

Let the Consumer Know

There is bad news from the marketplace which goes well beyond vertical movements in the consumer price index. According to a survey carried out by the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), prices of essentials have risen by an average 3.21 per cent during the week following presentation of the '91-'92 budget in parliament even though new rates of taxes are not due to come into effect until July 1. The increases have hit foodstuff such as edible oils, vegetables, pulses and spices quite hard, implication of which in a low, stagnating income country like Bangladesh does not need elaboration. The CAB report stated that certain items such as soyabean oil and soap, registered price rises couple of weeks prior to the budget, and further rises immediately after. The underlying trend is a most disturbing one, making a mockery of the principles of free market economy, and holding the consumer, particularly those on fixed income, hostage to the whims of a handful of unscrupulous business operators.

For the past several years, the CAB has been campaigning for a change in government approach to handling the tax issue. At present, tax increases or decreases are merely announced through the budget, without paying much attention to whether the consumer is aware of the impact of such changes at the retailer's or not. Consequently, the consumer is helpless when faced with higher prices at the shops after or even before July 1. The CAB maintains that the consumer has a need, indeed a right, to know, and there cannot be any dispute over that point since the public's right to any information that affect their daily life is a fundamental one.

The government should inform the public, by placing advertisements in the press as well as the electronic media, how changes in taxation on essential items is likely to affect prices. Listing all essential items by item, the announcement should explain clearly whether the price of a particular item would rise or fall as a result of tax changes. The government should also clarify the range within which prices would vary. Only then can the consumer be aware of what he should expect at the shop.

Recently, finance minister Saifur Rahman complained that due to his tax changes, price of soyabean oil should fall by three per cent, instead of which we have already seen a 17 per cent rise! But how many consumers are even aware that price is supposed to fall? Instead of complaining, the government should act — that is what they are there for — and without any more delay. As well as informing the public of impending price changes, the government should also empower the police to investigate into and take action against any price hikes that go beyond what is justified as a result of tax changes. But to make that effective, public cooperation is essential, which will be readily forthcoming once it is taken into confidence by the government.

The government's Price Review Committee, which brings together various ministries and production and wholesale businesses, can play a more constructive role in making sure prices remain stable at the market. Greater importance could be attached to the workings of the Committee by holding its meetings more regularly, and using the occasions to bring pressure on producers and wholesale businessmen to keep prices within the accepted range. The commerce minister, who presides over these meetings, should make it plain that no price cartels will be allowed to operate, as they are contrary to consumer interests, as well as free market principles. At all times, government policy should reflect interest of the consumer rather than organised business groups trying to control the market through price fixing.

World Shattering Run

Dhaka Press, both vernacular and English language, has not many things in common with the British Press on which it has been modelled over more than a hundred years. First, we publish too much foreign news and too little on home affairs. Secondly, although we all always catching up with the west in production technology — we hesitate to go for the big pit. That may be because of the peculiar format our newspaper comes in — 33" X 23" is no size for a newspaper anywhere in the world.

Even after all that we used to take a lot of pride in the sports coverage of newspapers. And to tell the truth, a good many of our journalistic stalwarts started career as sports writers and retain well into their years a certain attachment to the same. A vernacular daily is credited to have a good circulation in spite of its being a mouthpiece of the establishment which never helped it become a darling of the masses — all because of its wonderful sports coverage. There are now more newspapers who devote two pages to sports news.

Bengalees are a football-crazy nation. Lately cricket has also caught on their fancy. All in all — the predominance of newspaper coverage of sports undoubtedly reflected in good measure the Bengalees' love for sport — a love to distraction at times.

It was a rude shock then to find none of the national Press frontpaging Leroy Burrell's breaking the world record for the world's most prestigious sporting event — usually the 100 metres sprint. In New York last Friday he beat both his compatriot and training partner Carl Lewis and his world record time of 9.92 seconds to create a new mark at 9.90. Our marvelling at Burrell's feat would somehow lose in colour with a wistful remembrance of Big Ben's 9.83 howevermuch assisted by long intake of anabolic steroid. Ben has suffered much for that but he still retains a Mohammad Ali-esque big mouth and the same type of failing to form. That can mean Burrell's record standing for a while, if not improved upon by Burrell himself.

The 9.83 feat was something out of this world — something like Bob Beamon's long leap. But whoever has relegated 9.90 to the sports page has done a patently foolish thing. He knows not what it takes.

Stage Set for Constructive Politics

CONFOUNDING the sceptics, we are slowly, steadily — and I hope surely — moving towards a situation of constructive politics. The deputy leader of the House, Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury's statement in the parliament on Tuesday that the treasury bench's bill on the form of government will be tabled soon, and more importantly, the bill is not likely to be very different from the one that has been submitted by the opposition earlier, clears the obstacles impeding close co-operation between the treasury and the opposition benches on this vital national issue.

The news is heartening, and augers well for our political future. What the current constitution amendment process is doing is setting a laudable example that our political parties and personalities can put their heads together and work out, if not a consensus, but at least a converging political formula, that helps to strengthen our faith in politics, restores people's confidence in our politicians and reconfirms our confidence that we can make democracy work.

In this connection a few words of praise for our politicians are in order. It was just a few months back that we heard many people say that our people were too illiterate, our educated class too corrupt and our politicians too divided to launch any effective movement against the autocratic regime of Ershad. Every time the wily general was able to drive a wedge in the opposition ranks.

It used to be gleefully pointed as another example of how unreliable our politicians were. Even when the nine-year old, outwardly invincible edifice fell like a house of cards in the face of the mass upsurge their lack of faith in people's power remained unaffected. We were told that negative politics was one thing, when it comes to building things together, our leaders will fall. The prognosis was that with the removal of the one factor that was uniting the three alliances — that is of toppling Ershad — the opposition unity will fall apart and the politicians will start scrambling for the spoils of the game. Proving them wrong our political parties held fast and slowly steered the country and the politics first, towards a genuine election, then to a functional parliament and now towards a parliamentary system of government, which seems to enjoy the support of most members of the parliament. Our political parties can be said to have risen to the occasion and co-operated in giving a solid start to our struggle to establish a representative government.

The latest developments in the gradual evolution of our political system came rather surprisingly fast. It seems to fall into place once the process was jolted into motion by the unexpected, but effective appeal of the Acting President, urging all parties to work together for the necessary constitutional amendments so that power could be transferred to the representatives of the people.

Once again proving that however divisive, inexperienced and factional our politics may be, our political parties can work together if they want to. Belying fears of an acrimonious debate on the form of government, BNP declared its intention of going for the parliamentary form. The move saved the nation from a divisive and potentially destabilising politics as the opposition would have surely gone on the offensive with the joint declaration of the three alliances as the rallying point. The BNP can be said to have taken the wind out of the opposition's sail by moving so fast and so decisively on this issue.

had no option but to opt for the parliamentary system. This view is based on the argument that the ruling party really could not risk going for a one-to-one presidential contest in which every other party might have ganged up against it. It was also said that another election would entail unnecessary costs, put the nation through another spell of several weeks of electioneering, diverting and wasting national energy.

There was also the Ershad factor, some argued. Nobody believes anymore that Ershad posed any serious challenge to anybody. Yet holding a presidential poll with Ershad — in jail

BNP to suddenly opt to follow an uncharted political course may indicate that the party feels more confident of its standing with the people. It felt secure that bowing to a popular demand only enhances a political party's prestige and not gives it an image of weakness — as many argued it would.

By all accounts, the BNP chairperson is said to have changed her mind because of what her party members told her. It is another heartening development in the evolving political culture of our nascent democracy. In a political culture — taken to perfection in the recent years — of sycophancy and the leader-is-never-wrong mentality, the example of party members being able to reverse the position of their leader should usher in a new and refreshing practice of internal political debate and democratisation of the political parties' decision making process.

Looking at it together, small and temporary ups and downs notwithstanding, our politicians and their parties have come a long way together in spite of all their divisiveness and petty jealousies. It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that the stage is set for constructive politics. Whatever may be said about our political parties and personalities — the extent of their knowledge, experience and administrative ability — the fact is that they have given effective direction to the people during the last ten months. There are however some

gaping holes in the otherwise solid record of cooperation among the political forces. The most obvious one is in the area of student politics. What has happened in the Chittagong University, in the Dhaka University halls and in the Jagannath University College should leave no doubts about the seriousness of the malaise and the urgent need for all political parties to act together. The country can ill afford a restive student community at the commencement of our renewed democratic journey.

Another gap concerns our trade unions and professional associations. The parent political parties of these bodies must set in motion a genuine dialogue between all concerned and take a serious look into what this country can afford and how far it can go in meeting the rising demands of our labour and professional communities. There is no scope for false promises and false hopes. Let us remember that a transparent and representative form of government greatly increases the responsibility of those to whom the government is responsible — meaning the people, but more precisely the members of the parliament.

Having achieved so much together, can we not expect our politicians, especially our parliamentarians, to take full advantage of the present climate of constructive politics and develop national consensus on fundamental policy issues?

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

There is a definite sense of relief all around that the vital question of the form of government has been solved — unless the present indications prove false — so smoothly. Notwithstanding the fact that every system has its own in-built strength and weaknesses, BNP's readiness to adopt the parliamentary form is a far-sighted move. The ruling party perhaps realised that 'power corrupts'; and the more it can be diffused and dispersed the better is our chance to establish a transparent and responsible government. The checks and balances in the parliamentary system will increase our ability to check corruption, nepotism and abuse of power.

There is a view that BNP had its back to the wall, and would present a poor image of the present government, nationally and internationally. On the other hand if Ershad would be allowed to contest in the presidential poll then it would revive him as a national political figure — something that nobody wants, least of all the leader of the ruling party.

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That Fateful Day in Europe Fifty Years Ago

by Derek Ingram

In tune with the new times in the Soviet Union no military parades will be held to mark the 50th anniversary of the invasion of the country by Hitler's Germany on June 22, 1941. Instead, memorial services and wreath layings will take place in those towns attacked in the first week of the war. It is estimated 25 million people died in the USSR in the bloodiest war in world history.

FIFTY years ago, on June 22, 1941, came a great and sudden turning point in world history. The Germany of Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union of Josef Stalin through eastern Poland.

Just 131 years earlier, on June 14, 1812, a similar thing had happened. The France of Napoleon Bonaparte had invaded Russia by crossing the River Nieman into occupied Poland.

On each occasion the Russians swallowed their enemy at massive suffering to themselves.

Napoleon's adventure lasted little more than six months. He captured Moscow, then had to retreat and left his surviving troops to straggle back through the Christmas blizzards. Hitler reached only the outskirts of Moscow, but his armies were not finally driven out of Russia until more than three years later.

It was incredible that Hitler should repeat Napoleon's disastrous mistake. His generals tried to stop him, but he would take no notice of them. The moment he attacked the Soviet Union the outcome of World War Two was never in doubt. On that day 50 years ago horror mixed with a feeling of relief struck the allied countries fighting Hitler.

The British were the most immediately affected. Since France had surrendered to Hitler one year and one day earlier, on June 21, 1940, Britain with its empire had faced Germany alone. The events of June 22, 1941 now made it certain Germany would lose.

The political lineup in Europe was suddenly turned on its head. Communist Russia had been the hated enemy of Britain as much as of Germany. Hitler had wanted to stop fighting Britain and join forces with it to crush Russia.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill had an anti-Communist record second to none among British politicians. Yet on June 22 he willingly became a bed fellow with Stalin.

That evening Churchill, in one of his most historic broad-

casts, pledged that "we shall give whatever help we can to Russia and to the Russian people".

With typical emotion, he spoke of the Russia soldiers guarding the villages "where the means of existence is wrung so hardly from the soil, but where there are still primordial human joys, where maidens love and children play... I see... the dull, drilled, docile, British masses of the Hun soldiery plodding on like a swarm of crawling locusts."

The British had warned Stalin several times that Hitler was getting ready to strike, but Stalin refused to believe them and the Russians were caught unprepared. The Germans

advance on a wide front and within months were deep into the country from the Baltic to the Black Sea. It cost the Soviet Union something like 25 million lives before they got rid of the Germans.

For the Russians, what became the Great Patriotic War created a unity under Stalin that helped to blur in their minds the terror they had endured in the Thirties. Outside the Soviet Union, Stalin's purges had been well known, but the extent of the repression and suffering was not at that time realised.

In any case, all that was forgotten in the common task of defeating Germany. And when on December 7 the Japanese

bombled Pearl Harbour and brought the United States into the war Stalin found he had a place at the top table with Britain, France and the US.

The isolation of Moscow ever since the 1917 revolution was at an end. The communists were suddenly respectable. The Soviet Union had become a superpower, though in those days the phrase had not been coined.

Churchill, however, remained deeply suspicious and as the tide turned and Soviet troops swept back into Europe he tried in vain to persuade the Americans to launch an offensive north-east from Italy into the Balkans rather than mounting the huge

but unnecessary invasion into Southern France that followed the landings in Normandy in June 1944.

The Americans rejected Churchill's advice and the Russians were able to advance into eastern Europe — Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia — and reach Berlin before the western allies.

It was the overture to 40 years of cold war. Although the cost had been huge, Stalin had united the Soviet people in war and emerged more powerful than he had ever been. After the allies carved up Europe in 1945 Stalin was soon able to consolidate his grip on eastern Europe.

One of the big ifs of history is: What would have happened if Hitler had not attacked Russia? Almost certainly Britain would have been occupied by

the Germans for a period before the United States was able to mount an attack on to southern Europe, presumably from north Africa.

It would not have been easy because they had to beat back the Japanese in the Pacific as well. Presumably the nuclear bomb, ready for delivery in 1945, would have been used against the Germans as well as the Japanese.

Whatever the sequence of events the bomb would have ensured the end of the war that year.

And the Soviet Union? Would it have stayed out of the war or taken the opportunity at some point to attack an overstretched Germany and sweep west anyway? It would have been risky, the Americans alone having the bomb.

It is just possible that if Hitler had not invaded on June 22, 1941, then, the world would have been spared the cold war. But in the end the death and destruction might have been even worse than the 54 million estimated to have died in World War Two.

— GEMINI NEWS

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War that cost Russia 25 million lives

OPINION Coal: A Bright Possibility

About 150 years ago, Mr Rupert Jones, the celebrated geological scientist, stated about the possibility of having coal mines beneath the granary soil of North Bengal. In 1857, another celebrated geological scientist Mr Malet forecast that the granary and fertile land was blessed with enormous mineral resources. Recent geological surveys in the northern part of the country reveal the bare truth of the forecast. Out of 11 spot drillings in the region, seven spot drillings reveal the deposit of good quality coal in abundance there. Only in Jamalganj it is estimated that there is a deposit of 760 million tons of coal within 25.75 kilometre area. As this deposit lies very deep in the earth, the exploration is reported to be costly. So the exploration was made to trace the deposit of coal which may be located nearer to the earth-surface and, thus, economically viable.

Fortunately, at the Bara Pukuria in Barabur upazila of Dinajpur District, bituminous coal is found to be available in abundance — only 150 metre below the surface. In this field there are seven parallel layers which is rare in the history of coal fields and is easy and economical for extraction. Its calorific value is 6700 kilocalorie/kg and the percentage of carbon is more than 80%. Survey report on coal deposit at Bara Pukuria conducted by ODA of UK in November 1988 reveals that there is deposit of 300 million tons of coal beneath the earth at a depth of 350-1600 feet in seven layers in an area of five to seven kilometre. It is reported that its total extraction will cost Tk. 475 crore and the total extraction period will be 48 months. If 7.85 lac tons of coal is extracted annually from this field, it will last for 47 years.

The projected extraction cost will be Tk. 1274 per ton. It is reported that in view of the deposit's economic feasibility at Bara Pukuria, Asian Development Bank (ADB), in principle, has agreed to allocate fund to the tune of US \$ 150 million. If the necessary steps are taken in time, the extraction and marketing of the coal will be possible in 1995 and it will provide jobs to 20,000 people.

It is reported that at present there is the need of seven lac tons of coal per year for internal consumption (without the use of gas, wood in brick-fields and no use of coal in producing electricity) in the country. Installation of power stations on the basis of coal is economically feasible and practicable in the northern part of the country. It is reported that Electric Power Development Company of Japan has shown keen interest in installing power stations in the northern part on the basis of coal. It will need more seven lac tons of coal per year. Now if the coal mine is extracted in Bara Pukuria only, commercially it alone will meet the demand of 14 lac tons per year.

The sign of desertification in the northern part of the country, in particular, and the western part, in general, is apparent. It is learnt that only in Bogra, Rajshahi, Pabna, Rangpur and Dinajpur towns and the nearby brick-fields 23,000 tons of wood is burnt as fuel per day. So, to protect the region from desertification, steps need to be taken to procure fuel from ADB, donor countries, Middle East — whatever source feasible — for the extraction of coal in Bara Pukuria at the earliest.

Md. Anwarul Afzal
Dhaka

To the Editor

Eidul Azha and sacrifice

Sir, I congratulate Mr. A. Gayyum for his opinion expressed at a correct time in your column, captioned 'Eidul Azha and sacrifice'. I endorse his view; he has a point to ponder by those who care for the poor.

To sacrifice animal during Eidul Azha is 'Sunnat-e-Ibrahim'; it is neither 'Faraaj' nor 'Wazeh'; (by this I have no intention to lower its religious status or value). We are to say prayer five times a day and there are 17 Rakat 'Faraaj' and three Rakat 'Wazeh'. I am sure many of us even forget about 'Faraaj Namaaj' but we take two 'Eids' very seriously. There may be a hundred and one reasons for it, but to my mind it is social and family pressure which makes us extravagant in spending on these two occasions.

It is correct to say that the "ultimate result of all our actions depends on what our intention are." If we sacrifice an-

imals with an intention that the action would earn name and fame in the society, I think that sacrifice would go in vain.

I, therefore, earnestly appeal to all concerned specially the Moulanas to express their valued opinion in favour of 'welfare concept of sacrificing the wealth' with an intention to serve the needy people in a proper way, and for their permanent rehabilitation.

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Red-tapism

Sir, The country has achieved democracy after nine years of autocratic rule after a great deal of sacrifice and a people's government has been installed with a democratically elected parliament. But the hopes and aspirations of the people are again gradually giving way to frustration. Things are not exactly going the way

as is expected in a democratic set-up. So far there has been no change in officials' attitude nor any attempt made to reduce procedural bottlenecks to make things easier. Wherever you happen to be, in a government or autonomous body of office, on the road or at home with your telephone set, you confront a situation of apathy, harassment, indiscipline and inefficiency.

If you are on the road, you are there at your own risk and responsibility. For the laws to protect you from road hazards are there only in name. The roads and pavements belong very much to house builders and civil contractors, vendors and the like to carry on their trade. If you set your hands on your telephone you immediately get a headache instead of the desired number. One should, perhaps, be contented to be an owner of a telephone and not talk much over it. In public sector organizations it is apparently the lack of 'will' on the part of top management

that is responsible for people's sufferings. In cases they appear to be "jimmy" in the hands of the subordinates who seem dictating the whole process, maybe due to lack of the former's effective control on the latter. In service sector, top management is not approachable by public and others in the hierarchy have either no authority or avoid taking responsibility and leave the job to their subordinates. This system has been followed in the past and continue to be very much so at present.

How this 'attitude' and 'will' of the officials will change is for the government to devise. People have pinned great hope in the new government which need to be respected by all and sundry in the hierarchy. The government would do well to devise ways and means to cut 'red-tapism' for easier solution and approach to problems.

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