

## Saving forests from plunder

*Prioritise their conservation*

WITH an understaffed department lacking in adequate logistic support to look after forests, the government is oddly matched against poachers and land grabbers to protect what is left of the country's forestland of about 1.50 million hectares. The tree coverage of the country now stands at around 10 per cent which is far below the necessary level of 25 per cent of the total land area. It is hardly surprising that Bangladesh is fast losing its forests along with the flora and fauna they contain thereby leaving its environmental balance in grave peril.

Reports have it that to meet the manpower shortage, the forest department, as a makeshift arrangement, has placed a large number of boatmen as forest guards. Worse still, these boatmen-cum-guards are provided with guns that they are not trained to use. Small wonder our forests are victims of its own gatekeepers turned poachers, let alone by robbers coming from outside.

This adhocist and stopgap approach to conserve our forest sounds like a dangerous joke. The government must act fast to put an end to this state of affairs.

It's indeed unacceptable that out of some 10,240 approved posts, the forest department is at present running short of 2668, which is around 26 per cent of the total. The government must fill these vacant positions with special attention to field level personnel. At the same time, to keep loggers, poachers and land grabbers away, there should be adequate logistic support including firearms, transports as well as necessary training for the forest guards. In addition, steps need to be taken to introduce modern forest conservation technology replacing the existing outmoded one.

## Proposal to increase tax revenue

*Bringing personal incomes under purview*

POLICY Research Institute, a private think tank, has proposed that the National Board of Revenue (NBR) bring all forms of personal incomes under the tax regime. Given that every year the government is taking more and more ambitious goals under its belt, experts believe that the only way to generate sufficient revenue is to maximise tax collection from personal incomes. When one takes into account the fact that the top 10 per cent of the population own 35 per cent of the national income but personal income taxes constitute a meagre 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), there are areas where the NBR could improve its performance.

Indeed, there is no reason why the NBR cannot undertake the task of meeting challenging revenue targets. As the government has set its target on raising this ratio to 4 per cent in the next 5 years, some fundamental changes in revenue collection must take place. To facilitate the broadening of the tax base, enforcement of tax laws and a simplification of tax filing and tax payments systems are prime requisites. For NBR to perform to desired levels, structural reforms need to be pushed through as soon as possible. Decentralisation is one of the steps that both domestic and international experts agree upon, as the way forward to a better functioning NBR. Unless the tax system is modernised, government's plans to increase revenue may be in for a rude awakening.

## The economics of being happy

FAARIA TASIN

THE discipline of 'happynomics,' otherwise known as 'the economics of subjective well-being,' is a field where respected economists are joining in. Whether this discipline will be able to help every person to remain happy is unclear; however, economists have managed to get some insights into what can help us being content.

Tim Harford, widely known as 'The Undercover Economist,' recently provided four tips as to how to be happy.

Number one: never be distracted by the obvious. For example, when buying a new car, it is obvious to imagine the amount of compliments one will get for it; or when buying a new apartment it is natural to visualise the pleasure of hosting friends and family at the roomy dining table.

However these thoughts fall prey to what psychologists call "the focusing illusion." Due to this, many are influenced by attractions because they are focused on them just at the moment they decide. Because at the end of the day the functionalities of these new buys are important; it is difficult to drive a BMW through the narrow lanes of Dhaka or it turns out that buyers of these huge apartments never manage to throw plenty of elaborate parties for their friends anyway. A woman who buys an extravagant diamond jewelry set with her savings may find herself not using it after a few wears. Rather, it is suggested that more happiness can be attained if this money was used on something that makes her day to day life better.

Number two: pay attention selectively; for instance instead of listing what depresses us, we should count the good things in our lives.

Number three: doing some preparation to make it easier to do what brings us joy. For example: if reading books makes us happy, we can leave books lying around our house and make a plan to visit a literary festival. Or if we like movies, we can set our browser homepages to a movie review site. In other words, we should make our new habits easy to ignore.

Number four: it is important to keep a sense of what is possible. Renowned psychologist, Daniel Kahneman pointed out that much of our happiness is genetically predetermined! As a result, we cannot expect an introverted depressive person to suddenly mingle with everyone and jump with joy. However, he did provide evidence-based suggestions on how having friends and family and make us happier.

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# Sushma's visit: A successful diplomatic balancing act

**BOTTOM LINE**



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

NO one in Bangladesh expected that the pending bilateral issues with India would be resolved during the 38-hour visit of India's Minister for External Affairs Ms. Sushma Swaraj to Dhaka. The fact that her visit took place within a month of the installation of the Modi government is symbolic of the priority India attaches to relations with Bangladesh.

While visiting Dhakeswari Temple, the minister reportedly said that she came to Dhaka with an open mind and would continue to remove obstacles to relations between the two countries. She could not have articulated more than that during the first visit.

The primary purpose of the visit appears to have been to assess the political situation in Bangladesh by meeting leaders from all sides following the January 5 election in Bangladesh. Her visit may be described as testing the water before one swims.

In her speech at the BISS, a think-tank, she reportedly said democracy needed strong institutions and a culture of tolerance, inclusion and respect for differences. She used the weighty words which have enough food for thought and meaning for all about the need of observance of democratic norms in a country.

Let me say a few words about some of notable features of the visit. First, Bangladesh leaders received the minister with extraordinary warmth and courtesy. Second, the usual joint statement/communique after the bilateral talks at the foreign minister's level was not issued. Third, the minister's meeting with the BNP chairperson has sent a signal that India has reached out to a major political party outside the parliament. Observers say that it was desirable that she should have met the leaders of civil society.

The minister stated in no uncertain terms that India's cooperation with Bangladesh will continue so as to ensure a long-lasting, safe, secure and peaceful neighbourhood. During the visit, it was made clear that Bangladesh-India relations will be people-to-people and that the Indian government will deal with the Bangladesh government, irrespective of the party in power. She also said that comprehensive and equitable partnership with Bangladesh was essential for a stable, secure and prosperous South Asia. In plain language, she meant that since most of the bilateral issues are interconnected, the solution has to be in a total package with fairness and justice.

India's relations with Bangladesh are strategically important for India because Bangladesh can provide transit and security for the northeastern states. Accordingly, political stability in Bangladesh is essential for India and its absence in the country will have an adverse impact in many ways on five Indian states which share the border

with Bangladesh.

The minister invited Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to New Delhi. In turn, the Bangladesh prime minister invited her counterpart Modi to visit Bangladesh. It is expected that the Bangladesh prime minister will have an opportunity to meet the Indian prime minister at the Saarc Summit in Nepal in November. It would seem to be politically uncomfortable for the Bangladesh prime minister to visit New Delhi unless India takes action on both the Teesta water issue and the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement.

Broadly, the perception about India in Bangladesh is not favourable. People ask: is the land transit through Bangladesh to the Indian northeastern states compatible with the spirit behind fencing of the Indo-Bangladesh border? Does the fencing of 3,300 kilometres border along Bangladesh with barbed wire make India a trusted friend?

Furthermore, the proposal of visa on arrival in India for Bangladesh nationals was turned down by the home ministry when citizens of Nepal do not even require a visa to enter India. The rejection by the home ministry led by veteran minister Rajnath Singh, former president of BJP, has disappointed Bangladesh people as they had hoped that the new government would take steps for building confidence with the people of Bangladesh.

The huge trade deficit is no more an economic issue but has turned into a political one in the country. During 2012-13, Bangladesh imported goods worth \$4.2 billion through official channel, while it could only export goods worth about \$563 million. In addition, unofficial imports from India are reportedly about 1.5 times more than official imports.

The trade deficit for Bangladesh did not seem to have been included during the official talks, although the visiting minister reportedly stated at the BISS that India "will work with Bangladesh to move beyond the quota-free, duty free regime to facilitate trade and address the trade imbalance." It is good news for Bangladeshi businesspeople because researchers in both countries have found that Bangladesh has a potential export market of \$2 billion in India.

Before the minister left Dhaka, the Indian foreign office spokesperson termed her visit as an "excellent beginning." He also said that internal issues will need to be addressed by the people of Bangladesh. Overall, India's diplomacy was at its best because it has been successful in keeping both the government and the largest political opposition outside the parliament happy.

The ball now is in the Modi government's court and the people of Bangladesh wait expectantly to see the next steps of the Indian government toward Bangladesh following the visit. The Bangladesh prime minister rightly pointed out to the visiting minister that poverty is the main enemy of South Asia and Bangladesh needs good relations with India for alleviating poverty in the region.

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## Organising Middle East peace

ANN-MARIE SLAUGHTER SERIES



CHRIS PATTEN

IN Bertolt Brecht's great anti-war play, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, one of the characters says: "You know what the trouble with peace is? No organisation."

The play is set during Europe's Thirty Years' War, which devastated Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century, ending only with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The war began as a religious struggle between Protestants and Catholics, but rapidly morphed into a long-running fight between rival countries and dynasties, principally between the Habsburgs and the Holy Roman Empire on one side and Cardinal Richelieu's France on the other.

Not surprisingly, some have compared today's Sunni-Shia conflict, which is consuming swaths of Mesopotamia and Western Asia, to that war, which caused death on a massive scale, plagues, economic destruction, and social turmoil marked, for example, by a wave of witch hunting.

There had in fact been a peace settlement a half-century before the fighting broke out—an effort to organise peace. Emperor Charles V engineered the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, which was based on an agreement that sovereign states could choose for themselves which version of Christianity to adopt. When that treaty fell apart, the killing started.

What was the "organised peace" that preceded the current bloody turmoil in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere? The answer depends on how far back one goes.

As the Ottoman Empire crumbled, the Western powers launched a self-aggrandising project to redraw the region's map, installing regimes, creating dependencies, establishing spheres of influence, and securing access to increasingly important supplies of oil. Then came a persistent tendency to judge the behaviour of states across the Maghreb and the Levant by whether or not they would make diplomatic (or other) trouble over Israel's attitude toward Palestine and the latter's claim to viable statehood. There have also been explicit interventions, from the covert removal of Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, to the more recent military intervention in Iraq, which led to a quarter-million Iraqi deaths.

But Western countries have been reluctant to face up to the region's underlying realities, set out in a 2002 report by the United Nations Development Program. The Arab scholars and policymakers who drafted the report drew attention to the connections between authoritarian government, economic weakness, high unemployment, and excessively confessional politics. The more dictatorial politics in the region became, the more young men—denied both jobs and freedom of expression—turned to extremist and violent Islamism, the perversion of a great faith.

So here we are today, with the obvious but inadequate answer to the question, "Well, what would you do about it?" being the Irish farmer's reply to a traveler's request for directions: "I wouldn't start from here."

Alas, that is no answer at all, though it may be a useful riposte to those—like former US Vice President Dick Cheney—who advocate a replay of the recent past. Denying reality, American and British neoconservatives apparently believe that recent events justify their view that their war of choice in Iraq would have been a great success had there only been more of it.

But the neocons are not entirely misguided. The United States, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

rightly argued, for too long had pursued "stability at the expense of democracy"; as a result, it had "achieved neither."

That is a powerful argument for not abandoning a long-term commitment to the sort of pluralist values embraced by—among others—the authors of the 2002 report. The West has been inconsistent in its application of these principles, has occasionally tried to impose them by force (with disastrous consequences), and has failed to use effectively the money and mechanisms devised to support them. Consider, for example, the miserable results of the European Union's trade and cooperation agreements around the Mediterranean.

The West must use all of its diplomatic resources to broker an understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the main sponsors of, respectively, Shia and Sunni armed struggle. It is not remotely in either country's interest to see their own region go up in flames. These two countries need to start repairing their relations, a prospect (recently set back) which seemed a real possibility back in May.

With American and Turkish help, Iraq should be steered in the direction of a federal state, which recognises the aspirations of Kurds, Sunni, and Shia. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad remains in office but hardly in power. His army is probably winning, but the fighting continues. At the moment, the best outlook appears to be that described



by the Roman historian Tacitus—"they make a desert, they call it peace."

The time is long since past when outsiders could have considered an effective military intervention. But with UN Security Council support, the world's humanitarian efforts should be more extensive and focused, so that greater relief can be brought to the almost 11 million Syrian refugees who need it.

Finally, we should not ignore the continuing toxicity of the unresolved Israel-Palestine conflict, which continues to feed political extremism and raises serious questions about the West's commitment to human rights.

Countries outside of the region face an additional task: the need to discourage young men from going to fight in Islam's civil war. That is a problem for my own country, where it seems that we have not done a good job instilling in some communities an understanding and acceptance of the values that often brought these young men's parents to the United Kingdom in the first place.

The agenda for real and lasting peace is long and complex. Plans need to be organised, and they will take years to implement. Unless we start now, the fires will spread—fanned by politics and religion—and it will not only be Nineveh that is consumed by them.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### "May was hottest on Earth since records began"

This letter is in the response to the above online article (June 24). It may be exciting to think that there was a record high temperature for May but on closer examination of the data, one sees that such claims are not correct. The amount by which the record was supposedly set was one-fiftieth of a degree Celsius. This is far less than the uncertainty in both the land and ocean surface temperature measurements, which are typically +/- 0.2 degrees and +/- 1.0 degrees respectively. In other words, we cannot measure so-called global temperatures to one-fiftieth of a degree Celsius. The record is therefore meaningless.

Whenever such temperatures are given in hundredths of a degree, you know it is a merely a computed statistic that has little association with the real world. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration should be ashamed of engaging in such PR hype. Yet, it is on the basis of such unscientific propaganda that the United States and Canada are stopping their use of coal for generating electricity, even though it is the cheapest source available and is being increasingly clean. We must learn from Europe which is desperately scrambling to re-open its coal stations as they realise that green energy sources such as wind and solar are completely unable to provide the high quality, abundant power needed by today's industrial societies.

Dr. Tim Ball  
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### World's first GM salmon

A US biotechnology company has successfully developed the world's first GM salmon fish which is being named as 'AquAdvantage salmon' and which reportedly grows twice as fast as wild salmon. Approving the human consumption of the transgenic salmon, the US's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is now analysing public comments on its environmental impact as the final part of the approval process. As it is known, Salmon fish is the richest source of Omega-3. Recent studies have found that salmon contains a bioactive protein called calcitonin which provides special support for joint cartilage, insulin effectiveness, and control of inflammation in the digestive tract. Human form of calcitonin is made by the thyroid gland which is a key hormone for helping regulate and stabilise the balance of collagen and minerals in the bone and surrounding tissue. The GM salmon is said to be containing all the nutrients like the naturally grown salmon fish.

Doubts and confusions remains about the impact of transgenic salmon on the natural salmon habitat and on aquatic environment. Since food security is the top priority nowadays, higher production is the main point of consideration for accepting or rejecting a food item.

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### Comments on news report, "Cheers for black money holders," published on June 29, 2014

#### Hardreality

In 2008 election manifesto, "Effective Action against Corruption" was the ruling party's 2nd most important agenda. Instead, they weakened ACC. Giving chance to whiten black money is kind of encouragement of corrupt practices. Now, backtracking from a statement 'of not giving that chance' shows their inability to stand against corruption.

#### Spiderman

They are giving chance to loot the nation and deprive the people of democracy and good governance.

#### Impartial look

Is not bribe money considered as black money? Then how shall we go without bribe? That is the major source of illicit income for many sectors!

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### "Shamim's arrogance, Bashir's courage" (June 30, 2014)

#### Malik Muzib Rahman

Thanks a lot for the praiseworthy writing. At least few people should express the truth.

#### Hardreality

We have a political culture where evil things are encouraged and good things are stifled. What ASP Bashir did was very brave and just and we salute his courage. However, if he does not get any back up from his superior and if his life is in jeopardy, then will not it create a ripple effect in the entire police department so that no one would stand against politicians' injustice?