

Arrests of JMB cadres

Let there be no let up in counter-terror efforts

INSTANCES of militant cadres being apprehended from time to time by the law enforcing agencies send a clear message to us, which is that the radicals are not done away with as yet. Recent capture of four JMB members clearly indicates that they have regrouped; and, as we had said several times before, loss of leadership may have set them back temporarily but apparently they have the resilience to bounce back to once again carry out their destructive acts. It is a good job, in the latest instance, that the militants were caught before they could carry out their mission of death and destruction. We commend our security forces for their vigilance.

There are certain disquieting features that the arrests indicate. The explosive devices that have been found in their possession, as well as the remarks of a senior member of the RAB made while commenting on the captured explosive devices, show they were going for targets like motor vehicles etc. This seems to confirm the account of a JMB operative interviewed by a local television channel not very long ago that the extremists were being trained to carry out car bombings. This is not to sound alarmist but to suggest that there is no alternative to constant vigilance, by the law enforcing agencies as well as the people.

There are reports also that the cadres have infiltrated inside some organisations and work places like the NGOs in order to carry out attacks against them. This is exactly how the militants operate, keeping sleepers-cells at strategic places to go into operation at the most opportune time on the instruction of their masters. In such circumstances there is need for the law enforcing agencies to be provided with actionable intelligence that will help forestall the militants. And that requires the active support of the public who must be made aware of the tell-tale signs to lookout for.

The recent arrest shows that there is absolutely no scope to let down our guard. We want that militant groups like the JMB are fully quashed and their sponsors and sympathisers identified to divest them of the funds and motivation. And this demands that the counter-terrorist campaign be conducted in a holistic manner involving the people also. At the same time the relevant agencies must not lose sight of the anti-terrorism aspect that must address the reasons why and how these groups managed to induct a fairly large number into their ranks in the first place.

Chilli hotter than ever before!

Marketing mechanism needs to be harmonised

WHO could think green chilli would attain such phenomenal distinction, selling at the astronomical price of Tk. 200 a kilogram, thereby upsetting the culinary tradition of the consumers? In fact, consumers find it difficult to comprehend why green chilli should sell at the same price of beef.

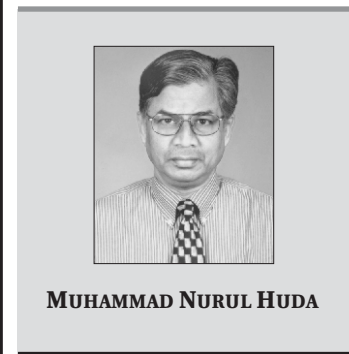
This abnormal rise of price of locally grown green chilli cannot be attributed to the floods alone because it was selling at over Tk. 100 before the advent of the waters. Even that was an exorbitant price by any definition. And the fact that imported varieties sell at Tk. 100 to Tk. 120 per kg offered little solace as it also remains out of reach of most people.

The galloping price of essential commodities is clearly symptomatic of lack of coordination existing among the various agencies operating in the markets. Apparently, importers, wholesalers and retailers are running their business arbitrarily following no rules or agreement. Even the highest trade bodies in the country could make little progress in establishing some kind of cohesion in the markets.

We are aware of the various methods applied by the present government in a bid to check price escalation and thereby steady the erratic market. But we have yet to see any tangible result. In some cases the propensity to bypass the normal channels proved to be counter-productive. We therefore feel relevant government officials should sit with the appropriate agencies, the real people involved in the commerce, to evaluate the market situation based on ground reality. They should be given the required trade incentives and protection so that they may operate freely and reach a solution to the best interest of all concerned.

With floodwaters getting unmanageable, people apprehend further escalation of prices in the coming months. It is the solemn responsibility of the government to ensure that no such thing actually happens.

Beyond the anti-corruption drive



THE enormity of corrupt practices that have surfaced during the ongoing anti-corruption drive must have baffled and surprised most Bangladeshis. The illegal acquisition of wealth by persons occupying high public office, however, was not a well-kept secret. There were gossips and tale telling in plenty. Some website reportedly displayed explicit estimates of the ill-gotten wealth of the so-called billionaire ministers of Bangladesh. Nobody took any serious note of the malfeasance and misfeasance of the high and mighty until early January 2007.

Now that the harried members of public have some glimpses of the shady deal and the plundering of State resources, they are bewildered by the recklessness and the gay abandon modus operandi of the political predators and their associates. The informed and the knowledgeable are not upset for they were aware of the total lack of accountability in the corridors of power.

High positions of public trust were grabbed by real brats who had the singular qualification of being politically blessed. They took it to be their last chance to loot. It appeared that men of 'East India Company' have reappeared and the robber barons were in charge.

Some apparently well-intentioned personalities have taken exception to

the operating style of the Anti-corruption Commission and have commented that the anti-graft drive should not be seen as an event and that it should be a process. This writer is of the view that since in pre-January 2007 Bangladesh there was no noticeable political will to curb corruption and as a large part of the establishment itself went headlong into corrupt acts, it serves a purpose if the anti-graft drive has the attention-drawing element of an event. For quite some-

time henceforth, the publicity aspect has a socially utilitarian value.

The members of public need to know how their leaders have betrayed their trust and how public offices have turned into a clearing house for ensuring personal and family affluence. They need to know how scions of the ruling family have stashed millions of dollars of public money in faraway places while the school teacher's daughter had to commit suicide because the dowry, a paltry Taka twenty thousand, could not be arranged.

The honourable Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has impressed upon the creation of an anti-corruption ethos because we have failed to culturally internalise the positive social values. This deficiency was not unexpected as insensitive men and women with a marginal sense of public duty were catapulted

into positions of national importance. They did not care if corrective institutions were subjected to constant battering by the unscrupulous. No wonder, therefore, that in Bangladesh today the regulatory institutions do not have the required bite. Clearly we need to rebuild.

The ACC Chief has been very pragmatic in soliciting the active cooperation of officials under the NBR in preparing credible documentary evidence for booking the accused. In

ment of the immediate past. There is no denying that there was hardly any political will and determination to counter corruption as many politicians continued to hold the belief that political power was the means to become rich. In such an environment it was only natural that the offices of erstwhile bureau of anti-corruption at different places would suffer from inactivity and inertia. Irregularities and indiscretions did not cause the raising of eyebrows in a milieu where

corruption for many has become a way of life.

No stigma was attached to black money in our society. Tax incentives have been given to black marketers, tax evaders, smugglers etc. The corrupt had their promoters, supporters and partners everywhere in business, trade, industry, and agriculture and even in media.

The extent of corruption and related difficulties of countering the same, need to be highlighted to impress upon the unfortunate development concerning near total absence of departmental vigilance and corrective action.

Somehow there was a belief that irregularities of all sorts may go on regardless until the malfeasance has attracted the attention of the regulatory authority including the anti-corruption department. The situation is ludicrously akin to one in which all

the erring and negligent headmasters are virtually motionless waiting for the School Inspector to pull them up. It amounts to a multiple crooks and the lone ranger scenario. No wonder, therefore, we are witnessing a huge backlog of financial, legal and administrative irregularities and deviations in all areas of national activity. Preparing a work plan and deciding on the bare reducible minimum is an extremely difficult task in such an unsettling scenario.

A retired defence official has very correctly pointed out that a process of accountability has been set in motion in Bangladesh. However, in order to look beyond the present anti-corruption drive, we have to adopt a number of measures to institutionalise the accountability mechanism.

Now that Bangladesh has signed the UN Convention against Corruption it is time for us to send a strong signal nationally and internationally about the importance of addressing corruption with a comprehensive framework and through coordination of national efforts with international. We have to confirm that the level of political commitment against corruption is high.

We have to ensure access to an extensive range of ways, means and standards for preventive measures for public and private sectors. In accordance with the fundamental principles of our own legal system, we

should have the opportunity to collaborate with other State parties and relevant international and regional organisations in promoting and developing the preventive and curative measures against corruption. We need to participate in international programmes and projects aimed at prevention of corruption. We should take measure to facilitate mutual learning and experience sharing including latest knowledge and information about best practices of transparency and accountability in public finance and public procurement, and other critical areas of the public sector.

We should have access to a comprehensive international cooperation framework for mutual law enforcement assistance, notably extradition and investigation.

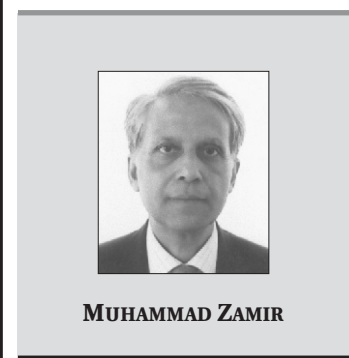
We have to give greater recognition to the role of the civil society and the citizens at large in fighting corruption. The government should be committed to ensure protection to witnesses, reporting persons and victims of corruption, and in particular the recognition of the right of bodies or persons who have suffered damages from corruption, to initiate legal proceedings for compensation.

Last but not the least, we have to ensure the establishment of the right of the public to access to information.

In the ultimate analysis, the test of our resolve will depend on how the collective will of our society guarantee that criminal acts, particularly of the elite, in both the private and public spheres, do not undercut government legitimacy and undermine rule of law. In the meantime, the burly predators may be incarcerated in public interest.

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Global impact of China's energy policies



MANY developing countries have a lot to learn from the manner in which China is trying to manage its energy strategy. China produces 93 percent of its energy, but still has problems meeting its needs because of its massive economic growth. It is therefore introducing interesting energy-efficiency and conservation measures to deal with shortages.

The seriousness of this issue has to be understood in relation to the growing concerns in the West about how Beijing's energy needs are driving its foreign policy. Given the fundamental size of the problem, many are carefully watching how China's management of its energy sector is affecting its international activities, specifically in areas such as Africa and north-east Asia, from where it is purchasing new energy resources. They are treating this seriously because they have noted the relative economic strength of China's state-owned companies' negotiations and the scope of their impact on market conditions and international relations. Examples are already being put forward about Chinese companies' negotiations with

the Uzbek government (affecting US foreign policy in the region) and deals with governments like Sudan (indirectly weakening Western pressure to improve the human rights situation in Darfur).

Chinese analysts are however insisting that such concerns are ill founded and Westerners should make greater efforts to understand China's approach. They are also reiterating that China's policy making and decision-making processes are very complex and involves different layers of political sensitivity and a large number of people. In this context, more often than not, they normally refer to the Chinese government's decision to create a National Energy Leading Group to deal with energy security.

Since 2005, China has become the world's second largest energy-consuming country. Today, 69 percent of its energy is provided by coal, 19 percent by crude oil and 4 percent by natural gas. This scenario has however three other interesting connotations. Energy consumption per capita in China is still below global averages. At the same time, China is the world's second largest energy

producer and fifth largest oil producer. Added to this aspect is another major factor. China today uses 40 percent of global coal supplies and, over the last four years, the country's energy demands have accounted for 45 percent of the increase in world energy demands.

Undeniably, this has had an impact on the international energy market, global warming and the country's overseas activities.

In the 1990s, the government

focused on energy supply, domestic energy production and building an equal society, to the detriment of economic and environmental efficiency in energy. Today, however, the country's energy demands are so high that there have recently been blackouts in 20 of the country's provinces, accompanied with soaring energy imports and declining environmental conditions. To stem the tide, the government is now prioritising energy efficiency as the means to keep the economy growing as well as emphasising the need to fight climate change through energy conservation.

Such a situation has created a unique dynamics within China.

Beijing knows that its momentum of growth will continue to rise in the near future. At the same time it is aware of the energy implications of such runaway growth. Accordingly, it has now formulated special plans to satisfy future needs through energy development and conservation. This is meant to ensure a stable, affordable and clean energy supply to help build a prosperous society without impacting on other areas of the state.

Its conservation strategy is now

being geared towards the reduction of energy consumption per GDP unit by 20 percent by 2010, and a further 30 percent by 2020. It is also planning to improve energy efficiency through new technology, new equipment and new processes. In this regard, it is also trying to restructure its economy to "shake off" high-energy consuming sectors such as iron and steel; and to improve efficiency through energy labeling for sectors such as transport, buildings and home appliances.

It would appear from the above that the basic principle of China's energy policy is to satisfy its needs primarily through domestic supply. This format is interesting given the fact that even

now, the country is far less dependent on foreign energy supplies than most OECD countries.

China is diversifying its resources away from coal, increasing nuclear power and using more renewables including hydropower, biogas, biofuel and solid pellets. Analysts are already predicting that by 2020, nuclear power will supply 4 percent and renewables 6 percent of the country's energy.

In the face of international scrutiny, the Chinese authorities have been

remonstrating that their energy policy is being "lost in translation." They acknowledge that their energy needs are having a huge impact on world markets. However, at the same time, they are underlining that China is trying very hard to avoid wastage of energy or to create unnecessary environmental pollution. Consequently, they are urging the world to ensure that China's voice is heard in multilateral organisations. It is also being reiterated that other developed countries and environmental activists should also overcome their "hysteria" about China's role and listen more to what it has to say.

Nevertheless, one thing is very

clear. China needs affordable Western technology to tackle its problems and to continue the current EU- and US-China projects, such as carbon capture and storage. It must also be understood that if the West wants Beijing to tackle climate change, it should not expect to make extraordinary amounts of money out of providing this technology.

It is important that the West helps China to find the right kind of future 'energy mix'. It is equally significant that China restrains itself from building and commissioning inefficient energy plants and instead focuses on clean energy. We are today at a crucial crossroad. What happens in China will affect the rest of Asia in more ways than one.

The northeastern Asian countries, particularly South Korea and Japan will have to work out a sustainable energy policy that will keep pace with the rising demand for energy within China. I believe that promoting practical cooperation in the energy field cannot only assist the energy policies of these three nations but also help to build trust among them. This could eventually promote a northeast Asian 'energy and environmental community' where all three countries could build up joint oil reserves to enable them to serve as a source of shared supply in times of emergency.

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Some proposals for stabilising food prices

ALI IDRIS

IN economics the theory of demand and supply prescribes that when supplies of commodities increase over demand in the market the price must come down unless there are syndicated hoardings and over-profiteering. For the last few years the political governments had miserably failed to keep the food prices stable. Now the popular caretaker government is also seemingly failing to stabilise the prices of the food commodities. Consequently the low and middle income group and fixed income earners are suffering to lead their lives. They are even losing their little savings in order to procure the daily essentials. These people constitute about 90 percent of the total population who contribute to productions and GDP growth of the country. If they lose their savings there won't be any growth in the per capita income of the people.

Factors responsible

The following factors seem to be hindering the stability of price of food items:

Decline in supply due to import of less amount of food commodities by the traders. Despite withdrawal of duties and taxes on some food items in the national budget of 2007-2008, food imports seem not to have increased. The reasons may be due to the measures taken against corruption and adulteration of food and collection of information about the source money used for opening letter of credit, many not so honest traders are fearing to utilise their capital freely and adequately in imports.

Due to dishonesty of a few traders whose food commodities were found rotten and adulterated in their godowns and who were punished, some supposedly honest traders as well are fearing to import food items lest by any chance any defect is found in their imported products.

There were no bumper crops in the

It is observed that when BDR sells commodities at selected centres, the prices remain lower than in market. But this system is not permanent and enough for the whole country. Hence Food or Agricultural Deptt or TCB should open centres throughout the country for purchasing and selling agricultural produce. This will eliminate profiteering by the middlemen, and the produce will be selling at reasonable prices to the ultimate consumers.

country during the last two years. Moreover mechanised cultivation methods are yet to be applied adequately in our farming like in neighbouring countries India, Myanmar, Thailand.

Increase in the prices of fuel (diesel, kerosene etc) and electricity directly and indirectly add to the cost of production and distribution of paddy, rice and other agricultural products.

Measures suggested

Supply must be increased in relation to or even in excess of the demand of food commodities in the market in compliance with the theory of economics while elimination of syndicated hoardings, cartelling and excessive profiteer-

ing must be ensured. The following measures are suggested to achieve the goals:

Duty-taxes-VAT on rice, pulses, edible oil, onion, garlic etc should be totally withdrawn.

Nil margin for opening L/C of food items, decrease in interest rate on loans, longer period for repayment of T.R, elimination of complications in assessment of and payment of duty, taxes, VAT (where applicable), preference in clearing of containers for food items at the port should be allowed by government order.

When any food item is scarce the government itself should import it through its agencies like TCB.

No question about the experience of

the importer, amount of LC, amount of capital used by the importer should be raised and banks should be ordered to give priority to opening of LCs for food items.

In order to prevent and stop hoarding, syndicated or otherwise, clear guidelines should be given as to the period of how many days a food item may be allowed to be stored with importers and wholesalers after its arrival and stringent punishment should be provided for in the laws for any deviation. Law enforcing agencies should be vigilant to look for deviations in storage periods.

TCB should be given responsibility to import and distribute food items in bulk aside the private importers. This

will create competition among the importers to sell them at lower prices. In the past as well TCB has played a vital role in importing items supply of which went short in the market. Last political government prevented TCB from importing perhaps with a view to benefiting the favoured importers. TCB may be converted into a public company as proposed, but it should be done quickly. TCB's capital or loan and manpower may also be increased to cater for mass distribution of imported and other agricultural items throughout the country by minimising the profits made by the middlemen.

Agricultural Corporation and Agricultural Department of the government themselves should be more

trained, made active and efficient in training the farmers in mechanised, scientific and modern cultivation like in neighbouring India, Thailand, Myanmar etc so that bumper crops can be harvested. Agricultural equipment, fertilizers, seeds, pesticides etc should be subsidised by the government. Farmers should be specially trained to face the aftermath of current flood damage.

Subsidy must be given to farmers if the prices of diesel, rural electricity, gas, kerosene etc are increased. But since subsidy does not reach the real needy, prices of diesel, kerosene, gas, fertilizers, seeds etc should not be increased at all.

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The vivid examples of how price drops when supply is adequate are (i) the price of sugar was Tk 65 per kg about six months ago; now, since its supply has in creased, it sells at Tk 25 per kg, and (ii) due to abundant supply of lemon in the market it sells at Tk 10 per score.

Conclusion

The noble task of eliminating grafts and corruption undertaken by the caretaker government must be successful in order to clean the garbage of past 36 years, but controlling inflation of food items is also a vital issue for the low and middle income group who constitute about 90 percent of the population. So I urge the government to give equal importance to controlling and stabilizing the prices of food items.

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