

FOOD PROCUREMENT

Glimpses of Field Experiences

by K M Nabiul Islam

In one of the remote villages of Raninagar, I interviewed one small farmer who, surprisingly, do not even know where the LSD or the government godown is located. The villagers nearer the LSDs are a little interested in the procurement, but the far-off farmers are least interested.

IN November '98, I led a field survey team, under the Food Management Research Support Project (FMRSF) of the Institute of Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Dhaka. The survey aimed at evaluating last year's Boro procurement. The survey was carried out in Rajshahi Division which constitutes the major food procurement areas in Bangladesh.

About 0.76 lakh tons of paddy and 2.03 lakh tons of rice have been procured throughout the country during last Boro season, which together amounts to 2.5 lakh tons in rice equivalence. About 86 per cent of this procurement has been carried out in Rajshahi Division. Dinajpur district is by far the largest procurement district in the country. The two other districts, Naogaon and Bogra, located in the central part of Rajshahi Division, are among the largest procurement districts in the division. The procurement in the three districts, Dinajpur, Bogra and Naogaon together constitutes 42 per cent of the total country's Boro procurement and 49 per cent of that of Rajshahi Division.

The field survey covered ten LSDs in ten thanas of the three districts. The study thanas are Gabtali, Adamdighi and Dupchachia in Bogra district; Dhamurhat, Mohadebpur and Raninagar in the Naogaon district; Birganj, Kahaor, Nowababad and Dinajpur in Dinajpur district. While in the field, I held discussions, formally and informally, with a few sellers, millers, farmers and concerned officials. Some of my field experiences and initial observations are as follows:

Aspects of Procurement

In the whole survey, the most tedious job was to find farmers, for an interview, who sell paddy to LSDs as 1) the sellers list is largely fake and most of the sellers are fraudulent and 2) whoever available are rather reluctant to respond at the first instance.

The overall picture in relation to Boro procurement is more or less same in all the three districts. The procurement is largely controlled by the political elites, UP Chairmen, UP members and traders. Even some so-called students are reported to be involved in the procurement business in some areas. The local elite appear to be largely controlling the sales through the distribution slips to fake farmers.

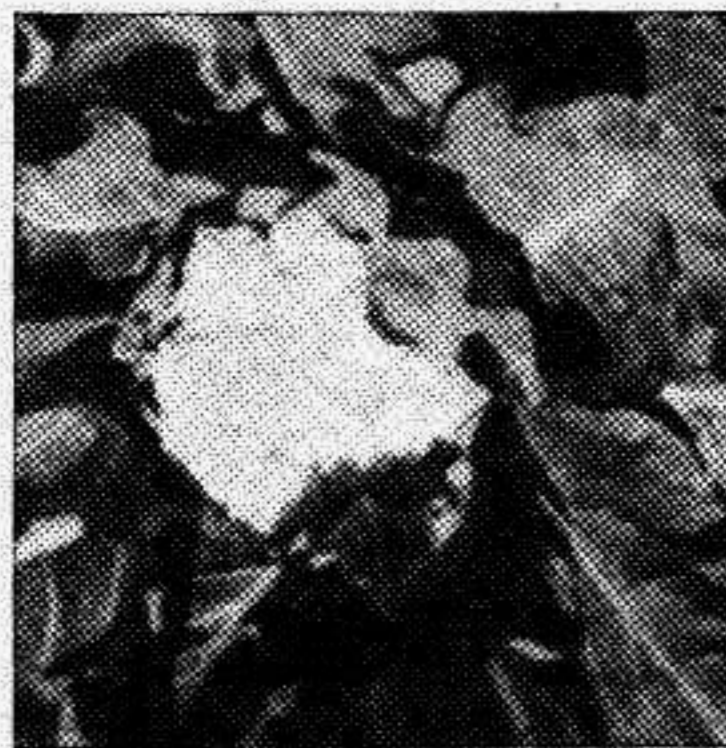
Participation from farmers is negligible. In one of the remote villages of Raninagar, I interviewed one small farmer who, surprisingly, do not even know where the LSD or the government godown is located. The villagers nearer the LSDs are a little interested in the procurement, but the far-off farmers are least interested. In fact, almost none in the remote areas appear to be keen in the procurement. Some villagers be-

longing to distant locations advocated for the re-introduction of TPC at the union level. In that case, they maintained, the participation from farmers would potentially increase. However, the food officials are largely against this proposition. Their arguments relate to, among others, resource constraints including construction of new godowns at union level, security of procured goods and enhanced overhead costs. In fact, the officials appear to be unwilling to live in relatively remote areas at union level.

In Dinajpur, the 'fertiliser cards' are largely used (instead of slips) for the procurement. Unlike in Bogra or Naogaon, in Dinajpur area a complete list of sellers (with identification address) was available for each of the LSDs. Compared to that in other procurement areas, the list of sellers here appears to be a bit genuine as the procurements in these areas are carried out through 'fertiliser cards'.

In urban and semi-urban localities around Sadar LSDs, however, participation from farmers is almost absent. In rural areas, not more than 10 per cent farmers sell directly to LSDs.

I came in touch with one farmer in Dinajpur who waited for 18 days with one ton of paddy at the LSD gate, but failed to get it passed on the plea of requisite quality. Ultimately, he had to return it back. He lost 36 person-days of labour, in addition to what he incurred as living expenses during this period. He had thus gained a bitter experience as this was a source of immense miseries to him. For farmers and traders, however, sales procedures appear to be relatively easy. For farmers, there exist too many formalities. Some farmers reported that they waited for 3 to 4 days with their paddy and ultimately sold it to traders present in the LSD premises, after which the paddy was immediately passed without any hindrance.



Winter vegetables: Growing after the flood.

In Dinajpur, I came across a UP member who purchased 10 cards at the rate of Tk 50 per card. He was frank enough to disclose that he sold 10 tons of paddy to the LSD in their names and earned a margin of Tk 8,000 from delivering the paddy.

Paddy is both a subsistence and cash crop for farmers. The farmers are in need of cash money immediately after harvests. They are to pay off wages and debts, buy food and clothes. About 70 per cent of total harvests are disposed off during the first one-and-a-half-months of harvests when the prices are low. The remaining 30 per cent are sold at later period.

The millers in particularly urban localities are playing a key role in the procurement for not only rice, but also for paddy. In the paddy procurement, they engage *farjias* and traders to procure paddy from the village farmers. In this respect, the millers seem to be playing a positive role, in favour of farmers, in the procurement.

Following are some of the specific problems faced by farmers relating to paddy procurement, which have hampered the whole procurement programme.

a) Unofficial payments at various stages of procurement, which have now become an open secret.

b) The time spent in the process of procurement is extremely valuable for farmers, as they are to keep busy in harvest and post-harvest activities at this time.

c) Farmers have little knowledge about Fair Average Quality (FAQ), the quality of paddy/rice with specified moisture content, which needs to be maintained for paddy/rice brought for procurement.

d) Farmers have the problem of drying paddy after harvests as few have drying places ('Chatal', as are called) at their

premises. e) During Boro season, the rainy days pose an additional problem.

f) There is no guarantee that the paddy brought by farmers would be passed without any barrier. So there are risks of carrying charge, and as to who will guard those paddy and for how many days. If one becomes a victim the news get spread across the whole village, which creates wide-spread discouragement for others.

g) Farmers are in dire need of cash money immediately after harvests, to pay off wages and debts.

Ensuing Aman Procurement

The prospect for procurement of Aman is extremely bleak mainly because the market price of paddy is well above the procurement price. The current wholesale price of Aman paddy (as of 15 November) is in the range of Tk 825-875 per quintal while the procurement price is fixed at Tk 760 per quintal.

Flood Loss to Crops

In Raninagar of Naogaon district, I met one big farmer who owns 40 bighas of land. The flood hit the area three times. He grew Aman in 20 bighas of his land at the first instance. All the crops were damaged when the flood first hit. After that, he replanted 10 bighas of land. Again he lost his crops. In the process, the financial loss incurred amounts to about Tk 20,000 on account of material and labour in-puts. Later, he decided to grow mustard seeds and waited for the land to get dry and suitable for cultivation. But the lands were still muddy and unsuitable for cultivation. In the end, he abandoned the idea. He has tried to obtain some agricultural loans, but he became disappointed.

In another case, I interviewed someone with a fishery

project. He cultivated 11 ponds with fisheries. The flood has damaged 9 ponds completely. He has been desperate to get some loan from the local Krishi Bank, but without any success so far.

The provision of institutional loans is reported to exist only in papers. There is widespread discontentment in all the areas visited regarding this. The business of informal moneylenders is in full boom. They are currently charging an interest of Tk 500 per thousand per crop season.

Rice Price

The rice price appeared to have a slight rising tendency in some localities. I visited a local hat at Raninagar where average quality rice (Payjam) was sold at 15.50 per kg at retail shops.

VGF Cards

I met one fisherman in a local bazaar of Raninagar, who was granted one VGF card. He received 8 kg of rice and 7 kg of wheat but just once. He knew only one person in his village who had a VGF card. He was in great financial crisis. He had no work. When I met, he was making one fishing net which he was preparing to sell at Tk 500. The input cost was estimated at Tk 300.

One Shopkeeper

I met one shopkeeper in the same bazaar. The average turnover was about Tk 1200 per day in the pre-flood period. The average sales was Tk 200 per day in the post-flood period. In a summary of the three study-districts, the overall situation in Dinajpur was less worse. In urban and semi-urban areas of Dinajpur the employment situation was little better where few thousand millers were operating. In this district, however, I came across some agricultural lands which have seriously been flooded affected due to sand deposits. Floods had always this type of impact on agricultural lands in the past. But last year, the situation was abnormally worse as some lands have experienced 2 to 3 feet of sand deposits. It is nearly impossible to make the land cultivable again in a short period of time.

In Naogaon, there have been spectacular harvests in vegetables, cultivated in some high lands, but owned by rich farmers. A particular mention can be made of bean and brinjal. On an average, one-bigha land under bean earned a gross return of Tk 5000.

In Naogaon and Bogra, however, the employment situation was far worse. In some localities, particularly in Naogaon, a nearly famine-like situation was prevailing. About three-fourths of the households interviewed currently had no stock of food. The situation with marginal farmers and wage labourers was particularly alarming.

The author is Research Fellow, BIDS. The views expressed are the author's alone.

Of Basic and 'Continuing Education'

by Shahnaz Kibriya

OUR education system is inundated with numerous problems which can only be overcome by massive changes, both in the structure and infrastructure of our current school system. During my 13 years of teaching at Saint Jude's, I acquired first hand knowledge of the present educational system of Bangladesh and simultaneously identified the problems. The issues include:

- lack of trained teachers
- lack of motivation, discipline and professionalism of teachers
- weak community involvement
- lack of parental participation
- weak content quality and irrelevant syllabi
- irregular, inefficient and inadequate supervision
- little or no accountability (especially in case of the kindergartens)

Education these days have become a burden and more a matter of fear for children. There is no joy or fun in learning and therefore the learning process has become less effective and inefficient. During my tenure at Saint Jude's, I was responsible for English Language classes for adults. I soon discovered that an alarming number of my students lacked Basic English skills, despite the fact that they had completed the Higher Secondary Examination and Graduated. This is a direct result of the deterioration of the current educational system in our country.

Presently, in my opinion, there exists four different kinds of education in Bangladesh, namely the education offered in the English Medium schools, the Government schools (which are purely Bengali medium), the madrasahs and the formal or non-formal institutions which are administered by different NGOs and private institutions. As such there is no uniformity of standardisation in the structure of these four systems. Children of the same age are undergoing different kinds/levels of education which

means different curriculum and even different books. The English medium schools follow their own curriculum, the government schools have prescribed curriculum and the madrasahs have again their self designed curriculum which is mostly theologically oriented. The formal and the non-formal education, offered by different private institutions and NGOs, is an attempt to provide basic education. The constraints they face are:

- the groups are heterogeneous of varying age and aptitude
- absence of uniformity in curriculum structure and content
- use of different kinds of learning materials without regard to learners' efficacy
- lack of coordination in relation to target group coverage and programme management
- lack of adequate supervision and follow-up

Basic education would, in fact, be effective or fruitful if it is followed by a technical education or a continuing education. The technical or vocational education would better prepare and ensure job opportunities in the real world. Otherwise, the person with the little bit of formal education may result in a false sense of security, being 'literate' and unable to enter the job market or accept a position which they consider below their dignity. At the same time, if one has no technical/vocational education, the little bit of so-called education he or she has, will never suffice for demands of the job market. There are organizations which are presently providing technical education simultaneously with the non-formal education. BRAC, Proshika, UCEP, etc., are good examples.

- Following are some suggestions for 'Basic Education':
- the same curriculum as the government schools should be followed
- teacher-student ratio to be ascertained
- teacher-student contact hour to be increased

- community participation should be increased
- there should be close coordination between government and NGO programmes
- equal opportunities for women should be encouraged and enforced
- qualified teachers with proper training should be recruited
- proper accountability for teachers
- there should be overall monitoring and regular follow-up
- development of appropriate and standardised teaching materials
- enhancement of technical education and vocational training, to make them more job-oriented.

Following are some suggestions for 'Continuing Education':

- Continuing education should aim to provide opportunities to upgrade whatever education one has attained and improve upon it to meet the needs of a changing world.
- The scope of continuing education should cover all those who have completed basic education, received skill training and are on the job.
- Community libraries and resource centres should be set up to encourage and support continuing education.
- A sound and efficient continuing education system should be available for all, regardless of past academic background, especially adults and working professionals, where returning to a full time programme is either impossible or inappropriate.
- The above is purely an account of my personal experiences and views about basic and continuing education. I think if anything is to be done it should be done immediately by the relevant quarters because as the saying goes, 'It is better to be late than never'.

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Boosting Eco-tourism

by Radhakrishna Rao

FOR more than a decade now environmental groups in different parts of India have been up in arms against the promotion of ecologically unsustainable tourism that invariably exerts a severe strain on the natural assets and delicate environmental balance.

From the magnificent snow capped Himalayan slopes in the north to the palm fringed surf kissed silvery beaches of Goa in the west, tourist spots all over India are rapidly becoming victims of unchecked and unceasing flow of visitors from India and abroad.

In fact for a large segment of population in the Himalayan region as well as in Goa tourism is a significant source of income and a veritable lifeline of the economy. But in the mad rush to promote tourism as a means to boost the economy, the vital symbiotic relationship between tourists and environment has been overlooked. Indeed Sunderlal Bahuguna, the father figure of the Chipko movement aimed at creating environmental consciousness in the Himalayas, has stressed on the need to save Himalayan environment from the onslaughts of the tourist flow.

Significantly, Himalayas hold a great fascination for tourists, nature lovers, pilgrims and adventure-seekers for this mountain range per excellence abounds in holy rivers, lush green meadows and innumerable pilgrim centres.

In a significant development, an ecotourism joint venture between China and UNDP is being launched to help alleviate poverty stricken people in the Mount Everest region. As envisaged now, the project is expected to generate income and protect the ecology and biodiversity of Qomulomngma Nature Preserve (QNP) bordering Nepal.

Promotion of the concept of eco tourism in the Himalayan region is considered significant in that it would go a long way in preserving the natural beauty of this mountain region which at-

tracts thousands of tourists from around the world.

The much-debated ecotourism in essence involves ecologically sustainable, nature-friendly tourism that inculcate a spirit of environmental appreciation among the tourists. Moreover, the creation of infrastructural facilities meant to attract tourists should not disturb the ecosystem in any manner.

Similarly, discarding of non-biodegradable substances like polythene bags, that choke water streams and despoil the mountain eco system, should be banned as part of the ecotourism scheme.

On another front, construction of high rise tourist resorts especially in the fragile Himalayan region should be banned in the interest of the long term ecological sustainability. Small hotels and resorts are ideally suited for ecotourist spots in that region.

Here, in the Himalayan heights, tourists should avoid making open fires at the camp sites. For it could lead to the conflagration in the forests nearby. In the ultimate analysis, eco tourism appears the only answer to the problems of increasing pollution, traffic jams, shortage of water and befouling of rivers and waterways.

The 100 years old and more picturesque hill station of Darjeeling in the sub-Himalayan West Bengal stands out as a prime witness to the havoc wrought in by an increasing tourist flow. Congested and narrow roads, drying up water taps, mushrooming concrete jungles dotting in the geologically unstable hill sides and drying up water springs and disappearing forest stretches in Darjeeling demonstrate the fall out of tourist flow averaging at five lakhs per year.

Over the last five years, more than 300 hotels have sprung up in the around Darjeeling. No wonder, the reckless construction activities in Darjeeling have led to massive soil erosion and landslides.

Originally, Darjeeling was meant for a population of 20,000. Environmentalists in this beautiful hill station point out that nearly half of the thirty natural springs in the 38 sq km Senchal Sanctuary just outside Darjeeling which feeds the lakes supplying water to the town, have dried up.

The fate of Nainital in the Himalayan Uttar Pradesh is no better than that of Darjeeling. Here too massive tourist influx has led to the population of massive magnitude in Naini lake, in the heart of the town. Further, mounting automobile pollution has been blamed for the growing incidences of respiratory diseases in Nainital.

And in Goa environmentalists have blamed the mushrooming hotels and resorts for the drying up of water sources blotting out of farms and fields with serious consequences for ecological well being of the state.

In the southern state of Kerala hailed as God's own country, eco tourism seems set to make strides in a big way. Here nature tourists and backwater tourism have become a big money spinner for the captains of tourism industry. Innovations by young entrepreneurs in the state have resulted in the setting up of tourist resorts that offer nothing but nature at its best.

For instance, Mohand Das, promoter of Rice Fields says, 'It is the true village life that we offer and as such it is an ethnic habitat and not a resort.' The Rice Fields is a sixty-year-old traditional Kerala house set against the lush greenery of paddy fields.

Indeed, a guided tour through the panoramic backwaters of Kerala provides a refreshing change to the tourists on the look out for an exotic experience. Mirror-still lagoons, picture postcard lake sides, palm fringed canals, tiny shimmering rivulets all go to showcase Kerala's bewitching beauty that is both unspoil and unknown.

— APB/PTI Feature

China Debates Dumping Disposable Chopsticks

Like other Asians, most Chinese go through at least one pair of disposable chopsticks a day. But, reports Gemini News Service, environmental concerns mean that pressure is mounting for China to break the habit and stop cutting down trees for their eating utensils. Yang Zheng writes from Chengdu.

CHENGDU is capital of the world-renowned Sichuan cuisine. Each day, hundreds of thousands crowd into the city's 60,000 restaurants to eat barrowloads of meat, rice, eggs, vegetables and chillies.

They also use disposable chopsticks that require up to 4,000 cubic metres of timber. "For that amount you need to fell 100 trees with an average height of 10 metres," said Cai Shiyuan, a deputy of the National People's Congress, China's parliament.

Throw-away chopsticks are now used in all but the poorest and the most expensive restaurants throughout China. The poor ones re-use bamboo chopsticks after cursory washing. The expensive ones prefer sanitised, lacquered-wood chopsticks.

All the rest use disposable wooden chopsticks, 20cm long and 2cm wide. They are trashed after a single use.

But public concern is growing over the environmental consequences. It was triggered last summer by devastating floods along the Yangtze, Nenjiang and Songhuajiang rivers, which killed more than 3,000 people. The floods caused such huge damage that the cost of reconstruction is, ironically, expected to help China keep its economic growth on track.

The government is convinced that the floods were caused by soil erosion resulting from excessive logging in river basins. Within weeks, the State Council banned logging and lumberjacks became planters in Sichuan Province, where the Yangtze gains force.

As saws and cranes fell silent, chopsticks became an issue. Although disposable chopsticks are used across Asia, China is the biggest consumer, producer and exporter. It fells 25 million trees a year to make 45 billion pairs. Two-thirds are used in China and few are recycled.

"It's an astounding waste," said Cai, who is campaigning for a ban on disposable chopsticks. "It takes 30 to 40 years for a birch tree to mature, yet thousands are eaten away in the time it takes to finish a meal."

The problem has been caused by the high demand for better hygiene and the cheapness of these chopsticks — just one-thousandth of a US dollar a pair.

Disposable chopsticks became popular in the late 1980s. Before that, Chinese would just wipe the pair in a restaurant and then wonder if they would go down with stomach ache, or even hepatitis, when they got home.

In less than a decade all that has changed. Mismanagement of the timber industry and natural disasters have landed the State Forest Administration with a bill of 20 billion yuan to protect natural forests.

China is severely short of trees. Only 13.9 per cent of its 9.6 million square kilometres is covered by forest. Its amount of forest land per capita is 121st in the world.

The country's 300 forest farms are mainly in the northeast — Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Jilin and Inner Mongolia. In Heilongjiang Province, China's biggest forest base, 12 of the 40 state-owned logging companies have nothing left to fell.

"The remaining 80 million hectares of natural forests will disappear in a decade if this felling continues," said Professor Shen Guofang, of Beijing Forestry University.

By contrast, Japan, another massive disposable chopsticks user, never cuts them to make them. It imports them from other countries, particularly from China. Most of the 15 billion pairs of chopsticks Japan imports every year are made in China with Japanese-made machines. And after use in Japan, chopsticks are recycled into paper.

What we learn from the Japanese, said an official of the National Environmental Protection Agency, "is that we must protect our forest resources and no longer use and

produce disposable chopsticks."

Dr Li Hao, of the non-governmental group Global Village of Beijing, put it this way: "Everyone who uses disposable chopsticks is actually a lumberjack." And because China exports disposable chopsticks, foreign "lumberjacks" are helping to chop down the trees.

People keep using disposable chopsticks because they believe they are clean, but is that true? Few producers subject their products to chemical sterilisation because most are small operators and cannot afford the equipment. "We have our own method," said the owner of a disposable chopsticks yard, "and that is to boil the cut logs in a big iron pot."

Tianli Forest Product Co., a Sino-Japan joint venture and major exporter, does not have such equipment either. Its chopsticks are sterilised and packed in Japan.

Public health experts say that even if chopsticks are kept clean during production, they can go mouldy in a humid atmosphere or even be polluted by flies or rats when stored in restaurants — despite being wrapped in paper sleeves.

A key to the popularity of disposable chopsticks is that they have never been in anyone

else's mouth. Cai Shiyuan suggests restaurants should go back to the old days and reuse chopsticks — but always sterilise them.

"Individuals could solve the problem themselves by carrying their chopsticks in their pockets," said Cai.

At Beijing Forestry University, disposable chopsticks have been banned. Workers at the National Environmental Protection Agency now use their own chopsticks. Six well-known restaurants in Chengdu have stopped using the disposable kind.

But not all voices call for an end of disposable chopsticks. Wu Zuruo, secretary-general of the Forest Products Association of the Ministry of Forestry, says they are made from birch and poplar which cannot be used for building or for producing furniture.

"Paper can be made from those trees, but it is less profitable than producing chopsticks. When birch and poplar reach maturity they die by rotting from the core if not felled."

We need rigorous control over the felling of trees for disposable chopsticks," said Liu Yun, director of the China Chopsticks Museum. "Export should be reduced, and production restricted."

— Gemini News
The author is a writer for the China Features Service.

Friend or Foe

A study conducted by the World Wild Fund of Nature (WWF) has claimed that Norwegians, who pride themselves on their green attitude, are the most environmentally-destructive people on Earth. The study says that Norwegians put four times as much pressure on environment as the average global citizen and 50 per cent more than Americans or Australians.

The reason: Norway catches 250 kg of fish per head, more than 10 times the world average. Much of it is not eaten directly but fed to salmon in fish farms.

The findings are based on a 'Living Planet Index', which WWF hopes will become the equivalent of Dow Jones Index of Global Warming. Even though the report is critical of Norway, it was appreciated by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Former Prime Minister of Norway and author of 1987 United Nations report on sustainable development.

Ozone Crisis

GERMAN scientists have warned that the Earth's ozone layer, which filters radiation from space, is regenerating itself at a slower pace than originally predicted. Even if international agreements on the protection of the atmosphere are strictly followed, the size of the ozone hole 20 years from now will be the same as today," warn experts from the German Aviation and Space Centre (GASC) at Oberpfaffenhofen, near Munich.

The ozone layer would regenerate itself only if, along with known "ozone killers" such as fluorocarbohydrates, carbon emissions are also eliminated. Also, according to GASC experts, if the concentration of chlorides in the stratosphere diminish more slowly than predicted, the ozone hole will continue to grow. And there is a danger that a new hole will be formed. The hole was first discovered in 1985.

Green Energy

A new revolutionary energy process could end up powering cities and industries in the next century, says a team of Australian scientists. The scientists, who conducted a feasibility study, suggested that a hybrid solar fossil fuel system has the potential to produce sustainable amount of power, while emitting very little greenhouse gases.

The Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (SIRO), Australia, has already begun the construction of a 20 kilowatt-facility in Sydney.

According to Jim Edwards, a scientist at SIRO, the plant will use solar power to effectively "decarbonise" fossil fuel, producing a gaseous mix of hydrogen and carbon dioxide. Electricity will be generated from hydrogen via a fuel cell or a micro gas turbine.

The process uses solar thermal energy from a large dish to combine gas with water and after the intermediary stage, produces a mixture of hydrogen and carbon dioxide," said Edwards. "First we separate these and then use hydrogen to make electricity and because the carbon dioxide is concentrated, we can dispose it off."

Carbon dioxide waste will be injected into underground reservoirs or deep coal beds.

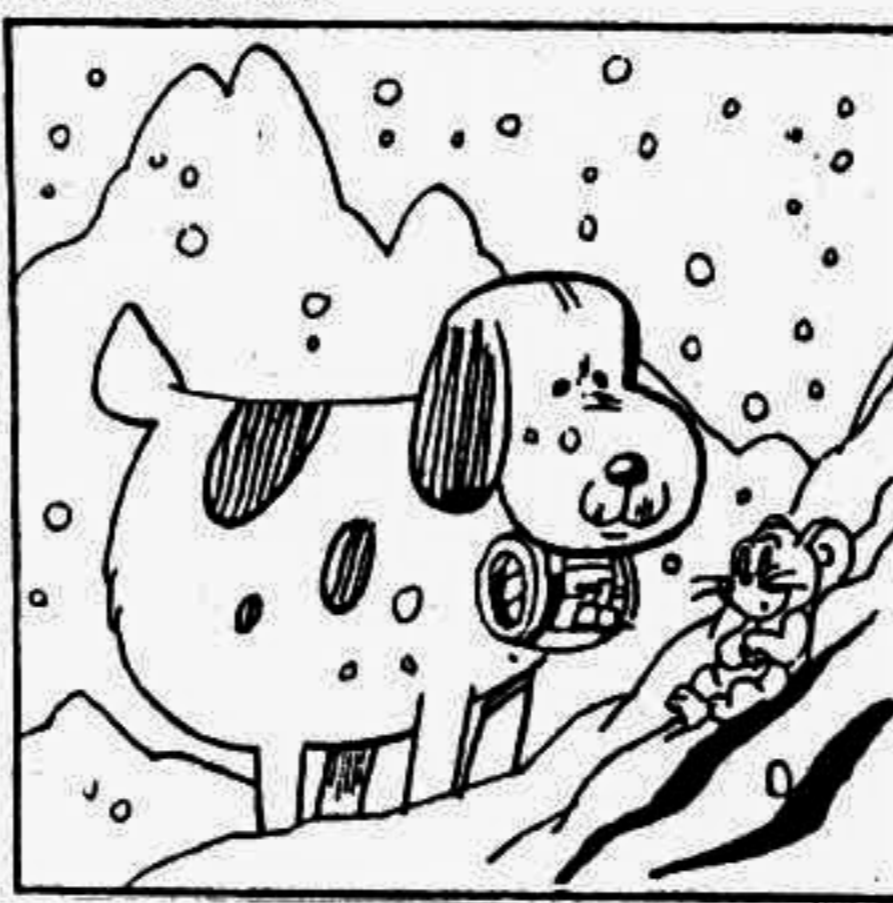
Lead Skies

A recent patent from British Petroleum (BP) makes a disturbing admission: piston-engined aircraft need such high-octane fuel that tetraethyl lead is still added to it to keep its octane rating up. So while all new cars can now use unleaded fuel, aircraft engines are still dropping lead from the sky.

BP claims a new high-octane fuel which is a mix of triptane, iso-pentane, iso-octane, toluene and methyl tertiary-butyl ether. This, says BP, raises the octane number to over 100, which makes it a usable, lead-free aircraft fuel.

CSE/Down To Earth Features

TOM & JERRY



James Bond

BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK

