

Price Control Failure

The buyers are burning their fingers in the market heat. A cross-section of them our reporter met in some crowded markets to prepare his item on 'steep rise in prices of essentials' which appeared in our paper yesterday, were not content with merely expressing their instant disapproval of it. Voicing concern for the remainder of the month of Ramadan, they clamoured for urgent government actions to bring down the prices.

The problem can be viewed on three levels: the daily provisions, the extra demand placed on them during Ramadan and the new items typically forming part of the Ramadan or the Eid shopping list. As for the daily necessities their prices have been on the rise for quite a few months. Increases in the prices of fish, rice and flour stand now at between 17 and 31 per cent from the previous years' levels. With those recurrent expenses going that much high, the consumers' predicament needs no elaboration as they are having to pay through their noses for the additional necessities of the month of Ramadan.

We reject the commonplace plea of a hartal villainy behind the current price rises. In a broad view, the political strikes were sparsely held either due to public apathy or media criticism or both making the opposition parties respect popular sensibilities and tone down their agitational programmes. For all we know, farm productivity remained unharmed, and some industries and trading networks, both wholesale and retail, worked extra to minimise hartal losses. Above all, organised transport strikes were few and far between, the scattered barricades, which could not seriously disrupt supplies.

If the imports were not charted out well in advance to meet the extra Ramadan demands, things obviously would go wrong. For instance, how is it that no LC could be opened in the last two months for import of edible oil? The government has to look into the traders' allegation that it had flunked on the budgetary commitment to lower the import duty on edible oil. Again that needs not be a reason for the traders to succeed higher prices when something else has caught hold.

Then the wholesale and retail price differentials are worrying. Where is the check?

The government has woken up after the price discipline has started showing serious cracks. Earlier, they produced some hot air through co-ordination meetings as these have failed to make any dent in the situation. We want a concretised price control mechanism, not another expression of resolve.

Europe Engulfed

In Germany and France they have already started calling it as the "flood of the century". In the Netherlands, the floods, worst in more than 40 years, have forced more than a hundred thousand people to evacuate their homes. Indeed, a large part of Europe is now experiencing an unusual kind of flooding. At least 27 deaths have been reported across northwestern Europe.

Caused by early melting of Alpine snows the floods now threaten to wreak further havoc in the Netherlands as a large swath of the country's reclaimed marshes and flood plains protected by dikes looks most vulnerable.

The rivers Rhine, Maas and Waal have swelled so much that France, Belgium, Germany and Holland have to sustain the full fury of a massive flooding at the same time. The phenomenon is important for two reasons: first, the environmental implications may be a serious subject of study for the scientists; and secondly, the very basis of Holland's technological achievement acquired through centuries of efforts may be coming to nought. This is quite frightening. The land of king Canute known for the best management of land and sea water could fail only to prove human vulnerability.

A deteriorating world environment, it is said, is being responsible for unprecedented natural calamities. We, in this part of the world, have more than a fair share of such disasters. A warmer earth poses to further aggravate our plight by causing a sea level rise which in turn will engulf our land. Whether it is the melting of the Antarctica's ice or of the mountain snow, the land area of this planet will lose to the invading sea. Going by the European scare we can only feel apprehensive of a chilling scenario in the event of the warming of the earth. Man's indiscreet use of natural resources is mainly responsible for the situation. So a global environmental management seems to be the answer to the problem. In the meantime, we sympathise with the flood-affected people in Europe.

Goitre Syndrome

Iodine deficiency has been responsible for the loss of immunity to diseases for as many as two crore people in the country's northern region. About one half of them are seriously handicapped and the other half too have complications that stand in the way of their leading a normal life. The birth of mentally and physically retarded babies, sometimes their premature death coupled with an ever-swelling rank of marriageable girls suffering from goitre have posed a serious problem for not only the country's north but also for the whole land. Virtually one-sixth of the total population are facing a human tragedy on a massive scale.

The more severely affected are the riverine areas where the iodine from soil gets washed away first by rain and then by the rivers. The areas in question are Sirajganj, Pabna, Bogra, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Kurigram, Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat. Only five to nine per cent people of these areas use iodised salt. The areas where the rate of iodised salt's users is higher, are gradually coming out of the goitre syndrome.

Now the question is why the use of iodised salt could not be ensured in the areas desperately needing the substance. This is for two reasons: the first is that the 1989 law providing for the obligatory use of iodised salt could not be enforced. Even the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) itself is violating the law by importing salt not mixed with iodine. In the country's north, report says, salt without iodine is sold in the name of iodised salt and thus the law is flouted.

What we need is the seriousness of purpose. The law is there. Just ensure that it is followed in letter. In this case the government can even take up a scheme to finance the process of iodisation of salt in that iodine-deficient region.

INDIA'S future is not dependent on the Congress (I), a lessening party. The future of the Congress (I) is, however, dependent on how the confrontation between Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and the outgoing Human Resources Development Minister Arjun Singh fares. It is going to be tough for the party because when the giants fight for their survival, they employ all methods to win.

I never thought that Arjun Singh would go to the extent of resigning. He looked like a person who was willing to strike but afraid to wound. But now that he has thrown down the gauntlet, he would fight with both hands. And cautious as he is, he must have assessed his support before entering the arena. The reaction of some Congress leaders indicates that his resignation is not a one-day event; more developments will unfold themselves as the time passes.

It is apparent that he did not want to wait till after the assembly elections in February. Probably his calculations are that the Congress will not do well. Expecting a renewed exasperation in the party over Rao's performance, Arjun Singh convinced himself that he would be a better contender if he was outside the government than in the cabinet. By then he would have projected the image of a person who had told so and who had listed grievances long before in his letter to the prime minister.

Two scenarios that come to my mind are that of 1969 when the Congress was split and the other of 1987 when V P Singh was thrown out of the Congress. Let me take the first. The split was Indira Gandhi's revolt against the old guard.

The Fallout of Arjun Singh's Exit

In fact, he is seen dragging the feet whenever it comes to acting against those who lack integrity. His mathematics on such things is faulty. He does not believe that two and two make four in the field of graft. I think the biggest fallout of Arjun Singh's exit is the suspicion he has raised against Rao's capacity to govern.

She reduced them to a rump and converted the Congress into the Congress (Indira). She gave a twist to the whole issue and made the old guard look like a band of conservatives standing in the way of progress.

Arjun Singh has neither the charisma Mrs Gandhi had nor an array of influential supporters she could command. Even when the Congress got divided vertically, the old guard had nearly 38 per cent of the party. Their personal image was never tainted. The use of government machinery by Mrs Gandhi could not tarnish them.

Without power and with some allegations pending against him, Arjun Singh is vulnerable. His main support is believed to be Sonia Gandhi. If it is so, she should give some indication about it before long because it is crucial. It is said that she got annoyed with Rao when he, before the last session of parliament, asked his parliamentary minister V C Shukla to brief the opposition on the progress of the Bofors gun scandal. None in the opposition had asked for the information, as Sonia Gandhi's nominees checked personally with its leaders. It was probably Rao's way of keeping Sonia Gandhi in tow. In any case, she is visibly disturbed.

Arjun Singh's categorical statement that Rajiv Gandhi and his family were not involved in the Bofors gun scandal gives the impression that he wants to be on her right

side. (The Italian connection has already been established). His bias is more evident by his remark that if she were to work for the Congress (I) it would "certainly help the party." But will she go as far as splitting the party is the question.

The other scenario is that Arjun Singh develops into a V P Singh, epitomising the resentment against the Congress. True, Arjun Singh has himself ruled out that role by observing: "What V P Singh did was to disrupt the party and have

line. If Rao was prepared to drop him from the cabinet and he beat him by a few days — so do the prime minister's men say — it is quite probable that Arjun Singh might meet the V P Singh fate.

The non-BJP opposition is waiting for that day. Their sympathy with him is beyond doubt. What is doubtful is whether he can get the same kind of support. This will depend on the waves he can make. Much more will depend on how much support he can muster within the Congress

has expressed her opinion on the reasons for the Congress rout in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. She may have even cautioned him against groupism that had come to develop in the party in the absence of a clear thrust. But she could not have given him any indication whether she would be taking an active part in the Congress deliberations or activities. At present she is a court of appeal. Were she to jump in, she would be a client. She must have calculated all this before giving the green signal to Arjun Singh.

That she would want the dynasty to play the role at some time — whether the son or the daughter — is getting confirmed gradually. Her argument may be altruistic. She may be genuinely convinced that India needed for its unity a symbol which the dynasty alone can provide. If one were to regard Arjun Singh's resignation as the first move, the jigsaw puzzle may be easy to solve.

Much binding in the Congress marsh is the corruption. The impression about that are in the party for personal gains. That is the main reason why Rao's has been postponing the reshuffle of the cabinet; those who are not made ministers may become dissidents. Had Rao dropped on his own B Shankaranand, Kalpana Rai and Rameshwar Thakur, the three trained persons, from the council of min-

isters, he would have earned the credit of cleansing the government. His prestige would have gone up. Now it looks a step that the opposition and the media has forced him to take.

In fact, he is seen dragging the feet whenever it comes to acting against those who lack integrity. His mathematics on such things is faulty. He does not believe that two and two make four in the field of graft.

I think the biggest fallout of Arjun Singh's exit is the suspicion he has raised against Rao's capacity to govern. This does not, however, mean that Arjun Singh is on a strong wicket. Those who prefer to keep quiet and speak out when the climate is favourable lose the ring of their own credibility. Their criticism loses its edge.

We, in the media, are grateful to Arjun Singh because his letter gives a peep into the working of the government. How wanting does it look? One thing may lead to another. More disclosures may be available to determine the depth of the rot. The Congress (I) will be the worst sufferer because charges and counter-charges will be traded in public, to the detriment of the party's interest. The prime minister's authority will be further eroded. His own partymen will disdain him for his weakness.

All this would have mattered little if the damage had been confined to the Congress. But imagine the harm the blows that the Congress (I) will be inflicting on the body politic of India till the next parliamentary election in June 1996. If Arjun Singh's resignation can lead to the advance of elections, say, by one year, it will be the sweetest fallout for the nation.

through the Swiss highways. She also uses French and Italian seaports in trading with other countries. As Bangladesh is concerned about her security, she could sign a temporary transit treaty with India keeping two important provisions as compulsions: a) Bangladesh will take responsibility for the movement of Indian goods in her territory, i.e., there will be no Indian interference in the territory of Bangladesh for the purpose of goods' movement and b) all sorts of military equipment will remain out of transit facility.

The Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Peace between the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Republic of India is going to expire on 19 March 1997. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Awami League has proclaimed her decision in favour of not renewing the treaty and the BNP yet has not spoken on the issue. But in order to maintain excellent relations with neighbouring countries, it is necessary to continue any co-operation treaty. So, a transit treaty between India and Bangladesh can also fill the upcoming vacuum.

Considering all the facts it seems that, India wants to relate the transit proposal with the share of the Ganges water, but it will not be helpful for Bangladesh to confuse the transit issue with anything other than trade and commerce. On the other hand, Bangladesh should bear in mind that international relations is a game of 'give and take'; if she wants to get something, she must have to give something. Hence, it is time to consider the Indian proposal keeping the concept of national interest in the heart of the matter.

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Transit Issue and Raison D'etre

by Badrul Hassan

state for tactful diplomatic device. The present government has succeeded to solve only one problem (repatriation of Chakma refugees) from a long list of outstanding complex issues between Bangladesh and India. In recent days, diplomatic efforts of Bangladesh have failed to settle the Ganges water dispute. The experts criticise Bangladesh's campaigns as 'poor diplomacy' although India is not sincere enough to solve the issue.

In the meantime, a new issue has been added in the index of Bangladesh-India relations. On August 3, 1994, an 18-member Indian business delegation visited Bangladesh

delegation left Bangladesh. Foreign Minister Mustafizur Rahman's 'silent diplomacy' became active and within three days of receiving the proposal, he gave a cold shoulder to the Indian counterpart after an inter-ministerial meeting, arguing 'granting transit facility to India might pose a threat to the greater interest of the nation'.

In order to develop interstate relations a state formulates a number of models keeping keen attention on the weaknesses of the opposite state and chooses the highest rational option which will help and influence in getting special concessions. India

1976 and 1980, Bangladesh signed two separate trade and transit agreements with Nepal and Bhutan respectively. But both the treaties were remained ineffective due to India's continued rejection of granting prescribed two-way transit facility. Bangladesh is being operating nominal trade with Bhutan depending on irregular Indian transit booking and trade with Nepal usually via Calcutta port. Since her independence Bangladesh has been keen to strengthen bilateral ties with Bhutan and Nepal; so, she could connect the two-way transit issue with the Indian proposal.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has

sent the current trade ratio between Bangladesh and India is 1:45 which is far beyond Bangladesh's control to bridge. Besides, these figures only indicate the approved trade, let alone the illegal border trafficking round the year. To reduce the gap, Bangladesh is stressing on more imports by India with more lower tariff barriers against her goods. But experts say these traditional proposal will not be effective to reduce such sky-high trade gap.

PD Patodia's second proposition was to use Bangladesh as a distribution point for Indian goods to their north-eastern provinces. To that extent,

A weak and small state in terms of economy, politics and military capability can easily be cornered by a strong neighbour. In such an adverse situation a weak state can get out of this circumference only with the assistance of politico-diplomatic wisdom and intelligence.

to attend the meeting of the Bangladesh-India Joint Trade Council under the leadership of PD Patodia, chairman of the council. During meeting with Bangladeshi counterparts they formally offered a package of proposals which reportedly R L Vatia, the deputy foreign minister of India had conveyed a few months back. The main topic of the proposal was the opening of the Chittagong port for transit movement of the Indian goods through Bangladesh to the seven north-eastern provinces of India.

Several newspapers of both the countries had more or less discussed the issue for years. So, it is obvious that the government of Bangladesh was informed about such proposal even before India placed it. We do not know whether there was any preparatory discussion at the decision-makers' level, but no sooner had the Indian

maintains communication with her north-eastern land-locked seven provinces through the Shilliguri corridor which is only 14 miles wide. For this reason alone it is very important for India to get an access to the Chittagong port for easy movement of goods to its north-eastern provinces. In this connection, Bangladesh possesses better issue-specific power. Bangladesh could ask for some valuable concessions which might offer her huge foreign currency as well as promote bilateral relations with India.

Bhutan and Nepal are two land-locked countries in the region. They maintain their foreign trade through Indian seaports and territories. Bangladesh could be an alternative transit channel for their foreign trade, and has indeed agreed to grant similar facilities to both the countries. In

taken initiative to construct the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge (JMB) which is the biggest long-range and expensive project in the history of Bangladesh. Experts assume that the bridge is going to open a new horizon in the intra-structural development of Bangladesh. If it is possible to facilitate transit movement of Bhutanese, Nepalese and Indian goods through the JMB, it is sure that Bangladesh will be the ultimate gainer.

The trade gap between Bangladesh and India, is increasing only too rapidly. Imports from India was 87 million US dollars in 1987-88 and it quadrupled in 1992-93 and recently it is five-fold at 435.31 million US dollars. In contrast, Bangladesh's export to India was 8.87 million US dollars in 1987-88 and it rose to only 9.57 million US dollars in 1993-94 fiscal year. At pre-

Bangladesh could put forward some exceptional proposals which would fulfil Indian aim and also help reduce the trade gap. India could invest in Bangladesh and set up industries under 'buy back' condition (where product comes back to the investing country and the profit is divided between both the countries) of those products which she wanted to distribute from Bangladesh.

Opening of the seaport and granting transit facility to a third country for trade and movement of goods are a world wide known custom. India also grants similar favours to Bhutan and Nepal while she enjoys navigational right through the Bangladeshi territorial water. Switzerland is also a land-locked country, she facilitates the French, German and Italian lorries in maintaining their inter-state trade

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Dilip Kumar

Sir, He came, he saw and he conquered the hearts of millions of Bangladeshis. The noted, celebrated and legendary kingpin of the silver screen, of Indian Hindi film, who acted for a span of about half century, graced the soil of Bangladesh by his presence on January 22 on an unofficial 6-day private visit. His memorable visit has aroused a keen interest, enthusiasm and up-beat amongst his fans, including nostalgic septuagenarians like me, for this matinee idol and heart-throb of hundreds of millions of people of the sub-continent.

The eminent, illustrious and a gifted leading celluloid heroine of Indian cine screen of late thirties and early forties, Devika Rani of Bombay Talkies, and the niece of Rabindranath Tagore, while shopping in Bombay sometime in 1944, happened to meet Yusuf Khan of Peshwar, then a slim and strapping youth of about 21, selling fruits in his father's fruit stall. She was impressed, charmed and inspired by his charismatic personality and induced him to

enter the canopy and compass of filmworld. At first, due to lack of self-confidence, he was a wee bit hesitant, but following insistence by her, he took up the gauntlet and dashed into the filmworld. Under the assumed name of Dilip Kumar, he set off his first lead role in 'Jowar Bhata', with the movie queen, Midrula, in 1944. I was then a fourth year student of Presidency College, Calcutta and watched this film in Joyti cinema. He rose to limelight in the leading role with the melody queen, Nur Jehan, in 'Jugnu'.

Producer and Director, Mehboob Khan thereafter cast him in the leading role with Nadira in the first colour picture 'Aan'. Meanwhile, in super hit pictures like 'Andaz', 'Deedar', 'Mela', 'Babuji' etc, he played leading roles with the most glamorous, glitzy and legendary and the most renowned heroine of the sub-continent, the late lamented Nargis (Kaneez Fatima). His wife Saira Banu, herself an actress of repute, is the daughter of Naseem Banu, one time beauty queen of Indian cine screen of late thirties. Dilip acted in all about 60 films. His

characteristic keynote lies in tragedy films, with his distinctive and inimitable roles and expression and unique delivery of dialogue which was replete with pathos and emotion.

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Role of DUTA

Sir, I am a bit puzzled to find that the newly elected DUTA command centre is publicly airing its opinion on diverse issues in current affairs at home and abroad. Very dynamic and noble objective. Other intellectual bodies can (and do) indulge in similar simulation exercises. If they mind others' business, who will mind their business (asking for 10 per cent increase is a part of own business)? Let us hope issuing 100 press releases a year will make Dhaka a better place to live in.

Harassed citizen  
Dhaka

Unfortunate Chechnya

Sir, History informs us that the tiny Caucasus Republic of Chechnya was never a part of Russian Federation, the largest component of former Soviet Union. The said small republic was first attacked by the Czar of Russia in 1839, but the brave Chechnyans repulsed the attack successfully to remain as an independent state. Again

the notorious rulers from Moscow, a city that was established in 1147 A D, invaded Chechnya and in spite of heroic resistance by the people the country was annexed to Russia. During the Communist rule in Soviet Union the Muslims of the Caucasus region were dispersed to different areas of the Union in order to jeopardise the unity, faith and discipline they cherished in hearts and heads.

The Caucasus region is rich in minerals, especially petroleum, for which perhaps the imperialist design of Moscow let them not to live in peace and harmony. Though the capital of Grozny is taken by the Red Army, the fight shall not come to an end because the Muslim Chechnyans are born to fight and they are those who know not how to surrender to foreign rulers. However, through the running war two things have come to light from dark:

1) The Muslim world believes in unity and harmony on paper; and factually the OIC is a white elephant being proved once again. And that is why no Muslim country recognised Chechnyan Republic. In other words the Muslim countries are too guided by global strategy than working for distressed people, at least in the wake of Russian invasion. Probably the leaders of Muslim countries have failed to perceive the teachings of Verse 75, Chapter 4 of Al-Quran. 2. The myth of Red Army of

former Soviet Union is gone. Frankly speaking the myth ended before in the war against Afghanistan. This is that Red Army whom the West feared like anything, and now the leaders of West feel ease that in the event of any future war the Russian soldiers will disperse like pack of cards. What appears to me is that the Russian Federation is facing yet another disintegration.

It is, however, no matter whether a Muslim country recognises Grozny or not; history says truth cannot be subjugated for ever.

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To care for guest birds and fish fries

Sir, That guest birds are welcome and not to be shot for sports and then eating, is well understood. Similarly, fish fries (young ones) are not to be netted and caught for marketing by fishermen and then fried (especially hilsa babies) for chewing by buyers. Everybody fully appreciates the objectives on which these guest birds and baby fishes are to be spared and not killed. The law of the land has also provided protective umbrella. But seemingly, neither moral force nor the law is effective, as you may notice the captivated birds in the city streets offered to the possible buyers or crying fish babies caught by 'current net' readily available in abundance in the bazaars.

For the sake of morality and for the sake of legality, may I, through this column, urge our Home Minister or Home Secretary or Inspector General of Police, to arrest those sellers of birds or baby fishes wherever they are found — in cities, towns or village market places. You will get good results.

Enayet Sobhan  
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Students and politics

Sir, Students are assets of a country; they are the blood of the nation. But in our country some of them appear to be the black sheep of some political parties. They get arms and explosives; then they think that those arms and explosives can turn everything impossible into possible. They are violating the educational institutions; they don't even think for a moment what they are doing!

In many a foreign country it is quite impossible that a student ends another student's life with explosives. Friendly attitude has run out from the campuses. Will the students understand that students are friends, and a friend cannot destroy the life of a friend for only some simple conflict on petty matters? Why don't they understand that they are being used rather for personal interests and not for any national interest? Will their conscience rise up yet again?

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