

Up, up and away*Prices of essentials spiral out of average consumers' reach*

A sudden surge in prices of essentials is usually traced down to either flawed government policy or artificial crisis created by a section of unscrupulous traders. However, the current upward trend could well have been triggered by both, with the balance tilting more in the direction of the government's failure. When the government detailed its budget for the new fiscal last July, it touched off a price-hike. Between then and now, in a bid to boost revenue earning, the tax regime has been revised and expanded, which has also affected overall market mechanism. Then, the businesses have never been spared the extraneous expenditures in the form of bribe and toll to cops and criminals alike. On top of it all, the economy has remained tangled in investment inertia and concomitant inflation.

Unfortunately, the government has failed to get rid of crime and corruption, two major impediments towards an investment-friendly environment on one hand and never really given protection to local market forces on the other. Its fiscal policy, albeit sound on paper, has proved regressive for small- and medium-scale entrepreneurs. The internal foodgrain collection has remained mired in controversy more often than not. Besides, certain decisions, such as open-market sales of four lakh metric tonnes of rice to arrest a price-hike three months back, have turned out to be misplaced and mistimed. To top it off, the government went for an upward revision of fuel prices on curious rationales.

Nevertheless, while the lion's share of the blame rests on the government, its apprehension that an organised business syndicate has contributed to the sudden spurt in essentials prices may not altogether be unfounded. At the same time, it should realise that it itself has to unearth proof, if there is any, to substantiate its suspicion. Should there actually be such a sinister syndicate, out there to cash in on consumers' ordeal, the government must trace it out and foil its evil design. Whatever course it wants to take or however it wants to pull it off, the government has to rein in the upward price curve. As one senior minister told the daily *Prothom Alo*, people have voted the government to power, not to spend more on essential commodities. This is indeed a challenge, a challenge the Khaleda administration has to overcome.

Push-in bid*It can only embitter bilateral relations*

A BSF bid to push in hundreds of people into Bangladesh territory has been thwarted by the BDR. But the humanitarian crisis that has arisen out of New Delhi's identifying a section of Indian population as aliens remains unresolved.

And Bangladesh is the country coming under enormous pressure because of the push-in plan. It is really a matter of great regret that good neighbourliness, which has always been an integral part of the relations between the two countries, is being affected by an avoidable irritant. But things took a sharp turn with the Indian deputy prime minister claiming that there were 20 million(!) Bangladeshis staying illegally in India. The Indian press was less imaginative to put the number at 15 million.

However, it is not clear whether the latest push-in bid by India is something designed for its domestic consumption.

A joint secretary level meeting was held recently to find solution to border problems. We believe the consultative process should be followed up in earnest to put an end to the crisis. It is not a border dispute in itself, but the ingredients for a sudden flare-up are very much present in it. Tension is already running high in the border areas; trade and commerce have been hit and channels of communication are not operating smoothly.

Dhaka had asked New Delhi earlier on to send lists of suspected aliens so that the latter's claim that they were Bangladeshis could be verified. Unfortunately, New Delhi never appeared to be ready to give us the details or a patient hearing on the issue.

The push-in bogey was raised quite a few times in the past also. But it was not pursued beyond a limit. However, it is too early to say what India is going to do this time around. We believe it will keep in view the fact that a large number of humans are made to suffer when they become the targets of push-in. So the situation calls for earlier amelioration on its side.

'Terror-risk country': Is hostile lobbying responsible for Bangladesh's inclusion?DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED
writes from Princeton

WE will never be privy to the actual discussion that took place inside the US State Department before Bangladesh was pronounced a "terror-risk" country. Certain general conclusions are transparent, however. That Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority nation did not help. Taking advantage of the September 11 tragedy, certain section of the American population, notably the pro-Israel Evangelical Christians and the Jewish lobbies, had made it their top priority to label every Muslim nation a haven for terrorists. Every attempt by the Muslim Americans to put forward rebuttals has been shot down by the Zionist-controlled US print and electronic media.

Those who worked hard for Bangladesh's inclusion on the list of infamy, now stand exposed. For a long time, the Indian Home Minister Mr. L. K. Advani, has been openly accusing Bangladesh of harbouring Al Qaeda terrorists. He can now rest easy. Why blame only India? Our own leader of the opposition said pretty much the same thing when she traveled abroad! Words from a nation's leader of the opposition carries much more weight than that from the Home Minister of a neighbouring country. Then there was the campaign against Bangladesh by the foreign news organisations. Zionist-owned TIME magazine claimed (refuted by US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Her Excellency Mary Ann Peters) that Osama Bin Laden's deputy was hiding in

Chittagong! It is now absolutely clear that the purpose of the deceitful entry into Bangladesh of British Channel 4's dynamic duo was to "prove" that Bangladesh was Al Qaeda territory. Finally, the prestigious news organization Reuters sacrificed its centuries-old journalistic refrains in its rush to erroneously proclaim the Mymensingh bombing the work of Al Qaeda! Although none of the above may have directly influenced the US decision, collectively they must have emboldened the enemies of Bangladesh within

first gaffe. In 1991, she had written letters to foreign embassies in Dhaka complaining about the then democratically elected BNP government. Ironically, in their recent public pronouncements at home and abroad, the US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Her Excellency Mary Ann Peters, comes across as a better advocate of Bangladesh than our own leader of the opposition!

Its detractors perceive Bangladesh as a soft target. It is not a sign of friendship to campaign against

World Hindu Council, which targets not only Muslims, but Christians as well, is free to operate and raise money in the US, thanks to the lobbying by the expatriate Indians. The writer came back from a visit to Bangladesh last week. Every other day there was press reports of Indian border security forces crossing into Bangladesh and killing civilians. Should not for such across the border terrorism into a Bangladesh land India be on America's terrorist list?

What about the lobbying by

Congressmen, Senators and President is laughable. And of course it is beneath the dignity of Bangladesh Embassy to ask for assistance from long-term US-resident expatriate Bangladeshis dying to help their motherland, and who know how such lobbying is done!

I believe that it is a mistake by the US to put Bangladesh on the list of "terror-risk" nations. Muslim nations are not monolithic. If that were the case, Bangladesh would not have separated from Pakistan through a bloody struggle in 1971, in Bangladesh they are. A native son like the writer was surprised to see so many women, young and old, at work in factories and offices in Bangladesh. At 11 P.M. at night the writer saw single young women shopping alone and confidently at Dhaka, something unthinkable at that time of night on the streets of New York City, Chicago or Los Angeles!

It is unfortunate that instead of discriminating between the few potential criminals and the overwhelming majority of peace-loving civilians, America has decided to label all the Bangladeshis as the same... America has embraced fear and paranoia, rather than hope and foresight. If America treats all Muslim nations as the same in spite of their differences, if America believes that Muslims ought to be feared as enemies rather than trusted as friends, America's apprehension of Muslims may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

It is unfortunate that instead of discriminating between the few potential criminals and the overwhelming majority of peace-loving civilians, America has decided to label all the Bangladeshis as the same... America has embraced fear and paranoia, rather than hope and foresight. If America treats all Muslim nations as the same in spite of their differences, if America believes that Muslims ought to be feared as enemies rather than trusted as friends, America's apprehension of Muslims may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

the state department.

I have enormous personal respect for our leader of the opposition and the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, whose patriotism is beyond question. But she must realise that hers is a government in waiting, and as such whatever she says is carefully scrutinised. If she says something negative about the ruling party, BNP, that is fine. On the other hand, if what she says can be construed as criticism of the nation of Bangladesh, the enemies of Bangladesh will pounce on it to the detriment of the nation. Unfortunately, this is not Sheikh Hasina's

one's neighbour, as India has done. Everyone knows that the India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power riding on the plank of anti-Muslim communism. In Mahatma Gandhi's native Gujarat, Mr. Narendra Modi's BJP stormed back to power last month, solely on the strength of his anti-Muslim campaign. Everyone also knows that the brain and financial power behind the BJP is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or the World Hindu Council). Yet, while every conceivable Muslim organisation, remotely suspected of having terrorist links have been banned in the US, the

Bangladesh Embassy in Washington, DC, and consular offices in New York City and Los Angeles to keep Bangladesh off offensive lists, you ask? Don't make me laugh! Stepping into the Bangladesh Embassy or the consular offices immediately transports one from post DC, NYC or LA to a clerk's office in Dhaka! I don't know how they do it, but every diplomatic outpost of Bangladesh in Europe and America is a replica of its sister offices in Dhaka, not only in terms of facilities and ambiance, but also in terms of the work habits of the employees. To ask such organisations to lobby the US government,

and Iraq and Iran would not have fought a 10-year war in the 1980s. It is true that as a Muslim-majority nation, Bangladesh has its share of extremists. And that both the major parties, Awami League and BNP, have used the Islamic parties to come to power. This is also true that by themselves the religious parties will never be able to come to power. This is because the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis are moderate by nature.

If America wanted to make an exception and say to the Muslim world, "Look, we do not look at all

Bangladesh-Australia relations

HARUN UR RASHID

nations commenced on a very positive note. In 1972 the first Australian High Commissioner (Ambassador) to Bangladesh could speak Bengali and this helped to create a very cordial atmosphere among leaders and people of Bangladesh. The very fact that Australian government chose a senior member of the Australian foreign service with spoken skill of Bengali language demonstrated its eagerness to foster bilateral relations with Ban-

1982. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid an official visit to Australia in October 1999 at the invitation of Australian Prime Minister John Winston Howard. The present Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited Australia in early 2002 to attend the Commonwealth Summit and during the visit she had a fruitful exchange of views on wide-ranging subjects with the Australian Prime Minister.

million dollars over four years to a population and health project of Internal Development Association in Bangladesh. Australia provides annually a large number of scholarships to Bangladeshi nationals for their higher education in Australian universities and provides assistance for universal primary education in the country. It provides facilities for cricket players from Bangladesh at the Cricket Academy in Australia (Adelaide).

Bangladesh obscures a large market for consumer goods, technical equipment, professional services and education. Australia is able to compete successfully for these lucrative markets through joint ventures and partnerships. In recent year Australia has marketed itself well to attract Bangladeshi students in Australian academic institutions.

With the rising affluent class in Bangladesh, probably equal to the

products. From July of this year Bangladeshi products will find an open market in Australia as part of Australia's decision to exempt duties for the Least Developed Countries including Bangladesh. Australian companies such as Westfarmers and Snow Mountain Engineering Corporation reportedly won major commercial contracts in Bangladesh.

Australia is at present involved in projects in poverty alleviation, education, nutrition and arsenic mitigation. In recent days Australia committed to provide \$10,000 dollars under its Direct Aid Programme to International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to purchase and distribute blankets, second-hand clothes and high protein biscuits for the needy people in the hardest hit districts of north and north-west of the country affected by severe cold wave sweeping over Bangladesh.

Bilateral trade has been growing quite speedily during the late 90s. The two-way trade during 2000-01 was about Australian \$ 424 million (Australian exports amounted to A\$ 368 million while Bangladesh's exports to A\$ 56 million). Australia's exports largely consist of wheat, oil seeds, milk products, fresh fruits, cotton and zinc while Bangladesh's exports include fertiliser and textile

entire population of Australia (nearly 20 million) there appears to be a good market of consumer goods from Australia. Many consumer items from India and South East Asian countries are available and popular in Bangladesh. There seems to be great opportunity of expansion of commercial relations between the private sectors of the two countries. At the upper end of the scale a smaller elite in Bangladesh with financial resources is capable of undertaking joint ventures in the country with Australian partners. Potential Australian joint-venture partners /businessmen may consider involvement with the Australian citizens of Bangladeshi origin living in Australia. They understand the mechanism by which commerce and industry in Bangladesh are carried out, knowledge which is not easily available to outsiders.

The stereotypical image of

BOTTOM LINE

Both countries are ardent supporters of complete disarmament including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Both are engaged in the fight against global terrorism. Both participate in the peacekeeping operation of the UN. Both are members of the Commonwealth and cooperation at the multilateral level is excellent. Bangladesh's relations with Australia are on a steady course

It is argued that the failure of Australian traders and companies to consider adequately the market potential in Bangladesh and the lack-lustre performance of Bangladeshi producers and exporters to Australian market may possibly be ascribed to the weak information base. There appears to be a clear need for action by private sectors of both countries to establish and develop a satisfactory communication/information base to set the stage for enhancing trade and investment relations between the two nations.

On foreign relations both countries are ardent supporters of complete disarmament including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Both countries are engaged in the fight against global terrorism. Both participate in the peacekeeping operation of the UN. Both are members of the Commonwealth and cooperation at the multilateral level is excellent.

Bangladesh's relations with Australia are on a steady course and are likely to develop in future to the satisfaction of peoples of both countries.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE**EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR**

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"Religious group halts women's football"

I am amazed at the reaction of Mr Yahya (January 24) on "Religious group halts women's football".

If our BFF did invite Indian women's team to play football in a place like Netrokona, they should have a lot of explanation to give. The religious group did a sensible thing by stopping the game. Such a game like football among women goes against our social ethos and should be played only in sports complex reserved for them. It is outrageous to imagine such a game in a district town for public display.

Mr Yahya got his ideas mixed up to imagine that such a rational attitude will earn Bangladesh a "Taliban" stigma.

Sakhatwan Hossain

Gulshan, Dhaka

Bangladesh on INS list

History witnessed many times before that naively and inaction

from the responsible Bengali states/women brought many tragedies in the past. Some recent comments of our ex prime minister in foreign forums and news media might have striking resemblance of the past and tested behaviours. Her thoughtless anger-blind comments might have seemed logical that Sheikh Hasina is responsible for helping the Americans to enlist Bangladesh in the terror list!

But it's not true, may be partially true. We are very quick to blame the obvious person or group of persons and do not look beyond. Did we ever think, why foreigners believe Sheikh Hasina more than our elected foreign minister? Is the chief of a defeated political party still a credible person to politicians abroad? Then what is the duty of our foreign office? What are the ambassadors, diplomats, and ministers doing there? Didn't they miserably fail in their duty?

M. Ayub Khan
Ottawa, Canada

The INS registration requirement for certain Bangladeshi citizens has surprised many of us. But I wonder

why? Early 2002 Bangladesh was included in the list of countries whose citizens require lengthy security checks along with mostly Arab countries. So our govt. should have lobbied with the US govt to at least delay the inclusion of Bangladeshis in the INS list instead of just being satisfied with the certificate of the US Ambassador.

U.S. Attorney General Mr. Ashcroft has said that gradually all foreigners will have to register with the INS upon arrival. So there is no discrimination at all. Some of our countrymen both here and abroad foolishly sympathise with Al-Qaeda although they are not involved with Al-Qaeda. We all will have to pay the price for this kind of stupidity. Every country even Bangladesh does not allow illegal aliens to live in their country. In fact you are certain to go to jail and face deportation if you ever stay your visa in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi passport is very easily available, as the passport office is full of corruption. Any terrorist from any country can take advantage of this. So instead of blaming each other the Govt should take strong measures to clean up the

passport office and restore some credibility to it.

**Arup
Shamoly, Dhaka**

Time to change the AL leadership?

Looking at the recent rhetorical statements of the Awami leadership, one cannot help wonder whether they take the people of Bangladesh as a naive lot. Rhetoric of course not a new commodity for them; it is ingrained in their very blood whether talk privately or on a public platform. People are in fact fed up with the comical rhetoric of the politicians. But the last thing they wish to see is their politicians, particularly the high-pitched ones, indulged in anti-Bangladesh and anti-people activities, as such activities adversely affect their bread and butter.

It may sound so painful but the fact remains, the Awami leadership and particularly our Sheikh Hasina has indeed been indulging in maligning our own country and its people without any rational reasons. It is not only painful, but also unthinkable to see an ex-prime minister of a country joining hands with the outside inimical forces and speaking in the same voices in deriding and defacing her own people.

**Ahmed Ghani
Dhaka**

Exploiting opponents at country's cost

AL, while attacking vulnerable side of the ruling party at home and abroad, was very much aware that linking BNP or Jamaat to Taliban would bring disgrace to the nation from across the world. After the real damage has taken place when America included Bangladesh in the so-called terror-risk, the ruling party is now capitalising on AL's fault. Front line leaders including the PM herself in several public meetings accused Sheikh Hasina of the consequences. By doing so BNP

may be able to secure public support, but the country's status in America's view will not change.

On this issue, BNP finds blaming AL advantageous as it provokes public anger against their opponent no matter whether it is going to deteriorate the country's interest further.

**Farhad Ahmed Khan
Dhaka**

BGMEA election

The BGMEA elections are to be held on Sunday. Regardless of the outcome, this has been a sorry affair in the history of the association. To an uninvolved member like me, it seems perfectly obvious. There were two main panels in the BGMEA, separated only by personality rather than policy. In light of the present crisis and the looming death of this business in Bangladesh, they decided to share the posts in the BGMEA rather than going through an expensive and time consuming election.

All was fine and good until some people got upset at not getting nominations to the coveted posts.

**Syed Badrul Ahsan
Mohammadpur, Dhaka**

These gentlemen broke off, set up a splinter group and started lobbying the government for a postponement to the elections so that they would have enough time to campaign. Needless to say the government has no right to tell the BGMEA what to do and they know this.

Azad, Dhaka

"My country right or wrong"

Megasthenes took us back to times past through his column "My country right or wrong" (January 25). The references to Iskandar Mirza are surely of immense help to individuals who have endlessly maintained their interest in the history of the Indian subcontinent, especially in the way politics systematically collapsed in