

The steps to clean food

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The per capita food consumption in Bangladesh has increased, thanks to rising incomes since 2000. However, worries over food adulteration have gone up side-by-side.

In an e-mailed interview with The Daily Star recently, Mike Robson, representative of Food and Agriculture Organisation in Bangladesh, discusses food adulteration and the reasons behind contamination in the food supply chain.

He also talked on the initiatives taken under a FAO-supported food safety scheme. The steps, Robson says, are likely to have a positive impact on public health and can support development outcomes as Bangladesh moves forward on a path to becoming a middle-income country.

The Daily Star (TDS): Food adulteration is a pressing issue in Bangladesh. Why is food contamination so widespread?

Robson: Food control is fragmented with 15 or more ministries and agencies playing a role. Coordination is weak, and so, adulteration can flourish. But the government is moving fast to rectify this by setting up the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) to oversee this co-ordination.

It is important to differentiate between accidental contamination due to a lack of awareness (poor hygiene during transport, manufacturing ice from contaminated water) and deliberate adulteration as an unethical business practice. The former requires regulation, standards and introduction of good practices along the food chain; the latter requires good policy and inspection measures.

TDS: What areas is FAO's food safety project focusing on? What are the project's achievements so far?

Robson: Food security and food safety go hand in hand. To illustrate, consuming contaminated food causes damage to the intestinal flora, which in turn can hamper absorption of even nutritious food and lead to



Mike Robson

malnutrition. Improving the nutritional status of the population of the country requires consumption of safe food. These issues are at the heart of FAO's mission and its strategic objectives.

FAO has actively been supporting food safety in Bangladesh since 2009. Our more recent efforts have focused on strengthening the building blocks – laws and policies, inspection, food-borne disease surveillance, standards, laboratory analysis, consumer awareness and piloting preventive approaches in value chains such as fisheries, poultry and horticulture.

We have supported the government in drafting a food safety and quality policy and we are supporting the set up of the BFSA with the food ministry.

In partnership with the health and family welfare ministry (MoHFW), a nationwide food-borne disease surveillance system using 10 sentinel sites, web, phone and household surveys are being set up with the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

In two years, the National Food Safety Laboratory (NFSL) has moved from being an idea to a laboratory

delivering reliable information for the country. Consumer awareness activities are being delivered through the technical departments of the ministry and a network of NGOs called the Bangladesh Food Safety Network has been established.

We are collaborating with the Department of Agricultural Extension, Department of Livestock Services and Department of Fisheries to incorporate food safety practices across production chains. This includes training of farmers and all those who participate in bringing produce from the farm to the market, to our tables.

In Khulna, with support from the City Corporation, we have distributed 300 street food carts, trained the vendors on good hygiene practices, set up healthy and sanitary markets and food kitchens, all of which are extensively being used by consumers.

We are supporting food standards formulation activities at Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) and harmonisation with international standards like Codex Alimentarius (internationally recognised food standards).

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Microsoft's new Surface tablet takes aim at Apple's MacBook

REUTERS, New York

Microsoft Corp unveiled a larger but lighter version of its Surface Pro tablet on Tuesday, hoping that the company's expertise in business software will help it take on Apple Inc in mobile devices.

At a presentation in New York, new Chief Executive Officer Satya Nadella made it clear that Microsoft, which recently acquired Nokia's handset business, is committed fully to making its own devices, despite a lack of success for its phones and tablets so far.

"We are not building hardware for hardware's sake," said Nadella, at the event. "We want to build experiences that bring together all the capabilities of our company."

The Surface Pro 3 tablet, which comes in three models starting from \$799 and costing up to \$1,949, features a 12-inch screen, much larger than Apple iPad's 9.7 inches. It also comes with access to Microsoft's Office software suite, employed in businesses around the world.

Microsoft executives made frequent comparisons with the MacBook Air at Tuesday's launch, making it clear that Apple's lightest laptop, which starts at \$899, was the device to beat.

The same executives, highlighting a focus on the enterprise segment of the market, also talked up the limitations of existing tablets in a full office environment.

Microsoft "has concentrated on its key strength - business users who look at tablets as extensions and/or replacements for full laptop capability," Jack Gold of J Gold Associates wrote. "Microsoft finally seems to understand it cannot go head to head with Apple's iPad, and must offer a superior business device."

Pakistan ball maker to fulfil World Cup dream



Employees conduct a final check to fix any cavity in the seams of balls inside a factory in Sialkot of Pakistan that produces official match balls for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

REUTERS, Sialkot, Pakistan

It was when he felt the roar of the crowd at the 2006 World Cup in Germany that Pakistani factory owner Khawaja Akhtar first dreamt up a goal of his own: to manufacture the ball for the biggest soccer tournament on the planet. "The people were chanting all around me. I just thought, 'This is the real thing,'" Akhtar told Reuters. "I was part of the crowd. I never had that kind of feeling before."

His factory in eastern Pakistan had made balls for the German Bundesliga, French league and Champions League, but he had never snagged a World Cup contract.

Last year he finally got his chance - but only 33 days to make it happen.

When Akhtar heard last autumn that Adidas' Chinese supplier for the World Cup couldn't keep up with demand, he immediately invited executives to his plant in Sialkot, a wealthy Pakistani manufacturing town with a long history of leatherwork.

Their first visit was not a success.

"They said 'You have Stone Age equipment,'" said his oldest son, Hassan Masood Khawaja, laughing. "After they left, my father called a meeting and said: 'This is our only chance. If we show them we can't do it, we'll never get another chance again.'"

It usually takes six months to set up a production line, but the factory only had a month - Adidas, the German sports equipment maker, was in a hurry. So Khawaja designed, made and moved the equipment into place within 33 days. Everything had to be done from scratch.

"It was hard, maybe the hardest thing I've ever done," he said over the noise of the hot, hissing machines.

But it was success, and the firm's previous investment in thermal bonding technology paid off. Only thermally bonded balls - made using a glue that reacts with heat - are round enough for the World Cup's strict standards.

A leading force in world cricket, Pakistan is a mere also-ran in soccer, where it ranks just 159th in the world. But Akhtar's

factory, where men and women in bright, flowing robes move plastic ball panels from machine to precision machine, is part of a long tradition of Sialkot football makers.

Local legend tells of a poor cobbler who made his fortune by repairing the punctured footballs of colonial-era British soldiers, then studying how to make them himself.

He was so successful that soldiers all over the region started buying from him. Business blossomed - but so did child labour.

A series of scandals, and changing technology, forced many factories to close. Others had to clean up their acts.

These days foreign brands frequently inspect Sialkot factories that make their footballs. Large signs on Akhtar's factory walls sternly proclaim that child labour is forbidden and unions are allowed.

Workers that Reuters spoke to privately confirmed that conditions were good - the salary was mostly minimum wage, around \$100 a month, but social security, life insurance and transport were extra benefits.

India Inc bets big on Modi, but can he deliver?

AFP, New Delhi

DAUNTING political and fiscal traps lie in wait that could ensnare new centre-right leader Narendra Modi as he embarks on the gargantuan task of fulfilling India's undoubtedly economic potential, observers say.

The landslide election win by Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could be a game-changer, they say, but any economic transformation will take time in the emerging-market giant of 1.25 billion people where competing interests abound.

"Expectations have built up very quickly, too quickly," Sidharth Birla, president of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

Mumbai's headline share index extended a heady rally on Tuesday to a new closing high and one of India's top investors, Rakesh Jhunjhunwala, forecasts the "mother of all bull runs".

The prime minister-elect has stoked the expectations by saying he could make the 21st century "India's century" within 10 years.

But Modi "will need to exercise reality management" to temper investor and voter hopes, Birla said, as the 63-year-old finalises his ministerial team before taking office on Monday.

The BJP ousted the left-leaning Congress, riding a tide of public anger over tepid growth, high inflation, rampant graft and a sclerotic political system.

Modi oversaw double-digit annual growth in a dozen years as chief minister of Gujarat state, and campaigned for national leader on his "Modinomics" mantra of "less government, more governance", pledging to spread his economic model nationwide.



A Bharatiya Janata Party supporter wearing a mask of Indian Prime Minister-Elect Narendra Modi gestures in Ahmedabad on Tuesday.

Top of a 12-point business wish list issued by the FICCI is a call to sweep away the remainders of the so-called "Licence Raj".

That refers to bureaucratic controls dating from British colonial rule that have stalled multi-billion-dollar projects as well as small investors wishing to start up businesses.

Analysts say India is also in dire need of more roads, ports and other infrastructure to boost productivity if it hopes to emulate rival China's economic miracle, along with a simplified tax system and reform of a cumbersome land acquisition process for industrial projects.

Gujarat, Modi centralised control and gained a reputation for brown-beating India's notoriously slow bureaucrats.

He was known as a tough taskmaster and reports say his office has already begun sounding out chief secretaries in various ministries asking them why stalled infrastructure or industrial projects have been held up.

But the challenge is greater on the national stage, where high consumer

inflation has kept interest rates elevated, discouraging consumer spending and investment.

Meanwhile, a hefty fiscal deficit means the new BJP administration has no fiscal firepower to spur an economy growing at 4.9 percent -- half the level notched up as recently as 2011.

Serious structural economic problems complete Modi's difficult hand, as highlighted in a new World Bank "Ease of Doing Business" survey that ranked India at a lowly 134th among 185 nations -- below its BRICS peers Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa.

"We have got to change how India is perceived," said Birla, citing years of project clearance delays, graft and red tape which have tarnished India as an investment destination.

An average infrastructure project, for instance, needs approval from around 20 federal ministries. A convenience stores needs close to 30 licences to sell milk, bread and other goods, the Retailers Association of India says.

Philippines to showcase economic comeback at Asia's Davos

AFP, Manila

THE Philippines will on Wednesday launch a high-profile sell of its surging economy as it welcomes hundreds of business chiefs and government leaders for Asia's edition of the World Economic Forum.

After decades of lagging behind many of its neighbours, the Southeast Asian nation has in recent years won investment-grade ratings and recorded stock market highs as its economy has expanded at one of the fastest rates in the region.

President Benigno Aquino, who has earned international plaudits for his economic stewardship and a bruising anti-corruption campaign, is now intending to use the three-day WEF on East Asia as a form of coming-out party for the Philippines.

"Holding WEF East Asia in our country is a clear recognition of the strong macroeconomic fundamentals in the Philippines, brought about by the many reforms in our society and governance," presidential spokesman Herminio Coloma said.

About 600 political and business heavyweights from around Asia and beyond will gather in Manila's increasingly glitzy financial district of Makati for the event, which will focus on sustainable and equitable growth for Asia's dynamic economies.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung will also attend what is commonly known as "Asia's Davos", in reference to the WEF's annual global gathering in Switzerland.

WEF Southeast Asia head Sushant Palakurthi Rao endorsed the Philippines' economic credentials, citing policies promoting good governance that he said were an example for the region as well as economic growth bettered in Asia only by China.

"This is the right moment to shine the spotlight on a country which has turned itself around remarkably after years of unfulfilled promise," Rao wrote in a WEF blog.

After Wednesday's social events to open the forum, the first official session on Thursday morning will focus on the hosts and is entitled: "Philippines: The Next Asian Miracle".

- Flaws in Philippine growth model -

Nevertheless, economists say the Philippines' growth model still has many flaws, with the elite soaking up much of the country's new wealth while roughly a quarter of the nation's 100 million people continue to live in deep poverty.

Within a few kilometres (miles) of the five-star hotel that is hosting the WEF event, brutal slums are home to hundreds of thousands of desperate people who have largely missed the country's economic boom.

Achieving more inclusive economic growth in the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia is one of the key themes of this year's WEF talks.

Another is the goal of economic integration by next year for the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

- Security concerns shadow talks -

A high-profile session on Friday will look at how security issues can affect the region's economies, a timely topic given the growing tensions over competing territorial claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

China's increasingly assertive efforts to stake its claims to nearly all of the South China Sea have been one of the most dominant issues in Asia in recent years.

Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, as well as Taiwan, also claim parts of the sea.

The Philippines has accused China of being a diplomatic and security bully in its efforts to control more territory, and called on the United Nations to declare that the Chinese claims to most of the sea are invalid.

In Vietnam, two Chinese nationals died this month amid riots triggered by China's decision to send a deep-water oil drilling rig into a part of the sea claimed by both countries.

The head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Locklear, will be one of the panel members for the security session.

Rao said China would not be officially represented at the WEF event, although he insisted the absence had nothing to do with the row with the Philippines and this week's gathering was not intended to focus heavily on the maritime disputes.

"We'll look at the other dimensions of the relationships of these countries," he said.