

Fertiliser Fraud

THAT the local markets are flooded with adulterated, spurious and, of course, toxic products speaks volumes about the government's surveillance failure. Inevitably it is the poor people who suffer most from it. From toxic poultry feeds and dairy products to vetch and adulterated food items, it's been the same tale retold. Troublingly, never have such criminal practices induced anything more than knee-jerk reactions like imposition of ban on the spurious products from the government. As soon as the initial outrage dies down, it goes back to its hibernation until such time as similar aberration surfaces again to cause another bit of short-lived stir. Neither any follow up nor a comprehensive planning to root out such evil practices once and for all would be attempted.

So has been the case with adulterated zinc sulphate. The exception here is that the impact of its application for cultivation would have a far greater impact on the people and the environment than anything we have known before. Decline in yield apart, the spurious fertiliser could result in soil infertility in the long run.

Interestingly, activism of the dishonest dealers and the government appears inversely proportional. While the former improvise its tricks to sell their products off to gullible and cash-strapped farmers at a 'reasonable' rate, the latter has failed to come up with any measure to thwart their design. Attractive package with fake seals of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) and the Bangladesh Standard Testing Institution (BSTI) has not only fooled the farmers but also the government monitors, it seems; for there has not been any action from them in this regard, not yet.

The government agencies have their work cut out in this case. As the report front-paged in The Daily Star on Saturday points out, the spurious fertiliser is produced, packaged and supplied from Jessore. So, they should immediately assign a unit to trace out these illegal establishments and seal them off. The delinquent dealers must be handed severe punishment for fooling farmers and putting environment in jeopardy. There is also the need to do random stringent testing of fertilisers available in market. It would not only help ensure strict quality control but also stop influx of spurious products into the market. However, the most important step that the government should take concerns sensitising the farmers about these unscrupulous traders. Awareness amongst them would automatically result in resistance to sales of adulterated fertilisers.

Missed the Bus

LACK of coordination between various ministries and lukewarm attitude of the officials concerned made us squander a golden opportunity in introducing the 1952 Language Movement to the outside world. The 188 member countries of the United Nations could be better acquainted with our heritage in good time for the observance of the International Mother Language Day on 21st February. It is for the first time in the UNESCO history that such a day has been designated for celebrations on a world-wide basis. The history, perspective and struggle for the mother tongue in our country were to be sent to all the UN member-states through the internet after the information was transferred in six official languages of the UN, namely, English, French, German, Arabic, Spanish and Chinese.

According to a *Prothom Alo* report on Friday the ministries of foreign affairs, education, culture and information shifted the responsibility for the failure on one another in a classic example of uncoordinated efforts, if there were any efforts at all. And all of this happened despite the directives of the Prime Minister to put their shoulders to the wheel in this matter. What baffles a good deal is the fact that many of the member-states asked for the relevant history and background of the Language Movement through the UN agencies in Bangladesh. The government has miserably failed to seize an opportunity that can only be apologetically made amends for next year.

We have the example of the Hay Market incident that made the historic May Day which is celebrated throughout the world every year. And here is the International Mother Language Day about to be on the lips of people around the world to be intoned every year. Till last year we were the only people and nation to observe this great day, but today it is the reference point for a world reawakened to the right of mother tongues across the globe. We would like to register our protests against the dereliction of duty pertaining to an international expectation that involved our own interest. We request the Prime Minister to seek explanation from the relevant ministries.

Taxi-cab Services

THE city's rent-a-car service is in a disarray. The benefits of the huge number of imported low-priced reconditioned taxi-cabs are not reaching the city dwellers the way these should have. Far from being at the beck and call of hailers, even getting their service by prior phone calls remains dicey. Although these taxis are quite viable, they are not easy to get when you try to hire one. Perhaps most people do not know the ropes yet to reach them. They are more or less a sure shot at the place of origin but not when they hit the streets. Maybe some places are out of bounds for them.

The lack of clear policy guidelines in initiating taxi-cabs in the city has opened up the scope for confusion about the fares, especially in the absence of monitoring and supervision. It is also true that the authorities, including the taxi companies, have failed to create the right kind of demand among the users.

Now, this calls for some concrete measures as far as making these services more friendly to the people is concerned. We would request the authority to sit with car-renting traders and come up with decisions that would make the cabs accessible and affordable. We can reap twin benefit by streamlining this sector. One, it will be a service to the commuters; and two, it will promote self-reliance among the unemployed.

President Clinton's Visit is a Compliment to Bangladesh

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Bangladeshis in America have reached the upper echelon of the American society in education-related professions, politics, business and finance. Those in Bangladesh are made of the same raw material. Given proper opportunity in their native land, there is absolutely no reason why they should achieve any less.

China's ascent into superpowerdom. If the enormous energy of 120 million people can be released, Bangladesh can be transformed overnight. 'Tiny' is not necessarily a negative attribute. It is the quality, not the quantity that matters. Tiny Israel is militarily superior to all its Arab neighbours combined. Because of Taiwan's economic, military and democratic prowess, mighty China is reluctant to confront tiny Taiwan. Look at Ireland. How could that tiny nation have produced literary giants such as James Joyce, Jonathan Swift, W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, Oscar Wilde, Patrick Kavanagh and George Bernard Shaw? Poverty is not a permanent affliction either. In the 1950s, Taiwan was poorer than Bangladesh; it is now a prosperous nation. Perhaps others sense potential for greatness in us that our myopic outlook prevents us for seeing. Even a tiny nation can generate world-shattering ideas, such as Yunus Bhai's (Dr. Mohammad Yunus) microcredit phenomenon.

Of course the writer does not know exactly why President Clinton has chosen to honour Bangladesh with a visit. It could be as simple as he genuinely likes Bangladesh. We know that the President and the First Lady are strong believers in Yunus Bhai's microcredit principles. As the Governor of Arkansas, President Clinton vigorously promoted Dr. Yunus's micro-

credit methods in his state. Perhaps the First Lady Hillary and the First Daughter Chelsea were so delighted with their visit to Bangladesh five years ago, that they suggested the President do the same.

There could be other reasons that have not been discussed in the Press. While America is displeased with General Musharraf's severance of Pakistan's linkage to democracy, America is not that excited about India's belligerent, saffron democracy either. America was alarmed at the murder of Christians and the destruction of their churches and properties by the BJP's ally the RSS gang. Is not lost on America that although the majority of the Bangladeshis are devout Muslims, among the nations of the subcontinent - India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar - Bangladeshis are the most friendly towards their minorities. That makes Bangladesh the only genuine, benign and moderate democracy in the subcontinent. Perhaps America wants to cement that perception. In which case Bangladesh should take a bow.

Our constantly bickering politicians aside, there are plenty to like about Bangladesh. We share some common traits with the Americans. By nature moderate, we are hospitable, generous, poetic, brave and adventurous. We offer one of the most delicious gourmet foods in the world. And we can forget those lustrous

'Bengali eyes' after beholding one.

American celebrities have been visiting Bangladesh since the fifties. The world's first two-time (1948, 1952) Olympic Decathlon Champion Bob Mathias visited Bangladesh in the mid-1950s. Actor Marlon Brando called on behalf of UNICEF, at his prime in 1967. After conquering the moon, astronaut Neil Armstrong, John Collins and Buzz Aldrin were our guests in 1969. Senator Ted Kennedy, a strong backer of Bangladesh's war of independence, came to greet the new nation in 1972. Not all American visitors were gracious. During the famine of 1974, on a visit to Bangladesh, a condescending Secretary of State Henry Kissinger refused to come to Sheikh Mujib's aid. Some say, hastening his fall. Adding insult to injury, Kissinger labelled Bangladesh, "an international basket case" prompting Sheikh Mujib to retort: "Bangladesh is not an empty basket!" "The Greatest" himself, Muhammad Ali, partook in our hospitality in 1978. Former President Carter visited us as a private citizen. Second Lady Marilyn Quayle visited the cyclone victims and American soldiers aiding them, in 1991. Of course, five years ago, the First Lady Hillary Clinton and the First Daughter Chelsea Clinton graced us with their visits.

The State Department classifies Bangladesh as a friendly

nation. America appreciates the fact that predominantly Muslim Bangladesh takes no part in international terrorism. There is a dichotomy in the way Bangladesh is perceived from within and without. The outsiders are impressed by the sheer numbers Bangladesh flaunts - increasingly more educated work force due higher literacy, impressive economic growth, bumper food production and the nation's willingness to embrace the internet. Of course our problem is internal terrorism. Those who live in Bangladesh have to encounter terrorism especially against women, all pervading pollution that is killing our cities and citizens, and a hartal-driven dysfunctional political philosophy that is broke. Our best hope is the Italian model, where the country moves forward in spite of the fickle politicians.

Bangladeshis are mild mannered people, who are transformed into Bengal tigers at the first sign of injustice. Our unwillingness to be exploited is what drove us to be independent of Pakistan. If we can only channel this enormous energy into fruitful pursuits, Bangladesh can be one of the happy stories of the next quarter century. And a partnership with America can speed up the process.

For a closer relationship with America, we need America to invest in Bangladesh. Currently, there is very little Amer-

ican investment in Bangladesh. Investment is not charity; American companies never invest unless the business atmosphere is conducive. In the global village that the world is transforming into, thriving democracies welcome foreign investments, not fight it. With low labour costs, Bangladesh is extremely attractive for American investors. Such investments will lift Bangladesh's standard of living one notch ahead immediately. However, if we persist with our suicidal hartal culture, that will drive American investors away in a hurry.

America treats its friends well. Israel and Taiwan would not have survived their big neighbours without America's protective umbrella. Bangladesh, too, has big neighbours, and would benefit from a security arrangement. In Israel, as in Saudi Arabia, the American dollar is as freely accepted as the local currency.

A closer relation with America will help us in other ways. Transfer of the latest American technology can help us leap frog into the internet age. There are virtues we can learn from the Americans, most notably their innovation, versatility, patience and perseverance. In return, Bangladesh can teach America and the West that as long as they are fair to the Muslims, they have absolutely nothing to fear from Islam.

Bangladeshis in America have reached the upper echelon of the American society in education-related professions, politics, business and finance. Those in Bangladesh are made of the same raw material. Given proper opportunity in their native land, there is absolutely no reason why they should achieve any less.

The Transition of Power in Russia

The presidential election has now been shifted back to March as the result of Yeltsin's resignation and handing power over to Acting President Putin on the new year's eve. While Putin's immediate task is to keep the war in Chechnya alive at least till the end of the next month he has already issued his first decree as president to guarantee immunity not only for the former president but his entire inner circle known as 'family'.

hardline communists was anymore repeated. He tore down the Soviet Union to grab power in a power struggle with Soviet President Gorbachev and became the first elected President of Russian Federation. But by then he was well past his prime and instead of showing any further spark he led his country to an era of decline, denial and decay. His 'market reforms' resulted in the economic meltdown of 1998 and his 'democratic' conduct, according to many, was one of an elected Tsar. Still worse was his monumental corruption in which he, his immediate circle of family members and close associates virtually plundered the country. No one could raise any allegations against the despot so long, he enjoyed unqualified support of the West during his heydays as 'market democracy' messiah. However his financial bungling and cronyism came under open scrutiny since 1998 economic collapse.

Although Yeltsin narrowly escaped an impeachment in the Duma, the move deeply frightened both the president and his inner circle led by his daughter Tatyana. They were now intent upon making sure that both the president and his 'family' received guarantee against prosecution when he left the office. Primakov, who was installed as prime minister in 1998 mainly to manage the fall out of Russia's financial crash the same year, instituted some of the corruption charges against the oligarch as a part of measures for economic recovery.

This further alarmed Yeltsin who, with his prolonged illness, went almost out of public appearance. He now started view-

ing Primakov a rival and his steps unfriendly. Even though Primakov made it known that he supported the immunity for the presidents only and no one else around him, it did not satisfy either the president or his inner circle. Finding Primakov unyielding Yeltsin sacked him a year ago only to find him a potential candidate for presidency in the next election. Primakov's alliance with powerful Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov under the banner of Fatherland-All Russia Party continued to be his

With the outbreak of war in Chechnya by the middle of last year the political climate in Russia began to change profoundly. Putin's hardline policy in Chechnya and the ruthlessness pursued in the war not only released Russians' pent-up frustration after years of economic woes and decline in national prestige, it made the lacklustre prime minister a hero overnight. As a godsend opportunity for Yeltsin the merciless pounding of Grozny coincided with the election of

brink of capturing Grozny. In the new parliament the communists again maintained their lead however with Putin's Unity Party closely trailing behind and Primakov's Fatherland Party pushed to a third place. Although communist party retained its vote share of 24 per cent, its seat share in the single-mandate electoral districts declined.

As a result of this and the communists' opposition to Chechnya war the centrist forces consolidated by Putin will now have greater voice in Duma. The Duma elections coming six months before the presidential election serve as a primary of sorts and are considered run-up to presidential election. The trend set in the recent Duma election - a decline in communists' dominance, the neutralisation of Primakov factor and the rise of centrist forces under Putin - are most likely to be reflected in the presidential election.

Boris Yeltsin precisely waited for this moment. So long he did not have an electable presidential candidate under his fold. But the Chechnya war created one for him who also seemed to have been endorsed by the electoral verdict of Duma election. There was also a political formation - the Unity Bloc - to back him up. Not only that. The Russian government and Unity Bloc were seen to be engaged in a war that many Russians believe would keep the Federation intact. The promoters of the bloc held powerful and key positions in the Kremlin and had the backing of well known financiers and mafia groups. The Unity Bloc is able to manipulate the media and the

state-owned television to its advantage and has access to government machinery. In addition, it had already been able to whip up a crude sense of nationalism by perpetrating its persecution of Chechens. Most importantly, the deal ensuring Yeltsin's and his family's security was already cut with Putin who was also designated as his successor - a *quid pro quo* of sorts.

Yeltsin's exit on 31 December of 1999 was the last act in a play which could not have been better scripted. The time could not have been more appropriate for a strike. It was a great escape for which he craftily devised his game plan. Now he could even go down in history as one who also safeguarded the sanctity of the country's Constitution.

As things stood after Duma election, with all factors taken together Putin's victory in presidential election looked all but inevitable. The Chechnya war was going Russia's way. Putin's opposition was in disarray. Everything was in Kremlin's favour. The only irritant had been the thought that war in Chechnya was too nasty to go always in Russia's favour. There can be a turning point in war at any time. So there was no point holding on to presidency. Boris Yeltsin wanted to seize the opportunity before things went haywire. He is believed to have decided to quit only after the results of the Duma election pointed in that direction.

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PERSPECTIVES
by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

worry in succession struggle.

After a brief trial Primakov's successor Sergei Stepasin, a former chief of Federal Security Service was considered too weak to counter electoral threat from Primakov-Luzhkov alliance and was dropped from Yeltsin's game of musical chair. Now entered Vladimir Putin, an obscure KGB man who was later in the staff of St Petersburg mayor presumably as a KGB agent to influence events within the newly elected civic bodies in early nineties. His appointment as prime minister raised eyebrows of many who could not find him a remarkable choice at a time of impending transition. However the unfolding events were remarkable as he stepped into Kremlin.

Duma in December last year.

In spite of Fatherland Party's stronger showing in the beginning the Kremlin could, with its popular war raging in Chechnya, successfully pitch its hurriedly cobbled-up Unity Party as main contender against the communists - the winner of two earlier parliamentary elections. Yeltsin's team tied Unity Party's fate firmly to Putin while Yeltsin himself largely disappeared from public view. He portrayed Putin several times earlier as his worthy heir and now the game was ostensibly to put him up as his nominee for presidential election.

As widely expected the Russians elected a hung-parliament on 19 December around when the Russians were on the

Indonesian President's Stand-off with the Military

by A S M Nurunnabi

President Wahid's strategy of chipping away at Gen. Wiranto's position has reportedly been backed by an impressive array of foreign friends, from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and President Bill Clinton to the European Union and international financial institutions. . . An IMF official said, \$2 billion of existing debt is likely to be rescheduled this year. The president's new agreement with the IMF on this issue would seem as victory, as was a positive market reaction to his austere and realistic budget for the year 2000.

January. Addressing it will be crucial in convincing decision-makers at firms like General Electric to do more for improving the economy.

Without investments from abroad, the Wahid administration can't hope to restructure corporate Indonesia's \$70 billion foreign debt and sell assets controlled by the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency. The impression that Wahid doesn't have a firm handle on his government is standing in the way of billions of dollars in potential foreign investment. The removal of Wiranto could help correct this, particularly if, as expected, it convinces some of his political opponents to back off. The key test is over Indonesia's largest car maker, Astra International. The sale of Ibra's (Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency's) 40 per cent stake in Astra to investors has been blocked by company leaders with military connections. Pushing the sale through will be a key test for Ibra and Wahid.

It could also help improve Indonesia's investment climate, which was tarnished by Standard Chartered's aborted effort to buy the scandal-ridden Bank Bali in December last, viewed by potential investors as an example of how entrenched interests continue to undercut deals. Observers believe the in-

vestment climate could improve with the emergence of a take charge president.

But commitments made in the new IMF agreement, which paves the way for \$5 billion IMF aid over the next three years, are identical to the commitments made, but never fully carried out, by former presidents Suharto and Habibie.

Now the question is: Will Wahid demonstrate the political will his predecessor lacked? "On economic policy, the new government didn't have any choices," said the head of Wahid's council of economic advisers. "The challenge is action-real, tangible action." But Wahid's showdown with the military has been getting in the way. In the three months since he took office, Wahid has been engaged in what his aides call 'psychological war' with the military, whittling away at the General's grip on the levers of power. Mostly, the battle has been about separating the palace staff from the five other departments that made up the State Secretariat, the 3,000-strong body that handles the executive's administrative chores.

The most important accomplishment may have been, as reported, the December edict depriving the president's four

adjutants of the right to monitor Wahid's visitors and outgoing correspondence. The number of senior military officers in the president's office has been pared down to 15 from 35, with three Generals among the 20 officers who got their marching orders. Yet staffers say the pressure from the military, though more subtle, is still there.

Asked to assess the president's performance, a Muslim member of Wahid's circle of economic advisers, made the observation: "They can't get him to spare the time to hear their concerns. The president is so concerned about his political survival that it's taking up all his energy and drawing attention away from economic policy."

Wahid's allies appeal for time after 30 years of corrupt and authoritarian rule. After Gen. Wiranto is dealt with, a bigger clean-up could be in the offing. Wahid looks set to dump on him as the price of the support that brought him the presidency exchanging them for a more traditional cabinet of loyalists.

Political analysts feel that Wahid's dismissal of Gen Wiranto would at least symbolise the political end of Suharto's New Order regime something

that wasn't accomplished when the long-time leader was brought down in May 1998 after three decades in power. In a January 14 warning that shocked the military and illustrated what is at stake, US Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke declared Washington's sympathy for Indonesia's reform effort, "because what we are watching is a great drama, a struggle between the forces of democracy and reform and the forces of backward-looking corruption and militarism."

With Muslim interests tugging on one flank and the military on the other, Wahid has come to seem indispensable in international eyes. An IMF official said, \$2 billion of existing debt is likely to be rescheduled this year. The president's new agreement with the IMF on this issue would seem as victory, as was a positive market reaction to his austere and realistic budget for the year 2000.

Meanwhile, the country's economically vital, predominantly Christian-Chinese business community, historically a target of mob violence in Indonesia, is also rallying around the president. The Chinese are alarmed by the high stake-romance between legislative assembly chairman Amien

Rais and a politically active coalition aligned against Wahid, while they see Megawati as a lightning rod for Muslim anger. Wahid is seen as the only hope of striking a peaceful balance.

Meanwhile, a belief has reportedly grown among officials and observers that much of the violence in the country - from North Maluku, Ambon and Lombok in the east to Irian Jaya and Aceh in the west - is either partly or wholly due to manipulation and incitement by elements of the Suharto-era military machine loosely linked Islamic militants and vested business interests, all aimed at sowing doubts about Wahid's ability to rule. Palace officials and some observers are of the opinion that an explicit separatist bloodshed in Aceh and the Muslim-Christian violence in the eastern Moluccan islands - the two thorniest tasks facing the new government - is vital to Indonesia's economic recovery.

It is, however, widely felt by keen observers that nothing much can be done about the economy until the problem with the military is solved. But the removal of Gen. Wiranto carries the risk of a backlash from an entrenched military worried about losing its place in the sun. That's why Wahid has been said to be moving gradually.

President Wahid's strategy of chipping away at Gen. Wiranto's position has reportedly been backed by an impressive array of foreign friends, from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and President Bill Clinton to the European Union and international financial institutions.