Rat Attack

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN



These days I see rats everywhere - some real, some imagined and some in the figurative sense, if you get my drift. These are not the cute and cuddly Jerry or Mickey kind, which in any case are mice and therefore far more benign; I'm talking about those vicious sharp-toothed, foul-smelling, scary looking rodents who gnaw at everything in sight, from food to wood to formica, not to mention your peace of mind. They scoot along the crevices at the back of the kitchen shelves, getting bolder by the day, marking their territory with their noxious excretions. Sometimes a mountain of chicken bones and debris of gnawed wooden shelves can be found as evidence of the tenacity with which these rodents hold on to their new homes and create havoc for the human inmates.

The other day I could have sworn I had seen a charcoal-coloured rat running along the wiring in the office room. Nobody else had seen it which made me wonder: Was I getting a little too paranoid about these rodents?

Not really I'm just disturbed and angry after reading a Daily Star news report of how Jhum cultivators in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) are again faced with the prospect of a famine-like situation because rodents have eaten up their crops and seeds. Last year the rats had eaten all the crops and without any proper assistance, the people of these areas have not been able to recover especially since the rodents had eaten even the paddy seeds that they could have sown. To make matters worse, bamboo plants have flowered, something that happens after every fifty years, which has given the rat population a fearsome boost; after eating the bamboo fruits these creatures have multiplied (perhaps bamboo is a rodent aphrodisiac) thus leading to further destruction of food crops as well as grains that had been stored. One cannot even begin to imagine the horror of seeing rats all over the fields eating away the food that would feed one's family for now and the future.

As if these people do not have enough on their plate of miseries. For the adivasis ethnic violence and land-grabbing are old wounds they have been nursing for decades. The withdrawal of troops from the CHT areas has been met with mixed reactions. Some are happy that the Peace Accord is finally being implemented, others are apprehensive of a new kind of violence from extremist groups on either sides while still others fear for the country's sovereignty.

Now the old rodent menace has returned. The people of these areas must face present and future hunger. International organisations such the WFP and Echo are trying to deal with the immediate crisis through financial aid and quick-fix projects. The government has given some people 10 kg of rice as compensation which is a ludicrous way to deal with such a devastating situation.

It is not just a food crisis that threatens the survival of these people. Rats are dangerous creatures and carry horrible diseases (remember the Bubonic Plague and other versions in the nineties?). Allowing these creatures to multiply and grow into humungous beasts indicates an ongoing apathy and neglect with which the state has treated these people.

A few bags of rice is nowhere near enough to ease the sufferings of people who have lost all their crops and stored food. The government has to assist these people in every possible way. The rats must be exterminated once and for all. The real ones first, though.