

Inflation rate still rising

Election year may fuel it further

SINCE 1998-99 fiscal, the rate of inflation had started increasing following devastating floods, but the upward trend continues even to this day. What was 7.06 percent in 1998-99 markedly increased to 7.93 percent in August 2005 and then plateaued at 7.95 percent as of November 2005, the highest figure of inflation in the last eight years.

One might argue that the rise in inflation has been staggered over the last eight years and, to that extent, it needn't be seen with an alarmist eye. But that is being skin-deep; for, the fact of the matter is that it has been steadily and consistently upward in movement with no signs of going down whatsoever -- in spite of good crops and supply positions in the last couple of years.

Furthermore, the 'bank-rolling' of an election year is round the corner, as a fuel to inflation.

The factors that have fuelled inflation are pretty much identifiable and, therefore, we are in the know of where the corrections are needed. First of all, there has been a sudden leap in fuel prices. Let's not forget that several fuel price hikes last year pushed up the input costs of production and the transportation expenses with the result that food prices soared. The prices of other essentials also increased. There have also been flawed distribution of agricultural subsidies, especially in relation to boro cultivation where farmers were hard put to use fertiliser in the peak season. This is likely to affect the food supply position somewhat.

The overall import-dependent supply side is distorted by monopoly and 'hegemony' being exercised by particular sections of businessmen who are apt to manipulate the market prices of imported goods. The depreciation of taka value by nine percent as against dollar has factored in an element of imported inflation to the prices.

This is an election year in which the ruling party will be under pressure from within to yield to market cronyism but unbribed higher prices would make them lose votes, something they need to be wary of.

Our primary concern is the possibility of heavier government borrowing from the banking system induced by increased public spending as the national election approaches. This scrounging of money from the banks has been one of the major causes for putting inflation on an upward spiral. The government knows the stake and must now act to put a lid on over-expenditure of any kind whatsoever. In fact, it needs to practice austerity.

For an independent EC

The safety-valve for free election, strong democracy

THE news that the government has no plans as of now to make the Election Commission secretariat independent must come as a shock to all those who would like to see a strong democracy flourish in Bangladesh. None can contest the opinion that operational independence of the Election Commission is indispensable for free and fair polls.

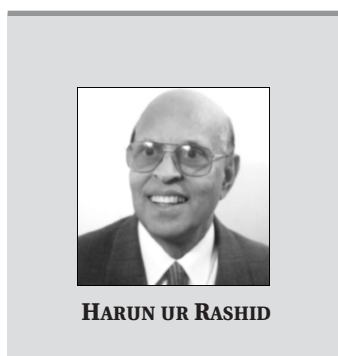
The previous CEC had in fact suggested several reform measures in the recommendations he made to the President in this regard. Regrettably, not only does the proposal appear to have been shelved, the current CEC, while agreeing to the need for reform of the EC, has neither deemed it necessary to pursue the matter, nor has he put up fresh proposals of his own in the eight months that he has been in office.

Free and fair elections are only possible if the chances of interference from the executive in its functioning can be eliminated altogether. Thus the demand for reform of the EC, including its complete independence with its own budgetary provisions and control, reflects the need of the day.

The reform of the EC secretariat would enable the commission to address and tackle issues relating to voter list preparation, monitoring of fund use in election campaigning, punishment of electoral law violations, cancellation of candidatures, or any other matter relevant to a fair and impartial conduct of the election.

In the ultimate analysis, only a fully independent Election Commission can guarantee free and fair election, nothing else will.

Suicide bombings: Who is responsible?



HARUN UR RASHID

THE rise of Islamic militants in Bangladesh, including suicide bombing by misguided youths in various places to achieve their cherished twisted goal, appears to be based totally on misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Islam. The militants of Islam, regrettably, believe in the interpretation of Islam that goes against the very core message of Islam, peace and harmony in the community.

It is particularly painful that the misguided young persons not only killed themselves but also killed other people. They were advised by their leaders that they were following the precepts of Islam. Their interpretation of Islam is distorted in such a manner that it provides a bad image for a peaceful religion.

In 1930, in the forward of the book by Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, *The Opening Chapter of the Qu'ran* (a part of the *Tarjuman al-Qu'ran*), Abul Kalam, who has an established place in the field of Islamic learning wrote:

"For various reasons, the exact message of the Qu'ran has for centuries been steadily kept out of view; so much so that when we look back into the history of the commentators of the Qu'ran from the earliest centuries of Islam right up to the close of the last century, we find that the standard of approach to the meaning of the Qu'ran had steadily deteriorated. This was the result of a gradual decadence in the quality of the Muslim mind itself."

The Qu'ran repeatedly proclaims that the verses should be read with understanding and reason. Islam does not advocate blind faith. Ibn Rushd was a great rationalist and he interpreted Islam with reason and understanding.

Informed observers believe that suicide bombing owes its origin to Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian, who was executed by President Gamal Nasser in 1966, who propagated a "divine program" to create an Islamic society. As the Prophet fought against the

jahiliyyah (age of ignorance), Qutb advocated that the Muslims should fight the *jahiliyyah* creeping in society, declaring jihad including suicide bombings against it, if necessary.

Qutb introduced two methods to remove "ignorance" from Islamic society. First, his followers must withdraw from the mainstream of society and organize their followers to fight against "misguided" Muslims on behalf of their narrow interpretation of Islam. Second, his followers would create a truly an Islamic society according to their version of Islam, even through violence including suicide bombings, if needed. The deceased who

does not care for them.

Added to this social phenomenon, the current global political climate is not helping either. The Iraqi war has fuelled the common belief that the US-led alliance of the Christian world has been fighting against Islam, not against terrorists.

The lukewarm reception of Turkey in negotiations for entry into the European Union demonstrates that even a secular Muslim Turkey is unwelcome into a "Christian club." Austria even proposed for a second class membership for Turkey as "Associate Member," and for membership, the Catholic-majority France wishes to hold referendum

conceived by the media.

Initial alarm bell

The initial alarm bell of presence of Islamic Jihadis in the country was rung by foreign journalists, followed by local media. Alex Parry of *Time* magazine in its edition on October 2002 ran a story that Bangladesh had become a safe haven for Islamic Jihadis and Al-Qaeda fighters. He wrote: "Bangladesh has also its fundamentalists. And its southern coastal hills and northern borders with India are lawless and bristling with Islamic militants armed by gun runners en route from Cambodia and southern Thailand to Sri Lanka,

their duties in arresting the suspected culprits.

Who is responsible?

Time is always rife for speculation during days of uncertainty, insecurity and fear. Although at domestic level, suspected culprits have been identified as members of the banned organization JMB, there are many wild theories or rumours floating in the country as to who are the behind the scene operators of the violence.

Informed observers believe theories of conspiracy against Bangladesh are easy to invent and sell. Ordinary people are credulous and

Observers suggest two alternatives in the matter. First, let there be a national fact-finding body, headed by an independent eminent person, with a few members representing cross section of people without any political affiliation to inquire into matter and submit their findings as to who is responsible for such dreadful state of affairs.

If that is not possible, the other alternative is to request the UN (as Lebanon requested the UN to inquire into the responsibility for assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February) to examine the empirical evidence and come to the conclusion about the causes of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh and who is behind it.

To request the UN is not to be considered as derogation of sovereignty or incapability of a state. It is an act that manifests maturity and commitment to the UN process. It is noted that the Commonwealth Secretariat was involved in the mid-90s to settle the political differences between the two mainstream political parties in the country. No question of sovereignty was raised during that time.

In any case, the concept of old-fashioned notion of sovereignty has undergone dramatic changes in a world which is being run by numerous treaties and conventions, to which the ratifying states limit their sovereignty to abide by the rules and regulations.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has always been a moderate and tolerant country. It is a multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic country. About 12 per cent of its people are non-Muslims (16.8 million people). It is a sizeable population of non-Muslims in the country.

The very fact that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are female persons demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of people are very enlightened and liberal in their mind and attitude. The Muslims of this country are non-Arab and have different traditions and cultures.

Those who support or are responsible for Islamic militancy in the country are enemies of Bangladesh and they must be identified through an independent probe body. People of Bangladesh have the right to know who is responsible for the militancy.

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BOTTOM LINE

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carried out the attack would go to heaven. Observers believe that Osama Bin Laden clearly subscribes to this extreme ideology.

The very notion that Islam would allow suicide bombers to inflict carnage on human beings is at the least an obscenity. At this critical time, Islamic militants should not be allowed to hijack Islam to achieve their twisted ideology to suit their ends.

Furthermore there is much that Muslims can learn from our Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) about how they should conduct themselves in the present day world. His whole career shows that the first priority must be to extirpate greed, hatred and contempt against others to reform society. Only then it is possible to build a safe, stable community where people can live together in harmony and respect each other

Fertile ground for fundamentalism

Many academics believe Islamic militancy flourishes in an environment of frustration, desperation and unemployment of youths. They are easily lured by the fundamentalists who preach an ideology that apparently offers panacea for them in the name of religion. Frustrated youths want to hear that there is a "magic wand" that will allow them to change their quality of life in a society that

for its entry, unlike in the admission of new members. What perception do they show to the Islamic world?

Gross disparity between rich and poor in Bangladesh

After independence of Bangladesh, many observers believe miscalculation of national priorities and confrontational politics have given a safe berth to steady rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country. Furthermore, economic policies arguably led many unemployed youths (each year 2.5 million educated unemployed youths reportedly join the labour market in the country) into the hands of fundamentalists.

Although Bangladesh has admittedly progressed economically during the decade, the disparity among rich and poor within the country has widened. Too much wealth has concentrated in a few people. For example, per capita income to the non-poor has risen by about 19.38 per cent, while that of the poor has risen only 4.82 per cent, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

The UN report, tabled in September this year at the UN meeting of the world leaders, indicated Bangladesh has achieved fifth worst ranking, only next to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Niger and Madagascar, in reducing poverty alleviation. The progress of poverty alleviation has been recorded at 0.52 per cent, well below the UN target of 2.2 per cent. These are realities, not

Kashmir, Central Asia and Middle East."

Eliza Griswold wrote in *The New York Times* in January 2005 about the alleged attempt of *Bangla Bhui* to bring about Talibanisation in some parts of the country, bordering India. Traveling through Bangladesh, she concluded: "The global war on terror is aimed at making the rise of regimes like that of the Talbans impossible, in Bangladesh the trend could be going the other way."

The authorities reportedly dismissed these reports and blamed foreign media against Bangladesh. Much later, the August 17 bombing incidents took place in almost all districts simultaneously, demonstrating the strength and organizational capability of militants throughout Bangladesh. Thereafter, the incidence of suicide bombings took place at Gazipur and in Chittagong, a seismic shift of nature of violence, borrowed from the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The two incidents compelled the authorities to take seriously the threat to internal security from militants. The daily media reports show large numbers of militants from the banned Islamic outfit with deadly weapons, explosives and bomb materials including detonators are being captured. They reflect the size of their strength and spread over the country. The law enforcing agencies have to be commended for

swallow whatever information is dished out to them.

The probing question is why Bangladesh has to be destabilised and in whose interests. Stability and progress of Bangladesh provide economic dividends to every state including its neighbours and distant states.

The cause of the rise of militancy has to be dispassionately examined and emotions or bias should not come into the picture. It has to be analysed in an objective manner as to how militancy has spread over the country and why.

It is easy to blame or pass the buck to others. It demonstrates immaturity and lack of self-examination or analysis. For example, parents should not blame only the environment of school or teachers for failure in examinations of their sons and daughters. Sons and daughters including parents should take responsibility for failures.

Neutral probe body

Bangladesh is a respectable member of the comity of nations. It became twice member of the Security Council, representing Asia, and actively participates in the UN peace-keeping operations of other countries. It is a tragedy that it cannot secure peace within its borders from Islamic militancy. Bangladesh is a nation of tolerant people and there is no room for violence in the community.

Counting progress in economic and social sectors

ABDUL QUADER writes from Canberra

SINCE independence, Bangladesh has made some remarkable progress in a number of economic and social sectors. In particular, the country's economic and social development during the past decade has been quite impressive by most measures. The country is progressing well in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The MDGs articulate the solemn obligations and commitments of the government to improve the economic and social lives of the people as fast as possible. These goals have been planned to be achieved by the year 2015. The failure to make reasonable progress in achieving the goals and targets enunciated in the MDGs will be considered as the failure of political leadership in the country.

The advent of democracy since the downfall of president Ershad in January 1991 saw a series of economic reforms put in place by successive governments with greater macroeconomic stability, a move towards trade liberalisation, structural reform and economic deregulation. All these have resulted in a significant increase in the rate of growth in gross domestic product (GDP), with an average growth of more than 5 per cent per year.

Faster economic growth has helped the country to reduce the poverty rate to a large extent since 1990. In fact, since independence Bangladesh has achieved a positive development record in the face of extremely weak initial conditions,

In general, people in Bangladesh are resilient, flexible and adaptable. They are eager to change for the better if they are given opportunities. People understand the benefits of change and transformation and have a will to develop, even under adverse circumstances. The remarkable success the country has achieved so far in different economic and social sectors reflects the indomitable spirit of the masses to move forward towards higher levels of development, even under a difficult political climate.

virulent and often times violent politics, fragile institutions and poor governance, frequent large-scale destruction by natural calamities, and the negative global image generated by these. So the level and pace of economic and social development achieved so far are something to reckon with.

In Bangladesh, prospects for continued high economic growth of 5-6 per cent per annum over the next few years are good in view of current macroeconomic stability, reasonable savings and investment rates and the pace of economic reforms being pursued by the government. According to a recent World Bank assessment, the country's economic growth could accelerate to 7-8 per cent if the government scales up its efforts to reduce regulatory costs, address infrastructure constraints (especially ports and power), deepen and improve the efficiency of the financial sector, improve labour quality, and further lower trade barriers.

Progress on many social measures has been encouraging. Primary enrolment for both genders is almost universal, and the secondary enrolment rate has more than doubled since independence. Bangladesh has already met the

Millennium Development Goal on gender parity in school enrolment at secondary and primary levels. After Sri Lanka, Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia to have achieved this parity in education enrolment on gender basis.

The child mortality rate has halved, and life expectancy has increased by more than 15 years since independence. Another success in social sectors in Bangladesh is the significant and rapid decline in infant and child mortality rates. Infant mortality rates have declined from 140 to 60 per thousand live births between 1972 to 2000 while child mortality rates have fallen from 95 to 30 during the same period of time. The decline in infant and child mortality rates has been among the fastest in the developing world. Given the current rate of progress, Bangladesh and Maldives will be the only South Asian countries to achieve their MDGs of reducing infant and child mortality by the year 2015.

Population growth rate has also declined to a great extent, coming down to 1.5 per cent by mid-1990s. Women in Bangladesh have experienced vast improvements in their health during the past few decades due, in part, to an increased nation-

wide commitment to family planning and population control. In the early 1970s, very few women used any form of contraception to prevent pregnancy. Since that time, the contraceptive usage rate has skyrocketed from 3 per cent to 54 per cent. Likewise, the total fertility rate has declined from 6.4 to 3.3 children per woman. Women also get reproductive health services provided by the government medical centres and NGOs.

Today, family planning measures are widely used in Bangladesh and women have taken a lead role in choosing the family size. The social stigma attached to the use of contraceptive has long gone, and through education, awareness, motivation, outreach, and commitment, contraception has become rather a social norm. As a result, women in Bangladesh are having smaller families and are now better able to actively participate in the communities and society.

Bangladesh has nearly achieved the safe drinking water goal, with 97 per cent of the population now having access to pathogen-free water.

Although Bangladesh has often started from a low base, it has achieved some notable success

both in terms of the rate of progress and actual development outcomes compared to its neighbours. According to the World Bank's World Economic Indicators, 2005, Bangladesh has outperformed India, Pakistan and Nepal on a number of social measures such as decrease in child mortality, maternal mortality and fertility rates, increased access to primary education, and higher child immunisation rates. These are no small achievements for Bangladesh.

The success of women in terms of education, training, employment and income-earning activities is very impressive. Women in both urban and rural areas are now heavily engaged in social, economic and cultural life in the society. Many barriers to women's participation in the society have been removed in the last two decades, facilitated by both government and non-government organisations. This has made significant contribution to women's emancipation in Bangladesh.

Micro credit is an area where Bangladesh has achieved outstanding success compared to many other developing countries in the world. The country is now known as the "motherland of micro credit." According to the current estimates,

about 15,000 NGOs, large and small, are registered with the NGO Bureau in Bangladesh. Nine million households have accessed the different kinds of micro credit, which has largely helped poverty reduction in the country, especially in rural areas.

Women have taken advantage of micro credit provided by different organisations such as Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB), Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), and Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation (an agency providing funding to government and non-government agencies engaged in implementing micro credit programs and projects).

The negative image of Bangladesh in terms of political violence, deteriorating law and order situation, poor governance and corruption often suppresses the achievements the country has gained over the years in economic and social sectors.

In general, people in Bangladesh are resilient, flexible and adaptable. They are eager to change for the better if they are given opportunities. People understand the benefits of change and transformation and have a will to develop, even under adverse circumstances. The remarkable success the country has achieved so far in different economic and social sectors reflects the indomitable spirit of the masses to move forward towards higher levels of development, even under a difficult political climate.

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Conspiracy about torture?

Bush administration loses further moral ground

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE third Geneva Convention on prisoners of war (POWs) spells out very categorically that POWs should not be subjected to cruel treatment, torture, outrages upon personal dignity and humiliating treatment. According to the Convention, tribunals must decide a prisoner's status. The fourth Convention also agrees not to torture protected persons that include enemy civilians in armed conflicts. And the UN Convention against torture defines torture as an act that inflicts severe pain or suffering, physical or mental. Therefore, it is banned to obtain information or a confession, by applying torture. The convention also prohibits countries from handing over captives to another state known to employ torture. Torture is universally considered as an act of violation of human rights as stated

by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. The United States defined torture as anything cruel and unusual under the eighth amendment of US constitution.

This being the position of international conventions on torture Bush administration has been carrying out the techniques like sleep deprivation, waterboarding, uncomfortable position, shock therapy, censoring deprivation and mind game. These are used by interrogators at Abu Ghraib in Baghdad, Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, Afghanistan and other prisons in Europe to extract information.

The recent disclosure by the Washington Post about CIA holding and interrogating some Al-Qaeda suspects at a Soviet era compound in eastern Europe and flying them to different places through European airspace has caused uproar in European capitals. In response to a

letter by Jack Straw, Foreign Secretary of Britain and the present rotating President of European Union, Condoleezza Rice, US Secretary of State toured some European capitals to explain US policy towards inhuman treatments and covert prisons in Europe.

Time and again, Bush administration has violated international law, to which the United States is itself a signatory, by sending captives to other states. The latest report in Washington Post of December 4, 2005 reveals the fact of a bungled rendition of a German citizen in 2004. Another case of torture was revealed by Italian court recently. Hasan Mustafa known as Omar, the target of an Italian criminal investigation, was whisked away by CIA operatives from Milan, who was taken to two US bases in succession and finally flew to Egypt where he was interrogated and tortured by Egyptian security agents before

being released to house arrest.

The Secretary of State's explanation does not appear to have the positive effect as there was uproar in British Parliament and European Parliament where lawmakers demanded thorough investigation to the allegation of CIA operatives' secret prisons and CIA's secret flights in Europe as well. According to British daily Guardian, more than 300 flights have landed at European airports to transport suspect terrorists to secret prisons in Europe. Meanwhile, Swiss Senator Dick Marty has submitted a report to the Human Rights Committee of the Council of Europe recognising the allegations that the CIA has been abducting and illegally transporting terror suspects across European borders.

In ratifying the convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in 1994, US Senate defined as cruel,

inhuman, and degrading any practice that would violate the fifth, eighth or 14th amendments. Water boarding and other CIA pressure methods do not necessarily violate the constitution as have been claimed by Bush administration lawyers. The fact remains that water boarding has been recognised as a torture techniques since the time of Thomas de Torquemada in the Spanish Inquisition in 14th century. US soldiers were prosecuted when caught using the method in the Philippines in 1901 or the Vietnam War in 1968. It is beyond comprehension what inspired Bush administration to conduct secret mission on torturing suspect terrorists.

The report in the New York Times of December 16 about President Bush's authorisation in 2002 of surveillances on American citizens domestically has caused further damage to his image. In a radio talk on December 17 last he admitted

authorising national security agencies to surveillances on Americans. Until then President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney began persuading Republican Senator McCain, who was prisoner of war in Vietnam and was tortured, to refrain from bringing a bill in the Senate to ban torture. The disclosure of this story has added further damage at a time when overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives comprising both Republicans and Democrats, endorsed the bill of Senator McCain to ban torture.

Earlier, Senate approved the bill. President accepted in disgraceful manner as the White House was on the record of vetoing the bill. The disclosure by the New York Times of the authorization by President Bush on overseas telephone calls and e-mails of US citizens has caused serious political uproar. His decision has been challenged by both Republicans and Democrats law-

makers alike.

Meanwhile, Democrat Senator Rockefeller released a hand written letter addressed to Vice-President Dick Cheney in July, 2003 objecting to the programme. Two Democrat Senators demanded a special prosecutor investigation. President Bush, however, asserted the legality of the programme under article 2 of the constitution and the congressional resolution authorising use of force after September 11, 2001 attacks. Both claims do not appear to have any justification for authorising National Security Agency surveillance on Americans citizens. This made both Republican and Democrats to refuse to extend the validity of the infamous Patriotic Act of 2001 which infringes upon civil liberty of Americans. As many as four columnists of the Washington Post in a civil liberty debate expressed their reservation.

The revelation of this domestic

surveillance could be compared with that of water gate scandal of Nixon for which he was impeached. With all branches of Republican dominated government at the highest levels now under indictment, under investigation or other sort of serious cloud, Bush administration is in jeopardy. Internationally Bush administration has been exposed shamelessly because of maintaining secret prisons abroad, unlawful torture being applied to detainees, unlawful detentions for unspecified time without access to lawyers and secret surveillance of Americans. President Bush's reluctant acceptance of the bill to ban torture will not improve the shattered image of the United States and she seems to have lost the moral rights to speak about upholding of human rights abroad.

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