

Trivialising the melamine scare

This is absolutely untenable

A month has passed since we were caught up in melamine scare triggered by detection of the industrial toxic element in Chinese powder milk which took a toll of child lives with 54,000 children fallen sick in that country. What have we done all this time to screen out hazardous milk available in the local market? Virtually nothing, just waiting for authentic test results from our research centres as the milk got consumed indiscriminately with damage being done to public health, especially child health -- insidiously. Melamine deposits in the kidney hinders its functioning apart from forming stones in the bladder.

Following newspaper reports nearly a month ago, the BSTI being handicapped by poor laboratory facilities, sent some 46 samples to Dhaka University Chemistry Department to do the testing on. The varsity department took its time to come out with its test results; only on Wednesday it conveyed to the BSTI that eight popular brands had melamine malcontent. Thereupon, the government in a press handout on Thursday advised consumers not to use the brands 'temporarily'. The Commerce Ministry has decided to have a few samples tested at the BCSIR and the Atomic Energy Commission labs. The question is why was it not done before?

It is disquieting to learn that there was no uniformity in the testing procedures or the reagents used by the DU Department of Chemistry, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution and the private Plasma Plus Lab resulting in confusion over the findings. While the chemistry department found melamine in eight brands, the BSTI and the Plasma Plus detected toxic element in one brand of milk only. Now, after such a long winded detour, the authorities are contemplating sending the samples abroad for further testing, analysis and confirmation.

All this is essentially an indictment on successive governments turning a blind eye to the pressing need for adequately equipping the BSTI to be able to detect public health hazards in essential consumer items, produced or imported. The lessons learnt must not be missed on the ministry concerned, which should do everything in its power to beef the BSTI's capacity with adequate research and laboratory facilities.

The government has already wasted a good deal of time wrangling over the issue sending negative signals about trivialising a public health concern. An appropriate action plan to weed out the hazardous milk brooks no further delay.

Farm output

Pragmatic policy needed to attain food security

THE occasion of World Food Day provided the opportunity for local and UN agriculture experts and the government top executives to take a deep look at the prevailing conditions in the agriculture sector of the country. Though we have heard of some success stories like bumper Boro cultivation past season to inspire us, yet we believe a great deal still remains to be achieved to reach the desired goal. There is no denying that with the rapid growth of our population the necessity to pay more attention to increasing domestic food output is but a stark reality that has to be addressed with more dynamism in thoughts and action. Food being the daily requirement of the fifteen crore people of the country, there is no scope to push the issue behind other less important ones. Boosting domestic farm output has become more pertinent today as the price index of food items in the international markets fail to remain at a stable level. From our past experiences we strongly feel the country needs a pragmatic and sustainable agricultural policy backed by government and non-government support to farmers to ensure food security. It needs no emphasising that Bangladesh, because of the lack of a stable agriculture policy, is faced with multifarious problems that need immediate attention of the government.

There are also other factors associated with cultivation that need to be addressed by the experts. For example, it is common knowledge that rampant use of chemicals as fertilisers and insecticides is damaging the soil quality of the farmlands and these chemical agents are polluting water resources in the nearby water bodies. Therefore, agriculture experts will have to find alternatives to these harmful chemicals to ensure safety of food that we eat. The amount of loss of crops in natural calamities like cyclones and floods is another area that needs to be looked into by the experts. The loss of crops under such circumstances must be reduced to the minimum through adopting modern harvesting and storage methods.

A pragmatic policy will benefit the farmers only when the relevant agencies will ensure timely supply of seeds, fertiliser, water and other inputs. A break in the chain will prove to be disastrous for the sector. We support the views of the experts that vigorous attempts have to be made to attain the much needed food security through enhancing domestic farm production with the application of low-cost technologies suitable for our country.

Future challenges for the US leadership



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RECENT debates have confirmed the important role of such a form of engagement in US electoral politics. The long awaited first showdown between Mr McCain and Mr Obama, the two US Presidential candidates, took place in the last week of September. It was followed by a debate between the Vice-Presidential rivals. The Presidential contenders returned to the podium a few days later. Foreign policy, national security and domestic issues (proposals that might affect taxation, healthcare and socio-economic opportunities) related to the troubled US social-economic scene took center-stage.

This election to the US Presidency has turned out to be the most expensive campaign in the history of democracy. Monitored closely by the world print and electronic media, it has been marked by edgy, cautious maneuvering between the candidates and also the policy-makers of the rival Republican and Democratic political parties. Each debate has ended with both rivals claiming victory. Pollsters have also been busy with interesting results classified according to age, gender, political belief, race and commitment (the undecided factor) to different issues. They have also been careful to point out the possibilities of margins of error.

This time round, the US Presidential election has been of special interest to peoples all over

the world. For the first time, we have significant additions to the matrix -- the presence of an Afro-Caribbean and a lady. One is tempted to say that it has added colour to the campaign.

This latest electoral contest in the United States, because of the very nature of its electoral process, has been very complex. The long primary season which helped to select a candidate from the two largest parties has at times also been tainted by controversy and debatable assumptions and rumours. The

will in tackling the menace of climate change and finding an acceptable compromise within the international trading regime. There are also the festering problems of poverty reduction and the containing of communicable diseases. The world is watching the US Presidential campaign and waiting for the long shadow that will be cast by its next leader.

I have been to several European countries in the last three months attending workshops and seminars. As always, discussions in these

constructively engage with Russia over the future expansion of NATO (given the need to protect the Baltic republics).

The Chinese are used to hearing a lot of over-heated US Presidential campaign rhetoric about their country. George Bush did this, so did Bill Clinton. This time round, the focus has not been so much on China. They however know that policy is more important than personality.

China, despite provocations over Tibet, has restrained itself from

sonary world markets.

This is understandable given the fact that The Bank of China has invested heavily to the tune of \$400 billion in America's bond market and in Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. So, continued turbulence in the US financial and housing markets is creating fear in China. The Chinese are also waiting to see how the next US President will handle the major challenge it is facing from China in Africa where China has not only become a commercial competitor to the US but also a political factor.

President will inherit many intractable problems -- a falling dollar, possible rises in oil price, an improved but insecure Iraq, a fragile Afghanistan, a Pakistan saddled with instability, the unresolved Middle East peace process, an angry and dissatisfied nuclear North Korea, the possibility of direct talks with an emerging Iran and a pugnacious Russia. The United States will also have to face the hard reality of an economic overstretch that matches its military overstretch.

The best way forward might be to launch, as a first step, a regional political and diplomatic effort in South Asia -- focusing on problem-solving dialogues to ease regional tensions -- between India and Pakistan, and Afghanistan and Pakistan. This could create the space for Pakistan and Afghanistan to start a dialogue with insurgents who are no longer prepared to support al-Qaeda. The initiative also needs to be accompanied by an economic package to stimulate economic opportunities in the vast rural hinterlands in this region. Similar meaningful initiatives could also be undertaken with regard to the Middle East peace process. The USA must understand that hunger and deprivation are synonymous with injustice. They also act as catalytic agents for radicalist networks. The USA has to realize that the best protection for Israel, its ally, is to have an independent workable Palestinian State. That will definitely take the sting away from the terrorists' tail.

In all of these areas, dramatic shifts in policy -- either hawkish or dovish -- are going to be difficult to implement. Yet, countries all over the world will continue to look to Washington for leadership in the collective global effort towards the establishment of stability, building of infrastructure, creation of jobs and tackling of extremism and poverty.

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Come January 2009, the next US

POST BREAKFAST

Come January 2009, the next US President will inherit many intractable problems -- a falling dollar, possible rises in oil price, an improved but insecure Iraq, a fragile Afghanistan, a Pakistan saddled with instability, the unresolved Middle East peace process, an angry and dissatisfied nuclear North Korea, the possibility of direct talks with an emerging Iran and a pugnacious Russia.

use of the internet has also played a pivotal role in fund-raising and highlighting issues. The primaries ran for many months and left its imprint on the subsequent electoral dynamics. Its after-burner effects also contributed to the selection of the running mates for the principal candidates.

We will now hopefully have a trouble free US Presidential election in November.

It is being held in a critical period of US history. The image of the US around the world has sharply deteriorated since the start of the war in Iraq. In addition to questionable advances in the War against Terror (particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan) and the Middle East peace initiative, other issues have emerged that have raised anxiety levels among other countries in the world. This includes the recent financial meltdown in Wall Street, the absence of sufficient political

meetings, proved to be a good learning experience especially pertaining to what the world is expecting out of the next US President.

It appears that Europe in general believes in the need for reconciliation of America with the world -- a sort of healing of the emotional gap. It wants an America that will give priority to the restoration of the American image. It was also clear that if the next US president were to be Barack Obama, the colour of his skin would do a great deal to change radically the image of America in the world. Obama is seen to be more in tune on diplomatic and strategic matters with the Europeans, though not necessarily on economic matters (where Democrats are believed to be protectionist). In addition, Obama, despite his relative inexperience in foreign policy, is perceived as a symbol of change and hope. It is also generally expected that Obama, unlike Bush, will try to

making any comments about the policy imperatives of the two US Presidential candidates. Chinese analysts participating in workshops abroad have however underlined a few aspects. They have acknowledged that Chinese-American relations improved under the Bush Administration and the government of Hu Jintao but have pointed out that President Bush remains a very controversial figure in the eyes of the Chinese people -- most especially for his doctrine of pre-emption. After 9/11 Bush proclaimed that the world had changed. Now the Chinese are wondering whether the next US President will change the world back ... or change it in different ways. In this context, they have noted that the next US President will have to engage more intensively in stabilising financial markets, dealing with a weakened US dollar, high oil prices and the threat of recession.

China, it may be recalled, because of its energy and mineral resources requirements, has changed the rules of the game in this region by offering aid and investment without political conditionality. This has presented itself as a great strategic problem for the USA.

In keeping with Russia's recent bellicosity, Russian analysts have also been very clear about what future US policy directions need to be. The US, one has pointed out, needs to stop acting like a teacher to the rest of the world, 'rid its foreign policy' of the subjective ideology that has created double standards (whereby 'the US closes its eyes to all sorts of faults in countries it likes, and declares them fully democratic when they clearly aren't'). The Russians want a more participatory role from the USA as far as the Russian sphere of influence is concerned.

Contain crimes from reaching new heights



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

FOR the last three months, Dhaka city has been witness to a series of horrific crimes including murder, extortion and rape, some of which happened in unusual circumstances. The murder of Fariduddin, a businessman at Shyampur, in the morning of August 14 last while he was taking breakfast in his own restaurant followed by the killing of Rubel Hlowdar, a driver of a microbus, on the same day at Gulshan Link road after taking possession of his vehicle, are painful reminders of the violence and anarchy that gripped the country in the pre 1/11 days. The deteriorating law and order situation that marked the rule of the past alliance government had shown remarkable signs of improvement after the take over by the present CTG, but now with their days numbered and all eyes focused on holding the parliamentary elections in December next, the law and order has slipped considerably.

Incidents of crime like murder and kidnapping are now the main topic of household discussions. Dhaka city has also attained the dubious distinction of being a criminals' paradise, where the most heinous crimes are committed in broad daylight. Report carried by the media on September 15 last indicated that a group of gangsters coming by motorcycle blocked the movement of a microbus carrying

Biplob Chakravarty, AGM and three other employees of ACL near Tejgaon Industrial Area and snatched \$2 lakh taka kept in several cartons in the microbus after shooting Biplob because he resisted. Biplob was admitted to a city hospital in a critical condition. On September 29, in the Tongi area under Gazipur Thana, muggers coming by motorcycle extorted two and half lakh taka from a young man after shooting him down.

Incidents of horrific crimes like kidnapping and murder are too many

endeavour becomes a tortuous process, with no support coming to the victim from any quarters. What is worse is that the law enforcers seem to have realised they can get away without being booked because they can twist laws, invent loopholes and manipulate tricky factors or points in their favour for any wrongdoing or not doing the 'duty'.

Unhappily for the country, in most such cases of crimes, young men with drug habits born of both poor as well as affluent parents are

either control or eliminate their business competitors or political rivals. Allegations are rife that these godfathers operate their invisible business in the form of clandestine terror attacks with the protection and patronage of some high ups in administration and politics.

The sequel to factional politics has simmered in the country for the last seven years or more. But in recent times hatred, animosity, rivalry and greed for power and money just before the national and upazila polls have touched new

national polls, Khan Ibne Zaman was hacked to death by unidentified assailants who entered Zaman's house by scaling the boundary wall of his three-storey house at Khalishpur. Given Khulna's history of factional as well as journalist killing, the administration should have anticipated trouble in the pre-poll days and taken precautions. Khulna witnessed killing of at least 13 journalists and some prominent political leaders and activists during the last ten years.

People only wonder how these

BITTER TRUTH

These grotesque incidents send shock waves through the spine of an impoverished nation that has helplessly witnessed so much of these killings, robbing, other atrocities in recent times. The present state of things that have rocked the community and the society is a sort of anarchy. Anarchy, as all people know, is an excess of freedom. Anarchy is the absence of rules, ethical limits, and any moral sense.

to be mentioned within the narrow space of a column. Abu Yousuf (28), a businessman in the Tikatully area was shot on October 10 last as he refused earlier to pay toll to the extortionists as per their demand.

In another incident at Polash under Narsingdi upazila, burglars looted 11 lakh taka in cash and 13 thousand Saudi riyal from the house of Nurul Islam on October 9 last after stabbing his son and daughter-in-law who had returned from Saudi Arabia some days ago. Other than crimes like dare-devil robbery in and around the city limits, kidnapping is a very common and tortuous, even murderous type of hassle people have to undergo these days. People are afraid to take the cases of their trauma and suffering to the police. Because fear of corruption, retaliation and harassment on the other end of the road to justice has rather become usual. The whole

getting involved because of lack of moral and social values in society, influence of satellite TV and inadequate games and recreational facilities.

Two juvenile muggers Liton and Ranju of Maghbazar area who killed two school boys of Nayatola after abusing them sexually in April last confessed to the Detective Branch of the Police their involvement in other crimes, and that they committed these gruesome killings while being under the influence of vicious drug cannabis. "These criminals are in pain inside" so says a social psychologist in the country "acting out their pain, in most cases on innocent victims."

Admittedly true, drug coupled with inducement of some godfathers with money and weapons make potent cocktail that fuels crime these days. In most cases these godfathers utilize them to

heights. That in turn have sparked more killings and atrocities. Report carried by the media in the recent past indicated that in the Tala upazila of Satkhira district, ten elected representatives at upazila level including one former Parliament member were killed as a sequel to factional politics. The recent killing of Arifuzzaman Chanchol, a popular Jubodal leader and Chairman of Dhandia Union Council under Tala upazila by a notorious rebel group vying for power in the upcoming upazila elections, as alleged in the media report quoting the S.P. of Satkhira district, points to clandestine pattern of politics taking roots in most areas of the country.

People learnt with shock again in the morning of October 14 last senior joint secretary of Khulna city AL and aspirant for the Khulna-3 constituency in the upcoming

spate of killings and extortion and terrorist attacks could go on unabated when the country's newspapers are full throated in their vilification of the dirty activities of a handful of goons. How could the whole society become captive in the hands of a limited number of monstrously dreaded gangsters? All these grotesque incidents send shock waves through the spine of an impoverished nation that has helplessly witnessed so much of these killings, robbing, other atrocities in recent times. The present state of things that have rocked the community and the society is a sort of anarchy. Anarchy, as all people know, is an excess of freedom. Anarchy is the absence of rules, ethical limits, and any moral sense. These criminals are psychic cases. They have lost, perhaps never developed, that psychic appendage we call conscience.

In the core of all such dastardly acts, there is one call that cry out for solution long since. We must all assume our responsibilities for not being indifferent to the circumstances that breed crimes of this sort. We must look to the communities that know nothing but frustration. We have seen some of our past leaders and stalwarts of the past regime indulge in corruption and immoral acts and then resign or leave the country in the face of public protest. We had bureaucrats amassing wealth and siphoning that out of the country without accountability and with impunity. Many of our youngsters see and act it out.

However the terrorists and gangsters must be shown what incalculable harm they have done to the society and must be made to pay the price. While releasing the dreaded criminals and drug lords out on bail in the face of vociferous arguments of the defence and on the plea of lax and shoddy police investigation report, it would be better for all concerned with the dispensation of justice to remember what Justice Murshed, Chief Justice of the then East Pakistan, said during the turbulent times in then Pakistani President Ayub Khan's dictatorial rule: "The strength of the Judiciary does not lie in the panoply of authority of physical might but in the commands it has over the minds and hearts of men. Such respect and prestige are the result of just decisions given with independence and courage. The Court that cannot stand before the unjust fury of an impassioned mob or the arrogant high-handedness of misguided authority is not worthy of its tradition. It would indeed be a sad day when a single individual may have the slightest reason for entertaining any misgiving with regard to obtaining justice in his case. This will spell the doom of civilized existence."

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Bank on Swiss bank savings



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

THIS is not a grandma's prescription. This is plain commonsense. Whenever you are hard up you reach for the money you have hidden. India or, for that matter, the entire South Asia, is facing the crisis of liquidity. And this is the time when politicians, industrialists and bureaucrats from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka should bring back the money they have stashed away in Swiss banks.

The amount reportedly runs into billions of dollars which the corrupt elite have come to possess through dishonest methods. I do not want to argue the rights and wrongs of their deeds because that would start

another kind of a debate. We need money to stave off the crisis we face. Even otherwise, if the corrupt have even an iota of patriotism, they should not hesitate to bring back the much-required finance to bolster our sagging economies.

Since Switzerland maintains secret bank accounts, it is not possible for any intelligence agency, however resourceful, to trace the money. The account holders will have to do it themselves provided they feel the pain which their nation is going through.

I do not know how much money is hidden by the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalese or the Sri Lankans. But the estimate about

Indians is around \$1,500 billion which, translated into rupees, comes to some 675 thousand crores (I have calculated it at the rate of Rs 45 per dollar). Indeed, the figure is mind-boggling.

In the 2006 report on black money in Swiss banks, the Swiss Banking Association has put the deposits of five top countries as: India, the highest, with \$1456 billions, Russia \$470 billion, the UK \$390 billion, Ukraine \$100 billion and China \$96 billion. If India's deposits were to be distributed, 45 crore people would get Rs 1 lakh each.

When I was India's High Commissioner at London, I met a

bank manager from Switzerland at a party. He said that his bank alone had so much money of Indians that their country could meet foreign exchange requirements for 10 Five Year Plans. Those were the days when we were acutely short of foreign exchange and had even pledged our gold to the Bank of England as a guarantee.

Financial situation in the world is not getting better. India is bound to be affected sooner or later. The money in Switzerland would come in handy at this time. Yet, the question is how to persuade the corrupt politicians, IAS, IPS, Indian Revenue Service (IRS) personnel and industrialists to move their piles from

abroad to India. Threats to them will not work because nobody except the Swiss banks knows how much they have. There has to be an appeal to their better senses and assurance that they can possess most of the money legally.

It sounds immoral. But there will have to be something like a tax holiday or some scheme where no questions are asked. If they were to give one-third of the amount they have abroad, they can retain the rest. I wish they realise that one-third is too little a price they will be paying for legitimising their loot in which they have indulged since independence.

In fact, tax havens that

Switzerland provides are a drag on poor countries. It is the exploitation to which South Asia has been subjected to by the West for centuries. A book written by a Western economist -- entitled Capitalism's Achilles' heel: Dirty Money and How to Renegade the Free Market System -- estimates that at least \$5 billion have been shifted out of poorer countries to the West since the mid-1970s.

Still the markets and several banks in the West have crashed. They are in fact responsible for ruining our meagre financial institutions. Imagine what would have happened to them if they did not have the money which our corrupt industrialists, bureaucrats and politicians have deposited with them? Add to this the money they have stashed away else -- wherein the UK, the US and tax havens like St Kitts.

South Asia has been hit because it is part of the global economy which has caved in. Under pressure from the West, we have opened up several sectors to them. It has been seen during the last few weeks that they have been the first to sell their shares in various Indian companies, bringing the share market tumbling down. It is estimated that in India alone they were withdrawing Rs

2,000-Rs 3,000 crore in foreign exchange per week because they experienced hardship in their own country.

In India, the Left who were supporters of the Manmohan Singh government have saved us from further disaster by not allowing some financial sectors opening up to the global players. We also owe it to the Left that the Western institutions were not allowed to enter insurance to the full extent. The Left also put in place some regulatory measures on banks.

The economic crisis, primarily because of Western wasteful living, brought the entire Europe, America and others together the other day at Washington to discuss how to overcome the situation. I wish New Delhi had taken the initiative to get the countries of South Asia around the same table to have a joint action to face the problem.

Poor countries have a lot of resilience. They may therefore weather the storm. But it will be again at the expense of the lower half. In a capitalist economy, the upper half loses luxuries, not comforts. The poor had to cut down on their necessities. One per cent of world population is said to be holding more than 57 per

cent of the total global wealth.

Manmohan Singh who authored a South-South Commission report proposed a close commerce and economic cooperation among the countries in the third world. The suggestions never took off. He should wash off the stigma by grouping the countries in South Asia into a common market. World financial crisis can be turned into an opportunity for the region to lessen dollar transactions. We can meet most needs from our own resources. We have men and material, technology and manpower to do so.

We have lost enough to the West before and after independence. Let us at least start depending on ourselves and do away with such foreign goods that are available in the region. And it becomes all the more necessary for civil societies to band together with national and international experts to put moral and legal pressure on Swiss banks to reveal the identities of account holders. This money belongs to the people of South Asia and it should be available to them when they need it. We should also develop confidence to borrow from one another instead of looking towards the West.

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