

## Pressure to raise fuel price again

*Welcome decision to withstand it*

IT is not always possible not to give into the pressure of the donor agencies and development partners. More so if it has to do with increasing the prices of subsidised commodities like petroleum. The Finance Minister deserves thanks of the countrymen for not wilting under the pressure of the IMF to increase the cost of fuel, gas and power. All these are the engines of growth, whose adverse impact, of even a slight upward rise, has profound effect on the man on the street.

Understandably, the latest price hike in September was inevitable, with the increase of crude oil price in the international market. However, there has not been a corresponding fall in fuel price in Bangladesh even though the international crude oil price has come down since then. We hope that the finance minister would resist any temptation to increase the price of these items even after there is, according to the finance minister, 'a downward trend in the price levels of essentials'. Price of commodities in our country always defies economic laws, and the theory of 'ratchet effect', is no more pronounced than in Bangladesh where prices go up, never to come down again. While one can understand the consequence of a lower price of petroleum in Bangladesh compared to the neighbouring countries, setting a high price for the commodity is not the way to stop its being smuggled out.

Over the last several years we saw manifold increase in the fuel price, which was raised as many as eight times, the ripple effect of which was felt on our economy. Another round of increase in cost of fuel would have the last straw on the camel's back. And yet a very large foreign exchange bill the government has to pay for importing crude oil, whose local market price dictates other commodity prices, which is as it should be.

It being a subsidised commodity, the one way of balancing the high cost of subsidy would be to reduce import and excise duty that the Petroleum Corporation has to pay on this account.

## Filling up of Gulshan/Badda lake

*Government's efforts have so far failed to arrest the menace*

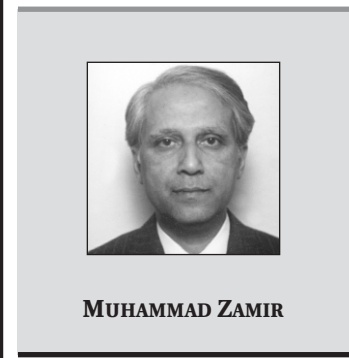
FILLING of our vital water bodies particularly those in and around the capital city has been going on unabated for quite some time despite periodic attempts by the Administration to stop this menace of encroachment. We are yet to see any tangible progress except for the grabbers producing documents to Rajuk officials in support of their claims justifying their actions while Rajuk officials negating that claim etc. In the meantime the earth filling continues with fresh instances of the same also taking place elsewhere.

We are most concerned. Reclamation and grabbing of land in this way is not without serious consequences. Already it has had disastrous effects not only on the people living around the lakes but also the entire population of the city. It has become one of the key factors of pollution for the city and also creating serious health hazards. The filling of the lakes is largely responsible for clogging and blocking the smooth passage of drainage water of the surrounding localities including monsoon rain. Whenever there is an excessive rain in and around the city many front yards of residential quarters get submerged due to overflowing of the lakes particularly the Gulshan/Badda lake causing sufferings to the residents of the locality. It has now become a yearly phenomenon. It is indeed an irony that this illegal filling is most rampant where some of the posh residential areas of the city are located.

We believe that it is high time the Administration dealt with this issue in a more definitive way bringing to a halt such illegal earth filling and encroachment for good. This is imperative for not just us but also for the future generation.

To date, whatever action the government has taken, is not only ambiguous but also failed to prevent or resolve even a single case of such harmful filling of lakes and water bodies. It is not even clear as to who or what agency of the government is responsible to deal with such a vital issue of public concern. It is therefore imperative that the Administration takes a firm policy on the matter for the benefit of the people at large leading to positive results on the ground.

# Bush and widespread anti-incumbent sentiment



RECENT results in the hard-fought Governor's races in the States of Virginia and New Jersey have underlined the political troubles of President George W Bush and other Republicans heading into next year's congressional elections. The loss in Virginia was a personal setback for Bush, who put his declining political capital on the line with an election-eve visit on behalf of Republican former Attorney General Jerry Kilgore, only to see him 'soundly' defeated by Democratic Lt Gov. Tim Kaine. The deteriorating fortunes of the Republican Party were also stressed by California's Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's across-the-board defeat on the four ballot initiatives that he had championed.

Fareed Zakaria, Editor, Newsweek International, commenting in the 14<sup>th</sup> November issue of that magazine has made a significant observation -- "as President Bush's approval ratings sink at home, the glee across the globe rises. He remains the most unpopular political figure in the world, and newspapers from Europe to Asia are delighting in his troubles."

The situation for the Bush Administration has become more difficult in the past few weeks with further revelations of discord from within the USA and continuing problems in Iraq. As the death toll of US military personnel

continues to rise in Iraq (it has climbed to over 2050), questions are being asked afresh about facts and information that were used to justify the controversial invasion of that country. The visit of the UN Secretary General to Iraq and UN approval for the continued presence of the multinational force till the end of 2006, has not greatly improved Bush's ratings within the USA. The Democratic Party in the US Senate has started its own campaign to overcome the stalling

staffers. Clinton Administration terrorism experts Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon have come out with conclusion that the United States is losing the war on terrorism. They have suggested that despite relatively easy victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush's subsequent policies have created a new haven for terrorism in Iraq and 'escalated the potential for Islamic violence against Europe and the United States.' They have also indicated that 'Bus's

It was as such, a relief to see efforts undertaken by Senator John McCain in this regard. McCain proposed an amendment to a law in the US Senate (also endorsed by Colin Powell) regarding the manner in which prisoners should be treated. It was passed by a vote of 90 to 9 and was a 'stunning rebuke' of US Administration policy. Washing of US policy dirty linen in public since the Abu Ghraib scandal is definitely affecting US image abroad. Open criticism is beginning to whittle

the fact that both the USA and the UK have been unable to understand that the presence of British and US troops in Iraq are a part of the problem. This thesis has been supported by a recent secret poll commissioned by senior British Officers (reported by British Sunday Telegraph on 23 October). It pointed out that millions of Iraqis believe that suicide attacks against British troops are justified. The poll also suggested that less than one per cent of the Iraqi population in south-

President Bush and his able Secretary of State Rice have been trying to round off the sharp edges since the beginning of this year. Spin doctors have been engaged to soften the situation. However, as evidenced in the hostile protests faced by Bush during his visit to the Mar del Plata Conference, his team has a long way to go. It should be a source of concern for creative thinkers in the USA, that even nations known for their traditional affection for America have become openly critical of American policy. Another factor is also emerging within international relations. Apprehension about US efforts and the creation of a disagreeable unipolar world is leading many nations to be more cautious and to explore ways of shaping closer regional associations rather than relations trans-Pacific or trans-Atlantic in nature. Such a trend does not bode well for the future.

US forces in Iraq have swelled to 161,000. Bush knows that the growing anti-war sentiment within the USA is beginning to find such figures unacceptable. I have a feeling that de-escalation in the number of troops will begin after the December 15 national elections in Iraq. I do not however see any significant reduction. There will probably be more rotation but a minimum figure of at least around 100,000 is expected to continue till the end of next year.

In my opinion, any disengagement of Coalition presence including that of the British troops will largely depend on how the Iraqi authorities handle the trial of former President Saddam Hossain. It will definitely impact on the internal political and security situation in Iraq. In more ways than one, the scenario will be a severe test for the new government in Iraq in the midst of a strong insurgency. It is also bound to affect Bush's popularity back home.

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tactics of the Republicans by imposing rare closed sessions in that body. This is being undertaken to force the majority in the Senate to complete a probe on whether the Bush Administration misused intelligence before the Iraq war. The Republicans are furious because they see such a tactic as an effort to draw public attention back to Iraq. The White House also considers such steps as factors that are compounding the problem for Bush, at a time when he is facing the fall-out from an indictment of Lewis Libby, a senior aide related to the handling of pre-war intelligence. Some 58 per cent of Americans surveyed during the middle of November indicated that they disapproved of Bush's handling of his job. This was a decline of five per cent in the last two months. Several other reports have also added to the home-work for Bush

mounting political woes at home have undermined the chance for any bold US initiatives to address the grim social realities that feed Islamic radicalism.' Another report has raised international concern not only about the use of torture by US interrogators but also the presence of secret prisons for al-Qaeda captives (in Eastern Europe). Declassified documents have also revealed that there has been 'widespread' use of torture and abuse of prisoners since 9/11. Evidence has been also surfaced that 44 prisoners died in Iraq and Afghanistan in US custody under questionable circumstances. This has been received by many including myself with great disappointment. This has affected the high moral ground which the USA has always taken on the question of upholding human rights.

away support for Bush. It would also be pertinent to refer here to Frances Fukuyama and his comments on the 'Bush doctrine' and associated US national security strategy. He has censured the Administration's inability in being able to differentiate between pre-emption and prevention. He has also castigated the failure of Bush's unilateralist foreign policy that has relied more on ex-post facto legitimisation of initiatives. He has similarly taken to task both Bush policy and his intelligence officials. He has upbraided these aspects for their failure in several directions -- finding Weapons of Mass Destruction, in being able to anticipate the almost uniformly hostile reaction of the Iraqi population to US concept of benevolent hegemony and the deep currents of anti-Americanism in Iraq. This sort of criticism only highlights

ern Iraq think that allied military involvement is helping to improve security in Iraq. Despite holding elections of sorts and crafting a Constitution, US policymakers have to appreciate that reformulation of US goals in Iraq is now needed. Zbigniew Brzezinski is quite correct when he suggests that the US Administration not only has to confront the political background of the terrorist menace but also realise that this is reinforcing public sympathy for the terrorists among the Sunni population inside Iraq and among Muslims in general in the countries neighbouring Iraq. The terrorist political agenda is evoked from images reflecting denigration of Muslims by heavily armed foreigners. Intense political hatred is also created through scenes of Palestinian civilians continuing to suffer under continued Israeli occupation.

# Hail the mighty government think-tank!

**BOBBY HAJJAJ** IT never ceases to amaze: the level of intellectual capacity, the political acumen, and the perspicacity of the people who are leading us into this new millennium. We couldn't find a more laudable and gifted group of individuals if we combed the whole nation; we'd have to comb with a specially designed thought-projection of course. Who'd have thought just four years ago, when we voted in this glorious assemblage, that they'd prove themselves of such outstanding worth and accrue so many accomplishments in such a short span of time? And it is all thanks to their mighty think-tank. It is you we hail, and show our gratitude for our ever diminishing rights and our palsied democratic institution.

Our hallowed political institutions are now fertile grounds for charges and recriminations, plots and counter-plots; nothing is considered inviolable. Chaos has become the order of the day. There seems certain disgust among the political elites today to comport to a more civilized and genial manner of conduct. How will such behaviour enrich the lives of our population of a hundred and fifty million plus? Don't we, the people, deserve an explanation? If our representatives fail in fulfilling their obligations then we harbour our hopes on the media as our voice to put them right. This attrition of our democratic rights needs to be protested vehemently by the press and the media. Why are we fighting these vicious games when we are supposed to be

living under the aegis of a civil democracy? Was this what the Athenians had in mind? We are a two party democracy, no matter how you spin it, how many groups and collaborations you bring to the fore, it won't change the fact that come election time we the people have two choices and two choices only, either the AL, or the BNP. And there are few ideological differences between the two parties, they are both pro-democracy, pro-capitalism, and both halfway between liberal and conservative, so why does the party in government harbour such animosity towards the opposition party, grand policies by the mighty think-tank perhaps? In a democracy the opposition party should be able to voice their concerns and raise their demands through the appropriate medium, the parliament. Our parliament these days seem more like a sham. It has become a mouthpiece for the party in power. In session after session the opposition is not allowed access to their rights of free speech; of course the official government line has put the blame squarely on the opposition's shoulders. But let's view this rationally: why would any party or

person eschew parliament if they can get their voice heard with due reverence? If nothing else they get free press. BTV is bound to transmit his or her speeches and opinions to every nook and cranny of the nation. On this 22nd of November, the opposition alliance announced their big meeting in 'Paltan maidan', something that is well within their rights. It wasn't as if they were taking over some busy thoroughfare and restricting the flow of already suffocated traffic of our mega city (not that minister must be acutely aware, even if the honourable home minister is not. If we are supporting a group of people to lead us in every aspect of our lives and giving them the reigns of our government, do we not, and can we not expect them to defend and apply the laws that are sanctified in our constitution? If the constitution is held of any value and the rights assured in it as indissoluble then why were people all over the city stripped of their right to free association? Why were there forces at work to stop them

from participating in the rally? Those men and women only wanted to go listen to the speeches of their beloved leaders, is that reason enough to beat, harry, and humiliate? Notwithstanding the official police statement, we have seen enough coverage on private channels and the print media to know the truth. The question stands then, are we living in a constitutional democracy where our rights are enshrined, or are we living in a police state that portrays the guise of a democracy -- a hunter in sheep's clothing? How will the mighty think-tank justify this to the public? This one really had me stumped; only the mighty think-tank can justify the necessity of playing out the farce of the transportation strike! We are

certainly all dullards in comparison but do they really think that the people of the nation are clueless to such tricks? Thousands if not millions of people were left stranded without warning. People with places to go, things to do, and in many cases emergencies to attend to, things they could have managed had they had prior warning of the government's underhanded play. While the rally was being held, and the public was rapt by their leaders loud declarations, the government

to the suffering of the hundreds of thousands of people who were left stranded for hours or had to travel by foot for miles due to such insensate policies? How about the businesses: transportation hurts everyone's pocket book? And did they sit late at night contemplating their humiliation when after trying every trick in the book to foil the alliance rally, after pulling off a transportation strike that effected all of Dhaka's inbound traffic, after harassing and beating people up on numerous locations in the city to scare, intimidate, and force people not to travel to the rally, the alliance pulled off the rally with flair and élan? What would have been the losses to the government party if they had appealed for a more symbiotic relationship with the opposition? It would be difficult to certify but there is good reason to believe that internal terrorist threats like the JMB and 'Bangla Bhai' would have been dealt with a long time ago, that they would never have achieved the level of carnage that they have. The opposition leaders have been trying to point out such threats to the government for years, but it always fell on deaf ears. Did the mighty think-tank overlook such possibilities or is there a deeper meaning to all their actions, something that our ordinary mortals cannot comprehend? Either way, we truly are thankful to you for turning our nascent democracy into a full-fledged burlesque, and we cant applaud enough your talent for doing so.

Bobby Hajjaj studied politics in USA. He is now a local entrepreneur.

## 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.

**Bangla Academy dictionary** English to Bengali dictionaries published by Bangla Academy are not available in the market for several months. Being a guardian of some students, I have been looking for such a dictionary. The Bangla Academy authorities should look into the matter. **Md Shahidullah Bhuiyan** *One e-mail*

**Female garment workers** It's pathetic that the poor young female garment workers are facing inequalities and other harassment and we the civil society (so called) just ignore it as they are not related with us -- they are women and poor women. I request some group to work on this issue, and try to neutralise these discriminations. The small political parties can do something, as major parties are not caring these types of issues. **Atiq, DU**

**Global village** Today's young and vibrant generation is smarter in the global village environment, and pick up ideas and trends faster from the foreign and alien developed societies; thanks to IT short-cuts in time and distance. Therefore, immature imitation and crude copying is a common sight in the third world countries. We live in a fast changing world, and we have to be careful of what we approve or adopt blindly. Adaptation is wiser! The local seniors have to monitor the scenes and offer indirect hints to the young men and women who would be running our country in the future. The good points in our traditional culture and philosophy of life have to be preserved without falling prey to modern materialistic life trends (DS report on fashion trends

Nov 7). Why what is good and lasting in our culture cannot be exported? Go *deshi* in a fashionable way! Make others imitate us. Distorted sense of superiority complex could actually be inferiority complex in disguise. What is the basic difference between the English and the Yankees (Americans)? The former like to merge with the crowd, while the other want to stand out, and attract attention to a root (foundation) and do not waver like the branch of a tree. Modesty is out of date, in dress and deportment. What has happened to modesty (*labonnya*) in our charming Bengalee women? It is irksome to see many of them with open flowing hair gracing formal occasions outside home, in public. Formality on certain occasions has to be respected. There is a limit to external physical ornamentation and cosmetics. There is no artificial cosmetic industry in Nature. The message is: Be natural; and keep in the background. There is too much artificial butterfly effect around (is the butterfly aware of what we term as beautiful? It's a camouflage effect for survival). Showmanship has limits. There is no point in trying to find fault with the divine conception of beauty. Better to have open debates on the issue. **Alfa Ahmad, Dhaka**

**Terrorism: Hit them back** It will be quite naïve to postulate that all the Islamic extremists/terrorists will cease to function and strike soon after the government has banned the outfits. The ban that was slapped too late for obvious political considerations, has pushed the misguided, 'quarter and half-literate', religious zealots to take up extreme activities for the sake of their survival at last battle. So, it is going to be a tough fight for many years. As the government and the intelligence agencies do not really possess much information about their strength, number and

striking capabilities the war against the terrorists is going to be a long drawn one. The present 'BNP-Jamaat' nexus kept on denying the existence of Ghalib, Bangla Bhai, Abdur Rahman, Mufti Hannan et al. They never contemplated that they themselves will be in jeopardy and threatened by them. They almost gave them a blank 'cheque book' for disruptive and anarchic activities. The root of the story goes back at least more than fifty years. 'Wahabism' the most extreme, ruthless, retrograde brand of Islam lied dormant but alive in the Arabian peninsula for long time. Abul Ala Moududi founded 'Jamaat-e-Islami' and he adopted and promoted 'Wahabism'. It could not gather much support among the mass population who adhere to the principles of 'Sufism', but the misguided so called 'Moulana' succeeded in recruiting and regimenting a group of hard core fanatical Muslims in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh etc. The real game started after the sharp

windfall rise of oil price in the Middle East in early seventies. These hard core misguided Muslims and their sympathisers collected, received, distributed astonishing amount of un-earned money among the various pseudo-religious outfits in poor Muslim countries, and recruitment of cadres -- 'Jehadis', suicide bombers -- went on unabated. In the 'disguise' of building, Madrasahs and providing social services etc. they strengthened their organisations and the cadres. They found easy recruits in the poverty stricken Muslims of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Algeria, Chechnya and also in the 'west'. It is evident from the testimony of the father of Mamun, a 'Jamaat' sympathiser, who hurled the bomb which killed two judges in Jhalakathi. The father is a security guard having five sons and two daughters without giving a thought on how he will feed seven children with his meager income. He said, 'we take two meals

a day. Mamun received 50,000 taka for volunteering as a suicide bomber. I would have sent the other son Sagor for that purpose too, for another 50,000 taka!' That would have fetched one lac taka for the family! Such is the mindset of the recruits, their guardians and mentors! **SN Mamoon, Dhaka**

**Uniform grading system for varsities** University Grants Commission (UGC) has taken an initiative to introduce uniform grading system in all the universities (The Daily Star, 16 November 2005). It is indeed a step in the right direction and, if implemented, this would be a major achievement of the UGC. It appears that the proposal contains nine-grade cutoffs. To administer such a large number of cutoffs is going to be a nightmare for both the academic and relevant administrative staff. There may be some com-

elling reasons for this, but for the tertiary level the proposal sounds complex because too many narrow ranges of grades have been considered. To keep the process simple and manage effectively, the nine-grade cutoffs could be brought down to five, for example, grade A (above 85%); grade B (above 75%); grade C (above 65%); and grade D (above 50%). Also, a 'no grade' for below 60% marks in the present proposal may not be justified given the international benchmark, which in most cases is 50%. With its present form, the proposal is likely to end up with a labour intensive and time consuming grading approach. This is not ideal for a university where smooth running of academic calendar still remains a huge challenge due to the political climate existing in the campuses. **Dr Moazzem Hossain** *Brisbane, Australia*