

## JU and the Rapists

The rapist and his accomplices are back on the Jahangirnagar University campus, to a reception, one may have all the reasons to believe, designed specially for the VIPs. Living quarters at the campus, a car for mode of transport and, last but not the least, an exclusive exam hall at the Savar Thana Health Complex, far from the madding crowd, were part of a special arrangement, planned and executed under the reportedly relentless supervision of the University authorities. Bewildered, general students went to the authorities for some explanation. Explanation never came. In fact, they were refused a meeting with the VC. Infuriated, they rushed to the examination office and tried to prevent the officials from conducting examinations for the 'criminals'. It didn't help, too. There came a warning from the proctor: stern action for those trying to jeopardise the examination of the three 'students'.

The authorities are not ready to lose their 'sense of proportion' in the face of intense agitation by the students. After all they are the framers and executors of the law of the university. And the law says the rapist and his accomplices are no longer 'perpetrators'. Rony, who actually committed the crime, won their hearts with 'good manner' and his one-year suspension was suspended. His abettors were not even convicted. They 'deserve' treatment a student is entitled to. They have the 'right' to sit for their MSS examinations. Special arrangements were made because they were 'sick' (sick, indeed). Justice (or travesty of justice?) was done! Action of the students, who declared the three-some *persona non grata*, actually hinged on 'insanity' in the eyes of the authorities who deemed it necessary to be strict on them. So much for sanity and sense of proportion.

The JU administration has definitely set a precedent, a precedent that would only encourage 'students' like Rony and his accomplices. You may commit the gravest of crime, just make sure you have the immunity — a membership of the student organisation of the ruling party. If the senate and syndicate of the university have done 'justice', then their Dhaka University counterparts have been unjust.

The JU authorities need not just introspection but reform as well. Their action (or inertia?) bears anything but the right message.

## Curbing Corruption

Although corruption at every level in Bangladesh is nothing unexpected these days, but the Paramilitary Committee on Health's insight into medical and surgical equipment-related criminal lapses by seven civil surgeons (CSs) leaves us rather frightened. These CSs, who are given the responsibility to look after people's health, were allegedly found "misappropriating" twenty crore taka. The offence they committed, as published in Thursday's *Daily Star*, clearly indicates that public health is in danger at the hands of these so-called "life savers" and persons associated with the whole process.

We look at the episode as the tip of the ice-berg. If the authority concerned energises themselves to dig deeper and start a countrywide investigation, there is bound to be more horrifying incidents to disclose and more "offenders against humanity" waiting to be taken to task. As far as the media is concerned, we will do our best, but at the same time we expect administrative hierarchy to perform its task. It is the healthcare of our country that is at stake. While it is already in dire straits, no one expects that more of these crimes and anomalies in hospitals make things worse.

We hold in high esteem what the parliamentary committee has performed. They have shown the way and have done this for the second time. Since it has unearthed a vicious circle, we strongly believe that members of the committee will not sway in following up these breaches in accordance with the law of the land. Only legal actions against criminals can make sure that we would succeed in curbing corruption, if not eliminate it. Let's begin the process now with all our integrity.

## Make It a Regular Fare

Finally the Indo-Pakistan cricket series got underway at Chennai Thursday. The packed Chidambaram stadium significantly displayed the eagerness and enthusiasm with which the cricket war between these two neighbours are relished by countless spectators. Both teams enjoy an enormous crowd following that often tells upon the nerves and performance of the players. Since Abdul Hafiz Kardar took out the first Pakistan cricket team to India in 1952 they have played 44 Test matches so far with a staggering 33 drawn ones; of the rest Pakistan had won 7 to India's 4. Whatever maybe the scorecard an Indo-Pakistan cricket match is always the jewel in the crown. The last time Pakistan was in India was in 1986-87 season under the leadership of Imran Khan. Subsequent attempts by both countries to play on each other's soil had to be abandoned due to threats of religious fanatics like Shiv Sena of India.

The present tour is the outcome of the determination of the cricket officials of both countries and a very positive approach shown by Wasim Akram, the Pakistan captain. There have been encouraging signs from both countries despite tensions after testing of nuclear devices by India and Pakistan last year. There is hardly anything more powerful than people to people contact for defusing tensions along the borders of these two warring neighbours and cricket, perhaps, is the best vehicle. Regular sporting contacts will definitely bring the people of these countries closer and that will lead to dispelling doubts and mutual suspicion. In fact these two cricketing giants are losing golden opportunities of improving their game and personal records by not playing more frequently and on regular basis. Why can't they agree on a calendar on the lines of the 'Ashes' series between themselves. If the Englishmen and Australians living 12000 miles apart can play regularly why can't India and Pakistan? We are making a strong plea to the politicians and cricket bosses of both countries to give this idea a serious thought. Meantime, we wish good luck to both teams.

# Failures and Famines

**"Famine prevention policy must be concerned with general conflict resolution between and within states as well as with human and economic problems of absolute poverty."**

I have a book in front: *Famines in Africa: Causes, Responses and Prevention* (Johns Hopkins, 1999). Very recently, in the first week of January I suppose, the book had its launching ceremony in Washington. Perhaps, the first and foremost arrival in the new year. However, the book is written by Joachim von Braun, Tesfaye Teklu and Patrick Webb — all economists of immense repute, especially, von Braun is very much known in the world of agricultural economists wearing two caps: Director of the Centre for Development Research (ZEP), Bonn, and President of the International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE).

The book, in the opinion of the book, seemingly starts with a discontent over the perceptions of famines in the past and a display of the feelings from field-level realities: "...for a long time famines have been considered anomalies—crises that must be remedied by short-term relief activities so that the normal processes of development can be resumed... We now know differently. Famines can destroy not just life but also the hope of development. They can make progress infinitely more difficult than it had been before... More—much more—is needed".

The authors are of the view that although largely confined to Africa at the turn of the twenty-first century, the spectre of famine still haunts other parts of the world. Why? Because the roots of famines are yet to be uprooted. The risks that tend to grease a famine-like situation are mainly the badly managed economic transformation, combined with social unrest and other political crises. To add fuel to the fire, there are factors such as (a) weak integration with global trade and aid; (b) less of market integration inside the country; (c) limited public capacity to

deal with emergencies and mass poverty and (d) urban and rural settings where public services fail to fish out the vulnerable groups from the ponds of poverty.

The book argues that important lessons could be learnt from South Asia and historical Europe and to that effect, the cogent arguments by A.K. Sen and J. Dreze (and Sen) on public recognition and their seminal analyses have been extended. "Until the groundbreaking work of Sen (1981), economic research largely shunned the complex issue of famine. New empirical study may help expand the frontiers of our understanding and facilitate effective action for famine prevention in the future... Learning from experiences within African countries may be at least as important as learning from outside the continent".

The reason for which I intend to present some of the observations of the book is their relevance in the context of a country like Bangladesh. But first, allow me to note the observations. There are three premises upon which the book is based. First, famine is just not the result of generalizable market and climate-driven market failure but largely of a function of institutional, organizational and policy failure. Second, famines, especially in Africa, must be explained in a long-term context and third, "just as the causes of famine are diverse, there is immense diversity in policy responses to famine—there is no optimal solution".

The perennial sources of famine today are policy, institutional and organizational failures. The authors of the book go to argue, a la Dreze and

Sen and others, that famine risks posed by inefficient or irresponsible government and limitations on market-based private action suggest a continued need for improving the role of public action. However, allegedly, "the public action, including state action, is complicated by governments that instrumentalize hunger as a part of conflict acceleration, becoming part of the famine problem. This then raises the issue of appropriate non-government and possibly international public action". The important dimension of public policy failures, as argued, generally spring from

prevention. The absence of effective systems of government can be both a cause and a consequence of famine".

The findings from the book seem to be firm on the notion that a move towards a democratic system of governance could curtail the chances of famine. This is not a new notion as we heard it before from A.K. Sen. But the authors try to expand the net of empirical evidences on that issue drawing from the contrasting experiences of African countries. Southern African countries like Botswana and Zimbabwe, with relatively strong partici-

face famine. Non-farm income sources are particularly strong in southern African countries to mitigate the sufferings. No less important is the role of NGO in the battle to face famine. Besides assets, the coping capacity also depends on human resource base.

There are, evidently, diverse sources to withstand the stresses but such strength also is a function of the degree and duration of the stress. Some households can anticipate the degree and duration and accordingly resort to coping mechanism while others fail to do just that and thus fall easy prey to lingering pains from the famine-led scarcity.

There is no doubt that present-day famines in Africa are mostly caused by military conflicts that arguably result from oppressive, unaccountable and non-participatory government. Relief programmes could be of little help in such a situation. To eliminate famine, there seems no substitute for rural participation in governance. "Famine prevention policy must, therefore, be concerned with general conflict resolution between and within states as well as with human and economic problems of absolute poverty".

The final observation from the book that I would like to highlight is that famine is not something that strikes suddenly. "There are an accumulation of events and policies that progressively erode the capacity of countries as well as households to deal with short-term shocks to the economy and food supply... Misguided macroeconomic and trade policies have been part of the problem in most famine-prone countries and conditions established by past policy failures cannot be rectified in the short run".

Now landing with the lessons for Bangladesh. Few months back, Bangladesh was almost on the verge of a famine following the unprecedented flood. Many analysts apprehended that the crises could call a disaster like famine. Fortunately, the doomsday did not arrive. There are a number of reasons which helped the government overcome the crises. First, over the years, the coping ability and mechanism of the rural people (including that of the poor) is said to have substantially changed along with growing dependence on non-farm sources of income. It may be mentioned here that non-farm sources of income now account for about two-thirds of rural household income. These activities are mostly transport and trading, remittances, services etc. Second, the government seems to have made less of policy mistakes, especially, relating to macroeconomic management. Third, the NGOs, political organizations and social and community groups all over the country quickly responded to the call of the crises and thus helped reduce the degree of severity. Fourth, different markets within the country are now better integrated than before. And finally, the democratic system of governance—despite much of the criticisms tabled by the critics—enlarged the risk premium of the rulers for turning a deaf ear to the crises. Frightened thus, the government was more serious in putting things on an even keel. And with an elected local level government and freedom of press in existence, the chances of famine seemingly dropped off.

The lessons, as could be gleaned from the book, are clear: appropriate macroeconomic policies, growing market integration, democracy and diversity in the sources of income go to contain the chances of famine in a country.

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

flawed policies, extensive environmental degradation, lack of rural and urban employment opportunities, limited access to education and inadequate health and sanitation services to beef up the rate of poor nutrition within households. Taken together, "the resulting socioeconomic conditions impair the ability of households to 'grow out' of poverty, thereby permitting production failures to develop into famines". Policy failures of these types are further greased by inappropriate macroeconomic policies and "excessive" state interventions. By and large, a positive policy and operational response to famine warrants a strengthening of the institutional and organizational capabilities, especially in the African context. "Central, local and community governments play key roles in famines causation as well as

participation in local governments, are countries in which government action has indeed responded to public demands while others miserably failed on this score. "The promotion of democratic government should therefore have a high priority not only to ensure equity in representation, but also with a view to preventing famine. This is one of the lessons learned from Asia that most easily transfers to Africa (a la Sen)".

At the household levels, according to the authors, the degree of the diversity of income sources also determine the severity of the famine that households are likely to be afflicted with. For example, countries where households derive a larger part of their income from non-agricultural sources (around 60-70 per cent) are found to be better equipped to

# Cuba Celebrates 40th Anniversary of its Communist Rule

by A S M Nurunnabi

**Now 72 in age, Castro is showing signs of his advanced years. But even at this advanced age, he seems to be in no hurry to decide when to leave his power to his successor.**

AFTER 40 years, Cuban leader Castro's grip on power has never been stronger, so say international observers. The communist revolution took place 40 years ago when the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista was ousted and a New Year's Eve party and boarded a plane bound for exile. No one then could believe that the Cuban revolution would happen so easily. The guerrilla leader, Fidel Castro, who brought about the revolution, was then 32-year-old.

On that day, January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro with his band of followers termed barbudos in the language of the Cubans, began a victory march across the country, starting in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba, the cradle of the revolution. A week later, Castro made his triumphal run to Havana, riding through the ecstatic crowd on top of a captured tank.

After four decades, the Cuban leader has shown one quality above all: an uncanny instinct for power and survival. Going over the years since the revolution, it will be seen that Castro has defied every challenge to his rule, from the Bay of Pigs invasion and other CIA-sponsored plots to the US trade embargo and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's key ally. As one of the world's most enduring leaders — and one of only four communist rulers still in power — he has caused serious political headache for nine US presidents so far.

72 in age, Castro is showing signs of his advanced years. But even at this advanced age, his grip on power has never been firmer and he seems to be in no hurry to decide when to leave his power to his successor.

Castro's government celebrated its 40th anniversary recently with proper ceremonies. But some observers commented there was little of the enthusiasm that greeted the barbudos when they rode down from the mountains in 1959 after their two-year guerrilla war. Congratulatory letters poured in

from Pope John II, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian leader Boris Yeltsin. Castro capped off the ceremonies by delivering a speech in the same Santiago plaza where he declared victory 40 years ago. In his speech, the Cuban President warned that his revolution was "just beginning" and urged Cubans not to lose faith in the socialist system.

Castro's speech carried a different message for some Cubans, especially those in Miami. To them Castro has always been a coldblooded tyrant who has killed or jailed his enemies to preserve his absolute power.

On the other hand, on the island itself, Castro is still widely admired as a patriot who resisted US bullying and tried to create a more equitable society. Still the withering impact of the economic crisis has dampened the enthusiasm of even Castro's most fervent followers. "We can't live off the past. For all of our ideals, we spend most of our time now inventing ways to make it through the day".

At present, as observers point out, everything in Cuba must be "invented": meals, jobs, transportation and entertainment.

In reality, Castro's regime from the start has been bedeviled by the inventive plots across the Straits of Florida. The Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961, when 2600 CIA-trained Cuban exiles invaded Cuba only to be overwhelmed by Castro's tipped-off troops was just the beginning. According to CIA documents de-classified in 1998, American spies dreamed up assassination plots against Castro in many ways: using poison cigars, toxic wet suits, exploding seashells and Mafia

hitmen. They also considered launching a fake terror campaign in Miami or an attack on a civilian airplane to justify military intervention in Cuba. None of the plans worked, of course, but Castro loves to highlight them in books, museums and conferences.

It has been also reported that Castro has even been able to turn economic adversity to his advantage. When Washington first imposed trade embargo 37 years ago, it was meant to cripple Cuba's capacity to export revolution and to hike the costs of the Soviet empire. In some ways, it worked. But now that the cold war is over and Cuba has opened up to the world, the sanctions have lost their effectiveness.

The US is virtually alone on the issue of sanctions: last year the United Nations voted 143 to 3 in favour of a resolution asking Washington to lift the embargo. According to observers, the irony is that the embargo, while sharpening economic crisis in Cuba, is helping Castro survive politically. The Cuban leader still blames America's aggression to justify everything from the crisis-ridden economy to his absolute control over the media.

Nearly a decade ago, as the Soviet bloc began to collapse, there was prediction that Castro won't last long. There were some indications in that direction. The Cuban economy sank more than 40 per cent between 1991 and 1994; dissidents became more vocal, and thousands of Cuban rafters threw themselves into the Straits of Florida.

But once again, Castro maneuvered to ensure his survival. He cracked down hard on internal dissent, even executing one popular General in 1989 after

charging him with drug trafficking. He also accepted stop-gap solutions he had once deemed evil: foreign tourism and investment, the legalisation of the US dollar and a limited number of "self-employed" workers. Today observers noted that, relying on mainly on tourism, sugar export and cash remittances from abroad, the Cuban economy is staying afloat.

When we look back, we find that the Cuban revolution resonated so strongly around Latin America because it was a home-grown movement, inspired by lofty goals, promises and ideals. Today most of those are gone. It is, of course, true that Cuba has made significant advances in health and education. Infant mortality, life expectancy and literacy rate are among the best in the world. But the economy has been so devastated that Cuban officials say it will be another five years before it can return to 1985 levels.

Castro is demanding a crackdown on rising crime in Cuba, calling it a threat to the revolution and urging greater US cooperation in the fight against drugs, terrorism and traffic in people. Castro said market-oriented economic reforms there following the collapse of the Soviet bloc had encouraged crime by creating circulation of dollars, bringing in tourists and now foreign businesses. Before the recent reforms, there were no dollars in Cuba. Once remarkably free of street crime and violence, Cuba has now seen a surge in prostitution, robbery and theft.

As Cubans scramble desperately to make ends meet, often resorting to the black market in food, merchandise and other questionable trading, a kind of moral rot has set in. For many Cubans, the festivities on the

occasion of the 40th anniversary of the revolution only served as a reminder that the man they greeted so deliriously on that great day is still in power-keeping, however, a strong vigilance on the doings of its enemies.

In later developments, US President Bill Clinton announced decisions allowing easing of a few elements of the US economic sanctions against

Cuba while still maintaining the bulk of the blockade. Clinton announced he would let US companies sell food and farm supplies to non-government organisations in Cuba and let any American send up to \$1,200 to Cuban individuals, as well as allow larger cash donations to Cuban charities. The measures also call for direct mail services to Cuba, expanded charter flights and easing limits on visits.

Cuba dismissed the US move to ease the embargo on the country as a "public relations maneuver", saying these measures would have little effect on Cuba's economy.

## OPINION

### "Tarnished Image of DU"

Amena Mohsin

Recently, the Dhaka University (DU) or more specifically the International Relations Department of the DU has been the focal point of much discussion and newspaper coverage. As a faculty member of the department I have followed the developments, news coverage as well as letters published in the various newspapers with much interest and concern. Dr Sabrina's Opinion (published in the DS on 17.1.99), however, I found most surprising and disturbing.

While I fully appreciate and support her concern on the question of sexual harassment, I cannot but strongly disagree with her on the issue of DMCH being pure and clean and DU being so polluted that even the best students have to please their teachers to get a first class first position. I don't know from where Dr Sabrina is getting her information but in my almost 15 years of teaching experience I have not come across a single instance of the above

sort. On the contrary I can proudly claim that in my department the moment the faculty members had even heard (without even any written allegations) that a teacher had favoured any student, the Academic Committee of the department would take specific steps to get the teacher removed from the Examination Committee. In fact the Academic Committee has also made it mandatory to have the scripts re-examined in case of over-markings.

I would therefore request Dr Sabrina to come out with specific evidences before making such sweeping allegation that indeed tarnishes the image of the university. It also hurts the feelings of the teachers who despite all odds are trying their best to keep the academic environment above nepotism. Most importantly, it tarnishes the image of the deserving first class students.

## 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.

### Air pollution

Sir, I read a report on 'pollution' a few days back in the DS on the air pollution of Dhaka city. A particular point in the report caught my attention.

The report says that this pollution causes brain damage. I myself is a victim of such damage. I work in the old part of the city and live in new town. Because of traffic congestion I travel mostly by rickshaws, but a few years back I used to travel on motorcycle but again the aggressive and rowdy traffic made me choose rickshaws as the only convenient alternative.

If I took me 15 minutes to reach my workplace from my house if I travel before 8.30 am but it took, more than an hour in the evening while coming back, breathing in large amount of exhaust from ill maintained buses, trucks and three wheelers, tempos and baby-taxis. It used to irritate me a lot but then I would see everybody around me take it very casually so I also did not complain much. But at the end of '97, I got some throat problem and my voice became hoarse. I thought it's either the cold or

the smoke that caused the problem. In early '98 the problem became serious and I consulted few doctors and each came up with a different diagnosis.

I then came across a senior E.N.T. specialist who said there is nothing wrong with my throat and it was a nerve problem. In the meantime my difficulties aggravated and trouble spread to my hands and legs. I had difficulty in getting up, walking, eating, writing and lifting things. I then went abroad for check-up where doctors diagnosed it as "anterior horn cell disease" in which parts of the brain and tissue suffer irreversible damage and they said pollution is the cause of this disease.

There is no cure for it and all I can do is delay the process by medication. I am already in deep trouble and my family is suffering with me.

It is very strange and very funny that our authorities cannot give us clean air to breathe, let alone other necessities of life. I request the DS to continue publishing articles on pollution and in the meantime we should keep our fingers crossed and

hope the general public and government will realise the seriousness of the situation. It is already too late.

A Silent Sufferer  
Dhaka

### Poverty and prejudice

Sir, It is time our political leaders realised that the Bengalee electorate is dangerous, because it is fickle. This state of the mind is due to poverty. Poverty endows a person with certain qualities. Like water, such minds seek the path of least resistance; go round an obstacle, desperate for security. Hence the resilience during the after calamities, political or natural.

As electorate, the voters like to take chances and hope for the best. If it does not work, they are used to the standard and instability. The experimental period is not stable.

Therefore it would be unrealistic for any powerful political party to rest on its oars and expect to be returned to power as a matter of routine; because the opposition parties would tend to group together for the downfall of the regime.

Prominent parties have to nurture their public relations carefully based on the Bengalee psyche (the failure rate to read the public mind is high). A frustrated person hovering close to the poverty line is unreliable as far as party and group

loyalties are concerned, because the grass appears to be greener on the other side.

The same is the case with another group in similar society, namely, the marginal politicians honing their careers. Floor-crossing is a popular pastime here, without any lofty display of qualms of the conscience. The latter is not dry, but rather wet, spongy, and soggy, reeking with political futility!

These symptoms in a society bring about the need for antibiotics to match the diagnosis. Perhaps the sinners seem to enjoy life more than those of the pious bent; and wallowing in the mundane and materialistic pleasures and goodies of life acts as a deterrent from pursuing life confined within the narrow boundaries of the right path. This is the old story right from the days of Adam and Eve. Therefore much originality is not expected from those who expect to run the country and come up to expectations of the insecure millions.

With unstable electorate and politicians, it is a merry-go-round we have been witnessing since independence. There are many kinds of independence. Have we identified the same, and listed which ones we have achieved so far, and which is next on the agenda?

Abul M Ahmad  
Dhaka.

### Senseless hartals

Sir, I have been reading about the Hartals in Bangladesh with quite an interest. I

cannot figure out the purpose of observing Hartals to achieve political goals. I am not a politician, but have our country's leaders ever thought about what kind of image they are portraying about Bangladesh, to the other nations of the world? It seems like there is a vicious cycle going on. We have had two previous governments brought down in this manner, and once again the same game is being played. Every time it gets worse than before. It's funny how former enemies join hands to bring down the party in power. AL and BNP got together to bring down JP, then AL and JP got together to bring down BNP, and now JP has joined forces with BNP to oust AL. These senseless politicians seem to put their own personal interest in front of national interest, which they say they are representing. If they think that they represent the view of the masses, then let them hold a referendum to see how many people want and enjoy hartal. We need to knock some sense into their skulls. What do they think they are achieving by calling these senseless Hartals, other than destroying the country's economy? Who do they think pay for the public buses, gov. buildings etc., that are set on fire? The money does not come out of the Prime Minister's pocket. The people pay for them, in the form of taxes. When one of these opposition parties comes to power, it will have to go out and buy them again. Instead, the opposition parties can go and open some new schools for the country's

poor, erect hospitals, invite foreign companies to invest in Bangladesh etc. When foreign investors see the political situation of Bangladesh, they do not want to invest there. When these political leaders themselves don't keep their own bank accounts in the country, why would a foreign national come and invest there? This is really sad.

My earnest appeal to all the political parties in Bangladesh is to refrain from calling these senseless Hartals, and work together to build the country. Millions of people gave their lives, not to suffer, but to prosper in a free country. I don't think we had this kind of chaos in the country at the beginning. Now that the people of Bangladesh control their own destiny, shouldn't they strive to be the best in the world? Look at Japan and South Korea. If they can develop and become respectable members of the international community, why can't Bangladesh? The people elected the present government for a five-year term. Let them finish it out. If they fail to prove themselves, then the people will vote them out next time. Just like they did the previous government. Obviously, the population were fed-up with them and so they lost the elections. I just hope that someone will lead the country towards peace and prosperity, just as the martyrs of liberation war and the freedom fighters envisioned.

Waseem Khan,  
Northridge, California