

Increase in fuel prices assailable

An avoidable strategic mistake

THE government has decided to increase diesel and kerosene oil prices effective from next month based on what appears to us to be a self-serving rationale and a poorly done arithmetical exercise. The interesting thing is, the conventional reasoning for raising the domestic fuel prices owing to an increase in the international prices is untenable here, because of the fact that import prices of fuel are actually on decline now.

Still, two arguments are being advanced in favour of the oil price hikes by the energy ministry: one, smuggling of lower priced diesel and kerosene from Bangladesh into the higher priced Indian market for the same; and two, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) is incurring an annual loss of Tk 2,200 crore through the subsidised fuel prices in Bangladesh. So, the line of argument is: the price differential with India has to be reduced by raising diesel and kerosene prices in Bangladesh so as to put a lid on smuggling and also to allow the BPC to tide over its losses.

All this doesn't stand to reason. In the first place, why must the cost of the failure to curb smuggling which basically mirrors failed border security vigil be borne by farmers and consumers in terms of higher irrigation costs and food prices respectively? Even the cost of transportation which is largely diesel-fuelled will go up across the board. As for the drain on the BPC's finances, we have to say that this could be significantly averted if the high import duties on oil were lowered by the government.

Finally, we agree with the experts who maintain that this is wrong time to have costlier diesel and kerosene. When the rate of inflation is close to a double digit figure, it is no good economic sense to be fuelling it further by any wrong policy. Taka is weakening against euro and dollar making imports costlier; and announcement of new pay scales for government officials is round the corner with the attendant prospect for adding to the inflationary pressures.

We urge the government to review the decision.

The errant publications

Government needs to act

THE news carried by the Bengali daily *Prothom Alo* that some publications -- including books and journals available in city bookshops -- are feeding the youths with militant messages saying that it is a part of their religious duty to heed them is cause for concern.

Clearly, the name of religion is being taken by fanatic groups to push their agenda which is to propagate their extremist ideas and impose these on others in an attempt to take advantage of their religiosity. Now, the question is what's the government doing to counter the move to disseminate such messages? Does it have enough information about the origin, stockpiling and distribution of such subversive printed materials? If the answer is negative, then we would like to point out that a very potent source of spreading fanatic ideas and pushing a section of the youths towards a destructive course is being overlooked or taken too leniently. The result of such leniency could be disastrous.

For obvious reasons, the law enforcement and intelligence agencies are now concerned with internal security badly undermined by the recent bomb blasts. However, it is equally important to monitor the activities of outfits which have apparently launched a propaganda offensive in favour of their militant plans and programmes. After all the message of militancy is no less repugnant than the actual acts of subversion.

To give the fanatics a free hand, even unwittingly, poses a lot of danger to our well-established ethos. Respect for religion may decline with such preaching of militancy which amounts to misinterpretation of the basic teachings of Islam. So, under no circumstances, can the bigots be permitted to mislead people through those publications.

How to make the caretaker system work

BRIG GEN (RETD) SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

OF late, a debate has been raging as to whether or not the caretaker government system in place in the country since 1996 should be reformed. AL and almost all other opposition political parties voiced the demand for reform soon after the government suddenly increased the age limits of judges, with the apparent motive of installing a particular Chief Justice as the Chief Advisor of the next caretaker government.

The caretaker system is a novel system suiting perhaps the genius of the people of this country alone. It is somewhat paradoxical that an elected party which governs the country for long five years has no jurisdiction to hold election to the Jatiya Sangsad for the simple reason that it is not trustworthy enough to hold free and fair elections. Instead of addressing the issues responsible for unfair election, our politicians opted for this novel system.

Novelty seems to be the name of the game of politics in this country. Our politicians devise novel ways of staging protests against government. They boycott parliament sessions for days and months together. They organise long marches. They issue ultimatums to an elected government to resign and fix a date predicting the fall of the government. They form a human chain from one part of the country to another. Who knows, there may be an aerial display like this some day!

We have so far had two elections under the caretaker government system. In 1996, AL won the election and formed the government with the support of Ershad's Jatiya Party. BNP called the election unfair and accused AL of having snatched away their victory by vote rigging. In 2001, it was BNP-Jamat coalition which won the election and formed the government. This time AL cried foul. So much for fair elections under the caretaker government.

Now that AL and almost all other opposition political parties are demanding reform of the caretaker

system, and the general mood of the civil society is also for reform, it will be worthwhile discussing the circumstances under which the caretaker government system came into being and also the inherent drawbacks in the system, necessitating reforms.

It is an irony that while BNP fought the movement for caretaker government tooth and nail, it was the BNP which had to enact the law for the caretaker government system in the end. Following the infamous Magura-2 by-election under the then BNP government, the entire mainstream opposition parties including Jamat-e-Islam, the present coalition government partner, launched a protracted move-

they did, they did not want to waste any time in going for the election and thus capturing the seat of power.

While there is no gainsaying that the caretaker government system has succeeded in reducing major irregularities and malpractice in elections it has conducted, the system has some serious shortcomings, which if not redressed in earnest now, will soon render the caretaker system as partisan as any elected political government of today.

We also need to do some sort of political cleansing in that the Jatiya Sangsad must be freed from people with black money and muscle power. This is the only way to

the retired justices. We may end up with someone with a partisan outlook and disputed background. Besides, since a particular retired chief justice as the potential Chief Advisor of a future caretaker government remains focused, his acceptability or lack of it by the government or the opposition is likely to be an issue, which may mar the political atmosphere. As a remedy, we should have a panel of all retired Chief Justices (except those who have already served as Chief Advisors) and all retired justices of the Appellate Division from which the President in consultation with both the government and the main opposition should pick someone as the Chief Advisor.

ment, should the President fail to appoint the Chief Advisor as per provisions laid down. New provisions placing the Ministry of Defence and the controlling authority of the Defence Forces under the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government should be enacted.

Since it has been made mandatory to hold election to Jatiya Sangsad within 90 days after parliament is dissolved, the tenure of the caretaker government extends generally a little over three months, which by any reckoning is a very short time for any government to be effective and authoritative, no matter how transitory the government is. Imagine the magnitude of the task the caretaker government

may need to be revised. Most importantly, new legislation needs to be enacted in the form of government ordinance debarbing bank loan defaulters, smugglers, extortionists, listed criminals and terrorists, people owning properties and having bank balance disproportionate to their known source of income, godfathers of terrorists, etc from becoming members of parliament.

This is all a tall order and the government can hardly do justice to itself in three months time. Besides the government for such a short stint can hardly command loyalty and obedience of the administration which is a precondition for any government to be effective. Knowing full well that the caretaker government is only for three months, the officers and staff of the administration are liable to adopt a go slow attitude and look forward to the new elected government to be installed which will hinder smooth functioning of the government.

It is therefore suggested that relevant provisions of law be amended to hold election to Jatiya Sangsad under caretaker government within 180 days instead of 90 days after parliament has been dissolved. Generally, people also feel relatively safer and happier during the rule of the caretaker government as the political big-wigs and political armed cadres cannot interfere with the normal functioning of the civil administration, particularly the police. So, in the interest of the people living under somewhat improved conditions of law and order and enjoying relative peace it would be worthwhile extending the duration of this interregnum as well.

Reforms of the caretaker government system as suggested above are neither anti-government nor pro-opposition. These reforms, if carried out in earnest, will only make the system work to the benefit of this country as it will pave the way for smooth transition to a truly elected democratic government which can be trusted for good governance and for holding credible elections.

The author is a former Military Secretary to the President.

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ment demanding general election under a neutral caretaker government. But the BNP was then as adamant in resisting the demand for introduction of the system as it is now against reforming the system.

It was only after the wholesale boycott of the February 1996 general election by all the main opposition parties that the BNP government was forced to accept the demand for non-party caretaker government and enact laws accordingly. Thus, BNP fathered the non-party caretaker government system as we find it now, but it did so under duress of a sort, and did it the BNP way.

AL accepted it as offered. To my reckoning there could be two reasons for ready acceptance by AL. One, it perhaps did no homework on the guidelines and the shape of the caretaker government it was agreeing to. This is quite typical of AL, as I believe that even now AL has not done any research on the system and has no concrete suggestions for reforming the system. Two, even if

improve the quality of the elected political government. No elected political government will do it. It has to be done by a caretaker government. Unless this is done, we will not have, and we cannot expect to have, an elected political government in the foreseeable future which can be trusted to give the nation even a modicum of free, fair, and credible elections. And we cannot continue experimenting with this novel and undemocratic system for an indefinite period either. So, with these ends in view, we must seek to reform the non-party caretaker government law.

Drawbacks and suggested reforms

The provision regarding the appointment of Chief Advisor by the President is seriously flawed in that when the appointment is limited to a particular retired chief justice as the case is, then it is likely that the person so appointed may not be the best and most acceptable among

With regard to the appointment of Advisors also, the President should act on the advice of the Chief Advisor and consult both the government and the main opposition and appoint Advisors acceptable to both the government and the main opposition.

But what has the most debilitating effect on the caretaker government system as a whole is the erosion of the executive authority of the caretaker government by taking away the Ministry of Defence and the controlling authority of the Defence Services from the caretaker government and the Chief Advisor and placing them under the President. Thus the caretaker government has been left at the mercy of the President, as it needs the services of the Armed Forces to maintain law and order in the country especially during election. As if this was not enough, a provision has been made allowing the President to assume the powers of the Chief Advisor of the caretaker govern-

has at hand. It has to run the day-to-day affairs of the country and then hold a free and fair election to Jatiya Sangsad within a time frame.

Obviously it has to clear the decks and create a climate of peace and confidence for all to participate in election process after a political government has ruled the country for five years and made every effort to leave its political stamp behind on every conceivable segment of the state machinery which it tried to make subservient to the government. There is a clear need for the administration to be recast and imbued with the spirit of impartiality and evenhanded justice and the rule of law.

The Election Commission, which has deliberately not been allowed by all the successive governments over the years to play its due constitutional role to hold free and fair election, needs to be invigorated and strengthened so that it can function effectively. The voters' list will need to be updated. The electoral laws

Khayaban-e-Pakistan



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CUTTING through the clutter, there are those who think it straight. Last week, I met some straight-thinking people in Pakistan, people who told me fascinating stories. One of those stories was hard to believe. They said Pakistan broke up in 1971 because that is how the rulers wanted it. First I thought it was some kind of a psychosis. After all, Pakistan suffered two defeats in a single year, one inflicted by its own demons and another by its archenemy. People need to get a handle on their shame and guilt.

Then I read it in the Dawn, the leading Pakistani daily, which expounded, more or less, the same line of thinking. On 17 December 2004, Masud Mufi wrote in *The Lessons of 1971*, that "16 December 1971 was merely a demarcation" in the two phases of Pakistan's history. In the first phase, the feudal-military-mullah alliance got rid of East Pakistan as if to jettison an unwanted weight, which threatened to sink their ship. The second phase started with the elimination of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who was a member of the same team until he proved risky, followed by weakening of the 1973 Constitution, all institutions under its umbrella, contours of civil society and any prospect of clean

politics. Masud vouched that since 1947, the Pakistani politics evolved in the shifting equations amongst the feudal lords, the mullahs and the military. He gave evidence to back up his hypothesis. The military rulers never rattled feudalism and avoided effective land reforms. The feudal lords in return always indemnified the misdeeds of the military dictators. All of them invited the mullahs to get involved in politics. But how does it show that the Pakistani rulers wanted to give up

buried with full military honors. Maulana Kausar Niazi, who acted as an intermediary between the mullahs and the establishment, was rewarded with a full cabinet posting. But what does it matter after 33 years? Perhaps historians will go on forever, digging for truth with prospector's nose. How does it matter to the rest of us? Ejaj Shafi, a prominent leader of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) died of a heart attack on 16 December 2004. Hours before he died, Ejaj spoke at a seminar on "Commemorating East Pakistan:

Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan in 1971, has written a book called "East Pakistan: The Endgame", published in 2004, and "Dedicated to East Pakistan, The Land I Loved". The Brigadier criticises the civil society of the then West Pakistan for its deep and deliberate silence to the military actions of 1971. He resents how the political parties in the Western wing shamelessly joined the fray to fill up the vacant seats of the Awami League MNAs, who had fled to India. Those parties included big

Rawalpindi after a long bout with cancer. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be gunned down in a coup in 1975.

Next in line came Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. A senior journalist of Pakistan told me that General Ziaul Haque had agreed to release Bhutto, and a Libyan plane was going to whisk him out of the country. Two Lieutenant Generals, a Brigadier and a Judge went to see Bhutto, trying to get him to sign a confession before he left the country. By then Bhutto was confident that he was

blamed Richard Nixon for being a party to this all-out conspiracy theory, and thought the Watergate scandal rightly served him for his sins.

One of the stories last week was about the Pathans, who get emotionally involved with trucks and buses, which they drive. They buy trinkets, pieces of metals and colorful clothes, and keep decorating their vehicles as if those were some kind of a shrine. Why does not anyone tell them anything? Because, it would be easier to sit a camel in the rickshaw than to ask a Pathan change his mind.

A Mohajir friend related this story to his disdain for the Punjabis. He said that the history of Pakistan had been a contentious and divisive road of politics, dominated by the Punjabis, who were emotionally involved with power like the Pathans were with their vehicles. Then he referred to an interview of MQM leader Altaf Hussain, which appeared in the Sunday edition of *The Nation*. The Punjabis run Pakistan, controlling the reins of power and trying to mould the identity of a common Pakistani in their own image, he complained.

A taxi driver, who hailed from Bangladesh when it was East Pakistan, told me another story, simple and straight. The Bengali-speaking people were still not issued national identity cards although they had settled down as citizens of Pakistan, not as immigrants or illegal aliens. He compared it to the traffic on the road. New traffic was building up, while some of the old traffic remained backed up on it. Such was the condition of Khayaban-e-Pakistan -- the Pakistan Road, he said. He was happy for Bangladesh, because we did not get stuck on it.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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East Pakistan in 1971? While the nation riled in humiliation of defeat, Masud claims, the alliance revealed in its hidden victory. East Pakistan was more vocal and politically conscious, and they were glad to let go of it.

Proofs galore! Even three days after twelve divisions of Indian Army openly attacked East Pakistan on five fronts, Pakistan had not complained to the UN Security Council. Masud refers to news dispatch sent by a foreign correspondent, which said that Pakistan wanted to go to a mock war and quick surrender. Even better, nobody was subsequently punished for the failure in East Pakistan, which indicated that there was not much griping about the loss. When General Yahya died, he was

Will History be Repeated? Mind the title of the seminar, and you have got your answer. It still matters in the minds of people.

To us in Bangladesh, it is a reminder of the long struggle for freedom, the language movement, martial law, agitations, the armed struggle, deaths of multitude, plunder, arson and rapes, horrors of being 56 percent of the population, yet mindlessly exploited like a minuscule minority. It marks a proud departure in our mind and history, like waking up from a bad dream to find freedom on a bright morning.

But it ratchets up different emotions in Pakistan. Brigadier A. R. Siddiqi, who was Chief of Inter-Services Public Relations and Press Advisor to the President and Chief

names like PPP, the various Muslim Leagues, Jama'at-i-Islam, and even the relatively liberal Tehrik-i-Istiqal of high-minded Asghar Khan.

In the epilogue of his book, Brigadier Siddiqi gets emotional and talks about poetic justice. When he saw General Yahya laid in Lahore, he lay in bed completely immobilised, his eyes wide open, staring blankly into space, hardly recognising anyone. General Abdul Hamid Khan outlived Yahya by a number of years and died at his Lahore residence, unsung and unmourned. General Gul Hassan would be promoted as Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army by President Bhutto, and then summarily retired. Disfigured by leukoderma, he died at CMH,

walking out free. He refused to sign anything and, when pressured, got abusive with his guests. In the fit of anger, the Brigadier physically attacked Bhutto, who was already suffering from numerous complications, and he collapsed on the spot. Many people in Pakistan believe that Bhutto was already dead before he was hanged for a 'mock execution'. You may not want to believe it, but a fascinating story nonetheless.

The last piece of the jigsaw puzzle was Indira Gandhi. Brigadier Siddiqi writes that Indira suffered her worst electoral defeat in 1977 and then would be assassinated by her own bodyguards in 1984. If my father were alive, he would have thrown one more name on the heap. He

A further fall in Tokyo's ODA budget

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

JUST a few weeks ago Japan saw a new breakthrough in its silent but long battle to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. A report submitted by a special committee of the UN has recommended the expansion of the Security Council and in one of its two suggestions to achieve that goal, has named Japan and a handful of other countries as most likely candidates for the permanent membership of a reformed council.

Japan for quite some time has been trying to convince the world community that it is now time Tokyo is given a greater say in matters that shape the global outlook on important issues. In the pursuit to win the support of various nations that would help her reaching the desired destination to become a permanent member of the most important organ of the UN, the leverage that Japan has so far used was that the country has long been a very important player in the process of helping the poor to

overcome difficulties in their long and painful journey towards the road of progress. Japan's key argument has always been her generosity in providing assistance to countries in need of international support.

As the country's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget reached a record high in the second half of the 1990s, Tokyo was seen courting developing countries to win over their support, which policy-makers considered essential if the country is to become an active player in international games that go beyond the narrow scope of helping the poor. As a result, many around the world expected that Japan would most likely continue that diplomatic initiative with an inflated ODA purse. But in reality things did not happen according to expectation and much is to be blamed to Japan's troubled economic performance that was triggered by the burst of a grossly over-rated bubble economy more than a decade ago.

The year 2004 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Japan becoming a donor nation. Japan's ODA had a

CLOSUP JAPAN

One interesting aspect of Japan's ODA has always been country's focus on mid-level developing nations that are relatively prosperous compared to many others that stand on the threshold of extremity. So, who are the countries that eventually will find themselves in difficulty due to ever declining budgetary allocation for Japan's ODA? No doubt, it is once again the forgotten poorest of the poor.

humble start back in 1954 with Tokyo's participation in the Colombo Plan. Though still an aid recipient at the time, Japan's involvement in technical cooperation programme of that joint initiative to assist Asian nations helped Japan gain vital international support less than a decade after the country was forced to abandon its colonial dream on the Asian mainland. During the last fifty years, Japan has utilised ODA to support actively the development of economic and social infrastructure as well as human resources and institution building in developing countries.

But the gain was obviously not one-sided. Japan too, as critics of Tokyo's ODA policy like to point out, heftily gained as Japanese companies were winning lucrative contracts in countries where ODA funds were channeled.

The gain for Japan was also not confined merely within the economic and financial sphere. Politically too, Tokyo could gain a new status as Japan repeatedly got elected to one of the ten non-permanent seats of the Security Council and its candidates periodically being chosen for crucial UN posts. No wonder, Tokyo's ODA

budget saw a continuous growth until it hit the eventual ceiling in 1999, bypassing the \$15 billion mark on net disbursement basis. But since then, Japan's ODA budget has been in continuous decline, reflecting the ailing state of economy that is yet to come out of a prolonged recession.

At the beginning of this week, Japan's finance ministry released the government's budget plan for 2005 fiscal year starting from April. In the draft budget, the ministry has earmarked less than \$800 billion for Official Development Assistance, the lowest level since fiscal 1989, representing an almost 4 percent

drop in ODA allocated in the initial budget for the current fiscal year.

The downward trend in Japan's ODA allocation is nothing new. The proposed reduction for next fiscal year will mark the sixth consecutive year of decline that started in fiscal 2000. The largest drop in ODA allocation was marked in fiscal 2002, when ODA allocation saw a sharp 10 percent downward trend. This was the direct consequence of growing criticism within Japan that much of the money was being spent on wasteful projects without bringing the desired results of helping the poor to improve their situation. The criticism also prompted

the government to review Japan's ODA Charter. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in December 2002 that it would review the ODA Charter, the basic document of Japan's ODA policy, and a cabinet meeting in August 2003 approved the revised ODA 11 years after it was first adopted.

The revised Charter declared the objectives of ODA as contribution to peace and development of international community and thereby helping Japan's own security and prosperity. The Charter also identified "human security" as a basic principle and "consolidation of peace" as one of its priority issues. This coincided with Japan's active involvement in peace initiatives in East Timor, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka.

Although the scope of Japan's ODA has been expanded significantly to allow the country to use its ODA allocation as a means that would help find solutions to conflicts in various parts of the world, the ODA budget, nonetheless, never saw an increase. And as with the war in Iraq came a new responsibility to help Tokyo's closest ally finding a way out from the mess it had cre-

ated, an already trimmed ODA budget is now shrinking further to accommodate the requests from such strategic partners.

One interesting aspect of Japan's ODA has always been country's focus on mid-level developing nations that are relatively prosperous compared to many others that stand on the threshold of extremity. China till today being a leading recipient of Japanese ODA does not speak well of the revised Charter's proclaimed noble intentions.

So, who are the countries that eventually will find themselves in difficulty due to ever declining budgetary allocation for Japan's ODA? No doubt, it is once again the forgotten poorest of the poor, part of whose shares are most likely to be seen diverted down the roads of Najaf, Karbala, or Kabul; and much of that amount not for the real benefit of those for whom the ODA is supposed to be targeted, but for those soldiers of fortune who are always at the forefront in the wild run of cashing in from the misfortunes of others.