

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 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

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.

We all know that a very pet 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 on board 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 counteracted 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 cheaply child labour. However, while developing countries including Bangladesh, carried out massive trade reforms and dismantled trade barriers showing deep respect 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 Lehtman 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 thereupon 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). The Central to the 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 attacking "values" related to the suspension of other country's trading rights. Value judgements are always varied excepting, perhaps, concerning that of 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

therefore dubious". 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 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

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 to 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 to the level of brutality 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-

Whether or not child labour should be altogether banned would hinge mostly upon the available alternatives of the households supplying child labour. The alternative that they tend to face in Bangladesh or elsewhere is starvation and extinction. Both starvation and extinction are greater calamity than that of the use of child labour. And "that eliminating child labour would then be like voting to eliminate abortion without worrying about the needs of the children that are born". Now let us take the fundamental fear that cramps on the

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.

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.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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 in the government 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 reacted saying that "there is a limit" when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) went amuck and attacked Christians. VHP chief Singhal's criticism of Mother Teresa and Amartya Sen was resented rightly. But it

is the philosophy of Hindu rashtriya, 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. Singhal can be made to eat his words as he had done in the case of Amartya Sen. But Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackarey is not immune to any plea. He is a stray bull.

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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 excessive 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 commended 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.

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 missing the Akal Thakt, the Sikhs' highest temporal authority. Its head, Ranjit Singh, has issued a hukamnama 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 Thakt 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 Thakt has emboldened them.

The hukamnama or Bal Thackarey's flats 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.

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 they thought or fear of this kind never even 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, a 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 a 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 any thing but study, study and study! That is the only thing a student is supposed to and wants to do. Butting, 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 also for the entire nation. Imag-

ine, what kind of graduates and first-class students they will be if they attained it through those means. And now we hear that the girls have to sacrifice even more than what the boys have to, in order to attain what they should or could have through mere hard work at studies. The fact that so many female students have dared to come forward and form a human chain and protest in various other ways shows that what we have learnt so far from the media is only the tip of the iceberg.

The situation could actually be worse for these ladies to overcome their fear of expulsion and intimidation by the political parties and to raise their voice against sexual harassment. We must give them credit and also our support for their cause, for this menace actually needs to be rooted out of all educational institutes. Otherwise we all will have to pay for it one day.

This kind of harassment has no limits or borders to be defined. It need not be physical always, it can just be a look, a word, a gesture, anything that conveys the message to a lady student from her 'sir', which can make her feel embarrassed or uneasy. So the very thought should not be there in the male teacher's mind for fear of the punishment that he can get if he conveys any such message to his helpless female students. The female teachers should come to the aid of the female students. They should try to protect and help them out of such difficult situations.

For complaining against a sir by his female student on such a matter is very embarrassing and difficult for the student. No girl wants to go through this experience unless driven to a corner. Therefore don't put them in such a position in the first place; respect them, as ladies should be!

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 in Bangladesh. 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 11.9.99, 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

sergeant stopped us and that rush hour traffic was caught up for 20 minutes — because the prime minister was coming for iftaar somewhere in the vicinity.

We, the rojdar, had to wait in that traffic till our roja became makru. So who will take the responsibility of this lack of civic sense? The DMP or the PM?

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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 the Returning Officer plays a key role in conducting the election. Neutrality, free and fairness solely depend on them. The present system of appointing Returning Officers from among the Deputy Commissioners has proved futile as their fundamental functions and duties are to 'please all and malign none'. So, they cannot remain neutral in conducting.

In the last mayoral election in 1994, the Deputy Election Commissioner of each Division was appointed Returning Officer for respective city corporations. They conducted elections neutrally, fairly and freely. No political parties raised any grievances against

the result of the election. Only because they were the officers of the Election Commission. They discharged their duties within full confidences of the public and political parties.

I suggest that the officers from the Election Commission i.e. Deputy Election Commissioners, Asst. Election Commissioners, Dist Election Commissioners, Thana Election Officers and Judicial Officers may be appointed of Returning Officers in the coming elections.

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Practice what you preach

Sir, Recently Professor Amartya Sen delivering a lecture in Dhaka eulogised the beauty of his childhood city. Unfortunately, he does not recommend one to live in the same Dhaka of present time with its problems of overpopulation. We all know how much damage has been done to the beauty of Dhaka by overpopulation and pollution.

Another thing that adds to the unclean look of the city is the graffiti by different political parties on the walls of public and private buildings. We expect that our elected officials who are the guardians of a beautiful capital city would not embark on such distasteful activities.

To our surprise, however, we have noticed that some mayoral candidates for the ensuing city corporation election have already started spoiling the walls with their individual campaigns. Opposite to Hotel Sheraton, one such graffiti requesting votes is contrary to one's sense of beauty. We would like to appeal to different mayoral and ward commissioner candidates that they give up such bad practice for the sake of

the city's cleanliness and beauty.

The least we can expect from the future guardians of the city is to practice what they preach!

Zarina Rahman Khan
Monirul Khan
Dhaka University

The worst humiliation

Sir, Through the media and personal representation, the attention of the government is drawn to abolish the practice of "super-session" which was done in a mass scale in February 1992 probably with an aim to politicise the bureaucracy. For this, the previous government, had to pay a heavy price. It is regretful that the bad practices set by the former government still continues unabated so much so that junior officers were promoted leaving behind their much (as much as 3-4 years) seniors on one pretext or the other.

This has multiplied the miseries of the illegally deprived senior officers. They have not only lost the preceding positions, privileges etc., that go with the promotion but even socially and mentally they feel humiliated and deprived because the junior officers in many cases have not only become equal to them but also overtaken them to become their bosses. Some junior officers, as learnt, show the audacity to speak not only in a commanding voice but also make arrogantly written instructions which are nothing short of compounding the humiliation of the once-upon-a-time senior officers.

The super session is humiliating not only locally but regionally and internationally too.

Abdullah
Dhaka