

## Stealing Food

Food is now the main thought exercising the government's mind. The post-flood scenario is looking fairly precarious, even though the government's initial efforts have been largely successful in preventing any serious shortages. However, we are well into the winter season when most of the rural development (RD) projects under food for work (FFW) programme are implemented. This programme helps to maintain, expand and improve rural infrastructure while providing employment and subsistence grain allowance to disadvantaged families. But this is where another worry comes into play. Corruption in the implementation of FFW programmes is nothing new, but given the precarious nature of household food security in the aftermath of the floods and lack of employment opportunities, the importance of FFW programme this season assumes critical proportions.

There are solid grounds for such worries. According to a recent study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), between 26 and 40 per cent of the food aid earmarked for RD projects are "misappropriated", which is probably a euphemism for stealing. But whether the food is stolen or "lost" in some other way is quite irrelevant. The fact, as clearly revealed in the IFPRI report, is that most of the "leakage" occurs through pilfering or stealing. Government officials, possibly in collusion with Union Parishad members and chairmen, are the key players in a chain of corruption that cheats ordinary poor folks of their rightful share of food aid donated by Bangladesh's development partners. Not only are the poor cheated this way — and receive less nutrition value from FFW programme than statistics show — but rural development work are also hampered.

What all this means is that the government needs to put this particular house in order with the utmost urgency. The politics of wheat may be the butt of many jokes, but this is certainly no laughing matter, particularly when a major food crisis is staring the rural population in the face. The government needs to improve monitoring of FFW programmes and distribution of food aid from the supply depots right down to the household level. More important perhaps, the government needs to install a mechanism by which the cost of corruption in rural development projects is made many times higher than the benefits gained by unscrupulous officials. Stealing from the poor to fatten the rich cannot be acceptable in any society.

## South Swathed in Terror

People in the south-western region of the country, it seems, have been condemned to the reign of terrorists. Fear of kidnappers keeps residents indoors once the day is done. But home no longer offers them a safe refuge. Behind the tightly-shut doors they spend every moment in anticipation for the worst. Same is the scenario everywhere. In some districts, joining the activists of outlawed political parties in engineering abduction, extortion and murder are small terrorist groups. In other districts even exponents of both ruling and mainstream opposition parties are involved in these criminal activities, it has been alleged. Fiercest foes on the political front, these activists appear in agreement when it comes to heinous acts of public discomfort. Businessmen are the worst victims of this prevailing lawlessness. Off and on, they receive letters on behalf of outlawed political extremists, asking for money. Refusal often leads to dreadful consequences.

The authorities concerned are apparently apathetic towards the public's plight. Repeated complaints against the known criminals with police station have had very little impact except for jeopardising the complainant's life. On the whole it's a sad story of hapless mass resigned to reign of terror with an underlying suggestion that the system that ensures protection to citizens across the country is fast crumbling down. We are appalled and implore the people at the helm to employ maximum effort to clamp down on kidnappers, murderers and extortionists in this region. Their indifference suggests they have forgotten who pay their salary and who they should serve. Also, we would like our political leaders to keep a close vigil on their activists on the southern front and put them under a tight leash. Criminals should not be nurtured, they should be put in the dock and behind the bars instead.

## Who's Responsible?

Syed Mohammad Nurul Absar, a 42-year-old restaurant worker in London, was picked up by police at Chittagong on the strength of a fax that was purported to have been sent by Interpol in London. Absar was identified as an explosive expert, arms dealer and an 'internationally reputed terrorist' who sneaked into Bangladesh to carry out destructive activities in different strategic establishments in the country. Very impressive list of indictment no doubt, but did the police verify the origin of the message and authenticity of Interpol's involvement before swooping down on an apparently innocent citizen? Chittagong police was so perplexed with this highly dangerous 'terrorist' that they sent him to Dhaka for further grilling by experts. For seven days police interrogated him about his whereabouts, intentions and possible involvement in terrorist activities but finally came up empty-handed. At the end of the ordeal the joint interrogation team successfully discovered that the said message was a 'hoax' and allegations against Absar were 'false' as the message came from a commercial fax shop in London. Since there was no charge to substantiate Absar's involvement in any terrorist activity he was released by the CMM court in Chittagong on 14 January.

This sordid episode gives rise to so many questions regarding public safety from the keepers of law. If the police cannot differentiate between truth and falsehood then there must be reason to be afraid of undue harassment and mental agony. Why the police did act on impulse rather than logic? It was not too difficult for them to verify a message that was supposed to have been sent from Interpol. We would strongly suggest for caution in such cases in future so that they don't make a fool of themselves and warn people responsible for such irresponsible act.

# Child Labour and Childish Arguments

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We all know that a very strict policy prescription of the developed countries and their spokes-institutions, World Bank and IMF, continues to be global free trade. From the arguments placed, it seems that nothing is more valuable than fidelity to free trade. (The world is dead but long live free trade!) It is, as if, an "economic tablet" that cures all kinds of diseases and applies to all kinds of people, irrespective of their age, sex, culture and other variables. It is, perhaps, needless to mention that the WTO is the end product of that "vision" of a globalised village where the "lions" and the "ants" are supposed to fight for a pie through engaging themselves in trade. And where efficiency and competition would rule the world, prayer for some degree of protection for the "ants" was never accepted and went, so to say, mostly unheard and unnoticed.

But once the game in the field of trade started with free trade as the motto, lion-like developed countries started to envy the ant-like developing countries, notwithstanding the fact that developing countries were forced to swallow the pill called free trade they invented only to be robbed of their entitlements, on different pretexts, through different trade embargoes. An arsenal of complaints are onboard against them but the issue of the use of child labour moved to the centre stage. It is being alleged that developing countries reap cost advantage over developed countries by using child labour in their production processes. Cheaper goods from cheap child labour tend to knock out dearer goods from expensive labour of developed countries. Therefore, it is another kind of dumping called "social dumping" which needs to be countered or faced with other means. The other "non-economic" argument against the use of child labour

generally placed is "humanitarian": Why should the "future" citizens of developing countries be used for their "present" production? After all, humanity is the hallmark of developed countries and that needs to be guarded against all possible odds and attacks. The proposed "green bill" in the US Congress stood for duties on products originating from cheap child labour. However, while developing countries, including Bangladesh, carried out massive trade reforms and dismantled trade barriers showing deep respects to the WTO rules, on the other side of the fence, developed countries, allegedly, resorted to various types of newer protectionist devices e.g. Voluntary Export Restraints (VER), Antidumping, etc. Such practices are opposed to the WTO rules. Furthermore, the US withdrew from its long-standing stances of opposition to regionalism and went to embrace preferential trading arrangement with Mexico, Canada and Israel.

Jagdish Bhagwati — Arthur Lehman Professor of Economics, Columbia University and a distinguished trade economist — attempts to contest the premises upon which the child labour arguments put a foot. He pinpoints the vacuousness enshrined therewith and seemingly, lashed out at the lame excuses thrown over, time to time, in order to place conditionalities of trade upon developing countries (see, The Global Trading System and Developing Asia, ADB): "... Central to United States thinking on the question of the Social Clause is the notion that competitive advantage can be morally 'illegitimate'".

In particular, it is argued that if labour standards elsewhere are different and unacceptable morally, then the resulting competition is morally illegitimate and "unfair". One may therefore, reject such trade, even though it is beneficial to one's nation; or one may alternatively veto it because it is unfair to have one's industry or its labour force be subjected to competition that is "unfair".

In the light of the arguments as mentioned above, one needs to reckon that the whole issue of child labour boils down to at-

mospheric products? ... Indeed in August 1995, the discovery of a garment factory in California run with about 70 illegal female migrants who were virtually imprisoned and worked as slaves ... leading to official admission of widespread abuse of minimum-wages, overtime, health and safety regulations throughout the garment industry ...

According to Bhagwati, there is pervasive presence of diversity of labour practices and standards which tend to reflect "not necessarily venality and wickedness, but rather diversity of cultural values, economic conditions and analytical beliefs and theories concerning the economic (and therefore moral) consequences of specific labour standards ...".

Further he goes on to challenge the "moral leadership" that US

seems to uphold on the question vis a vis developing countries:



## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

taching "values" related to the suspension of other country's trading rights. Value judgements are always varied excepting, perhaps, concerning that of the slavery which is condemned by every one, every where and every time. But child labour is not slavery (admittedly, slavery is rare nowadays). Of course, "ILO has many conventions that many nations signed. But many have signed simply because, in effect, they are not binding. Equally the United States has signed no more than a tiny fraction of these. The question whether a substantive consensus on anything except well-meaning and broad principles without consequences for trade access in case of non-compliance can be obtained, is

"... it is hard to sustain when its own violations would surely qualify for trade sanctions in an impartial tribunal. Thus for instance, worker participation in decision making on the plant, a measure of true economic democracy, much more pertinent than the unionisation of labour, is far more widespread in Europe than in North America. Would we then condemn North America to denial of trading rights by the Europeans? Migrant labour is ill-treated and slavery in US agriculture due to grossly inadequate and corrupt enforcement, if investigative television shows on US televisions are a guide; does this mean that other nations should prohibit the import of US agri-

## Willing to Strike but Afraid to Wound

*The Prime Minister said that Pakistan would play cricket matches in India. Thackarey challenged his statement and followed it up with the digging of the pitch at the Kotla grounds in Delhi. He has made India — and the Prime Minister — a laughing stock. If no action is taken against him, Vajpayee will be seen as a compromising Prime Minister. The BJP should at least resign from the Shiv Sena-led government in Maharashtra.*

It was no ordinary meeting. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was in the chair, flanked by Home Minister L K Advani and Human Resources Development Minister Murli Manohar Joshi. The National Committee for the 50th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's martyrdom had been convened to suggest how to observe the 30th January when he was shot dead by a Hindu fanatic, Nathuram Godse.

Strange, none of the former Prime Ministers was present although they were reserved on either side of Vajpayee. No representative of the opposition parties, except Dr Manmohan Singh from Congress, was there.

A historian sitting next to me whispered that nobody bought books on the Mahatma any more. The thin attendance and the tenor of the meeting itself showed lack of interest. Persons like Sushila Nayyar and Usha Mehta, although furred by age, whipped up enthusiasm. But theirs was a flicker, the flame in the hearts of people seems to be lessening. They spoke with the same poise and poignancy, which distinguished them from others in the past. But what about the future? The BJP looked like upholding Gandhi an thoughts.

Vajpayee is persistent in paying homage to Gandhi's memory. Even when in opposition, he has attended all meetings of the committee. Maybe, this gives him the liberal streak, which has sustained him in his fight against the hard-liners in his party. The recent BJP session in Bangalore is one example. He made party chief Kushabau Thackrey, an

RSS man, eat his words of criticism. But isn't Vajpayee somewhat late? The RSS — and the Hindutva supporters — are too entrenched and too strong. The time to assert was before Advani took a *rath yatra* through Northern India and polarised even the countryside. Vajpayee kept quiet then. His defence was that the BJP was forced to do so. He made no bones in saying that had there been no *mandals* (reservations for the backward as announced by then Prime Minister VP Singh), there would have been no *kamandal* (a small vessel, which distinguishes the *sadhus* from others). Looking back, it is clear that both divided the society. VP Singh's step articulated casteism and Advani's *rath yatra* communalism. While VP Singh's reform stopped at benefiting the creamy layer in the backward, Advani is making a tolerant society parochial. It will take many years for India to wash out the poison injected at that time in its body politics.

Vajpayee's silence harmed the nation still further when the Babri masjid was demolished at Ayodhya. Although upset, he did nothing to repair the damage inflicted on India's composite culture. I recall when I met him on December 7, one day after the demolition, I found him greatly disturbed. But his remark was: "Let the temple come up." This was no

solution when the Muslims were worked up and the matter was pending before the court. He can, however, help now to get an early verdict by requesting the Supreme Court to order day-to-day hearing by a special court.

The distancing by the Vajpayee group from the RSS may be a tactical move. If there is any reality, it is that the BJP leaders have realised that they cannot return to power if their party continues to have no support from the minorities and liberal Hindus. The BJP is itself to blame for this. It played the Hindu card to divide the society and get vote. In the process, the genie of fanaticism and fundamentalism has come out of the bottle. The realisation that the party has gone too far does not mean that the genie will oblige it and go back into the bottle.

The BJP spokesman had recently said that "there is a limit" when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) went amuck and attacked Christians. VHP chief Singhvi's criticism of Mother Teresa and Amartya Sen is one example. He made party chief Kushabau Thackrey, an

is the philosophy of Hindu *rashtra* that has given birth to the VHP and the Bajrang Dal. Maybe, they owe their existence to the strategy of blowing hot and cold at the same time. How can the BJP leaders disown the two when all, including the BJP, are members of the RSS parivar? True, Vajpayee is liberal. But he has also stood in knickers in a rally held in the presence of the RSS chief. Differences between the hard-liners and others are there but they are no more than a tension within a family.

The point to worry about is a party like the Shiv Sena, which has used the same chauvinistic Hindu stance to build up its following but which is not under the discipline of the RSS. Singhvi can be made to eat his words as he had done in the case of Amartya Sen. But Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackrey is not immune to any plea. He is a stray bull.

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with the digging of the pitch at the Kotla grounds in Delhi. He has made India — and the Prime Minister — a laughing stock. If no action is taken against him, Vajpayee will be seen as a compromising Prime Minister. The BJP should at least resign from the Shiv Sena-led government in Maharashtra.

That the BJP has changed its tune is clear from what Advani said in the wake of attacks on the Christians in Gujarat. He said that it was the duty of the state and central governments as well as the BJP to ensure safety and equality to members of all religions in the country. They are laudable thoughts. But when it comes to implementing them, the BJP drags its feet. Even now the Home Ministry's response to the excesses committed against the Christians in Gujarat has been lukewarm.

Advani's, or for that matter, the BJP's stock would have gone up if he had recommended the dismissal of the state government. Instead, the resolution passed at the Bangalore session commanded the handling of the situation by Gujarat chief minister Keshu Bhai Patel. His proximity to the RSS rescued him.

Such examples only prove that Vajpayee is willing to strike but afraid to wound. His liberal posture is not enough.

## OPINION

### Tarnished Image of DU

Dr. Sabrina Q. Rashid

I would first of all like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the lecturers and professors of our medical college (DMCH) who taught and treated us like our guardians and parents. Their behaviour to us students was so gentle, polite and affectionate that when I read about the behaviour of some teachers of DU, I was overwhelmed with gratitude towards the dear sirs of our Medical College. They treated us so well; that the thought of fear of this kind never crossed our minds.

The fear, the shame and the humiliation that so many female students have to face in DU is not only a pity but also a disgusting situation. For, the female students here are few of the best the nation has produced and yet they have to go through this humiliation in their quest for knowledge from the highest seat of learning of our country, which was once called the Oxford of the East!

The fact that the lady students are so disgusted with the whole system in which even if you are one of the best student you have to please your teachers to get First Class First position, or if you are not so good you have to lower yourself the same way to be passed, is a chilling news to us. Whereas the environment in DMCH was so pure and clean of these wrong ways of achieving something that should depend solely and wholly on the students' caliber and hard work.

How lucky we were that we never had to think of anything but study, study and study! For that is the only thing a student is supposed to do and wants to do. Buttering, greasing, bribing and doing politics to get passed or attain position is most hateful to majority of students. But the fact that they have to do so, otherwise they are lost, is bad news not only for the students but for the entire nation. Imagine

developed countries. It is that the low-cost commodities (from low-priced child labour) exported by the developing countries appear to compete with unskilled labour of the importing countries. As a result, there grows unemployment and deprivation. The argument is not tenable due to three reasons. First, over the years, technological developments in developed economies, especially in the US, seem to have replaced labour to an extent and second, the prices of those products have not fallen, in fact have risen. Whereas, according to the famous Stolper-Samuelson postulate, the prices of the products that cheap labour produces in developing countries should go down in developed countries. And, third, statistics on real wages of America display no sign of a decline and thus does not conform to the hypothesis. Of a fall in employment level and therefore of real wages.

Instead of raising hue and cry over the child labour issue and forcing the developing countries to leave the trading field on different pretexts, the positive attitude would call for (a) a regular monitoring of the security standards of those labour in plants; and (b) working out a formula to set a common standard of child labour throughout the world. After all, the standard that US wants to maintain in respect of child labour could be different from that in Bangladesh.

In the name of labour standards or other reasons, a move towards protectionism would only kill the globalisation baby of which the developed countries claim the fatherhood. It is an irony that the fearful lion stopped roaring and begs Special Social Clause from world trade bodies. Let not healer be the killer.

He has to undo the harm his party has done. The polity has got so contaminated that the disparate ethnic groups are having their way. In fact, the BJP's governance has let the worst elements in the society to come to the fore. Violence and hatred are rocking the nation. Religion is being mixed with politics with a vengeance.

Take the Akali Dal, the BJP's ally. It sees no difference between religion and politics. So much so, it does not mind misusing the Akal Thak, the Sikhs' highest temporal authority. Its head, Ranjit Singh, has issued *hukumnama* to order Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal and the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) chief Gurcharan Singh Tohra not to make statements against each other. How can the Akal Thak interfere in a matter, which is solely political? Badal has been rightly trying to establish the supremacy of an elected government over religious zealots. But the interference by Akal Thak has emboldened them.

The *hukumnama* or Bal Thackarey's fiat have created a situation in the country where there is no respect either for law or order. Normalcy has been pushed to the background. The Home Ministry's serious notice, if at all it is there, is confined to the precincts of the secretariat. The Mahatma's martyrdom should remind us, if nothing, the futility of violence. It will be interesting to watch how Vajpayee will counter fanatics, fundamentalists and hard-liners when his equation with the RSS has got somewhat diluted.

## To the Editor...

*Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.*

### Employment Bank

Sir, The idea of floating Employment Bank in all thanas of Bangladesh is a very generous idea but I am not sure about its implementation. I might be wrong or do not have enough information to comment about it. But as I understand, the bank is expected to boost the government's drive to reduce unemployment, through creating opportunities for self-employment. Then is it not the duplication of activities of many of the NGOs?

There should not be any political purpose for its creation. If the bank is created to expand job opportunities for the unemployed, please use the already established organisation structures. I am sure Bangladesh has many reputed NGOs who can carry out the purpose of the bank without costing a penny to the new establishments. We should try to use the existing facilities before trying to create any new organisation.

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### Civic sense

Sir, On 11.1.99, I was driving from Banani to Gulshan to have *iftaar* with my father and mother who live near Gulshan One Circle. This drive at the peak hour usually takes about 15-20 minutes. That day I started at 4:50 pm well ahead of the *iftaar* time. But when I came near Kumudini the police

### Returning Officers

Sir, The opposition political parties have already demanded the reorganisation of the present set up of the Election Commission and also of the Chief Election Commissioner. We know that the Returning Officer plays a key role in conducting the election. Neutrality, free and fairness solely depend on them. The