

Preparedness against Monga

High time to cast a safety-net

It is again a parliamentary standing committee, as the only limbering leg of an otherwise dysfunctional Jatiya Sangsad, that has called a piece of government inaction into question. This also happens to be on a very pressing agenda of fighting Monga, that near-famine situation which seasonally visits country's northwestern region.

The government has got a rap on the knuckle from the standing committee on agriculture ministry for having reneged on its pledge made two years ago to put an alleviation infrastructure -- as distinguished from temporary relief hand-outs -- in place to cover the Monga-vulnerable pockets.

It must be stated as a tribute to the integrity of the chairman of the standing committee who is a ruling party MP, that he meant business saying that despite three years of submitting recommendations to the government for action, the committee has failed to draw the latter's attention.

The government's commitment had two parts: first, commencing crop diversification programme; and secondly, undertaking projects for small and cottage industries with a view to offering alternative job opportunities to the people. Monga is typically characterised by food shortage, joblessness and a drastic fall in purchasing power during the months of September and October.

None of the promises seem to have been fulfilled and the reason why this has happened sounds as baffling as it is ludicrous.

While the standing committee's three-year-long trail of recommendations has drawn a blank, the subcommittee formed nine months back to suggest ways of creating alternative jobs in the Monga zone has yet to yield any report.

Typically, political chemistry has seemingly come into play behind the deficit of action. The stalemate is attributed by the opposition members to lack of interest on the part of their ruling party colleagues, because the Monga-prone area is largely represented by opposition MPs. Also, the chairman of the subcommittee which is entrusted to deal with the specifics of the issue, is a man from outside northwestern region, so that he has little 'stake' in the matter.

There is still time to make an all-out inter-ministerial move so as to minimise effects of a possible Monga on people in some northwestern districts.

Jail raid ending in a whimper!

Authorities should address the internal problems

THE massive raid on the Dhaka Central Jail by 200 members of the police, Rab and the BDR ended with the recovery of 10gm of ganja from some inmates. Apparently, the outcome was nowhere the target set by the law enforcers.

The jail is believed to have become a den of drug peddling and other anti-social activities. But the news of the raid had somehow been leaked out and the raiders found very little to justify an operation on that scale. What is particularly worrying is that the jail is a closed quarter where the government is supposed to have absolute control, but it seems the Dhaka Central Jail has become a burrowed place where all kinds of illegal activities can be carried out. If an operation in a jail fails, what can people expect when the law enforcers are combating criminal activities in open places? It seems secrecy is no longer a part of special drives or missions.

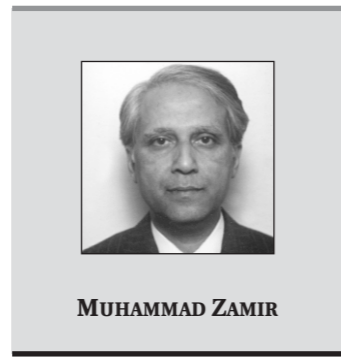
The only explanation for the leakage of news is that the whole system is riddled with corruption and inefficiency.

The jail authorities are supposed to have their own system of gathering information regarding anything going on within the jail. And an internal mechanism should be in place to deal with illegal activities. What is the point of deploying such a huge contingent of law enforcers and finally achieving nothing? It's another example of how not to address a problem.

It would be no exaggeration to say that many of our jails have become an extension of the underworld that most of the prisoners belonged to, before they were imprisoned. And the situation has turned critical as there are a large number of under-trial prisoners, many of whom have suffered long sentences without ever being convicted. Such a state of affairs can only spawn frustration. Furthermore, the jails are overcrowded with the facilities available to the prisoners being hopelessly inadequate.

The decision makers must have been prompted by the reports of illegal activities in the jail before they decided to order the raid. However, it is essential that the conditions in the jails are improved and monitored regularly so that the situation never goes out of control.

Implications of fuel price hike



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

INCREASE of fuel prices across the board on 4 September, has, as expected, generated controversy and anger among the vast numbers of low and middle class population, entrepreneurs, businessmen and farmers.

It appears that the measures were introduced at the insistence of multi-lateral lending agencies. It was also similar to steps undertaken elsewhere in South Asia. This was also in response to extra-ordinary rise in crude oil prices over the last few weeks.

This time round, prices have gone up on an average by 14 percent, with octane by 18 percent. This has been the twenty-sixth increase in the price of oil products since 1972 and the eighth since the present government assumed power nearly four years ago. This was also the four such enhancement in price since the beginning of this year.

There are some interesting statistics that have emerged in the past few days. Out of 3.76 million metric tons of oil imported last year, diesel accounted for 2.3 million metric tons and kerosene for another 0.55 million metric tons, i.e., almost seventy-five percent. Furnace oil accounted for 0.31 million metric tons and the rest went for petrol and octane. The other significant aspects is that, despite the latest price hike, the government will continue to sell diesel and kerosene at a loss of Taka 12 per litre. This connotes substantial continuing subsidy.

It has also been revealed that during FY 2004-05, Bangladesh Petro-

leum Corporation sustained a loss of Taka 3,100 crore and that if prices had not been raised, this might have doubled given the steady rise in international fuel prices.

The other important factor that seems to have influenced the decision was the inexorable and steady rise in the volume of fuel consumption. Before FY 2004-05, it was increasing at about 10 percent per year. That was more or less consistent with the upsurge in economic activity. However, during the last year it rose by

There are 786,004 shallow pumps now in operation for irrigation across the country, of which only 54,392 are electricity driven. This price rise will definitely hurt the irrigation of winter paddy Boro crop by marginal farmers who constitute the largest segment within the agricultural sector. This latest decision will make things particularly that much more difficult for farmers using diesel pumps. They are already incurring 30 percent more expenditure than those using electricity-run pumps.

sea waves and solar energy.

The government in a knee-jerk reaction has not only raised the price of fuel but also taken the controversial step of a two-day weekend, halving of fuel for government vehicles and shorter shopping hours. One can understand the rise in oil prices but one fails to appreciate this decrease in the number of working days. As it is, our bureaucracy has become notorious for its lack of professionalism, corruption and poor governance. This extra day of holiday both within the

Our government has to understand that international oil prices are not going to come down. The steep growth in demand for oil by China and by India in the coming years and lack of sufficient global refining capacity might keep prices over US Dollar 70 per barrel in the foreseeable future. The oil price dipped below dollar 68 a few days ago, but some analysts have predicted that it might rise. US dollar 100 per barrel is also on the horizon. There is no longer any time left for playing politics.

not only for domestic purposes but also for small economic units like poultry farming. Collective usage can also assist irrigation on a small scale. This potential will help in re-payment of loans.

Another urgent step should be the encouragement of wider usage of compressed natural gas (CNG) in vehicles. This could be facilitated by reducing the conversion cost through introduction of indigenous technology. There should also be reduction in the time taken to re-fuel CNG powered vehicles. Currently, it takes roughly one hour of waiting time. This needs to be brought down drastically. CNG should also be made available all over the country by having such re-filling stations on every highway.

The government also has to give increased emphasis on the extraction of our coal deposits. This will help in generating power. It will require investment in related capital-intensive infrastructure. However, money for this can be found from our own domestic private sector savings. Usage of pre-paid electricity meters will ensure that there is no 'systems-loss.' It will also guarantee return on investments. The government might even consider making dividends and profit accruing from such investment from the private sector tax-free.

The Bangladesh Bank, in consultation with scheduled banks, has already permitted them to keep open some of their branches on Saturday to facilitate foreign trade transactions. This will make possible opening of letters of credit and transfer of money. This will reduce the cost of doing business, ensure continuity of competitiveness and also promote trade and investment in the country. This has been a good step. We have to take similar practical measures with regard to other areas of our economic activity.

We are passing through a critical time. We need bold measures. That will be the only way to reduce the suffering of the common man and to contain inflation.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador -- any response to mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

Another urgent step should be the encouragement of wider usage of compressed natural gas (CNG) in vehicles. This could be facilitated by reducing the conversion cost through introduction of indigenous technology. We are passing through a critical time. We need bold measures. That will be the only way to reduce the suffering of the common man and to contain inflation.

almost 18 percent. This was despite a significant rise in the use of CNG motorised vehicles both in the private and public transportation sectors.

This scenario has led to allegations that this extraordinary rise in consumption during the last FY was probably due to smuggling of fuel across the border. It has also been suggested that the difference in the rates of exchange and payment for informal trading have been contributory factors. The recent seizure of 300,000 litres of oil by coast guards at the Mongla Port has lent credence to such assumption.

The prices of diesel and kerosene have both been increased by 15 percent. Despite such an increase there will still be subsidy. However, the question that arises is whether such a step to balance the budget will eventually affect the agricultural sector. I believe that effects of such an increase will be felt during the in-coming Boro season where farmers will be affected with regard to their irrigation needs. They will also have to incur extra costs for supplementary irrigation to rain-fed Aman cultivation.

The Asian Development Bank in its latest report has already forecast erosion in growth in our economy. This is not good news.

Such regression will not be limited only to the rural sector. International rise in oil prices will affect our economy in more ways than one. It will lead to a pernicious cycle of higher price of products, higher wages, higher inflation and subsequently higher interest rates. It will affect producers, importers, exporters and consumers. Industrialists and trading houses, unwilling to suffer losses in profits will pass on the additional cost on to consumers, who are already suffering under high inflationary pressure (7.3 percent on a point to point basis for June). Such higher supply chain cost, including expensive loans, will offset exchange rate gains that had made our products cheaper for the international market.

Such a scenario is underlining once again the need to undertake more structural reforms to bolster productivity growth and also the necessity to identify alternative renewable energy sources -- wind power, bio-gas from crop wastes, exploitation of tidal or

government as well as in the financial sector will make things worse. It will only increase pressure on those associated with export-driven industry. They will now face greater delay in obtaining necessary clearance for the many regulatory measures built into our economic system. This will affect their obtaining of the required certificate of origin from the Export Promotion Bureau. This in turn will impact on general competitiveness, pricing, service and quality.

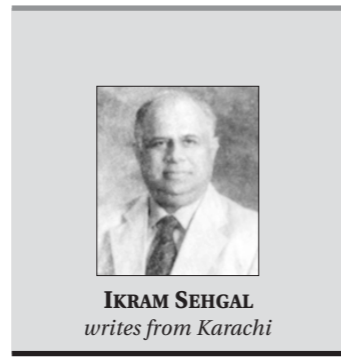
Similarly, halving of fuel for government officers is hardly a solution. The total volume consumed is insignificant compared to other factors. For example, the government may like to declare that henceforth, every Minister will travel economy class with excursion fares. It may also take steps to reduce the Cabinet by half. If the Caretaker Administration can run with ten members, there is no reason why we cannot have a smaller Cabinet. The number of cars allocated to Ministers should similarly be reduced from two to one. These are drastic steps but the time has come to initiate such measures.

The crisis has to be discussed and considered from a bi-partisan spirit. A parliamentary technical committee needs to be set up to seriously analyse our expected growth, future demand for oil, alternative sources of energy and how best to move forward. While doing so, it needs to be remembered that the vast majority of our rural population live without electricity and are dependent on kerosene and candles.

One way out might be greater use of solar power as is being done in Nepal. Power generation through solar house system (SHS) has reportedly been already introduced in some rural areas of Bangladesh. It is understood that a 50-watt SHS can meet basic electricity needs of a rural household. However, the cost for installation of such units remains comparatively high. Nearly Taka 23,000 is required for installation of each unit. That is beyond the reach of the rural poor.

This environment friendly application could however be facilitated through credit extension by micro-credit financial institutions. In that case, such electricity could be used

Justice sits up



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

THE Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) has constituted a two-member committee to prepare draft rules and procedures for accountability of judges. For this one must commend the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, this initiative was long overdue. If the superior judiciary has no self-accountability, what can one expect down the line? The Council approved a proposal to amend the code of conduct for judges to make it more elaborate, objective and specific.

The learned judges noted that amendments to Article 209 of the constitution under the 17th amendment were needed to make SJC more effective by viz (1) suo motu powers of initiating action and (2) preparing and adopting procedures, and setting up institutional mechanism for receiving complaints against judges and deciding them. The need was viz (1) to take notice of incidents of inefficiency or corruption in the judiciary and (2) promptly deal with them according to law, checking false and frivolous complaints being filed to malign individual judges of the superior judiciary. This will go a long way in

institutionalising the SJC and making it an effective forum for the accountability of judges.

Accountability is difficult in a country where almost all statements or cross-examinations under oath are badly tainted. For personal gain, whether monetary or otherwise, false representation of facts and distortions, a gentlemanly phrase for "outright lies", is the order of the day. Vested interest wants to keep the real facts concealed, invariably it is they who volunteer to become witnesses in any

exemplary punishment, ruthless enough for people to try and avoid giving a statement under oath lest that statement (or part thereof) be detected to be false. The system is so credible that depositions under oath save the time of the courts in long-drawn out examination of witnesses. Automatic and severe punishment acts as a deterrent of sorts, a search of the legal history all over the developed world will show that because of repeated convictions due to perjury, the drop in corruption has been commensurate with that of perjury. The

presented. The twelve jurists on the panel then consult among themselves before arriving on a finding. Whereas it is quite possible to give false evidence, the body language of the witness while giving answers to questions as seen by 12 pairs of eyes makes it that much more difficult. The literacy level being low in Pakistan, the jury system is not considered a feasible proposition, somewhat of a strange stance in face of the age-old concept of the Panchayat.

Sometime back I sat and watched in increasing frustration and disgust as

Rome is the origin. Having disposed off his co-ruler Marc Antony (and with him Cleoptra), to maintain law and order the nephew (and adopted son) of Julius Caesar, Augustus, created a corps of fire-fighters. They had a secondary task of keeping "vigil" to prevent crime, helping the Praetorian Guard on an "as required" basis. Called "vigils", they were the forerunner of the self-appointed "Vigilance Committees" in the US in the nineteenth century, keeping a very public eye over wrongdoing. "Vigilantes" is a term

procedural delays because of lacunae in the law and/or the system being overwhelmed by numerous cases and want to bring criminals to justice. Frustrations can be contained in a society where the intent of rendering justice is sincere, but if the whole system is corrupt and the justice meted out is unjust and unfair, frustration boils over, forcing those seeking justice to take law into their own hands.

The fabric binding society is the belief that those that are supposed to uphold the law will do so, if one has reason to fear these very people of violating the laws of the land then the very basis of civilization fails. The superior judiciary has a very crucial role to play in securing the rule of law in Pakistan, public perception must not see them as being biased and/or corrupt. Loss of faith in the judicial system is a very potent breeding ground for vigilantes, therefore, it is imperative that the credibility of our judiciary not be called into question, their integrity must never be compromised.

Accountability in a civilized society, therefore, assumes utmost importance, the transparency and integrity of the process must ensure that those who are the ultimate arbiters of rendering fair and equitable justice, the guardians of the rule of law, law enforcement officials and the judiciary, must remain above reproach. If the likes of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry (and his 'activist' colleagues) fail, vigilantes of the Taliban-kind will appear to take justice in their own hands, sooner rather than later.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

AS I SEE IT

Accountability in a civilized society assumes utmost importance, the transparency and integrity of the process must ensure that those who are the ultimate arbiters of rendering fair and equitable justice, the guardians of the rule of law, law enforcement officials and the judiciary, must remain above reproach.

enquiry or trial. They manage to disguise the truth in so brazenfaced and bold a manner that law enforcers do not have the courage to intercede and take action against them. That is why corruption has flourished, these old hands creating a wall of lies, impossible for the investigators to penetrate. In simple terms, a perjurer is a criminal. False evidence under oath is an incurable cancer eating at the heart of our society, it has brought the nation on its economic knees. The Oxford Dictionary very correctly gives the meaning of perjury as "an act of wilfully telling an untruth when on oath", and goes on to use the words, "lying, mendacity, mendaciousness, falsification, deception, untruthfulness, dishonesty, duplicity".

In most countries, perjury carries

situation is readymade for malfeasance as in Pakistan today where every enquiry, every investigation, every trial, every arbitration, etc reeks of rampant falsification with absolute impunity, whether it is statements before the Oath Commissioner, particularly in the matter of real estate, as paid (or motivated) witnesses in any trial before the court etc.

The judiciary acts only on the evidence on record, giving judgment on the basis of the statute books without relevance to the integrity of the evidence being presented before them. One must take a hard look at bringing in the jury system where the judge controls the courtroom keeping the flow of facts reasonably credible, giving rulings based on the law books and precedence, giving directions to the jury as a summary of the evidence

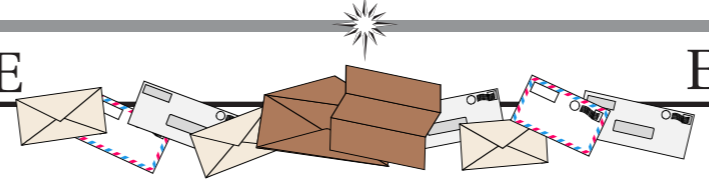
two executives of a semi-government corporation lied through their teeth while giving evidence under oath. Almost every sentence of their affidavits was a lie, answers to every question was a blatant untruth. The tragedy was that their eminent lawyer actually smirked at their lies. Even though this was before supposedly one of the best judges ever produced by the judiciary in Pakistan, one could see why the judiciary seems to have become helpless to prevent perjury. The two executives did not bat an eyelash, in fact they smirked about this, secure in the knowledge that at best the judge would probably throw out the evidence, but would not proceed against them for fabricating evidence.

Whenever society is frustrated by the lack of justice it turns to vigilantes.

normally used for those citizens who take law in their own hands and mete out crude justice, targeting mainly those who have the influence and money to escape the clutches of justice.

A movement from a small village called Naxalbari spread in the 60s in India throughout the East and South East as the "Naxalite" movement. Naxalites even today remain a potent force to contend with in some Indian States, killing criminals and the corrupt in the judiciary and law enforcement alike, not to mention corrupt bureaucrats, crooked businessmen, anybody amassing inordinate wealth, etc. Vigilantes may come from law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and/or from the public, those who are frustrated by the injustice of a corrupt judicial system and/or the

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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.

Failure of students in English

Failure in English is a common matter in our country whether it is SSC/HSC or degree level. There are many reasons of failure of students in English and the reasons are not far to seek. There's a proverb in English 'A stitch in time saves nine'. Not only our education system is responsible but also the students. Because, I saw in the textbooks published by the NCTB for class VIII and class X, there're new words in every chapter, grammatical structure with many examples, a dictionary in the last portion of the book and also there is a list of major grammatical structures taught in the book (in order of presentation). I'm sure, most of the students didn't follow the style or curriculum. Their 'curriculum' (tactics) is very bad -- they buy a guide or notebook and memorize just only the important questions following a suggestion bought from the market. Thus they lose all the interests of

comprehensive reading let alone the freehand writing or free-speaking. Their motive is responsible for failure in English.

Even many degree class students fail for the same reason -- weakness in the root. Also, most of the so-called English teachers aren't good in English, aren't trained and can't teach the students in scientific way. Students don't feel curiosity in reading English newspapers, enjoying English TV/Radio programme. These are the reasons for which they fail.

Engr. Mohammad Ariful Islam
Baghill, Tangail

Stop nasty politicisation

We are perplexed at the news report that 150 JCD cadres have been appointed as Upazila Election Officers through PSC. It is sad news indeed. We came to know from the news media that Hawa Bhaban, the behind the scene powerhouse of BNP government has finalised the list and PSC has just rubber-stamped

the result. So the next parliamentary election may also be doctored in the same manner. Such a trend is not healthy for the country. Through such nefarious practice our country will be more polarised politically and all state organs will ultimately collapse. We, the general public are very much worried. The CEC is not helping in the situation. Frankly speaking, most of who are actively involved in today's politics have little quality to do such kind of job. Ironically AL has record of politicising the BCS examination. And it is alleged that many BCL cadres joined police force through political consideration during its tenure. Why does the PSC toe the line of government? I urge all the political parties to halt such kind of monkey business. Otherwise all these morons will torpedo the future of the country.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, DU

How appropriate is 'CDBL'?

Whenever we address someone or something by his/her or its name it generally depicts at least its simple identification or nature of works by its name. Now-a-days Bangladesh capital market has gone ahead clearly by establishing CDBL for better management in capital market through electronic device. But general shareholders of capital market very often ask each other about the name and functions of CDBL. They say, Central Depository Bangladesh Limited does not clearly express the Depository of Securities at a glance. In this regard, question may be raised that depository for what? Because there may be various things, which may be centrally deposited for particular purpose. Such as, central depository for rice, jute, paper etc. and many things like that. If authority would consider the matter as to change the name of CDBL for better understanding the functions of the organisation as Central Depository System for Securities Bangladesh Limited (CDSBL) that would be easier

to understand its normal functions and its nature by the general people as well as shareholders.

Mir Latifat Ali
Abul Hasnath Road, Dhaka

Why PSC needs parental information?

I was seeing a junior friend's BCS application form and was stunned to see a question. Question No. 4 of BPS Form 2 is titled "parent's information" (yes, the apostrophe is in the wrong place, but that is not the point). PSC wants to know the parents' education level, yearly income, residence (urban or rural area), employment status (govt. service, private service, self employed), and occupation. Under occupation they gave options: agriculture, business, teacher, lawyer, doctor, engineer, others. Applicant will have to fill up related circle.

I would like to know what these information got to do with getting a government job? Is it that a doctor's son will get preference over a farmer's? An urban parent's daughter will have

better chance than a rural parent's? Will parents' income level affect opportunity? Would PSC explain why they need this information about candidate's parents?

Ashish Ansan
Uttara, Dhaka

Students' attack on BUET VC

The first question that arises in my mind is "How dare they attack the VC?" These are the people belonging to the best institution of our country. If they yielded to something so low as to attack a VC already, what can we expect from them in future? Being the most intelligent among their peers, did it not occur to them that there are other ways to demand longer holidays for Puja? Hey guess what, we in the West, don't even get off for Eid, Puja or any other major non-Christian holidays. Are we deprived of our rights? Yes! And do we manage to survive peacefully? Yes!

I demand that those involved be pulled out and expelled for the sake of

"civilisation". At the same time, the university must make exceptions for at least the Hindu students so that they can take off for longer days. If the university remains indifferent, the students, with whatever sanity they have, go out to the court and file a lawsuit.

Come on, students of BUET. You are the leaders that the rest of your peers are looking upto. Do not succumb to insanity.

Mohammed Rashed
One-mail

Whither road maintenance?

Dhaka beautification, specifically its road beautification, work is continuing, although not at a high speed. Some road islands are being undone and some already undone are being done anew -- and these are the activities we have been witnessing all along over decade in the name of road development or beautification. But all these in whose benefit -- the road users or the road

breakers/makers?

However, road users are perhaps supposed to suffer because they pay the tax for its maintenance. What else to expect, because in our country, irony has become the norm. For instance, a portion of Toyenbec Circular Road, just before meeting the Hatkhola road, is in so dilapidated condition for year on that it has simply become hazardous for any automobile. And this is a very important thoroughfare always under heavy traffic.

Another instance is from a locality. A lane called Dr Radhashyam Shaha Street or North Maishundi, running north-south from Hare Street west-end to Tipu Sultan Road is just left unrepaired for year on after allowing indiscriminate digging many a time. The residents are of course tax payers, and ironically are perhaps destined to suffer! Shall the authorities come to senses, ever?

Asufferer
Wari, Dhaka