

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

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Of Discipline and Sacrifice

We are into the month of abnegation and prayer. By denying ourselves food and drink before sunset we shall get a feel of what starvation means to millions in the country. Ramadan generates an empathy with the malnourished, under-nourished multitudes barely breathing on the margins of life. Apart from this churning of a fellow-feeling in the faster's mind, the importance of food dawns on his or her consciousness in a slightly different but equally significant way. It is the food we waste in surfeit throughout the rest of the year that keeps hurting our conscience as the Ramadan rolls on.

So, the moral here is this: never allow any viciot to rot or be thrown into a dustbin, instead make it a point to share it — when still unhaazardous to health — with folks who cannot afford it. Since fasting is an antonym of gluttony, overeating is ruled out at *Iftar* and *Sehri* times. It is basically self-purification in bodily and spiritual terms that Ramadan stands for, so that austerity is to be regarded as the key element of the whole effort. In an extended sense, personal gratification better be kept at a level that does not militate against the societal interest.

So, the fundamental message of Ramadan is sacrifice for the sake of others, something which is best translated at the governmental level by an expenditure pattern oriented to the average men and women of the country rather than lining the pockets of a few. At the professional levels of doctors, engineers, teachers, policemen, industrialists and businessmen one expects that they would reflect a robust sense of social commitment.

Profligacy and extortionism have a way of exacerbating, quite ingeniously at that, during the month of Ramadan. No amount of exhortation can drum sense into the ears of those who commit such offences. Administrative vigil is called for.

It is said that nothing is possible without discipline, and no discipline is possible without sacrifice. These wise words square up with the essence of Ramadan. The holy month inculcates the spirit of discipline based on sacrifice, sacrifice of not merely earthly appetites but also of consuming personal and party egos and prejudices for the greatest good of the largest number.

Given the continual political strife that remains as our uppermost national concern today, we cannot but turn to the spirit of Ramadan, born of the twin emphases on discipline and sacrifice, for guidance through the dark tunnel we find ourselves stranded in. The path of anarchy national politics is embarked upon needs to be abandoned before all boats are burnt to national reconciliation. We have a particular suggestion for the month of Ramadan.

In deference to the spirit of *Siam* political parties have traditionally put off agitational programmes during the holy month. Our entreaty with the opposition will be that not merely they abide by the established practice but also extend the spirit in a way that they can utilise the Ramadan respite for a spade-work towards an early resolution of their differences.

Let the purity of Ramadan sentiments stimulate a genuine launching of a formal initiative by the PM for a dialogue with the opposition leader, who in her turn, imbued by the same spirit, ought to be receptive to it.

Friday Mailbox

Democratic breeze

Sir, It was indeed satisfying to read that some intellectuals have started questioning the severe government control of the independent body known as the Bangla Academy. Any "Academy" should not be under direct or indirect political control.

Culture may flower, but not under polarised fertiliser scheming. The political leaders should have the guts to leave certain areas free from their corrosive presence. Whatever they touch, they muddle it, at least in the LDCs. Who gave them this authority? Certainly not the people, the people's representatives may kindly remember. This representation is a trust, not a license. Do we wish that our democratic engine should be run by bulldozers.

The sad thing to note is that there are no people's bodies (non-political), to criticise the politicians who misuse power and influence. What a pity our intellectuals are generally found to be polarised. It is the weakness of the citizens that we allow them such leeway. There could be other darlings of the crowds. It is very easy to compromise in principle, and join a camp, for quick and transient personal gains. The society has to demarcate the political grazing grounds. One cannot chew another's cud!

A Zabir
Dhaka.

The Seattle fiasco

Sir, After many hullabaloo, the inconclusive world trade talks at Seattle finally proved to be much ado about nothing. In spite of dissensions on the streets, the parties on the stage stuck to their stereotype roles based on enlightened self and group interests.

There were two-pronged attempts by the Americans to slash the huge agricultural subsidies to farmers provided by the EU countries and Japan and also to link trade deals with labour and environmental standards especially in case of developing nations. But ultimately nothing emerged from the talks and the Americans were dubbed an incompetent organiser failing to come to an agreement renewing trade talks at the start of the new century.

There were complaints by representatives from the developing countries that they were treated like animals, were kept out in the cold during the talks and told nothing. That probably reflects the status of Third World representatives in global dialogues at the present juncture.

Especially since the end of the cold war and the capitalist transformation of Eastern Europe, the developing nations are now a marginalised lot in global exchanges. They are overwhelmed by the strength of a united capitalist front that always tend to uphold the interests of their mighty multinational business empires, their work-force and their life-styles.

Much has been said by the developed West about child labour in developing countries. But what they overlook is that it is the market forces (so extolled and sanctified by the capitalists) which determine the entry of children into the labour market. For millions of children in the Third World, work is a brutal compulsion, a question of life and death — one's very survival often hinging on that.

The advantages that the western capitalist societies acquired through their colonial rules and possessions have placed them in a driving seat in the global arena. They are now making good use of that advantage through neo-colonial ploys like controlling the global economy and regulating the flow of capital and labour throughout the world. Thus, opening up their borders for free flow of labour according to their own capitalist theory, would have been an optimal economic solution.

They are strangulating Third World labour with closed borders and instructions on who should and who should not work. In the process, they are making an attempt to treat the symptom rather than the cause, ultimately defying the very market force they hold so sacred. What a mockery!

Helal Uddin Ahmed
Editor of Bangladesh Quarterly
Dhaka.

A better tomorrow?

Sir, The rioting in Seattle, USA on the occasion of the WTO conference was a message against the cunning domination by the industrialised nations for the global trade, who use WTO as a ploy to strengthen their hold on the deprived nations in the Third World countries.

It is not surprising that Seattle is behaving like the *hartaal* sights in Dhaka. Violence and indiscipline is the voice of the millennium. We wait for the next crash of the Wall Street (Dhaka SE index has gone down from 3,500 to below 500 — a world record!). There is an indirect price to pay for the heartless exploitation of billions who also hope for a better tomorrow.

A Husnain
Dhaka.

Bursting the WTO bubble

Sir, The WTO bubble had to burst at Seattle (riots), exposing the long-term secret plan of the industrialised countries to capture the global markets, and deny development of third world products (much cheaper), marketing and services. We are told what to do for them, but we cannot tell what to do for us. This dictatorial situation will last till the next collapse of the Wall Street (the other big powers are non-entities).

The problem is due to one angle or aspect of the whole issue: the only superpower is on the other side — as the US President has himself indirectly admitted after the Seattle flare-up. This attitude brings up the other point: the national and international policy-making in the developed countries are controlled by the industrial and business lobbies. The latter have not yet developed in the LDCs to have a sizeable effect on the local and external public opinion.

The produce of the DCs and LDCs are rural, agricultural, or cottage-industry oriented, with weak lobbies, weak economy, and weak governments (weak political base, resulting in sustained instability); it is also labour intensive; which cannot compete with high speed mass

Post-crisis Recovery in Southeast Asia

Success often breeds complacency. The early signs of rapid economic recoveries may tempt policy makers in these countries to curtail their reform efforts in the mistaken belief that with their economies on the mend the need to pursue restructuring has somehow lessened.



Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

Central banks have significantly eased credit conditions, so interest rates have declined substantially. Lower interest rates have had two positive effects — they have made debt repayments more manageable and reduced borrowing costs. In addition, government spending in these countries has increased.

Second, the economies have remained open during this tumultuous period. No government has cut its ties to the global economy, although Malaysia did impose some controls on the flow of capital into and out of the country. Open trade and investment strategies allowed these economies to rely on exports to propel economic activity during the crisis when domestic conditions were so poor.

Third, all the affected countries are moving towards restructuring their economies. Some are moving more quickly than others, but all are making the necessary adjustments to remedy the kind of structural problems that played a part in igniting the crisis. This process will take time, especially in the area of financial system reform, but these countries currently appear to be moving in the right direction.

Finally, the strength of the US economy has contributed to Asia's recovery. As the Asian countries used exports to earn money for their wounded economies, the US has been a major customer. This increase in imports of Asian goods into the US market has helped in improving the trade situation in these countries.

For better or for worse, the Asian crisis prompted investors to reassess investments in all emerging markets. It revealed a tendency among investors to treat emerging markets as an asset class, whether the markets are in Asia, the former Soviet republics or Latin America.

Perhaps the first time the Asian crisis started being considered as an emerging market's problem rather than a regional situation was when stocks in Latin America tumbled in late 1997 after strong returns in the early part of the year.

In one sense the international crisis appears to be over because the affected Asian economies are recovering and are no longer constituting a drag on other parts of the world, at least in terms of trade flows and financial market effects.

With the important task of reviving growth and restoring confidence achieved, the Asian countries must now aim to make this growth sustainable.

The expansionary monetary and fiscal policies that helped in the rebound cannot be kept up forever. Public sector debt has increased, and while total

debt remains low by international standards, countries must start the process of fiscal consolidation now. Also, despite excess capacity, strong economic showing may lead to inflationary pressure which would require a monetary policy response.

If policy makers in the region continue to restructure and reform their economies, the long-term economic and financial outlooks should remain positive. The achievements so far have been impressive, but there is much more work to be done. The factors that have fueled economic resurgence may not be there two or three years down the road.

For example, declining interest rates in the region coupled with rising rates in the US and Europe could slow down capital inflows into the region. Moreover, unless the problems of non-performing loans was addressed banks would not be able to help recapitalise insolvent companies. Without a properly functioning banking system, a credit crunch is a real possibility. Finally, without corporate restructuring, excess capacity will continue and investment will suffer.

Despite evidence of an eco-

nomic rebound, social indicators in these countries reveal that there has been serious social costs to the financial crisis that may take longer to work through in the region.

In each country, a significant segment of the population is living in poverty — in many cases, extreme poverty. Put simply, the financial crisis has made some of the rich less rich, has pushed many of the middle class into poverty and has made the poor in these countries poorer. It may take years for this situation to greatly improve. For instance, while analysts believe that South Korea will recover to their pre-crisis level of national income next year, Indonesia is not expected to return to a pre-crisis level for some time. In the next stage of the recovery process, policy makers in these countries must, therefore, concentrate on improving the social indicators.

Success often breeds complacency. The early signs of rapid economic recoveries may tempt policy makers in these countries to curtail their reform efforts in the mistaken belief that with their economies on the mend the need to pursue restructuring has somehow lessened.

This would be unfortunate. If the momentum for further economic reform and restructuring is lost, the potential for these countries to return to a rapid and continuous economic growth path will be greatly hampered.

One For AIDS

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

The numbers about AIDS are staggering by all means. Almost 95 per cent of the people around the world with HIV/AIDS do not know that they are infected. There has been a 100 per cent increase in the number of HIV/AIDS patients in the former Soviet Union in last two years. There are 4 million Indians living with HIV, which is higher than in any country of the world. In Bangladesh, we have every reason to feel concerned about a formidable adversary, which is elusive, rapid and adjacent.

The millennium bug is successfully tackled, the biggest threat facing us will be the bug inside our own bodies.

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There has been a 100 per cent increase in the number of HIV/AIDS patients in the former Soviet Union in last two years. There are 4 million Indians living with HIV, which is higher than in any country of the world. In Bangladesh, we have every reason to understand the disease than fear it. John Nashe, an English pamphleteer, wailed in *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, "From winter, plague and pestilence, good lord, deliver us!" This winter we need to plead with ourselves for deliverance from the ignorance of the plague which threatens to wipe out a great portion of the human race.

According to the experts who spoke at the HIV/AIDS awareness workshop, the infiltration of HIV into the country has started already. Even though more than 50 sex workers tested were found HIV negative, the infection has been found in other categories. But it exists in the population but its capacity to multiply at a dizzying rate. In Bangkok, HIV infection increased from a negligible one per cent to more than seventy per cent within a few years. One more revealing information came from another guest speaker. A survey

has identified almost ten thousand male prostitutes in Dhaka city alone.

Plague and pestilence are how nature does its own periodic housecleaning. One doesn't have to be a fan of Malthus to know that decimation of human population has been an essential way to maintain equilibrium between demography and ecology. The earliest plague known was traced at least 2000 years ago when a great epidemic from AD 542 to 554 killed about half the population of the Roman Empire. The so-called Black Death, which had started in eastern Asia in the 14th century, spread to Asia Minor, Arabia, Egypt, North Africa and Europe. This pandemic had destroyed about 25 million people and over half the population of England. The last pandemic appeared in Canton and Hong Kong in 1894 and spread to Japan, India and Asia Minor, then to USA, South Africa and South America.

AIDS has been the most daunting catastrophe of the twentieth century when man, pushing the frontiers of mind and intellect, fizzled before the limits of his own body. One can attribute many reasons to how HIV sneaks up on the human body. It transmits in varying degrees through blood, semen and saliva, but arrives in the immune system like the Visigoths and destroys its civilization. AIDS wastes a human body like termites waste a piece of wood as the outer shell slowly caves in to the dissipation of inner substance. If death is the end of suffering for most patients, the suffering starts with the anticipation of death for an AIDS victim.

Thus, if we have succumbed to the tragedy of HIV already, we are yet to cope with its trauma.

As the keynote speaker made his point social taboo stares death in the face of an AIDS patient, which need not be the case.

He claimed that an AIDS patient doesn't have to die of his misfortune, because its severity can be controlled if the patient is restrained in his habits and takes medication at the same time although he will never cease to be the carrier of the virus.

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of the state affairs of the country to avoid being left out. There appears to be serious cracks within the major political parties as many law-makers feel left out and ejected with the autocratic handling of party policies. These unhappy law-makers cannot contribute to the welfare of their voters they represent.

Regional groupings with religious and/or language alignments have emerged in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh, however, is a homogenous country with the majority speaking the same language. But development has not always been even across the country. Of late, in particular, Larma and his group have achieved something unheard of even a few years back in respect of autonomy and self rule in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where most of the tribal people live. Anyway, for the sake of peace, what the present ruling party has done to calm the tribals may go down in history as a monumental achievement for AL. UNESCO has expressed its laurel in the form of a Peace Prize given to our PM, BNP, however, resented such unilateral steps taken by AL government for bringing in peace to the troubled tribal region unarming the insurgents and finally offering them amnesty and financial assistance for their rehabilitation.

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