

## Caring for the old

Old age has a dual dimension of challenges and opportunities that can give society their vision of life. While elder people were sometimes seen as burdens on society, they are now increasingly recognised as assets, which should be tapped. So, it is the task of our government to safeguard the rights of the elderly people.

A. N. M. NURUL HAQUE

THE poignant story, carried by The Daily Star on February 15, of an elderly woman living a lonely life in an old people's home in the capital, despite having four children in high places, touched the hearts of scores of readers, as many of them rushed to meet her in person and offered financial help for her treatment.

60 year-old Selina Majumder is a mother of four. One son is a doctor and the other is an architect. One daughter lives in US and the other is married to a wealthy man. Selina, who should have been a happy and contented mother, is now desolate. The children, whom she reared and educated with love, have no time to pay her a visit.

Old people have social protection in most countries. New Zealand enacted laws protecting the rights and well-being

of older people, and its Positive Aging Strategy has raised the profile of older people. Abuse and neglect of older people have been recognised as issues that are specially addressed by legislative provisions or social service policy.

More than 21,000 people over age 65 live in 303 retirement villages in New Zealand. These villages are large complexes with elaborate facilities, and provide security, companionship and access to the services they consider important.

The legal rights and social security of senior citizens in India are protected by the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizen's Act-2007. The objective of the act is to oblige persons who inherited the property of their aged relatives to look after them and provide facilities, including medical care.

The act also safeguards the legal rights of childless senior citizens, who could

move against their prospective legal heirs. Under the Act, even the transfer of a property by a senior citizen or parent to his or her prospective heir could be declared void if the transferee failed to provide the parent's needs.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is responsible for the welfare of the senior citizens in India. It has announced the National Policy on Older Persons, which seeks to assure older persons that their concerns are national concerns and they will not live unprotected, ignored and marginalised.

The National Policy on Older Persons visualises support for financial security, health care and nutrition, and shelter for senior citizens, and pays special attention to protecting and strengthening their legal rights so as to safeguard their life and property.

It aims to strengthen their legitimate place in the society, and to help them live the last phase of their life with purpose, dignity and peace. The National Policy on Older Persons confers the status of senior citizen to a person who has attained the age of 60 years.

The Indian government has also taken steps to ensure welfare and safety of senior citizens residing in Delhi, keeping in view the fact that in 2007 there were 17 fatal attacks on them in Delhi, compared to 12 in 2006. Establishment of helpline, identification of elderly people living

alone, and setting up of Senior Citizens' Security Cell were some steps taken to protect senior citizens.

Elder people, with diminished mental and physical capacities, require others to take care of them. But, in many instances, they are abused and neglected instead of being loved and respected.

Aging has become a major social problem because of break up of the joint family system, where aged parents and relatives are often exposed to emotional neglect and denied financial support. This is happening not only in urban society but also in suburban and rural areas.

Under the social safety net, Bangladesh government provides old age allowance of Tk. 250 per month to some 20 lakh vulnerable older people having no financial support. Other than this program, there are no ways and means of addressing the plight of the elderly people with no law in place to protect their rights.

Sadly, the abuse and neglect of the elderly people have not yet been recognised as a major social problem, which needs to be addressed by legislative provision. The government should enact laws protecting old people's rights and form a national council of elder people.

The elderly people need not only



Inside Probin Bhaban: Their silence speaks of their loneliness.

financial help but also love and respect from their near and dear ones. Therefore, the core family values, which have been lost in the whirlpool of so-called nuclear lifestyle, must be redressed through vigorous campaigns.

Old age has a dual dimension of challenges and opportunities that can give society their vision of life.

While elder people were sometimes seen as burdens on society, they are now increasingly recognised as assets, which should be tapped. So, it is the task of our government to safeguard the safety and rights of the elderly people.

A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist for The Daily Star.

## Free trade versus fleecing America

It's not free trade, but unfair trade, that has been fleecing America for years now. During Bush's eight years, Canada, Japan the European Union and China racked up trade surpluses of \$2.6 trillion at America's expense.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE US Congress has passed into law a \$787 billion stimulus package, hoping to deliver a jolt to the moribund economy. The bill received only three votes from Republican lawmakers while the rest described it as being fiscally incontinent yet not being stimulative enough.

The original bill had a "Buy American" Provision (BAP), which distraught free traders at home and abroad looked at in alarm -- as manifested in the article "The Return of Economic Nationalism" in the February 7 issue of The Economist.

Free traders see BAP as a precursor to protectionism, which might trigger cross-country trade wars and economic misery globally. What prompted the inclusion of BAP was the continuing slide of the US economy.

Last week's unemployment benefits claim reached 626,000 -- the largest since 1967. There are concerns that the \$787 billion package isn't big enough to bolster

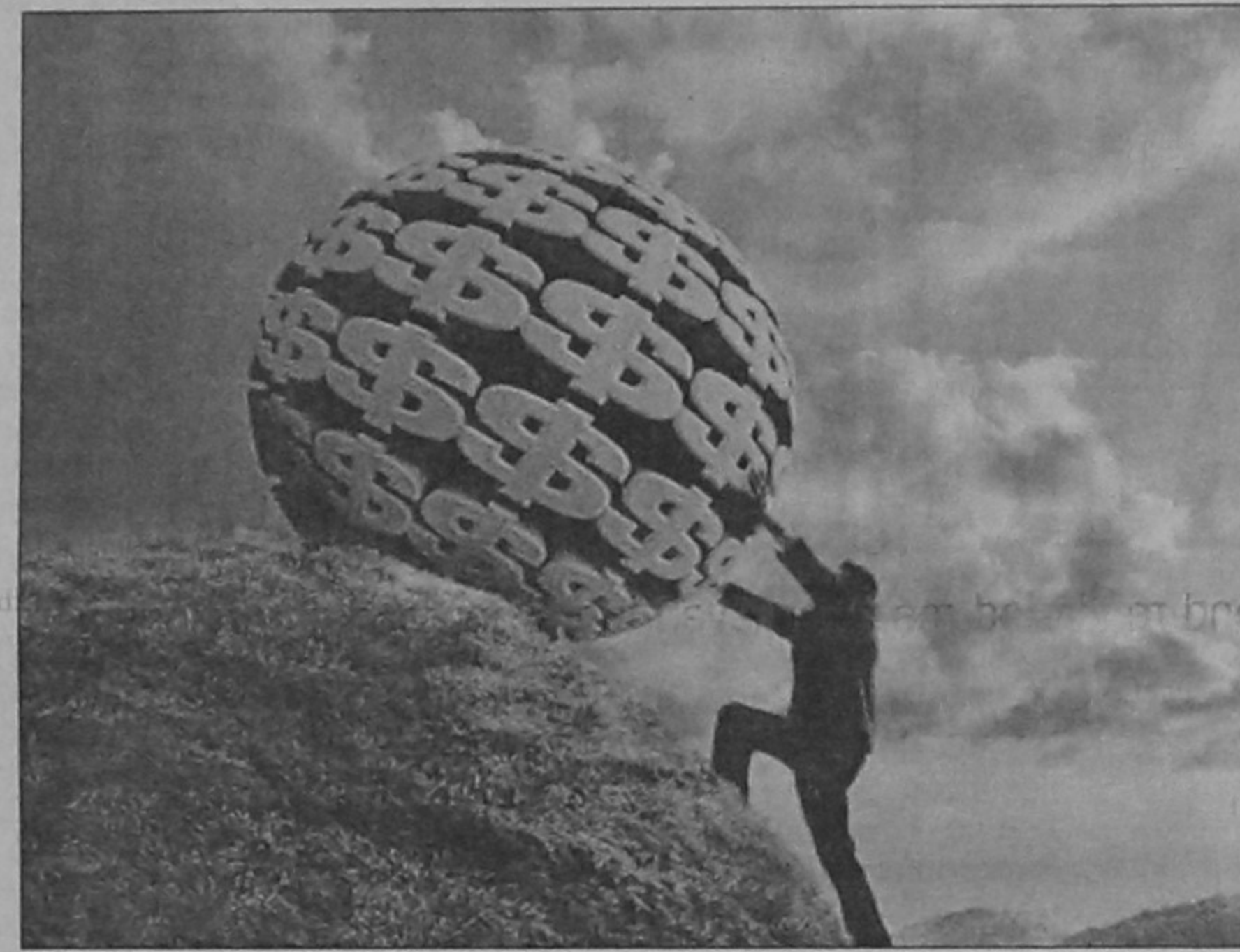
aggregate demand and thwart the deflationary glide.

How can American workers benefit from competing with their foreign counterparts whose hourly wage is less than a dollar? Paul Krugman argues that the negative effect is considerable. But the burden of trade-related job losses and wage declines that hit the middle- and lower-income Americans isn't a tell-tale.

However, it's also true -- argues James Surowiecki in a May 26, 2008 piece in The New Yorker -- "that the very people who suffer most from free trade are often, paradoxically, among its biggest beneficiaries."

Free trade with low wage countries adds more to the buying power of middle- and lower-income Americans than to the wealthier Americans. The former spend a bigger chunk of their income on manufactured goods, while the latter spend much more on services.

The BAP asks for the use of taxpayers' dollars for domestic public works. When President Obama said "we can't send a



The weight of the financial world ...

protectionist message," the Congress stipulated that all government procurement policies should comply with World Trade Organization (WTO) provisions.

Although the US and 38 other countries have signed WTO procurement codes barring restrictions on government purchases between member countries, the BAP doesn't violate these commit-

ments. The foreign ministers of China and Russia, which haven't signed the WTO procurement codes, have also complained about the BAP.

America's domestic industries are among the hardest hit by unfair trade practices. China spent more than \$15 billion on energy subsidies for its steel industry in 2007, violating WTO rules.

So, why is it protectionism if American tax payers ask their government to use their money to buy domestically supplied materials for any work? Around the world, ailing carmakers are receiving financial support from their governments, and a host of industries have sought help from their governments.

In Europe, economic nationalism is rooted firmly in banking, and is spreading in other sectors. France and Britain are funneling taxpayers' money to bail out banks, while demanding lending to domestic borrowers. In Switzerland, banks have been freed from holding capital requirements against domestic loans. The governor of Greece's central bank warned Greek banks not to send bail out funds abroad. The British banks are pulling money out of South Africa.

Across Britain, workers went on strike protesting French-owned North Killinghome oil refinery's awarding a \$300 million contract to an Italian company that plans to employ 400 Italian and Portuguese workers. The Labour Party is demanding that the PM fulfill his election campaign pledge: "British jobs for British workers." France is asking its auto firms to cut down production in the Czech Republic to increase domestic production and employment.

Governments protect goods and capital in order to protect jobs. When domes-

tic industries are hurt by unfair trade practices, helping them survive shouldn't be labeled as a "return to protectionism." What's wrong with achieving trade balance through practicing fair trade -- even if it requires restricting imports from countries that violate WTO codes?

It's not free trade, but unfair trade, that has been fleecing America for years now. During Bush's eight years, Canada (\$500 billion; 80% of Canadian exports depend on US markets), Japan (\$600 billion), the European Union (\$800 billion), and China (\$700 billion) racked up trade surpluses of \$2.6 trillion at America's expense.

They collected value-added taxes on US imports and returned them as rebates on goods sold here, drying up jobs and taking capital out of the US. Although smaller, the US has trade deficits with other countries as well.

"Economic nationalism -- the urge to keep jobs and capital at home -- is both turning the economic crisis into a political one and threatening the world with depression. The global economy is in deep crisis. American leadership is the only chance," observed The Economist. I agree -- why not then stand up for fair trade against fleecing America in the name of free trade?

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## Environment gridlock

The most important skepticism about an aggressive national strategy has been from a coalition of centrist Democrats who fear the impact on economic growth. One key to success will be crafting a deal with developing countries to show that they, too, are making an effort. But serious efforts on that front are still in their infancy.

DAVID VICTOR

ONE effect of the new Obama administration's global charm is that America could be let out of the environmental doghouse. The Obama plan to restart the economy is stuffed full of green incentives, and the new president has earned global cheers for his promise to cut the gases that cause global warming. But hope and change are not easy to implement in Washington, and the first big disappointment is likely to come later this year when the world's governments gather in Copenhagen to replace the aging and ineffective Kyoto treaty.

Pundits have been talking down the Copenhagen summit on the theory that the current financial crisis makes 2009 a tough time for governments to focus on costly and distant global goals like protecting the planet.

In reality, the greenish tinge on nearly every economic recovery plan, even China's, show that this crisis offers green opportunity. The real reason Copenhagen will be a disappointment is that the new Obama administration can't lead until it first learns what it can actually implement at home.

House and Congress.

On environmental issues, America is barely a nation. Under a single flag it uneasily accommodates a host of states pushing greenery at wildly different speeds. In the 1970s and 1980s, this multispeed environmentalism propelled America to a leadership position. The key was truly bipartisan legislation, which allowed Washington to craft a coherent national approach.

In fact, most of the major US environmental laws did not arise solely from the environmental left but were forged by centrist Republican administrations working closely with centrist and left-leaning Democrats.

Republican President Nixon created America's pathbreaking clean air and water regulations; Republican George H.W. Bush updated the air rules to tackle acid rain and other pernicious long-distance pollutants.

In his more moderate second term, Ronald Reagan was America's champion of the ozone layer and helped spearhead a treaty -- probably the world's most effective international environmental agreement -- that earned bipartisan support at home and also pushed reluctant Europeans to regulate the pollutants.

Ever since the middle 1990s -- about the time that the US government was shut down due to a partisan budget

dispute -- such broad coalitions supporting greenery have been rare.

In the vacuum of any serious federal policy, for nearly a decade the greener coastal states devised their own rules to cut warming gases. The United States as a whole let its green leadership lapse. At the same time, the project to create a single European economy has shifted authority in environmental matters from individual member states into the hands of central policymakers in Brussels, where a coterie of hyper-rich and very green countries have set the agenda. Europe, long a laggard on environmental issues, is now the world leader.

The normal multispeed script was playing out on global warming as the Obama administration took power. Industry, worried about the specter of a patchwork of regulations, has lobbied for a coherent national strategy. But the Obama administration's first major policy on global-warming policy went in precisely the opposite direction: he reversed the Bush administration's decision that blocked California from adopting its own strict rules on automobile efficiency.

Today's challenge, which won't be solved by Copenhagen, is for Obama to stitch these many state environmental efforts together. That's no easy task. Global-warming regulation will probably have a larger impact on the nation's economy than any other environmental program in history, and any plan will have to allow enough room for some states to move quickly while also satisfying industry's well-founded need for harmony.

Obama's Democratic Party controls both the White House and Congress, but that does not guarantee success. It will be difficult to craft a national policy that

earns broad and bipartisan support while also taking the big bite out of the emissions that the rest of the world is hoping Obama will promise to the Copenhagen treaty.

The difficulties aren't just in dragging along wary conservative Republicans. In fact, the most important skepticism about an aggressive national strategy has been from a coalition of centrist Democrats who fear the impact on jobs and economic growth.

One key to success will be crafting a deal with China and other developing countries to show that they, too, are making an effort. But serious efforts on that front are still in their infancy.

The big challenge for Copenhagen will be to find a way to allow negotiations to stretch beyond the unrealistic 2009 deadline while still keeping momentum. America's slowness in getting serious about global warming should be welcome because it is a contrast to its rushed behaviour in negotiating the Kyoto treaty.

At Kyoto, Bill Clinton's administration promised deep cuts in emissions without any plan for selling them at home, which is why the Bush administration could so easily abandon the treaty. Repeating that mistake would be a lot worse than waiting a bit for America to craft real leadership. If that's why Copenhagen falls short of the mark, then that's good news -- real greenery, rather than fakery.

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### THE BOY

SUNANDA KABIR

The naked boy now wears a shroud  
In the pre-dawn darkness when the coffin bearers  
Are not awake with the dead  
And all the dear words are fast asleep  
When the north wind in the heart of the dew  
Sees the image of darkness  
At the end of the night  
They took away the boy.

One slipper left by the doorway  
A side of the mosquito-curtain rolled up  
The intoxicating warmth of the red-cloth'd quilt  
The night beckons the barebacked and  
Tying the knot at the waist  
The boy went away.

He left behind  
Some tattered dreams  
Some blooming maiden, a patch of cropland  
Mother's own 'bhapa pitha'  
The clinking of silver rattle etc etc.  
He wanted to touch happiness  
But knew not when he wore street clothes  
May his fingers have writ some nonsense

Now  
It rained for a while  
Scattering the krishnachura on the roads  
The boy wore the shroud at the end.

(Composed on the commemoration of Ekushey 1952)