

The month of self-purification

Live up to the inner message of Ramadan

WITH the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims throughout the world embrace a life of self-abnegation, purity of soul and spirituality of the mind that is far removed from the crass materialism of day to day world. It is a month in which the faithful forsakes food and drink during day time thereby feeling the pinch of hunger and thirst that draws him nearer and binds him in an empathetic relationship to the less fortunate of his fellow beings. He emerges bodily purified and spiritually elevated through austere living, prayers and supplication before the Almighty.

One of the chief messages to be drawn from the experience is the total commitment to the welfare of the humanity, for service to humanity is the pathway to Allah. We learn to be conscientious, honest, ethical and corruption-free in our dealings with fellow human beings. In the national and societal perspectives, we must not only be tolerant and respectful of each other but also eschew violence in any form or shape. This is the time to renew our faith of Islam being a religion of peace.

Along with the spiritual uplift of the mind, the officials should work with honesty of purpose much as the traders and businessmen who are dealing in Ramadan essentials have to maintain steady supply of goods to the people and act with great social commitment. The government has taken some steps to steady the supply side in the market to cater to the increasing demands at affordable and fair prices. The private sector traders taking full advantage of the liberal import policies with the TCB in the government sector playing a complementary role, the market should stabilise and price jacking effectively kept at bay. Hoarding and all forms of market manipulation need to be discouraged.

Extortionist activities in the transportation, marketing and distribution channels have been one of the major causes of price hike. All concerned must be alive to this malady and tackle it wholeheartedly. Ramadan is a supremely benevolent month and people must live up to its benevolence.

Swine flu alert up

Roll up sleeves to meet the challenge

THE latest about swine flu infection in Bangladesh is that the number of reported cases has gone up to 87. Of that number, 32 have been fully cured and the remainder receiving follow-up treatment. The health ministry has been closely monitoring the situation and the health minister at this point in time is apprehending that the situation might worsen. Reports from neighbouring India speak of the affliction widening; and an alert declared in the Indian state of West Bengal, albeit a cause of concern for us.

One worrisome dimension of the swine flu situation is that it's at level-2 now inasmuch as several cases have been detected in the community via cluster identification. The chances of exposure are greater there as the latter is internal, introverted. Of course, we are aware of the health screening programmes being conducted at 16 entry points to the country. But are the 16 points of surveillance enough of a safeguard against the spread of the disease? We have to be, however, realistic in our perception of the danger in a globalised world where viral incidence knows no border. We have to bear this in mind and prepare accordingly.

So far, the health authorities and the specialised hospitals have tackled the situation well. They are also constantly assuring the people of sufficient availability of the anti-viral vaccine. We also hear of the five major hospitals in Dhaka city setting up pandemic influenza management committees and training their members up in the ways of managing the malady. The training regime should now be speedily taken to 95 urban primary healthcare centres. There is, of course, the need for encompassing private hospitals, clinics and the semi-urban centres.

It is now for the people to come forward to inform the health professionals with any symptom of flu they have contacted, besides, of course, maintaining personal hygiene meticulously.

Price spiral again: What needs to be done?

To increase the prices of essentials in the month of Ramadan is somewhat a business culture of a section of the unscrupulous traders in the country. On the other hand, while analysing the supply side constraint, one can see that the middle is too long and too many are living off it, depriving both farmers and consumers.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

PRICES of essentials that are usually consumed during Ramadan have shot up as usual beyond anybody's imagination much before the month of Ramadan. Even the commerce minister's assertion of keeping the prices of these commodities under control through import by the TCB, and asking the traders to keep profits within limits, did not have any impact on the market mechanism.

Evidently, some unscrupulous traders were tracking the activities of the TCB, and when they sensed that the efforts had not gained momentum and what the TCB had done during the last seven months was just a trickle compared to the requirement they started playing the foul game.

The explanation given by the commerce minister that the quantum of import by the TCB is not enough and business community does not have any confidence in TCB will not satisfy the people. What hope is there that this organisation will douse the fires of the price spiral? The commerce ministry should have assessed the ability of this organisation to contain the price spiral during Ramadan. Moreover, TCB does not import goods directly, it just works as an outsourcing agent. That means there may be many a slip between the cup and the lip.

Then comes the food and disaster management minister's revelation of his personal experience of the extortionists' vile game in shooting up the transportation cost. As the minister explained, transportation cost, which shot up to Tk.28,000 from Tk.7000 actually received by the truck owner, has added to the woes of the consumers -- bringing in the extra burden of Tk.21,000 on the consumers through cost adjustment in the form of price spiral. And the minister knows who these extortionists are! He has diagnosed the ailment and if the government fails to apply the medicine it will mean governance failure.

Added to this is the popular perception that there is a hidden extortion business in the transportation sector indulged in by a section of law enforcers, which has kicked up the prices of goods.

The fact is that every crisis calls, not for controls or for elimination of the snags but for more reforms. The problem with the policy machinery is that there is debate as long as the crisis lasts. The odds are that as prices even out, government will return to "business as usual" mode. Worse, ad hocism would rule policy. But price spiral

and food security are not issues that a nation with a huge population and low productivity can take lightly. What is needed is a long-term view of needs and engineering of solutions that survive the test of price cycles.

As Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya the CPD said: "Issues like the capacity-constraint of the TCB, its weaknesses, its management capability in a fight against organised business groups who are least willing to loosen their control of the business world, and the trend in the international market, were visible long enough for the government to act." The fact is; nobody acted, apart from indulging in rhetoric. The problem is that when the government does decide to import, it takes too long -- driving prices further up.

Take the case of pulses. We don't produce enough. We need to increase acreage in pulse cultivation or invest in technology that will deliver higher yields. As some eminent economists in the country revealed: "There has been no breakthrough in output efficiency during the last three decades." Neither is there any attempt to move the farmers away from crops that add to water stress towards produce that we necessarily import.

The price rise of perishables like fruit and vegetables may be seasonal but, like in grains, it has a structural issue. Thanks to the absence of distribution links and processing, several thousand tonnes of fruit and even vegetables are wasted, which adds to losses and prices. This is because the traditional distribution chain from field to fork is too long. It involves too many middlemen, resulting in consumers paying as much as four times what the farmer gets paid for his produce. Retail chains world over invest in logistics, warehouses, and delivering value to both consumers and to farmers.

The problem is that when a crisis strikes, we resort to ad hoc measures that create more problems. Agriculture is the mainstay of our economy and a vital sector that brightens our lives, but it remains as neglected as ever. With the winding up of the BADC, no branch of the administration has replaced it to meet the accelerating needs of a growing population.

In a bid to bring down the prices in the month of Ramadan, the government has undertaken some belated measures like cutting import duties on certain items and launching OMS by the TCB in Dhaka that people, in light of their past experience,

speculate would just be cosmetic measures. Firstly, the import duty on sugar and fruits has been reduced at a time when it is most unlikely to bring any relief to the consumers during Ramadan. Secondly, nobody knows when the sugar will be arriving, because of the inefficient handling by the TCB. Family budgets in urban homes have seen the expenditure on food and groceries going up by about 50% much before the advent of Ramadan.

While BTV and print media have raised the concern of the urban consumers, the agonies of the rural folk who spend about 60% of their income on food items remain unheard. Expectedly, with Sk.Hasina ushering in various reforms, people in the country were bubbling with new hope for reconstruction in all sectors of public life and development activities. But with prices of essentials soaring, extortionists having a field day, and with rape, murder and violence increasing by the day, sensible citizenry are afraid that their hopes might be belied again.

Sadly true, with the country having one crore and sixty lakh hectare agricultural land, which is about sixty percent of the total land area, agricultural production is nowhere near international norms in yield per acre. Even though agriculture employs more than 50% of the labour force, and GDP earning from agriculture comes to about 20%, investment in the sector is abysmally low.

Investment must be made in agriculture and technology, including irrigation, to enable multiple crops and high yield seeds. Higher credit must be allowed to farmers, who till now have no access to bank funds. Farmers also need advice, which the death of BADC has denied them.

The present crisis gives indications of what needs to be cultivated. For instance, it needs no genius to understand that we need to urgently increase acreage for pulses. It is also clear that, given the level of water stress, cropping pattern has to shift from water intensive crops to those that

deliver higher returns per litre rather than per acre. Given commitment, it should not be too tough for the government to focus on a new blueprint on agricultural production which functions on incentives based on national needs.

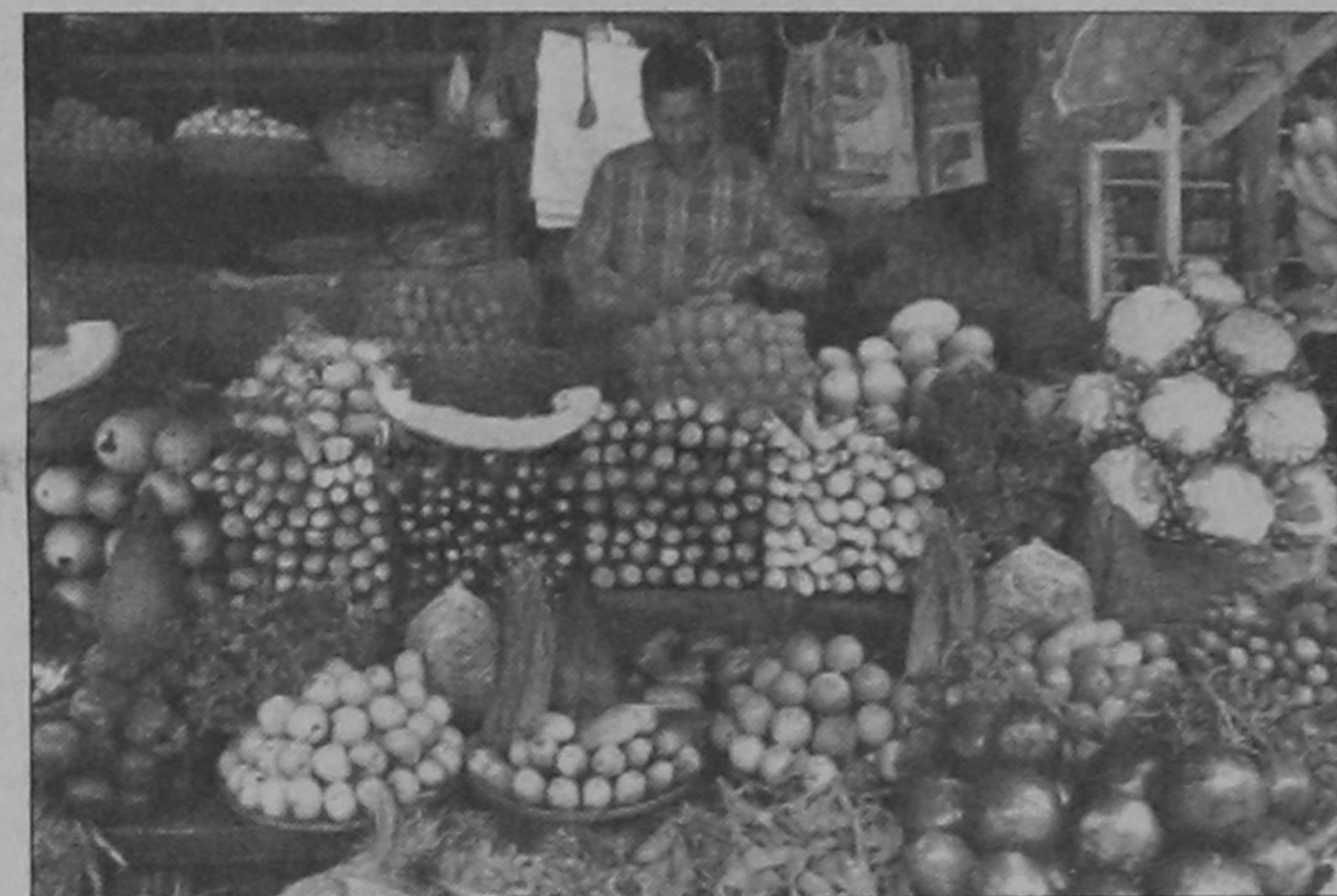
What all this adds up to is a new vision statement for agriculture as the food minister, while speaking in a MOU signing function arranged by Agora and rural co-operatives sale of agricultural products from the producers to the Agora, stressed the need for setting up agro-based industries and such co-operatives. This is, in fact, one of the promises of the government.

Investment in distribution and food processing will deliver value to farmers and consumers. What needs to be recognised is that agriculture is losing its viability. At the same time, it has to be stressed that the present crisis in the month of Ramadan stems more from sinister market manipulation than actual shortage.

To increase the prices of essentials in the month of Ramadan is somewhat a business culture of a section of the unscrupulous traders in the country. On the other hand, while analysing the supply side constraint, one can see that the middle is too long and too many are living off it, depriving both farmers and consumers.

The practice just initiated by some entrepreneurs like Agora needs to be expanded. As farmers get better value for their produce, they will be able to invest in quality inputs, learn from the market, and use technology to improve their lot. Greater common good -- of farmers and consumers -- dictates that the government utilise the potential of the masses by opening up investment in this sector. Presumably, it is not that the government lacks the economic vision to foresee the shortage, or an increased demand of certain commodities, in the month of Ramadan, then why are things going awry?

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Fresh US efforts towards ME peace

The USA, as expected, has reiterated its strategic support for Israel's security. However, this time round, the US officials appear to have moved slightly forward in their quest for facilitating a truly comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace that would include facing up to the challenges pertaining to Palestinians and Israelis, that between Syria and the Israelis and between Lebanon and Israel.

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WE have had a flurry of important US officials visiting Syria, Israel, Jordan and Egypt. It has been an indication of President Obama's resolve to mediate a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement. The officials have included George Mitchell, President Obama's Special Envoy, Robert Gates, the US Defense Secretary, James Jones, US National Security Adviser and Dennis Ross, the US President's Envoy to the Gulf States. Their visits were preceded by a stop-over by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

George Mitchell, who had earlier been involved in weaving threads of peace among the combatants in Northern Ireland, has described his present efforts as 'historic endeavour' and the restarting of peace talks between Syria and Israel as a 'near-term goal.' Mr Mitchell was the highest level US official to visit Damascus since 2005. It has assumed greater importance because of known Syrian support for the Palestinian militant group Hamas (the de facto government in the Gaza Strip), its backing for Hezbollah in Lebanon and its close links with Iran -- all anathemas for US strategic policy planners.

The past Bush Administration identified Syria as a pariah and cut virtually all ties with that country. Now Mitchell's visit is being seen as 'the first step of dialogue' aimed at removing the atmosphere of hostility and moving towards comprehensive peace on the basis of a constructive engagement.

Another practical measure has also been taken. USA has decided to send an Ambassador back to Damascus to replace the envoy it recalled in 2005 after the assassination in Beirut of Rafiq-al-Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister. It may be

recalled that the killing was blamed on Syria although Damascus steadfastly denied any involvement.

Such efforts lead one to believe that the USA now seriously thinks that Damascus is the key towards the forging of a new peace process in the region.

Comments by politicians of that area however suggest that US strategists will have to address certain issues not only to regain meaningful credibility but also to persuade Syria to be more amenable. They relate to the question of full Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories including the Golan Heights (formally annexed by Israel in 1981), removal of more than 20,000 Israeli settlers from occupied territory and re-settlement of the internally displaced Syrians who had to flee Israeli occupation. There is also the question of resolving the outstanding matter of re-settling 400,000 Palestinian refugees who have taken shelter inside Syria near Yarmouk.

Turkey has already tried to jump start an Israeli-Syrian understanding but appears to have failed. Four rounds of preliminary negotiations were held last year but eventually suspended after Israel's brutal invasion of the Gaza Strip towards the end of 2008. Hopefully the new US Administration will be able to move ahead and disprove the assumption that Israel is involved in occupation and colonisation in contravention of international legal principles and that USA is not committed sufficiently enough to stop them from doing it.

Both Mitchell and Gates during their visit to Israel have denied that there was any impasse with Israel over Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank. Nevertheless, it was also clear from reading between the lines that there have been differences with Israel and that the US

officials have been unable to dissuade Israel from the continuation of building settlements in east Jerusalem or in the expansion of settlements based on the contentious Israeli principle of 'natural growth.'

The resolution of this factor is vital if the process is to move forward. It is a major obstacle to peace. The Jewish population in the territories occupied in the 1967 war is thought to have topped half a million. It has also not helped matters when another recent Israeli declaration indicated that Israel had approved the construction of 50 new residential units in Adam settlement, to house settlers evicted from an unofficial outpost. Such a measure is totally contrary to Israel's commitment to freeze settlement construction under the 2003 'road map' peace plan.

There is a possibility that we may eventually hear of a limited Israeli decision to 'suspend settlement activity.' One hopes that sustained US and European pressure will make that happen. Such a step would be a significant psychological boost for the demoralized and growingly desperate Palestinian community.

It would be useful to remember here that the creation of each illegal Israeli settlement, also leads to further loss of land and economic harassment for the Palestinians. Each settlement tends to be surrounded by a buffer zone -- land that Palestinians cannot farm. Settlements are also usually serviced by roads that Palestinians are not allowed to use. A growing disaster case in point is the Effrat settlement, close to the Palestinian town of Bethlehem. It now houses 9,000 people but expects to grow to 30,000 in the coming years -- taxing the already depleted ground water resources available to the Palestinian population resident in that region. Such a prospective scenario is being repeated throughout the occupied West Bank, and for obvious reasons is not palatable for the already marginalised Palestinian community.

Interestingly, the Israeli human rights group 'Peace Now' says Israeli government has construction plans to double settler numbers in the West Bank, an allegation the Israeli housing ministry denies. However school maps, used in schools across Israel, do not mark the occupied

West Bank as a separate territory. One would be tempted to draw one's own conclusion from this.

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Gates has urged the Palestinians to refrain from 'words or actions that might make meaningful and productive negotiations impossible.' However he has to understand the extreme frustration of the Palestinians. Saeb Erakat, the Palestinian negotiator encapsulated this in his scathing comments after Mitchell's meeting with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. He accused Israel of failing "to fulfil any of its roadmap obligations, including a settlement freeze, the reopening of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, removal of outposts, the release of Palestinian prisoners". He also gave vent to Palestinian exasperation by stating that "if the US cannot have Israel comply with obligations like stopping settlement activities including natural growth, who will believe that the US will be able to have Israel comply to withdraw to the '67 borders or solve the problems of Jerusalem, refugees, water, security?"

We have the purported honest intentions of a new US President. We also have the past failures of the US Administration in meeting out even-handed treatment of the problem. One can only hope that both Israel and the United States realise that the ultimate sustainable security of Israel lies not in spending more money in sophisticated weapons but in investing in peace through compromise, based on the international legal process.

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