

## Rise in Fuel Price?

HERE are indications that a decision might soon be taken by the government to raise the petroleum prices substantially. We ran a frontpage scoop yesterday underlining the imminent possibility of an at least 30 per cent hike in the fuel price. Allowing for the government's clarification on the issue, this appears to be an attempt to milk money from petroleum prices on the pretext that there has been an increase in the international crude oil price.

What sounds a bit extortionist is that when the domestic oil prices were raised by 60 per cent in 1997 the international crude price which was cited as the reason for the hike had been 27 US dollar per barrel.

If the present international price is 27 dollars per barrel, as some BPC officials claim, then why should the government need to increase the domestic prices of petroleum products computed to the 1997 international crude price benchmark of 27 dollar per barrel? But the truth of the matter is the upper limit of the current crude oil price is 23 US dollar so that there is not even an excuse for the government to raise the domestic price. The pointers to devaluation and increase in the tax on imported oil must be seen in the light of other developing countries' success in passing on the benefit of reduced international prices to the domestic consumers of petroleum products. In November-December last year when the global crude price plummeted to 9-10 dollar per barrel, did our government proportionately reduce the domestic prices of petroleum products? They didn't do it when it was most expected, so that it could hardly have surprised anyone when they turned their back to it subsequently. The government went back on its words given to the people two years back by no less a person than the finance minister himself who had promised to reduce the domestic price if the global price decreased.

Any drastic increase in the fuel price will have a telling effect on productivity and transportation, not a speak of pushing up the consumer price index. Already an additional levy has been imposed on car-owners so that if a fuel price hike comes about they would feel assured and also take fright of the dangerous prospect of adulterated fuel corrodng their engines.

## Good Work Cash-strapped

LACK of funds has caused an ECNEC-approved project of major importance to city-life to be shelved. The Tk 93.4 crore waste management project of Dhaka City Corporation remains a non-starter. The project envisages land-filling on 32 acres at Matuail and installation of at least two incinerators to dispose of city's clinical garbage. But neither the donor nor the government has apparently kept its promise. The DCC received a letter from the Netherlands Embassy on 17 August informing them that only 50 per cent of promised contribution could be made available under the Dutch Environment and Economic Self-sufficiency Programme (MILIEV). The DCC people said the project could not be started unless the entire amount was in hand. The sanitary situation of the city is getting worse by the day. The present dumping ground for the 3 to 4 thousand tonnes of solid waste daily at Matuail has reached a bursting point and unless a new dumping ground is created it will pose a big health hazard to the citizens. Coupled with it is the long-standing problem of wastes generated by about 450 clinics, hospitals and diagnostic centres. This highly toxic garbage is dumped haphazardly. This is another high risk public health concern.

Incinerators should be used with utmost care because these can also be hazardous to public health. But the question remains why funds are not available for such an important project relating to the health and sanitation of 8 million people of the metropolis? The government must sanction the funds required for this project immediately in the greater interest of public health. We have been watching expenditure of crores of taka for no good reason. This lopsided approach by the government towards new areas of development must be replaced by positive thinking that can help improve the health and sanitary conditions of the people of Dhaka city in particular and the rest of the people of Bangladesh.

## Euphoria Dispelled

WHEN the West Indies cricket team arrived here for a three-day match and a two-game one-day series, millions of fans in the country had expected our boys would not at least chicken out. In the rain-ruined three-dayer, Aminul Islam and co. indeed lived up to expectations. But, disaster befell them in the one-day internationals. The two-time World Cup winners simply toyed with the hosts, cruelly exposing their inadequacy in each department. True, our batsmen, chasing mammoth targets, ended up with 200-plus scores in both outings; it nevertheless was a complete humiliation. So painfully outplayed our team had been that the West Indian skipper, a living legend for his batting prowess, came on to bowl himself, not to speak of the occasional bowlers like Ricardo Powell and Sherwin Campbell who got wickets. In fact, Campbell returned a fabulous four-wicket haul.

Occasionally our cricketers have brought pride and glory for a success-starved nation. After their phenomenal performance on debut in the World Cup this year hopes for the much-coveted Test status had naturally gone sky high. However, the International Cricket Council (ICC) in its meeting after the final broke millions of hearts, deciding that the country was not yet ready to enter the elite club. Although five Test nations voted for our inclusion, we fell two short of the requisite number. Development of domestic infrastructure is still a far cry. The country's think-tank must realise that until and unless it introduces at least a three-day league format, our cricketers won't stand a chance in Test cricket. We need to make success a habit, not just a flash in the pan. To that end, we have to take the game to the grassroots level. Once we institutionalise the process of talent hunting and honing, sustained success will be its logical consequence, so will be the coveted Test status.

R Koji Kitani, president of JCO Ltd, should have knelt even longer as he apologised to Tokaimura's 300,000 citizens who had to be evacuated owing to a major accident at its nuclear plant.

A mere 16 kg of uranium dioxide was enough to cause what has been acknowledged even by the nuclear industry as the world's fifth worst nuclear disaster. There are many lessons for us in Tokaimura — and in the ensuing Wolsong accident in S Korea.

The Tokaimura accident was caused by workers mixing seven times more uranium dioxide than the recommended 2.4 kg. This instantly resulted in "criticality", or a self-sustaining chain reaction, which produced radioactivity 20,000 times the permissible level. Fifty-five people were exposed to high radiation doses, many of them to levels 1,000 times greater than what you would receive in a chest X-ray, itself considered risky.

Tokaimura ranked Level Four in the nuclear industry's seven-level scale, but may be upgraded to Level Five. Only four other disasters, including Chernobyl, have matched that level. JCIO says the accident was caused by "human error". Another view is that the operators violated safety regulations. This also involves human fail-

ure. Chernobyl too was caused by "human error", when engineers were experimenting with a reac-

## NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE IN JAPAN

# Saying No to Poisoned Power

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

**Nuclear power is not the technology of the future. It is in retreat. There are safer, cheaper, sustainable alternatives to it. We must call a halt to the nuclear madness. We should demand a full, independent, safety and social audit of nuclear power. Till then, all nuclear development must be frozen.**

tor's shutdown procedure. This led to a core meltdown and catastrophic release of radioactive poisons which contaminated land and water thousands of kilometres away. Sheep in Scotland were slaughtered for consuming contaminated grass.

The death-toll from Chernobyl was over 100,000, according to the Ukrainian government and independent experts. This dwarfs all industrial accidents including Bhopal.

There lies the rub. Nuclear power is an ultra-high-risk technology where human error, however limited, produces horrific effects. Radiation is an invisible, but potent, long-acting poison transmitted across generations. There is no cure for it.

This puts nuclear energy at a qualitatively higher danger threshold than, say, chemical technology. Compare it with a man walking a tightrope at a height of 300 feet above the ground. The chances of his falling are the same as they would be if the rope were at six

feet above ground level.

But the consequences are vastly different. At six feet, a broken leg. At 300 feet, certain death. Nuclear power involves extremely fast, high-energy reactions. It is super-hazardous.

The world has witnessed over 150 serious accidents in its 420-odd nuclear reactors. Potentially, each could have been a Chernobyl. This accident rate is more than 100 times higher than for high-risk chemical plants and cuts across boundaries and levels of development. Some of the worst accidents have occurred in the U.S., France and Japan.

Generically, nuclear power poses three safety problems. First, catastrophic large-consequence accidents. These typically involve high exposure to small populations, in cases to the public.

Second, "routine" radioactive releases right from uranium mining to power generation. These affect large numbers, e.g., people living near nuclear reactors and working in

uranium mines, or consuming irradiated foods.

Third, and most serious, nuclear waste. All nuclear technology generates waste, some of it long-lasting. For instance, plutonium-239, named after the God of Hell, is the most toxic substance known to science. Its half-life is 24,000 years.

This means that even as it decays, half the quantity will still be present 24,400 years later. There is no safe method of storing such waste without leaking it into the environment. Even diluting it to "safe" levels means using 10 billion units of water—physically unachievable.

The waste problem warrants a complete, radical reconsideration of nuclear power. So long as there is no solution to it—no method to contain it safely for millions of years, no stable geological storage site—we must demand a nuclear phase-out.

We have no right to create, and then inflict upon ourselves, problems to which we have no solutions.

The generic problems posed by nuclear power are magnified in India. Our nuclear programme is a story of failures, unsafe practices, breach of regulations, missed targets, horrendous cost overruns, and lack of public accountability aided by secrecy.

Take a quick look at the Department of Atomic Energy's (DAE) record. Its usual cost overruns are 300 per cent-plus. It has never completed any project in time. Its reactors' plant load factor is a miserable 37 per cent—less than that of the Bihar Electricity Board!

The DAE has absorbed 15 to 25 per cent of India's energy R&D budget, but generated just 2 per cent of our electricity. The cost of nuclear power in India is twice that of thermal electricity.

The DAE's safety record is appalling. It has exposed thousands to excessive radiation doses. It has had many major accidents. A fire broke out in the Narora reactor in 1993. This cut off power to the emer-

gency cooling system, the last barrier between normalcy and disaster.

The incident was described by Dr A Gopalakrishnan, then Atomic Energy Regulatory Board chairman, as 'doomsday averted'—averted by God's grace.

In 1994, a safety system, a concrete containment dome, collapsed during construction at Kaiga. In 1996, a waste-processing plant at Tarapur released liquid waste into a canal used by the public. In March this year, heavy water leaked from the Madras reactor.

More such accidents are waiting to happen. Dr Gopalakrishnan listed 130 'safety issues' in the DAE. He was sacked.

Nuclear power in India involves excessive risks, unsafe practices, extravagant costs, and poor returns. It has betrayed all its promises. Even those who thought it would provide a cover for clandestine weapons development must concede after May 1998 that it is useless.

Nuclear power is not the technology of the future. It is in retreat. There are safer, cheaper, sustainable alternatives to it. We must call a halt to the nuclear madness. We should demand a full, independent, safety and social audit of nuclear power. Till then, all nuclear development must be frozen.

## Vajpayee Wins, and He Has Responsibilities to Shoulder

by Harun ur Rashid

**All eyes are now on India as to how the new government in New Delhi addresses the critical issues facing the country. One hopes India's new government will be bold enough to choose paths of tolerance over animosity, peace over bloodshed and kindness over tyranny for the peace, progress and prosperity of the people of India and Pakistan and, by definition, the people of the South Asian region.**

THE BJP-led alliance with 24 parties, National Democratic Alliance (NDA), claimed election victory, although the BJP candidates did not secure as much seats as they had hoped for. The business people sighed a relief that the election did not result in hung Parliament. The Bombay Stock Exchange soared 5 per cent as soon as the result was known. The result was not a surprise as the exit-polls for some days placed NDA ahead of its main rival, the Congress Party.

Sonia Gandhi's Congress had worst ever showing in this election since India's independence, although Sonia Gandhi was elected as an MP. The result severely disappointed the Congress party. A debate has already ensued about the change and style of leadership in the Congress party. Sonia's future as a leader of the party seems uncertain. There is a view that the old leaderships need to be replaced by a younger generation of leaders if it wishes to show a good result. Priyanka, Sonia's daughter, was a great success during the campaign and the party leaders have an eye on her to rescue the party after some years in future.

The election result did not show the usual trend in Indian politics. The votes did not follow strictly on caste basis in Bihar. Mr Laloo Yadav, a former Chief Minister of Bihar, who had advocated the cause of his lower caste, had lost his seat in the Uttar Pradesh. The Muslim voters did not support the Congress candidates and voted for the regional parties. It seems that the dynamics of politics has changed in India. With the decentralisation of economy in the country, the political power is also being decentralised. It appears that at the time of globalisation of markets, finances and information technology, a counter-force, namely, regionalism is on the rise in India and also as a result the regional parties have made huge gains at the expense of national parties, such as the Congress Party and BJP.

The election is the largest in the world by sheer numbers. A few statistics seem to be mind-boggling, such as 800,000 polling stations manned by 4.5 million public servants with the support of 1 million police personnel. 140 political parties are 8 are national and the rest are confined to 25 states & participated in India's 13th general election, three since 1996. Over 600 million voters participated to elect 543 parliamentary seats in the Lok Sabha in five phases.

The election is India's third in 3 years. The people seem to be fed up with the instability of the government. All the government programmes are in hibernation during the caretaker period. The people lose in the political game at the end. They want good schools, roads, health centres, jobs, safe drinking water and shelters. They are not interested in the ideological fights among the parties.

There is a view that the BJP alliance will be able to hold on power for the full term because any party or parties, who wreck the stability, will be spurned by the voters as they are tired with the political squabbles among the political parties. People want stability for implementing what the government can vouch for in the manifesto. Furthermore, BJP had learnt the art of running a coalition government by a process of trial and error and they would be careful enough to ensure that the coalition would not crack.

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Long term use of it is linked with cancer. I was shocked to find that most restaurants in Dhaba use enormous amounts of tasting salt in their food to make it taste better. This is particularly the case with restaurants serving Thai, Chinese and fast food (especially fried chicken).

But MSG is very harmful for health and causes a wide variety of reactions including severe headaches, migraines, stomach upset, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, asthma

attacks, shortness of breath, anxiety or panic attacks, heart palpitations, partial paralysis, numbness, heart attack-like symptoms, mental confusion, allergy, skin rashes, depression, weakness etc.

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There is another view that it could be difficult for BJP to keep the 24 parties together more than 2 years as the internal contradictions and competing interests among the parties would surface. Since the parties are defined by personalities, language, region and caste, it would be almost impossible to bind them together for a full term. Furthermore, the past experience backs up this view. BJP only 'hopes' that the coalition would work smoothly.

Now, what are the challenges of the new government in New Delhi?

Political observers maintain that Indian economy needs immediate attention for more structural reforms. An average of 3.5 per cent a year in the first three decades grew which was barely ahead of the population because of the cumbersome state-run economic system favoured by India's post-independence governments. However, since 1991 India has liberalised and restructured its economy and for the last six years it was able to achieve growth at an average of 6.5 per cent. More economic growth is required as India's existing population of 960 million is forecast to overtake China's 1.3 billion within next 20 years.

The regional parties have asserted their political power and assumed more importance than before. The coalition government in New Delhi appears to be a permanent feature of Indian politics and will remain so in foreseeable future. BJP will have to work with other disparate regional parties what has been described as "coalition culture" by the BJP stalwart and Home Minister L.K. Advani.

Unless India is economically strong, its strategic edge will slip away in the region. The economy needs to be deregulated more to attract foreign capital so that India could become an economic powerhouse. Furthermore, the wealth gap in India between rich and poor continues to widen and the restive poor population is likely to cause social tension endangering the stability of the country. Because of the past neglect the "seven sisters" (Assam, Arunachal, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura) in eastern India bordering Bangladesh, Myanmar and China are in revolt against New Delhi's domination. It is believed that with economic prosperity the tension in these states may subside. The smouldering unrest has been a worry for New Delhi and one of the reasons for which India wants transhipment of Indian goods through Bangladesh appears to provide easy access primarily to consumer goods with reasonable prices to the people of these outlying states.

Another issue is India's attitude towards nuclear test and its proliferation. The major nuclear powers have all reduced their stockpiles to various degrees in recent years. The US is to enter talks on START III (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) to reduce further nu-

clear arsenals. The nuclear tests of India and Pakistan came when progress on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament was in sight. Since the UN General Assembly adopted the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996, discussion on Fission Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) was in progress. Both India and Pakistan dropped their opposition to FMCT and agreed in principle to support CTBT.

India and Pakistan have always criticised the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) for being an inequitable two-tiered institution, which conferred special regime for the five nuclear weapon countries including China. Therefore India and Pakistan did not become parties to NPT and could argue that by conducting the tests they had not breached any international legal obligations. However, high tensions on Kashmir dispute combined with relatively unsophisticated command and control systems with no second-strike nuclear capabilities and shortest distances to potential targets in the populous parts of the country do not provide any margin of error. Therefore the international community, in particular the US is anxious to ensure that both countries commence bilateral talks on Kashmir dispute and sign up the CTBT, preferably prior to President Clinton's visit to South Asia.

No one can deny that there is

## OPINION

### Rickshaw Design Competition

Alif Zabr

The cycle or pedal rickshaw is the most popular mode of transport, numbering in lakhs, employing more than a million in the process. But its design and mass production is still left to the non-formal sector, and it does not attract the technical interest of the government or the top-level national planners. Hardly a seminar or workshop is held on better and more scientific design of the cycle rickshaw. Are the educated people, the technocrats and the experts feel embarrassed to cast a glance on this ubiquitous vehicle, without which the majority of the urban dweller simply cannot advance in daily life?

Another issue is India's attitude towards nuclear test and its proliferation. The major nuclear powers have all reduced their stockpiles to various degrees in recent years. The US is to enter talks on START III (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) to reduce further nu-

clear arsenals. The chassis has been unjustly targeted many times in the past by vested interest groups and the recent occurrence in Khulna only enhances the fact that freedom of association and religion and the provisions of non-discrimination as guaranteed by the Constitution of Bangladesh are sadly not being preserved or protected.

We extend our heartfelt sympathy to the families of the victims of this heinous and unjust crime and urge all human rights defenders and conscious members of society to protest against such cowardly attacks and to strive to live in peace and harmony and continue to respect each other's religious identity.