

Asian University for Women

'The students will be trained to face the world'

Located on a stunning campus of 100-plus acres in Chittagong, Asian University for Women (AUW) will begin offering an international quality education for women from all cultural, religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds across South and South East Asia next March. AUW's vice-president for academic planning, Dr. Hoon Eng Khoo, and head of admissions, Dr. Regina Papa, took the time to speak to The Daily Star's Saushan Rahman about the university's mission to provide a first-rate education and training for the next generation of woman leaders in the region.

THE Daily Star: Tell me a little bit about the Asian University for Women.

Hoon: The university is going to follow a liberal arts curriculum, with a three year honours and a two year masters program. Apart from that we will also offer a pre-SSC program where the students will be taught English and IT.

Papa: 25 per cent of the students will be from Bangladesh and the rest would be from other countries, especially South and South East Asia. But we do welcome young women from all around the globe.

In Bangladesh there are two streams of education, both Bangla and English medium. Is there any particular stream you prefer?

Hoon: Not at all. We do not wish to discriminate. They students will be given training in maths, English, critical thinking, and IT. We wish to help them to develop their leader-

ship qualities so that in the future they can become leaders. In this case we look beyond the medium in which they have been educated. Girls from both Bangla and English medium schools are invited here.

Since it is an all women's school, aren't you afraid that this might only attract girls from a conservative background?

Hoon: I do not think so. We have an innovative curriculum. It is not a classroom oriented or textbook oriented, but an action oriented curriculum. We the faculty will help them to develop certain qualities such as leadership, the ability to solve problems, etc. Here they will learn that they are capable of doing anything. They have the ability to change things and be good leaders. Besides there will be cultural diversity and student will be able to meet people from around the globe.

Papa: I believe that any girl would be interested to come to this university because of its unique features. Since there will be students from other countries, so there will be a fellow feeling among them.

Who are going to be the faculty?

Hoon: Well we are looking for experts with good experience in their fields and interest in this part of the world.

Papa: At the same time we welcome Asian expatriates. They can come and teach in the university and contribute in the process of development. Though we are looking for Asian faculty, teachers from the Western countries are also welcome.

Will there be any visiting faculty or part-time teachers?

Hoon: No, we will have permanent faculty for the university. I do not know about the other private university of Bangladesh, but Asian University for Women does not have such facility.

Why did you chose Bangladesh as your venue?

Hoon: First and foremost, Bangladesh is a democracy. And it is secular Muslim country. Besides, the government of Bangladesh has been very helpful to us. There was no problem from the UGC. We have

full liberty to make any changes in the curriculum.

Papa: The UGC has given us full autonomy.

What courses will you be offering to the students (on top of the basics)?

Hoon: IT and sustainable development, environmental engineering, education, public policy, and business management.

How much will it cost a year?

Papa: Per year it will cost \$10,000 [Tk 700,000 approximately]. But the students will given scholarship



PHOTO: MOSHE SAFDIE

based on need. We hope to provide 50% of the students with scholarship.

What about the merit-based scholarship?

Hoon: We do not have any merit-based scholarship. Whether the students are meritorious or not will be proven when they go for the admission exam and the access program.

Why an all women's university?

Papa: In a co-ed school the girls are always the back-benchers, and they are forced to be the back-benchers.

It is difficult for them to fight and come to the front. Here they will not face such problems. They will be the front-benchers all the time.

What are your plans for expansion?

Hoon: We hope to have at least 500 students per year. We are starting with 100 students. There will be students from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Cambodia and some other countries.

Is it necessary for the Bangladeshi students to stay in the dorm? Or can

they stay at home and come to class?

Hoon: No, the students will have to stay in the dorms. It is a fully residential university. The reason for this is because the education does not end in the classroom. There are a lot of outdoor activities where the students' participation is needed.

Where do you see AUW 10 years from now?

Hoon: We hope that by then at least three batches will have graduated. We hope to increase in terms of the number of students and campus. We wish to have a vibrant open-to-all institution.

Why did you choose Chittagong?

Papa: The government has granted us with a 100 acres of beautiful land. And the campus overlooks the Foy's Lake. The reason why we chose this place is because then the students will be close to nature.

What extra-curricular facilities do you have?

Papa: Extra-curricular activities are important. We will have a gym, athletic facility, centre for performing arts, places for meditation, computer centre, etc. Other than that, the students can also take karate lessons for self-defence.

What made you join the university?

Hoon: I have been a social activist for a long time. I grew up in a small town in Malaysia. It had a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious environment. This gave

me the chance to work with people of different strata. And I hope to build the same kind of environment at AUW.

Papa: I have been a social activist from an early age. I was a leader and nothing stopped me from being a leader. I always loved to play with innovation. I had the opportunity to work with different people. Though I did my masters in English literature, later I moved towards women's development.

What is the philosophy of the university?

Hoon: We want the students to realise their potential. There might be few who have the potential, but that few people can bring a vast change. The students will be trained to face the world. Gradually they will grow confidence.

What other plans do you have for the students?

Hoon: We wish to bring in role models. We want our students to meet other women who are established in different fields. Besides we have an internship program for them. And that is not only in this country, but in other countries as well.

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A business unfriendly government



PHOTO: STAR

S.M. ABDUR RAHMAN

Oh my! How perceptions have changed since January! In the immediate aftermath of 1/11, I kept thinking that was a pity that the famous singer James Brown, the man with the potent rasping voice was dead. He could have had a nation of 140-million swaying their hips to the song "I Feel Good."

Yes, those few days after January were amazing. Law and order being restored, excellent systems installed, good people rising in eminence, crooks going behind

bars, and so on. In essence, it was a time when the nation enjoyed "Fakhruddin's biriyani" to their hearts' content. It all seemed so rosy.

But now, there is a stench from the rose garden.

A climate of self-righteousness accompanied by an unrelenting propaganda machine that would make Karl Rove blush seems to have replaced the modesty and commitment to justice that once characterised this administration. It's never a good sign when men play God, yet a God-complex among some of the higher-ups is

unmistakable.

The honeymoon period is over. Far from the euphoria, there is nervousness and disillusionment -- especially among the staunchest supporters of this government.

The reasons for this shifting public sentiment have been addressed thoroughly in the press. Now, the latest addition to the charge-sheet is business unfriendliness.

It seems that this government has resuscitated the corpse of tired-old-arguments. The discredited regulatory mechanism of price-control is very much in vogue. And,

denouncing evil business syndicates as the root cause of all economic malaise seems to be a mandatory part of everyday government briefing.

Yet, the whole world now accepts that the best regulator of prices is competition itself. Only in circumstances where competition cannot be fostered is price regulation justified.

Sadly, the government has chosen to differ from the learned opinion in the rest of the world.

Putting a price-cap on mobile phone call charges is a case in point. Competition is fierce in this market, with prices being slashed every day. There was absolutely no need for price control here.

Essentially, losing the battle with rising food prices has caused the government to panic. It is now frantically trying to contain the overall cost of living by interventions in well-functioning markets.

But this line of thinking is misconstrued. First, food price inflation affects the poorest the most. This group is unlikely to be making calls on cell phones on a regular basis.

Second, unlike food, cutting back on phone bills is easy. One just makes fewer calls, or opts for text-messaging that is much cheaper.

All that this supremely unnecessary intervention has achieved is to send shivers through the rest of the private sector that their industry is the next victim of a serial price-controlling government.

The effects of price regulation are seldom benign. Take for example the case of life-saving intravenous saline, prices of which have been regulated for years. Of late, the cost of plastic has increased so much in the world market that it is no longer

feasible to produce this product at the regulated price.

As a result there is likely to be scarcity of a life-saving product in the coming months. Moreover, in anticipation of a scarcity, a black-market in IV saline has already started where these products are being traded at several times their stipulated maximum retail price. Here is a classic example of price-control leading to the exact opposite result that was intended.

Losing the battle against rising food prices was a fait accompli. Food prices have risen everywhere in the world. So, most of the inflation in food grains is imported and unavoidable.

A thoughtful government would have sought to cushion the poor from the impact of food-price rises through some form of compensation mechanism. Instead, it took a harsh moralising tone against, "evil-profiteering businessmen." This witch-hunt caused entire supply chains to disappear making the problems of inflation even worse.

Well-functioning markets are the best guarantor of consumer welfare. The right question is therefore not whether prices are too high, but is there enough competition in the market? Save special cases, in most instances, the correct policy decision is to foster competition -- not control prices.

Sadly, in all the markets where interventions have occurred are precisely those that are highly competitive and efficient. Such markets tend to have well-identified business houses that form soft targets for this government which seems to have an innate longing to point fingers.

It does not ask: "What's the

problem?" Instead, the question invariably becomes: "Whom can we blame?" This approach leads to spectacular news headlines, but also disastrous economics.

A caste-system seems to have surfaced in the society. The government sees itself as the Brahmins (although technically they are the Kshatriyas), and the "dirty businessmen," the lower Vaishya class.

Thus, to cleanse the residential areas, the Brahmins feel it is their moral duty to evict offices of the Vaishyas. Who cares if a small, struggling businessman drowns in puritanical whitewash!

There is an old saying: "The road to ruin is paved with good intentions." This government might mean well, but it has a very poor understanding of how a market economy functions -- even less so of the key players in it.

So when businessmen complain about over-regulation, inconsistencies in fiscal policy, and impediments to day-to-day functioning, it's just a bunch of evil profiteers trying to push through some sordid underhanded scheme.

A wise man once said to me: "Look sonny boy, we hate these uncouth businessmen. And God forbid, if our daughters want to marry them; but the fact remains, that they are the heart and soul of economic development. We need them."

Apparently, this government believes that 50% of the above statement is true.

S.M. Abdur Rahman is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

My homage to Ambassador Momin

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

AMBASSADOR Abdul Momin passed away on August 11, at the age of 86. With his death, the country has lost an astute diplomat, a perfect gentleman and, above all, a valiant freedom fighter.

Momin was one of three Bangladeshi ambassadors who had declared allegiance to Bangladesh during our War of Liberation. At that time, he was serving as Pakistan's ambassador to Argentina. The other two ambassadors were Abul Fateh and late Khurram Khan Panni, who were posted in Baghdad and Manila, respectively.

The provisional government in Mujibnagar gave him a special assignment to create international opinion in favour of our independence movement. In that capacity, he visited a number of countries and worked tirelessly for the cause of our country. The nation will remember his valuable contributions at that critical juncture with deep appreciation and gratitude.

Ambassador Momin came from an illustrious family of Feni. His elder brother Abdur Rashid was a member of the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) and rose to the rank of secretary to the then central government of Pakistan. Rashid's two sons Dr. Harunur Rashid and Mamunur Rashid had joined the CSP and played major roles during our independence war.

Momin's younger brother Abdur Razzak was a member of the Pakistan Foreign Service (PFS), but he left the service and settled in Sweden. In 1971, he came out of his private life to promote our cause. He also served as Bangladesh envoy to Sweden.

Ambassador Momin had initially joined the Bengal Civil Service in 1946 and was absorbed in the PFS in 1950. In addition to Buenos Aires, he served in Pakistani missions in Rangoon, Washington DC, Baghdad, Shillong and Brussels.

After independence he was given special assignment as secretary (administration) to create the organizational framework of the Foreign Ministry of independent Bangladesh. Later, as the special envoy of our prime minister, he visited a number of countries to seek recognition of our newly independent country. He played a major role in the establishment of diplomatic ties with South American countries.

Thereafter, he served as Bangladesh's first high commissioner to Canada, then as the first



ambassador to the People's Republic of China and, finally, as our envoy to France.

During my career as a foreign service officer, I had various opportunities to interact with this great freedom fighter and astute diplomat. I had the privilege of meeting ambassador Momin for the first time in Islamabad, at the Pakistan Foreign Ministry in 1969, when I was assigned there for on-the-job training.

At that time, he was in charge of the South American division in the ministry, and my probationer colleagues and I were able to gain much from his vast and varied experience. He was kind, soft spoken, and a strict disciplinarian, always immaculately dressed, suave and elegant.

I met him in Ottawa in 1973 when I had gone there for a visit from Washington DC, where I was a second secretary at the Bangladesh Embassy. Ambassador and Begum Momin invited my wife Tuhfa and me to a lunch at his residence. With examples from his own life, he gave us so many tips for our diplomatic life.

I met him for the last time about a year ago, when he had come to the Retired Ambassadors Group's get-together. One could see that he was in failing health and yet he was in full spirit. He talked with all of us and enquired about our welfare.

At his namaz-e-janaza, I remembered the quiet contributions of this great man to our nation. I pay my homage to this eminent freedom fighter, express my deep condolences to Begum Momin and members of the bereaved family at their irreparable loss, and pray to Allah to grant eternal peace to his soul.

Syed Muazem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

First prize for weird

MARY CARMICHAEL

God, as the hymn goes, may have made all things bright and beautiful, but for sheer weirdness first prize should go to a man-made creation instead: aerogel. A solid that's up to 99 percent gas, it is rigid to a light touch, soft to a stronger one, and shatters like glass if it's put under too much pressure too quickly; it's one of the most enigmatic of materials, as well as one of the most versatile.

It can withstand the heat of a direct flame; engineers use it for insulation on oil rigs and for warmth in the insoles of hiking boots worn in the coldest temperatures on Earth. NASA uses it to trap comet dust blowing through the universe at six kilometers per second. It even works as casual, sporty jewelry -- AeroGem sells a key chain with an aerogel bob on the end, and a pendant "hermeti-

cally sealed inside silver-over-titanium end caps for added strength and long-lasting, waterproof durability."

The most recent headlines about aerogels, however, don't have anything to do with oil rigs or NASA or geeky jewelry. They instead bring the unfamiliar and exotic materials into practical, and not at all weird, territory, by suggesting a big, broad-reaching new use for them: to clean up pollution.

Researchers announced recently in the journal Science that they had created a new form of aerogel capable of sopping up heavy metals, particularly mercury. It could eventually be used to purify contaminated water. There are efforts to make all sorts of new products from the stuff: rocket fuels, catalytic converters for cars, cell-phone batteries. Aerogels may be weird science, but they're turning out to be more practical than they look.

Nicknamed "frozen smoke" after its ethereal appearance, aerogel is neither frozen nor smoke. It's also surprisingly low tech -- it's been known since 1931, when Lore has it that chemist Steven Kistler discovered it after a colleague bet him that he could not easily take all the liquid out of a gel and replace it with a gas.

Kistler heated the gel, forcing out all the liquid, and then replaced it with a gas, methanol. He published the result, his oddly behaving "aerogel," in Nature that year. Researchers played with his formula for the next seven decades, finally settling on more suitable and safe ingredients for making the stuff: oxides, such as silicon dioxide and aluminum oxide, as the base gel, and carbon dioxide gas in place of highly flammable methanol.

Together, these ingredients can form a structure that chemically resembles glass but is so full of

whorls and crevices that one cubic centimeter has a total surface area equal to a football field's. The lightest-weight solid in the world, aerogel weighs 1.2 milligrams per cubic centimeter -- barely more than the air molecules around it.

In fact, the material itself is almost entirely made of air, like a sponge that consists mostly of holes. Don't let its lightness fool you: it's strong. NASA photos show it with a gas, methanol. He published the result, his oddly behaving "aerogel," in Nature that year.

The aerogel revealed last month is made with new ingredients: sulfur or selenium in place of oxides. But it's still built like a sponge, and that is why it can soak up so many heavy-metal atoms from polluted water, says Mercurio Kanatzidis, a chemist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, who conducted the new research.

Aerogels made with oxides don't bind to heavy metals, but the

new sulfur and selenium ones cling to them like nothing else. And because the aerogels pack an enormous surface area into a tiny volume, small pieces can clear out many liters of water. Kanatzidis's aerogels sopped up so much mercury that they diluted a solution of 645 parts per million down to 0.04 parts per million. They had similar effects on lead and cadmium, two other pollutants.

The new aerogels aren't ready for widespread use: they're made with platinum, so they're extraordinarily expensive. But if other metals can be used to make them instead (Kanatzidis says they can), chunks of them could be dropped into polluted water, removing contaminants.

Scientists are also discovering new uses for aerogels made with more traditional oxides. Biologists in California are working on an aerogel that's porous and complex, like a cell membrane, and

could help them better understand molecular processes in the body. The substance is "as close to a biological membrane as we can get right now," says Marjorie Longo, a chemical engineer at the University of California, Davis.

Several projects are underway to desalinate brackish water in cities such as Las Vegas and Phoenix using aerogels, though it is unclear if they'll be practical on a large scale. Then there are those rocket fuels (aerogels can purify hydrogen-based fuels and trap energy from sunlight), and the cell-phone batteries and catalytic converters (aerogels are good conductors of electricity). Keeping the world bright and beautiful, it seems, is just the beginning.

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