

CROSS TALK

High Court's stern directive welcome

Deterrent punishment to those who poison food

THE High Court directive ordering police to file criminal cases against those who use toxic chemicals in fruits couldn't have come a day sooner. Use of extremely hazardous chemicals to artificially ripen and preserve fruits is a heinous crime which has become pervasive all over the country. It exposes consumers to serious health hazards including fatal diseases. It, therefore, demands immediate punitive actions from the government.

A number of studies, among others, by the Institute of Public Health (IPH) and the Institute of Food and Nutrition (IFN) at the University of Dhaka have confirmed the alarming extent to which both the imported and home-grown fruits are adulterated. Notwithstanding such authentic proof of food adulteration, the government only relies on mobile courts, especially during the month of Ramadan, conducted by several government wings including BSTI, DCC and Directorate of Consumers Rights Protection (DCRP) in association with metropolitan magistrates and law enforcing agencies. However, the sporadic nature of such uncoordinated as well as unplanned drives has done little to bring the criminals to heel. In the absence of a well-planned, continuous government monitoring cell, the pernicious practice has kept growing.

In the backdrop of this lax monitoring system, we hope that the High Court directive will propel the law enforcers into taking prompt action without having to wait for nods from higher authorities.

The directive, however, requires law enforcers to invoke the Special Powers Act, 1974, if need be. However, we consider it a Draconian law. Sacrificing human lives at the altar of crass commercialism and profiteering is a crime which must be deterred, and we prefer other laws be used.

As much as we appreciate the court's decision, we cannot but wonder why a similar directive should not apply to all the food items, most of which are similarly adulterated. The most harmful adulterant, formalin, is injected in fish. Other toxins such as artificial colours are used in many food items, which may cause cancer and also badly affect liver, kidney and nerves.

Structurally, what we really need is a task force to look after this affair because neither the National Food Safety Advisory Council nor the Directorate General of Food has been able to ensure food safety for us.

Corruption in toll collection at Jamuna Bridge

Monitoring should be foolproof

A recent probe conducted by the Bangabandhu Bridge Authority (BBA) has unearthed a den of corruption in its toll collection regime. It has found that the culprits involved in the misappropriation of the toll money are on the staff of the company employed for realising the tolls for the BBA.

The news is disconcerting, for in consequence, it is the bridge authority, or the government, for that matter, that is ultimate loser.

As unravelled through the probe, the records have shown that the company employees involved in the act of embezzlement recorded fewer numbers of vehicles in the register book than had actually crossed the bridge over a certain period of time. In a similar fashion, they also showed heavier vehicles as lighter ones.

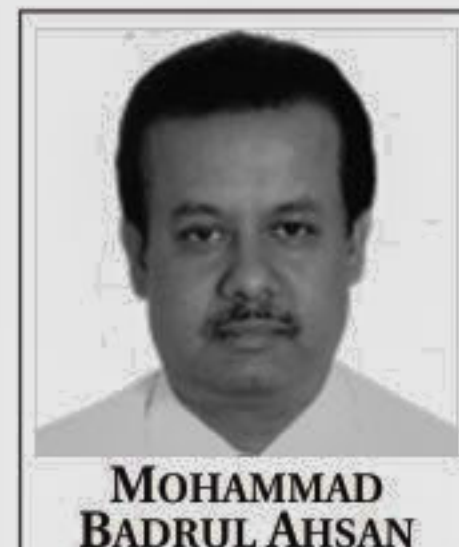
Surprisingly, these kinds of crude methods of cheating are easily detectable by the monitoring mechanism in force including the security cameras taking pictures of the vehicles passing. Similarly, the weighing machines can easily tell the heavier vehicles from the lighter ones.

The BBA probe randomly carried out over a period of three months in the last year, unearthed these irregularities from the video footages. So the proofs are incontrovertible.

The probe report has shed light on only a fraction of the irregularities actually taking place. We do not know for how long the evil practice has been going on.

Clearly, responsibility for the failure to check the ongoing pilferage as well as other cases of irregularities devolves on the company engaged by the BBA to realise the tolls from the bridge users. The BBA itself cannot also shrug off its own responsibility in stemming the rot in time. It should mount further investigation to hold those responsible for this scam to account.

The government should give a serious look into the matter and take steps to strengthen monitoring in order to eradi-



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

MORE than two hundred years ago Benjamin Franklin was a one-man band of talents, a noted polymath, leading

author, printer, political theorist, politician, postmaster, scientist, musician, inventor, satirist, civic activist, statesman, and diplomat. He proved electricity and lived a long life. "Better slip with foot than tongue," is how he concentrated the expression of his prolific life.

Our prime minister doesn't always exercise that wisdom in her choice of spoken words. Most lately she commented on the ruthless murder of a journalist couple, and what she said has left this nation reeling under its impact. Not that the PM has been insensitive or rude. She was quick to give her personal commitment to look after the deceased couple's only child. She also said she was going to personally monitor the investigation so that the killers would be brought to trial.

A perfect picture until then, it became a masterpiece of shattering once the PM tried to speak more on that subject. She said that too many people milling around the crime scene had destroyed evidence and also that it was not the government's responsibility to safeguard people's bedrooms. People didn't know if she was talking as the head of government, or a forensic expert, or the chief of police. Public image is like a conversation. Some people are adept at it, but others find it difficult to carry on.

It was back-to-back in the same week that the PM also told a visiting delegation of the European Union that Dr. Muhammad Yunus should be considered for the top job at the World Bank. A head of government is supposed to get briefed before her meetings with high-powered foreign delegations. We don't know whose

idea it was, but that apparently well-meaning proposition has backfired as yet another harebrained slip of tongue.

The master of minds Sigmund Freud tells us that everybody produces slips of tongue. In 1901, he based his monograph, *Psychopathology of everyday life*, on the assumption that those errors resulted from repressed thoughts. In

thoughts ever rose to their mouths and got them in trouble.

Then we have got the minority side of people who speak whatever comes to their minds. They don't care what they say, true or false, genteel or grotesque, and whom they hurt or whom they please. These are powerful people, who have nothing to fear because nobody dares to challenge them.

That, in a nutshell, is the dynamics

This country is divided into two sides. One side has the majority of people who are afraid to speak their minds. Then we have got the minority side of people who speak whatever comes to their minds.



plain English, people in their subconscious minds carelessly give away what they most consciously try to hide.

In that sense, this country is divided into two sides. One side has the majority of people who are afraid to speak their minds. They plop their thoughts into the river of oblivion, and live in the mortal fear lest those

of our democracy, where the minority is footloose and the majority is tongue-tied. If we closely listen to our politicians, weird expressions, malapropos, shockingly silly comments, vulgar vitriol, incoherent speeches, unwarranted interjections, inflected invectives, terminal threats and inappropriate aspersions characterise their dialogues and monologues. This

Asia's rising economies

DINNA WISNU

IT is nice to "grow up." Indeed, that is the very feeling that should come with economic growth. Busy streets, people working in high-rise offices, decent houses and healthcare, children with quality education and lively markets are a few indicators of economic growth going right. Yet, not everyone is happy. Other countries that have developed for over a century had earlier complained.

In international forums, the rising economies are urged to share their growth with ailing Europe and the USA. Numerous "strategic" and "comprehensive" partnerships and forums emerged. If one looks closer, only few of these partnerships between the "rising" and "ailing" economies are developed on an equal footing.

The heading may be about transfer of technology or promotion of education, but barely any local universities or research institutes obtain any genuine upgrade of knowledge. If one is lucky, a few students or faculty members may be given a few days visiting abroad for projects to hold international conferences or serve as visiting professors to teach a few credit hours. But that's about it.

When it comes to economic cooperation, non-tariff barriers become the new trend. The usually pro-liberal market World Trade Organisation (WTO) allows this.

The biggest barrier lately has been focused on "green" requirements. One must calculate carbon emissions in business, pass certification requirements and count how much biodiversity is conserved in plantations and forests.

Young foreign scholars with little knowledge about socioeconomic or political history come to villages to write reports on whether these economies are green enough or not for their governments to support.

Among the elite, diplomats are pulled-out from reality. The variety of international forums has mush-

roomed. Their frequency has more than doubled in the past decade.

Discussions among heads of state and ministers are intensified and have become so intense that any immediate detrimental consequences to their citizens are considered normal. The obvious examples are the free trade agreements.

These agreements are signed long before there is any clarity on how to improve infrastructure and other trade facilities and long before any step-by-step domestic reform on agricultural, industrial or mining policies.

Any statesman, or even businessman, would know that provision of

No growth will be sustained if the people where the business is operating are marginalised by businesses and government officials. Let us put things back where they should be.

infrastructure, trade facilities or other common goods cannot be started or left alone to the private sector. After all, this is the responsibility of the government. No wonder once the agreements materialise there are more protests than support. Policies become harder to reform because insecurity is higher.

Don't get me wrong. I agree that we must create more partnerships between developed and rising economies to save the earth and prevent climate change while promoting free trade. Yet, the steps taken thus far have been wrong.

The diplomatic steps taken do not solve the problems. If the pattern continues, we are going to witness a serious eruption of anger, disappointment and protests from communities around the world. Not just in the rising economies, but also in developed economies.

Why? Because governments that are detached from society cannot solve society's problems. With more sum-

mits and high-profile talks, more hours are taken away from handling domestic problems.

Too many handshakes and photo-opts have lured leaders to be "rock-stars" on the world stage. International forums can negotiate terms, but what makes a difference is the implementation of the agreements domestically.

Economic growth is different from wealth accumulation and distribution of wealth. What makes any government a hero is when wealth is distributed to as much of the population as possible.

If one wants to be honest, what every human being needs is food,

healthcare, housing, education, decent jobs, lifestyle and some refreshing time. Growth alone cannot deliver these needs to citizens. Even if the government is very responsive, the time lag between economic growth and distribution of wealth is significant.

Let me take the example of Indonesia, India or China. These countries may be rising economies, with increasingly obvious modern living facilities. Yet, a large number of their population still lives below, or just slightly above, the minimum standard. When people go to malls, buy cars or talk on cell phones, this should not be misunderstood as wealth.

Traditional markets are mostly gone. The big whole-sale air-conditioned shopping centers promise discounts and cheaper products than small traders. People buy cars or motorcycles because they can't afford houses that are close to their offices.

There are no any decent modes of reliable public transportation. In

People's Republic is a contradiction in terms. Bigmouths run this country, while people have lost their voice.

The statements of statesmen can reveal their stunningly shallow minds. Former US president George W. Bush spoke incorrect English with incorrec pronunciations, perhaps the worst amongst the US presidents. But when it comes to this Bush and his father, also a former US president, one could say that the slip doesn't fall far from the tongue. In 1988, while describing his experience as Ronald Reagan's vice president, Bush senior said "We have had some sex...uh...set-backs."

Some slips are inadvertent mistakes. Words are wrongly pronounced, often marked by wrong choice of words. But these slips can also be conscious and intentional, aimed at giving a purported message under the excuse of a slippery tongue. Richard M. Nixon, the only American president to resign from office due to a scandal, once boasted: "I would have made a good Pope."

In our case it's not always the fault of unctuous tongues; some of it is forged by acrimonious hearts. Politicians have domesticated national chaos into snatches of their conversations or snippets of remarks. Singing insults like canaries, they have turned rudeness into mother's milk of their hallowed profession.

Back in the 8th century Arab linguist Al-Ki-sa-i believed that slip of the tongues might provide clues as to how language changes. Language has indeed changed in our politics. And it provides alarming clues as to why the politicians are slipping too often with clumsy foot in their slippery mouth.

Even the hens of the world know the rule; they cluck after they lay an egg. Our politicians may not have the dignity of those fowls. They cluck to cover up their incompetence.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 2

- 1919** The first Communist International meets in Moscow.
- 1946** Ho Chi Minh is elected the President of North Vietnam.
- 1962** In Burma, the army led by General Ne Win seizes power in a coup d'état.
- 1990** Nelson Mandela is elected deputy President of the African National Congress.
- 1991** Battle at Rumaila Oil Field brings an end to the 1991 Gulf War.
- 2002** U.S. invasion of Afghanistan: Operation Anaconda begins, (ending on March 19 after killing 500 Taliban and al Qaeda fighters, with 11 Western troop fatalities).

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