

# Humble onion could be government's undoing

D K Joshi writes from New Delhi

Dayaram, a middle-class resident of South Delhi, was robbed of 500 rupees and five kilograms of onions.

An enterprising shopkeeper in Delhi doubled his sales by offering one kg of onions with every two t-shirts purchased.

Satirist Jaspal Bhatti in Chandigarh visited a vegetable market flanked by black-clad commandos, highlighting the fact that onions had become precious. He also held an onion fashion show with the models flaunting the onion theme.

All these things have happened recently in India in response to the scarcity and skyrocketing price of onions.

The onion crisis — along with abnormal increases in the price of potatoes, tomatoes, salt, lentils and cooking oil — comes at a bad time for the seven-month-old Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party government. It's fighting to win four state assembly elections — in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Mizoram — but the food crisis has sullied its image and made it look inept and ineffectual.

The BJP knows that an increase in the price of onions has political importance. When the price of a kilogram of onions rose to five rupees in 1980 during the Janata Party's rule, it helped Indira Gandhi return to power.

The nervous Atal Behari Vajpayee government airlifted large quantities of onions from Iran to sell them to sensitive Delhi consumers at a subsidised rate of 10 rupees per kg, incurring a loss of 200 million rupees with, however, little effect on its dented reputation. At vegetable markets across India, onions are selling at 30 rupees a kg.

Even Vajpayee has acknowledged that the unprecedented price rise will be a contributing, if not a decisive, factor in the election outcome.

But he contends that his government could do little about the price rise, especially the increased cost of onions. He blames untimely rains, unprecedented floods and a decline in production for the onion crisis.

The crisis has pushed up substantially the monthly budget of most households. A survey among middle and lower income groups in the metropolitan areas finds that one-third of respondents are spending 21 to 40 per cent more than before the crisis while the monthly budget for another third has risen by more than 40 per cent.

Only 21 per cent of the respondents attributed the abnormal price rise to poor rains and genuine supply problems; 38 per cent blamed hoarding and black-marketing by traders and middlemen, and another 38 per cent blamed the government for mismanaging distribution.

Two-thirds of those surveyed had no confidence that the government could bring the situation under control. The crisis has given Congress, BJP's main political rival in the four states going to the polls, a credible issue to use against the ruling party in the state elections, which are seen as a referendum on the Vajpayee government. Congress and other opposition parties are taking full advantage of popular discontent to impress on the people that the BJP-led coalition is inexperienced, incapable of ruling India and a

failure on all fronts.

In three states — Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi — the clash is between BJP and Congress, other parties have practically no presence. The elections there are important since these states are located in the Hindi-speaking belt, which is BJP's area of influence.

The tiny state of Mizoram in the north-east with a 97 per cent Christian population has only marginal importance for national politics. It is ruled by Congress and the BJP has no presence.

Congress is confident it can wrest power from the BJP in Rajasthan and Delhi and expects to retain its hold in Madhya Pradesh, the largest state in India. If that happens, Congress can dream of returning to power in the central government.

Sonia Gandhi, the Congress

president and the Italian born daughter-in-law of the dynasty, has an agenda of her own. This is the first electoral exercise under her presidency and she is campaigning with an aggressive tone, anxious to demonstrate she has acquired the necessary charisma to sway popular opinion in her party's favour.

A clean sweep in the four states will not only bring credibility to her leadership but also help make her more psychologically acceptable to voters as the next prime minister of India. She knows the tag of a 'foreigner' is still on her and is exploited by the BJP.

Gandhi calculates that the BJP's alliance partners will desert it if it fails electorally.

They are already openly blaming Vajpayee for the onion fiasco. Coalition partner Lok Shakti has called the BJP a party of crooks, accusing BJP traders of hoarding commodities. Mamta Bannerjee, fire-brand leader of the Trinamool Congress party, resigned from Vajpayee's co-ordination committee as a protest against the price rise.

BJP is obviously on the defensive against the price rise and the deteriorating economic situation. To counter the opposition campaign, Vajpayee and his finance minister Yashwant Sinha have been making sweeping promises and raising high expectations.

There is, however, general skepticism whether the promises can be implemented and whether they will improve business confidence.

BJP unfortunately finds it has few achievements to boast about. Indo-Pakistan talks have not been fruitful and there is no improvement in Indo-US relations.

In a desperate bid to save its caste of power from collapsing, the party is going back to its tried and tested techniques of rousing Hindu emotionalism.

Party president Kushabhau Thakre released a document accusing Congress of distancing itself from Indian tradition and culture and practising 'minorityism' and vote-bank politics (a euphemism for taking up the causes of Muslims and Christians). Thakre said Congress leadership is mantally distanced from cultures and traditions of India, a sharp reference to Gandhi's 'foreign origin'.

The writer is a freelance journalist who formerly worked for the Bombay Free Press Journal. He is the author of two books.



As Vajpayee aims for the demon, the humble onions may cause his downfall

# Grounds for complaint in Brazil

Beauty Lupiya writes from Rio de Janeiro

Whereas the rest of the world associates Brazil with good quality coffee, the coffee sipped in the country is questionable. Gemini News Service reports on a lab analysis revealing contaminated coffee on local supermarket shelves and efforts by Brazil's coffee industry to perk up its quality control.



Jordi Bou

## COFFEE IN THE RAW...

In some brands, the rat droppings come later

It's quite absurd. How could they serve us with this coffee? One of the deputies, Marcelo Duda, said in the respected Brazilian daily *O Globo*.

The Brazilian Association of the Coffee Industry (Abic) revoked the membership of the company that produces Cafe Belem in 1996 and removed the quality label from the product.

Had the National Congress asked us for recommendations, there's no way we were going to approve Cafe Belem," says Abic's lawyer, Alexandre Lima. Only companies affiliated to Abic whose coffee has been analysed and approved have the right to the quality label. Non-member companies sell their products without any assurance, even though Abic has the right to examine their products.

Abic has no power to close any company producing polluted coffee. Our job is to check the quality," says Abic's director of quality control, Taimo Alves Pimenta. "It's important and urgent that the government comes up with severe punishment for such companies, which seem to be the same offenders all the time."

According to Abic, every packet of coffee sold with a label is a guarantee that 'what's inside is 100 per cent coffee'. Abic is the only association permitted by law to check the quality of coffee throughout the country.

Brazil has a good international reputation as a coffee producer. Our job is to maintain that status," Abic press officer Eduardo Buetron said.

Abic has intensified a programme which started nine years ago to control the quality of coffee sold throughout the country. The association analyses the coffee and sends the results to the Public Ministry and the Association of Consumers' Rights.

Belem, the brand at the centre of the Congress fiasco, is by

no means the worst or only transgressor. In recent tests conducted for Abic at the Adolfo Lutz Institute, 80 per cent of one brand of coffee, Cafe Catui, was full of pieces of maize and husk. Another brand, Cafe Rosana, was found to contain 85 per cent of the same wastes. Sixteen other brands contained sand, cereal, maize, flour and caramel.

The findings confirm the common belief among Brazilians that the best coffee is sold abroad, especially to Europe and North America, while the low quality coffee is let for local consumption. One survey carried out by a local newspaper showed only one in three Brazilians trust the coffee they drink.

"I trust the coffee I drink because I grind it in my own home. I would never waste my time using pre-ground coffee sold in the streets," says 69-year-old Francisco Costa, who works as a porter in a public building in Rio de Janeiro.

Similarly, Maria Bueno, a

30-year-old dressmaker, has no reason to trust her coffee. If the coffee served in the National Congress is contaminated, how dirty is the coffee I drink?" she asked.

Marcela Carvalho, a cashier in a Rio de Janeiro snack shop, had no choice. "I need to go to Europe to buy good coffee, but, since I can't afford to travel, I will have to drink my favourite Cafezinho," she says. Cafezinho is the term used for the traditional Brazilian coffee served strong and usually very sweet in tiny cups.

Coffee is one of the main products which the rest of the world associates with Brazil. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the country's international trade in coffee was so dominant that the 60 kg weight of the Brazilian coffee bag became the standard unit throughout the world.

Coffee brought in more than half of Brazil's foreign exchange earnings in the 1820s and the machinery and railways built to service the indus-

try helped transform the tiny village of Sao Paulo into a gigantic industrial city of 17 million.

It is still an important crop and constitutes the biggest employer in the three main coffee growing states of Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais and Parana. A record 33.95 million coffee bags are expected this year, an increase of 80 per cent on last year's harvest.

To satisfy both local and international consumption, Brazil needs to produce at least 30 million bags of which 15 million are exported, 12 million left for local consumption, and 3 million for making instant coffee.

Despite all the problems with some companies mixing pure coffee with unwanted products, Abic says the number of coffee consumers in Brazil is up by 4 per cent.

The writer is a Zambian freelance journalist working in Brazil. She was formerly a senior sports writer with the Times of Zambia.

# Lanka devolution package runs into trouble

Colombo, Nov 25 - Sri Lanka's main opposition party has rejected the devolution package, presented by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, saying it could lead to a division of the country.

The government's bid to give more powers to the regions to help ease the ethnic crisis ran into a fresh hurdle when United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremasinghe said at a rally that his party will never support the package as it offered too many concessions to the Tamil-majority north and east. Wickremasinghe said his party opposed the proposed creation of a Union of Regions leading to a federal set-up. "Sri Lanka is not a conglomerate of provinces or regions but a single sovereign entity divided into several provinces with the provincial administration having the right to determine matters relating to the province," he said.

The government had de-

signed the package with the hope that the 15-year-old separatist insurgency in the Tamil-majority north would ease when more powers were given to the regions. Political analysts believe Wickremasinghe's decision to oppose the devolution package would pose an almost insurmountable obstacle.

With the main opposition party rejecting the proposals, there is no way of implementing it (the devolution package) because the constitutional amendment would require a two-thirds majority and the ruling party will not get it without the support of the UNP, analyst Jehan Perera said. The UNP has 87 members in the 225-member Parliament. Perera said it was unfortunate that

whenever there was even a hint of a chance to solve the ethnic crisis, one of the national parties created a hurdle. "It is only a vote game and there is no national endeavour to find a lasting solution," he claimed.

UNP spokesman Ronnie de Mel said the twin objectives of the party were to ensure national power sharing without dividing the country and to put an end to the present violence, ensure free and fair elections, establish an independent judiciary and public service and restore peace, parliamentary democracy and individual liberty. The UNP has however accepted almost 90 per cent of the clauses in the draft constitution presented by the government. The party is of the view that de-

ference, foreign affairs, national and international finance, justice, broadcasting and television, ports and airports should be retained by the federal government.

To ensure proper representation for minority communities — Tamils and Muslims — the UNP proposed a bicameral legislature and appointment of two vice presidents. Wickremasinghe said. But the UNP's rejection of the main clauses will block the parliamentary passage for the government's constitutional draft. The Kumaratunga government had earlier proposed to get the draft passed in Parliament before placing it before the people in a national referendum where a simple majority would suffice to see it through.

The government had announced that it would go before the people in a non-binding referendum if the UNP rejected the proposals.

# Uprising pushes thousands of jobless across SA border

Japhet Ncube writes from Johannesburg

The political upheaval that swept across the mountainous Kingdom of Lesotho in September has triggered a crossborder influx by armies of jobless Basotho into South Africa in search of food and jobs. But, as Gemini News Service reports, life in South Africa promises to be far from easy for them.

As calm slowly returns to the strife-torn mountainous kingdom of Lesotho, thousands of people left jobless by one month of political chaos are fleeing to seek employment in South Africa.

And with its job market apparently already overcrowded, and already expelling thousands of foreigners, South Africa is making frantic efforts to flush out all illegal immigrants and tighten the movement of Basotho (the people of Lesotho) through the Lesotho/South Africa border post in the Free State town of Maseru, about 20 km from Maseru.

Here, over 10,000 Basotho reportedly cross the border every day in search of job and food. Others come to live with friends and relatives, hoping for a speedy return of peace to their country.

The border post is full of life as more and more people cross into South Africa. Ben Matosa, spokesman for the border post, says more than half of those that cross do not come back by the end of the day.

"It's a real crisis" he says, "and it is spilling into South Africa. Over 2,000 of those leaving Lesotho every day have not travelled to South Africa in the past two years. And most of them will probably never return."

Reforms announced earlier this year by former education minister Valery Tikhonov — who was dismissed in the August government reshuffle — justified the fears.

Among other points, the plan involved state finance for private schools, encouraging market competition between schools for pupils, new unspecified test regimes and a cut in free places for tertiary education.

After special hearings with educationalists in January, the Duma committee on education denounced Tikhonov's proposals and called for a special state commission to be convened, to organise a public discussion on them and propose revisions.

Kolebaskhin of the education union said: "In our view Tikhonov's proposals were directed not at improving the quality of education, or the working conditions and lives of teachers, but only at saving money and at paying the way for education to be privatised."

In a newspaper interview Tikhonov defended the proposals on the grounds that education had to "get into tune with the market economy" — and confirmed that a 25 per cent cut in education funding was their central pillar.

businessmen and the poor, between rich Moscow and the poor regions — "are bound to bring with them the danger of a polarised education system," said Dr Lukashkin.

Along with most educationalists, he fears the gap between fee-paying Moscow schools and prestigious universities, and impoverished rural schools, will continue to widen.

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The director of the Moscow Metallurgical Institute, Professor Nikolai Lukashkin, voiced the fear felt by university staff, school teachers and parents alike. "Education was always a priority here. It is not," he said. "It is in danger of being ruined."

The deepening divisions in Russian society — between rich

Three South African towns of Bloemfontein, Ladybrand and Johannesburg are the key destinations. And although most shops and factories in Bloemfontein and Ladybrand display large "no jobs" signs on their doors and gates. The Basotho keep streaming in, hoping to find work and feed their families.

One of those roaming the streets of Ladybrand in a desperate search for a job is Martin Dhlamini, aged 33, a former supermarket till operator.

"Anything," he says, "I'm looking for anything that can give me money to feed my family. I don't mind cleaning the floors or working in the garden. Christmas is around the corner, and my three children are looking forward to it."

His voice cracks. "I have never failed them before, but this year, God has forsaken us."

Dhlamini says he arrived in Ladybrand on 10 November with his wife and children. They are staying at a disused school which they share with 300 other refugees. Relief organisations such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and some churches, are providing food.

But, as Dhlamini knows, no-one can say how long these organisations will be able to assist the growing number of Basotho refugees. "We can't afford to depend on them all the time," he says.

"That's why I desperately need a job — any job."

Hundreds of others sleep in the streets with nothing to eat and nowhere to go, breeding fears among South Africans that squatter settlements, crime and diseases could sprout in Ladybrand and Bloemfontein.

Back home in Lesotho, the capital Maseru is slowly awakening from the effects of the riots that engulfed the small southern African nation of 500,000 people in September, reducing the capital to a smouldering ruin. The Maseru city centre, once a bustling business environment, today remains a burnt-out shell. Shattered shop windows and charred walls and ceilings are a reminder to many of the political upheaval, stamped out by the intervention of Southern African Development Community (SADC) forces led by South Africa.

Most of the businesses were reportedly uninsured, and the loss will probably never be recovered. Some companies have retrenched their workers as they come to grips with the economic chaos. No-one knows whether they will ever get their jobs back or what will happen to their pension and other benefits.

The Lesotho Crisis Committee, a non-political organisation formed to assess the crisis in the tiny country, says although exact figures on the damage have not yet been compiled, it runs into billions of rand, and that it will have devastating effects on the economy.

A MIDST the turmoil of recent Russian history — the political upheaval, the war in Chechnya, the ups and downs of Boris Yeltsin's state of health or sobriety — one constant has been that public services in Russia continue to spiral downwards.

Three months after the country defaulted on its international debts, it comes as no surprise that the alarm bells sound again.

The fear is now that the Russian health care system could implode altogether, at a time when the country's social turmoil means people need medical care more than ever.

The crisis in Russia's medical services is rapidly approaching a line, which if crossed will lead to the collapse of the entire health care system, says a recent draft Health in Transition report for the World Health Organisation.

And the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, recommending emergency food supplies for Russia this winter, said: "The rather ineffective public health system and high costs of medicine mean that temporary or long-term illness carries the risk of destitution."

The extent of the problem is underlined by research showing rapidly worsening health indicators. Life expectancy has fallen between 1990 and 1994 from 63.8 years to 57.6 years for men and from 74.4 years to 71 years for women, a trend described in the UK medical journal *The Lancet* as "without parallel in the modern era."

# As economy slides, services crumble in new Russia

With the Russian winter approaching, and likely to be even worse than usual, the carnage wrought to Russia's economy by market reforms show no signs of abating. As Gemini News Service reports, the country's schools and hospitals are feeling the pain.

Simon Pirani writes from London

Ministry of Health figures suggest that by December 1994 6.9 per cent of under-twos and 10.4 per cent of two to six-year-olds suffered from stunted growth.

And tuberculosis — sometimes combined with HIV — cholera and typhus are spreading, especially in southern Russia.

The medical care system is simply starved of finance. Laws were passed in 1994 to devolve the old centralised Soviet system leaving it starved of cash by destitute regional authorities.

WHO figures estimated that even as a proportion of GDP — which has collapsed in recent years — Russia's health spending is below most European countries: 4.8 per cent of GDP compared to 7.7 per cent in western Europe and 5.7 per cent in central and eastern Europe.

Most schools funding comes through local district budgets, which have been devastated by the financial crisis that came to a head in August.

In both fields, the result is massive wage arrears. The average pay of health workers — if and when they actually receive it — is 640 rubles per month. The lowest grades receive 180 rubles. "Not even enough to buy a monthly travel pass in Moscow," said Mikhail Kuzmenko, a health workers' union leader.

About 80 per cent of the union's members rely on food from their garden allotments to survive, he said. "Along with miners and teachers, our members are the most militant campaigners over wages," he said. One million of the Union's 3.5 million members participated in the recent one-day-strike over wage arrears, with the rest maintaining full emergency

services. The teachers are no better off. Nikolai Kolebaskhin of the education workers' union said the new government of Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov — appointed after the August crisis — promised arrears owed to teachers and other public service workers would be paid.

"The wages arrears have indeed been paid — but only those financed directly by central government like university and college staff, and a small proportion of primary and secondary school teachers' wages," Kolebaskhin said.

"But 80 per cent of teachers' wages come from local district budgets. These are still not being paid and teachers are still owed six or more months' pay. This month [November] a new round of teachers' strikes has begun in various localities to protest."

Non-existent pay is bad enough. But equipment and infrastructure are also withering fast. In hospitals, according to unions, preventive medicine has practically been abandoned. Hospital patients have to bring their own sheets and pillows and, often have to buy their own medicine, the prices

of which have soared since devaluation. Medical provision is "disappearing from the poorest areas, said Kuzmenko. "I went to Siberia and even I was shocked by what I saw. There were cases of power companies switching off the electricity to hospitals because of unpaid bills."

And in the schools the situation is no better. "In Moscow," said Kolebaskhin, "money has been found to pay teachers but not for any other expenditure, and no region is in a better financial position than Moscow."

"No building repairs are done. No equipment or textbooks are purchased. Schools are frequently forced to close because they can't pay for heating. Teachers are often compelled to turn to parents to ask them to provide the most basic classroom equipment."

The director of the Moscow Metallurgical Institute, Professor Nikolai Lukashkin, voiced the fear felt by university staff, school teachers and parents alike. "Education was always a priority here. It is not," he said. "It is in danger of being ruined."



The writer is a British journalist, normally based in Moscow, who will shortly be returning there from London.