

An apology of portfolio reshuffle

Cabinet functioning gets messier

AN elephantine cabinet has apparently jettisoned Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and Barkat Ullah Bulu as commerce minister and adviser to the ministry respectively ostensibly for their poor performances. We think it is a fig-leaf of a change brought into the cabinet. In fact, change is an overstatement. It is more of a gimmick to assuage public ire over exorbitant essential prices than something done out of any genuine conviction or administrative consideration. It is so much of a political stunt that even a failure of a minister has been made to look as scapegoating and perhaps martyrdom.

Or is it? They have not got a sack; their status, for all practical purposes, has been protected. The former has the glaze of a new look as minister without portfolio meaning little work all play. One almost feels that though he looks sidelined publicly he has been rewarded quietly -- thanks to the skyrocketing essential prices and his failed negotiating performance at the Hong Kong WTO.

By removing a minister what miracle is expected by way of prices, which have progressively risen over the past four years, coming down at the fag end of the government tenure? Besides, a few other ministries are involved with the price-line behaviour.

Altaf Hossain was an unqualified disaster in the role of a home minister, and yet without a blink of the eye, the government made him into a minister of commerce allowing him to function that long to quip such a joke that he didn't see any fire brigade lorry to put out blaze in the market prices people were complaining of. Was he wrong to brag, he was 'elevated, not demoted'?

Barkat Ullah was an adviser to the commerce ministry and he has been inducted again as an adviser, this time to the women and children affairs ministry. What are the functions of an adviser except to work as a costly appendage?

How serious the government is about bringing down prices can be measured by the stopgap arrangement envisaging Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, who already has a plateful as the water resources minister, to be holding the additional charge of the commerce ministry. How can ad-hocism do with such a demanding portfolio as commerce?

Inevitably, we come to the conclusion, therefore, that the PM's overall approach to portfolio distribution and cabinet functioning tend to put her sense judgement under a question-mark. There are quite a few ministers in her cabinet who have had a much-publicised reputation for corruption and incompetence. No axe has fallen on them. Why?

With such unanswered questions, the last palliative of portfolio change falls flat.

BAF aircraft crash

Causes must be unearthed to prevent future accidents

A death naturally brings pain to us, more so when it is that of a young life nipped in the bud. We grieve at the death of the soon-to-pass out flight BAF cadet in the recent air crash.

Accidents in flying are occupational hazards for a pilot, and those choosing the hazard-prone calling take up the profession fully aware of this possibility. While that is so, it is the responsibility of those that send our young men up in the air, either on training or on operational missions, to ensure that our pilots are in control of machines that are operationally fit and secure in all respects. It must be seen to that all actions are taken to ensure that the probability of accidents is brought down to near zero, if not eliminated entirely.

While one accepts, with some degree of reluctance, the probability of accidents when flying, we find it hard to accept the statement made by a senior BAF officer that accidents of training planes are usual. And very little comfort can be drawn from the fact that the numbers of aircraft accidents in the BAF are less than that in other neighbouring countries. Without going into number crunching even 44 crashes is quite large if taken in percentage terms of the number of aircrafts held by the air force and the yearly flying hours that are logged.

Even more disconcerting is the statistics that 40 percent of the accidents occur due to technical reasons while the causes of 50 percent of the accidents remain unearthed. Both should give reason for worry to the BAF top brasses. Technical flaws can be removed with proper maintenance, but if one were to remain ignorant of the causes of half of the aircrafts that crash, we are in a very uncertain zone, a situation that should not be countenanced by any air force, let alone ours whose resources are severely limited as it is.

Flight safety establishment, whose job it is to ensure the reduction of probability of accidents, is an important adjunct of an air force. But, it can do very little if it remains clueless of the causes of 50 percent of the accidents.

Of human frustration

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

THE PM was perhaps right when she pleaded her ignorance about the existence of militants in Bangladesh prior to the symphony bomb blasts across the country on August 17, 2005. I say so because prior to that ominous day Banglabbhai of today was seen to have been enjoying the privilege of a 'very respectable person' at least with the local administration. The Superintendent of Police, Rajshahi was even reported to have played host to this 'bandit' in his office to work out 'strategies' against the so-called 'sharbohara' insurgents in the northern region. Banglabbhai's active cooperation with the law and order enforcing agencies eventually saw a good number of apparently innocent rural families ransacked through many a predatory measure

taken directly by the criminal. The episode turned out to be a literal 'myth' with the State Minister for Home Affairs who even went to the extent of joking with the media making a parody of Banglabbhai with 'Englishbhai' etc. In a jovial mood and expression Mr Lutfuzzaman Babar discounted press reports and rejected the existence of any such character at Bagmara, Rajshahi. At that time the Prime Minister (who holds concurrent charge of Home Ministry) didn't appear to have any feedback from her state minister on such an "insignificant and unimportant" matter.

The former US ambassador in Bangladesh, in his parting statement to the electronic media, insisted that Banglabbhai was an 'Islamic militant' already making substantial headway towards

Significance of the Chinese president's visit to the US

BOTTOM LINE

It has been a concern for the US about Beijing's quest for energy supplies. Both compete with each other to explore and exploit oil from other countries. The Chinese politics of energy has an impact on oil diplomacy of the US. Saudi Arabia, despite its long-standing relationship with US oil companies, is turning to China and is today its largest oil supplier. China has struck a deal with oil-rich Venezuela for supply of oil that currently has developed strained relations with the US under the left-wing and populist President Hugo Chavez. In recent days China was able to conclude oil deals in such places as Russia, Gabon, Nigeria and Angola.

HARUN UR RASHID

CHINA'S President Hu Jintao for the first time visited the US for four days from April 18 and he met President Bush on April 20. During the last three years there have met five times in different capitals, including in Beijing last November.

Hu is not like his predecessor Jiang Zemin who could easily relate to Westerners with his ability to quote from Western poets and leaders. Hu, on the other hand, is quite reserved, reticent, and a keen observer of everything, but he does not make jokes or quote from Western poets.

The significance of the visit to the US has been closely watched and evaluated by all nations, big and small. A leader of an existing superpower had a meeting with a leader of a future superpower. This is the equation between them in such a meet. The dynamics are known but what will unfold is unknown as it has not yet been worked out between them. That is the concern of other countries.

Balance of power is an old game. It occurred in the 19th century in Europe; when Germany rose as a power, France and Britain cooperated to limit the power of Germany. They ousted Germany from overseas possessions in Africa and

divided the continent among themselves, eastern part of the continent to British and western part to France. When Japan was emerging as a power in its own right, Russia saw that Japan did not make political waves in the region. They even fought with each other to hold possessions in China.

Against the background of historical precedents, it is no wonder that China's rise has created a concern and stir in the US because political supremacy is a zero-sum game. One rises, the other falls; that is the natural and historical phenomenon. Currently China is rising and therefore the US will eventually decline. There cannot be two lions in the same forest.

One a global super power, it is hard to relinquish that role, and the US has been placed in that position. It carefully watches challenges from countries, real or imaginary, to its global power. It is important for the US to keep the unprecedented military power and to retain its "world's policeman" role across the globe by resorting to unilateral right to use force pre-emptively, ignoring the UN and international law.

Charles Kupchan, of US Foreign Relations Institute, in his book *The End of the American Era* (2002) predicted the decline of supremacy of US in the following words:

"Combine the rise of Europe and Asia with a declining and prickly internationalism in the United States, and it becomes clear that America's unipolar moment is not long for this world. America's dominance and its political appetite for projecting its power globally have peaked and both will be dissipating over the course of coming decade."

Before he proceeded to Washington, Hu was the guest of honour of Bill Gates at Seattle. It is reported that Hu has lavishly praised Microsoft that has struggled to find a firm foothold in China.

Bill Gates saw this opportunity to harp on the Chinese president to halt the piracy of Microsoft software products in China, as a result of which his company has been losing millions of dollars. As a responsible member of the international community China knows the importance of protection of intellectual property rights and Hu reportedly assured Gates that his government would address the problem.

Although the relations between the US and China are calm and correct, they have yet to decide to which way they would go: coexistence or confrontation. The Bush administration considers China as a "strategic competitor" in the Asia Pacific region. It is reported that President Bush said prior to meeting

the Chinese president that: "It is a very important visit. China is a very important strategic, you know, friend in many ways, and in many ways they pose competition to us."

Strategically, India and Japan are the countries that, according to the US, have the capability to counterweight China to keep the balance of power in US's favour and the US has been directing one of its planks of foreign policy to achieve the goal. The deal on nuclear fuel and technology with India by the US is a part of its strategy so as to provide India muscle to restrain China's power.

Having described the dynamics underpinning their relations, let us examine what are the major issues that are of concerns to them and to what extent they are being sorted out. First, China has become a manufacturing giant and US imports have been rising. The Chinese products are cheap, work well, and provide profit to importers. They sell like hot cakes in the US among consumers. The products arrive at the scheduled time from China and are cost-effective, leaving the US products unsold. In 2005, the trade deficit for the US with China was estimated to be around \$200 billion.

As a result, US manufacturing industries cannot compete with those of China and are laying off workers. Unemployment among youth is a big concern for US politicians who are likely to contest the mid-Congressional election in November this year. They want President Bush to do something about it, otherwise they suggest that the US Congress may consider adopting a strict protectionist policies to keep Chinese products off the market.

Second, the Chinese currency (Yuan) is cheap and the US thinks it is undervalued 40%. The US wants action from China to raise the value of Yuan, so that there is a level playing field for both of the countries for competition. The US considers that China has been deliberately keeping

its currency undervalued to enter into US markets and products are attractively priced for consumers.

US Treasury Secretary Snow have made noises about it but China remains quiet. Only action China did was to announce a basket of foreign currency in which trade may be conducted. As a result, Chinese Yuan has moved a little higher to the US dollar. This action does not satisfy the US administration because it is too little. There is a move that a bill may be adopted in the US to slap 27.5% tariff on Chinese imports to the US unless Beijing allow its currency to rise.

Third, there is a concern of human rights record of China. Not only Falun Gong devotees are punished, but also many breaches of human rights occur when Chinese citizens express their views against the government. The US believes that China, as a responsible player in the world affairs must address the human right record, in accordance with UN standards as reflected in numerous international human rights instruments.

Fourth, the prickly issue of Taiwan acts as a fracture between US-China relations. While the US acknowledges "one China" policy (no recognition to Taiwan as a state), it does not want China to grab the renegade province by force. Taiwan has turned out as a democratic country, and China, being a one-party state (Communist), the US naturally supports Taiwan in the power-game and is committed to provide sophisticated weapons to ward off any armed invasion. China does not approve it and considers interference in its internal matters by the US. It is noted that the US and China are aware that any armed conflict would irreparable damage to their economy as both have huge economic interests in each other's country.

Fifth, North Korea's nuclear program has been a political headache for the US. As a policy the US does not want nuclear proliferation glob-

ally, most importantly among the "axis of evil" countries, such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq. To halt nuclear program, China has the influence to do it with North Korea, partly because it shares borders with North Korea and partly because oil is being supplied by China to North Korea. Furthermore, China likes to have leverage with the US on the North Korean issue.

Finally, both the US and China are the largest consumers of oil. It is reported that from 1995 to 2004, US oil imports grew by 3.9 million barrels a day, while China's grew by 2.8 million barrels a day. By 2020, China will need reportedly 70% of US oil needs, compared with 40 per cent today.

It has been a concern for the US about Beijing's quest for energy supplies. Both compete with each other to explore and exploit oil from other countries. The Chinese politics of energy has an impact on oil diplomacy of the US. Saudi Arabia, despite its long-standing relationship with US oil companies, is turning to China and is today its largest oil supplier. China has struck a deal with oil-rich Venezuela for supply of oil that currently has developed strained relations with the US under the left-wing and populist President Hugo Chavez. In recent days China was able to conclude oil deals in such places as Russia, Gabon, Nigeria and Angola.

Given the above concerns, how the great political game of the 21st century is played out between the two powers is an issue that is being closely watched by other nations because all states, big or small, will be affected in one way or other. It is hoped that during the visit each side has been able to size up each other's strength and weaknesses and reconcile to co-exist peacefully for the benefit of people across the globe.

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Whither implementation of the amended food law?

BARE FACTS

But the government has now adopted the policy of procrastination in implementing the amendments in the PFO. Some knowledgeable people are of opinion that the implementation of the amendments will go against the interest of many food manufacturers and traders who belong to the ruling camp. The government, therefore, does not want to incur their displeasure before the forthcoming general election.

M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

AGAINST the people's demand for enacting a comprehensive and tough law for preventing adulteration in all varieties of food, the BNP-led four-party alliance government went for amendments in certain sections and sub-sections of the half-century old Pure Food Ordinance (PFO), 1959. In its 18th session, the BNP-dominated parliament, boycotted by the main opposition AL, passed Bangladesh Pure Food (Amendment) Act, 2005 on September 19, 2005.

The salient points of the amendments include: (i) elaborating definition of food; (ii) specifying local authorities empowered to conduct drives to combat food adulteration and appoint one or more qualified persons to be public analyst of food within its area; (iii) constituting a National Food Safety Advisory Council (NFSAC) headed by the local government, rural development and co-operatives minister and consisting of representatives of the ministries, departments concerned; (iv) prohibiting the use and sale of any poisonous or dangerous chemicals or ingredients or additives or substances that may cause injury to human body; (v) establishing one or

more pure food court in each district and metropolitan area; and (vi) enhancing the minimum and maximum fine or rigorous imprisonment for the offence for manufacturing or selling of adulterated or staled food.

Now, let us see whether these amendments have been implemented, and if not, what are the problems that stand in the way of their implementation?

The Pure Food Rules (PFR), 1967 made to carry out the purposes of the PFO, 1959 contains a schedule which is a description of prescribed standards (nature, quality and substance) of the articles of food. Drinking water, livestock and livestock product which were not specifically mentioned in the definition of food in PFO, 1959 have now been included in the amended definition of food.

But the PFR, 1967 have not yet been amended to include them in the schedule prescribing the standards of the articles of food. Unless the standards of these articles of food are prescribed and included in the schedule to the PFR, it may not be possible for the public analyst of food to determine their normal constituents as well as deficiencies or additions rendering them adulterated.

Some countries have unified food laws. Available information

suggests that the Ministry of Health and the departments under it in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia are entrusted with the responsibility of enforcement of food safety and quality standards. The unified legislations of these countries are: Malaysia Food Act, 1983 and Food Regulations, 1985; Thailand Food Act 1979; and Food Regulations of Indonesia. In Britain, the Food and Drugs Act of 1955 incorporated all the previous legislation and together with the Public Health Act of 1961 gave a new foundation to the subject. It is known that food laws in the USA basically follow the British pattern.

In Bangladesh, we have a number of food laws namely, the PFO, 1959 (as amended up to 2005), the PFR, 1967, the Cantonnments Pure Food Act, 1966, the Cantonnments Pure Food Rules, 1967, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute (BSTI) Ordinance, 1985 and rules made thereunder, which are responsible for enforcement of food safety and quality standards. Besides, we have the Penal Code, 1860, the Special Powers Act, 1974, and six City Corporation Ordinances that deal partially with food safety and prescribe punishments. Different ministries and agencies are responsible for the

enforcement of these laws.

The amended PFO has provided for the constitution of the NFSAC to work as the apex body to coordinate and advise the government on matters relating to safety of food, standard and quality control for food, development of manpower services and facilities required for ensuring safety, quality and pure food for human consumption, etcetera. But the NFSAC has reportedly not been functional till date. Further, in the absence of any coordinating body at the field level, particularly at the district level, to help the NFSAC, it may not be possible for the apex body to discharge its responsibilities properly.

The amended PFO has provided that the government may, by notification in the official gazette, establish one or more Pure Food Court (PFC) in each district and metropolitan area. The court shall consist of an officer who is vested with the power of a magistrate of the first class and who shall have power to impose any punishment specified in the amendment. As far as it is known, the PFC is yet to be established. There is the least possibility that PFCs will start functioning in all the districts and metropolitan areas during the remaining days of the BNP-led alliance rule.

The laboratories are ill-equipped both in terms of equipment and trained manpower to deal with the gigantic problem of food adulteration. After the passage of the Pure Food (Amendment) Act, 2005, the daily Prothom Alo reported on September 22, 2005 that its field-level survey of the laboratories of the BSTI, BCSIR, IPH and the DCC revealed that they did not have

necessary equipment and trained personnel to detect adulteration.

Mention may be made that the most important area of concern is the use of colours in food. Natural or vegetable colours are generally considered safe. In the absence of necessary equipment and skilled manpower, these laboratories cannot test and distinguish between natural/vegetable colours and hazardous artificial and synthetic colours.

There are public analysts of food, inspectors, health officers, etc to ensure safety of food in the interest of public health. But they have so far hardly played any role in the prevention of food adulteration. Rather, there are allegations that many of them are in the pay roll of the food adulterators. Unless their activities are carefully monitored and the corrupt ones punished, noticeable improvement in the prevention of food adulteration may not be possible.

Campaigns against food adulteration by the mobile courts in the capital city and in other cities and towns are welcome. But mobile court approach is not enough, especially when the adulterators resort to newer techniques to avoid detection and accountability and the mobile courts suffer from shortage of necessary specialists and equipment to deal with such situation.

In its editorial of March 22, The Daily Star wrote: "All agencies involved with food safety matters and the protection of consumer rights in general, like the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI), Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and food directorate must be adequately equipped and empowered to be able to do their job effectively

enough. Let's invest resources in them, so we don't need to have ad-hoc campaigns with short-lived effects."

The bill amending the PFO, 1959 was passed in haste. The bill was introduced in the House on September 13, 2005. The parliamentary standing committee on local government, rural development and cooperatives ministry was given only three days to scrutinise the bill. It is learnt that the even the amendments suggested by the treasury bench members of the committee were not accepted.

Many observers feel that the government wanted to achieve some political gains by hurriedly passing the bill. This became evident when the government started trumpeting the passage of the bill. But the government has now adopted the policy of procrastination in implementing the amendments in the PFO. Some knowledgeable people are of opinion that the implementation of the amendments will go against the interest of many food manufacturers and traders who belong to the ruling camp. The government, therefore, does not want to incur their displeasure before the forthcoming general election.

To conclude, considering the importance of food on public health in general and in the building up healthy workforce for the country, all necessary steps, including implementation of the amendments in the PFO, 1959 must be taken to ensure availability of safe food to all sections of the society.

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building an Afghan-style 'Taleban regime' in the country. The ambassador was also reported to have requested the Prime Minister to intervene immediately before things went out of control. Indeed she reacted quickly and ordered for immediate arrest of the hoodlum at any cost. Reward of a huge amount was readily declared on his head. Before the police could go into fresher action the notorious bandit went underground to avoid interception of the police. Virtually he and his assistants were granted enough time to make final dents to their organisational mechanism. The formal emergence of JMB on August 17, 2005 with simultaneous bomb blasts at 63 out of 64 districts gave the big jolt. Suicide bombers took, among others, many lives including those of judges, lawyers,

and general members of the public.

When the Prime Minister said that she or her government was not aware of the existence of militants (Islamic militants precisely) prior to August 17, 2005, she doesn't tell us how then and why she asked for immediate arrest of Banglabbhai long before August 17. One might wonder if she didn't consider Siddiqi Islam alias Banglabbhai as an Islamic militant capable of terrorist activities creating serious law and order situation in the country. However, if she didn't think Banglabbhai was at par with the ferocious 'Islamic militants and terrorists' and equally dangerous her orders for rounding up the man would bear unacceptable contradiction of one's own conviction. To yet another question of the journalist representing Time Magazine she revealed that when

she took over charge of the government in late 2001 the law and order situation in the country was very bad. The people were in perpetual fear and couldn't sleep in peace. She added that she and her government inherited 'terrorism' from the predecessor government of the Awami League. We have an irreversible self contradiction from the prime minister occurring perhaps very unknowingly.

Thomas Gray, the great English poet (1716-1771) famed for his 'Elegy' written in a country churchyard' said in one of his poems: "Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise." In our case here the initial pleadings of ignorance appears unfortunately to have been mere pretensions rousing consternation. A little bit of diplomacy in place could perhaps salvage the

PM's stance, instead of going for a political gimmick to put the onus of responsibility on her predecessors.

We have had echo of frustration in her statement when she said that at times she thought of relinquishing her position being pinched by human instincts. But she couldn't leave because of the trust and confidence reposed with her by the people whom she couldn't disappoint etc. Frustration is the inevitable product of failure in one's endeavours. In this case, the loud bragging on the 'tide of development' paralleled to the ever-compounding human miseries on the economic front make the claim mere empty clamour having nothing to do with reality. Perhaps here the shoe pinches and hence the prime minister feels disheartened. And that's why she vents her wounded

feelings in frustration. This is indeed human and there is none to blame.

Yet one can very rightly allude to the none too effective role played by the administrative machinery of the government. In spite of the early indifference to act in time to contain the Islamic terrorists her ability to prove in recent times earned her credit and commendation at home and abroad. The whole nation awaits the end results of the legal proceedings against Shayek Abdur Rahman, Banglabbhai and other JMB militants. Meanwhile, due to extreme highhandedness of the police and other law enforcing agencies at Kansat, the image of the government has again been pitifully rifled through. Belated though the commotion there has subsided on the commitment of the negotiating committee of the government to

meet the demand of the people in one month.

But the relief offered in the news above was overturned in 24 hours at Chittagong Stadium by the police headed by DCAl Akbar. This time the whole nation and the world at large had witnessed on the electronic media the unprecedented excesses of the police force on the journalists/photographers beating them brutally with rifle butts, batons and boots. The DC himself was seen mercilessly beating the old photo-journalist Al-haj Zahirul Haque. Can it be a part of the conspiracy the prime minister often refers to? Perhaps not. But truly these unfortunate and deplorable episodes could be the real and undesirable elements compounding the frustration.

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