

How hazardous is the protein we consume?

Seminal risk in poultry and fish feed needs addressing urgently

EXTENSIVE use of chemically treated tannery wastes to produce feed for fish and fowls containing chromium and lead in dangerous levels may have entered our food chain as far as our consuming protein, an otherwise a vital ingredient of human nourishment, goes. This evil practice dating back to a decade has been putting public health to serious carcinogenic hazards to liver and kidney causing incalculable damage to human organs.

Tannery wastes that should have normally been disposed of through standard effluent treatment to keep the environment clean, turn into a lucrative business for a whole range of vested groups gravitating around it. They collect these on payment to tannery owners, supplying them to feed factory owners who then process it into poultry and fish feed who in turn sell these off to poultry and fish firm owners. The feed so produced costs cheaper than imported feeds, that being the stimulating factor for the vicious business.

The point needs hardly any elaboration that the exponential expansion of the poultry and fish industry has been a great boon as a source of protein for a vast majority of people. If the growth and nourishment of children and protein consumption generally from eggs, meat and fish is fraught with such dangers then we are lacking in the basics of providing safe food, thereby adding a new dimension to food security.

Now that a study by Dhaka University and Bangladesh Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) has established higher rate of chromium in eggs and poultry meat than the tolerable level, and the media has taken issue with it, it's highly imperative for the government to set up a committee for scientific inquiry with the following suggested terms of reference: (A) determining how serious and pervasive the practice is and to what extent has it damaged public health and is capable of doing so further; (B) if the findings are found to be dreadful formulate immediate steps to ban the practice; (C) if, however, the scientific appraisal does not point to serious risks, then devise ways and means to prevent the practice posing any serious threat to public health; and (D) make it mandatory for the feed manufacturing factories to adopt hazard-free feed processing modelled on best practice methods applied in the region itself. It is not a tall order but an essential one to redeem.

One more garment employee dies

Workplace must be made safe for workers

THE death of yet another woman garment worker raises once again all the old questions about the safety of women working in such a vital sector as the readymade garments sector. Through her mysterious death, the 19-year old Beauty Akhter makes us pause once more to ask if those engaged in the garments business are fully qualified or trained in the job of ensuring that those who work for them feel secure in their jobs and about their physical security. No one is yet sure how the young woman died, though there is the huge suspicion that dark play was involved in her death. She was allegedly pushed from the top of the building housing the factory she worked for, after an altercation with another worker followed by a visit to the production manager's office.

Our sadness regarding Beauty Akhter's death takes a broader perspective. Briefly, it is young women like her, driven as they are by grinding poverty, who make their way to the garments factories in search of rather low-paid jobs that are somehow a means for their survival as well as for their poverty-stricken families. In a very large number of instances, these women are self-sustaining and, beyond that, happen to be sole earning members for their families. And so when they are subjected to bad or exploitative treatment and when some of them are even pushed to their deaths, entire families are once more threatened with a return to poverty. The bigger issue here is why such realities as the death of garment workers in their workplaces take place at all, especially when it is understood and expected that the rules pertaining to employment will be followed by the management of industries. In the past many years, for all our happiness at the development and expansion of the garments sector, we have repeatedly had to deal with such vexing matters as the workplace treatment of workers, especially female ones, the sexual and other forms of harassment they often prey to and the like. Questions have abounded about such trivial matters as provisions of emergency exits in case of accidents.

We believe it is time for everyone, the government in particular, to take a serious look into the conditions of garments workers, especially women, in the light of the tragic death of Beauty Akhter. The allegations that have arisen about her death must be thoroughly inquired into and everyone involved must face the law. The authorities must see to it that attempts are not made to pass off the death as a suicide. In the long term, but not too long, proper and well-meaning steps must be in place to ensure that at least minimally congenial working conditions are there for garments workers. That also entails a management that must be educated and trained in the task of guaranteeing workers' welfare.

Meanwhile, we will expect that law and order will be maintained in the garments industry and that nothing will be done to damage a sector that has already taken a number of bad blows.



Creating employment is the only way forward.

The unemployment bomb

Both remittance and RMG depend on economic growth in other countries and thus remain susceptible to sharp swings. Along with encouraging exports, we should also encourage efficient import substitution that has high employment elasticity with respect to output.

ABDUL BAYES

IT is said that if all the people of the world were accommodated into the US, the population density there would not be as high as it is now in Bangladesh. Population density at roughly 900 per sq.km. tells us that Bangladesh is one of the hugely populated countries in the world. It seems that there is a *jonoshova* (public meeting) everywhere -- in front of a household, at a tea stall, on a footpath or in a bus stand.

More than 80% of the country's population live in rural areas, and almost half of them cannot get the required calorie. The infant mortality rate of 45 per 1000 live births, life expectancy of 65 years and adult literacy rate of 60% point to the perilous non-income poverty in the country.

A rural household with 5.3 members owns, on average, 0.48 ha of land. This shows the precarious land-man nexus. A Malthusian nightmare once haunted us with population growth rate running at 3% plus. But thanks to the green revolution and efforts at reducing population growth rate (1.4% now), the current state of things appears to be better than before. But optimists say that Malthusian doomsday is over while pessimists argue that it has come to our doorsteps behind a different veil.

If we bring the employment scenario into the discourse, the pessimists seem to be winning. Politicians and policy makers

do not appear to have identified the true problem. Creating productive employment opportunities for a rapidly growing labour force is a daunting challenge.

The labour force stands at about 50 million or so. It is surging at 3% per year (higher than the population growth rate), and adding 2 million workers each year. The growth of the labour force reflects demographic transition; increasing working age population and sharp increase in female labour force participation rate.

Admittedly, economic growth coupled with expansion of non-farm activities has contributed to some job creation. But the structural shift had been mostly from agriculture to services rather than to industries and within industries, or towards construction. Close to 80% of the employed labour force come from the informal sector. The agricultural sector has the top share in absorbing labour.

In Bangladesh, nearly half of the employed labour force is self-employed. Only 13% of employment is generated by the industrial sector and 35% by the services. Thus, neither quantity nor quality of employment has increased up to the mark. Maybe more jobs have been created, but not better jobs.

The unrest in the RMG sector, deteriorating law and order condition, and political unrest are the result of a failure to create jobs (and better jobs) for the labour force. The ticking time-bomb awaits us. Facing

the conundrum with the canons of the law enforcers will only aggravate the pains.

An effective job creation strategy has to include macroeconomic environment, governance, security, investment climate, education, training and so on. I wonder why we talk about setting up universities in all divisions or district headquarters. This seems to me to be a populist slogan to satisfy the elitist segment of the society. Obviously, not all HSC graduates are university candidates. Why should a student from a poor family spend 6-7 years in university if he/she could avail a job after 12 years of education?

Our aim should be to establish technical and vocational schools so that a large number of college graduates could access training and skill and enter into the job market quickly, either here or in foreign countries. Once in job, that student has the opportunity to upgrade through open or national university programs. I met few cab drivers who obtained masters degree from universities, some are also engaged in selling Oxford University publications. Was the investment on this student worth the job he/she is doing?

To create more and better jobs, Bangladesh should attract both domestic and foreign investment. The tariff and tax structure, commercial policy, exchange rate regime, bank interest rates, bureaucracy, and political mindset should promote labour-intensive manufacturing industrialisation.

Unfortunately, in this country, a manufacturer is not as valued by policy makers as a trader or businessmen, though the former helps to generate more value addition and employment for the economy than the latter. Yes, the agricultural sector provides food and employment to the poor, but the point is that it cannot guarantee sustain-

able development to ensure a decent and dignified life. The surplus labour from agriculture must be drawn into the modern manufacturing sector.

The information that our per capita GNI now stands at \$700 clearly hints at the growing demand for income elastic commodities, e.g. tomato sauce against tomato; milk products against milk; chips against potatoes; juices against raw fruits. Keeping that in mind and shelving for the moment the idea of imports, we should encourage investment in these sectors through correct policies.

If, for example, the wage rate for a Bangladeshi RMG worker is \$0.12/hour against \$0.44 in Vietnam and Sri Lanka, \$1.44 in China, \$0.51 in India and \$0.56 in Pakistan, then the right policy is to encourage this sector with due attention.

In addition to RMG, Bangladesh has to develop new areas of production by utilising its relatively low wage levels, such as in footwear, agro processing, dairy development etc. Unfortunately, we are yet to reap the potential rewards from livestock, which has multifarious uses and, more importantly, is pro-poor and pro-women.

The ticking time-bomb cannot be faced without changing the mindset of politicians. We shall have to come out of the cave of conventional wisdom and look for new ideas on where employment can be generated.

Both remittance and RMG depend on economic growth in other countries and thus remain susceptible to sharp swings. Along with encouraging exports, we should also encourage efficient import substitution that has high employment elasticity with respect to output.

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The regime in Iran isn't about to fall

What little polling has been done in Iran, coupled with the observations of people who have been there, all suggest that the regime has considerable public support in rural areas, among the devout, and in poorer communities.

FAREED ZAKARIA

AS Barack Obama goes through one of his most difficult periods as president, you might wonder what it would have been like if the other guy had won. We will never know, of course, but in one area, John McCain provides us with some clues. He would have tried to overthrow the government of Iran.

In a speech on June 10, later published as a cover essay in *The New Republic*, McCain urged that we "unleash America's full moral power" to topple the Tehran regime. The speech highlights one of the crucial failings of McCain's world view, one in which rhetoric replaces analysis, and fantasy substitutes for foreign policy.

By now, it's become something of a mantra among neo-conservatives that we missed a chance to transform Iran a year ago. Reuel Marc Gerecht, writing in *The New York Times*, compares Iran's Green Movement to "what transpired behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s" and accuses Obama of being passive in the face of this

historical moment. Bret Stephens, a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, imagines that a more forceful Western response could have set off a revolution.

I have been deeply supportive of Iran's Green Movement. I wrote glowingly about it, highlighted it on television, and showcased its advocates. But I do not think there is much evidence that it was likely to overthrow the Iranian regime.

To believe that, one has to believe the government in Tehran is deeply unpopular with a majority of Iranians, holds onto power through military force alone, and is thus vulnerable to a movement that could mobilise the vast majority in Iran who despise it. None of this is entirely true.

The Iranian regime has many, many opponents, but it also has millions of supporters. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may have actually lost the presidential election of 2009, but it was a close contest in which he got millions of votes. What little polling has been done in Iran, coupled with the observations of people who have been there, all suggest that the regime has considerable

public support in rural areas, among the devout, and in poorer communities.

Newsweek's Maziar Bahari, who was jailed by the government for four months on trumped-up charges, believes that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, remains the single most popular political figure in Iran.

McCain reveals a startling ignorance about the Iranian regime when he argues, in his speech, that it "spends its people's precious resources not on roads, or schools, or hospitals, or jobs that benefit all Iranians -- but on funding violent groups of foreign extremists who murder the innocent."

While Tehran does fund militant groups, one of the keys to Ahmadinejad's popularity has been his large-scale spending on social programs for the poor. The regime lays out far more money on those domestic programs than on anything abroad.

The comparison of Iran's Green Revolution to the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe is mistaken. In 1989 dissidents had three forces on their side; nationalism (because communism had been imposed by force by a foreign power), religion (because communism repressed the church), and democracy. The Green Movement has only one; democracy. The regime has always used the religiosity of the people to its advantage, but it has also become skilled at manipulating nationalism.

In May, the Milton Friedman Prize for

Advancing Liberty was awarded to Akbar Ganji, one of the bravest advocates of non-violent agitation and secular democracy for Iran. Ganji was jailed for six years in Evin Prison, mostly in solitary confinement, for his writings against the government. In his acceptance speech, Ganji explained that US foreign policy does have an impact on Iran's freedom movement but not quite in the sense that neo-conservatives mean.

"Even entertaining the possibility of a military strike, especially when predicated on the nuclear issue," Ganji said, "is beneficial to the fundamentalists who rule Iran. As such, the idea itself is detrimental to the democratic movement in my country."

The regime bends internationally to its favour, and has become vocal about what Ganji calls the "gushing wound of Palestine ... [which] worsens the infection of fundamentalism." He pointed out that Tehran continually reminds Iranians of America's "double standards" in opposing Iran's nuclear program while staying silent about Israel's arsenal of atomic weapons.

Ironically, those hoping to liberate Iranians are the very same people urging punitive sanctions and even military force against Iran. Do they think that when the bombs hit, they will spare those who wear green?