LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY AUGUST 9. 2005

Good thinking on food safety

But still far to go

HE news that the responsibility for combating food adulteration has been placed in the hands of the LGRD and Cooperatives Ministry is welcome. We trust that this will ensure that a central authority will now be responsible for coordinating food safety and that the issue will be given top priority.

The directives given by the ministry to local bodies under its authority to aggressively pursue adulterators is similarly to be applauded, although the directive does beg the question of why this was not within the local bodies' area of responsibility in the first place. We would have thought that local bodies would already have been obligated to perform the tasks that they are now being directed to do.

Similarly, the fact that a draft amendment of the Pure Foods Ordinance has been prepared and will be placed in the next session of parliament is a positive sign that the government is giving this crucial issue the importance that it merits. These steps the government is taking seem to us to be a little belated and to do little more than address needs that should long ago have been fulfilled, nevertheless it is better late than never, and we welcome the efforts.

Now is the time to move forward boldly on the issue. The first item that should be part of any new legislation is the need for registration and licensing of all who are involved in the food industry. Then strong safety standards must be set forth and circulated publicly so that there can be no doubts as to what the law requires and what consumers can expect. The next step is to impose stiff punishments to deter would-be adulterators, including the blacklisting of restaurants and shops that violate the law and the barring of those involved from further association in the industry.

The devil, as ever, is in the details. We strongly urge the government to ensure that the amendments to the bill are meaningful and to show that they mean business. The final piece of the puzzle is to make sure that local bodies have the manpower and financing to perform their watchdog function. The government must ensure that the drive against food adulteration does not founder due to lack of support from the top and that it is not politicised and therefore rendered toothless.

Drinking water crisis

A thorough-bred approach awaited

HE government is going to formulate a master plan with ADB assistance for adequate availability of potable water in the city, the supply of which is at least 25 per cent less than the demand at present. The total shortfall is now 500 million litres per day and is likely to be three times more by 2015 if the trend is not rolled back.

So, the need for better management of water resources and improving upon the existing collection and distribution systems can hardly be over-emphasised. Already, the situation is critical as too much extraction of ground water has resulted in an alarming lowering of the subsoil water table. The side effects of the underground water level can be disastrous. Land subsidence, the signs of which have been noticed in some places around the city in recent times, is one of the hazards that unplanned extraction of ground water could invite. And the risk of earthquake damage being multiplied is also there. So the bulk of water requirements should come from surface water. And better planning is needed to avoid any crisis during the lean periods. That's why emphasis should be laid on use of rainwater and its conservation for the dry season.

The weaknesses in the management of Water and Sewerage Authority must also be eliminated to avoid wastage of water. A huge number of consumers in the city slums are still dependent on illegal connections for water supply. Things have to be set right there because no planning will be effective as long as such unaccounted for consumption continues. Water supply to the slums has to be ensured, but not in an unlawful manner. Moreover, WASA has a weak distribution system with leakage that allows entry of pollutants, causing both contamination and loss of water.

The task of maintaining water supply consistent with demand in the years to come will be a daunting one, given the gap between the installed capacity and the ever increasing demand. The formulators of the master plan should concentrate on both capacity building through surface water plants and combating the environmental fallout of excessive ground water extraction over time.

King is dead, long live the king



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

HE above adage went down the history for centuries, applying first with the deceased Kings of England, simultaneously reminding subjects of the unbroken link of dynastic chain King Fahd-bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia died on 2 August following illness with a debilitated stroke suffered a decade ago. The succession was immediately transferred and smoothly to his half-brother, Crown Prince Abdullah.

Kings of Saudi Arabia, unlike constitutional rulers of Great Britain are absolute monarchs and ruled the kingdom with unlimited authority since the founding of the dynasty by King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in 1932. There is no elected body to participate in the running of the affairs of the oil-rich kingdom, and demand thereof is largely muffled out of fear of repression. However, that is generally the case with other hereditary rulers of the Gulf States.

The unending stream of the members of the royal family, leaders of the community and ordinary citizens to greet the new monarch in person demonstrated the traditional custom designed to reassure the new potentate of the allegiance and loyalty of his subjects. The large

royal family in an admirable display of solidarity and adroitness had settled the issue of succession well in advance through consultation. shrouded under strict secrecy. That factor along with the fact that Crown Prince Abdullah acted as the defacto ruler of the kingdom during the decade-long illness of the King eased the process of succession without hindrance.

The late King and the new one were made of two distinctive elements. Firstly, they belonged to two different mothers, Fahd being the

his young days. He was guite unlike his predecessors and brothers, all of whom were reputed to have led a less ostentatious but religious life. Fahd after being king, in deference to the religious overtone of the holy land, took the title, "Servant (Custodian) of the two Holy Mosques and the Ruler of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." But it is interesting to recall that his brother King Faisal once had to send a special aircraft to fetch young Prince Fahd back from Monte Carlo, the playground of the rich and transportation in vester years vividly demonstrate the differences caused by changing technology and opulence. Prince Abdullah commanded the National Guards, composed of fierce Bedouin warriors, who were ready to sacrifice their life at the slightest will of their masters. This strength was, however, counter balanced by his successor to be. Prince Sultan, who heads the Ministry of National Defense and commands a large establishment of well-trained and well-equipped

ing his generous gift, I was wondering instead of this touching gesture if I received a pledge of some financial help for the reconstruction of our war-ravaged country, our government would have been happy and people immensely benefited. But I hid my inner feelings and parted my ways with the desert Prince, both looking happy and contented. However, the civilian Finance Minister, Abba-al Khail, later pledged funds to meet our reconstruction and development needs, and agreements were soon con-

was able to rule personally, relations with the United States were still marked by a strong link of friendship, understanding and a degree of mutual dependence in several fields. United States still maintains in the Middle East the largest contingent of its troops and war materials in the kingdom, which was the major springboard of attacks against Iraq during the Gulf war. Besides, Saudi Arabia is the major supplier of oil to the oil-starved USA and Europe and, in return, enjoys protection of its financial interests and political

The Kingdom's traditional relations with the West, the Muslim Ummah and Bangladesh will undergo no fundamental change with the changeover at the apex. But the fact that Saudi national Bin Laden and his compatriots being the architect and perpetrators of the most devastating act of terrorism of 9/11, indeed, caused some cleavage in the country's relations with the USA. On the other hand, serious terrorist attacks on American interests in the kingdom in recent years testify to the simmering discontent of disgruntled elements coming out in the open. The emerging relations with the West in the post 9/11 scenario as well as the urge for establishing democratic values and actions of religious extremism in the kingdom will now form the major issues and will pose a litmus test for the new Saudi King for his ability to demonstrate wisdom skill and the much needed display of pragmatism both to his people and to the international community.

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

factory in Canada, where unions

flourish, in preference to the US,

where they don't. South Korea is

known for serious industrial unrest.

Labour militancy there resembles

the vigorous unionism of early 20th

century Europe. The same compa-

nies demand a submissive

Such double standards and

violations of constitutional rights

must not be tolerated. India should-

n't become a Banana Republic,

which guarantees foreign capital

unlimited freedom to exploit Indians

workforce in Gurgaon.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

The death of King Fahd does not portray any change in the domestic and foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. The principal reason thereof was that it was the policy of the new King that was pursued during his decade-long de facto rule. The Kingdom's traditional relations with the West, the Muslim Ummah and Bangladesh will undergo no fundamental change with the changeover at the apex. But the fact that Saudi national Bin Laden and his compatriots being the architect and perpetrators of the most devastating act of terrorism of 9/11, indeed, caused some cleavage in the country's relations with the USA.

offspring of the Sudairi mother whose sons have ascended the throne of the kingdom since the death of their father, King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, the founder of the Kingdom, in 1953. Even the successor of the new King, Crown Prince Sultan, is one of the seven Sudairi Princes. One may recall that King Ibn Saud was blessed with 42 children from an unrecorded number of wives. King Abdullah has the Bedouin blood flowing through his veins from his maternal ancestors. That explained the difference in the character of the two brothers. The late King Fahd liked to lead an extravagant life, particularly during

King Abdullah, at the age of 81, enjoys good health and is reported to be more popular than his other Princely brothers. It is principally because of his Bedouin origin. Bedouins are universally recognized for their strong adherence to ethical principles and their legendary anecdotes of hospitality. Abdullah still enjoys spending days and nights in the desert in what is called "khima" or tent. Obviously. ornate and elaborate airconditioned camping contraptions as well as fleets of Cadillacs and Pajeroes used at present in contrast with the traditional tents made of black shrouds and camels used for

When I went to pay a courtesy call on Prince Abdullah after having set up the Bangladesh Embassy in Saudi Arabia as Minister Charge d'Affaires in January, 1976, he was then third in line of succession. To my delightful surprise, he listened attentively to the rationale of the birth of Bangladesh, appeared quite moved and offered two dozen finest Arab horses for Bangladesh as his personal gift. He said that to a Bedouin the prized possession was his horses, and he wanted to present some of his horses to the suffering and needy people of Bangladesh as a token of love and brotherhood. While thankfully acknowledg-

cluded for the first Saudi financial aid to Bangladesh to the tune of \$220 million. But the gift of horses, which were later used in the Sardah Police Training College, still remains the pioneer of the multifaced co-operation we are proud to have received from Saudi Arabia.

The death of King Fahd does not portray any change in the domestic and foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. The principal reason thereof was that it was the policy of the new King that was pursued during his decadelong de facto rule. But the rule of the two brothers evidently witnessed some significant phenomena worth reckoning. During the period Fahd

Repulsing the employers' offensive

Honda is a turning point



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

HE extraordinary brutality of the Haryana police against Honda Motor Cycle and Scooter India Ltd. (HMSI) workers has shocked the public. Going by the SMS messages displayed by several TV channels, even people vith no sympathy for trade unionism were appalled.

The police tried to rationalise the lathi-charge on the 25th afternoon as "retaliation" for an attack on them in the morning. But the two events happened at least five kilometres apart and with a five-hour gap.

The lathi-charge was not committed in the heat of the moment. It was a cold-blooded attempt to brutalise subdued bleeding workers. The police had no business to "retaliate." According to court directions, they must not wreak revenge or chase retreating crowds

In Haryana, the police were brazenly partisan towards the HMSI management right since trouble began in that 100 percent Japaneseowned factory in December when a Japanese manager assaulted a

Soon, HMSI workers started unionising. The management suspended/dismissed dozens and illegally locked out 4,000. The Harvana administration worked hand in glove with it and prevented union formation.

The central issue at HMSI, then, was not wages -- which are Rs 4,200 p.m. after deductions -- but refusal to tolerate a union, forming which is a constitutional right.

sity for anti-labour violence?

This has three sources. First there is the macho aggressive culture of certain communities heavily represented in the police. This culture is also displayed in violent casteism (e.g. recent Dalit killings), reckless driving of Blueline buses, and khap or clan panchayats which order the murder of couples who marry against the "norm." Absence of social reform means this culture faces no resistance.

round up worker-activists every fortnight, and badly thrash them and illegally detain them for days. Any agitation, however peaceful, would be crushingly repressed. No rallies would end without broken bones.

This writer is personally familiar with this scenario in the Faridabad-Ballabhgarh belt

The Haryana police was blooded long ago in anti-worker violence. That culture has been transported into 21st century Gurgaon. The only difference is the currently fashionreflected in recent judicial pronouncements -- like the SAIL judgment upholding contract labour which weaken the rights to unionise and strike This climate has encouraged

ment runs among the elite. This is

employers to launch a powerful offensive through legal and illegal

Over the past 15 years, the number of person-days lost in lockouts has greatly exceeded the

> The time has come to build massive resistance. This demands initiatives not just by workers, but all those who believe in the dignity of

labour and industrial democracy. The Honda dispute is India's first labour landmark of the 21st century. should trigger new thinking including a charter to reform labour relations. We must replace weak labour laws with strong ones, and create job security with humanelevel wages. We must reform labour laws, upgrade minimum wages, and

The dispute conciliation machinery in most states simply doesn't work. Nor do industrial courts. We need an effective grievanceredressal system. A new labour charter is the only means through which producers of wealth can get a stake in growth.

punish union-smashing.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

number lost in strikes. According to In this, HMSI wasn't unique Secondly, Haryana has a long The time has come to build massive resistance. This demands initiatives not just by workers, but all those who believe in the dignity of labour and industrial democracy. The Honda dispute is India's first labour landmark of the

21st century. It should trigger new thinking, including a charter to reform labour relations. We must replace weak labour laws with strong ones, and create job security with humane-level wages. We must reform labour laws, upgrade minimum wages, and punish union-smashing the latest Economic Survey, the

According to an independent survey by the Centre for Education and Communication, 90 per cent-plus of the 800-plus large or medium industrial units in the Gurgaon-Manesar-Dharuhera belt don't allow the slightest union activity.

The general pattern in this prosperous enclave, where multinational corporations have invested is: low wages, prevalence of casual labour and contract labour, arbitrary lockouts, extreme job insecurity. absence of skill-improvement schemes, and authoritarian shopfloor practices. This is a recipe for

The police perpetuates this retrograde pattern. That's its historic role. But what explains its propentradition of unfree/bonded labour and oppressive working conditions. Harvana has among the highest per canita income of all states, but its prosperity is based on merciless exploitation of heavily indebted Bihari workers, who work and live in sub-human conditions.

Such conditions' prevalence encourages Harvana's state functionaries to imagine that this norm should apply to modern industry.

The most important factor is Haryana's conscious policy since the early 1970s to attract investment by quaranteeing "industrial peace" by suppressing labour rights. Therefore, no stable unions must be

In the 1970s, the police would

able neo-liberal belief that unions are "artificial" -- they "distort" the market and must be crushed. This belief is incompatible with

constitutional values. Unions are a natural, spontaneous response to capital, embodying the rights of association and collective bargaining. They are absolutely irreplaceable in Indian conditions, marked by unlimited labour supply, crisis in agriculture, forced urban migration, and high unemployment.

Today, employment is annually growing at 1.2 percent, or half the rate of growth of the workforce. In this situation, individual workers have no bargaining power to negotiate a living wage

Today, a strong anti-labour senti-

number of strikes has decreased from 540 in 1999 to 252 in 2004. while person-days lost in lockouts have exceeded those lost in strikes by 60 to 800 percent.

In this vitiated climate, many foreign companies do what they wouldn't dare do at home -- for instance, refuse collective bargain-

The constitution of Japan -- which has the most investment in Gurgaon -- guarantees the right to work and says, "wages, hours, and other working conditions shall be fixed by law" and "the right of workers to organise and bargain and act collectively is guaranteed."

Recently, Toyota established a

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Preventing launch disasters

I refer to the letters of Salahuddin Ahmed (20 July) and SA Mansoor (10 July) on this topic. While such disasters can in no way be excused we must be careful that any proposals we put forward to reduce such incidents are realistic and conform to maritime practice and experience in other countries

Mr. Salahuddin writes about applying the "International Load Line Convention" to the inland passenger launches. This Convention is mainly for sea going- cargo vessels plying internationally. For passenger ships while plying nationally or internationally "Passenger ship construction rules" are applied which are much more stringent than the load line convention rules. Passenger ships therefore require more rigorous subdivision of its hull against damage and flooding and requires a higher margin of safety for its static and dvnamic stability.

The BIWTC vessels which are mentioned by Salahuddin as safe are so because they are made safer

by such design under the supervision of professional Naval Architects from the very planning and through to completion stage and afterwards by an 'inclining test' which must have proved an adequate margin of safety for its stability. This is also the practice in the British Marine and Coastguard During my term as IMO Maritime

Adviser to the Bangladesh government (1980-82), I could not lay my hand on any stability information or actual test results for any inland passenger launches. One significant reason for this in my opinion is that there were no Naval Architect surveyors or 'ship surveyors' employed by the department of shipping. If this is still the situation, the recruitment and training of such naval architect surveyors and their training abroad to learn and implement the passenger ship construction rules regarding the hull of the vessel should now be a topmost

The suggestion by Mansoor that inland motorised passenger and cargo vessels be given over to a classification society like Lloyds,

and safe certification and survey etc is perhaps impossible because I do not know of any classification society of repute who would like to undertake work of such responsibility to safeguard lives involving such small survey fees, (normally based on tonnage of the ship). Classification societies came into being to assist the insurance of vessels and its cargo. If a ship is not classed it would be difficult to insure it and without insurance no one would supply cargo to it. The responsibility for safeguarding lives has always been the prerogative of respective government agencies and such statutory burden cannot be delegated to classification societies nor would they want this responsibility of being prosecuted every time lives were lost in a launch disaster. It must be pointed out that Lloyds had moved out of Bangladesh altogether a few years ago after closing down all their offices there, and they are unlikely to move back in to register passenger launches. Apprehensively. I also read in the newspapers that there are many influential launch owners who can

ABS, NKK, BV etc for registration

flout the law with impunity with powerful political backing so much so that the Minister of Shipping cannot make much progress. In such dire circumstances the Prime Minister must lend her support to the Minister concerned in public and in unequivocal manner. Public clamour for a minister to resign and then filling the post by another politically impotent person is just a waste of time and energy. Shafi Ahmed

100, Western Avenue London, UK

Social gaps

The British PM is now grappling with the social gaps in the diversified Muslim society in the UK, after the London blasts on 7/7. The 1.5 million Muslim settlers in the UK have different backgrounds (Sunni, Shia, the Commonwealth diversity, and the huge generation gap between parents born abroad and children born and brought up in GB). A dialogue is better than threats of revenge and restrictions. The attitude of the United States is peculiar (to the rest of the world).

In Bangladesh also, the social

gaps are not being addressed seriously, and pointed out by the leaders of the society. The main culprits are the political ideologies, encouraged through charismatic culture (political leadership has no elbowroom with small footprints). Now a third component has

entered into the arena: the active politics of religion, (ruled by the heart, rather than by the head). As per newspaper reports, recently a Maulana in Sathkhira termed the Jamaat as un-Islamic. What is the end game? The sense of direction has to be clearly defined, at least at the highest national level. The nation is faced with a huge complex jigsaw puzzle which it cannot

The regime is said to be thinking what to do about student politics on the campus (DS report July 19). Political indolence and nepotism have aggravated the situation. with teachers held hostage for hours: and chases and pursuits by political activists of different groups.

This educated young generation would be running the country in the near future. How to maintain neutrality in various public services.

Reorientation is not that easy. But even the first phase of the correction programme has not been set into motion. Why the students and the labour unions are used so much by the political parties? More than half of the population live in the rural areas, and their literacy and economic levels are low. In the underdeveloped nations, politics is not a part-time activity; and the political activists have to sustain themselves through other means. There lies the

Another evil: the people are not aware that corruption is being contained in a firm way, as per some road map. Why this dilly-dallying? This gap is harming three generations: the old, the present, and the

How to console and guide the parents? Social reorientation through politics, and through other agencies, have differences in content, style and ideologies. In this truncated society of multi-segment allegiances, who are going to coordinate and send through a common message acceptable to the majority? Voluntary formation of public opinion is a tricky task. Are we ready

to wage this major silent revolution in the background?

Bangladesh is passing through a perspective crisis. Who are monitoring the SOS signals?

A Mawaz

CD-politics!

Insular politicians do not care about public feedback, and thereby risk their own careers, and mismanage governance while in a regime. Insularism in politics is insulting to the voters. What is the true central, core role of MPs?

The central idea was well brought out by the commentary of a retired general (DS, July 13). Party manifestos have to be topical, and change with the mood and mode of the electorate. Autocracy in the name of democracy is a sham, as are the preceding general elections, decade after decade, generation after generation. How it feels, as a voter, to be a virtual political hostage in one's own country? The leaders seem to be blissfully unaware of the

It is not possible to hoodwink 60 million voters, when four million

Bangladeshis worked abroad in the last 29 years, and last year remitted about four billion dollars, (according to the 494-page report released by INO; DS report July 13). Our politics needs BNR, not BMRE!

The autocratic pattern of political culture is not changing decade after decade. What are the causes for this nasty continuity; when, paradoxically enough, the two main political parties are so hostile to each other for 15 years? Secret: the selfish interests are common; and this philosophy is against public interest. Wait for the turn of the tide, long overdue. Time for a political tsunami, speaking as an 'honest' voter! The political burga has to be removed, to reveal the satanic verses in the 'kalb' (soul) inside. Metropolis Dhaka is looting the

divisions and districts, and sucking them dry. Suckers are knockers. It is 'Centralised Democracy', or 'CD politics'! Time to change over to rewritable compact disc (CD). Some say computerisation of politics is not possible, because it is the art of the improbable! AZ, Dhaka

time-bomb ticking away. De-fuse it.