

## 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 paise 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 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 are they 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 disenchantment 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 diatribe campaign 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

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-

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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



HEART OF THE MATTER  
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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

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 the same as the party is very much in power?

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? There are precedences that on some other issues of national urgency like the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner or during peace negotiations with the tribal insurgents in

## The Godfather

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the police and bureaucracy, such is the potent power of money and patronage in strengthening (and sustaining) their power-base. Corleone's plans ran into trouble because of the cross-purpose ambitions of other gangsters 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 Raiwind (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 'Raiwind, We Have Problems', 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 homestead, Raiwind, 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

democratic throats to be more precise.

Abbaji's recollections are a sorry indictment of what politics in Pakistan has become, mostly the privilege of a few elite families, the manipulations of the landed 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

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 manoeuvred 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?

In the same article of Dec 19, 1997 I wrote, 'Those of us in the

media who have been rooting for Mian Nawaz Sharif since his first dismissal as PM in 1993 (including myself) are guilty of helping 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 upto 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 resting in the hands of a godfather who was way past his prime even before the end of the 20th Century (and whose mindset is more akin to the 15th), the country was rapidly descending to the dark ages even as the new millennium approached. If the godfather's rule would have been in the country's vital interests one could have condoned it but it was compromised by the narrow, selfish interests of a one-track agenda, Sharif-isation of everything. That is not an acceptable proposition. 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.

## 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's government. 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' Rebuka. 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 'lever' to the frustrated elements among the indigenous Fijians.

### Indian Immigrants

Fiji, a former British-ruled territory gained freedom in 1970, under the UN Declaration on Decolonization (officially known as the UN Declaration and Granting of Independence to colonial countries and peoples, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 14 December 1960), and became the 127th UN member in October 1970. But centuries back, people of Indian origin came here or were brought here to work in the British-owned sugar plantations. These Indians were gradually amalgamated with the indigenous Fijian life and considered themselves as Fijian citizens, now making some 43 per cent of the total population. Being both economically and politically much advanced than 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 multinational 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

### 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, Derek Ingram, "Commonwealth attempts to good governance and democracy... are all in shreds". He also detected glaring "anoma-

lies" in Commonwealth approach in two cases of same nature: when Sierra Leone's Kabbah 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 Qarase? If the assurance, given by then 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 multinational constitution, is implemented, how far it would go to solve the problem, or would it further worsen the situation with a rather unwelcome backlash by the frustrated indigenous Fijians?

However, Qarase has thrown some light as to how his government is going to face the situation during the next three years. He had clearly said that "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", he said adding, "they needed to look at the root causes of widespread Fijian dissatisfaction with the last elected government." Qarase's warning may not be the last say. There may be more in store; who knows?

Anyway, Qarase seems to have rung the alarm bell, by putting his fingers perhaps on the right chord. At least it shows which way the Fijian political wind is blowing

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## To the Editor ...

### Torture in custody

Sir, What can be more reprehensible or more sickening than tying a man for a woman, for that matter to a post, making him completely helpless, and then systematically beating him to pulp? In fact, there are things even more sickening and revolting. Later, the man is given electric shocks, his nails are pulled out and so on. In the society that we live in, these things occur everyday.

It is well known to all that torture in police custody is a routine practice in our country. Even the police themselves do not deny it. It takes place in almost all police stations across the country; but, of course, the real

master of this black art is the Detective Branch, the 'DB'. Almost two years have passed since an innocent young man, Rubel, was tortured to death by the DB in front of his own family. The outraged public called Rubel's horrific death a murder and called for the guilty to be punished. Yet calling this incident a murder will confuse the issue. The end result was definitely a brutal murder, yes, but what transpired before that was standard police procedure. In the aftermath of Rubel's horrific killing, The Daily Star had an interview with a former chief of the DB. He openly admitted that his detectives frequently used to torture 'suspects' during 'questioning'. He also went on to say

that this was necessary to get information to solve cases. Why is torture, in any form, for any reason, wrong? Firstly, because it is against the law (although the enforcers of the law may not be aware of it). It is forbidden in the Bangladesh Constitution. Almost all countries of the world have outlawed this practice. It is expressly forbidden by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, by the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and by the UN Convention on Torture to all of which Bangladesh is a signatory. But even without all this legality, how can we justify torture? One argument often heard is that it is sometimes necessary to torture one person to get information

that can benefit many. 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?

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