

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

'AL will adopt a forward-looking strategy'

Known as a firebrand in her young days and now among the most honest of politicians, **Begum Matia Chowdhury** is currently a member of the presidium, the highest policymaking body of Bangladesh Awami League. She served as the agriculture, food and disaster minister of Sheikh Hasina-led government during 1996-2001 successfully. Matia Chowdhury was elected general secretary of Dhaka University Central Students' Union in 1964 and president of the East Pakistan Student Union the following year. She played a vital role in anti-Ayub movements. After the 1/11 political changeover, Matia Chowdhury has been a vocal exponent of the AL party position. **Hasan Jahid Tusher** took the interview.

What do you think about the next election scheduled for December 18?

We want a free, fair and credible election in an environment free from fear, apprehension and criminal activities, where people will exercise their freedom of choice and votes will be counted for the candidates whom they vote for and result will be announced accordingly. Any manipulated result will not be acceptable to the people.

Do you think the election will be held in such an apprehension free environment?

We hope so. But the state of emergency definitely could generate such an environment of apprehension. Although the chief adviser had categorically said during his oath taking and his address to the nation earlier that the emergency would be relaxed and definitely withdrawn ahead of national election, but he said the opposite when he was abroad recently -- that the emergency would continue until the next election.

For this reason, a question has arisen as to whether people could vote for their chosen candidates and whether the result would be declared subsequently.

What is the position of your party regarding taking part in the national election under emergency?

If any political party alleged that the

poll results had been snatched away under the state of emergency, then the party's claim would have logical grounds and national and international acceptance. Under the emergency, if the government declares election results according to its liking, the people won't be able to take to the street to protest that. We have seen that manipulating the results of five to six polling centres can change the result of a constituency. So, we will strongly ask the government to lift the emergency completely before the national election. Fakhruddin Ahmed will have to give explain why he has shifted his position regarding withdrawal of emergency.

Will you hold another round of talks with the government to press the demand?

Why is another round dialogue necessary for this? Why would the government not keep its promise? Earlier, all the caretaker governments used to hold talks with the political parties again and again to solve polls-related problems, but this government seems to be reluctant to hold talks with the political parties amidst number of problems. Do you think there is any apprehension about holding of the election on December 18?

If any uncertainty over holding of the election is created, it will be by the government. Awami League wants election, and we want to take

part in the election with Sheikh Hasina.

Are you prepared for the upcoming polls?

Since we were prepared to take part in the January 22 parliamentary polls, preparing for this election won't be difficult for us. We may include or exclude some candidates from the list of candidates prepared for the January 22 polls, but nomination will be finalised on the recommendations of the party's grassroots level committees. After assessing their recommendations, final nomination will be given by the Awami League Parliamentary Board. Already, different committees of our party have been reviewing the popularity and acceptability of the candidates in each electoral constituency.

You are saying you have preparation enough to take part in the poll, then what about AL's election manifesto?

Based on our political ideology -- democracy and secularism -- the manifesto will be finalised at the party forum after an intense discussion on it soon. Reaching the five fundamental necessities -- food, clothing, housing, health and education -- to the common people in a consequential way will get priority in our manifesto. We will also include a detailed five-year plan in it, and a visionary long-term program.

What electoral pledges will you

make to seek votes?

Our attempt will be to make the country forward looking, and to revitalize all sectors to improve the condition of millions of extremely poor people.

How will AL formally start its election campaign and when?

I cannot tell the date until Sheikh Hasina returns home. She has an appointment with doctors on October 17, and after that the date of her return will be finalised. Why won't Hasina be able to take part in the election? We are apprehensive about it since the government has been interfering in the highest court and showing a discriminatory attitude towards Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina.

What about formation of proposed grand alliance when Jatiya Party has been demanding 60 seats from Awami League?

We will form the grand alliance after discussing the matter in the 14-party combine. As the BNP and Jamaat have been trying to expand their alliance, we won't sit idle. We want all the secular democratic forces in the country in our fold. The grand alliance will be formally finalised after Sheikh Hasina returns home. The matter of sharing seats will be finalised when we sit at the bargaining table. They (Jatiya Party) are talking prematurely about seat sharing, which can create complications. It's not expected.

When is Awami League going to get registered with the EC? Why didn't the party amend its constitution in line with the RPO?

We will obviously get registered with the EC within the stipulated time. We are not bound to accept all of the provisions in the RPO. We have already amended our constitution, subject to the approval of the next council and with some notes of dissent on some of the provisions in the RPO -- including the no vote option, foreign and associate organisations, among others -- and give it to the Election Commission. We hope we will be flexible and

consider our amendments while giving registration.

What will you do if the Election Commission does not consider Awami League's constitutional amendments to RPO?

If they do not consider our amendments regarding getting registration, we will hold a party meeting then and take a decision on the matter. The Election Commission is not going to take part in the election. It will conduct the polls. So it will have to be more flexible so that more parties take part in the poll.

When do you want upazila election, since you are demanding a change in the polls date?

We want the polls to be held at a reasonable time, which can be at least one month after the national election. If the local body election is held immediately after the national election, there could be a chaotic situation in the country. But upazila election must be held to tackle the growing number of problems of the people, because it won't be possible for an MP to deal with them.

Will Awami League nominate honest and competent candidates in the upcoming polls?

We will give preference first to our political leaders and workers. Obviously honest, competent and tested leaders will be nominated this time. Is there any party that nominates incompetent candidates?

What will be AL's position on keeping those convicted in lower courts, or corrupt suspects or patrons of criminals, away from election?

Any legal matter will have to be settled through legal process. If there are competent candidates after overcoming legal barriers, they won't be excluded from the nomination process. Obviously, we won't do anything that violates the laws.

What does your party think about the role of the army during election? We want the army to be used like they were used during the 1996 and

1991 polls. We don't want the army to be given the arresting authority during poll, like in 2001. We have objections about the arresting authority of the army during polls. We have already conveyed our message to the government in this regard.

What do you think about your political archrivals BNP and Jamaat taking part in the polls?

As the BNP and Jamaat want a conspiratorial poll like the aborted January 22 polls they are hatching conspiracies, clearly indicating that they do not want the December 18 polls. Khaleda Zia, after her release, had said that they would take part in both the election and the dialogue, but is now saying that the decision of the four-party coalition will be her decision. It proves that the BNP is again trying to make the national election impossible.

What do you think about the anti-corruption drive? Will AL continue it if voted to power?

If Awami League is voted to power the drive will be continued according to laws. We'll maintain a strict policy so that it is not used for political purposes.

Will you make the parliament effective if voted to power, or refrain from boycotting it if you are in the opposition?

It is right that we boycotted the parliament in 1994 protesting the stage-managed Magura-1 by-election, and also when BNP did not allow the parliament to take a condemnation motion on the August 21 grenade attack in 2004. Awami League again joined the parliament to place the 14-party's reform proposals, and for the budget session. Awami League never used parliament negatively. If we are voted to power, we'll make the parliament effective in a bid to show respect to the people.

What is your evaluation about 1/11? Is there any lesson that the politicians can learn from 1/11? The arrival of January 11 is a reality.



Begum Matia Chowdhury

At that time, the caretaker government had attained much popularity and people thought that they would work for a fair election, besides they (government) had vowed to root out corruption from the country. But today, after 20 months in power, they could not place specific proof before the countrymen that they have been able to do that. According to Art. 58 (gha) of the Constitution, their main job was to hold a national election, but they have raised questions and debates on the matter. In the meantime, many

things have been done with political motives.

The lesson from 1/11 is that whatever efforts are made to suppress politics, it will always raise its head held high with the power of the people, and the people will rally behind politics and political parties even after plots against them. January 11 also shows that no one can hold a blueprint election if he/she wishes by going against the people's will. It will be good for the country if everyone shows respect to the people's power and their judgment.

Ready for the second Green Revolution?

Are we ready for the second Green Revolution? This time the situation is different. Unlike the first Green Revolution, in which productivity growth was achieved with the introduction of modern varieties in tandem with assured irrigation and inputs (such as fertiliser), and guaranteed prices, the second Green Revolution needs to achieve the same goal in the face of several 21st-century challenges.

KAZI SHAMSUL AMIN

THE need for a second Green Revolution has been a dominant theme at different forums, workshops and seminars, even at top government levels in Asia, amid growing food and rice crisis across the continent.

Indian President Pratibha Patil and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, at a recent seminar in New Delhi, called for a second Green Revolution, urging scientists and policy-makers to work towards this objective. "We now need a second Green Revolution that will enhance our agricultural productivity and make India an agrarian superpower," Patil said.

The Asian-European Editor's Forum, recently in Bangkok, gathered journalists and rice experts from Asia and Europe in a discussion about policy issues on the world food crisis and its effects on Asia, along with the search for

solutions to a global problem. Experts from different international organisations discussed the rice crisis as a way to another Green Revolution.

This stark warning, in line with calls from organisations such as the World Bank, the World Food Program, and Asian Development Bank (ADB), was issued by members of the Board of Trustees (BOT) of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) following their meeting on September 16-19 at the Institute's headquarters in Los Baños, Philippines.

"The global community needs to remember two key things," said BOT Chair Elizabeth Woods. "First, that growth in agricultural productivity is the only way to ensure that people have access to enough affordable food. Second, that achieving this is a long-term effort. A year or two of extra funding for agricultural research is not enough. To ensure that improved technologies flow from the

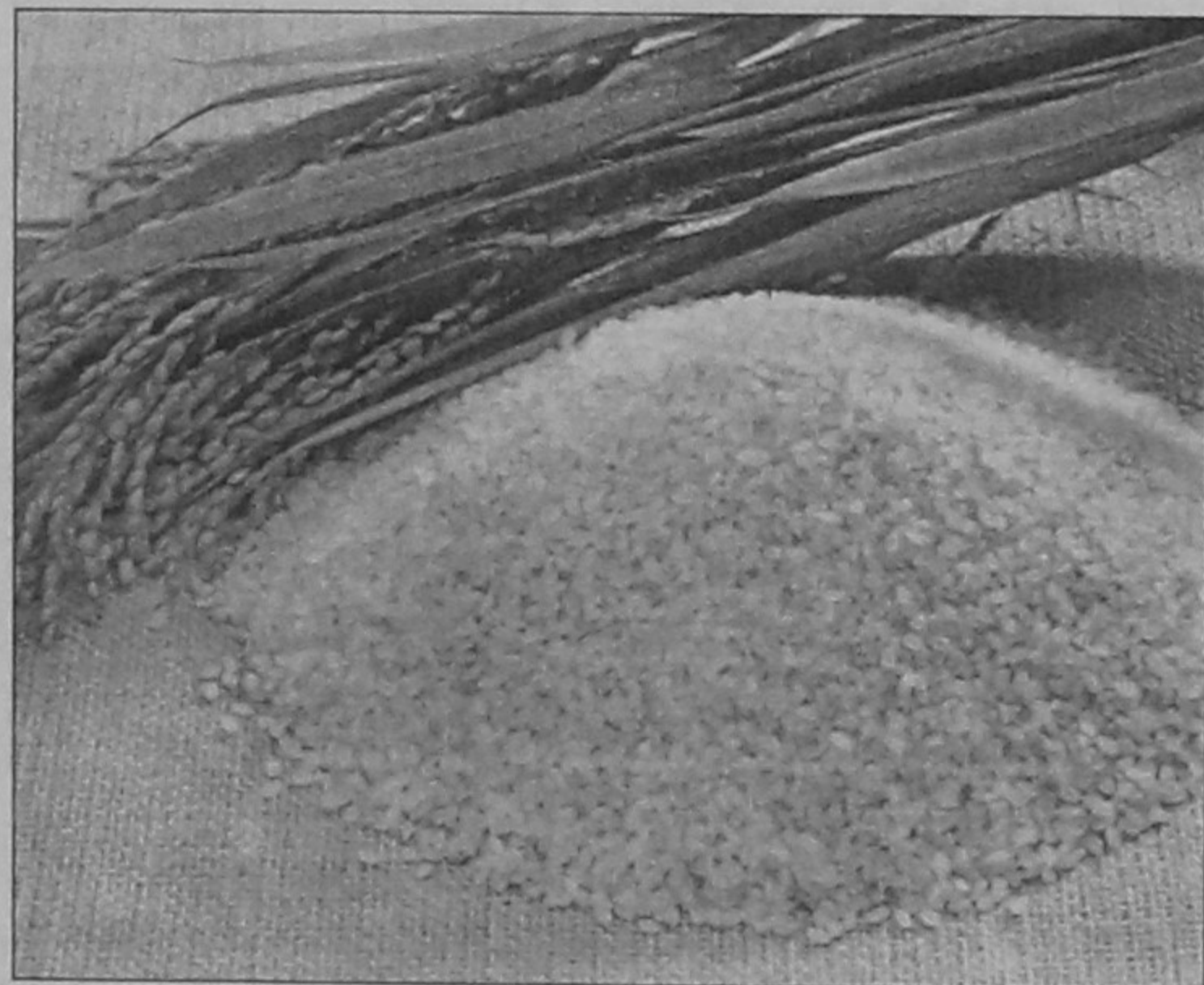
research and development pipeline, a sustained re-investment in agriculture is crucial."

In April and May this year, agriculture in general and rice in particular dominated world headlines in a way not seen for decades. As rice prices skyrocketed to 35-year highs, civil unrest broke out in several countries around the globe.

Rice prices have doubled over the past year to Tk 40 a kg, forcing a third or more of Bangladesh's 140 million people to skip one or two meals a day.

Bangladesh announced plans to import 1.3 million tonnes of grains from the international market up to June 2009 as it builds emergency food stocks of 3 million tonnes.

Declining agricultural productivity and continued growing demand have brought the world food situation to a crossroads. Failure to act now through a wholesale reinvestment in agri-



Grow plenty if not surplus.

culture -- including research into improved technologies, infrastructure development, and training and education of agricultural scientists and trainers -- could lead to a long-term crisis that could make the price spikes of 2008 seem a mere blip.

As per the IRRI estimates, the annual rice yield growth rate has dropped to less than one percent in recent years, compared with two-three percent during the Green Revolution period of 1967-90.

Based on projected income and population growth, annual pro-

ductivity growth of almost 1.5% will be needed at least until 2020.

A report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations stated that higher food prices were partly to blame for the number of hungry people growing by 75 million to around 925 million worldwide -- and further jeopardising the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving hunger and poverty by 2015.

Another report, released this week by the ADB, argued that, for Asian countries to prevent future food price surges, agriculture

needs wide-scale structural reform. This report also warned that, with demand remaining higher than supply, any supply shock would further increase cereal prices.

An ADB report released in August increased the cut-off level for poverty from \$1 per day to \$1.35 per day, meaning that millions more people are trapped in poverty than previously thought.

Disturbingly, the new measure does not take into account the higher food and fuel prices of 2008, which, according to some estimates, have plunged a further 100 million people below the poverty line.

Although the export price of rice has settled from more than \$1,000 per ton in May to around \$700 per ton, it is still double the price of one year ago.

Economic growth in Asia has been driven by the "rice sector." Of the world's 1.1 billion poor people, almost 700 million with income of less than a dollar a day reside in the rice-growing countries of Asia. Poor people spend as much as 30% to 40% of their income to buy rice.

The world is consuming more cereals than it is producing. Thailand and Vietnam, the world's two largest rice exporters, have capped exports at lower levels than previously to ensure domestic supplies. Rising energy

costs are hitting farmers.

Increasing demand for meat from Asia's growing urban population is diverting production from food grains to animal feed. The rising thirst for bio-fuel is starting to affect food production. Climate change also threatens to hamper production.

The first Green Revolution

In the late 1960s, modern, newly developed, high-yielding rice varieties launched the Green Revolution, which rapidly pushed up yields and allowed rice production to keep pace with population growth.

"The Green Revolution is generally believed to have saved one billion lives over six decades, making it arguably the single-most-effective philanthropic initiative in human history," wrote The New York Times in its March 8 issue.

Because of the Green Revolution, food production has increased substantially over the last 30 years in Bangladesh. The world is better positioned to take advantage of whatever science has to offer, since the public platforms required for success are in place to support a new Green Revolution.

Wake up call

Are we ready for the second Green Revolution? This time the situation is different. Unlike the first

Green Revolution, in which productivity growth was achieved with the introduction of modern varieties in tandem with assured irrigation and inputs (such as fertiliser), and guaranteed prices, the second Green Revolution needs to achieve the same goal in the face of several 21st-century challenges.

These challenges include water and land scarcity, environmental degradation, skyrocketing input prices, and globalised market-places, all within the context of global climate change.

Just 45% of harvested rice in Bangladesh reaches the markets, because growers stash away some for personal use, traders hoard some, and transport bottlenecks delay the rest, agriculture officials say. "Bangladesh is already self-sufficient in food grains," officials said. "But problems remain with management, distribution, monitoring and market control."

The current crisis serves as a timely wake-up call for governments, multilateral organisations and donors to refocus on agriculture. Various national and international bodies have called for a second Green Revolution to feed the world in the face of growing population and shrinking land base for agricultural uses.

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Discover the new English

Vittachi
ONLY IN ASIA
by Nury Vittachi

THE most widely used language of Asia isn't English. It isn't Chinese. It isn't Hindi. And it isn't Chinglish or Hindlish, either. It's a curious new "Englasian" tongue, which has been cobbled out of the most useful bits of several other languages.

Sit in a sidewalk café in any big city in Asia, and you'll see a waiter approach a diner and say: "You wan?"

A typical reply: "Two piece kari gai, two piece french fry, faideelah."

"Set?"
"Doe wan."
"Dring? Chah?" the waiter offers.

"Kopi bring," says the diner.

Of course, this is easy to decipher: the diner has declined the set lunch and ordered chicken curry with French fries, and a cup of coffee.

Vocabulary and syntax from many languages are cross-fertilising at high speed. In Jakarta, children ask for aiskrim (ice cream) and kek (cake). Students in Tokyo head for the bar with the phrase: "Let's beer!" Singaporeans go shopping with the sentence: "Everything also I want."

There's even an Asian word (originally found in Malay and Cantonese) universally used by

speakers of almost all the languages around the world. Fan ke tzup ("foreign vegetable juice") is one of the roots of the word ketchup.

Things are getting really mixed up. The Hong Kong diner's traditional cry of maai dan (Cantonese for "calculate the bill") is becoming widespread in mainland China, where it is assumed to be an English word for receipt and is spelt: "My Dan."

Here's a trick. Ask an English speaker in East Asia what language the following words, commonly used in the area, come from: coolie, congee, shroff and catty. Most will reply: "Chinese."

Ask a Chinese speaker what language the words come from. Most will reply: "English." Both are wrong. They're Indian words.

Asian words can have great practical use. I was once told by Beijing reader Marije Vlaskamp. Yanju is Mandarin for the booze and cigarettes used to bribe officials. "If you say, 'I have not yanju-ed the official so we did not get permission,' everybody who knows China will know what you mean," she said. "And, sometimes more importantly, outsiders listening in will not know what you mean."

The most useful word from Chinese is mar fan, she added.

Although usually translated as "trouble," it can carry a range of meaning, depending on how much emotion you pack into it. "You use it if you are having difficulty opening a pack of candy, or if you lose your money, family and job in a single day," she said.

The new Englasian language is snappier than traditional English, I learn from readers in Singapore.

English: Is it convenient to pay me what you owe me now?

Englasian: Where go?

English: I need to use the rest room.

Englasian: Toilet-toilet.

A good example of the directness of Asian English can be found on a sign in Jalan Rajah Omar, Sitiawan, Perak, Malaysia. Instead of "Do Not Disturb" or "No Car Horns" it says: "All of you listen to mee (sic). Don't disturb here, I will call police catch you, don't come to my bungalow house, understand, OK, I hate you all."

Can't get clearer than that. But sometimes, Asian English reverses the original meaning. Next to a lake in Nanjing, China, is a sign, which says: "Take the child. Fall into water carefully."

Send Asian English words to our columnist via www.vittachi.com.