

Fertiliser, gas, energy prices

Government must move with extreme caution

THE move by the government to hold back a proposal for a hike in the price of urea fertiliser is welcome. It is, from our point of view, a wise move considering the ramifications that a fertiliser price rise could have thrown up. While we appreciate the decision, we are also concerned that the advisory committee on economic affairs has asked the related ministries to come up with a comprehensive proposal for a possible hike in prices of gas, petroleum products and electricity. It is our expectation that the authorities will step back from making such a decision in light of the economic realities affecting citizens' lives at this point.

How the economy-related activities of the government may be turning into a matter of concern has recently been highlighted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue. The CPD clearly feels, and with good reason, that the planning strategy of the present caretaker government has largely been based on suggestions made by the World Bank and the IMF. Of course, the government and the two Bretton Woods institutions do not agree with such an assessment. That does not in any way dispel the suspicion that the government has in fact moved away from a programme that might have given people breathing space where prices are concerned. It was only recently that the prices of fuel products were increased; and so trying to make the way clear for a new increase can only put a fresh and tighter squeeze on consumers. Where urea fertiliser is concerned, one does not need to be educated in detail on the consequences a price hike in the sector will have on agriculture. And yet a disturbing part of the story is that in June this year, a proposal sought to increase the price of urea fertiliser by as much as Tk. 7,000 per tonne, meaning an enhancement in price by a whopping 51 per cent. One might be consoled by the thought that the move has now been held back, but the truth is that the government still plans to go for a hike in gas prices. If it does, it will mean things going back to square one.

The government will need to move with caution over the price question. As it is, it has been unable to take any measures toward controlling the prices of essential commodities. That may soon turn out, if it has not already, to be its Achilles' heel. On top of such vulnerability, an increase in the prices of fertiliser, gas, electricity and fuel will only compound the miseries of citizens. The ground realities call for extreme circumspection. Nothing should be done that will make new holes in an already frayed social fabric.

The 'psychological' affliction

There must be a way to prevent it

WHILE we take some comfort from the experts' assertion that the spate of illness afflicting female students in many parts of the country is to do more with the mind than anything else, and that no one should panic, the fact remains that the disease, mystery to many since the like of it we have not been exposed to before, it has spread from only one school in Narshingdi to not only other schools of the area but to other districts of the country as well. It is also a fact that it has affected students who are very far away from Narshingdi, like in Natore, where it all started.

It may not be infectious, and, as physicians have asserted, it cannot be classified as a disease either since there are no pathological evidences, but the misery and sufferings, albeit short-lived as the doctors say, must have a way of being prevented. We feel that the health department should go deeper into it and study as to why this has come about. We may agree that this is a 'psychological' phenomenon and while not questioning the experts' opinion that psychosomasis may be largely to blame for it, we wonder how the physical symptoms of pain and convulsions accompanied by high temperature affected the students in Narshingdi in the first place.

Some doctors have suggested that the occurrence being a psychological phenomenon, and those affected by it may have been influenced by the news and the visuals carried by the print and electronic media, we have an entirely new psychic problem to look into. We take the point but would like to suggest that the health ministry and the media put their heads together to chalk out a plan of putting out messages to counter the psychological impact and the 'preventive measures' if any, that might be adopted.

This may not be a disease, but it may just take on an epidemic proportion should more and more female students in more and more schools continue to be afflicted by it in the future. We must, therefore, find an answer to this malady through our own study as well as by drawing upon the fund of world health expertise.

BRIGADIER GENERAL
SHAMSUDDIN AHMED (RETD)

THEY say that a wise man is one who learns from others' mistakes and corrects himself. And not so wise is one who waits until he himself commits mistakes and then corrects himself. There is yet more -- the self-conceited, the megalomaniac, the duffer, the idiot who do not take lesson even from their own mistakes because they think that they are always right and it is the others across the divide who are wrong. Our rulers over the last 36 years without exception have made mistakes, nay blunders which is why we have the Bangladesh of today, a very badly battered and bruised nation still trying to stand on its own feet. A nation born in 1971 is still a baby because it has not been allowed to grow into adulthood. Why? Because the rulers in charge of the baby nation robbed it of all the nourishment it needed and nourished themselves instead. But none of them have had the good sense to say that they made a mistake, let alone a blunder.

Democracy is still a far cry and so is the minimum basic infrastructure required for a nation's growth in

The Chief Adviser has firmly asserted in his public address on more than one occasion that no one is above the law and anybody found corrupt or having been a law breaker regardless of who he or she may be will be brought to justice. This is indeed what ought to be the declared policy of any democratic government. Let there be no let up in the government's efforts to clean up the mess created by our rulers over the years. And let the educated people, the intelligentsia, the civil society be behind the government in their resolve to usher in a truly democratic system of governance.

terms of material and moral uplift and social justice. We have very successfully become a nation of beggars, robbers, looters, plunderers, killers, cheats and liars. Yes this is true. Go through the newspapers. The staple news is that the nation has been cheated and robbed of its wealth and its morality by the same very people who ruled us and lectured us on probity, honesty, morality and hard work while they themselves were plundering and grabbing wealth all these years and all in the name of democracy and nation building.

We humans are prone to make mistake. But our political leaders, have never said that they made any mistake perhaps because they think they are super humans. They seem to be past masters in lying in public. They lie with such aplomb and with such dexterity without batting an

eye lid that truth seems to be a lie and lie a truth. They never say they ever made a mistake. They never ever uttered a word of apology to the people of this country for having robbed them of their minimum basic right to eke out an existence as a human being, let alone a citizen.

Pseudo democrats and autocrats alike these rulers have not only misgoverned but also torn asunder the fabric of national unity and cohesion by pursuing a policy of stifling all political dissenting voice through violence by trying to make the political opposition an effete entity, the sole motive being that the rulers alone should pillage and plunder and make fortunes for themselves. You dare criticise them only at the peril of your life and honour.

Ask Gen Ershad about being the chief wrecker of democratic institu-

tions and the chief promoter of autocratic rule and all its concomitant evils. Most unabashedly he would say that he was a better administrator than both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia and that his was the golden period of development in this country. He would further say that he was as honest a man as one can think of. True, in the last sixteen years of rule by the elected governments of AL and BNP we had no clue of how much money this man has made and where he has kept it while we are made to know it for sure that he is the very epitome of corruption and profligacy.

Ask Sheikh Hasina if she as prime minister knew about Hazari terrorizing the people of Feni and about her ministers indulging in corruption. She would perhaps flatly deny everything.

Ask Khaleda Zia if she knew of her sons making money right and left and of her ministers and law-makers having amassed vast wealth and property as revealed in the media. She would most probably say as she has already said that it is all rubbish.

This interim and non elected government with the backing of the armed forces is now on a mission to do what an elected and pro-people and pro-democracy government should have done before-- to build a process of accountability of people holding public office and misusing their power and authority for their personal benefit and for the benefit of their families and cronies. Very powerful people who have allegedly plundered public funds and property and built fortunes for themselves have already been rounded up by the

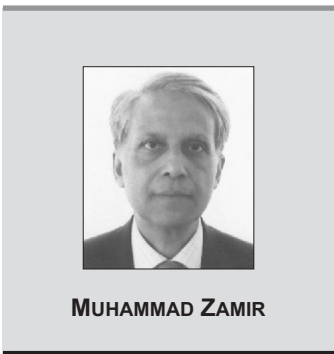
government and a due process of investigation and trial has begun.

The Chief Adviser has firmly asserted in his public address on more than one occasion that no one is above the law and anybody found corrupt or having been a law breaker regardless of who he or she may be will be brought to justice. This is indeed what ought to be the declared policy of any democratic government. Let there be no let up in the government's efforts to clean up the mess created by our rulers over the years. And let the educated people, the intelligentsia, the civil society be behind the government in their resolve to usher in a truly democratic system of governance, a system which will work to ameliorate the lot of the teeming millions and not the handful of the privileged and the socially advantaged.

A word of counsel for the government: Please do not be guided at any stage by any animosity or grudge towards any person or a group of persons.

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Insurgency and instability mount in Afghanistan



MORE than five years have passed since the major combat operation Enduring Freedom was unleashed in Afghanistan. Former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld in his typical vein of over confidence had suggested in May 2003 that the war in Afghanistan was in a 'cleanup' phase. His assessment has obviously been proven wrong. Afghanistan, till today, has not been able to achieve the desired stability.

Recent reports coming out of Afghanistan indicate that this new member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is still facing a continuing storm of insurgency that is beginning to mimic operations and tactics now being witnessed in Iraq. Analysts from all over the world are now beginning to re-think their earlier views about the Taliban being a simple radical Islamist movement with very little strategic ability or imagination.

In this context, it was particularly interesting to read a recent article -- "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan" written by Thomas H Johnson and M Chris Mason, published in Vol. 51, No. 1, Winter 2007 issue of *Orbis*. The authors, one, a research professor from the US Naval Postgraduate School and the other, a former US Foreign Service officer serving as a fellow at the Centre for Advanced Defence Studies, have provided a valuable insight into the complex cultural, religious and political underpinnings of the Taliban. They have also urged policymakers to stop falling prey to the Taliban's game plan by continuing Vietnam style kill/capture counterinsur-

gency in that country. They have claimed that such measures are only alienating the rural tribal infrastructure.

Journalists have been pointing out for sometime now that President Hamid Karzai's NATO supported government has been encountering extreme difficulty extending national control and mandate outside Kabul into country's hinterland regions. A resurgent Taliban backed by Al Qaeda is

planners appear to have moved towards a detached, objective assessment of the governance structure of Karzai. They are identifying weaknesses and then exploiting them to further de-stabilise the situation. They are, in this regard, focusing on the Afghan government's lack of state formation (viewed from a strictly public administration angle) and its inability to establish a significant presence throughout the country. The

of Oruzgan, Helmand, Zabol and Kandahar. This now permits them relatively free movement in the east and the south of Afghanistan, and also if necessary, across the porous border into and out of Pakistan.

The other area of serious concern is the introduction of suicide bombings in recent insurgent attacks in Afghanistan. This new factor has added another serious dimension to the crisis. It was

in Afghanistan in order to achieve 'strategic depth' on its northern border in the event of any conflict with India. Successive Pakistani governments have also promoted Islamic radicalism as a counter-foil to the Pashtun and Baluch nationalist movements. These inherent elements have also added to the complexity in Afghanistan.

The South Asian state today is again in danger of being inundated by the flood brought on not only by

This has resulted in lack of employment creation and return to narco-trafficking. The level of committed funding has been shockingly low and there have been very few visible reconstruction projects. Disappointment from such a course of action is having its own strategic impact.

A classical case has been that of the sensitive province of Paktila. Reports indicate that this province is supposed to have 352 elementary schools for boys. There is however only 40 actual school buildings. The rest are just patches of open ground.

It would have made sense if the Karzai government had been sufficiently assisted by the US and other development partners to enable him to undertake visible infrastructure development. This might have had a demonstration effect. There is a lot of corruption in Afghanistan, particularly within the government. Nevertheless, there is also severe resource constraint. I believe that one way of fighting insurgency in that country would be to build more school buildings both for boys and girls and also healthcare clinics, particularly in the rural areas. This will send a different sort of signal about government involvement. This will also nullify Taliban propaganda that the US and its NATO partners are only interested in Karzai and the affluent urban class living within the secure perimeter of Kabul.

It is time that Karzai and ISAF understand that the success metric of body counts and counterinsurgency operations will be irrelevant in the long run if appropriate corruption free constructive engagement is not introduced urgently into the social, health and educational sectors in that troubled country. The sooner this is done, the better it will be for Afghanistan. This will also ensure that the fledgling secular democratic process grows roots in the landmine littered landscape outside the carefully guarded compounds of Kabul.

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POST BREAKFAST

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apparently resisting his efforts. Added to this equation is the tacit and active support extended by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction of Hizb-I-Islami. The juxtaposition of these forces have led to the rapidly diminishing control of Kabul over a broad swath of the country, particularly in the eastern and southern Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan.

Talibans appear to have evolved over the last year and a half. They are no longer just an obtuse, radical Islamist organisation. Their current level and pattern of insurgency suggests a subtle change in their strategic and operational levels. As opposed to their inflexible policies of the past, the Taliban and their collaborators are now rising over existing subsets of ethnolinguistic group-divides and the according of primacy to ties of kinship alone. Through such a move, they are expanding the scope of their association. It is no longer a band of politicised insurgent Mullahs. The Afghan Opposition is gradually morphing into a more inclusive equation rather than remaining just a revolving-door phenomenon.

The Taliban hierarchy and policy

Opposition is also fomenting dissatisfaction in the insecure rural areas where unemployment and potential credit extension facilities are still very poor. They are pointing out the very slow pace of development and reconstruction that is taking place there as compared to relatively urban areas and in Kabul. This is being specially stressed in the troubled southern half of the country. These factors are not making things easier for Karzai.

It is true that the overall level of conflict in Afghanistan has not yet approached the level being experienced in Iraq. However, the last few months have witnessed an acceleration of deadly attacks that are uncannily similar to the tactics being employed by the Iraqi insurgents. Taliban battle dynamics have also altered from hit-and-run attacks by small groups of guerrillas to concentrated assaults on government security posts by bigger groups, sometimes even exceeding 100 fighters. Intelligence reports published by the Centre for International Issues Research in 2006, hint that the Taliban have at least 12,000 hard-core fighters controlling areas in the provinces

generally believed till now that members of the Taliban due to the cultural aversion would not carry out such suicide attacks because suicide is forbidden in Wahabism (the Islamic philosophy followed by the Talibans). The Afghan government has used this argument to claim that some of those participating in such attacks are Taliban inspired non-Afghans, mostly from Pakistan and Arab countries. Through this, they are trying to underline the presence of foreign elements. Nevertheless, one thing is very clear. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for this purpose has demonstrated a significant level of coordination between the Taliban and the Iraqi insurgents and growing technological sophistication within opposition forces.

For decades, Afghanistan's neighbouring states have produced disenchanted groups such as the Uyghurs, Tajiks, and Uzbeks who have used this country for guerrilla training and as an operating base. The years before 2001 saw Pakistan exploit this scenario to its advantage. Vanni Cappelli, a political historian has usefully explained this as being consist with Pakistan seeking to exert influence

insurgency but also by the old actors -- narcotics and warlords. Many like Johnson and Mason believe that 'benign neglect by the United States since Spring 2003 has brought Afghanistan back to the brink of state failure.' Comparatively, US has treated it as a lesser problem than Iraq and consequently 'shortchanged Afghanistan in both personnel and resources'. One analyst has shockingly pointed out that the US spent more money every 72 hours on the war in Iraq in 2006 than it spent on Afghan reconstruction that year. It is now estimated that deployment of US troops and NATO International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) dedicated to the stabilisation of the countryside represents the lowest per capita commitment of peace-keeping personnel to any post conflict environment since the end of World War II. It is today roughly one peacekeeper to every 1000 Afghans as compared to one to every 48 and 58 for Bosnia and Kosovo respectively.

Similarly, efforts to re-build Afghanistan have been inadequate. What was envisaged in the December 2001 Bonn Agreement has unfortunately not taken place.

OPINION

Diluvion-Alluvion Act: Need for amendment

MD ABDUL KADER

THERE are some Acts and rules in our country which are not pro-poor, rather seem to be kept to deprive the poor of their rights. Ironically Bangladesh is more known as a poor or least developed than a developing country. Vast majority of the people are poor and deserve to be supported by all laws of the land. But some of such laws are not only not pro-poor but also too complex to be comprehended by the common people. As such their application, effectiveness or loopholes and exploitation remain much beyond their knowledge and majority of them tend not to bother about that either. On the otherhand, a section in the society who could have enlightened them in this regard to certain extent, do not tend to do so allegedly to yield benefit out of their ignorance.

Such an Act is the Diluvion-Alluvion Act. Here the very words

Diluvion and Alluvion are almost unknown to most people. Not knowing that these concern erosion and accretion of land in river they seldom care to think over these. As a result mostly illiterate poor people are very often deprived of their right to diluvion land by the cunning land grabbers exploiting the existing Act to their benefit.

Although this Act was adopted for the poor and the landless immediately after independence but later on it was amended and changed and actually did not remain pro-poor any more.

The Diluvion-Alluvion Act adopted by Bangabandhu government in 1972 was that, if any land is lost by erosion in river and occurred in accretion thereafter then it would be owned solely by government and none else. Government would declare it as khasland where only the helpless landless people would get the right to till and produce crops. The poor erosion victims would get allotment

To cure the existing malady, it would perhaps be better to revert to the earlier Diluvion-Alluvion Act of 1972. There it was mentioned that whatever accretion, it would be considered khasland and government would take steps to distribute it to or among the victims (the former losers). At least in such provision the administration would get the opportunity to scrutinise the genuinity of the claimants, and judge who deserve it most.

of such land on priority basis. It was also told that government would exempt them from taxes too. In fact the Act was so made to discharge the state responsibility to the poor landless people. This act also could check landgrabbing, terrorism and anarchy in char areas.

It's true in Bangladesh chars are notorious for violent as well as deadly clashes. And these occur because the influentials just fall on to grab whenever any accretion is sighted. Our land offices are also notorious for corrupt officers and staff. The land grabbers tend to prepare false documents with their help and claim the newly accreted lands as their own. This leads to

clash for possession. At the same time the poor erosion victims just remain dispossessed and landless and whenever they try to mention of their right, not to speak of asserting it, they are oppressed and threatened. This leads to the influx in rural-urban migration and increase in city slum population to the concern of not only the city fathers but also the society as a whole.

In 1994 the Diluvion-Alluvion Act was amended to the effect that no accretion shall be owned by the government rather if any erosion is found to be rising in accretion within 30 years, then the earlier owner would get it back subject to some conditions. Apparently it

seems alright but the ground reality is that the accretion is not the eroded land, sites are always different, and the measurement? There is no such record of meeting all claims of all erosion victims. In fact, in most cases claimants are not the actual victims. And there are possibilities enough for the actual victims to suffer deprivation. Taking the advantage of their illiteracy and poverty the cunning well-to-do exploiters have benefited with the possession whenever there was an occasion of accretion in rivers utilising the loopholes of the Act. Even they often succeeded in evicting the landless poor who might have moved there losing their homesteads in river erosion.

In fact, this amended existing Diluvion-Alluvion Act has led to a lot of conflicts and litigations with both old and new char lands. Exploiting the loopholes of the Act and provisions that remain almost inaccessible for the poor illiterate landless farmers, the cunning occupy these lands even through registration. Although they fight among themselves for the possession of the lands but the actual deserving erosion victims are always kept at bay.

That this Act is not desirably effective is proven by the fact that while river erosion is rendering thousands landless and homeless, not even hundred are becoming owners of the accreted chars with the

help of this Act. And just a further probe reveals that most of the owners are well to do persons made richer with the new possessions.

In a poor country like Bangladesh we need laws and Acts that are really pro-poor. Otherwise the national policy of poverty alleviation or for that matter achieving an MDG shall just not be possible. But the Diluvion-Alluvion Act is exploited otherwise by the land grabbers. They are coming up with a claim that a charland belonged to them 30 years ago. But it actually wasn't. They might have lost some land in river erosion, but not the one they are claiming. The poor settlers came there in course of a few years when it accreted, tilled the land, grew crops and settled. The new claimers exploiting the Act evict them from the settlement, adding another group to the landless class, who would ultimately crowd the city slums and inflate the number of ultra poor.

This is just not desirable. To cure the existing malady, it would perhaps be better to revert to the earlier Diluvion-Alluvion Act of 1972. There it was mentioned that whatever accretion, it would be considered khasland and government would take steps to distribute it to or among the victims (the former losers). At least in such provision the administration would get the opportunity to scrutinise the genuinity of the claimants, and judge who deserve it most.

The present government in most cases is acting for just causes. We believe in this case also it would act to contain the number of landless poor from being inflated further. A major step seems to be making the Diluvion-Alluvion Act pro-poor plugging the loopholes of exploitation.

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