

## Ramadan and prices

Strengthen the supply side

WITH the month of Ramadan before us, the prices of essentials are showing a marked upward trend which will put tremendous pressure on the purse of general consumers. In fact, the prices of all the commodities, except sugar, have already registered a sharp rise.

The TCB and BDR outlets opened to cope with the price spiral by beefing up the supplies have to go some way before making their presence felt.

Obviously, there are factors that have made the market behave so erratically. The heavy late monsoon rain across the country and the opposition programmes have had a paralytic effect on transportation of goods. Then there is the tendency of hoarding among traders which can, and does, create an artificial crisis. Finally, extortion at different points make the businessmen mark up their prices.

That said, the government could take corrective steps, at least in some areas, to prevent the prices going beyond people's reach. For example, extortion, mostly by people flaunting political clout, is a problem that the government can eliminate to a great extent by enforcing the law.

The businessmen appear to have been under the impression that the TCB would do the bulk of the import trade. However, good planning and facilitating the private sector to complement the government efforts are needed to stabilise the market. In other words, the supply side of the market has to be strengthened by all means.

The consumers are suffering but there is apparently nobody to take the responsibility for the oppressive price hike. The retailers blame the wholesalers for hoarding and the wholesalers say that it is the retailers who are trying to make extra profit at the cost of the buyers. The government, for its part, claims that in a market economy it has little to do to control prices. So, who will come to people's rescue?

One would expect that all the parties concerned would show a greater commitment to the people during this month of self-abstinence and refrain from indulging in dubious business practices that tend to destabilise the market.

## Hazaribagh tannery relocation

A chronicle of procrastination

THE Dhaka Tannery Estate Project (DTEP) involving relocation of 273 tanneries away from Hazaribagh to Savar has been thrown out of gear as far as its time-bound completion goes. Launched in 2003, the project period was extended up to December, 2006 at the time of its formal inauguration in 2005. Now, the time period may be extended from December, 2006 to December, 2010. A proposal from the project officials to this effect is before the government.

In the meanwhile, the tanneries and other related industries are dumping 7.7 million litres of toxic liquid waste into the river Buriganga, not to mention the 88 tonnes of solid wastes disgorged everyday by them into the same river. Denizens of the western part of the city who have been reeling under the onslaught of toxic wastes for years have to put up with it another four years, if not more.

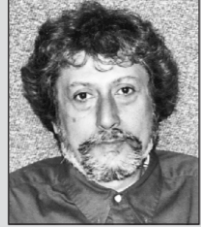
The bleak outlook of the project is underscored by its cost escalation; what started out as an estimated cost of Tk 175 crore is set to escalate now by Tk 187 crore to stand at Tk 362 crore.

There are other complications as well, some which sound typical of the demanding nature of our industrialists. There may be a justified point about the need for soft loan to buy modern machinery to replace the old vintage machines, but to ask for a waiver on repayment of a loan worth Tk 1200 crore, borrowed for hide procurement during successive Eid festivals, is evidently unjustifiable.

China and India are said to be cutting back on the number of tanneries out of sheer environmental concerns. This can imply two things: on the one hand, if we have modernised industries in safer locations with suitable effluent treatment plants we can increase our share of the world market, but on the other, if there is any flaw in terms of providing safeguards against toxic pollution it will pose serious environmental hazards. The bottom-line is: our relocation project will have to be foolproof.

We urge the tannery owners and the government to work hand in hand on the project so that a vast number of people can be saved from lethal toxic hazards.

## For him the bell tolls?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE lighted corridors and dark alleys of power are abuzz with the rumour that the bell perhaps tolls for the CEC this time. Questions such as these are being thrown into the air: Will he be dumped before the expiry of the term of the present government? If not, will he be able to withstand the pressure of the opposition during the tenure of the caretaker government? Who will replace him? Is he going to be rewarded or reprimanded by the government?

All enduring, rather battling, all sorts of disparagement and media-bashing, the iron-willed CEC is perhaps looking back at the event-filled months in office. He came with a mission and he has done as he pleased. He cared little for what others, even the High

**SENSE & INSENSIBILITY**

No nation in the world has allowed a handful of people to deal such a deathblow to its national airline. We have done that. We have seen from a distance how corruption, backed by the political leaders of the time, had gone wayward in Biman's office and how it spread to each and every station abroad. From the sweepers to the MDs and ministers and secretaries that came and went in succession, all are culpable, directly or indirectly, by commission or by omission, in the plundering of Biman. It needs no super brain to understand the consequential downward plunge.

Court, thought about his stand on an issue, on any issue. Being a judge himself, he attempted to juggle with court judgement to suit his purpose. Was it his very own purpose? Is he the righteous man that he tries to project to all? Is he really a neutral person, as he claims himself?

Whatever he was or is, the CEC did manage to create an aura of mystery, even suspicion, around him throughout the past year. No other individual, besides the prime minister, was given so many column-inches in newspapers and footage on television channels. He also became the darling of the talented cartoonists of the country. But when it came to sticking to his guns, he excelled above all. For these and many other reasons, evaluating him remains a

daunting task. Perhaps history will one day place him before the people in true perspective.

### Elegy written at Biman's bedside

Biman Bangladesh Airlines is in deep coma. It is kept alive with life-support system. The 33-year old airline, the pride of the country, the flag carrier of Bangladesh, is suffering from various ailments, many of which are fatal. We had written on the ill-health of Biman in this column some months back, but we never thought it would come to such a tragic finale, so soon.

The pride of the 15 crore people of Bangladesh has been trampled under the feet with devilish glee by a handful of greedy people to earn millions. They had no compunc-

tion, no qualm whatsoever, about the failing health of Biman, as they went on plundering the airline of all its resources and wealth.

Today, none of those people who have bought flats in New York or Los Angeles with Biman's money are to be seen at the bedside of Biman as it struggles to survive. Even today they are plotting to make a profit out of the carcass of Biman. Next, they would pick up the bones and sell those in the market as scrap iron. There are two words that are missing in their dictionary. They are "patriotism" and "shame."

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The 15 crore people want to know from the decision makers, past and present, whether Biman has been slow poisoned all these years to hasten its demise in a bid to pave the way for another lot of greedy people to come into the scene? If so, then what will happen to our national airline?

### Strange local news

Our attention has been drawn to a huge ad in a newspaper. It's about new bottled water named Shanti and it is being bottled and marketed by our good old WASA. Remember that (in)famous authority that has been messing up our precious water since time immemorial? Precisely that. After supplying earthworm and human excreta through their water pipes, this organization has started to collect water from God-knows-where in some plastic bottles and is trying to lure us to buy them. We

hope Shanti water does not come from ditches near those shanties we have all over the city. One wonders whether after drinking Shanti, one will have "chiroshanti" (sleep from which you do not wake up)!

### Strange foreign news

Many of us in Bangladesh laughed out loud reading an interesting foreign news item. It was about a minister in India paying a large sum as fine to the Indian railway for traveling without ticket with a group of supporters. Even after introducing himself as a minister, the stubborn guard refused to allow him to travel without ticket and fined him about ten thousand rupees!

Why did we laugh? Well, the poor minister should have visited Bangladesh and traveled with a sitting minister and his two hundred followers by train or airplane or expensive limousine or steamer or helicopter or elephant to learn a few tips on how to use and misuse state property and how to hold up traffic for hours. He would have also witnessed rolling of heads for protesting such misuse by any petty staff like that railway ticket collector.

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## Papal indiscretion



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IT is truly regrettable that the leader of the Catholic Church, who is revered throughout the world, has chosen to become embroiled in a controversy that smacks of clash of civilizations -- a thesis as controversial as it is famous.

The controversy originated from a speech at the University of Regensburg in Germany in which Pope Benedict XVI referred extensively to an edition by Professor Theodore Khoury of a dialogue carried on "perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara" between Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an unnamed Persian scholar of enough erudition to merit a long dialogue with the Emperor on "Christianity and Islam, and on the truth of both."

Several factors have drawn public attention to this lecture by Pope Benedict. Foremost, of course, is the fact that it was by the Pope. Secondly, Pope Benedict started off his address with three paragraphs that discuss Islam that was immediately bound to attract people's attention. Thirdly, it is thought that Pope Benedict used Emperor Manuel II's argument in order to draw a distinction between the Christian view that "not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature," and the Islamic view, as explained by Khoury, that God transcends concepts such as

## GOING DEEPER

Even before he became pope, Cardinal Ratzinger, differing from John Paul's policy of alliance with Islam, suggested an alternative strategy for consolidation of the Catholic Church in Europe and America, demonstrated by his opposition to Turkish membership of the European Union: "Turkey has always represented a different continent, always in contrast with Europe." His objection to Turkish membership was not only based on geography that he found to be an over-simplification: "Europe was founded not on a geography, but on a common faith."

rationality, and as "ibn Hazan went so far as to state that God is not bound even by His own word, and that nothing would oblige Him to reveal the truth to you. Were not God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry."

In laying down this premise, the Pontiff faces the dilemma that acting unreasonably not only contradicts God's nature and is akin to Greek idea or is "it always and intrinsically true?" Pope Benedict's dilemma also puts the Muslim world in a fix because Prophet Mohammed's (pbuh) lifetime efforts were to convince the people of monotheism and his struggle was aimed at destroying idol worship during what is known as the period of Aiyam-e-Jahiliyat (period of ignorance).

The Pontiff appears to refer to a sura revealed to Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) that: "There is no compulsion in religion" and its revelation strangely coincided and was helpful with the state when the Prophet "was still powerless and under (threat)" and that the revelations regarding Holy War were made when Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) was politically and militarily more powerful. The Pontiff then through Emperor Manuel II turns to the "central question on the relationship between religion and violence in general, in these

words: show me (Emperor Manuel) just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by sword the faith he preached."

At this stage, perhaps, it would be instructive to get a glimpse of Emperor Manuel II's life history. The second son of Emperor John V Palaiologos (1341-1391 with an interruption of three years), in 1390 Manuel was forced to go as honorary hostage to the court of the Ottoman Sultan and during his forced stay he had to participate, against his will, in the Ottoman campaign that reduced Philadelphia, the last Byzantine enclave in Anatolia. The death of Emperor John V gave an opportunity to the Ottoman Sultan to lay siege to Constantinople from 1394 to 1402 which might have succeeded had not the Ottomans been crushingly defeated by Timur at the battle of Ankara in 1402.

Even after his restoration to the throne, Manuel was not free from the clutches of the Ottomans and during the last years of his life he was forced to sign a peace treaty with the Ottoman Turks whereby the Byzantine Empire undertook to pay tribute to the Sultan.

Given these episodes of his life, there is no reason to believe that

Manuel II had any reason to be overly friendly towards the Muslims. The reasons behind Emperor Manuel's characterization of the spread of Islam through violence and his assertion that Islam was a stranger to the long-held tradition that "violence is incompatible with the nature of God" are equally understandable.

Quoting Theodore Khoury, the Pontiff provides decisive argument against violent conversion. The Emperor, shaped by Greek philosophy, was ruled by reason, but for the Muslims, "God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality." The Pontiff then goes on a learned discourse on Christian faith.

Understandably Pope Benedict's lecture at the Regensburg University raised storm of protests and indignation throughout the Islamic world. Muslim leaders have described the clarifying statement issued by the Vatican as insufficient and have demanded a personal apology from the Pope.

Some have pointed out the difference between late Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict XVI in style and substance. While John Paul was a witness to Hitler's brutality in his native Poland Pope Benedict has confirmed an

enforced membership of Hitler Youth.

Even Pope Benedict XVI's installation mass indicated a radical change in the Vatican's strategy towards Islam. In his greetings the new Pope welcomed Catholics, other Christians and Jews, but not Muslims. Later, two intercessory prayers for oppressed Christians were delivered, one in Arabic, indicating religious persecution of Christians in Arab lands.

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Though he (mutedly) opposed US unilateralism in Iraq invasion, he expressed happiness over the coalition's victory in Iraq because "it was not possible to foresee what might happen; with chemical weapons, anything was possible. But now, one can begin again." It is not known whether Cardinal Ratzinger made this comment before or after it was established that Saddam Hussein had no WMD to deliver.

Some believe that Pope Benedict XVI must have found disquieting historian Bernard Lewis' prediction that "Europe will be Islamic by the end of the century" as he has urged Europe to discover its Christian roots "if it truly wants to survive." He has also

criticized multiculturalism because it "sometimes amounts to an abandonment and disavowal of what is our own."

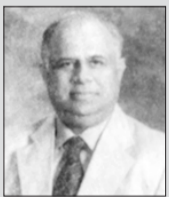
Unfortunately, the Pope's criticism of Islam has come at a time when both the East and the Western world are preoccupied with the war on terror which the undiscerning Western public mind often equates with war with Islam.

The cartoon controversy was quickly followed by race riots in France, where one prominent commentator observed "among a generation of Muslims born in Europe, significant number have nothing but contempt and disdain for their native land and have allegiance to Muslim Ummah and the lands of their parents." Added to this, Pew surveys have found that almost half the Americans believe that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers.

What then is the Muslim society required to do? Columbia University Professor Fritz Stern once said that the rise of National Socialism was neither inevitable nor accidental. Civic passivity and willed blindness were the preconditions for the triumph of National Socialism that many Germans had recognized at the time as a monstrous danger. That Pope Benedict's indiscretion has to be protested is not the issue. But in today's globalized world, where we are living in "overlapping communities of faith," Pope Benedict's Regensburg lecture, however impolitic, should be answered through interfaith dialogue and discussions and not through street demonstrations.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

## Why 9/11?



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

POPE Benedict's sacrilegious remarks deeply hurt the sentiments of Muslims everywhere, underscoring why 9/11 was a catastrophe waiting to happen. The Pope gave credence to distorted beliefs based on perceptions not facts. The conventional wisdom about 9/11 is that while a whole lot of Muslims were aggrieved at the treatment being meted out to them, particularly in the last decade or so, a virulent militant section represented by Osama Bin Laden (OBL) was bent on extracting vengeance, as well as highlighting the "cause." A number of deadly schemes carried out (or aborted)

did not get world attention over a prolonged period.

Since 9/11, persecution of Muslims across the board has escalated in real earnest, the Pope should have been careful in getting involved. One cannot imagine the late Pope John Paul indulging in such controversy. Muslims everywhere had deep respect for him. Even the words of Pope Benedict's public apology were carefully crafted, regretting the Muslim reaction to his words but not regretting the spoken words themselves.

Even moderate Muslim resentment which condemned 9/11 feels that Muslims are being deliberately targeted for religion alone, a 21st century version of the

## AS I SEE IT

The tragedy is that the focus of Muslim anger is the most generous nation on Earth. The US has not only willingly opened its arms to the destitute, persecuted, and homeless of the world, irrespective of creed, caste, or religion, but has contributed the most among the nations of the world, both in cash and in kind, for ameliorating misery and privation. A major percentage of US Aid has gone to developing Muslim countries, far more than that given by the rich Muslim countries.

Crusades. The Pope's remarks only seemed to confirm this. Given that liberal Muslim thought is prevalent in the silent majority and seeing the gravity of the situation, the Pope should have made his regrets explicit instead of playing with words.

As a private security company, my people have been guarding dozens of churches free of cost since 2002 throughout Pakistan during Sunday church services (and other special occasions like Christmas). The guards are Muslim and refuse to take overtime, it being their duty as Muslims to guard minorities. The grateful churchgoers bring picnic baskets for them. One is very proud of this practical community integration

exercise.

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During the October 8 earthquake in northern Pakistan last year they were the first with the most, the Chinook helicopters acting as angels of mercy. The so-called

"Ugly Americans" continue to give the maximum to the poorer countries of the world. Receiving undiluted venom in the streets, mirrored in a more sophisticated manner in the Muslim media, Americans have a right to feel that the receivers of their largesse are an ungrateful lot. Unfortunately the policies being presently followed seem insensitive to Muslim sensitivities. That is why it is significant that US President Bush has appointed his closest confidante, Karen Hughes, to bridge the gap.

According to OBL's own repeated claim, the 9/11 mass killing was carried out by those funded by his resources. What did the innocent who died in this atrocity have to do with the perceived persecution of Muslims? Among those who died were many Muslims, OBL and his apologists seem to write them off as acceptable collateral damage. This was out-and-out murder of innocents and cannot be condoned for any reason.

Academics and experts lined up on either side to promote or dispel various scenarios refuse to even acknowledge clearly defined facts if they do not support their respective

premises. Having over 2,000 flying hours on light fixed wing aircraft, L-19s, Cessnas 150, 172, 188, 310 and 337, as well as Bell OH-13(S) and Alouette-3 helicopters, etc, even I find it difficult to believe how pilots having experience of only a few hundred hours on light aircraft could have flown a fully loaded multi-engine passenger jet aircraft with such precision. Were the aircraft remotely piloted or programmed on auto-pilot to their targets, very much like precision guided missiles (PGMs)? From the available evidence made known, the hijackers had access to the simulator training but not to the practical high-tech associated with PGMs.

A plausible conspiracy theory is that some intelligence agency discovered OBL's plans and decided that the inexperienced pilots (would-be-suicide bombers) needed "help." Infiltration of double agents to accomplish one's objectives is an age-old mechanism. In the Attock Conspiracy Case in 1973 government agents infiltrated the conspiracy and kept it going when the original plotters seemed to lose interest and direction. Originally directed against the military hierarchy responsible for the 1971 debacle, the "conspir-

acy" was enlarged by government agents to show an apprehensive Bhutto that it was a full-fledged coup attempt against him. Confirming the loyalty of the then military hierarchy on the one hand, it put the young officers of the army against Bhutto on the other. Bhutto was specially appreciative of Gen Zia's role as president of the General Court Martial (GCM). The rest is unfortunate history!

Previous to 9/11, Palestine symbolized the Muslim-Jewish confrontation. Could an interested third party have ensured the success of OBL's foot soldiers by providing the high-tech support necessary? One can subscribe to any number of conspiracy theories filling many books, yet there is no real smoking gun to give credence. Dirty tricks are not beyond the realm of those who have most to gain by having almost the entire Muslim world up in arms against the Jews and Christians both. One rules out the possibility of US neo-cons involved in a conspiracy, neo-cons consider themselves red-blooded Americans -- could they sacrifice the demolition of a symbol of the US? All conspiracy theories are conjecture!

We are at historic crossroads which may create a divide that will widen as reaction and counter-reaction sets in. This chasm must not become impossible to bridge, only innocents get caught in the crossfire. Tone down the rhetoric and all leaders, political, religious and intellectual, etc should reach out to each other, various governments endeavouring to do what they can.

The World Economic Forum's Council of 100 leaders of all faiths, C-100, launched in May 2004, has special significance because it is a practical manifestation of interfaith at the highest level. A special responsibility devolves on people like Prince Turki Al-Faisal Bin Saud and former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey of Clifton, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, Dr Hanay El-Bana, etc to take the initiative, preferably under the WEF's aegis, or without it, if the WEF cannot organize this on short notice. We must engage in immediate and dialogue to ensure that 9/11 does not happen again. And again.

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