

Special quotas, doles

No let-up in voter wooing

IN a tell-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

IN 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-stoke 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, urbane 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 I K Gujral 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

lems. It is true that there is a long border, with some parts undemarcated, and with enclaves in 'adverse 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; this time 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

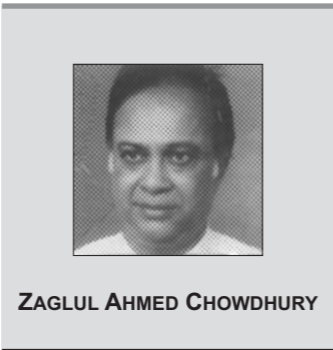
have appeared with too much circumstantial detail for us to dismiss the whole ting by saying that it never happened. If the facts are established, India will have to ask Bangladesh to take appropriate action. But is that likely? First, we were told that there was an expression of regret by Sheikh Hasina; 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

tain 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.

I am driven to wondering whether in fact good relations between India and Nepal or between India and Bangladesh are possible. Perhaps it would be more realistic to give up such expectations and accept that there will always be a strong undercurrent of anti-India feelings in these countries (unrelated to anything that India does or does not do); that India must not expect to be loved but at best tolerated; and that India must learn to live with that situation. And in that case, should India aim at anything more than coldness, correctness and distance in its relationship with these countries? I shall be most happy if that pessimistic conclusion can be convincingly refuted by anyone in India or Nepal or Bangladesh.

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 ?



INDIAN 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

askance at India's nuclear programme. But it appears to be happy with Islamabad's progress in this field since both describe each other as close friends. While reviewing the political climate in the South Asian region, the Chinese premier must have spoken to the leaders of the countries he visited particularly Pakistan on the nuclearisation of this region. Nothing much has come out in the press and as such it is difficult to guess what transpired in

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 this 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 inhabited by more than one fifth of humanity should be of immense importance to all. If South East Asia can do it, can South Asia lag far behind ?

MATTERS AROUND US

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... If South East Asia can do it, can South Asia lag far behind ?

fact that some of the countries here are militarily strong and might have also nurtured the desire of acquiring atomic power some day. But the collective decision by the South East Asian countries some years ago to keep the region away from nuclearisation has put a halt to such ambition and the region now seeks endorsement and support to this position from different countries especially those who have acquired this power in the vicinity. Indian support will definitely be a shot in arms for the ASEAN countries.

Chinese prime minister Zhu Rongji was on a visit to some south Asian nations almost the same time. The Chinese premier was in Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri

club are opposed to further spread of the nuclear power. As such, when India and Pakistan detonated a series of atomic bombs in May,1998,all the five countries reacted adversely. Some of them and economic power Japan imposed sanctions on New Delhi and Islamabad protesting the explosions.

China was very critical of the Indian action but much less critical of Pakistan's. Evidently, Beijing is a close friend of Islamabad and it is believed that the two countries may be having collaboration in the nuclear field. Because of its once-hostile relationship with New Delhi, which, however, is now in a process of normalisation, China looks

the talks between the leadership of the two countries.

However, Indo-Pakistan 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 kind of 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.

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 at sanctions imposed to punish India and Pakistan for 1998 nuclear tests, saying these have outlived their usefulness and as such should be lifted. Cristina

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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, KUSHITA

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.

Mujibur Rahman
On e-mail

Leave the army alone

I was worried to read the news item "Board to meet ahead of scheduled-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.

The army has its own rules, regulations, conventions, practices and routine of work. Any interference by a political government, contrary to these rules, regulations, conventions, practices and the usual routine, without a very strong tangible reason, makes the army politicised with far reaching adverse effects on the morale and discipline of its officer corps. Why should a political party in power be so extra keen to go out of the way to promote some chosen officers, if it does not want to politicise the army ?

In the past, the BNP government committed the same mistake. Some senior army officers, some of whom were otherwise good enough to be promoted on the basis of their professional competence, were then promoted in an unholy haste, violating the standard procedures and practice. On promotion they were branded as "BNP generals" and lost their impartial image, and thus acceptability, specially among their under command junior officers. There is a controversy about the way in which the last retired CAS was appointed. With such politically branded commanders at the top no army, worth its name, can function efficiently.

Most of the officers, whose names appeared in your newspa-

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 .

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'.

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.

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 industrial and donor countries use such reports as political propaganda material to control the LDCs; closely followed by the UN agencies, which are indirectly controlled by the only super power.

Cultural sympathy is not expected, but there is a severe lack of empathy of the working environ-

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