

SKOP's Strike Call

There is something new in the latest 48-hour strike call, on 4-5 April, by the federation of 18 trade unions, known as SKOP. In the press conference on Thursday, the labour leaders have said that they hoped the problems would be resolved through a dialogue, averting the strike.

We have commented earlier that this government has the habit of waiting till the very last moment before it starts any negotiating process. This tactic, if it can at all be called as such, creates the impression that it is not the justness of the demand, but the pressure that the demanding organisation can bring to bear upon the government, which ultimately clinches an issue.

April 4-5 is not too far away. But on the other hand, it is not next week either. If there is a will, we think, there is sufficient time to resolve the issues. The strongest point in favour of SKOP is that it is asking the government to implement agreements made earlier. As we had stated in our earlier editorials on the subject, a government must honour its obligations — unless there are overwhelming reasons not to. In such a case government must come out in public with the reasons why it is stepping back.

Opinion Polls by BUP

Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP), a leading think-tank in the country, made public a recent opinion poll conducted under its auspices. The survey gives some interesting indications of what is going on in the public mind. The poll was conducted during the month of January and February last among 1,862 respondents, drawn from voting age groups, consisting of 28 urban and 72 per cent rural samples. The poll revealed that 41 per cent held the ruling party responsible for the present political crisis, as against 25 per cent blaming the Opposition. However, 59 per cent considered improper the opposition's resignation from the parliament.

The BUP poll is worthy of notice for several reasons. First, the total number of respondents is quite high. Second, the fact that 72 per cent of those whose opinions were sought belonged to our villages makes the poll quite unique, and representative. Finally, the poll results are as recent as one can get. All these factors, plus the reputation of BUP as a rigorous-research body makes for the poll to be one that should be seriously considered by all those who are interested to learn about public mind.

Where are the Coins Going?

Prices are on a devastating march. With no sign of stopping anywhere at any time. Rice has climbed one hundred per cent in less than ten years. Eid is now well past, still meat has gone up by 20 taka for a kg over the Eid rate. As with fertiliser, there are one or two big factors, manipulative rather than market-force ones, which are doing the propelling. But there are myriad other smaller causes contributing to the artificial price boom.

That was no vanishing trick. Government is phasing this note out and replacing it with the one-taka coin. Where are then these coins? They are a very rare sight, if at all. In the absence of both the note and the coin — the smallest legal tender, for all practical purposes, has risen to Tk 2. Coins smaller than one-taka value were long out of use, only adolescent girls were wont to hoard them for telephoning on the sly from coin-boxes.

A report from Jhenidah, published in Thursday's Daily Star gives a clue to where the coins are going. At Benapole and Khalishpur-Jhenidah and Darshana in Chuadanga the one-taka coin is selling for up to 1.30 taka. The coins are travelling across the border and coming back transformed into jewellery having an eager market in Bangladesh.

This is hard to believe as modern banking practice makes it sure that coins do not have their metal value get anywhere near their legal face value, precisely to discourage melting these for others purposes. Perhaps some error has crept into Bangladesh Bank's minting calculations. If the report is true urgent measures would be needed not to issue these coins anymore and replace these with a new one that would not accrue profit as a metal.

Frightful Fire in Fertiliser Market

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



If one scans the newspaper reports of the last few weeks, one can, perhaps, guess the havoc that the recent fertiliser crisis seemingly gave rise to. Fertiliser shortage in different parts of the country is reported to have hiked the price from Tk 230 a bag (Tk 4.60/kg) to Tk 400-500 a bag (Tk 8.0-Tk 10.0/kg).

Heart Breaking, Record Making

Quite obviously, a rise in the price of this vital input for irrigation-led boro crops, by whatever margin it may be, should upset the calculus pertaining to net returns to farmers. Total fertiliser cost accounts for about one-third of the total cost of production of HYV boro/acre. For the small and marginal farmers who eke out a living by producing boro crop and who are reported to use fertilisers with more intensity than large and medium farmers, a price hike would mean much more than a mere common sense would justify.

When 'Fence Grabs the Crops'

If newspaper reports are taken for granted, then the faulty distribution mechanism should be adduced to the crisis. Whether that has to do with the whole privatisation of fertiliser distribution is, perhaps, difficult to establish because a crisis of this year's order could never be in evidence during the last few years or so. For example, during the same period last year, the price range was Tk 220-Tk 255. From what newspapers said it appears that it is the 'politicisation' of privatisation and corruption among officials, and traders that could be held responsible for the riots under public control also there could be politicisation and corruption. It is reported that many

compensate through boro output. And second, for the last two years, the acreage under boro fell (possibly due to the 1992 'dip' in rice price) and it is the time this year that farmers might warm up to grow more boro paddy. The traders' forecast seemed to hold good and the crisis deepened.

Therefore, privatisation of this most sensitive agricultural input should not have been left entirely to the whims of the dealers. Instead proper monitoring of the distribution should have acquired prominence in policy actions.

The government should, we think, hold a high powered enquiry committee (preferably headed by any judge) to ferret out the root cause of the crisis. At the same time, stern actions against those who lifted fertilisers but hoarded them or against those who used party's name (may be the party is innocent) to trade fertiliser. An enquiry commission is needed to reject the hypothesis that the party men were not responsible for all crisis. People may be interested to know who the culprits are and, perhaps, more so to know what happened to the culprits.

The above suggestion is for the sake of a healthy and meaningful privatisation that the present regime vows to uphold. The basic premise behind the success of privatisation is proper duty as it is the proper property rights. A government which claims to be the custodian of privatisation should see that the prices are right everywhere. After all, the fence of the field should not grab the crops therein.

Looking Back at

March towards Independence

March 18, 1971

In his statement the Awami League chief Sheikh Mujibur Rahman said: 'I regret that the Commission of Inquiry which has been announced, on the face of it cannot satisfy the demand voiced by me on behalf of the people of Bangladesh. Its very institution by a Martial Law Order and the provision for submission of its report to the Martial Law authority are highly objectionable. The terms of reference themselves betray the intention of pre-judging the most fundamental issue and to shut out inquiry into the real issues.'

The only term of reference is: 'To go into the circumstances which led to the calling of the Army in aid of civil power in various parts of East Pakistan between March 2 and March 9'. The fundamental issue is thus pre-judged, since what has to be inquired into is whether the deployment and use of force was in aid of ulterior political purposes and not at all in aid of civil power. The commission is further shut out from inquiring into the actual atrocities, which have been reported from various parts of Bangladesh, involving thousands of casualties. Thus, even the number of casualties and the circumstances in which unarmed civilians were shot down cannot be enquired into.

'Such a commission' can serve no useful purpose. Indeed such an inquiry would not at all be genuine inquiry aimed at arriving at the truth, but would be a mere device to mislead the people.

'We cannot, therefore, accept such a commission'. The people of Bangladesh shall not co-operate with such a commission, nor serve as its members.

'On behalf of the people we had made four-point demand on the 7th of March, 1971, one of those demands was that for fair, impartial and public inquiry with proper terms of reference. The nominal and piecemeal acceptance of one of those points and that too in the manner described above, cannot contribute to the solution of the grave crisis that faces us.'

Meanwhile, Sheikh Mujib had sent Capt. Mansur Ali, leader of Parliamentary party in the East Pakistan Assembly, Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed, Vice-President, East Pakistan Awami League and Mr Abidur Reza Khan, MNA-elect to Chittagong to make an on the spot enquiry into the recent firings and other incidents.

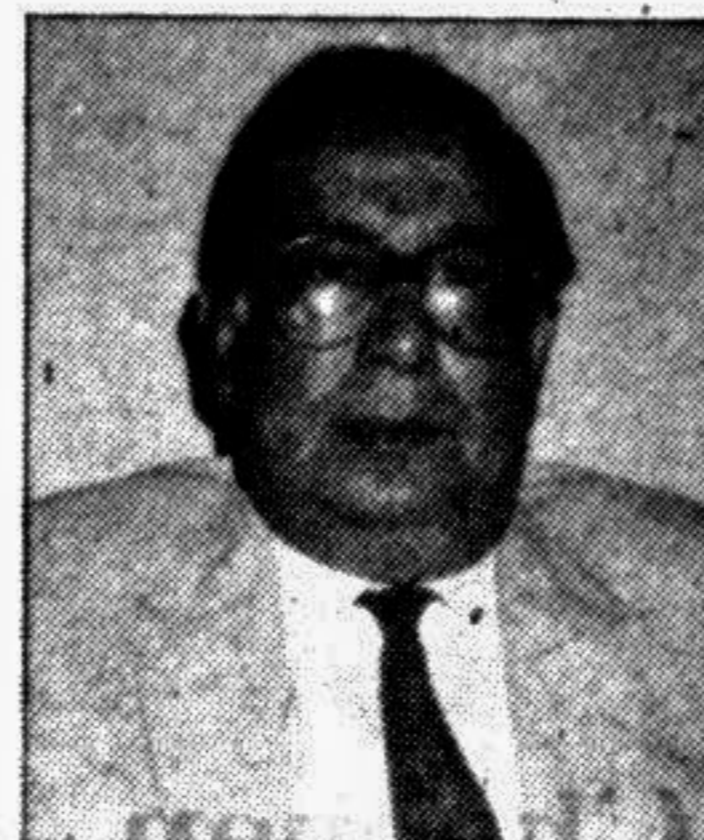
They were to assess the situation and report accordingly. It may be mentioned that Maulana Bhashani had also sent him a telegram to this effect.

(Compiled by Aasha Meherin Amin)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'It's a Crisis of Confidence, Basically'



Faruq Choudhury, a retired diplomat, has served as Foreign Secretary and as Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India. A popular and widely read columnist, in Bengali, he is an Adviser of BRAC, a Bangladeshi NGO. The following are his responses to The Daily Star questionnaire:

be is quite irrelevant to the resolution of domestic disputes in this country. The question is not the finding of an appropriate formula, the question is of bridging the credibility gap so that there is a meeting of the minds.

The next step to be taken is a crucial one. It should be well-thought-out and constructive. The Prime Minister has indicated that if necessary she would negotiate with the Leader of the opposition. The necessity is now apparent. So she herself and the Leader of the opposition of a small number of people nominated but fully authorized by them should immediately meet with the support of an agreed upon amicus curie to discuss and finalize the method, time and the organization of holding the next general elections. The Prime Minister has already said that she would quit a month prior to the elections. The Leader of the opposition has held that she would accept the President as the head of a non political caretaker government. So the constitution of a such a government could be discussed and finalized and if need be, the agreement could be made a part of the amended constitution for future adherence. This should be in the interest of all political parties.

Democratic traditions do not grow in a day. We must give those time. We have to make the right efforts. The present situation calls for the combined wisdom of both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the opposition.

DS: Everybody is talking about election, but when should it be held, within the next few months, or later in the year, or at its schedule time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for timing of your choice.

FC: Elections, of course, have to be held within the time frame provided for by the constitution. But then, elections can be held much before the expiry of this period, should the Prime Minister find that it will be in the long term interest of democracy in this country. If there is no other way of infusing life in this moribund parliament, the best way, of course, will be to hold free and fair elections, as early as possible.

DS: How to ensure an independent Election Commission? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed?

FC: I am not an expert on such matters but as a citizen I feel that the Election Commission in this country has not exercised its power in the manner it should have. I think our constitution and the recent enactment provide enough authority to the Election Commission, to ask the government to create conditions for the holding of free and fair elections. For instance, I have seen both the Election Commissioners in India and Sri Lanka in action from very close quarters. I

lavish entertainment etc should be forbidden. DS: What are your views on the mechanism under which the next election should be held? What about constitutional amendments? FC: We should have a strong civil bureaucracy and an independent Election Commission acting under a non-partisan government. Holding of smooth, impartial and fair elections not only depend on an objective policy making level, and an independent effective Election Commission, but also, and very importantly at that, on functioning of strong non-partisan civil bureaucracy. The permanent functionaries of the government should be in a position to act without fear or favor, as true servants of the Republic. They should be in a position to generate confidence in the minds of the people — the electorate, the voters. Transfer of officers on political considerations, rewarding public servants for partisan activities and utilizing government servants for party or political purposes should not only be strictly prohibited but should be brought under the preview of the consideration and judgement of the Election Commission all the time. In any functioning democracy, the role of the public servant is always politically above board. There have been cases in UK when permanent secretaries have refused offers of knighthood on consideration that there may be looked upon as acceptance of favor from the party in power. In India participation in any form of a public servant in political activities which include organization of meetings and welcome ceremonies for political leaders holding government office is prohibited. The principal political parties will have to ensure that the public servants act with confidence and objectivity under the protection of the law of the land. DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political understanding between the ruling party and the Opposition to ensure a free and fair election? Is such an understanding possible? If yes, then what should be the next step? If not, why not? FC: There should not only be understanding among the principal political parties but there should also be a clear understanding and correct appraisal of the evolving situation. If the opposition continues its governance till the constitutional stipulated period, the stalemate will not only continue but may well lead to disastrous consequences. Bangladesh may then subject itself to unacceptable interventions both from home and abroad. We must look around and learn from contemporary experiences. Let us not turn into a Somalia. The people of this country do deserve better.

To the Editor...

Strong Taka

Sir, This is in response to the letter titled 'Strong Taka' by Mr Ekram Belal, an expatriate Bangladeshi in New York, published on February 20, 1995.

This is a case where comments have been made and conclusions arrived at on hard economic facts of life and harsh realities of Bangladesh without knowing or understanding the underlying causes of it. Also, the prices of a few items or commodities cannot give any indication of what would be the proper value of Taka against other currencies.

In my view Taka is not only not overvalued but slightly undervalued because of favourable balance of payment in the last few years: result of low domestic demand and buying power of consumers. Also, there has been steady increase of foreign currency reserve, presently at about 4 billion US dollar — over 3 billion dollar in Bangladesh Bank account and nearly 1 billion dollar stashed away in mattresses and such other places because of lack of trust, poor service, inefficiency and corruption in the NCBs. It should be remembered hardly any of the remittances that come through the hundi system ever finds its way in any bank account.

The fact is much of the textile goods of Indian or Pakistani origin are cheaper in the world market because both these countries are major producers of cotton and also they do most of their own processing — spinning, weaving and finishing. They also manufacture their own textile machinery and chemicals like dyes, starch etc.

In contrast, Bangladesh not only has to import raw cotton or yarn but also the machinery and chemicals. Moreover, setting up of an industry here is not an easy task as this can be done only after greasing the palms or lining the pockets of officials concerned of the administration, banks and regulatory bodies. Sometimes this is not enough. Gifts of gold and precious stones to the wives (the universal bhau) will pave the way. Needless to say all these add to the cost of production and price.

One should also add to these the working or productive hours lost due to hartals, labour strife, power outage, high cost of utility services and numerous and unending national and religious holidays. It is a wonder anything is manufactured in this country at all.

Much is made out about the success of the garment industry which earns about 2 billion US dollar annually. In reality, Bangladesh earns only about 15 to 20 per cent of the amount as 80 per cent of the earnings

go for paying of the inputs which are all imported. Unfortunately, this vitally important industrial sector is controlled by Indian and Chinese businessmen based in Hong Kong or Singapore. Bangladeshis do not have the contacts, know-how or capital to get in the marketing aspect of the business where the lion's share of the profit lies.

The only solid and substantial income Bangladesh has is from the export of manpower. Even the garment industry income could be substantially increased by improving the skill, education and quality of human resources. This has been the key to the success of all the economically developed Asian countries.

Bangladesh is an import-oriented country and even imports basic necessities like rice, pulses, onions, cattle etc, not to speak of all the inputs of most industries. Any arbitrary devaluation of currency will further lower the buying power of the average consumer and drive them to desperation and social unrest.

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Zhirinovskiy's effrontery

Sir, It appears that after the humiliation in Afghanistan, collapse of the giant USSR and the on-going encounter with the brave Chechens some of the Moscow's leaders have lost their senses and they have started babbling in a vain and foolish fashion.

It is pity and shocking to watch Russian leader of the Opposition Vladimir Zhirinovskiy disorganizing venomous utterances that "Russian soldiers will one day wash their shoes in the Indian Ocean" and also telling some leaders in New Delhi that "India should effectively annex Pakistan and Bangladesh".

Have the 30 lakh Bangladeshis sacrificed their lives to be annexed with India? Has Moscow supported our war of independence in 1971 to become a part of India?

We wonder how a man like Zhirinovskiy can think about becoming the future President of Russia?

We strongly demand an unconditional apology from the Russian leader of the Opposition for his most objectionable and audacious remark against our independence and, as such, diplomatic action may be taken by our Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the government of Russia.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203