

Dangerous toxins in food chain

Make the food safety authority effective

FIFTEEN major food commodities were tested at various stages of production over an eight-month period between November 1, 2015 and June 30, 2016 at the National Food Safety Laboratory. It was found that nine out of 15 foods tested contained dangerous levels of harmful chemicals. The test results are alarming because the most common foods we have on our plate are tainted with toxins that stay on in foods like cauliflower, brinjal, green chilli, tomato, bean, etc. So with pesticide residues, colouring agents and formaldehyde in fruits and vegetables, public health at large is under serious threat. And children in particular are more exposed to a very harmful toxin, aflatoxin.

This paper has always taken a tough stance against adulterators but when we find overuse of pesticides and other harmful chemicals at the production stage – we are obviously dealing with a much greater problem. Farmers, due to their lack of knowledge and prevalent belief that more is better, keep putting in more of everything as inputs when growing their produce. In order to protect public health, the Food Safety Act, 2013 was finally passed that year. And to enforce that Act, Bangladesh Food Safety Authority was formed by the government in February, 2015. This regulatory body remains a regulator on paper only, as requisite manpower has not been made available for it to carry out its task, i.e. safeguarding the public against adulteration of foods.

Today, we fight an increasingly uphill battle against contamination of the food chain and it is essential that the BSFA is given the resources to play its role effectively.

Buriganga waterbus service

A good intention gone awry

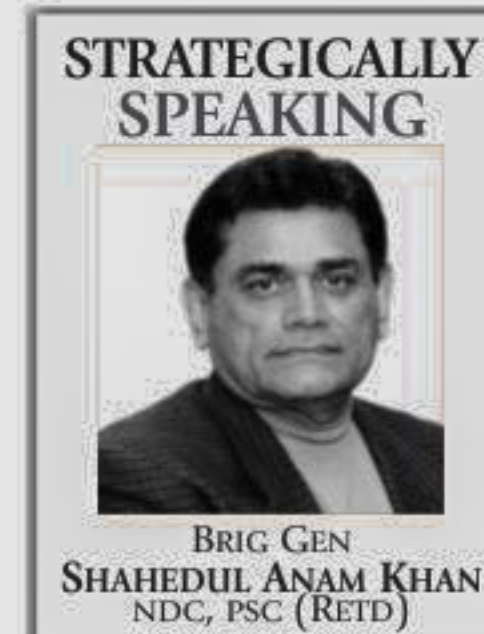
THE dysfunctional state of the waterbuses of Buriganga is an example of how bad management and lack of commitment can ruin a good initiative. Introduced by the state-run BIWTC six years ago with the purpose of providing passengers with an alternative mode of transport, the service is failing to attract passengers. And that's due to an irregular timetable, incommensurate terminal facilities and frequent engine failures of the waterbuses. Out of the twelve vessels only eight are operational now.

Things went even farther downhill from there when the government, in a bid to improve the quality of service, recently leased it out to a private company which now operates only two trips a day as opposed to five conducted by BIWTC previously.

Water transport is one of the most dependable, hassle-free means of communication and has a lot of potential in Bangladesh, a country crisscrossed by about 700 rivers including tributaries and canals—constituting a waterway of about 24,000 kilometers. If properly developed, it can give relief to thousands of passengers from the agonising traffic gridlock of Dhaka in particular, achieving the dual objectives of saving time and increasing productivity. In any planned city, waterway is a vital component of the transportation system.

All the money invested in the project—about Taka 10 crore—seems to be going down the drain. BIWTC should come up with a strategy to better operationalise a good idea through proper planning and thereafter effective monitoring of the performance of the lessee company.

He 'Kerry-ed' the day



BRIG GEN
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
NDC, PSC (RETD)

WHO said that the art of diplomacy ended at the Cliffs of Dover? That the fine art, so perfected by the British, has rubbed off very well eventually on

the current progeny of the settlers of one of the largest British colonies was well demonstrated during the whirlwind tour of Bangladesh by the US Secretary of State. If after a tour lasting less than ten hours all the parties, including the hosts, are 'happy' then there cannot be a greater cause for comfort for the visiting guests.

And that is what we have been given to understand from the news and various reports-laced-with-comments. The party in office is happy mainly because the visit, first of a very high ranking US official since the 2014 elections, to them is an indication of a change of US perception of the government from what it was following that election about which the US had had serious reservations.

In the absence of a joint communiqué of sorts post visit, it is difficult to say what specifics were discussed between the visitor and the various parties. The foreign ministry statement has little details, and all that we come to know from the US Secretary about his discussions with the Prime Minister and other senior officials is that he "had the opportunity to highlight how far Bangladesh has come in its four and a half decades since independence, and how much our countries now work together on everything from health care to education to regional and global security."

The ruling party has taken comfort in assuming, and some AL stalwarts have even gone so far as suggesting, that Secretary Kerry's visit is an acknowledgement by the US of the 2014 elections' freeness, fairness and inclusiveness. That perhaps may be a self-assuring pronouncement but there is no doubt that for our friends and development partners, like many in Bangladesh, the current political dispensation is a fait accompli. Recognising an aberration does not validate it in as much as recognising a military government and doing business with it - as most countries had done with the military rulers and pseudo-democratic governments in this country for good ten years - does not validate the means and methods of its assuming the reins of power.

But that the importance of the need for inclusiveness and democratic



PHOTO: PMO

practice, as well as the requirement to uphold human rights, as prerequisites for equitable development and for security of the country, particularly when dealing with militancy, was not lost upon our US guest who ever so subtly put the message across in his speech at

As for the brass-tacks, we do know that, "The issues of bilateral trade, investment and duty free access of Bangladesh products to the US market were discussed in detail," but what came out of the discussions on the most pressing of the issues - that of restoring

handout is what foreign aid turns out to be in the long run. The last thing that a development partner would want to impose is a mechanism that stifles export growth of its partner to its market.

As for the 'assurances to consider' extradition of the killers of Bangabandhu, wasn't the same assurance given during his predecessor's visit to Dhaka in 2012?

The BNP seems to be happy too because, according to the comments of the secretary general of the party after the Khaleda-Kerry meeting that, "They (US) are full of hope, and we are also hopeful that Bangladesh will see economic development as well as establishment of democracy here with the help of the US." And this is where one would like to take issue with the BNP position as far as 'establishment of democracy' is related. No party worth the salt, and one that has any democratic credentials, and if it wants to be taken seriously by the people, can ever think of establishing democracy with the help of a third country. It may go to power that way, but establish democracy it can't.

The only party that is perhaps unhappy is Ershad's Jatiyo Party for the apparent short shrift it got during the Kerry visit. But that is perhaps also an expression of how the US actually views the current political dispensation in the country.

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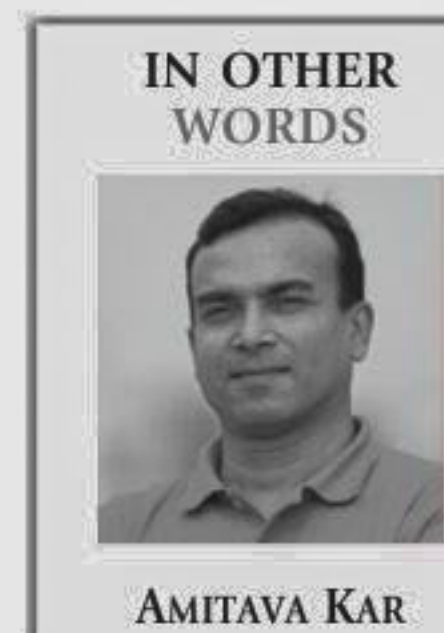
John Kerry had listed the areas that the US government had aided Bangladesh in since its independence. But if it really wants Bangladesh to develop, the only policy that will make US' role as our development partner meaningful is a 'hand up' rather than 'handout' policy; handout is what foreign aid turns out to be in the long run.

the Edward Kennedy Centre in Dhaka; it merits repetition. John Kerry said, "Security also has to be built on the strength of your civil society and the strength of your people's ability to be able to express their views and not feel as if the only place they can turn is to extremism in order to make a point.... democracy still provides the most resilient and the most reliable platform that we have for preventing and responding to violent extremism."

the GSP facilities to Bangladesh – we do not know. From the rather remorseful comments of the commerce minister we may as well forget about the GSP for good.

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Corruption: Nature of the disease



IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

NO country has ever been able to eliminate corruption. It exists even in the most developed nations. US economist Alan Greenspan noted that it is regrettably the way human nature functions, whether we like it or not. What successful societies do is keep it to a minimum.

We haven't been able to do that. Despite having an extraordinary development story, Bangladesh ranks 13th among the most corrupt countries in the world, Transparency International has said in its Corruption Perception Index. The TIB National Household Survey 2015 reveals that corruption hounds passport, law enforcement, transport, land administration, judiciary, health, local government, power, agriculture, taxation, gas, insurance, banking and NGOs. What's left?

Total bribery in the service sectors in 2015, the report said, amounted to Tk 8,821 crore which amounted to 3.7 percent of Bangladesh's annual budget. The foreign minister himself, at a recent seminar organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, identified corruption as one of the biggest challenges in implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the globe. "Bangladesh is no exception," he reportedly said.

And yet very little is spoken about or written on how to reduce it beyond the call for tougher laws and their enforcement. But is that enough? When has the death penalty stopped people from killing? Countries that have managed to keep corruption, embezzlement and fraud under control have done so by adopting a three-pronged approach: the lawyer's approach, the economist's approach and the businessman's approach. It is the first - tougher new laws and tougher enforcement of existing laws - that is usually the topic of discussion in the media and other circles.

The economist's approach is the least talked about. There are reasons for that. A lack of data on corruption to analyse the theoretical contributions have allowed conflicting theories on the causes and consequences of corruption to coexist. As a result, the field has failed to provide consistent policy guidelines to tackle corruption and has remained somewhat disconnected from the discussion arena. One of the reasons often cited for the relative neglect of corruption as a research topic in economics is that a bribe is simply a transfer and therefore entails no serious welfare losses.

The economist's approach basically entails unleashing the forces of competition against corruption and has the least cost in terms of civil liberties. In laissez-faire societies market forces effectively drive away rent-seeking. How? The primary objective of firms is to maximise profits. Their actions are affected by rules and regulations the public decides to impose on



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the private sector. A second factor that determines the behaviour of firms results directly from a direct monitoring by the public to ensure compliance with its regulations. Lastly, there is the market structure in which companies operate, something that is the product both of natural technological possibilities

and of deliberate policy choices of the public, such as the level of the tariff rates on foreign trade. The market structure will have an effect on the extent of the control right owned by the bureaucrat. Typically, the ability to extract bribes in exchange for softer regulations will be higher in environments in which firms enjoy monopoly rents.

The businessman's approach entails paying higher wages to bureaucrats. Two of the least corrupt countries of the world, Singapore and Hong Kong, are usually cited as examples of successful applications of the lawyer's approach, as they have extremely tough laws on corruption. But they are also examples of countries that pay their bureaucrats exceptionally well. However the level of political competition and civil liberties in these countries is quite poor, something that has allowed exceptional levels of pay in the bureaucracy without too much political opposition, and has often bestowed the anti-corruption agencies with sweeping powers that amount to a 'guilty until proven innocent' principle, or even the right to violate the privacy of individual citizens.

But it is difficult to distinguish how much of their clean record should be attributed to their policy of higher wages in the bureaucracy and how much to their tough law enforcement. Thus, what is required is an assessment of the relative impact of each policy option based on a wider empirical basis.

The businessman's approach is not showing much promise in Bangladesh. The country should put more focus on the other two.

The writer is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Families' role in preventing terrorism

We are going through a difficult time. The religious scholars of the country should be appreciated for their anti-terror guidelines which they had issued to create awareness among the mass people. The general people of the country can also play a big role in combating extremism and terrorism. Families need to spend more time with their children and instil in them values that encourage them to become good human beings.

Nasif Ferdous

Sylhet, Bangladesh

International Day against Nuclear Tests

International Day against Nuclear Tests is observed each year on August 29 to prevent nuclear catastrophes. Although atomic bomb has not been used since the WW II incident, no one can guarantee that it wouldn't be used again. Over the years, there have been calls from people all over the world to ban nuclear weapons. We hope that good sense will prevail and the nuclear power countries will do that to make the world more peaceful.

Sanaullah Samad

On e-mail