

Banned pesticides in food chain

Effective pre-emptive measures called for

BASED on a FAO-sponsored test at the National Food Safety Laboratory (NFSL), it has been reported that some 40 percent of the 82 food samples tested contained dangerous pesticides that were banned more than fifteen years ago. On the whole, presence of toxins in the foods was found three to twenty times the limit set by the European Union. Against such an ominous backdrop a number of agriculturists have blamed sloppy government monitoring at field level for the use of banned pesticides. But what concerns us is how do the chemicals, prohibited so long ago get smuggled into the country -- and into the food chain on a regular basis?

According to the Director General of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) all of its field offices have been under instructions to take action against sale and use of banned and low-quality pesticides. The question is, in the face of DAE's instructions being sorely missing, what did it do to enforce compliance? The FAO- sponsored tests also shed light on the rampant usage of arsenic, chromium, lead, anti-biotic and formalin.

This should be taken as another wake-up call for the government to put stern measures in place for stopping foods from being contaminated. If necessary, the law should be given more teeth and its implementation ensured.

Food chain from production level should be strictly monitored. Smuggling of banned chemicals into the country should be stopped. Finally, producers, sellers and consumers of food items should make a common cause of fighting the malaise which is but ruining health and future of the country.

Rise in incidence of abduction

Public confidence in police sapped

THERE has been an alarming rise in the incidence of abduction in the country. It is distressing to see dead bodies lying on the roadside or washing up in the river banks. What is alarming is that some of these abductions have been carried out in broad daylight. The latest is the case of the Narayanganj ward councilor and four of his aides who were all abducted from the court premises. We wonder how that was possible without any hue and cry being raised at all. Not only that, the vehicle reportedly travelled from Narayanganj to a place in Gazipur undetected. Should not have the police been alerted immediately to keep a look out?

Apparently, many of the incidents are politically motivated while a few of these were done for ransom. What is alarming is that in many cases it was alleged that the law enforcing agencies had picked them up before they went missing. This has been made easier because of the fact that the police are no longer required to produce arrest warrant before taking anyone in custody.

The police cannot absolve itself of its responsibility by citing other cities of the world where the rate of abduction is higher. That may be so but the police bosses need to be reminded that so is the rate of recovery and rescue and arrest of the abductors. The current situation should not be allowed to go on for much longer. We believe that there is a case for the police to be more proactive. Instead of denying they must realise that groups masquerading as police are picking people up. And these groups the police must go after.

Transboundary rivers: Missing the global voice

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

HOW do you dry out a nation of its water resources? Well, one way is to cut off its rivers by diverting the historical course of water flow. If desertification occurs due to climactic changes then it has a natural reason, but what if the reason is anthropogenic and also far beyond one's control?

Unilateral withdrawal and deliberate diversion of most of the water of Teesta and some 53 rivers by India is not only affecting Bangladesh but also raises a serious question about India's internal policies and politics regarding water sharing. In terms of water sharing it's clear that provinces in India think that rivers flowing over their respective boundaries are theirs to control and use. And it's all happening since water resource and its management is a provincial matter in the world's largest democracy.

So now it's clear that if we want our share of Teesta water then we will have to wait for India to introduce some basic changes in its rivers and water policy. Even if changes take place, who will guarantee that they will be made without affecting the historical flow of river waters? How can we be assured of the minimal cues of water we need while keeping the rivers alive within our territory?

Sharing of Teesta or any trans-boundary river for that matter is not in our hands any more. Apart from our current sufferings at least three rivers which were part of the Teesta basin have been rendered dead with silt. Aquifer level in the Barendra region has been severely affected. In the northern region, not only are our irrigation projects being hampered but the ecosystem as well as the biodiversity is badly hit too. Amidst such happenings what's missing is 'the global voice for giving Bangladesh its fair share of water that it deserves.'

However, we haven't seen any international concern in the form of seminars, symposiums or protests organised by the various western countries regarding our fair share of water with India, or by those who claimed to be the 'true' friends of Bangladesh during our internal political turmoil or industrial disasters. Or do our 'friends' only become 'true' to raise their concern about us in times of disasters that affect their vested interests? We also don't know how we will be compensated for the incurred loss of some Tk.135 billion in our agriculture sector due to India's unilateral water withdrawal from all the 54 common rivers in the upstream (calculated by a former UN water expert).

Not only manmade disasters created by ourselves, we expect the global media, environmental and human rights organisations to focus their attention on manmade disasters designed by another country, of which Bangladesh is fast becoming a helpless victim. Raise your united global voice before Bangladesh starts turning into a desert.

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Need for Smart identity cards



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

merely reinforced the security loopholes in the system and brought into question the usefulness of NID system in its present state. With NID cards becoming the document of choice for availing a vast array of services ranging from new cell phone registrations to availing financial services, the absence of 'off line' verification threatens the validity of the system.

As reported in a Daily Star report on April 20 that it requires regular, off-the-shelf technology like computers, laminating machines and printers to produce fake ID cards. Hence, the introduction of "Smart" NID cards is the logical step in the right direction to make forgery near impossible. Currently, the weakness of the system is that there is no system to authenticate these paper laminated NID cards. Until the cards are equipped with a computer chip, the proposed database of 92 million people will not bring benefits to policymaking, nor enable citizens' access to a whole range of social benefit programmes and other services that the NID programme hopes to deliver on.

Indeed, Smart cards are being utilised by some Asian countries to great benefit. Thailand has introduced agriculture credit cards to 4 million rice farmers. The Smart card allows the card holder to purchase agriculture inputs using a credit card that can be paid back once harvest is complete. Similarly it has an "energy" card that helps taxi drivers to purchase subsidised compressed natural gas for vehicles.

Pakistan is implementing a programme called NADRA. It has successfully introduced a Smart card targeting 2.1 million government pensioners. Elderly pensioners had been facing great difficulty in withdrawing their monthly pension, primarily due to "long unmanaged queues, accessibility issues, manual record keeping by disbursement agencies, restricted timings and limited outreach of designated disbursement agencies." The disbursement system designed under NADRA is an automated system that allows for transactions to be made electronically that is both secure and safe through a franchise of 6,000 "e-sahulat" outlets initially. The project will be expanded to bank branches and post offices in the next phase.

In Bangladesh, a handful of agencies like the National Board of Revenue and Bangladesh Bank are integrated with the NIDW with proper verification system. The issuance of digitalised or Smart NID card is the logical step forward to maximise the benefits that can be derived from the NID system. It has the potential to fundamentally

change the way people derive benefit from various service sectors. All the Smart card holders will have bank accounts. It will pave the way the government pays dividends for various social safety net programmes. For instance, farmers are generally deprived of government supplied fertiliser due to pilferage at various levels. Were authorities to send money for fertiliser through the NID account, farmers could easily collect the cash using Smart card that would operate through ATM machines at village level.

The transformation of existing laminated NID cards into Smart cards involves inclusion of a chip. Given that poor countries like Bangladesh are hoping to make a database of 92 million citizens with corresponding 92 million Smart cards, duration is of great import. Hence, having a shelf life of at least a decade with a chip that can accommodate more information with passage of time is essential.

The Smart card would store citizen data in two groups. First is the basic information. The other part would include biometric data which would make the NID Smart. Facial recognition is basically a digital photograph of the holder. Given that people's facial features change with time, a provision could be made allowing citizens to update their photograph and other relevant information before they



STAR ARCHIVE

get a new Smart card. Security features include digital prints of four fingers of both hands. The "chip" inside a card would have sufficient space for additional information which will be stored in applications and these will form the basis of authentication from EC which will be tied up to its database.

The amendment of NID Registration Act in the parliament on October 6, 2013 has given impetus to NID system implementation in the country. The Smart NID card can very effectively help the government maintain the privacy of citizens' data -- inclusion of data privacy and data security feature an important aspect of amendment of the NID Act. In the final analysis of things, the Smart card has the potential to greatly expand the horizon of governance and improve service delivery system in Bangladesh. For the poor to have genuine access to safety net programmes designed for them, it is imperative that the government introduces the Smart NID cards sooner than later.

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Afghan elections: Can democracy be sustained?

MAHMOOD HASAN

AFGHANISTAN has so far organised three elections to democratically choose its president. Hamid Karzai was installed as head of transitional government in 2001 after US led operation "Enduring Freedom" ousted the Taliban from Kabul. In 2004, Karzai was elected president and reelected in 2009. On April 5, 2014, the third presidential election was held. According to the constitution Karzai cannot run for a third term.

Originally there were 27 candidates, of which 19 were either disqualified or withdrew from the race, leaving only 8 aspirants. Prominent among them were Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. Preliminary results indicate -- not confirmed by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan -- that Abdullah Abdullah has secured 44% votes, while his nearest rival Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai got 33%.

Election law prescribes that a candidate has to win at least 50% of the votes cast to be declared winner. Thus, a second round is expected to be held on May 28, 2014 to choose a president, who will preside for the next five years. Interestingly, both the candidates are westernised and have good links with Washington.

Abdullah Abdullah (Pashtun-Tazik ethnicity), an ophthalmologist who was foreign minister (2001-2005) under Hamid Karzai, was a close friend of assassinated Ahmed Shah Masoud of the Northern Alliance. He identifies himself more with the Taziks and belongs to the National Coalition of Afghanistan. He cleverly chose two running vice presidential mates to reach across the ethnic divide -- Mohammad Khan (Pashtun) of Hezbi Islami and Mohammad Mohaqiq (Hazara) of Hizb-e Wahdat. In 2009, Abdullah ran for the presidency against Karzai and came out second, but withdrew from the second round voting alleging massive irregularities.

Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, (Pashtun), an academic (Ph.D from Columbia University) and former World Bank official, had served as finance minister (2002-2004) under Karzai. He is supported by National Solidarity Party and his running mates are Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek warlord) representing National Islamic Movement and Sarwar Danish (Hazara) of Hizb-e Wahdat.

Holding elections in war ravaged rugged Afghanistan is a daunting task for the IEC. Manning, dispatching voting material and collecting them from 6,423 polling centres, and providing security under constant threat of attack by the Taliban is a formidable responsibility. Out of a population of 32 million, 12 million were registered voters. According to IEC more than 7.5 million votes were cast on Election Day. Long queues of borqa-clad women were seen waiting at polling stations to cast votes. Women participation actually raised the figure to over 60%, higher than expected.

The Election Day passed off largely peacefully with isolated incidents of violence. But before that the Taliban mounted several attacks in Kabul. The attack on Serena Hotel on March 20, killed 9 people including a senior Bangladeshi expatriate. These sudden attacks drove away many international election observers.

The new president will have a daunting task on several fronts.

First and foremost, he will have to deal with the Taliban, which will pose a serious threat to his government once US forces leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014. The Taliban are still not a part of the political system and as a powerful non-state force (estimated at 40,000 -- mostly Pashtuns)

they have the strength to topple any government in Kabul. As the date for US troops withdrawal nears there will be increasing pressure on him to engage the Taliban and bring them into mainstream politics. Political stability cannot be achieved in Afghanistan as long as the role of Taliban remains indeterminate.

Secondly, keeping the post-withdrawal scenario in mind, the Americans have been negotiating the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with Hamid Karzai for more than a year, which has not yet been signed. Under the Agreement some US troops will remain in Afghanistan for counter-terrorism operations and to train Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). The Agreement has been delayed due to controversial operations by the US forces in Afghanistan. US want the Agreement to provide immunity to its troops from any legal action by the Afghan government. Karzai wanted full Afghan sovereignty over the US forces. The new president will have to conclude the Agreement before end of August 2014, paving a smooth withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

Thirdly, the new president will have to unify the country and strengthen Afghan armed forces to withstand possible Taliban onslaughts. The total strength of ANSF is 352,000, but it is ethnically fractured. Majority of the officers are Tazik, while the soldiers are mainly from the Pashtun tribe. There are frequent desertions, switching sides with Taliban. Unifying ethnic Afghanistan -- Pashtuns 42%, Tazik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, with the remaining 13% consisting of Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others -- will be a nightmarish experience for him.

Fourthly, relations with Pakistan and India have to be set on an even keel. Relations between Kabul and Islamabad have been frequently strained. Karzai often accused Pakistan of aiding and abetting the Taliban to destabilise his government. Karzai considered India a close friend and sought economic help from Delhi. Pakistan, which is itself fighting Tehrik-i-Taliban, is deeply suspicious of Indian motives in Afghanistan. India wants a stable Afghanistan, which will keep Pakistan busy across the Durand Line. That way Pakistan will have less chance to do mischief in Kashmir. Abdullah will have his plate full dealing with these two nuclear armed states having opposing interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan is also worried that US withdrawal will not only create a void in Afghanistan, it will also deprive it from the annual billion dollar American military assistance.

Fifth, the new president will have a formidable job establishing good governance and strengthening democracy. Curbing corruption that had beset the Karzai government will not be easy because of vested groups. With a narrow GDP base of \$20.5 billion (WB, 2012) the country is heavily dependent on external assistance to meet its budgetary obligations. Corruption actually stems from illicit opium production. Since US occupation, Afghanistan has become the largest opium producer in the world. The export value of opium produced in Afghanistan is over \$ 4 billion, of which a small fraction goes to the farmers and the rest to tribal warlords and the Taliban. Actually Taliban sustains itself on opium money.

Three consecutive 'democratic' elections, though flawed, have been held in Afghanistan since 2001. Will 'democracy' sustain and bring political stability in ethnically divided Afghanistan? We shall know only after the Americans leave feudal Afghanistan end of 2014.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Work environment at RMG factories

After the Rana Plaza tragedy, new alliances and accords have been eventually formed for safer RMG sector in Bangladesh. It is appreciable that all relevant divisions are working hard to ensure fire and structural safety following the ongoing inspection reports and action plans. However, besides structural and fire safety, would the indoor environment of these buildings be improved considering garment workers' health and comfort?

In Bangladesh, most of the buildings accommodating garment factories lack required ventilation and daylight. These production units depend totally on artificial lights. Significant amount of heat is generated inside the building from the artificial lights and equipment (sewing machine, Iron machine, etc.).

Research shows improvement in workplace environment also increases workers' productivity. Hence, it is high time the owners, with the help of the government, took measures to improve the work environment at the garment factories.

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Making science interesting to students

In recent years, the number of students studying science in secondary, higher secondary and honour's level has decreased alarmingly. In this era of science and technology, no proper advancement of the nation is possible without the knowledge of science. There are some reasons behind this decline. First of all, students consider science a tough subject. Most of the teachers are not well-trained, so they cannot make science interesting to their pupils. Secondly, studying science requires more financial support from the family. Lastly, there are not enough job opportunities in the country for the science students. The government should consider all these points and take appropriate measures so that students get back their interest in science.

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Politics of climate change

This refers to the report, "World can meet UN climate goal" (April 14). The ideal solution to the problem of greenhouse gases is the use of solar power to run industries and homes. Unfortunately, it is not being done. Nuclear energy is a costly affair. The developed nations should not play politics of climate change as the use of petroleum and its products is more in the developed nations. Increase in the population is another reason for greenhouse gases emission. Use of bio-fuels should be encouraged. There are reports that even water can be used as fuel to run aeroplanes. If human beings are able to colonise other planets like the Mars or the Moon in the foreseeable future, then the problem of greenhouse gases can be solved to some extent. There is another theory that the talk of climate change is hollow and it is a ploy to prevent nations like China and India from competing with the USA and European nations in global trade. We need a James Bond to find out the truth.

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Comments on news report, "No trace of 8 since December," published on April 25, 2014

Aasfisarwar

I feel extremely sorry for these families; at the same time, I feel unyielding anger knowing that the government is involved in abduction.

"Promises not kept, mostly" (April 24, 2014)

S.M. Iftakhar Rosul (Faisal)

Government needs advisor in every sector who would remind the authority to keep promises. Garment workers' fate is going to change only in words, not in real life.

Taufiq

It is the government who should have not only kept their promises, but also made sure that the other parties kept their promises too. If this disaster cannot reshape the garment industry, then nothing can.

"Abductions on" (April 24, 2014)

Mofi

Alas! Our law enforcement agencies are not being able to keep pace with the intelligence of the miscreants.

Sara

This is getting weird... Is this a plot to create terror without taking lives... or just an odd game?