

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# The Economist goes out of its depth ...



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE Economist has done it again. Its India-centric perception about Bangladesh has become an obsession with it. This tenor comes through articles in its May last week issue -- "Bangladesh's toxic politics -- Hello, Delhi" appearing under its high profile 'Leaders' column and "Politics in Bangladesh -- Banged about" in its 'Asia' section.

The sub-titles read patronisingly prescriptive: "It is up to India to try to stop Sheikh Hasina ruining Bangladesh" and "The prime minister sets the country on a dangerous path."

At the outset its editorial policy should receive a word of appreciation. For, it highlights leadership issue which is fundamental to an understanding of Bangladesh's current political crisis and shining the path out of it. Placing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina under its 'Leaders' column, the widely read British weekly is taking and giving a world view of what political leadership in a developing country like Bangladesh is made up of and where it is faltering.

And, as if to advertise a self-entitlement to pontification (our leaders have courted anyway by default), The Economist added: "Since Bangladesh's political leaders show no interest in their fate, outsiders need to do so."

Looking back, The Economist in its July 30, 2011 issue carried an article titled "India and Bangladesh: Embraceable you." In it the magazine suggested that Awami League was helped by India materially and through advice to win the 2008 election ... It virtually meant India cashiered AL in the polls, naively oblivious

to the implication of calling into question the integrity of the 2008 election process. It is a matter of record that the election met all the stringent international standards of free and fair polls.

We value how foreigners look at us and what they say about us more than how our own compatriots judge their leaders and critique them so they could reflect

their wishes, resonate with their feelings and aspirations. This trivialisation of indigenous wisdom is shocking: All that the "natives" say, however, they do so from their seminal position as the electorate. Yet, they are the ones to become fodder of mismanaged politics, they are at the suffering end.

Between the ruling party and the opposition, without even caring to dissect the analyses of the overseas media to internalise what is correct, objective or flawed in them, they are over the moon when something positive is said about them but spitefully spurn the unpalatable.

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For instance, Awami League Joint Secretary Mahbulul Alam Hanif reacting to The Economist write-ups said that BNP "bribed" the magazine into publishing those. He smelt "conspiracies" by "undemocratic forces and their beneficiaries" behind publication of the stories. By a rule of the thumb, the Awami League being the ruling party has to take the brunt of most

criticism, to say nothing of earning quite some of it by its own mistakes, though. But the BNP has not been spared either. A typical observation in the article read: "(When) Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), alternated in power in the 1990s, things were pretty bad, but in the past decade

they have got worse. The administration Mrs. Zia headed from 2001-2006 was a brutal kleptocracy."

Leave aside The Economist's editorial policy for a moment; concentrate on its content, and you find that wrong assumptions have led to wrong emphasis and even erroneous conclusions. This is not to say that we

don't agree with many of the details and even some interpretations, but the thrust of the articles we have to say may not find resonance with discerning readers.

The unnamed article writer, or shall we say, a group of area experts contended that India now seems to be "hedging its bets between the two parties." A democracy accepts the electoral verdict in another democracy and deals with a government formed by any party that the people have reposed their confidence in. This is an accepted norm.

So where is the hedging of bets? Besides, you take note of AL's success in curbing ideological extremism, its traditionally liberal and secular inclinations and denial of sanctuary in Bangladesh to Indian insurgents from its Northeast. So, leveraging the AL with "India's influence" on the party to have it listen to its words, is wishful thinking, especially when India has yet to deliver on its part of the bargain.

By the same token, "if it (India) still wants to have a functioning democracy next door, it needs to speak out far louder in favour of it," again sounds simplistic and even disrespectful of the sensibilities of an independent, sovereign country.

Speaking of good offices, this is not in short supply either from visiting foreign dignitaries, EU representatives or development partners in general. But what have all these added up to? So long as Sheikh Hasina is not convinced that she has the trump card to turn the situation around and use it, there is no way we can avoid a bad take.

The Economist may have shown journalistic finesse but not politic savvy.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net

## Professor Dr. Mohammad Tamim, Dept. of Petroleum & Mineral Resources Engineering (PMRE), BUET and Professor M.M. Akash, Dept. of Economics, University of Dhaka, give their reaction to *The Daily Star* on the proposed



M.M. Akash

THIS is an opportunity to get electricity. If the price is reasonable businessmen will buy it. To have an opportunity is better than having nothing. The opportunity may be meaningless if the price does not suit them. If there is no demand the opportunity will lie idle.

The government has taken this decision eyeing political viability. This is an emergency case. Usually, in normal time these types of plants are not built. The government made a wrong decision when it went for such cost intensive projects and is now trying to correct the mistake. The government is trying to minimise losses through this offer. The investment which has already been put in pro-

ducing electricity from furnace oil will lie idle if there are no buyers.

There might be inequality along with some growth. Those who will not be able to buy it because of cost condition will not get electricity. The government did not plan the project from universal range. So we have to suffer the inequality.

If the supply price is less than demand price then businessmen will buy it. And that will prove the utility of this offer. The rise of price is justified as the production cost is very high. If this is a temporary project then the price offering will also be temporary.

I think the solution to the power crunch is going back to gas-based plants. As soon as possible the government should bring in other sources of supply of electricity and reduce the cost and make it available to all.



Mohammad Tamim

I am looking at it as providing optional electricity product and the sale of which will be determined by market demand and requirement of the businesses. Businesses with high energy cost will not be able to buy electricity at this high price. This option is also not viable for the businesses whose

power requirement is comparatively less. So, I don't think there is any scope for discrimination, and it is all a matter of market. A high priced option has been offered in the market, availing which is not compulsory. But if it is made compulsory then it will be a disaster for the country. If the price pulls up to that level then foreign reserve will disappear and there won't be any new inflow

of foreign reserve.

This is a way to utilise the idle rental plants built by the government, and it will only be sustainable if there are enough clients. However it can be said that the sustainability of such project is unlikely.

The cost of uninterrupted power is always high and it is evident in a lot of countries where one has to pay a premium rate for uninterrupted power, but that premium rate is not double the normal rate as proposed in Bangladesh. It is unlikely that anyone will opt for uninterrupted power at such a high rate. The rate would have been rational if it was Tk. 10 and there was an option to use electricity at normal rate when available. But the current rate is not a solution for even the industries. They have provided an option but only the ones who can afford it will go for it.

# Tobacco: An epithet for death

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

THOUSANDS of people worldwide stop smoking everyday -- by dying." Keeping in mind this mind-boggling reality, World Health Organisation has been observing May 31 every year since 1987 as "No Tobacco Day" with diverse campaigns to raise global awareness against smoking. Only two causes of death are large and growing worldwide -- HIV and tobacco. While most countries have begun, at least, to respond to HIV, the response to the global tobacco epidemic has so far been limited and patchy.

Tobacco use kills more than five million people a year -- an average of one person every six seconds. About 1 in 10 adult deaths is related to tobacco use and about half of current tobacco users will die of a tobacco-related disease. By 2030, the proportion will be one in six, or 10 million deaths per year -- more than any other single cause. Around 3 million of these will occur in the developed world and 7 million in developing countries. Cardiovascular disease is the most common smoking-related cause of death.

"I say, if you can't send money, send tobacco." US President George Washington's request to help finance the American Civil War in 1776 is a symbolic illustration of tobacco's influence and perceived value.

Consumption of tobacco has become a global epidemic. Asian, African and Middle East countries in particular have been the target of US and UK tobacco companies, which are cranking out five and a half trillion a year cigarettes every year -- nearly 1,000 cigarettes for every man, woman, and child on the planet. While tobacco production has almost doubled since 1960, consumption in high-income countries has fallen

over the past decades. By contrast, consumption in developing countries is increasing by 3.4% every year.

In Bangladesh, more than 46 million are smokers. Approximately 43% of adults in Bangladesh use tobacco. Each year, more than 57,000 people die from tobacco-related diseases and about 1.2 million cases of illnesses are attributed to tobacco. Among adults, 63% are exposed to secondhand smoke at the workplace. Healthcare costs associated with tobacco related illness amount to 10% of monthly household expenditures. Tobacco users have increased 7.5% in five years from 2004 to 2009. About 30% of deforestation in the country has occurred due to tobacco manufacturing. Bangladesh is one of the most profitable tobacco markets in the world, with annual sales of around \$1 billion dollar.

Half of our population lives below poverty line and half of them are in hard core poverty. Coexisting with this extreme poverty is a booming tobacco industry. The use of chewing tobacco, bidi and cigarettes is widespread. About 15 local companies compete for the lower end of the cigarette market. British American Tobacco (BAT), which owns the controlling share of Bangladesh's former tobacco monopoly, is a ubiquitous presence through its lustrous media advertising, cigarette display cases, and storefront signs. In 2011, BATBC reported pre-tax profits of approximately \$65 million, while it spent \$3.4 million on brand promotion and development. The cost of tobacco usage exceeds its benefits like tax revenue and wages in tobacco production by \$1094.86 million per annum.

In 2000, WHO released a report detailing the tobacco industry's tactics in obstructing tobacco control policy. The report found that the tobacco companies spent enormous amounts of money sidetracking attention from the public health issues raised by tobacco use, attempting to

trim down budgets for the scientific and policy activities carried out by WHO, pitting other UN agencies against WHO, seeking to promote views that WHO's tobacco control programme is a "First World" agenda carried out at the expense of the developing world, manipulating the results of important scientific studies on tobacco, and demonising WHO as an institution.

The tobacco industry continues to fund, directly or indirectly, esteemed academic centres and scientists in its effort to attain scientific credibility. Among the distinguished academics enlisted by the industry are professors such as A. R. Feinstein of Yale University, editor of the Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, who on many occasions has presented the view that the epidemiologic methods used to assess the risk of passive smoking are inadequate. He did not mention, however, that he was a tobacco industry consultant and the beneficiary of highly secret "special project" awards.

The ultimate goal of the industry is to prop up the trivialisation of the menace of tobacco use, stating that nearly everything from eating Twinkies to crossing the street was unsafe, and that tobacco was just one more "risky pleasure."

"Operation Berkshire" showed how 7 of the world's largest tobacco companies conspired to foster doubt about tobacco and health. These companies created the International Tobacco Information Center to internationally coordinate a network of national manufacturers' associations to block tobacco control measures.

In the US today, the tobacco industry spends \$28 million each day on marketing of its products, annually contributes \$2 million to federal candidates, political parties and PACS, and spends \$16.6 million for lobbying Congress to influence state and local politics when threatened. Tobacco-related monetary costs in the US

today are \$96 billion on annual public and private health care expenditure and Medicaid payment of \$30.9 billion.

Despite all these evils, it is appalling to think that an industry notorious for its dirty tricks and dirty laundry manages to trump what is clearly in the public's best interest. Interference by the tobacco industry has become a hard row to hoe in instilling anti-tobacco sentiment. Against this backdrop, "Tobacco Industry Interference" has been rightly set as the theme of this year's No Tobacco Day. The initiative is to unveil and offset the tobacco industry's brazen and increasingly antagonistic attempts to undermine global tobacco control efforts.

Tactics aimed at undermining anti-tobacco campaigns and subverting the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC) are no longer stealthy or cloaked in an image of corporate social responsibility. Big tobacco companies can afford to hire the best lawyers and public relation firms that money can buy. Big Money can speak louder than any moral, ethical, or public health argument, and can trample even the most damning scientific evidence.

For saving millions of people against the killing effects of tobacco and its intimidating industries, we need to face their muscle and money from a common platform through creating awareness and collective effort. Shaping public opinion is vital. If sturdy tobacco legislation wins votes, politicians will back it, and fight back against the ruinous industries threatening our invaluable earning, health and life.

The writer, a physician and specialist in hospital management, is Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services, Comilla Cantt.