

## TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

## 'There is no indication of election except the words that election will be held'

Dr. R.A. Ghani is a member of the BNP standing committee. He participated actively in the language movement, liberation war and the struggle for democracy in '90's. Ghani, born on February 9, 1931, was elected member of the parliament in 1979 and served as minister from 1979 to '82. He was founder-chairman and sponsor director of Prime Bank and former director of Bangladesh Bank. He played a vital role in ensuring Khaleda Zia's leadership in BNP since emergency was imposed last year. **Rakib Hasnet Suman and Rashidul Hasan** took this interview.

The BNP standing committee brought some changes in the party constitution. Can you tell us about the major changes?

We approved only those changes that were necessary to fulfill the criteria for getting registration with the Election Commission. But they have to be approved by the council, which will be held later.

Did you decide to curb the power of the chairperson?

It is not possible without holding a party council. But maybe the chairperson will take the decision in consultation with the party forums instead of taking unilateral decision. Generally, the decision will be taken on the basis of consensus. But some matters, like appointment of the secretary general, will depend on the chairperson, as only she knows who will be helpful in running the party.

The chairperson, herself, could bring changes in the constitution, but she did not do that. She called a meeting of the standing committee and took the decision through discussion.

Did you include a provision to ensure elected leadership in the

party?

The provision already exists in the party constitution, but we did not practice it.

BNP has submitted the application for registration, though the party leadership had earlier said that they would do it before the second round of talks with the government.

We asked for extension of the deadline as it was not possible to apply according to the previous timeframe. We also placed some proposals, including lifting the emergency.

Did you make the changes due to pressure from the government?

That is partly true. On the other hand, we had to do it for getting registered, as a party will not be allowed to participate in the election without registration.

Does it mean that participation of BNP in the coming polls is confirmed?

We don't want to eliminate the option of taking part in the election. But I cannot tell you right now about the final decision regarding participation in the election.

There are allegations that BNP was

never run in a democratic way. Do you agree with this?

Most of the times we entrust the power of making decisions on the chairperson.

You are opposing election under emergency, but the government says that emergency will stay to ensure the safety of voters.

Election is held not only in Bangladesh but also in other countries of the world.

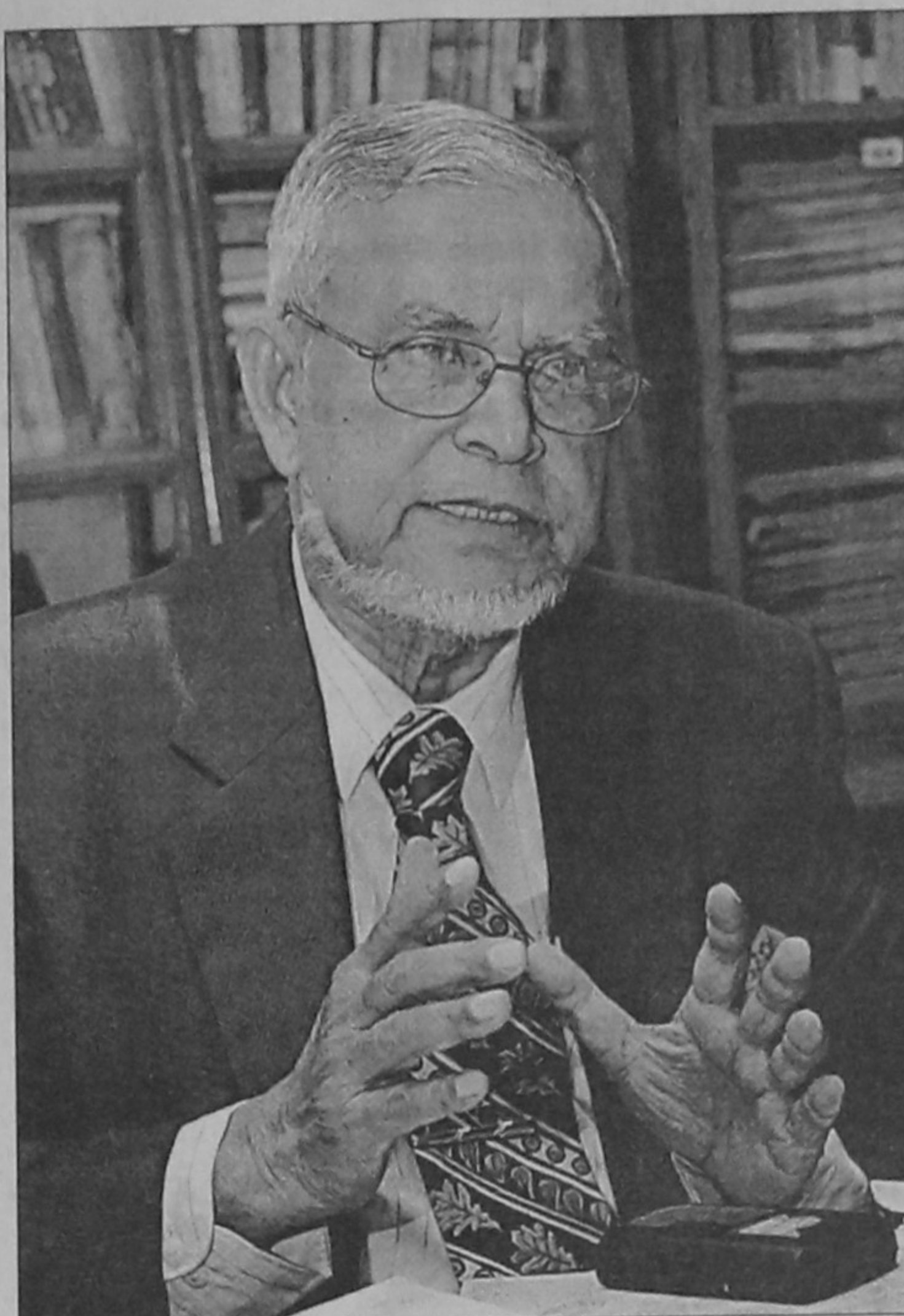
Will convicted corrupt leaders continue as party members?

I think a house-cleaning operation should be conducted inside the party, and if anybody is found guilty he should not come to the forefront. But a chance should be given to the criminals so that they can become honest. That will be the real reform. Did you give the proposal to the chairperson to conduct house-cleaning operation?

We feel it. Though our party stance is that we want to see all the trials under existing laws in an open court.

Will corrupt persons get party nomination for the coming polls?

Many convictions have been given, but the convicted persons said that



Dr. R.A. Ghani

they did not get the chance to defend themselves in the court.

Do you think the Election Commission's initiative will be able to bring qualitative change in politics?

I don't think so.

What were the mistakes of the BNP

led four-party alliance government?

They ran the country according to their wisdom. But the country could be developed more.

Who is the responsible for this inability?

Of course, BNP is responsible.

BNP's failure is that they could not even understand the plan about 1/11, which was a pre-planned incident.

There is corruption allegation against Hawa Bhaban, which was known as an "alternative power-house." Do you think the activities of Hawa Bhaban should have been controlled?

Of course, they should have been controlled. I went there only when the chairperson called me to join a meeting there after election. Otherwise, I could not believe the existence of Hawa Bhaban, which, however, played a fantastic role in collecting constituency-based data. Even the activities of party lawmakers were monitored from there, which was appreciable.

What is your opinion about the much talked about minus-two formula?

No one is empowered to minus anyone, and solutions cannot come through minuses, because every citizen of the country has the right to live in the country.

What is your observation about the activities of foreign diplomats?

The activities are beyond their jurisdiction. But, yes we go to them when invited as it has turned into a tradition.

What is your opinion about the proposed meeting between the two top leaders (Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia)?

I think it has no negative side; rather it may bring something good for the country.

You attended the much talked about meeting of the standing committee at Saifur Rahman's residence on October 29, 2007, you even signed a paper to approve the

meeting decision. Why?

Yes I attended it as I was invited for tea. We were asked to sign on a blank paper. Though we discussed some issues, I told them that the meeting was not convened properly. But we were asked to sign the paper.

Who asked you to sign?

There were some people other than party members.

Khaleda Zia held a meeting with the BNP and Jamaat secretaries general inside the jail. As a political leader how do you explain it? Meetings can be held inside the jail. But I don't know about their discussion.

Is there any weakness in running BNP?

Yes, there are organisational weaknesses. The party has grown bigger but the structure has remained unchanged.

Do you think the weakness may have a negative impact on the result of the coming polls?

They may have some impact. We have to overcome the weaknesses. Will the reformists be allowed to return to the party?

Minus two or three cannot be termed as reform as the party has two factors -- popularity and leadership. Begum Zia has not attained her popularity in a day. In fact, it (reform initiative) was a plan to destroy the BNP. So we have to judge the popularity of those leaders (reformists) among the leaders, workers and followers in their respective areas.

We have heard that the government has provided a list of leaders who cannot be nominated for election. Is that right?

I have heard about it. We are also working out who can take part in the polls and who can't as many people

have already been convicted, though I think only open trial will be acceptable and we have to wait till the decision of the highest court is delivered.

Do you have confusions about the December 18 election?

Of course, we have. The government is repeatedly assuring the nation, as it also knows about the confusion. A congenial atmosphere must be created for the election, but it is totally absent now. There is no indication of election except the words that election will be held on December 18. A free and fair election is not possible under emergency.

Are you prepared for the polls?

We have many lawmakers and we were prepared for the January 22 poll. So it will not be difficult for us [...] we just have to make some changes.

What could be the situation after the polls?

It will depend on the result. There is a possibility of post-election violence if the people fail to cast their votes freely.

Do you think BNP made any mistake when running the country? If yes, then does the chairperson have any responsibility in this regard?

Of course. The party could formulate many good laws as we had two-thirds majority. But we did not do that. So what benefit did two-thirds majority bring for us? But it was an unusual time and the government faced many challenges.

Do you agree that BNP lost the golden opportunity to run the country on the right track despite having two-thirds majority?

Oh yes... Sure... no doubt about it.

## Thaksin takes a hit

The Supreme Court's guilty verdict on corruption charges against the former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, may prove to be another nail in Mr. Somchai's political coffin. This is the first time Mr. Thaksin has actually been convicted of corruption -- ostensibly the reason the military moved against him two years ago. There are scores of other cases against him still pending in the courts.

LARRY JAGAN

THAILAND'S former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra has been found guilty of misusing his powers when he was in office and sentenced to two years in jail. The Supreme Court handed down its verdict amidst tight security around the courthouse. More than three hundred police were on guard to prevent the proceedings being disrupted by pro-Thaksin supporters. Earlier in the day, a bomb exploded outside the residence of a senior judge, but no one was hurt.

Mr. Thaksin, who is living in self-imposed exile in England, was not present at court. He and his wife jumped bail in August and fled to London, saying they could not get a fair trial in Thailand.

The former premier was ousted from power in a military coup in September, 2006. After fresh elections last December, under a new constitution, the newly formed People's Power Party (PPP), founded by his supporters, formed a new government.

For months now, it has been besieged by anti-government protesters demanding that current Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat -- Thaksin's brother-in-law -- resign.

The court's decision, though, is unlikely to ease Thailand's political impasse. In fact, the country's political crisis is set to get even

worse, as Somchai's beleaguered government faces further anti-government protests, dissension within its own ranks and a worsening economy.

The protestors, led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), have occupied Government House for more than two months, forcing the government to work out of the old airport on the outskirts of Bangkok.

A week ago the police cracked down on the demonstrators when they tried to blockade parliament, leaving two dead and more than four hundred injured. The protest leaders have vowed to continue their demonstrations until the prime minister and his government resign.

Pressure is increasingly mounting on Mr. Somchai. The army chief, General Anupong Paochinda, added to the prime minister's problems, when he launched a "television coup" against the government last week, recommending that Mr. Somchai stand down and take responsibility for the deaths of two protestors as a result of the police crackdown.

For his part, though, the prime minister remains adamant that he will not resign or dissolve parliament. But time is running out for Mr. Somchai, and his options are continually narrowing. "The government is unlikely to survive much longer," a PPP insider told *The Daily Star*. "Somchai may

have to give up before the end of the week," he admitted.

This week is certain to add fuel to the crisis, as the confrontation between anti-government protestors and government supporters is set to escalate.

Already, the PAD is beginning to sense victory, as the government continues to fumble around for solutions to the country's political impasse. More demonstrations are planned for later this week, after two peaceful forays into the centre of the capital city -- the business districts last Friday and the commercial centre on Monday. But Wednesday may be the watershed, as former policemen plan a mass rally in support of the police action and the government.

"A violent class between the red and yellow on Wednesday would effectively put an end to Somchai's government," Kavi Chingkitavorn, senior political analyst with the daily English-language newspaper, the *Nation* told *The Daily Star*. PAD protestors are dressed in yellow as a sign of respect to the country's king -- who is legally above politics -- and the government supporters wear red bandanas and handkerchiefs.

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been convicted of corruption -- ostensibly the reason the military moved against him two years ago. There are scores of other cases against him still pending in the courts.

Many analysts believe the decision will only increase the divisions in society, and lead to further confrontation. "No matter what the verdict, the court's decision will increase the political temperature in the community," according to the head of the Chulalongkorn University's department of government, Chaivan Chaiyaporn.

Thaksin's supporters have already dismissed the decision as politically motivated and plan to turn to street protests to vent their feelings.

"Somchai may have no alternative now but to resign, probably within the next week," Kavi told *The Daily Star*. "But it may drag on until the end of the month -- as everyone is keen to avoid any non-constitutional change," he added.

The army chief continues to rule out a coup -- but has added his voice to those calling for Mr. Somchai to stand down in a television interview last Thursday. The military is solidly behind its commander, according to military sources.

But, while the forces mount up against Mr. Somchai, there is no obvious way out to the current political crisis. There are hints that the military and other establishment figures favour a National Unity Government led by the main opposition political party, the Democrats.

But for their part, the Democrats leaders have continually urged the prime minister to dissolve parliament and hold fresh elections, even though they know they are unlikely to topple

the PPP's popularity. "A fresh mandate through a general election would help clear the air, even if we ended up with another PPP-led government," said the Democrat's deputy leader, Korn Chatikavanij.

"A snap election is no longer an option -- parliament would have to be dissolved 45 days before the polls and this is no longer possible," said Kavi. This means an election could not now be held before the end of December as campaigning could not take place until then, because of the royal funeral rites for the late Princess Galyani Vadhana (the king's sister) starting on November 14, followed by the king's birthday celebrations and the Asean summit in mid-December.

By then, Thailand's political map may have been well and truly redrawn. The constitutional court is currently deliberating on the electoral commission's recommendation that the PPP, and several other coalition partners, be disbanded for electoral fraud in last December's polls.

Indications are that the court will follow the electoral body's position, according to many Thai political pundits. The PPP government would then fall -- and at least ten senior party members banned from politics -- leaving they way open for the Democrats to take power constitutionally.

While this seems to be the most likely scenario, Thai politics remains uncertain and anything could happen. What is certain is this week could be a major turning point in contemporary Thai political history -- and may yet be Prime Minister Somchai's last week in office.

Larry Jagan is a former Current Affairs Editor, Asia, BBC World Service.

## IN MEMORIAM

## A personal tribute

HABIB KHONDKER

ONE of my favourite quotations is: "It is great to be great, but greater to be human." All I remember is that it is a quote from an American writer. It is not important who said this as long as I can grasp, and live by, this significant statement. There are many people I know who would rather be human than great; who would want to remain hidden from the glare of publicity and pursue happiness somewhat unobtrusively, and live quietly rather than pompously. Mr. Azimur Rahman, or Harun Bhai as I knew him, was one such rare person.

Those who knew him, knew that he was a successful businessman. I bet many did not know about his academic credentials. It took me quite a while to know that Harun Bhai had an engineering degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder. He went to study in the US at a time when not many people knew about engineering or about American uni-

versities, especially the University of Colorado that was famous for its engineering programs. I can imagine many who would not waste any time to let people know about their educational achievements, wealth, and position in life or family connections. Not Harun Bhai. Not that he was self-deprecating; he knew the virtue of humility and, above all, humanity. He was a personification of quiet gentleness. I was so impressed by his manners and honesty that I waited eagerly to meet him every time he was in Singapore. He also had the rare virtue of keeping above partisan politics. I would wait to listen to his insightful and honest views on Bangladesh politics.

Thanks to his upbringing, Harun Bhai had a cosmopolitan mind. His early years of schooling were in Madras, where his father was a high-ranking official in the British government. He also had an uncanny resemblance with the former Indian prime minister I.K. Gujral. I trusted his judgment, whether it was concerning a movie

(I watched *"Dil Chahata Hai"* and *"Captain Corbelli's Mandolin"* at his suggestion) or about a person. He was a man who exuded dignity and, thus, did not need to resort to pretension.

In my last meeting with him, barely a week before his sudden demise, he stressed on the neutrality and impartiality of the press in Bangladesh. He was, in his characteristically quiet manner, a great champion of freedom of thought and speech. I remember praising some of the courageous pieces on Bangabandhu that Mr. Mahfuz Anam wrote in *The Daily Star*, and he quickly agreed with my assessment and reiterated the need for unconditional editorial freedom. Today, Harun Bhai is no more, but his ideals remain with us and will continue to inspire us. The lessons we can learn from him are the importance of those eternal values of freedom and neutrality, and enjoyment of life with a sense of humility and humanity.



Late Azimur Rahman, The Daily Star's founder chairman, addressing the guests on the occasion of the paper's 10th anniversary.

## Six trillion dollars can't just vanish, you know



ONE of my kids was staring at the front page headline on the newspaper: "Six trillion dollars lost in global markets," it said.

"Who took it?" she asked. "That's naughty."

I thought about this. This was a good question. Before I could attempt to answer it, she asked an even better one. "Whose money was it?"

I answered the last question first. "Not your Dad's," I said. "I'm too smart to invest my money in risky stocks."

The following day, I asked my friend Todd, a man who recently

changed job from banker to property fund dealer, to answer the first question. "The six trillion dollars lost from the stock markets in the global financial crisis -- where did they actually go?"

He was on his way to his car, but he stopped and thought for a moment. "Nowhere. They never existed. It was a nominal six trillion: just figures on paper."

As I watched him leave (in a sports car -- bankers adhere strictly to stereotype), I realised his answer had left me more puzzled, not less. If the six trillion dollars that disappeared never existed, there's no

crisis. So why are the newspapers full of panic?

I put the point to the wisest person I know, my mentor-bartender. "It's true," he said. "The money never existed. They call it a bubble because it is an insubstantial thing that disappears with a sudden pop, like a mirage, or the career of the guy who played Luke Skywalker."

He picked up a glass to wipe and explained: "But banks thought it existed, so they spent unimaginably large amounts of money buying the stuff in the form of home loans, stocks, hedge funds and other investments."

I knocked back my shot of mineral water on the rocks. "So that's why banks are in trouble. Well, it serves them right," I said. "For once, the rich get into a whole heap of trouble, while widows, orphans and regular people like me, escape."

He finished polishing his glass and slowly shook his head. "Sorry to bring you bad news," he said. "But where do you think the banks got the money to buy all these bad investments?"

I froze. He was smiling one of those creepy smiles that have no actual smiliness in them.

He nodded. "Yes. They used the money that normal people put into their accounts -- widows, orphans and general, struggling non-entities, like you. No offence intended. They used your savings and pension funds."

And now they're scared they may not have enough money to pay up when you want to take it out. Banks can go bankrupt, you know. And they can take ordinary people's savings with them when they go."

Ah. Now I saw where the crisis was. I asked him to hit me with another shot of mineral water on the rocks and downed it in one.

The kids were still awake when I got home so I told them the bad news.

"You know that six trillion dollars that was lost in the stock market? I have some really bad news for you. It was your Dad's."

"Oh," said one. "Never mind, Dad. I'll share my pocket money with you."

I patted her head. "Thanks." You know what? A pledge like that one is worth six trillion dollars in any currency, no doubt about it.

If you know where the money is, write to our columnist via: www.vittachi.com.