

Cold wave victims

Set up temporary shelters for the homeless

AS reports of deaths caused by the cold wave continue to pour in, it is now pretty clear that the most vulnerable group of people is finding it extremely difficult to face the winter. Hundreds of people are also reported to have been hospitalised with cold-related ailments -- a sure sign of the victims fighting a losing battle against the scourge.

The situation is going out of control, and there is no doubt that some sort of quick action is needed to save the homeless, badly exposed to the full fury of the cold wave. Obviously, the first thing that they need is a shelter where the temperature will be higher than what they are experiencing in the footpaths or other open spaces. Our options here are rather limited: big buildings that normally house schools, colleges, or community centres can be used as temporary shelters. The schools or colleges will have to be shut down for a week or so. But we must not forget that it is a question of saving the lives of a large number of humans stranded virtually in the open, and facing the wrath of the winter. They may not be able to hold out for long, as their defence mechanism is highly flawed -- they are neither well nourished nor well equipped to remain afloat. The government may also consider in all seriousness the idea of raising temporary tents in open spaces. The army and the law enforcing agencies having the wherewithal to help the homeless can be called out to face the emergency.

The next thing that the victims of the cold wave need is adequate protection, which only warm clothes can provide. Here, again civic bodies and organisations must swing into action with the objective of collecting warm clothes from donors and people in general. However, some extra-ordinary measures might be needed to reach the victims in the remote areas.

The meteorological department has said the cold wave may persist for some more days. The information is significant because the poor people have low resistance, and the death figures may rise quickly if they are not given the shelter that they desperately need at the moment. The time factor is very important -- any delay in carrying out the rescue operation could only mean more suffering to the distressed.

Flawed fuel-price hike

Impact on living cost ignored

THE international fuel market over the last one year or so has been whimsical no doubt, the prices of crude and refined petroleum fluctuating between a high of \$28 and \$35 per barrel and a low of \$27 and \$33.5. However, as far as the country's import is concerned, the price has been more or less steady for both crude and refined fuel in the range of \$27 to \$29. Still, the little did government hesitate when it came to raise the prices of petrol, octane, diesel, jet fuel, etc twice in the span of just a few days over one year. In both cases, the reason, or should we say the pretext, has been the same: the price uprising on the international market.

Interestingly, halfway through the 2001-2002 fiscal, when this government effected the price-hike for the first time on December 27, the state-owned Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) was counting Tk 10.50 for diesel, Tk 10.25 for kerosene, Tk 11 for octane and petrol, and Tk 10.45 for jet fuel in import cost. As per the revision then, prices of diesel, kerosene, petrol, octane and jet fuel were fixed at Tk 17, Tk 17, Tk 28, Tk 30 and Tk 21.15 respectively. On top of such an expansive revision, comes the latest hike at an weighted average of 13.75 per cent. International market prices aside, the two other reasons the government has tried to establish -- recoup the losses of the BPC and discourage smuggling to India -- do not hold much water either. On the balance, the decision not only defies any logic but also reflects the government's ignorance or indifference to the impact it will have on overall cost of living.

According to a Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) survey, the cost of living in the country shot up 8.52 per cent last year. Increased prices of fuel, and also of water, will certainly push it quite a few percentages higher this year. Unfortunately for the people, there has not yet developed any institution nor is there any comprehensive consumers' right protection law in force in the country yet to protect and promote the interest of the consumers. If such an illogical price hike had been resorted to elsewhere, public protest would have forced the government to backtrack no doubt. Our consumers are neither aware of their interests or rights nor are they assertive about it. People in good faith have put trust in the government to protect their interests and rights. Neither this government nor the ones before have shown any respect to their faith.

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There are however, two ways of getting their attention: 1) if you are a big, powerful leader 2) if you have some "notes" -- they don't like coins!

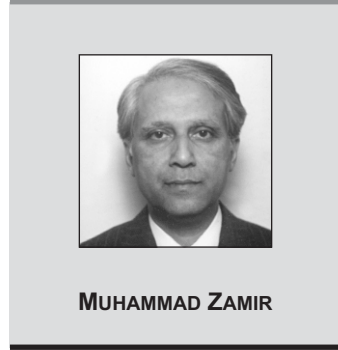
Unfortunately, these are not going to go from our society any time soon. Our leaders, who claim during election that they would tackle these, never have to experience these irritations themselves and so it simply doesn't matter to them!

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK

This is in response to the letter from M.A.U. of Cleveland, OH, USA, published on January 08, 2003.

I sympathise with the shock that you have felt first-handedly after your visit to Bangladesh. Your points are well taken. I agree that the immigration and customs desk at

The welcome shadow of China



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE economic map of Asia is being redrawn, with China at the centre. Its economic policies have borne remarkable fruit over the last decade. It has become the most important manufacturing nation in the world.

The results over the last two decades have been staggering. Even if one assumes that some of the growth numbers might be slightly exaggerated, 'it has moved hundreds of millions of people from poverty into middle-income status' (Newsweek, 30 December, 2002). One would tend to also agree with economist Jeffrey Sachs' assertion that 'China is the most successful development story in world history' cannot be denied.

China's single minded focus on economic growth through market reforms has today become an example for its Asian neighbours. It has also become an example of how a country can integrate into the world economy, utilize foreign investment and convert such input into export potential. This is probably what most developing nations aspire to achieve. It can be best explained through some simple raw statistics. It makes this assumption that much more understandable. In 1985, exports from foreign companies in China were composed of only 1 per cent of the country's total exports, amounting to \$300 million. In 2001 they composed 50 per cent of its exports, totalling \$133 billion. It would be interesting to note here that China is now the largest provider of Japanese imports, and 'these goods are not all cheap plastic toys'. The other day, Sony, Japan's flagship corporation revealed that it will be manufacturing more goods in China than in its home country. No wonder that

Singapore's Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong has called China's continuing growth 'scary' in terms of competition for the Singapore economy.

However, a scenario where China continues to grow in economic strength will also be beneficial for its neighbours. After all, as China's exports continue to grow, so will its imports. As its exports diversify, so will its import needs. In the long run it will not be surprising to find the emergence of complementarities of economies.

enhanced by visits to Bangladesh over the years by important Chinese leaders.

The latest visit to China by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia from 23 to 27 December, 2002 may be considered as one of the high points in her Administration's efforts to further open the eastern horizon for Bangladesh entrepreneurs. The recent inter-action with Thailand and Myanmar and now with China will hopefully give Bangladesh a stronger economic platform to pursue her economic and trade agenda.

eral ties in different fields between the two countries. In this context many accords were signed between the two sides. China is to provide Bangladesh with a grant of US \$ 7.25 million for construction of the Sixth Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge over the Dhaleswari river. There will also be a soft loan of over US\$ 6.04 million and the conversion of a US\$ 3.02 million credit into grant. The Chinese government also demonstrated their goodwill for the people of this country by announcing that the new Confer-

ever that this does not lead to further unnecessary misunderstanding with other countries in our region and some of our development partners. I am sure that our relevant authorities will be taking the required steps to explain the peaceful content to all concerned. The Foreign Minister in his press briefing on 28 December, 2002 has already outlined the organizational reasons for the signing of this accord. This has been a good decision.

The other interesting feature of the visit appears to have been the



The private sector in Bangladesh have a lot to learn from what is going on in China...There is potential for China to invest in our EPZs...What we should remember is that Bangladesh's relations with China should not be subject to partisan politics. China has already demonstrated its maturity by inviting the Leader of our Opposition while our Prime Minister was a very important guest in that country. This is the essence of friendship.

Politics will of course play an important role in this evolution.

It is in this context that the countries of the European Union and the United States have started focusing very carefully not only on the possible areas of future cooperation but also on the consolidation of existing sectors of cooperation. The private sectors in these countries are also exerting indirect influence on the formulation of trade and foreign policies of these countries towards China. Both the public and the private sectors realize that this is the need of the hour. I am happy to note that this is also the case in Bangladesh.

Although China formally recognised Bangladesh in 1975, informal contacts had been made even earlier. Subsequently came the visit of journalists in 1976 and the visit of General Zia in 1977. He went back again as President in July, 1980. After Begum Khaleda Zia became Prime Minister in 1991, she led a delegation to that country. Similarly, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina went to China in September, 1996. This process of strengthening existing bilateral relations were also

It is at this point that I revert to political will. In this case, during the Chinese visit, the Bangladesh Prime Minister not only had the singular opportunity to hold talks with Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and Chinese President Xiang Zemin, but she also met the newly elected Chinese Communist Party Secretary General Hu Jin Tao. This was important, given the fact that the Sixteenth Congress of the Communist Party of China has just concluded with a smooth and meaningful transition from one generation of leaders to another. In a way, as has been correctly pointed out by some analysts, the visit enabled Bangladesh to thank the 'old guards' and welcome the new leadership. This renewal of high level contacts also gained particular significance given the fact that Begum Zia was paying a return visit within twelve months of Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's visit to Dhaka.

It is understood that the leaders of both sides exchanged views on regional and international issues of common concern. They apparently also agreed to strengthen and intensify the existing 'special bilat-

ence Centre in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka built with Chinese assistance of US\$ 24 million would be a gift from the Chinese people. Although, we did not host the Non-Aligned Conference in Dhaka, the Centre itself is proving to be an important addition in terms of available facilities.

Another important aspect was the signing of an umbrella defence cooperation agreement aimed at integrating piece-meal accords. It is being hoped that this will maximize cooperation in defence training, maintenance and also in some areas of production. It is presumed that this will facilitate the supply of armaments, military hardware and special equipment. It is also expected that it will assist in the modernisation of the armed forces. According to published reports, the duration of the agreement will be for five years in the first stage, with the provision of further extension if both parties so agree. Supporters of the present Administration have hailed the signing of this arrangement as 'a turning point in foreign policy'. There is no question about it being a significant step. One hopes how-

last part of the itinerary which took the Bangladesh delegation to Kunming, capital of China's Yunnan province. It has been subsequently explained by the Foreign Minister that this was part of an initiative that seeks to create a 'growth quadrangle encompassing Yunnan, Myanmar, the seven north-eastern states of India and Bangladesh'.

I strongly believe that sub-regional cooperation is as important as regional cooperation. The previous Administration had also emphasized this perspective. We should not forget the great advantages that can accrue for Bangladesh through such a system. We need to look at Europe to understand the merits for such inter-linkages.

The potential for tourism and the putting in place of the required infrastructure will for obvious reasons be that much easier if such regional cooperation can take place. Joint investments and regional airline connections will also emerge in the long run. When one thinks of also including Laos, Cambodia and Thailand in this grid, the scope continues to grow. However, like all good ideas, this one will need

very careful planning as various sensitive factors exist within the equation it would probably be useful in this regard to set up an inter-ministerial committee in Dhaka to not only study the implications but also the measures that will have to be undertaken to activate this process. Getting the various Chambers of Commerce and the private sector representatives from this sub-region together would also help.

There is also the question of improving the existing communications network. Efforts are already underway for connecting the south-eastern fringe of Bangladesh with Thailand through Myanmar. China can be asked to participate in a meaningful way in this exercise of inter-linkage.

The private sector in Bangladesh have a lot to learn from what is going on in China. They need to focus on the bigger picture after 2004 in the field of textiles, readymade garments and knitwear, particularly in high fashion items. They should try to establish links and seek technical expertise in the fields of agriculture, horticulture and agro-processing. Bangladesh, because of the 'Everything But Arms' initiative introduced by the European Union (for LDC States) has a distinct advantage. Its products can enter Europe duty-free and quota-free. We should try to cash in on that. There are limitations at this point of time, but these can be overcome. Phyto-sanitary standards and other regulatory requirements can be put in place with technical assistance from Thailand, South Korea and China. With their assistance, we can also create forward as well as backward linkages for our products. Packaging and canning facilities are particular areas that can benefit. There is potential for China to invest in our EPZs. This can be specially geared towards information technology.

What we should remember is that Bangladesh's relations with China should not be subject to partisan politics. China has already demonstrated its maturity by inviting the Leader of our Opposition while our Prime Minister was a very important guest in that country. This is the essence of friendship.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Of protocol and precedence

MEGASTHENES

A dear friend of mine, who is very well-versed in such things, once went to great lengths to explain to me the importance of protocol and ceremonial. These were, he said, the lubricants that were so essential for facilitating government-to-government and person-to-person relations. Within a country also, it simplifies and clarifies certain aspects of governance and interaction with the public. His contention: protocol far transcends the trimmings and trappings of high office, that it is necessary for contacts between nations to be made according to widely accepted rules and norms and some form of planned organisation. He did animate a somewhat dry and formal subject with interesting bits of information -- the personal element -- that made it easier to grasp its essence and purpose.

Ceremonial is the "close observance of certain formalities" -- often in the nature of grandiose ceremonies publicised in the media -- while protocol is a "form of hierarchical order, the expression of good manners among nations". There is invariably a Table or Warrant of Precedence in protocol, some form of pecking order; who outranks who, and this is not as simple as it seems. Obviously a secretary to the government would precede a joint secretary and a deputy commissioner a TNO. How should one however relate military officers to their civilian counterparts? Where does the judiciary fit in? And the diplomatic corps? For such details there is some variation from nation to nation, as there are no immutable first principles. Rather the practice followed in a country, whether detailed or flexible, is based more

on usage, tradition or expediency. Protocol or ceremonial can or sometimes is relaxed and this is often an expression of a desire to please or show a special courtesy. The story has been told that when the then First Lady of the US, Mrs John F. Kennedy visited the Vatican, Pope John XXIII was advised to address her as Madame la Presidente or madam or Mrs Kennedy. When receiving the First Lady, the Pope, however, spontaneously

up till the mid 1950s showed the President at the top, the Prime Minister in the second category. Governors within their jurisdiction in category no. 3 and the Vice President at no. 3a. There was a change in 1957, the Vice President was moved to category no.2 and the Prime Minister moved down to category no.3. Governors also moved down one rank. My friend told me a plausible enough story behind this change which he had

notably from Sardar Patel. Eventually Rajendra Prasad was chosen and in 1952 he went on to be elected for a full five-year term. Rajaji did not leave politics but served as Home Minister after Patel and later as Chief Minister of Madras. In 1957, when Rajendra Prasad's term drew to a close, Nehru thought of Vice President Radhakrishnan to succeed him. Prasad, however, was kept on another term. By this time Patel was dead and Nehru's posi-

himself in protocol. The formalities of high office would seem to have weighed less with Nehru than with Bhutto.

Steeped as he was in British tradition, Nehru was only too aware that in the UK the Prime Minister was outranked not only by Royalty, which is only natural in a constitutional monarchy but also by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and even by a member of his own



The trend today is for protocol and ceremonial to be simplified as much as possible. This is perhaps inevitable. And yet in the words of a former Chief of Protocol of the US, protocol still represents "a body of social discipline without which the encounter of princes and presidents would have little relevance. For protocol brings to the meetings of world leaders a mixture of good manners and common sense which make effective communication possible".

exclaimed "O Jacqueline".

The first Warrant of Precedence in Pakistan was issued sometime in the 1950s. It showed the Governor General and later the President in first place and the Prime Minister in the second category. The Office of Prime Minister became defunct after martial law in 1958 and thus became irrelevant in the Warrant. When third constitution was adopted in the 1970s, the country changed from the presidential form to the cabinet form and the then President ZA Bhutto moved to assume the prime ministership. The Warrant of Precedence was suitably amended. The Prime Minister was placed in the same top category as the President but placed after him. The Indian Warrant of Prece-

read somewhere. In 1950 when the Indian constitution came into force, the Governor General was Chakravarty Rajagopalachari. Nehru thought it only natural and proper that Rajaji should move to the Office of President. There was another contender though -- the President of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad. Nehru felt that both stalwarts had much to contribute and it would be difficult to accommodate Rajaji, the serving Governor General, anywhere but as President. Rajendra Prasad could on the other hand could serve as Speaker or in the cabinet. There were problems however. Rajaji had not supported the Quit India movement and Rajendra Prasad had strong support within the party

in the Congress unassailable. He did not wish to overrule the wishes of his Party, however, especially when Maulana Azad, possibly his closest colleague in the cabinet told him that while Prasad on the one hand and Nehru and Azad on the other did not always see eye to eye on all issues, all three had fought for independence and served jail sentences. There was no significant mention of Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, however, in the history of the freedom movement. Nehru had already broached the issue of the presidency with Radhakrishnan and was placed in an awkward position. He resolved matters by a generous gesture; revising the Warrant of Precedence and placing Radhakrishnan above

cabinet, the Lord Chancellor, whose emoluments are also higher than that of the Prime Minister. The Lord Chancellor's is a unique office that predates that of the Prime Minister. Sir Thomas More and Thomas Becket had held that office in days of old. Today he is the presiding officer of the House of Lords, the law minister and also the head of the judiciary.

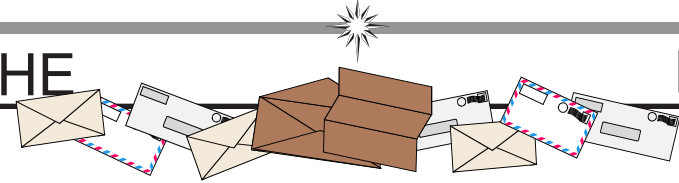
There is no officially established protocol precedence in the US. The President of the US determines the rank of all US officials on the Precedence List. President Kennedy for example moved the Speaker of the House ahead of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In India the Chief Justice and the Speaker are at

par. Former Presidents, as in most countries, have a high place in US protocol, but how to determine inter-se precedence among them if more than one former President happens to be present? There is the "British way" and the "French way" of looking at this issue. The British would tend to give precedence to seniority or in other words the senior-most former President would precede. The French would give precedence to the junior-most former President on the ground that he has held office more recently than others. Both points of view have much to recommend them. My friend seemed to be fairly certain of his facts. He was assuredly persuasive.

In these times of summit diplomacy, there is also frequently the problem of relative precedence among Heads of State and Government. On this there is a certain broad agreement. Heads of State precede Heads of Government, Monarchs precede other Heads of State, and among other Heads of State, precedence is on the basis of the length of time an individual has been serving in that capacity. A special gesture or departure can always be made.

The trend today is for protocol and ceremonial to be simplified as much as possible. This is perhaps inevitable. And yet in the words of a former Chief of Protocol of the US, protocol still represents "a body of social discipline without which the encounter of princes and presidents would have little relevance. For protocol brings to the meetings of world leaders a mixture of good manners and common sense which make effective communication possible"

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.

"My visit to Bangladesh - An American view"

This is in response to the letter by M.A.U. (January 8).

I can understand the frustration you had at the immigration counter. Sadly, it is nothing new! This sort of "thuggery" is experienced not by just foreigners, but by millions of Bangladeshis as well. Too often, these officials would chew Paan during duty and they would look at you as if you have committed a crime against the whole humanity! They ignore you and wouldn't say anything, but when they do, they ask you all the unnecessary questions, as one official did last time I visited. I also had this pathetic experience in a bank. I was standing there, hoping to get their attention. As I didn't succeed, I suspected they were blind, in which case they shouldn't

be there in the first place. But no, they weren't blind either!

There are however, two ways of getting their attention: 1) if you are a big, powerful leader 2) if you have some "notes" -- they don't like coins!

Unfortunately, these are not going to go from our society any time soon. Our leaders, who claim during election that they would tackle these, never have to experience these irritations themselves and so it simply doesn't matter to them!

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK

This is in response to the letter from M.A.U. of Cleveland, OH, USA, published on January 08, 2003.

I sympathise with the shock that you have felt first-handedly after your visit to Bangladesh. Your points are well taken. I agree that the immigration and customs desk at

the Zia International Airport need to be well equipped with people who are well versed and trained to receive foreigners. This is the front line or the start of image of Bangladesh to any foreigner entering the country by air. The immigration and customs people need to have a certain degree of understanding of the foreign cultures represented by the visitors. It should not cost a pretty penny to be courteous. Past the airport, the civil aviation authority also need to clear out all those good for nothing passers-by, who do nothing else but gawk at the travellers and ask for "bokshtis" [i.e. tips ... and for what!] All of these can be done and should not cost much, only the strict enforcement of rules and regulations.

The garbage situation and road conditions are pathetic. The government needs to create and deploy some of their resources to correct these conditions. I also recommend

that the city government open up new sectors to handle these situations and use the unemployed people to fulfil these posts or positions. The city government can also utilise the existing sections to combat the mosquito infestation. The present government (BNP and others) has taken several steps to eradicate the lawlessness, pollution control, etc. I would very much like to see that the trucks and busses are put under strict regulation, periodically tested or fined heavily, to further reduce the air pollution within the city.

Only time will tell if the appropriate authorities have an open door, open ear policy and listen to our suggestions.

Babak Sayer
Chicago, USA

"Autorickshaw and the affluent"

I have to admit that I was deeply disturbed by Aran Anjan's first letter on the recent regulation banning 2-stroke autorickshaws and doubly so after reading the rebuttal he sent in on the Jan 8th issue.

The fact that he believes the government needs to look after his interests because he belongs to the "solvent" class clearly depicts the level of insensitivity the "elite" in Bangladesh have developed towards the less fortunate majority. Mr. Anjan, the very basic principle of Governance is "equality". A true and fair Government does not distinguish between its citizenry on the basis of the amount of taxes it collects from it. Mr. Anjan, it is morally wrong to be concerned about your "smooth ride" while the "smooth lives" of thousands are at stake. The need for banning 2-stroke auto rickshaw for environmental purposes is a foregone conclusion and one should not have

problem with the feeling of relief the readers are expressing as a result of it. But it also must be understood that the affected, in this case the people whose livelihoods are being effected, are the last person to be blamed for the pollution their vehicles have caused.

The governments over the last thirty plus years had ample opportunity to take care of the problem before it became a monster, but they chose not to. In a nation where the illiteracy rate is as high as ours, mistakes out of ignorance and carelessness will be and should be a norm rather than an exception. I hope you would agree that the government should have been proactive rather than reactive and handled the matter with the welfare of everybody in mind. It would have been proper and humane to have arranged rehabilitation for these poor people before they were hung out to dry. Mr. Anjan, somebody, if

the opportunity presents itself, try walking in the shoe or the lack of it of a poor "rickshawala", your perspective on life might change. Be thankful for what you have because you are one of the lucky few in Bangladesh. Please don't let your wealth and position in life get the better of your judgement and make you insensitive towards your fellow being.

Anwar Babar
Dallas, Texas, USA

Bank loan for CNG conversion

Recently the government has increased fuel price. This has created extra burden for the fixed income group. The worst affected group is the middle-class. Those who currently own a vehicle are already facing extreme hardship in maintaining their vehicles with the increased fuel price. The newly

increased price will aggravate their limited budget. Many of them will not be able to use their vehicle.

The government is encouraging vehicle owners to use CNG to run their vehicle. The CNG conversion charge is extremely high. The price is around Tk.30-40 thousand taka which is unaffordable to the middle income group. Therefore, it would be very much helpful if the banks provide loans to the borrowers in soft term basis to convert their vehicles in to CNG-runned vehicles. Bank may pay this money directly to the conversion companies/plants instead of paying this directly to the borrowers.

S. M. Khalequeez Zaman
Mirpur, Dhaka