

Saarc must act as one on climate change

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RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

CLIMATE is not something that we can fix whenever we want, because most climate models predict gradual changes related to the steadily increasing greenhouse gas concentrations and carbon emissions. But ice and sediment core records reveal that, in the past, climate has changed abruptly -- possibly in as little as 10 to 20 years. Such rapid change in the future could make prevention and adaptation strategies difficult and expensive to implement.

We are altering the environment far faster than we can possibly predict the consequences. Comparable climate shifts have happened before, but over tens of centuries, not tens of years. Rapid change could accelerate the already high rate of species extinction as plants and animals fail to adapt quickly enough. For the first time in history, humans are affecting the ecological balance of not just a region but the entire world.

The alarmists in the global warming debate have had their say in every newspaper practically every day, and in countless news reports and documentary films. There is an increasing need for governments,

organisations, businesses, and even individuals to understand and help tackle the issue, as climate change is one of the biggest challenges we are facing today.

In view of the growing demand to form a regional action plan for adaptation to climate change and mobilising funds for the purpose, environment ministers of South Asia are going to sit for the first-ever summit meeting in Dhaka on July 3. Before that, an expert-level meeting is being held yesterday and today, which will make an in-depth assessment of the probable impact of climate change on the region and will suggest measures to tackle the situation through regional cooperation. A fund titled "Fund for Climate Change" has also been proposed to seek funds from donor agencies whose representatives have been invited to the meeting.

Climate change affects everyone, every day, everywhere. Hundreds of people were reported dead when a passenger ferry, having around 700 passengers and 121 crew members on board, capsized due to typhoon Frank (Fengshen) in the Philippines on June 22. Kansas, Indiana, and Iowa were heavily affected by floods on June 6-13. Rising flood waters swamped the central US river city,

forcing residents to flee their homes and officials to abandon City Hall amid a wider crisis that left 20 dead. On November 15, 2007, the category 4 cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh uprooted more than 3,000 lives and unknown number of homes.

Humans are changing the Earth's climate so fast and devouring resources so voraciously that the survival of the world's ecosystems and of humanity itself is at stake. According to German scientists, the climate will be changing more quickly in this century than it ever has in the recent history of the Earth.

Besides various UN organisations, governments of different countries, non-government organisations, scientists, and individuals, many regional organisations throughout the world are now working together to cope with climate change as most of the times in any natural disaster, neighbouring countries in the region are usually affected.

2008 will be a decisive year in the battle against climate change. Hopefully, it will see us forge an international consensus so an agreement can be reached in Copenhagen in 2009, which will allow us to build on the Kyoto Protocol. One of the main themes of

the 34th G8 summit, which is to take place in Tokyo on July 7-9, is environment and climate change.

The economic impact of climate change, rising food prices, and a broad range of other trade, growth, and development issues were discussed at this year's OECD Ministerial Council Meeting in Paris on June 4-5. World leaders will lay the groundwork for a global agreement through the 14th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Poland, on December 1-12.

After a two-day summit in Brussels on March 14, EU (European Union) leaders declared an ambitious plan to fight climate change and agreed to implement a 20% cut in greenhouse gases by 2020, compared with 1990 levels. The EU leaders also agreed to consider cutting value-added tax (VAT) on environmentally-friendly domestic products, which aims to increase the use of so-called green goods.

Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer urged the 26 member nations to bear climate change in mind as one of the key elements, as it will lead to international tensions and conflicts over resources, water and farming lands, and will also increase migration.

According to the World Bank climate change expert Richard Damania, the poorest of the poor in South Asia are the most affected by climate change. The impact of higher temperatures, more extreme weather events such as floods, cyclone, severe drought, and sea

level rise are already being felt in South Asia, and will continue to intensify. "We are going to see the wet parts of South Asia become wetter, causing flooding and affecting more people. We will also see the arid areas getting drier. This will hurt the poor the most," he said.

Bangladesh is set to disappear under the waves by the end of the century, says Nasa. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted that Bangladesh was on course to lose 17% of its land and 30% of its food production by 2050. Bangladesh has already begun to feel the effects of climate change as flood periods have become longer and cyclones cause greater devastation. As sea-levels rise, the IPCC warned that 35 million refugees could flee Bangladesh's flooded delta by 2050.

The impact of climate change on India is likely to be worse. According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics, India's agriculture will suffer more than any other country's. Assuming a global temperature increase of 4.4°C over cultivated areas by 2080, India's agricultural output is projected to fall by 30-40%.

The 2004 tsunami was the deadliest in recorded history, killing over 280,000 people in towns and villages along the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Over 3 million survivors had their livelihoods destroyed. India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Somalia were affected. Over 40,000 died in Sri Lanka. Thousands were never found. Sri Lanka expects that



Climate: Act before fertile land becomes waste land.

over the next two decades the sea-level will rise by half a metre, with dry areas becoming drier and wet areas becoming wetter, leading to floods in some areas and drought in others.

Maldives is a very low-lying island nation. During the past decade, the sea on average in the Maldives has risen by one millimetre every year. Since 80% of it is no more than 1m above sea level, within 100 years the Maldives could become uninhabitable.

For the first time, the government of

Bangladesh allocated Tk 300 crore to create a special fund for enhancing public adaptability to face the challenges of climate change. India has adopted a vaunted policy, the National Action Plan on Climate Change and formed a powerful council of ministers, bureaucrats, scientists, and businessment to co-operate on the issue.

Recently, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in Sri Lanka launched a Climate Change Secretariat and the Sri Lanka Carbon Fund. Pakistan Environmental

Protection Agency is working to improve and protect the environment.

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True democracy

To bring honest, patriotic and clean people to politics, holding local government election without political influence is a must. Such kind of people will contribute directly to the welfare of the people and the nation. Party and muscle power-controlled election never allures the honest people to come to politics.

MASUM BILLAH

THE Election Commission has announced the schedule for holding four-city corporation and nine municipal elections, triggering criticism from the big political parties. Intra-party disputes and rivalry between prospective candidates within alliances have become intense since the declaration.

In four divisional headquarters, mayoral aspirants in both AL and BNP are bracing for challenges from components of fourteen-party and four-party combines. Things are worse for lack of instructions from the central leadership of the parties that have yet to decide whether to take part in the elections.

The parties must understand that the government will not face any problem if they don't participate in the local government elections; instead, they might get isolated. How will they resist the elections, as they are threatening to do? This threat indicates that they are pressing the government to free the leaders who are in jail, thinking that if local government elections were held the central leaders would lose their hold in their areas.

Indirectly, it means that they are not bothered about the strengthening of local government bodies. They think of their party interest instead of welfare of the people. Ups and downs in the political arena have made the ordinary people of this country politically mature, and they will not respond to the unreasonable call of the leaders.

Dr. Kamal said: "After 1/11, massive reforms were started in the country, and should be successfully concluded. Questions are being raised about the government's ability to manage it." He told the caretaker government: "You have taken up a responsibility. Your

patience, competence and honesty are being tested. Don't let the corrupt people browbeat you. The country cannot be handed over again to those who were engaged in corruption in the past, and the election must be held without any manipulation by godfathers and black money holders."

Our democracy suffered from a top-down philosophy, which hardly saw real representation of grassroots-level leaders. The party that wins the election decides the composition of the local government body.

Such kind of top-down system helps the party and central leaders to dominate, keeping aside the local government body's interest and the welfare of the people. This hardly gives opportunity to people to elect their liked candidate, as central leaders influence the process.

To bring honest, patriotic and clean people to politics, holding local government election without political influence is a must. Such kind of people will contribute directly to the welfare of the people and the nation. Party and muscle power-controlled election never allures the honest people to come to politics.

It is true that running the government calls for experience, and party leaders have it. But their corruption, nepotism and party leaning banish all sorts of public welfare, and the ordinary voters are deprived of their due rights and civil privileges due to these negative aspects.

On the other hand, honest citizens who usually remain away from the turmoil of politics don't have any experience of governance. But even if they make mistakes their honesty may remove the hurdles standing in the way of their public dealings. This will bring positive changes in the lives of ordinary people.

Some political leaders and even civil society members say that this government does not have any right to hold local government elections,



Let's build a strong local government.

take any financial decision, etc. Why not? Political turmoil has given rise to this government, and even though it was not elected it enjoys public support.

Democracy is a popular form of government, but that does not necessarily mean that it always brings good for the public. India is the largest democracy in the world. It has never seen military rule, whereas Pakistan and Bangladesh have. Definitely India deserves credit in this respect but its economic situation is still grave, which is evidenced from an article by Kuldip Nayar in the Daily Star on June 16.

He wrote: "No doubt, India's middle class has expanded to 350 million but the 20 million at the bottom is destitute. The government's own report published earlier this year says that more than 70% of the people live on less than a dollar per day. What does development or progress mean when roughly 70 million people are deprived of basic necessities?"

This proves that though democracy is an established form of government, it cannot ensure basic necessities of ordinary people. We are still to form, establish and exercise democracy. So, the participation of big parties is of utmost importance.

After the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991, all the governments were either coalition or

quasi-coalitions. Gradually, the country was moving towards bigger coalitions. The fact indicates that, however large the parties are, they are not in a position to rule alone.

The CECS said: "The country's political culture has to be changed to establish democracy in the true sense. Everyone has to play his or her role in changing conventional ideas and beliefs for the betterment of the people." The local government elections must not be dominated by politics, and the big parties should restrain themselves to give an institutional shape to democracy.

The traditional ideals and beliefs must be abandoned once for all. The government is firm about holding the elections as per schedule and roadmap. Commerce and Education Adviser, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, said: "We are moving forward step by step, and the election to the local bodies is an important step to pass."

To address local issues effectively and combat natural calamities which we experience almost every year, the strengthening of local government bodies is of utmost importance, but it has remained neglected. Now the time has come to rectify the situation, and political parties cannot remove themselves from this requisite element of democracy.

Md. Masum Billah is a specialist in the Brac Education Programme, PACE, and regularly writes on various national and international issues.

The war premium on oil

This certainly explains the disinformation, feints and bluffs the world is witnessing on oil markets, in Mediterranean airspace (where Israel "secretly" carried out a "dry run" attack on Iran in June) and in technological, financial and commercial exchanges between Iran and the rest of the world.

JORGE CASTANEDA

THERE are two questions being asked around the global water cooler these days, and no one seems to have a very good answer for them. First, why does the price of oil keep rising, even if the world economy is slowing down and the Saudis appear to be willing to raise production?

Second, why do so many analysts and governments think that the United States or Israel, or both, will attempt to destroy or set back the Iranian nuclear program sometime before George W. Bush's departure from the White House early next year?

While there is an early infinite number of answers available to both of these questions, this writer likes one: it lies in the link between the two questions.

Obviously there is no single explanation for the astonishing and persistent rise in oil prices, recently hitting more than \$140 per barrel. But one explanation may well be that energy traders and even real consumers, including refiners, companies and governments, are betting on an American-Israeli intervention against Iran in the near future, and logically believing that such an act would drive oil prices sky-high.

While the American, Israeli and increasingly European attitude of turning up pressure, sanctions and threats against Tehran may well be the best way to both avoid military action and ensure that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons, it has the unintended consequence that some people may actually believe it.

Speculators and others may be acting on the assumption that Washington and its Israeli ally will proceed to "take out" Iranian nuclear facilities, because that is exactly what Bush and his allies are implying will happen if the Ahmadinejad regime

does not comply with UN resolutions.

What would happen if such an intervention were to occur? To begin with, Iran would almost certainly suspend most or all of its oil sales abroad in retaliation; that would remove a couple of million barrels from the current worldwide supply of roughly 85 million barrels per day.

Then -- and this is crucial -- Tehran's increasingly close ally, Hugo Chávez in Caracas, would in all likelihood at least stop sales to the United States and possibly declare a general suspension of sales.

There goes another 1.5 million barrels per day, though PDVSA, the Venezuelan state oil company, claims it is exporting substantially more today (showing, by the way, that in today's global economy, it is not that easy to know exactly how much each producer is placing on the world market).

Finally, it would not be impossible for other exporters, out of tongue-in-cheek solidarity with Iran (applauding the American-Israeli move in private while giving lip service to

international law in public), to remove an additional million or so barrels per day from the global market. Prices would in all likelihood break through the \$200 ceiling, and maybe go much higher.

Would this be cutting off the noses of Iran and Venezuela to spite their faces? In part, of course, but it would not be very different from the 1973 Arab exporters' boycott of oil sales to industrialised countries in the wake of the Yom Kippur war in the Middle East, which multiplied prices by four.

Both Tehran and Caracas, at least, have monetary reserves to sustain a boycott for a while, especially if they cheat and make spot sales at inflated prices. True, they could not maintain this stance indefinitely, but do the Republicans really want to begin the autumn election campaign with gas at \$6 per gallon -- a 50 percent increase from today's already high prices -- and a crisis on their hands in the Persian Gulf and Latin America?

On the other hand, the window for doing something about Iran will not remain open forever. The more time that goes by, the closer Tehran will be to both producing a nuclear device and having the capability of delivering it in the neighborhood.

It seems highly improbable that an Obama administration would like to kick off its first term with a surgical strike against Iran; nor does

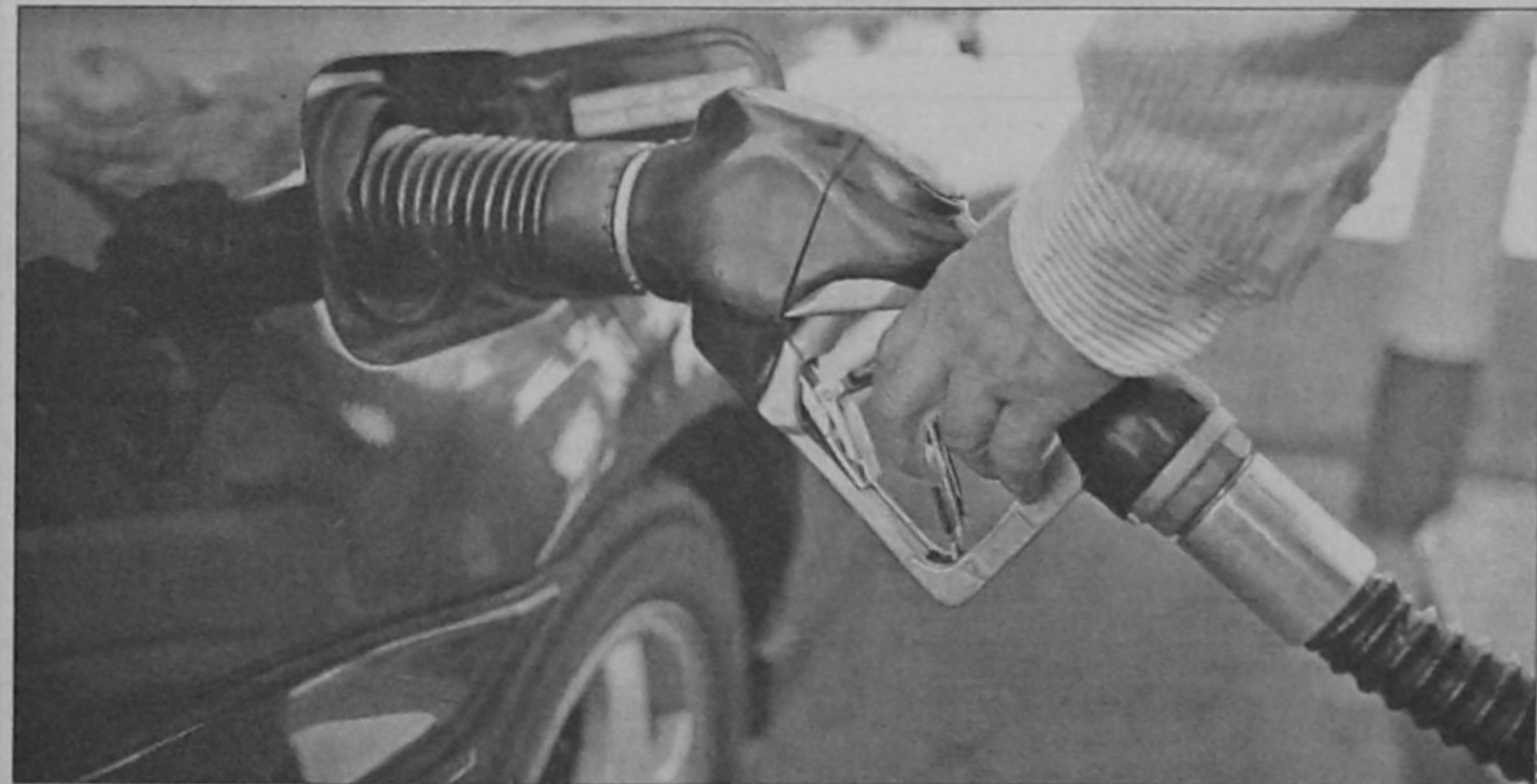
it seem plausible that Israel would move on its own without US acquiescence. Those who fear a nuclear-armed Iran (French President Nicolas Sarkozy said in June in Jerusalem that such a notion was unacceptable) have rapidly diminishing room to maneuver.

This certainly explains the disinformation, feints and bluffs the world is witnessing on oil markets, in Mediterranean airspace (where Israel "secretly" carried out a "dry run" attack on Iran in June) and in technological, financial and commercial exchanges between Iran and the rest of the world.

There is a theory that the Iranian nuclear program is in fact much less advanced than many believe, mainly as a result of constant sabotage and assassinations, as well as disruptions of deliveries and purchases, all carried out by Western intelligence services.


This views holds that financial sanctions, undercover operations and the Israeli efforts to drive a wedge between Iran and its allies in the region, particularly Syria, may suffice to restrain Iran from gaining nuclear weapons, for now. On one condition: that Iran and others believe that the military option remains on the table. But if they believe it, energy traders will, too, and oil prices will react accordingly.

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Price rise -- when is it going to stop?

This financial prediction is guaranteed to be on target



ONLY IN ASIA

by Nury Vittachi

LIKE many people, I have watched the world's stock markets bounce up and down over the past few months. But unlike the rest of you I KNOW WHY.

The answer was given to me by a financial analyst, a person who can best be described as "a man who carries a printout of a wobbly line." He pointed to it. "You'll notice that every few years, there's a wobbly bit. Well, we've hit another wobbly bit." (He gets paid the GDP of a small country for saying things like this.)

I showed him a prediction in the newspaper about Asian financial markets over the summer: "While we may see the markets advance,

further corrections remain a real risk, as does the possibility of the indexes being trapped in a narrow trading range."

Hmm. "Advance" means climbs up, "correction" means falls down, and "narrow trading range" means stuck at one level. In other words, he is saying it may go up, it may go down, or it may stay the same.

In OTHER words, it is really saying, "I don't have the foggiest idea what's going on."

Does this mean brokers are stupid? No, it means they are very clever. It means I am stupid because I nod admirably while they are telling me they have no idea what is

going on.

In one newspaper recently, an investment banker said: "The markets may recover, or it may be the end of the world." That's what is called "hedging bets." He gets paid the GDP of a medium-sized country for saying things like that.

But I did learn one useful thing. Financial people are often highly creative individuals (I use the phrase in the journalistic sense of "crooks"). The many guides to new financial terminology on the market get thicker every year, as indeed, do sad people like me who attempt to read them.

But these books only tell you

what financial people say -- they don't tell you what they mean. So here's a guide to what bits of financial jargon actually mean.

Short-term buy: Probably a bad investment.

Medium-term buy: Definitely a bad investment.

Long-term buy: Definitely a really, really bad investment.

Ultra-long term buy: Guaranteed to make no money at all for at least seven generations or until the sun implodes, whichever takes longer.

Standard and Poor: A description of the typical investor.

Market Crash: A major price

adjustment that the financial community arranges to happen the day after you put your savings into shares.

Cash Flow: Movement of money, which always happens in one direction: away from you and towards the brokers.

Institutional Investor: People who lose money in such vast quantities that they should really be locked up in institutions.

Bull Market: A normal part of the cycle, which causes financial professionals to mistake themselves for geniuses.

Correction: God having the last laugh on the people in the item

above.

Some people have found a way to guarantee they will not lose money in the financial markets. This cunning scheme is called "Not Having Any in the First Place" and is widely used by teachers, journalists, social workers, nurses, priests and so on.

My financial analyst friend has more money than I do -- but it comes with a new wobbly line chart. It's his stress level, and I wouldn't have it for all the tea in my grandmother.

Send your stock tips to our columnist at www.vittachi.com.