

## Adulteration of food

*Tough laws alone cannot set things right*

THE parliament has incorporated many stringent provisions in the food ordinance with the objective of curbing production and sale of adulterated foods. A bill titled Bangladesh Pure Food (Amendment) Act, 2005 was passed on Monday last.

This is a vigorous response to the public outcry that the existing laws were not tough enough to deal with a crime like adulteration. The fine money has been raised to Tk 75,000 for those committing the crime for the first time along with one year rigorous imprisonment. The money will be tripled for any repetition of the crime.

So there is no doubt that the decision makers are making a determined effort to impose heavier punishment, that might really work as a deterrent, on the dishonest elements. However, some questions are still unanswered. For example, how are they planning to stop adulteration of non-food items like pharmaceuticals? This is a vast area where quality control is yet to reach the desired mark.

Another area of concern is that fake manufacturing plants are using popular brand names. So bona fide businessmen are losing their goodwill and getting enmeshed in legal complications for no fault of theirs.

The government's decision to go for tougher legal measures against adulteration is understandable. The plan to involve local bodies in the anti-adulteration drive through having their representatives as public analysts of food is a commendable one. But matters must improve in other areas also. It has been reported in the daily Porthom Alo that the government agencies have neither the equipment nor the trained personnel at the laboratories to detect adulteration. The laboratories do not have the facilities to correctly assess the damaging effects of non-food grade colours and other harmful ingredients on the human body.

So, it is necessary to strike at the roots of the problem. The government has to think in terms of developing a reliable system of detecting adulteration and unhygienic practices at different levels of food production. The magnitude of the problem calls for a round-the-year vigil, instead of seasonal campaigns.

## Minister, advisor on prices

*Theories abound, action in short supply*

THE orisation about higher prices by some top government functionaries appears to be taking new flights of imagination. In the process, domestic market distortions, which largely lie in our power to streamline, remain unaddressed and, are given a freer rein.

At a press conference held on Wednesday to brief newsmen about the outcome of Bangladesh Expo-London, commerce minister Altaf Hossain dropped a bombshell claiming that the domestic price level remains steady. While admitting that rising onion and pulse prices are a cause for concern, the minister waxed political in reminding that the onion price had soared to Tk 60 per kilo during AL rule. Does it mean then that a hike up to Tk 60 is admissible?

If newspaper reports are anything to go by, Barkat Ullah Bulu believes that it's a handful of city-dwellers that raise any hue and cry over prices, ordinary people are hardly bothered. For instance, he suggests, rural people are happy over higher rice prices, because these fetch them increased purchasing power to afford essentials at increased prices in turn.

The current prices of essentials are on a skyrocketing spiral across the board building up on an upswing that originating in the oil price hike gathered momentum through higher import prices and increased transport costs to reach the present plateau. But the new spurt in prices is the direct result of the pre-Ramadan surge in speculative trading.

If the commerce ministry's attitude is to blame the higher prices on external factors washing the hands off the domestic obligations, then our approach to resolving the price crisis would be widely off-the-mark.

If we have to wait till the passage of the consumer rights protection law which has been eight years in the making to combat hoarding, then God help us! We urge the government to initiate steps that ensure effective marketing intelligence, secure cooperation from the trading community in return for security offered to them, and checkmate hoarding that leads to market distortions.

The inter-ministerial committee that is said to be in place should gear up its activities with two specific targets in mind: first, strengthen the supply side in keeping with Ramadan related demands; and secondly, effect maximum coordination between different market monitoring agencies to hold the price-line at an affordable level.

# UN World Summit ends with a whimper



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

BACK in June this year, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan addressed the International Councilors of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and observed that the United Nations 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit offered a 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity to transform the world body. Like him, many of us, who have been associated with multilateral diplomacy for nearly forty years, thought that the September Summit, particularly after the Volcker Report, would generate sufficient political will and necessary agreement. We hoped that necessary reforms would be introduced facilitating efficiency and effectiveness within the world body.

Unfortunately it was not to be so. In this increasingly interdependent world, leaders from more than 150 countries met in New York and blinked when confronted with major substantive issues. They failed to rise to the occasion with regard to measures required for defeating poverty, assisting in the reaching of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) -- eradicating listed socio-economic ills by 2015, building a collective security system able to meet the century's common threats, increasing respect for human rights through institutional reform and making the Security Council more democratic and representative.

The UN Secretary General's wide-ranging report entitled 'In Larger Freedom' offered concrete proposals on the above issues, it also proposed sweeping overhaul of the UN's architecture -- probably the most comprehensive in the last 60 years. These were reviewed by governments in a series of informal

consultations conducted by UN General Assembly President Jean Ping. Subsequently, a watered down and whittled draft compromise was circulated for re-consideration just ahead of the Summit. Even this weak document failed to pass the international litmus test.

One of the greatest drawbacks of this compromise draft was its generic approach and the eagerness to arrive at consensus on significant issues by deleting points of argument. Consequently, what we have

also been postponed and will be dealt with again during the forthcoming Hong Kong Trade Summit being convened later on in December this year.

Civil society campaigners originally had high hopes that the UN Summit might see further commitments by rich countries to increase aid flows, but in fact the possibility of reaching the 0.7 per cent of GDP target was never there. Political will was absent.

Similarly, the process of debt

agricultural talks on agricultural subsidy at the WTO in Geneva were adjourned, a day early without agreement. This failure was caused by the inability to adopt a more comprehensive approach.

Such action reiterated once again that the important players are focussed only on short term individual country interests. Time, I believe, is running out for a global trade deal. The bright promises of summer appear to be fading.

Kofi Annan's document, with

lish ownership over natural resources with the help of foreign state-holders. Nothing was done to stop this.

The biggest failing was in the area of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Here 'posturing' got in the way of results.

Security Council reform was also left on the wayside. Democracy and suitable representation were swept underneath the blue carpet of the United Nations. The carrot of an eventual expanded Security Council

mit, Mr. Annan has correctly noted that members had failed to achieve the profound reform the world body needed. Every side has been a loser -- not just the developing countries for whom an effective UN is a vital source of aid, advice and influence; also the US, which has demonstrated repeatedly in recent months and years that it is both ill-equipped and often unwilling to do precisely the tasks that an effective United Nations would undertake -- such as peace-making, nation-building in failed states and dealing with disasters.

The planned reforms were intended to persuade Washington that it should use the multilateral system in future, rather than going it alone as it did in Iraq. They were also intended to make the United Nations more effective -- not just in US eyes but also to all its members, rich and poor.

I believe there were pluses for the Bush Administration if the reforms could have been agreed to. Yet, as Quentin Peel has commented, 'instead of getting enthusiastically involved in the negotiations to get the best possible and most widely acceptable package, Washington remained in the sidelines'. They tabled 750 amendments to the reduce 39 page draft reform document. That hardly reflected a positive approach.

A clear message has nevertheless rung out -- the United Nations and its bloated bureaucracy have to be fully accountable, transparent and efficient. It has also been reiterated that its workforce has to have high standards of integrity and competency.

The United Nations is at the crossroads. It has reached the age of sixty, not too far away from the universally accepted age of superannuation. One only hopes that it is not retired, as happened with the League of Nations. Member States also need to remember that the strength and effectiveness of the United Nations will be directly proportional to the level of unity within themselves.

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## POST BREAKFAST

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been left with is a shadow of the substance.

This is particularly disappointing given some of the important aspects sought originally through the draft Summit document.

On 'Freedom from want' it not only included proposals in the area of development but also called for breakthroughs in debt relief and trade liberalisation. It also suggested increases in aid to revitalise infrastructure in health and education sectors in order to achieve the MDGs.

We need to recall here that this Summit was originally called to endorse and measure progress on the MDGs. Such intentions however appear to have been hijacked. The Summit ended up addressing more of its attention on plans to fight terrorism.

The Summit retained the ambitious goals set by G-8 leaders in Glenageas Summit in July this year -- to double aid, to increase debt relief and to open trade barriers to poor countries. However, final decisions were not taken. It was left dependent on decisions to be arrived at in future meetings -- notably the World Bank and the annual meeting of the IMF in Washington. Resolving trade issues have

relief was not accelerated and added to at the United Nations. It might be recalled that G-8 Finance Ministers had agreed on a relief debt deal at Glenageas, particularly granting full debt relief to 18 highly indebted poor countries (HIPC). This initiative has now got embroiled in several difficulties.

Switzerland and Netherlands among others are objecting to such across the board debt relief. They fear that the cost of debt relief -- after the initial three years -- will not be fully funded by the big nations and that the plan will also hurt other developing countries that are not receiving such debt relief. Some others have also raised the question of IMF imperatives that insist on 'good economic management' as being *sine qua non* for implementation of such an initiative.

At the end of the day it appears that there was much of rhetorical endorsement of the importance of a global trade deal at the United Nations. There was also recognition that trade has the potential to boost developing country incomes far more than aid inflows. However, such perception seems to have been deficient in resolve. This was reflected in the fact that while the UN Summit was going on, the key

regard to 'freedom from fear' had sought improvement in collective security arrangements to prevent terrorism and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. It was also implied that serious efforts were required to have agreement on the definition and the denotations and connotations of the term 'terrorism'. It also pointed out the need for the establishment of a Peace Building Commission that would support countries during their transitions from armed conflict to lasting peace.

On this front, the Summit did much better. It agreed to establish a Peace Building Commission to help resolve conflicts, many of which take place in developing countries. They also accepted that there was a common obligation to intervene when civilians face genocide and war crimes.

The United Nations Security Council passed a Resolution to prevent the incitement of terrorism and another to prevent conflict, especially in Africa. However, very little attention was paid to stopping the sale of arms in conflict-ridden areas. We already know that the civil strife lingering on in Congo and in other areas of Africa are being fuelled by parties seeking to estab-

without veto powers for the newly included permanent members will eventually be agreed to, but it is unlikely to be so during this UNGA Session.

Under 'freedom to live in dignity', the UN document had stressed that there could be no development without security, no security without development, and neither without the universal application and protection of human rights. Within this chapter, nations were also asked to seriously consider creation of an independent and self-financing Democracy Fund to help governments strengthen their democratic practices and institutions. It was also proposed that the largely discredited Human Rights Commission needed to be transformed into a smaller standing body called Human Rights Council with membership subject to approval by two-thirds majority of the General Assembly.

There was acrimonious debate for quite a few days among members on this question and the blueprint for future international action. Least common denominators having failed, it was decided to refer it to the General Assembly. This means further delay.

At the conclusion of the Sum-

## OPINION

# Secondary education: Unitrack or not?

MANZOOR AHMED

THE government decision to introduce from next January one common curricular content for all students in grades nine and ten has generated a spate of controversy. Separate tracks of science, commerce and humanities in existence for 40 years will be discontinued. SSC examination in 2008 will be based on the common content. Henceforth, the tracking that determines higher education eligibilities and career opportunities will begin from grade eleven. Is this not a good idea? Why is the controversy?

Historically, secondary education access worldwide was limited to a small privileged group and one academic stream was the norm. The aim was to prepare most high school students for higher education. With the expansion of opportunities for secondary education, larger proportions of young people enrolled in high schools. The idea of preparing students for future occupations and linking secondary education to career choices took hold. Separate tracks or streams were introduced in most countries at the secondary level. The main purpose was to separate out those who would follow an academic stream and go on to higher education and others who would enter vocational and technical training

institutions. Children of age 11+ years at the end of primary schooling competed to gain entry into the academic stream that promised greater opportunities and rewards in life. This became the prevalent system in Europe and elsewhere, except in North America, where public secondary education offered largely a common curriculum for all.

Higher levels of skills and basic

lar content with some elective subjects in secondary education has become the dominant model. From this perspective, the government decision is the right one; in fact, it should have come twenty years ago.

We have serious problems in our secondary education system which must be considered in introducing any change in the curriculum. Secondary education is already

stream in general secondary schools which serve at least two thirds of secondary level students. The questions being raised by the skeptics, however, have merit. Are the schools prepared for absorbing a dose of substantial change in their teaching programme? SSC results have shown that about half of all the candidates fail and in some 3,000 of about 20,000 secondary level institutions the pass rate has been

teachers to be employed, privatisation of textbooks leading to a choice among multiple books for the same subject, a new learning assessment method which will emphasise knowledge and skills rather than recall of textbooks, and linking government subvention to performance of schools. This is quite an ambitious agenda. At least some progress in these will prepare schools better for other

reform and improvement in student performance. Moreover, a change in the curricular and teaching content in grades nine and ten have consequences for the HSC level too. The implications for the earlier stage of grades six to eight also cannot be ignored. A prudent course of action would be to proceed more deliberately, allow the time necessary for preparation and orientation for all concerned, and introduce the unitrack curriculum from 2007 academic year. An alternative may be to test it in 2006 in a selected number of schools which are judged to be well-prepared, at least in respect of qualified teaching personnel to teach all the subjects. This would mean having two sets of examination questions for SSC examination in 2008 -- not something that cannot be handled.

Unfortunately, new initiatives have a tendency to become a matter of political discord in our confrontational political culture without these being judged on their merit. This is another reason for proceeding not in haste, but with due deliberation, in introducing a significant change in secondary education.

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competencies -- especially in language, mathematics, science and lately, computer literacy -- are now demanded from workers by modern economies in the globalised markets. The pendulum has shifted to more years of general education for all students in the secondary school. The need for learning new skills and making workers adaptable and trainable for different jobs in one's lifetime also put a premium on general education and basic competencies. In both developed and developing countries, a common core curricu-

divided into several parallel sub-systems. Besides the general secondary school to which the government decision applies, there are madrasahs of various types, the English medium proprietary institutions preparing students for overseas credentials, other English medium schools following the national curriculum, and the formal vocational-technical institutions. There is no parity or commonality in educational content and quality criteria among them.

A good case can be made for at least a beginning with a common

from zero to ten percent. This is due to, among other reasons, poor quality of teachers and even absence of qualified teachers for science, mathematics and English in a large number of schools, especially in rural areas.

Complaints have been voiced about teachers and schools not being made aware in time or given guidance and orientation about the new approach. A number of other reform measures is under introduction. These include teacher accreditation and certification allowing only those in a pool of certified

reforms. Over-burdening the curriculum with teaching contents in the name of standards without regard to the reality of teacher skills and school facilities can also be a problem. This would defeat the purpose of the unitrack curriculum and must be carefully scrutinised.

Some of the dissenters about the unitrack curriculum speak from ignorance or misunderstanding. However, the concern about preparedness of teachers and schools and their capacity to absorb reforms cannot be underestimated, if the aim is genuine

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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.

### Protect the mobile telephone industry

The Bangladesh budget recently passed in the JS did not reduce the high tax (comparatively speaking, judging by the average mid-level earning power) on mobile telephones, which is showing exponential growth rate every year, and the MNCs are rushing in to invest. This sudden brake is inexplicable (when laundering of black money is allowed!).

This is a budding and nursing period for this new ICT industry in this fast developing country (with the highest of population ratio in the world). Perhaps the Finance Minister could have been incorrectly advised from the technical professional aspects, to tap this lucrative sector for quick milking of easy government revenue, thereby retarding the nursing period of rapid growth of cellular/mobile/wireless telephone system, for at least the next five years. The systems loosed in the revenue collection are tardy (corrupt practices), but why punish

the mobile users?

Even the middle and lower classes of households were keen to acquire such wireless telephones, boosting fast communication in the rural areas, where 80 per cent of the population lives, or have bases. It was unimaginable a couple of years ago that (non-earning) students would be carrying mobile sets. The GrameenPhone (GP) experiment of hawking mobile telephone calls by women peddlers in the villages drew global attention. It is still being treated as a luxury item?

The percentage of revenue collection from mobile telephones is microscopic (percentage-wise) but substantial. Initially a holiday period should have been allowed for the base or foundation to be established, before tapping (in the near future) the branches and other technical services of this network for additional regular revenue. Telephoning is no longer a luxury. In contrast, the poor fixed-line telephone service by BTB has to be taken into consideration. It is suggested that the Prime Minis-

ter might be pleased to call, as a public service, for a special review of the situation, and bring some cheer to lakhs of new mobile phone users. It is good for rural business, and plays a silent and indirect background role in poverty alleviation. AMawaz, Dhaka

### Adoption law

I am very happy that KM Rasheduzzaman Raja, joint district judge, Sirajgonj has underscored the need for Adoption Law. This is indeed an outcome of humanitarian attitude as well as courage. The response to this idea by Mohammad Zahidul Islam is the one expected in a closed and backward thinking society (response published on Sept 10 in The Daily Star, Law and Our Rights supplement). In support of Adoption Law I would draw the attention of the readers to the fact that the prophet of Islam (pbah) had an adopted son. Circumstances under which the status of this adopted son had been changed are

all recorded in various texts. Now the ground reality in Bangladesh is that every year orphans in large number are taken away from the country after being adopted and those orphans lead a high quality life under care of family in advanced countries. Had there been an Adoption Law and adoption was encouraged thousands of children would have lived in families in love and care. It is sheer inhuman and cruel to raise untenable issues against Adoption Law. I only hope society would be more liberal than in the past and have compassion for unfortunate orphans. Ahmed Shah, Dhaka

### Bad effect of dowry system

Now-a-days whenever we open the pages of newspapers, we see women are tortured by their husbands for the worst reason of dowry system. Usually in our society female children are considered inferior to male

children. They are thought to be of no use to the family. So, during marriage ceremony a section of greedy people claim much wealth or money from the guardians of the brides. Generally, the poor and illiterate girls mainly become the victims of dowry. If the guardians fail to fulfil the demand of their bridegroom, they misbehave with their wives and sometimes torture them seriously. As a result, many of them commit suicide or are killed by their husbands.

This evil system has affected our whole society. At present father can't think of marriage of his daughter without giving dowry to the bridegroom. I am dead against this evil system. This scourge should be uprooted from the society immediately. This social curse can be abolished by changing the outlook of the people, especially the male members of the society, and by taking strict legal measures against the persons who take dowry. Mir Mofajjal Hossain, Dhaka

### Tornado in Kuakata

We the expatriates living in New York, USA are extremely depressed and worried about the news of devastation by the tornado in Kuakata. We understand that hundreds of fishing trawlers have been vanished in the sea because of the tornado. Nearly one thousand fishermen may have lost their lives. We convey our deep sympathy to their families. We are equally shocked like them when we got the news. We hope the local administration and concerned govt. officials have already visited the area or going to visit immediately. We request the concerned Ministers and their staff, as well as political leaders taking initiative to provide shelter for those who have lost their homes and establishments. Immediate initiative must be taken by the govt. to rescue the fishermen who have not yet returned to their homes.

We on behalf of all the brothers and sisters of Barisal division living in USA want to appeal to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh to take following steps immediately to help the victims of this terrible disaster. We have been observing for last two weeks the devastation made by the Tornado in the states of southern bay of USA.

1. Permanent rescue team for the coastal area i.e. for the communities living along the Bay of Bengal

2. Communication system in the coastal area to contact the govt. authorities in Dhaka as well as with the local govt offices

3. Immediate reconstruction of the barrage in the spots where it has been washed away

4. Placing water pump in the rice fields to save the crop otherwise people in these areas will suffer from famine

5. Provide shelter to those who have lost their homes and belongings

6. Start immediate relief work to provide food for those who have nothing to eat

In addition to the Govt. initiative we urge the NGOs and local associations to organise volunteers and send them to the devastated

areas with food and clothes.

Mohd. Shah Alam (President)  
Dr. Rashidul H. Khan (Senior Advisor)  
Newer Barisal Division Association  
New York, USA

### Fresh and healthy foods!

Now-a-days a lots of steps have been taken to standardise the foods of the renowned fast food shops. Now, when the 'behind the scenes' facts of the fast food culture is revealed, we have been totally dependent on those shops which are inspected. But actually there are a lot remaining - on which the ordinary people have to depend much. What about those? Should we abandon those till inspections? We should be eligible to determine the quality of foods by ourselves. Some sort of training or technology may be helpful in this regard. For anytime we may take toxic materials with the food. It's the government's duty to make people conscious about the toxic foods they take, and also to ensure supply of proper food everywhere.

Diba  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka