

## OMS, VGF programmes stuttering

*Timely and smooth implementation crucial*

THE government has stopped, or shall we say, postponed, open market sale (OMS) of rice for the third time, despite the cereal prices having been high and the food department being fully prepared to deliver the required quantity of rice to the dealers. The decision to launch OMS was taken in view of the spiralling rice prices that affected the vast majority of people.

Now the stoppage of the OMS programme could give the hoarders the time to sell the huge stockpiles of rice. And the people in desperate need of buying rice at a lower price will have to suffer until the programme is started again.

The government's plan to tackle the rice price hike by adopting counter steps at three levels i.e. OMS, introduction of village rationing and vulnerable group feeding (VGF) has been a timely one as reports of acute food crisis have been pouring in from some northern districts. But the delay in launching the OMS could turn out to be self-defeating as people are not getting the opportunity to buy rice at a lower price. The village rationing system targets a huge number of people, but this programme will also take at least a week to begin, as cards have not yet been prepared. So the idea of seeing people through their worst period was all right, but it has to be implemented in time to bring succour to the poor.

Rice distribution under the VGF programme has started in some districts. But there have been reports of irregularities in the distribution system. Obviously, the aim is to help the poor. But if, as the reports suggest, the comparatively better off people get the cards, the whole exercise will be a futile one. The authorities concerned have to make sure that the poorest of the poor are benefited by the programme. They have to probe the reported allegation that even some bona fide card holders did not get rice under the programme.

The government has to ensure that the programmes taken up to counter the ill effects of soaring rice prices are not politicised in any way, or manipulated by any quarters to achieve any goal, other than helping the poor and the needy.

## Cost-cutting gimmick

*Big heads of expenditure skirted*

WHEN the government early this month announced a 10 percent cut on patrol and lubricant expenditure coupled with the halving of the allocation under entertainment head, on the back of a steep oil price hike, it sounded more like a damage control exercise than a dramatic side-show.

The consumers felt they were being subjected to the consequence of the government's action raising the fuel prices and, the austerity move therefore went down with them as a tactical measure to divert public attention away from the psychological fallout of the rising oil price which was an unpopular move anyway.

Now, it seems it wasn't even a prudent act. Altogether, Tk 37 crore will be saved out of the estimated revenue budget expenditure amounting to Tk 39,110 crore if the austerity measures are carried out. This is a drop in the sea of deficits. The heads under which much more money could be saved have been left untouched. For instance, there is ample scope under the unforeseen expenditure, services and supplies, and acquisitions of assets and works heads where the total allocation stands at Tk 7,546 crore. Surely, we could do without buying land and constructing buildings on a scale originally envisaged. Curiously, no cap has been put on buying new vehicles.

By far the biggest scope exists in the ADP allocations to cut back on, not so much in the revenue budget, because of the simple reason that money is often wasted on development projects adopted on political considerations, especially those devoted to Prime Minister's commitments, or undertaken in lofty public interest.

We hear that due to lack of funding from multilateral financing institutions the government may be constrained to go for the Suppliers' Credit entailing high interest rate depletions. We must do all in our power to avert such a course.

In the ultimate analysis, austerity is a matter of governance efficiency, containment of corruption and ridding the system of wasteful management that places individual and group interests above national priorities.

## Cartoon, caretaker and credibility



ABDUL BAYES

IN the September 22 issue of The Daily Star, my eyes were curiously cast on a cartoon drawn by Sharier. In the said cartoon on the left-hand side, there hangs a signboard that reads: BNP University of Election Engineering and Technology (BUEET). Just below that another small signboard reads: Convocation -- Chancellor Zia. It appears that Chancellor Begum Khaleda Zia is distributing certificates to those who passed out from BUEET. The graduates are seen wearing Sherwani, convocation-cap and sandals. They are apparently approaching the Chancellor for receiving certificates. Interestingly, the certificate reads as follows: "This is to certify that, Mr Selim is a polls engineer... On the right-hand side, a signboard shows Election Commission and a person (possibly CEC) praising the performance of the candidates as excellent.

As we understand, the cartoon has been drawn on the basis of a recent news item that surprised all

of us. Allegedly, 200 BNP-Jamaat cadres have so far been appointed as Upazila Polls Officers by the government. It is expected that these officers will be used in the upcoming general election, 2006. The promotions and appointments in bureaucracy on the basis of political affiliations in recent times have already earned wraths from critics. The increase in the age limit of the Chief Justice, allegedly, to place partisan person

seconds!" opined the nephew. "Wait and see. Look, the referee of the match being played is my maternal uncle, the linesmen are my in-laws and their goal keeper lives on my doles every day. How can we lose the battle?" asked the uncle.

In Bangladesh, the caretaker government concept was created keeping in mind the election engineering episodes of ruling parties. In one sense, it is the

BNP VC during the last caretaker government. There were many appointments (e.g. bank chairmen or directors) who had been wearing BNP-cap during their long life. In Feni, for example, one terrorist Joynal was hunted for and forced to flee but another terrorist Joynal, allegedly, bagged the blessings of the then government. Besides, Awami League candidates and activists were harassed by law enforcing

also the bitter experience of witnessing CEC standing helplessly on the heels of partisan attitudes of the government.

Unless there is overhauling in the whole system of election process, not much can be expected. We are afraid that under the present scenario, another Magura or February election might visit us very soon. Whether that type of election would be acceptable or able to keep winner

dear, it has been hijacked by those who made us win!" lamented the uncle. If election is managed and thus power is pocketed, the fruits are hijacked by those who help win the election!

A free and fair election is a win-win game. This is how the system works in many countries of the world. The experiences of India, Sri Lanka and some other countries clearly point to that. However, the political instability looming large on the backdrop of the upcoming general election -- feared to be not fair or free -- might cost the nation heavily. Let people, not palace politics, decide who should be in power. And people can judge the best when Election Commission is fully independent, a caretaker government is free of problems. It is high time that all political parties sit together to thrash out a common concern with regard to caretaker government. It is also high time that the Election Commission should be totally autonomous in finance, recruitment and deployment of forces for law enforcement.

Professor Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics of Jahangirnagar University

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

**Let people, not palace politics, decide who should be in power. And people can judge the best when Election Commission is fully independent, a caretaker government is free of problems. It is high time that all political parties sit together to thrash out a common concern with regard to caretaker government. It is also high time that the Election Commission should be totally autonomous in finance, recruitment and deployment of forces for law enforcement.**

as neutral head of caretaker government, added further flesh to the argument of election engineering.

It might appear that the arrangement is for a one sided election game in 2006. May be like the one in Magura or as farcical as the February general election in 1996. The arrangements remind me of a story that I heard in my boyhood. An uncle was talking to his nephew: "We must win the match, otherwise our image will be lost for ever". "But how can you, my uncle? Your team is too weak to win. I think they will have to swallow five goals in five

failure of the politicians to keep themselves pure and, therefore, the concept is an aspersion to them. However, the concept relatively worked well under Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Justice Habibur Rahman. Barring few criticisms here and there, both of them earned credibility in the eyes of the public. But suddenly it lost its credibility as a neutral government during the last general election. There are many empirical evidences in support of the hypothesis but allow me to cite a few. A Pro-Awami League VC of National University was replaced by a Pro-

agencies even on the day of the poll. Last but not the least, during the last caretaker government, minorities were deprived of their due rights due to reigning terrorism. In fact, all of these allegations were unheard of during the first and the second caretaker governments.

It is, therefore, expected that a major reform package pertaining to polls should be immediately on board for a free and fair election in the country. With the arrangements in evidence, sorry to say, we see no hope of a free and fair election in 2006. Needless to mention, perhaps, that we have

in power is altogether a different and distant issue. The pertinent question is: should we not learn from our neighbour India as to how powerful an Election Commission can be, as to how to make elections credible and as to how to make the democratic system work smoothly? The sooner we learn the lessons and realise the realities on the ground, the better it is for the nation as a whole.

Let me finish the arguments with the story I told earlier. This time the nephew whispered to the uncle: "You have won the game but where is the Cup, uncle?". "Oh

## A date in Basra



M.J. AKBAR

EVER wondered about the difference between light and highlight? Information is softly diffused light across a flat surface. Highlight is the little bits we journalists select and treat as news. Information has no dimensions. It may not be totally accurate, since deadlines are the soot that nourishes the fog of fact; but it is more objective. News is subject to the journalist's assumptions, convictions and prejudices even when he (or, increasingly, she) tries to be carefully neutral. Patriotism leaves a natural and even understandable tint across the telescope when you view distant events. When you are British, sitting in London, and two British soldiers have clearly messed it up in spades, the heavy weight of the media elbow dams and diverts the free flow of information towards preferred contours.

So let's take a test. What do you remember of the dramatic events in Basra this past week, in which two British soldiers were stopped, arrested and later rescued by units of the British force but not before two tanks were lost to petrol bombs, and their occupants pelted with stones as they fled in flames?

Do you recall that:  
A: The British soldiers were disguised as Arabs?  
B: That there was a substantial cache of arms in the car they were driving?  
C: That, when questioned, they

refused to show their documents to the police (which, of course, might have ended the whole fracas before it blew up into a crisis)?

D: That the Iraqi police were only doing their duty: it is their job to stop cars being driven by "Arabs" who look suspect (the British disguise may not have been totally clever)?

E: That no explanation has been given by the British authorities as to the nature of this undercover

the Iraqi police had become loyal to anti-Occupation militias, and therefore could not be trusted with the lives of British soldiers? And that if it is indeed true that 75% of those who are meant to fight alongside the British forces in Basra have turned, then Britain and America are arming, training, feeding and building a force in which 75% are ready to turn their weapons against the British and Americans. Even Vietnam cannot

always get the big picture right. And that is what, in the end, matters.

In London, the first reports of the Basra incidents were drowned out by the power of the image, particularly on television. The sight of two British tanks in flames in the heart of Basra was stirring enough, but was eclipsed by the shot of a soldier leaping from his burning Warrior armoured vehicle, his uniform in flames; and

faces of Bush and Blair, who have become the two great captives of the Iraq war. Deborah Orr in the Independent, ruling the many "bad reasons why this country was occupied", notes, "People continue to be dragged from their homes, just as they were in Saddam's day, to be executed in the squares and public places of frightened cities." Patrick Chikburn reports from Baghdad how the credibility of their so-

## BYLINE

**Common sense suggests that a force will be needed to help Iraqis restore order, while they set about creating a law for their future. A joint force of Arab countries as well as units from nations whose credibility has not been destroyed, working under the UN flag, can help fill the breach for the limited period needed to calm the country. George Bush and Tony Blair are the problem in Iraq. They can no longer be the solution.**

operation; nor has the press probed to find out, although soldiers have been given permission to grant interviews to convey their side of the story?

F: That the British soldiers shot and killed an Iraqi police officer who was doing his duty, and that this murder was unprovoked since there are no reports of the Iraqi policemen opening fire on the disguised British soldiers?

G: That the initial attempt to suggest that the arrested soldiers were handed over to some dreaded militia (very useful, that Moqtada al-Sadr) was quietly forgotten after it had served the purpose of muddying the sand, to reposition a phrase?

H: That the British blasted open the jail in which the soldiers were held, and in the process permitted over a hundred prisoners at the very least to escape, doubtless strengthening the insurgents thereby?

I: That the justification offered for this illegal invasion of a country's prison was that "75%" of

boast of a somersault at such speed. I quote from a conservative British newspaper, reporting from Basra: "The two men were held in a building belonging to the shadowy internal affairs department." Hulio. The official internal affairs department of the Iraqi government in Basra has become "shadowy"? Where's the light then, Brother Blair?

J: That, by the rules laid by George Bush, who has said that anyone not in uniform is an illegal combatant and therefore not entitled to the protection of the Geneva Convention, the two British soldiers could not claim the status of prisoners of war?

I could, as you might imagine, go on. I dwell on the chiaroscuro of journalism not in an accusatory spirit, but as self-criticism. All journalists privileged to work in the few nations with genuine press freedom are prone to such lapses. We in India hardly deserve the right to accuse. But the strength of free media is that even if the details are sometimes wrong, we almost

a third picture of a British soldier being pelted with stones as he escaped from his private hell. All around were young men, their faces wracked with anger against the tanks and soldiers, each face condemning the British as invaders and occupiers rather than liberators.

Those images, in a profound sense, shaped the big picture that emerged by columnists of all persuasions. Boris Johnson, the Tory MP and editor of Spectator, concluded in the Telegraph: "Whatever we achieve in Iraq, we will not have made our world safer, or make the risk of terrorism less likely: quite the reverse... That was a claim (that the Iraq campaign was part of the war on terror) was a lie, and whatever good may come out of the Iraq war, we should never forget that it was based on a lie." Above his column was a brilliant cartoon by Nick Garland. The official photograph of the two British captives had blurred their faces to protect their identity. In Garland's blur, you discern the

called sovereign government is collapsing. He quotes a goldsmith, Abdul Hamid: "People here have seen that our government has no authority in Iraq. The British did not respect them when they smashed into the jail, so why should we respect our own leaders?" The political class is no longer afraid to demand a phased return of British troops from Iraq. Ken Clarke, frontrunner-aspirant for the Tory leadership, has called the invasion a major mistake. Charles Kennedy, leader of the Liberal Democrats thinks it is the worst foreign policy fiasco since Suez. His deputy, Menzies Campbell, writes, "This was an illegal war, on a flawed prospectus, without the authority of the United Nations..."

The misjudgement of war has been matched by the mishandling of occupation...

Now the insurgency threatens the unity of Iraq. The risk of dismemberment of Iraq increases, civil war is in prospect and instability threatens the whole

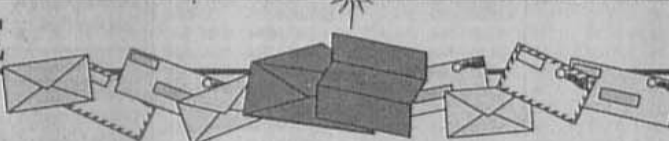
region." One answer that Tony Blair has found is to up the ante at home so that fear can remain his chief weapon. Simon Jenkins in the Guardian exposed the faultlines of a law that threatens to lock up for five years anyone who "glorifies, exalts or celebrates" a terrorist act committed in the last twenty years. Master Blair's government intends to list a series of "historic terrorisms" and the punters are waiting anxiously to see whether Stalin and Mao are included in the Gospel according to Blair. Irish terrorism has been deleted from the ambit of the proposed law, the better to concentrate upon Muslims I suppose. Jenkins describes this pithily as the "New Orwellianism". Boris Johnson's headline summed up the mood in Britain: The war in Iraq was based on a lie and policing Basra is an illusion.

Tony Blair, caught out, survives by shifting the goalposts. Once weapons of mass destruction were assiduously sold as the reason for a war ordered by Bush; and now the world is being saved from terrorism. The latest, and crumbling excuse for remaining in Iraq is the old excuse trotted out by the French king before the revolution: After me, the deluge. Amend that too, after we leave, chaos. Except that chaos is already there. Common sense suggests that a force will be needed to help Iraqis restore order, while they set about creating a law for their future. A joint force of Arab countries as well as units from nations whose credibility has not been destroyed, working under the UN flag, can help fill the breach for the limited period needed to calm the country.

George Bush and Tony Blair are the problem in Iraq. They can no longer be the solution. I am not alone in saying this. This is written on every Iraqi face in Basra.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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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.

### Women workers

Our female workers have been brought back from Saudi Arabia. They had been there to work as housemaids with skill, efficiency and a will to help their family back at home through work. But, unfortunately their dream has come to a sudden and humiliating halt. Their Saudi employers had sexually harassed them. More appalling is the fact that our government hasn't yet asked the Saudi government for an explanation, rather they just acquiesced in the ill whims of the oil-rich Arabs who inflicted a hellish ordeal on the lives of our poor but worthy people.

Now the question is, if the government doesn't make any attempt to seek justice for the cruel injustice that has been done to our citizens working across the globe, then how can we explain the doing nothing stand? Moreover, the

inexplicable stoicism will only demean our dignity and the morale of the people of this independent country.

I strongly urge the government to take a stand on the issue on behalf of the citizens.  
Rafiqul Islam Rime  
Agrabad, Chittagong

### Inspiring through Urdu!

The endeavour of the state minister for sports to encourage the Bangladeshi cricketers to perform better by exactly pronouncing what a former Pakistani dictator uttered during a war can't be taken lightly, nor can it be considered an innocuous sally. When you are representing a nation, you have the responsibility of lifting the image of your country and so you need to be very careful and prudent before you say anything.

By exact replication of the

dialogue that the dictator produced, he (Mr. Minister) has actually failed to echo general sentiments. Sport nowadays has become a medium to introduce a nation to the world at large. Think of Argentina-- a nation immersed in extreme economic straits, but still the whole world knows about it due to its football. Bangladesh too has a great scope to cut across the boundary line of minimal introduction to the world through cricket. And I believe, with my whole being, that one day the Bangladesh cricket team will bring glory, fame and name for us and make us known to the globe.

I also believe that the minister should explain as to why he decided to use wrong words to spur the boys.  
Sulav Chowdhury  
London, England

### Can we afford two-day weekend?

Sometimes we get dumfounded to

witness some peculiar decisions coming from the very top. The hasty decision of the present government to declare two-day weekly holiday has really astonished us. The government has done so in response to the price hike of fuel. Does it smack of any ingenious idea? Is it convincing at all? Can we really afford even one day weekly holiday? Fifty percent people of our country still live below poverty line. What about their holiday? Millions of cases in different courts lie unresolved. In all the government offices thousands of files are waiting to receive signature of the bosses. In this social setting can we really afford to enjoy two-day weekly holiday? Haven't we dragged the wheels of progress back through this declaration?

Actually, we cannot afford weekly holidays at all if we deeply ponder over the issues of the country. Government or semi-government

staff will enjoy holiday but offices must remain open. Two or three shift offices should be introduced. Customers will receive service and officials and staff will work up to a particular time. The nature of job of all establishments is not the same. So it is unnecessary to start and finish office at the same time. Post offices, banks, hospitals, police stations, educational institutions and business establishments must have their own timing. Our post offices and banks follow peculiar timing.

When all other offices remain open, post office is also kept open. Now how can the people who work in different offices receive postal service? The big bosses can get their works done by their peons but what about other staff? Even post office remains open up to five but that does not mean that people get the service from post office and banks up to five. They

follow a peculiar time of their own. For money order one has to go to the post office before twelve. After twelve it is absolutely impossible to get this work done.

To avoid these problems and extending customer service, post offices, banks, and all such organisations in the service sectors must remain open up to night. As the nature of their jobs are different, so what's the harm? The staff of these offices will replace their colleagues in different shifts without affecting the normal affairs of the office. If it is done, the wheel of development will run smoothly and quickly. Otherwise, matters will not improve.

Md. Masum Billah  
BRAC Head Office, Dhaka

### Stipend for boys

Contribution of girls' stipend to rural secondary school is tremen-

dous. It really works very effectively to ensure greater boys' enrolment at school, reduction of drop out rate, increase in attendance in the class, elimination of early marriage, adolescents' empowerment and so on. It lessens financial burden of poor parents in educating their daughter. But the decision of giving stipends to only rural girl students is a kind of discrimination against boys. Boys' education in rural secondary school is in bad shape. I witnessed the real situation of boys' education when I was a teacher in a rural secondary school. Prices of educational materials have shot up to a great extent. Poor rural parents cannot afford to send their sons for education. On the contrary, they encourage their boy child to earn to combat extreme poverty.

So the drop out rate of boy students at secondary schools in rural areas is increasing at an alarming rate. It is necessary to

mention here that the turn out rate of boys from primary level is very encouraging because in primary school boys are provided stipend for their continuation of study. I have learnt that the government is planning to introduce girls' stipend at the secondary level even in some of the cities. Most of the guardians of metropolitan city are financially solvent enough to afford the costs of their daughters' education. But rural boys at secondary school are really deprived of the facilities that they deserve. They could be an asset for the nation if they are properly groomed. But due to discriminatory treatment, these rural boys are turning into working children and advancing towards a bleak and uncertain future.

Can't the government do anything about it?  
AFM Tanvir Habi  
Uttara, Dhaka