

CA's emphasis on price control

Reassuring poor and middle classes is important

CHIEF Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed's emphasis on the need to control prices of daily essentials is certainly welcome. There is, however, the caveat that such emphases on the part of earlier governments have not quite led to the kind of results we looked forward to. And if one were to observe market conditions in the past few weeks, one would easily discern a pretty relentless tendency on the part of a section of traders to enhance prices, much to the discomfiture of the poor and middle classes. The traders, both suppliers and sellers, have cited the usual reasons to explain the rise in prices, and have apparently been put in a difficult position by the on-going drive against stockpiling.

Now that the Chief Adviser has spoken out on the issue, we would like to tell ourselves that some good will come of the approach, especially with duty cuts on imports and the decision to go for open market sales. But even for that to happen, there is a paramount need to take swift and ruthless action against the syndicates which had kept control over prices despite all the anti-corruption drive that has been going on in the country. It is these elements, which need tough handling. The entire sinister chain that has been in place behind a fixing of prices must be broken if the caretaker administration means to assert its authority in such a sensitive area. Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has, in this regard, directed an opening of sealed food godowns in the country as a way of minimizing prices in the markets. Indeed, the decision reflects the point we at this newspaper made sometime ago about such godowns being opened and stored foodstuff of good quality being sold in the market. We share the Chief Adviser's feeling that storing such food and not releasing them in the market will not produce any good results.

Overall, it is today a matter of how effectively the caretaker administration can pursue a pro-poor, pro-middle class program through the reforms it has undertaken. The CA's stand against the eviction of the poor from the slums they inhabit, in that sense, sends out the right message about the priorities before his government. Removing slums, haats and bazaars and demolishing illegal constructions erected by the powerfully corrupt ought not to be measured on the same scale. It is, in the end, a matter of the government maintaining its good image by vigilance against the forces of corruption. Coming to grips with prices and reassuring the poor and middle classes about social security will surely add to the scores the caretaker administration has so far come by.

Wreaking environmental damage

Lack of awareness is the danger

JUST imagine -- we have to part with four percent of our gross domestic product as a cost of damage that we wreak upon the environment annually. And all this because of our object ignorance and lack of awareness about the need to preserve the very essential part of our existence, nature. The World Bank (WB) report is not only timely, it ought to also help shake us out of our stupor, that we are collectively in now, regarding this issue, and move us to undertake some very concrete actions to preserve our environment.

We depend on nature to provide us the basic raw materials to survive and our development and economic activities have to do with how much nature can supply us with the raw materials. We have gone about extracting for our need, without bothering to tend to its needs.

Just translate the loss in terms of money and one would be horrified at the sheer magnitude of the loss. But we would go wrong if we were to count the losses in terms of money only. The cost that we have to defray in terms of the effect on human lives is a cost that keeps multiplying at incremental rate, the log-term effect not discernable till the damage has been done.

This paper has been relentlessly highlighting the harmful activities that have been damaging our environment. The damage that has been caused to our forest has resulted in the proportion of afforested land to come down to less than eight percent of our total landmass when it should ideally be around 25 percent. The uncontrolled flow of effluent from industries into the waterways and canals and in some cases into arable land depriving the farmers of their sustenance, speak of the sheer apathy and utter disregard for human sustenance and environmental safety. Environmental degradation has a direct bearing on our national security also.

Some very good suggestions have been made in the WB Report and we suggest that the government addresses the issue as a matter of priority. Not only are harsh measures be taken to curb environmental pollution and implement related rules for its preservation, our development and economic activities be so planned that they are environmental friendly. We must also take steps to strengthen our institutions and increase their regional and global networking to improve our oversight capability in this regard.

Guinea: State of the unions

The unions called for strikes to force him to step down, but the rioting left 100 people dead and thousands injured. Not all of them were murdered by the police or the army. Ordinary criminal gangs are making hay while the country is gripped in turmoil. Looting and arson have become the order of the day, even in the capital Conakry where the writ of the state has vanished in thin air.

SAAD S KHAN

GUINEA pigs are a form of small rabbits and, in fact, that was the only entry for "guinea" in my dictionary. Few people know, in the advanced world at least, that Guinea is also a country name for at least four nations of the world: Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Equatorial Guinea and Papua New Guinea.

It is the country Guinea, the simple, on the West Coast of Africa, that is making headlines in the world these days. This time it is the trade unions that had called the strikes against rising cost of living and poor working conditions. The military had staged a mutiny in 1996 against low pay, and students had rioted years before that.

It was the turn of the unions to

challenge the autocracy, this time around. All thanks to the old, sick fox, Col. Lansana Conte, the president for the last quarter of a century, who has checkmated the Unions by a mix of repression and crookedness.

Last month, the unions had ended an 18 days strike against his rule, when he promised to abdicate his powers to a new neutral prime minister. Lately, when he appointed his own right hand man as the prime minister and kept power in his own hand, the unions felt cheated and cried foul. Comte has retaliated by declaring a state of emergency and martial law.

For years, Guinea had been deemed as an island of stability surrounded by war and bloodshed in Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. In fact, this stable façade

Registration of political parties

Parliamentary democracy, no doubt, cannot function with coherence and effectiveness unless it is served by well organized political parties. A political party cannot be well organized all by itself. Some regulatory principles must exist for this purpose. The compulsory registration of all political parties with the Election Commission through an enactment is the only answer to the problems now facing the country in holding free, fair, impartial and credible election.

BURHANUDDIN AHMED

FOR operating as a political party, registration with the Election Commission is compulsory in almost every country practising parliamentary or representative democracy. This is also true in the case of our neighbouring countries India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri-Lanka. We, however, find an exception in the case of Bangladesh, though it has a long history of practising parliamentary democracy.

Following a bloody war of liberation, Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign country on the map of the world on the 16th day of December, 1971. There had been a persistent feeling amongst the honest elements of the society that there should be a legal instrument to stop such behaviour and activities of the political parties which are not in consonance with established law, practices, procedures and principles that promote free, fair, impartial, meaningful and credible election.

But no government had ever made any attempt to frame such a law to regulate the unbridled activities of the political parties. Because of this, the political

disorder and violence had, time and again, not only interfered with the continuance of democratic rule in the country but also damaged the economy of the country beyond repairs. This state of affairs was always condemned by the sensible section of the society.

In an attempt to come out of this dismal situation, the Martial Law government, on July 28, 1976, made a law (Martial Law No. XXII of 1976), called "Political Parties Regulation, 1976," prohibiting formation of political parties with the objective of engaging in any prejudicial activity, or in any activity involving propagation of any opinion which is prejudicial to the independence, sovereignty, integrity or security of Bangladesh.

This regulation, amongst others, also provided that every political party must, before it operates or commences its activity, submit to the government several documents, such as Constitution of the party setting out the aims and objects, the organizational structure at all levels, the sources of funds, annual audit report of accounts, a list of its affiliated, associated or front organizations specifying the name and the field of activities of each such organization,

and shall not commence its activities before getting clearance from the government.

This Martial Law Regulation was followed by an Ordinance promulgated by the then President Ziaur Rahman, calling it "Political Parties Ordinance, 1978." This Ordinance reiterated that: "No political party shall be formed with the object of propagating any opinion or acting in a manner prejudicial to the sovereignty or security of Bangladesh." But, to our misfortune, neither law saw the light of day. On the eve of the general election to the second Parliament of Bangladesh on February 18, 1979, the laws were annulled by the then government for reasons best known to it.

Consequently, the issue of framing a law for regulating the activities of the political parties remained dormant till a demand was voiced by FEMA, a non-government, non-political and non-partisan organization, by organizing 56 workshops all over the country. The proposal formulated by FEMA included, amongst others, the following recommendations for incorporation in the proposed legislation:

- Registration with the Election Commission is a must for

- operating as political party;
- The power for cancellation, revocation, withholding or suspension of the registration of a political party for a specified period must rest in the Election Commission, and the circumstances under which the Commission may resort to such an action should also be clearly spelt out in the legislation.
- The power for disqualifying any contesting candidate for a particular period for gross violation of provision or provisions of the law must vest in Election Commission, and the circumstances for resorting to such action should also be specified in the proposed legislation.
- State funding of political parties for equalising the opportunity of all candidates, subject to fulfillment of certain conditions as may be specified in the law.
- Compulsory maintenance of accounts, reflecting all receipts and donations, minute books etc.
- Open acceptance of donations from business organizations and individuals with proper receipts, subject to suitable regulatory conditions, including tax relief with ceiling in the case of individual and corporate donors.
- Compulsory audit of accounts by an agency to be nominated by the Commission.
- Submission of periodical reports to the Commission; and
- Publication of audit report for

information of all concerned.

FEMA's proposal was endorsed by representatives of the political parties, lawyers, journalists, academicians, women activists, NGO leaders and the professional groups in 56 workshops organized by FEMA throughout the country during the period October 1, 1977 to December 1999. After fine-tuning the recommendation on the basis of the suggestions made in the 56 workshops, it was duly printed and handed over formally to the president, chief election commissioner, prime minister, leader of the opposition and the members of parliament, but, to our dismay, it did not receive any consideration whatsoever of the government. Of late, it, however, received the consideration of the care-taker government. On the eve of the last general election, held on October 1, 2001, the care-taker government, at the initiative of the Election Commission, made an enactment through an Ordinance providing that, if a political party if obtains registration from the Election Commission, it shall be entitled to

- One of the prescribed symbols for all the candidates set up by it in any election under this Order according to preference indicated by it, and the symbol so allotted shall be kept reserved for it.
- One set of electoral rolls at half cost.
- Broadcasting and telecasting facilities in the state-owned media during the general election, according to principles and guidelines prescribed by the Commission.

- Be consulted by the Commission in respect of any matter relating to the general election to parliament, particularly problems of, and measures for, holding elections fairly, peacefully and in accordance with this order and the rules.
- The above allurements did not attract the major political parties as expected. They are still operating according to their whims the impact of which is being felt by all at the moment.
- Parliamentary democracy, no doubt, cannot function with coherence and effectiveness unless it is served by well organized political parties. A political party cannot be well organized all by itself. Some regulatory principles must exist for this purpose. The compulsory registration of all political parties with the Election Commission through an enactment is the only answer to the problems now facing the country in holding free, fair, impartial and credible election.

The author is the Executive Director of FEMA and a former Deputy Secretary of Election Commission.

The VOIP license debacle

While the government of Bangladesh and BTTB have been sitting idle since 1998 with regards to implementing the National Telecommunications Policy, young, energetic and entrepreneurial private VOIP operators have ironically followed the plan set-out by the policy itself. This is hardly surprising; technology and innovation often find their way into people's lives first, to be followed later by standards, policies and regulations.

MAMOOON REZA

I welcome the recommendation of the government committee to allow VOIP licenses for all operators, as reported by a staff correspondent of The Daily Star on Monday March 5.

As VOIP technology rides on IP networks, it would have been unwise to deny Internet Service Providers (ISP) the opportunity to obtain VOIP licenses. Unless ISPs are given this opportunity, they will be in a position akin to the proverbial fox guarding the chickens.

However, I still question the wisdom of the common platform concept. Is this really necessary? What are the benefits? Wouldn't the end-users (common people of our country) end up paying for the cost of the platforms eventually built by foreign-owned corporations? Would the common platform

really be effective in controlling VOIP traffic?

The answer is a resounding "no." The Internet, and in general computer technology, is very malleable; it is capable of changing form and adapting very quickly. Like the flow of a vibrant river, it can take a different path as soon as a barrier is put in its regular path.

VOIP technology is no different. As long as there is Internet connectivity, VOIP will be there in some shape or form. One can add filtering to identify and block it, only to discover later that it has changed its shape and come in through a different way.

I believe that it is unwise to try to control the technology -- we should instead form policies that will allow the spread of technology in a way that benefits the people it is supposed to serve.

Having lived overseas for a number of years, I have become

quite intimate with VOIP technology. It is because of VOIP that I have been able to speak to my mother, father and siblings on an almost daily basis over the last 5 years.

VOIP has given me the choice of buying phone-cards that make phone calls to Bangladesh affordable. VOIP has also allowed me to make calls from my computer to my dear ones in Bangladesh at very little, or no, cost.

I must say that it is the private, so-called "illegal," operators that have made it possible for many hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis living overseas to keep in touch with their loved ones in Bangladesh.

They are the pioneers of this technology in Bangladesh, and I don't agree with the government committee's recommendation that they should be punished for providing the people of

Bangladesh with a valuable service that the past government was unable to do in an orderly manner.

Since the crackdown on private VOIP operators began a few months ago, the price of phone calls to Bangladesh has been on the rise. Many phone-card operators around the world, who are not actually doing anything illegal in the country they are operating from, are unable to connect calls to Bangladesh.

Even the large, mainstream telecommunication providers are unable to connect calls to Bangladesh, despite charging 5 to 10 times more than phone-card operators. This is a clear indication that BTTB does not have the capacity to accept incoming calls, yet it continues to claim that private operators are taking away its business!

If BTTB has lost international call revenue in the last few years, it is due to its own inactivity and lack of initiative in the new world of telecommunications convergence. In this new world, BTTB is not the only telco to lose revenue to VOIP -- this is a worldwide trend. But elsewhere, large telcos are taking it in their stride, and building VOIP

infrastructure alongside the private sector so that they could be competitive on all levels.

The National Telecommunication Policy 1998, available on BTTB's website, states its vision: "The strategic vision of the government is to facilitate universal telephone service throughout the country, and where there is a demand."

It goes on further to state: "To achieve the vision, the government's role as a service provider will diminish as the private sector's role increases."

While the government of Bangladesh and BTTB have been sitting idle since 1998 with regards to implementing the National Telecommunications Policy, young, energetic and entrepreneurial private VOIP operators have ironically followed the plan set-out by the policy itself. This is hardly surprising; technology and innovation often find their way into people's lives first, to be followed later by standards, policies and regulations.

I would like to finish by urging the present caretaker government of Bangladesh to free VOIP from its shackles. Those who have the true interest of Bangladesh in their hearts should not overlook the huge

amount of foreign currency, which would otherwise end up in the hands of foreigners, that VOIP brings into the country.

And rather than locking up the enthusiastic, intelligent and resourceful youths of our country who have worked hard to learn this technology, and whose actions, in my view, have brought more benefits to the people of the country than harm, we should now give them the opportunity to use their skills and expertise under a licence, to help rebuild Bangladesh's VOIP infrastructure.

These young, educated and gifted youths have a lot to offer to Bangladesh. Their talents will be wasted, and will become a burden on our society, if they are kept behind bars. To my understanding, they have committed some offence unknowingly, and whatever they did was based on good faith and for a good cause.

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Conte's own fortunes.

In 2005, the inflation figure topped 250%, an all time high for the country since its independence from France in 1958. Living, even for middle class, became a struggle, what to speak of the 80% majority that lives well below one dollar a day. So, the present rioting was already expected. The only surprise is that it has been sparked so late.

Ahmad Sekou Toure, the hero of the freedom struggle and the first president of the republic, ruled the country with an iron fist till his death in 1984. Sekou Toure was one of the founding leaders of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and later became the head of the OIC Peace Committee for bringing the Iran-Iraq war to an end (1980-88). Unfortunately, his peace activist credentials always ended where the international boundaries of his own country started. In Guinea, he was ruthless to political dissent.

In April 1984, Col. Conte took over in a bloodless military coup, in the confusion and mayhem created by Sekou Toure's death the preceding month. He treaded

the footsteps of his predecessor in power-hunger, mismanagement and misrule.

When the wave of democracy swept Africa, he donned a civilian outfit in 1993, formed a Party of Unity and Progress (PUP), got elected twice in questionable elections, got his second term extended from five to seven years, and finally, in a mock referendum, got popular mandate to lift the two-tenure bar on presidency, eventually getting himself reelected the third time for seven years in general elections boycotted by the opposition parties lately.

Col. Conte is a chain smoker and a chronic diabetic patient. He is rarely seen in public and in the past few months, rumors are resounding that he is suffering from some form of terminal illness. Although, it is a criminal offence in his country, the present wave of rioting was sparked by his failure to deliver the independence day speech in October last year because of poor health.

The unions called for strikes to force him to step down, but the rioting left 100 people dead and

thousands injured. Not all of them were murdered by the police or the army. Ordinary criminal gangs are making hay while the country is gripped in turmoil. Looting and arson have become the order of the day, even in the capital Conakry where the writ of the state has vanished in thin air.

More and more casualties are turning into fatalities, as the under-equipped and understaffed hospitals in the capital are over-flowing with injured people. With no running water and electricity for days now, effective emergency care is an abject impossibility. Plus, there is an acute shortage of essential food items in many leading towns of the country.

Unfortunately for the common people, if they riot, they are shot at by the security forces. If a town is peaceful, the hooligans loyal to the opposition attack it for being complicit with the despotism of Conte.

Guinea is mineral rich, including being the largest exporter of bauxite, and this makes it potentially one of the richest countries of the region. But the decades of



misrule have led it to a precipice.

Civil war on ethnic lines, unthinkable in the country two decades ago, is today a real threat. Guinea is no doubt another victim of the developed countries' courting of the developing world's dictators for political ends. The situation in Guinea calls for a full-

fledged United Nations intervention, a la Congo, Sierra Leone and Angola, before it is too late.

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