

A S Mahmud: A tribute

Today is the seventh death anniversary of Mr. A S Mahmud. He was the founding Managing Editor of Mediaworld, the owning company of The Daily Star and one of the driving spirits behind launching of this paper. We, in The Daily Star, recall with profound respect his immeasurable contribution to this paper.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

The journey of The Daily Star started with two competent and committed men. One was an internationally known and well respected journalist and the other was an entrepreneur cum visionary who not only dared to dream, but rather dreamed too big, going by the standards of print and electronic media prevailing at that time. Last month, I shared my insights into the journalist Mr. S M Ali, the founder editor of the Daily Star. Being the editor, obviously, Mr. SM Ali was known better to all than the equally strong driving force behind the most successful English daily of today. The gentleman I am talking about is Mr. A S Mahmud, the founding Managing Editor of Mediaworld, the owning company of The Daily Star.

In addition, Mr. Mahmud was the pioneer of initiating the move to open the world of private TV channels in Bangladesh. When today's youngsters sitting on the sofa couch keep on conveniently switching between the so many options of private channels, very little they know of the time when BTV was the only option available to the people of this country. Through the launch of Ekushey TV, Mr. Mahmud opened an entirely new horizon in the arena of news and entertainment. Today, access to the private channels is expanding rapidly into the rural areas after the urban areas have been mostly covered. Sometimes when we are spending the evenings outside the cities where the only option is BTV, we realize how life would have been had the era of private channels not arrived. It is on those reflective



moments, we come to appreciate better the contribution of people like Mr. A S Mahmud who challenged the status quo.

On a personal level, both Mr. S M Ali (we used to call him "Khasru Mama") and Mr. A S Mahmud (we used to call him "Noni Mama") are my maternal uncles coming from the bigger clan of families that have had the privilege of having literary giants like Syed Mujtaba Ali who himself was the uncle of these two gentlemen. If Mr. S M Ali had the intellect and journalistic aptitude, Mr. Mahmud had the entrepreneurial ambitions and visionary instincts to foresee a

time for Bangladesh when people's insatiable hunger for reliable news and objective reporting would have to be met from the dynamic private sector. Although driven in his professional pursuits, Mr. Mahmud was an unassuming man with a gentle demeanor. He was as respectful to his colleagues and cousins as we were affectionate to his nephews and nieces.

Mr. Mahmud was a man with a modern outlook towards life and living which enabled him to look beyond the conventional wisdom and traditional values to be able to connect to the younger generation. His ability to mix with people of any age and background at ease, explains the reason why he was so successful in assembling a group of bright young professionals for jump starting ETV.

Many of today's media stars in the private TV channels have had their initial training and orientation through the well developed professional culture that Mr. Mahmud was able to nurture in the ETV. Had it not been for the initial success of ETV, there would not have been so many entrepreneurs and professionals investing in and joining the private television channel industry which was still at its infancy stage at that time.

The first movers always take the bigger portion of the risk and face the accompanying uncertainty. The thriving private TV

channels of today have been rewarded most by the risk Mr. Mahmud undertook at that time when there were very few to do that. Unfortunately, the uncertainty entailing the risk and the corresponding price was paid mostly by none other than Mr. Mahmud as he spent his last few years in a foreign land far distant from the land which he wished to serve and which he felt betrayed him most. I guess for those dreaming big and dreaming much, the potent hard reality in a volatile country like us gets obscured in their missionary zeal to succeed. Well, then again, if there were no such risk takers, then we never would have made any progress as well.

Today, Mr. Mahmud's success is in the pleasure made available at our finger tips as we surf from one private TV channel to another and can make choices as rival channels compete to get our time and attention. Hence, even in the lonely days Mr. Mahmud spent away from home and in "obhiman" with his motherland, the gentle breeze of freedom of choices and the era of enlightenment that he championed have continued to serve us well far beyond his times and much beyond his expectations. A big thanks to the pioneer and may his soul rest in eternal peace.

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Development today, devastation tomorrow

For poor countries like ours, the top priority should be to reduce rapid population growth and urbanisation. Overpopulation means overloading the earth's carrying capacity -- and that translates into diminishing resources for development and hastens the process of deteriorating quality of life.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

MOST of the news about the environment is distressingly bad. Reports on disappearance of forests, destruction of wetlands, death of coral reefs, and extinction of other natural resources come with frightful frequency. In Bangladesh, we hear about threats to wildlife and forest resources as well as marine life.

The environmental crisis that we are in points to one salient fact: Poverty is the greatest polluter. Poor people in our region have contributed to ecological destruction through burning firewood, clearing forest patches, and burning trees in brick kilns. True, all of them are not being malevolent but are simply living off the resources available. The global environment, both ecological and human, now seems worse than it was when the first "Earth Day" summit was held in 1970.

In most parts of Asia, including ours, firewood gathering along with land grabbing for human settlement has produced deforestation on a vast scale. The Washington-based World Resources Institute estimates that just one-fifth of the world's

original forest cover is still intact. According to FAO on average 15.4 million hectares of tropical forests disappeared annually over the decade. Rain forest loss was the highest in Asia at 2.2 million hectares per year.

With population pressure mounting in a land-starved country like Bangladesh, most people do it in a bid to claim land for farming. This has proved to be a self-defeating exercise, since the forest soil is unsuitable for farming. After a few seasons, when the land plays out, the peasants move on clearing more ground and cutting a swath of devastation across the precious ecosystems.

The rampant felling of trees, jhum cultivation and poaching in the reserve forests have led to disappearance of at least 37 species of birds. Chokoria Parabon, home to abundant wildlife in the past, has almost disappeared in just 30 years. Another report says that almost 10,000 hectares of the reserve forest of Rangamati that once comprised 60,000 hectares have already disappeared.

It further says that out of 80 species of birds found in 1980, only 43

species still survive. Fish population in the wetlands has also declined. Telapia and alien species now dominate the wetlands harming the native species. Forests in Bangladesh will be depleted in less than 15 years if the current rate of destruction continues.

Home to 330 species of plants, over 270 species of mammals, including the majestic Royal Bengal Tiger and the spotted deer, the Sundarbans is under assault. The biggest mangrove forest in the world that once comprised 10,000 sq kilometers is now left with only half of that. Once the rulers of their forest home, the tigers are now at the mercy of human intruders.

Almost 4 million people now depend directly or indirectly on this forest for their livelihood. Overfishing and over-exploitation of plant and wild life species are placing increasing amount of stress on the viability of this delicate ecosystem. Other than logging and slash and burn practices resorted to by criminal gangs illegal quarrying has stripped the earth of its foliage, which eventually clogs the rivers and waterways and worsens flooding.

Greed, shortsighted environmental policies and corruption cause much of the damage. Perhaps the greatest culprit is the indiscriminate logging, much of it illegal, around watersheds.

The move by the cabinet to introduce an act to prescribe tough punitive measures like longer jail term and fine for plundering of forest wealth brings hope that the situation will change for the better.

Forests store 40% of terrestrial carbon and can slow the build up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Deforestation in mountains can worsen floods in grasslands or agricultural lands below, as was the case in China, Brazil and Madagascar. Humans have hurt coastal and marine ecosystems by draining wetlands, cutting mangroves, trawling oceans for fish, and destroying reefs and lagoons. Besides, we also damage these ecosystems indirectly as rivers transport and by-products of agriculture, industry, urban areas, logging to the coasts. This interference with the ecosystems brings in its wake serious catastrophes.

Man-made climate change threatens all coastal areas, as melting glaciers send more water seaward and the warming and expansion of the oceans cause sea levels to rise. Other than halting this assault on the forests, afforestation in the entire coastal belt is the need of the hour. Vast coastal areas of in the U.S, India and Bangladesh may someday be inundated and Kutubdia, Sandwip, Hatia, as well as coastal areas of Bhola, Patuakhali, Bagerhat, Satkhira and Khulna region could disappear beneath the waves

The extinction of forests has come in the wake of unprecedented population boom, especially in the Third World countries. Much of the land is becoming less arable by the minute, assaulted by urbanisation, chemical pollution, desertification and overuse of pesticide and fertilizer. The exhaustion of land in many areas has created a new class of displaced persons known as "environmental migrants." While wars so long had been fought over territory, the future may see "green wars" triggered by shortages of such basic resources as topsoil or water.

Let us look at the trend of phe-



Clearing forest: How good for development?

nomenal population growth. It took humans about 1,50,000 years to reach one billion around 1800. Since then an additional 5 billion have been added to the headcount, and if this trend continues the world population could pass 10 billion by the end of this century.

One consequence is certain -- this would cause pressure on woodlands, especially the tropical forests that are reservoirs of the majority of the earth's animal and plant species. The loss of such irreplaceable biological treasure is disturbing, especially if we consider that the impact of deforestation goes far beyond the felled trees.

If farmers harvest crops year after year or make intrusion into the existing forests, the soil will be constantly exposed to wind and water. The result: the world will lose 24 billion tonnes of topsoil a year. When the dry areas are worn down by the wind, or by intensive farming, the region may eventually

become a sterile desert, a fate that has befallen about 30% of the world's dry lands.

For poor countries like ours, the top priority should be to reduce rapid population growth and urbanisation. Overpopulation means overloading the earth's carrying capacity -- and that translates into diminishing resources for development and hastens the process of deteriorating quality of life.

Rapid population growth in poor countries has begun to cause permanent damage to the environment in the form of deserts, infertile topsoil, barren hillsides and most notably deforestation. In Bangladesh, this damage will accelerate as our population swells. In consequence, the social unrest that we are witnessing now may erupt in a more vicious form.

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Worst prediction of 2010



TODAY, I hand over this space over to a far more intelligent source of commentary: readers. You sent in your best predictions for the coming year -- and nominated the worst prediction of last year.

That second, rather undesirable title should surely go to the UK's Meteorological Office. Reader Sunita Chau sent in a summary of its weather forecast printed in the Daily Telegraph newspaper in October last year:

"This winter could be unusually mild and dry, with temperatures at

least 2C more than last year's big freeze in which snow and ice caused travel chaos across much of Britain."

As we now know, the UK didn't have a winter, it had an Ice Age.

The runner-up was also from UK. Reader Graham Lovell saw a Psychic Fayre advertised at Wembley Park in London: "Then one day a little amendment was glued across the

posters, announcing that the Fayre had been: 'cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances'."

Erich C, writing from China, made a prediction for the year ahead. Since North Korea had recently introduced a new technology, fire, the upcoming five-year plan will be called "The Bronze Age" and feature the introduction of cooking pots.



Britain experienced a freezing winter instead of predicted mild.

Thomas Siefert said only one type of person regularly made accurate predictions: mothers. They continually say things like: "If you drink that glass of stain-berry juice while lying on the couch, you'll spill it. If you get your face dirty, I will have to spit in a hanky and use it to rub your face clean." Etc.

Thomas' response: "Mom, stop it, I'm 43 years old now." Lift Lurker (named Otis Schindler in the newspaper versions of this diary) came up with five rather courageous predictions for the year ahead.

- 1) Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt will adopt Jennifer Aniston.
- 2) China and India will unite into one massive country. The residents of Chindia will speak Chindi and the national dish will be steamed tandoori vegetarian wonton curry noodles on basmati rice.
- 3) War will finally break out between North and South Korea.

The result will be four Koreas: North Korea, South Korea, East Korea and West Korea.

4) Japan will rearm and release an armoured giant Godzilla monster with stealth technology and radioactive flames. Then the world will finally understand their obsession with robots.

5) Everyone will start wearing automatic translation devices. Thus we can all fulfill our fantasies of listening to say, Queen Elizabeth, speak Jamaican English. "Dis yo' Queen speaking, mon."

Reader SEJ, (Jason Sydun) pricked up his ears at that last comment. Google is already testing such a gadget, he said, for launch later this year.

Here's a demo of it: Interesting. Let's prepare for the Google translator launch by holding a contest to nominate the most incongruous speechmaker with the most incon-

gruous language.

I nominate Hamlet and his "to be or not to be" soliloquy, which I want Google's amazing translation device to turn into Singaporean English.

Original: "To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them. To die -- to sleep, No more."

Singaporean English version: To be, can or not-ah? That question I asking. Is it more good to be hit by plenty big trouble? Or to fight back and finish all quick-quick? I dead; I sleep; Aiye eah. Enough already-la.

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