

DOWN TO EARTH

The Spectre of Price Spiral

By ASM Nurunnabi

Price hike of almost all essentials has lately become a matter of serious concern. Price rise, especially of rice, has hit the consumers hard. The sudden spurt in the prices of essentials has set in motion a rising inflationary trend.

There has been an unprecedented rise in price during the last two months. Compared to the last year's figure, rice price has registered a staggering rise. A random survey in the city markets suggested that prices of all varieties of rice rose by Tk 2 to 3 per kg.

Last year the prices were at least Tk 4 below the present level. All varieties of pulses underwent a price change and rose by Tk 4 per kg. Similar is the case with fishes. As there was inadequate rainfall and no floods in the country during the last rainy season, there has been a persistent scarcity of fishes in the local markets. Prices of smuggled fishes are exorbitant.

As regards other commodities, vegetable prices did not come down as expected. Tomato, potato, and all varieties of leafy vegetables are being sold at higher prices than last year. Garlic price has surpassed all previous records. The garlic price rose to Tk 120 per kg — an all-time high in the country. Last year this sold at Tk 40 per kg at this time. Turmeric and ginger have gone beyond the purchasing capacity of the common people. Higher price also included powdered milk, soyabean and rapeseed oil.

Thus we find that the prices of all commodities registered a phenomenal growth.

There is a general apprehension that difficult days are ahead during the Ramzan days. Bumper rice harvests in the last three years consecutive years raised the hope of near self-sufficiency in the food sector. Then how is it that the price of rice jumped so alarmingly? The prolonged drought in the northern regions of the country took some toll in Aman production, but the Ministry of Food sources claimed that the shortfall in Aman production would be on the whole not substantial, leaving only marginal impact on the supply position of food grains in the country. Now it appears that the market forces are not dictating the price mechanism.

In a free market economy it is normal that if prices rise on account of shortfall and if there is a real shortfall no machinery can check the price spiral. Now it is to be seen whether the price hike is artificial or real. Impartial observers are of the view that profit mongering is at the bottom of such a situation. A section of unscrupulous traders and hoarders with profit mongering tendency tend to create artificial shortage in the market.

In this situation, some sort of supervisory measure by the policymakers in unison with the relevant trading community is needed to contain the adverse effects of such trends in the country. The government has already gone in for open market sale of rice and oil.

It is felt that as important as the government control to check unbridled profiteering

is the need for further development of consumer protection bodies like the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) which with their enhanced research and survey abilities may help reduce exploitation of consumers. Lapses on the part of any agency need to be dealt with properly with preventive and palliative measure so as to ensure the balancing of demand and supply if the availability of goods and services for the increasing number of consumers is not to suffer.

A disturbing aspect of the present economy scenario is that the growth pattern of prices and essentials is much in excess of the existing pay structure of employees both in the public and private sectors. Movement for further pay enhancement was gaining ground. Though the movement was temporarily contained by concession of 10 per cent dearness allowance to its employees, the rising trend of prices unless checked will reverse the movement for pay hike again.

CAB surveys indicate that the price hike of essential and housing have registered disproportionate rise as against the recent small increase in dearness allowance. With the continuous influx of rural people into the cities and towns, problems are multiplying taking its toll with further price escalation.

Analysts say that the need of the hour is the adoption of effective measures of price control, particularly bridling the tendencies of hoarders and profiteers and raising production at all levels.



Roy Disney (2nd L), nephew of Walt Disney and head of the famous cartoon studios, is flanked by characters of Disney films as he receives the German Video Prize 1995 at Munich's Prinzregenten Theater Thursday. Roy Disney was honoured for his life works by the German Video Academy. — AFP photo

Russian tanks break through Chechen defences near Grozny

GOTTI (Russia), Feb 3: Russian tanks and infantry broke through Chechen defences southeast of Grozny today, reaching a major crossroads that controls the last open road into the city. Chechen soldiers said, reports AFP.

"I don't know where they came from, but the tanks and soldiers are at the crossroads," said Akhmed Gilayev, a retreating Chechen soldier.

The crossroads is about 12 kilometres south of Grozny and controls traffic moving from Chechen-held territory in and out of the city.

Yamadaye Khalid, military commander in the Gudermes region, said a Russian assault launched from neighbouring Dagestan was expected within a week.

Khalid's region includes the major town of Gudermes, 28 kilometres east of Grozny and 21 villages.

The push, involving some 300 vehicles, including 40 Grad multiple-rocket launchers, would also hit slightly further south in Shali, giving the Russians full control over

eastern Chechnya, Khalid said. "They want to surround Grozny," he said.

Khalid said his spy network told him the Russian column would enter on an unmarked military road from Dagestan.

Reuter adds: a top Russian commander said the Kremlin faced a guerilla war in Chechnya as fighting between Russian forces and Chechen rebels raged in and around Grozny.

A Russian government statement said the situation remained 'tense' in the north Caucasus territory, which declared its independence from Moscow three years ago.

The statement said Russian forces, who have been trying to win full control of Grozny since December 31, killed 24 rebel fighters in the last 24 hours but did not give its own losses.

General Ivan Babichev, who commands Russian forces trying to capture Grozny from the west, was quoted by the independent NTV television station as saying: "the fighting will not end soon."

AP says Russia's war in

Chechnya has created the country's worst medical crisis in years, and authorities now fear outbreaks of cholera, diphtheria and the plague in the region, the health minister said today.

The months of fighting have rendered clean drinking water a rare luxury, and scores of trained doctors have fled the hardest-hit areas.

"Where we used to have hundreds of qualified local doctors, we now have only handfuls," Health Minister Eduard Nechayev said at a news conference.

Nechayev called the medical crisis in the war-torn region the worst challenge his administration has had to face in over six years, since the Armenian earthquake in 1988.

The Caucasus Mountains region has suffered several outbreaks of infectious disease in recent years.

Extension of overbridge may be delayed

By Staff Correspondent

Extension work on the Farmgate overbridge may be delayed because relevant authorities are taking long to rearrange electricity and water supplies at the site, sources said.

Extension of the overbridge for connecting its eastern flights with the pavements is scheduled to end by mid-April.

"We applied to the local electricity office a week ago," said the source, "but every time they are asking for a new paper. To get these papers we are going from office to office." He added, "this is consuming a lot of time."

The Tk 25 lakh extension work of the Farmgate overbridge is a part of the Dhaka City Corporation's plan to construct four overbridges at Airport Road, Jatrabari, Shyamoli and Shanir Akhra at a cost of Tk 2.8 crore. All works were earlier scheduled to be completed by April, according to DCC officials.

US, European countries pull 93 unsafe drugs off market

WASHINGTON, Feb 3: Pharmaceutical records show European countries have had to pull off the market two to three times as many unsafe drugs as the United States, adding fuel to a growing battle to restrain US drug regulators, reports AP.

Propelled by increasing arguments that the Food and Drug Administration hurts Americans by overly restricting new drugs, an advocate of strict regulation compiled records from the FDA, Britain, France and Germany to compare the countries safety.

Dr Sidney Wolfe of Public Citizen's Health Research Group reported Thursday that the four countries had to pull 56 drugs off the market between 1970 and 1992. All had proved a health threat, and dozens of deaths were attributed to them.

The United States withdrew nine drugs, Britain 23, Germany 30 and France 31.

Each country blocked at least some drugs that later were withdrawn from another. For example, the United States withdrew six drugs that France never allowed, while France pulled 28 drugs never sold

here. And some drugs were withdrawn from one country but can still be bought in another, such as the sleeping pill Halcion that England has banned but is still sold in the United States.

Among the 56 drugs pulled, problems ranged from animal tests that prompted France to withdraw a potassium supplement feared carcinogenic, to liver failures from a US diuretic, to a painkiller that ate through the linings of people's stomachs and intestines in England and Germany, causing at least 36 deaths.

"It is clear from this study that the more-stringent drug safety and efficacy laws and regulations in the United States have saved many lives," concluded Wolfe, a frequent FDA critic who says the agency

isn't strict enough.

But groups that want to re-vamp the FDA argued that the data don't address the growing battle over the agency, which they contend kills sick Americans by delaying new therapies. The FDA takes an average of 19 months to approve a drug. Some critics say any drug approved overseas should be given automatic approval by the FDA.

"What it says is it's a mixed bag at best," said Brent Bahler of Citizens for a Sound Economy. "Obviously there's a lot that's not shown here, and we're just getting a snapshot that needs to be placed alongside other information."

Indeed, the report doesn't indicate standards used to evaluate drugs, noted Steve Berchem of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association. Nor does it say how many drugs each country allowed on the market during the 22 years, nor compare drug approval times.

The FDA welcomed the report as its first support after a month of attacks. It was announced Wednesday that the US Congress may begin hearings on reforming the agency this month.

Indian books

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Sammijityo Sangskritik Jote Golam Qudus and leaders of Muktiyoddha Chhatra Command, were present during the operation.

Earlier, organisers of the fair, imposed a ban on the selling of Indian publications and posters at the fair. However, the ban was being ignored by some stall-owners since the inaugural day on February 1.

Senator Domenici

From Page 1 Col 8
Breakfast Meeting.
The state minister conveyed the greetings of the Bangladeshi parliamentarians to Senator Domenici and to other senators.

During the discussion he also extended an invitation to Senator Domenici to visit Bangladesh. The senator is currently the chairman of the Senate Sub-committee on Energy and Water Resources of the Appropriation Committee. The state minister was accompanied by Mr Iftikharul Karim, counsellor in the embassy.

Earlier, the state minister attended a luncheon in which the chief guest was the US Vice President Al Gore. At the luncheon Vice-President Al Gore prayed for world peace and understanding.

Couple arrested on charge of killing 3

SIRAJGANJ, Feb 3: Police have arrested a couple on charge of killing a young man and his two sisters in village Durgatpara of Kazipur thana on Wednesday, reports UNB.

Abdul Bari and his wife Jahanara Begum, arrested Thursday, confessed to police that they had poisoned the three to death for grabbing their property.

The victims are: Selina Khatun, 27, a teacher of RD Girls High School, Rokeya Khatun, 22, teacher of Zogachha Primary School and their brother Abu Bakar Siddiqui Bablu, 20, a student of Mansur Ali Government School.

Autopsy of the bodies was completed at Sirajganj General Hospital.

US hails Lanka for truce

WASHINGTON, Feb 3: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher congratulated Sri Lanka's foreign secretary Thursday on the cease-fire concluded last month in the country's 11-year civil war, reports AP.

Nor'westers

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mm rain followed by 8-12 mm rain in the Rajshahi division.

Khulna and Barisal divisions are likely to have 15-20 mm shower during the period, the Met Office added.

Military presence in CHT reduced

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ence in civil matters was not desirable, it states that as in other countries with insurgency problems, military presence in the CHT became inevitable.

The government felt compelled to call in the armed forces for the sake of security in aid of the civil administration on October 6, 1976.

The Shantibahini, it said, had mounted its first ambush on a patrol sometime in early 1975.

"If police or other para-military forces had adequate strength, equipment and training, the military would not have been engaged."

The report adds, "There is also the trans-border security consideration of the ethnic conflict engineered by a small group of disgruntled members of the tribe."

"The evidence of Indian support and involvement in the insurgency was all the more a reason for grave concern. Not only did India lend tactical support but it also gave active support to the insurgents operating from bases well within the Indian border. This called for inevitable intervention by the military," the PROBE report said.

It cited that India went to the extent of deploying troops in Sri Lanka to quell Tamil insurgents. There had also been widespread deployment of Indian army in the entire insurgency-prone north-eastern states.

"So deploying armed forces

within a country's borders is only natural," the report says "all the more so when a neighbouring big power is involved."

So far, over 300 military and para-military personnel have been killed during the counter-insurgency. Other than that, while serving in the mosquito-infested bushes of the hills, over one hundred members of the security forces died of malaria alone, it said.

No new cantonment is being set up at Ghagra, Rangamati, as the CHT Commission alleges.

The investigation shows that the Ghagra Cantonment was established in the early 1980s. "It is only natural for a cantonment to be set up for strategic and tactical grounds. Two new cantonments have been set up in the plains too. It is not just something reserved for the hilly region, as has been implied."

The CHT Commission had earlier alleged that an extra budget is allocated for counter insurgency. Upon inquiry, the Finance Ministry told the investigators that there were no separate budgetary allocations for counter-insurgency in the CHT, PROBE said.

This is used from the allocated budget of the military and the Home Ministry. The only extra allocation is 1000 maunds of wheat per month for "pacification purposes," such as building of schools, roads etc.

The report quoted an offi-

cial of the Comptroller and Auditor General's office as saying, "there is simply no scope for any expenditure to go unaccounted for by the civil government. Every penny is accounted for."

The publication also rejects the allegation in the CHT Commission's Update-2 report that British and US army officers were giving counter-insurgency training to the Bangladesh army personnel.

Under an agreement between the British government and the Bangladesh government in 1977, officers of the British army were in Bangladesh till 1990 to help establish and expand the Staff College at Mirpur. "Counter-insurgency had no part here," the investigation revealed.

The PROBE publication quotes GOC, 24 Infantry Division Major General Azizur Rahman as saying, "the confusion of the government was due to many reasons for which it vested the responsibility with the GOC. I have already informed the authorities concerned of my feelings and in the near future, with the improvement of the situation, we hope the matter would be resolved."

Through exhaustive investigations, it was revealed that there had been a significant increase in conversion to Christianity in the CHT region. The PROBE enquiry revealed that since 1981, 337 persons have adopted Christianity, while 88 have adopted Islam in the hills. It

points out that while seven missionaries and three Christian-based NGOs are active in the area, Rabitat al Islami, is the only Muslim NGO in the area.

Marriage is seen as the main cause of conversion to Islam. Monetary and other facilities from the missionaries are seen as the main motive behind conversion to Christianity, though the publication does feel that religious ideals have also caused many tribals to change faith.

The PROBE report notes that while The Special Powers Act is in force and it has brought a stream of protest from various sections of the society and the political parties have been vocal about it, the CHT Commission's report implying that the authorities use this power against the tribals of CHT is not true.

"It is used against persons from anywhere in the country. In fact, it is the non-tribal Bengali population in the cities who are most vocal against the Special Powers Act," PROBE commented.

It was critical of the present stand of the Local Government Council (LGC). It felt that the way the specified subjects have been handed over to the LGC has not been smooth, and has taken more time than stipulated.

The PROBE report suggested that elections to the council were imperative and the institution should play an effective role.

The Midnight File

Arab FM's meet tomorrow

CAIRO, Feb 3: Foreign ministers from Egypt, Syria and the six Gulf Arab states are to focus on ways to improve inter-Arab relations when they meet here on Sunday. Egypt's Foreign Minister Amr Moussa said today.

The meeting of the so-called Damascus declaration states will concentrate on the contributions of member countries to efforts to improve relations in the Arab world and strengthen cooperation. Moussa told reporters, reports AFP.

9 shot dead in Colombia

BOGOTA, Feb 3: Gunmen burst into a Colombian farm where a family was praying for a murdered relative and sprayed the grieving mourners with bullets, killing all nine of them, police said today. The youngest of the victims was a three-year-old girl. A tenth person, who apparently acted as a driver for the killers was murdered minutes later to ensure his silence, reports Reuter.

Margarine: Latest study

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hydrogenisation process that hardens oils into something more resembling butter. They said the trans fatty acids formed in the process acted just like harmful substances in butter and other animal fats, raising blood fat levels and causing arteries to become clogged.

But in a series of reports in the Lancet medical journal, researchers said they could find no real link between trans fatty acids and heart disease.

Dr Rudolf Riemersma of the University of Edinburgh and colleagues around the world undertook a study in eight European countries and Israel.

They decided to look at human body tissues and see just how much trans fatty acid had been absorbed, figuring this would be the best indicator of how much of the substance their subjects actually ate.

They analysed the body tissues of about 700 men who had suffered heart attacks and another 700 who had not.

A second study measured trans fatty acid concentrations in the tissues of 66 British men who had died from coronary heart disease and more than 280 men who were healthy.

Coffee

From Page 1 Col 5

Researchers at Copenhagen's University Hospital said they had no conclusive explanation for the findings but suspected that the coffee might reduce blood pressure. The study of 2,984 men aged between 53 and 74, was carried out between 1985 and 1992.

2 murdered

From Page 1 Col 5
Wakil Mia said, their neighbours barged into their home and severely beat up Helal at one stage of an exchange of hot words among them.

Helal was immediately taken to the National Hospital from where he was referred to the Suhrawardy Hospital. But Helal succumbed to his injuries on the way, Wakil said.

Sutrapur police said they arrested two of Helal's neighbours — Abdul Hakim, 50, and his son Sajedul Alam Biplob, 25, — on charges of the murder.

The two detained by the police will be produced in court today.

An elderly rickshawpuller, Sirajul Islam was stabbed to death in the city's Soupar, Deura when he was returning home after tarabi prayers around 3.30 last night.

Sirajul Islam, 60, was attacked by unidentified youths who brutally stabbed and left him in a pool of blood on the road.

He was declared dead at the Mitford Hospital.

At Malibagh, Ibrahim alias Kazi Babul, suffered a bullet wound in his right thigh when two groups of armed men clashed over the death of Liton. Ibrahim was admitted to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Liton, 19, was shot dead Thursday night in a feud with the local bulles.

Chakmas

From Page 1 Col 7
Bangladesh border. Health Minister of Tripura Keshab Majumdar, Youth and Sports Minister Jiten Chowdhury, secretary to the state governor, relief commissioner, district magistrate of south Tripura and high officials received the Bangladesh delegation.

Addressing the refugees in camps, the communications minister said the government had already fulfilled all its pledges given to those who had returned home officially or on their will. "All returnee families have got back their normal life with full security," he added.

Rashed Khan Menon MP, referring to allegations raised by president of the Parbatya Chattagram Jumm Saranathi Kalyan Samity Upendra Lal Chakma, said that all aspects, relating to the return of refugees were included in the agreement signed between him and Chakma on June 30, 1994 in Rangbar.

See Page 2

Neither study found any difference in the levels of trans fatty acid in the tissues.

"Our study and other epidemiological evidence indicate that the relations between trans fatty acids intake and increased risk of coronary heart disease remains unproven," the researchers, who included Riemersma, wrote.

"What we found is that there was no consistent relationship," Riemersma said in a telephone interview. "In Britain, if you adjusted for socioeconomic factors or for smoking, then there was no relationship whatsoever."

In 1993, Harvard University researchers studied 85,000 nurses and found those who said they ate the highest amounts of margarine were far more likely to suffer heart disease than the ones who said they ate less.

These findings sent people rushing back to the butter dish. But Paul McKeigue of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said the Harvard study — which relied on questionnaires asking people about what they ate — was flawed.

63 HIV cases

From Page 1 Col 7

The WHO's EPI model predicts that between 1,47,000 and 7,03,000 Bangladeshis might contract HIV by the end of the century — by the time a serious anti-AIDS programme takes off in the country.

The researchers say that the HIV/AIDS situation in South Asia, including Bangladesh, would continue to get worse in the coming years because of high population and lack of resources for the detection and prevention of the disease.

As the model predicts, between 16 thousand and 62 thousands of the estimated patients would have developed symptoms of AIDS or died of the disease, they say.

The researchers calculate that Bangladesh would have to spend about Tk 1.6 billion if 16,000 people develop AIDS by the year 2000, as projected in the WHO's EPI model.

Roughly Tk one lakh would be required for a Bangladeshi patient to treat his life time AIDS-related complications, the count said.

For the 62,000 projected victims, total estimated expenditure would cross Tk 6.2 billion — 70 per cent of the current allocation for all activities in the country's health sector, according to a Panos AIDS briefing document prepared for Bangladesh media.

Road accident

From Page 1 Col 4
West Madarbari in the city.

The dead was identified as Abu Bakar Siddiqui, 17. The injured were admitted to local clinics for treatment.

The truck was held by the angry people, but the driver fled the scene, police said.

UNB from Lalmonirhat adds, two passengers were killed and 25 wounded when a Dhaka-Burimari night coach fell into a roadside ditch at Rotherpur under Aditmari thana, 16 km from here yesterday.

Nurul Islam, 27, died on the spot while Dharendra Nath Roy, 50 of Bhaluka thana under Mymensingh district succumbed to his injuries at Lalmonirhat Sadar Hospital.

The injured were admitted to Lalmonirhat Sadar Hospital and Kalganj Thana Health Complex. Condition of three of them were stated to be critical.

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