

Oil price happily going down

Govt should match, and lower fuel cost

THE government raised the price of fuel across the board on September 4 in response to the rising price of crude oil in the international market, which had on that day reached \$70.85 per barrel. If the government's decision to raise prices then was based on a simple response to market conditions, then logic should dictate that now that the price of crude has fallen, and is estimated to fall further, that the pressure on consumers should be relieved by a corresponding reduction in fuel prices.

The price of a barrel of crude on October 26 was \$59.56 -- a drop of over \$10 a barrel since prices in Bangladesh were raised -- and experts estimate that the price will continue to drop further to the region of \$56 per barrel. It should be borne in mind that all estimates about the needs of BPC were made based on a calculation of crude oil at \$70 a barrel, and at the current rates BPC is looking at an expenditure cut of Tk 766 crore a year.

Energy Adviser Mahmudur Rahman has said that if crude oil goes to below \$50 a barrel, he will make the case for reduction of fuel prices. Nothing would be more welcome. No Bangladesh government has ever lowered fuel prices after raising them, and the government would do well to set a precedent of harmonising fuel prices with international market conditions.

With respect to the Energy Adviser's argument that a cut in rates for diesel and kerosene would be more likely, we have an observation. We agree that lowering the price of these two fuels is top priority due to the needs of farmers and the poor, but we also do not see why the price of petrol and octane cannot come down too. If revenue is a problem, then the government should think of raising more revenue by collecting taxes, and not using what amounts to a backdoor tax on consumers.

A second observation is that if the intent is to relieve pressure on BPC, then the government should think of bringing down or eliminating the excise duty that has to be paid on the crude oil import. This strikes us as a better step than continuing to charge consumers an exorbitant rate at the pump.

Incredible utterance

Victims, not the culprit, in the dock!

SOME of our ministers often tend to look at things from a queer angle and utter strange words, baffling the audience to no end. We have heard a minister making light of deaths in launch accidents as being the result of a divine decree, instead of shouldering the responsibility of it all.

Now the communications minister is blaming bus passengers for paying the arbitrarily increased fares without demur! The same minister made an extraordinary comment about journalists recently, suggesting that Rab go after them.

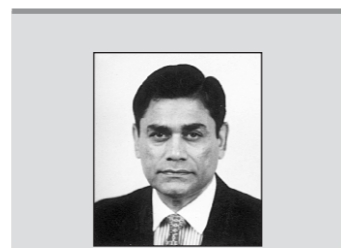
We don't understand what the minister is trying to say by placing the blame at the doorstep of commuters. Is he suggesting they fight the transport operators while the transport ministry and the bus owners association play the mute spectator absolving themselves of any responsibility in the matter?

Eid is only a few days away and people are anxious to go to their village homes to celebrate it. It's not a routine trip they are making, but one that they find themselves emotionally bound to be doing. Sadly, the minister, without showing an iota of sensitivity to the passengers' longings to celebrate the festival with their near and dear ones, is passing the buck of his failure on to the victims.

We demand to know what his ministry is doing to see that the fare chart it has stipulated is being adhered to. Isn't it their responsibility? And that is the issue here, not whether the passengers have failed to raise a wall of resistance against extortion in the name of selling tickets. The minister should have been aware of the helplessness of passengers in such situations.

The way we look at it, our policy makers will have to be more circumspect before making utterances on what the public regard as their pressing needs that must be met with greater sensitivity from people in power.

Terrorism and our response



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

LIKE it or not, we are in the vortex of terrorism fuelled by extremist religious ideology. From whatever information available so far, although no definitive links have been established as yet with international terrorist organisations, it is quite clear that there is definitely a symbiosis between the religious extremists in Bangladesh and other international Islamist organisations, at least insofar as the basic motivation behind their activities is concerned. Thanks must go to the US for making the word "jihad" a popular term in South Asia, by making it such a tantalising undertaking amongst the gullible Muslim youths of the region against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Statements of some of those arrested after the August 17 bombings reveal their training and participation in "jihad" in Afghanistan. It would be unwise to consider these elements as motley groups of disgruntled individuals, or as people exploited by the indigenous condi-

tions in Bangladesh -- this is not the case, at least among those who are calling the shots. Their modus of action suggests a very well-entrenched bunch, capable of challenging the state apparatus.

So what do we do about it? Response to terrorism normally follows the three strands of views that dominate the discourse on the means and methods of countering terrorism, i.e. the liberal, conservative, and the realist views. In the case of

ment to initiate actions with promptitude, almost at par with a war footing, it must avoid falling into the trap of being at "war" with the extremists. Nothing will give them more comfort and validity than their being involved in a "war" with the state. Apart from that, the grave mistake, as one eminent expert on terrorism suggests, in using phrases like "war on terror" is, "it does create an expectation among some that there is a solution to terrorism that is entirely military."

responses must be more proactive than reactive. Terrorism being multi-dimensional, the means of combating terrorism also need to be multi-focused. While legislation of appropriate laws to address terrorism must come into the reckoning of the government, other important measures as well as the impediments than are likely to crop up in the process of combating it, must also be seriously considered.

Two decisions of the government

to legislate new law to combat terrorism merits more detailed deliberation; first and foremost one needs to ask whether we need new legislation at all to fight the trend that we are facing?

Apart from the relevant provisions of the criminal procedures and rules formulated by the British to combat indigenous terrorism in India that we have inherited, there is very little that is in our statutes that addresses the classical form of terrorism. Even, the

activity. There is also a need to guard against the possible use of new legislation in a selective manner. In fact, one of the reasons why the latest anti-terrorism legislation in India had to be rescinded was because of the accusation by the opposition that it was being used very selectively

Although India, which has had to face terrorism in its most virulent form for the last three decades or so, and had as many as fourteen different pieces of legislation to deal with terrorism, it was compelled to go for TADA (Terrorist And Disruptive Activities Act, 1988) and POTA (The Prevention of Terrorism Act, 2002).

Mere legislation to combat terrorism may not always pay dividends at least in the short-term. The Indian experience in this regard is worth studying. The fact that POTA replaced TADA, only to be scrapped after only two years, albeit by a new coalition in Delhi, who was opposed to its very introduction in the first place, is indicative of this.

While devising our response to the current spate of terrorism in Bangladesh, the government should incorporate in its strategy the liberal, conservative, and the realist views. The liberal prescription of fighting the root causes must go hand in hand with the conservative and realist prescription of confronting the terrorists head on.

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Bangladesh, the response has so far been primarily reactive, perfunctory, and palliative measures. This is an unwitting response brought about by the very nature of the state itself.

A knee-jerk reaction by the government would be the least judicious act. On the contrary, the problem such as the one with which we are confronted calls for sober examination of the type of threat we are up against, thereafter formulation of appropriate responses. Nothing would benefit our enemies more than us going after red herrings; and going after terrorist can indeed be a long drawn affair that may turn out to be a wild goose chase should we fail to identify the people involved and devise appropriate strategy to tackle the problem.

Although one expects the govern-

Such attitude stems unfortunately from a misperception that terrorism can only be combated through the use of force. But while we should develop our own mechanism of physically nullifying terrorism and terrorists, our focus must also be on the causes of terrorism. Rise of terrorism in a particular country is primarily due to the interaction of local factors and internal sociopolitical and economic dynamics that will have to be identified and addressed.

Physical confrontation of terrorists is but one aspect of combating terrorism. Even more important is to thwart its spread in our soil since its germination could not be prevented in the first place. And this is where our riposte must take a holistic form rather than piecemeal approach. Our

in the aftermath of August 17 bombings are worth a close look. First, its decision to enact new laws, and second, its plan to conduct motivation programmes to keep the potential extremists from swelling the terrorists ranks. These are what one might term indications of the government's action plan for tackling the issue. Although there is as yet no palpable indications of actions underway, one hopes that one would get to hear about these soon.

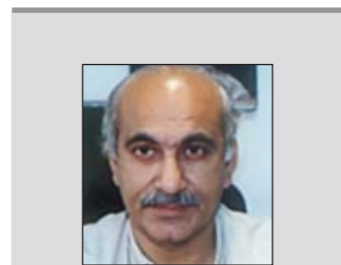
Without going into the general gamut of the issue of "motivating" -- suffice it to say that while doing so the target audience must be correctly identified. How and what to motivate is a matter that would require very deliberate consideration.

The intention of the government

now expired Suppression of Terrorist Offences Act (1992) related to only law and order situation and societal violence, rather than the type of terrorism that we are now confronted with. The current law's efficacy to tackle the societal violence can be judged by the poor conviction rate of cases tried under these laws.

It may also be worth studying the laws in vogue in the US and the recent British enactment following the July London bombings. But while legislating new laws, it needs to be kept in mind that they must be relevant to the issue at hand, i.e. it should not only be adequate to tackle the crime, it must have adequate provisions to tackle the terrorists' strategy. We must address the phenomenon as a state of mind rather than as merely an

A radical lasso



M.J. AKBAR

THERE is nothing personal about suspicion. General, it comes, to indulge in a mild pun, with the territory. If President General Pervez Musharraf has a fault, it is to take things personally. When Lyse Doucet of the BBC asked him how he could allay suspicions that Indians might entertain about his radical offer to melt the Line of Control in Kashmir, he blew a minor fuse, answering on the lines of, "If they are suspicious about me then I will get suspicious about them," etc. There is also institutional suspicion in relations between warring neighbours, as well as suspicion of institutions. The Pakistan military establishment might harbour suspicions about India that are as justified, within the framework of its commitments and compulsions, as the Indian military establishment's are about Pakistan. That has to be factored into any equation that seeks to balance the betrayals of the past against hopes about the future.

And yet, paradoxically, that personal element is also an asset. Pakistan's peace initiatives towards India are propelled to a great extent by the dynamic of General Musharraf's personal will. He is sincere, and has given as much evidence of his sincerity as is perhaps realistically possible. He also believes that Dr Manmohan Singh is equally sincere in his desire for peace, and has said so publicly; when personality is critical, trust is vital.

India's Prime Minister is in

politics but not of politics. Even those who disagree with him never go so far as to doubt his sincerity. Dr Singh, who keeps his private thoughts private, has not given us too many hints about what he thinks of General Musharraf, but the circumstantial evidence is positive. There would not have been a four-hour dinner between them in New York in September otherwise.

I cannot think of a parallel rela-

more in common than you might think. Both were 19th century prohibitionist puritans whose efforts at social reform energised a sectarian base. Both were pro-American in their policies, Desai by ideological preference and Zia by utilitarian choice. They came to power at the same time, but since only one of them was a democrat, they left power on different dates and through different routes. Benazir Bhutto and Rajiv

Manmohan Singh and Musharraf, having developed the trust, have time on their side. Experience, their own and that of others, should warn them that time is an unreliable ally, always prone to slip and crash on the unforeseen.

It is boring to repeat that a terrible tragedy can be converted into a momentous opportunity. But was the General running ahead of history when he made the most radical, even



The Kashmir fog has overpowered the day and seized the night. But it is in the ability of the leaders of India and Pakistan to improve the environment. This subcontinent suffered a political earthquake nearly six decades ago. The last bit of uncleared debris lies in Kashmir. A natural earthquake has given General Musharraf and Dr Manmohan Singh what can only be described as a God-sent chance to clear that debris.

tionship between two serving chief executives of India and Pakistan. There was mistrust and worse between Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, which spilled over into the brief Nehru-Liaquat Ali Khan era. Liaquat's civilian successors did not merit much attention from Nehru. By the time Ayub Khan came to power in Pakistan's first military coup, and stabilised his regime, Nehru began to fade. Ayub Khan went to war with Lal Bahadur Shastri; ironically, the two established a certain rapport during the post-conflict peace talks in Tashkent. It was, tragically, too late, for Shastri did not survive Tashkent. Yahya Khan's shallow obstinacy could hardly be good news for either his country or the subcontinent; his legacy is well-known. Theoretically, the Indira Gandhi-Zulfikar Ali Bhutto relationship held promise. Both were populist in their politics and sophisticated in their personal lives. But they spent their time mopping up the dire consequences of war.

The oddest couple was surely Zia ul Haq and Morarji Desai. They had

Gandhi shared a similar inheritance as well as a similar problem: they were disliked by their entrenched power centres, and were destabilised when they tried to reach out to each other.

The nineties disappeared in alternate cycles of uncertainty and instability. The two bombwalls were the second odd couple: Atal Behari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif. They took one dramatic leap forward with the Lahore agreement, and were equally stunned when the leap ended up in a somersault. The relationship between Vajpayee and Pervez Musharraf was always clouded on the Indian side by the memory of Kargil, in which trust was the first casualty. Their faces at the first official meal of the infamous Agra Summit, a lunch in Delhi, were worth a thousand pictures. Vajpayee's face was ice, Musharraf's was stone. Lal Krishna Advani's face, for those who might be interested, was granite punctuated by two very careful eyes. Trust began to develop only during Vajpayee's second gambit for peace, which went to ground when time ran out on him.

audacious, offer in six decades of confrontation over Kashmir? Analysts have suggested that by military training General Musharraf is a better tactician than a strategist. However, the offer to melt the border that separates two sides of Kashmir so that people can help one another in the aftermath of a numbing earthquake is a strategic masterstroke. It was made in the context of a crisis, but the idea has already been stretched towards an undefined timeframe. Is this the way to a solution of the one problem that has prevented India and Pakistan from being natural, friendly neighbours?

Much depends on how you define a solution. Is the solution about geography, or is it about people? Is it about Kashmir or Kashmiris? Geography is possessive, acquisitive. Once we shift the radar to the problems of Kashmiris, and how to minimise them if we cannot end them, then ideas, options and opportunities open up.

General Musharraf says that the world is aware of his ideas, and uses some key words: identify ... demilita-

Demilitarisation will require trust between institutions much more than between individuals, however important the latter might be. Self-governance is a comfortable thought; the means of achieving the authority that will govern less so. Will such governments be democratically elected? Definitions of democracy are not the same on either side of the Line of Control, and indeed differ sharply within Pakistan. Democracy does not mean the same thing to Pervez Musharraf, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto. Long before thoughts of superstructure engage us, the structure might be straddled with hurdles. And so on.

But what is undeniable is that General Musharraf has thrown an innovative lasso across the divide in a search for answers.

The critical fact of the Indian response was its immediacy. The suggestion had barely been made when Delhi said yes. A principle has been established, and we are already way beyond a bus route between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. Yasin Malik has already tested the princi-

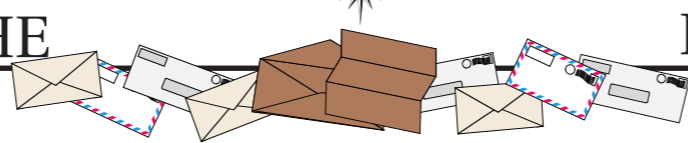
ple, and has reached Pakistan-occupied Kashmir with funds for relief. A year ago, the idea of Yasin Malik, or any member of the Hurriyat, visiting Pakistan was considered unacceptable by Delhi. Today we are discussing means of normalising contacts between a divided people. If there is some applause in the air it is only because both hands are clapping.

It is my view that the dialogue between India and Pakistan works when handled in incremental, digestible portions. Sometimes the increments are large, as in this practical move towards soft borders, but, since they are unencumbered by other demands, they become, slowly, digestible. The present chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed (who may not be chief minister by the time Id comes along) has suggested to Delhi that five crossing points be identified to turn the idea into reality. Another step, that is, in the digestion process. If you continue to change reality on the ground, minds will continue to open at the higher reaches of power.

Suspicion is a fog. The dense Kashmir fog is streaked with too much blood. A fog never lifts suddenly, except in fantasy. It clears slowly, invisibly, and only if the environment improves. The Kashmir fog has overpowered the day and seized the night. But it is in the ability of the leaders of India and Pakistan to improve the environment. This subcontinent suffered a political earthquake nearly six decades ago. The last bit of uncleared debris lies in Kashmir. A natural earthquake has given General Musharraf and Dr Manmohan Singh what can only be described as a God-sent chance to clear that debris.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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.

Flummoxed four years!

I read the article "False hopes or achievements falsified" by Major General ZA Khan (Retd). He wrote that TI's one source of information is national dailies, and indeed I do not want to point out that not much of this information is substantiated by accuracy, not to speak of their being backed up by empirical research.

We, the common people, know that every sector of the government is smeared with corruption. The only unbiased voice is heard from our print media. Today pressure groups' interests are preserved well. He wrote that one would agree that corruption that has been embedded in our lives would not tiptoe out that soon. Efforts are afoot at the government's behest, and now it is for us

citizens to help the government to translate its pledge to reality. His expression in optimistic mood is attractive but he is not the first one to solace the countrymen. Mere eloquence doesn't work today, people want to see results.

He wrote militancy has gripped the world after 9/11. Bombs are hurled at all with no holds barred, secured Green Zone of Baghdad, parliament in New Delhi, subway system in London, harmless Bali nightclub, NE Indian states, resorts of Cairo, mosques of Pakistan, motorcade carrying dignitaries, anywhere and everywhere.

How many of the perpetrators of these heinous acts were brought to book? It is an over-simplified generalisation of the menace that Bangladesh has been encountering for years.

Roney, On e-mail

Wastage of public money

We observe and feel that there is colossal wastage of public money due to lapses, irregularities, negligence of duty, corruption and lack of proper supervision and vigilance on the part of some of our authorities concerned.

For the sake of accountability and transparency of public money we would request our Ministry of Finance to kindly let us know the following financial expenses/losses during the financial year 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 in the interest of public service:

- 1) Expenses on TA & DA of ministers, MPs, government officers visiting foreign countries.
- 2) Expenses on purchase of new vehicles, fuel cost, repair and maintenance of government transports.
- 3) Expenses on grant of honorarium

and overtime allowance to the officers and members of staff.

- 4) Expenses on holding of iftar parties, state functions and celebrations.
- 5) Systems loss on electricity, WASA and natural gas supply.

OH Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Eternal Bangladesh

Trees, plants, flowers, fruits, rivers, clouds hold a distant connotation of their own. Rivers are the sources of joy and sorrow. They are a major theme of Bengali songs.

Rivers figure very prominently in the lives of people in this country. A young woman with a Kalshi on her waist goes to river ghat not only to fetch water but also to have a glimpse of her hero awaiting near the ghat. This is still a common sight in rural Bangladesh.

Engr Mohammad Arifil Islam
Ramdebpur, Baghli, Tangail

TI report on corruption

Bangladesh has been voted the most corrupt country in the world five times in a row. In 2002, after being one year in power and when the TI report came out placing Bangladesh again as the most corrupt nation in the world, some ministers blamed it on the Awami League. "This is what we inherited from the previous government, we will do better next year," they said. Four years later the situation has worsened. I wonder how does this government feel? They should be ashamed. It won't surprise me if I will read sometime soon some comments from some of our ministers trying to blame India or even Israel for the situation.

R.A. Dhaka

CDMA mobile

I have been using a CDMA mobile for the last couple of years. But I have some points to raise about its efficacy.

Nowadays, after successfully launching international SMS service, the provider has forgot about Local SMS. I think CDMA mobile users face this problem daily. Upon receiving a message you cannot identify the person who has sent you the short message. This problem has been persisting for the last one month. Due to higher call rates and no Pulse Facility for prepaid users we use SMS for emergency notifications and now we don't get to see who has sent the SMS.

I hope our service provider will look into the matter in the interest

of the clients.
Sakib khan, On e-mail

Open the road

The age old 20km road connecting Dholla Railway Station and Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway at Kashigonj Bazar of Trishal thana cannot be used by vehicles due to earth-filling work on the two sides of the Jhiki Bridge near Kashigonj Bazar. The road has been constructed and three medium-sized bridges have been built for nearly two years. But due to earth-filling on a few yards long stretch of land on the two sides of the Jhiki Bridge, no vehicles can move through the road, leaving it deserted. That causes immense sufferings to the people of the thickly populated areas. Robberies and unsocial activities have been rampant but due to disruption of communica-

tion, police do not have access to the area.

The peasants have to bring their products to the highway (Dhaka-Mymensingh) for trading, which they can easily do if the road remains open.

So we urge the authorities concerned to take necessary measures to open the road as soon as possible.

Tawhid Ilahi
Trishal, Mymensingh

Price hike

The prices of essentials are shooting up at an amazing speed. What does the government have to say about it? Conspiracy by some quarters?

The government is expected to come up with some plausible explanation.

People are finding the situation very difficult to cope with.

Mansoor Raja
Dhaka