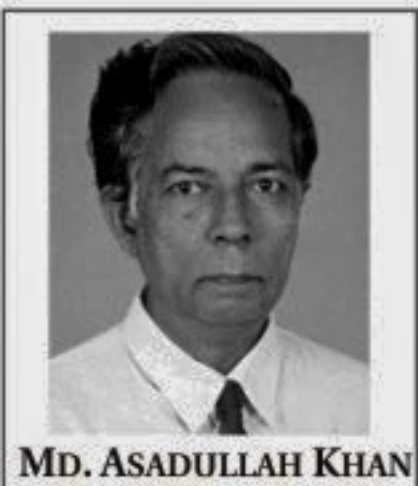


BITTER TRUTH

Stop migration to urban centres



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE economic situation in the country is perhaps heading towards chaos, with no apparent signs of a redeeming future for the people. Millions of them have started wondering if elections or a people's

government could bring about any substantial change in their lot. Most of the countryside, where 70% of the people live, is as poor as ever. The lower middle-class could not share the country's economic growth.

As political conflict lingers, reform measures stall, economic woes mount, more and more people in the countryside are fleeing from there. Another reason is the lack of expansion of basic industries away from Dhaka and Chittagong, which could offer employment facilities to many unemployed people.

The rural areas have vast possibilities. The populace is implicitly committed and imbued with a sense of integrity and sincerity of purpose. But these potentialities till now remain to be exploited. Because of lack of patronage, entrepreneurship and motivation, much of the countryside is facing insurmountable problems -- poverty, illiteracy, corruption, social breakdown, vanishing resources, drought and environmental catastrophe.

Until very recently, this country was termed an international basket case. Natural calamities make things worse here. Happily, the country is slowly recovering from the ravages of some of these scourges through access to modern and scientific techniques. In the face of political bickering, vandalism, extortion, terrorism, disintegrating transport system, power crisis, and other disincentives, investors are withdrawing from Bangladesh. Bangladeshis too are pulling out their money.

But, despite the threats to the growth of the economy, there is a lot of enthusiasm and craving for a better life among the people. What is needed is for the political leaders and industrial entrepreneurs to consider self-sacrifice rather than self-service. The largely illiterate and overwhelmingly poor electorate signaled their disillusionment with the previous regime's failure to deliver on its tall promises to spur equitable economic growth. Agricultural and industrial rejuvenation as expected by the people did not happen.

Poverty has assumed alarming proportions. Battered by grinding poverty and inability to pay the loans they took from NGOs, working class people are selling their organs to stay alive, oblivious to how it may affect their health or working capacity.

The ruling party has to stem the eroding public confidence in the government. What is needed is

probity in public life as well as on the part of our leaders accompanied by tough and consistent enforcement of laws. Containment of corruption in public life would reassure investors from within and without. Senseless bureaucratic regulation and political interference have almost stalled the growth of industries and development activities in the country.

If we want to stop migration of people from the countryside and the poor people to stop selling their kidneys and livers, then the government has to set up agro-based industries, maybe on a small scale, in the rural areas to bring a sense of reassurance in their lives. Desperate to overcome poverty, they have taken up the last best option. Rural exodus will continue unabated unless a production base is created in rural areas.

The stark reality is that in general people's purchasing power has gone below any conceivable

limit. In some areas, disgruntled producers and sellers blocked road traffic by heaping up potatoes and bananas because of low prices and poor turnout of purchasers. This also occurs with other commodities at harvesting time. Surely, things would not have come to such a sorry pass if we had agro-based industries in the vicinity.

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The communication network and hazards in the transportation of perishables have accentuated the frustration of the growers and small scale traders. Many of them have left production and business after incurring heavy losses one after another. On the other hand, it must be emphasised that agriculture faces a crisis of land as the amount of cultivable land for food grains is decreasing every year. Worse, there have been no breakthroughs or investment in technology.

The present crisis has resulted from complacency arising out of miscalculation of the actual population figure and the food yield needed to feed the increasing population. What needs to be recognised is that agriculture is losing its viability. Agricultural land is being used for non-agricultural purposes and profitability has not

increased as land holdings have become smaller and investment is negligible. There is disincentive amongst the younger rural people who had always worked in farms and were pretty happy in the earlier days to get involved in agriculture, which forebodes an uncertain future now.

With 30 lakh new mouths added up every year to the existing population, there is need for diversification and innovative thinking in this area. Bangladesh agriculture now needs to find jobs for those who are under-employed, to discover and implement a market approach to agriculture. It is said that Bangladesh lives in its villages. But those villagers need to live as well as the rest of Bangladesh for our growth to be truly meaningful.

The benefits of economic growth must be distributed evenly; such growth which was spurred by the successive governments' stray economic liberalisation has tended to benefit the already affluent class. The poor must be provided greater access to educational and employment opportunities. It must be brought home to all of us entrusted with the gigantic task of planning and drawing the future strategy of the country that nearly 50% of the population is under 25 years of age. These youths, if disgruntled, can become explosive, blocking the little bit of reform and structural reorganisation that are taking place here and there.

The other key issues that need to be addressed are population control and empowering women in the rural areas. Population control effort needs to be energetically activated so that the population does not overwhelm the limited resources. Sadly true, the rural areas as well as the streets of big cities are teeming with boys and girls whose battle for a decent life was lost the day they were born.

The state of the world population report made public in earlier days, which addressed the issue of empowerment of rural women as the key to solving the population problem, should be given a priority cognisance. Our effort to remove gender disparity in the rural populace can meet with success when the people are more educated, culturally advanced and forward looking.

Economic expectation has turned into disappointment as the price-hike of all food items has shattered the lives of the fixed income groups in the urban and rural areas equally. In the rural areas there is desperate poverty mainly because of bad politics and uncaring governments. Without increasing the agricultural production in a land-scarce country, building an infrastructure for industrial base and implementing poverty eradication programmes, stopping migration of about 5 lakh people every year to the capital city will remain a distant dream.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Boundaries of friendship



MILIA ALI

FRIENDSHIP is always sweet responsibility, never an opportunity," wrote Kahlil Gibran. A recent incident set me thinking about the "responsibilities" and the "opportunities" that come with friendship. Of course, the term "friend" is generic and doesn't always convey the true nature of the diverse relationships that one develops in the course of one's life.

However, the most remarkable aspect of friendship is that it has undefined borders and is constantly evolving. A friend can assume any role: soul mate, confidante, mentor and, occasionally, just someone to share good times with. Yet the ties of friendship are fragile because there are no strings attached. It's a relationship built upon mutual respect and love. Also, one needs to work within self-imposed limits and boundaries and surf on a shifting tide, since life is in a state of flux for us all. But the most challenging part is that, more than other relationships, friendship tests one's capacity to accept, endure and make sacrifices.

These reflections arose following the passing away of my dear friend Pat last week. She succumbed to cancer -- the disease didn't even give Pat a chance. She was consumed in two months. Pat had all the attributes of a fun person as well as a loyal friend. She would cook a great meal for you in moments, take you out to the Salon for a manicure and make small talk. At the same time she was as solid as a rock when providing support during hours of need.

My most treasured memories of Pat date back to when I visited her in San Francisco at a time when I was going through a difficult life-changing experience. She and her husband Tom never asked any probing questions but made sure that I felt secure in the knowledge that they were there for me. The days were spent in pleasant drives through the

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Napa valley or leisurely walks in the Redwood forest or stopping at a country restaurant for a sumptuous meal preceded by home-baked loaves dipped in fresh-smelling olive oil. The conversation focused on children, the good old days we spent together and the state of affairs in Bangladesh (where Tom and Pat had spent four years!)

Just outside the front door in Pat's home, there was a Chinese wind chime which made sweet tinkling noises, creating a meditative environment. I would lie awake at night for hours listening to the ringing sound, which changed its rhythm and tune with the intensity of the passing wind. Somehow it helped relieve my tension and stress. Perhaps the chimes broke the silence of my inner solitude!

It is an interesting coincidence that when I last spoke to Pat she told me that, because it was difficult to move her to her bedroom upstairs, she was sleeping in the guestroom next to the entrance. A strange thought crossed my mind -- did she also lie awake listening to the chimes to console her through her lonely and painful nights?

The one regret that I have is that I never visited Pat during her last days. I wanted to, but when I called and told her, she cried and said: "Not now, I will let you know when I am ready!" At first I was confused and somewhat hurt. Friends advised me to go despite Pat's reluctance, since this was my last chance to spend time with her. However, I thought about it and concluded that the journey was not for me but for Pat. It mattered little what I felt -- the important point was: would meeting me make her happier? Or, like many people suffering from cancer, did she want her dear friends to remember her as she should be remembered -- a lively, beautiful and loving person. Seeing her vulnerable and suffering would, perhaps, cloud the fond memories of the happy times we spent together!

Pat is no longer with us but the experience of losing her opened up a floodgate of emotions. Not just sorrow and grief but introspection about worldly relationships. I also reflected deeply about how different people face the challenge of death in different ways. The fear of the unknown must override all other feelings, even for those who are deeply religious and believe that there is something better waiting in the next world.

However, a close friend gave me rather a different perspective. According to her, some people prepare to make the journey by severing ties with the world that they have come to love and cherish. They turn themselves off from their known environment and gradually make the transition to the other side. Perhaps this is why Pat was reluctant to meet her friends from this side. I wonder whether the wind chimes that she had lovingly decorated her front door with, created equal music between this world and the next to help Pat's passage more harmonious. I will never know...

I keep on asking myself: "Did I pass the test of fulfilling my responsibilities as a friend? Or, did I use Pat's hesitation as an opportunity to ease myself out of a difficult meeting?" More importantly, did I pass the litmus test of friendship?

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Collective MADness

ANGELA ROBINSON

IF those of us who lived through the Cold War period in the West were told we would read an article in one of our prestigious newspapers about the absurdity of nuclear weapons, such as the one by Barrister Harun ur Rashid, we would never have believed it!

The Cold War was, indeed, a time of madness, especially as MAD came to mean Mutually Assured Destruction. The commercial pressure of the military-industrial complex (as Eisenhower called it) was more than some western governments could stand up to because of the thousands of well-paid jobs that went into making these weapons that were, as the good Barrister told us, un-useable.

There was also the courage needed to ask questions about the practices or policies of nuclear weapons, for fear of being called "unrealistic," "Lefties," "bearded weird-ies," "the woolly-hatted, and woolly-headed, brigade," "stoogies of Russia" etc. The implication was that even asking questions about these issues meant that one was being disloyal to one's nation -- and the Western world!

In those days, a whole mindset of hatred took over. Every society has a small minority of people with a psychological need to hate in order to preserve their own sense of identity; to control such "alligators" you must give them a smaller and smaller pool to swim in -- not invite them to take over! Exaggerated claims were made about the strength of "the Russian bear" that was out to destroy the West -- I remember the rhetoric -- and posters! -- when the whole struggling, ramshackle empire was doomed to fall apart.

I still have the poster, unfortunately not dated, produced by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, that says: "The money required to provide adequate food, water, education, health and housing for everyone in the world has been estimated at \$17 billion a year. It is a huge sum of money ... about as much as the world spends on arma-

ments every two weeks." For that was the real tragedy.

For 50 years or so, the spending priorities of the West were so skewed to what was considered "security" that a huge percentage of some of the best brains were drawn into its vortex, instead of their being focussed -- along with huge sums of money -- on closing the much more dangerous gap between rich and poor. The Brandt report in the 1960s warned that, if the western countries did not respond to the needs of the poor of the world, they would come swarming into western countries in a tide that could not be controlled. Never say we weren't warned!

It is not those that talk about justice and rightness who are being "unrealistic" but those with the hating mindset who can only think of "winners" and "losers." Will we never learn that that way of thinking is a guarantee that everyone loses?

My own "conversion" experience on the nuclear issue came in the 1980s when I was the minister of a little village church in the north of England, and someone suggested starting a Peace Group. I had thought I was reasonably well educated (six years at Oxford must mean something) and had I not read the *Observer* cover to cover every week? I began to research and was shocked to discover the extent to which even "educated" people had been kept in the dark about the nuclear issue. I learnt, for instance, that decisions

had been made on nuclear weapons that not all the members of the British cabinet knew about. The more I knew, the worse it got. It seemed that there was a "worm" under every stone that was turned over.

The final straw for me was the evidence of the treatment, by the West, of the islands of the Pacific, which were used for trials of the atom bomb. At first, the damage they did was not understood but, when it was, it was often concealed, and one western nation, which shall be nameless, deliberately kept no records of the numbers of those who were airlifted out of its territories and hospitalised in Europe, nor the numbers of deformed babies. These innocent people were totally non-aligned in the "Cold War," but it was assumed that no one would bother about them because they were not politically important.

True "peace" is a great deal more than how many weapons you have. True "prosperity" is a great deal more than indulging middle and upper class consumers. Are we not all under a divine mandate to look after the justice and rightness of the world, and to discover that, in that case, true peace and prosperity will be God's gifts to us. It is not "the economy, stupid!" Nor is it the "war against terrorism" or against anything else.

We must learn from the mistakes of the Cold War that whipping up hatred for political or commercial purposes -- or for "religious" power games -- has appalling results. The best sort in the military -- and police and law courts -- have always refused to indulge such thinking. God bless them! If they can hold steady, there is hope.

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The writer is Church of Bangladesh Chaplain to the English speakers.