

**Retirement age**

*57 is too early for swan song*

THE cabinet committee is looking into the prospect of raising the retirement age. We say, it should strongly recommend it without ado. It's one of those vital matters we have inexplicably but deliberately chosen to be indecisive about. Thanks to a geriatric notion that is ironically obsolescent, we have kept to a 57-year cut-off mark for the government servants to hang their gloves and, for too long. The practice dating back to the British colonial era has been rendered totally outmoded as the average longevity in Bangladesh has reached 58 in contrast to 27 in 1950s.

Need we say that, leading a reasonably good life most government officials remain fit at 57? To top it off, they are vastly experienced at that age. We talk of capacity building and meritocracy in the services but if government servants are retired at 57 we are losing out on both -- in terms of proven reserves of capacity and merit.

At present, when government servants are superannuated, they are given contracts to continue for limited periods of time. Such contractual offers have often been stigmatised by political favouritism with considerations of merit or integrity playing a second fiddle in the public eye. Retaining retiring government officials on contract has generated resentment in the administration; for, it is regarded as having blocked the promotion prospects of next-in-line officers. In truth, the proliferation of contractual assignments has impacted negatively on the efficiency and morale of the officialdom, especially because of the bottled-up situation.

But that is not the sole reason why we should raise the retirement age. The latter deserves to be revised upward on its own merit. The corporate sector has benefited immensely from people above 55 years. They are not only repositories of experience and leadership qualities but also creative by the same token.

To say that the raising of the service age will create administrative clogs is downright foolhardy. For, it would be uniformly beneficial to all government servants with each taking his or her turn in moving up the ladder?

**Anti-land grabbing initiative**

*Will the government finally act?*

IN the past weeks we have been writing both news reports and editorials to try to focus the government's attention on the problem of public land being illegally appropriated, occupied or otherwise used by unscrupulous land-grabbers in collusion with corrupt officials. It is thus heartening to see that one JS body, at least, has taken the bull by the horns and is determined to enact tough measures to ensure that public land remains protected and those who seize such land unlawfully are brought to justice.

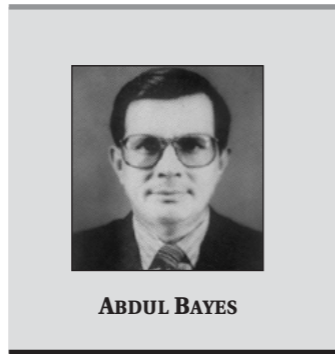
The parliamentary standing committee on the land ministry on Sunday recommended to the government that land grabbers be made subject to the Speedy Trial Act to help recover public land from encroachers. We whole-heartedly second this proposal which recognizes the scale and the seriousness of the issue. To illegally occupy for private gain land that rightfully belongs to the public and to betray the public trust by colluding in such criminality is the worst kind of anti-social offense and deserves the opprobrium that the standing committee's strong measures imply.

The committee is to be further congratulated for naming ten real estate developers that are currently illegally occupying public land and announcing that stern action will be taken against them if they do not vacate the grabbed land. The list includes some of the best-known conglomerates in the country and one hopes that being "named and shamed" in this manner will have a salutary effect on their actions and that the stigma and odium attached to their names will encourage them to clean up their acts.

The committee also charged the deputy commissioners of 61 districts with submitting detailed reports on the status of public, vested and abandoned land within 60 days in order to expedite the process of ensuring that public land not be misused for private gain. This, too, is a positive step in the right direction.

The egregious conduct of land-grabbers and the corrupt officials who collude in their pillaging of the country is now clearly before the government. Let us hope that the issue is kept alive and that the proposed measures are implemented seriously so that land-grabbers and their official cronies learn that there is nothing more disgraceful than the plundering of the nation for private gain and that they will be severely punished for such a crime.

**From the Philippines and for the rice**



FEW persons would, perhaps, favour a forthright liberalization of rice trade. The reasons are not far to seek. Rice is the staple food crop in most of the Asian countries -- in fact 90 percent of world rice is grown in this continent. In these countries, more often than not, politically pointed "pro-poor" ramifications tend to reign over economics as far as any decision pertaining to rice is concerned. That is why -- despite a history of taxing agricultural sector -- many of them insulate their domestic rice markets from the international ones. Ipso facto, rice prices tend to remain substantially above the current world price levels, allegedly, resulting in high effective rates of protection. But suspicion looms large whether the protection accorded to rice actually helps or hurts the poor. To put a provocative premise, it can be hypothesised that a protection to rice could turn out to be a protection to the rich at the cost of the poor.

In a recent research paper, David Dawe of the Social Sciences Division of IRRI confronted the issue of rice trade protection. He argues that the protection to rice in the Philippines, in fact, goes to benefit the rich farmers at the cost of the poor. Although he directs his pen at the Philippines, I presume, the observations made and the conclusions reached could cover, more or less, some other countries in this region that have a firm faith on an inward looking strategy for rice to propagate a pro-poor policy.

**Relished rice**

Rice is the single most important commodity in the Philippines accounting for 40 percent of calories intake, 30 percent of protein and nearly one-third of total agricultural area harvested. On average, half of the farm household income originates from rice and roughly one-fifth of the expenditure of bottom one-fourth in the income distribution hovers around rice. The ratios are, admittedly, lower compared to Bangladesh where, I guess, roughly more than two-thirds of calories come from rice and it costs more than half of the budget of the lower deciles. However my visits to IRRI lead me to believe that like Bangladeshis, from the dawn to the dusk, Filipinos also religiously relish eating rice. The per capita

consumption of rice is lower here but in terms of frequency, almost at par. And I am not pointing to the poor but to the posh and the prosperous Filipinos working at IRRI.

**Pondering over wonders**

There is no doubt that the establishment of the IRRI in this country -- the most prestigious organisation dealing with rice research -- is something to be proud of. But the Philippines has another landmark in the realm of rice: rice terraces. I am grateful to AFSTRI (Association of Foreign students/scholars,

from the price incentives, drives towards the production of more rice and little of other crops. In economic jargon, it is called "dead-weight" loss to the economy since more valuable crops could be grown in the absence of distortions. Second, it transfers income from rice consumers to producers. The triangle in the imaginary diagram, depicting producers' surplus, gets bigger while that of the consumers' surplus suffers a squeeze. Whether the losers in the battle are poor or not is an important empirical question and several authors have addressed this on theoretical as well as empirical

negligible rise for smaller groups too. Thus, neither time nor country considerations could contest the core of the argument that largely the large landowners are prized with high prices of rice.

However, all that have been said from India to Bangladesh mostly matter for growers of rice and ignore the landless households who, by definition and without default, are net buyers of food from the market. By and large, "the poorest rice farmers are quite vulnerable to an increase in the price of their principal crops.... Conversely, the largest, wealthiest

poor with one-fourth below the poverty line and accounting for 30 percent of the poor in the country. Second comes rural landless "who are often overlooked in many popular discussions of the rural sector". Various surveys show that the head of an agricultural labour household in the Philippines earns 22 percent lower than that of farm household and two decades back, the difference was devastatingly higher (47 percent). The third group comprises non-rice farmers and the most recent agricultural census shows that almost half of all farmers grow no rice at all. Other than rice, common crops in this

unlikely to face adverse effects.

But that will hurt half of the farmers who grow rice. David Dawe delved into the dynamics of the distribution of the Filipino rice farmers. The average income of the top 20 percent of rice farm households (ranked according to percapita income) is 15 times as large as that of bottom 20 percent. The top fifth of rice farm households is located in the top half of the national income distribution. Again, in per capita terms, the top fifth of the rice farm households has non-farm income that is 30 times more than the bottom fifth. The richest rice farmers are more specialised in rice than the poor ones. For example, the top fifth obtains 11 percent of agricultural income from non-rice crops compared to 25 percent by the poor. Thus it appears that the poor farmers already gained an edge in terms of relocations. Besides, the richest rice farmers--the top quintile--hire 90 percent of labor to grow rice compared to 51 percent by the poor. The top quintile of rice farm households marked 44 percent of the surplus followed by 23 percent by the second quintile implying that the current policy of protection and high prices of rice serves the purpose of the wealthier farms who reap home two-thirds of the benefits of the present policy.

**Concluding remarks**

David Dawe's paper points to interesting insights. Nevertheless, few observations should be on board. First, it lacks quantitative assessment based on general equilibrium framework and, seemingly, assumes that the imported rice does not receive any subsidy from the exporting country. In the latter case, the comparison appears to be with concocted comparative advantage. Second, as Jean Derze and Amartya Sen observed: "The links between food availability and entitlements are indeed numerous and often important... For some people, the output of food grown by themselves is also their basic entitlement to food. For example, for peasants engaged mainly in growing food crops, the output, availability, and entitlement of food for the family can be much the same. This is a matter of what may be called 'direct entitlement'. Therefore, a la Dreze and Sen, one needs to distinguish between direct and trade-based entitlements. Any way, the intuitive impacts so investigated by David Dawe throws an illuminating light into the reality. It only shows that sometimes pro-poor politics tends to contain some elements of enriching the rich. The Filipino phenomenon might provide a wake up call -- at least in terms of research -- to those who live on rice but want to leave the issue of trade liberalisation on political grounds.

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trainees) for providing me with the rare opportunity of visiting the places at Banaue, about 700 km from Los Banos. Stepping into the soil in a fine morning, I found myself in one of the wonders of the world: 2,000-year rice terraces and related rituals and cultures. As UNESCO stated: "for 2000 years, the high rice fields of the Ifugao have followed the contours of the mountain. The fruit of knowledge passed from one generation to another, of sacred traditions and a delicate social balance, it helped form a landscape of great beauty that expressed, conquered and conserved harmony between humankind and environment". Their watershed management for the growth of rice in such high altitude -- roughly about five thousand feet above sea level and in climatic conundrums -- is something to be seen. Unfortunately, as elsewhere, the Ifugao also faces the challenges of modernisation, and is on the verge of extinction. Tourists come here and, sometimes some octogenarians pose for cameras under shivering cold for the sake of only 50 pesos!

**Protection and poor**

Back to business. For the last two decades or so, domestic rice prices in the Philippines, reportedly, ran much above the prices in other countries or world markets. The domestic retail prices often reach levels higher than 100 percent than would be the case under an unrestricted regime. One can easily comprehend the impinged impacts of the large price differentials due to protection (my undergraduate students at Jahangirnagar University could close their eyes and recollect the partial equilibrium analysis on protection). David Dawe succinctly summarises the considerations.

First and the foremost perhaps, is that the driven edge resulting

plane pertaining to individual countries. The third effect of higher rice prices is reduced employment. Higher rice prices (or any food items) prompt workers to raise hue and cry for higher wages (since unions in the Philippines reportedly have a say in setting wages). And in the face of fiery demands for increased wages, iritant investors invariably respond by laying off the workers. "The higher wages do reduce employment, however, creating a larger pool of unemployment than would exist if food prices were lower". And finally, as rice is the dominant crop, very high price is likely to put a pressure on land values making it more difficult to go for land reforms. "If rice prices were to fall substantially, the government would probably have to pay less to purchase the land and transfer it to someone with less or no land".

Factually speaking, the poorest in Asia are the net purchasers of rice. John Mellor -- an ace agricultural economist -- observed in 1978 that the two poorest deciles of the income distribution in India were net buyers of food while each of the top eight deciles were net sellers. Just a decade later, in 1988 and for Sri Lanka, DE Sahn observed that two-thirds of all farmers with marketable surpluses of rice are in the top half of the expenditure distribution. Almost another decade later, in 1996, CB Barret and PA Dorosh observed almost the same trend for Madagascar: "The roughly one-third of rice farmers who fall below the poverty line have substantial net purchases of rice, suggesting important negative effects of increases in rice prices on household welfare". And if my memory recalls correctly, studies on Bangladesh (especially by Drs Mahabub Hossain and Kazi Shahabuddin) point to the preponderance of large farms in rice marketing although they noticed a

10 percent or so of farmers stand to benefit significantly from rice price increase". But the contrast comes from Vietnam -- against Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, and the Philippines -- with a period of Communist rule providing comprehensive land reforms to live with less of landless people. Minot and F. Goletti argue that an increase in rice prices in Vietnam, albeit marginally, would reduce the incidence and depth of poverty.

**Pertinent point**

A pertinent question props up: would the poorest of the poor necessarily benefit from lower rice prices even if they were net buyers? David Dawe -- drawing upon another prominent researcher M. Ravallion -- devotes a part of his paper on the evidence from Bangladesh. Ravallion argues that many of the poor consumers eke out a living from wages from other farms. High prices of rice results in increased production and hence demand for labour and that in turn pushes up wages. Thus, the net effect would hinge on their net consumption position in rice on one hand and the effect of rice prices on wages -- the main source of their income -- on the other. Ravallion also finds that "in the short run of one to two years, the induced wage response from higher rice prices in Bangladesh will be inadequate to compensate the poor for the adverse effects of higher rice prices. In the longer run of three to four years, the effect of higher rice prices is more neutral as wages eventually rise with a lag".

**Findings for the Philippines**

David Dawe's data show that "the poorest of the poor in the Philippines are net consumers of rice, not net producers". There are four categories of them. First, urban

country are coconut and maize -- also far behind rice earnings but upfront on pervasive poverty. And the final group comes from small rice producers who do not produce enough rice for family consumption.

How would a regime of more imports and consequent lower rice prices affect these various groups? According to the researcher, lower rice prices (with a surge in imports) would put up upward pressure on the wages of unskilled labour. The effect on wages tends to be the function of land markets, the arbor intensity of alternative crops to rice, and the influence of urban sector wage to rural wage. "With lower prices, rice farming must remain profitable for those farmers who continue to grow rice. For farmers who cannot restore profitability in the face of lower prices, must necessarily give up rice farming and use the land for some other purpose". Profitability can only be restored through adjustment in input prices especially of nontradable land and labour prices. Pesticides and fertilizers -- tradable inputs -- could cast little impact in terms of cost minimisation. Arguably, lower rice prices would lower rental prices for land (and increase land tenancy). Farmers might go for diversification and make up the loss by growing maize for which demand growth surpasses that of rice. Both use similar quantities of labour per hectare to arrest any decline in labor demand as a result of the shift. By and large, lower rice prices are unlikely to cause a fall in wages as espoused by the critics of liberalisation. First, land market will absorb some of the shocks through lower land rents. Second, alternative crops grown e.g. maize and vegetables would take care of a part of the problem and finally, given an integration of rural and urban sector, agricultural wages are

OPINION

**Public property and private gain**

**Need for consistency in standards for allocation of public land**

ABDUR RAHMAN

Parliamentary subcommittee recently found Rajuk's allocation of two plots to the Rajuk Employees Welfare Society in 1994 and 1998 to be illegal. The subcommittee found that the allocation of two plots at much lower than current market prices caused a loss of Tk. 12 crores to the government.

A shopping complex has already been built on the land by the Rajuk Co-operative Society. The subcommittee has asked the authorities concerned to submit all relevant documents to it so that a lawsuit can be instituted against those responsible for authorising the unlawful allocation.

The obstacle, however, is that, as of now, there are no uniform standards in place to govern the issue that the subcommittee would like to see settled.

The commendable concerns and efforts of the subcommittee highlight the need for a uniform set of standards which have to be followed for the allotment of any public plots in order to check corruption and nepotism. However, until a uniform set of standards is put in place by the courts, it is unclear what the result of the legal proceedings the subcommittee has initiated will be.

The unauthorised occupation or use of land that rightfully belongs to the government has long been a thorny issue. Only last week, the story of 700 acres of khas (government owned) land and vested property in Dhaka that had fallen into the hands of land-grabbers made the headlines.

The government has convened a secretarial committee to look into what steps need to be taken to recover the illegally occupied land and to punish the unlawful occupants. The committee has recommended that the relevant laws dealing with unlawful occupation or use of government land be updated and made more stringent to deal with what has developed into a test of the government's willingness and ability to stand up against private interests for the public good.

However, as we can see from the parliamentary subcommittee's findings mentioned in the first paragraph, the problem does not lie only with government land that is being occupied or used without any kind of lawful authority. There is also a problem with the rules and standards governing the allocation of public land.

Another example of this predicament is the government's recent

drive to dredge the Buriganga to a depth of 12 feet from Sadarghat to Ashulia that has initiated the almost farcical spectacle of scores of individuals claiming to be the rightful owners and laying claim to the banks and foreshores of the river and even the river channel itself!

The genesis of the sorry state of affairs with respect to the ownership of the Buriganga, according to an investigative report, was that much of the land (including the river channel) whose ownership is currently being contested was originally "deaccessioned" by officials in the Dhaka Deputy Commissioner's office and subsequently sold or granted to private individuals.

The current quandary the government finds itself in with respect to the ownership of the river and its banks is compounded by the fact that the properties in question have may have changed hands over the course of years and that many of the current claimants or owners claim to have made their purchases in good faith.

It is thus clear that one of the principal problems which has led us to this unsatisfactory state of affairs with respect to the disbursement of public land is that there are no uniform rules, regulations and

standards in place that govern such disbursements.

Now, in a democratic society, the government should not be free to select the recipients of benefits granted by it. The power of discretion of the government in the matter of the granting of benefits such as the allotment of public property must be confined and structured by rational and non-discriminatory standards.

Any lack of transparency in the process of the allotment of public land permits nepotism and arbitrariness. It is thus essential that the entire process should be transparent and fair, and that clear and uniform guidelines and rules exist to guard against the possibility of arbitrary or preferential treatment.

Fortunately, the possibility of a uniform set of standards is just around the corner. I am speaking of the case of Mirpur Mazar Co-operative Market Society Ltd v. Secretary of Works and others.

The petitioner in the case, the society, was the owner of a three-storey supermarket building in Mirpur on a piece of land measuring about three bighas. A piece of land measuring roughly 1000 square yards stood adjacent to the east of the society's market and had been described as a "car park" in the Master Plan prepared by the

then DIT (now Rajuk).

The society had been using the land as a car park for the last 20-25 years, and had sought lease of the land several times, but were told that the land could not be allotted to them.

Subsequently, the land was allotted to a third party at a price which was 10 per cent of the then prevailing market price for similar land. The society claimed that the allotment had been unlawful. Hence the current case.

Perhaps coincidentally, the allotment was made to a company one of whose directors was the wife of an MP and two other directors of which apparently shared the same address as the MP.

The High Court declared the allotment to be null and void. The High Court also observed that, in view of Article 144 of the constitution, public property may generally be disposed of only by public auction or by inviting applications or tenders which would give all citizens equal opportunity and ensure fairness, accountability and transparency in the activities of the public authorities.

Article 144 gives the power of acquisition and disposal of government land to the government, but there are constitutional limits on

the government's powers to deal with public property and to grant rights on public property.

The legal principle laid down by the High Court judgment was that any allotment of public land made in violation of the provisions of Article 144 is not sustainable in law.

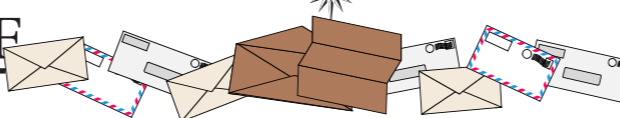
However, on appeal, the Appellate Division reversed the High Court's judgment.

A review petition has been filed in respect of the Appellate Division's judgment. The issues raised by the questionable allocation of public property to a company owned by the wife and relatives of an MP belonging to the ruling party is thus soon to be taken up once again by the Appellate Division when hearing the review petition.

Let us hope that a set of uniform standards regarding the allotment of public plots will emerge from this hearing. Only then can nepotism and corruption in relation to the allotment of public land be effectively combated and will the government be able to ensure that private parties are not enriched at the expense of the public good.

Abdur Rahman is a researcher in legal matters.

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.

**Minority rights**

Your news item "US State Department lauds Dhaka for religious freedom, critical of minority rights", December 22, 2003 (front page) reflected a partial view of the reality of rural life in the context of minority rights preservation, protection and promotion. The report released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, has noted that many of the "religious minorities who have been victims of crimes" or of "politically motivated violence", have not been verified independently.

Investigations into this kind of incidents or violence could not be carried out due to fund constraints and shortage of police

personnel in particular, during the post-election (October 2001) period when such violence took place sporadically in rural Bangladesh. However, the US State Department report has mentioned; "The government sometimes has failed to investigate the crimes and prosecute the perpetrators, who are often the local gangleaders."

The fact is that the backbone of the real perpetrators of the crimes and violence upon the minorities in rural Bangladesh is really a small group or political leaders and influential villagers who wield power and try to grab the landed property or homes of the minorities by fair or foul means.

**MARub**  
*A human rights activist*  
Uttara, Dhaka 1230

**Stringent electronic media law.....**

I read with great interest one of the lead news items published in the DS of January 11. This was shocking.

To begin with, as rightly observed, this is rather stringent and certainly unwarranted given the current state of the media. If anything, the government should consider making it freer and more independent. As suggested in the report, the proposed committee "will examine whether the applicants have anti-state or anti people

roles or attitudes" as one of the criteria for issuance of the licence etc. This is highly presumptuous, vague and wide open. Again I am curious as to what prompted the government to suddenly feel that "continued setting up of the electronic media in the private sector and their indefinite operation under simple guidelines are not wise" as officials concerned are quoted as saying. Clearly, if there is half a truth in what has been reported the proposed law is sure to turn out to be a law aimed at curbing the already precarious state of the freedom of the media. Bangladesh today is already living under conditions close to those of a Police State.

It is a shame when you come to

think that Pakistan from whose occupation we snatched our freedom and gained our independence, today has more "democratic" institutions in place than Bangladesh, a classic example is its media. There is even a privately owned Pakistani TV Channel operating from Dubai. No less than the president of the country is often seen to be giving interviews to both national and international news media including attending question and answer sessions with the international press. Besides the print media continues to criticise the country's president in no lesser terms on a regular basis.

More heritage and tradition will not make us a democratic

nation. We have to continuously and honestly work towards that goal without recourse to any falsehood or treacherous actions driven by "autocratic overtures".  
**Shamsher Chowdhury**  
*On E-mail*

**Boorish behaviour!**

In the year 2003, we celebrated the 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Victory Day. In order to pay tribute to the martyrs and freedom fighters of the Liberation War, we, under the banner of Shamsun Nahar Hall (DHU), went to the National Memorial at Savar.

As we were waiting along the entrance like around 25 other different organisations for our turn

, suddenly people under the banner of a certain political party proceeded towards the Memorial along the exit. To our utter astonishment, they placed their wreaths at the Memorial earlier than us (the waiting organisations and parties along the entrance) and left the premises of the Memorial clapping, chanting slogans and sometimes dancing. Witnessing such a farce, I am in doubt whether those people came to pay tribute to our victorious freedom fighters, or to dishonour them or to demean our pride--the liberation war.

**Shima**  
*Dept. of English*  
*Dhaka University*  
**Is it true?**

There is no doubt that the western media are run by the Zionists and, therefore, they try to highlight the Muslim countries as terrorists.

I still wonder whether the coalition forces really captured Saddam Hossain or was it just a propaganda made by the US government, as the US presidential election is ahead. I don't think Saddam Hossain has been captured! The coalition forces have failed to meet their objectives in Iraq.

The resistance against the coalition forces by the Iraqi people is not an act of terrorism but it is their duty to protect their motherland.

**Minhaj Ahmed**  
*Uttara, Dhaka-1230*