

## Rice still dear despite OMS

Nice plan, but fault-lines in implementation detected

THE initiative of the government to commence open market sale (OMS) of rice, which consists of the government releasing rice from its godowns and then selling it through selected dealers at a fair price to the public, is sound policy given the recent escalation in the price of rice. However, the move has not yet succeeded in forcing down the price of the staple, and there is ample evidence to suggest that the reason for this is that the programme is being implemented rather poorly.

There are several easily identifiable problems with the programme. The first is the widely reported fact that the rice that the government has released for the OMS programme is of low quality. To make matters worse, it has been alleged that dealers are short-changing customers when it came to the weight of the rice being sold. It is no wonder that this has provided so little relief and there are not as many takers of the rice as would have made a difference in the marketplace.

In addition to the unattractive deal being peddled through OMS, the food ministry has launched the operation without sufficient administrative and logistical preparations, so it seems, to make the exercise fail-safe. There has been a lack of coordination between government warehouses storing rice and the dealers who are selling the rice, which has resulted in much of the rice that has been ear-marked for the programme not being released in a timely manner.

Another problem is that the government has not publicised the programme to the extent necessary and so many people are totally unaware that they can now purchase rice from the selected dealers at a fair price.

It is not enough to initiate a good programme even with the best of intentions behind it. The government needs to follow through to make sure that the programme is running efficiently and effectively and that the people are being well-served by the initiative.

The government must take affirmative measures both to see that the market manipulation that has caused prices to sky-rocket in recent days is checked, and also to ensure that its programmes to bring down the price of essentials are implemented thoroughly and yield positive results.

## Disgruntled food officials

Twelve years lost in deciding their fate!

FOOD officials at the upazila level are planning to go on strike if their demand for promotion to class-1 is not met by the government. The upazila food controllers have been second class officers since the post was created in 1983.

The officials concerned are reported to have been given the assurance, back in 1992, that they would get promotion. The establishment ministry's clearance in this respect made it amply clear that the then government had decided to accept the demand of the officials. But it seems the issue is still stuck in an insoluble bureaucratic tangle, which is why the officials are now planning to go beyond the usual track to press home their demand. It is not at all clear why the committee in charge of reviewing the issue now wants to know from the food ministry the rationale behind the decision to promote the officials. Why after 12 years? After all, the matter has had a bearing on the careers of 623 government officials. The usually slow-moving bureaucracy appears to have been particularly lacklustre in dealing with the issue.

The services of government officials are regulated by clearly laid down principles and if the government wants to upgrade a group of functionaries there should not be any ambiguity in the decision.

The food officials have announced their action plan at a time when the country is passing through a crisis, prices of food of various kinds having soared considerably in the last 10 days or so. The strike will surely have a debilitating impact on the public food delivery system.

It is far from desirable, and amounts to breach of service discipline, if the officials go on strike to force the government to accept their demand. But the government should also see to it that the case that has hung fire for so long is resolved positively. We suggest that the path of discussion be taken to settle the issue sooner than later.

## The choice this Autumn

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

FOR the people of the world could vote in the US presidential election, Senator John Kerry would win hands down. Even in Australia and Britain -- President Bush's unwavering loyal allies in the invasion of Iraq -- more than half the citizens would like to see Senator Kerry elected president. Despite Israel and Russia, where Bush is favoured over Kerry, the global average of support for John Kerry is 54 percent. Strangely, however, though Iraq figures prominently among election issues, global disenchantment with President Bush is not equally reflected in the American voters' preference between the two candidates.

In the latest polls the two appear to be in a neck-to-neck race for the White House. Reasons could be manifold. Americans still feel that George Bush can wage a more effective war on terror than Senator Kerry can do. Bush they know. Kerry they have just started to know. Despite his definitive win in the three presidential debates, Senator Kerry does not appear to have been able to convince the American voters that he has the better plan to get the US out of the Iraq quagmire, reduce budget deficit, provide affordable health care, improve American competitiveness, arrest outsourcing of jobs, give tax relief to middle class Americans, etc.

To non-Americans such a baffling situation is reflective of American insularity verging on isolationism at home and indifference to global concern over four more years of George W. as president of the US. US voters have failed to acknowledge former UN weapons inspector Hans Blix's warning that the US-led invasion of Iraq not only failed in its aim to make the world a safer place, but has succeeded in stimulating terrorism. The acknowledged gain of the war, in Blix's opinion, was the removal of "a treacherous and murderous dictator, but the rest has been tragedy and failure." Quite an indictment of Bush and Blair from a man who was closely associated with the unfolding drama in pre-invasion Iraq.

Blix's views coincide with those of Leo Abse (Labour MP from 1958-

1987), expressed in his book, *Tony Blair: The Man who Lost his Smile*. Abse writes that like Bush, Blair is a great believer that God is on his side, and regardless of the condemnation of the Iraq invasion by the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury, Blair's "personal communion with the Lord during his incessant Bible reading has left Blair confident that when the day comes for him to appear before God, the Lord's

decided that the entire Palestinian territory should belong to the Israelis. Albeit neither President Bush nor Senator Kerry are evangelical Christians. Yet as politicians courting votes, they cannot be oblivious to the disproportionate influence this group may wield in the coming presidential elections.

It is ironic that while the Christians persecuted the Jews for centuries bearing responsibility for the

pretext of WMD and untenable links between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein had to be drummed up.

But the Americans standing at the threshold of November elections do not seem to care as evidenced by the recent (October 13-16) CNN/USA Today, Washington Post, Business International, Time, and Newsweek magazines polls. Americans under 50 years of age, urban

There old sciences were recovered and new sciences were discovered, industries were born, manufactures and commerce were expanded, and growth of freedom of thought and expression led the persecuted Jews and dissident Christians to flee Christendom and seek refuge in Islam. But the erstwhile asylum seekers proved to be more brilliant, innovative, competent, and also devious, enabling them to outpace

present an equally blind view of Israeli genocide in Palestine, but a proactive US role relating to the genocide in Darfur.

There is no gainsaying the report of Brussels based International Crisis Group on needed reforms in Saudi Arabia, for example, treading carefully upon the strain put by an westernised elite and by the Wahabis wedded to their belief in the simplicity, decisiveness, and incorruptibility of their religious thought, seeking return to Quranic literalism and puritanical theology of Islam. It would not be anti-Semitism to criticise Israeli murderous excesses and ask the next US president to be even-handed in solving the Palestinian problem, the absence of which is being used by Al-Qaeda as an important tool for recruitment of nascent terrorists from among the deprived, delinquent and marginalised people.

Henry Kissinger does not believe that elimination of Osama bin Laden will end the problem of terrorism nor does he believe that success in Afghanistan, by itself, will end the issue. Perhaps Dr. Susan Rice is not off the mark in her observation: "It is we who lose when failed states like Afghanistan, Somalia, and Pakistan cannot keep terrorists out of their territories, even if they want to."

Therefore the next US president may consider taking the path of internationalism forsaking unilateralism, promote traditional understanding of international law forsaking preemption as a first resort, embrace diplomatic and developmental engagements with perceived enemies forsaking confrontation, and encourage inter-faith dialogue to bridge the civilisational chasm. It is the use of "soft power" forsaking "hard power" which can return to the US its moral claim of global leadership.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

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judgement and his own will happily coincide." In his inimitable and entertaining yet unsparing analysis, Abse characterises America as a nation of church-goers, with invocation to God being part of national conversation, where the Republicans have struck a Faustian bargain with the Pentecostal movement: the Republicans will concede that abortion or stem cell research are against Biblical text in return for the church mobilising its members to vote for the Republican party.

It is amazing to note how important a role religion plays in the lives of western leaders. Millions have noticed the deep attachment to religion expressed by Bush and Kerry during the presidential debates. Such attachment if confined to their personal life would perhaps be admirable in a world which some would like to describe as becoming increasingly agnostic in belief and atheist in practice. But then again there is a powerful Christian Right in the US, particularly the evangelists who firmly believe in the gathering of Jews in Palestine as a precursor to the second coming of Jesus Christ when all Jews will become Christians.

This group, writes Stephen Zunes (of Foreign Policy in Focus) sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a continuation of the battle between the Israelites and Philistines with God already having

betrayal of Jesus Christ to his enemies by Judas Iscariot, the Muslims lived in peace with the Jews in what is now Israel and the occupied lands. Lord Noel Becker, the first Secretary General of the League of Nations noted that in one of his conversations with King Abdul Aziz, he found the Saudi king favouring the idea of Jews living alongside Arabs who would benefit from the expertise the Jews would bring with them being "so talented people and so advanced in different branches of knowledge."

Lord Becker's view finds resonance in the words of historian Bernard Lewis when he writes:

"Until the rise and spread of western tolerance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they (Jews) were better off under the Muslims than under Christian rule in most significant respects." But the cruelty dispensed by the Israelis to the Arabs in which the West, particularly the Americans, have been complicit has produced a different history and a disharmonious world. Some have seen the appalling terrorist acts of 9/11 on the phallic twin towers as akin to castration of American manhood which had to be avenged immediately through the total decimation of the Talibans and grinding of Afghanistan, already a pre-industrial society, literally to dust. But the American anger was not to be satiated so easily and therefore

Americans and poor Americans living in big cities, many of whom would have ordinarily voted for Kerry, are more fearful of terrorist attacks at home than outsourcing of jobs, burgeoning deficit, or unaffordable health insurance. President Bush clearly outpaces Senator Kerry as the man most capable of thwarting terrorists at home and abroad. This seemingly inexplicable phenomenon of support for President Bush almost inevitably leads to an obsessive suspicion of Muslims and Islam as being instrumental and inspiration of Al-Qaeda terrorism.

That such an interpretation of global conflict is a gross oversimplification has been accepted by Bernard Lewis (Atlantic Monthly, Jan 2004) is by itself noteworthy. It is generally acknowledged that if any single individual has provided intellectual muscle to the Bush-Blair misadventure in Iraq it is the unassimilable intellect of Bernard Lewis. Even Lewis who sees millennial rivalry between Islam and Christianity and the defeat of the Muslims at the hands of the Christians and the Jews as forming the root of Muslim rage is wary of blaming Islam for the current global mess.

For most of the Middle Ages,

Lewis argues, it was neither the older cultures of the Orient nor the new culture of the West that were that major centres of civilisation and progress, but the world of Islam.

A Bush victory would possibly increase further the obscurantist view of Islam and indelibly imprint in the western mind the impression of all Muslims as followers of Osama bin Laden. If Dr. Susan Rice's (a Kerry advisor) recent comments on Israel and Saudi Arabia are any indication, a Kerry victory would

says.

Another welcome development is that Musharraf has "clicked" well with Manmohan Singh whom he finds sincere and straightforward. He recalls with equal warmth his meeting with former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. However, Musharraf regrets that the breakthrough did not come at Agra three years ago. By this time, he believes, the two countries would have normalised their relations.

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response is thus: I have never set any time limit. I know it will take time. But we cannot afford to go on and on. The Pakistanis are eagerly waiting for a solution. The sooner the problem is settled, the better. Even outside powers are looking at us. The present is the most opportune time.

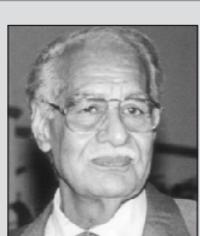
It is now for the liberals on both sides to suggest options, says Foreign Minister Kursheed Kasuri, present at the meeting. He too feels that if the present opportunity is not grasped, it may not come again. I do not know if he is fair in his expectations. The two governments have already established a back channel through their national security advisors. Non-official efforts are neither encouraged nor recognised.

After meeting Musharraf, I felt that he should know more about the ground realities in India. There is no political party -- the ruling Congress, the BJP, or any other -- that can risk disturbing the Line of Control which Zulfikar Ali Bhutto told me was the "line of peace" even before the Shimla Agreement. Softening borders or giving more autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir is achievable. Even demilitarisation of the valley is possible provided militancy within and without Kashmir ends.

Another formal seems difficult in a democratic and secular India to sell. The solution on Kashmir should strengthen the Indian polity, not weaken it. Musharraf should realise that there is a point beyond which the Manmohan Singh government cannot go.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## Light at the end of the tunnel



KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

FOR ALL the military dictators I have met in Pakistan, I have found President General Pervez Musharraf the brightest. General Ayub Khan, the first one, was stodgy, General Yahya Khan clueless, and General Zia-ul Haq devious. But the problem with Musharraf is that he has come to believe that he has a solution to every problem. All that a ruler has to do is to show courage and people will follow him.

Democracies, I am afraid, function on the basis of consensus, not by dictation, however courageous the ruler may be. Musharraf says confidently that he has a solution to Kashmir in his mind. He even spells it out: identify the area, agree upon its status, and demilitarise it. He does not tell me the area he has in view but describes it as the one where religion, geography and ethnicity meet. He has probably the valley and the surrounding Muslim majority area in mind. Is it bifurcation or trifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir? What about the "Azad Kashmir" under Pakistan? He assures me that geography can be the criterion to identify the area, if not religion.

Status reminds me of the offer Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali

Jinnah had made to Sheikh Abdullah before the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India. It was the Sikkim-like position, then British India's protectorate, which the Sheikh had spurned. When I conveyed Musharraf's thinking to Majid Nizami, chief editor of Nawa-i-Waqat and the Nation, he says it is "too confusing." He would rather have the status quo. Nizami, respected as well as feared, has always held the view that Kashmir's integration with Pakistan is the unfinished agenda of partition.

live. "How can we agree to a passport," asks Sardar Qayyum Khan, former Prime Minister of "Azad Kashmir," when I check with him. "It amounts to accepting Kashmir as part of India."

The bus is not the nettle, but Kashmir is. Musharraf is all focused on that. Our talk spreading over an hour hovers around Kashmir. When I tell him that if the confidence building measures were to be implemented, they would generate so much goodwill that Kashmir might

posed agreement before it is signed. "If you propagate it first, there is bound to be opposition in India." He does not see much of a problem in Pakistan. His announcement will be adequate, he says.

My impression is that Musharraf is not familiar with our procedures. True, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh can sign the agreement if and when reached, and the cabinet can ratify it. But our parliament will have to approve it before it has any sanctity of acceptability. If there has to

says.

Another welcome development is that Musharraf has "clicked" well with Manmohan Singh whom he finds sincere and straightforward. He recalls with equal warmth his meeting with former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. However, Musharraf regrets that the breakthrough did not come at Agra three years ago. By this time, he believes, the two countries would have normalised their relations.

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## BETWEEN THE LINES

After meeting Musharraf, I felt that he should know more about the ground realities in India. There is no political party -- the ruling Congress, the BJP, or any other -- that can risk disturbing the Line of Control which Zulfikar Ali Bhutto told me was the "line of peace" even before the Shimla Agreement. Softening borders or giving more autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir is achievable. Even demilitarisation of the valley is possible provided militancy within and without Kashmir ends.

Musharraf should know that the Kashmiris on either side say "let there be plague on both houses." They want independence. Yet he is confident that they will step back when some concrete proposals are on the table. Musharraf, however, underlines the necessity to associate the Kashmiris with the talks. Let the Kashmiris on both sides meet; their dialogue may throw up something.

"Why don't you send the Kashmiri leaders in the first bus from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad?" he proposes. It is apparent that the two countries have sorted out their differences over the bus service. The passport is out. Passengers will use documents from the place where they

not pose any problem, he does not minimise the importance of confidence building measures. But, at the same time, he seems to believe that "the progress made on Kashmir" will determine how far the two countries have covered the distance to normalisation. He cautions that many in Pakistan have already begun to suspect that India is "again at its old game" and wants to solve "other problems" without conceding anything on Kashmir.

The biggest weakness in Musharraf's approach is the presumption that the Indian Prime Minister has to be "courageous enough" to spell out the proposal and the rest will follow. Musharraf is not in favour of any public debate on the pro-

be a territorial change, it would require a constitutional amendment.

It means the support of two-thirds of majority in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha before the bill is passed. Besides, the Supreme Court of India has the right of judicial review.

"We will have lawyers for consultations when we come to discuss any concrete proposal," says

Musharraf.

It may take three, four days but he says he is confident that it can be done in a day if "we sit from morning till evening."

What impresses me is his enthusiasm. He is overwhelmed by the slightest opportunity and minimises the impediments in the way. "There is light at the end of the tunnel," he

long ambition of the minority depriving the majority of the means of wherewithal.

It is a familiar symptom in the new emerging countries, but the Bengalees have now turned ruthless, intolerant, cruel, and murderous. The killer instinct is the order of the day. A keen Japanese JICA observer of the Dhaka scenes wrote (in the DS) an illuminating commentary of the present psyche of the Bangladeshi mind. The insecurity syndrome has turned into grab, grab, and grab philosophy. Why have we become so trigger-happy? Do we need so many hidden godfathers (funny, no godmothers are ever mentioned)? Is the high density of population (the birth rate has gone down from 3 to 1.5 percent, a record in the third world).

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dominated.) The government may sit down with BGMEA and ADAB/NGOs and formulate some measures for the welfare of the workers such as security, medical and daycare centres, overtime payment, etc.

The BGMEA can easily half a percent of its gross earnings (over \$2 billion) for welfare. Inhuman working conditions should not be allowed by the government, not to speak of the foreigners, who stopped child labour. Discourage employers who behave as sharks. Workers have human dignity and some basic rights. Can we have a public clarification from BGMEA on its labour welfare policies?

A Mawaz  
Dhaka

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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Letters will only be considered if they carry the