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Silent famine

A man with a pale face, skeleton like figure in dirty dress has been living for some days in front of a community centre (Mirpur-6) beside a drain with no roof, no cot but he is living there as if it were his house. Who knows when he had bathed last and for how many days he has been starving (without meal). People cannot stay at the place where he lives. However, he is one of the many homeless people in Dhaka city. This clearly shows that Dr. Akbar Ali Khan rightly observed that a silent famine is going on in Bangladesh. The present government which came to power for only three months and to arrange a free, fair and credible election should acknowledge the situation. But ironically it is not doing so, rather we found the responsible people making fun with the poverty of the hapless people by advising them to eat potato, instead of rice. However, my question to the people who gave the potato theory: did you try potato instead of fast food at your home or in any advisory council meeting? We know the answer must be: No. So don't you think you are being unkind? My request to the people at the helm: acknowledge the famine like situation first and try to solve the problem.

Dipu
One-mail

National Women's Development Policy

The government, in all its wisdom, has referred the National Women Development Policy to a committee of ulemas. The following are just some excerpts drawn from The Daily Star of Friday, April 18 which highlight the ulemas' response.

"A woman cannot enjoy rights equal to a man's because a woman is not equal to a man by birth..." "...the ulema recommended abolishing the section that suggests steps to implement the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)".

"...not only is it impossible to establish equal rights for men and women in the country, but in some cases giving women equality would deprive them of their rights in many sectors."

"The committee opposed inclusion of women in peace-keeping missions, saying it would make women insecure and it could tarnish Bangladesh's image".

"They also opposed the provision that women 'must be given equal opportunities and participation in wealth, employment, market and business'".

Ironically, women seem to have been absent from the entire discourse regarding a policy aimed specifically at them? Am I the only one who is outraged by all of this?

Wasiqur Rahman Khan
Tejgaon, Dhaka

Gas-driven generators

There was a news item on April 12, in a local English daily about Wasa utilising "Gas driven generators" at its Water Treatment Plant, which provides relief from power failure and is cheaper! This is only the confirmation of what is known to the industrial sector and is happening in practically all industrial units in Bangladesh. All of these provide prime power from their own generators, mostly gas driven except diesel driven where gas mains are not available!

The undersigned pioneered this approach, way back in 1987, which was presented as a power and cost saving approach at the seminar on Industrial Gases at New Delhi, India in 1988! The undersigned has further presented a paper on utilising these independent generation resources for integration to the power distribution system for enhancing power carrying capacity of the system at the international conference on Electrical & Computer Engineering at Dhaka in 2002. Again in 2004, when this conference was held at Dhaka, the undersigned presented a paper on utilising gas pressure reducing stations in our natural gas distribution network for generating power from the potential energy of gas pressure reduction. This will NOT NEED ANY FUEL for generating power! In fact this is a source of fuel free power!

Our print media will do a favour if these two ideas are widely publicised and awareness created in the power and energy sector for utilising these untapped resources of power going unutilised; while we suffer massive power shortages!

The USA and Europe and South Africa capitalise on these technologies to enhance their public power network capacity! The State of California (which once suffered a Brown-out power-wise) is now possibly a pioneer in the world for utilising all resources (conventional and non-conventional) to enhance their power network capability!

S.A. Mansoor
Rtd. Engineer, Dhaka

Women's rights

In light of the review committee's report, my question is did they publish a more formal report where they said a little more than "it clashes with the Holy Quran's teachings" and said "just rights" should be ensured for men and women in light of the Holy Quran and Sunnah? My question here is simple, did they give elaborate quotations from the Holy Quran and Hadith that support their ideas? Islam is not some scientology that the information is all obscured and granted only to a few. We have access to all the info, materially anyway, that the ulemas and the mufis have; so, I think it is only fair (since we are talking about the word so much anyway) that we the people ask for clear and unambiguous quotations from the sources that are guiding their beliefs and that are helping them 'decide' which laws need amendment.

Sarwar
One-mail

Remittance

Myself and millions of other remitters send millions of dollars to banks of Bangladesh. My humble question is, how has the money been spent? Expatriates who are spending sleepless nights in middle eastern countries shouldn't be ignored. Has the govt formulated any policy for the NRs?

Any school for their children? Any help for their broken families? Please make expatriates our partners in national development. Skilled expatriates should be appointed in government organisations because they have got experience of both worlds. Their money could be invested in their own locality if possible, rather than banks only.

Dr Karim
GPAustralia

Madrasahs in India

India is attempting an innovative approach to strengthen its madrasahs. As of this week, the National Monitoring Committee for Minorities' Education in India has recommended to the Central Government's Ministry of Human Resources Development to integrate the madrasahs in each State with the syllabus of respective State's government schools. The recommendation, part of a larger initiative to modernise the madrasahs, envisages that a government school, closer to a madrasah, will be given the responsibility of supplying the madrasah with textbooks in English, other languages, science, math, and social sciences. Teachers from the government schools will also conduct tests and examinations for the madrasah students. In explaining the rationale for this recommendation, the Minorities Commission reasoned this measure as a way to enable the madrasah students attain a larger world vision, as was indeed the original philosophy many decades back.

The Commission, however, views this integration step as an 'interim measure'. Ultimately, madrasahs are expected to be governed by a central madrasah board (which is still not there in India), which would function like India's Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE). Well, the Commission, aware of possible opposition to such reform measures, engaged with the Imams, key madrasahs across India, following which this recommendation emerged. The only apprehension that the madrasah management conveyed is increased government interference in matters concerning functioning of the madrasahs.

Otherwise, they all voiced their keenness about modernising the syllabus of madrasahs.

Riaz Hamidullah
Kathmandu, Nepal

VAT

The Bangladesh government is continuously losing a huge amount of VAT and duty because of inept Customs/VAT inspectors. Not only is the government losing VAT/Duty but the businessmen are also facing harassment by the inspectors due to the latter's inadequate knowledge of different products.

Mohiuddin Howlader
Satish Sarker Road
Gandaria, Dhaka

Women's representation in parliament



It is time again to bring the issue of women's representation in Parliament to the forefront as the general election is going to be held in December 2008 according to the roadmap designed by the govt and the Election Commission.

Women leaders and activists have been demanding direct election in reserved seats for women to represent a particular constituency in parliament for at least one-third of the three hundred seats. To me, the demand is quite reasonable. In a country where fifty percent voters are women the demand for one third of the total seats is logical. Women everywhere in the world are being regarded as a potent force for achieving development goals. Why not in Bangladesh?

In Bangladesh with their talent, commitment, sincerity and positive attitude women are contributing a lot to society which is not being recognised fairly and properly. In the agriculture and garments sectors women's contribution is very significant.

Women of our country hope that the political parties would come forward and give women their due as far as representation in parliament is concerned.

Munira Khan
Immediate past president
Bangladesh Federation of University Women
Dhaka

Tackling food crisis

Voices from different corners are being heard in favour of reintroducing the rationing system in the country to cope with the food crisis. The government is trying its level best to tackle the situation with the present food policy of open market sale. But unfortunately what we are observing is not working properly.

Without going into the details, I would like to say here that a control measure like rationing may help ease the situation.

Md. Habib Mansur, DC Food (Rtd.)
Shantinagar, West Dighar kanda
Mymensingh Sadar
Mymensingh

Explosion of gas cylinder

On Pahela Baishakh when the people were enjoying and celebrating the "Nabobbarsho", a young but poor balloonwallah (seller) met a tragic death as one of his gas cylinders blasted with a terrible sound. With the cylinder the man was flown into Dhammondi Lake. I heard such kind of explosion of a gas cylinder for balloons a few years ago in old Dhaka. Not only the balloonwallah but also the children who are attracted to buy these balloons can be hit or killed. So a restriction must be imposed on the use of these cylinders.

In recent times, we have seen a number of accidents or explosions of cylinders used for vehicles. Certainly, those were defective. More accidents will occur in future if faulty cylinders are not banned and withdrawn immediately.

Gas cylinders are also being used in kitchen for cooking. Are all these cylinders 100% safe?

Harun-or-Rashid
Sobhanbag, Dhaka

American Ambassador

On behalf of the people of Bangladesh, I would like to extend a warm welcome to the new American Ambassador His Excellency James F. Moriarty. We hope that he will work for improving the relations between the two countries and have an enjoyable stay here.

May we request the new Ambassador to see if the process of issuing visas to Bangladeshis can be expedited. As everybody is aware, most male Bangladeshi applicants have to wait for months to be given security clearance before issuance of visa. Unfortunately, this is also being done in the case of H1 visa applicants who come home for a rest-stay.

H1 is a work visa which the US government gives to those who qualify to work in their country. The sponsors of these visas are the companies that need the skill these individuals have to offer. H1 itself is issued after having been cleared by the Homeland Security Department in America.

Unfortunately, though these visas are approved for three years, individuals are given visas for only one year. So anybody who comes home after that one year has to go to the embassy for a new visa. We understand that the countries have their own systems but it is necessary for a first world country to take 4-8 months to issue a clearance?

The USA has the state of art database of all individuals who live within their boundaries by which they can easily monitor everybody's movements.

It is our request that the new Ambassador look into this matter. It would be highly appreciated by all Bangladeshis.

Basera Ali
Gulshan, Dhaka

Bus service

The other day, I was returning to my hall from Gulshan. I was on the bus having a 'sitting service'. But the bus was full of people. The conductor took the full fare from all the passengers. The driver stopped the bus several times to take passengers, though his bus was full.

I think the road transport authorities should do something to solve this problem as soon as possible.

Hasan
Azimpur, Dhaka

Trial of war criminals

We are living in an independent country. But we could not punish the war criminals in 37 years.

So, we have to be united on this issue.

Bakul Kabiraj
One-mail

Pope's address to the UN

I commend Pope Benedict XVI for his profoundly moving address to the United Nations which emphasised the need for universal human rights, based on natural law, as a condition and foundation for

world peace.

The West, in particular, has largely accepted a public or social morality that emphasizes terms like progress, freedom, liberty, equality, justice and peace. But these concepts are decidedly vague and largely confined to party politics where they are open to all kinds of abuse. Moral consciousness is now, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "purely a species of functional rationality. In such a world where calculations are the norm, it is the calculations of consequences that ultimately determine what is moral and immoral." Nothing is good or evil in itself. There are no absolute values.

When human interests and values are based on reason alone, apart from the truth that transcends them, the individual and his human rights, dignity, worth, and capacity for self-realization are at the mercy of caprice. Religion, on the other hand, favours conversion of heart which provides the proper context for commitment, dialogue, authentic human rights and ultimately peace.

Religious freedom, therefore, must be considered a fundamental right that precedes the state and which cannot be severely curtailed or denied by it. Put more broadly,

and as Pope John Paul II put it, religious freedom is the "first freedom." It is "the premise and guarantee of all freedoms that ensure the common good."

Paul Kokoski
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Obnoxious

Everyday, we, the students of East West University, have been suffering in the hands of hermaphrodites, who walk in a swaggering manner, and ask for money from the students and vendors whose shops are situated near the campus area.

Sometimes, some of those hermaphrodites have a unique way of collecting money, as they, unabashedly, touch the students and ask for money, and they don't release their hands unless money is provided to them.

Students have no way other than fleeing to save themselves from further humiliation.

It is their bad luck that these people were born with different physical characteristics, but they should not be allowed to do whatever they want.

Nasir Ullah Wadud Alam (Paolo)
Department of English
East West University

Bangla Calendar

I cannot praise enough the splendid article, "Our fiscal year should be based on Bangla Calendar" by Syed Muazzem Ali. I invite all to read it and contemplate. For the not-to-be-easily-convinced, a second or third reading is recommended.

There is no need for additional logic or reason. Only action is needed. He has even suggested the mode- the new budget. The time- Now. There may again never be another CTG like this. And no other time more opportune than now. This would be the best and the longest lasting action by this CTG. The dyed-in-the-wool politicians may come back, corruption make a vengeful resurgence (But how I wish that they would not!) and we shall have no reason to remember or be grateful to this CTG.

Following our own calendar will be another great event like the International Mother Language Day.

Bangla shon or saal was created only for us. It is all our own. We owe it to ourselves to preserve it, cherish it, live it and make it part of our life. In due course of time, Language Movement, Victory Day, Mujibnagar Day, Independence Day etc would also be attuned to and observed accordingly to our calendar. With modifications suggested by Dr Mohammad Shahidullah ours is now a 'permanent' calendar, comparable to, if not better than, the Gregorian Calendar.

I implore the CTG to act and make a permanent place for itself in the culture and history of Bangladesh. And no half measures like Ershad's ticketing with Bangla signboards. But then he had other, more pressing items on his agenda!

WD Ahmed
Baridhara DOHS, Dhaka

Food crisis

The government needs to stipulate the maximum retail prices of rice. Hopefully, this may afford relief to a populace that has been suffering as a result of high rice prices for a long time.

There are those who argue that such price controls are not really compatible with the concept of an open economy. True, the basis of an open economy is healthy competition for emptying the consumers' wallets. But the government cannot remain an onlooker if the people are victimized by economic forces, trade manipulations or a combination of such factors. It has to take the side of the consumer, without necessarily harming the interests of the farmers and traders.

But it would be naive to think that this crisis is confined to Bangladesh. According to the latest reports, the entire Asian region

(where the staple food is invariably rice) is facing a 'rice crisis' on an unprecedented scale. Food prices are going up globally and rice is no exception.

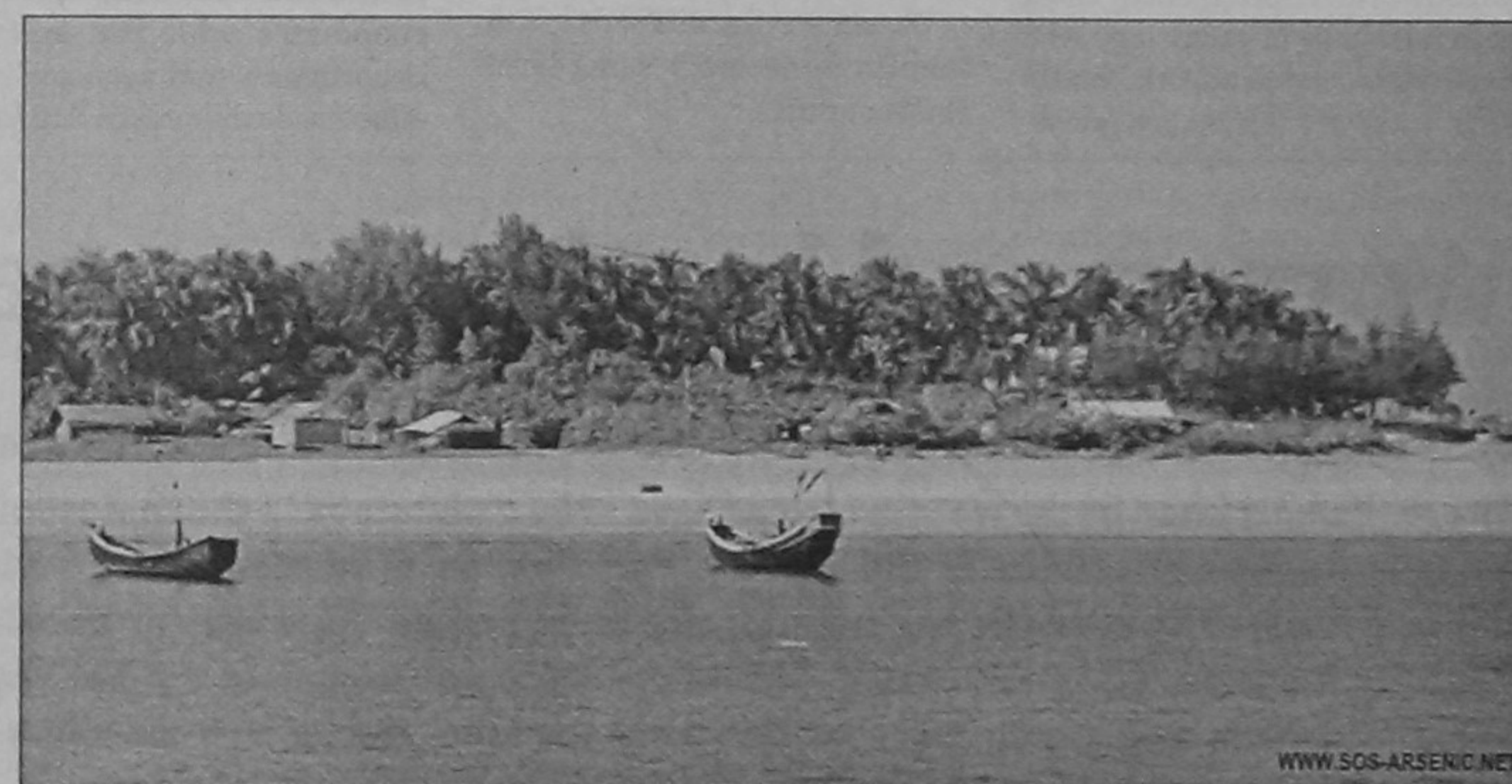
Is there no solution in sight to the food crisis? That would be a pessimistic assessment even amid these challenges. Sometimes even the simplest of ideas can be part of an overall solution. One frequently-quoted example is the low productivity of farms in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the Third World. Better-yielding and more disease resistant paddy varieties must be cultivated using more modern (mechanical) methods.

There will be no simple solutions to this global crisis, but a concerted effort on the part of all rice producing countries will help ease Asians' hunger pangs.

A tourism worker, On e-mail



St. Martin's Island



Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) has been working on the legal aspects for preservation of the environment and has also accomplished significant tasks in this field. The recent news in your newspaper (DS 19-04-2008, pg. 2) regarding BELA serving legal notices against illegal structures in St. Martin's Island attracted my attention. The structures in St. Martin's Island were not constructed overnight. The foundations of some of the structures were laid as early as 1996 even before the Island was declared as an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) in 1999. Most of the construction took place during 1997 to 2004. Thereafter with the growing concern and discussion about the fate of these structures slowed the construction spree. At present the government authorities are not allowing any further concrete construction by the outsiders who have bought land in the island. However, to avoid the present restriction on construction local people in partnerships with outsider businessmen started to make edifices on their own. Further, the local people are in favour of building structures as they will be benefited monetarily. In my article on this construction issue in St. Martin's Island (DS: 05042008), I raised the question whether restriction on construction will help save the island's biodiversity while other factors responsible for habitat degradation, biodiversity loss continue unabated.

In another gazette notification right after the declaration of the ECAs in 1999, it was mentioned that St. Martin's Island is to be

promoted as an exclusive tourism area. When tourism has to be promoted construction of hotels/motels is necessary. But this has to be regulated according to the management plan (MP). The management plan was developed by the Ministry of Environment & Forest (MOEF) in 1997 but the tragedy is that it was not followed. The MP clearly demarcated areas for general use, core protected areas, buffer areas, sea turtle sanctuary and coral sanctuary. Moreover, land was also acquired south of Diar Matha including the Cheradia by the MOEF for establishment of a protected marine park. The general use area, in the north, could have been managed properly to promote responsible tourism but things have got out of hands now as hotels/cottages have been built in strategic locations all over the island including buffer and core sanctuary areas. However, expansion of the structural facilities have halted but may erupt any time unless stern measures, guidelines and presence of an authoritative institution are there to monitor the development of tourism in the island.

Further, the authorities should also come up with models of eco-friendly accommodation facilities that the entrepreneurs and locals could follow to publicize responsible, community-based tourism, if tourism has to be promoted!

S.M.A. Rashid, PhD
Baitul Aman Housing Society
Adabor, Mohammadpur
Dhaka