

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 constituencies 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 Suranjit 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 medicine 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.

Euro : A New Currency for the New Century

The Euro encompass 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 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 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 was to settle the financial capitals of the world.

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 EU.

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 issue 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.

The Euro encompass 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. It is easy to understand why Euro has caused such a big storm in the financial capitals of the world.

EU has gone through many steps in its long journey since the fifties. Beginning with the

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

ership 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 Commissions 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 Wim Duisenberg of the Netherlands with his headquarters in Frankfurt in Germany.

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

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.

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 multiplier 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.



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

has remained unshakable. Even the redefinition of Germany in the eighties was unable to dent this friendship. Thus when Gerhard Schroeder is elected the new Chancellor of Germany, he has his first visit to the Elysee palace in France.

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 lead-

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 herself 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

Bal Thakarey's Shiv Sena at It Again

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?

WHEN Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the external affairs minister of India in the Janata Party government more than two decades ago, his tenure was considered as one of the best as far as relations with the neighbours were concerned. New Delhi's relation with Islamabad was reasonably normal despite their known disputes.

The period saw an increased flurry in exchanges between the two belligerent neighbours in the fields of culture and sports. Later on, when Mr. Vajpayee was in the opposition, he said he had some contribution towards staging cricket matches between the two countries. He did earn plaudits for the part he had played in facilitating greater sports contacts between the two countries — rated among the bests in cricket and hockey.

Now, as the prime minister, Mr. Vajpayee faces stiff opposition from a small fundamentalist group as India readies to host the Pakistan national cricket team for a two-Test series after gap of nearly twelve years. Bal Thakarey's Shiv Sena has threatened to disrupt the tour by all means. The two Test matches are scheduled in capital New Delhi and Chennai but Shiv Sena with its base in the western state of Maharashtra is hell-bent upon preventing the Pakistan team from playing anywhere in India.

"My men are ready all over to accomplish their task," said Mr. Thakarey. Ready his 'men' are indeed. On Wednesday last, they made their way into the Feroz Shah Kotla stadium in Delhi under the cover of darkness and dug up holes in the pitch. Authorities were caught napping but still, it is not too late. Mr. Vajpayee has said that his government will provide full security to the Pakistani players and to the matches at any cost. Home secretary B. P. Singh called an emergency meeting to prepare

necessary security net and some of the security personnel at the stadium were suspended for dereliction of duty.

Former Indian cricket captains Kapil Dev and Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi came out to criticise the designs to foil the games. Millions are eagerly looking forward to the Pakistan, while the chief executive of the Pakistan Cricket Board, Majid Khan, wants the series to go ahead, former chairman of the selection committee Hasib Ahsan feels otherwise. Ahsan believes that the tour should be called off because security of the players is greatly threatened.

The tour, which starts with the Test match in New Delhi on January 28, seems to be on the right track despite the disturbances. Millions of cricket fans across the world will be dismayed if the tour is called off.

Animosity between Iran and the United States is definitely of a greater intensity than that existing between the South Asian neighbours, but strained diplomatic relations have not barred their footballers from playing each other in the last World Cup. While Tehran took sportingly face-off on the green with the 'Great Satan', Washington also reconciled to the idea of playing with the 'Great terrorists'. England and Argentina have featured in some of the closest matches in the annals of the World Cup. At the diplomatic level, dispute between the two over the Falklands lingers on. Same is the case with North and South Korea.

Ironically, India and Pakistan have so many things in common. The people speak almost similar languages. They have estranged families across the border. People in the two countries are bound with a



poignant and pervasive sense of nostalgia. Yet at the diplomatic level the ambivalence continues. While the governments miss no opportunity to scoff at each other, there are also initiatives to encourage people-to-people contacts. Just when a handful of Shiv Sena activists were digging up the pitch at the Feroz Shah Kotla, a bus carrying officials flagged off from New Delhi to begin the first trans-border bus service to Lahore. The Delhi-Lahore service is scheduled to begin for the public later this month.

Even enmity is governed by certain norms and decencies. When India and Pakistan, in early eighties, were characteristically accusing each other of 'hostile acts' in Kashmir, late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent some of the best qualities of litchis to late Pakistan President General Ziaul Huq, who reciprocated by sending some of choicest 'Anwar Ratol' mangoes from Multan. All these did not mean that two countries have buried the hatchets and have become friends overnight but only underlined the niceties that characterise civilised society and international behaviour. We are human beings first and everything else is secondary.

I had the occasion to watch the India-Pakistan Test at the Feroz Shah Kotla way back in 1980 when Kapil Dev and Asif Iqbal were captaining their respective teams. The packed crowd applauded whenever a player was good with either the bat or the ball regardless of his team identity although it is commonly understood that cheers will be more for the host side. When Pakistan's lanky speedster Sikandar Bakht ripped through the Indian batting order, there was no dearth of appreciation among the audience.

When India won the coveted World Cup in 1983 in England, I vividly remember, it was past midnight in New Delhi and the entire capital was in a festive mood. Some delirious neighbours in the Pachseel park area in South Delhi dragged me

out from my house to join them in the festivities. I also thought that it was a great feat for a South Asian team although my own country Bangladesh was still then struggling to find some kind of identity in international cricket.

A Pakistan journalist was also posted at that time in New Delhi and they said their neighbours overwhelmed them with sweets and flowers. Some of the Indian sports and cultural figures received warmest treatment in Pakistan and so were the Pakistanis in India. When Pakistan's famous music director Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan died young in London last year, many Indians wept openly and the avalanche of shock there was no less than that witnessed in Pakistan. Sports and culture transcend national boundaries and the SAARC spirit should prevail in these fields no matter what sentiments the fundamentalists in any of these countries attempt to whip up in different pretexts.

Shiv Sena says how two countries can play games when they are fighting in Kashmir. What a humane approach! As if the Indo-Pakistan problems cropped up the other day! It began from the day they were created and God in heaven knows 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 expelled 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-Pakistan 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?

OPINION

"We Don't Need This Education"

Omar Sharif

Please don't get panicky by reading the heading. It's just a line from a famous song of the band 'Pink Floyd', which was sung as a protest against teachers who abuse students. Who needs education from such teachers? For the last few weeks the news must have spread all over the country that a female student of Dhaka University has raised an allegation of sexual harassment against a teacher. This news might have surprised many people and they might have wondered how a teacher from the best university of Bangladesh can do such a thing or they might even wonder if it is true or not. For them I have something to say as a student of DU.

This news doesn't surprise me at all, because almost every student of DU, particularly those of Social Science and Arts faculties are used to such news. During my four years of university life I have heard a lot of things like these. I praise and hearthily who are at present demanding investigations of such allegations. But they must not forget that there might be few cases where the students might be the culprits.

I was surprised that for the first time a female student filed a written complaint to the Vice

Chancellor of Dhaka University that she was sexually harassed by a teacher (later heard that a similar type of complaints were filed before and were never investigated, which is not surprising). At last, I said to myself, someone showed the courage. The question of equal right of woman will never see light if they never complain against man. The first step is to complain, then demand justice, then to fight for justice. I support all of those students who are at present fighting for justice.

I must say that not only the students of DU but also the students of all universities in the country, and all educational institutions should join with those students who are at present fighting for justice.

It surprised me that no leading student organisations of DU, and for that matter of whole Bangladesh, are doing anything for this situation. I am shocked that some students of DU brought out a procession few days ago against these students who are demanding investigation against the allegedly wrong-doers. I heard their speeches too. These students are saying that such demands are destroying the good-

will of DU, and this is done intentionally by some outsiders. This didn't end here — on December 27, 1998 around 1:00 pm these so-called goodwill protectors of Dhaka University went into action. They saved the goodwill of the university by stoning their rivals and injuring students in broad daylight, in front of many witnesses.

I have few questions for these so-called goodwill protectors of DU:

1) How the goodwill of DU is destroyed if only a few among hundreds of teachers of the institution are accused of harassment?

2) Why students of other institutions can't join with the students of DU and demand justice against something that violates student's rights?

3) What's the problem in investigating such allegations? At the end I want to say that the goodwill of Dhaka University can't never be destroyed by teachers who sexually harass students, by students who do politics with firearms, by all those who have done lots of harm to general students in various ways. Because, whoever they are, they are very few in numbers, but Dhaka University had, has and will have great teachers and bright students all the time.

For a Better Tomorrow

Munira Khan

knowledge is tree where the mind is led forward into ever-widening thought and action; into that heaven of freedom

These words are most relevant today as we approach the new century. We want to live in dignity, in peace and in harmony. We don't want hunger, poverty, disease and injustice; we don't want gender and racial discriminations; frustration, fear, sorrow and conflicts due to selfish reasons; we also don't want nuclear war, global warming, toxic pollution, acid rain, ozone depletion etc.

Is it possible to fulfill all those wishes? How to — and when to — get those wishes and dreams come true is a big question for all of us. We all want to strengthen democracy which augments progress and development and fulfillment of all those wishes. By working side by side, men and women together, we can try to build a prosperous and free society.

At the end of the twentieth century, we are facing a daunting challenge to ensure eco-

nomic freedom and liberty for the people to strengthen democratic institutions. As Bill Richardson of the US last year said in a speech in Bangladesh: "compromise, not confrontation; accommodation, not acrimony must be the words we need to use for democracy."

We should display accommodation and tolerance to ensure a free and fair society, ensure the rule of law, freedom and human rights. For all of those who are needed most's commitment and patriotism which inspire people to work hard to see one's own country occupying a position of honour in the international arena.

In my opinion under-development of Bangladesh so far has been a consequence of the lack of real patriotism, true love for the country which needs sacrifice, sincerity and honesty. All of us together should vow to create an environment in which people of Bangladesh get the inspiration to build a better Bangladesh.

We want to live in honour, in peace, in love in the new century. We wish all the peoples of the world to live for love, with love and by love.

To the Editor...

South Asian University

Sir, The article regarding a 'South Asian University' in the JS issue of 24 December, 1998 is an interesting subject for discussion. Imtiaz Ahmed has criticised the British colonial education policy and knowledge system, and tried to find a case for a South Asian University.

There is no doubt that any alien system of education imposed on the people brings about social ills because it serves the masters. So why should one criticise British rule in India.

There were the Portuguese, Dutch, French etc. who did destroy the then existing systems of knowledge in South Asia, particularly by the Portuguese and Dutch in Sri Lanka. More importantly in the medieval times the Indian educational institutions were destroyed by the invading Mughals. They in some places, completely destroyed the excellent universities in India.

Therefore, I have a reservation regarding a South Asian University on the basis of attacking British systems and policy in this connection. There are universities already in India, which are doing excellent on issue-based research and teaching. Moreover admission to such institutions are not limited to Indians alone.

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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

the basic stage, it does not need so much foreign labour. Also in view of the financial depression in Malaysia, it has to take more interest in developing countries, where labour and production costs are cheaper, and investment there and go where the labour is located. Instead of bringing the labour to Malaysia.

Bangladesh and Malaysia have several areas for collaboration in investment and industries:

i) Malaysia is strong in computer hardware industry and electronics. Bangladesh can join hands with software development, and the combined hardware and software thrust can capture a sizeable world market in cheap computers for export to the developing countries.

ii) Wireless telephone systems including WLL fixed cellular not mobile. Less maintenance hassle for LDCs and DCs, less human factor in maintenance, no cables overhead or underground. Sheba should have long-term plans between these two Muslim countries.

iii) Malaysia and Bangladesh complement each other in many areas. A position paper may be prepared for further studies.

iv) Edible palm oil is a vast potential area complementing soy oil from the West for use in Bangladesh kitchens. It is cheaper. Awareness publicity and free or subsidised sample campaign. Set up palm oil refining, packing and export plant here to market in S Asia one billion customers. Resist US Western opposition to sell soybean oil.

v) Bangladesh can supply cattle once properly organised for meat and beef, which now come from Australia and New Zealand. Give chance to develop local Muslim countries.

vi) Same for export of vegetables and shrimp and lobster, and medicines. Our medicines

are one of the cheapest in the world. Malaysian medical delegation may carry out a study tour and start a pilot import scheme under close observation of feedback for Malaysian users and doctors. There are many Bangladeshi doctors in Malaysia; hence orientation period will not be long. (The Malaysians are fond of famous brand names. Those days are gone in these days of austerity. Patronise developing countries).

vii) Malaysian managers can open fast food centres under joint venture here and invest on QC projects; the next phase leading to the tourist infrastructure.

viii) Combine Malacca cane and Bangladeshi bamboo products for better export market; include flowers; include molasses and rice cakes (the latter a huge market in Asia).

ix) Petrochemical industry with our natural gas.

x) Furniture export from Bangladesh to Malaysia may prove a potential line using raw materials from both countries.

xi) Import more tea from Bangladesh. Coconut products industry may be examined.

xii) Use Bangladeshi experts and personnel in Cyber Jaya IT project; prelude to Islamic broadcasting network. C Jaya can support it. IT industry has huge controlling power at global level.

xiii) Both Malaysian Airlines and Bangladesh Biman need each other to ride the depression now that Indian international airlines in the red.

iv) Higher education — fill in the gaps jointly, there are several areas.

There are other areas which may be examined if Malaysia is seriously interested in doing business with the developing and Muslim countries.

Alif Zabr
Dhaka