

Prices register rise across the board

Efforts needed to bring them down

THE prices of daily essentials have risen markedly to the misfortune of the limited income people, let alone those with very little purchasing power to withstand it. Rice, edible oil, pulse, potato and the whole range of green vegetables are selling dear. Vegetable prices have particularly skyrocketed from last year's levels, the latest steep rise, of course, being an upshot of the on-going floods.

The across-the-board increase in food prices is worrisome in itself because of its implication in terms of subsistence; but there is more to it. For, when you add this on to other living expenses, such as housing, utilities, transportation, education and medical, which have been on an upward curve themselves, the over-all living costs become problematic for the fixed income groups.

The most obvious reasons for the rising prices of cereals and vegetables are the heavy rains and the consequent flooding. Production, processing, and above all, transportation of goods have been hampered. Rice traders say if they get seven days of sunshine, the rain-soaked paddies could be dried and milled for rice which would then ease off some of the price pressure. Even though they have a point, it may not be all that simple given the danger for a bigger flood looming on the horizon. So long as that's the case, a contingency plan for transportation needs to be kept handy.

We believe the government has its own explanation for the upswing in prices. Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, the CPD executive director has tried to establish a cause-and-effect relationship by referring to higher electricity, gas, fuel and other service costs on the one hand and to Taka devaluation and import squeeze on the other (contingent upon forex reserve difficulties earlier on). Whether a reduced flow of investment and a decrease in the rate of interest on savings certificate created an inflationary pressure or not, Dr Debapriya has urged the government to consider that as well.

In certain circumstances, leaving the price-line to be determined by demand and supply forces, especially when these have been upset, may not be a practical option to take. Although the market mechanism should reign supreme at normal times, a limited intervention may be unavoidable in an exigency. Food-for-work releases apart, the government must go for open market sale (OMS) of rice. So, we are looking forward to some timely off-takes from the government silos to bring stability to the cereal markets. The contingency strategy should include facilitation of speedy imports.

Basically, marketing intelligence gathering should be stepped up at all retail and wholesale levels to enable the government to keep a constant tab on prices. Simultaneously a free flow of information will have to be ensured to the media. Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) and the apex bodies of business communities. Let's have price watch committees at the union parishad and ward levels and government-chamber body consultations in a bottom-up process. It's a good idea that shopkeepers start displaying price lists with plus and minus signs, where applicable, from time to time.

Govt's firm stand on autorickshaw ban

More thought on alternatives needed

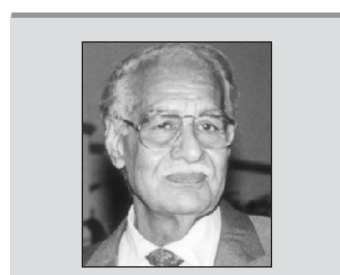
THE government has made it amply clear that the ban on two-stroke three-wheelers will come into effect from September 1. Its resolve is indeed commendable. However, there appear two glitches down the road. One, there will be a shortage of passenger vehicles once the two-stroke engines are taken off the road. Transport experts believe that the measures the government has taken so far in this regard fall short of requirement; therefore, a section of commuters will feel the crunch for at least two months, if not more, when the autorickshaws will have been taken off the street. Two, autorickshaw owners, drivers and employees have threatened to go for agitation if the government does not defer the deadline and give them more time for their rehabilitation. This could give rise to a law and order situation.

The government claims it has undertaken adequate alternative measures to offset the impact that withdrawal of some 16,000 to 18,000 autorickshaws and autotempos from city roads will have on the public transport system. The Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) has plans to add 30 double-deckers and 100 buses to its fleet. Also, it has signed an agreement with a Singapore-based company to launch a taxi-cab service. Moreover, a good number of privately owned buses and other passenger vehicles will also hit the road soon. However, each plan has a timeframe of two months or more, which clearly justifies the experts' concern of a transport void for a good stretch of time. The government will have to ensure that import of passenger vehicles does not face bureaucratic hindrances and that all help is extended to the private sector in this regard.

As for the grievances of autorickshaw and autotempo owners, drivers and employees, the government need to engage them in a dialogue and offer as much support for their rehabilitation as possible without compromising its stand. Indeed, four months are a reasonably long transition time and the proposal to lease BRTC buses to co-operative societies formed by them is sound indeed. There could be some communication gap between the two sides that needs to be addressed.

The ban on two-stroke engines is premised on the objective of ridding the city of air pollution by motorised vehicles. Faulty and unfit engines are also major culprits in this regard. Unfortunately, many government vehicles fall in this category and should be got rid of. We urge the government to make sure that they are. The cleansing after all has to begin at home.

The spark that Pakistan lacks



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

YOU can have Kashmir provided you give us Nehru. A Pakistani intellectual made this remark while we were debating post-partition events many years ago. By then India had introduced the constitution and the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies had begun functioning after free elections.

Pakistan, on the other hand, was always in the throes of some political crisis or other. It had lost both its founders, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and his deputy, Liaquat Ali Khan. One prime minister after another was resigning. The country itself was alternating between the scheme of one-unit and a federal pattern of empowered provinces. What the Pakistani intellectual tried to convey was that it was Nehru who had established democratic institutions in India and that if someone like him had been there in Pakistan he would have done the same thing. He added Kashmir to show that they would even sacrifice their dearest thing provided they got democracy. Much water has flown down the Sind since then. Democracy, let alone its institutions, is a relic of the past in Pakistan. The military has ruled the country for most of the time since independence. Even when the soldiers have gone back to the

barracks they have seen to it that the "elected" prime minister would visit the military headquarters to "talk things over."

Even today, Pakistan remains under tight military control. But it is exhilarating to see free and open debate raging in the country on the restoration of democracy. The appraisal of political changes that President Pervez Musharraf wants to bring about is both candid and critical. The media is vociferous and politicians unsparing in their attack.

General Zia-ul Haq staged a coup d'etat. I asked Zulfikar Ali Bhutto: "How he would ensure that the military did not return."

Nothing like that ever happened. Even after Bhutto's execution, not a dog barked in Pakistan. In contrast, India saw the countrywide protests, a big one right in New Delhi. People criticised the then Morarji Desai government, which was diffident to say anything official against Bhutto's hanging.

My reading is that military

Some of my friends have gone to jail. But those agitations were of a political nature, one party opposing the other in power. There has never been any movement worth the name to get democracy back.

The question is why Pakistan has been under martial law rule for decades and why India has escaped from such travails. We are similar in so many ways. We both resort to dictatorship and love freedom and liberty. Perhaps what is lacking in Pakistan

League only a couple of years before independence.

East Pakistan was far more in tune with the national struggle. One saw agitations in support of Pakistan's demand. And when it came to their own freedom or identity, the Bangladeshis fought an equally ferocious battle to free themselves from the 'exploiters' in West Pakistan. Bangladesh, with all its ills, has done far better than Pakistan in keeping the armed forces out of politics. True, India's biggest asset is

templating to establish, is not foreign to India. But its role is advisory and the cabinet is supreme. Pakistan's NSC will be superior to the cabinet, an apex body of elected government. It will become active when the military feels that democracy has gone off the rails. Its job will be over when it has restored democracy. Who will decide? The whole thing is undemocratic because the NSC, which is not a duly elected body, cannot be the authority to decide on the intervention.

General Zia mooted the idea first. He did not constitute it because he probably found the political opposition too strong. When I asked him once during an interview for his insistence on constituting such a body, he said that it was the only way to stop military takeover. I told him that the armed forces had walked in whenever they had felt like and nothing had stopped them. Then why the council, I asked. He had no convincing answer except that some set-up, other than the elected one, had to be there to protect democracy. India can feel proud that it has succeeded in preserving democratic institutions. Our failure, however, is that some political parties have tarnished the secular ethos for which we fought during the national struggle. When incidents like the Babri Masjid demolition and the Gujarat carnage take place in states where we have elected governments, the question arises whether our polity is truly democratic. Democracy is a system of governance by the people, of the people and for the people. But people do not mean only the majority community.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Our failure, however, is that some political parties have tarnished the secular ethos for which we fought during the national struggle. When incidents like the Babri masjid demolition and the Gujarat carnage take place in states where we have elected governments, the question arises whether our polity is truly democratic. Democracy is a system of governance by the people, of the people and for the people. But people do not mean only the majority community.

One, however, wonders whether all those who are articulating their opposition to Musharraf's political package are doing so without bothering about the consequences or whether Musharraf has allowed them leeway to have their pent up feelings off their chests.

But the ventilation is at best a catharsis, an emotional purification. Media men and political elements are speaking out because they did not when it was necessary. They probably regret that they never put up even a semblance of a fight whenever their democratic institutions were demolished before their own eyes.

"People would come out on the streets to defy the tanks if ever the army dared to take over," he said. In an interview a few months before

regimes in Pakistan have found little resistance because the atmosphere in the country has always been that of acceptance and not defiance. There is no tradition to challenge big landlords and vested interests, much less martial law rule. I have found no popular movement -- it could have been called *jehad* since this word goes down well in an Islamic state -- against either General Ayub, General Zia or, for that matter, General Musharraf. During Ayub's time, even the Qaid-e-Azam's sister, Fatima Jinnah, who had stood by her brother in the making of Pakistan, was defeated when she ran for President. True, the election was rigged but the nation pocketed the humiliation without demur. I do not say that there has been no agitation in Pakistan.

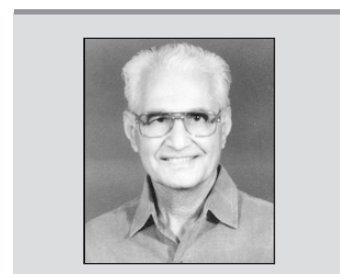
is the ferment that a national struggle builds up among its people to make them stand up to dictatorships or martial law administrations. India went through fire while fighting the British. That movement steeled it to challenge anti-people rule. Mrs Indira Gandhi was routed at the polls for imposing the emergency (1975-77).

During the national struggle the Congress Party attracted ordinary people who were willing to sacrifice all to wrest freedom from the hands of foreign rulers. The Muslim League, on the other hand, was a party of big landlords, tribal leaders and confirmed toadies. Its approach was not that of protest or opposition. Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province, which constitute Pakistan, joined the

that its military is apolitical. When the emergency imposed by Mrs Gandhi was losing its edge, she reportedly approached the then Chief of Army Staff General Raina for help. He refused point blank, observing that the armed forces were meant to support the constitution, not to supplant it.

A few years ago when the governments at the centre were falling like ninepins, none in India thought that the army would take over. We watched on TV the governments proving or not proving their majority in the Lok Sabha. Democratic institutions have taken roots in India -- one of the few countries in the third world where this has happened. The National Security Council (NSC), which President Musharraf is con-

Powell's visit: Aimed at what?



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE US Secretary of State Colin Powell was in South Asia and has returned home via Far East. Can anyone say that he came, he saw and he conquered? Apparently not. Nothing has changed on the ground. Atmospherics too have not. Has nothing changed?

If anyone in India or Pakistan thinks that the current tensions on the borders and the Kashmir problem were uppermost in the mind of Mr. Powell and his delegation he would not be realistic. Enough indications had been given by the American media of what the visit was all about. Doubtless careful deliberation had been done in Washington about what precise gifts were to be given to the Indians and what goodies were for Pakistanis. Even the phrases to be used had

been calibrated. But first the motivation.

This assessment has necessarily to be based on some indications and some inferences. But the indications were clear: the Bush administration appears to be raring to attack Iraq next; this time round the same objective has to be achieved that was left half or a quarter achieved in 1991: the removal of Saddam Hussain from office.

Abdullah of Jordan having called the scheme a can of worms.

But it does seem as if the American administration has made up its mind to go for Saddam Hussain, nevertheless. Its motivation is to be seen under several heads. The elements that underpin the American obsession with Iraq are the usual ones: there is the question of Israel's assessment of its security; that also translates into America

Bush's 'axis of evil'; they have been trying to make up between each other. That sounds alarm bell in both Tel Aviv and Washington.

Where Pakistan comes in is the fact that the Arabs and the Europeans are reluctant to become partners in the US campaign against Iraq. Even Turkey is hesitant, though many expect it to veer round and acquiesce in the American scheme. But it remains a doubtful proposition.

India he had just one gift to give to the Indians: that the October polls in the Indian-controlled Kashmir can be a starting point for the search for a solution of the problem. But he felt it necessary to hedge it with conditions that can be explained away as well as, if necessary, built upon further: the election should be free and fair and some of the prisoners should be freed while international

vis-à-vis Kashmir polls was sweet music for the Musharraf government. The message was well timed and well aimed. But the purpose had little to do with either Kashmir or even the military tensions with an implicit threat of war. It was aimed at America's larger purpose vis-à-vis Iraq.

There are many in Pakistan who have already concluded that the Musharraf government will have little hesitation in accepting the American 'offer'. There are others who think that the Musharraf government will be hard put to it today to accept participation in a war. That is directly aimed at Iraq and is indirectly inimical to Iran, a traditional close ally, if also somewhat unhappy of late. This aspect will make it difficult for Pakistan to become a partner in the attack on Iraq. The fact that Turkey and other Arab states have volubly expressed their unhappiness should weigh with the Musharraf government. Characteristically, Musharraf left for a foreign tour soon after meeting Powell that will take him to Beijing, the views of which are important for Pakistan. The decision has not been taken for the time being.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

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It so happens that the Europeans do not like the idea one little bit; they think the effort will be counterproductive and more instability is likely to result. The traditional Arab allies of the US are frightened of the American scheme and have been saying so quite loudly. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Kuwait nor anyone else in the Arab world is willing to let its facilities to be used for attacking Iraq. Adequate Arab representations have been made in Washington with King

regarding Iraq as injurious to its own security or nearly so. Stability has to be maintained in the region; that translates into safety and security of various kings, dictators, Amirs and Shaikhs of ME.

Thirdly there is the oil; Iraq sits on a huge oil lake and the idea of Saddam being in charge obviously looks like being injurious to Americans. Finally, there is the usual strategic consideration. Iran and Iraq are both members of George W.

Some experts think that Pakistan's location and its standing in the region would make it a fine partner for the US. American experts think that their logistics would become easier or more manageable if Pakistani facilities are available. In any case, the politics of that war would be facilitated for the US if Pakistan is sharing the burden. Hence the need for some humouring of Pakistan.

This requirement has made Mr. Powell weigh his words carefully. In

observers should also be allowed in.

In Pakistan his gift pack contained more: (a) Kashmir is an international problem and is on the US agenda; (b) the US intends remaining engaged with India and Pakistan on a longer-term basis; (c) the Kashmir election will not constitute a solution of the problem by itself; and (d) all about human rights and the fairness of elections and presence of international observers

OPINION

We owe an apology to Bangladesh

HASSAN ABBAS

PAKISTAN armed forces committed human rights violations during the military operation in East Pakistan in 1971, testifies the declassified Hamoodur Rahman Commission report.

For the last 30 years, it is only around December 16 (fall of Dhaka) every year that newspapers carry articles on the subject. The high school level textbooks, instead of focusing on the causes of separation, explain how India played an evil role in the dismemberment of Pakistan. Every effort has been made to cover up what the political, military and bureaucratic elite of this country did to Bengalis. Even at Master's level (History), the subject is dealt with at a somewhat superficial level. Moreover, very few Pakistani scholars choose to write on the subject. The only other community that is burdened with this aspect of Pakistan's history is the candidates of the Civil Superior Services (CSS) exam, who have to prepare an answer to a possible question on the issue. But they also mostly stick to the official position, because critical approach may endanger their aspirations of joining the civil service. Professor Moonis Ahmer some time ago very aptly summarised the tragic episode in a column in a Pakistani English daily: "Overwhelming majority of people of East Pakistan were simple, patriotic, moderate and democratic people who could not cope with the feudal, tribal, bureaucratic and military traditions of West Pakistan." From day one,

Bengalis were treated as second-rate citizens of Pakistan. The West Pakistani feudal elite postponed elections during the early years to avoid the possibility of power shifting into the hands of Bengalis. Constituent Assembly of Pakistan in 1947 was by no means truly representing the federating units, e.g. six members of this assembly from East Pakistan, including Liaquat Ali Khan, Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, Khan Abdul Qayyum Khan, and Ghulam Muhammad were non-Bengalis. On the other hand, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, one of the most brilliant politicians this land has produced, was disqualified to be a member of the Constituent Assembly on the grounds of non-resident.

Signs of discontent were visible

right from the beginning: In the East Bengal provincial elections of 1954, all the Bengali members of the Constituent Assembly lost their seats. On May 23, 1954, *The New York Times* carried the interview of East Bengal's chief minister Fazlul Haq in which he was quoted desiring the independence of the province. Instead of trying to understand what made the mover of the 1940 Pakistan Resolution change his heart, Iskander Mirza was sent as the new governor of the province to keep a watch. Ayub Khan's martial law proved to be fruitful for West Pakistan in economic terms. But for Bengalis, it was a death knell. In the elections of 1962 and 1965, many of the new members of the National Assembly were the sons and close relatives of the landlords and feudal lords of West Pakistan but the

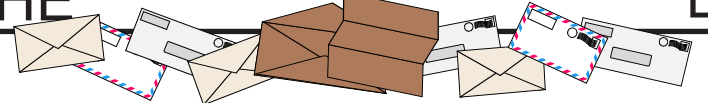
majority of opposition members belonged to East Pakistan and were from middle class. It was clearly a division between political haves and political have-nots. Awami League's Six-point was a natural reaction. According to Rounaq Jahan, a Bengali scholar teaching in USA, Mujib even hinted at negotiating the six-points but the signals fell on deaf ears. Hence, success of Awami League in the 1970 elections was an obvious outcome of regional disparities and class inequalities perpetuated by military dictatorship. Bengalis again were denied the chance to form the government at the centre. Their constitutional right was again being whisked away. Use of force was the response they received but the pile of combustibles already smouldering blew up this time. Mukti Bahini

was also involved in indiscriminate killings, but the retaliation was greatly disproportionate. The Bengali disenchantment was too deep-rooted and disillusionment so complete that no one could have bridged the gulf of estrangement by then. It was all over.

Reconciliation can take place only if Pakistani leadership can gather the guts to accept that they were wrong and that they were unfair, and last but not the least, that they were brutal with Bengalis. Pakistan owes an apology to the Bengali nation.

Hassan Abbas, a police officer from Pakistan, is South-Asian specialist at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. He is also an adjunct faculty member of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, Canada.

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



BAF crash

First of all my condolences on the BAF crash in Chittagong.

The fighter that crashed was an A-5 which was the export version of the Q-5 short for Qiangji-5 (attack aircraft 5) purchased by Pakistan and Bangladesh from China.

The fighter's design dates back to the '50s and is derived from the Soviet Mig-19. Of course the Q-5 and A-5s are equipped with modern avionics and in the case of the A-5 the ability to fire AIM-9 Sidewinder AAMs.

The crash fortunately happened outside the city and casualties were limited.

But here's some food for thought closer to home. The Old Tejgaon Airport should have been turned into a park by now dedicated to civilian use and the annual military parade. Instead it still hosts quite a few aircraft which take off and land

throughout the day.

The A-5 crashed in some place called Banskhalhi. Ever heard of it? Me neither. Heard of Farmgate? Well if you happen to be around Farmgate in the morning up to late afternoon, look up. You'll see Bell 212s and ancient Russian MI- 8/17 helicopters practising flying and taking off overhead. There is another helicopter based in Tejgaon but of a make I couldn't identify (Bell 206L7).

There is a C-130, which also occasionally uses the Tejgaon Airport runway to practice its take off and landing.

But Dhaka City is expanding. Tejgaon Airport is almost the centre of the city now while ZIA is being surrounded by the suburbs.

Do you know what takes off on training flights from Zia, flying over Gulshan, Baridhara and Uttara? MIG-21s the Widow-maker or Flying Coffin as it is better known.

Over 100 MIG-21s of the Indian Air Force crashed over the last five years.

It's time to start thinking about what'll happen when one of these aptly proven flying bombs crashes into your house in Gulshan.

Biggles Dhaka

"I need a 'boss' desperately Mr. Minister"

I went through all the letters on August 2 but read Mr Ghulam Sarwar's ("I need a 'boss' desperately Mr Minister") several times.

The writer has revealed the facts prevailing in Flight Safety directorate of CAAB. These precarious conditions should have known by the nation long ago. But better late than never.

It is high time for the government to bring back the image of the coun-

try from Cat-II to Cat-I. Obviously that can't be done with a 60-year-old Airworthiness consultant.

It is also a fact that the authority can appoint as many as four regular aircraft inspectors with the salary given to this single consultant. Why CAAB has no Flight Operations inspectors (all left very recently) and only three aircraft inspectors (out of 7) require a high level neutral investigation in order to find out the facts and to take necessary actions accordingly.

Thanks to Mr. Sarwar for warning the nation beforehand.

A retired Pilot of Biman Bangladesh Airlines Banani, Dhaka

"Attention Mayor"

I'm a regular subscriber of your daily from Chittagong and I must say you deliver news like no other English daily.

The reason I'm writing to you is about your back page which often carries an article "Attention Mayor" showing various irregularities in the capital city that need immediate attention-- I think that is wonderful-- it's a great way to attract the authorities' attention.

I have recently been to Dhaka and had a chance to go through the Cantonment area beside the parliament which exits on the airport road; due to the roadblock on the airport road for construction of the fly-over at Mohakhali. I must say that I could not believe what I saw there. Everything on that street was systematic just the way it should be all over the city-- organised traffic, no unlawful overtaking, even though there were no road dividers - stopping at the stop sign and not crossing the mark, all rickshaws in a designated queue etc. If by our fellow countrymen can abide by all the rules on that street then why not on other streets? Are

we afraid of the military but not of the police or are the police very lenient when it comes to road rules and the military isn't?

AJ Salgado Alkaran, Chittagong

Finally the VC gave in

An untoward and unprecedented incident took place at Shamsunnahar Hall of Dhaka University, which triggered widespread condemnation because police swooped and physically assaulted on the female resident students of the Hall at night on 23rd July in a clandestine manner.

In the wake of the incident more than 10,000 students (figures provided by leading national dailies) expressed their repugnance towards the VC and demanded his immediate resignation. But at that time he ignored their demand. Rather, it was he who said that he

wouldn't buckle under any pressure and resign from his post. He also said he would resign only if he is found guilty. We cannot still make out why he resigned before a one-member probe body submitted its report.

Harun-or-rashid East-12, S/B Hall, RU

Banning of student politics-- not the solution

I am really worried about the future of the students of our country. The incident that took place at Shamsunnahar Hall is very insulting for the government and a shame to the nation.

Instead of curbing terrorism in educational institutions, the government is busy finding ways to ban "student politics". But why? Is student politics responsible for Sony's death in BUET? The answer is NO

but the so-called 'tenderbaazi' is. Then stop 'tenderbaazi' and take action against the responsible party or cadres. The government cannot control its own student wing (JCD) and it is trying to ban student politics!

Student politics does not mean going after tenders and having gun battle to snatch a tender. Because of student politics, the students of DU were able to protest the police atrocity that took place in Shamsunnahar Hall. If there had not been any student politics they should have to keep their mouth shut and wait for more humiliation and oppression in future.

So I ask the government to bring JCD and other student wings under control and not let them take part in tender bidding. This will cool down the matter rather than banning student politics, which will take away the rights from the students.

Arafat Islam Lalmatia, Dhaka