

Cereal procurement draws a trickle

It could take the market lever away

THE government's two month-long Aman rice and paddy procurement drive seems destined to miss the target by a very wide margin. In place of the targeted 2 lakh 46 thousand tonnes of paddy and rice, given the pace of purchase, only 20 thousand tonnes is likely to be collected by March 15, the cut-off date on which the programme ends.

This is a steep fall we are looking at. Even last year the procured quantity stood at 1 lakh 12 thousand tonnes while the year before it was more than one lakh tonnes.

One can think of three reasons for such a bleak procurement picture. First, the drive was not undertaken hot on the heels of the harvesting season. Whereas it should have been kicked off in the third week of November, the purchase operation began as late as in January, allowing the availability level to drop. What is more important, the prices at which the government would purchase the stuffs were lower than open market prices. The farmers naturally therefore preferred selling their produce at the marketplace. The minimum price of rice in the open market is Tk 15 per kilogram but the government's procurement price has been Tk 12 and 80 poisha. Thirdly, there has been a distracting factor: the open market sale (OMS) operation and the procurement drive ran parallel to each other and could not be undertaken with equal efficiency.

At such a juncture, the upcoming Boro season becomes crucial. But then agricultural experts are not optimistic: good quality seeds were in short supply at the start of the season; the wintry chill damaged seed beds; and irrigation cost increased due to diesel price rise on the eve of Boro season. All these require that the pitfalls of the Aman operation is avoided during the Boro procurement drive.

Good procurement is the cornerstone of a market rationalisation policy insofar as rice as the core item of the basket goes. It gives the government a lever against traders who create artificial scarcities and jack up prices. Furthermore, buffer-stocks help us see through rainy days. A high premium is *ipso facto* put on the next procurement drive.

An early dengue alert

DCC has to come out with a plan

THE Dhaka City Corporation has failed to formulate an effective strategy for curbing the mosquito menace. The result is that the threat of dengue breaking out on a larger scale than the previous year looms over the horizon. Experts have already sounded a note of warning with the rainy season in mind.

Dengue, as we noticed over the last two or three years, can be very difficult to contain once it starts spreading. Lack of proper treatment facilities is highlighted by the fact that well over 100 people are dying every year of the disease.

Destroying mosquitoes is the universally prescribed method of preventing the disease. But the DCC has not demonstrated the kind of preparation needed to kill mosquitoes before they proliferate quickly with monsoon rains, and become almost unmanageable.

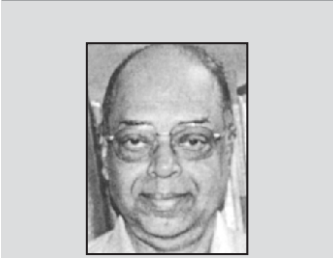
The authorities should not ignore the report that already three dengue cases have been detected in the city. So the process of people contacting the disease may have started, and the DCC has to swing into action to destroy the aedes mosquitoes. But reports received so far on the DCC's action plan are hardly hope-giving. The plan of aerial spraying was approved a few days ago.

Ground operations, considered safer than aerial attacks, have also been stalled, as the DCC does not have an adequate stock of larvaecide. The overall picture is one of poor planning and even poorer implementation.

There is also a visible lack of coordination among the DCC and other agencies. The procedural complications involved in getting any plan through are too time consuming to make the field level operations effective. Killing the aedis, or any other mosquito for that matter, is a task which must be carried out at a particular time of the year. But the DCC's approach to the issue smacks of bureaucratic indifference and sluggishness, which can render the whole operation pointless.

The problem is a recurring one, yet there is no urgency to tackle it at the initial stages. We urge the DCC to give a roadmap of how and when it is going to fully activate its mosquito-killing squads in a bid to stave off the dengue threat.

Better were the union council elections fair and less violent



ATAUS SAMAD

IT is now accepted that violence has become a part of the union parishad (union council) elections this time. Clashes and shedding of blood have occurred in the past in local government elections and in others too, but this time it was forecast that such would happen.

At the same time, it will be incorrect to say that the union parishad polls have not been peaceful anywhere in the country. There are many areas which saw these local body elections take place peacefully. Yet, it has to be taken note of seriously that violence before, during and after the voting has been widespread and that polling have been tainted at too many places.

The union parishad polls, 2003, should therefore serve better if these are taken more as examples of bad elections and less as instances to be followed. It may be possible for one to make a list of dos and don'ts from these polls with a view to attempting to organise better elections in future. This research, of course, will have to be done with some good faith, somewhat honest intention and a bit of diligence.

But while we wait for someone to do that we can draw some conclusions from what can be seen plainly. The first of these is that every election, Bangladesh has got something to do with greed and power. Each election, be that to the parliament, a union parishad, a school committee, a students' organisation, an association of professionals or businessmen or a trade union, leads someone to a

position from which he or she can wield power to reap a harvest of cash and other wealth. Power in Bangladesh no longer connotes ideology. It means a way to make money, to own property and to control opportunities. It is the greed for personal wealth that makes most candidates stand in an election. The theory is simple, power yields money. A corollary to this is that in Bangladesh greed has no limit.

Knowing this the way it is, fair-

a national election under a non-partisan caretaker government will result in good people being elected to the parliament, as the polls will be fair, and that will lead to good governance, including in local bodies.

The political parties that won the Jatiya Sangsad election held this way, unfortunately did not behave well and thus fairness everywhere has remained a far cry. Perhaps some good persons were elected in those national elections,

went straight to jail from the government house upon being convicted in a case of corruption. President Nixon had to resign in disgrace for the Watergate scandal. On the other hand in Bangladesh, it has not been possible to execute verdicts of election tribunals in the cases of members of parliament as the losers promptly appealed to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court and won enough time to run out their term in parliament. We keep hearing similar

displacing older ones (for which they sought blessings from the party MP) and (b) the union council election became a proxy fight between BNP leaders at higher levels (say between the MP and the president or secretary of the district or upazila committee). Clashes have taken place among these rivals before and after elections. In some cases where pre-election violence was avoided, due largely to the efforts of the government officers, post-election

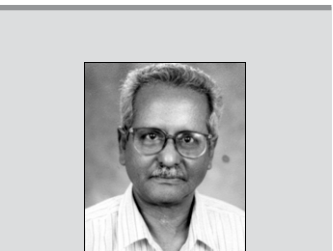
enmities between inhabitants of one village and another, between one family and another. Some of these people when asked why an election should lead to such negative tribalism or clannishness or simply mutual hatred they often said that those become elected, specially as chairmen, usually steer development of roads, culverts, power lines, embankments, drainage canals and food for work projects towards the localities where they live. They also use their influence with the thanas and TNOs in favour of themselves, kith and kin and supporters when settling local disputes. These disputes quite often relate to matters as vital as the ownership of land, homestead or business and as sensitive issues as marriage and divorce.

Finally, there still exist feudal attitudes in rural Bangladesh. Therefore, a union council chairman or member is sometimes seen as the modern day replacement of the zeminder or talukder. Social and family prestige and power come with these positions. And as said earlier, wealth too.

One of the positive aspects of the current union council elections is the participation of women voters in large numbers. It seems that village women in Bangladesh are using their right to vote as a way of empowering themselves. They are also making use of it to break the taboos that still keep many of them confined indoors. A News Garden Online correspondent told us that he saw at a union in Netrokona district that women candidates were canvassing door to door, and even on paddy fields, unaccompanied by any male supporter or assistant. It is good to know that our girls in the villages are becoming more and more courageous day by day. They have however stayed away from voting centres where disturbances took place. It would have been much better in every way could the union council elections be held in a more peaceful and fair manner.

Ataus Samad is senior journalist and columnist

How realistic is Washington's plan in practice?



M.J. ZAHEDI

IF America goes ahead with its war on Iraq, it would be doing so in defiance of world opinion. The entire world is against this war, never so justly as now. They may not admit it, but George Bush has been shaken by the massive turnout at the peace rallies, which have acquired a worldwide dimension. The opposition is not confined only to the Arabs and Muslims alone, the whole world has united against it. An American led invasion is likely to be much bloodier affair than the Gulf war of 1991. If Saddam Hussain decides to battle it out, he will try to inflict as much damage on the Americans as he can because he knows he is going to lose anyway. Baghdad has more than four million people and even few hundred determined defenders could recreate the ghost

of Somalia or even Vietnam for the Americans. US defence planners are no doubt hoping for a quick kill; the world is likely to see the use of some high tech weapons. In this scenario, there are a few civilian casualties.

But it could all go wrong, because lopsided wars are rarely

race against time. His military advisers believe a large round force would have to sweep through Iraq before the beginning of April when the oppressive summer weather would set in. Hence Washington's reluctance to delay military action by the first week of March. Saddam Hussain too is not likely to repeat

will be a new kind of war, with untold risks and perils. Unlike his father, the junior Bush appears to be a risk-taker on a grand scale.

But even if the US does win quick victory, the danger of Iraq lapsing into a bloody chaos will inevitably remain. That phenomenon alone

the region and the wider Muslim world. Washington will be faced with a serious dilemma in post-Saddam Hussain Iraq. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Kuwait reportedly want to see the existing power structure in Iraq left in place, allowing Sunni minority Muslims to exert control over a country that

Saddam Hussain or Iraqi people, but it need not be left to buy of a new balance of influence in the Middle East.

Washington hopes that a pro-western and democratic Iraq will provide a beacon for other countries in the Middle East, spurring political, social and economic reforms in the region. The thinking in Washington appears to be that the more open and democratic governments will help diminish the terror in action.

How realistic is Washington's plan in practice? The fallout of an Iraq war will not be confined to the Arab world alone; its shock wave will be equally felt in Teheran and Islamabad. If the American military adventure in Iraq goes on, the political and military activity in Pakistan, tenuous even now, will receive a severe blow. Will Islamabad be able to absorb the jolts and pressures? Since there are many imponderables, no one can tell how the events will eventually unfold. But one thing is certain: if an US invasion goes ahead, the situation extending from Cairo to Islamabad will not remain as before.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan and formerly the Editor of the Khaleez Times.

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

Editorial on Mongla Port: A clarification

Mongla Port Authority would have been happy to appreciate the DS editorial regarding the present situation of Mongla Port if the same and the news item published on 26th Feb. 2003 were based on facts. The news item regarding frequent labour unrest, lack of security etc. are not based on facts as there had been no work stoppage/labour unrest in the year 2002-2003 with regard to loading and unloading of Cargo. Question of pilferage of foodgrain from ships as well as storage godown is also not at all true to the best of our knowledge as the foodgrains are unloaded under the direct supervision of customs officials and there are no storage godowns of food within the port area.

Whatever is required to keep the port operational and efficient including navigability of channel, jetties, berths, crane facilities are in place and there has been no complaint received by MPA. MPA so far handled 152 ships since July 2002 and this figure indicates veracity of your claim of abandoning the port of the ship owners.

The truth is that this region does not have industries requiring lot of import excepting some clinker industries set up within MPA and other than jute and frozen food there are no industries here for

export as well. Moreover, the hinterland of Mongla is limited within Bagerhat district, because Rupsha and Pakshhey and Padma Bridge are not in place. The containerised cargo cannot travel to Khulna or other northern areas of the country which has become hinterland of Chittagong Port because of Jamuna bridge. Garments, tea, leather etc. are not at all imported or exported through Mongla due to lack of Padma bridge connecting Dhaka, although Dhaka is hundred kilometres closer to Mongla than Chittagong. A foreign ship owner even sometimes does not like to travel to Mongla as it takes almost three hours to reach Mongla from Jessore airport. Needless to mention that MPA still does not have a digital exchange for better communication and Nepal is willing to use this port provided minimum operational infrastructure is there in Banglabandha and Pakshy and Rupsha bridges are completed.

From the above it is clear that neither the MPA has become dysfunctional as stated in the editorial nor the port management can create right infrastructure required for its full fledged operation like Chittagong port as portrayed in the editorial.

Under the circumstances, you are requested to publish the correct news so that the image of the Mongla Port remains unhampered.

Jahangir Hossain
Secretary (B&PR)
Mongla Port Authority

World Cup thought

The World Cup tournament appears so boring now. The favourites like South Africa, West Indies, Pakistan, England couldn't make it to the Super Six but minnows like Zimbabwe and Kenya have moved to the next round! How unfortunate! We didn't wait for long four years to watch a tournament like this.

Though England and Pakistan got what they deserve, one forfeiting a match and thus handing over four points to its opponent and another going through one of their poor patches, South Africa and West Indies, in no way, deserved to be left out like this. I feel so sorry for South Africa. Almost in every World Cup tournament they have to face the greatest odds but this time it is too much to bear.

Zerlin Khan
Banani, Dhaka

I really feel sorry for South Africa as they failed to reach Super Six because of 'rain'. World Cup tournament is the most important of all the cricket tournaments. And in a tournament like this there isn't any reserved day for rain! I condemn the authorities concerned and hold them responsible for not allowing

the host country to make it to the next round. A team like South Africa doesn't deserve this.

Asif Raihan
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Hadn't rain disrupted the match between Bangladesh and West Indies, Namibia and Bangladesh would have been the only two teams without any points. The nature was on our side and Bangladesh was awarded two points, gained not by our own merit like this.

However, by sharing four points Bangladesh managed to hold back West Indies from making it to the Super Six and deprived us from enjoying some excellent matches. Our 'toothless tigers' have not only been successful in making the entire nation ashamed by their lowly performance but also succeeded in holding another team back from overcoming the next hurdle.

Well done, Bangladesh!
Niloy
Dhaka

I think there will be at least one positive outcome of the Bangladeshi fiasco at the World Cup. Ali Asghar Lobi MP's head must roll, the PM's son if he has any shame, would resign as well.

BNP is proving itself in being a complete failure not only in the

practice of democracy but even cricket.

Emile
Dhaka

As an avid cricket fan I am absolutely disappointed at the dismal show of our team in the World Cup. The way our players were throwing their wickets away in almost every match, it seemed that they were in a hurry to return to the pavilion. Along with the players, the BCB officials should also be held responsible for such humiliating performance in an important tournament like the World Cup. No one has the right to embarrass the nation this way!

Mohammed Sohail Hara
Dhaka

I am really curious to know why Grameen phone's score update number is 2002.

Wouldn't 2003 have made more sense?

Azad
Dhaka

"So who is winning?"

I was quite surprised to read K A S Murshid's column on March 5. I find myself probably for the first time in complete disagreement with him.

He claims to be horrified to find that the Economist is endorsing the war in Iraq. He obviously doesn't

get his issues regularly because the Economist has been consistently endorsing the war.

Mr Murshid doesn't address any of the possible benefits of the war. He doesn't even consider for a moment the possibility of the war succeeding. Mr Murshid glibly asks if Saddam is SO unpopular why isn't there a popular uprising against him. Well first of all most of the dissidents not murdered by Saddam are in exile. There is no opposition leadership in Iraq and since Mr Murshid is not clairvoyant, he can't tell what ordinary Iraqis are thinking. During the last Gulf War when Saddam's forces were in retreat, there were spontaneous uprisings all over Iraq.

I really wonder what Mr Murshid will write about when our TVs and newspapers are full of photos of deliciously happy Iraqis celebrating their salvation from this tyrant.

Shonku
Dhaka

Al-Qaeda suspect in US custody

I am surprised and alarmed as to how (as reported in the press) a US Intelligence Official (incognito) said that Al-Qaeda suspect Khalid S. Mohammed "probably would be placed in military or CIA custody and could remain incommunicado for months or even years." The Official even disclosed

daringly "it will be a lot better if we can interrogate him for a year and a half without having to worry about telling him (in court papers) everything we know about him".

How strange and sad that law and human rights become toy in the hands of the powerful who play with the universal laws according to their choice! I also wonder if Pakistani authorities could pursue legal proceedings, in such a haste, while they handed over Khalid Mohammed allegedly involved in al-Qaeda activities.

AF Rahman
Dhaka

"War on Iraq"

This is in regards to Jamil Ahmed's reply to my letter on Iraq (March 2). He seems to be quite convinced of the evil nature of the American Zionist and Evangelical lobby. Of course like most other people I too look upon Zionists and Evangelicals with disdain.

But to suggest that these lobbies make American policy is to over simplify the matter. It's ironic that the Jewish vote in general is more for the Democrats than the Republican Party. President Bush's family also has a long history of close association and personal friendship to Arab regimes and almost none with Jewish groups. Evangelical groups are also a strong lobby for Israel but their influence is over inflated.

I do find Jamil's last sentence interesting. He asks if Muslims and Arabs are aware of their interests. The essential mistake Jamil and many like him make is in assuming that Muslims or for that matter Arabs are some homogenous group with similar interests. Personally I don't think Bangladesh has anything in common with Saudi Arabia or Pakistan; do you?

Gora
Dhaka

Hypocrisy of Bush and Blair

Bush and Blair want to invade Iraq to liberate the Iraqis from the dictator Saddam. If they are so generous then why don't they withdraw sanction from Iraq and save the lives of millions more?

How many ways Bush and Blair will deceive the peace-loving people like us who are dead against war? Like Saddam, these two warmongers are also responsible for the sufferings of the Iraqi people and they talk about liberating them! What irony!

Bush and Blair are the greatest hypocrites in the present world.

Ahmed Habib Manzur
Buraydah, Saudi Arabia