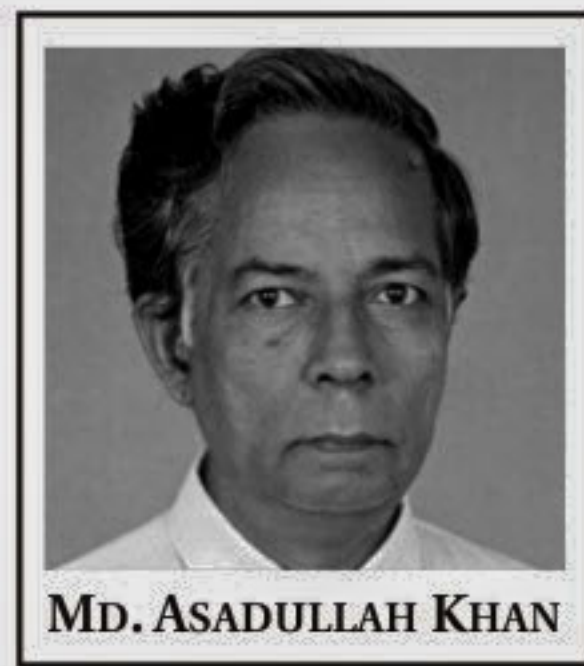


BITTER TRUTH

Committed action to ward off disaster needed



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

MOST of the news about the environment, either here in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the world, 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.

Because of human greed and insensible activities, the world is losing a marvelous diversity of genetic material that has enabled the plant kingdom to overcome pests, blights and droughts through the ages. In Bangladesh, we hear about threats to wildlife, as well as aquatic and marine life.

The environmental crisis points to one salient fact: "Poverty is the greatest polluter." Poor people in our regions have contributed to ecological destruction through burning firewood, clearing forest patches, and burning live trees in brick kilns. True, all of them are not being malevolent but are simply living off the resources available. This galloping poverty is a challenge to all of us just struggling to survive in an unforgiving environment.

The global environment, both ecological and human, now seems worse than it was when the first "Earth Day" summit was held in April 22, 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 remains intact. According to FAO, on average, 15.4 million hectares of tropical forests disappeared annually over the past decade. Rain forest loss was the highest in Asia at 2.2 million hectares per year.

With population pressure mounting in our land-starved country, most people grab forest 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, cutting a swath of devastation across the precious ecosystems. We have failed to understand that the earth is one intricate system of links by which by which all life is shaped. Lose one species and a thousand others will be on the brink of extinction, eventu-

ally threatening our survival. Rain running off deforested northern hills has badly eroded the soil. Assault on our forest resources, rampant felling of trees, jhum cultivation, and poaching in the reserve forests have led to disappearance of many plant and animal species. Fish population has also declined. 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

Since the world really needs the remaining forests, a crash effort must be made to raise the living standard of the people living in and around them, and population growth has to be limited. More appropriately speaking, we must pay the people who own this marvel of utility.



WAHID ADNAN / DRIKNEWS

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. Almost 4 million people now depend directly or indirectly on this forest for their livelihood.

Other than logging and slash and burn practices, illegal quarrying has stripped the earth of its foliage, which loosens silt that eventually clogs the rivers and waterways and worsens flooding. In almost all places, including ours, greed, shortsighted environmental policies and corruption cause much of the damage.

Such indiscriminate felling of trees has been stopped in India by an order of the Supreme Court. The court order banned felling of trees in all natural forests areas except under state working plans, suspended the running of saw, plywood and veneer mills, and made cen-

tral clearance mandatory under state governments for their operation.

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 recent past in China, Brazil and Madagascar. Humans have hurt coastal and marine ecosystems by draining wetlands, cutting mangroves, trawling oceans for fish,

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 have so long been fought over territory, the future may see "green wars" triggered by shortages of such basic resources as topsoil or water.

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 intrude into the existing forests, the soil is constantly exposed

to wind and water. The result: the world wears away 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.

Happily, the prime minister, while inaugurating the tree plantation programme, has exhorted the citizens to plant at least three saplings in a year. Forest officials and different agencies take up a programme of planting saplings throughout the county, but do not care to see if the saplings planted are alive and growing. Stunted growth of trees planted on the sideways of Dhaka city roads and road islands years ago only make it clear that these were done in the most haphazard way without proper knowledge about the depth of the soil required for luxuriant growth.

Encouragingly, after decades of helter-skelter development in which the dark side of development was ignored, governments and citizens around the world have woken up to the damage that has been done to the precarious balance between man and his surroundings. Paradoxically, enough, the economic crisis and health sector ills have brought home the need for a more responsible way of doing business as well as to pause and reflect on how the environment could have been better managed.

But the stark fact is, since the world really needs the remaining forests, a crash effort must be made to raise the living standard of the people living in and around them, and population growth has to be limited. More appropriately speaking, we must pay the people who own these utilities. This puts issues like foreign aid and Third World debt into a new perspective.

The writer is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

Enduring links with Maldives

SELINA MOHSIN

IT is not merely the numerous exotic islands of the Maldives spread out on the Indian Ocean, but also the courageous and indomitable spirit of the people that makes the country a memorable one. Recently, the Foreign Minister of Maldives, Hon. Ahmed Naseem visited Bangladesh for a short trip.

During a politically momentous period towards the end of Gayoom's 30 year regime, I was posted to the Maldives as High Commissioner of Bangladesh. The first multi-party presidential election was to be held within a few months. The political scenario was an unprecedented one. Events unfolded like acts in a dramatic play as we waited for the impending election. Thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers, including illegal, unemployed and without money roamed the streets, hungry, angry and desperate. Instigated by rumours that catapulted into fears they sought help from the Bangladesh Mission. A demanding period began.

After the first multi-party election, President Nasheed ratified the ILO Convention. The condition of migrant workers had to be stabilised. Ahmed Naseem, who was then the state minister for foreign affairs, accompanied me during discussions with the labour minister and was present at meetings with the Vice President, Dr. Md. Waheed, whose assistance went a long way in solving labour difficulties. It was possible to legalise over 17,000 illegal Bangladeshi workers. The process was complicated, complex and fraught with hurdles, but the workers were saved from harassment.

Then a new problem emerged. Unexpectedly, the labour minister decided to impose a moratorium against all Bangladeshi workers. I registered a strong protest on grounds of human rights and discrimination. This was immediately endorsed by Ahmed Naseem, who could not agree to such a sanction against migrant workers from only Bangladesh.

Yet again, another situation arose. Maldives was closing down missions in selected countries as part of a retrenchment policy and its mission in Bangladesh was one of them. Meeting with the then Foreign Minister, Dr. Shaheed elicited negative response. The only way forward was to see

President Nasheed, to whom I reiterated the close ties between the two countries and timely assistance provided by Bangladesh to Maldives at time of natural disasters. Moreover, Bangladeshi labourers helped the country in its development process. The president assured me that the mission would remain open, and within six months a high commissioner would be posted in Bangladesh. Mr. Ahmed Sareer arrived as the High Commissioner. Bilateral relations reached a higher plane through mutual cooperation.

Living in an isolated state in the Indian Ocean, the people of Maldives were unaware of the rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh. This needed to be shared, so discussions were held with the president and the vice

Now, with the ruling MDP having a majority in the Parliament, implementation of reforms to stabilise the economy, proactive policies and positive relations with Saarc, China, and western states, Maldives will go forward as a vibrant middle income country in the world stage.

president. As a result, on March 26, 2009, the Independence and National Day of Bangladesh, Dr. Waheed announced a Cultural Agreement between Bangladesh and Maldives.

I finalised the Agreement and later prepared MOUs on manpower and education after negotiations. Bangladeshi physicians were recruited for hospitals/clinics and sports promoted to develop intercultural interactions. Initial discussions were undertaken on trade and investment with exports from Bangladesh of medicines, electrical goods, non-perishable food items and others.

In 2010, a 14-day Cultural Festival of Bangladesh was held in the Maldives. While arranging the Festival, I received concerted cooperation and help from Ahmed Naseem

through regular meetings when management challenges were discussed and actions taken. It was an arduous task, but when the festival began with "Historical Links between Bangladesh and Maldives," chaired by the vice president, the exertions were forgotten. Life in Maldives was not always stressful work. Sometimes, visits to enchanting resorts and inhabited islands gave me quality leisure time and provided intimate knowledge of the country and its people.

During the current visit by the new Foreign Minister, Ahmed Naseem, bilateral focus was placed on skilled manpower for Maldives, collaboration in education and enterprise building, recruitment of Bangladeshi physicians and nurses, cultural exchanges, collaboration on improving tourism in Bangladesh, possibility of air flight by Biman from Europe via Maldives, trade and investment.

The foreign minister pointed out that customs duty in Maldives would be replaced by Goods and Sales Tax (GST) by the end of the year. This positive move will enable all countries including Bangladesh to trade with Maldives through a much easier procedure. It is a matter of some satisfaction that I had promoted almost all the areas of mutual interest at a turbulent period in Maldives. This was possible through negotiations and collaboration with the current government of the country.

During my tenure, great changes took place, opposition parties with a majority in the Parliament turned confrontational, making it difficult for the ruling party to govern effectively. Now, with the ruling MDP having a majority in the Parliament, implementation of reforms to stabilise the economy, proactive policies and positive relations with Saarc, China, and western states, Maldives will go forward as a vibrant middle income country in the world stage.

During the recent visit, it was a pleasure to see the Foreign Secretary, Ahmed Naseem with his warmth and amiability. Mr. Jabbar of MDP, a new friend, was full of good will and commitments while the high commissioner praised the efforts I had taken to raise bilateral relations.

My interest in this bewitching island state will remain forever.

The writer is former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to the Maldives and former Head of Human Resource Development Initiative, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, UK.

3 new flying animal tales



Nury Vittachi

IN the fearless world of journalism, there are "slow news days," when nothing at all happens, "heavy news days" when loads of interesting things happen, and "flying cow days" when columnists leap up and dance. The last of these occurs when readers around the world spot

Major News Events of Global Importance for Columnists, which almost always feature a four-legged animal in mid-air.

Woo-hoo -- three arrived in one day, sent in by alert readers.

1) A man was driving along a dark road next to a farm last week. He hit a black cow, causing it to fly over his car. As the cow shot upwards, it peeled back the bonnet, obscuring the windshield and causing the car to smash into an electricity pole. A surge of electricity ran down the wires, and made the meters at the ends to explode. This set fire to the cow shed. The flames melted a water pipe in the roof. The water put out the fire.

The whole incident, which took place on Monday last week in the Taranaki district of New Zealand, is the long-awaited "smoking gun" that proves the laws of physics which govern the cartoon world really exist.

Suck on that, non-believers. Cartoons are REAL.

2) A dog fell out of a clear sky last week. The white poodle landed in the grounds of a nursing home in Vancouver, Canada. Vets bandaged up some broken bones and are hopeful she'll make a full recovery. No one knows where she came from, since there were no planes flying overhead at the time. The main theories are: (a) she was dropped by a giant bird; (b) she ejected from an invisible stealth bomber she was piloting; and (c) she materialised from a parallel dimension in which poodles have invented molecular transporters.

The third option is the most scientific, so is probably the real story.

3) A cow who thinks she's a horse has been leaping over fences and giving people rides. Luna, a German cow, became a horse-substitute after the parents of 15-year-old Regina Meyer refused to buy her a pony. Now Regina's cow is a show-jumping champ. But since cows weigh 600 kilos, everyone's hoping she doesn't fall over onto judges pinning dressage medals to her reins.

Here in Asia, humans have a long-running love affair with cows, sometimes literally.

For example, Gau Brands, an Indian firm, last week announced that it had turned cow-poo and cow-urine into cosmetic products, including cow-soap and cow-toothpaste.

Consumers are urged to use these in place of soap and toothpaste; items which the company (surprise, surprise) has discovered are extremely harmful to humans.

"It gave me immense satisfaction to learn that people can easily switch over to such (cow-poo) products rather than using products that have harsh chemicals that harm the skin of people," company representative Dr Pravin Togadia told the Ahmedabad Mirror.

Cow-poo cosmetics also cure cancer, the company claims. That would be impressive except for the fact that every medical product in Asia cures cancer. Even Asia-made suicide pills cure cancer.

Meanwhile, please continue to tip me off about large airborne quadrupeds. And if you are planning to go outdoors today, be sure to take a strong umbrella.

To know more about flying animal tales, visit our columnist at <http://mrjam.typepad.com>