

Meet Mr. McCain, the next president of the United States

However unreasonable, white urban Americans remain scared of blacks. For whatever reasons, blacks earn significantly less than whites, live shorter lives, and their social conditions are worse. McCain will silently become the symbol of protecting white Americans and he will win the necessary votes to fulfill this role. Whites are worried, concerned about the tensions in their society, and scared of Islamic fundamentalists blowing them up! They think McCain will protect them.

FORREST COOKSON

THE evidence is mounting fast that Senator McCain, Republican nominee for president, a long-term senator from Arizona, and war hero in the eyes of most Americans, will be elected as president of the United States. Despite the Republicans achieving a weak economy, mis-conceived and poorly planned wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, an unconstitutional assault on the civil liberties of Americans, and pursuit of torture and cruelty against the persons who are suspect in the "war against terror," the Democratic party has again found a way to lose the election.

In 2004, the Democrats managed this by nominating a rich guy, without the common touch, who was not strong-willed enough to defend himself from the nasty accusations of the Republicans. This time the Democrats are nominating a black man, or at least half-black.

The leadership of the Democratic Party have simply buried their heads in the sand, ignoring the continuing power of racism in the United States. Few

are prepared to admit the reality and, instead, hide behind the claim that things are now much better. Indeed, racial discrimination problems are better, but they have not gone away.

The election of a Republican to be president for a third consecutive term means that there will never be accountability for the crimes committed by the Bush administration in promoting torture and violating the Constitution's protections under the Bill of Rights. So they got away with it!

Along with the election of a Republican president the people will elect a strong Democratic Congress, with both the House of Representatives and the Senate having substantial Democratic majorities. The result will be a legislative grid-lock, with a more aggressive Democratic Congress determined to impose their own policies on the Republican president.

The Democrats face the following situation: The American electorate can be divided into three groups: Non-Hispanic whites, blacks, and Hispanic whites. I believe that Senator Obama will

be the candidate nominated by the Democrats. The black voters will give him virtually 100 percent of their votes.

The Hispanics, many of whom live in the same areas as the poor blacks with whom they are in conflict in many ways, will vote heavily for the Republican candidate, continuing and accelerating a trend of the past few presidential elections. The one issue that Hispanics care about passionately is the treatment of illegal immigrants.

While right wing Republicans want to make life very difficult for the illegal immigrants Senator McCain has been a strong supporter of making it easier for illegal immigrants to legalise their status. This, along with Hispanic attitudes towards the blacks, will be sufficient to draw more of the Hispanics to the Republicans.

Compared to past elections, Obama will gain from even greater black support (it was almost 88 percent in the 2004 election), but this will be offset by his losses among the Hispanics.

White voters will shift even more to the Republicans. No matter how much one looks the

other way, the United States remains a nation that is deeply racial in its attitudes. Much of this is concealed, as it is not popular to express such feelings; but in the secrecy of the polling booth it will emerge.

Many Obama supporters believe that he will attract strong support from white voters, based on his performance in the primaries. Such ideas are based on exit polls, which may be very deceptive as many conceal their racial attitudes.

In big states like California, Clinton probably did better among the whites than the exit polls showed. But it is the key swing states -- Ohio, Florida, and Pennsylvania -- that are critical to the presidential election where the whites will not support Obama, based on the primary results.

While most Americans are fed up with the Bush presidency and its widespread failures to manage the economy well, and the incompetence demonstrated in Iraq, this distaste will not shift to McCain.

First, McCain will convince many that he has the best chance to stop the war in Iraq. As a trusted military figure, the population has much more confidence in him than in Obama, who has no record at all with respect to national security affairs (1952 election with Eisenhower and Stevenson).

Second, the Republicans will fight a very nasty campaign, filling the air-waves with the speeches of the Reverend Wright who has shocked the whites who, finally,

are hearing about how black people really feel; and the senior thesis at Princeton of Michelle, Obama's wife, whose views will shock -- even if this was written many years ago.

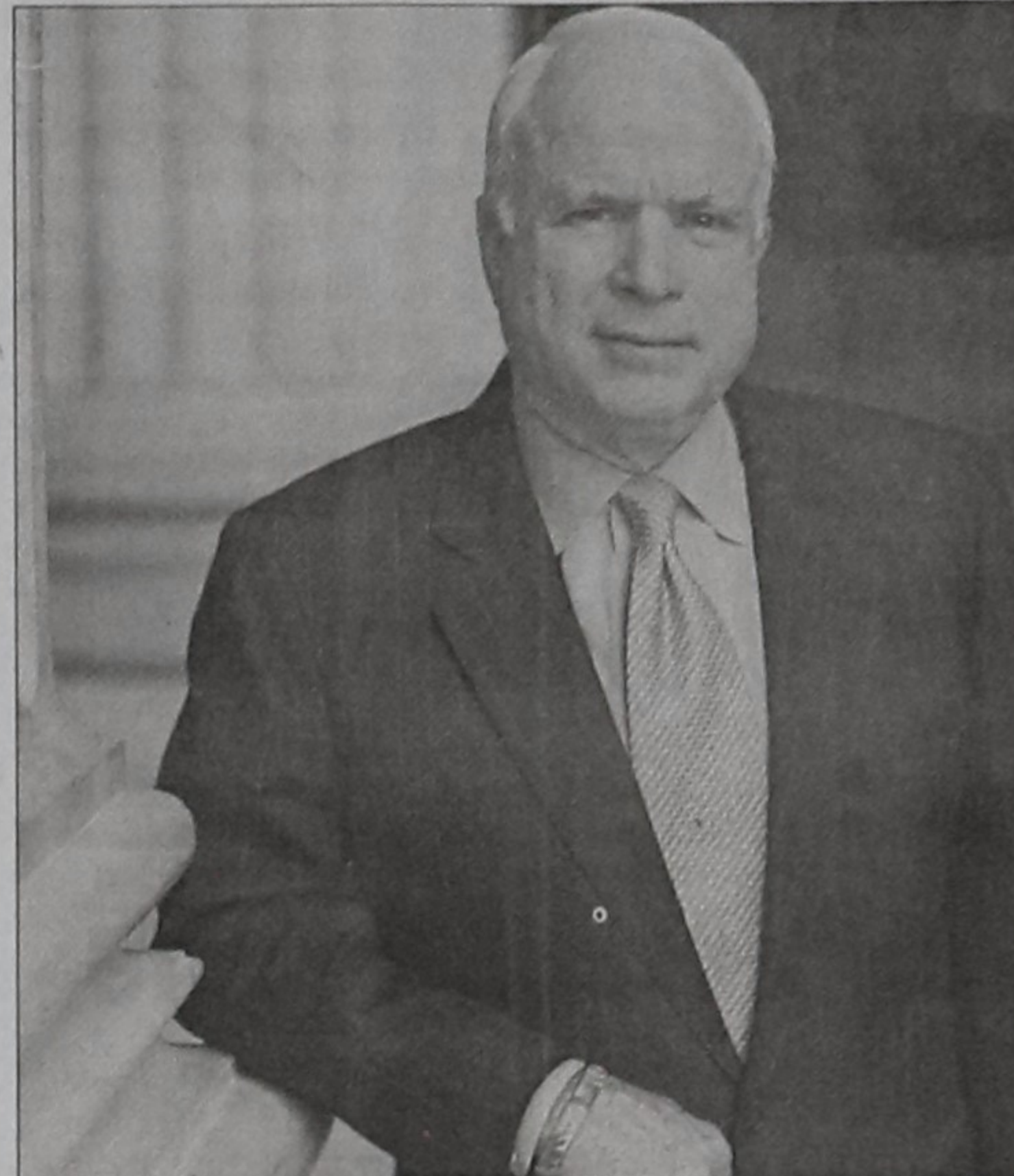
Third, McCain appeals to a large number of American whites independently of their political views: He is a war hero; he is a maverick going his own way -- a favourite American attribute; and he upholds the ideals of traditional patriotism, still a powerful force in the United States.

Senator Obama's general position that things are not going very well and that he can fix them is, ultimately, not a message that the white voters want to hear from a black guy. Put another way -- "I may be sick but I do not want this doctor."

I think that the top 40 percent of the population will vote heavily for the Republican candidate; McCain, after all, is going to look after them by maintaining low taxes and not threatening their dominant position in the society.

The bottom 40 percent will largely vote Democrat. It is middle the 20 percent that McCain and Obama will struggle to gain support from. In this group, I believe that racial feelings are alive and strong although hidden away.

In the actual voting, the white voters will shift towards McCain. Many will offset their "guilt" by voting for Democrats for Congress. The anger of the American people at the Bush administration will fall on the Republican senators and con-



gressmen, but not on McCain.

The central issue in this election in the United States, now six months away, is race. Have no illusions about this. The United States has done wonders in removing racial prejudice; compared to most nations it is far along in this regard. For example: caste prejudice in India is far worse; Japan simply sees non-Japanese as another species; German and French people treat their immigrants far worse than

American black citizens are treated. But this remarkable progress in the US does not mean that the attitudes and feelings have vanished! Far from it!

The day after the 2008 election, the blacks will cry foul, the Democrats will engage in angry attacks among themselves. The United States will be subjected to another four years where there will be very limited progress in building a fairer society.

The blacks' position in America

is a very complex issue. More and more Americans are colour blind. But a large number of Americans still see blacks as their inferiors; in the cities there is great fear of the blacks in whites. American communities and schools are, de facto, largely segregated.

Most sociological measures show the blacks significantly behind, or with a social structure that cannot support change for the better (broken families; rejection of good grades as this is being like whites etc.).

However unreasonable, white urban Americans remain scared of blacks. For whatever reasons, blacks earn significantly less than whites, live shorter lives, and their social conditions are worse.

McCain will silently become the symbol of protecting white Americans and he will win the necessary votes to fulfill this role. Whites are worried, concerned about the tensions in their society, and scared of Islamic fundamentalists blowing them up! They think McCain will protect them. My argument is admittedly not popular. The test is the outcome. Six months ahead, I believe Mr. McCain will emerge as president.

I hope I am wrong. In an Obama-McCain contest, Obama promises the leadership to a better future for the United States. But my personal views are irrelevant. I maintain that the remaining prejudice in the US will cause Obama to lose the election.

Forrest Cookson is an economist.

In search of sustainability

Synthetic fertiliser is the lone source of replenishment of the soil. But, in reality, synthetic fertilisers never replenish the soil, they pollute it. Even then, our lands have been producing crops as we are blessed with heavy rains and floods that keep most of the crop fields across the country submerged for a sizeable period of the year.

NAZRUL ISLAM

IT is indeed good news! Agriculture will get more allocation in the next budget. But can mere increased allocation meet the current and future challenges in this sector?

Agriculture has been facing multi-faceted problems. There is no reason for complacency because of good harvests in the ongoing boro season. Agriculture is not a fair for one season. It's a culture; lifelong and unending culture. There might be a short-cut method for achieving immediate success, but that's not all. We must evolve long-term, i.e. sustainable, ways that will meet the challenges of the future.

Regrettably, our agriculture is heavily dependent on outside inputs. The inputs are costly and non-renewable. Their reserves are being exhausted fast and prices are increasing faster.

Nearly 50 percent of our precious natural gas and 20 percent of imported fuel are currently being used for agricultural purposes (for producing urea and electricity). How long will the country be able to supply this fast-depleting natu-

ral gas for agriculture? The available gas reserve data suggest -- not for long.

Then what will we do? Making urea fertiliser through imported gas, or importing it from outside and supplying it to the farmers at affordable price would be a nightmarish task.

Being a student of agriculture and a member of a peasant family, I have been witnessing for three decades how our agricultural practices have shifted from sustainable to non-sustainable direction. Since the mid '60s, we have been concentrating all our attention on so-called modernisation of our agriculture.

Our research, motivation and extension -- all are directed towards "modernisation." And what is that modernisation? Applying more synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, using more water, using more mechanical appliances and using more laboratory-made seeds.

Farming can be compared to feeding newborn babies with formula feed instead of breast-feeding, and that of having lunch or dinner with junk food rather than homemade meals.

As our burgeoning middle class is leaning towards artificial formula food and junk food, our farmers are also being induced to use readymade fertilisers and pesticides. Today's farmers have become so lazy that they are reluctant to even prepare their lands with bullock-driven ploughs. However, rearing of cows and bullocks has also become a rare scene in many peasant families in the villages.

Many farmers told me that they couldn't recall when they last applied cow-dung or compost in their lands. If you visit the countryside, you will hardly find any haystack or heaps of cow dung or compost adjacent to the courtyards, which was a common scene a decade or two back. The farmers used to preserve the cow dung carefully, and make compost with homestead waste, and sometimes with water hyacinths when they were available.

The "modern" farmers don't want to endure the "hazards" of rearing cows, goats or even poultry birds. A middle class farmer would have at least half a dozen cattle heads, a dozen goats, a flock of poultry birds (both hens and

ducks) and a few pairs of pigeons -- that was common in the past. The sizes of the straw heaps and the cattle shed of a farmer used to be a measure of the affluence of a village farmer. But gone are those days.

Domestic animals have disappeared from the courtyards of the farmers. They require special care and attention. Today's farmers and their family members don't want to spend much of their time and attention for that purpose.

Moreover, shrinking of grazing space, scarcity of cattle feed, and susceptibility to diseases also discourage the farmers from rearing domestic animals.

So, synthetic fertiliser is the lone source of replenishment of the soil. But, in reality, synthetic fertilisers never replenish the soil, they pollute it. Even then, our lands have been producing crops as we are blessed with heavy rains and floods that keep most of the crop fields across the country submerged for a sizeable period of the year.

Then, is there no light ahead of us for sustainability in the sector? Have all the means been plugged off? Possibly not. Rather, there is a great prospect for durable agriculture in our country.

The illiterate or half-literate farmers of our country time and again show us the light. We have already been introduced to hari dhan (hari paddy). A farmer of

Narikelbaria in Jhenidah district, Haricharan Das, has evolved the high-yielding variety of indigenous paddy through selection process. The paddy has been spread in the locality.

Many of us might not know that farmers of Pairabandh area (birth place of Begum Rokeya) of Mithapukur Upazila in Rangpur hardly use any chemical fertilisers or pesticide in their lands. I personally visited the area and came to know that each peasant family produces compost out of household waste, crop residue, water hyacinths and other perishable items.

At first, a few families of the area initiated the process, and now farmers of a large area have adopted it. By doing this, they are not only saving money but also producing poison-free healthy food items.

An almost similar initiative has been undertaken by a sizeable number of farmers of Kaunia Upazila in the same district. They are producing vermi-compost and applying those in their crop fields instead of chemical fertilisers. Vermi-compost is a product from earthworms.

Those who have minimum knowledge about agriculture know that earthworms excrete granular soil-like substance which is highly nutritious for crops. This substance contains high quantities of nitrogen, phosphorous and

potassium (NPK). A large number of farmers of Kaunia area are now producing vermi-compost by cultivating earthworm at their homes.

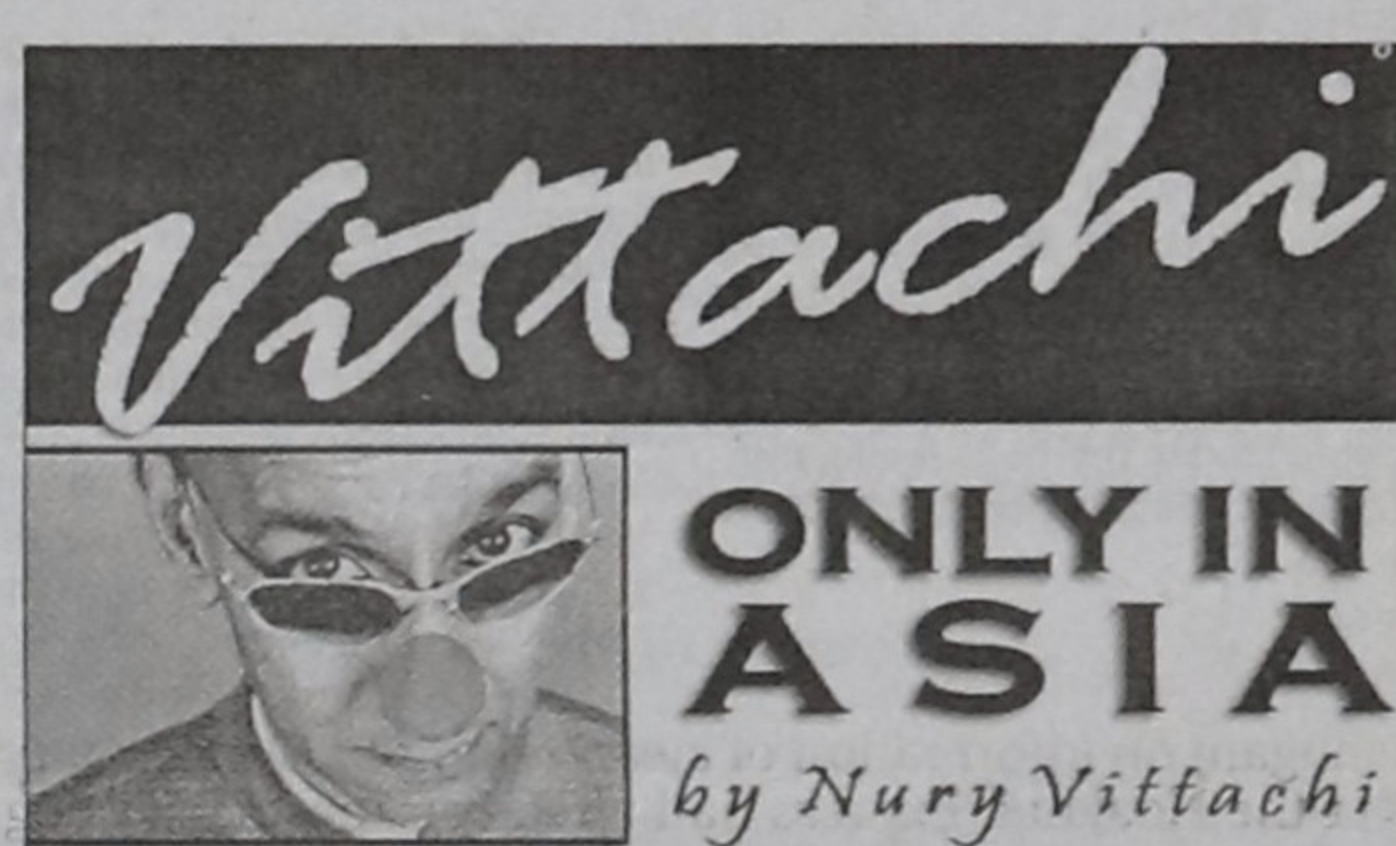
So, all paths have not been blocked. The problem is the mindset of our policy-makers, scientists and experts. They are following the practices of western countries, where agriculture is not the priority area.

They don't have to cultivate three/four crops on the same piece of land in a year. We have to understand our own socio-economic conditions. Replicating the western model might work for some time, but definitely will not work in the long run. Our scientists will have to evolve our own ways of blending the indigenous and the acquired knowledge.

Our scientists can get a clue from Haricharan Das on how to nurture indigenous resources. The policymakers can replicate the examples of Pairabandh and Kaunia's farmers in other places of the country.

I would like to suggest to the concerned authorities to allot 50 percent of the allocation for agricultural research in sustainable agriculture. Before that, a plan would have to be made for agricultural research centres and educational institutions for carrying out innovative research and learning.

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Never serve nylon food to a Serbo-Croat in polyester

TODAY, as everyone knows, is Nylon Day: the anniversary of the day the world's most celebrated (in the journalistic sense of "hated") synthetic fabric was invented.

You may be thinking: Why would anyone want to celebrate nylon? It's icky stuff that makes the wearer fidget and sweat and smell funny. To which I would reply: Are you implying that there's something wrong with being fidgety and sweaty and smelling funny? Huh? Huh?

Nylon has an amazing history. In the 1930s, a scientist made blobs of transparent plastic. When he went out to lunch, his naughty young assistants pulled them out in pizza strings. When one string turned out to be several metres long, they realised that they had stumbled on an amazingly useful invention: plastic pizza strings.

No, I mean synthetic thread. They made vast amounts of it and then tried to think of a purpose for it.

But thinking is not that easy, especially for young males. Scientific tests prove that ninety percent of male thoughts are about leggy women (the other ten per cent are about busty women). So not surprisingly, the first thing the guys came up with was the Nylon Stocking, launched in 1938. These led to the invention of sex in the 1940s, the baby boom in the 1950s, and Bob's your uncle (or, quite possibly, your father).

Although stockings came first, nylon was soon being used for a variety of garments, along with its sister fabric polyester (Latin for "cheap and revolting"), invented in the same lab. Nylon eventually reached Europe and Asia.

But this tale has a sad ending. The Serbo-Croats noticed that French were unable to mention nylon without sneering. "Zut alors! Sank God you are wearing tres chic Parisian leather

trousers instead of 'horrible American nylon pants,' they would say.

The Serbo-Croats thought nylon meant nasty, and that's what the word now means in their language. "Don't stay there, it's a nylon hotel," they advise tourists. "It's got nylon food and it's near a nylon beach."

If a Serbo-Croatian approaches you wearing a suit made of man-made fibres, never say: "You're looking very nylon today." You could start another war.

Baffling instructions department: A reader from Malaysia sent the following message: "The cardboard cupholders at Starbucks each contain a small block of text making two points. One is that the things are recycled. And other is that they are for single use only. Er?"

Readers' letters department: I wrote recently that in Swaziland, the most powerful woman had to be addressed as "The She-Elephant." I also said you should not try this at your home or workplace. Well, I got a sad note from one reader. "I ignored your warning and tried the She-Elephant thing in my office," wrote Peter Emmett. "I should have heeded your warning." Too bad, Peter. My office also has a powerful woman at its heart. We just call her "Sir."

Baffling road instructions department: Reader David Wijekoon-Perera saw a sign on the road in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka: "Tourists beware, all cars have right of turns at the left corner road."

Gratuitous abuse of westerners department: When a French Canadian politician was applauded by an American audience, he beamed, "Thank you for giving my wife and me the clap. I thank you from the heart of my bottom."

Put on something nylon and visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.

Tibet and Olympics 2008

Aren't games on an international level all about seeing your country being represented at the international podium? What about the fact that Tibetans are not allowed to participate unless they call themselves Chinese? Beijing herself has long-politicised the Games by taking the Olympic torch through Tibet and trying to legitimise their claim on this holy land for Buddhists, and trying to show the world that Tibetans are happy under their rule.

WASFIA NAZREEN

"By allowing Beijing to host the Games, you will help the development of human rights." -- Liu Jingmin, Beijing 2008 Olympics Games Bid Committee

BEIJING promised the international community many things for the privilege of hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. The major one was regarding human rights. However, can it honestly be said that Beijing has fulfilled its obligations with respect to the issue of human rights in advance of the Games?

Let me take this chance to also remind everyone that in 1980 China herself boycotted the Moscow Games in protest against the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

But now, when people all

across the globe are standing up against the atrocities committed by the Chinese government, there seems to be no similar world-wide consensus on boycotting.

I urge the readers to think on the following questions and ask their own conscience. If there is nothing to hide in Tibet, why is it sealed off from the rest of the world? How come no independent journalist is allowed? Why have all tourists been asked to leave? If something as little as possessing a photo of the Dalai Lama can land one in jail -- how is there any freedom in Tibet?

I have no doubt in my heart about the Chinese as a people. Personally, I have many Chinese friends, so does his Holiness the Dalai Lama, and many Tibetans will agree with me in saying that Tibetans will gladly accept any Chinese as their friends. However,

that is not the issue. That does not take away from the hideous crimes committed against peace-loving Tibetans, nor does it change the fact that the CCP uses a strict regiment of control and dictatorship to rule the Tibetans.

Whether from Tibet or Burkina Faso or Timbuktu, don't we all, as humans, have a right to self-determination? Is it so hard to comprehend the forced illegitimate occupation of a foreign power? Is it too difficult to identify with the suffering of Holy Lhasa?

No matter who blames who, at the end of the day it is up to the Tibetans, and no one but themselves, to decide their fate. Unfortunately, the Chinese communist party is not really allowing that to happen. Tibetans, not just inside Tibet, but all across the world, are crying out against half-century long repression by Beijing,

and the time to act is now.

Breaking the Olympic myth

The Olympic Games, if you ask me, have always been politicised. Most sports fan often tend to exclude the whole image, that is, surrounding these thousands of athletes is billions of dollars of international corporate interests and industries. Surrounding the talent of a few thousand athletes are the agendas of different countries.

Yes, of course, it breaks my heart to not even fully understand the work that these sportsmen and women have undergone, but in terms of seeing the bigger picture -- a country who promises to straighten up their human rights record in order to hold the Games, but clearly has failed -- such a country definitely has no right to host the Games, especially not in the name of "harmony" or an alleged journey of "unity."

In terms of the repression in Tibet -- I am very sorry to say that the athletes' sacrifices are not much.

Aren't games on an international level all about seeing your country being represented at the international podium? What about the fact that Tibetans are not allowed to participate unless they

call themselves Chinese? Beijing herself has long-politicised the Games by taking the Olympic torch through Tibet and trying to legitimise their claim on this holy land for Buddhists, and trying to show the world that Tibetans are happy under their rule. I think the whole world has seen by now the truth to that.

A historical look at few of the ways the Olympics have been politicised

- Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold and bronze medalists in the 200 metres, gave the Black Power salute during the American national anthem in Mexico, 1968, to demonstrate against racial discrimination in their home country.
- The silver medalist in the 200 metres, Peter Norman of Australia, who was white, wore an "Olympic Project for Human Rights" badge in support of Smith and Carlos's protest. When he died, in 2006, Smith and Carlos were his lead pallbearers.
- Irish athletes boycotted the 1908 Olympic Games in London in protest against Britain's refusal to give Ireland its independence.

The American team also refused to dip its flag to Edward VII during the opening ceremony.

- In 1932 Italian gold medalist Luigi Beccali gave a fascist salute on the podium at the Los Angeles Games.
- The Nazis' appropriation of the 1936 Berlin Games for the purposes of propaganda included the introduction of a grand torch relay to the Games -- the very same that is causing trouble today. Boycott efforts by Britain and the US were short-lived, but many Jewish athletes refused to participate.
- At the Munich Games of 1972, gunmen from the Palestinian Black September group broke into the compound occupied by Israeli athletes and killed 11 of them.
- In 1980, 62 countries -- the biggest number in history -- boycotted the Moscow Games in protest against the intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. China was part of this boycott.
- An Eastern Bloc boycott was organised in retaliation at the next games in Los Angeles.

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