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Let's tighten our belts for one year all will be well

There comes a time in almost any life, when one has to tighten one's belt and rein in one's consumption, for the sake of health and longevity. A time to pull back the stomach to what it was when we were younger and fitter and improve our muscles with a bit of dieting and exercise.

This is that time in Pakistan.

Our imports and consumption are out of control. We are importing luxury cars like never before. Gone are the days when a 1600 CC car was considered a luxury, and most people made do with 1300 CC. A modest or a younger man started with an 800 or a 1000 cc car. Petrol at thirty-six rupees a gallon was considered expensive, so, many used bicycles or tongas. Now a 2000 CC SUV is considered the minimum to establish social status. Every fourth car is a Land Cruiser which consumes a litre of petrol for every 4 kilometres. A trip from say Lahore to Islamabad costs Rs30,000 one way! Just for the fuel.

The normal "cash and carry" in any city will have eight brands of imported olive oil, six brands of olives, four brands of coconuts, coconut oil, imported mushrooms and gherkins. Apples from New Zealand and France and grapes from Iran. Even pickled cucumbers are being imported; as if we are incapable of growing and pickling our own cucumbers. The doyens of "high society" are worried about the supply of imported dog and cat food, so they are stocking up for the impending famine. If our common man can survive on Daal and Roti why must the pets be fed imported luxuries? Just go to the toys section and you will be bewildered by the flood of imported toys and gadgets. There are plastic cars, horses, hundreds of dolls and toy houses and kitchen sets and so on. There are sixteen models of bicycles that are imported for children from the age of five to fifteen. There are cars, and planes and boats that run on batteries and can be commanded by remote controls.

It is difficult to find the amount spent on these trinkets as the statistics hide the luxury items under say "plastics and items made of plastic." Container loads of such goods arrive at Karachi port full of such toys and bubble gums, nachos, chips, chocolates, sweets and sugary drinks. If they are worth say 40 million rupees, they will be mis-declared for four million, the customs inspector will refuse the declaration and add back 50% and reassess the duty at six million. The importer then pays a hefty 60% customs duty which may amount to 2.4 million rupees. Now this is only six percent of the original value of 40 million. No wonder goods are sold in Pakistan at the same price as Dubai. Soybeans arrive as chicken feed, luxury foods as medicines, the mis-declaration of cargo is rampant.

A capable and motivated government can surely put a stop to these malpractices. We can do without bubble gums and imported chocolates for a year.

The other national malaise is that of conspicuous consumption. If my house is not floored with Carara marble from Italy, Spanish tiles, German kitchen fittings and fancy ornamental lights my status in society begins to dwindle. This fascination for all things foreign is not only wasteful but is undignified and displays an inferiority complex.

Similarly, why must we have over 80 ministries? Why can we not do with 16 as we did 50 years ago when our country was twice as large. Why must special planes transport our leaders and army chiefs when first class seats on regular flights are just as comfortable and probably safer. Officers and employees of the Government of Pakistan, whether civilian or military should not get luxury cars at the poor taxpayer's expense. Fleets are being imported while our own car assemblers are laying off their workers.

In the field of energy a national conservation plan has to be evolved. Each agency or area of activity should be asked to reduce their consumption of electricity and gas. Electricity is wasted by our civic agencies mercilessly. Road and intersection lights are left on all night, even when there is no one around. Neon lights are left on for publicity all night in empty markets and roads. How come our shopkeepers and traders get away by defying all appeals to shut the markets by eight in the evening. Shops and stores in most of the rich countries shut down by seven in the evening, why not ours? All large buildings and Public sector buildings should be asked to reduce consumption. The air-conditioning should be reduced, as surely most of our countrymen live without it.

The holy month of Ramazan is just a few weeks away. It teaches us to live with less, particularly food and luxuries. The lesson we are supposed to learn is not just to eat less and fast during the day, it also teaches austerity. We turn the whole thing on its head. The national consumption of cooking oils and ghee goes up by 50%, sweets, pakoras, fruits and all luxury foods go up and not down. The whole point of the lesson is turned upside down. For sure this is all wrong.

The trade figures for January show a massive contraction of imports and narrowing of the current account deficit. It's been done by the government restricting the flow of foreign currencies on imports. The value of the rupee has been driven down to a ridiculously low level. It is now 260 to the dollar whereas the Indian rupee is steady at 80 to the dollar. We used to be nearly at par. Surely, the productivity of a Pakistani is not one-third of an Indian? All these are indications of our national policies and priorities going completely wrong and we need to set them right before we are driven into a complete collapse.

Let's cut down on our luxuries and waste, before our necessities are snatched away from us.

**(The writer is also the current Chairman of the
Towel Manufacturers Association of Pakistan)**