

Rice Prices

The government has just announced procurement target and price for the IRRI, Boro crop. Earlier the impact of paddy price slump on the rural population came to be analysed at a seminar held in the city last week. A survey conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) into the phenomenon of sliding paddy prices for three years in a row beginning 1991, supplied the basis for discussions at the seminar. As expected, the findings of the survey confirm that the price plunge benefitted the poorer segment of the rural community but also hit the surplus farmers hard.

The survey reveals that forty-five per cent of rural households consider that the fall in paddy prices worked to their advantage. These households are net buyers of food. This section of the rural population represents labourers, people depending on non-farming activities for livelihood and owners of small farms who do not produce enough to meet their requirements of food. Eighteen per cent of the families polled felt that the price change did them neither good nor harm. On the other hand, as high as thirty-seven per cent of the households see themselves really hurt by the decline in paddy prices. These people run medium and large farms.

The advantage that low paddy prices brought to a large segment of the rural population is indeed a welcome development. At the same time, the loss of income of the surplus farmers could hold adverse implications for the rural economy itself. These surplus farmers play a crucial part in generating incomes in the rural economy. It is they who hire farm labourers. Petty traders and villagers who earn their livelihood on agro-based non-farming activities, also depend to a large extent on the patronage of the surplus farmers.

There is another social dimension of the dilemma. A large majority of the surplus farmers hold medium farms only. Their capacity to withstand a continuous erosion of income is severely limited. They would not survive paddy price slump for long. They would sell their land, joining the ranks of small and marginal farmers and, perhaps the landless peasantry eventually.

Low rice prices benefit the vast majority of the population. The economics of the country's food policy also is undergoing a transformation. Production of foodgrains had all along been in private hands. Food distribution also is now being increasingly relegated to the private sector. The government does announce a procurement price. However, the quantity procured is too small to influence prices. Procurement is seen more as a food security than price support measure. In fact, it is the market which determines food prices now. Given this situation, the government neither can nor would wish, to hold paddy prices artificially high, to support the surplus farmers.

Low output price is not the only factor that places the farmers at a disadvantage. The cost of inputs has not gone down alongside the price of paddy. Rather, inputs at best cost the same as before, usually more. This has eroded the return to the growers further. Even without introducing new forms of subsidies, the state could rationalise the cost of inputs to the farmer through improved management in such areas as supply of seeds, irrigation facilities, fertilizer pricing and the like. Simultaneously, cost-efficient and diversified use of paddy by-products could bring higher returns to growers.

Owners of medium farms cannot draw advantage from seasonal price variations as they lack the capability to hold on to their surplus produce. Prices slumped during last Aman harvesting season but have looked up now. However, these farmers would have had sold off their surplus stocks early in the season. The state should immediately expand storage facilities for these farmers, enabling them to receive advance payments against paddy placed on pledge in the godowns. They could then sell their produce later when prices rise, pay off the advance and service charges. And the state can help the farmer by promoting an appropriate mix of crop diversification as well.

Fall-out of Gorazde Debacle

The fall of Gorazde to Serbian troops even after NATO's admortory air strikes against them — at the call of UN peace-keeping force on the ground — has been a classic example of an uncarried conviction turning an apparent roar into a whimper. But of course, the howling from the very beginning remained rather suspect, because those were 'selective air raids, that too without an animated ground support — all in the nature of a token application of force.

In an earlier editorial on the subject we had advised against loosening the grip over Gorazde that the decision to go for air strikes had signalled to the Serbs after much ado. But no one even pictured a scenario in which the UN ground forces would be frozen into inaction and some of the troops even held as virtual prisoners.

No matter how this is sought to be explained away, the episode will be seen as caving in by the UN and NATO before a minor power like the Bosnian Serbs. When international authority is sought to be exercised, in the form of a military intervention, all care must be taken to ensure that its objective is not made a mockery of. Understandably there was not the collective will in the fullest measure behind the action that was needed to make any radical difference in the situation with Russia keeping out of it. But that is again why there a high premium put on the success of whatever move was made anyway. The failure tended to only highlight and, even accentuate, the existing contradictions at the apex of world leadership. This in turn provides a greater sustenance to the wrong-doer.

The way things are drifting in the area reminds one of how the first great war began from the Balkans. At that time the world was rather vaguely multipolar somewhat as it is today. Thus we may be in dire straits if the vulnerabilities in the area develop into a full-size vortex of conflicts.

Now the immediate task is to protect the lives of besieged Bosnians in Gorazde. A ceasefire can only accomplish this for the short-term. Essentially, however, there should be serious efforts to negotiate a military 'exclusive zone' around the embattled township. If the path of negotiations is spurred by the Serbs then fresh air strikes need to be used to force them out for the creation of an exclusive zone. NATO can give an ultimatum like that in February which had forced the Serbs to pull their heavy weapons from Sarajevo.

Economic Zones to Ensure Grassroots Involvement

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

by Dr M T Haq

I would like to refer to two policy statements of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. (I consider the utterances of the Prime Minister on vital economic and planning matters as policy statements). The first statement includes a high priority to the industrialization of the country as a means of alleviating mass poverty, unemployment etc. (made in December, 1991), and the second, the participation of the people in the planning process of the country as announced by the Prime Minister while inaugurating at Thakurgaon on 5 April, 1994 a two-day workshop on 'New Perspective Planning for Bangladesh: 1995 Onwards' stresses planning from the grassroots level to materialise the objective of building a self-reliant Bangladesh as far as possible.

While the industrialization of the country and/or the industrialization as a component of the integrated rural development programme in Bangladesh was the most urgent thing to promote, I wonder if there are any appropriate and local planning and administrative machinery to generate this type of participation. To ensure the participation of the people in the planning process in general and the industrialization process in particular, there is the paramount need for the division of the whole country into viable economic, social and geographical regions, neither too large nor too small, suitable for development purposes on the basis of dispersal and decentralization which, among other things, should be the two major objectives of the economic and social policies of the Government. I find no alternative to some such arrangement on sound lines in the light of the various relevant considerations.

Erstwhile Upazila

The country was divided by the past regime into some 460 or so upazilas. The present BNP Government has, however, by an Ordinance, repealed the 1982 local government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Reorganization Ordinance) and has said that all public functions at the upazila level would now be performed

by the executive orders of the Government. The Government set up a high-powered body to review all aspects of the local government institutions. If the participation of the people in the planning process is to be ensured, if an integrated rural development programme whose one important component should be the industrialization of the rural areas has to be implemented in the country to expedite development and to deal with other problems, then there is no alternative to dividing the country into regions which should be viable as far as possible, both economically and socially.

The present government would do well to publish a full-blown report on the activities, good or bad, of the past Ershad regime which was in effect a totalitarian military administration. The Secretary-General of the BNP not long ago even assured the country that a White Paper on the Ershad regime would be published. In fact the present democratic government should have given this objective, among others, a very high priority after coming to power, but this still remains an unfulfilled promise. Even the totalitarian military administration might have done some good works and the country could have profited by them. The upazila system, to my mind, was a good thing for economic and social reasons. The military ruler, H M Ershad might have used it for political purposes, but the present government could have used them mainly for economic, social and political purposes, honestly, if it so desired, instead of reintroducing the same old system which the colonial administrators developed mainly for administrative purposes. However, for reasons of the participation of the common people in the planning and development at the local level, some alternative to the present arrangement introduced by the BNP Government needs to be developed and implemented.

The Thana Concept

Now what has been created by the present government is something like this. At the police station (Thana) level, there is a municipality which includes the town area and

perhaps some adjoining unions — not all union areas are within the police station jurisdiction for local planning purposes. There are other unions within the administration of the police station for the maintenance of law and order. The municipality area authority is not a planning authority covering the entire area over which the police station has the authority to maintain law and order. Under a union there are a number of villages. Now the question is, which is the planning authority over the entire police station area? The situation regarding the local government at the lowest level is, therefore, very confusing. Perhaps the proper arrangement should, therefore, have been the upazilas. Moreover, it is logical to have sub-districts into which a district could be divided. The village as an economic unit is not acceptable nor the union which is rather too small for the purposes of local level planning, although the needs of a union or a village must be taken care of by the local administration. The ideal arrangement should have been to retain the sub-district (upazila) as the planning area for local level planning.

The situation described above is more or less the structure of the present arrangement as regards local government at the lowest level. Now in this scheme of things where is the machinery for local level planning through which the popular will and enthusiasm can be harnessed to facilitate the planning process? The new arrangement has been introduced very recently and cannot be abolished soon either and as such a suitable and appropriate alternative in the form of economic regions should be considered by the Government.

Policy Measures Needed

The Prime Minister has rightly emphasized that the participation of the people in general and the rural population in particular is indispensable for economic, social and political development. The machinery for this purpose must be developed and related to the regional and national

institutions. It goes without saying that the appropriate policy measures with this purpose in view are also essential, linking these with the regional and national level policies.

It is also important to note that in actual practice, both the bottom-up or planning from below and the top-down or planning from above and the interaction between the two are necessary to identify the bottlenecks anywhere in the planning process — whether those are in agricultural, industrial or infrastructural development or at the project, sectoral and national level planning; in other words, at the macro and the micro level.

The reforms adopted and claimed by Finance Minister, M Saifur Rahman as 'people-oriented' are practically far from being so. Even in the developed countries like Great Britain, experience has shown that such measures are not anti-poverty or 'people oriented'. They have aggravated the distribution of income between the haves and the have nots. The Prime Minister has rightly indicated in her policy statement on the participatory perspective of the next plan, starting in 1995. The statement has indicated at least a sense of direction but how the ideal will be realized rests on the planners' abilities to adjust themselves to the emergent changes in the policies and their implementation.

Economic Regions

To return to one of the original themes of this write-up, I am inclined to say that the division of the country into economic regions is imperative for the economic and industrial development of the country on the basis of dispersal and decentralization. To give an example of the case for this division we may refer to Great Britain which has been divided into the counties at the top and all along the line down to the parish with an appropriate organization at each level for local administration. Further, the whole of Great Britain was or is divided into some 12 standard regions. Great Britain, however, is twice the size of Bangladesh in geographical

area, while her population is half that of Bangladesh.

In the suggested division of Bangladesh into economic regions, the emphasis should be placed on population and many other relevant considerations. The country may be divided into some 20 to 25 regions. This concept, if accepted on principle, an expert body consisting mainly of economists, sociologists and political scientists should be set up under the auspices of the Planning Ministry for making the appropriate recommendations on the basis of the criteria to be identified by the experts, on various economic and social considerations. It is only then that a regional development policy at the national level can be formulated for facilitating economic and social development on the basis of decentralization and dispersal.

It is in the context of this regional arrangement that the growth centre concept can be used as an instrument of economic and social policies. A union or a village in Bangladesh cannot be a suitable geographical unit for adoption as a growth point. The growth centres will be somewhere in the suggested economic regions, to be identified after surveying these regions mainly, from the physical, economic and social stand-points.

One probable alternative to dividing the country into economic regions is whether the present districts can be used as regions. The former districts have been divided into smaller areas; the former subdivisions are now districts. The proposal is whether the present districts can be used as economic regions. The government should seriously consider this alternative. If so, then the position becomes much easier, and the work on the demographic, social and economic surveys of the districts could be taken up almost immediately to ascertain the development potentials of the districts. The present number of which is 64.

Aggravating City Problems

Further, the monstrous growth of the city of Dhaka must be checked through a

vigorous application of policies on location of industry and physical planning. I would just like to refer to the random growth of the garments factories, for example, in the already congested parts of Dhaka in recent years. This growth has in particular led to a considerable inflow of people to Dhaka from the rural areas, adding to the already serious problems of congestion with all its attendant evils — overcrowding, housing shortages, pressure on the basic services such as electricity, gas, water and environmental pollutions. The trickle-down principle has apparently not worked in Bangladesh as elsewhere.

Many factories of this industry could preferably be located in many of the rural areas which has excellent communication links and transport relations with the cities, particularly Dhaka and the port city of Chittagong, without aggravating the problems stated above. This has happened because there is an unbridled exercise of the private decisions on which there is really no state control. The attitude of the government towards these problems seems to be something like this; let the society go to hell, but a few individuals must prosper at any cost. At one time there was something like an industrial location policy in Bangladesh. I wonder if that policy exists or is at all followed any longer. This is how the participatory role of the poor people in rural Bangladesh in the planning and development process has been checked.

Once the basic principle, that is, the delineation of the economic regions, has been adopted by the government, researches into the prospects and possibilities of these regions in the form of economic and social surveys will open up new opportunities for development in these areas and will result in the generation of employment for our educated, skilled and semi-skilled men and women.

The writer is former Head of the Department of Economics and Commerce, Rajshahi University, and former Senior Industrial Advisor, United Nations (UNIDO).

"TERRIBLE DAY!" thundered the newspaper headlines. "CHAOS!" shouted a second newspaper — "City Turned Into Giant Parking Lot! 20 Million Citizens Victimised!"

The apocalyptic press pronouncements zoomed in on the "100 marches for democracy" demonstrations called by the left-centre Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

The scheduled protests spurred urban hysteria in some quarters as television commentators forecast massive traffic snarl-ups and soaring pollution levels when marches swarmed over key Mexico City arteries.

Both Televisa and Television Azteca have been campaigning for restrictions on street demonstrations.

Mexico City authorities recorded more than 1,700 protest marches in 1993. In addition to severely testing the tempers of motorists, marchers are accused of endangering public health by forcing the citizenry to inhale the fumes of millions of idling cars.

"The demonstrators are injuring third parties," TV commentator Luis Pazos remonstrates. "If we had good government in Mexico City, demonstrators would be jailed."

Mexico City's largely ornamental Assembly of Representatives has taken the first steps towards restrictions.

Challenged by Regent (unelected mayor) Manuel Aguilera to curb 'abusives' before the August presidential elections when an upsurge in protests is anticipated, Assembly members belonging to the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and three allied parties agreed to ban marches on four major roads.

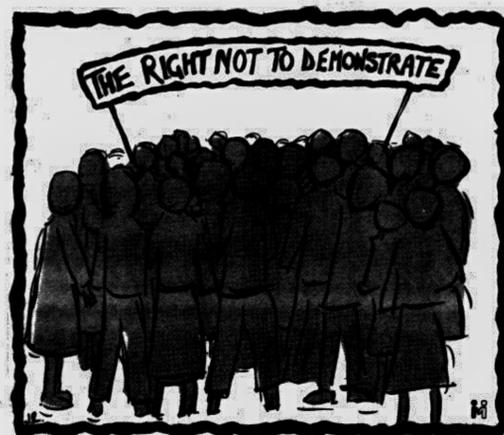
Prohibitions on blocking streets and setting up encampments in "the public way" are also included in the new regulations.

"Many of these marches are examples of political black-

Mexico Marches for Democracy—and Pollution

John Ross writes from Mexico City

With an election approaching, Mexico City is gearing up for a spate of demonstrations. But with protests already running at about five a day, sometimes involving thousands of people, residents of the western hemisphere's most congested city fear that the resultant traffic snarl-ups and pollution will be horrendous. Gemini News Service reports on the urban price of freedom.



mail," declared Assembly President Juan Jose Osorio. In addition to the agreed restrictions, the right-to-centre National Action Party (PAN) urges that groups wanting to demonstrate should pay for city services incurred in policing and cleaning up after marches. The final regulations will be agreed during the Assembly's April session.

The Opposition is unhappy. The proposed regulations "have no judicial standing" and are "clearly in violation" of constitutional guarantees of free expression, declares opposition member Pablo Gomez.

Pressure groups also decry the new rules: "If the bureaucrats would start paying attention to our petitions, we wouldn't have to march so

often," reasons Jose Santos of the Popular Urban Movement, which frequently descends on City Hall to press its claims.

Marchers from the provinces also come to Mexico City to present demands — sometimes marching hundreds of kilometres and adding supporters along the way. They head for the city centre, the Plaza of the Constitution, of Zocalo.

Police clear routes for the marchers and block traffic at intersections so that protesters can pass. Demonstrators limit property damage to spray-painted slogans on walls and shopfronts and are never confronted by police for vandalism.

Sometimes protests get out of hand, as in the clash be-

tween police and 90 busloads of street-vendors from Puebla state, blocked by authorities from a central road, the vendors destroyed a dozen patrol cars and sent ten policemen to hospital before advancing on Zocalo to demand the release of their leader from prison.

But it is pollution levels and not violence that raises hackles against the demonstrators.

"Yesterday, the police stopped traffic for 15 old ladies! God knows what they were complaining about..." grouses Nario Gomez, a newspaper vendor in the Historic Centre where exhaust fumes are often so intense that he gets dizzy.

There are said to be four million cars in Mexico City, 70 per cent of which do not meet emission standards, according to the international environmental organisation Greenpeace.

Motorists are barred from driving on two days of the week, but many families have bought extra vehicles to operate on the off-days.

One proposed solution to the motorists vs. marchers conflict is to bar cars from the Historic Centre and convert streets to the Zocalo into pedestrian passageways.

The Zocalo is regarded as the political heart of the nation. Every day except patriotic holidays, demonstrators stream into the square like advancing armies. Many stay for weeks.

In the past year, the Zocalo has played host to protest encampments of disgruntled teachers, fishermen, police of-

ficers, airline pilots, oil workers and sugarcane cutters.

On one day recently, the Francisco Villa Popular Front was living on one flank of the Plaza of the Constitution, awaiting a decision by city officials on a land claim.

Freshly-washed clothes were strung between blue plastic tents emblazoned with likenesses of popular heroes such as Pancho Villa and Che Guevara, and teenagers played volleyball under the square's great flagpole.

On the opposite side of the Zocalo, 60 truckers had parked their lorries in a protest against increased road tolls and simultaneously pressed their electric airhorns "just to let them know we're here," shouted one driver.

Other demonstrators included several thousand marchers demanding the dismissal of the head of a milk dispensing agency — "Get the Jews out of the milk!" they chanted in an attack on the religion of the agency's director.

Later, a handful of inventors marched into the plaza to protest patent laws revised to accommodate the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Mexico City's Regents have frequently sought to limit such "excesses of liberty", as former Regent Manuel Camacho labelled them. Demonstrations were banned during the 1968 student uprising and each May Day, Mexico City police battle labour militants barred from joining the official workers parade in the Zocalo.

The current effort to regulate demonstrations is designed to restrict protests after the August elections and is a violation of free speech, argues opposition politician Bernardo Batiz.

"The Assembly has no power to override the constitution," commented Batiz, interviewed during the culmination of the "100 marches for democracy."

The 100 Marches, designed to "open a dialogue with the Regent about the practice of democracy in the capital", were organised by 54 organisations allied with the PRD and mobilised some 35,000 citizens, according to party official Rene Bejerano.

In an effort to counter the cataclysmic prognostications of critics that the 100 marches would bring terminal pollution to the most congested city in the western hemisphere, organisers practised "ecological democracy" and strung together 100 (actually 102) "mini-marches" that navigated pavements instead of blocking boulevards. Ozone readings on the city's pollution monitoring system hovered around 130, compared with scores of days with 200-plus readings.

"Citizens have both the right to march and the right to an environment that is free of contamination", Batiz explained as hundreds of protesters stormed City Hall to 'dialogue' with Regent Aguilera.

"It's more logical to ban cars than protesters from the centre of the city but some elements here are using the environment as a pretext to provoke hysteria", snapped the lawyer, ripping up a copy of the Televisa-owned daily that had falsely reported that the 100 Marches for Democracy had turned Mexico City into a "giant parking lot".

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Somalia: Cautious optimism

Sir, While congratulating AMM Shahabuddin for his insight and objective analysis (DS 18.4.94) of the political situation in Somalia, I share his optimism for a 'happy ending' of the man-made tragedy and an example of one more American folly. But had not the Los Angeles Times divulged the Bush machinations to world would not have known the full story. After all it is the American 'Fourth estate' which deserves to be lauded first for its abiding interest towards humanity at large and beyond America's. About the latest 'peace move' which is now an all-Somalian affair, I would express 'cautious opti-

mism' because of the involvement of innumerable 'war lords'. Will Somalia go the Afghan way?

Abdul Kader Bashabo, Dhaka

Beauty and beast!

Sir, Sometime back your paper published a letter regarding the corner of footpath opposite the New Model High School and Degree College being used by some vested quarter for the past 'three decades'. This 'dairy farm' had disappeared immediately afterwards. But it is an irony that after the mayoral election and the city ward commissioners election that footpath has turned into a cat-

tle raising ground once again. We fail to understand how such kind of things can happen in the capital city which is supposed to be boasting its beauty!

Cattle is not being reared only on this corner of the footpath but on the north-western side of the Dhanmondi Lake a large number of cattle are seen as though they reportedly belong to the concerned authorities who are supposed to keep the Dhanmondi Lake free from water pollution. Surely Dhanmondi Lake is not in need of "natural fertilizer", that is supposed to have come from cow dung and other materials like grass and hay used to feed the cattle herds.

It is hoped in good grace that positive action would be

taken once and for all by the concerned authorities to save us from such nuisance.

Nahatasha Kamal Dhaka

Anarchic situation

Sir, It appears from the recent development in our political arena that the country is again moving towards a chaotic condition. It is sincerely expected that the democratic government will take necessary steps to redress the anarchic situation. It is also heartily desired that the opposition political parties, before intensifying their movement for what they called restoration of democracy in the country, should

take pragmatic measure to restoring democracy within the institution of hartal so that people can observe hartal on their free will without any fear or compulsion.

Zahid Dhaka

Sanitation

Sir, The Country's sanitation is at stake. In this respect a news item and an article were published in your esteemed daily in March by Mr Rahmat Ali, staff reporter and Syed ANM Kabirushan respectively. They clearly pointed out what actually is going on in the matters of country's sanitation programme. We like to urge the hon'ble

Prime Minister and ECNEC authority to review their decision of shutting down the sanitation programme on the wrong impression that the handling of the sanitation programme by the Govt itself is no longer necessary and it should now be handled by NGOs only.

Our view is that the Govt should continue the sanitation programme at least up to 2000 AD, and about technology, the so-called "home-made latrine" is a negative step towards yours etc sanitation development as it is not sustainable. Water-seal latrine is the minimum requirement and it is the cheapest in actual sense.

Dulal Khan and Akkas Ali 12, Arambag Dhaka