

## Special quotas, doles

No let-up in voter wooing

**I**n a tall-tale departure from norms, Food Minister Amir Hossain Amu has acquired a special quota of 25 per cent in the current season's boro procurement drive. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Food, apparently caught in the pre-election fever, has endowed the minister with that special privilege. The remainder 75 per cent of the procurement work will be for the Directorate of Food to handle through buying centres at the thana level. It is common knowledge that the food directorate has been the sole nodal agency for conducting procurement drives.

The question, therefore, arises as to why a part of the function hitherto wholly reserved for the directorate, which works under the food ministry anyway, is being taken over by the minister himself? That the motive behind this unprecedented step has to do with nurturing constituencies is only reinforced by the so-called proviso that the minister 'would allocate from the special quota in consultation with the members of the standing committee on food ministry.'

This amounts to a resurrection of permit or agency system, as it were, which the present government had otherwise slammed shut the doors on picking up laurels in the process.

We don't know how the special ministerial quota will be operated, something that we would certainly like the food ministry to enlighten the public on through an appropriate clarification sooner than later. But as it looks, private parties or favoured individuals would replace the thana purchasing centres insofar as the 25 per cent of the boro procurement drive goes. Collaterally, those who procure cereals might also be in charge of deciding offtakes or allocations from it. But if all this comes to happen then there could be a major distortion in the food distribution mechanism without a shadow of doubt.

This ruling party move rhymes with the news that one lakh fifty thousand acres of khas land will be distributed to the landless by the month of June. As the Krishak Sramik League looks for 'genuine landless farmers' it is not surprising that many in the ruling party circles have reportedly fallen head over heels to fill in the prescribed form in a bid to lay a claim on the largesse.

Pragmatically, at this pre-election time, what the ruling party needs most is enhanced credibility, not a plummeting one.

## Two-stroke tyranny

Enforcement, incentive missing in phasing out three-wheelers

**I**n 1998 the government took two environmentally significant decisions. First, it would phase out two-stroke three-wheelers, namely auto-rickshaws and tempos, over a period of five years. And second, it would ban import of leaded fuel. The second has had a successful execution despite an initial stutter. However, execution of the first, in real sense, has never had a start. It seems the government completely failed to perceive the implementational reality while reaching the conclusion that two-stroke engines must be eliminated from the country's road traffic system. The first step in the decision-making process should have been a comprehensive survey on the number of three-wheelers and the number of people dependent on these for living. The next step should have been to devise means and ways to effectively introduce the four-stroke engines. Here, the government has banned import of two-stroke engines all right, but import of four-stroke engines has not been facilitated. While import duty on taxicabs is only seven per cent, it is a staggering 72 per cent on four-stroke three-wheelers. And despite the ban, two-stroke engines and their spare parts are reportedly smuggled in from India.

No wonder, there has been a progressive growth in the two-stroke three-wheeler population. Some 65,000 ply on the streets of the capital alone. Again, it is just the official count. Given the rampant practice of forged registration and other documents, there could be several thousand more in operation. Overall, it looks highly unlikely that the government would be able to rid the traffic system of two-stroke three-wheelers by January 1, 2003, that is, if it continues to go about the task the way it has so far done. In the coming budget, the government should slash the tax on the import of four-stroke auto-rickshaws. The next step should be enhanced enforcement at different tiers.

Two-stroke engines spew some 200 volatile organic compounds (VOCs), into the air. Increasing level of lead content in the air is exposing children to different mental and physical disorder. With every passing moment, the situation is aggravating. We are sure the people at the helm know that.

## India and Bangladesh

RAMASWAMY R. IYER

**I** am deeply disappointed that even my good friend Mahfuz Anam, as decent, civilized, urban and friendly a person as I have ever come across, and usually well disposed towards India, has succumbed to the prevailing atmosphere of ill-will, described India as 'Big Brother' and shown traces of bitterness that I did not believe he was capable of.

He says that to India only China and Pakistan matter and that Bangladesh does not exist. Pakistan and China matter to India for negative reasons: India is worried about both, and they figure prominently in the Indian consciousness. Neither Bangladesh nor Nepal is a source of worry in the same way, and they do not figure frequently in government communications or in the media. Is that a bad thing? Does it follow that India is not interested in these countries? When the Awami League Government came into power in Bangladesh in 1996, the Indian Foreign Minister K. G. Gajral led a goodwill delegation to Dhaka. In September 1996 (I was a member of that delegation), he made a promise that he would find a solution to the longstanding Ganga Waters issue before the onset of the ensuing lean season (1 January 31 May 1997), and he kept that promise: the Ganges Treaty was signed on 12 December 1996. Did that show a lack of interest in Bangladesh? After an initial shaky start because of low flows in the river in 1997, the Treaty has operated well in the lean seasons of 1998, 1999 and 2000, and the two Governments have expressed satisfaction with its performance. Is this evidence of neglect? What must India do to demonstrate that it cares for Bangladesh? May one venture to suggest that this feeling of neglect is a purely subjective Bangladeshi perception unrelated to anything that

India has done or failed to do?

Yes, India is inordinately slow in doing certain things, for instance, trade liberalization or resolving the issue of border demarcation or exchange of enclaves. However, these delays are not due to a lack of interest in good relations or deliberate foot-dragging or sheer cussedness: they arise from our extraordinarily dilatory and cumbersome systems and procedures, the complexities of our federalism, the intricacies of our legal machinery, and so on. I am not justifying slowness of action

with Pakistan). Is there a similar body of opinion in Bangladesh or Nepal in favour of good relations with India? Yes indeed, but it is a small one which is not always ready to speak out. More than anything else, India desperately wants to be loved by its neighbours, and that is a bad qualification for an intending hegemon. Whenever India has unwisely embarked on strong measures, it has usually bungled and come a cropper (for instance, the so-called blockade of Nepal, the IPKF venture in Sri Lanka, and so

on). It is true that there is a long border, with some parts undemarcated, and with enclaves in 'adversary possession' on either side that have not yet been exchanged. As mentioned earlier, there are real difficulties here, not just 'foot-dragging' by India. However, this uncertain and fluid situation does lead to trouble from time to time. Usually the incidents are minor; these events have taken an ugly turn. From all the reports that have appeared, it seems clear that there was a bit of adventurism on the part

have appeared with too much circumstantial detail for us to dismiss the whole thing by saying that it never happened. If the facts are established, India will have to ask Bangladesh to take appropriate action. But is that likely? First, we were told that there was an expression of regret by Sheikh Hasina; then this was flatly denied. The response to an Indian invitation for talks was that a visit to India was "ruled out". Now Bangladesh in turn is said to have invited India for talks in Dhaka: how popular would that be in India, given the

remarks said to have been made by an Indian actor (which were subsequently denied), and how this led to riots. Similarly, when low flows in the Ganges in April 1997 caused some problems, anti-India feelings rose quickly to the surface in Bangladesh. Fortunately, the problems did not recur in the ensuing three years, and the acrimony died down; but it can happen again at any time as it now has over the recent border incidents. My regret is that when those feelings rise to the surface, even sane, civilized people are not totally exempt from their influence. Contrariwise, there are some in India -fortunately a small number- who argue that India should indeed be a hegemon and a tough one; luckily, that view does not have a wide following.

or failures to act promptly on commitments made. I am only saying that India does have a genius for tying itself up into knots. Its capacity for sheer inefficiency, for making things complicated, for allowing simple problems to become formidably difficult, are awe-inspiring. Exasperation with this is understandable, but it should not be misinterpreted as lack of interest or ill-will.

Hegemonism? India seems to me a most unlikely hegemon. A hegemon usually knows exactly what it wants and goes about it with single-mindedness and determination. India does not know what it wants, is confused by internal divergences of views, and ends up by pussyfooting or doing the wrong thing. For any one person who advocates hegemonism in India there are twenty others who would strongly deprecate it. There is always a strong body of opinion in India in favour of good relations with the neighbouring countries (even

failures to act promptly on commitments made. I am only saying that India does have a genius for tying itself up into knots. Its capacity for sheer inefficiency, for making things complicated, for allowing simple problems to become formidably difficult, are awe-inspiring. Exasperation with this is understandable, but it should not be misinterpreted as lack of interest or ill-will.

The one successful venture was the assistance given to the Bangladeshi liberation struggle, but that too was bungled as it failed to ensure a stable and friendly relationship with Bangladesh: instead, for the major part of the last three decades India has had a hostile Bangladesh to contend with. Even after a 'friendly' government came into power in Bangladesh, that government has to look over its shoulder constantly for fear of being considered too friendly to India which is the worst possible abuse that can be hurled at anyone in Bangladesh. One wishes India had never got involved in that liberation struggle. Even without India's help, Bangladesh would probably have come into being sooner or later, and India-Bangladesh relations would not have been complicated by expectations of gratitude on the one side and resentment on the other.

Consider the recent border prob-

onities, the allegations of torture, and the curt rejection of the Indian invitation by Bangladesh?

Given the strong upsurge of nationalist feelings in Bangladesh and the compulsions of the forthcoming elections, the official Bangladeshi enquiry into allegations of torture and mutilation seems unlikely to be fair and objective, and we cannot seriously expect the Bangladesh Government to take stern action against those responsible. We are much more likely to be told that nothing could be established.

Let us face it. There is a deep visceral anti-India feeling in Bangladesh (as also in Nepal) and this cannot be fully explained with reference to anything that India might have done or failed to do. That feeling is easily brought to surface. Contrariwise, there are some in India -fortunately a small number- who argue that India should indeed be a hegemon and a tough one; luckily, that view does not have a wide following.

Ramaswamy R. Iyer is a former secretary to the Govt. of India. After retirement he worked for the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, and has written extensively on the water problems between India and Bangladesh.

## Can South East Asia encourage South Asia in nuclear non-proliferation?



ZAUKUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

**I**NDIAN prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was recently in Malaysia, an important country in the South East Asian region. Besides having bilateral talks on different matters including bolstering cooperation in the economic and commercial fields, discussions with his Malaysian counterpart Dr. Mahathir Mohammad covered issues of regional and international importance. India, in addition to being the largest democracy in the world, is also a major power in the region. Malaysia is the most stable democracy in the South East Asia and its leader Dr. Mahathir Mohammad is not only one of the longest serving, democratically elected prime minister but is also considered as a bold voice for the developing nations. As such, the visit of the Indian prime minister carried significance not only bilaterally but also otherwise. While discussing a number of subjects pertaining to global peace and security, the two leaders also exchanged views on the political environment in the two populous adjacent regions South Asia, South East Asia.

One of the main outcomes of the visit that has received sufficient international attraction is prime minister Vajpayee's consent to honour the decision of the South East Asian nations to keep the region a nuclear-free zone. Indeed, it is an achievement of the talks since India is a nuclear-power nation. Malaysia and other fellow ASEAN countries have been striving to turn their region into an area devoid of nuclear power despite the

Lanka. China has earlier given support to the ASEAN nations will to keep the South East Asian region a nuclear-free zone. It is understood that the Chinese prime minister's talks with the leaders of the four South Asian nations must have covered, among other issues, the nuclearisation of this region. China is one of the five member of elite "Atomic Club" that also comprises the United States, Russia, France and Britain. All the members of this

Asian regions. While South Asia is embroiled in fears of the dangers of atomic weapons, South East Asia has moved a step further in securing the area from this danger. True, fundamentally two regions represent different pictures as regards the atomic scenario since none of the nations in the ASEAN has gone nuclear while two major countries in South Asia have acquired this power and both are in a spirit of severe rivalry in this field along with overall

Rocca, assistant secretary of state designate for the South Asian affairs, said that the administration was reviewing all sanctions including those against India and Pakistan. Obviously, the new administration wants a change in the position from the Clinton era which had imposed the restriction. Former president Bill Clinton had postponed a planned visit to South Asia because of atomic tests by two countries and paid the visit much later. Admittedly, there is no point to continue the sanctions on developing countries like India and Pakistan where a large segment of people are mired in poverty. But it is also necessary to pursue efforts to convince the two nations of the need to improve the political climate in the area by lessening their bilateral tensions as far as possible and decision to restrict proliferation of atomic weapons.

It is no more possible to make this region nuclear-free like the adjacent ASEAN region but it is possible to make South Asia a "safer" place if the countries which possess nuclear power are kept under control by their respective 'peace' policies and pressure exerted by international community including the United States, currently the only super power in the world. After all, the peace and stability of this region on the nuclearisation of the two neighbours whose relations are only characterised by belligerence and hostilities.

Although the visits of Chinese and Indian prime ministers to two different regions have been different in nature but what is in common is that the discussions were markedly on the political environment in two

military strength. It is more so because both are justifying their possession of the atomic power and plan to improve it citing "security" reasons. Pakistan says it needs it to match, the "Indian design" while New Delhi "finds" dangers to its security from Pakistan as well as China. In such a circumstance, the concerns of smaller nations of the region on the nuclearisation of the South Asia often fall on deaf ears.

New American president George Bush's nominee for the crucial South Asia policy has taken a relaxed stance on sanctions imposed to punish India and Pakistan for 1998 nuclear tests, saying these have outlived their usefulness and as such should be lifted. Cristina

the talks between the leadership of the two countries.

However, Indo-Pakistani rivalry and proliferation of atomic weapons by both nations must have figured prominently in the discussions. After the 1998 tests, both New Delhi and Islamabad said they were exercising a moratorium on its further proliferation but few took this claim seriously because of rivalry between the two neighbours whose relations are only characterised by belligerence and hostilities.

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I hope that our major political parties would incorporate a decision in this regard in their forthcoming party manifesto so that the issue is not raised repeatedly by the oil companies to embarrass the government or the country.

Reaz Hassan Awwal  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka, on e-mail

**HR reports**

The HR reports released periodically by the US government appear to be coming from another world, where the working conditions in the Third World countries are appreciated only through written reports, and rarely based on first hand experience acquired through a long period of stay. There are many paper solutions, but field implementation is quite baffling.

The point to be remind them is that at the moment, Bangladesh does not have enough natural gas to serve its own needs for at least 50

years. It would, therefore, be suicidal for us to allow export of gas in any form to any country.

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Reaz Hassan Awwal

Dhanmondi, Dhaka, on e-mail

**PHOTORIAL**

ment in the other world, where two thirds of the world's people live under unenviable conditions.

**Abd**

**Dhaka**

**Hotel accommodation**

A wide range of hotels in Dhaka and outside Dhaka charge exorbitant room rates for accommodation.

There is no fixed rate of tariff for a single room, double room or other types of accommodation.

We would appreciate it if the hotel owners display on their respective notice boards the rate of tariff of different types of accommodation in their respective hotels for the convenience of the customers and also issue them with money receipts at the time of payment of hotel accommodation charges.

Would the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, and Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation kindly look into the matter and issue necessary instructions to all hotel owners?

**O. H. Kabir**

**Wari, Dhaka**

## PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: M RAHAT AHMED SIKDAR, IU CORRESPONDENT, KUSHTIA

## The game of life

These kids do not work for a circus company, but are deprived youngsters, trying to have a good time in their own way. Schooling is the last thing they can afford because earning a living is their main challenge. They don't know what the future holds for them but they do know that they have to rely on themselves from the moment they are born. No one is there to take care of them, but themselves.

## Sports news

I would like to request your sports editor to include the PGA tournament scores in the sports page, as this sports has become highly popular world-wide.

In addition, the end of the day's play score of the cricket matches that is being played in England, may also be published for the convenience of the readers. The Daily Star only gives the lunch time scores.

Mujib Rahman

On e-mail

## Leave the army alone

I was worried to read the news item "Board to meet ahead of schedule-six brigadier generals to be promoted" (May 14). As the news item has not so far been contradicted by the ISPR, we may take it as correct.

The term of the present government will expire within less than two months. It is understandable, the government will now be in a hurry to implement much of its agenda before it hands over power to the caretaker government. But in this hurry, it should not interfere in the routine work of the army, specially in a very important aspect like the promotion of senior officers.

Most of the officers, whose names appeared in your newspaper

per, are reportedly known to be professionally good officers. I don't think they need any favour from any political party to become generals or brigadiers. Rather such favour, if shown so nakedly, will make them feel inferior in the eyes of their comrades-in-arms. Yes, such wrongs were done in the past, but it has not helped wrong doers in any way. It also did not help Marcos, Estrada, Suharto and many like them.

I appeal to the government to leave the army alone in the national interest and let the promotion board be held by the end of this year, when it is normally due.

A retired officer

Dhaka, on e-mail

## Gas export

From a recent newspaper report, I have learnt that two major U.S. oil companies-- Unocal Corp. (UCL) and the Royal Dutch/ Shell Group (RD), contemplating winding up their business operations in Bangladesh. The reason adduced is that there is 'no point in drilling holes if gas can't be sold'.