

Rising Cost of Living

WITH the electricity, gas and kerosene bills inflating, the living costs are up by another round both in urban and rural Bangladesh. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. The rise in the octane and diesel prices has triggered off a series of price increases pushing up the cost of living indices well beyond the affordability range of the middle and low income groups. With the fuel prices going up the fares on riverine and land routes have soared just as the transportation of goods has become costlier, the latter in turn raising the prices of daily necessities.

The diesel-operated irrigation pumps will run at a higher cost, which in time will push up the costs of agricultural production. The costs of industrial production, needless to say, will have been raised by higher electricity and gas prices as well.

So, that is how the consumers are going to reel under the chain effects of fuel price hikes. And our government must thank its stars that it is being spared anything even remotely resembling the turmoil the governments of some major European countries are facing in the wake of a sharp rise in oil prices, not so much by deliberate domestic decision-making as by the rise in the international crude price. The surging demand of the transport and other service operators and the consumers in general before their governments have been that the latter immediately cut back on fuel taxes. The OPEC has been under pressure to raise the level of oil production which it has done alright but without any corresponding effect in terms of reduction in the oil prices being noticeable. Experts don't see any wisdom in the conventional belief that an increase in the availability of crude could put down the oil prices at the consumer's level because of an exceptional reason which is this: since the existing refining capacities cannot cope with an increased output of crude the petroleum products that are in stock have to be disposed of first in order to make room for refining the new arrivals of crude. Before that happens the petroleum products in hand will sell dear that is the crucial factor the world economy has to reckon with.

What can Bangladesh do for its people under the circumstances? We all know that our oil taxes have been pretty much on the high side which is why the fuel prices at the user level have been so exorbitant. The government has been not only consistently reluctant to reduce the oil taxes it has even refused to bring down the prices when the international prices declined.

It is time the government stopped profiteering on oil prices to balance its budget at the cost of dwindling purchasing power of the people.

Chased to Death?

ANYONE losing his life for police action could be promptly branded as a 'terrorist' with a series of allegations churned out against him. As if they have a right to take the lives of so-called terrorists without trial.

The latest victim of police excess seemed to be 27-year-old young businessman named Mahbub Hasan Khan Oli of Khilgaon. Youngest among eight children of a former joint secretary, since deceased, Mahbub purportedly ran a rent-a-car business. It has been alleged by some members of his family that of late his relations with SI Motiur Rahman of Khilgaon thana became strained as he refused to 'pay bribes' to the SI regularly. As police raided the Bohumukhi Club around 3:30 in the afternoon of Monday, when Mahbub and his friends were gossiping, there they became 'panicky', and in a bid to escape the police noose they threw themselves into the nearby jheel (lake). Mahbub was no swimmer. He cried out for help with outstretched hands but the policemen allegedly neither helped him nor did they allow others to help Mahbub. The body was recovered in the morning of the following day but police did not show up till 7 in the evening, according to some reports. About eighteen months ago three persons were chased to death by police, all of them drowned, in the Subujbagh thana area. What is happening in the city is alarming: the triple murder, the double murder and now this case of Mahbub's death. The last two clearly pointed to some kind of involvement of the police.

Is this the way the people are supposed to get service from the law enforcers? Police are meant for the protection of the life and property of citizens but what some of them are doing is only casting them in 'killer' image. We demand a thoroughly neutral investigation into the allegations. The Home Minister must come down heavily on the policemen whose guilt is proved. Beyond that, what needs to be closely looked into is the complaint that many a policeman is showing a tendency to settle personal scores and vendetta. The government must wake up and deal with the situation with an iron hand.

Fillip to Trade with Thimpu

THE recently signed agreement with Bhutan, in our view, reflects more than Bangladesh's intent on carving deeper niche for her products in the fast growing market in the Himalayan kingdom; it mirrors her commitment to facilitate wider access for a landlocked neighbour. The treaty, which provides for two more overland transit routes to add to the existing one through Burimari at Lalmonirhat, could boost the already "overwhelming" surplus Thimpu enjoys in her trade with Dhaka. However, in the long run, we would benefit from the trade and transit agreement because we have a wider range of exportables than Bhutan. But, more importantly, it would initiate strengthening of trade relations on the sub-regional basis in South Asia.

Since the proposed routes go through the Indian territory, the Dhaka-Thimpu Trade and Transit Agreement would obviously need New Delhi's co-operation to be effectual. Already India's support has been sought and, hopefully, India would not object to the proposition. However, one may recall that in regard to Dhaka-Kathmandu trade and transit agreement conditions were apparently put by the Indian side which they could easily do without. India should know more than any other country that enhanced economic co-operation between her smaller neighbours would also be beneficial to her interest in the long run.

The Dhaka-Thimpu trade and transit agreement should thrive on both nations' commitment to healthy and mutually profitable economic relations. In 20 years since the first treaty was signed, trade between the two has grown exponentially. Already, governments in both countries have started envisaging free trade between them. Once modalities are worked out and ways to plug possible spilling over of commodities into a third country devised, that would become a reality. We hope the next stop would be free trade amongst all of South Asia.

Practice of Democracy in Bangladesh

by Anwar Hashim

In a not too distant past, the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela and Fredrik de Klerk had produced in an internationally acclaimed accord on dismantling apartheid and post-apartheid political structure of South Africa. Should it be impossible for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister and Opposition Leader Begum Khaleda Zia to display sagacity, open-mindedness and far-sightedness and to forge accommodation, if not co-operation, for making democracy work in Bangladesh?

THE democratic principles of 'equality, human dignity and justice' are enshrined in the historic Proclamation of Independence made by the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh on April 10, 1971. Likewise, the Provisional Constitution Order of January 11, 1972 promulgated by the (then) President of Bangladesh described parliamentary democracy as 'the manifest aspiration of the people.' In keeping with this spirit, the ideal of democracy has found renewed and abiding expression in the Constitution of Bangladesh adopted on November 4, 1972.

In proclaiming democracy as one of the fundamental principles of state policy, the Constitution has called upon the state to adopt effective measures to promote local government institutions, facilitate participation of women in all spheres of national life, emancipate the peasants and workers from all forms of exploitation, attain rural development through agricultural revolution, provide equal opportunities to all citizens, ensure availability of basic necessities, and establish a uniform and mass-oriented system of education. It contains numerous universally accepted fundamental rights of the citizens with guarantee for their enforcement by the judiciary. Apart from clearly defining the powers and functions of the state organs, it has made adequate provisions for checks and balances which include, among other things, the requirement on the President's part to act on the Prime Minister's advice, the Prime Minister's responsibility to keep the President informed on matters of domestic and foreign policy and to submit for the Cabinet's consideration any matter which the President may request him/her to refer to it, collective responsibility of the Cabinet to the Parliament and separation of the judiciary from the executive organ of the government. The Constitution also provides for the holding of general elections on the basis of equal franchise.

Indeed the Constitution has laid down an ideal framework for building a welfare state based on democratic norms, values and

principles. Yet the transformation of theory into practice, words into deeds, and pledges into reality appears to be far at sight. To be more specific, establishment of a democratic order characterised by rule of law, good governance, transparency, accountability and distributive justice remains an unfulfilled dream for the populace. Admittedly, three decades cannot be viewed as too long a period in the life of a nation. What is, however, disappointing, if not frustrating, is that much of this time has been either wasted or not utilised judiciously. This leads to an obvious question. Why all successive governments have not been able to deliver on the promises set out in the supreme law of the land? The reasons are not far to seek.

Ironically, the Awami League, which had won a landslide victory in the general elections in 1970 and played the pioneering role in the War of Liberation in 1971, initiated the assault on Bangladesh's nascent democracy shortly after its assumption of power. The creation of the August coup was the armed forces' entry into politics and their alliance with civilians in the game of power sharing. Khondoker Mushtaque Ahmed, who became the new President in connivance with the coup leaders, moved the country towards dictatorship. During his less than three months' rule, the nation witnessed some of the most unfortunate developments in its history, including the gruesome killing of four top Awami League leaders inside Dhaka Central Jail, overt confrontation between top brass and young coup leaders, and two counter-coups in quick succession.

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Awami League with a handful of inconsequential pro-Moscow parties was launched under the banner of the Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL). Despite being projected as a 'National Party' comprising patriotic and pro-liberation forces, the BAKSAL turned out to be a facade for establishing and perpetuating an autocratic rule. Moreover, the induction of government officials into BAKSAL on a selective basis marked the inauspicious beginning of politicisation of the bureaucracy.

The military take-over of August 15, 1975 put an end to the BAKSAL rule. But, the damage it had inflicted on the country's crawling democracy was far greater than the ill-conceived BAKSAL experiment. The tragic and brutal assassination of President Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of the members of his family paved the way to unconcealed authoritarian rule. Another fallout of the August coup was the armed forces' entry into politics and their alliance with civilians in the game of power sharing. Khondoker Mushtaque Ahmed, who became the new President in connivance with the coup leaders, moved the country towards dictatorship. During his less than three months' rule, the nation witnessed some of the most unfortunate developments in its history, including the gruesome killing of four top Awami League leaders inside Dhaka Central Jail, overt confrontation between top brass and young coup leaders, and two counter-coups in quick succession.

Despite the stepping down of Khondoker Mushtaque and the emergence of General Ziaur Rahman on the centre stage of power by the force of events, the

democratic process remained to be revived for over two years. Eventually, Ziaur Rahman restored electoral politics in 1978, a year after his assumption of the office of President. This was followed by the holding of the Presidential election which he won comfortably. In the National Assembly elections of 1979, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which had earlier been launched by him, emerged victorious by a wide margin, though not without allegations of rigging. The nation's resumed stride on the road to democracy was, however, short-lived.

The tragic assassination of President Ziaur Rahman on May 30, 1981 in an attempted coup followed by the ouster of Justice Abdus Sattar on March 24, 1982 in a military take-over unfolded the longest chapter of autocratic rule in the history of Bangladesh. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who seized power and subsequently declared himself as President, failed to earn any credibility during his almost nine-year long rule. His repeated attempts towards so-called 'civilisation' through the floating of his Jatiya Party as well as heavily rigged elections, viz. Referendum of 1985, Presidential election of 1986 and Parliamentary polls of 1986 and 1988, were intended to ensure his continuance in power. He also politicised the armed forces and appointed numerous top brass to high-level bureaucratic positions in order to strengthen his power base. Ershad's despotic rule caused deep anguish and resentment among the silent majority. Ultimately, on December 6, 1990, he was forced to resign in the face of combined movement launched by all major political parties with

extensive support from the people.

With the fall of General Ershad, Bangladesh has now been under civilian rule for nearly a decade at a stretch. In the meantime, it has also succeeded in restoring parliamentary form of government and conducting two free and fair elections under neutral Caretaker Governments.

Undoubtedly, these are positive, encouraging and forward-looking developments. The fact, however, remains that the holding of rigging-free elections in a peaceful atmosphere is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Election is not a synonym for democracy but an indispensable precondition for establishment and strengthening of the democratic system.

Democracy in Bangladesh remains fragile mainly because of degeneration of politics into an acrimonious struggle for gaining and retaining power. Consequently, the political situation has become confrontational and even volatile. To mention a few, this has been reflected in relentless exchange of accusations between the party in power and the opposition: mudslinging and character assassination at the highest political level; overt demonstration of partisan feeling on the part of the Speaker and deprivation of opposition MPs' rights in the parliament; transformation of the Jatiya Sangsad into an opposition-free and unidirectional law making body; induction of hartial culture in politics (the frequency of which has been reduced considerably in recent months, thanks to the mainstream opposition parties' understanding for the common people's sufferings caused by hartial); intensification of street politics; recurrence of

politically motivated violence; crackdown on peaceful rallies and demonstrations; frequent armed conflicts between student fronts of political parties; patronisation of mafias (muslemen) and other criminal elements by their high and mighty godfathers; and infusion of big money, both black and white, in politics.

The political horizon has been further clouded by the executive censure of the judiciary's higher echelons and the print media, virtual breakdown of law and order, enactment of repressive legislation, politicisation of the bureaucracy, growing menace of nepotism and influence peddling, and endemic corruption.

Such a depressing, disheartening and demoralising scenario does not auger well for building a welfare-oriented state based on democratic ideals. Does it imply that there is no light at the end of the tunnel? The prevailing situation does not permit a straight answer but an expression of cautious optimism would perhaps not be inappropriate. History is replete with glaring examples of resolution of intricate and intractable issues of vital national interest and concern through dialogue and negotiation between ideal-driven leaders belonging to diametrically opposite poles. In a not too distant past, the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela and Fredrik de Klerk had produced in an internationally acclaimed accord on dismantling apartheid and post-apartheid political structure of South Africa. Should it be impossible for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister and Opposition Leader Begum Khaleda Zia to display sagacity, open-mindedness and far-sightedness and to forge accommodation, if not co-operation, for making democracy work in Bangladesh?

The writer is a retired Secretary to the Government and a former Ambassador/Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations Offices in Geneva and Vienna.

OPINION

Changes Brought Forth No Change

A H Dewan

Out of the ambit of state power for 21 years, AL back in power in 1996 just let us down in delivering of what it made myriad of fascinating commitments. When the administration was found fumbling with the exacerbated law and order situation and the people's frustration rose to the peak, the government removed the reportedly sober and honest personality like Major (Rtd) Rafiqul Islam who did not seem to drag to put his mettle while dispensing his job as Home Minister and he was even found seeking cooperation from the opposition in combating terrorism. In his place was brought in Mr Nasim, a party stalwart who already held two portfolios, later relieved of one. He began uttering tall talk that turned to be merely claptrap. He set about the combatting operations in the southwestern part of the country to rid those parts of the extremist deserters of the erstwhile Communist/Sarbanara parties engaged in widespread killing and looting but the operation ultimately fell far short of the people's relief. Uddihi organised meeting was totally marred and the dais razed to the ground by planted bombs that massacred scores of a dozen people including veteran left leaning politician Kazi Aref (who was also an active member of the Ghatai Dalal Nirmul Committee) and this nerve-racking happened when Mr Nasim was in high pitch of his much trumpeted operations.

It is really a matter of deep concern that two years have gone by since the changeover took place, but the law and order remained as bleak as ever, and naively speaking some incidents of the kind were/are so frequent that it only goes to bear the starkest testimony to the fact that the AL government has totally failed to rein in the all-time low deterioration of law and order situation.

The task of law and order is so grave and great that it warrants the Home Affairs to be held by one definitely with proven competence and probity of highest order with a trait having no prejudice to any. The grim picture of lawlessness in every nook and corner of the country that our dailies present well speak of

coverage but to whose benefit? The society we have been living in has been in the grip of terror and horror and the common people have completely lost their security of life. Their sense of security has been jeopardised, their miseries and sufferings are being compounded day after day but no one dares open his mouth comprehending grave consequences. In a desperate bid to rid themselves of this horrible situation, the privileged section of the society are availing the first available opportunity to leave this country (Sonar Bangla) and migrate to some other land and settle there. The deteriorating law and order situation and the ever-increasing environmental degradation are, among many other factors, persuading the gifted and talented sons of the soil to desert the coun-

try increasing number culminating in the so-called 'brain drain'. But who will put a brake to this trend if the overall situation prevailing in the society and the country as a whole, continues to remain as it is?

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bility of a person. But a man who is already holding a lucrative ministry of telecommunications that entails no less full time attention has been burdened with the additional responsibility. It seems he holds formidable clout with the PM, but his actions have not made things to be formidable for the terrorists and criminal offenders. People's disquiet and impatience have reached the saturation point, and we are saddened that the change of portfolio came of no use except a stunt.

Another competent retired general, himself an engineer by career, was stripped of his charge of Energy Sector and the PM herself took over, later made over to another AL lawmaker Prof. Rafiqul Islam as the country's loadshedding was showing no sign of improvement. Genl. Nuruddin is not one who could be blamed to be incompetent or dishonest. But he could not cope with the dishonesty, which permeated through the rank and file of electricity distribution system. But with Prof Rafique at the top also with over two years to his credit, he could make no creditable marks of change towards the betterment of the condition, rather the incidence of unabated erratic loadshedding became more of a common phenomenon to the utter dissatisfaction of the consumers who are now so sick of it that many not only keep grumbling but also cast foul languages against the government. Neither it could proliferate generation of electricity, nor keep it from going bad to worse. How could they do? They could not even take any actions to remove the backlog of anomalies in the system loss by bringing any of the corrupt officials to task, much

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less to book and improve the situation.

Four years are a pretty long time for a govt. to grasp the irritated sentiment of the people and do something drastic at any cost, either by expanding the existing installations of power generation or installing new ones. A bigger power plant under private ownership commissioned during this regime is just a drop in the desert. AL has thus failed to respond to the call of the hour or for that matter of the people, whereas it was very much expected to be committed to the alleviation of the people's woes, if not elimination. On the other hand it has been spending lavishly in building mausoleums and squares after its late leader and others which in fact mattered little with the people's concern. Whereas priority was how to overcome the loadshedding and getting it done by any means merited foremost consideration. Our ill luck is that it did not happen. As a resident of a certain area in Dhaka city, last Friday, like any other day of the week, I had the worst time because of non-availability of electricity for two hours at a stretch. Then what good did the change of portfolio bring forth?

Although other ministries except for Health had not had to face any change of their men they are not any better. Corruption and inefficiency in the education department as also the defaulting culture in the financial institutions remained as pervading as ever. The recent report in the newspapers about the fraudulently bagging of crores of taka by the private colleges in collusion with the men in the education department was just shocking. That inefficiency of a government breeds corruption has come to be true of AL

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To the Editor ...

Reign of terror

Sir, I was taken aback by the press report of five gruesome murders within a span of 16 hours (DS, 18 September). As the law and order situation of the country has deteriorated alarmingly, such occurrences of brutal killings naturally give rise to the question whether we are living in a civic society or not. The overall situation has worsened dramatically, if not mysteriously over the past couple of months. Criminal reports are occupying the front pages of all national dailies almost everyday. Crimes of all categories are going on unabated and incidents of murder, hijacking, mugging, kidnapping, looting, children and women representation (particularly rape) etc are making their room for press

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disease is spreading rapidly, many people have been afflicted by it and quite a number of them have already died.

A new century is only a few months away and we don't know what is in store for the future generations but one thing we know that if everyone forgets about their petty interest and strives for the interest of the country and the people then the world will indeed be a better place to live in.

Hapless country, helpless people

Sir, The law and order situation of the country is in a complete