

No stars will shine for the farmers



GOLAM MORTOZA

IT may seem like a scene from a Cold War-era political thriller: A farmer burns his own paddy field, out of frustration. The food minister declares: "This is a conspiracy against the government!" A parliament whip confronts the minister: "You cannot make fun of the farmers." Enters the agriculture minister, apparently helpless, and offers his one pearl of wisdom: "More rice is being grown than needed. The farmers are not getting a fair price for their production, but nothing can be done about it now."

This gloom-laden scene, however, is not from any movie. Anyone who has been following recent developments in the agriculture sector knows that it happened right here in Bangladesh. The question is: by producing more rice than necessary, did the farmers make a mistake or did they commit a crime? It's natural that increased production will lead to a lower price. To protect farmers from the fallout of such eventualities, governments usually buy, store and even export paddies and other food grains, if necessary. It's a common practice all over the world. The price of the paddy, which is determined by taking into account its production cost and a fixed margin of profit for the farmers, is subsidised. This year, Bangladesh government has fixed the price of every maund of paddy at Tk 1,040. But how much "profit" the farmers are making has become evident from a report by the *Prothom Alo* which, citing sources from the rice mill owners' association and the food ministry, said the production cost of each maund of paddy is Tk 960. Discounting this cost, the farmer is supposed to have a profit of Tk 80 per maund which, all things considered, is a pittance in itself. But the reality is that far from making a profit, the farmer has to count a loss



Farmers thrashing Boro paddy at Doljor of Lalmonirhat's Aditmari upazila. What should have been a time of plenty and joy, plummeting prices of paddy during harvest season have eroded their enthusiasm. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

of Tk 400-500 per maund since he is being forced to sell it for Tk 450-500, well below the production cost itself. This exposes the fault lines of the government's rice procurement policy and the anti-farmer bias rooted in how the agriculture ministry functions. Note the comment by the Agriculture Minister Dr Abdur Razzaque: "Despite the unusual drop in rice prices, there is no scope for purchasing rice directly from the farmers and increasing the price at the moment" (*The Daily Star*, May 18). Earlier, on May 15, he made a similar comment in an interview with Ekattor TV. When asked why the government is procuring rice from the mill owners and not from the rice producers, despite setting a price for the latter, he argued that it was a logistically gargantuan task given the huge number of farmers involved, and other procurement and storage issues

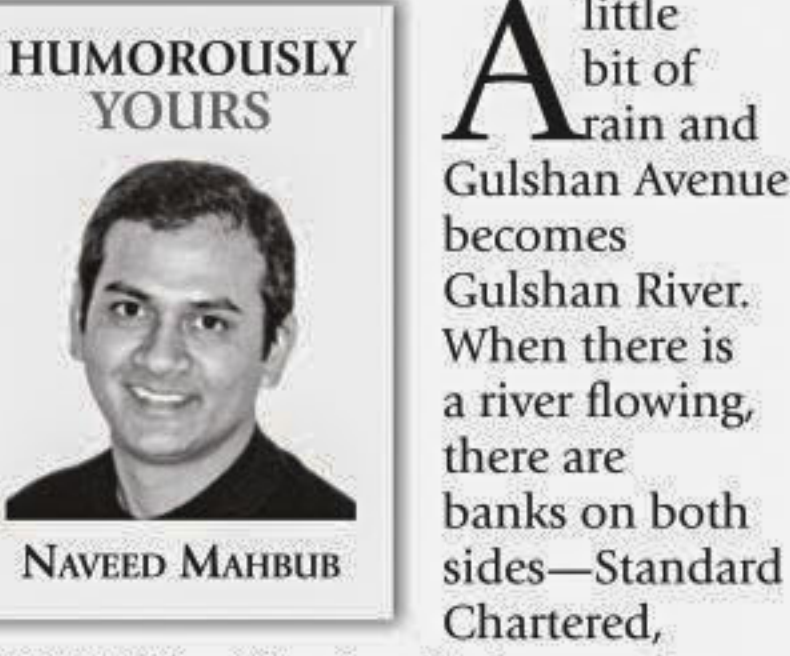
which, in his view, necessitated the use of services provided by the mills. One thing is clear from his statement: the government had, and still has, no plan to purchase paddy directly from the farmers. The price was subsidised *not* for the sake of the farmers, as was expected, but for the mill owners, who buy rice from the farmers and sell it to the government. Mill owners and others involved in the rice collection process are often linked to the ruling party. In other words, the beneficiaries of farm subsidies are not farmers. Interestingly, the plight of the poor rice growers has ignited a debate about the affordability of other daily essentials such as water, meat and so on. For example, the going rate for one kilogramme of beef is Tk 525, which means that a farmer cannot even buy this much beef with the price of one

maund of rice. Meanwhile, the "pillow" scandal at the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant has added a new dimension to this debate. How much is a pillow worth? As part of a bid to procure household goods for 330 Russian nationals taking up residence at the facility, pillows were purchased for Tk 5,957 each. Add to this, the moving cost of each pillow which was fixed at Tk 760. This means, each pillow for the residents of the 20-storied building cost the state a whopping Tk 6,717—which is nearly the price for 15 maunds of rice (each accounting for an average of Tk 450). The prices of some other goods were also abnormal. For example, the price of each bed sheet has been shown at Tk 5,986. While expensive pillows are not unheard of, was it truly necessary? Was the money well-spent? Was the government justified in spending

taxpayers' money for luxury goods in a public project, when it is failing to pay a decent price to the hard-working farmers who feed the nation? What determines our priorities? There have been, however, some arguments in favour of the procurement in question. One, given by a vaguely identified author in a column for an online news portal, sought to offer a lesson in public procurement, saying that the important thing in a quotation is not the accuracy of the price of individual items but their cumulative prices, which have to be in sync with the approved budget. This kind of argument suffers from a basic deficiency: it doesn't prove that no corruption in the form of overpricing has taken place. Actually, the price of individual items in a quotation is very important. Overpricing aside, existing price lists influence the way a project budget is increased later, which is often the case in Bangladesh. For example, if it is decided in future that more pillows will be needed, this price list will provide the basis for future procurements, thereby justifying the extension of corrupt practices. Coming back to the farmers, it's surprising that the government, despite acknowledging a bumper harvest, has stuck to its decision to import rice from India. Although officially only the import of aromatic rice is being mentioned, the truth is, even rice of ordinary varieties is also being brought in from across the border. The price of rice on the domestic market has not come down, although the price of paddy has. Now the government has decided to export some rice but it is uncertain when that will happen. Meanwhile, the poor farmers and all who depend on them will continue to suffer, like they always do on this land. No stars will shine for them. It's a sad, depressing scene and it will remain so, unless we decide to do something about it.

Golam Mortoza is a journalist. The article was translated from Bangla by Baduzzaman Bay.

A Dime A Dozen



NAVEED MAHUB

A little bit of rain and Gulshan Avenue becomes Gulshan River. When there is a river flowing, there are banks on both sides—Standard Chartered, Citi NA, The City (spelled correctly as opposed to its foreign counterpart), Eastern Bank Ltd, United Commercial Bank Ltd, Basic Bank, Bank Asia, Meghna Bank, Woori Bank, Bank Al Falah, NRB Bank...can't list 'em all in one breath. While Gushan River joins its sorority that makes Bangladesh a riverine country with the Padma River, Meghna River, Jamuna River, Modhumati River...the banks on both sides of Gulshan Avenue River also make Bangladesh a bank-ine country with Padma Bank, Meghna Bank, Jamuna Bank, Modhumati Bank... At the time of printing this column, there were a good five dozen plus banks in the country. That makes the neighbourhood variety store now competing with mushrooming ATM booths (when there is rain, there are mushrooms). That is a boon for the average person who can, at any time, walk into any ATM booth for some free air conditioning. I can well imagine how all the bankers are sweating bullets trying to meet their targets. Like they already aren't (sweating bullets) from wearing suits in the heat. I am no finance person, but I am sure the dime a dozen (no pun intended, uhm, on second thoughts, yes, pun intended) banks must be scrambling for the limited cash

out there. After all, cash is king, and the king somehow prefers to spread its wings. Supposedly, USD 80 billion has flown away overseas in the last 10 years, thus making Bangladesh's *hoondi* businessmen Canada and Malaysia's star remittance-earners. Besides, every fiscal year's provisioning of whitening black money (powered by *Fair and Lovely*) doesn't really help the liquidity crisis of the banks. Hence, when I recently went to an ATM to draw money only to receive a slip saying "insufficient funds", I was wondering whether it was referring to me or my bank. The job of the bank employee is thus not an enviable one. Perhaps the mobile app Sarahah, which allows people to vent their frustrations anonymously, was developed by a former banker. Bosses are thus tough, setting tough KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), but the good news is that the boss is not Donald Trump, who fires first and then sets targets for them. All this is not to say that the average banker has no job security. Quite the contrary—there aren't many who are interested to take his job. Hence I am happy that my wife has left her 10-year stint in the banking industry. The insanely long hours have had me see her only three times in those 10 years and thus, we have three children. With the liquidity crisis, there is now the matter of the banks being smart with investing. Maybe they should invest in SMEs—small and medium enterprises—while avoiding the large ones since the large ones, upon receiving large sums from the banks, tend to somehow shrink into becoming medium and then small enterprises anyway. After all, behind every (well many a) successful businessman, there



SOURCE: GARYONEILL.COM

is a non-performing loan. If I owe the bank Tk 1,000, it is my problem. If I owe the bank Tk 1,000 crore, then, somehow, it becomes the bank's problem. Maybe the loans are taken as though they are marriage loans—if I can't pay back, just take the spouse away... But one good thing is that the financial institutions are embracing technology. Who knows, a day may

come when there may no longer be branches given the way the average consumers are warming up to technology. Not too long ago, I could avoid giving out *eidis* during Eid with the excuse of running out of cash. Not anymore, the kids merely say: "Uncle, no problem, you can just bKash it to us." It will be interesting to see what pans out with so many banks out there. But

at the moment, for every dime, there are a dozen (banks) running after it (the dime). And the winner, at least during Ramadan, is the foodie enjoying BOGO (Buy One, Get One) Free *iftar* deals... Naveed Mahub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's *The Naveed Mahub Show* and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahub.com

QUOTABLE Quote

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
(1706-1790)
One of the Founding Fathers of the United States

Without freedom of thought, there can be no such thing as wisdom, and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Audition goal
- 5 Silver bar
- 10 "—we all?"
- 12 Noted trailblazer
- 13 Gala event, of a sort
- 15 Outback bird
- 16 Tennis need
- 17 Actor Wheaton
- 18 Maiden
- 20 Copenhagen native
- 21 Old treaty org.
- 22 Ogler
- 23 "—Fly Now" ("Rocky" song)
- 25 Viral sensation
- 28 Nuts' partners
- 31 Composer Charles

DOWN

- 1 Showed nervousness
- 2 Scents
- 3 Start again
- 4 Blasting stuff
- 5 Skeptical comment
- 6 San Francisco's —Hill
- 7 "Scram!"
- 8 Surfing the web
- 9 Bank employee
- 11 Choose on the radio
- 14 Fruit cocktail item
- 19 Wise ones
- 20 Gave out hands
- 24 Procrastinator's words
- 25 Farmer, at times
- 26 "Just the same..."
- 27 Snake-haired Gorgon
- 29 Tex-Mex snack
- 30 Justice symbol
- 33 Grasps
- 35 "The — the limit"
- 38 Sedan or SUV
- 39 Feeding-time need

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

GREG: I GOT TO THINKING... IF YOU WERE RUN OVER BY A BUS, I'D REALLY MISS YOU

HOW ABOUT IF I WAS RUN OVER BY A TESLA INSTEAD OF A BUS?

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SAGS REWED
COLA EXILES
AKIN PANAMA
RADICAL TIC
EYETEST ILK
ANT MOLE
START LINED
LACY OIL
APE AND IRON
YET RESTORE
ERASED ASIS
RETINA RIOT
DECAY YENS

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WHACK!

PING! PANG!

NO HOCKEY IN THE HOUSE, HAMMIE!

EVER NOTICE HOW I'M THE FIRST ONE SHE ALWAYS BLAMES?

EVER NOTICE THAT SHE'S ALWAYS RIGHT?