

The world that Yunus would build

Self-enterprise cannot but be its basis

IN a world which often bemoans the paucity of visionaries in our times, Muhammad Yunus comes across as one who can and does peer into the future. In his recent address to the Indian parliament, which has demonstrated its unqualified respect for him by inviting him to speak before it, the Nobel laureate has spelt out his vision of the future in what is clearly a bold and unambiguous manner. The boldness stems from his projection of a South Asian Union by 2030. On the face of it, and given the trend toward political unity in such regions as Europe and South East Asia, there is little that could be considered new in Yunus' suggestions. And yet for a region which remains stymied by crises of a multifaceted sort (think of all the bilateral and other issues which have held up regional cooperation for years), Yunus' vision of a single, purposeful South Asia is an expression of the courage one expects men of vision to demonstrate before the multitudes.

Beyond the courage factor, Professor Yunus' thoughts on a unified South Asia make sense for a whole range of reasons. There is little question that in the years immediately ahead, South Asia, without infringing on the sovereignty of its constituent states, will be in need of common domestic and global policies if it is to have any impact on the rest of the world. However, as Yunus has pointed out (and one cannot but agree with him), those policies must have the individual at the centre of things. The vision of self-enterprise, through provision of easy access to financial services to every person that the Nobel laureate has focused on, should be seen as the fulcrum on which individual and in turn social growth can define lives in the region. For far too long, the individual in South Asia has been dependent on handouts to eke out a bare existence. The time has now come for him to branch out of such a condition. He can do that if governments in South Asia are ready and willing to go the necessary lengths to allow him to make that leap from mere survival to dynamic individuality. Charity, as Yunus tells us, will need to be converted to social business if every citizen of South Asia is to feel that he is an integral part of and not an incidental existence in the development process.

Muhammad Yunus has given the nations of South Asia a plateful of thoughts to mull upon. His vision of the region being the first poverty-free part of the globe indeed exercises our imagination. So do his thoughts on the creation of a state-of-the-art health care system for the people of South Asia. With Saarc already at work, Yunus' ideas should come in as a substantive buttressing of the whole idea of regional cooperation in our part of the world.

PM sets an example from the top

It shouldn't be one-off, must be followed through

BY a single gesture Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has made a strong statement of propriety, respect for others and nearness to people. She has put forward a useful message to organisers of events by setting aside a flashy, ornate and throne-height chair reserved for her in preference to the type others sat on at the inaugural of the SME Financing Fair on Tuesday. We thank her for her thoughtful act of conscientious self-effacement. A Prime Minister is prime minister no matter whether she sits on a big or small chair or fanfare accompanies her or not. The moral needs to catch on amidst our elitist frills.

In our rather sycophantic political, administrative and management culture, oversized decorative chairs have come to be regarded as status symbol and, therefore, an ungainly ubiquitous feature in public functions. That this is rather discriminatory and an anathema to a democratic psyche seems to slip through the indifference of the system. Their sensibilities thickening people in high places tend to accept it as something of a norm being habitually oblivious of the unwholesome effect it could have on the other guests on the podium, especially the audience. But the organisers are to blame for it in no small measure as well.

The Prime Minister, we think, has made a point whose significance should transcend the event. The underlying message that comes through her gesture is that it shouldn't be one-off but something that ought to be followed through. We would urge the PM to issue formal instructions to all concerned that she should be provided with no different chair than what others will be in official and public functions she would have consented to attend. She has already indicated her choice and led by example. Replicated on a wide scale, the high and noble spirit of her gesture can be truly lived up to. What is furthermore important is the adoption of a general attitude of austerity reflected through the policies of the government.

Will the Earth expire by 2050?

And what is the extent of that risk? In 2006 James Hansen, the head of Nasa's climate research team, warned that more than 10C above what the level was in 2000 would constitute alarming effects on sea level and extermination of species. The Earth is reeling on the razor's edge.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE World Wildlife Fund claims that the Earth will become uninhabitable by 2050. Our planet has been badly abused, and it has been dying a slow death. The Earth will face extinction in roughly forty years, which is sooner than a child born today enters midlife crisis.

So, the news is bleak for those who are working hard to build the future of their children, and for all those ambitious people who have grandiose plans for their future. Why bother about interior decoration if the house is burning? There may not be any future left in the future. The Earth is dying.

Signs are there in escalating global warming. There has been drastic reduction in rainfall. Rivers are shrinking. Satellite photos show Greenland ice sheets in full-fledged meltdown. A large portion of Bangladesh is likely to go under water. In US much of Manhattan and eastern shore of Maryland could be washed into the Atlantic Ocean. Pacific island nations will be blotted out.

Hurricanes will ravage the Earth. Rising sea levels and severe droughts will destroy crops. Widespread famine will wreak havoc with starvation and death.

Anticlimax: We are killing the Earth in our lust for living. The rain forest habitats are the hardest hit, having lost 93% of their area. The latest update from International Union for the Conservation of Nature shows that nearly one-third of the existing species are under the threat of perishing. Species are becoming extinct at as much as 1,000 times the natural rate.

What are the symptoms of an ailing Earth? The Worldwatch institute released a report, Vital Signs 2006-2007, revealing major indications. In 2005, the average atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration increased 0.6% over the high in 2004, representing the largest annual increase ever recorded. The average global temperature reached 14.6 degrees Celsius, making 2005 the warmest year ever recorded on the Earth's surface.

Some 40% of the world's coral reefs have been either damaged or destroyed. Water withdrawals from rivers and lakes have doubled since 1960. New Orleans in

Louisiana was at sea level when the first settlers arrived in the 18th century. It had sunk as much as a meter below that level when the hurricane season began in 2005.

Weather-related catastrophes have jumped from an average of 97 million a year in the early 1980s to 260 million a year since 2001. Three of the 10 strongest hurricanes ever recorded occurred in 2005 alone, and the average intensity of hurricanes is increasing. The concentration of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas that is driving climate change, has reached its highest level in 600,000 years. It continues to rise at an accelerated rate.

Measures are being taken to deal with this crisis. Renewable energy industries have seen rapid growth in 2005, increasing ethanol production by 19%, wind power capacity by 24% and solar cell production by 45%. Hybrid car sales doubled in US in the same year. The Chinese government responded to rising fuel prices by increasing tax on large vehicles and mandating higher levels of efficiency.

But too little has been done too late. If we take the US example as a yardstick, aggregate greenhouse gas emission level remained unchanged in eight years since George Bush promoted voluntary action against global warming. As of today, only 10% of American household light bulbs are compact fluorescents. Hybrids account for only 2.5% of US auto sales. The carbon-cap bill still remains unachieved. The carbon pollution level has to be limited to 350 parts per million of

CO2 in the air by 2020 to avoid the imminent risk.

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Sixty-five million years ago, dinosaurs walked on Earth until they abruptly ceased to exist. Many reasons are ascribed to what happened, such as food shortage, extreme weather, etc. But the most accepted theory is that when a meteor hit the earth, it drastically changed the climate. Failing to cope with the change, the dinosaurs went extinct.

Between December 7 and 18, Copenhagen turns into "Hopenhagen" to host the Climate Conference. This could be humanity's last hope to achieve a turning point to cope with climate change. Scientists argue if man and dinosaur ever existed together. But we know why they didn't perish together. The dinosaurs couldn't cope with the Earth. The Earth couldn't cope with us.

Breaking news: Hackers broke into the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia in Britain as evidence that scientific data have been rigged to show that humans are causing climate change.

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Banning rice export

It appears that the time is not yet ripe for exporting rice. So, the ban on rice export should continue beyond December. Food security of the people of the country must be the prime consideration. Exporting rice may be considered at an appropriate time.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT is good to learn that the government has banned export of rice. The Daily Star on December 5 quoted a statutory regulation order (SRO) of the commerce ministry issued at the end of November, which prohibited export of rice, both aromatic and non-aromatic, till December 31, 2009.

It seems that the factors which have influenced the government to take this decision are:

- Uncertainty about achieving the aman production target this year;
- Keeping the rising prices of rice in the domestic market under control;
- Ensuring availability of rice in the domestic market;
- India's ban on rice export, which has been the most important source for importing rice by Bangladesh; and
- Rising trend in the prices of food grains in the international market.

Minister for food and disaster management, Dr. Abdur Raqzaq, said last September that the government was considering allowing export of rice, both aromatic and non-aromatic, and the final decision would be taken after observing whether any natural calamity affected aman production.

There was criticism at that time against the government's proposed move. The points made by the critics were:

- Annual population growth rate was outpacing annual food production rate in the country;
- Inconsistency in the food production in the country on year to year basis;
- FAO's forecast of contraction in rice production in few countries, including Bangladesh, in 2009-10;
- The difficulty faced by the government in importing rice in 2008 due to restrictions imposed by most of the rice exporting countries, resulting from the worldwide shortage of food grains and their very high prices in the international markets;
- The world's second largest rice grower India's decision to join the club of rice importing countries visualising a minimum reduction in her rice production by 15 million tonnes in 2009-10 due to severe drought compared to last year's (2008-09) production; and
- Uncertainty about natural calamity that might affect aman production in the country.

Harvesting of aman paddy has already started. Available reports suggest that there is hardly any possibility of achieving

aman production target of 12 million tonnes this year due to drought-like situation at the time of transplantation of aman in the country's northern region, known as the granary of the country.

Actually, less rain was observed throughout the monsoon season. Further, there are reports about the decline in the area of cultivation of aman perhaps, as a reaction to low prices received by growers last year.

There is already a rising trend in the prices of rice in the domestic and international markets. Food and disaster management ministry's (MOFDM) Fortnightly Foodgrain Outlook dated November 24 shows that both Dhaka city wholesale and retail prices picked up by 3.4% and 4.5% respectively in the fortnight ending on November 19.

The Financial Express on November 22 writes that the country's food inflation rose to 4.98% in September from 4.93% in August on point-to-point basis mainly due to increase in the prices of essential items, including rice, during the period.

The IMF team which visited the country last October warned Bangladesh that excess liquidity and resurgent international commodity and food prices might push inflation to double-digit by the year-end.

In the wake of the UN food summit (November 16-18, 2009) in Rome, the UN food envoy Olivier De Schutter gave a grim picture about rice prices in the near future. He warned that a new food price crisis was likely to develop as the world leaders hadn't tackled the key factors -- speculation and bio-fuels -- responsible for the price spike in 2008.

World Bank President Robert Zoellick recently said that excess liquidity in global markets was driving up prices of farm products, which could be dangerous in the near term. Since last year's (2008) record levels, prices of staple commodities like rice and wheat have fallen, but market watchers believe new spikes are all but inevitable.

MOFDM's aforesaid Fortnightly Foodgrain Outlook shows that the prices of Thai 100% parboiled rice and 5% parboiled rice continued rising up to \$592 per tonne (+0.8%) and \$577 per tonne (+4.0%) respectively in the fortnight ending on November 16.

According to climate change experts and agricultural scientists, variability of temperature and rainfall pattern in Bangladesh exhibit early signs of climate change. There was less rain than normal during June-July this year, the peak time for transplanting aman paddy. The rainy season surprisingly started this year in mid-May instead of the first week of June. Winter usually starts from the first week of November but temperature is still higher than normal. This erratic rainfall and deviation in temperature will affect our production of food grains, starchy tubers, vegetables, pulses, fish etc.

It appears from the above that the time is not yet ripe for exporting rice. So, the ban on rice export should continue beyond December. Food security of the people of the country must be the prime consideration. Exporting rice may be considered at an appropriate time.

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Terrorism without borders

Terrorism in South Asia has not only established itself in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also expanded to other parts of the region. Pakistan is in an embattled condition because of the ceaseless activities of the religious terrorists. The spectre of terrorism has found a new dimension with its cross-border links.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE recent arrest in the country of several terrorists belonging to foreign terrorist outfits points to the existence of terrorists with active international links who are carrying out terrorism inside the country.

Police intelligence sources say that more than 50 terrorists of Pakistan and India are active in terrorism in Bangladesh with blessing from the banned Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji), which was formed reportedly with assistance from Osama bin Laden. This outfit has a strong network with other terrorist groups in South Asia to carry out its nefarious designs.

All the foreign extremists so far arrested are leaders of the Kashmir-based militant outfit Asif Reza Commando Force (ARCF) or Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which have been working together with similar outfits in Bangladesh. Police had earlier arrested Indian national Daud Merchant along with his accomplice from Brahmanbaria. Daud Merchant is a close associate of the underworld mafia don

Daud Ibrahim.

The arrest and subsequent confessional statements by the terrorists clearly suggest that they have active international links. No terrorist outfit can operate without external links, as funding, equipment and logistics are not always available in a single place. The arrested Huji founder confessed the involvement of foreign terrorists in the August 21, 2004 grenade attack on the Awami League rally.

South Asia has been suffering the most from the dreadful scourge of terrorism compared to other regions in the world. Whatever may be the identity of the terrorists, it is no doubt a setback for all the South Asian countries, and regional resolve is needed to banish terrorism.

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The UN, in association with the gov-

ernment of Bangladesh and Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, arranged a three-day workshop in Dhaka for the frontline officers involved in combating terrorism in the Saarc countries to discuss their experiences and the lessons they had learnt in combating terrorism in their respective countries. The regional workshop also gave them an opportunity to enhance their counter terrorism capacities and raising their awareness of the latest available techniques of investigation.

The Saarc Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was signed in Kathmandu in November 1987 during the third Saarc summit, and came into force after ratification by all member countries. The Convention provides a regional focus to many established principles of international law in this respect. Under its provisions, member countries are committed to extradite or prosecute alleged terrorists, thus preventing them from enjoying safe havens.

The Additional Protocol to the Saarc Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was signed by the member states in the 12th Saarc summit held in Islamabad in January 2004. All the member countries have so far ratified the additional protocol except Nepal. This ratification came amidst assertions from India pointing at involvement of militant outfits from Pakistan in the serial blasts of October in New Delhi.

The Saarc Terrorist Offences

Monitoring Desk (STOMD) was established in Colombo to compare, analyse and disseminate information about terrorists, their tactics, strategies and methods. Efforts must be taken for further strengthening STOMD to banish terrorism in South Asia.

Terrorism is growing apace across the world. Many countries have had to witness the ugliest face of terrorism. The brutal killing of innocent people in New York, Madrid, Karachi, Mumbai, Colombo, Katmandu, Dhaka, Bali Island and London has revealed that terrorism is a common enemy to all human beings.

Present-day terrorism differs in nature and approach from the nineteenth century terrorism because earlier it was linked only with national struggle for independence and social justice. The terrorist activities are now being used and abused for fulfillment of ulterior motives by a few.

Terrorism is surely a major threat confronting all the South Asian countries. Tackling of terrorism without borders is no longer an event but a process, as these outfits have strong international links. The South Asian countries need to coordinate their counter-terrorism measures more intensively than before in order to ensure peaceful living for the people of this region.

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