

Come down to reality

PM's comment on soaring prices unrealistic

WE are surprised by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's observation in parliament the other day that prices of essentials have not increased, these were being blown up by some newspapers 'for nothing'.

This is far from the reality on the ground. Going by what she has said, either she is not kept well-informed about the changing market behaviour which is actually a reflection on the quality of advice she gets on burning issues, or the PM herself is caught in an overall denial mode to be somewhat rejectionist of any negative tiding. Furthermore, it might have given an impression that because the highly placed people do not visit the market place as a matter of necessity they are out of touch with the ruling prices and, in the process, may have distanced themselves from the people even as elected leaders.

The official figures like those of the government's agricultural extension and marketing wings, the TCB and, last but not least, its task-force are clearly indicative of rising prices. The chamber bodies, consumers associations and the vast majority of middle and low income buyers have pointed their finger at a new spate in prices. The prices have risen across the wholesale and retail networks. There have been clearly some fuel to the fire of prices and this is attributable not entirely to the government's mismanagement but also to some extent ascribable to extraneous factors. Incessant rain and high cost of import due to depreciation of taka value against dollar which, put together, have disrupted the supply side. Illegal toll collection by extortionists of all kinds, policemen not excluded, high transportation costs induced by raised diesel price are man-made factors behind price hikes. These together with Bangladesh Bank's contractionary monetary policy to contain inflation which is recoiling on private sector activity and productivity, hoarding practices, import duty and lid on imports are areas where the government need to intervene rather than taking umbrage on higher prices.

Image vs objectivity

Outrageous suggestions

WE wonder what motivated the newly appointed head of the Press Council, which is mandated to act as the guardian of press freedom and freedom of speech in the country, to come out with the most outlandish suggestion that the press should refrain from carrying news even if it is objective about our politicians and important personalities lest it damage the image of the country. What perhaps he is worried about is the image of those that are exposed by these reports, and not of the country.

Even more outrageous is the reason he proffers in suggesting that the Press Council Act of 1974 should be amended. But we fail to see any connection between what he says as increase in criminal tendencies in the society and amendment of the said Act!

What he has said amounts to gagging and stifling of the press and he owes to the people to explicate his motivations in suggesting thus.

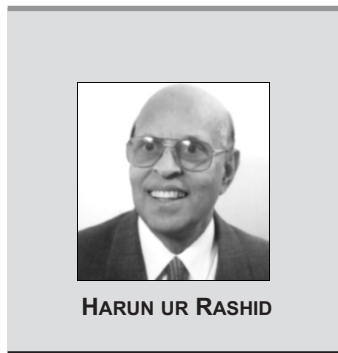
It is only through the free press that the accountability and transparency of public and political figures and institutions can be guaranteed. A free press is an important adjunct of a vibrant democracy and a sine qua non of its efficacy, that rest considerably on transparency of behaviour and accountability of the acts of politicians and public servants.

Are we to understand that reports such as that of the dealings between a foreign company and an ex-state minister, which involved more than a mere jeep, it was a question of our vital national interest, should not have been published because of some unfounded apprehension of loss of national image? Or for that matter reports on the underhand dealings costing hundred of millions of Taka at Chittagong port or the under the table deal involving public servants that prevent timely implementation of foreign funded projects should not have been made public at all?

Image of a nation does not rest on falsehood, lies and suppression of facts; on the contrary, these are what not only slight our image abroad, they impinge on our vital national interest also.

Our press cannot be expected to deviate from its bounden duty, which is, ensuring the people's right to know the truth.

Terror spreads to London



HARUN UR RASHID

THE July 7 bombings on the underground trains and the number 30 bus have killed at least 50 and left 700 injured. Every visitor or resident from Bangladesh knows that underground trains are the best way of getting around London and its suburban areas. The trains are efficient, quick, and run with great speed, and they have been a part of life in London since 1893. Of the 12 underground train lines, the Piccadilly line is the deepest one and one of the explosions occurred in this line. The rescue efforts have, therefore, been difficult.

The victims of the London's bombings belong to a multi-cultural group, almost drawn from all continents. The horrors created among innocent civilians are terrible and deserve condemnation in the strongest terms.

Among the missing persons, two are reportedly from South Asia. One is a Bangladeshi young girl born in Britain. She is Sharara Akhter Islam, 20 years of age, and a bank employee. Another one is of Indian origin, Neetu Jain, 37, a computer analyst.

It is reported that Ms Islam left her home (where she lives with her parents Shamsul Islam and Rumana, 17-year old brother and 13-year old sister) for a dentist's appointment before going to her job at the bank. She never arrived at the bank. Her family fears that she might have been caught up in the explosion that wrecked the underground train just beyond Aldgate station in East London at 8.51.

Although she was known to be a devout Muslim and regularly had been going to the mosque every Friday with her close-knit family, she loved designer handbags, clothes, and going out with friends. Shahara Islam embodied as much as anyone multicultural Britain and the way in which younger generations of Muslims are embracing both their

own and Western cultures.

Her uncle Nazmul Hassan reportedly said about the bombing: "If there was a word to describe them, I would use it but there isn't. Inhuman doesn't come close to it, the word terrorist doesn't come close to it. These people are not Muslims. No Muslim in this God-given world who has an iota of compassion or humanity would do this."

Why London?

Many, including noted political analyst, Tariq Ali, say that the London bombing is a payback for the Iraq war supported by Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister. London's

London transport system and the stations that would have most devastating impact on commuters.

Perpetrators are non-state actors

The question is how the London bombings occurred in a city that was prepared for such attacks for a long time. London is reported to be the best protected city in the world because it had the experience of IRA bombings in the 70s and 80s. IRA attack came close to blowing up the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Brighton.

A deadly phenomenon in national and international security has

tion of the Roman Catholic Church launched to suppress "heresy" in the mid-13th century or to combat Protestantism in the mid-16th century.

Even among most peaceful Buddhists in Sri Lanka, some have demonstrated their revenge mentality when they refused to support the government in providing relief money to tsunami victims in the rebel-held area in northern Sri Lanka.

These are the realities of life that a fringe of minority fanatics believe in something that has been interpreted by them to be the "authentic version" of their religion.

Likewise there exists Islamic

through the centuries. Why is that fanatics have been able to recruit "jihadis" to carry out such deadly attacks on innocent civilians?

Some authors have described certain reasons for this evil phenomenon and even Tony Blair talked about the elimination of root causes of terrorism as he admitted that it was very difficult, if not impossible for the government, to protect the British people from such future attacks.

First, the central problem lies in the Middle East. For the last 38 years, Israel has run havoc with lives of Palestinian people. No Western country did anything sub-

occupied by Muslim soldiers, how some orthodox Christians would feel about it.

Furthermore, Muslim fanatics got what they wanted. Because of the on-going Iraqi war, they are able to recruit and deploy suicide bombers in Iraq to kill Muslims, Christians, and others. The Iraqi government supporters are perceived as "traitors" to Islam.

For example the statement, posted on the Internet on July 8 announcing the murder of the Egyptian Ambassador to Iraq, Ihab el-Sharif, said everything about their mind: "We, al-Qaeda in Iraq, announce that the judgment of God has been implemented against the Ambassador of the infidels. Oh! Enemy of God, Ihab el-Sharif, this is your punishment."

Third, many political leaders including Pakistan's President Musharraf have said in many forums that poverty is one of the causes of recruitment of young people to militant Islam. In the Palestinian territory, 60 percent of youths are unemployed, helpless, and hopeless. Not to address poverty in the Middle East is one of the reasons for easy recruits. Otherwise how can one reason with the willingness of a suicide bomber when he/she knows of his/her death in doing such an act? To a suicide bomber, it appears living or dying does not make such difference.

Finally, act of terrorism is an asymmetrical war. The fanatics know very well that they cannot fight against superior power of states. In such circumstances it is the weak power that engages in guerrilla tactics -- hit and run. Vietnam war is a classic example to demonstrate this power by the weaker party.

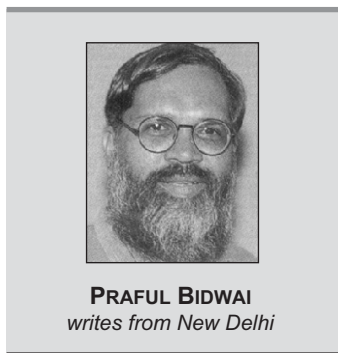
Conclusion

Many say that war on terrorism is a misplaced term. Terrorism is a tactic to achieve the goals of the fanatics. If it is a war, it is against the firmly held belief of fanatics. It is not an ordinary war and one does not know how long it will take to eliminate the extremist ideology. But one fact on which many agree: fighting terrorism with war is like fighting fire with petrol. War is fuel to terrorism, not a deterrent. Violence begets violence.

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Empowering the poor

For a job guarantee Act



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

PERHAPS never before have the riders of a simple 47-seater bus raised as much public awareness as did the citizens' organisations which launched the just-concluded Rozgar Adhikar Yatra. The 52-day journey covered more than 4,000 kilometres and 10 Indian states.

The yatra was Democracy on Wheels, which mobilised people to fight for a comprehensive Employment Guarantee Act (EGA). It was also Theatre in Action, with skits, songs, slogans, puppet-shows and talks focused on the EGA as a means to the right to life with dignity.

The yatra was backed by over 150 mass organisations and numerous political parties. It ended on July 2 with an inspiring day-long programme in Delhi. Among the participants were former President K.R. Narayanan and Prime Minister V.P. Singh, Rural Development Minister Raghuvansh Pratap Singh, social scientists, activists, and

political party leaders.

The event reverberated with the slogan, *Har Haath Ko Kaam Do, Kaam Ka Pura Daam Do* ("Work for Everyone, and Full Payment for Work") amidst stirring ballads and moving testimonies by chronically unemployed people.

The EGA is an idea whose time has come. Workers' organisations have long demanded it. Last year, the United Progressive Alliance's National Common Minimum Programme promised to annually

select rural areas. Rather than allow self-selection, it targeted "below-the-poverty-line" households, a notoriously slippery category, which excludes millions of poor people.

Under the Bill, the government could switch the scheme on or off at will -- making nonsense of a *right*. The Bill didn't specify a *minimum wage*. It bypassed Panchayati Raj institutions and lacked transparency.

It is imperative that the UPA radically revise the Bill and have it

The government views the NFFWP as "an experiment". However, the NFFWP's flaws reflect official failures and shouldn't lead to a re-victimisation of the victims of poverty. The government must enact an EGA with transparency, and universal access to all adults in all districts. The employment guarantee must be irreversible, unrestricted (in the number of days worked), and ensure equal payment to women.

passed soonest. Parliament's Standing Committee on Rural Development has prepared a good draft. The UPA must adopt it and thus fulfil its *single biggest promise*.

Why is the EGA an imperative? It is superior to any employment scheme because schemes can be switched off at will. They create no entitlements, and leave the poor at the government's mercy. An EGA will create *judicially enforceable* obligations, give the poor bargaining power, and promote accountability.

The EGA is essentially a *social security* measure. Because poverty and unemployment are *socially determined*, it is society's duty to

provide the minimum means of survival to the underprivileged who cannot find work for no fault of theirs -- *despite* willingness to perform manual labour.

An EGA will produce numerous social benefits -- the greatest being protecting people from hunger and malnutrition. It would infuse incomes into villages, and reduce migration into cities, besides raising crucial social indicators. It would also raise aggregate demand, and boost the national economy.

An EGA will give economic independence to women, and promote gender equality. It'll create rural assets and revitalise the village economy.

All this will change the balance of power in favour of the poor. It'll help unorganised workers organise themselves.

These merits *greatly outweigh* the costs. These costs are modest. Professor Prabhat Patnaik argues that a national EGA would cost under Rs 24,000 crores -- less than the one percent of GDP.

By contrast, the non-performing assets being written off by banks total Rs 45,000 crores. Unpaid taxes alone total Rs 90,000 crores.

public sector. It confuses *stocks* (of public assets) with *flows* (recurring EGA expenditure). The divestment money will eventually come from bank borrowings. The government could also borrow from the same banks. The EGA must be supported -- *without ifs and buts*.

While drafting a new EGA Bill, the government must learn from the experience with the National Food-for-Work Programme launched last November in 150 districts (of a total of about 650). A survey conducted under Professor Jean Dreze by Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University students in six states shows that the official procedures are flawed and lead to mas-

There is an *independent* case for the EGA. Those who would like it to be *conditional* upon reduction of subsidies, or divestment of public sector undertakings (PSUs) misunderstand its social security rationale.

There is nothing sacrosanct about creating or abolishing subsidies, a form of *negative taxation*. In fact, we need to raise India's tax-to-GDP ratio, which stands at half the level in many Third World countries.

Financing the EGA through PSU divestment means bankrupting the

sive corruption.

The scheme's muster-rolls are regularly fudged. The *kutchra* rolls are authentic. But the *pucca* versions exaggerate the scope of work, number of workers and wages paid.

In one case, the survey found that people who worked for three days had 60 days entered against their names. In MP, workers were paid half the minimum wage (Rs 59). Contractors, who are debared, actually run the NFFWP in many districts.

"Many flaws can be rectified", says Prof Kamal Mitra Chenoy, who spent three weeks on the yatra, "by mandatorily placing the muster-rolls in the village panchayat office. This will minimise corruption".

The NFFWP runs best in Rajasthan, argues Prof Dreze, because the Right to Information campaign there is deep-rooted.

The government views the NFFWP as "an experiment". However, the NFFWP's flaws reflect official failures and shouldn't lead to a *re-victimisation* of the victims of poverty.

The government must enact an EGA with transparency, and universal access to all adults in all districts. The employment guarantee must be irreversible, unrestricted (in the number of days worked), and ensure equal payment to women.

Will the UPA summon the will?

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Decentralisation is the remedy

BRIG GEN (RETD) JAHANGIR KABIR, NDC PSC

CONSTITUTION is to anchor freedom within law. If people feel suffocated the highest document stands accused in the public eyes. Proposed European constitution is a suspect and people are rejecting it. With endemic corruption in Bangladesh, law and order at its worst, endless crossfire and extra judicial killings, some feel that it may be safer to live without The Bill of Rights than with it. There is loss of faith in the present form of government and judicial process, they are afraid of just about every branch of the governance. Most generous definition of the government in Dhaka is oligarchy at its worst. How do we get out of it?

The logic is on the doorsteps of

the ordinary. In a capitalist economy every individual is encouraged to earn more and have it to his pleasure with progressive taxation system for social justice. Primary focus of the market economy is always on the consumer. In politics it is on the people; which is missing in Bangladesh.

Market rule applies for the management of the resources within the boundaries of a state for maximising benefits to the people. If it is true for an individual it is truer for a region or community. If a region or a community has the potential to develop faster it should be encouraged to unleash the potential. Like all children are not equally gifted, not all regions can be developed equally. The constitution, like parental care, should offer opportunity to every individual and region to exploit the

abilities. If Dhaka is asked to be equal with Maherpur it will be catastrophic. Similarly if the entire country is skimmed for the capital, the rest of the country will become its grazing land. That's what is happening today. Dhaka is enjoying the milk and honey at the cost of blood and sweat of the rest of the regions. Sovereignty once transferred from British Crown to Islamabad, then to Dhaka in a bloody war, changing the name only of the people from subject to citizen. Dhaka has usurped their right by a constitutional coup de

grace. Bangladesh tried all sorts of governments, many times under near revolt conditions. But the illusive freedom or initiative never came in the hands of the ordinary. As decision making was all along in Dhaka, initiative of the people was parried by bureaucratic and political wilderness with carnivores in every turning. People could never question the wisdom. Net result, Dhaka is gnawing with latest luxury cars and endless train of rickshaws. White money is so much marginalised today that

only source that I can safely recommend is the rickshaw puller's wage that has no capacity to cross beyond foothpath vendors. Rest of the things are run by visibly invisible money. Such is the plight of democracy and market economy under unitary government and unicameral legislation that we are yoking. People do not really matter. Two halfhearted attempts were made earlier to empower people with local initiative. One was by Bangabandhu himself, appointing political governors to the districts. He decided to decentralise

the governance through one party rule with all parties accommodated in it. Rest of the story is the national tragedy. President Zia traveled a lot to the countryside. But his intention was not clear on decentralisation as he never spoke a thing. Those are turbulent days of military indiscipline. Ershad had enough time, got elected Upazila Parishads, but was busy in extra-curriculum activities to have district council elections in quick succession. The rudimentary effort was doomed along with him.

People had enough of dictator-

ship; presidential and parliamentary democracies like neon signs of Dhaka or all cure medicine vendors at ferry-ghats. The core issue is decentralisation of power to the people and their regional centres which have not been touched. If Sylhet decides for cane furniture and tea, Rajshahi surely will go for silk and juicy mangoes. Like every brother and sister has his or her character within the parental care, energy of every region can be unleashed if it is allowed to manage its development perspective within the bondage of sovereign Bangladesh. I am little shy of calling the regions as provinces. If faster economic emancipation is possible through political decentralisation why not do it? Yes decentralisation is the remedy for the political ills of Bangladesh. The rest is browbeating.

To avoid whittling down the initia-

tive the regional finance must not be on the mercy of the centre, but on revenue sharing right; residue being duly managed under the stern eyes of the judiciary. The regions with revenue rights and elected local governments can unleash energy of the people everywhere. If Dhaka-centric politicians are asked to take the initiative, one is kidding. Nor Ayub Khan or Ershad is any solution. Only grassroots and divisions can demand their collective rights through constitutional means. The way the French and Dutch said 'non' to over-centralisation of Europe the call must come from the grassroots for the decentralization in Bangladesh. The people must assert their right to speak the last word in our politics.

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OPINION