

## Transport Fare Hikes

THE government has woken up after ten years of slumber to raise the bus and minibus fares by around 50 per cent on an average much to the annoyance, discomfort and hardship of commuters. A flat rate of increase worth 15 paisa per kilometre has been announced as 'compensation to the transport owners' for fuel price hike and other costs without taking into account the people's capacity to pay or the hardship which they will have to undergo as a consequence. The rationale for this decision seemed to be that the government had failed during the last ten years to raise the fares in accordance with the fuel price hikes from time to time. But that does not mean the transport owners and operators were laid back because of the government's inaction. It has always been a common practice with the owners of transports to raise their fares on the slightest pretext and fares on different routes have been increased several times over during the last decade without bothering to secure any government approval for the same. For all intents and purposes, the transport ministry remained a silent spectator to the arbitrary raises and helped the transport owners implement their unilateral decisions against the interest of the travelling public.

When this is the scenario in the transport sector how can the authority be absolutely certain that the latest raise in the fares as announced by the government will not add to the existing fares which already stand enhanced in the wake of the fuel price rise affected last month? Does the authority have any mechanism to check how the rates fixed by them are working on the ground?

We would like to know the formula which the government has applied in raising the bus fares by fifty per cent and also wish to know how they are going to implement their decision. We suggest that the authorities arrange to draw up fare-charts for commutation between major cities at least, and have them hung inside the vehicles for the travellers' eyes. The premium bus services could be rendered at a higher cost. We hope the transport owners will be more attentive to the safety, security, comfort and service aspects when the fares are up and also keep in mind the wellbeing of the thousands of transport workers who are associated with a major service sector in the country's economy.

## Not Just a Question of Party Discipline

DISSIDENT BNP MP Major (Retd) Akhtaruzzaman has made no bones about his complete disengagement with the party on whose ticket he had become a parliament member from Kishoreganj in 1996. He has joined the JS session in open defiance of a long-standing party whip and against the torrid backdrop of the breaking-point he had reached in his relationship with BNP on the question of the party's early return to parliament.

We know the whole thing would be looked at from the standpoint of party discipline but it gives rise to certain fundamental issues of concern to democracy that should not be brushed aside. Whatever may have been Akhtaruzzaman's motive behind his romping into the parliament which must have impacted differently on the ruling party and the opposition BNP we are hanging our hat on this peg to raise certain questions that seldom make it to the fore except through a jolt Akhtar delivered on Sunday.

The first question to raise is: what is the status of an MP in terms of the Constitution and how much he can sacrifice the obligations of his elective position vis-à-vis his loyalty to the party? In the ultimate analysis, should an MP not feel responsible, answerable and accountable, to his constituency to the people who had elected him as their representative in the parliament in the first place? Can an MP be a conscientious objector to a certain party decision adopted without sufficient debate? Does he have to submit to all dictates of the party without questioning or more importantly, against the dictates of his best judgement? Basically, how did the party's suspension of his primary membership come about or a decision adopted to continue with the parliamentary boycott. The parliamentary party meeting in question was attended by 47 members with the leader and the deputy leader themselves absenting. How many MPs were allowed to speak, far less speak their mind? The decision of a small powerful coterie was ratified in the half-attended meeting and willy-nilly imposed on Akhtaruzzaman.

MPship is a sacred trust. When this is given a short shrift, the very status of parliament is undermined and the right of voters personified in an MP as an elected public representative is trifled with.

## Overcrowded Prisons

QUITE predictably, the issue of overcrowding at some nine central, 55 district and 15 thana jails across the country came up at Sunday's inaugural session of the three-day training programme titled *Good Prison Management for Prison Personnel in Bangladesh*. The facts and figures that featured in the discussion pointed to a harrowing reality inside the penitentiaries: the number of inmates is nearly four times the capacity of the prisons. Although the additional inspector general of prisons contradicted the figures presented by Dr Kamal Hossain (75,300 detained in jails with accommodation for 23,942) his own estimate (62,000 for the same) was no less appalling.

The key, as Great Britain's deputy high commissioner to Bangladesh said, is "access to justice." According to the latest statistics, there had been a rise in the number of under-trial prisoners from 26,000 in 1995 to 37,000 in 1999 while the number of convicts went down from 15,730 to 13,422 over the same period. So alongside expansion and modernisation of prison facilities, there is the crucial need for legal and judicial reforms. Here lies the crux of the matter.

Regardless of the extent to which we might enhance the capacity of different prisons, unless we do something about the huge judicial backlog, the jail-houses would continue to be overburdened. Many senior judges and jurists have rightly, therefore, expressed their concern over the judicial logjam. In its overzealous criticism of the judiciary, the government appears to have overlooked the fact that for any attempt to reform the legal and judicial systems, convergence of political opinion is of utmost significance. Therefore, instead of launching diatribes against the higher judiciary, it should right-away get its act together to facilitate the process of required reforms.

# Politicians' Meetings with Editors : Points to Ponder

*Referring to women's representation in Parliament the BNP Chairperson said the government should have consulted the opposition on this vital issue as her government did during the passage of the 12th Amendment to the Constitution designed for switching over to parliamentary system from the presidential one. But where is the guarantee that the BNP would respond to the ruling party's invitation for talks?*

Within the span of about a week, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia had exchanged views separately with the editors of national dailies, weeklies and news agencies. The Prime Minister, who is also the Chief of the ruling Awami League (AL) met the editors on August 29 last while the meeting of the Chairperson of the mainstream opposition the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with the editors was held on September 6. Against the backdrop of the approaching general elections in the country (scheduled for sometime next year), these exchanges of views by the top leaders of the two major political parties with the editors of the country's print media have, no doubt, assumed significance. These revealed not only their respective mindsets, but also the strategies their camp followers are likely to take during the impending hustings.

Brushing aside the invectives, diatribes and polemics which they hurled against each other which is their wont, certain cogent points have come out of their discourses that merit attention of all and sundry. Both Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia appeared to be confi-

dent of the victories of their respective sides in the upcoming polls. In a fray this is usual on the part of the contending parties to claim majority support and there is seemingly no harm in it. But what, however, looked disturbing is that none of them seemed to be in a mood to accept gracefully the verdict of the electorate. Both of them forcefully insisted on their victories and dismissed any possibility of defeat. Both claimed that they were almost certain to form the next government and none said that in the event of people's mandate going against, she or her party was ready to concede defeat. This amply indicates that the defeated camp will raise the old bogey of rigging and manipulation as is the culture of elections in Bangladesh. This is against democratic norms and ethics and against showing due respect to popular feelings. In such a situation the long-running stand-off that bedevils the country's political scenario is likely to continue with all its accompanying evils like parliament boycott, non-cooperation

from the opposition, frequent shutdowns, lingering uncertainty, further deterioration of law and order situation and their cumulative fall-out on the economy as well as on the life and security of the ordinary citizens.

For the rising incidences of

the police.

About the women's representation in Parliament the Prime Minister said she was in favour of maintaining the status quo of reserving thirty seats to be elected indirectly and referred to the bill prepared by the Law Ministry. The logic that she gave

equal number of districts against the demands of various women's organisations for 150 directly elected seats) the ruling party's antagonism is liable to be construed as 'opposition for opposition's sake'. The AL must have a set principle on this vital issue. If it could demand more seats for women during BNP's tenure what prevents it from going for what seems to be queer. As reported by the daily Ittefaq (August 30) she said when the BNP was in power her party had demanded for increase of women's seats in Parliament. But the BNP reportedly opposed the move. Now that the BNP has agreed to the proposal of increase in women's representation (the party stand, as spelled out by BNP Secretary General, is for 64 directly elected women's reserved seats from

## HEART OF THE MATTER

### Mansoor Mamoon

crimes, terrorism and violence. Sheikh Hasina blamed the opposition and made oblique references to the court for not adequately dealing with the criminals and killers. She, however, preferred to ignore the highhandedness of her party high-ups, their close relations and followers about whom the country's print media are long pointing fingers of accusation, not to mention the ineffectiveness and inactivity of

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## The Godfather

*Given the commitment to democracy in the 21st century, godfathers and Pakistan cannot co-exist. The Army would be well advised to make the godfather an offer he cannot refuse.*

LONG Island and New York are a long way from Rawind and Lahore but a recent interview with Mian Mohammad Sharif, the father of former PM Mian Nawaz Sharif, "Abaji" as he is widely known, shows that godfathers are alive and well, in any country and in any age they remain the same. Mario Puzo's fictional saga of a prominent mafia family had "olive oil" as the core family business, for the Sharifs it is "steel". The script of "The Godfather" is eerily familiar, the similarities are uncanny. Vito Corleone and the eldest Sharif, both dominant personalities displaced from their roots, rise from humble origins in the new country to control large, powerful "families" comprising blood relations and close associates. One does not see "Abaji" going around brandishing a pistol knocking off people in his young age as did the elder Corleone but Abbaji is far luckier, one of his sons became Prime Minister of Pakistan twice and another the Chief Minister of Punjab. Abbaji names a long list of luminaries in politics, uniform, bureaucracy, business, etc visiting first Model Town and then later Rawind (on his shifting residence), to do him homage and pledge their loyalties in person. In godfather's world respect and influence are bought with money, slights are never forgotten, or forgiven. People are classified as "good" or "bad" according to the measure of their "loyalty" to the family.

In an article in The Nation on Oct 10, 1998 entitled Rawind, We Have Problem!, I had commented: "Since everyone knows that all decision-making emanates from the patriarch of the Sharif family, it is only right that all Pakistanis collectively turn to the Sharif homebase, Rawind, we have a problem" in the same manner "that the spaceship commander in the real-life movie 'Apollo-13' very laconically informs his base in Texas, Houston, we have a problem! The decision-making process is hardly institutionalised or for that matter democratic. While it speaks very well of the Sharif brethren to give devoted respect to their father and to seek his advice about all the important issues, they hardly have the right to surrender the democratic mandate given to them by the people to the veto of one man. The

Sharif patriarch and his geriatric inner circle are arch-conservatives. The person really calling the shots (instead of the City) is too far right of the vast middle ground that is really Pakistan. The first symbolic public exposure of this farce was when, instead of consulting the cabinet or even his senior party colleagues, or for that matter taking into account the feelings of the smaller Provinces, President Tarar was presented as a fait accompli, shoved down their

destroyed her great potential of becoming a really superb national leader.

There is no crime in dreaming that your sons may become the leaders of the country, that is a dream one hopes many fathers in Pakistan will continue to have. The problem lies in the modus operandi in accomplishing that dream and once the objective is reached, the means used to perpetrate that power in pursuing one's own selfish interests in supercession of the vital interests

today. John Kennedy's father was also self-made and meticulously planned and manouevred his (and brother Robert's) rise up the political ladder. However once in power, they were their own masters, never gave a hint that the Kennedy patriarch or any member of the family ever got involved in influencing decisions of State or for that matter acquire any financial benefits in their years of public service. In his inaugural address as US President in 1961 John F Kennedy said, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country". And he meant what he said. In the case of the Sharif family there seems to be very little doubt that the family prospered because of the use of political power to further their own commercial interests. SROs were issued by CBR to suit Sharif family business interests and loans advanced for huge projects without adequate collateral from government controlled financial institutions.

Misusing government machinery for personal gain is not only unacceptable, it is also accountable. Clever, highly-paid lawyers may get them off on technical grounds but in the moral sense the Sharif family cannot escape retribution. Leadership of a poor country inculcates a moral responsibility in the leaders towards the impoverished (and God knows we have a great many) of that State, what is the quantum of personal greed that seduces a person to compromise his (and her) conscience and line his own pockets at the expense of the poor of that State?

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country one is privileged to serve as leader. In an article in The Nation on Dec 19, 1997 entitled The Olty-state of Lahore, I wrote

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## AS I SEE IT

**Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi**

democratic throats to be more precise."

Abaji's recollections are a sorry indictment of what politics in Pakistan has become, mostly the privilege of a few élite families, the manipulations of the larded gentry giving some way grudgingly to the nouveau urban rich. For those who believed in Mian Nawaz Sharif, and I am one of them, eroding of the delusion we had been living in for years was very upsetting, adding to the disappointment of our very own Princess falling in the acid test of governance. Ms Benazir was intellectually capable of governing with competence but as a woman in Pakistan she could not separate the straitjacket of eastern culture from the requirements of good governance; this culture held her captive and

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## The Question of Ethnic Dominance

## Peace and Stability Remain Elusive in Fiji

by AMM Shahabuddin

*Those in Fiji and abroad calling for the re-instatement of the ousted Mahendra government are not realistic about the local political situation. "It was not just enough to focus on constitution and democratic process" ... "They needed to look at the root causes of widespread Fijian dissatisfaction with the last elected government."*

cabinet members and some MPs, the troubles brewing underneath suddenly gushed out, making the future of Fiji uncertain. Speight declared that what he had done was to uphold the interests of the indigenous Fijians, which was gradually being eclipsed by the ethnic Indian-Fijians.

**Fiji and the Commonwealth**  
So the situation is not as simple as the Commonwealth thinks that a mere suspension of Fiji's membership would work miracle to ease the situations and bring back normalcy and democracy, perhaps reinstating the ousted Prime Minister. Had it been so, the Commonwealth's 'prescription' would have been effective in 1987 when Fiji's membership was cancelled, following a military coup by the Army 'strongman' Ratu. Rather Fiji was out of the Commonwealth for long 10 years

till 1997 when it returned to the fold after adopting a multi-national constitution. And under this constitution, Mahendra Chaudhury rode to power as Prime Minister, perhaps creating discontent among the indigenous Fijians which ultimately led to taking hostages of Mahendra and his cabinet members and MPs.

However, they were released after about 56 days, following long-drawn 'give-and-take' negotiations between the Army and the rebel leader, which guaranteed an amnesty to the rebel leader and his group for their political crimes. But the Army didn't uphold, for some reason or other, this provision of the agreement when Speight and his group were arrested for trial on charges of treason. Such a mockery of an agreement cannot bring lasting peace perhaps giving another 'leverage' to the frustrated elements among the indigenous Fijians, they have gradually emerged as powerful and dominant politico-economic force in Fiji, the clear

manifestation of which was found when Mahendra Chaudhury, whose forefathers came from Chandigarh, India, became the first ethnic Indian Prime Minister of Fiji, under the multination constitution of 1997.

Now the ousted Prime Minister who had recently visited India, Australia and New Zealand, had urged Fiji's to nearest neighbours Australia and New Zealand to impose strict sanctions against Fiji to force it to return to 1997 constitution and restoration of his Government. Fiji is now reeling under sanctions imposed by Australia and New Zealand, and its economy is on a breaking point with the poor show of the tourists, mainly from Australia and New Zealand, plus deep fall in its export of sugar, the two being the only foreign exchange earners

iles" in Commonwealth approach in two cases of same nature : when Sierra Leone's Kabba was overthrown in a military coup and he fled to Guinea, the Commonwealth continued to recognise him as the "head of state". "Logically", he said, "it (Commonwealth) should continue to recognise Mahendra Chaudhury as Prime Minister of Fiji."

**What's the Way out?**  
Now that the deck has been cleared of the coup leader, George Speight, and his supporting group of Special Services soldiers having been put in prison waiting for trial on charges of treason, what option is now left for the military-backed civilian government, headed by Garase? If the assurance, given by the military government, at the beginning of the hostage crisis, to the visiting Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) in June last that the country would return to its 1997 multination constitution, is implemented, how far it would go to solve the problem, or would it further worsen the situation with a rather unwellcome backlash by the foreign exchange earners

**Commonwealth's Weakness**  
So, what Commonwealth suspension of Fiji's membership could not achieve, Australia and New Zealand have been able to do that. Here it won't be out of context to mention Commonwealth's 'failures' in such situations. In fact, Commonwealth has its own weaknesses and defects that betrays its action. (What actually the Commonwealth had achieved by suspending Pakistan's membership after military take over last year? The Army strongman Gen. Musharraf would continue for another two years before democracy returns, under a Supreme Court order). As pointed out recently by the former Editor of Gemini News Service, Drek Ingram, "Commonwealth attempts to good governance and democracy... are all in shreds". He also detected glaring "anomalous

that this was necessary to get information to solve cases. Strong argument it appears, indeed. But then again, if it is okay to torture one person, why not two? Or five? Or ten? Where do we draw the line? And who decides who gets tortured? No one amongst us should feel safe from the long arm of the law. After all, if a brilliant student like Rubel, who came from a relatively well-to-do family, and a Biman employee like Nuruzzaman can be tortured to death who amongst us is safe?

It can be said without a lot of doubt that a civilised society cannot allow the practice of torture within it. The only question is: are we a civilised society?

Masud Sohail Dhaka

Chittagong Hill Tracts (two lawmakers from the BNP not taking part) and for entering into Ganges water sharing treaty with India the BNP refused to cooperate with the ruling party. At least the BNP could have joined the parliament session to table a bill of their own for women's representation in Parliament opposed to the government's move for the continuation of status quo which would have been lauded by the people.

The Prime Minister gave her own reasons for the devaluation of taka and increase in fuel prices but was short of explaining why parliament was bypassed in such crucial matters even though it has largely become a one party affair. At least the people would have got an opportunity of hearing from the lawmakers the reasons behind the moves rather than from bureaucrats and technocrats. It has been reported that even high ranking ruling party leaders expressed their dissatisfaction over the steps coming as they did particularly when the elections are almost round the corner. There are already tremendous backlash and the low and fixed income groups are increasingly becoming restive under the pressure of extra burden of price increases.

media who have been rooting for Mian Nawaz Sharif since his first dismissal as PM in 1993 (including myself) are guilty of pulling the PM talk their way out of self-created controversies" and further, "We have been propagating from various media pulpits that the PM holds the national interest supreme, even at his personal cost, whereas the bitter truth may well be that he stays well within the parameters of a rather myopic annunciation of democracy of the Lahoris, by the Lahoris and for the Lahoris".

Democracy has no place for one-man rule. In the circumstances leading up to Oct 12 military rule was inevitable, indeed if there had to be a one-man rule why not that of an organized entity like the Army rather than the elder Sharif running the affairs of country through his proxies without having to face the democratic process himself and without the necessary qualifications to do so? With all the powers of the State