

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.

Arable land



In our country of 147,570 sq km with 144 million inhabitants, the arable land for cultivation is steadily diminishing not only for the dense population but also for high costs and higher standard of living. The inward remittances, garment products, prawn and shrimp cultivation, tanners and tea planters are fetching valuable foreign exchange for our development works.

The world's population has increased further to 6.3 billions and consequently the sup-

ply is becoming limited causing upward trend in the prices of industrial raw materials and the consumable semi-processed agricultural products.

For retaining the existing green agricultural land, the ministries of industries, finance and planning should give priority to mergers, amalgamations and joint ventures of the firms and companies.

Golam Ashraf
Guishan, Dhaka

diplomats.

Yes, we have shamefully forgotten all about our national pride. It is even appalling to consider that this is the same nation which stood up to colonial oppression and subsequently earned its sovereignty through an indescribable bloodbath. Our politicians have become too dependent on their foreign sponsors. They look away, ignore and/or revert back to our co-dependency, at times of crisis instead of standing up to it. Do the politicians think that all solutions provided by these foreign emissaries are in the best interest of our nation? Should we always extend our begging hands to the foreigners, thirty years after our independence?

As Mr. Ahsan points out in his article, why our politicians feel/need that every single issue should be prescribed/solved by the diplomats? Should our politicians feel their own inadequacy and ineptness, then they are the ones who should simply retire from politics.

For all practical purposes, the diplomats of other nations on our soil are here because they play a role of being ambassadors of their nations representing trade, bilateral interests and matters of mutual interest. They are not here as our political mentors, are they? Nor should they be looked upon as such.

Case in point, very recently the New Zealand ambassador to Fiji has been asked to leave the island by the regime out of concern for the ambassador's meddling in Fiji's internal matters. Certainly, I am not suggesting that we follow Fiji's example. In unison with Mr. Ahsan's article I am merely requesting our political leaders to refrain from running to foreign ambassadors on issues of national importance which should rightfully be addressed by Bangladeshis.

Is it too much to ask?

Shiblee Ahmed
Midland, Texas

Deals with India

It is fashionable to criticise any deal with India. The tradition should be reversed if we really give railway transit facilities to India in exchange of technology access, elimination of a billion dollar trade deficit, investments of Indian companies, atomic energy plants, Farakka water solution etc, then it would be a good bargain. Both the countries can be in a win-win position.

At the same time, we might seek help of international bodies for transparency of international contracts.

Dr. Mohammad Karim
General Practitioner, Australia

Bangladeshi missions overseas

I believe the current government needs to have a good look at the activities if its foreign missions. The missions are simply not supporting the government the way they should. They are the ambassadors of the country in a foreign land where Bangladesh and its culture is unknown. They are supposed to be projecting the current activities of the caretaker government to the world community. Are they doing enough? Due to the divisive politics at home and a specific quarter's activities to gain illegal benefits from the corrupt politicians, those abroad are also seen active in a negative way. They are involved in different ways of tarnishing the image of the country in the global field.

The government needs to find out whether the high officials at the high commissions, in most cases appointed by the previous government, are serving the country or they are still loyal to the political parties that appointed them. The message to the high commissions should be sent out that they are there to uphold the country's image and interest.

Rissala Dean

Taxation

I would like to take this opportunity to comment on tax increase on telecommunication equipments and computer.

1) Telecommunication and computer are directly related to and essential ingredients of Information & Communication Technology (ICT).

2) ICT is a priority sector. Bangladesh is already a signatory to WTO and WSIS (World Society on Information Sector) where ICT's importance has been accepted as a priority sector.

3) One of the main challenges in front of Bangladesh is more and more job creation. ICT is a sector where hundreds of thousands of jobs can easily be created with less investment. It is a skilled-manpower-intensive industry.

4) The forecast is that half the jobs in the world will be shortly in the field of ICT or ICT related areas.

5) With the reduction of taxes on those items in the last budgets, the ICT sector started growing, even lower income groups started getting service.

6) Capital Dhaka and major cities are well connected by transmission networks. To utilise these networks computers are necessary.

7) The Ministry of Finance can seek the opinion of ITU (International Telecom. Union, a specialised organisation of the UN) which helps members states with advice/statistics/study results.

Engr. Siddique Ali Miah
Managing Director
Robotel Limited

Politicians and ambassadors

I cannot but applaud Mohammad Badru Ahsan for his article ("Eating out of foreign hands," Dated Fri, June 15, 2007) rightly pointing out how our politicians have become shameless in ignoring our national pride and running to the

diplomats. Yes, we have shamefully forgotten all about our national pride. It is even appalling to consider that this is the same nation which stood up to colonial oppression and subsequently earned its sovereignty through an indescribable bloodbath. Our politicians have become too dependent on their foreign sponsors. They look away, ignore and/or revert back to our co-dependency, at times of crisis instead of standing up to it. Do the politicians think that all solutions provided by these foreign emissaries are in the best interest of our nation? Should we always extend our begging hands to the foreigners, thirty years after our independence?

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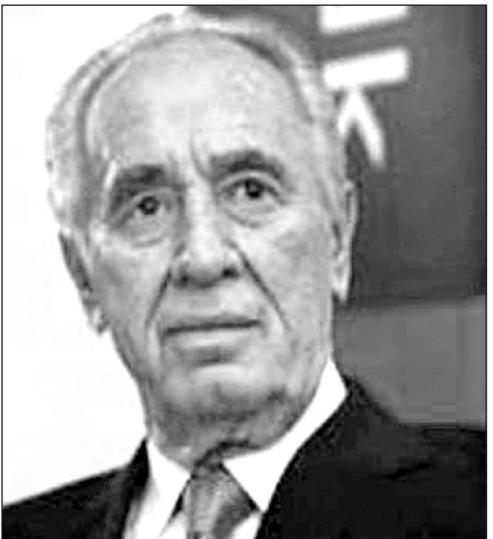
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New Israel president



tions, and has held many significant Israeli cabinet posts including Finance Minister, Foreign Minister, and Defence Minister. Peres was nominated by the Kadima Party, founded by Ariel Sharon, to run for Presidency. Peres was elected by the Knesset for the presidency for a seven-year term.

Like in many other countries, the post of president is a merely ceremonial post in Israel where the Prime Minister is the supreme authority in practical terms. It seems the post of President is practised by many countries just not only as a formality but also to tell the USA where the president is the deciding authority that President could be used as a rubber stamp, as it is done in India, without any real powers. Keeping a weak presidency promotes political manipulations at all levels and gives room for rampant corruption, which is beyond the president's capacity to stop or control.

For Peres the second term is a remote future question. But the moot question would be: will the Nobel laureate be able to bring about a final settlement of the Palestinian problem, or will he also prove that there is nothing so great about Nobel Peace Prize?

Dr. Abdul Ruff Colachal

New Delhi, India

As if to bring together the warring Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah amid the huge explosions, Nobel laureate Shimon Peres became the President of Israel on 13 June. He was the winner of Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 together with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat for the peace talks that produced the Oslo Accords. Peres participated in these talks as the Israeli Foreign Minister. Peres has served three times as Israeli Prime Minister, though only once as the result of direct elec-

Canberra, Australia
Message of love

The Messianic King, promised by Scripture, went unrecognised by the Jews. In this Messiah, Jesus Christ, God is no longer tied to a specific geographical area which, in the case of Zionism, is Israel. God's kingdom is a universal kingdom today. All the people of the earth are the people of God.

The only true answer to the war in the Middle East consists in the Christian message of loving one's enemy. Only through reason and love can we surpass and resolve our disputes. No situation of injustice, no feeling of frustration, no philosophy or religion can justify violence. It is easy to fall prey to temptations of hatred and violence. Nonetheless, we must keep in check our base impulses and together work to build a global culture of solidarity that restores hope in the future to the young.

Jesus' injunction to "love your enemy" is the basic tenet of Christian non-violence. It is the nucleus of the Christian revolution. Christ's typical and forceful message does not mean succumbing to evil, as a false interpretation of "turning the other cheek" claims, but in responding to evil with good and thereby breaking the chain of injustice.

For Christians, non-violence is not merely tactical behaviour, involving strategies of economic, political or media power, but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is so convinced of God's love and power that he is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone.

Here is the newness of the Gospel which silently changes the world!

Paul Kokoski
Hamilton, Ontario
Canada

Education sector

I wonder why our national newspapers tend to go any deeper while doing news coverage of examinations such as the SSC or the HSC. It could be my dismal ignorance that, I am not aware of any press coverage where, anything else apart from the pass rate and the number of expelled students from board examinations have been highlighted or even pointed out. Though, I must acknowledge the fact that there was admirable press coverage of academicians' dismissal of the plan for uniform education system in Bangladesh back in 2005.

Newspapers could easily invite a debate on whether or not the curriculum of the SSC or the HSC is reflective of our changing society, especially when globalisation is a fact of life. Education encompasses something less tangible but more profound and reflects the imparting of knowledge and positive judgement on the direction and growth desired by the nation. Education has, as one of its fundamental aspects, the imparting of cultural values from generation to generation. It is in fact the most powerful tool for socialisation. It is true that the education system as a whole gradually instills nationalism in the pupil's mind; it works as a valuable tool in achieving a unified national identity and social cohesion to a very great extent. Therefore, it is essential that we ask if our educational system cultivates or gradually destroys the prospects of millions of young minds.

One of the most talked about educational issues is different tiers of the educational system. Different tiers are associated with specific ideology and reflect different philosophies of individual and national life. Therefore, the picture of our social cohesion is one of discomfort. Fortunately, many people are more concerned about this than ever before as many come to realise the fact that monosyllabic education brings about nothing but well-being and social cohesion and minimises the impact of class conflict.

Very often, I tend to think if the pass rate of board examinations is premeditated, since it is not rare that the political party in power or interest groups are very alert to take advantage of some positive statistics for their public image, whereas the nation could potentially suffer from intellectual shallowness. Rate of pass could suggest that either the board examinations are too difficult or too easy for the students of a particular age group. So, serious consideration is required on a constant basis as to the evaluation procedure of the two major board examinations.

I was fortunate to come across a piece of writing by Dr. Zafar Iqbal published in The Daily Star, where he discussed scientific terminology in Bengali science textbooks for school goers. He addresses issues such as, exposure to real scientific terms for Bengali textbook readers and the complexities and difficulties students face when they go for higher studies, as they have to switch over to English language and so on. It amazes me the way he,

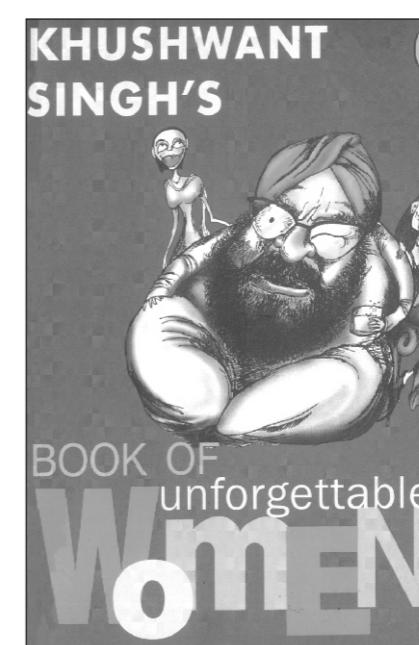
Books and budget

Apparently, a small but very important point was not noticed by the present caretaker government of Bangladesh (CTG) in the national budget 2007-2008.

Every one does know that "Books & Journals" are still the main tools of education with which many modern instruments & technologies have also been added as the world is progressing. In respect of higher education in any field(s) whether it is Humanities, Social Science, Medical or Engineering one cannot think about not having any foreign publications as our publishing industry is yet to come up with any such publications which are comparable to the publications of the United States, Europe etc. We are still fully dependent on the international publishers which are fulfilling the requirements of our higher education.

A truly international publication does not have any frontier and most countries of the world are following the policy of free flow of publications without having any restrictions as they also follow the Unesco agreements like the Florence Agreement not to create any obstacles by imposing import duty, import surcharge, VAT & other charges etc on books & journals.

Unfortunately, both the Awami League & BNP governments in the past ignored this very important aspect & imposed import duty on certain categories of publications. During the tenure of the AL, initially the import duty was proposed @ 15% on fictions, biographies, travelogues etc as if reading such books was a big crime. However, it was reduced to 5% immediately after announce-



ment due to the strong opposition by the elite citizens & the media. Later on, the immediate past BNP government imposed import surcharge & AIT (Advance Income Tax) on all categories of publications including text reference books, dictionaries, encyclopedias & had another category as "Other Books" on which a 15% duty was payable. The term "Other Books" is a very vague term and the customs authorities in many cases categorized even Text Reference books as "Other Books"- just to show their efficiency in collecting revenue for the government.

Being repeatedly harassed, importers virtually stopped importing all categories of general books, world classics, biographies, fictions, travelogues etc & thus only the readers of Bangladesh suffered. However, when

a very limited number of such publications were imported paying import duty, import surcharge, VAT, AIT & all other import costs- the prices were always logically much higher than that of the original publisher's price!!

It seems that the sayings of "Lekha Para Kore Je Gari Chapa Pore Se" mentioned in one of Satyajit Ray's films is the hidden policy of political governments as they feel it good to keep people uneducated and uninformed! So imposition of duty, taxes on books & other educational materials & creating other hindrances is the best way for implementing such a hidden agenda! We even came to know that the Bangladesh Paper Manufacturers & Merchants Association made a full-page newspaper appeal to the government in the past with the proposal to impose 45% import duty on foreign books & journals on the lame excuse of protecting the Bangladesh paper & publishing industry!!!

We do hope that the pro-people CTG will consider full withdrawal of all import duty, import surcharge payable at import point, VAT payable at supply/selling point on all categories of publications so that the students, teachers, researchers, & general readers can be benefited by getting the books & journals (that are acceptable to all) they need at a cheaper price

It will be a big contribution of the CTG to the people of Bangladesh. Nazmul Abedin
Canada

unfailingly, notices gaps in the education system. Interestingly, issues that he often comes up with are the ones which should have been highlighted by professional educationists.

It is depressing, yet not surprising, that we do not see any functional R&D in our education sector. But, fortunately, we have a few academicians who are always outspoken about this and never falter to give us their candid judgments.

However, the time when national board examinations are held is a good time to press these issues harder, since that increases the likelihood of more attention and concern. I am particularly concerned about our national dailies, as I believe that the press is still the strongest outlet in Bangladesh.

Sady Mirza
MSC Student, Development Policy Management
University of Glasgow
Scotland

Nayar's article

Please refer to the letter to the editor by Shah Abdul Hannan on June 15 on Kuldip Nayar's article of 26 May. I would like to add a few points to clarify the matter. Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, entrusted the Turkish Army with the unique role of safeguarding democracy and secularism. Kemal Ataturk, a hero of the battle of Gallipoli, took the reins of the country after a long rule of Ottoman despots. Turkey, a superpower of those days, sank into a state of despondency, despair, religious bigotry etc. during the last years of the Ottomans. Kemal Ataturk salvaged the 'sick country of Europe' and placed it firmly on modern rails with many sweeping reforms.

Unfortunately, in the last few years religious fundamentalism has flourished in many predominantly Muslim countries. This movement is generously funded by the fanatic 'Wahabis' whose hidden agenda is anti-people, anti-democratic, anti-progress and destructive. Turkish people also fell prey to the ill designs of the 'Wahabis'. You can see the faces of the 'Wahabis' but cannot read their eyes.

In my opinion, Turkey is a modern role model country to the other Muslim countries. It was in fact saved by the timely and firm intervention by its armed forces.

SN Mamoon

On e-mail

of the Middle Eastern Studies at Sara Lawrence College in New York, recently wrote: "The first is the widening gap between a tiny elite and a critical segments of the Arab population. On the average, up to 40 percent of Arab population live below poverty line. In poverty belts surrounding Arab cities from Egypt to Sudan, millions of young Muslims struggle to subsist, with no stake whatsoever in the existing order."

The same can be said of India when Mahatma Gandhi launched his freedom struggle after the end of the First World War. Vast majority of Indians lived in abject poverty beside a tiny English-educated elite and India was ripe for anyone to call for armed struggle to overthrow the existing order. Yet, Gandhi rejected out of hand any call for violence in the name of anti-colonial struggle and social justice. Here are his own words: "If India makes violence her creed, I will not care to live in India. She will fail to evoke any pride in me."

Gandhi rejected the idea that the end justifies the means. He believed that the means must be noble if the end is noble.

Although Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu extremist who thought he was too soft on the enemy, the Muslims, he achieved

the independence without taking a single British life.

Today India is a vibrant democracy despite growing gaps between impoverished masses and prosperous urban elites. The poverty of the Indian masses vis-a-vis the prosperity of the Indian elites should be enough to turn India into a region of violence similar to the Middle East. Although India is rocked by occasional violence, it remains a largely stable and peaceful country. This is because Mahatma Gandhi had left behind a legacy of tolerance and non-violence which keeps India from falling apart.

Similarly, the Middle East needs its own Gandhi who can reach out to the sectarian and economic divides and peacefully transform the region.

Today, the Arab world is torn by Shia-Sunni mayhem in Iraq, by Hamas-Fatah bloodletting in Gaza and West Bank and by extremists trying to destroy the moderate secular government in Lebanon. Only a broad-based movement which will renounce violence in the name of politics and religion can save the Arabs from self-slaughter.