

Rupsha Bridge

Put an end to the builders' worries

THE construction of Rupsha Bridge has come under the ever lengthening shadow of extremist activities, toll collection in particular. Nearly 90 per cent of the construction work is complete, but the foreigners working for the project feel insecure in the face of extremist threats. Matters have come to a head, following the bomb blast last Monday in front of the residence of the project director. Though the local police have downplayed the incident as being no cause for concern, the reality is that the foreign experts and engineers are feeling threatened.

It is obviously not easy to conclude that the foreigners have nothing to fear, particularly when we have witnessed a series of criminal activities perpetrated by the political extremists in recent times. Equally worrying is the fact that toll collection has become a regular business for a large number of anti-social elements across the country. So, the complaints lodged by the bridge builders deserve a patient hearing.

Extortion, and the tactics often resorted to for carrying on the illegal business, has already had a crippling effect on trade and commerce. Now, it is obvious that even construction of infrastructure facilities is not being spared by the organised criminals. The presence of the law enforcers has become so feeble that people can hardly rely on their services. In most cases the victims try to strike some sort of deal with the extortionists.

The result has of course been disastrous. An almost parallel economy has grown out of the extortionists' clout, as the law enforcers have failed miserably to curb their illegal activities.

But this is not an issue that can be conveniently ignored by the policy-makers. Since the foreigners working for an infrastructure project have been targeted, the law enforcers have to go flat-out to crush the elements harassing or intimidating them.

The incidents like the one reported from Khulna can send damaging signals to all concerned. It's time the policy-makers realised that lawlessness could deal fatal blows to development.

Confusing productivity signals

Agri-inputs pivotal to economic recovery

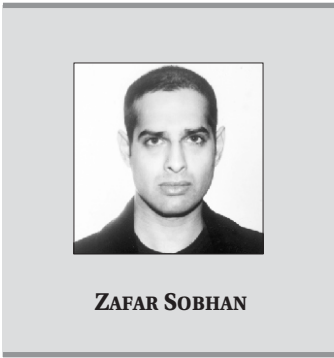
THE state of agriculture in the flood aftermath has been a subject-matter of conflicting analyses. The impression on the one hand is that early floods have all but queered the pitch for a good Aman crop. On the other hand considerable optimism is aired. It is based on a safe assumption that the alluvial deposits left by cascading waters from the upper reaches have enriched the flood plains of Bangladesh. So, the loss of Aman can be made good by a bumper Boro crop like it had happened in the wake of the 1998 floods.

In fact that was the point in time when contrary to doomsday predictions, the GDP growth rate increased. But we better not rest our oars on soil enrichment following the floods. There is quite a plateful on our hands in terms of what need to be done to salvage agriculture. For one thing, even though the floods have delayed Aman cultivation there is still scope for a reasonably good Aman-Aus harvest. On the inputs front, the BADC is inhibited by two factors. First, it had distributed most of the seeds in its stocks before the floods struck. To be able to cater for the farmers' urgent need the BADC will have to import seeds, but there is very little time for them to procure these from abroad. The Aman season is fast running out, so that the decision to provide seedlings rather than seeds to the farmers is a good one.

Seeds or seedlings, farmers are actually getting very little of these even though they have heard broadcasts over radio and television claiming steady supplies of inputs to farmers. They do not seem to know where to go to procure these.

The bottom line is whether it's a matter of salvaging Aman crop or that of making good its loss through a Boro bumper, timeliness of inputs supply holds the key to success.

US election descends into the mire



ZAFAR SOBHAN

WITH the US presidential election in less than eighty days and the Republican National Convention just around the corner, the race for the White House is really heating up. Statistically the race is too close to call right now and it would be foolish to predict with any certainty a victory for one side or the other so far in advance of the actual election date. Eighty days is an eternity in politics.

It is a telling sign of how close the race has become that the Bush campaign -- as is their wont -- is pulling out all the stops to attempt to discredit Kerry. The conventional wisdom is that the American public has made up its mind that it is ready to dump Bush in November, but is not yet convinced that Kerry is the right man to replace him. If Kerry cannot convince the public that he would be a credible commander in chief, then Bush will win by default. It is thus that the centrepiece of the Bush campaign right now is not so much Bush's record as president as it is Kerry's unfitness for the presidency.

Kerry has made a big deal about his credentials as a decorated veteran. He opened his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention with

the line: "My name is John Kerry and I'm reporting for duty," and a crisp salute to hammer home the point.

The point was to counter the long-standing public perception of Democrats as weak on defence and national security and to highlight the fact that, President Bush, for all his tough talk, skipped out of serving in Vietnam in favour of a cushy berth in the Texas Air National Guard, and that once there apparently did not even make the effort to complete his commitment.

aply puts it, these statements would be devastating indictments, if they happened to be true.

The first problem with the ad is that none of the veterans quoted actually served on Kerry's swift boat in Vietnam. Some of them served alongside him in other swift boats patrolling the Mekong Delta, but, for the most part, what the officers quoted in the ad mean is that they served in the Vietnam War at roughly the same time as Kerry.

The second problem is that the

Kerry's, is also highly suspect. The incident referred to was an ambush of the patrolling swift boats which consisted of the Viet Cong exploding mines under the boats and then opening fire from both riverbanks.

Under enemy fire from the banks, Kerry turned his boat around to return to the scene of the ambush and personally pulled a crewmate who had been blasted overboard by one of the mines out of the water. O'Dell, whose swift boat was also caught up in the ambush, claims that there was no

before the Senate in which he stated that the US military had been guilty of systematic war crimes during the war, and it is this that is motivating their attack against him.

The ad is funded by a major Bush campaign donor, and the accompanying book Unfit for Command that has just been released by the right-wing Regnery Press and is shooting to the top of the best-seller lists is co-written by an extreme right-wing activist who has been quoted as referring to Bill Clinton as an "anti-American commu-

STRAIGHT TALK

The Republican National Convention will take place in New York in just over a week's time, and it will be interesting to see how the Republicans and President Bush present themselves. So far, Bush has run a negative campaign against John Kerry, but in New York he will have to defend his own record, which will not be easy to do.

It is for this reason that the Republicans have now chosen to put John Kerry's military record front and centre in their attempts to discredit him.

The latest barrage against Kerry is an ad run by a group that calls itself Swift Boat Veterans for Truth that calls into question Kerry's service in Vietnam.

The ad in question features a devastating indictment of Kerry by thirteen other officers who also claim to have served with Kerry in Vietnam. The officers make statement such as: "I know John Kerry is lying about his first purple heart because I treated him for that injury" and "John Kerry lied to get his bronze star... I know, I was there, I saw what happened."

Or, as comedian Jon Stewart so

claims they make are untrue.

For instance, the first claim I quote above, was made by medical officer Louis Letson, and it turns out that Letson is not the person listed on medical records as having treated Kerry. Letson has also stated in an affidavit that Kerry's wound was self-inflicted and did not merit a purple heart.

But the two crewman who were with Kerry that day say they have never met Letson, which calls into serious question his statement that "the crewman with Kerry told me there was no hostile fire, and that Kerry had inadvertently wounded himself with an M-79 grenade."

The second statement, made by Van O'Dell, who was serving as a gunner of another swift boat alongside

firing from the banks and that Kerry falsified his account to get a medal.

O'Dell's account has been very effectively disputed by Kerry's crewmates, and the Navy's official after-action report, which normally includes input from all swift boat officers involved in a battle, confirms that the patrol came under enemy fire during the ambush. Basic common sense and military strategy also suggests that it wouldn't have been much of an ambush if there hadn't been sniper fire supporting the mines.

The ad is simply a calculated political slander. It is clear from their public statements that the swift boat officers who attempt to discredit Kerry have never forgiven him for his role in the anti-war movement on his return from Vietnam and his testimony

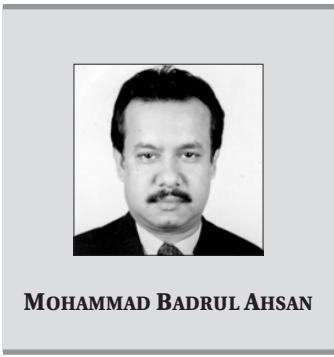
nist" and describing Islam as "a worthless, dangerous Satanic religion."

Enough said about the credibility and decency of those who are associated with this attack on Kerry's record.

Republican Senator John McCain, who spent five and a half years as a POW after his plane was shot down in Vietnam, and is respected across the political spectrum, has called the ad "dishonest and dishonourable" and has called on President Bush to repudiate the ad. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Bush has declined to do so.

McCain shouldn't be surprised. When he was running against Bush for the Republican nomination in 2000, the Bush campaign smeared him by spreading rumours that he had fathered a half-black love-child (McCain actually has a dark-skinned

Smell of hunger



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

EXPLAINING hunger is like explaining a void. It is like the sound of silence, emptiness that growls within its own bleak resonance. Hunger is like wolves howling in the wilderness. It is when the belly screams like fire alarm in a burning house. Hunger basically means that a person's daily intake of calories is not sufficient for an active and healthy life. It may be because he does not have either enough to eat or anything to eat at all.

Hunger is a familiar menace and famine is genocide of its kind because it systematically eliminates a particular group of people, who cannot eat. These people starve at the beginning, and then slowly and gradually they feel severe and racking pangs of hunger as a simmering fire starts to burn in their bellies. But then things improve after a few days, when the pains go away as the body tries to find its strength in its reserve of fat. The reserve of body fat may last for a week or two, maximum three, but after that the body turns to the energy reserves contained in the muscles.

Once hunger goes to muscles, it makes the body listless and depressed, too tired to do anything. Children do not have much energy in their mus-

cles, so they are the first to die. For adults, the body weight falls as the limbs begin to shrink and emaciate. The personality of the hungry man undergoes drastic changes. He may fly into irrational and uncontrolled rage or become totally apathetic as death approaches.

We have roughly 6.3 billion people in the world out of which 842 million are hungry. The developed or industrialised world consists of about 50 countries with a combined population of 0.9 billion or less than one-sixth of the world's population. Nearly 5

indicates that at least 20 million citizens may be hungry in the United States of America for some period of time each month. 153 million children under 5 in the developing world are underweight. Worse yet, 11 million children younger than 5 die every year, more than half from hunger-related causes. Thirty million people die of hunger every year.

We all feel hungry from time to time, especially when we cannot eat on time. Doctors would call it appetite, the urge to eat, the craving for sustenance, the way firewood is supplied to

CROSS TALK

The former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower said in his speech that every gun that was made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signified, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. Every day that theft is happening 842 million times and 30 million people are dying every year, perhaps more than the number of people killed by the guns, warships and rockets combined.

billion people live in about 125 countries, which make up the developing world and the remaining 0.4 billion live in countries in transition, which include the Baltic states, eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

It is important to throw in the numbers not to impress anyone but to draw the configuration of hunger. In the developing world, more than 1.2 billion people live below the poverty line, earning less than US\$1 per day and almost three billion people -- half the world's population -- live on less than two dollars a day. Around 800 million people go hungry in the poor countries, and available evidence

the fireplace to keep it going. The loss of appetite is sign of trouble, it means the body is not behaving itself. We often fast, going without food for virtue or diet, which is kind of customised starvation to suit our needs.

But hunger has a different connotation from appetite as a matter of choice. Hunger is when appetite waits too long without any sign of hope in the horizon. It is when appetite feeds on appetite, and the spark grows into flame. Hunger is when that flame rages in the belly and starts gutting rest of the body. So appetite is stretched to hunger and hunger is stretched to starvation and famine is when that starvation breaks out like an epidemic.

person per day worldwide. Still people die of hunger and malnutrition, like an engine that sputters to a halt for lack of fuel.

In his article *The politics of hunger*, Ignacio Ramonet expounds that hunger is more a creation of politics than anything else. In countries like Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, North Korea, Burma and Afghanistan, governments and military leaders were holding innocent people hostage and starving them for their political ends, using cruel means at times. In Sierra Leone, Ignacio adds, the men of ex-Corporal Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), systematically chopped off peasant's hands with

gap in 1995 was 82 times greater. In over 70 countries, per capita income is lower today than it was 20 years ago.

As per the UN calculation, a levy of less than 4 percent on the accumulated wealth of the 225 largest fortunes would be sufficient to meet the basic needs of the entire population of the world. More interestingly, the total cost of the world's sanitation and food requirements come to only \$13 billion, which is hardly as much as the people of the United States and the European Union spend each year on perfume.

Have you ever felt the smarts of hunger without knowing when and whether you will get to eat? I have never gone hungry, but I have talked to

adopted daughter from Bangladesh) and that he might have gone a little crazy in his years in captivity.

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In 1980, then candidate Ronald Reagan skewered President Carter with the simple question to the American people: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" Indeed, as Bush prepares for New York, it is worth recalling Reagan's words at the Republican National Convention that nominated him for the presidency in 1980:

"Can anyone look at the record of this administration and say, 'Well done'? Or at the state of our economy when the Carter administration took office with where we are today and say, 'Keep up the good work'? Can anyone look at our reduced standing in the world today and say, 'Let's have four more years of this?'"

Tough stuff. President Bush knows that he has no real answer to similar charges, which is why the only card he has left to play is to spend the next eighty days trying to convince the American public that John Kerry is unfit to be commander in chief. The ad run by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth is just the opening salvo in what promises to be the most vicious US presidential campaign in memory.

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people who did, and according to them, the entire existence of a hungry man heavily rotates around the lightness in the belly. It is even more difficult for a man with family, for a mother with children, because the opportunity cost of each morsel of food determines who is to die and who is to live.

One person described the experience of hunger as a sea of despair churning in the belly. He described how it devastated his mind first before it got to his body, how he felt the stabbing pain of being isolated in the grim prospects of dying from want in a world of plenty. He wondered why he was chosen to bear the burden of hunger when millions wasted food around him like frolicking children throw water during bath.

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Points to ponder if you are not starving today. Bon appetit and congratulations! You are the lucky people who can think of hunger. The hungry ones are too busy thinking of food alone! Next time you put on perfume, remember it is the smell of someone who has not eaten yet.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

OPINION

Citizens' voice in health policy and programming

ROUNAQ JAHAN

I read with interest two articles recently published in The Daily Star by two experts who have been associated with the health and population sector for decades. Both articles raise interesting questions for debate about programme instruments and options. Dr. Syed Jahangeer Haider (Population Programmes and Directions, DS, July 24, 2004) presents interesting findings about positive correlations between achievements of total fertility rate (TFR), contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) and allied reproductive health data, and questions the wisdom of emphasis on single focused family planning (FP) approach and over reliance on domiciliary services. Dr. Zakir Hussain (Population Control: Reaching the Remaining Half, DS, August 4, 2004) also argues that further reduction of TFR and increase of

CPR will demand a more comprehensive approach to reproductive health, and a greater focus on consumer orientation. Both authors strongly endorse the ICPD approach of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and both underscore the importance of evidence based debate on various policy/programme options.

The two articles are timely as the government of Bangladesh (GoB), is currently negotiating with the development partners, funding for the current three year (2003-06) Health, Nutrition, Population Sector Programme (HNPSPP) and a longer term (2005-10) Strategic Investment Plan (SIP). Various new programme elements, such as demand side financing and diversifying service provision through contracting NGOs, are being discussed and debated between GoB and development partners. Several NGOs, professional

organizations and civil society organizations have already been consulted on these new programme ideas. However, it will be useful if there is an open public debate on these ideas through articles published in the newspapers so that citizens are better informed about the implications of these various policy/programme options now under consideration. Many more voices need to join the debate regarding the future directions of our health policy and programming.

Up to now, citizens' experience of voicing their concerns and interfacing with the government has been far from satisfactory. The two gatekeepers of official policy/programme processes -- government and development partners -- tend to consult "communities and stakeholders" in an ad hoc way. The latter is episodically consulted to give opinions and citizens usually do not get feedback as

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to how their concerns are being addressed. Additionally, these consultations are rarely sustained. There is no institutional arrangement through which citizens' voice can inform policy and programme design, implementation, monitoring and review, so as to get the desired impact of their "voices." Government and development partners show interest in consulting citizens during the design phase of a policy/programme but appear to lose interest during implementation.

However, empirical evidence from Bangladesh and elsewhere suggests that citizens' voice and oversight is crucial for improving the quality, access and utilization of health services. In Bangladesh, several NGOs and civil society organisations have already started their own community based "health watch groups" to monitor the work of the health services. These have had some success in linking users with providers of health services. But these "voices" are generally trapped at the local level with little

impact at the national/central level of decision making. The responsiveness of the system depends on the personality of the local level providers/managers. There is no institutional mechanism through which service users can enhance accountability of the providers to them. Additionally, non-government groups do not have an effective forum of their own at the national level outside of the official processes to advocate the interests of service users and engage with the government and development partners in a sustained way. Moreover, at the national level, organisations of service providers are much stronger consumers associations.

I believe the time has come for academics, civil society groups, and the media to be more proactive in taking an interest in policy debates. This means not simply talking about problems but also about realistic

solutions. We need much more open and public debate about the costs and benefits of different policy and programme options. More importantly, we need to discuss more openly which groups would bear the costs and which groups would benefit from different choices the government will make.

A dilemma faced by the academic and civil society organisations is that while they need to maintain independence from government and development partners in setting their agendas, they are also dependent on the same government and development partner sources for funding, who generally provide restricted project funds. Absence of long term institutional and programme funding seriously limits the capacity of academic and civil society organisations to undertake independent research and advocacy. Additionally, for policy and programme relevant research

and advocacy, academic, and civil society organisations need access to official documents as well as processes such as meetings convened by government and development partners.

As the government and development partners start to develop a strategic health plan for the future, it will be important to remember that such a plan should contain specific policy and institutional support for effective citizens' voice. Obstacles to participation should be addressed and the capacity of citizens' groups to advocate the interests of users of the health services, particularly of the marginalised groups, should be strengthened.

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