the need to launch a massive awareness campaign to prevent this common but deadly disease. In this important task we would appreciate the active participation of concerned NGOs and also BGS. After all, there is hardly any substitute to a healthy nation.

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**A note on Malaysia**  
Sir, It has been noticed that lately Malaysia has been taking interest in Bangladesh. Its former foreign policy stance was not on the third world, but exports to the North and interest in high-tech and in mega-projects. Now that its development of infrastructure has gone beyond

# Euro : A New Currency for the New Century

*The Euro encompasses an area from the arctic to the Mediterranean and will be the lone currency for 290 million people. It will also be the currency of the highly industrialized world and naturally will lay its claim to be the reserve currency nearly at par with the Dollar.*

JANUARY 1, 1999 is a date that the world will remember for a long time. This is when the Euro was launched.

This is an epoch making event. At the beginning of the 21st century it is an event implications of which will continue for decades to come.

This is not the end of the pre-eminence of the Dollar but the beginning of the arrival on the scene of a formidable rival. True in the financial world Japanese Yen had cut out a strong place although never rivalled the supremacy of the Dollar.

The advent of the Euro heralded with fanfare and 4000 balloons in Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union (EU) did not come about suddenly. The Euro is the baby of the EU although a hefty one.

The European Union was conceived by the French visionary Jean Monnet in the fifties. He had the simple idea that the hatred of centuries leading to horrendous bloodshed in Europe had to be buried once and for all. Germany had launched two world wars within the first half of the century causing untold death and destruction. Jean Monnet hit upon the brilliant idea that since political issues would take a very long time to settle, the best way to settle intra-European issues and particularly those between France and Germany, was to address economic problems first.

This was the beginning of the European Union as it has emerged today. There are 15 members. They are Austria, Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. But 11 have joined the Euro. Britain, Denmark, Sweden and Greece have remained outside the Euro. Whereas Britain, Denmark and Sweden have remained outside the Euro by choice, Greece is unable to participate because her economy has failed to meet the standard set by the Euro.

The Euro was launched on 1 January and although it looks as something on paper only, it is really not so. From credit cards, to issues of cheques and dealing in bonds and stocks. Euro will be legal tender throughout. Only Euro currency and banknotes will arrive in the market by 2002.

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Integration of coal and steel industries of France and Germany, the EU has gained from strength to strength. The core of the EU has been closest possible ties between France and Germany. After all, Germany invaded France twice during the last half century. Any European arrangement had to take account of this reality. And during the half century of its journey Franco-German friendship

to the European Union. Britain remained the odd man out for a long time. Indeed she did not join the EU for many years. Rather she tried to build alternative centre of Union of states but it proved to be a non-starter. Britain finally came in, Britain, who had the largest empire and had naturally many pulls, was unable to throw her lot with EU. That would rob her vocation as a

EU entrusted in 1969 the Luxembourg Prime Minister to study possibilities of creating a common currency. His plan to set up a common currency within 10 years met a disastrous fate and the plan had to be abandoned. In 1989 European Commission President Jacques Delors relaunched the plan for currency union.

In December 1991 new European Union Treaty called for creation of a single currency on 1 January 1999. On December 31, 1998 EU finance ministers agreed to irrevocable conversion rate between Euro and participating currencies.

The first Euro coins came out of the mint in Italy and the Italian treasury minister described it "a great dream come true". It is worth recalling that a single currency existed during the Roman Empire, which had a larger territory than today's EU. The Governor of the Central Bank of Euro will be Vittorio D'Alessandro of the Netherlands with his headquarters in Frankfurt in Germany.

What can be predicted for certain is that the cool European heads will not be swayed by emotion but will take a calculated step if and when political union appears unstoppable. The world will witness then not a single pole of attraction but a multi-polar one. The event of 1 January made certain that the world of the twenty-first century will be a very different one from that of the twentieth century.

means a big change in the global picture. The Europeans have been extremely careful in launching the single currency and have weighed the pros and cons. There does not appear any danger of any backlash.

After a long period of consolidation EU has now taken a decision to rapidly expand her membership. Several East Europeans and Cyprus are ready to start negotiations for eventual membership. Since nothing succeeds like success there are many candidates for membership.

The question uppermost on everybody's mind is what about political union? Will political union follow the economic union? There can be no doubt that a single currency will work as a strong stimulant in the direction of political union. A vast area without borders is a reality for several decades. 290 million consumers in the world market with a high standard of living will be a potent force. The push will inevitably come from the grassroots for a political union.

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Shiv Sena says how two countries can play games when they are fighting in Kashmir. What a humane approach! As if the Indo-Pakistani problems cropped up the other day! It began from the day they were created and God knows whether at all these will be resolved at any time. But must they behave in such an irrational way? The same Shiv Sena sometime ago sought to discover presence of a large number of Bangladeshis in Mumbai. The party is ruling Maharashtra in alliance with the BJP, which is the dominant force in the coalition government at the centre.

Shiv Sena is losing ground in its stronghold Maharashtra. It was explicit in the Lok Sabha elections in March, last year when the Congress greatly recovered its lost ground. It is for the Shiv Sena the cricket-loving people of Mumbai are deprived from any Indo-Pakistani match in their city. Indian political parties — the progressive leftists, the centrist and even the BJP, which is regarded as having communal bias in certain quarters — have come out against the Shiv Sena scheme against sports. Will the fundamentalists continue their fulmination or wisdom will prevail upon them?

## The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



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How does the US view the launching of Euro? It will take some time to adjust to see a new rival in the field, when until now the mighty Dollar reigned supreme. Dollar will no longer be the only currency of reference. Since we live in an age where politics has taken the back seat to economics, this

world power. Furthermore she had linked her fate solidly with her former colony and now the sole superpower, the US.

Yet economic pull and proximity to Europe proved much the stronger and Britain joined the EU. There has been divisive debate within Britain on this issue but the debate has progressively died down. It is really a matter of time before Britain links itself with the single currency — the Euro. The mighty Pound will become a thing of the past.

It has taken exactly 30 years for the Euro to be launched. The

friendship has been nurtured by successive great leaders who have ruled France and Germany. The friendship got solidified during the long reign of Adenauer and De Gaulle and Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterrand. Indeed these two countries have provided joint leadership to the European Union.

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