

Rising price trend

Strategy needs to be focused

An impression has gained ground among business community that the government's drives against hoarding and illegal structures have upset the supply chain from big cities to rural areas. Resultantly, a scarcity-induced price hike has taken place.

Concomitantly, they argue that they are shying away from import in recent times which has rendered the supply side weaker.

Bangladesh Bank statistics however show that there is no scarcity in production of commodities and that the import too has been adequate. For example, compared with 20.15 lakh MT of Aush and 1.22 crore MT of Aman produced last year, output of Aush and of Aman stood at 22.24 lakh and 1.28 crore MTs this year. BB data also show that importers opened Letters of Credit of US dollar 33.93 million for rice in February this year as compared with US dollar 13.09 million in the corresponding month of last year. Wheat import was at US dollar 9.62 million in the preceding month in place of US dollar 5.39 million in February last year. The edible oil figure rose to US dollar 40.42 million from 28.69 million in the same period.

Obviously, there is need for allowing the market forces to work normally and determine the price line. But intervention from the traders' side to manipulate the market for profiteering distorts the demand-supply equation. Anti-hoarding measures by way of government intervention is also a part of free market regulatory operation. After all free-market is not a free wheeling and dealing proposition. Now the good things that were seized are being released by the law enforcers and this must be vigorously done to replenish market stocks. A realistic anti-hoarding policy is long overdue.

Two steps that the government is contemplating could shore up the market supplies: first, the intensification of import by the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB); and secondly, cutback on import duty on a number of essential items.

Incidence of crime

Extra vigil called for

WHILE the on-going drive against crime has been generally effective, it appears that incidence of mugging and robbery is back on some scale. Needless to say, it is the people in general who have to bear the brunt of it.

An NGO executive was killed in the city on Thursday by muggers who also snatched away Tk 6 lakh from his possession. And only a week back, an elderly woman died after being unable to overcome the shock when robbers entered her house in Uttara. A similar robbery was committed at Pallabi on the same day and a housewife was shot at. A jewellery shop was looted in Kishoreganj and the son of its owner was murdered by robbers on March 1.

The incidents are reason enough for citizens to feel insecure. There is a feeling, however, that maybe the bigger crime drives might have caused a distraction from small crimes. Now it is evident that the criminals and their godfathers are still active and are taking advantage of the vulnerability of people. It seems they don't even feel discouraged by the bold and determined efforts made so far by the caretaker government to curb crime.

Some other incidents, which are really cause for concern, have also taken place recently. For example, two members of Rab were gunned down near Savar. No less worrisome is the news that criminals masquerading as law enforcers have harassed people. The members of the public have been alerted by the law enforcers not to be intimidated by such elements. However, we feel that the law enforcers should keep a watchful eye on the activities of the criminals targeting people in various ways.


Finally, the drive against robbers and muggers has to be intensified to protect the innocent people and restore law and order—something the government is firmly committed to.

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Rising expectations in brightened horizon



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

The country cannot prosper through the efforts of ministers and civil servants only. We can now try to have a truly participating democracy for the first time in Bangladesh. Under the previous political regimes, the government and the people virtually became two hostile armed camps. Now is the time to have an exciting joint venture between the government and the people. Let us ensure the rule of law while providing liberty under law.

less about public property as they are careful about their own property. They would not allow any trespass on their private property but do not take serious note of gross encroachments on public property and destruction of public amenities.

Recent eviction drives point out that humanitarianism has not been distinguished from miscarriage of mercy. We are witnessing how many politically blessed slumlords have grabbed public lands and are making large untaxed incomes every month out of the miseries of the homeless. There is no doubt that shelter for every citizen is an imperative of any good government but we should be able to find cleaner ways of achieving that goal than converting public property into slumlord's illegal estates.

No democracy can survive without law and order and public interest requires promotion of law and order and not its denegation and destruction. Those who support encroachments may be motivated by kindness but good

motives are always not enough. Many criminals are also impelled by good motives. Gross national peace demands greater priority.

A fortunate republic at its birth is blessed with leaders who produce the institutions and later it is the institutions that produce the leaders. The question is, what have we done to the institutions that shall produce the leaders of tomorrow? The quality of education or the lack of it will determine the quality of life in Bangladesh in the coming years.

Our leaders look with austere disfavour upon any attempt to depict the reality and continue to wax eloquent on the blessings of the government they represent. It may be pertinent to recollect that eloquence flourished most in Rome when public affairs were in the worst condition. However, the point to stress is that our innate potential is far greater than our actual achievement.

Our State which has relished in dwarfing its citizen now unfortunately finds that with small men no great thing can really be accom-

plished. We have devalued the judiciary, as we have devalued every other important institution. Instead of defending our judges against political pressures and threats, instead of insisting upon integrity and impartiality in judicial appointments, we have permitted the political executive to appoint individuals who stand ready to subscribe to the philosophy of the ruling party. We are indeed in a scenario where we find it difficult to have the inner strength that would sustain us in adversity.

Our nation can grow strong and healthy if we now break our tradition of being collectively unimaginative despite being individually intelligent. It is time to make efforts to ensure that every class of citizens puts the nation above the party and the group and simultaneously, the change from privilege to talent and from accident of birth to accent on calibre is brought about.

It is also time now when businessmen and professionals realize that there is more to life than suc-

cess and more to success than money and that money has to be regarded as something to be earned rather than to be got or won. At this juncture of our history, extra efforts should be put before extra leisure and working hours must not be turned into chatting sessions.

It is time to realize that we have to stop our society from disintegrating into factions. We need leaders who have the wisdom to perceive the truth and the courage to say it to the people. For the electorate there has to be a realization that the entire destiny of the country is in their own hands and that there is no substitute for knowledge and integrity in public life.

We need to build that temper which does not press a partisan advantage to its bitter end, which can understand and respect the other side and which feels a unity between all citizens. If the spirit of moderation does not prevail then our society will degenerate into divisions and hatred will continue to replace goodwill.

It will perhaps take a long time to ensure the prevalence of higher standards of mature public conduct. We have an environment where instead of learning the value of obedience to the unenforceable, there is a growing tendency not to show obedience even to the enforceable laws.

In a country where different groups function harmoniously, the results are fantastically gratifying, often out of proportion to the inputs. Germany and Japan are examples of the synergistic effect

of such cooperation. Therefore, it is to be hoped that the present government will endeavour to pass such laws and take such executive actions as are not meant merely to deal with the difficulties of the moment but calculated to ensure the good of the country in the long years ahead.

Our first concern should be to look after the weakest -- the man who is stolid and stunned being bowed by the weight of centuries. His recovery and prosperity lies in economic pragmatism characterized by a heightened sense of social justice.

The country cannot prosper through the efforts of ministers and civil servants only. We can now try to have a truly participating democracy for the first time in Bangladesh. Under the previous political regimes, the government and the people virtually became two hostile armed camps. Now is the time to have an exciting joint venture between the government and the people. Let us ensure the rule of law while providing liberty under law. This has to be the desirable objective as chaos cannot be the alternative to authoritarianism. The government has to demonstrate that liberty is not an "optional extra" in a democracy and human rights are not a luxury for the elite and affluent only and that our poor are intensely committed to the free way of life. Let equality before the laws become the foundation of our republic and equal opportunity of social justice.

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US needs flexible engagement with adversaries

POST BREAKFAST

Today, President George W Bush, like others before him will be looking over his shoulder at the possible legacy that he will be leaving behind. One hopes that in all wisdom he would like to be remembered as a leader who brought understanding and unity rather than recriminations, sectarianism, destruction and an unfinished war in Iraq. Let wisdom steal a march and let direct and meaningful negotiations begin with the required foreign leaderships.

observations on his experience of meetings with many former and current leaders of countries in the Middle East and Latin America. The honours roll includes deceased Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad, Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat, Iraqi President Saddam Hussain and the still living Cuban President Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

The article has indicated certain least common denominators. The most striking comment was that those meetings had shown "that people are people, even at the highest levels of Government. They are interested in a candid dialogue. They accept differences and disagreements as long as the tone is courteous. Regrettably, the world-wide 'ugly Americans' reputation is encouraged by our (US) unwillingness to at least meet and talk one on one without preconditions."

In contemporary international politics, Iran is slowly emerging as the next potential flash point. A proud nation, with a rich history, it is bent on proving to its neighbours and to the surrounding region that it is first among equals. It has, despite widespread concern decided that it has the right to develop nuclear technology. Iran thinks that in order to be a world power, and to obtain the necessary status and respect, they have to become a nuclear power despite their massive energy

reserves in the form of oil and gas. Inversely, this is probably due to what psychologists would call a 'siege complex' and a sense of insecurity.

This quest to be recognized could also be described as a hidden desire to be treated with deference, as an equal with other developed countries, particularly the USA and Israel. Iran feels that this is important for any possible future negotiations on questions of status and strategic areas of interest.

Most analysts believe that terrorism, military nuclear capabilities, energy, Iraq and the Israel-Palestine 'dilemma' are all major issues confronting the United States and the world.' These are challenges that are intrinsically inter-linked and need to be addressed together. It is also alleged that the only common factor in this regard is Iran.

It is this perception that persuades me to state that it makes sense for the USA to initiate a purposeful and serious dialogue with the Iranians. There might not be an immediate breakthrough but any discussion will be peace in the making.

The Baghdad Conference that will start on 10 March and is expected to involve representatives from Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Bahrain, the Arab League, the OIC and representatives from the five

UN Security Council permanent members will hopefully provide an opportunity for bilateral talks on the sidelines. This option should not be lost.

North Korea and the Six-Party format could also be another option. It may also be carried out within the matrix of the United Nations, with both China and Russia as participants, along with the United States. The United States has to engage Iran not from the sidelines but as an active partner. This is a diplomatic option that deserves special consideration. It cannot be kept in the cupboard any longer. This path will also be consistent with the advice of Sun-tzu 'Keep your friends close and your enemies close.'

The extreme right within the US Administration might think that any dialogue with Iran would be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Some among them have even suggested that any such contact would connote de-facto recognition of the current Iranian regime. Such views, twenty-eight years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, can only be construed as meaningless and an example of lack of confidence in the United States' inherent strength of being the only superpower.

Let us also consider whether US refusal to undertake direct contacts with Iran and Syria is helping the US Administration and its efforts to spread the US version of democ-

racy and accountability in the Middle East at a cost of hundreds of billions of US dollars. I think not. It has only bolstered extreme nationalism in Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus. It has also created the distraction of probable support for the extremists and militants opposed to US ideology and the US led coalition presence in the Middle East. It has not contained instability.

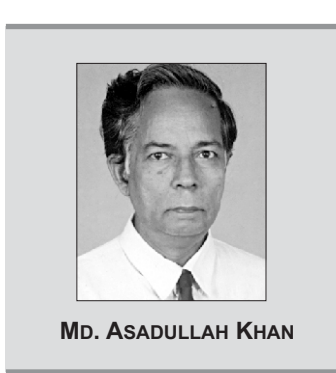
Possibility of any dialogue between the USA and Iran has been like the proverbial snail climbing a greased pole-one-step up and then one-step down. In 2003, Iran, with the blessing of their spiritual leader Khamenei, secretly proposed talks with the United States on Iraq and Iranian nuclear ambitions. That same year, the US offered to send a high-level delegation to Tehran following the earthquake in Bam, only to be rebuffed by the ultra-conservative elements in Iran. Subsequently, there was another 'tentative shuffie' when Iranian President Ahmadinejad sent his 18-page letter on 8 May 2006 to President George W Bush. However, nothing concrete has really emerged till now and the situation continues to be fragile.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has announced that the United States is willing to hold talks with Iran provided that country suspends its enrichment process. There were conditions, but the fact remains that talks, as a concept, have been indirectly accepted.

The right thing to do would be to take this process further through talks at a neutral point on a multilateral level. It might also be useful to include, in addition to EU representation, Russia, China, USA and the UK, other countries like Turkey, Pakistan and India. This would make it more comprehensive. If the process moves forward, it could also include senior representatives from the office of the United Nations Secretary General and the IAEA.

US Republican Senator Specter,

Reforms first, election next



CHARITY, they say, begins at home. It appears before quitting power by the immediate past administration hundreds and thousands of bundles of CI sheets, sarees, rags and biscuits meant for distribution among the poor were made over to the BNP law makers which they comfortably used for their personal use. After 700 pieces of relief C.I sheets meant for distribution among the distressed people were taken out from the labour sheds of the ceramic factory of BNP lawmaker Mr. Mosaddeq Ali Falu, by the army led joint forces, explosive news of such recovery from all parts of the country started pouring in. The relief goods released from the

BITTER TRUTH

What people want now is that no innocent people should be put to unnecessary harassment as much as also the corrupt persons should have no scope to come out as hero taking advantage of the loopholes of investigation. And election should be held expectedly, by the shortest possible time, when all these objectives like preparation of voter ID card and electoral reforms have been done and corruption has been weeded out from the fabric of the society.

prime minister's relief fund were used by these persons for their self enrichment. With little concern for the distressed people in the country, the relief materials especially CI sheets were used by the BNP law makers to build their own houses, their factories, 'public libraries' to perpetuate the memories of their deceased relations and even in building their cow sheds.

Taking advantage of the import of duty-free cars many of them brought luxury cars in the country that even the most affluent businessman in the most developed country would have thought ten times over before purchasing. It seems the past prime minister's close associates and relations had

a pie in every business deal in the country and only those business deals like Biman purchase, Jatrabari-Gulistan flyover project, and even some investment proposals included in the suppliers' credit perhaps could materialise with some commissions going to these wheelers and dealers in the corridors of power in those days. Interestingly, this self enrichment policy pursued by the party sycophants and lastly by the law makers, as it appears from the standpoint of nuclear physics, is very destructive.

In nuclear reaction occurring in a nuclear reactor, naturally occurring uranium (U235) is converted into plutonium 239 (Pu 239) that is used

as bomb (Atom) making material. People without having any knowledge of the nuclear physics know the devastating effect of plutonium 239. Now the CI sheets they used and commissions ate up from different projects have proved to be self-destructive. All these dastardly acts, these malfeasance of worst nature by our so called politicians, belonging to either the treasury or opposition block, have cast an ominous shadow on the future of political parties in Bangladesh. After all these horrific revelations of looting state wealth, grabbing state lands, and allotting Rajuk plots coming to public attention, could people have faith in democracy?

Now the day of judgement for

these so called custodians of people's rights and protector of constitution has arrived. Not only these powerful and influential leaders of those days themselves indulged in corruption, but they also shielded corrupt businessmen, CBA leaders like Bakir Hossain, Gas Mashuk (CBA leader of Jalalabad Gas Company) and ward commissioner Chaudhury Alam to have a free hand in that. The country is now replete with stories of politicians and faceless persons acquiring wealth, cars and properties beyond anybody's imagination. Undeniably true, they have sucked the country dry. In fact it seemed as if the whole state machinery lay in deep slumber while they were busy ravaging its wealth. Otherwise it is hard to explain how the BNP chairperson who very often goes ballistic on any issue relating to impropriety on the conduct of persons in the opposition block could have been lost in silence while all these were going on.

This government in its crusade against corruption has declared a host of reform measures as its first priority before the next parliamentary poll in a bid to free the country from the menace of muscle power and black money. True as the chief adviser has stressed no election can be free and fair as long as the country bristles with black money and illegal weapons. Lulled into complacency by the favour they distributed in all levels of administration including transfer, postings, promotions in all sectors of administration and most important of all with new recruitments, the immediate past government was trying to come back to power riding the much vaunted slogan of safeguarding the constitutional obligations.

The cornerstone of the Constitution is the rule of law, which implies equality before the law. It is this principle of equality that has been paralysed from the top by the power of money and muscle. Some very powerful people were reportedly learnt to have master minded the killing of SAMS Kibria, ex Finance minister in the AL government and a law maker in the past government but because of their alleged close links with the power of the day, they could not be nabbed. Evidently, before this CTG came to power, in every high profile criminal or corruption case, the investigative agencies invariably succumbed to political pressure.

The failure of the rule of law has pushed Bangladesh towards a near helpless situation, turning justice into a joke.

In such a messy situation when the whole country is redolent with the stench of corruption and justice very often seeming to be denied, people look forward to the judiciary as the last hope on earth. And sure enough, the courts have faithfully mirrored the growing popular unwillingness to accept sleaze as an accepted way of life. Where others have failed, the judiciary has responded to public unease by saying enough is enough. .More to the point, the present CTG by taking corrective measures and plugging the loopholes in the frame work of the ACC law, it is reportedly learnt, has tried to insulate ACC and other investigative agencies. Until very recently, the endeavours of the judiciary have not entirely borne fruit, not least because the rule of law was regarded as negotiable in the country. But so long it certainly precipitated a conflict between the political class and the investigative agencies, a conflict which is both unwholesome and undesirable.

Legislators are elected repre-

sentatives of the people and the ultimate custodians of purposeful governance; the law enforcement agencies exist to detect the transgression of law. One cannot exist without the other. But the identities of the two are separate; a fusion has the potential of compromising the foundations of an orderly society by making some people more equal and others more vulnerable. The rising curve of politically sponsored corruption is a good enough reason why a nebulous relationship should now give way to institution-aised divorce. What people want now is that no innocent people should be put to unnecessary harassment as much as also the corrupt persons should have no scope to come out as hero taking advantage of the loopholes of investigation. And election should be held expectedly, by the shortest possible time, when all these objectives like preparation of voter ID card and electoral reforms have been done and corruption has been weeded out from the fabric of the society.