

Fuel price hike again

Consumers need safeguard against exploitation

WHILE announcing the upward price revision of fuel, the state minister for petroleum and mineral resources was quick to put the hike down to "high prices in the international market as well as in India" and a bid to "recoup losses of the state-run Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation". The price differential between local and Indian markets encourages smuggling of petroleum to the neighbouring country, he reasoned. Also, he said the BPC losses accrued over the years stood at some Tk 3,100 crore and were mainly due to price differences between local and international markets. Apparently, the minister did not do his home-work right.

Whatever price differential there is of petroleum between markets in Bangladesh and India, to make a windfall out of it, a smuggler has to run a sizeable operation involving a huge logistical set-up. Had there been such large-scale smuggling operations, the border forces would have surely at least spotted them, if not stopped them outright. So far, we have not heard of any and the state minister himself could not produce any specific data on petroleum smuggling. On the question of BPC losses, too, he was far from depicting the true picture. The state-run agency remains the greatest source of revenue for the government, paying more than Tk 3,500 crore to the exchequer in duty and value added tax (VAT). The BPC's predicament stems largely from poor management and high taxation policy.

The increase in the fuel price by such a higher notch is certain to raise the overall cost of living, which even without this had shot up 8.52 per cent last year. Agricultural and industrial production cost will go up because of increase in diesel and furnace oil price. The immediate effect of the price revision will be on the public transport system. Passenger vehicles such as buses, minibuses and autorickshaws are reported to have increased the fare, in some cases, out of proportion to the fuel price rise. Ultimately, the middle- and lower income groups will be the worst hit by the price revision.

Over the years, the government has increased fuel prices on the grounds of upward trend in the international market. However, it has never scaled them down following downswing in the international price. It's the government's responsibility after the fuel price increase to ensure that unscrupulous traders, transport owners and service providers do not fleece the consumers using it as a pretext.

Why these fetters on NGO activities?

This is throwing the baby with bath water

ISN'T it a close-door policy that is out of date by eons? The government has asked the NGOs to seek its permission before they invite foreigners and take them out on field trips to projects. Even organising meetings and seminars has come under the stipulation. On a lighter vein, this is a somewhat small-minded attention being paid to details smacking of nit-picking. But to be serious, this amounts to immobilising, even strangulating, the NGOs of the dynamic variety.

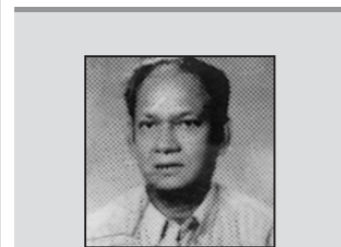
The government cannot be unaware of the salutary impact the NGOs have had on the socio-economic lives of general masses. Starting from awareness building on various issues to poverty alleviation, education, women's empowerment, micro-credit-based self-employment, there is hardly any field where they have not left their imprint. As a matter of fact, the NGO success stories have enhanced the image of Bangladesh abroad, to say nothing of improving some vital socio-economic indicators. The essential thing to note is that the NGOs flourished largely because of non-interference of the government in their functioning.

There may have been stray incidents involving controversies surrounding alleged politicisation of some NGOs but imposition of sweeping restrictions is tantamount to throwing the baby with the bath water. Let's say, a foreign expert has planned to visit a time-bound water or sanitation project the NGO Bureau will presumably give the trip a go-ahead after a thorough verification of his credentials. There may be inordinate delays in attending to such requests on a case-by-case basis.

This is a sure formula for virtually scuttling the project. The Bureau, as it is, is gasping for breath with a minuscule manpower to carry out its legitimate functions like overseeing the audited accounts of the NGOs. The restrictions can easily spawn corruption. So, the realistic approach would be not to insist on prior permission but to ask the NGOs to make a post-facto report on any special programme activities they might undertake. The government will, therefore, be well advised to withdraw the new restrictions immediately for the good of the NGOs, the people and the country.

In most of its public announcements lately the government has assured all concerned that it is only interested in facilitating NGO activities, not impeding them. Don't the latest restrictions negate such pious pronouncements of the government?

New year's gift for Erdogan -- the Turkish premier in waiting!



ARSHAD-UZ-ZAMAN

RECEP Tayyip Erdogan is a name that Turkey in particular and world in general will hear frequently during the year 2003.

The year began for Erdogan with a welcome gift from the President of the Turkish Republic, Ahmet Necdet Sezer. He lifted his veto against Erdogan allowing him to run for a Grand National Assembly seat from Siirt in eastern Turkey. The seat fell vacant following the ouster of Jet Fadhil, who had been earlier elected as an independent candidate. Through incredible twists and turns Fadhil finds his parliamentary immunity lifted and is lodged in jail. In the fresh elections due in February next Erdogan is sure to win a seat. Siirt is the birthplace of Madame Erdogan.

In the 3 November elections of last year, proving all pollsters wrong the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan won a two thirds majority. The three-way coalition led

by Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit of the left leaning Democratic Left Party (DSP) had an ignominious defeat and none of them could cross the barrage of 10 per cent votes nationwide. Along with AKP the only other party to cross the barrage was People's Republican Party founded in 1923 by the founder of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The party is now led by Deniz Baykal.

With the convincing victory of

the President of AKP and Abdullah Gul, the Prime Minister. The two launched a fierce campaign for membership of the powerful European Union (EU). The Summit of EU was held in Copenhagen, capital of Denmark, on 12 December last. The Summit decided to expand the 15-member organisation into a 25-member one by including virtually the entire former Soviet bloc. Turkey had

against the US determination for a strike against Iraq. The excuse is, Iraq is supposed to stockpile weapons of mass destruction and President Bush is determined to 'disarm' Iraq. The fact that UN weapons inspectors are looking at all nooks and corners of Iraq and seem to have failed to find the 'smoking gun' leaves Bush unimpressed.

The fate of Turkey, a close

Turkey. Turkey seems prepared to have a *modus vivendi* with the US for she too has expressed strongly that her forces, which are already there, will enter in larger numbers to protect the oilfields. Turkey does not want a British presence. Britain has eyed those oilfields since her imperial days. Opinion in Turkey is divided whether to take part in the operations in Iraq, should US start a military campaign as it appears

Turkish National Security Council in a meeting under the residency of President Sezer and presence of the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister and participation of the three Chiefs of the Armed Forces decided that there was no need for Turkey to act at the moment since the UN would examine the report of the weapons inspectors at the end of January 2003. The Turkish decision, therefore is to work through the UN.

High on the Turkish agenda is her campaign for membership of EU, a campaign she has carried on for more than four decades for the better part of November and December Recep Tayyip Erdogan, although sporting the title of President of AKP, toured the European capitals and the US and had red carpets rolled out for him everywhere, for he was the Prime Minister in waiting. Shortly his ambitions will be fulfilled. He has appeared on the Turkish political horizon as a new meteor. The only administrative experience he has is the one of successful Mayor of Istanbul. In his hands will lie the fate of nearly 70 million population, a vibrant dynamic population, bursting at the seams with energy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early nineties and the emergence of nearly a dozen Turkic states, Turkey has become the veritable bridge of Eurasia. Time will tell if Recep Tayyip Erdogan will fulfil the expectations of the people.

Arshad-uz-Zaman is a former Ambassador.

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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AKP the Government has been formed under Prime Minister Abdullah Gul, deputy of Erdogan. Since Erdogan had been slapped a ban by the Turkish courts for reciting poems in public meetings considered seditious, he had been banned from politics. The New Year's gift by President Sezer is the lifting of the ban and thereby opening the door for his taking over the reins of administration.

For the last month and a half Turkey has been through tumultuous politics. There has been a two-headed administration -- Erdogan,

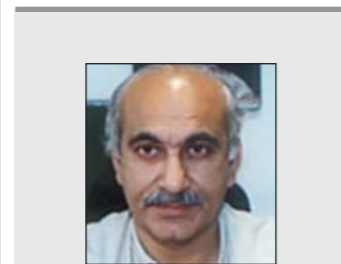
strenuously campaigned that the EU would announce a date for Turkey to start negotiations for eventual membership. In the Summit declaration EU came tantalisingly close but backed away at the last moment. It appears Turkey will have to resume her odyssey once again in 2003.

The year 2002 has witnessed war drums grow louder and louder emanating from Washington and the target is oil rich Iraq. President George W Bush appears all set for a strike against Iraq. The entire world minus Britain has been ranged

neighbour of Iraq, seems inextricably linked with Iraq. Northern Iraq is the focal point of great diplomatic and military activities and Turkey has a large border with Northern Iraq. Two huge oil fields in Kerkuk and Musul are located in Northern Iraq and nearly three million ethnic Turks, the Turcomens, live there. The greedy eyes of the US, Northern Iraq administration propped up by Washington, Britain, the administration of Baghdad and Turkey are focussed on that region. The US has been threatening that she will enter the region through

more and more likely. There is consensus that even if Turkey does not take part directly in a US sponsored war, she cannot remain indifferent to the fate of Northern Iraq, since she has her kith and kin there. The US has been mounting pressure steadily for a Turkish decision. She has launched a vigorous campaign through her Turkish friends, mostly former ambassadors in favour of the 'mightiest power' in the world and it would be foolish not to benefit from this 'opportunity'. The pressure reached such a level that the

Some questions about 2002



M.J. AKBAR

QUESTION: Why does India's, and perhaps the world's, premier empire, Venkatraghavan, chew gum like an adolescent? Sometimes the gob on one side becomes so prominent that he looks as if he has put a whole packet of that mindless narcotic in his mouth. He also seems to chew either angrily or hungrily, implying that he is either being eaten by a secret sorrow, or there were not enough vegetables available for breakfast. Both theories have their merits. To look at Venkat is to look at the face of a Secret Sorrow. What that secret may be I cannot tell. Perhaps Pataudi or Wadekar did not give him enough overs to bowl. Maybe he is bitter with his parents for bringing him into the world at the same time as Prasanna and Chandrashekar, with Bishen Bedi waiting in the wings to trip him. On the other hand, hunger works equally well as a reason. Where in South Africa is he going to find *idlis* for breakfast?

Venkat is a thinking man. Surely he realises that his USP (Unique Selling Proposition, for those who don't know management jargon) is dignified integrity! Being human, he is fallible; but no one, official or spectator, questions his motives. Chewing gum erodes credibility. Whoever created this miserably useless bit of rubber obviously took inspiration from the cow. Chewing cud is not the most inspirational thing you can do while judging the fate of nations in front of millions of television viewers. It implies that you

are tense, and need to chew stupidly to calm your nerves. Venky will represent not only himself, but also India at the World Cup in a few weeks. It is possible that he will be the only Indian visible on the television screen in the second half of the Cup, after the Great Indian Team has returned after being defeated by Zimbabwe. He cannot let the side, and the country, down. He can have all the *paan* he wants when back home.

Question: Why does Saurav

should the captain of India expect either featherbeds or turners? Pace and swing are going to get wickets in South Africa; line and length are going to prevent runs. Where better to test this out than in New Zealand? Or are we planning to win the World Cup without getting any wickets? Sachin Tendulkar would need to score a hundred and Rahul his traditional 76 in every match in that case. The simple fact of the matter is this: what happened to the Indian cricket team in New Zealand is

same in the local dialects, if you see what I mean, but who can stop an anchor once he or she believes that breaking a sentence with a pseudo-erotic intonation is the key to the next promotion? The habit has not become an epidemic because some restraint has clearly been placed by the Americans, for which we should be grateful. I recall some CNN anchor who used to do this, but I cannot see the lady on the screen now. Thank you, CNN.

Question: How has everyone --

BYLINE

What happened to the Indian cricket team in New Zealand is exactly the same as that which happened to the Congress in Gujarat. Neither the Indian cricket team nor the Congress Party has ever been in such disarray. And both are refusing to change the captain for the real game ahead -- the World Cup in South Africa and the general elections in India... Sonia Gandhi, who spent the whole of the Gujarat campaign being a pseudo-Hindu, decided that it was high time she became pseudo-secular again... Such faith could last even as long as the next election.

Ganguly blame the pitch when he gets exposed in New Zealand as a batsman with two left feet and no brains? A pitch is not made for just one side. Both teams have to play on it. It isn't as if India is told to take one bouncy irreverent strip while New Zealand is offered a dead track nearby. A home team will always try and squeeze advantage from a local pitch. That is what Saurav Ganguly does in Eden Gardens. Moreover, there is a neutral toss to determine who gets first use of pitch, to either bat or bowl. If the pitch is such a vicious swinger, then why bat first after winning the toss? And which pitch in the world can be blamed for India being bowled out, consistently, within less than fifty overs? The pitch is the same for Saurav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid; how come Rahul can bat and Ganguly cannot? Has some special instruction been given to Indian bowlers forbidding them to exploit the bounce of the pitch? If these matches are meant to prepare the team for South Africa, why

exactly the same as that which happened to the Congress in Gujarat. Neither the Indian cricket team nor the Congress Party has ever been in such disarray. And both are refusing to change the captain for the real game ahead -- the World Cup in South Africa and the general elections in India.

Question: Why have television news anchors begun to punctuate their chirpy disbursement of news with a sucking sound that goes something like this: pchha! My personal memory bank indicates that someone in BBC started this trend. It is an irritating, pseudo-superior sound that is possibly also considered sexy in the suburbs of Camden or the pubs of Notting Hill. A careful hint of a smile partners the spitting sound. Maybe it is the small pout with which pchha is thrown at the viewer that is meant to be the turn-on. Cultural colonialism being what it is, a number of Indians have begun to do their own versions of pchha! It doesn't sound quite the

with the notable exception of Praveen Togadia and Ashok Singhal -- turned secular after the Gujarat elections? Narendra Modi now holds press conferences to announce that he has forgiven a Muslim who sent him hate mail. He wears a beatific smile, the kind of smile that you do with half-closed eyes brimming with goodwill towards the fellowman. A tape recorder placed close to Modi's chest could have preserved the sound of the milk of human kindness sloshing about in his heart. There was no mention of Mian Musharraf in the whole press conference.

The deep pangs of secularism have hit everywhere. Prime Minister Vajpayee doesn't muse every year. Last year, for instance, he stuck strictly to amusement during his year-end holiday; there was no musing. This year he mused, thanks to Gujarat. Maybe he should have mused a little more during the Gujarat elections, when the air was thick with a different rhetoric. To be

Vajpayee as a pseudo-Hindu.

Sonia Gandhi, who spent the whole of the Gujarat campaign being a pseudo-Hindu, decided that it was high time she became pseudo-secular again. The Congress Party, which had been pseudo-obedient during the Gujarat fiasco, loyally rediscovered secularism. Its first reaction to the rout in Gujarat had been to blame, in this order, the pitch, the umpire, and the opposing captain. When carping found no takers, it retreated into silence. Even Ambika Soni stopped praising Sonia Gandhi's leadership on television, which is saying something. After a few days, someone dusted an old file and produced a speech for the leader in which she denounced the BJP as communal and claimed that Congress was the true flagbearer of secularism. Such faith could last even as long as the next election.

Question: Here is one I think I do have an answer to. Why do so many applicants for jobs, when wanting to

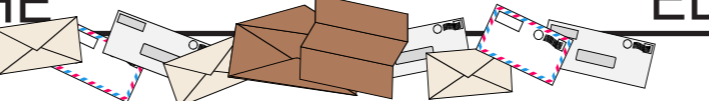
describe their marital status, call it instead their marital status? Is dyslexia a natural trait of Indian English? Or is this some deep sign of Indian wisdom that hints at the truth by the elliptical process of insinuation? Marriage is so often a martial art.

The better explanation is that English is at last becoming a democratic language. All foreigners who came to India to settle, or rule, or both, brought a language with them. India quickly Indianised it. Persian morphed into Urdu. English remained a ruling class language because the English, with a few exceptions, did not mix with the natives. The *sahibs* stuck to themselves, finished their tour of duty, and went home. The Mughals, or the Pathans, or the Turks, or the Kushans -- and we could go all the way back to the Aryans -- did not have home leave. India became their home.

Paradoxically, but logically (does that make it a double paradox?) English became an Indian language much after the British left India. Till the Sixties there was open conflict between English and Hindi for the status of link language, or the national language if you like. Parties as different as the Socialists, Communists and Jana Sanghis, believed that the poor could not become involved in nation-building unless the nation chose to rule itself in their diction. In the Seventies the conflict began to melt, not because anyone in power changed the dynamics of the language-people relationship but because the people found their own answers. The usage of Hindi crossed the Vindhya, and the usage of English crossed class barriers. As English seeped down, its grammar took a hammering. Which is preferable? Growth or grammar? English is safe in India because of bad English.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Fuel price

Like many people who voted for BNP for the first time in the last elections, I also thought that at least we would have better economic management. It was the common perception that BNP is more of a pro-business party than AL.

But as this fuel price hike has shown, BNP knows no more about economics than a layman. It is a simple formula, higher energy costs are a burden on the economy. Energy costs, both direct and indirect were already high. Both gas and electricity are unreliable and expensive. Fuel is now even more expensive and it was already adulterated.

An interesting exercise I wish The Daily Star would undertake would be to try and work out how much fuel would cost if its import were not a government monopoly. I am certain we would find that it would be much cheaper.

MA

Dhaka

Encroaching playing fields!

Even ten years ago there were quite a lot of open, free spaces in the city

for kids to play. Gradually as the Dhaka city is becoming a concrete jungle these afternoon playing fields are disappearing into thin air. The ones remaining are either in their way to vanish or subjected to illegal encroachment.

The Dhanmondi Road No 8 playing field which was also a local cricket practice ground has now become a fair ground. Fair after fair goes on almost all through the year. On Fridays, some dishonest caretakers rent it for setting a bazaar to earn some extra money. The fairs cause heavy traffic jam in the alley adjacent to it after dawn. As this is an important alley for Dhanmondi dwellers like me, it causes great inconvenience to us.

I would earnestly like to ask the authorities concerned to look into the matter.
Saquifa Islam
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

PM on Gulshan-Banani Lake demarcation

I am surprised to see your headlined news the other day on flouting of the PM's order on demarcation of the

Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake and actions concerning lake filling and improper allotment of land. This is the best time for the Anti-Corruption Bureau to take to task all concerned officials and departments that are responsible to take actions according to the PM's instructions and have ignored them for their vested interest or pure inefficiency.

I may again request the Editor for an editorial item on this subject including the growth of slums.
Z.A. Khan
Gulshan, Dhaka

I have been noticing with interest the regular news items in your newspaper concerning land grabbing by the high and mighty and the accomplices of them. I have also read some of the views expressed by the readers on the occupation of the lakeside land by slums who enjoy the protection of other powerful. Is there anyone in the administration or political office who cares? We expect that laws should be strictly enforced irrespective of political or influential colour. Some authorities in the past have rampantly filled the lakeside to create plots for allotment

to 'favoured' persons. It is also a common knowledge that some unscrupulous persons in connivance with law enforcing authorities encourage slums to grow by the lakeside to facilitate land grabbing.

We request that the allotment of lands by the lakeside over the past 10 years by Rajuk/concerned authorities be investigated and scrutinised for any irregularities. Also the slums that serve as an operation base for criminal and drug dealers be removed. We also request the authorities concerned to take actions to evict the numerous illegal *'pan-biri shops'* spread throughout the residential areas.
Nasir U Choudhury
Banani, Dhaka

Human cloning

I am really curious to know how human cloning works and does it have any side effect. Is it too expensive? As I have read in a number of letters in the Letter Page, I am also interested to know whether a cloned human being would be infected with some incurable disease, become physically disabled, mentally handicapped and so on.

I ask our University Professors

and the learned readers to enlighten me on this regard.

Samia Rahman
Dhaka

Physicians accused of malpractice should be punished

There are different types of malpractice prevailing in our health sector and a number of physicians are involved in it, which is acting as a barrier in improving our overall health care facilities. It is about time we became aware of this malpractice.

As a physician I am tempted to write about it to help the poor people who are the usual victims of these malpractice, performed daily by numerous physicians ranging from newly passed medical graduates to full professors all over the country.

'Rickshaw Practice' is a very common one, where rickshawpullers in carry the poor, ignorant, helpless and innocent patients who have come to the nearby town for treatment. These patients are taken from the bus stoppage or terminal or from railway station to the target destination, sometimes even against the will of

the patients and their relatives. In return these rickshawpullers get a fixed amount of money per patient basis from the private practitioner.

Secondly, I want to mention about the pathological laboratories or blood bank who provide a fixed percentage of commission at the end of each month to the private practitioners, who refer the patients to them without considering the standard or the quality of the laboratory tests. Often some private practitioners ask the patients to do unnecessary tests so that the laboratory can charge the patients more.

Then again, often the village quacks refer their patients to some particular medicine shops, clinics or private practitioner in exchange of a fixed per cent of commission.

A number of private clinic or hospitals where surgery facility is available often refer the patients to do operations like appendectomy or caesarean which is probably not necessary to the patients.

It is time for our Government to make a well-planned decision to combat this widespread malpractice and provide the general people with better health care facilities.
Dr. Ahmed Habib

Manzur Buraydah,
Saudi Arabia

War is not the answer

Thank God the defiant Bush is at last (perhaps) coming to senses. It has been reported in the press that Bush has expressed his confidence of "diplomatic resolution to nuke tension in the Korean Peninsula!" How come, he is in contrast making all preparations for attacking Iraq? It is high time that the Muslims and the Arab Countries realised their plight and the stand that DPRK has taken to defy USA, came what may and follow suit. But I also feel Bush's shift of attitude is not the change of inner plan but his toning down is only due to the real resistance shown by DPRK. And the apprehension of the US business interests who fear renewal of boycott drive, by Iraq and the middle Eastern countries, of the products from the USA and the West, if Iraq were really erupts. Otherwise, further deployment of 17000 troops in the Gulf region would not have been ordered (largest since the Gulf War 11 years ago).

Let's hope that good sense ultimately prevails on the warmongers and Bush's declaration (with

reg. to DPRK) that "this is not a military show-down" will come to reality in respect of all nations under threat. Let Bush & Blair Company realises the hard facts that if they can become a threat to others with their nuclear arsenal, they have no moral or legal right to oppose others' nuke ambitions.

AF Rahman
Dhaka

We have heard a lot about "Axis of Evil", but there is another very important element in this great game of good and evil, which is missing. Do you know what that is? It is of course, the 'Centre of Evil'!

The original creator of modern evils, the mastermind of international terrorism, the mother of all conspiracies and the undisputed champion of WMDs; the USA. This is the nerve-centre where terrorism begins and that's why the fight against terrorism must begin from within USA. Blaming Afghanistan, Iraq, or North Korea is only a deceit.
Azad Miah
Oldham, UK