

Fuel Price Backlash

THE oil price hike has sparked off protests right across the road transport sector. The transport owners and workers of Chittagong region have scheduled a 48-hr-long shutdown for August 29 and 30 on top of the strike they observed on Sunday last. Today itself, a dawn-to-dusk transport strike gets underway in 21 districts of the south-western region as a protest not merely against increased petroleum prices but also fresh taxes likely to be imposed on them from the next month.

Even the AL-leaning Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Samity seems disenchanted as its secretary general has announced a week-long deadline for the government to either reduce the oil prices or face a strike *ad infinitum*. The remaining major transport owners' association — Bangladesh Bus-Truck Owners' Association — may have a stronger movement up their sleeves.

Needless to say, the rising spectre of such transport sector shutdowns along with that of greater political agitation hold damaging implications for the national economy. In fact the strikes are going to precipitate an increase in the prices of daily necessities before the latter are put in spate by the increased oil prices subsequently. So price-wise we have a double-edged sword syndrome that needs to be neutralised quickly.

Also, the likely political fall-out of the increased fuel prices cannot be trifled with. This is not merely to say that the Opposition is likely to capitalise on the issue of oil prices but to basically bring up the question of people's tolerance level being tested too severely by action-reaction buffets of all kinds.

The underlying reason behind raising fuel prices appears to be the differential between oil prices in India and those in Bangladesh. The higher prices in India were said to be inducing smuggling of petrol and petroleum products from Bangladesh into that country. Then apparently the higher international crude prices 'provided a ground' for the government to raise the fuel prices.

Whatever the reasons, the government owes a satisfactory explanation to the public as to the factors it had taken into consideration before upping the fuel price twice in three years. In fact, the people should have been convinced of the rationale for fuel price hikes before the government actually announced them.

The striking transport owners and operators better refrain from demanding higher fares from the public because that will assail the very argument for the strike, let alone signalling to the consumers that they are there to be exploited only. That said, we urge the government to sit down with the transport sector associations and head off a crisis that stares us in the face — rather ominously.

Biman Should Explain

IMAN Bangladesh Airlines has already a fleet of vintage aircraft under its wings. To make matters worse, Biman authority has decided to take on lease another vintage DC-10 aircraft manufactured in 1979 on a three-year contract. Only one of the existing four DC-10s was built in 1989 with a smack of being not too old like rest of the fleet.

It is very interesting to note that the proposed lease-bound aircraft was manufactured in 1979 but its chronological number is 46542 whereas the one manufactured in 1978 has a serial number of 46943, clearly 401 steps ahead of the former one. Why discrepancy between the year of manufacture shown and sequential number engraved on the aircraft?

Both the chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh and the Managing Director of the national flag carrier have admitted to relaxing rules but denied having violated them to a local Bangla daily which carried the report on Wednesday. But it is apparent that both of them are playing with words. They say they have relaxed the rules to take this 21-year-old plane on lease. Is it not a deviation from the Civil Aviation Authority rules on the subject? If the purchase or lease rules are only 'relaxed' and 'not violated,' we would like to know from the CAAB chairman and the Biman MD as to how they draw a line between relaxation and violation. Let us also know the extent of relaxation of rules and how far it deviates from the existing rules for procurement of aircraft on lease.

Biman should also clarify the apparent discrepancy between the sequential number and manufacture date of the aircraft they are trying to hire on lease to replenish their fleet. We are aware of the fleet constraint of Biman and their limitations as far as competitiveness with other airlines goes but these are no excuses for procuring old aircraft outside the prescribed rules. Caution must be exercised in this particular area of communication where million of precious lives are involved. The recent Concorde crash around Paris (flying old planes) that cost 109 lives should be a case in point.

Give Chittagong a Break

If one were to make a rating on the trouble-prone cities in the country, Chittagong would surely have topped the chart. The port city more often than not gets the lion's share of political agitation, labour unrest, workers' strike and what have you. Just take the month of August for example. There have already been three hartals, including two locally called ones. As an appendage to yesterday's countrywide hartal staged by the opposition alliance, the SKOP called a dawn-to-dusk hartal across greater Chittagong, protesting 'repression' on workers at the CEPZ and demanding resumption of work at the laid-off factories. There are more strikes on the anvil, including the transport owners' shutdown planned for end-August.

In their organisational over-enthusiasm, leaders and activists of political, labour and transport entities often end up jeopardising the country's economic interest. They tend to forget that the port city is the nerve centre of our economic activities and should, by no means, be pushed to a standstill. The port has already earned notoriety in the international shippers' community for inefficiency brought about by unceasing labour unrest. To make matters worse, political unrest poses a constant hindrance to cargo distribution through road network. The whole scenario smacks of self-destructive impulses, to say the least.

Therefore, we would request the government primarily to initiate a dialogue with the political parties, dockers' associations, transport workers' and owners' organisations and work out a formula whereby the port city is spared the roller-coaster ride it so often gets.

Women Repression Resistance Day

Who Should be Held Responsible?

by Shaheen Anam

All they are asking is a little support from society. History tells us that when repression goes beyond limits then society has its own way of responding. Women in our society will have to take up this challenge themselves and put an end to the brutality that they face almost on a daily basis.

It is befitting that I start with Yasmeen. Remember the 14-year-old girl who was brutally raped and murdered in Dinajpur and by a gang of policemen on that fateful night of August 24, 1995? The women community rose in protest and demanded for justice. Since then August 24 has been observed as the Women Repression Resistance Day. Many women's organisations get together for rally, street protest and to commemorate Yasmeen murder and also to remind everybody of the disease that is growing like a cancer in our society which must be contained.

However, violence against women and children did not start nor did it end with Yasmeen. Since then we have witnessed an unabated series of both state-sponsored and other kinds of violence, each one more gruesome and brutal than the other. The barbarity, depravity and cruelty have surpassed previous examples and have continued to shock all civilised people in the country. The only quarter which seems to be oblivious is the authorities, those entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the lives and dignity of people.

One wonders who will take the responsibility for continued violence and more importantly for not taking action as per the law of the land. Somehow, the answer has always eluded us. Those seeking justice are constantly shown the other door — it is somebody else who is responsible. The buck does not stop with anyone it seems. Such evasive tactics, shrugging off responsibility, has severely eroded the credibility of the law enforcing authorities, and the sincerity of the entire judicial process is being questioned.

To mention a few cases in which there is no logical reason for delays except the indifference of the authorities: Starting with Yasmeen. She was raped and murdered in August 1995. After a long and difficult court battle four policemen were awarded punishment in 1997. It must be mentioned that the outcome of the case could have gone either way if women's organisations had not united to demand justice. However, the sentences have not been implemented pending appeal for the last three years in the High Court. Appellate cases cannot continue for an indefinite period. The Attorney General's office has to take an interest and make sure that the case reaches conclusion.

Shima was raped and murdered in police custody in 1997. All those accused were acquitted. The judge when acquitting them admitted that he had no other alternative but to let the accused go given the way the case was presented. An activist lawyer took up the case and filed charges against those who abetted in hushing up the case. Three policemen have been accused of wilful attempt to hide the truth. This case is still on appeal for witness hearing on 24 August.

The violation of Taniya, a child of 5, at the CMM premises in March '98, shocked the entire country. Again no one was willing to take responsibility for such a shameful incident. A farce of a case was put up in an obvious attempt to hide the truth. Mora, a man not even remotely associated with the

case was identified as the culprit. Again an activist lawyer has demanded another investigation. The investigative officer has not been able to prove that Mora is the person who committed the crime. A judicial inquiry is going on; meanwhile the real culprit is still free, roaming the streets and perhaps continuing to prey upon the weak and the vulnerable.

Soon after in the same month Moushumi was raped. This case is still on appeal for witness hearing on 24 August.

Shazneen, a girl of 15, was murdered in the sanctuary of her home on April 23, 1998. This finally seemed to be a conclusive case because some of the accused had confessed. There was a perception that a well off family might get justice sooner than those with fewer resources. However, two-and-a-half years later the case is nowhere near over. The family waits in anguished silence, hoping and praying that someday they will get justice. The family has to bear the daily harassment and face psychological and emotional trauma. A shocking part of the story is that while the family spend their days in agony, the main accused is spending his time in the relative comfort of a hospital bed under dubious medical rationales that even the doctors and medical experts cannot de-

fend. In this case, it is not only money, which is calling the shots, a more influential hand is involved which seems to be more powerful than the laws of the land.

Since then there has been innumerable such incidents. Every year there is a rise in cases of rapes and murder. It has been documented that the increase is reported in cases of violence and also those up for trial, but not in conviction. Convictions in such heinous crimes as rape, acid attacks are still negligible. The Women and Children Repression Bill 1995, 1998 and finally 2000 was passed with much fanfare. It was claimed that now finally we had a bill that would truly protect women and children from violence. However, unfortunately nothing has changed. Influence, power and money still reign supreme. The demand for justice is not heard and there is a perception that the law works for a select few.

The recent case of Bushra, the daughter of a retired police officer, has shown that even the families of police, if they are out of power, can be victims of the same indifference. The case is under investigation, some have been taken under custody but no one knows or trusts that the truth will come out or whether the family will ever get justice.

Perhaps the two groups who face the most continuous oppression are the garment workers and the prostitutes. It seems

that society is oblivious of their plight and while they face harassment, humiliation, oppression and torture everyday of their lives, society has taken on a holler then thou attitude, especially in the case of prostitutes.

Cases of rapes against garment workers have registered an alarming rise. Appeals for their safety has fallen on deaf ears. The garment workers have refused to provide them with minimum security on their way to home and work. Most of the crimes occur at that time by fellow workers or neighbourhood *mastaans*. These young workers brave all odds to earn for their impoverished families and also foreign currency for the country. However, neither the authorities nor the owners have shown them the minimum respect for their labour and hard work. On the other hand, many are denied minimum wages, made to work overtime without proper remuneration plus face the day-to-day fear of rape and molestation on their way home. In the last five years there has hardly been any conviction against rape and murder of garment workers.

The eviction of prostitutes from Tanbazaar was portrayed as an effort to clean the society of anti-socials and unlawful activities. We all know the real reason behind this eviction. However, few had the guts to face the real truth. There were

claims of rehabilitation, jobs for them, and a chance for a better life. It was claimed by the highest authorities that millions of taka had been allocated for their rehabilitation. In reality the eviction has resulted in their total pauperisation.

They have lost the little savings and assets they had and have become destitute with no shelter or protection. The High Court has recently made a ruling that their eviction was illegal, yet this court order is not being implemented. The vested interest in this case is more powerful than the High Court.

This article has been written in an attempt to bring to attention the indifference with which cases related to violence against women are still being treated by the authorities. It is not meant to portray women as weak and oppressed. On the other hand, cases of violence — rape and acid attacks — have not prevented women from coming out of their homes to pursue normal activities or to protest such oppression. Women all over the country have built and organised resistance against violence and harassment. The movement in Jahangirnagar University and Dhaka University are examples of women's spirit to fight oppression and prevail over, no matter what the odds are. All they are asking is a little support from society. History tells us that when repression goes beyond limits then society has its own way of responding.

Women in our society will have to take up this challenge themselves and put an end to the brutality that they face almost on a daily basis. Violence against women is an expression of a deep-rooted perversion in the society and unless the whole society rises up against it, it will not be eliminated.

The Solarz Correspondence: A Congressional Inquiry Deliberately Derailed?

Third and Concluding Part



(Continued from yesterday)
N April 1979, Kai Bird and I wrote Henry Kissinger a detailed letter asking him to reply to specific questions regarding the 1971 contacts with the Mustaque group in Calcutta. We also posed several questions regarding the 1975 coup against Mujib. US Embassy sources had wondered out loud to us whether the CIA Station in Dhaka had disregarded Ambassador Boster's instructions to break contact with the Mustaque group on their own initiative or whether they had instructions to do so from Washington. We asked Kissinger this question. We asked him if he had 'Prior knowledge' of the coup d'état against Mujib. We posed seven specific questions. Four questions concerned 1971 contacts with the Mustaque group. Three questions concerned the 1975 coup. We asked Kissinger to reply promptly since we were intending to publish an article in *June in The Nation* magazine in New York.

Kissinger replied in May. 'I have read your astonishing letter of April 23' wrote Kissinger in his dismissive, one paragraph reply. 'It reached me while I was traveling in Asia, and, therefore, your two-week deadline has already passed. In any event, I cannot deal with the extraordinary mixture of allegations and innuendo contained in your letter, except to say that in substance they are so far from the truth that I am impelled to question the motives of your informants.'

In the summer of 1992 a curious article appeared in *The Washington Post*. At the time, the trial of a senior CIA official, Claire George, was then under way for lying to Congress about the Iran-Contra affair. George had served as the Deputy Director for Operations at the CIA. In September 1991, George was indicted and charged with ten felonies, including obstructing justice, obstructing a congressional investigation, making false statements, and perjuring himself before congressional committees.

According to Lawrence Walsh, the retired judge, who served as prosecutor in the case, 'Claire George's indictment mobilized the intelligence community. Support came not only from officials in active service, but also from the CIA's alumni, who were steeped in the agency's traditions and proud of its accomplishments. They keenly felt the irony of the fact that a career officer, who had been trained to protect the secrets of the agency with lies if necessary, was now being indicted for lying to congressional committees.'

When the Carter Administration came to power in 1976, a new director, Admiral Stansfield Turner, took over the Central Intelligence Agency. Turner began an intensive review of past covert actions involving possible illegal actions by Agency officials. This internal review ultimately led to the

Senate intelligence committees. After the trial, Craig Gillen, the lead prosecutor in the George case, stated, 'This marks the first time that a senior CIA official was convicted of felony offences for crimes committed while he was in his position at the CIA. Congress expects and deserves full and truthful answers from the intelligence agencies.' Gillen concluded, 'Make no mistake about it, we are pleased with this verdict.'

Word has gone out to senior officials in the intelligence agencies that they cannot use the secrets of our nation to hide.' As one of his last acts of his Presidency, George Bush, a former CIA Director, pardoned Claire George and other senior officials, convicted of lying to Congress.

After the pardon, Lawrence Walsh, the Independent Prosecutor and a retired judge with Republican Party credentials, denounced the pardon. 'There was no excuse for pardoning these persons,' declared Walsh. 'They were prosecuted for covering up a crime, for lying to Congress, to keep Congress from finding out what had happened ... They were deliberate liars.'

A decade before George was indicted, the CIA Director in the Reagan Administration, William Casey had appointed Claire George to be the CIA's 'liaison with Congress.' This was the time when William Barndt, a 'retired' CIA officer, was 'supervising' the Bangladesh Subcommittee on Asia chaired by Stephen Solarz. According to a statement Robert Gates made to Joseph Persico, William Casey's biographer, 'once Claire (George) got there [i.e. up to Congress], he reinforced all of Casey's worst instincts. Their attitude was 'don't tell Congress anything unless you are driven to the wall.' Gates was CIA Director under George Bush.

The Post article of 5 August

1992 described how a member of George's legal team named Phil Cherry, a retired CIA officer, had been discovered visiting the CIA's archives during the trial. 'In a development outside the courtroom, Philip Cherry, a retired CIA covert operations officer who has appeared in court as an unpaid member of [Claire] George's legal defence team, was seen last Friday afternoon leaving CIA headquarters,' reported *The Post*. 'He was using a pass normally possessed by agency employees.'

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The Post article stated.

'Cherry, a lawyer, said that it had nothing to do with the case.'

'Asked why he had a CIA pass,'

he responded, 'No comment.'

'In response to further questions from The Post's reporter, a CIA spokesman declared that 'Cherry had applied earlier for a contract position with the CIA's newly expanded historical review staff.'

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