The New Nation

NGO activities should be under guidelines

Non governmental organisations (NGOs) have been playing a role in the social and economic life of Bangladesh for a long time. In some cases, their work have been complementary to governmental activities in the social sectors such as medical care, nutrition, education, etc. In other cases, NGOs have been discharging valuable services in extending credit to the rural and urban poor in a situation where these people have been largely by-passed by the formal providers of institutional credits such as banks.

But not everything about the NGOs are unmixed blessings. Taking advantage of the leniency of the government in subjecting NGO activities under firm guidelines and enforcement of the same, NGOs have mushroomed in the country and many of these bodies allegedly engage in highly undesirable activities. Some foreign-aided NGOs invited criticisms for their objectionable proselytising activities. Poor Muslim families are allegedly targeted by them for conversion through enticing offers of loans and jobs. Then there are the NGO bodies that have transparent political objectives. They were accused for their mobilising of support for a particular political party during the last three general elections in Bangladesh. NGOs are supposed to be non-political organisations working for the social and economic good of the people of the country, so their dabbling in politics, therefore, understandably creates suspicion and is unacceptable. Many NGOs under the garb of micro credit operations are actually conducting bank-like activities in the rural areas by extending loans to very poor people at high rates of interest and also recovering the same employing harsh methods. The insufficient banking services and lack of formal institutional credit operations in the rural areas make rural Bangladesh the happy hunting ground of these so-called NGOs. Even some NGOs have been blamed for women and child trafficking and others for drugs trafficking.

Thus, the case is ripe for the introduction of a set of rules or guidelines for NGO activities. The Prime Minister had a meeting with representatives or eminent leaders of NGOs on Thursday and in it she drew the attention of the NGO personalities and the need for their organisations to be regulated by some official guidelines. The NGO leaders mostly agreed to the suggestion but they proposed that any governmental committee formed to examine NGO affairs and prepare guidelines should also include representatives from the NGOs. The government may take the next step in forming the committee keeping in mind the request from the NGOs. But its aim must be to produce and enforce a set of guidelines at the earliest for proper regulation of NGO activities.

Cricketing shame

TWO successive innings defeats at the hands of the Pakistani test playing squad preceded by six consecutive such defeats at the hands of other Test playing countries has created nothing but shame for Bangladesh cricket. It appears that the destiny of the Bangladeshi side is to pathetically appear in match after match and test after test to be only humiliated in the worst fashion. This is hardly the Bangladesh cricket team that defeated a Pakistani side at a World Cup tournament in UK or scored other triumphs against teams of other countries to establish its credentials as fit for playing test cricket.

When the test playing status was extended to Bangladesh, knowing sports commentators remarked that the ICC was rather generous about it. They observed that ICC more considered the enthusiasm for cricket in Bangladesh, the ability of this country to organise cricketing tournaments and some other features in extending test playing status to Bangladesh. According to them, the decision was more influenced by a desire to give stimulus to Bangladesh cricket and came not so much as a recognition of the high class of cricket here. Others murmured that the test playing recognition was the result of wheeling-dealing behind the wings and that the Bangladesh victories were only the results of 'fixed matches'.

Particularly this last conclusion appears more and more tenable as the foreign test teams play out their true games and the Bangladesh team crumbles most pathetically before their onslaught. The continuing crushing defeats reinforce the point that Bangladesh cricket probably did not deserve to be given so early recognition as a test playing one. It would have been so much the better if cricket here developed naturally and got due recognition for playing tests when it became rightly fit for it.

At any rate, every cricket lover in the country will want that something should be done to stop repetition of the national shame for that is what the performance of our national cricket has come to mean in the eyes of countrymen. Let us hope that the shame will trigger some determination somewhere to overcome this nightmare. The sponsors and organisers of cricket in Bangladesh must think out their strategies afresh and rebuild the team with spartan training in the days ahead for it to rise above its shame and restore the national honour in respect of cricket.

Crop genetic engineering and food security

Dr. Rafiqul Islam Khan

CROP genetic engineering has evolved from the advent of civilisation when man decided to domesticate plants for his own consumption. Man started picking plants with better qualities having desirable genetic make-up. As the need for food increased, man made progress in producing more food by gaining and playing knowledge of the functions of water, manure, timing of culture, etc. Organised farming, storage of food and marketing of surplus products developed as civilisation progressed.

New varieties evolved as a result of natural genetic processes like gene recombination (deletion, duplication, addition), spontaneous mutations or shuffling of genes through cross pollination. Knowledge of genetics developed further with the discovery of microscopes, gene structure, gene function, gene isolation and gene recombination techniques.

Recent discovery has made it possible to cut and join parts of the gene, insert it into plant cells and grow those cells into genetically modified plants. This process is known as modern day genetic engineering, which is a progression of human knowledge in quest for making better varieties of crops. Although, genetic engineers are able to make better plants by inserting new genes but they can only do things which nature allows them to do.

Crop genetic engineering research focuses on making crop farming easier, cheaper, sustainable and safe for the environment. The two most important traits so far introduced into major crops are herbicide and insect resistance. Farmers are taking advantage of effective weed control, which is easier, cheaper, less time consuming and involves less tillage compared to conventional weed operations. The rapid adoption of high volume of herbicide resistant crops in the US as well as in other parts of the world confirms the benefit and trust on genetically modified herbicide crops.

Because the cost of production is reduced, benefit also flows from farmers to the consumers. BT crops are resistant to some insect pests, developed by isolating a BT gene from the bacteria Bacillus thuringiensis and inserting it into plants. Inside the genetically modified BT crop a type of protein is formed which is toxic for some insects but not against humans or any mammals. BT crops have gained popularity with farmers because they need less insecticide and farmers are able to save on cost of production.

Scientists have developed 'Golden rice' (that synthesises provitamin A) by introducing into rice two genes from daffodils and one gene from a bacterium. This kind of multiple gene introduction from diverse sources is possible by GM technology and cannot be done by conventional breeding. Farmers as well as consumers of the developing countries will benefit from this invention. In future, traits expressed by combined action of multiple genes will be engineered into crops to produce high value crops.

Future vaccines and pharmaceuticals will be made in large scale in crops. This technology will make it possible to produce industrial products like plastics (biodegradable) and some lubricants in crops. Farmers would largely benefit from these high value products and consumers would benefit from low cost of production of those products. New jobs will be created with the development of industries in these areas.

Since 1996, when the first commercial GM crops were grown, the global GM crop area has increased 26 fold in five years (4.2 million acres in 1996 to 109.2 million acres in 2000). US leads in GM crop production representing two thirds of world GM acreage. 26% of corn, 68% of soybean, 69% of cotton, 55% of canola in the US are genetically modified.

Worldwide, about 670 million acres of land are under cultivation, of which 16 percent consisted of GM crops in 2000. According to one estimate, GM crops acreage in 2001 has risen to 19% representing 125 million acres. Argentina is the next largest producer, with 24.7 million, followed by Canada with 7.4 million, and China with 1.2 million acres in 2000. Together, these four countries grew 99 percent of the global GM crop area last year. South Africa, Australia, Mexico, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Germany, France, and Uruguay also planted significant acreage in GM crops in 2000. (Indonesia was added to the list in 2001.)

Despite the on-going debate on GM crops, particularly in countries of the European Union, millions of large and small farmers in both industrial and developing countries continue to increase their plantings of GM crops. This is an unprecedented increase, reflecting grower satisfaction due to the significant and multiple benefits of GM crops including increase in productivity.

In the early 1990s, many critics of biotechnology were skeptical that GM crops could deliver improved products and make an impact in the near-term at the farm level. Farmers have made independent decisions to increase their GM crop areas by almost 30-fold in six years. The collective judgment of millions of farmers speaks volumes of the confidence and trust they have placed in GM crops that can make a vital contribution to global food, feed, and fibre security.

Protecting crops from insects and diseases is always a challenge for the farmers of developing countries. Loss of crop productivity from insect or disease damage can be minimised by application of GM technology and making plants resistant to insects or diseases

Governments of different nations in consultation with societies have been putting in place regulatory measures for GM crops for their countries. Recent Indian regulation has recognized the rights of farmers as well as breeders. Under this regulation farmers will be allowed to save GM seeds from their production and sell the GM seeds in their locality, while the GM crop developers will have their right to sell their GM seeds under brand name.

Governments in different countries are also responsible for making safety regulations. In the USA, FDA, EPA and USDA are responsible to make sure that the crop is safe and to certify the crop's safety for consumption before it is released for commercial production. Each GM product undergoes rigorous scientific test for its safety as a food or feed and, the environment by the research institutes, government agencies as well as independent evaluating authorities.

Genetic engineering technology has genuine potential to help alleviate food deficiency problem around the globe and thereby making food available to poorest of the poor. Protecting crops from

insects and diseases are always a challenge for the farmers of developing countries. Loss of crop productivity from insect or disease damage can be minimised by application of GM technology and making plants resistant to insects or diseases. Food storage is a significant problem because of the lack of refrigeration. Tons of food rot before reaching to the market. GM technology can help to prevent these losses by producing crops that ripen more slowly.

Scientists have been trying to identify genes responsible for yield increase. GM technology has the potential to develop higher yielding varieties for different crops. This would allow us to produce more food from the ever-shrinking cultivable land. GM technology has the potential to develop crops that can grow in difficult conditions like flood or drought. This technology may deliver crop varieties that will be able to grow in alkaline, acidic or saline soils. This would allow more unusable land to be cultivated and produce more food to obtain food security for our generation and for the generations to come.

Population is increasing at a higher pace in the developing countries compared to the developed nations. Plant breeding and improved agronomic practices have so far improved productivity and were able to feed the world population.

Recently, genetic engineering has evolved as an extension of improved agricultural practices and is a powerful tool to deliver crop varieties with desired traits for higher productivity, healthier food and protection of environment. GM crops in the foreseeable future is set to improve productivity by protecting crop from damage, provide higher yield with the same or less input or by developing varieties that grow in difficult conditions (flood, drought, acidic or alkaline soils).

Agricultural research and development today is primarily driven by private sector investment. It may be beneficial if the private life science companies establish concessionary pricing now in the low-income countries so that poor farmers can also benefit from the new GM crops. Companies may also share their expertise with public research institutions and scientists concerned with smallholder agriculture, and form partnerships to work on crops and agricultural problems locally.

Contd from page 2 (Saturday issue)

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they swore to defend. At the same time, his foreign policy, if one could call it that, is being directed

From foreign press

questions of the legitimacy of the election were going to come back

which he and his team handled effectively: the China spy flight