

## Food safety

### System needs to be rebuilt from scratch

THE mobile courts continue to bring to book those purveying adulterated and dangerous foods and the issue has come to the forefront of public consciousness. Indeed one down-side of the current drive for food safety is that the food industry has been hit as consumers have responded to the current scare by scaling back their purchases of certain items and eating out less often than before.

This market response shows the insufficiencies and limitations of the current measures in place to ensure food safety. The point is not to cause harm to the industry as a whole so that the good suffer along with the bad, but this is the unavoidable result of the haphazard system that is currently in place for ensuring food safety, and is evidence that the consumer is hopelessly confused as to food quality and has no idea how to ensure that the food he or she eats is safe.

What is needed is a mechanism whereby people can be ensured of the quality of their food with no ambiguity or uncertainty. At present, every step along the supply chain is subject to corruption. The current system is in a state of total collapse and the public has no way of ensuring whether the food it eats is safe or not.

It is clear that the entire regulatory system needs to be overhauled and restructured from top to bottom. The authorities need to go beyond the conventional measures that have proven so ineffective, and devise a workable mechanism so that the consumer is protected and that the food industry can maintain quality control.

The first step is a registration and certification programme for every step along the supply chain. This will bring the industry under some kind of discipline. Needless to say, the standards for certification must be rigorously upheld.

We would like to see a clear mandate given to a single authority to ensure food safety. Currently the matter falls under the authority of a number of criss-crossing agencies and ministries, to say nothing of local municipalities, and this is one reason for the confusion.

In addition, what is needed is fresh thinking on the matter. Let us tap experts in both the public and the private sector to resolve this problem. This is fruitful ground for a public-private partnership approach.

Indeed, the entire food industry has seen its reputation tarnished by the scandal, and this should be incentive for it to get involved in self-policing. The private sector need not wait for the government to set up a regulatory regimen. The food industry has everything to gain from setting up its own quality control standards, and ensuring that each member of the industry in good standing maintains them.

## A confusing approach

Reclaim natural channels as top priority

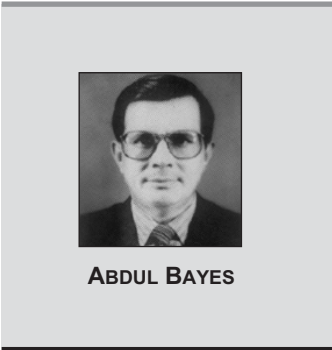
THE Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) is addressing the problem of waterlogging in the city by cleaning drains and storm sewers. WASA has already spent Tk 50 crore out of Tk 203 crore allocated to a massive project for eliminating waterlogging. But the task has not been undertaken on the basis of a comprehensive plan that would include provisions for dealing with the problem in its entirety.

Obviously, routine exercises like cleaning the drain and storm sewer lines have to be carried out to avoid blockage. But WASA planners should not lose sight of the fact that the canals in and around the city are the natural drains for flushing out water, particularly during the monsoon. Unfortunately, most of these canals have gone derelict due to illegal occupation and the resultant obstruction of the flow of water. This natural drainage system has to be revived to prevent waterlogging on a long term basis.

The WASA project had also envisaged dredging the canals on the basis of a study conducted by the district administration. It found out that 14 out of 35 canals in the city could still be recovered and the WASA started clearing these canals in May last. But the job is partially done. The canals have not been sufficiently cleared and connected to the rivers outside the city. In other words, the situation remains unchanged.

We believe that the tasks of cleaning drains and dredging canals should be undertaken simultaneously. Experts have time and again emphasised the need for making the derelict canals navigable. And this has also been a major goal of the WASA project. But it has focussed its attention on routine, short term measures instead of going for a permanent solution to the problem of water logging. The decision-makers should waste no more time and shift their attention to reviving the canals which are still not moribund, keeping in view the multiple benefits of having them flowing through the city. These canals will have a very positive impact on the city's environment, alongside removing water logging.

# Time and tide for the tillers



THE International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has launched a series of seminars, workshops and symposium in different parts of South Asia over the course of the last two years. Held under the aegis of its South Asia Initiative (SAI), the purpose was to intensify IFPRI's research and outreach efforts geared to the growing challenges of poverty and hunger in this part of the world. Specifically with the opening of its regional office in New Delhi, IFPRI signaled its stronger presence on the ground, quick and closer ties with its clients in the region, and commitment to confront the crises concerning food and agriculture in South Asia.

### Focus of events

In the following paragraphs, we present the upshot of three seminars in three countries: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Although focused on the particular situation of each country, the experiences of some other countries were drawn upon to substantiate the empirical evidence. The events focused on many aspects that apparently go into shaping the lives of the people of the region: (1) Agricultural growth and transformation, (2) Food security with a reference to the issues of food safety and biotechnology, (3) Poverty and hunger reduction strategies with due attention to "hidden hunger," and (4) Institutions and governance.

### Developments

The three countries under consideration stand at crossroads; on the one hand, there are challenges of malnutrition, hunger, and poverty,

and on the other hand, there are tremendous opportunities and technologies that may hold answers. Bangladesh has been showing a positive picture pertaining to HYV technology, increased food production, and poverty reduction. India emerged as a food surplus country with poverty gradually going down. But Pakistan witnessed a waning agricultural growth rate, and, in consequence, an increase in poverty. Most of the discourses in these seminars were driven by the

percent in Thailand and the Philippines. Third, contract growing emerged as important institutional arrangements where NGOs, agro-processors, and supermarkets are competing to procure perishable products. High-value commodities have had a significant influence on the diversification of agriculture -- occurring much faster in urban and per-urban areas than in near-urban areas and hinterlands.

### The drivers

South Asian tillers are facing a tough time to cope with globalisation. To tide over the wave, they now need more innovative institutional support than ever before. They can face the emerging challenges and turn out to be competitive provided appropriate roles are played by government, NGOs and private sector.

imperatives of the emerging transformation of agriculture that the region is faced with. The "old order" of growing and marketing of cereal crops and subsistence farming is reported to be increasingly paving ways for a "new order" of agricultural practices. In the changing scenario, production and marketing of horticultural crops is gaining ground and farmers are leaning on commercial cultivation. Cereals still dominates in terms of acreage in SA countries --surely for the sake of food security -- but developments on other fronts also loom large.

### Dimensions

There are many dimensions to the aforementioned developments. First, the dietary patterns of consumers in the region are rapidly shifting from cereal-based to high-value commodities. For example, the domestic demand for the commodities increased at 3-5 percent per annum and exports of high-value crops are creeping up due to better incentives for exports and changing demand in importing countries. Second, the number of supermarkets and other food retail shops has grown dramatically, varying between 10-90 percent, over the years. The rate of sales of food through supermarkets expanded at 5 percent in poor countries like Bangladesh and at 50

In all three countries, the main drivers behind the developments were, for example, (a) rapid urbanisation, (b) faster growth in per capita income growth, (c) a shift from inward looking to outward looking trade strategies, and (d) removal of restrictions on foreign direct investment in the food sector. All of these factors contribute to a change in lifestyles, food preferences, investment priorities and production decisions.

The degree of diversification and the attended effects, however, varies across the region. For example, Bangladesh witnessed marginal increase in diversification compared to India and Pakistan. Supermarkets seem to have proliferated in Indian states, but to a lesser extent in Pakistan and the least in Bangladesh. Foreign direct investment flow to the food and retail sector in India and Pakistan, but not to Bangladesh. Contract growing arrangements have emerged in all three countries. Some foreign companies are operating in India and Pakistan. However, in Bangladesh, local NGOs and agro-processors are taking the lead.

Innovative institutional arrangements are silently evolving in the three countries that link producers with agribusiness. Cooperatives,

the domestic private sector, and multinational firms in a few niche areas initiate most of the models. The impact of institutional arrangements included: (a) access to assured markets, (b) access to reliable information, (c) a reduction in transaction costs and market risks, and (d) higher profits for producers. Case studies have shown that as a result of contract farming, transaction costs were reduced by over 90 percent for milk and vegetables, and 58 percent for

smallholders under various production and market-risk scenarios. Second, since production and marketing of high-value agriculture is capital intensive and smallholders generally starve for capital, agencies and associated legal framework should be devised. Third, to avoid the breach of contract under contract arrangements, legal and regulatory mechanism should be developed. However, most of the participants emphasised building trusts among agents and participa-

tion of community in the negotiations. Fourth, public sector should help high-value agriculture through investment in infrastructure to crowd in private investment. Public sector should also create an enabling environment for business. And finally, to propagate food quality and safety issues to all farmers in general and to smallholders in particular, the government must develop appropriate infrastructure and expertise.

### Food security and bio-technology

Bio-technology is a critical tool that will help achieve the Millennium Development Goals by facilitating improved food production and reducing the burden on the environment (through better resource management). The safe and sustainable use of bio-technology, especially in developing countries holds immense potential. In Bangladesh, backward areas could benefit. India has already one genetically modified (GM) crop, Bt cotton, on the market with several other important crops waiting on the wings for a release. Bangladesh has yet to step into the process, but as argued by the participants, research is needed on how international market will change over time and whether

Bangladesh will have a strategic advantage as a result. It has emphatically been argued that regulatory mechanisms must be based on both ethical and bio-safety concerns. The technology should be viewed as a whole package -- one that includes an effective regulatory system, safety precautions, public awareness, and partnerships between the various stakeholders.

In his keynote speech, Joachim von Braun sketched a global policy perspective of food security and then put forward relevant policy parameters that might apply in Bangladesh: "Not only ask: How many are hungry, who, and where are they. But also ask: Why?" He suggested researchers pay attention not only to "open hunger" but also to "hidden hunger" caused by micronutrient deficiency. According to him, Bangladesh should adapt the UN-sponsored "Hunger Task Force" recommendations to its circumstances: (1) Move from political rhetoric to action, (2) Reform policies and create an enabling environment; (3) Increase the agricultural productivity of food insecure farmers, (4) Improve the nutrition of the chronically hungry and vulnerable, (5) Reduce the vulnerability of the acutely hungry through productive safety nets, (6) Make markets work for the poor, and (7) Restore and conserve natural resources essential for food security.

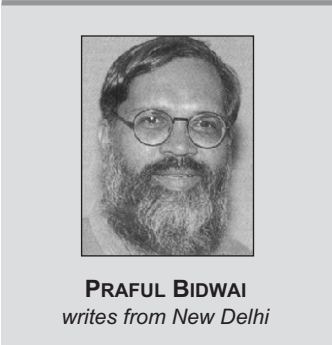
### Final words

South Asian tillers are facing a tough time to cope with globalisation. To tide over the wave, they now need more innovative institutional support than ever before. They can face the emerging challenges and turn out to be competitive provided appropriate roles are played by government, NGOs and private sector.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

# India joins global apartheid

## A bad nuclear bargain



AFTER signing the "New Framework" defence deal, which virtually turns India into the United States' subordinate ally, New Delhi has reached a nuclear cooperation agreement with Washington, which mocks India's stated policy.

The UPA's Common Minimum Programme explicitly said India would take "leadership" in "promoting universal nuclear disarmament." Instead, India has joined the Nuclear Club, and abandoned disarmament.

For decades, India condemned the present Club-dominated global nuclear order as "atomic apartheid." It has joined that very apartheid regime. This knocks India's credibility and exposes her colossal hypocrisy in hiding her nuclear ambitions behind high moral posturing -- at least since 1988 when Rajiv Gandhi made a thoughtful global disarmament proposal.

It's a terrible irony that Dr Manmohan led India's descent into nuclear cynicism. He himself had spiritedly criticised the Vajpayee government for conducting the

Pokharan-II tests.

Dr Singh accused it of reducing national security to its "military dimension," and launching an "uncontrollable" arms race. He warned of threats to "social cohesion" and insecurities "arising out of ill-health, illiteracy, ignorance, and disease. If we do not attend to these threats, you will have WMDs like the Soviet Union, but the Soviet Union still withered away. Therefore, think before you weaponise."

The latest agreement seeks to

India would also "secure nuclear materials through export control" and through "adherence to Missile Technology Control Regime and Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) Guidelines," although it's not a member of either.

Contrary to the BJP's claims, the agreement won't cap India's fissile-material production or its nuclear arsenal's size. Nor will it permit blatant IAEA "interference." The choice of designating nuclear facilities as civilian/military is

nism" and "reconsider their self-restraint" -- like India did.

Besides finding a market for America's crisis-ridden nuclear-equipment industry, Washington's motives are to build India into a counterweight to China, and use India to "embed" itself in Asia. With this strategic embrace, India risks losing its policy independence and undermining improved relations with China.

This bargain assumes that India desperately needs nuclear power

means perpetual external dependence.

Two-thirds of the world's 440 operating power reactors are in North America and Western Europe. By 2030, most of them will be closed. Countries that opted for nuclear power early are phasing it out, including Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Belgium. Even France, 78 percent of whose electricity is nuclear, has closed 11 reactors, including the world's largest fast-breeder.

an estimated 50,000-plus deaths.

Nuclear plants produce high-level wastes, which remain hazardous 20-fold longer than the oldest human structure. This problem has defied solution.

Nuclear power is being touted as a cure for global warming. It's not. Electricity generation accounts for only 9 percent of global GHG emissions. Nuclear power accounts for only 16 percent of electricity globally, and just 3 percent in India. So its potential for reducing GHGs is insignificant. Nuclear power certainly produces more GHGs than renewables like wind and solar.

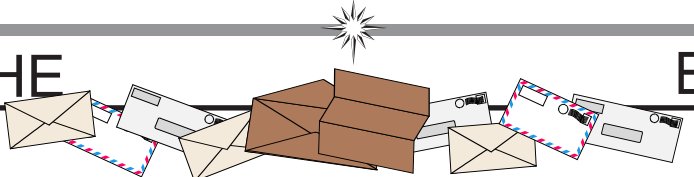
Nuclear power doesn't lead to reduced carbon-dioxide emissions in the long run. Japan's nuclear capacity rose between 1965 and 1995 by 40,000 MW. But carbon-dioxide emissions tripled!

There may be a ray of hope, though. The agreement will probably face stiff resistance in the US and NSG states. Last fortnight, a US Congressional Committee torpedoed nuclear exports to India. NSG members like Japan, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and Sweden, which forswore nuclear weapons, could oppose dilution of the Group's Guidelines. In India, the DAE will be reluctant to execute the agreement.

The "grand bargain" could turn out hollow.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Two DNA labs

DNA tests are needed for crime detection and they serve many other purposes. These tests enable us to discover the identity of anyone very accurately. DNA tests are being used worldwide for identifying victims as in Tsunami and also for identifying criminals. Bangladesh being a developing country does not have such technology because it is expensive.

But it is good to learn that the government is establishing a DNA lab at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. But it has also been learnt that the lab is being set up on a temporary basis! So it is not clear why the authorities are spending so much money for a temporary arrangement. It has been reported that another DNA lab is set to be established for the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab).

In an interview with a satellite

channel the state minister for home affairs has expressed his intention to prevent wastage of money. But two expensive labs with costly instruments are indicating something different. In a terror affected country like Bangladesh, DNA technology must exist as the criminals sink through our porous laws and judicial process. But we should be aware of our resource constraints.

### Moinul Alam

Eskaton Garden Road, Dhaka

### Corruption in schools

There was a letter about corruption and money making policies at Private Universities in Dhaka which was published in a newspaper sometime last week. The writer perhaps has forgotten to mention about corruption even at primary level schools in Dhaka, mostly the private ones. Rather shamefully, a new trend is

developing where school students are forced to undertake special after-class coaching by their respective class and other school teachers. Students not complying with such special coaching are subjected to serious discrimination. The important lessons are intentionally brushed aside from bagful of homework. On the other hand, the important lessons are taught to the students at the special coaching classes which eventually pave the way for those students to achieve better results and thus leave the non-special coaching students lagging far behind! And of course do not forget the criminal approach of "Donation" for "Admission".

By the way, I am not against special coaching class but certainly not the way it is going on. Rather, coaching in any form should be rightly accepted at schools.

Everyone wants to make fast money and wants to buy houses and

cars etc. Corruption is too deeply inserted in our blood. It is cancerous!

We need to do the following to improve things at schools.

- 1) Intensive visits to schools, area wise, to check ability and sincerity of a teacher
- 2) Find out communication between a teacher and a student.
- 3) Find out the progress of a student.
- 4) All teachers must have a lesson plan.
- 5) Check exercise copies so as to check proper teaching within the syllabus.
- 6) Heads of schools should also take up the above tasks if inspection is delayed or not available. The Ministry of Education is requested to wake up and do something about this horrible and disgraceful situation.

### Farzana Akter

Rampura, Dhaka

### Education of Bush

President Bush is getting educated, after deciphering of the signals in London (7/7 and later), and Egypt. Now he is advocating more use of nuclear power stations, for 'peaceful' uses. But the Red Indians (natives), and the settlers are opposing the proposals, as the resulting garbage is radioactive for many years, and it cannot be thrown into the sea, or kept in space.

Kill ideology or kill people? That is the theme many critics and observers have taken up as the current topic of debate. The motivations have to be analysed, and understood, (as Britain has stated doing, hopefully). The Romans (in EU, now called Italians) are historically philosophical, and are mentally prepared for what might be coming. "You asked for it!"

Dhaka's foreign policy might slip from solid foundation in the absence of political consensus at the national

level. But the focus is on the cleansing of the election apparatus. Neither here nor there!

There is nothing to write about, but to wait and see.

AZ, Dhaka

### Ninety-nine political parties!

I am surprised to know that there are as many as 99 political parties in Bangladesh. I think the parties exist in paper only and they have no presence in the political arena.

I don't understand why the Election Commission has undertaken this futile exercise of holding talks with a great number of parties, most of which are dormant.

Ashfaq Mahmud  
Banani, Dhaka

### Nobel nomination

It is heartening to read in the newspaper that Dr Yunus of Grameen Bank might be nominated for the Nobel Prize. The recognition should have come earlier. He is to micro-credit what Bill Gates is to personal computers (popularised both DOS and Window).

The GB microcredit programme is being widely replicated in many countries, and have changed the lives of millions of poor families, restoring to them the will to live on.

It is time there is some good news from emerging Bangladesh.

### A Mahasen

Dhaka

### Resisting dacoits

I have read the letters of Mr. Mahmud Hussein from Tower

Hamlet college in UK published in The Daily Star and The Bangladesh Observer on July 13, 2005 and July 24, 2005 respectively. He wrote in response to my letter "Resisting Dacoits". Everyone is free to express his/her opinions, but it may not be acceptable to everybody.

As for "feigning sleep when thieves enter your house", it was written in a world famous magazine. We should save our lives before valuables.

What is the point in it, you will be no more to enjoy those and the dacoits will not leave the booties either after killing you, so your family will lose you and your valuables.

I will not call it cowardly if one does not resist dacoits, I will call it a sensible act.

### Nur Jahan

Chittagong