

Maldives at a crossroads

PROF. SELINA MOHSIN

STREET protests, unruly mob violence, nightly raids and destructive slogans against the ruling party have put the first democratic government of Maldives in a vulnerable position. Dollar shortage for over a year resulted in a flourishing black market and economic instability. Recently, the government acknowledged that the local currency, Ruyffia was overvalued and a decision was taken by President Nasheed to devalue it. This was backed by IMF and the central bank. But, for a country almost totally reliant on imports for fuel and consumer goods, the costs of living for average Maldivians has exacerbated to almost 20%. It would have been prudent to devalue the currency incrementally over the last two years. But the current move was imperative to save the country from further disasters.

The high costs of living led to confrontation between the opposition and the ruling MDP parties. Since the opposition parties are going through internal strife with former President Gayoom forming a new ZDRP party yet unregistered, the devaluation of the currency has provided an opportune moment to protest against the government and create a smokescreen over their own political wrangling. They claim that the government is responsible for financial mismanagement and reckless spending without investing in productive resources. The youth are being used as pawns and the recent unrest has been termed by

the opposition parties as youth movement reminiscent of political movements in the Middle East. For their own vested interest opposition parties appear to have incredibly short memories. Most have forgotten that in 2008 the World Bank stated that Maldives was in a volatile economic situation. The budget deficit stood at

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31% of the GDP, inflation at 12% and the economy was reeling from massive fiscal expansion with the government's wage bill increases. When President Nasheed came to power after the first multi-party democratic election, the World Bank noted that Nasheed had inherited the worst economic situation that

any country faced since the 1950s. Recently, after international media coverage of days of violent demonstration across the capital Male', countries that have tourists travelling to the Maldives have warned their citizens of security problems. Maldives was identified by Hong Kong as 'amber' after several nights of severe protests. This



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threat indicator now ranks the Maldives alongside Israel, Iran, Indonesia, Russia and Pakistan. China's Xinhua news agency reported a government spokesperson as saying that those who plan to visit the Maldives or are already there should "monitor the situation and exercise caution." Chinese

Representatives of Maldives tourism industry attending the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai, the regions largest such expo, claimed that cancellations are being made because of fears of security amid angry political rallies. Tourism is the largest dollar earner in the country and these cancellations will result in

severe decrease in the country's foreign exchange earnings.

It is pertinent to mention here that the tourism industry of the country has been carefully engineered to avoid interaction between travelers and locals. Almost all tourist resorts are located in individual islands with little connection with the capital, Male'. Even the airport is on a separate island and it is perfectly natural for foreigners visiting Maldives to have no idea of the political background to their holiday. But, press coverage by international media has created a negative perception that will have adverse effects on the country's earnings.

The Foreign Minister of Maldives, Mr. Ahmed Naseem accused opposition parties of 'misleading' international media which has impacted on the country's lucrative tourist industry.

He further added that "People who organize such protests should take full responsibility for the images and disruption and damages to property caused." There was instant reaction from opposition leader Thasmeen Ali who said he was "utterly surprised" that a member of the current government that has always stood for freedom of speech and democratic reforms, would find protests "unreasonable" on the basis of protecting tourism. He completely ignored the fact that tourism is the most profitable asset. To overlook it reveals a total disregard for the good of the country with an innate desire to discredit the ruling government at any cost. Speaking at a rally, President

Nasheed stated that the government's currency devaluation was backed by IMF and challenged the opposition to defeat him in an election rather than attempting to topple the government illegitimately.

Peaceful protests are legal but somehow many democratic countries are incapable of doing so due to lust for power and hidden grievances. A Government spokesperson in the Maldives stated "In the Middle East, you have democrats on the streets bringing down dictatorships. Ironically, in Maldives the parties of former dictatorship are trying to bring down democracy."

Mr. Robert Blake, the US Assistant Secretary of State visiting Maldives said that "Even in an older and more established democracies such as ours, politicians find it difficult to work together across party lines in a spirit of fairness and bipartisanship for the sake of governing well. But, when they do, everybody benefits."

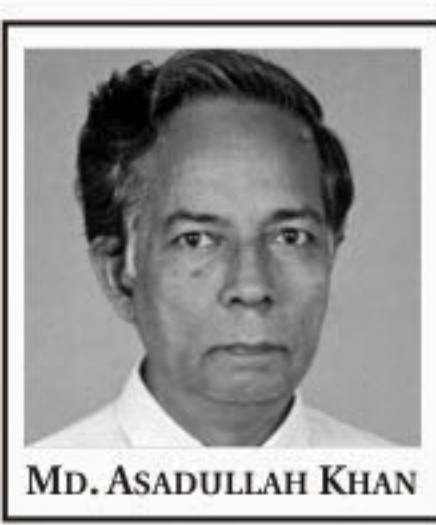
A dialogue was held a few days back by representatives of the government and party youth leaders. It was unsuccessful. The youth leaders demanded further reforms to reforms that have already been undertaken. To ask for the moon is a means of thwarting any useful dialogue.

It appears that the current unrestrained demonstrations are not merely against a rise in the costs of living but to bring the government of President Nasheed down. Such is the peril of democracy.

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BITTER TRUTH

Do environment a favour



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

Warming and destruction of wildlife with concomitant effort to conserve biodiversity, the world's rich nations hardly followed up on their rhetoric. The hope and sense of purpose have been tempered by disappointment and disillusionment.

The second convention signed in Rio emphasized the need to stem the loss of biodiversity, the irreplaceable variety of plant and animal life around the globe. Every year, 20,000 species become extinct. The agreement calls on countries to identify endangered species and preserve the places where they live.

The Convention underscored that when a company manufactured medicine and other commercial products with ingredients from a rare plant or animal, it should share the proceeds with the nation where the discovery was made. The Convention has failed to stop the inexorable advance of logging companies, settlers and land speculators who are chopping down or torching tropical forests before all their biological treasures are discovered.

The utility of the forest is boundless. In the rain forest the understory palm trees use branches growing out of their trunks to make baskets that become compost machines for falling leaves, which keep the trees alive. In the ecosystem of the tropics, termites eat and digest cellulose, a major component of plant tissue, without the decay of cellulose. Hidden world connect to things that hide them. Within the bark of a redwood lies moss under which live loads and insects.

Despite the warnings, destruction of forests and their wild life goes unabated. It is in the tropics that the battle to preserve what scientists call biodiversity will be won or lost. Tropical forests cover only 7% of the earth's surface but house between

50% and 80% of the planet's species.

Experts fear that invaluable lowland forests are likely to vanish from many parts of the world. Protected areas are not always better off. Many national parks and designated wild life sanctuaries are safe only on paper.

With the shrinking of forest areas, wild life resources are fast disappearing. Outside the protected areas, Asia's giant cats are now a vanishing breed. Even inside the parks the tigers are succumbing to poaching and the relentless pressure of human population. On the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans, tigers are hunted down.

The basic facts relating to destruc-

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tion of forests worldwide other than human actions have been widely accepted. We are adding 3 billion tons a year of carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other harmful trace gases. The prescribed cure seems deceptively simple: reduce fossil fuel emissions, stop producing CFCs, stop deforestation and start replanting.

Forests are carbon dumps: trees extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, emit oxygen and store the carbon. We must preserve the forests that still stand and restore those that have been destroyed. It is only logical that the countries that control potential forest areas will begin to demand rent in one form or another for the service which they provide to the rest of the world.

It should be no surprise that forests are being destroyed. Most people who live in and around them are poor, and their population growth continues. We must concede that the people actually carrying out the

destruction are obeying the first rule of any living being: to survive. Political problems often contribute to the destruction. In Teknaf for example, there is a steady influx of refugees from Myanmar, and in Costa Rica political refugees from neighbouring Central American countries continue the slashing process to build habitat and scratch out a few corn patches.

To preserve an environment, wetlands or forests, there must be an acceptable level of economic well being of the people who live in and around them. Poor people who lack food to eat or fuel to burn lack restraint as well. Without some economic surplus in human society

there will never be meaningful conservation. It is true that these poor masses are destroying their own world, but they have their priorities too. They must say: "If you care about my rain forests, you make it worth my while to save them."

Effort must be made to raise the living standards of the people in and around the remaining forests. We must pay the people who own these utilities. This is why the climate adaptation fund should be channeled to countries affected by climate change.

At this critical point of our existence, even developed countries can't afford to dismiss the growing concern about earth's future or their own countries' environmental woes. It has been stressed that variety is the spice of life or more correctly it is the very stuff of life. Life needs diversity because of the interdependencies that link flora and fauna and the variations within species allows them to adapt to environmental challenges.

But ironically, as the world's population explodes, other life forms continue to go extinct. And surely humans are indulging in a risky game. Many of us are mistakenly prone to believe that we don't need the great variety of earth's species to survive.

Extinction is a natural calamity that is irreversible. As these low species go extinct, they take away with them the survival mechanism of other species. Dealing with the extinction crisis is no simple matter, since much of the world's biodiversity resides in the poorest nations.

These countries can't spend large sums of money to save some species be it elephant or orchid when a sizeable percentage of the people live below the poverty line. Developed countries must offer development aid and give local people economic alternatives to cutting forests and tilling the land. People in poor and vulnerable countries should not be asked to choose between short-term survival and long-term environmental needs.

The money should come from international sources, and the accord reached at the Rio and Copenhagen climate meets made this clear. Either the more affluent world helps now or the world as a whole will lose out.

Because of shrimp culture, mangrove forests in the Sundarbans are being cut relentlessly at the expense of the wild life. Curiously enough, some opportunistic species of insects are multiplying as a consequence of global warming resulting from deforestation.

In the backdrop of the rallying cry to vote for the Sundarbans to help it win a place in the

7 wonders of the world, there has to be a bold initiative on the part of the government and public to rejuvenate and restore the forest cover of the country that has now come down to 7% against an indispensable requirement of 25% for sustainable living.

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Who is robbing whom?



Nury VITTACHI

A computer opened a supermarket for business, turning on the lights, switching on the cash registers and unlocking the doors. But it was a public holiday, so

no staff turned up. Yet shoppers did. The first used a self-service till to pay for her goods. Other customers at Pak 'n' Save, one of the largest supermarkets in Hamilton, New Zealand, sneaked off without paying.

Ninety minutes later, someone called the police. They pulled into the supermarket's parking lot just as many motorists zoomed off.

"This is funny on so many levels," said TS (reader Thomas Seifert), who told me about the incident. "You have people who seem nice and normal on the surface turning into looters at the first chance they get, possibly motivated by revenge for all those years spent trying to steer a trolley with a wonky wheel around the shop."

Professor Paul Morris from Wellington's Victoria University reckoned the high rate of theft could be due to the fact that the incident happened on Good Friday, when the more moralistic people were at church. "It's the secular who have gone shopping on Good Friday and you've put them to the test," he told the Dominion Post.

Not sure if I agree, despite that fact that I'm more moralistic than most people. I always complain if I find my children watching pirate DVDs. "This is not a pirate DVD," they object. "It's about talking animals."

Anyway, I have sympathy for the people who didn't pay. Supermarkets rob us every day of the week. If a customer robs them on one occasion, it's hard to feel sorry for them.

Take my local supermarket for example, which I shall Park 'n' Rob, with due cause. This is the least moral entity I've ever encountered, not excluding the murderers I met when I was a court reporter.

The person who stacks the shelves gives customers one message, the person who writes the shelf price tickets gives us another, and the person who programmes the cash register's barcode reader a third. The result: fooled customers;

The posters advertising discounts are blatant lies, with "sale prices" being higher than normal prices; The supermarket's internal, managed inflation rate is clearly modelled on that of Germany in the 1920s multiplied by Zimbabwe in 2008.

If anyone ever robbed this supermarket, I would organise massive public celebrations to mark the fact that someone has taken a tiny step towards resetting the equilibrium of the universe.

Anyway, there was more excitement to come at the supermarket in New Zealand. Police discovered that the computer had also turned on the security cameras and filmed the whole episode. It revealed that 12 shoppers paid, and 12 didn't. At the time of writing, half the naughty ones had returned and paid the cash, while the other half were given a one-week deadline before the video tape goes to the police.

Last night, my local Park 'n' Rob had a sign announcing a "sale" on my favourite fruit: the conference pear. They were 52% higher than normal.

From now on, let's all take our own security cameras when we go shopping, and one day one of us will catch the real criminals in the act.

Mwah ha ha ha ha!

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