

Gym culture taking shape

Dhaka International Trade Fair offers plenty of workout devices

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THE equipment looks strange to beginners: five red and black walking machines with computer displays stand in a row in the stall of Asian Sky Shop at Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF). You can even smell the new plastic in the air.

Although it is allowed to try the machines out or touch the gear, they keep distance and look from outside the stall.

This shy behaviour has a reason, explained salesman Shamsul Bahar to The Daily Star. "In Bangladesh, it is not very common to go in for sports," he said. After work, people go home and relax instead of jogging or making exercises.

In other regions of the world like Europe or the United States, this is very different: people go to gym clubs during lunchtime or they run on the streets or at home on a running machine after work.

In western countries, it is considered important to be in a good shape, and leading a healthy life is currently in vogue. This starts with the food and ends in the way you pass your leisure time.

"This trend to a healthy lifestyle will reach the Bangladeshi society very soon," said Bahar.

In his opinion, it would become more and more important to be in good shape and people do already care more about their health.



Treadmills with electronic displays and other workout devices are up for sale at the stall of Asian Sky Shop at Dhaka International Trade Fair.

Also industry people said things are changing in Bangladesh, albeit gradually. People, particularly in the urban centres, are more conscious than past about their health and good physique to ensure a good and healthy life.

The rise in the number of diabetic population and obesity in Bangladesh is also another reason people are turning to exercise equipment at home or private gyms.

The country is one of the world's largest in terms of diabetic population and the educated young popu-

lation consume fast foods due to a rise in income level.

Healthy lifestyle is also a question of economic wealth. If someone earns enough for living, he can start caring about the shape of his body.

But only a decade ago, building up muscles and toning up body were almost individual efforts at home level.

Jafar Ahmed, chief executive officer of Dhaka Fitness Gym, one of the oldest fitness centres in the country, said things are changing gradually in Bangladesh when it



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comes to turning to gyms for maintaining good health.

"But when I started the gym 12 years ago, people did not know what a gym is about."

Nowadays, salesman Bahar is optimistic for his business at the annual trade fair in Dhaka. He expects to sell at least hundred exercise machines until the end of the DITF at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar on January 31. During the first three days he sold two.

In total, there are three stalls selling the running machines. They belong all to Asian Sky Shop, which

is known for its telemarketing.

If every stall sells 100 machines expected by one of the salesmen, they will dispose 300. The Asian Sky Shop imports the gear from China.

The range of products leads from running machines for Tk 50,000 to more luxurious gear for Tk 60,000. These machines offer more possibilities than just running. So you can also sit on a chair and row. Furthermore, the shop sells a stationary bicycle and a bench to exercise sit-ups.

As a target group, the salesman eyes the middle and the upper-class

people. "Men are more interested in my offer than women," Bahar said.

"But if the machine is installed at a family's home, everyone gets the chance to try it out without spectators like at the trade fair."

In the public gyms, women are already present, as Khosru Parvez, who runs Combat Gym in Siddheswari in Dhaka with his wife, said. Now people irrespective of gender and ages come to gyms, he said.

The same development is observed concerning the age of the sportspersons. "When we started, only people under 30 were interested about gyms. Now people up to the age of 70 come to gyms to maintain a healthy life," Parvez said.

He said the number of women choosing gyms to maintain good figure is also increasing, as gyms are increasingly offering more space to them.

Although the exact number of gyms in Bangladesh is hard to come by, people involved in the industry said one would find gyms in every district and upazila.

In spite of this changing behaviour, Bangladeshi industry still does not offer the appropriate gear. The industry people said the exercise equipment are all import-dependent.

Some are trying to manufacture exercise equipment, but their quality is nowhere to those from China, Taiwan and South Korea, said Parvez.

Fiscal cliff fracas: from smiles to distrust to rancour

REUTERS, Washington

IT began so optimistically. On November 16, after their first "fiscal cliff" session with President Barack Obama, the four leaders of Congress had stood in the driveway of the White House shoulder-to-shoulder for what is a rare photo these days, Republicans and Democrats together, smiling.

There they were at the microphone, talking about a "framework" for tax reform and deficit reduction.

In hindsight, the shot of House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell -- the Republicans -- with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi -- the Democrats -- seems like an old family photo, before things went bad.

From that day on the driveway, things went downhill, rather quickly.

There was a feeling on both sides that the other was not acting seriously to avert the "fiscal cliff" of tax hikes and spending cuts that were set to occur at the beginning of this month. That was inflamed by public comments from ranking Republicans and Democrats, poisoning the atmosphere.

Many lawmakers and their aides fear that things may get more toxic through a series of bitter struggles expected in the next few months over the nation's debt and deficit burdens -- fights not just between the parties but within them, and between the White House, the Senate and the House.

At stake is not only the US government's ability to get its finances under control but whether it might default on its debts, and suffer further downgrades in the nation's credit rating.

While Obama is perceived the victor in the fiscal deal passed by Congress earlier this week, he did not come close to getting the one thing he demanded that could have headed off the next potential crisis: Freedom from a fight over the federal government's debt ceiling, which is likely to occur in February when the Treasury Department must ask Congress to increase the government's borrowing limit beyond the current \$16.4 trillion.

Any positive vibes started fading a few days after the photo. On November 20, at a meeting between Republican staffers and Rob Nabors, the White House director of legislative affairs. Nabors announced that he had a White House offer in hand but "didn't want to be laughed out of the room and implied he would skip it because it was a waste of time," according to one Republican source. The White House declined to comment.

What the White House was offering was Obama's budget proposal from earlier in the year, long ago rejected by Republicans.

A Democratic source familiar with the



AFP

US President Barack Obama delivers a statement at the White House on Jan 1. Obama said he fulfilled a campaign promise to make the US tax system fairer with a deal to avert the fiscal cliff crisis.

negotiations said it was merely an opening bid that should have come as no surprise, but Republicans saw it as a red flag, particularly after Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner touted it again nine days later.

Things didn't get better in the final weeks of the year.

At a December 13 meeting between Obama, Boehner and their aides at the White House, Obama spoke for almost the entire 50-minute session, according to Republican sources. They said he warned that if he did not get an agreement to his liking, he would spend the next four years "campaigning against House Republicans," starting with his second-term inauguration speech on January 21.

As far as the Republicans were concerned, Obama had effectively remained in campaign mode after his November 6 re-election, going on the attack in his "fiscal cliff" speeches.

One of the clearest examples of this, occurred at a delicate point in negotiations on Monday, with a looming deadline and the risk growing that the Republican-controlled House would blow up any deal pulled together by the Senate. At a campaign-style event with "middle class" Americans in the background, Obama accused Republicans of trying to "shove spending cuts at us that will hurt seniors, or hurt students or hurt middle-class families."

The move angered House Republicans who were already divided on how to proceed, leading to more bad blood. Republican Senator John McCain responded in the Senate, wondering "whether the president really wants this issue resolved." The people Obama

was talking to, McCain said, "were laughing and cheering and applauding as we are on the brink of this collapse."

By that time, Boehner had ceased to be a force in the negotiations, thanks to his own miscalculation on December 20. That's when he brought his own "Plan B" to the House -- a bill to avoid the "fiscal cliff" with minimal tax hikes on the wealthy -- and then had to pull the bill when he couldn't get enough Republicans to support it.

The defeat humiliated Boehner and, by depriving him of the ability to deliver on any commitments he might make, sidelined him in the final stages of the negotiations.

In the final days of the year, Republicans routinely accused the president of bad faith, saying he preferred to go over the 'cliff,' triggering the tax hikes and rattling the markets, because it would increase his ability to pressure them.

The same was said of Boehner by Democrats, including Reid.

"He's waiting until January 3 to get re-elected as speaker before he gets serious with negotiations because he has so many people over there that won't follow what he wants. That's obvious from the debacle that took place last week," Reid said in the Senate, referring to Boehner's failed effort to get his own caucus in line on December 20.

He was operating the House as a "dictatorship," Reid added in his December 27 speech, by refusing to allow a vote on a Senate bill to avoid the automatic tax hikes and spending cuts. Boehner was re-elected as speaker on Thursday.

The best solution for climate change is a carbon tax

RALPH NADER, for Reuters

WITH Lisa Jackson, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, stepping down, President Barack Obama is losing one of the few people left in Washington who was willing to speak up about global warming and to push for significant measures to curb its impact. During her tenure, Ms Jackson was frequently denounced by GOP members of Congress and all too often reined in by Obama. Despite his and Congress' failure to pass legislation addressing global warming, Ms Jackson advanced a regulatory agenda to pick up some of the slack.

She managed to see that fuel efficiency standards will increase by 2025, enact stricter pollution controls that must be met before any construction of new coal-fired power plants, and established EPA's "endangerment finding," bringing carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases (GHGs) under the Clean Air Act. Her departure, however, highlights the failings of the Obama administration to address global warming in a significant way. In his second term, the president can change that by pushing to enact a carbon tax.

A carbon tax would place a fee on polluters that emit GHGs like carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. It should be applied at major sources of GHG emissions: coal-fired power plants, petroleum refineries and importers, natural gas processors, and cement, steel, and GHG-intensive chemical plants. This tax would prod us away from dirty fossil fuels and toward clean energy alternatives to avert global warming while raising considerable revenue.

Global warming is happening, whether or not lawmakers on Capitol Hill want to acknowledge it. Unfortunately for the rest of us, the consequences of ignoring it are dire.

Given the already lacklustre recovery, the future economic devastation from global warming looms many times larger than any "fiscal cliff." A 2006 report from British economist Nicholas Stern estimated that if global temperatures increase 2-3 degrees Celsius in the next 50 years we risk losing up to 20 percent of global GDP -- a loss similar to that of the Great Depression.

But global warming won't just affect our pocketbooks. According to a report from DARA, an international humanitarian organisation, if we do nothing, over 100 million lives will be lost by 2030 from our reliance on fossil fuels

and the effects of global warming, including hunger, the spread of disease, air pollution, and cancer.

We are already feeling the impacts of a warming planet. In 2011 the Mississippi River experienced yet another "500-year flood." Extreme weather events, like Hurricane Sandy, are becoming more common. This summer, western states saw blistering wildfires consume over 9 million acres, about 3 million more than the annual average over the last decade. Droughts ravaged our heartland's crops. By the end of the summer, nearly two-thirds of the contiguous US was experiencing moderate to exceptional drought.

Philip Bump, writing for Grist, pointed out data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration showing that November was the 333rd consecutive month with global temperatures higher than the long-term average. If you are 27 years old, you've never experienced a colder-than-average month.

As one of the largest polluters in the world, the United States has a special responsibility to lead the way in tackling global warming. We emit 18 percent of worldwide CO2 emissions with just 4.5 percent of the world's population. In 2010, the country was responsible for about 5.6 billion metric tons of CO2 emissions -- more than the collective emissions of all the countries of Europe and, not counting China, as much as the next five largest CO2 polluters combined. All of this doesn't even include the additional 1.2 billion metric tons of CO2 equivalent emissions that we spewed into the atmosphere from non-CO2 GHGs.

According to the world authority on the subject, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a carbon tax on GHGs of \$50 per metric ton of CO2 equivalents would be a good first step. With annual emissions of 6.8 billion metric tons of CO2 equivalents, the United States would collect \$340 billion each year.

With revenue like that, a carbon tax could be used to help balance the budget. The policies discussed in the fiscal cliff debate were comparatively instructive. For example, extending the Bush tax cuts to all but the top 2 percent -- as President Obama has suggested -- would cost \$171 billion each year in lost revenue. Preventing cuts to nondefence spending would cost \$55 billion. Continuing to pay unemployment benefits would cost \$26 billion. A carbon tax would pay for all of this and then some.

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