

Hold the priceline now Is it not threatening to cut loose?

THE prices of daily essentials have increased markedly of late. Rice, lentil, fish, potato, onion, only to name the obvious few on the shopping list of most people, are selling dearer. A certain pressure is building up across the wholesale networks and retail outlets to trigger a sympathetic chain of price increases. The outlook is patently worrying.

The first burst of price-rise overshooting the affordability threshold of consumers was experienced during the Shabe-Barat. With such a precipitous price hike in the backdrop, there can be an apprehension of record increases in living costs lying in store for the month of Ramadan leading up to Eid-ul-Fitr and to Eid-ul-Azha almost two and a half months thereafter.

The latest trend in the price upswing is a case of price jacking rather than a spurt in prices caused by a sudden rupture or dysfunction in the ways marketing forces operated thus far. The price-line held during the short-lived flash floods, mostly because flooding was confined to the country's northeast; commodity import flows have been steady, thanks to wage-earners' funding, let alone increase in the inflow of remittances. And, the communication network worked better with a somewhat lessened degree of obstructive extortionist activities due to a law enforcement intervention at the terminals. A good Rabi crop is awaited together with a predictably sizeable Aman harvest to cater for open market demands.

There is no earthly reason for a spate in prices at this time. The demand-supply equilibrium is potentially there; the normal marketing mechanism should have worked in favour of the buyers, even though ours happens to be a sellers' market largely because of the absence of a strong consumer protection law. The consumer resistance bodies backed by an appropriate legal instrument could have wielded a powerful influence on the prices and qualities of goods and services.

Speculative trading, hoarding and black marketing have seemingly kicked off in anticipation of making windfalls with the high market demands generated during the Ramadan and related festivities.

Who is in charge? What is the role of the government or its commerce ministry? If their copy-book reaction to the situation is: well, free market operations should be allowed to determine the price levels, then we need to remind ourselves that there are mercenaries and vested interest groups out to subvert and abuse free market norms we are crying hoarse on. The government must immediately initiate a vigorous consultative process with the business community and launch a joint monitoring mechanism to curb profiteering among the dishonest traders.

Shalish in Gazipur

Tragic consequences for a girl

TRAGIC incidents concerning a young pair at Gazipur last Saturday only served to expose how the traditional form of local conflict resolution, 'shalish', was once again abused by vested quarters. The girl, Khuki died while the young man, Akbar was badly hurt in their suicide attempts. The two were reportedly in love. They became subject of 'shalish' through the initiative of Akbar's father. When the couple mutually consented to marrying to set the matter at rest, the man's father and his supporters got very angry at the prospect. And that's why at one point of 'shalish-making', the elders gave a verdict of beating against the victims in front of all present.

A lawyer present there beat up both Khuki and Akbar but it is the former who lost her senses in the process. As if that wasn't enough -- when she regained consciousness, the hapless girl was again savagely beaten up. In fact, she was so badly injured that she had to be sent home on a rickshaw van accompanied by a village chowkidar. Akbar meanwhile had gone home on his own. What is astonishing, not a single voice or finger was raised in protest against the barbaric act. Khuki's family had not even been informed of the forthcoming 'shalish', which means poor Khuki suffered the humiliation all by herself.

'Shalish' is meant to be a medium for out-of-court settlement of disputes or tiffs. But we have witnessed how 'shalish' has been abused by local influentials time and again. The incident regarding Khuki and Akbar is hardly an isolated one. There have been many such occurrences where the weak get oppressed by the strong who revel in taking the law into their own hands. We have always condemned extra-judicial verdicts -- be it a fatwa or something else. Though in Gazipur there was no fatwa as such, we have no hesitation in saying that it was no less reprehensible.

The war on terror: The mess is getting messier



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AN arrogant imperial ambition when combined with the self-righteousness of Christian right to which George W. Bush and most of his advisers belong can produce a ready brew. Its intoxication makes one act recklessly in most irrational manner as did the US President in making Iraq a pre-emptive target in his war on terror. While addressing the UN General Assembly last year his message to the world body was both bizarre and blunt: the UN must either support his Iraq campaign or be doomed to irrelevance. To his call the spontaneous support for his action against Afghanistan in the wake of nine/eleven conspicuously lacked and most countries including the allies refused to back him. Throwing the principles of multi-lateralism -- which the US itself adopted in 1945 while laying the foundation of the UN under one of his great predecessors, Roosevelt -- to wind a desperate President Bush plunged into war. Mesmerised by the warped world view of his neo-conservative cabal Bush led his great country in wreaking havoc first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq while encouraging a blood thirsty Ariel Sharon to unleash similar violence in the occupied area of Palestine -- all to fulfil the self-imposed mission of chastening the world in his image. As a result, the international security has never been so undermined and

the world peace so threatened since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The certainty, resolve and unshakable confidence exhibited last year by Bush's America have since given way to anxiety and fear over steadily deteriorating security situation and rising American casualties in Iraq, notwithstanding a quick military success early this year. The country is in utter chaos and nominally administered by a

now challenged by a new wave of Iraq's fierce nationalism. Iraq is turning more and more gory with more bloods spilled, more people killed on both sides and increasing misery for the populace. The Americans haunted by the spectre of Vietnam do not have as yet an exit strategy and are preparing for a long haul by pouring in more money, troops and weapons in Iraq's cauldron to fight whom they naively think

constituted drafted, a new national Army raised and preparation of an election undertaken. On the other hand the crime rate has surged seven-fold during the last one year. The tribal warlords who now rule the roost are reportedly running private prisons, bonded labour camps and smuggling rackets. Poppy cultivation has seen an alarming rise and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has so far

recently, "That election was not a mandate for radical change, but that is what we got. We went from surplus to deficit from a reduction in poverty to an increase in poverty Instead of uniting the world we alienated it. And instead of uniting America we divided it by trying to push it too far to the right." Indeed, as the vanquished nations of Bush's pre-emptive war are paying the price of freedom by building up resistance, the US also has started to count the prohibitive cost of occupation.

The fall of either Kabul or Baghdad has the least of sobering effect on the so-called "rogue states." This is another disappointment for the 'pre-emptive' ideologues. Even as the Americans find themselves on the brink of a quagmire, the post war developments have only emboldened the "axis of evil." The North Koreans today are openly defiant; Iran's nuclear programme continues to be active and Syria is once again permitting Hezbollah to use its soil for attacks on Israel. The Bush road map aimed at delivering an imposed Middle East settlement appears to be in shreds. And there is no sign of an emerging democratic transformation elsewhere in the Middle East. For the Americans the whole exercise carried out by them has so far proved to be a zero-sum game.

As Stephen Walt, academic dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard has aptly advised the Bush Administration to "swallow its pride and get out as quickly as it can before Iraq becomes America's Chechnya" it will require courage to accept the exit strategy. Even if the administration fails to display that courage the American people who are hit hard by Bush's self-imposed mission, would surely step in after a year, if not now, to get out of the Iraq mess.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

As Stephen Walt, academic dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard has aptly advised the Bush Administration to "swallow its pride and get out as quickly as it can before Iraq becomes America's Chechnya" it will require courage to accept the exit strategy. Even if the administration fails to display that courage the American people who are hit hard by Bush's self-imposed mission, would surely step in after a year, if not now, to get out of the Iraq mess.

controversial Iraqi governing council answerable to Paul Bremer, the US 'viceroys' in Iraq. The country was already under the clutch of a tyrant with fundamental rights denied but now it's under alien military occupation with even its sovereignty lost. Saddam's Iraq, to be fair, was efficiently -- even if discriminatorily -- run giving a taste of solvency, if not affluence to its proud people. Now it's a living hell with no water, electricity or employment and above all no safety to its people. There are for the first time instances of the trafficking of women and children from occupied Iraq. A modern, semi-industrialised Iraq of Saddam era is now pushed to a medieval mould with its vast oil-wealth up for the grab.

With the excuses for the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq proving outright-hoax and the promised democracy nowhere in sight it is to the Iraqis a classical colonial occupation with ulterior motive which is

the al-Qaeda remnants or Saddam's elusive fugitives.

Even if Iraq is now constantly in focus the US' predicaments in Afghanistan where also it scored an early military success are no less acute. Afghanistan is, however, long

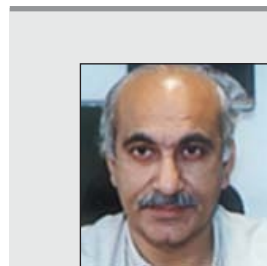
their internal feuds and lastly by the Americans is indeed discouraging. The Taliban fell almost two years ago and the US-installed President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, is in office for more than a year. Yet an internal order is still to be restored,

failed to curb such activities. With the Western donors still withholding their promised money for reconstruction Afghanistan is virtually abandoned and once again destabilised. The resurgence of the Taliban now appears to be only a matter of time.

Bush-Blair exaggeration of intelligence reports to justify war in Iraq has turned into political scandals with the duo's approval ratings plummeting significantly. In Britain, the biggest damper on the government's spirit was Labour's stock defeat in the Brent East by-election. In the US Senator Edward Kennedy has called the Iraq War a "fraud made up in Texas." As the trauma of nine/eleven fades the Americans are again made conscious of the fact that 2000 election installed Bush as a minority President and he unduly enjoyed the bonanza of the windfall of nine/eleven in terms of popularity. As Bill Clinton put in a speech



The prisoner of Iraq war



M.J. AKBAR

LONDON: The smiles are much broader in the departure lounge than they are on arrival at Heathrow airport but that is not particularly British. All developed nations look upon a Third World visa-holder as a potential problem, and we periodically reinforce an unspoken reputation of being sneaks, of getting past by legal paper in order to vanish illegally into a vast brown swarm. It might be called the Luthiana women's cricket club syndrome backed up by the Daler Mehndi corkscrew. Two of the five women "cricketers" from Punjab who came to play cricket and stayed to play the field are still untraced. They will doubtless become visible after they have found men who will marry for money, and thereby give the women the right to stay in South or Ealing or wherever. The British immigration counter is a Maginot Line. It is very pregnable. It keeps getting penetrated. Minor and major eddies of behaviour follow.

The taxi driver at Heathrow who discovers that he has picked a brown in the queue-lottery cannot camouflage the spreading pain on his face: this must be his bad-face day. Not because he is racist but because he is sick at the thought that the brown arrival's destination will be Southall, which is only minutes away from the airport, and from where he is unlikely to

get another customer into white civilisation. The relief on his face is palpable when he learns that I am going to St. James' Court, an Edwardian pile managed by the Taj next door to Buckingham Palace. Not because he loves the Queen, but because by the time he reaches England's premier tourist trap, he will be richer by 50 pounds.

The news, meanwhile, from Southall is that the forces of upward mobility are once again on

export item, of course. Poppy. When they talk of Afghan Black in those parts they are not discussing Black Label. They are talking about what you smoke, not what you sip. And here is the ironical fact that somehow seems to have lost the attention of both the White House and 10, Downing Street. The one positive thing that the Taliban did was to crack down, as it were, on crack. They burnt and destroyed poppy crops since they too were against drugs. Under the

was marked by two funeral ceremonies. One was in London at St. Paul's. Just how much the perception of the Iraq war has changed in Britain since Saddam Hussein's statue was brought down by the Donald Rumsfeld's troops in Baghdad is evident in how this event changed. It was first envisaged as a "victory parade," in the manner that Margaret Thatcher has celebrated the triumph in the Falklands over Argentina, or George Bush had promoted the

British soldier who refused to attend the service and told television reporters: "The Prime Minister does not really care. He just cares about his slot in history." The Prime Minister must, at the very least, be wondering precisely how history will describe his decision to order war: because Saddam had his famous weapons of mass destruction (which could threaten Britain in 45 minutes!), or because Saddam was on his way to making a nuclear bomb, or

Each time the British voter looks at the Tory alternative, Tony Blair seems reassuring, even if 59 per cent of Britain believes that he lied over Iraq. Smith drives the voter back to Blair in much the same way as Sonia Gandhi huddles the voter back to the BJP. There are two differences though: Atal Behari Vajpayee's personal credibility remains untarnished, unlike Blair's. And the Conservatives are not silent about their problem, unlike Congressmen. At the annual Tory conference in Blackpool this week, Smith was screaming at his own party MPs more than at Labour. It's always the same. Facts never interfere with a loser's commitment to suicide. It's remarkable how quickly a natural party of government becomes a natural party of drift. The curious reality about British politics is that neither Labour nor the Conservatives know where they are going. Both are circling in a whirlpool. One whirlpool is in power, the other is powerless.

The sun is ablaze with a happy radiance, comfortable in the thought that it will not be asked to work for some months. The trees are beginning to talk of winter. Green is in retreat before yellow, and yellow will surrender to bare branches which will in turn await the first white of winter snow. Men age, year upon year. The seasons rejuvenate, agelessly. There is no moral in this story, except perhaps that only nature has the right to determine the cycles of life and death. Leaders who sentence young men to die in unjust wars cannot atone with a day in a cathedral. Their sin condemns them to a thousand deaths, each one framed by the twitch of a tortured eye, or the turn of a bitter lip. The joy has gone from Tony Blair's life.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

Men age, year upon year. The seasons rejuvenate, agelessly. There is no moral in this story, except perhaps that only nature has the right to determine the cycles of life and death. Leaders who sentence young men to die in unjust wars cannot atone with a day in a cathedral. Their sin condemns them to a thousand deaths, each one framed by the twitch of a tortured eye, or the turn of a bitter lip. The joy has gone from Tony Blair's life.

the move. The Sikhs who introduced Britain to chaat and the Muslims who inflicted balti curry upon the British (I can't imagine a more devious way of taking revenge upon the Raj) are giving way to Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan. Kabul's traditional Sikh community survived even the Taliban, or perhaps had little option except to live through the darkness of closed minds. The more liberal regime of Hamid Karzai has made travel easier, and escape faster. The latest arrivals in Southall have also turned up with serious amounts of hard cash. Somehow Afghanistan and currency notes do not seem to sit at the same table, but one of the unique institutions that survived intact and unscathed through the Taliban regime was Kabul's currency market. Currency traders continued to sit in the open with bundles of notes piled high in front of them.

What fuelled this hard-cash economy? Afghanistan's biggest

watchful eye of the American troops, the poppy crop is back as the greatest source of wealth accretion in Afghanistan. And Lucy is laughing in the Sky with Diamonds over Britain and America.

THE most famous Prisoner of War in the world must surely be Tony Blair. He has become a prisoner of his own war, shackled by chains of deceit. He has the haunted, even wild, look of a man trying to break through a throttling net that reproduces another mesh each time Blair feels he has cut his way through to safety. It must be a suffocating moment for Britain's Prime Minister when a journal as pro-war as The Economist headlines a cover story featuring Blair and Bush with the caption "Wielders of mass deception?" And to hear "You bastard" at St. Paul's Cathedral after a memorial service for those who gave their lives in the war must be close to a political death rattle.

The television news on Friday

official end of conflict in April. This was scaled down to a glittering parade through London, before morphing gradually into a mere "thanksgiving service." When it became evident that there was little to thank for, the event became, more simply, "A Service of Remembrance, Iraq 2003." And, in a fine and moving British gesture inspired by the Church of England, the service not only remembered the 51 British and 315 Americans who have died, but also all those who died in Saddam Hussein's armed forces, as well as the thousands of Iraqi civilians who have lost their lives in this brutal conflict.

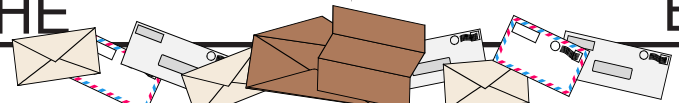
Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who opposed the war, made it a point to say that "While we talk people are suffering appallingly; while we try to keep our hands clean, atrocity and oppression reign unchecked." The mood of the moment was summed up by Rob Kelly, a bereaved father of a lost

because he had links to Al Qaeda. As Vladimir Putin has pointed out in an interview this week to the New York Times, Saddam actually suppressed terrorists. He had no time or use for Al Qaeda.

The second funeral shown on television on Friday took place in Baghdad: it was in some ways a celebration of two Iraqis who had given their lives in another suicide mission against the American occupation and its fellow travellers. Crowds unafraid of being recorded by cameras chanted "Allah-o-Akbar" as they took the cortege towards the burial ground. A young man with a sophisticated gun in his hand and grim determination on his face led the procession. Bush and Blair have created an enemy that never was. You can see this truth etched in their eyes. Tony Blair may win another election, but he has lost his people.

Is Ian Duncan Smith related to Sonia Gandhi? Tony Blair's only strength now is the Opposition.

TO THE EDITOR 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.

Popular cricket

The game of cricket was invented by England some one hundred and fifty years ago. Cricket is also known as the game of the lords. Test cricket, or in other words, cricket played between two countries, is stipulated for maximum five days consisting of first and second innings. It is indeed time consuming and a bit boring at times, especially with the busy professionals. The shortened version of the game, the one-day international which was first introduced in the prudential world cup in England, in 1975, has since gained more popularity and excitement, since the newer version is played fifty over aside.

Recently, some letter writers have expressed their discontentment over the game and even have approached the concerned authority to not to encourage it. Those complainants will not be surprised to learn that in the developed countries like, England, Australia and New Zealand, the stadium is packed house, even at the five-day version of the game, not to

mention of the more popular one-day matches. Now the question is, if some one is opposed to the game, should it be made public and even if it did, how does it matter? The game of cricket may be time consuming but it is very much money generating in both the aspects of the game. Cricketers are handsomely paid, so are the ground staff, the advertising companies, state owned television companies, and many fruit and drink vendors etc., which eventually helps many families to be taken care of. Cricket like other games helps to divert many a mind from many heinous and other dirty activities.

Zaki Ibrahim
Banani, Dhaka.

Top down marketing policy

The government's marketing policy on the development of some local products is top-down -- starting at the top apex of the triangle, without developing the base, and the middle infrastructure.

Some examples: tourism, jute

products, and handicrafts. We are obsessed with export marketing only. Cheap jute shopping bags (disposable) could have competed with the banned polybags. Nowadays we have to leave home carrying a shopping bag, as the small shops cannot afford to give away cheap free bags as done earlier. The authorities are not trying to solve this environmental problem, while lakhs of empty PET beverage bottles cannot be even recycled.

Tourism cannot start and develop with five-star and three-star foreign tourists. Come down to the upper middle-class level, then aim for the top class tourists. Handicrafts has the same short-sighted policy -- trying to export without developing the internal market. The air-conditioned shopping centres are full of foreign goods, and the number of shoppers is frequently less than the salespersons.

The same lack of planning in restricting the movement of the popular cycle rickshaws: The right not to travel in buses is denied. Also, there are not trained professionals in

the design of cycle rickshaws. Why this type of transport has to remain in the informal sector? There was a photo in the local press of a newly designed cycle rickshaw designed by German industrial designers. Why not have a pilot project (do we have industrial design courses at different levels?) The fashion may catch on, once the component parts are mass produced locally. The ordinary bicycle wheels (diameter and spokes) are not suitable for rickshaws, and the gear ratios are not right; the seating is cramped, and the centre of gravity high.

Who are providing technical advice to the politician-minister. Our jute research is good enough, but the marketing bottlenecks for cheap products are not being solved (including diversity). The Machine Tools Factory can produce a wide range of goods for industrial use; but no feasibility report has been released. The cabinet has to be properly advised. It is good that the Prime Minister has talked to the secretaries. The ministers seem to lack technical

awareness in this fast-moving world. **A Mawaz Dhaka**
The PERC and the Maglev

A controversy has been recently kicked up by the government plan to introduce Maglev train between Dhaka and Chittagong, on the counts of both technical acceptability and financial feasibility. Arguments and counter arguments are put forward. Unfortunately, the Chairman of the PERC, formed by the government to recommend measures to effect overall economy, reduce wasteful expenditure, check extravagance, has of late got embroiled in the controversy by advising the government not to go ahead with the plan. An ex-auditor general (also a former Finance Advisor to the caretaker government) is amply competent to offer any advice he deems fit for greater interest of the poor taxpayers. But he perhaps made a gross mistake by not dancing to the tune of the people who matter, in the prevail-

ing realities of Bangladesh, and was calling a spade a spade. May Allah protect us.
Abdul Hamid Mirdha,
Plot 45, Road 6, Sector 3
Uttara, Dhaka.

Corruption

This refers to a letter by Mr. A.F. Rahman published under the above caption in your esteemed daily on 30th September 2003.

Almost everyone in our country is talking and complaining about corruption. But unfortunately no one is coming forward with any concrete proposal or suggesting to contain corruption.

As a matter of fact, no matter which government goes out of power or comes to power, corruption in our country continues unabated.

It is of no use for us to shed crocodile's tears for corruption and keep sitting idle with our hands folded. It is humbly suggested that the only way to contain corruption in our country is that our MPs/law makers of both the ruling and the opposition

parties should sit together, discuss and find out ways and means to contain corruption and to punish the corrupt persons.
O. H. Kabir
6, Hare Street, Wari
Dhaka 1203

A good gesture

On 5th October the PM called a high level meeting of the secretaries of the government and instructed them to adhere to various administrative norms strictly. As if they were sent back to their pavilion. This is a very hopeful event. Twelve or thirteen years ago when I worked in the cabinet division, I was in-charge of such meetings to call every month with the cabinet secretary in the chair. In the meetings attending secretaries would express their problems in administration and implementation of government decisions at head-quarters and field level without hesitation. The chairman would hear the grievances/difficulties and decisions would be taken on particular problem according to the discussion of the cabinet secretary with the secretaries.

Though late, the above mentioned meeting made me hopeful about speedy implementation of the government decisions. I will welcome it, if the intention is honest. But for these the secretaries and their executing hands are to be given lawful authority to overcome the hindrances without any interference from outside. But if the meeting was called seeing black lining of cloud in the corner of the sky due to failure of administration and other anomalies as prevailing in the country, another record of the present government would be added to their credit.
Delwar Hossain
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Dhaka-1203

In this way good decisions were taken. In a year the President of the country would also hold such meetings in the cabinet division at least twice. In each meeting the progress of the government decisions would be discussed. They also would point out problems beyond the agenda for successful running of the administration. Important matters which deserved attention of the higher level would be taken care of by the cabinet secretary.