

Rice price pressure

We need a mitigation strategy

WE have a rice crisis of sorts on our hands. Aman harvest, critically relied upon against the backdrop of a severe flood, had turned out to be lower than expected. So, the rice market has been under pressure due to supply shortfalls with the result that for the last more than one month we have seen the cereal prices showing an upward trend.

The problem with the unabated price hikes is that it fuels inflation, simply because of the fact that cereals constitute the central element in our cost of living index, more so in a predominantly rural Bangladesh where the food basket is almost entirely made up of rice. And the villages of Bangladesh happen to be where people with the least purchasing power live. So, the people were already in the grip of hardship.

As if that was not enough; we now have another spate in the prices of cereals. The increase in the diesel price ironically taking effect on the new year's day has raised the cost of transportation of rice from the growers' level through the wholesale network to the retail market. Furthermore, the import cost of rice rose, this having been caused by production shortfall in the traditionally rice exporting countries. Output in India, Thailand and Philippines declined. Add to this the fact that the value of taka depreciated in relation to dollar in which we paid for the rice import. So, we ended up paying more to procure rice from abroad.

What's even more worrying is an apprehension that *boro* cultivation on which we are pinning our hopes to ease off the price pressure might be hindered by the increased diesel cost.

The government is apparently working on a two-pronged strategy: first, it might resume open market sale (OMS) of rice; and secondly, have the private sector import rice on a liberal scale. In the light of our previous experience with OMS, marked by lack of coordination and timeliness, the resumed effort will have to be much better managed. And, the private sector import worth ten lac tonnes which is supposed to be in the pipeline must materialise. Maybe the government should also consider reducing the import duty on diesel and kerosene so as to ensure that their prices come down in the best interest of the peasantry.

EPZ trade unions

US takes a positive view

THE government sometime ago had responded to US reservations over denial of trade unionism in the EPZs by allowing the industrial units in those zones to have trade unions as per the law. The response reflected the country's readiness to go by international norms and standards insofar as industrial relations and rights of workers are concerned.

The US, for its part, has reciprocated by cancelling the GSP withdrawal process relating to Bangladesh. That amounts to recognition of the efforts being made by our government to establish the rights of workers. Now, we can logically expect that the positive attitude of the US would be translated into concrete steps to help our garment industry expand further. It may not be out of context to mention here that some Caribbean and African countries were given special concessions for boosting their garment exports. Bangladesh would hopefully now be considered favourably for grant of such concessions.

The US and other developed countries should take a positive view of the efforts we are making in other areas for complying with international standards. For example, efforts are on to eliminate child labour, considered an anathema to the modern concept of industrial labour.

The point that the importers of our products need to consider is that our reform regime compares well with the reform processes in other parts of the developing world. We urge the US authorities to appreciate the fact which is actually a reliable indicator of what the countries are doing to improve working conditions and other related matters for the workers.

It must also be noted that trade union related voting has taken place in 34 out of 208 industrial units in the EPZs since the government took the decision to allow trade union rights. The progress is quite satisfactory.

There is ample scope for increasing US investment here and breaking new grounds for strengthening trade ties between the two countries. Bangladesh is keen to go by the rules and take such steps as will give industrial relations and working conditions a more humane face. For obvious reasons, therefore, we look forward to increasing US assistance in terms of bilateral trade and investments.

A new beginning for the Palestinians?



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

SIXTY days after the death of legendary leader Yasser Arafat, (he died on November 11, 04) Palestinian people elected on December 9, 05, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), the close associate of Arafat and senior member of Fatah, as the President of Palestinian Authority. He had a landslide victory with 62.32 per cent vote against 21 per cent of his nearest rival Mustafa Barghouti. Five others were in one digit. So Abbas has the mandate of the Palestinian people. Immediately after the election victory Abbas said, "I present this victory to the soul of Yasser Arafat and present it to our people and to our martyrs." He spoke in favour of peace with Israel and against violence. He also asked the Palestinian fighters to stop Intefada so that he could start peace talk with Israel.

The election was monitored by over 800 international observers that included former President Carter and his group and also the members of National Democratic Institution of the USA. After the election President Carter said to CNN that the election was free and fair and in fact used the word superb while explaining the election process. He said there were certain obstructions from Israeli side while the election was going on in East Jerusalem for which he had to intervene with Prime Minister

Sharon's office four times. He said justice to Palestinians was long overdue and this election should be a positive step towards the two-state solution, where both Palestinians and Israelis can live together side by side.

The most important was the absence of violence by Hamas or other radical Palestinians during election. The environment was peaceful and the Palestinians could vote freely. The spokeswoman of the National Democratic Institu-

tion of the USA said the election did reflect the will of the Palestinian people. This is the first time an Arab nation has shown that it can establish democracy in its territory. Therefore, Israel should no longer take the credit that it is the only country that has established democracy in the region. Its next-door neighbour has done the same indeed in a better way -- dignified and more peaceful way -- without any influence from outside as Israel has from the vast number of Jewish people in the US. So whatever had name the Palestinians have earned in terms of violence was due to Israel's occupation of Palestinian land against international will and its oppressive military actions against Palestinian people. It is quite clear that if Israel vacates

land and removes forces to its 1967 border, peace would descend on the land and both states can live side by side peacefully.

Another Presidential contender Mustafa Barghouti who received over 21 per cent of the popular vote conceded defeat and welcomed the election outcome. This deserves high appreciation. His party men did not do any violence nor disturbed the election process. He, however, complained against Israel

electing President of the Palestinian Authority. He also invited Abbas to visit Washington, which he steadfastly refused to do to Arafat. EU Foreign Affairs' Chief Javier Solana welcomed this as a new opportunity for peace in the region where both states could live together side by side. He said EU would do everything it could to help the peace process.

Sharon personally did not say anything about the result of the election till President Bush came

Hamas said this was not a one way street -- Israel must remove its forces from the Palestinian cities, towns and villages, ease travel restrictions and stop assassination of Hamas leaders and only then it would be prepared to consider a ceasefire. These are legitimate demands. Hamas was, however, of the view that Oslo Agreement was a "monumental mistake" which, of course many would not agree to and therefore it wants to continue its arms struggle till occupation is

between Israel and Palestine. It is true that these distant cousins have been too deeply entrenched in their fight to have sovereignty over a piece of land -- too precious to both. Former President Carter agreed to the suggestion while talking to the CNN. He said the Road Map has been endorsed by President Bush and also accepted in entirety by the Palestinians. The Road Map was worked out by the Quartet -- the US, UN, Russia and the EU. Only Israel had 14 reservations. So Israel is the only party that has problem with the Road Map. So it is quite clear that the world including the US is on one side and they must agree to impose it on Israel as only the Road Map is the best solution and undoubtedly can ensure peace which is in the interest of everyone. Israel must not be allowed to wreck it and continue its occupation endangering the peace and security of the world.

The world cannot suffer for the obstinacy and belligerent behaviour of Israel. As it appears America itself got into the Iraqi quagmire because it wanted to take upon itself the burden of fighting the Israeli war. Oil was undoubtedly of American interest for which it also wanted to have occupation of some sort. All these were evil ideas and result was colossal loss of human lives -- both Iraqis and Americans. Indeed, the root cause of the present day worldwide terrorism is the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the consequent armed struggle by the Palestinians to recover their land. So end of occupation of all Arab land by both Israel and America is the only way to bring peace in the region as well as in other parts of the world.

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Muslehuiddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

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out with his congratulatory message. Sharon telephoned Abbas only on January 11 to congratulate him. What his people earlier said after the election results were out was that Mahmud Abbas must try to stop violence and terror. One of the spokesmen, however, said they are ready to compromise, a term which, he said, is important in Israel's dictionary, but they are ready to do so if terrorism stops. But unfortunately they do not understand that "terrorism" (armed struggle) would end the day the occupation would end.

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vacated.

Abbas and the senior members of the Palestinian Authority appear determined to put in place all the democratic institutions for which they are having the parliament election too on July 17, 05. The decision has also been taken to bring 19 security outfits to three to create the good base for good governance. Palestinian Authority has reportedly posted its budget in the web site with a view to ensuring transparency. These are the good steps to earn confidence of the international community.

Former National security Advisor (during Sr. Bush's presidency) Brent Scowcroft said the US should impose the settlement as given in the Road Map on Israel as otherwise no peace can be achieved

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Have you placed your bets?

FARID BAKHT

THE next general election is due in January 2007. It could be called anytime within the next two years. In smoke-filled rooms, political fixers are plotting, seeking the best fit and the right combination. They are courting suitors. The game is on for stitching coalitions together. The Big Two are not strong enough on their own.

BNP's limited options
Even though the Rapid Action Battalion seems to have quietened things down, the BNP desperately needs friends. It has shown skill in surviving the defection of its ex-General Secretary (and former President) B Chowdhury. But they must still be wondering whether the dam will burst. Their allies, the Jamaat-e-Islami have benefited from being part of the governing alliance. They have gained credibility without being tarred with the general failure of the government. However, they have less to offer electorally, despite their strong network in the mosques. Next time round, they should be considered a liability rather than an asset.

The BNP could prefer an alliance with the Jatiyo Party (Ershad). Both are military creations, with similar histories. If HM Ershad were to be President (again), with the BNP holding the Prime Ministerial and major posts, this would be a formidable force. This would rally all those against the major opposition party, the Awami League. The BNP could then ditch the Jamaat and the Islami Oikyo

Jote. In one stroke, they would remove the stigma of 'collaboration' in 1971, which the opposition can play on with the presence of these two parties. The BNP would also be free from the charge of being soft on so-called Islamic fundamentalism? Bye bye Bangla bhai. They could seek favour with Washington and New Delhi. So far, there has been no hint of any such move or understanding. But where else do they look?

Awami League which way?
The Awami League is trying to

too many votes at the ballot box. This is despite their reputation as the political conscience of the people. They have the power as a political movement to derail plans to export gas or private ports. They provide the Awami League goodwill but not sufficient seats.

Which third party?
Until recently, the media have been going gaga about the so-called Alternative Stream. Dr. B. Chowdhury's Bikalpadhara started off as a BNP offshoot. So far, he has prised away two MPs (one of whom

all their factions and look like they can win sufficient seats to be a deciding 'player'. A union of B Chowdhury, HM Ershad and other lesser leaders might look attractive on paper. It looks more likely that this will be put on the back burner. The newest of the Third parties will have to prove it has real strength. Time may be against them. Building a robust nationwide network is difficult. To date, they may have beaten the Jatiyo Party in media column inches. However, media coverage on its own does not lead to

in the early 90s. It captured the people's imagination but not their votes. Dr. Kamal Hossain also leads the 'Oikyo Mancha' and has also campaigned with Dr. B Chowdhury. This is where it becomes very unclear. Will Dr. Kamal Hossain make his mind up about Bikalpadhara? Or will he plump for the left forces? And by extension, will the Awami League offer him the Presidency and real influence? Will he want it?

While not bringing many votes, his reputation with the middle

Putting this in perspective, the political parties have a limited influence because they have at best a tenuous hold on national sovereignty. Governments nominally decide national security and our foreign policy posture. Economic policy is a hand-me-down too. Parliament seems irrelevant right now. Nevertheless, which party or coalition wins is important for two reasons:

(1) They possess "negative power" i.e., they can mess things up further and bring the country to chaos and disorder. Some would say we are there already.

(2) And because it does not have to be this way. Despite the restrictions of globalisation, they have sufficient room to initiate a Common Minimum Programme and negotiate a better deal with the 'donors'. Instead they prefer to lie down like a doormat.

This winter, politics seems to have cooled down, though it traditionally goes the other way. By contrast, last summer seemed to indicate major upheaval. Is this therefore the calm before another storm? Or will politicians be allowed to continue wheeling and dealing for the next couple of years? Have they been allowed another chance? Place your bets.

Farid Bakht is a founder member of Futurebangla.

NOTICE
Under unavoidable circumstances, the regular column 'CROSS TALK' will be published tomorrow.

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cobble together an on-off 'pro-liberation' coalition. Since it is now a centre-right party, it feels that allying with small leftist parties will enable them to project a 'progressive' image. They would then 'unite' secular forces and go for a showdown with the 'fundamentalist' and 'communal' groups. The fallout from 1971 would still be with us. Would this be enough? It's doubtful.

Firstly, this is not a message about going forward. It is about fighting the old battles from the past, to a young electorate who were either in primary school or not even born then.

Secondly, the Left do not pull in

is his own son). The BNP is incensed and would like nothing better than to crush this new upstart group. It is not clear what the direction or message of the party is. Awami League strategists may see B Chowdhury as a pole to attract around 20 dissident BNP MPs. This would weaken the BNP without threatening the Awami League. Instead, Bikalpadhara is gunning for the 'North Bengal' option.

There have been two other major third parties, before Bikalpadhara. One is HM Ershad's Jatiyo Party whose base is centred on his hometown of Rangpur and North Bengal. They have been quietly regrouping

victory in elections. In Pakistan, cricket hero, Imran Khan, had name recognition and also drew crowds and TV cameras but got nowhere.

The Jatiyo Party is likely to be coy and talk with everyone and decide to play with no one. For now. Not until much closer to the election. Time is on their side as they aim to play the role of kingmaker.

The other third party, Gano Forum, is led by internationally known lawyer, Dr. Kamal Hossain. He was once Foreign Minister and Presidential candidate for the Awami League in the seventies. He left them and formed Gano Forum

classes, media and western powers would be invaluable for the Awami League. He then too is a potential kingmaker. Which way the physician or the Lawyer swings could tip the balance.

Other possibilities include Jatiyo Party's HM Ershad joining up with the Awami League (if they ditch the Left). Voters disenfranchised with the BNP but sceptical about the Awami League may switch over if the Jatiyo Party were involved. This does not look plausible right now but one never knows. Most parties have been crafted together through personality and promise of booty. Philosophy and ideology was left behind in all the excitement.

The first Bangladeshi American Rhodes scholar!

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED
writes from Princeton

BANGLADESHIS have some wonderful news to celebrate. Kazi Sabeel Rahman, a senior at Harvard University, has become the first American of Bangladeshi heritage to win the most prestigious Rhodes Scholarship to continue his education at Oxford University, UK. For those who do not know what a Rhodes scholarship is, it is simply the world's oldest and the most coveted international graduate scholarship. The writer ought to know: he was lucky to be the first "East Pakistani" to win Pakistan's only Rhodes Scholarship after some grueling interview sessions at Lahore's Catholic School in December 1970. Born in Roosevelt Island, New York City in 1983 and raised in Dhaka, Bangkok and New York, Sabeel is the youngest of the three children of Feni's Mr. Kazi Afzalur Rahman, formerly a diplomat with Pakistan and Bangladesh foreign service and currently a Senior Economic Affairs Analyst at the United Nations Secretariat in New York and Mrs. Shegufa Rahman, a descendant of the highly distinguished and well-known Majumdar family of Mozumdari, Sylhet.

Rhodes scholarship, "the apex, the Mount Olympus of all awards," is the legacy of the 19th century British colonialist and diamond baron Cecil

Rhodes, who had won a royal charter to administer a territory that was eventually named after him, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Rhodes believed in the supremacy of the white race and dreamed of a trans-African railway line joining Cairo with Cape Town. Some modern day Rhodes scholars are embarrassed at Cecil Rhodes' colonial past. It is easy to criticise Rhodes one hundred and three years after his death. In many ways Rhodes was actually ahead of his time. In his will, Rhodes stipulated that the scholarship bearing his name be awarded to "gentlemen" of any race, religion or national origin. Rhodes wanted promising young men of the British Commonwealth and the English-speaking world to be trained at Oxford so that they could return to their homelands and become leaders. Cecil Rhodes awarded two scholarships to non-English speaking Germany only because Kaiser Wilhelm was a friend of his! The scholarship is not awarded to British nationals. Originally, the scholarship was open only to men. During the writer's tenure in the early 1970s, resident Rhodes Scholars at Oxford began a petition campaign to open the scholarship to women. This led to the British parliament's modifying of Cecil Rhodes' will to allow women to compete for the scholarship. The first women Rhodes Scholars entered Oxford in 1977.

Academic excellence is not enough to win the Rhodes Scholarship. Successful candidates are expected to excel in four different categories: literary and scholastic achievements; energy to use one's talents to the full, as exemplified by fondness for and success in sports; truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak; kindness, unselfishness and fellowship; and moral force of character and instincts to lead and take an interest in one's fellow beings. Sabeel has always been an A to A+ student in both High School and college. Teachers always recommended Sabeel for "double promotion," which his parents resisted. All his High School teachers hoped that he would specialise in their subject area in college. In his SAT I, SAT IIs and AP Examinations, Sabeel recorded perfect scores in Verbal, Writing, Math IIC, Physics B, Physics C, Calculus, American History, French Language, French Literature and English Literature!

Sabeel also has a glittering array of achievements in extracurricular activities. Between February 2002 and October 2003, Sabeel was the Senior Editor of *Harvard International Review*, a quarterly international relations journal with a circulation of 30,000 in 75 countries. From his freshman to junior year Sabeel was a member of Harvard's Mozart Society Orchestra, playing

the clarinet. From May 2002 to present Sabeel is a Tutor at Harvard Writing Centre, instructing undergraduates in essay writing, revision and conceptual development. In 2002 Sabeel was the Director of Harvard's Model United Nations team, organising and directing committee sessions and authoring essays on international affairs. In the summer of 2002, Sabeel was an intern at the International Crisis Group, an international and public policy advocacy group, United

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Nation liaison office, where he researched funding prospects, produced publicity materials and brochures. And in the summer of 2003, Sabeel was a Research Assistant at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, conducting research, data collection, statistical analyses and mathematical modeling to assess the impact of South Korean trade policy on economic development.

Thus far, Sabeel has won eight awards and grants from Harvard University. With one of those, Sabeel spent the summer of 2004 at Bangladesh's biggest non-governmental organisation (NGO), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

(BRAC), researching and writing a working paper on social capital, collective action, and the role of BRAC. Sabeel's field of specialisation at Harvard is Social Studies, an honours only concentration. Sabeel's thesis, based on fieldwork conducted at BRAC, examines the role of the NGO sector in Bangladesh's economic and political development since 1992. Specifically, Sabeel evaluates the impact that NGO-led development projects are having on Bangladesh's political landscape. Sabeel believes that his strong commitment to social justice and development -- evidenced by his course of study at Harvard and fieldwork in Bangladesh -- contributed significantly to his winning the Rhodes scholarship. At Oxford, Sabeel hopes to pursue a 1-year M.Sc. course in Economics for Development and before deciding what to do with his second year.

American Rhodes Scholarship candidates apply to their colleges for nomination in early September of their senior year. The colleges nominate the strongest candidates at the end of September for the national competition. Nominated candidates

then apply to the national Rhodes scholarship competition in early October. The State Committee informs the successful candidates in early November and schedules interviews for them in mid-November. The surviving state candidates are then called for District level interviews (New York candidates are interviewed with Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Delaware candidates) before the winners are announced at the end of November.

Rhodes scholarships are worth \$35,000 a year for two to three years of study exclusively at Oxford University in the UK. Out of about 95 Rhodes scholars every year, 32 are from the US. The competition for the scholarship, among America's cream of the crop, is intense. Many US colleges have set up committees to win Rhodes scholarships. Rhodes scholarships add prestige to a college, enhance its ranking and result in an instant increase in alumni contributions! There have been 3046 US Rhodes scholars (1794 are living) from 307 colleges. Sabeel's Harvard leads with 313 winners, followed by Yale's 208. Georgetown University graduate William Jefferson Clinton is the only Rhodes Scholar to have been elected America's President. There have been several Rhodes Scholar Senates (such as Bradley, Feingold, Sarbanes and Lugar), Congressmen, and Supreme Court justices (such as,

David Souter). In June 1993, there was a reunion of Rhodes Scholars residing in America in Washington, DC's Georgetown University. President Clinton did not come to Georgetown; however, when the British Embassy hosted a reception for all the Rhodes Scholars, President Clinton showed up and complained that he had not yet used his third Rhodes year at Oxford! Rhodes Scholars have also been the President of Pakistan and the Prime Minister of Australia.

Regardless of their party affiliations, the writer has found all Rhodes Scholars to be exceedingly enlightened. During the June 1993 reunion, the writer had a long and satisfying chat on the burning issue of the day -- Bosnia -- with the Republican Senator from Indiana, Richard Lugar, who currently heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Only one Rhodes Scholar has ever disappointed the writer. During one session of the June 1993 reunion the writer found himself sitting next to a gentleman who was introduced as the Director of the CIA, Mr. Robert J. Woolsey. After he left the CIA, Mr. Woolsey became a neoconservative and is ubiquitous on television these days saying the most awful things about Islam and the Muslims, something quite unbecoming of a Rhodes Scholar!

Firsts are not at all uncommon in one of Bangladesh's most distin-

guished families, the Rahman family of Feni. While Sabeel's father reached the upper echelon of Foreign Service and his uncle Mr. Kazi Golam Rahman, reached the top of Bangladesh's police service, Sabeel's eldest uncle, Mr. Kazi Fazlur Rahman, is a real genius. Mr. Kazi Fazlur Rahman stood third in the Matriculation Examination in the (undivided India) Calcutta Board in 1947 and in 1956 stood first in the Central Superior Service (CSS) examination of Pakistan. An intellectual and a prolific writer, Mr. Kazi Fazlur Rahman, now retired, served in the top posts of the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh and was a member of Bangladesh's first caretaker government in 1991. Mr. Kazi Fazlur Rahman, the writer's uncle, is not only the inspiration behind the success of the Rahman clan as represented by the stunning achievements of the writer's kid cousin, Sabeel, he has always been the only role model for writer's family as well. With Sabeel's outstanding performance in America, chalk up another HUGE FIRST for the much maligned, yet secretly envied and revered Feni/Noakhali region of Bangladesh! One of Sabeel's teachers once commented, "I should like to know what Sabeel is doing at forty." One can be reasonably certain that nineteen years from now Sabeel will be scoring another first!