

## What About Moral Responsibility?

We think that the communications minister Col. (Retd) Oli Ahmed should resign. This we say both from the point of view of failing to properly run the Bangladesh Railways, and from the point of taking moral responsibility for the death of officially accepted 25 passengers, but widely suspected to exceed 100. Just as the buck stops with the minister, so should the ultimately responsibility — both administrative and moral. Dismissing a few cogs in the wheel like the pointsman and the station master may be a necessary step, but definitely not a sufficient one. We notice with shame that so far neither the Prime Minister, nor the minister concerned have talked about responsibility, except pointing fingers at low level staff. Public accountability and democratic morality demand that responsibility be taken at the highest level. Can we, therefore, expect the minister, in the highest standards of democratic tradition, transparency and public accountability, to stand up to the public and say "As the head of the railways, I take full responsibility for the tragedy, and tender my resignation." Remember a Korean minister resigning after the recent bridge collapse in Seoul, a Japanese minister did the same thing after a JAL crash, not to mention Lal Bahadur Shastri's resignation after a similar train accident, some years ago, and Ram Mohan's offer to resign after the recent stock market scam. There are numerous other examples of moral courage of political leaders who want to establish ethical principles.

Our report has revealed that the microwave telecommunication system which connects the country-wide BR network has been out of order for Hill station during the last 11 days. Other reports say that the train arrived three hours late, and was then detained at Hill station for more than 55 minutes, both without any apparent reason. Absence of either of these two delays would have prevented the accident from happening. Then there are other reports which depict the Hill station situation to be totally out of control. In fact a non railway employee was entrusted to do the job of the pointsman, while the regular person, and the station manager were both around. All these indicate that BR has become an organisation which has lost chain of command, supervision, accountability discipline, in other words, managerial ability. This reflects on the man in charge, and he must accept full responsibility.

If the lives of so many innocent passengers are not enough to put the highest executive of the ministry to the dock, than what will? How many innocent people need to die before the minister's conscience is touched? Before the public begins to ask these questions, the Prime Minister should, and before she does, the minister himself should. That is what the ethics and morality of democracy dictates. It is nothing personal.

## Please, Not Before the 26th

It has been talked about that the opposition may call for a strike on the 23rd of this month, for a 48 hour period. While being fully respectful of the opposition parties' demands and of their political movement, we reiterate our strong and principled position against all sorts of hartals and strike for the sake of the country's economy. We also reiterate our appeal that different ways are to be found to register our protest, without punishing the ordinary people. Having made the general observation, we would specifically mention about the period in question. During 24-25 of January, Euromoney, a prestigious European organisation that directs international fund managers and potential investors to new and emerging markets, will be holding the first ever investors' conference in Dhaka. Euromoney, which is an affiliate of the prestigious "Economist" magazine, has organised this conference not because of any PR exercise by the government, but because of its own assessment about the potential of Bangladesh. More than 200 world famous companies from Europe, USA, Japan, India etc. have already registered. Any strike observance during that period will deal a severe blow to the rising confidence in the future of our economy. It will strengthen our negative image, and give a further handle to the forces who do not want foreign investors to come to our country.

So, we urge the opposition leaders, not to call for strikes or hartals over the period just before and during the conference. Some may think that such a programme will embarrass the government. No, it will embarrass the country, and the people. Shifting the dates and holding the same during the last week of the month will not make much difference as far as the political impact of the programme is concerned. So we see no reason why strikes cannot be called after the conference is over, if they have to be called at all.

## Improving Things at DMCH

If vehicles and vessels in Bangladesh are death traps in motion, what are the stationary things that deal deaths with equal and indeed more facility? They are called hospitals in Bangladesh. Stephen Hawking when peddling his black holes could very well compare those graves of mass and energy with Bangladeshi hospitals — particularly the state-run ones.

Courage, some people have indeed taken it as a cause to do something helpful to the most dreaded of them all — the DMCH. The idea is to reduce waiting time for patients, improve the appalling hygienic condition and the quality of diet and the overall management of the hospital. This is truly heartening.

The question, however, looms as threateningly as ever as to whether anything can improve there with three things remaining as they are: one, the orderlies, bearers and peons wielding the power as they have been doing as ultimate arbiters of admission and treatment; two, the physicians and surgeons treating their job there as nothing more than a business on the sideline that helps their main occupation elsewhere; three, the nursing staff specially the female ones, generally charged the world-over with the actual running of the hospitals, being treated little better than house servants.

Modern-day hospitals are built and staffed and managed in a way that would give you not only the best treatment available but also the best relaxation possible. A concerned doctor, an affectionate nurse, a spick and span ambience and an overall feeling of being cared for very very lovingly and responsibly — that is what hospital should give us. Try to give it, things certainly will improve.

# Winter Drizzle, Rice Price and the Farmer

**D**AYS of intermittent drizzle last week washed some dirt off the trees and they looked greener. But the first rainfall of this winter was too thin to revive the brown brittle grass on the ground. All the same the air seemed cleaner to breathe while the dust settling down made roads muddier. So it was not a boon altogether.

Aid the rain would not have dripped blessings on the poor longing for warm clothing, the pavement dweller living in the open and all the people who had to go out and get wet on a wintry day or night. For sure, the drizzle and the wind that drove it brought chill too. To hark to Khonaar Bachon — says lines of the sage Khona — "Borshay jodi Poushay, korhi aushay tooshay." If it rains during the month of Poush, money comes from (selling) rice husk. Now, why burn rice husk to light up a fire and keep it on for heating during winter rains? Well, the twigs, branches of bamboo steps that you could have used otherwise, would be wet too from the dripping rain. Stored inside, rice husk would have kept dry.

Here, Khona had spoken of the farmer. The mid-winter rains coming at the lag-end of the month of Poush, did not bring much of a cheer for the farmer. True, the earth would have softened a bit to make ploughing a shade easier during the weeks ahead. Some leafy winter vegetables would sprout. However, rainwater seepage could also damage tubers underground. Worse, chilly wind combined with rain

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could hurt wheat, pulses and grams crops. Mango buds also would not fare better either.

Manifestly winter rain is not an abnormal phenomenon. Otherwise, the sage Khona would not left her words of wisdom for posterity to muse on. All the same, the farmer had plenty of reasons to consider the rainfall in the very first days of 1995 with mixed feelings. Back in 1994, the rain did not come when he needed it most for his Aman crop. The farmer looks forward to heavy monsoon rains in the months of July and August so that the soil would turn soft and malleable for him to transplant the Aman seedling. He would sink knee-deep in the puddle as he bends over to plant the seedlings in rows. The pouring rain might soak him through but that would not matter. May be, he would even love it.

Well, the monsoon down-pour reached the north and western regions of the country too late for Aman transplantation. The farmer actually faced a drought — one of the worst in decades. He tried to gain access to irrigation facility to water the soil in the absence of rain. And when the rains came at last, he went for Aman transplantation any way, although it was late for that. Despite the farmer's redoubled efforts, overall some land remained fallow. The yield on the late transplanted areas was

low. The total Aman harvest was poorer than the year before. No official estimated of the 1994 Aman harvest appears to have been published yet. Available unofficial estimates of the crop are rather confusing, bordering on guesswork. The worst case scenario puts the 1994 Aman crop yield at 90 lakh tons. The more optimistic accounts reckon it to have been nearer 92 lakh tons. The

best on record. In 1993, it came down to 94 lakh tons and in 1994, as some apprehend, it might have dropped to 90 lakh tons or even less. This downside in Aman production would have eaten into the country's food stocks.

In the pursuit of a free market economy, the government, on the other hand, has modified its food policy. Gone are the days of heavy procurement of foodgrains by the gov-

about the lot of the farmer and the possible impact of the price slide on future production of rice. This time, it is just the reverse. The concern is about the upswing in rice price and it is the consumer, people are worrying about. All the while, we remain captives of the market forces.

Rice price has shot up by around 20 per cent over the last couple of months or so. Compared to January '94, the price now is near about 30 per cent higher. The extent of price rise cannot really be correlated to a less than 5 per cent shortfall in Aman yield. Authorities also say that part of the shortfall in Aman output would be made up through higher Boro and wheat harvests, just around the corner.

The market, on its part, has sensed that the winter rains could affect the wheat crop on the field. Besides, winter rains also upset drying and milling of paddy, transportation and marketing of rice. All the more reason to mark the rice price up another notch. Well, that is the way market forces work.

In an attempt to contain price rise, the government has now withdrawn customs duty on rice and has halved the import levy on wheat. The idea, it seems, is to encourage the private sector to import more of rice and wheat to supplement domestic supplies. That way, availability of foodgrains would

increase and the price, hopefully, would come down. International price of rice is said to be substantially lower than the domestic market. If the market forces really work then imported rice should sell cheaper than the domestic price. Question is, do market forces work in this country the way they do elsewhere? Then again, critics are asking why the authorities did not shore up earlier. After all, it had been known for months now that the Aman crop would fall short of original projections.

Come to think of it, should the consumer gripe too much about the rice price rise? Aman growers had to pay higher prices for fertilizer. In a bid to irrigate his land to beat the drought, the farmer had to pay more for the water he bought. Weeds had heavily encroached on the fields because of inadequate rainfall early in the monsoon, forcing the farmer to go for two or more weeding, increasing labour cost. Some experts have suggested that the farmer's cash outlay on the 1994 Aman cultivation could have been as much as three-times higher than in a normal season. Should the farmer be denied the opportunity to recover his increased cost of cultivation from higher prices of rice? That is the way an open market economy ought to function. Shouldn't the farmer then get a break? Alas, such considerations would probably be far away from the consumer's thoughts. All that the consumer can reckon is that rice price spiralling up hurts him.

## ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

1993 crop was 94 lakh tons. Thus, even we take on the worst-case scenario, Aman yield fell short by 4 lakh tons or by just about 4.25 per cent. That does not look like a prescription for disaster exactly.

Fact of the matter is, the level of our cereal production is heavily dependent on the Aman crop. Of the total foodgrains output of 191 lakh tons in 1993-94, Aman alone contributed 94 lakh tons. That comes to nearly half of the total. Any shortfall in Aman yield thus impinges on overall food situation. Then again, output of Aman rice had been on the decline for two years in a row. The 1992 crop of nearly 97 lakh tons is reckoned as the

ernment. Internal procurement of rice is only limited to the quantity needed to maintain food security reserves. In the process, the government's capability to intervene in the market has also been eroded. Rather, it is the market forces which largely determine the price and supply situation of rice. And the market has sniffed a supply shortfall. Market forces are therefore at work to push rice prices up.

Just as it did two years ago, rice price is again capturing newspaper headlines. Albeit, there is a difference. Then, it was a question in slump in rice prices, induced by a bumper Aman crop. Some people myself included, had worried

## USA: Rightwing Swing to Hurt Aid

**T**HE Republican sweep of both houses of Congress may mean a drop in US foreign aid in 1995.

Since the Republicans won big at the November polls, supporters of US foreign aid have been gnawing their fingers — and with good reason.

Recently, both the staunchly rightwing Heritage Foundation and the chairman-to-be of the key Senate Foreign Operations Subcommittee, Mitch McConnell, have come out in favour of sweeping changes and cuts in the US foreign aid programme.

On the chopping block are a US\$800 million a year Development Fund for Africa, specialised UN agencies and US participation in UN peace-keeping operations.

Also scheduled for the hatchet are some funding for multilateral development agencies, including the World Bank's soft-loan facility, the International Development Association (IDA).

Foreign aid proponents are already gearing up to what is certain to be a major fight when Congress reconvenes in January and when the administration of President Bill Clinton unveils its proposed fiscal 1996 budget in early February.

Administration officials are trying to take the rhetorical offensive. In a major blast in mid-December, J. Brian Atwood, the Administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) accused some Republicans who want slash foreign aid of advancing a "neo-isolationist agenda".

Those who suggest that our nation can afford to reduce our foreign aid budget still further are playing with fire. They're yielding the ground of respon-

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sible stewardship of our national interest to the isolationists and the populists," he said.

Atwood himself noted, US foreign aid began declining since well before the end of the Cold War. Washington trails virtually all western industrialised countries in the percentage of its gross national product (GNP) it devotes to foreign aid — only 14 per cent.

This year's US \$13.7 billion programme is the smallest in recent terms in more than 30 years. Almost half of that total is earmarked for key US allies in the Middle East — Egypt, Israel and Jordan. Another US \$850 million are going to the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU).

But the relatively small amount of money at stake belies Washington's status as a global leader. The more it reduces its aid, the more difficult it is for other wealthy nations to justify their own foreign aid programmes to their constituents back home.

In addition, reductions in its contributions to multilateral agencies, especially IDA, the world's largest source of aid to the poorest nations, can trigger corresponding reductions by other donors.

Congress plays a key role in US foreign policy through its control of the government's purse strings. Leaders of what will be the first Republican Congress in 40 years have already made clear they intend to guide policy precisely through that device.

McConnell's chairmanship of the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee will make him a key player in the

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Foreign aid supporters fret over the Republican take-over of Washington. Jim Lobe of Inter Press Service reports from Washington.

Under his plan, aid would be conditioned on whether or not it serves US security and economic interests — a far cry from the Clinton administration's early advocacy of promoting "sustainable development", especially in Africa!

And, like the Heritage Foundation, he argues that economic and development aid should go only to those countries which have created a welcome climate for foreign investors and the private sector.

Human rights conditions — hallmarks of Democratic conditions on foreign aid since the early 1970s — are largely discarded.

With the exception of US allies in the Middle East and certain Central European and FSU nations, McConnell proposes cutting aid 20 per cent across the board. He also wants to slash aid to Russia in a bid to reverse what he regards as Clinton's misguided "Russia First" policy towards the FSU.

McConnell's proposals are by no means the most radical being put forward by Republicans. The new chair-

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man of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms, has called the entire US foreign aid programme a "rat hole" and strongly opposes US backing for UN agencies and the World Bank.

Atwood himself admits that

he has little choice but to work with McConnell whom he calls a "constructive critic". He said 25 per cent of the new Congress will be made up of isolationists.

He will argue that slashing aid will lose Washington new emerging markets abroad and may end up costing the country more as it faces major humanitarian disasters to which it will have to respond.

"We cannot simply wall out the chaos beyond our borders," he said. "Millions of refugees,

## POLITICAL SCENARIO

# Seething Business Community Seek a Solution to the Stalemate

by Q M Karamat Ali

**The situation is apparently headed for further conflicts and confrontation. While the political pundits may dare predict things and foretell the future, a layman may easily observe that the economy of the country has fallen a hapless victim to the crisis.**

**T**HE conflict between the ruling party and the combined opposition over the national election issue compounded by the failure of the Ninian mission has been further crystallised with the unprecedented resignation of 147 opposition members, who polled 69% of the votes cast in the last general election, from 330-member 5th parliament. This consigns an economically struggling nation to a dreadful limbo of despair and despondence, driving her business community to a state of utter frustration and desperation.

Though the difference between the ruling party and the opposition at a time deceptively seemed to disappear with the delayed declaration of the desire of the Prime Minister to resign her post 30 days prior to the national election, yet the yawning gap between opposing parties inscrutably grows wider with subsequent emphatic assertions of their respective positions.

The situation is apparently headed for further conflicts and confrontation. While the political pundits may dare predict things and foretell the future, a layman may easily observe that the economy of the country has fallen a hapless victim to the crisis. Despite positive macro-economic indications — robust reserve, dwindling budget deficit, increased national resource mobilisation, enhanced contribution to ADP and soaring share market — the economy has virtually stagnated at the micro level, agitating the business community. Notwithstanding Bangladesh Bank's guarantee for double and treble support for investment, fewer entrepreneurs reportedly enter the DFIs awash with excess liquidity for investment proposals. Foreign investments flight shy and flock to the neighbourhoods.

Businessmen offer under the auspices of the FBCCI to initiate a dialogue leading to the diffusion of the stalemate between the ruling party and the opposition could be interpreted as a manifestation of their profound concern at the prevailing situation. When the political parties still strongly stick to their guns, show no signs of relenting, nor send any signals for mutual accommodation, the FBCCI, the apex body of the business community of the country, is contemplating strategies for seeking a

solution to the crisis.

Recently, the FBCCI convened a summit of the Chamber and Association leaders and a special general meeting of the General Body of the FBCCI representing whole business community of the country to deliberate on the current political crisis impacting adversely upon the fragile national economy. The business leaders aggrieved at the state of political affairs decided to survey soon the negative impact of the crisis on the economy and convene once again a grand conference of the businessmen for further pressurising and prevailing upon the national leadership for an immediate solution to the intensifying political crisis.

Speakers in the summit meeting while admitting hartals, sieges and blockades as last democratic resorts available with the opposition castigated them as dangerous detriments to productive activities and at the same time flagged the prevailing law and order situation, unfair tax and VAT system, bureaucratic red-tapism, bad policies and bad governance as intractable impediments to the flourishing of trade, commerce and industry.

Many of the participants lamented at the thoughtlessness of the national leadership at a time when the country has just entered a new economic order in the world overlorded by WTO — the successor to the GATT. By the next decade, they opined, when the national tariff barriers will be flattened, protection to the fledgling economy demolished, privileges and patronisation to LDCs perished, we will be left on our own in a world where many monopolise capital and technology and master modern management, while we miserably lack in them all. We still then will be burdened with a booming population which need to be converted into human resources, trained and employed; an outdated infrastructure to be restructured and resuscitated; a lethargic judicial system to be updated.

Hungry men, they say, are angry men. Businessmen are not definitely hungry men. But even then, many of them could not conceal their anger. A very pertinent point to ponder, is that among the businessmen there were many who actively belonged to the parties fighting in the national political

arena, but they prided on being businessmen first and businessmen last so far the current crisis is concerned.

Some participants even pointedly asked if the signals sent from the summit were not serious enough for the political leadership to sit across a table for sorting out their differences, bridging the gaps and building an understanding before it was too late. They wondered how could the parties who, not very long ago, unitedly spearheaded a colossal movement to topple a dictatorial regime for the sake of democracy, refuse to sit, meet, talk and seek a solution when that very democratic dream is in danger. They asked again why not a Constitution which a dozen times was amended to accommodate events not very much ethically and morally justified, be amended again to accommodate a solution to avert a crisis which cripples a budding economy which has much to deliver to a nation that has not really tasted the very fruits of independence even if the price they paid was very dear. They asked once again whether understanding for economy, compassion for common men, desire for democracy were reigning supreme in the hearts of our leaders. And when countries in Asia — Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, even West Bengal of India — were setting their houses in order encouraging and attracting investments, if we were rigidifying, hardening and shutting our doors against investment and economic development.

If it is the state of affairs to remain, the examples of its consequences are not very far to seek. Political differences have derailed a burgeoning garments industry and crippled a growing economy in Sri Lanka, dwarfing a promising Asian Tiger into a pitiable pet cat. Political division has drawn them to fratricidal civil war — an unremitting blood bath, yet no solution could be achieved. After prolonged and terrible tribulations, the Govt of Kumaratunga has been voted to power to seek a negotiated settlement to their problem. Should not our leaders learn from their counterparts in the neighbouring countries and spare us the agonies and anxieties, sorrows and sufferings the nation has had enough?

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## To the Editor...

### Confrontational politics

Sir, Indeed, the article of Dr Quazi Kholiquzaman Ahmad in your 8 January issue has raised a few pertinent points. One cannot but agree with him more and the main casualty will eventually be the people's progress and democracy. I think I am right in saying that the available surplus investable fund is limited at a given time. An investor will require such funds to be invested as quickly as possible and in areas where he feels the investment is safe and able to generate profit. To a foreign investor if Bangladesh does not fit in to his calculated conditions, he will invest the same fund, earlier earmarked for Bangladesh, in countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Myanmar etc. Although the democratisation of Bangladesh through 1991 fair general election encouraged a few investors initially, but the present confrontation between the major political parties has driven the prospective investors away to safer countries and will perhaps drive the existing handful of them out in the near future. Thus we will be left with a bottomless basket for ever. I hope our future generation will remember and mark the people responsible for dwindling away the future of this country through their irresponsible political actions.

On a more serious note, although everyone admits that the Government was changed in 1991 through a democratic upsurge, does one really think that the parties involved presently in this impasse are truly democratic themselves? I for one, do not believe they

### And now the nights?

Sir, The people of Purana Paltan area are the worst sufferers of all sorts of violence and trouble. On hartals days, the locality is affected by the worst sporadic violence and trouble. There is, almost every day, loud screams and shouts of a political party holding their meetings across the Baitul Mukarram Square. And then, there is the fanatic shouts-cum-explosions and sometime clashes between rival football supporters.

And now the nights have become the favourite hour of some tough men of the locality to arrange night long seasonal Jari Gaan programme at the very centre of the densely populated Purana Paltan area, without the slightest consideration for anyone's peace. The Jari Gaan continues till the Fajr prayers time at a piercingly high volume causing much inconvenience and serious disturbance of sleep to the whole neighbourhood. The cat creaking sound of flutes and wild beat of the tablas are too much to bear at that dead of the night. It would be really nice if the organisers care to arrange the traditional Jari Gaan programmes in parks or in open fields, causing less problems to others.

If this rather uncivilised procedure is not seriously taken care of then the opportunists will soon take the chance of situation to do whatever they please and nights will soon no longer be 'the hour of rest'.

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