

The abundant basket

SHYKH SERAJ

Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger dubbed Bangladesh as a bottomless basket when the country achieved independence from Pakistan.

Fifty years back, Bangladesh was a country dependent on foreign aid. The first budget of the independent country was USD 92 million. I remember, former finance minister of Bangladesh Tajuddin Ahmad announced the budget on the radio and that was dependent on foreign aid. He said whatever the size of the plan is, its success can only be assured by a massive collective effort of disciplined people. He urged people to respond to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's call and move forward together to build 'Sonar Bangla'. Foreign journalists have repeatedly asked Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahma, who took the helm of a war-torn country, how will he rebuild the country? Bangabandhu, in a convincing voice, said my country has soil, my country has people and with these two, I will make Bangladesh stand on the rubble. Today's Bangladesh has travelled this far following the path of Bangabandhu's golden dream and now is a self-sufficient country in cereal and protein food production.

I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity

Shykh Seraj is Bangladesh's pioneer development journalist. He received country's two highest civilian honours, Swadhinata Puroshkar and Ekushey Padak, respectively. He is a BIDS, Ashoka and Bangla Academy Fellow. He also received highest award for agricultural journalism from the United Nations, FAO A.H. Boerma Award, Gusi Peace Prize (Philippines) and many other prestigious accolades at home and abroad. At Channel i, he's the Founder Director and Head of News. He's also Director and Host of Channel i's popular agro-documentary, Hridoye Mati O Manush.



to observe this long journey, from the birth of a country to 50 years of its glorious journey. The main struggle of the people of post-independence war-torn country was against hunger. People built this country through their hard work. Today, from a bottomless basket, Bangladesh is an abundant basket. This achievement belongs to every single citizen of the country.

There was food shortage even before the independence of the country. During the Liberation War, agricultural production was severely affected and the amount of food shortage was about 3 million tonnes in 1971-72. The amount was about 30 percent of the total production. And when I am writing this, total government reserve of food grains is 1.5 million tonnes. The population has increased from 75 million to over 160 million. On the contrary, the amount of agricultural land has been decreasing every day. In many developed countries of



Shykh Seraj shares the joy with Hakim Dewan, a farmer from Mamasar village in Munshiganj.

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

the world food shortages have occurred due to global pandemics like COVID-19, but Bangladesh has marched onwards successfully. Some of the catalysts behind this achievements are our resilient farmers, increase in agricultural production, expansion of farming initiatives, the government's farm-friendly policy, ensuring irrigation availability, continuous subsidy in agriculture, the success of agricultural research, use of technology, private cooperation, the role of media and many more. This has created a comprehensive food system in the country. Bangladesh in fact has become an overflowing basket as the nation has already become self-sufficient in cereal and protein production and is well on its way to becoming food self-sufficient.

Development of irrigation system is at the root of agricultural progress. Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque said Bangabandhu had taken a landmark step in the expansion and development of irrigation. He arranged cash subsidies and easy loan facilities for farmers. He brought water pumps from Germany on an emergency basis and due to the development in irrigation systems, farmers have been able to grow multiple crops from a single land. Now in some areas, farmers can cultivate three to four crops a year on the same land. Even in hilly lands, where it wasn't possible to grow any crop due to lack of proper irrigation system, farmers are growing crops abundantly.

Another important catalyst for increasing agricultural production is the seed, especially development of high yielding varieties. According to the information received, agricultural scientists from various research institutes of the country have invented 962 varieties of different crops and 1,392 advanced agricultural technologies, which has taken the farming sector forward. In this case, of course, our young generation of farmers have walked before the researchers. Seeing the success of global agriculture on YouTube or online, they

have come forward to innovate technology in their own adaptive method. Today, one can see varieties of diversified fruits and vegetables in every corner of the country.

I was saying, technology is taking our farming sector forward. However, our pace is much slower than the other countries, who have entered into agricultural mechanization. Moreover, developed countries are moving towards digitization at the end of mechanization. We are entering the age of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has called for ensuring easy transfer of available technologies to developing nations so that they can face the toughest challenges of the 4IR. The new changes in the farming sector is shaping everything, from production process to management. Things like transformation of information technology around the world through smartphones, the Internet of Things, the application of artificial intelligence in equipment management, robotics, biotechnology and quantum computing have geared up the 4IR. Artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things are now being added to the world's newest agricultural machinery. Precision agriculture and smart farming like saving farmers' time and labour is also reducing the production cost and ensuring good profit margin. This will definitely change the face of farming in Bangladesh in near future. The future of agriculture is all about science, technology and investment in innovative projects. In this regard, farmers should remain prepared as well as the government should also take necessary initiatives so that they stay in the race. My expectation is all about the development of farmers and progress of Bangladesh. When the centenary of victory will be celebrated, many of us may not be here, but hope this Bangladesh will remain and names of our farmers will be uttered with respect. Because these are the people who have sacrificed everything to build a prosperous Bangladesh.

Gone with erosion

Northern rivers eroding even in winter, render 10,000 families homeless

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Four months ago, Nesar Uddin (65) had a homestead, arable land and an orchard. But now there exists nothing. Nesar along with his seven-member family has taken shelter on the land of others. The family is now passing their days amid hardship and starvation.

Farmer Nesar Uddin of Gatiyashyam village in Rajarhat upazila of Kurigram district now stares at the place which used to be his homestead and cultivable land and what he now sees in the place is the devouring Teesta.

Farmers Jabelul Isram, Akhirul Issam, Abedul Islam and Alamgir Hossain were seen in a sombre mood like Nesar Uddin in the same area of the Teesta shoal. They all were staring at a bleak future losing all their belongings to a forever hungry river.

Nesar Uddin said that he has lost his homestead and 10 bighas of arable land to the Teesta river and he had to witness the devastation helplessly. Even a few months ago, he used to hire labourers to work on his land and now he runs to other people's doors in search of work.

"The river Teesta has taken away everything of mine. It has shattered my dreams," he said.

Farmer Jabelul Islam said in an emotion choked voice said that he had a happy family even five months ago. All their smiles and joys have been washed away by the furious river.

Jabelul has lost 12 bighas of cultivable

land and his homestead to the Teesta riverbed.

Now his family has taken shelter on a relative's land. 'I can't sleep peacefully at night. I could never have imagined that I would lose everything to a hungry Teesta,' he said.

According to the District Relief and Rehabilitation Office, around 10,000 families have lost their homes due to the erosion of Brahmaputra, Teesta, Dharla, Dudhkumar and Gangadhar rivers at 90 points in 14 upazilas of Kurigram and Lalmonirhat in the last five months. A vast tract of cultivable land and many establishments have gone into the rivers.

Abdul Malek, 56, a farmer from Gatiyashyam village, said that the erosion of the Teesta river did not stop even in winter. Every day cultivable land is going to the stomach of the river.

"My homestead is under threat and it can be washed away at any moment. My seven bighas of cultivable land have already gone into Teesta riverbed over the last few months," he said.

Mizanur Rahman, executive engineer of Water Development Board (WDB) in Lalmonirhat, said that the erosion of the Teesta river is being seen in some places even in winter. However, as there is not much water in the river, the erosion will not be that severe.

Preventive measures will be taken soon in the places affected by erosion so that it does not take a serious turn during monsoon, said the WDB official.



Arable land and homesteads are being devoured by unabated erosion of Teesta even in the winter. The photo was taken from Gatiyashyam village in Gharialdanga union of Kurigram's Rajarhat upazila recently.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Obesity in children

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fat. The condition occurs when a person's body mass index (BMI) is 30 or greater.

In 2016, over 340 million children and adolescents, aged 5 to 19, were overweight or obese, according to World Health Organization.

However, South Asia has the lowest (6 percent) child overweight prevalence and the lowest (3 percent) child obesity prevalence in the world, according to a study by University of Washington.

Children who consume more calories than they burn may become overweight or obese. The most common causes are genetic factors, lack of physical activity, unhealthy eating patterns, or a combination of these causes.

Although the rate of obesity is higher in high income countries, it is also increasing in low income countries.

The prevalence of obesity is alarming among school-aged children in Bangladesh too, according to a research article published in BMC Pediatrics. However, there is a lack of national data for overall body weight status of such children.

While being underweight is predominant among rural children, obesity prevails among the urban children in Bangladesh, states the article.

Healthy diet and physical activities are both the mainstay treatment and effective preventive measures for this condition in children.

5.2cr people food insecure

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engulfed Bangladesh as much as any other country in the region, has had a serious impact.

There are mainly two reasons behind the increase in food insecurity, Mahbubul Mokaddem, chairman of Dhaka University's economics department, told The Daily Star.

"If the production of food decreases, food insecurity increases. If the price of food increases, people's capacity to purchase food decreases. We have to look into what could be the reasons for the increase."

Besides, Bangladesh suffers from another phenomenon, he said.

"The gap between the rich and poor is increasing day by day. It could be another reason for the rising food insecurity," Akash added.

Just 1 percent of Bangladesh's population holds 16.3 percent of the total national income in 2021 and the bottom half 17.1 percent, according to a recent report by a Paris-based research organisation -- making it a quintessence of a poor and unequal country.

Bangladesh is one of the seven countries in the Asia Pacific region where the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity is above 30 percent, said the report, which was released on Wednesday.

The other countries are Afghanistan, Cambodia, Iran, Kiribati, Nepal and the Philippines.

In Bangladesh, the number of people experiencing severe food insecurity steadily declined from 2014. In 2020, about 1.7 crore faced severe food insecurity -- which is about 10 percent of the population -- down from about 2.07 crore in 2014.

The prevalence of severe food insecurity in the Asia-Pacific region was 10.3 percent in 2020, with the highest being in Southern Asia (19.9 percent).

Bangladesh has made a good improvement in bringing down the prevalence of undernourishment: in 2020, 9.7 percent of the population remains undernourished -- which is

closer to the Asia-Pacific average of 7.9 percent -- down from 15.2 percent in 2011.

In 2020, 14.1 percent of the population in Southern Asia were undernourished.

The number of undernourished people in Bangladesh stood at 1.59 crore at the end of last year, down from 2 crore in 2018.

The report also looked at the number of undernourished people, stunting among children under five in the Asia Pacific Region.

Bangladesh is one of the 10 countries in Asia and the Pacific with a "very high prevalence" of stunting according to the World Health Organisation criteria.

About 30.2 percent of the children under the age of five in Bangladesh experience stunting, which is low height for age and is the outcome of chronic malnutrition.

While the prevalence has come down substantially since 2000 -- when 56 percent of the children were stunted -- it is still too high, the report said.

The other countries with a very high prevalence of stunting are Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, Laos, the Marshall Islands, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste.

Nearly 23 percent of the children in the Asia and the Pacific region are still stunted, the report said.

UN says hunger on the rise in the Arab world

AFP, Cairo

A third of people in the 420-million-strong Arab world do not have enough to eat, the United Nations said yesterday, highlighting that 69 million suffered from malnutrition last year.

In a report, the world body's Food and Agriculture Organization said that between 2019 and 2020, the number of malnourished in the Arab world rose by 4.8 million people to 69 million, nearly 16 percent of the population.

Family torn apart

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uncommon. Two women died after being hit by a train in Khulna city on November 10. A 24-year-old college student was killed near the faculty of Fine Arts in Rajshahi University on November 19.

One death was reported in the capital's Teigaon on November 23 and another at Matikora level crossing in Sirajganj on November 30.

Nasa's rover makes

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The rocks that Perseverance has sampled so far also revealed that they interacted with water multiple times, and some of them include organic molecules.

These discoveries could help scientists create an accurate timeline for the events that have taken place in Jezero Crater, the site of an ancient lake, and has wider implications for understanding Mars.

The finding was announced Wednesday during the American Geophysical Union Fall Meeting in New Orleans.

For years, scientists have questioned if the rock in this crater was sedimentary rock, comprised of layers of material deposited by an ancient river, or igneous rock, which forms when lava flows cool.

"I was beginning to despair we would never find the answer," said Ken Farley, Perseverance project scientist at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California, in a statement.

Everything changed when Perseverance began using a drill on the end of its robotic arm to scrape away at the surfaces of rocks.

488 journos imprisoned

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journalists detained, with the overall number of 60 representing a third more than 2020.

China once again has the highest number of imprisoned journalists at 127, said RSF, which has routinely lambasted Beijing over what it describes as an "unprecedented crackdown" on press freedoms.

In Hong Kong, there has also been an uptick in arrests as Beijing's national security law has taken hold. "In this special administrative region, which used to be a regional model of respect for press freedom, and which had no imprisoned journalists, the national security law imposed by Beijing in 2020 has been used as a pretext for arresting and detaining at least 10 journalists as of 1 December," RSF said.

'PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL' Myanmar was second with 53, followed by Vietnam (43), Belarus (32) and Saudi Arabia (31).

The falling number of deaths since a peak in 2016 reflects changing dynamics in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, where a reduction in conflict means fewer journalists have been drawn to the region.

Most of the 46 killings were assassinations: "65 percent were deliberately targeted and eliminated," the report said.

Momen likes Blinken's 'positivity'

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The phone call came after the US on December 10 imposed sanctions on Rab and seven of its current and former top officials on human rights grounds, alleging responsibility for disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture.

Earlier, the Biden administration also dropped Bangladesh from the list of invitees to the Democracy Summit that took place on December 9-10.

On December 11, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen summoned US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller and said the accusations against Rab were not corroborated by facts.

Momen said Blinken congratulated Bangladesh on the 50th Victory Day during their phone conversation.

Momen, who was attending an event at the Bangabhaban on the occasion of Indian President Ram Nath Kovind's visit when Blinken called him, told the US secretary of state that his countrymen did not like the US decision without consultation.

"I said we have a very trusted friendship with you [the US] of 50 years. We are a country that solves all problems through discussion. So, we expect you to let us know before making any decision."

He explained to Blinken that the US has some global priorities that include preventing terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking -- ills that Rab have

fought well against in Bangladesh. So, it was unfortunate that the US sanctioned Rab, the foreign minister told Blinken.

After the Holey Artisan attack, there has not been a single terrorist attack in Bangladesh and that is because of Rab, he said, adding that people also trusted the force and it is not involved in corruption.

Blinken said they would discuss the issues and their door for discussion is open.

"I said you accused those who protect human rights. I said six lakh people in the US disappear every year. Police kill 1,000 people in the line of duty [in the US]," Momen said, recalling his conversation with Blinken.

Asked if he sought withdrawal of the sanctions on Rab, Momen said he did not directly say that but that was the thrust of the conversation.

"We have a good rapport with the US ... the sanction was imposed because of the Congress."

Meanwhile, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement yesterday that Blinken reaffirmed America's long-standing partnership with Bangladesh in development, economic growth, and security.

Blinken and Momen discussed the importance of human rights and agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation and address shared global challenges, Price said.

Jabs, boosters 'vital'

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gathering, underlined the urgency Omicron has injected into European policy-making just three weeks after South African researchers detected the strain.

The rest of the summit was to focus on other issues also pressing hard on the European Union.

Chief among those was concern over a Russian military build-up on the border with Ukraine, which the US has warned appears to be preparations for a possible invasion.

An ongoing confrontation with Belarus over migration flows testing the EU's borders and spiking energy prices aggravating sky-high inflation rounded out the agenda.

It all made for a charged summit, the last before France takes over the rotating six-month EU presidency from Slovenia in the New Year.

Alarm over the Omicron variant galvanised the meeting in Brussels, to which all participants -- from presidents on down -- only had access if they could show a negative PCR test, regardless of their vaccination status.

"Rolling out vaccination to all and deploying booster doses are crucial and urgent," the leaders said in their joint conclusion.

But they also had a warning from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control ringing in their ears that Omicron's high infectivity -- doubling cases every two days -- meant it was too late to overcome the "vaccination gap" among EU countries.

Several countries, including Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Greece, have already announced they will impose pre-arrival Covid tests on all EU arrivals.

That undermined an EU Covid certificate that had previously exempted vaccinated travellers from such tests. The European Commission said that Italy had not given the requisite 48-hour notification before bringing in its added restriction.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said he foresee the additional testing obligation being only "for the Christmas period, in order for us to gain additional time to boost as many people as possible". For Orthodox Christians in Greece, Christmas celebrations continue up to January 7.