

Paddy production and rice consumption

We remember clearly that by the time the UNF government was returned in December 2001, the buffer stocks of 'Rice', the country's staple food could last only a week. Hence the UNF government had to take urgent measures to import rice to avoid a catastrophe, resulting in the price of rice shooting up.

Today, we are happy that the country produces paddy/rice far in excess of her needs.

This self-sufficiency in rice has raised several issues that need to be sorted out without delay.

The most important is the very low-price the farmer gets for his paddy. Though the government has authorized a 'minimum price of Rs. 13 per kilo' of paddy the farmers lament that they are unable to get even a price low as Rs.

8 per kilo. They are so desperate and frustrated that they may be prompted to commit suicide for not getting a just and reasonable return for their hard work, sweat and toil.

On the other hand, we see how tons and tons of paddy have been stored in various stores for months without finding market.

Some storekeepers went public saying that when the harvest of the Yala season was reaped, the present stocks of paddy may have to be either destroyed or would be suitable to make animal food. Are we not heading for massive national calamity of sorts? What can the government and the people of this country do to avoid such a situation?

Well, the answers are simple. Firstly, the government must try to explore the possibility of exporting the excess rice (we are told that over 100,000 metric tons are available) at a reasonable price. For this purpose, the government must talk to leading Chambers of Commerce of the country and businessmen and draw up strategies and with their active participation such export possibilities should

be fully explored. Secondly, the government can restrict or if necessary impose a temporary ban on the import of 'wheat flour' into Sri Lanka and simultaneously launch a strong and formidable propaganda to induce and educate people to use rice, even for all three meals or else go in for other foods such as hoppers, strings, *pittu*, *roti* etc. made out of rice-flour and not wheat flour. The people too have a duty in this instance. They must fully co-operate with the authorities and avoid wheat flour and wheat flour products and instead go for rice-flour and rice-flour products. It is said a sum of Rs. 25,000 million is spent annually for the import of wheat flour. I was informed that even quality bread could be made by using rice-flour instead of wheat flour. Even if this is not so, surely the government can get some entrepreneurs to do some experiments and try to evolve other by-products from rice-flour which are all more nutritious, clean and healthier than products made out of other flours.

It is heartening to see some effort being made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Live Stock Development to encourage people to give up imported milk powders and revert to pure cow's-milk for their daily needs. Yes, the National Livestock Development Board, the National Milk Board and others such as Kotmale Dairy Products etc. should launch a joint campaign to promote pure cow's milk and their by-products.

Then let's take the issue of fish. Here is a country surrounded by the sea, the great Indian ocean. She has territorial limits up to 400 nautical miles. The fisheries resources available within our territorial waters are so vast that the major portion of it is tapped by pirates and illicit fishermen. We, in the mean-

while, import 50,000 metric tons of canned fish annually. The world must be laughing at us. All governments have miserably failed to address this all important issue and now, we have come to depend so much on imported canned fish. Why cannot the government obtain the services of some foreign experts and work out a strategy to make Sri Lanka self-sufficient in her fisheries products, and if possible to export it?

Another important, but forgotten matter is coconut and coconut oil. The whole country was plunged into a deep fear near two decades ago, when numerous letters and articles from eminent scientists, medical doctors came in the print media that coconut oil was bad for health. This was a folly, a surreptitious move by the multi- to sell their artificial oils such as Soya, Sunflower etc. But today the and researchers have confirmed beyond an *iota* of doubt that the best cooking and edible oil is coconut. It is said that Mothers with AIDS/HIV will still not pass on the disease to their infants by breast-feeding if they consume four tablespoons of coconut oil daily. Please stop using fertile coconut land for real-estate development. Grow more coconut and encourage people to use more coconut oil in their daily cooking.

Here again the government should take the lead with an effective awareness campaign with the help of all the media. It is the duty of the media - both electronic and print to allow some free time and space for the government to effectively launch such an important programmes.

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