

Live grenade haul

Terrorists continue to be very active

WE commend the Rab team's digging out of 46 live grenades from the bank of a pond in Sathkira. This is the latest in a series of such discoveries from city's Banani and Moghbazar, Nalitabari in Sherpur, Barabari in Pirganj, Thakurgaon, Sirajganj, Botiaghata in Khulna, Sonatila in Khagrachhari and Shalipur in Savar. The wide territorial range of the findings should be an eye opener to the tentacles of the terrorist threats.

Some arrested terrorist suspects gave the tip-offs for the recovery of the clandestine grenades. Cooperation from the local people was also thrown in. This pattern of raiding the terrorist dens and caches of hidden arms is a redeeming feature no doubt; but we must not overlook the unrelenting clandestine activities of the potential extremists. They are living in the midst of people so that public vigil and cooperation are crucial in detecting their hideouts or any sign of subversive activities by the terror peddlers. They play on the religious sentiments of the people to spread the message of their hidden agenda to destroy the fabric of the society as we know it. That Islam is completely opposed to violence and destruction of human lives will have to be constantly harped by the influential people in the community to their compatriots. They must be as organised as the religious extremists, if not more.

In the case of Sathkira grenade haul, confessions made by Mufti Moin Zandal, the top leader of Mufti Hannan-led Harkatul Jihad (Huji) arrested earlier in Dhaka and the statement made by Nazrul Islam picked up in Sathkira led to the discovery of the live grenades.

Surely, by discovering the grenades and arms caches, the Rab is doing a laudable job but what we would like to stress is the need for finding appropriate answers to the following questions: how the grenades were trafficked or made available to the confessions? Are these manufactured locally? Who are their godfathers, mentors and financiers? What is the kind of network they have?

It is important that the cases are expeditiously tried and culprits punished in order to din the right message into the ears of those who maybe waiting in the wings to spring deadly surprises.

Ekushey book fair energises us

Reading on, hold fast to our moorings

THE Ekushey book fair goes on apace. And that is as it should be, for in recent years the publications that have come before us in the season when we observe the anniversary of the struggle for language have pointed to the strong cultural ethos that underpins our history. The Ekushey book fair is an occasion which takes us onward from an observance of a politico-cultural movement to a celebration of our heritage as a people. Judging by the enthusiasm this year at the fair, one can surely rest back in the knowledge that Bengalis, for all the political issues that have of late been exercising their minds, feel themselves on firm ground when it comes to a renewed awareness of their cultural sense of belonging.

There are the images that light up every time the Ekushey book fair makes an entry into our lives, both as individuals and as a collective band of citizens. The sight of a child astride his father and poring with serious expression through a book he has just come by could surely be looked upon as an apt metaphor for a nation that has historically cultivated reading as a habit. And yet we realise with somewhat of dismay that reading is what actually may have been going out of the system we are part of. And because of such depressing circumstances, we all have reason to think that the Ekushey book fair acts as a shot in the arm for us. It reminds us of the legacy which Bengal, in cultural as well as political terms, has historically been heir to. On any evening in this season of remembering and dreaming, one is liable to walk into a crowd eager for autographs from their favoured writers or desirous of refurbishing their ideas of history through listening to eminent cultural personalities reflect on the background against which Bengali culture has shaped itself. Indeed, the swarming crowds before the ubiquitous book stalls are proof that despite the battering we receive from nature and from predatory men all year round, we find in the Ekushey book fair a degree of resilience that only adds to our self-esteem as a nation.

So let us read on. Let the book fair energise us, enough to remind us that a nation which reads is also a society that can come to terms with the rest of the world. It finds it easy to spot a comfortable place for itself under the sun.

The Bangladeshi brands

Brands were originally developed as labels of ownership. However, today it is what they do for people that matters much more, how they reflect and engage them, how they define their aspirations and enable them to do more. Powerful brands can drive success in competitive and financial markets, and indeed become an organisation's most valuable assets.

MAMUN RASHID

CONSUMER perception of the word "brand" is usually associated with quality. In the western world, with the variety and options available, it is the concept of brands that help consumers decipher and match their needs to that of the products available in the market.

Asian countries, particularly our own Bangladesh use other sensibilities rather than simply resorting to quality. The inclination of most Asian nations to their culture is inherent to their way of life and it is no different when it comes to our own version of "retail therapy."

While most western nations prove to be melting pot of cultures, in most Asian countries we see a majority of a particular race and religion, and, even if not, culture is a phenomena that is adapted by inhabitants even if race, religion, creed, language, and even beliefs differ.

Such forms the basis of our "cultural branding" in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi brands are representative of our culture, our preferences and most importantly, our identities. In Bangladesh, whether it is "Comilla's rasmalai," "Hajee's biryani," or "Fakrudin's Kacchi," we can immediately relate to each product and relate it with our culture and our roots as memories from yesteryear to the present day all come flooding back.

However, due to the cultural aspect and the internal nature of our understanding of our Bangladesh "brands," many living abroad fail to clearly understand what the hype is all about at first glance. Then again, their look out for the seal of quality also keeps them from seeing what we treasure in some age-old products.

Innovation is key to the global marketing world. The more you invent new ways of doing things and the more tech savvy the prod-

uct is, the more its demand in the market. This is a clear distinction from most of our local brands. Every district of Bangladesh has its specialty, be it in sweetmeat, handicrafts, agricultural produce, or even fish, and this is what the common man finds himself relating to. These are interests and beliefs that have been passed on from generation to generation.

For instance, when it comes to handicrafts, Aaron has made its mark in the Bangladeshi market and even those visiting from abroad know that it is the landmark for getting traditional artwork and crafts. The "nakshikatha" is a particular favourite for most tourists, as it is a rare display of intricate artwork done through very careful embroidery. Such handwork is said to be rare, as the world has moved onto efficiency and most processes are automated, there are still brands that are labor-intensive and require a lot of creative attention.

One example of the use of tech-

nology would be the initiation of Grameenphone. In true Bangladeshi tradition, that too has a rich history unlike any other seen abroad -- the first mobile phone for rural women -- whereby women empowerment took on a whole new meaning. Grameenphones were first distributed to women entrepreneurs who partook in the micro-finance scheme developed by Grameen Bank. They would use the phones of getting in touch with markets and operate as sellers themselves or as middle-women. The popularity of the Grameenphone's cellular phone caught on and supply began growing till today where Grameenphone is the leading mobile telecom company in Bangladesh with millions of subscribers. It has come a long way from when the target group was only rural women.

I always feel the need to explain my Bangladeshi background in any conversation lasting longer than five syllables. This has shaped the course of my entire existence and this compulsion does not stem from insecurities, rather the inherent attitude to bask in the glory of the golden Bengal. Personally, I feel the need for people to understand our culture and the importance given to culture. However, it is not that I

don't realise that it is an impossible task to reach out and make everyone understand the finer points of our cultural attributes, but like playing my part to make a little difference in shaping one's perception.

Brands were originally developed as labels of ownership. However, today it is what they do for people that matters much more, how they reflect and engage them, how they define their aspirations and enable them to do more. Powerful brands can drive success in competitive and financial markets, and indeed become an organisation's most valuable assets.

The social stigma associated with inferior brands sometimes may prove to be a disqualifying factor when it comes to making that final purchase. One must properly comprehend the use and understanding of brands differ from country to country. Hence, it is essential that if comparisons must be made, then it should be done on a platform taking into account differences in perceptions.

In the final analysis, it is based on perception that people purchase and consume what they do and that is something that marketers must be in tune with in order to meet demand with supply. From

the Bangladeshi perspective, it can be seen that the choice is based on not only what is of popular demand but items which are passed down traditionally from generation to generation.

The western consumption dynamics are more prone to the assurance of quality and it is the effectiveness with which producers market their goods that becomes the decisive factor. The consumer must be convinced and not for just one day or a single instance, but the belief must be long-lasting for the product to make a name for itself.

However, the process of sustaining the brand image is an ongoing process which marketers have to take into consideration. This may pose to be a similarity between nations all over the world when it comes to the brand that they refer to in the local and international context, whereby the continued popularity of a particular item in comparison to the many available in the market must be sustained. Thus, besides preferences, cultural practices, quality and preferences, the need for familiarity and unrelenting image building gives an acute understanding to the power of brands in our consumer societies.

The writer is a columnist.

Poorer than we thought

With the study's release, our view of the world has changed. While economists previously thought that US GDP per capita was 6 or 12 times higher than that of China and India, respectively, these numbers have been revised to 10 and 20 times. Until last month, economists thought that China accounted for 15 percent of the world economy; it's now revealed to represent less than 10 percent.

BRANKO MILANOVIC

THE economics profession underwent a revolution in December last year, as economic understanding of the world suddenly shifted.

Suddenly the world has more poor. Incomes declined in emerging economies: down by 40 percent in China and India, 17 percent in Indonesia, 41 percent in the Philippines, 32 percent in South Africa, and 24 percent in Argentina. For Indonesia, the decline was far worse than the Asian crisis, and for China and India, the decline was worse than the one experienced by Germany during the Great Depression. Yet hardly anyone noticed.

The event was the release of new estimates of purchasing power parity, or PPP. Measured as part of a large international endeavour called the International Comparison Program, PPP aims to accurately calculate a country's economic power, rather than simply dividing total national output by a country's population.

As every tourist knows, prices of goods and services differ widely between the countries. Poorer countries generally have lower price levels. A nice dinner, a haircut, or a concert ticket, using market-exchange rates, cost much less in China or India than in the US or Norway. But the good or service is the same, and, in principle, must be valued equally. The objective of the project is to compute difference in price levels, so that each unit of consumption can be valued the same, regardless of where it is consumed. Only then can true output and welfare differences between the countries be assessed.

Measuring price levels is an immensely complicated project that involves detailed reporting of

more than 1,000 prices of goods and services in almost 150 countries. A project of this magnitude has never been undertaken before. The most similar project took place in 1993, including data for about 100 countries and a limited range of goods. More importantly, the 1993 survey did not include China, which officially participated for the first time in the 2007 report, or India, which had participated since 1985.

The recent data include not only China and India, but countries that include 95 percent of world population and about 99 percent of world output. The list of surveyed goods and services was augmented, the methodology improved and 146 national statistical agencies collaborated along with international bodies including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, Eurostat, the Economic Commission for Latin America, Asian and African Development Banks, and others.

Price comparisons are important for at least two reasons:

First, they provide so-called PPP exchange rates, that is, in principle, with one PPP dollar, one can purchase the same bundle of goods and services in all countries. For example, with 100 PPP dollars, I would be equally well off in India and the US, even if that may involve only 30 "real" greenback dollars in India and 100 greenback dollars in the US.

Second, by using these exchange rates, we can convert incomes expressed in local currency and obtain "true" gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, reflecting real welfare and productivity of citizens. All inter-country comparisons, including poverty rates, depend on PPPs. When we say that one-third of the

population in India lives at incomes below \$1 a day, that one dollar a day is a PPP-converted dollar a day.

For modern global economics, PPP is like oil. One cannot move far without a method of comparison. So on December 17, 2007, this most detailed study of the world economy ever undertaken issued the conclusion that price levels in most Asian countries -- in particular India, China, Indonesia, and the Philippines -- are much higher than assumed by economists, based on the outdated 1993 results. Not everybody's GDP per capita declined. Incomes in some countries -- Russia, Nigeria, Egypt, Lebanon -- increased, but the increases were more modest than the declines. For the rich countries, the revisions were minimal, falling within the 2 to 4 percent range.

These new estimates will have far-ranging consequences. Literally hundreds of scholarly papers on convergence or divergence of countries' incomes have been published in the last decade based on what we now know were faulty numbers. With the new data, economists will revise calculations and possibly reach new conclusions.

With the study's release, our view of the world has changed. While economists previously thought that US GDP per capita was 6 or 12 times higher than that of China and India, respectively, these numbers have been revised to 10 and 20 times. Until last month, economists thought that China accounted for 15 percent of the world economy; it's now revealed to represent less than 10 percent.

In its December forecast of 2008 global economic growth, the IMF took account of the new numbers, lowering its projected global



Protesting the high price of fuel in India.

growth rate by one-half of a percent because high projected growth rates of China and India will pose less of an overall impact. In other words, China's expected growth of 10 percent will add only about 1 percent to global output rather than 1.5 percent.

These new results may, somewhat paradoxically, help the case of India, China, and other poorer countries in having the International Monetary Fund accept using PPP-adjusted GDP to calculate countries' quotas, which determine voting rights and the ability to borrow from the fund. The new results show that moving to PPP-adjusted GDP does not entail a change as huge as earlier thought, and the rich countries may be more willing to accept it.

Implications for the estimates of global inequality and poverty are enormous. The new numbers show global inequality to be significantly greater than even the most pessimistic authors had thought. Until the last month, global inequality, or difference in real incomes between all individ-

als of the world, was estimated at around 65 Gini points -- with 100 denoting complete inequality and 0 denoting total equality, with everybody's income the same -- a level of inequality somewhat higher than that of South Africa. But the new numbers show global inequality to be 70 Gini points -- a level of inequality never recorded anywhere.

Similarly, until last month, the number of people living at less than \$1 PPP per day was estimated at just under one billion. The call to action issued at the Davos World Economic Forum still speaks of "980 million people who live on less than 1 dollar a day." But this was based on old estimates of price levels. Now, we know that the price levels in these and many other poor countries are higher, and the measured number of the poor will jump.

The most famous set of estimates of countries' historical PPP-adjusted GDP, made by Angus Maddison, is based on the old data. Maddison's numbers, the only data series of GDP per capita

that include practically all the countries in the world, providing estimates for most as far back as 1820, is extensively used by econometricians and economic historians. Its revision will be massive. Much of what we think we know about comparative economic history will be re-examined.

Like in any revolution, the effects will take time to settle, and it will be several years before a consistent and standardised set of GDP numbers emerge. Only when the magnitude of this revolution sinks in will we see the beginning of far greater concern about the true outcome of global economic growth we celebrate. Again as with every revolution, we at least know that we are already living in a different world.

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Bangladesh still bleeds from war wounds

Let us do things that unites the nation, heals the bleeding wounds of 1971 permanently where it hurt most and take Bangladesh to newer heights for all the sacrifices made not only in 1971, but in the past 36 years by people like my late mother or Noor Hossain. If nothing else for those children who grew up only holding a picture of their martyred father. Yes, we can because we love our motherland -- Bangladesh.

NADEEM QADIR

OUT of sheer frustration I remained out of the ongoing debate on the trial of those accused of crimes against humanity during Bangladesh's 1971 Independence War. I am still skeptical with my past experience, but thought it was worth pondering.

As a journalist, I have attended press conferences of various kinds, including those of the Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed and her co-accused

(Niko deal) and BNP leader Khaleda Zia.

"The laws of the land will take its own course," that was Khaleda Zia's reply when she became Bangladesh's first woman prime minister in 1991, when I asked if she would consider punishing the war criminals.

Her first tenure ended and I was in the durbar hall of the Bangabhaban presidential palace when she came to take oath as prime minister for the third time. (The second oath was after the bungled voting in February 1996)

Even though I knew that this time her cabinet colleagues would include controversial figures of 1971 due to the poll alliance, when the names were announced of the two such men, it hurt.

It pained and my eyes became watery. I thought what a tragedy. I told my parents that I was sorry. Indeed what else could I do as a journalist other than report what was happening.

A friend of my father was standing next to me. Suddenly he held me close. Maybe he also disapproved and understood my mind.

Then the red and green flag cars sped away with the controversial figures.

The law of the land did not take its own course!

Came Sheikh Hasina, who backed Jahanara Imam's fight for the trial of 1971 war criminals. "Do ask things that you don't understand," was her reply to my question on the same issue. She added: "There were laws to deal with those."

Ah! so I am back to square one. Jahanara Imam's campaign saw a slow death or at best survived on a life-line.

People still pursuing the cause were harassed since 2001 elections. Many moved away out of fear, only the very determined (Ekkaturer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee) stayed on and carried on with the mission in their own way.

I remember that strangely an out fall of democratic process that started in 1991 split the nation into pro or anti - this or that. If one used Bangabandhu to address Sheikh Mujibur Rahman then he was labelled "Awami," while adding "Shaheed" before Ziaur Rahman meant "BNP."

On those similar lines, seeking trial of those collaborators meant one became "Awami." So, those who had nothing to do with politics, moved away to avoid getting such labels.

Then comes Jamaat leader Ali Ahsan Mujahid's comments and which was quickly followed by Quader Mollah. Was it a challenge or a pre-emptive defence strategy. Most people I talked to thought it was the first, as slowly in 36 years things have gone in their favour.

I had interviewed a Qamruzzaman of the Jamaat

before and after the 2001 polls. He was very categorical of assuming state power by 2015 at the latest. I remember he thanked me for the interview after it was published in the Middle East for being able to reflect "accurately" his mind. Well that was my job to be accurate as a professional.

So, is all this part of it when a neutral caretaker government is in power.

It may well be so because if they remained untouched on the issue now meant a "Good Conduct Certificate," an elderly gentleman argued with me when I said why the pressure now on Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed's government.

The pressure on the government appears to be mounting with Bangabhaban ceremony being boycotted by the sector commanders last December 16. I am

not too concerned about BNP or Awami League staying away. Or even Awami League's Zillur Rahman pledging a trial if elected does not move me.

I talked with a cross-section of people. I read about them and I see them on private television channels. They echo the sector commanders.

The feel is very clear: "If this government can do so many other things not usually in the agenda of a caretaker government why was it ignoring the demand for bringing to book those accused of war crimes."

That is the pulse of the people. The government needs to address the issue or they will stand misunderstood as "blind to the issue for some ulterior motive."

Brushing aside such questions quickly, I feel, is always unwise. But it has been done and now the

government has to be pro-active in ensuring it was not misunderstood despite all its good works since 1/11.

Let us begin by talking to the sector commanders and eminent jurists, like former chief justice and caretaker government chief, Justice Habibur Rahman, who have spoken on the issue.

Let us do things that unites the nation, heals the bleeding wounds of 1971 permanently where it hurt most and take Bangladesh to newer heights for all the sacrifices made not only in 1971, but in the past 36 years by people like my late mother or Noor Hossain.

If nothing else for those children who grew up only holding a picture of their martyred father. Yes, we can because we love our motherland -- Bangladesh.

Nadeem Qadir is a journalist and television anchor.