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CRITICS of foreign aid (FA) often argue that it is primarily used by the rich nations as an influence peddling mechanism to augment the interests of the citizens and organisations of the donor countries at the expense of the recipient countries. The popularly alleged partners of this unholy FA alliance are the donor governments, institutions like the World Bank, IMF and the UN, international NGOs and large multinationals. Political parties in the recipient countries are often labeled as agents of the FA alliance by many of their citizens, intellectuals and media.

This commentary attempts to evaluate the merits of this perception of FA being unholy or immoral. The focus here is on whether FA is contrived as an unholy endeavour, not the extent to which FA has historically helped or harmed the recipient countries. There are several angles to look at this issue.

First, except in unusual circumstances such as Iraq and Afghanistan, FA is not forcibly parachuted into the recipient countries; by and large it is the recipient countries that seek out FA.

Second, critics may argue that the alliance manufactures a crisis environment or a pretext in general, that forces a recipient country to request and accept FA. This could indeed be the case for achieving geo-political objectives of mighty or aspiring donor countries. In such instances, FA can be termed unholy if the geo-political outcomes are detrimental for the recipient country. There is nothing unholy about the manufactured pretext if both the donor and the recipient ultimately benefit from the geo-political outcomes.

Third, it is important to keep in mind a framework of mutual benefits for the parties to an endeavour. One-directional flow of benefits is inherently unsustainable in the long term, especially when resources are scarce. As such, that the FA alliance may seek to harness benefit from FA for their stakeholders is rational, and should be expected instead of suspected or despised. After all, FA transfers to the recipient country imply foregone opportunities (such as curtailing budget deficit) in the donor country. What could be

truly at stake is the sharing of the long-term benefits of FA between the recipient and the donor countries. As a matter of practice, the long-term benefits for the donor countries are rarely stated or even discussed in FA arrangements. This lack of full disclosure permits the critics and political opportunists to paint FA as unholy endeavours with hidden agenda. Importantly, however, that the agenda of long-term benefits for the donor country is not being delineated does not make the offering of FA unholy in any way.

Fourth, it is true that there can be collusion between the international agencies and the rich donor countries funding these agencies. But this is known, rational and expected. Doesn't it make sense

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that the donor countries have a major say about the FA operations of the agencies they fund? Thus, for example, suppose the major donors ask the WB to cancel a previously approved loan to Bangladesh because of corruption allegations. Is this immoral? Not really. Governance is a major concern everywhere and it can only be beneficial for the people of Bangladesh if the WB uses the FA window judiciously to help improve governance atmosphere in Bangladesh.

Fifth, multinationals do profit from FA through consulting, banking, construction, et cetera, in the process of implementing FA funded projects. In most cases, the multinationals obtain these businesses

through competitive bidding process and quite often they seek the services of local lobbyists and partnership of local firms. As long as the multinationals carryout these activities in a legal manner and within the stipulated conditions of specific FA ventures, there is nothing unholy about it. In fact, there is a transfer of technology and know-how from the multinationals to the recipient country. It is true that in some cases, the donor countries may insist on the employment of specific firms for FA projects. But in those instances, it is generally because the technological information is very sensitive and/or its transfer or leakage may pose a security risk, as in the case of nuclear power plants.

Sixth, unlike the multinationals, the NGOs are non-profit organisations. As they carry on their development work in the recipient countries, their mandate may require them to promote specific types of economic or social practices and institutions. Critics argue that the preferences of the NGOs lead to transformation away from the traditions of the recipient country. Yes, they can and yes, they do. The important thing, however, is that none of this is done by compulsion, all NGO activities take place upon the approval of the government of the recipient country and within the laws of the land, NGOs are not making any money from such activities and there is no owner of NGOs. They raise a significant part of their FA funds from the well-meaning citizens across the world including those from their home base or donor country, and the operations of NGOs create local employment and transfer of technology and know how. So, what is unholy about the operations of the NGOs?

To conclude, there is not much that is unholy or immoral about FA. So long as the FA activities are mutually consented to, respect the laws of the land and the terms of the contracts, and are not designed to benefit the donor countries and institutions at the expense of the recipient country counterparts, the perceived unholy alliance is just that, imagined, not factual, and the allegations are likely spawned by political opportunism or an inherent philosophical intolerance for foreign practices and institutions.

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## SHIFTING IMAGES

# 'Facing unpleasant facts'



MILIA ALI

MOST books on spirituality emphasise the importance of living life with positivity while cherishing each moment as a rare gift. According to spiritual pundits, injecting passion into our daily tasks, however mundane they may be, helps us attain emotional equilibrium. There is yet another school of thought -- mainly comprising successful entrepreneurs and business gurus -- who believe that the key to success is to be flexible and opportunistic, and not to be doggedly attached to a single mission. To these high performers, job contentment and satisfaction are detrimental to career growth and upward mobility.

The two contrasting philosophies may appear to be at loggerheads but, the truth is, their goals are quite different. The first path may help us experience the ecstasy of an inspired life despite a mundane existence. The second approach serves as a pragmatic model for achieving material success and status. As I struggled with the ideas behind these contrarian views, a chance encounter helped clear the cobwebs in my mind. It was as if destiny had played its hand!

Our neighbourhood grocery store is quite an amiable place, with a fair level of interaction between the salespersons and the customers. However, as is true of most work places, some workers are friendlier and more eager to help than others. One man in particular, Andre, always appears positive, upbeat, and smiling. He has a flair for languages and greets customers with "Ola" or "Bon jour" or even "Oyahou Gozaimasu," depending on their country of origin. Ever since he spotted me in a sari, he folds his hands and utters a soft "Namaste." Andre is not only a natural polyglot he has the unique ability to make each person feel special. His work ethic is not dictated by an assembly line approach, with the usual "Did you find everything you need ma'am?" question.

Andre works at the cashier's desk. His job is pretty repetitive, almost mechanical. He scans each item, bags the groceries, processes debit/ credit cards or cash payments and then hands the receipts or cash back. He has been doing this routine work for the past thirty one years, but somehow manages to maintain an exemplary sense of engagement with the clients and an enthusiasm for the job.

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A few days ago, I happened to notice him in the parking lot of the grocery store. On an impulse I decided to chat with him about his can-do-attitude and positive outlook toward life. "How do you always manage to stay so positive and jovial?" I asked. "Oh! I love being an entertainer," he responded half-jokingly. "I deal with negative and unpleasant situations by thinking of funny and happy things all the time. That keeps me smiling!" "Do you have bad days?" I inquired. "Yes, ma'am I have my fair share of them ... a curt customer, short change in the register, and the usual managerial grunts," was his candid answer. "But, I never let these weigh me down. Once I am out of the store I am in a different world. My world then is my three kids, my music and the language classes that I teach to young people." A simplistic formula that has, obviously, worked for him!

My thoughts turned to friends and acquaintances, with high-level jobs and six figure salaries, who constantly whine about their situation. It's the same rhetoric: "Not enough challenge," "bored doing the same thing," "boss is unfair" or "need better salary and perks." And Andre? All he does is scan groceries and put them in bags and yet he has found a way to make his work interesting and fulfilling! He has decided that his job is more than bagging groceries -- it's about meeting people from different ethnicities and backgrounds and, for a few moments, being a part of their world!

I wonder, why is it that people like Andre can derive happiness from the little pleasures of life? Yet so many of us are never satisfied and hanker for more, no matter how much we have. Consequently, we never live that one contented moment.

In my search for answers I recalled a quote from George Orwell, who is known for his deep understanding of human nature. According to a recently published article by Christopher Hitchens, George Orwell "gave us an account of what made him tick, as it were, and of what supplied the motive for his work. At different times he attributed success to his "power of facing unpleasant facts." Only Orwell could have articulated such a complex idea so simply and beautifully!

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

QUAZI SALIMUDDIN

IN my previous article "Defeat Enemy No.1" (The Daily Star, Aug 28). I wanted to highlight the grim situation this nation will be facing in the very near future due to poisoned food we are eating every day. The attention of the government was drawn and immediate and long term actions to be taken were suggested in the article

It was also mentioned that we as citizens also have a role to play. How and what role we should play is discussed below:

**Media:** They are covering all aspect of food adulteration to create public awareness. They are doing a great service to the nation. Reasonable public awareness has been created but much is required to be done to generate public demand for access to safe food. They know better as to how to do it. Voice, image and print coverage could be made more attractive, informative, appealing, touching and regular. Needless to mention, our writers, singers, actor/actress and other media personalities have a crucial roll to play.

**Trade and commerce organisations:** Growers, manufactures, wholesalers, retailers even roadside vendors all belongs to business community.

Excessive use of chemicals by agri-growers, adulteration using poisonous chemicals from manufacturing to sales stage is done by some of them. Their greed for profiting at the expense of very existence of the nation is required to be curbed. True that all business people involved in food sector are not greedy but some of them are. The onus of ensuring that businessmen abide by laws, rules, regulations and ethics is on their association and chambers of commerce and industries. Recently, FBCCI took a welcome step to turn one kitchen market in Dhaka into a formalin and carbide free market. But this is insignificant compared to the threat the whole nation is facing. They have to be more up and doing. Their action should cover everything from the source to retail level. They have to compel the manufacturing industries to not discharge toxic material without first neutralising them. Do not add chemicals which are banned in food processing in developed countries. Develop the capacity for checking chemically contaminated vegetables, fruits, fish etc at haats and bazars of the country. This they can do by involving local government elected representatives and hat - bazaar committees. The initiative take by FBCCI has to initially cover all bazars of main cities (because contamination is more there) and gradually expand to the whole country. It is expected that all chambers and association will come forward and take coordinated action under the stewardship of FBCCI. Funding, training and tools should not be any problem for the busi-

ness community. We may suggest that FBCCI and all district chambers to have "Safe Food" subcommittee responsible to prepare policy for consideration by government, coordinate implementation of rules, regulations etc. FBCCI must ask the government to motivate and educate the people, and monitor, supervise, regulate, implement, formulate rules/regulations/laws to ensure people's right to safe food.

**Student community:** They had played a glorious vanguard role in all the national movements. Language movement of '52, mass uprising in '69, national freedom movement and war in '71 and anti-dictatorship movement in early nineties. In all these movements they had played a leading. We cannot conceive of any movement not led by students. They are requested to get out of their vacillation, organise themselves to



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answer to call of the nation -- "save us from being slow poisoned, save the nation from becoming mentally and physically challenged." Organise yourselves and raise demand for safe food from each and every educational intuition. In this national crisis, the nation is depending up you. Please do not fail us.

**NGOs:** They have given and are giving commendable service to nation building. Working at grass root level they have helped the government in reducing poverty, reduce child mortality, remove illiteracy, implement family planning program etc. They should be taking up "safe food" as a project, giving it the highest priority. Use every means at their disposal to raise awareness of common people about the harmful effect of chemically treated and adulterated food of our daily use, motivate them to avoid such food, teach them how to reduce the

amount of poison in vegetables and fruits. Propagate the adverse effect of overuse of chemicals in land fertility, development of immunity of insects and pest to chemical insecticides and pesticides and what damage they are intentionally doing to the nation by using overdoses of chemicals on their agricultural fields. Most of all, introduce a peasant-friendly, viable, sustainable, more profitable and cost effective alternative to chemicals.

**Political parties:** All politicians in position or in opposition big or small or of different ideologies, work for the service of the people. But they are conspicuously silent regarding this grave national crisis. People expect them to be at the forefront in their effort to defeat the national enemy No.1. People's right to access to safe food should be in their manifesto. To stop the silent genocide, they should be heard and seen in raising

demands vigorously and continuously to the government. But alas our politicians have no time to address this issue. We urge up on them to please help the hapless people.

**Social, cultural, professional organisations:** Teachers, agriculturists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, labourers; district associations, unions, etc; Lions Club and other social clubs; all have a role to play. They must raise awareness amongst their members and of the public to such level that loud demand for safe food is raised throughout the length and breath of the country. Consumer's associations, environmental and human rights associations are playing notable role in this regard. We hope their activities will extend to district level soon.

**Places of worship and religious institutions:** Honour-able imams, priests, darbar sharifs, ulema, all have great influence over common people. Side by side with the general religious sermons about the sin one is committing by adulterating food items, they are requested to make person to person contact to persuade the involved people not to commit this heinous crime. Tabligi Jamaat can play a very significant role in this regard.

**National Human Rights Commission Bangladesh:** As our right to safe food is being brutalised, the Commission is urged to take the matter up for action.

Let us get out of the despair we are in. No solution is going to come from the sky. This is a battle of great national import. Together, we can definitely defeat the enemy No.1. The chemical terror has to be stopped to halt the silent genocide being conducted against us. All our actions must be peaceful. 14 children of Dinajpur and Thakurgaon died in June this year by eating insecticide poisoned litchis. Let us observe 14 June as "Bishokria Dibos" each year. We have only two options, win or perish. Let us work to build a poison free Bangladesh.

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# How to defeat enemy no.1