

'If People Want Us to Stay in Power ...'

by Anwar Hossain Monju

WHETHER new tax has been levied in this budget or not has been the major topic of discussion in this year's budget session in the parliament. In all my years on the government, I have sensed frustration in those at the helm of the finance ministry. While our friendly neighbours and organisations who want Bangladesh's economic development, poverty alleviation and improvement of the poverty-stricken people's lot ask us to expand our tax-base and raise our foreign reserve. Unfortunately, there is no means or option to directly expand the tax base in our country. People in power only recognise its importance. Those in opposition feel there is no need to expand the tax base for public welfare, as if it could be done with a magic wand or some other means or wishful thinking.

In 1977, I had a conversation with the then minister for finance and planning Fashuddin Mahtab. He had just proposed a Tk. 500 crore budget. When I asked him what was his impression of the country's economy, he said, "I have proposed a Tk. 500 crore budget. Say, it will lead to a surplus of another 500 crore taka. Its equal distribution will lead to the rise of a discernible class, a class that will manifest the country's development." Mr. Mahtab was not perhaps a politician like me, but the fact is that we no longer think of improvement of the people. We are more in favour of distributing the money to a few people whose personal gains like air-conditioned residence and cars will create a good image of the country. Whether the people feel it or not, the donor agencies will be satisfied that there has been economic development in the country.

In 1977-78, I had the opportunity to accompany late President Ziaur Rahman on a visit to Indonesia. There I heard that if the road from the airport to Sheraton Hotel was developed, if sky-scrapers were built on both sides of the road, it would convince the donors and creditors that their money was utilised. Yes, Mr. Speaker, that is what has been happening here. We now have large buildings along the road from the airport to the Sheraton Hotel, we are constructing an eight-lane road from airport to the cantonment. We are constructing four-lane roads by-passes. We now see neon lights decorate them. Only the other day Mr. Harun, who was the owner of the Pakistan Times and came to Bangladesh after 28 years, said in a speech, "I opposed Mujib

when he wanted independence for Bangladesh. I had told him to negotiate. Today, having come to Bangladesh 28 years later, I think Bangabandhu was right. Bangladesh has really prospered." But, Mr. Speaker, one renowned economist from Pakistan and one from Bangladesh have said that Pakistan and Bangladesh have only got poorer between the 60s and the 90s. We cannot arrest the downward slide, Mr. Speaker, nor are we coming up with any solution.

When President Hossain Mohammad Ershad assumed power then Bangladesh had a burden of 2,000 crore taka in tax and in 1990 we wanted to levy 10,000 crore taka in tax. When the democratic government of Khaleda Zia stepped down the tax-burden was 17,000 crore taka. Now, it is 19,000 crore taka. What do we do with the money collected through tax? For the sake of argument we say that we have to levy tax for public welfare, but what do we actually do? In reality, all the money is spent for the ministers, bureaucrats, and government officials and employees; and to meet the deficit in state-owned enterprises like industries, power and railway sectors. As a result we are left with nothing for development. Then we have to depend on foreign grants and plead for exemption of previous grants. We are one of the poorest countries in the world. The way we are increasing tax and the way the people are getting poorer everyday, I am afraid, a day will come when the people of Bangladesh will refuse to pay tax for improvement of living standards of the ministers and bureaucrats and overlook the accruing deficit in public sectors. We hope that day will never come and we will find out a way to eliminate shortages.

Whenever we go to Paris for the Aid Club meeting, we want to know how much money have we got, 1.9 or two billion dollars? Our well-wishers tell us — why do you have to go to Paris, Tokyo, London, Washington for money? Just eliminate the systems loss in the power and railway sectors, and ensure optimum use of the Chittagong port, you don't have to go to anyone for money. The question is why can't we do that?

We have all observed hartals when necessary to achieve our freedom. But now that we are independent, when we have earned the right to improve upon our own lot, if we call hartals now and waste thousands of crores of taka then we have failed to realise the essence of independence. When we went to the World Bank for construction of the Bangabandhu Bridge

I met two Japanese prime ministers in Tokyo. If you could stop hartal you would be able to build one Bangabandhu Bridge every year, you wouldn't need to come here for money, they told me. I was embarrassed, Mr. Speaker. As the communications minister when I am requested by a legislator for a convert in his constituency, I realise that it is needed. Why after all these years since independence these people would still have to use bamboo-bridges? We have to answer this question. We are not stopping hartal. We are only letting the deficit rise and going to Paris for more aid. It is a vicious cycle, a cycle we have to come out of. We have to create a new leadership and a new vision.

I am a Jatiya Party man and part of the opposition. This government was not formed by my vote. Even then, the incumbent prime minister has made me a minister in her cabinet. Not only she has also made ministers two BNP legislators. She has created a consensus government. It is certainly a novel concept, but what has actually happened? It has been criticised. The parliament has not yet become the centre of political activities.

Many a peer Awami League legislator says that a politics of conspiracy has started in the country. We cannot come out of this politics of conspiracy. I had the chance to listen to Amir Hossain Amu's speech the other day. He said, "We have been in politics for so many years but still could not manage more than 30-35 per cent votes whereas those who came to power after 1975 managed 98 per cent votes. How could that happen?"

There lies the conspiracy. We came to this parliament with 98 per cent vote. We have to sustain this change after 1990, for our own interest and for the interest of the people. We claim that the constitution says people are the determining force, people are the driving force. Then why are we not turning to the people? Why Hussain Muhammad Ershad goes against the constitution and also Begum Khaleda Zia is the question when it is said that people were not allowed their rights to choose in successive autocratic regimes since 1974. Why is the compassion to turn back the clock to those days when only the TNOs and SPs cast their votes. I tell my friends that it won't happen again.

With the advent of new age, the end has come to the politics of conspiracy, the politics that ignore people for power. No more can a dictator or an autocrat come to power in this world, there will be no Marcos.

no Ayub Khan, no Tikka Khan, no Ziaur Rahman. There will be Khaleda, Hasina and others like them. But you have to realise, Mr. Speaker, that we have to take a tough decision, a decision for the welfare of the people. The mass must be told that the government of the coming millennium will improve their lot. Gone are those days, gone are the days of deficits. People will pay tax for the improvement of their lot and for the improvement of their conditions. There will be culverts, roads and electricity for all. Rights of the people of this new world and the country will be established. Democracy has come to stay.

One other thing, Mr. Speaker. We have to do something about corruption otherwise we will be in grave danger in future. There are news reports on the punishment of an elected union parishad member for embezzlement of 100 tonnes of wheat. The World Bank in its report describes how a policeman in our country takes bribe. Those of us who own thousands of crores of taka keep our money in their (abroad) banks. Once I asked a person from there when you give the documents on Benazir Bhutto to the Pakistan government, why can't you release the documents on Hussain Muhammad Ershad? Double standard shouldn't be practised.

One of my friends once told me if Ershad is corrupt then so is Monju. I am not saying that I am not corrupt. Mr. Speaker, the BNP government arrested me under the Special Powers Act. They kept me in the punishment cell four times but they filed no corruption case against me. We have heard allegations of corruption against the BNP government. We have heard of Airbus, arms, fertiliser factory, KAFCO and also issuance of 25-30 lakh taka by legislator without any kind of auditing. However, there was no case and there still is not, yet we claim we want elimination of corruption. I propose closure of the bureau. Mr. Speaker, these corrupt people are now the opposition leaders. They don't want to see the elected government in power any more, although it does not depend on their whims. When people will no longer want them, they will leave. If people want them to stay they will stay. In our time, we used to say that you cannot oust us. When Allah wants us to go, we will only be ousted then.

The author is the minister for communications of the Government of Bangladesh. The above is an abridged version of his speech in the just-concluded budget session of the parliament.

Liberation and Beyond

by J N Dixit

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1972: Efforts at National Consolidation

Part-VI

HAKSAR found Mujibur Rahman ambiguous and dilatory in some of his responses. I remember him remarking to me after one of his sessions with Mujib in Dhaka: "It is difficult enough to negotiate with the Pakistan; but what I find more difficult is to negotiate with our own side with different departments of Government of India and with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." In the even he was successful in getting the consent of the Bangladesh Government to return the POWs to Pakistan, Mujibur Rahman on his own told Haksar that given the difficulties about collecting evidence he did not want to waste energy and time on holding war crime trials. The substantive strategy of not doing anything which would prevent recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan and other Islamic countries. Holding on to a large number of POWs and conducting war crime trials would have generated controversies and subjected Bangladesh to the criticism of prolonging tensions even after liberation was achieved. In the larger interests of peace and normalcy in the sub-continent Mujibur Rahman's approach was valid. It also helped India in finalising arrangements for the Bhutto-Indira Gandhi summit at Shimla in July 1972.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, the Shimla Agreement embodied the following decisions: all the prisoners of war were to be repatriated to Pakistan. India conveyed to Pakistan on behalf of Bangladesh that no war crime trials would be held. India also suggested to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that he should recognise Bangladesh and establish diplomatic relations with it. An in-depth analysis of the Shimla Agreement in the context of India-Pakistan relations is not relevant here. (I have already covered the subject in some detail in my book published in 1995, anatomy of a Flawed Inheritance.)

After Mrs. Gandhi's visit Indo-Bangladesh relations settled down to normal patterns of bilateral interaction. These of course were subject to the political attitudes in India and the political developments in Bangladesh. On second thoughts, to claim that Indo-Bangladesh relations settled down to normal and positive inter-State patterns by March, 1972 would be an over-simplification. As for the Indian attitude towards Bangladesh, there was the strategic and political situation of having achieved a decisive military victory over Pakistan.



Sheikh Mujib is flanked by Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister for the Mujibnagar Government, on his right and Syed Nazrul Islam, Vice President, Mujibnagar Government to his left.

There was also the feeling that India had outmanoeuvred and isolated Pakistan in the international community despite a majority of the countries supporting Pakistan bilaterally and at the United Nations. There was also a feeling that the people of Bangladesh seceding from Pakistan had established an independent State on the basis of their linguistic, cultural and intellectual traditions had finally disproved the two-nation theory which led to the partition of India. The prognosis was that given the massive local popular support and India's military support for the liberation struggle, Indo-Bangladesh relations would be close, warm and based on mutual trust and goodwill. There was also the expectation in Indian public opinion that the Government and people of Bangladesh would be grateful for many years to come for India having helped them break the shackles of West Pakistani domination and discrimination.

India desired the closest economic, political and defence cooperation with Bangladesh. It also expected that the issues inherited from Indo-Pakistan relations 1947 to 1972 would be resolved peacefully without acrimony and by mutual accommodation. Issues like the sharing of the Ganga waters, the exchange of enclaves and the granting of mutual transit facilities for travel and tourism were expected to be sorted out in the context of goodwill and mutual cooperation which characterised India's relations with the Mujibnagar Government during the liberation struggle. As events from the second half of 1972 showed Indian expectations proved to have lacked a clear un-

derstanding of the deep undercurrents in 'the psyche of the Bangladesh power structure under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Indian anticipations also lacked in political realism, as we shall see in later developments.

Bangladesh attitude under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, though not expressed overtly and clearly, were quite different from Indian expectations. Mujib of course appreciated India's help in the liberation struggle. He desired a practical and friendly relationship with India. He was also conscious that if Bangladesh earned sufficient recognition from important countries and developed the minimum required levels of bilateral political, economic and technological relations, he would not need India's substantive support and assistance. In keeping with this approach, he was clear in his mind that he did not wish to be over dependent on India. He also (quite logically) did not wish Bangladesh to be dubbed a client State of India, as was being anticipated by many political observers and analysts from different parts of the world. He was of the view that while pending disputes and issues should be resolved amicably through political dialogue, there was no going to be any compromises on the part of Bangladesh on issues which could affect Bangladesh' vital interests as perceived by him.

The appreciation or gratitude towards India was not going to cloud his perceptions of Bangladesh' interests, nor was it going to reduce his determination to stand firm on fulfilling these interests. His objectives were to consolidate his own leadership and the Awami League's sway over Bangladesh politics. He wanted to focus on the political consolidation and economic reconstruction of Bangladesh. He felt that to achieve these objectives, he had to gain recognition from important countries in different parts of the world, particularly from the United States, China and Pakistan. There were already supportive of Bangladesh. His political judgement was valid that depending off any excessive influence by India would depend on his ability to establish formal and substantive relationship with important countries of Asia and the Super Powers. He had taken a decision by May-June 1972 that if he had to compromise on the question of release of prisoners of war and the holding of war crime trials in order to establish relations with Pakistan he would do so.

It was also his assessment that Bangladesh should reassert not just its Bengali linguistic and cultural identity but its Bengali Muslim identity as well if the country were not to be swamped by identification with West Bengal and India. He was therefore keen for Bangladesh to be acknowledged as an important Muslim country of South Asia.

So despite the genuinely emotional and sincerely warm reception which he extended to Mrs. Indira Gandhi when she visited Dhaka and despite his desire to retain Indian troops to suppress residual pro-Pakistani opposition, his foreign and security policies were at variance from the general Indian expectations.

The Indian brigade operating in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong Hill Tracts completed its task by July-August, 1972 and was withdrawn. At the end of the negotiations which Mujib had with P.N. Haksar in June 1972 he agreed to the return of all the POWs to Pakistan and he had indicated that he was dropping the idea of holding war crime trials. He had taken the first step towards normalising relations with Pakistan under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

He also took a number of steps for what he considered necessary for ensuring national reconciliation and for sign all his independence from Indian influence. The Bangladesh Government conveyed messages emphasising its urgent desire to take possession of the enclaves which India was supposed to transfer to former East Pakistan under the Radcliffe Award and subsequent agreements. He appointed Dr. Abbas as the Bangladesh co-chairman of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission which was to resolve the complex issue of the sharing of Ganga waters. Abbas had been the senior negotiator on behalf of Pakistan at discussions on the Farakka issue with India before liberation. He was a hardliner committed to the Pakistani negotiating stance. He had even authored a book called Mrituyur Padadhwani (The sound of the footsteps of death), a highly polemical work criticising the consequences of the India-built Farakka barrage.

Mujib took a decision to re-recruit Bangladesh military officers and civil servants of the Pakistani armed forces and civil service. He did so despite the fact that many of them did not support the liberation struggle of Bangladesh.

He gave the important portfolio of Irrigation and Water Resources, a Ministry which was to deal with the Farakka barrage negotiations, to Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed, who had been removed as Foreign Minister by Tajuddin Ahmed in September, 1971 for reasons recounted earlier. Mujib also sent messages to the United States, UK and China as well as to Indonesia and Malaysia conveying Bangladesh's desire to establish bilateral relations. He sent 'back channel' messages to Z.A. Bhutto that he was willing to restore normal relations with Pakistan if Pakistan if Pakistan gave full recognition to Bangladesh, showed a willingness to pay some sort of reparation to Bangladesh for the losses during the liberation war and also agreed to transfer some assets of West Pakistan to East Pakistan which were the legitimate inheritance of former East Pakistanis.

(Continued)

Concerns over Tanbazaar

by Salma Ali

THE recent steps taken by the government to bring an end to prostitution in Tanbazaar and the subsequent measures taken to rehabilitate these women into the social mainstream have caused great concern. I applaud the sincerity of the government in its efforts in making the flesh trade to an end. But as an activist who is directly involved with the sex workers, I believe the system is failing to foresee many of the complications related to rehabilitate these individuals. I commend the decision of the government to rehabilitate sex workers for which it has all my support, but I would also like to state that the dissipation of centuries-old profession cannot be brought about drastically without consideration of the serious repercussions it has for the nation as a whole.

The grim determination with which the government has embarked on such a project seems to suggest that the efforts are entirely divorced from the subjects, i.e. the prostitutes, and this can only mean a failure in the measures in the long-run. My personal experience in working with prostitutes and victims of sexual abuse and rehabilitating them as healthy functioning members of the society has shown that this is a long, tedious and exhaustive process, which is plagued with possibilities and actual incidents of failures. I feel there are certain issues that the government has to take into consideration before following through their ambitious programme.

The urgency of the local authorities and government to rehabilitate the sex workers together with the unnatural death of Jesmin have led to these women including over 70 per cent of the minors moving away from the red-light area. They are now spread all over the city and the outlying areas of the country. This means that there are many who will continue being prostitutes at the cost of fatal health consequences. The continued efforts of BNWLA to rescue prostitutes and women

subjected to sexual abuse since 1991, have systematically exposed a grim pattern of serious diseases among these women. The organisation has, to date, rescued over a hundred women and young girls. And it has been found that out of every 20, two have tested positive for the HIV virus, 80 per cent of them have been afflicted with STDs and hundred per cent of them have skin diseases. If the results found are anything to judge by, it can be stated without any doubt that the dispersal of the sex workers will pose as a serious health problem of calamitous proportions in the near future.

Rehabilitation does not only imply the physical movement of a group into an existing framework. I feel that the government has not put any thought into the whole issue of psychological trauma that each of the sex workers carry with them, especially the minor girls and the need for psychosocial counselling before they become integrated into the social mainstream. Rehabilitation requires time and the dedicated work of experts—moving the sex workers to another area and providing them with another profession does not begin to address the roots of the problem.

Experience has shown that victims of sexual abuse and systematic and continued sexual exploitation suffer from serious often devastating psychological disorders. Younger children are plagued with PTSD (post-traumatic stress syndrome) which involves frequent nightmares, flashbacks and acute sensitivity to their social surroundings. They also suffer from depression, inability to confide in anyone, distrust of themselves and others around them, are volatile in their behaviour and engage in destructive behaviour including self-mutilation and destruction of personal belongings.

This is the grim reality which I face in my line of work and I do not think that learning a different profession is an adequate measure to deal with the multifaceted aspect of rehabili-

tation. In a situation where 95 per cent of the sex traders are illiterate and are very much bound by the social and cultural dos and don'ts I find it difficult to accept any easy solution to the flesh trade.

In trying to provide an alternative to prostitution, I believe the government is engaging in a simple case of putting the 'cart before the horse'. Teaching them a different trade is not the way to reintegrate the sex traders. What causes me concern is the fact that the government has not recognised that the mentality of the workers themselves has to be changed. They themselves have to come into terms with the fact that their old profession is over and they have to be willing to accept it and work within their actual limitations. Even if many of the madams took away most of their earnings, the tips they received promised them fineries which they will not be able to afford. By looking at them as subjects of a project only, the underlying issue of their existing mental framework will not change.

It is important to recognise the importance of these women understanding their limitations and being satisfied with their new way of life. Otherwise, they will not be rehabilitated into the very society that is trying to reform them.

What a propose is that detailed action research is carried out instead of haphazard surveys which only gloss over the problem. It is vital that the government listens to what they need and problems. The needs of the children of sex traders too cannot be ignored. Otherwise there is little possibility that the government endeavour will succeed. While reintegrating the sex workers of Tanbazaar, it is also important that a level of secrecy is maintained. Otherwise these new training areas will be identified as areas where these women have been rehabilitated, and will only mean a relocation of the problem without actually accepting

them as individuals into the society.

In trying to deal with the issue of the sex workers in Tanbazaar, the government should be aware of the lessons learned from Kandaputti. In trying to eradicate prostitution, the government and the local authorities should not work with a political or personal agenda, but should work with existing NGOs with expertise and knowledge in this area. The betterment of these women should be the one and only goal. And as I pointed out, the road to success in this respect is very long with too many pitfalls.

The author is Executive Director of BNWLA.

Food and the Frankenstein Factor

Claude Martin writes from Gland, Switzerland

THROUGHOUT history, one of the strongest forces driving the development of human society has been concern for health. Many fundamental scientific and technological advances have occurred as a result of the desire to control or eradicate disease and to improve the quality and duration of our lives. In the 20th century, a huge international industry has grown up dedicated to the promotion and achievement of good health and prolonged fitness. It covers everything from drugs and medical technology to our lifestyle habits and the food we eat.

Most recently, what has become almost an obsession with health has led to renewed interest in traditional medicine and in the potential of biological treasures such as those contained in tropical forests, which harbour a vast array of plant species with possible medicinal value.

At the same time, however, the health industry and public expectations have combined to produce new branches of science based on interference with the fundamental materials of life. The study of genetics, of course,

is not new, but what is different about it now is the ability of scientists to manipulate genetic material easily for the production of drugs.

But the science of genetic engineering has also responded to the other great current theory on health, which concerns diet. The race is on to create almost unlimited quantities of what is considered to be good, healthy and affordable food. Here, though, genetic manipulation has run into trouble. Fears are growing that genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, will produce food that is itself dangerous to health.

We have been eating plants and animals which have been produced with the help of man for centuries. Plant and animal breeders have always mixed and matched genetic material to create the species of vegetables, fruit, cattle and so on that we take for granted. Those modifications, though, were carried out among closely related species through selection processes using cross-pollination and cross-fertilization. What is new about today's genetically modified foods is that we can cross species barriers, so that in order to achieve the re-

sult we can take genes from, say, a fish, and place them in a tomato. If that sounds far-fetched, it is not. The gene that protects a flounder from extreme cold has been introduced into the make-up of tomato plants so that they will continue to flourish in adverse weather. That may help to ensure ready supplies of tomatoes but the question is, what effect might the foreign gene have on the people who eat them?

The same applies to genetically modified crops such as soya, corn, maize, rape and potatoes which have been developed by conglomerates like Monsanto and Novartis, chemical firms which now prefer to describe themselves as 'life science companies'.

All this is worrying enough, to the extent that agricultural GMOs have been dubbed 'Frankenstein foods'. But there are wider implications that concern us at WWF effects that could radically alter the biological structure of the entire planet.

An example of what can happen when GM crops are introduced was reported last month in the USA. Pollen from corn into which a toxin called

Bt had been genetically engineered killed nearly half the monarch butterfly caterpillars fed on it in a test at Cornell University. The really worrying point of this is that the test was carried out only after the Bt gene had been added to almost a quarter of the US corn crop.

Imagine the possible result if GMOs were widely used. Cross-pollination could transfer the foreign genes to other plants, with the result that weeds could become resistant to diseases, pests and herbicides. Monsanto has patented seeds that are genetically immune to its own product Roundup, one of the world's leading weed killers. If those plants cross-pollinated, Roundup could become useless against species of super-weeds and the whole exercise would be a best counter-productive and at worst highly dangerous. Similarly pest-control genes spreading in the wild could wipe out countless animal and insect species.

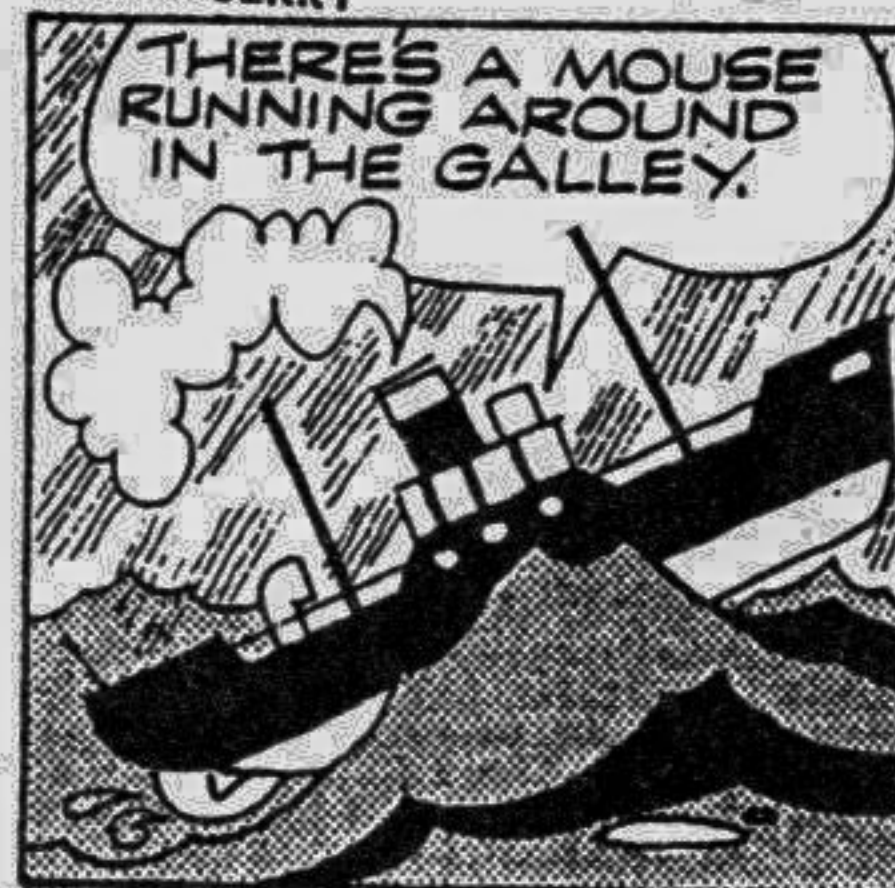
Now that such risks are beginning to be understood, a fierce international debate has begun over GMOs. Some countries, such as Switzerland, are demanding clear labelling of foods containing genetically

modified material so that worried consumers can avoid them. WWF believes that is not enough. Certainly people should be able to identify products containing the now widely used genetically modified soya and other GMOs, but the broader environmental threat demands much stronger action.

WWF is calling for moratorium on the use or release of GMOs until their potential impact on the general environment has been carefully researched and evaluated — and proper safeguards have been established. Moreover, it is vital that the implications for the food chain and the natural environment are openly communicated to the public so that informed choices can be made. Nor should control of gene technology be left to scientists and commercial organizations: there must be official regulation through independent statutory bodies with the power to ban future GMO releases until agreed standards have been met.

— WWF Features
The author is Director General of WWF International based in Gland, Switzerland

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

James Bond

by IAN FREMING

DRAWING BY HORAK

THE DIVING SAUCER SURFACES NASTILY TO RADIO THE YACHT

BAD NEWS, KAPITAN! THE BRITISH AGENT, BOND, HAS ESCAPED FROM OUR NET!

FOOLS! YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS WHEN HERR KREST LEARNS WHAT HAS HAPPENED!

CALL THE BRIDGE! TELL THE WATCH TO WAKE HERR KREST ON THE BOAT DECK! WE MUST FIND THE ENEMY AT ONCE!

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