

Stemming price spiral

Minister's comments disappointing

MINISTER Hafizuddin Ahmed has the reputation of being a doer, but his comments at the meeting with the top businessmen on Sunday have disappointed us in no small measure. He seemed to shrug off responsibility and tried to pass the buck on to others adding that his ministry cannot be held solely responsible for the unbearable price hikes.

Here our position is clear that if lack of inter-ministerial coordination is the major factor behind the spiral then it is for him as member of the cabinet to ensure it. If his cabinet colleagues are not sufficiently forthcoming then he should take it up with the Prime Minister for the latter's intervention so as to make sure that effective coordination is achieved.

Under no circumstances, can we accept the commerce minister not taking responsibility on his shoulders with a hands-on proactive policy in dealing with the matter. We also regretfully find his making light of the role of a so called syndicate in manipulating market prices. Is it because a genuine search might reveal skeletons from the BNP's cupboards?

He also brings in the issues of hartal, barricade and extortion. About hartals which The Daily Star never fails to condemn, these have not occurred as frequently as to affect productivity, supplies and the market prices. As for barricade, we do not understand what he was referring to. And about extortion is it not part of his government job to eliminate it? Indeed, extortion at various stages of procurement, transportation and storage is one of the prime causes of price hike in that traders have to mark up their prices. It's a law and order problem feeding on nexus between various vested quarters, which is not insurmountable at all.

Overall, we find his position about price hike not vigorous enough to stem it.

A high point in forex earning

Shot in the arm from expatriate

Bangladeshis

THE annual remittances from the Bangladeshis working abroad are expected to reach a record \$4.5 billion by the end of this fiscal year from what was \$3.8 billion in the preceding fiscal. Remittances from the non-resident Bangladeshis have been showing an upward spurt particularly since December of last year.

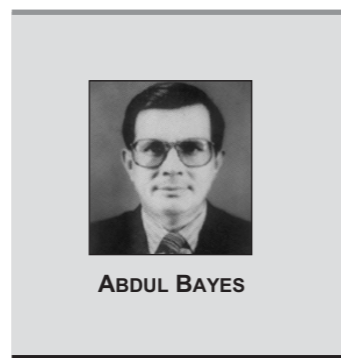
The rising trend has been possible due to a combination of factors. These are increase in the number of skilled non-resident Bangladeshis earning higher wages, devaluation of the taka, meaning more of local currency to a dollar which encourages remitters to send more money to beneficiaries, various positive and practical measures taken by the banking sector which look upon remittances as profitable business and implementation of the provisions of the Money Laundering Act at the behest of Bangladesh Bank.

As much as we are happy with the overall state of foreign remittances, we strongly feel that there is still considerable scope of further increase in the flow of remittance. The yearly remittance made by the Bangladeshis abroad might well be averaging \$ 7 billion a year and yet a substantial amount of it comes through hundi as observed by none other than the Governor of the Bangladesh Bank.

Despite the positive trend, problems do exist with regard to remittance by low wage earners due to imposition of a flat rate of charges irrespective of the amount of remittances. We need to give special emphasis on serving their needs by bringing down the charges for them. Already we find that many of the countries that were traditional employers of our manpower are now hiring more from other countries. On the one hand our visa arrangements and other travel related documentation continue to be cumbersome and fraught with many inadequacies; on the other, many of the host country agencies fail to stick to the contractual arrangements with individual employees which often result in underpayment of wages and violation of other service terms and conditions.

A hands-on manpower export policy based on exploration of new markets is the need of the hour.

When people chase police and politicians



ABDUL BAYES

AFTER the Kansat tragedy, far away from the capital city, another tragedy of that kind was almost going to take place in Dhaka. Thanks to the police force for taking the lessons from Kansat that lives are lost but the noble cause remains to propel people. This time it was in Demra, almost at the heart of Dhaka city, where policies for people's welfare are being chalked out, the gates of the "flood of development" are being opened for the country, and the Parliament speaks for the cause of the people.

In Kansat a few days back, people "revolted" against irregular supply of electricity to the cost of twenty lives under police firing. Women and children appeared as the vanguards. In Demra this time, people revolted against non-availability of water and interrupted supply of electricity, day and night, for 2-3 months! We fail to understand as to how the government or its agencies could overlook the woes of the people for whom they stand to serve.

People of the locality complained several times about the acute scarcity of water and electricity -- two of the most important ingredients in modern day life --

BENEATH THE SURFACE

If Dhaka -- the capital city -- faces such problems frequently, what could be the situation outside? The Hon'ble Prime Minister has possibly noticed that the "flood of development" during the tenure of her government has caused a serious drought in water and electricity. She should have also noticed that her party lawmakers are unpopular with the people. The notice should serve well for a wake up call that the whole of Bangladesh today assumes the situation of Kansat or Demra.

but received no attention either from the government or from the person they had voted for as MP during the last general election.

Historically speaking, people of this country are, by their very nature, polite and reasonable. The suffer and rarely rise up unless forced to by the ferocity of the events. But once they appear on the streets for a cause, history tells us, they never return home without fulfillment of their demands.

Meantime, valuable lives are lost and properties are destroyed. The most recent empirical evidence to this effect was a "quasi-revolution" in Kansat that cost twenty lives to warrant attention from the government. The government had to eventually bow down to the people.

Likewise in Shanir Akhra, special arrangements with regard to water supply -- though meager -- are seen to have been taken after people chased police and the "politician" who represents them in Parliament.

Newspaper reports say that Shanir Akhra in Demra turned turbulent on May 5 as clashes erupted between people and the police. As the police failed to face the turbulence, local JCD activists

or government-backed "private police" armed with sticks stepped in to drive people back to their houses. Both public and private police attempted to attack people demonstrating for their right to water to drink and bath.

But faced with the odds, the people of Demra barricaded the highway for thirteen hours. We saw the scene shown by private TV channels the other day in their news bulletins. Police tried to subdue them by the traditional means but had to back out on the heels of heightened agitation.

Then came the local BNP lawmaker -- with gun and goons -- to show that he is master of the people, not their friend. He had no idea about the adage that, to people's power, everything is powerless. Instead of show sympathy for the noble cause and giving them assurances for redressing hardships, the MP uttered threats and insults and authorized the police to shoot. People got furious when the local MP himself tried to open fire with the gun that he carries with him.

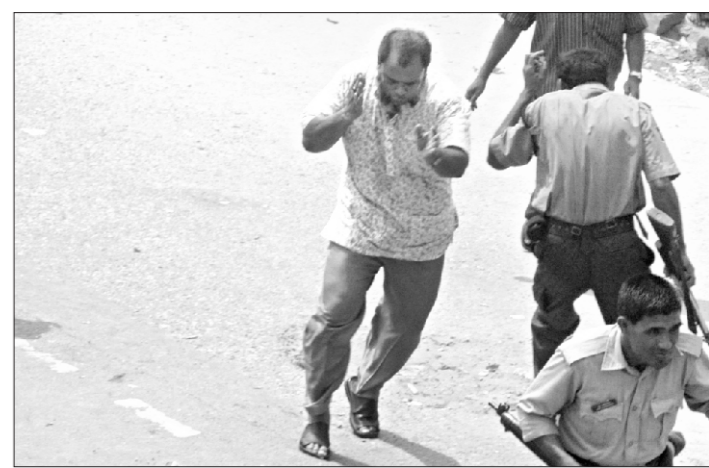
Has he read or heard about Kansat in recent days -- not to speak of people's power in distant past? Perhaps not. Unfortunately, his ignorance was not bliss but a

curse. The "honourable" MP was found desperately running for a cover as the people pelted him after he fired in the air.

The personage referred to is Salahuddin Ahmed, a ruling party MP, and the people were from his own constituency. He earned the wrath of the public for his alleged show of gun. The BNP lawmaker was injured as the angry agitators hurled bricks at him and beat him with sticks. Thus he entered and thus he left.

Like Kansat, the initial reaction was peaceful and quite in consort with democratic norms. People have the right to raise the demand for water and electricity. But as we heard, police soon arrived to charge batons and lob teargas shells to disperse the demonstrators demanding water and electricity. In both Kansat and Demra, the "villain" seems to be the local MP who instigated police to open fire.

It is unfortunate that in the heart of Dhaka city, residences remain without water, not for few days, but for few months. In the heart of Dhaka city, interrupted supply of electricity causes tremendous losses to business and industries, hampers students before the ensuing exami-



nation, and causes all kinds of hardships.

Few days back, I visited a re-rolling mill at Shampur on the way to Narayanganj. The owner of the mill (a cousin of the local MP) complained to me that during the last Awami League regime, his firm faced no serious crisis as far as electricity supply was concerned. But during the last couple of years, his production came down by one-third due to frequent power outages. Re-rolling mills need constant power supply to minimize costs. He also spoke about the problems in the area with respect to public utility services.

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Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Can Koirala make peace bloom in Nepal?

The Maoists are aware that in the final analysis they have to accept a political settlement and they do recognize that the current movement has given them a historic opportunity to become a respectable partner in the democratic process. Premier Koirala's most recent assurances to drop all terrorist related charges against the Maoist militants and the government's decision not to designate them as a "terrorist group" have created favourable ground for the resumption of peace talks.

SYED MUJAZEM ALI

PEOPLE'S power has triumphed over Royal power in the Himalayan kingdom. King Gyanendra, in the face of determined and non-violent movement of his people, as well as pressure from outside, has restored the National Parliament which he had dissolved in 2002.

The Grand Old Man of Nepali politics and three-time Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, has been called out of semi-retirement and installed as the Prime Minister again. Peace and normalcy have returned to the Himalayan capital, but the bigger challenge lies ahead.

The crucial transition from monarchy to democracy has just begun. The coming months will demonstrate whether the historic April revolution will firmly establish democracy in Nepal, or, like the previous occasion, the movement will lose its track due to political infighting or palace intrigue. The Nepali people, however, have indicated that they will be more vigilant this time.

The King, since the dismissal of the last Prime Minister in February 2005, had sought to establish absolute monarchy in the country. In the process, he has jeopardized the future of the monarchy that has ruled Nepal since 1769. The Nepali people, who in the past treated their King as a direct descendent of God Vishnu, are now openly asking for the end of monarchy.

In the past, the three major players in Nepali politics -- monarchy, political parties, and the Maoist rebels -- have tried to corner each other. The Kings, taking advantage of the division within the political parties, used the "divide and rule policy." They dismissed the governments one after another on grounds like "corruption" or "their failure to curb the Maoist insurgency."

The Nepali people had thought that after the democratic revolution of 1990 their elected representatives would be more responsive to their legitimate demands and basic needs. Unfortunately, the politicians proved to be self-seekers and made hardly any

move to improve the living conditions of the teeming millions.

Absolute monarchy, rampant corruption by the politicians, and the total lack of concern for the common people created necessary grounds for the emergence of Maoist rebels in the mid-90s. The Maoists, who understood the plight of the poor villagers, took a number of steps to alleviate their sufferings. This helped them earn popularity and support of the rural people.

The Nepali government has virtually lost control over most of the countryside to the rebels. So far, 13,000 people have died due to military offensives against the Maoists. The Maoists' steadfast opposition against the monarchy, and the heavy price that they have paid, especially during the direct rule of Gyanendra, have made them a force to reckon with.

In a rare show of unity, seven parties formed a loose alliance (SPA) and got their act together. The Maoists rebels surfaced publicly for the first time and they too joined them. This unexpected unity completely upset the Palace

plan and the King had to concede.

The Maoists would like to bring an immediate end to monarchy and transition to a republic. The mainstream political parties, however, believe that it would be prudent to keep "ceremonial monarchy" but to take away the control of army from the King. This issue will be determined by the next constituent assembly and one of the principal tasks of the Koirala government will be to hold fresh elections as soon as possible.

The politicians must maintain the existing unity and take advantage of the current momentum to bring in lasting changes in Nepal. Although Koirala was chosen as the Prime Minister unanimously, the parties squabbled among themselves when it came to naming the ministers.

After a week of bitter haggling, the parties finally reached a compromise last week and a new cabinet has been formed. The new cabinet represents a fine balance among the main political parties. The two minor parties, however, have decided not to join the government but support it from outside. The students, who played a crucial role in the mass agitation, took note of the squabbling and warned the ministers not to forget the people's aspirations.

The bigger challenge, however, is to persuade the Maoists to give up arms and become involved in mainstream politics. So far, the

progress has been good. Following Koirala's telephonic conversations with the Maoist supreme Prachanda, the Maoists suspended the three-week long blockade and announced a three-month unilateral truce. Whether they will agree to play by the rules of parliamentary democracy, or make ideological concessions for the sake of wielding power in the "bourgeois democracy," is not yet clear. Equally unclear is the question whether they will be able to control their overzealous militants.

The Maoists may not give up arms at this stage but they have indicated that they will be agreeable to isolate their troops under international supervision, if the Royal Nepalese Army does the same. Eventually, they want their forces, the People's liberation army, to become a part of a new national military.

The Maoists are aware that in the final analysis they have to accept a political settlement and they do recognize that the current movement has given them a historic opportunity to become a respectable partner in the democratic process. Premier Koirala's most recent assurances to drop all terrorist related charges against the Maoist militants and the government's decision not to designate them as a "terrorist group" have created favourable ground for the resumption of peace talks.

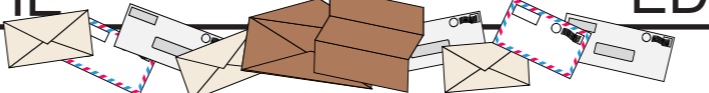
Nepal is lucky as there was no

overt outside meddling in their internal power struggle. Fortunately, interests of her two major neighbours, India and China, as well as that of the United States, had converged, and they had acted in concert to put pressure on King Gyanendra to restore democratic rule and end confrontation. Experts believe that the outside powers were apprehensive that further continuation of confrontation would edge the Maoists closer to power as it was an opportunity for them to fully exploit the crisis to expand their insurgency.

Interestingly, China did not support the Maoists. Until recently, they were staunchly supporting the King, but as his unpopularity grew, China shifted its stance in favour of the democratic movement. Now that the crisis is over, US, China, and India have sent high-level delegations expressing their desire to offer generous economic assistance and resume military supplies to Katmandu. India has always played a leading role in this Himalayan kingdom: how far they will allow other powers to involve themselves in Nepali affairs remains to be seen.

The author is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

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.

Woes of pensioners

We were pleased to note the pay hike for government servants. Looking at price hike of daily essential commodities, one has the feeling that the government had to do something in this respect. The raise has been expressed in details; including that of private offices. Private offices follow the same orders, so far I know. But what about retired officials like me?

Price hike is affecting all classes of people. The state of the poor is beyond description! I would request the government to increase our pension by at least 80%. Otherwise, how can we survive?

Dr. Lailun Nahar
Dhaka

Nepal scene

After the royal proclamation on April 24 reinstating the parliament, there is happiness on every Nepalese face. The jubilant crowd on the streets and the celebrations do indicate that the Nepalese people have a profound faith in democracy. Under democracy, freedom and equality are the two main principles of governance. We should not forget that the Maoists are not

happy with the prevailing political situation in Nepal. If society wants to feel secure on the basis of crowd's response, leaving the major problems untouched, then democracy has no meaning.

The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) with internal coordination led the protests against the King. People supported and came on to the streets despite curfew. Women, children, youths and elderly people were in the frontline and they never cared for life. Under international and national pressure the King had to accept the popular demand.

The main parties have welcomed the royal proclamation and they are ready to go for interim government of Girija Prasad Koirala, who was recommended unanimously by the SPA for the post of the prime minister and leader of the reinstated House of Representatives, though the Maoists have decided to remain away from the government. They claim that the parties have betrayed the 12-point understanding and have secured the future of the monarchy. They should follow the political road map and go for interim government since a few months back in

a very popular interview Maoist leader comrade Prachanda and comrade Dr Baburam Bhattarai said they were ready to take part in the government under certain conditions. The Maoists should not call it a historic mistake, rather they should call it a "historic event" because the situation of 1990 has changed to a great extent. There is a burning passion for absolute democracy inside every Nepalese heart; so why not let the parliament decide the fate of the monarch!

Sandarva Giri
Savar, Dhaka

Image and the Ks

This refers to Md. Zaman's letter entitled "Image not decoupled from reality" in DS (25 April). Unfortunately, the image of Bangladesh is "going down the drain" allegorically speaking. Coincidentally, all the eye opening factors could be represented by the letter K.

K: Is for Kansat where legitimate demand of power from our "very successful" development oriented government caused unnecessary deaths of twenty peasants and innocent bystanders including children with injuries to many more. The whole affair is

a "dark deed" done in broad daylight. Its impact on our images is positive if autocracy is the yardstick while it is totally negative in a democratic environment which we claim to represent.

K: Is for Kriket (phonetically representing "Cricket") where the greatest show on sports arena was enacted during the second Test with Australia in Chittagong. If local news blanketing was the authorities' policy; it was a top class audio visual action played under international coverage, and a very determined Nazi style positive action at that! If however local news blanketing was not the policy then the image value created deserves the inverse (mathematically speaking) of an "Oscar" award!

K: Stands for the Kitchen Market. Prices of all inputs needed for feeding the poor and middle class are rocketing upwards and accelerating beyond control. Meanwhile, the police is acquiring its hands on experience and know-how in violently taming the housewives (our mothers and sisters) who are victims of this price hike. As the saying goes "practice makes one perfect". Despite Ministerial and Advisory shuffling, price hike

is reaching the sky and the infinity of space. After all it is a part of free market policy of our elected democratic government! Who are we to complain as free market citizens? We have to pay or perish.

K: Is for the Killing (extra judicial) duly sanctioned by our democratic (?) government! It is for the elimination of evil people through an ethically evil process. "Ours is not to question why" as the famous line of poetry states. Image wise, however, it is another question if we are not in a state of declared warfare against an external enemy of the country. But our law allows it; so questioning it may be itself criminal and anti-state!

A "Kritic"
One e-mail

Uniform grading system

The uniform grading system in public, private universities will be disgusting if it doesn't maintain the international standards. The report about uniform grading system was published in almost all the newspapers on December 25, 2006. As a university student, I totally disagree with the details of the

UGC recommendation because it doesn't maintain the international standards. However, the leading private universities in our country follow the international standards. Most of the public universities haven't introduced grading system yet. On the other hand, the education system is quite different in the public and private universities in our country. The education system of some leading private universities in our country is of international standard, whereas the education system of public universities is not suitable for grading system. Therefore, the authorities could make a different grading system for the public and private universities.

I hope UGC will look into the matter.
M Salahuddin Chowdhury
North South University

"Tritiyu Matra"

In Sharjah, I regularly watch Channel i, not to speak of the wonderful programme "Tritiyu Matra" conducted by Mr. Zillur Rahman. One of the recently concluded programmes in which Communications Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda took part generated a lot of heat. Mr.

Huda was very much "excited" when the question of three stroke CNG run auto rickshaw was aired. On the other hand, our Education Minister was speaking very politely. He said he did not change the history books in the school. Then who changed those?

Finally, Matur Rahman Nizami the Jamaat leader, who in 1971 openly opposed the creation of Bangladesh, is a very nice person and very successful minister for industries. The sugar production is good this year but the price is not within the common people's reach!

The political leaders are getting excited openly on the "media". What should be our reaction? What should be our reaction? Taher, J. Sharjah, U.A.E.

Human rights or human wrongs?

What the world has learnt from the dailies in Bangladesh on 21 April? Are we progressing as a nation or going backwards? Do we have a democratic government elected by people? Is the country run by a woman prime minister? Has politics made us so vicious, blind and

cruel, when it comes even to treating women? Why does the government behave like the way Pakistanis had behaved with us? Hasn't Bangladesh seen enough in the last few years? The rape of women and opposition workers and their daughters after the election of 2001, the torture on female students by the police and JCD activists in the middle of the night in Samsunnahar Hall of Dhaka University. Add to this, the killings of opposition leaders, workers and MPs, the mass arrest of common people, the so-called crossfire, the rise of Islamic militants under the patronisation of the government. What more do we have to see? Why are you adding new chapters? I just hope that the civil society, journalists, educationists, media, and every conscious citizen of the country will strongly protest the police brutalities. We should all raise our voice against this, regardless of our political identity and support. All of us have mothers, daughters, and sisters.

This is a shame for the whole nation and the world does not endorse this.

Abdul Moyeen
Australia