

Price rise before Ramadan Engage traders in a consultative process

CITY markets are restive, seem to be heating up really. With the holy month of fasting a few days away, prices of daily essentials are rising. These are a wee bit short of galloping. But if no lid is put on the upward trend now, this could be alarming with the forces of demand and supply subverted by those who trade in high demand to jack up prices. Let's not forget, the whole month of Ramadan leading up to the Eid festival is ahead of us. The supply side of the market has to be strengthened to cater for the high demand which also carries the prospect for honest traders to spread their profits thin and yet earn handsome dividends.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was spot-on when sometime ago she stressed the need to all concerned for ensuring steady supply of daily necessities to the market-place. Her call was followed by an announcement from the authorities that one lakh metric tonnes of rice and fifty thousand metric tonnes of wheat were being released. This was done against the backdrop of a rise in cereal prices with some effect.

However, in the overall, we think, the supply side has been pretty strong. We have had a good *rabi* crop and there has been stepped up import of commodities in advance of the Ramadan season. Yet the lentils, chickpeas, edible oil and fruits are dear. Moreover, one important difference in the situation is marked by the drastic fall in the extortion and toll collection activities of hooligans lately. The commodity distribution routes and networks -- thanks to the combined army-police operations -- are no longer swarmed by hooligans extracting their prices. The traders have themselves expressed their relief over the cessation of extortionist forays in to their business places. This basically leaves them without any reason to mark up their prices to cover the toll or rent-seeking costs.

But we now see a strange tendency among the wholesalers and retailers to blame each other for the rising prices. Our suggestion to the government would be that it better immediately enter into a dialogue with the business and trade community across the country so as to devise ways to bring down the prices within the affordability range of the common people.

Jail Killing trial

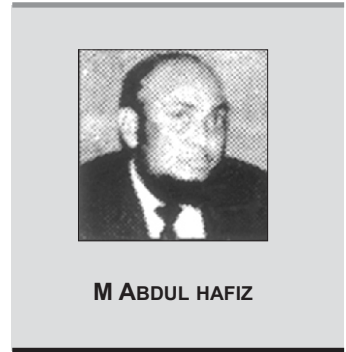
Test for supremacy of law

JUST like the gruesome murder of four national leaders 27 years ago inside Dhaka Central Jail left us in complete shock and anger, the inordinate delay in punishing those responsible for the crime makes us wonder if justice would ever be done. Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M Qamruzzaman and Captain M Mansur Ali who were slain by gunmen had all played a historic role in our Independence War, something which was recognized beyond their party leadership. But most unfortunate as it sounds, no regime since the killing made any efforts to bring the murderers to justice until their party Awami League came to power in 1996. It is shameful to say that after six years of investigation and more than a year after the hearing began, no one can say for sure when the case is likely to come to a close.

There is a feeling-- which we think, the BNP-led coalition government should strive to remove-- that since it came to power, the case has been put on the back-burner. Unfortunately, we have witnessed a similar indifferent attitude to the handling of the appeal stages of the Bangabandhu murder case. So we ask -- why should a democratically elected government and that is also with a huge mandate from the people, shy away from these cases? Where does the reason lie for not measuring up to such a supreme test of rule of law? Is it simply because the cases were politically sensitive? Any government that believes in the supremacy of law and justice, has to face it today or tomorrow.

No one can take away the glorious contributions made by these great leaders to our liberation war. Why then the hesitation in punishing their killers? If the reason is political, then contributions made by Ziaur Rahman, the founder of BNP, would not be easily forgotten either. When we hear the government expressing their commitment to rule of law and see them solving a few sensational cases within a short span of time, we wonder why this should be restricted to some recent non-political killings. Isn't it a strong component of a democratic polity that all crimes, political or non-political, should be treated equally? For how long could any government afford to be partisan? We have seen what years of mutual hatred and disrespect between the two major parties has done to our nation; therefore we hope that by putting political prejudices aside, those responsible for the killing of our national leaders would be brought to justice as soon as possible. Otherwise, establishment of rule of law in a democratic environment would remain a far cry.

Schroeder's defiant new 'German Way'



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AFTER running one of the most closely competed electoral race which produced almost a photo-finish Gerhard Schroeder reassured, in spite of his modest victory, the campaign stances from none of which he is likely to budge. In post war Germany no election was so much loaded with foreign policy issues ranging from war in Iraq to intra-European equations to transatlantic relations pushing even pressing domestic issues to the background. Surrounding the electoral issues as well as the emerging ones Germany is about to chart a course that may split it not just from Washington but from the rest of Europe as well. Amidst anxieties as to where the Schroeder government's defiant path is taking Europe's largest nation and what would it mean for others, the just reelected Chancellor proudly calls the phenomenon the new 'German Way'. Causing a bit of trepidation Schroeder made it clear that now onward important decisions concerning Germany's security interests would be made in German Way. "On the essential questions of German politics, the decisions are made in Berlin -- and nowhere else", he added. Translated into policy such a German Way, the observers

fear, could be dangerous, especially if it takes on an anti-American tinge. That would split Europe very badly. But even before the election Schroeder's approach particularly on war in Iraq seemed to have struck a chord with German electorate. As a result they tended to overlook Schroeder's unsavoury incumbency factor. With economy in shambles and unemployment figures hovering around four million, Schroeder's right of the centre CDU

another war that could have unforeseen consequences for Germany and international community. On the other hand both Schroeder and Fischer kept harping on Israel-Palestine and other regional conflicts which were yet to be resolved. They claimed that these urges merited much higher priority than an obsessive issue around regime change in Iraq. Fischer had been mentioning Kashmir as one of the most important issue that deserved

Berlin might supplant London 'in a special relationship' with Washington. Secretary of State Colin Powell recalled the way in which Germany had recently been a helpful friend by sharing terrorist intelligence to sending troops to Afghanistan. There was also talk of a permanent seat for Germany in UNSC giving Germany a powerful voice in world affairs. Now those prospects lie in tatter and all savoury recollections go blurred.

charitably. President Bush who feels 'double crossed' at the whole developments will find it hard to forgive or forget. Recently in Warsaw the Defence Secretary Rumsfeld pointedly walked out before a speech by his German counterpart. There was fresh anger in White House when Schroeder's justice minister chose, in a faux pas, to compare Bush's foreign policy to that of Adolf Hitler. President Bush himself was indignant at

over Kyoto's environmental treaty, trade and NATO alliance will increase, besides the Middle East policy and human rights. The US-German rift cannot be however without its profound effect on Germany's relationship with her 'European partners'. French President Jacques Chirac who is known to personally detest Schroeder clearly took pleasure in the chancellor's trouble with America -- just as he did in the earlier prospect of Schroeder's electoral defeat. It's widely predicted that after a long time these 'historical enemies' will soon be locked in a Franco-German 'war' -- this time over the leadership of European Union. Anti Germany resentment has also surfaced elsewhere -- particularly in Spain and Italy where the conservative presidents are pro-Bush. According to Potsdam Centre for Transatlantic Security and Military Affairs, "Germany hasn't been so isolated since the Second World War."

For quite sometimes Schroeder has been speaking of the necessity to free Germany from its sense of collective post-war guilt -- to become a 'normal country' with normal national aspiration expressed in a normal and self-confident manner. His talk of a new 'German Way' is perhaps its direct expression. "We are only starting to emancipate ourselves from America's protection and our own historical guilt." If Germany's friends and foes are bewildered at the pace and boldness of the transition initiated by Gerhard Schroeder it is only time that will bring about adjustment for the rest to this new reality.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS

PERSPECTIVES

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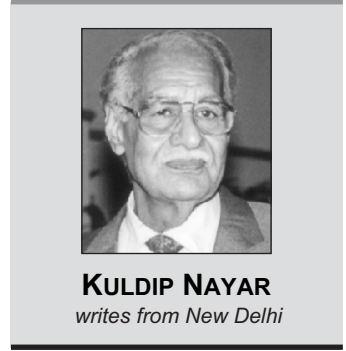
challenger had enough munitions in hand to silence him. As Edmund Stroiber, the CDU candidate, was muzzling his gun to bake on Schroeder, the issue of Iraq came in handy. The politically astute Schroeder, sensing the anti-war mood in the country sided with the vast majority of the world community by announcing publicly that Germany would not support Bush Administration's plan to wage war against Iraq. He went a step further by telling that his country would not participate in any new adventure in the Gulf even if mandated by United Nations Security Council (UNSC). On the campaign trail Schroeder's foreign minister Joschka Fischer repeatedly emphasised that there were other important international issues to be solved before starting

an immediate attention of the international community. When the anti-war sentiment reached its peak before the election even Edmund Stroiber, gauging the public mood, said that there was no difference between him and Schroeder on the issue. Even if Schroeder broke a long spell of rightwing rule in Germany when he was first elected Chancellor, he however maintained a moderate image of himself. Germany has long been one of America's dependable allies. So, there was status quo even when Helmut Kohl departed. After September 11, 2001, Schroeder promised 'unlimited solidarity' with the United States. Germany participated in US-sponsored Balkan and Afghan wars. Not so long ago it seemed that

Meanwhile the transatlantic gap keeps widening and intra-European gets strained with Schroeder rejecting any common European position that did not categorically rule out war. Nor is he about to back off. He had also repudiated the United Nations which every other European government considers to be an indispensable instrument for the exercise of multilateral power. Schroeder did not consult any of his European allies in making his decision. After all, 74 per cent of Germans are behind him, not to mention many Europeans who disagree with their own governments' pro US policies. "We have no reason to change our policy on Iraq" the German officials assert. Obviously the US did not take Germany's defiant posture quite

the comment of Herta Daeubler Gmelin when she said, "Bush wants to divert attention from his domestic problems. It's a classic tactic. It's one that Hitler used." The way the things stand prompted Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice to speak of a poisoned atmosphere between the US and Germany. Even during the election campaign Donald Rumsfeld denounced it saying that the way it was conducted had poisoned US-German relations. Leading analysts agree that the difference between the US and Germany are serious and Schroeder's anti-American stance was just not an election gimmick. Now that the Greens played a more effective role in Schroeder's reelection, the differences with the US

The puppets and the puppeteers



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

BACK-SEAT driving, anyone will tell you, is dangerous. It confuses the driver and can cause accident. Even then, the worst that can happen is a few mangled bodies and the destruction of the vehicle. But back-seat driving in governance is a disaster. It can ruin the country because those who try to guide the rulers from outside have their own line to follow. They do not realise that they can make the ones in the *gaddi* go wrong. The RSS should face this fact when it seeks to have a defined role. Already it has its imprint on the working of the BJP. Whether ministers or party functionaries, they are conscious of what they are expected to do. Must they rub their noses on the ground every now and then to assure the RSS of their servility? The agreement that has emerged at the meeting between the Prime Minister and the RSS leaders reportedly says that decisions on all 'national issues' would be after consultations between the government and the RSS and its non-political affiliates, including the aggressive Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). This makes the parivar an extra-constitutional authority. Things may not have yet reached

the stage of Sanjay Gandhi's extra-constitutional rule during the emergency. But they are undoubtedly moving towards that direction. If the parivar is allowed to have its way there will be a parallel authority working behind the scenes. If such an arrangement is accepted, it would mean that the real rulers will not be those whom the people elect but those who sit behind the walls in

connivance, if not the command, of the BJP government? There was a time when the BJP, on the PM's suggestion, was inclined to get rid of Narendra Modi. But the RSS had its way at the BJP's conclave at Goa. Although the PM does not meet him, the RSS has seen to it that Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani receives him in Delhi and that their meeting is shown on the

from the party. These are top positions. By wanting to guide governance from outside, the RSS, which has in its parivar the bigoted VHP and the militant Bajrang Dal, may harass the ministers still further. They are already watching their steps, so much so they come out of their office to receive even a petty Sangh pracharak. Many BJP ministers say in private that they function

its parivar. This is no "communication gap" as the RSS spokesman said after his last meeting with the Prime Minister. What it boils down to is that the RSS is keen to rule without having any responsibility. It wants the shield to continue while it shoots from outside. In the case of Atal Behari Vajpayee, the RSS clothes have always ill-fitted him. Its ideologue

the RSS does not like the irreverence that he shows towards the parivar. Only a few months ago there was a meeting at the Prime Minister's residence to iron out differences. The RSS dropped its insistence on Vajpayee consulting it regularly when he threatened to quit. If he has caved in now, it is because of his new thinking not to fight since he does not want to be PM after the tenure of current Lok Sabha. One does not see the non-BJP ministers in the coalition even voicing their protest against the dictation by the RSS, much less submitting their resignation. Still they should ponder over the new situation. They came to an understanding with the BJP, not the RSS. An agreed agenda was accepted. The RSS wants to change it. Certain points on the agreed agenda, an RSS spokesman has said, are irritants to the parivar. Reportedly, one is the building of Ram temple on the place where the Babri mosque stood before its demolition. The tragedy with the non-BJP constituents - even the humiliated National Conference - is that they have become so greedy for power. They have got so used to it that they cannot do without it any more.

The tragedy with the non-BJP constituents - even the humiliated National Conference - is that they have become so greedy for power. They have got so used to it that they cannot do without it any more. Railway Minister Nitish Kumar, the Samata Party leader, has admitted this in a recent meeting held in Patna in connection with JP's birth centenary. He said that he for one should be written off because he could not wrest himself from the sinews of power. That is where his qualms of conscience ended. People like George Fernandes and Sharad Pawar do not go even that far.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

The RSS parivar seldom accosts Vajpayee directly because it knows that his liberal image has brought the BJP to the point where it has won governance at the centre. But it is an open secret that the RSS is not completely comfortable with him because unlike Advani, Vajpayee often goes out of step at times... The tragedy with the non-BJP constituents - even the humiliated National Conference - is that they have become so greedy for power. They have got so used to it that they cannot do without it any more.

Delhi's Jhandewalan or at the headquarters in Nagpur where the RSS and its parivar congregate. Why don't they come out in the open and fight the elections so that the voters know who they are? What the RSS wants is to arrogate to itself the power, which belongs to the representatives of the people, without facing the polls. It wants to be a third chamber. Already one can see how a particular RSS line comes to be the BJP's viewpoint. Gujarat is a recent example. The BJP initially felt unhappy and embarrassed. But once the RSS said that the 'ethnic cleansing' was because of the Godhra train incident, the BJP began to say the same thing. There is none who has not condemned Godhra. But does it justify the planned, systematic killings at the

hapless Doordarshan. Advani has already announced Modi as the state's chief minister after the election even before a single vote has been cast. Take another example. The VHP has announced that it will not accept the court verdict on the Ayodhya case. The BJP's opinion is contrary. My fear is that the RSS, without consulting which the VHP would not have made the statement, will come into the picture to see that the court decision is bypassed. If that happens it will be a sad day for the country. For, it will set a dangerous trend that will have far-reaching implications. In the coalition at the Centre, Home, Finance, External Affairs, Human Resource Development are with the BJP. Both the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister are

in fear because they do not know if they will rub a Sangh parivar member on the wrong side by mistake. Whatever the façade, the RSS is not the party in power. The government and the BJP can act differently. The latter has the authority to advise or even issue fiat because both are the warp and woof of the same outfit. But how can a body, which masquerades as a cultural organisation, become a politically interested lobby? And how will it fit into the system where authority goes with responsibility? No one has raised these pertinent questions in a big way - neither the politicians, nor the media. It is the BJP in parliament or in the state legislature, which faces the music for the acts of omission and commission, and not the RSS and

once described him as a mukhauta (mask), which hides the real face of the RSS. Vajpayee said a few days ago that there would never be a Gujarat again and that the murder of five dalits in the Haryana village showed the arrogance of the upper caste, which masterminded the killing. There was a ring of honesty in what he said. The RSS parivar seldom accosts Vajpayee directly because it knows that his liberal image has brought the BJP to the point where it has won governance at the centre. But it is an open secret that the RSS is not completely comfortable with him because unlike Advani, Vajpayee often goes out of step at times. The attack on Brajesh Mishra, Prime Minister's Principal Secretary, is one way of telling Vajpayee that

OPINION

Sustainable tourism centre at Sundarbans?

DR. REZA KHAN

THIS has reference to the news item "Government to set up sustainable tourism centre at Sundarban" published in The Daily Star 28th October 2002. I am rather shocked to notice that a loss making organisation like the Tourism Corporation of Bangladesh jumping into some ethically high standard venture called "Sustainable Tourism". I'd like to ask the tourism department, have any of its earlier programmes become successful? All its hi-fi motels, clubs in *touristically* and potentially rich beach resort of Cox's Bazar are mostly lying empty. It seems in the name of sustainable tourism centre in the Sundarbans Tourism Department is hatching a plan to go ahead with structural developments within the boundary of the Sundarbans where till date there exists no structures other than those of forestry establishments, port authorities and the naval establishments. Any structural development within the Sundarbans would destroy this lone so-called virgin forest of Bangladesh. Bangladesh forest department and others have already destroyed most of the natural forests in the Sal Forest belt

and in the mixed and pure evergreen forested areas of the country, namely the Madhupur Tract, Barind Tract (Rangpur-Dinajpur), former Greater Chittagong Revenue Division. Alternatively all structural developments should be restricted to the outskirts or the periphery of the Sundarbans. All visitors to it should be transported on boats of various sizes and dimensions, motorized or manually driven. Even there could be accommodation boats like the famous "bozra nouka" of our heritage in the waters around the Sundarbans but not inside the Sundarbans. Instead of constructing ugly cemented structures let there be hundreds of hamlets built with Goalpata, Khajur or Narikel pata (nipa, date and coconut palm fronds) with olden day hurricane lantern or petromax-hajak lantern. That will attract people. Air-conditioned rooms, TV and computers will not attract genuine tourists but elements of the society with unaccounted money. Such structures could be at Mongla, Dhangmari, and Sarankhola and under Sakhira district that border the Sundarbans. This will neither destroy the scenic beauty of the Sundarbans nor its wildlife. At the

same time people will get a first-hand chance to spend some time on a floating vessel, boat, launch, etc. This will be a lifetime experience for a person or family from home and abroad. First and foremost our tourism and forestry or environment department should try to attract Bangladeshi tourists after making a safe and secured minimum development. Once Bangladeshi tourists' visitation turns from trickle to a mass flow can our tourism organizations think of attracting foreign tourists. Most foreign tourists want local fervour in everything from boats, foods, accommodation and local items of handicrafts instead of TV, Radio, VCR and electric supply systems. They want something classic and firsthand from the locality or the country but nothing "foreign" because they enjoy all that in their home country. I appeal to all government and non-governmental, and national and international NGOs not to allow anybody to go ahead with structural developments within the Sundarbans, be these concrete roads or buildings in the name of sustainable utilization of the natural resources.

All roads and highways through the former Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet Districts have led to wholesale forest destruction. It has expedited the removal of forest material in truckloads, instead of head-loads or boatloads that were controllable. Any structural development will make floodgate opening for the poaching of wildlife and the forest resources that needs to be stopped immediately. We need to remember that the Sundarbans is the largest single piece of mangrove forest of the world covering an area of about 5700 square kilometers. There are no human settlements within the Bangladesh part of Sundarbans. This is the most pristine forest of Bangladesh that holds maximum biological diversity in a minimum area. We will not be able to create a new Sundarbans once this is destroyed. We have not even been able to recreate the Sal or mixed-evergreen forests in spite of hundreds of crores of taka being spent by the forest and environment departments and international NGOs for it. Dr. Reza Khan is Head of Dubai Zoo, United Nations Parks and Protected Areas/IUCN

MOHAMMED AKEFUR RAHMAN CITY life has given us so many advantages and comfort in comparison to our rural life. We are enjoying lots of good things here in the city that our rural people can't. But at the same time we are having some serious problems, which do not exist in our rural life. One of such problems is noise pollution, which is becoming serious day by day. Increasing noise in the city has been posing serious health hazards to millions of people specially our children. Much has been talked and discussed in the media and other fora about some serious environmental problems such as polythene, air pollution, and water contamination. But noise pollution despite being a big problem has got little attention. Noise pollution in different forms such as horns of vehicles, loud speakers, grinders, factories are very common in the major cities of Bangladesh. Loud horns used by unscrupulous drivers are mostly responsible for noise pollution in the cities. According to a research paper presented by Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB), an environ-

mental NGO in Dhaka, the impact of honking is on children is very harmful. It hampers their normal psychological growth as well as their studies at home and school. The paper also said continuous noise pollution with such a magnitude could make a child deaf. The sound produced by the brick-breaking machine in the residential areas and noise coming from loud speakers and various music shops are dangerous for the heart patients as these increase blood pressure and lead to headache and irritation. According to the World Health Organization's recommendation the sound of horns should be within 40 decibel or less for the normal living, but in the city most of the vehicles use horns of 140 decibel which is about four times higher than the level recommended by WHO. According to the medical science noise pollution causes manifold health problems like headache, heart ailment, hearing debility and bad temper among the city dwellers. I have seen in Malaysia, Thailand and Laos, people usually don't use horns. I traveled several thousands kilometers by car and bus in Malaysia but hardly heard horns in

the streets that was one of my very good experiences and I have told this to many of my friends. While I was traveling in Vientiane by car my Bangladeshi friend honked in the street for having fun and people were watching us as if we were from the zoo. I realised their attitude towards horns. So far I observed there were very few initiatives that have been taken by the authorities concerned to address the issue and the role of civil society is not also sufficient. So I think all concerned especially civil society and environmental organisations should come forward to solve this problem as soon as possible. Some suggestions to overcome the harmful impact of horns among the drivers of bus, truck and cars. I think there is no alternative to increasing awareness in this regard. -There is a law regarding use of hydraulic horns and loud speakers but this law is not properly enforced. Our law-enforcing agencies perhaps are not properly informed about the law. They should be given the knowledge of the existing law and if needed enact new law to

check noise pollution. -Launch a comprehensive campaign in mass media to raise awareness as mass media can play a vital role in bringing about a positive change in notion about noise pollution. -Ban and control the indiscriminate use of loud speaker for any purpose. -Restriction should be imposed on industrial activity in residential area. Above all we should remember that we should not do anything that may be a cause of disturbance to others. As human beings we have rights to enjoy ourselves but at the same time we have the responsibility to protect the rights of others. If we can foster such a feeling in our mind, we can avoid many problems in our society. Finally I would like to say that as this is a serious health concern and is increasing day by day we all should come forward and take immediate action to solve the problem and protect the city dwellers from serious hazards. -Mohammed Akefur Rahman is coordinator of YPSA Centre for Youth and Development in Chittagong