

Vajpayee in Office

With the induction of BJP-led coalition government in India under the premiership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee the intense speculations building for the last couple of week following the inconclusive poll results have come to an end. Although he will have to be confirmed in his position by next Friday's vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha he looks more or less set to cross that hurdle for three reasons. First, after prolonged deliberations in their camps the Congress and United Front have decided to sit in the opposition. Any dramatic departure from their chosen-path is not to be expected, not at least at this stage. Secondly, none of the political parties would savour the prospect of another mid-term election which might yield yet another hung parliament. Who knows? They may be politicking intensely to make the most of the situation but hardly even consciously try to precipitate another snap poll which could cost eight to ten thousand crore rupees. So, in a way, the craving of the Indian people for stability is likely to influence the Indian politician to allow a certain arrangement to last for sometime. Thirdly, abstentions among some smaller regional parties from Friday's vote of confidence could save Vajpayee.

BJP's ascension to power has been helped by a certain moderation of its previously avowed rightwing policies and its give-us-a-chance-and-see appeal to the electorate. True to this dispositional mould BJP along with its partners has just announced their common national programme which is meaningfully silent on Ram Mandir and amendment to article 370. Even the issue of uniform civil code is not on a burner. The programme is committed to furthering free market economy introduced in 1990 with the proviso that it will have 'a human face'. BJP's 'economic nationalisation' sets a limit to foreign investment in the infrastructure sector including electronic media and seeks to promote the interest of indigenous industries. Its decision to review the nuclear policy was only expected. On the use of nuclear weapon it is keeping the alternative option open. With BJP's heavy reliance on regional parties, the states are likely to enjoy a greater power.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee has not only promised to implement the Ganges Water Treaty but also improve on it to yield greater dividends to neighbourly relations. India has a very large economy and it can only benefit from free trade in the region so that the regional trade barriers are expected to come down.

Our felicitations to Vajpayee government.

Tragic and Edifying

In a city of almost immobile traffic, thanks to the ubiquitous hold-ups, fatal accidents seldom occur. Denizens of Dhaka have come to view this as a that benign in disguise. Never mind that their hackles are up for the sheer tension of close shaves with dangerously negotiating vehicles and the constant sputtering of noxious gases hanging on to the dusts below all around.

On Thursday our luck ran out on the non-fatal streak. For there at the Kataban crossing five people died when a truck hit an autorickshaw in one of the most tragic road accidents to date within the city limits.

The casualties were a newly-wed couple, their friend, a Dhaka University student, a middle aged lady, the mother of one of the spouses and the autorickshaw driver.

It's a pity the truck driver sped out of sight with complete impunity — through all those jammed streets — with no police vehicle giving it any chase at all. We would have thought the walkie-talkie were there to relay information for necessary action. It was a morning hour on a working day when the traffic was helpfully slow to apprehend the culprit. What is police patrol for if it cannot spot and catch a fleeing killer?

It is time such arrangements are made and made fool-proof, too, along the lines these are provided for in other metropolises.

The second lesson we learn for the umpteenth time comes from the obnoxious reaction shown by the DU students to the accident. They damaged private vehicles and raised a road blockade forcing people who had nothing to do with the mishap to suffer. Does it behave anyone, far less educated people?

We send our condolences to the bereaved families and demand that the culprits be tracked down and punished.

Water Crisis

It is not summer yet but the scarcity for water in the city has already reached crisis point. Areas in the older part of the city are suffering and Gendaria seems to be the worst affected of them all. The crisis at Gendaria, however, has very little to do with the touted shortage of surface water. According to the reports published in the newspapers so far, a mechanical fault is behind the jeremiad of Gendaria's denizens. It all started when one of WASA's deep tubewells in that area conked out. And it looks like people of that area will have to put up with this for quite some time more because there is no sign of the tubewell being fixed soon. Driven by desperation, people there are resorting to illegal connections from the main line through electric motors. Interestingly, WASA employees themselves are counselling people to 'suck' water from the main line.

We feel the water supply authorities are making a mockery of their role. First they have failed to meet city dwellers' demand for water, secondly a group of them are actively abetting systems loss for their own good. We can't help feeling WASA has been using all this talk about shortage in surface water to camouflage its own managerial and maintenance inefficiency. What are its engineers for if they can't fix a mechanical fault in time? It is the reign of mismanagement and corruption in WASA which is affecting city dwellers more than the shortage of surface water. Unless this den of corruption is dismantled and given to the private sector for proper running, things will not look up. We demand the government to give it a decisive push. It should remember agencies like WASA are telling us its governance profile.

Price of Rice: Low vs High Pressures

Price of Rice: Low vs High Pressures

In formulating rice policies, you need to balance the interest of the two opposing groups: producers and consumers. As far as rice policy is concerned, you always have to walk along the thin rope, as in a circus, and a slight imbalance could seriously hurt, if not kill, you.

AFTER a short spell of upward trend, the price of rice has finally started falling down. It is said that, in Bangladesh, prices of rice generally determine the tone of politics and so political heat swept the country when prices were going up and up. However, the peak price of rice experienced recently was lower than the peak price witnessed during the earlier regime. That should provide the ruling party with shields of argument to protect itself from BNP-led lashes in the spree.

The most pertinent question that looms large with rice prices hovering around, say, Tk. 11-12 at present is: can this lower price be sustained in future? Mentionably, when the prices were soaring high, two important factors helped cause the downward movement. First, the Open Market Sales (OMS) operation efficiently orchestrated by the government contributed to easing the pressure — to a large extent. Second, arrivals of rice from India — through legal or illegal channels also dictated the total domestic availability of rice. So, arguably, if OMS stops at anytime or Indian rice fails to travel in time into Bangladesh, rice prices are likely to shoot up again to steam the heat. However, let us

present some hard facts pertaining to the present as well as upcoming rice supply situation to help arm our policy makers with some cautionary notes. The price of paddy is, reportedly now being sold at, Tk. 360/maund (Tk. 9/kg) in different places. Including processing and other costs, rice would have to be priced at Tk. 15-16/kg. In other words, the market is waiting in the wings to signal a rise in price unless government starts OMS to put out the fire. There is, of course, some hopes hovering around the boro and wheat crops — the dry season crops — in the field. It is being assumed that if the dry season production, by the grace of Almighty, goes up, prices will fall in two months. The concern is whether our expectations are going to be fulfilled — or not.

Because the price of paddy is high, more lands are expected to be under boro cultivation and given an undisturbed water supply, output would be higher. But the cloudy sky that prevailed during the season could put a brake on increased output. As we all know, normally cloud free sky helps more output

through increasing photosynthesis efficiency. Unfortunately, that did not happen this year. What about wheat output? Yes, hopes should run high in the wake of robust plants standing in the fields. But farmers tend to tell a different story. It is that the same cloudy, foggy

danger lurking on the horizon. As reported in this column several times, the international market for rice is very thin accounting for only four per cent (say, 16 lakh tons) of the total rice produced in the world. This year, Indonesian already plans to purchase 7 lakh tons — al-

12/kg. Due to the occurrences of money exogenous factors, no government, perhaps, could auger well in keeping rice prices so low. The government should, instead of being panicky, be prepared to accept the hard fact that rice prices are likely to rise to, say, Tk. 15-16/kg in the event that our assumptions regarding boro and wheat output do not hold good. Again, the government should not, in the interest of its own sake, clear up its stocks through OMS. Such emergency steps should be shelved for pre-election years or months. At the moment, few shots of rising rice price should not shake the government. In other words, the ruling party Awami League should not exhaust all its cards to play with during the rainy season that it might have to grapple with (we mean, during election year). But be careful that the peak price of rice during this regime is not above the peak price during the earlier regime. That would be a comparison to cry for lowering prices.

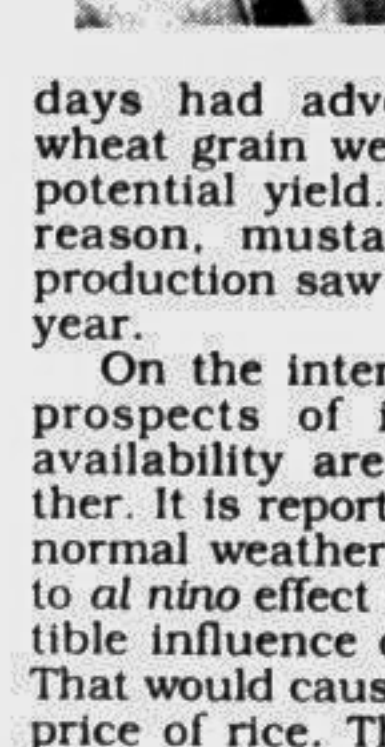
We would like to finish this episode by reiterating one point. Lower prices of rice, no

doubt, benefit consumers but, at the same time, it also hurts producers. By providing people with a cheaper rice today, you are in fact, robbing them of the same opportunity next year. Because, at such low prices, farmers would lose incentive to grow more rice and thus contribute to a price hike. Let us remember the debacle in last amon production. Was it solely due to drought as espoused by the government? Perhaps not. It was partly due to the lower paddy prices that farmers had to swallow the year before [which forced them to stay away from amon production]. This is borne by the fact that in 1996/97 amon season (July-September), total fertilizer intake was 11 per cent lower than the previous year's. So, in formulating rice policies, you need to balance the interest of the two opposing groups: producers and consumers. As far as rice policy is concerned, you always have to walk along the thin rope, as in a circus, and a slight imbalance could seriously hurt, if not kill, you. Let us face the low and high pressures in the rice market judiciously so that the boat is not rocked.

The writer feels grateful to Dr Mahabub Hossain of IIRI for providing some valuable insights.)

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



days had adversely affected wheat grain weight to kill the potential yield. For the same reason, mustard and lintels production saw a set back this year.

On the international front, prospects of increased rice availability are not bright either. It is reported that the abnormal weather worldwide due to al nino effect has its perceptible influence on rice output. That would cause a rise in world price of rice. There is another

Maria Deserves More From Us

There ought to be a strict moral code of behaviour agreed upon among the media with regard to the treatment to be given to victims of rape and sexual abuse — including, and especially for, minors.

I am not sure what to call her: Maria, (not her real name), or Tania (presumably her real name?). I am not sure what the media are playing at either. They call her Maria (not her real name) one day, Tania the next day and sometimes Maria and Tania on the very same day.

And like most other people who have read about the case, I am not sure who has raped the little girl called Maria or Tania. But there is one thing I am quite sure of: We are an insensitive bunch of people with very little understanding of what rape actually means to a victim. If you think I am being melodramatic, just hear me out. The alleged rape of Maria comes to our notice week before last. It is Wednesday March 11th, in fact, when the first news reports appear, telling us how a five or six year old girl has been found staggering out of a toilet in the CMM's Court in Dhaka in the afternoon with blood streaming down her limbs. She has apparently been raped, though no one is sure by whom.

The news reports, graphic as they might have been, are effective in raising a major hue and cry among activists as well as ordinary members of the public. We are shaken to the core at the bestiality of the incident, especially in view of the rising incidence of violence against women and child sexual abuse in this country. Furthermore, we are outraged at the fact that our children are being raped by men in authority who, in turn, are not being brought to book.

But does all of the above give us the right to blatantly print photographs of the innocent child victim?

Granted, the first photograph masks the face of the victim. Nevertheless, the very fact that it has been taken and printed is cause for grave concern. You may have seen it too. It appears on Wednesday March 11th, in at least one national daily. There she is, a limp body of a child, with her face blacked out, her limbs somewhat akimbo, being carried to a waiting vehicle. The caption reads as follows: "The little girl violated by an unidentified person is being taken to a hospital."

Tell me, what kind of a person takes a camera and shoots an image of a child, moments, minutes, or even hours after she has been raped? Would you allow someone to take photographs of yourself, or your child, if God forbid, one of

hoping that this will protect her from unwanted attention. But having taken this undoubtedly commendable step, both this newspaper as well as other newspapers fall flat on their faces with the most glaring of blunders: not only do they disclose the little girl's real name to be Tania, (I assume

while a bunch of men in uniform — complete strangers to her — hang about and peer at her, and a gracious lady, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, strokes her head. We cannot see the man, but one can safely assume that at least one other strange man points a camera in her direction and records the

pathetic image for posterity. One national daily, incidentally, prints the photograph in full colour on their front page, together with the amazing howler of a caption that says that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is 'fondling' the rape victim.

But the caption is hardly the problem. In my view, the problem is that firstly, we cannot justify publishing photos of a rape victim on the front or any other pages of our newspapers — no matter what.

There she is, little Maria (not her real name), lying in a large hospital bed, looking quite bewildered and unhappy.

that is her real name? By horror of horrors, in the days which follow the first reports of the crime, the media proceeds to print front page, clear as daylight photographs of the victim!

When I see the morning papers on Friday March 13th, I cannot believe my eyes. Am I the only one, I wonder, who is shocked and dismayed — and baffled?

There she is, little Maria (not her real name), lying in a large hospital bed, looking quite bewildered and unhappy.

Which is what at least one national daily tries to do. This very newspaper, in fact, makes a determined attempt to ensure little Maria (not her real name) does get the protection that she deserves. Reports in The Daily Star use a pseudonym to identify the victim, presumably

ally important position in the south Central Asia. A small narrow corridor in the northeast links it to China. The British and the Russians fought in the nineteenth century for the domination of Afghanistan for decades without success. Its people are fiercely independent-minded and they never allowed themselves to be subjugated by the colonial powers for long. The country kept it to itself and shunned all forms of modernisation and consequently was left behind times. The good King Amanullah's reign ended with his flight to Italy when he tried to introduce modest reforms affecting his subjects. Even more recent attempts to introduce similar reforms in health and education by the King Zahir Shah resulted in his abdication aided by the Marxist-led political upheaval which ended the monarchy and the country then became a republic.

Syed Mujtaba Ali, a renowned Bengalee writer, in his gifted travels, 'Home and Abroad', narrated in his imitable style the breath-taking natural beauty of the land, its beautiful people, their unique hospitality, their laid-back yet intensely proud of their tribal traditions, and also of its hills and mountains and its fruits and gardens, ten years of Russian occupation had destroyed much of the country, its infrastructure, its roads and

bridges, its agriculture and sadly its tiny industrial base. Even worse damage was inflicted by the opposing Mujahedeen groups engaged in the internecine tribal warfare for the occupation of the land. Having defeated the mighty Russians, 'the Holy warriors' got embroiled in the suicidal war of tribal supremacy. They completely lost sight of their main objective which was to rebuild their country that was completely savage by the Russian occupying forces.

In the end, the opposing Afghan leaders were able to agree a power-sharing formula which of course did not work as the sitting President Rabbani refused to hand over the rein of power to the party next in the line of inheritance. More intrigues and skirmishes between the opposing groups followed finally allowing the tactful Talebans to move in as the lesser evil. The Talebans fought heroically, and within a matter of weeks, occupied more than two-thirds of the country and set up the most reactionary government in the history of Afghanistan.

The Afghan war produced some of the brightest strategists and the tacticians in the history of guerrilla warfare in the names of Masood Shah and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. General Dostum, a conventional soldier, retreated to the north of the country with his sizeable

following where he is still entrenched. Hekmatyar fled to Iran after his coalition with Masood disintegrated. Hekmatyar has now returned to Mazr-e-Sharif and held out an olive branch to his opponents with a call to unite against the Talebans.

The Talebans opportunistic entry into the land and its occupation of more than two-thirds of the land is a striking military gain for them. They have not yet been able to form a constitutional government recognised by the international community, although they are the de facto government of the land. Their lack of experience in running a country and their pronouncements on women and their policy of keeping women indoors in veils have made them unpopular at home and abroad. Millions of Afghan refugees are still abroad and the circumstances are not conducive for their return home which has caused enormous economic pressure on their host countries and created an unmanageable law and order situation.

The Talebans should open up the country to the outsiders, allow aid agencies to carry out their humanitarian work, grant foreign press free access into the country to ventilate the grievances of its suffering people.

Afghanistan Deserves an Enlightened Constitutional Government

by Dr. F. H Chowdhury

The Talebans should open up the country to the outsiders, allow aid agencies to carry out their humanitarian work, grant foreign press free access into the country to ventilate the grievances of its suffering people.

SOVIET Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1979 in support of her puppet regime. Under intense international pressure, they were forced to pull their troops out which began in 1988 and was completed by Gorbachev in 1990. Russian occupation resulted in massive exodus of Afghan refugees into the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran which numbered about 5 millions. Historically this can be compared in its magnitude with the flight of the Bengalee population who took temporary refuge in India in 1971, which was a sad part of the birth of Bangladesh. An estimated staggering number of 10 million people migrated to the neighbouring India on that occasion.

Afghanistan's communist regions hooded by Babrak Karmal and Najibullah lasted as the lame-duck constitutional governments of the country for another 18 months or so after the Soviets had complied their exit. Most tragic fate awaited its last Russian-backed President Najibullah who had taken sanctuary in the UN compound; he was searched out of the UN premises and put on public display by the victorious Mujahedeens.

Afghanistan, a spectacularly beautiful land-locked country, bounded by Russia, Iran and Pakistan, occupies a strategical

To the Editor...

Wanted road-breaker

Sir, The life and security of workers and the visiting patients with their attendants to Savar Gonoshasthya Hospital situated half-a-mile between Bangladesh National Mausoleum and Naya Bazar along Shahid Rajibzadeh Avenue at Savar are threatened for lack of road-breakers on the road from two sides. The speeding vehicles of all descriptions, in particular the killer trucks, pass the hospital road sites at a very high speed threatening passersby and road crossers from GK and opposite side of the road. The situation is made precarious and deadly when the speeding vehicles veer for overtaking in front of the GK entrance gate and road-side crossing by the outdoor patients.

Not long ago just on March 2 by 4 pm, a coaster hit the rickshaw in front of the GK Hospital killing the rider — a woman (34) and the puller on the spot. It is unfortunate that the concerned governmental authorities have long been neglecting the issue of road-breaker and warning of horn use sign before this Hospital on the road-side. Yet on March 3 by 2pm an attendant male member of a patient under treatment at Savar Gonoshasthya Kendra Hospital was killed on the spot when a speeding vehicle (coaster) ran over him while crossing the road opposite to Hospital Gate. Will the authorities concerned do the needful?

MA Rub
PR Officer, Gonoshasthya
Kendua, Dhaka

FDI and economic diplomacy

Sir, The AL government under the leadership of PM Sheikh Hasina, since from the first day of taking charge, has noticeably been found to be very much enthusiastic in wooing FDI. Especially, the eloquent PM realising the dire need for the faster development of our economy, has rightfully chosen the path of wooing FDI. And we know that more inflow of FDI always brings more benefit for a developing economy like ours.

Moreover, the present deteriorating context of world aid environment also necessitated us to endeavour our every concerted efforts in fetching FDI. And in achieving so, the government in the meantime had undertaken several steps for attracting FDI, in confidence. In drawing the foreigners' attention the government's listed steps are: foreign ownership without limit, generous tax holidays, legal protection, capital gain and profit repatriation facilities, residency permits to foreign experts, reactivation of EOI and finally streamlining the economic activities of our foreign missions abroad.

It is believed that without the concerted efforts by our diplomatic officials we cannot boost the inflow of FDI in any expected manner. As such every success in this regard depends upon their every economic intelligence and dealings abroad.

Unfortunately, our diplomatic missions abroad are yet to show this desired diligence.

Md Muhtabul Abrar Choudhury
Chittagong.

OPINION

"One-stop, One-visit" Telephone Service

From press reports, it appears, on the eve of the announcement of the National Telecom Policy, that the state control over the main conventional telephone system will be enforced for the next 12 years till the year 2010. In the earlier phases, the copper telephone service will be opened progressively to the private sector in the districts.

It means that the government will continue to do telephone business as one of the operators retaining monopoly in one segment, and also provide opportunity for gathering tutorial experience to the private sector during the next decade.

The independent telecom regulatory body is being set up (tender notices for the purchase of vehicles, furniture and air-conditioners). The firm grip on government

business is supposed to speed up the issue of new telephone lines, from the current waiting period of two years (or, is it less?). When the waiting period will be reduced to a couple of weeks is a closely guarded secret? The 'telephone-on-demand' facility will be available from 2010? The whole projection situation needs to be clarified for the consolation of several lakh new potential subscribers waiting patiently during this decade of the 1990s.

Setting up new telephone networks is a high-tech and expensive undertaking, involving foreign investors in tie-ups with local partners; hence the question of lack of experience does not arise, as seen in the other developing countries.

Even under state control, the total initial project funding has to be met from somewhere, including the foreign exchange component.

The efficiency of work or business in the public sector is well-known to the public, with a long list of losing SOEs unable to find buyers. The tinkle of the telephone bell does not sound very cheery.

It appears that the official policy is a 'go-slow' one (why such strict security precautions?), as far as the rapid development of line telephone service in the country is concerned — in fact the line system may be out of date soon in the LDCs. Meanwhile, thousands of small private companies are offering wayside telephone ser-

vice at rates which have not been officially confirmed (unregulated?). The Card phone system is under the control of vested groups?

In addition to the background noted above, the government-controlled telephone service standard is abysmal. Hence it is not unnatural that this type of public complaints continues to be aired in the press. The transparency is missing (a style with the present regime?). The assurances coming out of the Ministry from time to time are not very reassuring in the negative environment prevailing in this vital communication sector.

The public needs to be informed clearly how and when to get a new phone connection within a month, through 'one-stop, one-visit' service.