

Rising prices, approaching Ramadan

Creating food security must be a priority

THE RE is an anxiety among the general public about a further rise in the prices of essential items during Ramadan. Every new season of significance, be it Ramadan or Eid, has seen prices inflate to levels that leave the poor absolutely helpless and the middle classes struggling, often in vain, to maintain a decent living. If some recent statistics from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics are any guide, the inflation rate on food items for the month of July this year registered a worrying 13 percent. It thus becomes easy to see which way things will likely go in the coming days, unless of course, import is timely, transportation of commodities, now impaired by floods is steadied with special efforts and supply and distribution mechanisms are rendered efficient.

The current global food situation is especially harsh for countries like Bangladesh in the sense that traditional sources of food supply have been shrinking. Countries like India and Vietnam, to name a few, are today finding it difficult to deal with requests for food items that other countries might want to purchase. Thus Bangladesh is virtually left to buy food at high prices. Be that as it may, we have to build a buffer stock of food for the rainy days. That calls for a coordinated, purposeful campaign aimed at ensuring food security for all. On a wider level, food security as an issue may be given added impetus within the South Asian context.

In the past couple of months, Bangladesh's food situation has been made worse through two flood surges in a row. What with farmers losing crops to the rushing waters, the floods have put a big question mark on overall supply situation. The bottom line is therefore obvious: the food stocks that we build up require a distribution network that must be as swiftly operating as it must be efficient. The Vulnerable Group Feeding Program (VGF) should be extensively implemented for the sake of the poorest of poor. Open Market Sales are a good instance of how food supply can be steadied and prices kept within tolerable limits. But what fundamentally needs to be put in place is a durable marketing structure. That can be done through revitalising conventional market mechanisms.

Shadows of 9/11

The world has gotten worse

WE shudder to recall the cataclysmic terror attack on US Twin Tower and Pentagon and express our heartfelt sympathies to the thousands of victims of the crime against humanity. Nobody can or will ever condone it.

Having said that, most people all over the world and USA have become weary of the so-called war on terror since it all started after 9/11 -- particularly the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. The moral and ethical basis of international relations was badly ruptured by the so-called preemptive action of the lone superpower on indefensible grounds. Despite the invasions, however, bin Laden seems still at large.

Majority of Americans believe that USA has become more vulnerable to terror attacks than it was prior to the 9/11 incidents. There is an increased perception that US policy on tackling terror has created the grounds for increased terror incidents in several parts of the world. Many countries face extremist threats themselves. The interfaith harmony has also received a jolt it will take a long time to live down.

We strongly believe that a comprehensive change in the superpower's policy on war against terror is not only overdue but also imperative if we are to contain this number one factor -- terror -- that is threatening to destabilise governments in many countries.

As much as our collective goal is to fight any form of ideological terrorism or extremism, it should be clear to men of wisdom and reason that war on terror need not necessarily be invasive but very much a matter of moderate people throughout the world asserting themselves to firmly establish the values of civilised world. On a broader plane, international rule of law is better upheld through enlightened multilateralism.

View from abroad

All we know that destructive ideologists and religious fanatics grow out of desperation in a poor country. Economic disparity in a society creates dissatisfaction in people. Once their needs are met (a decent house to live in, a decent income to afford three meals, the ability to educate their children, and the ability to afford consumer goods), then those ideologists and fanatics evaporate from the society. We believe that the CTG is heading toward establishing a stable, corruption-free, democratic society, with equitable distribution of wealth among its citizens.

SHER ALI

THE caretaker government (CTG) of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a blessing for Bangladesh. He and his colleagues are showing real statesmanship in governing the country, something which was unknown to the people of Bangladesh and in Bangladeshi history. The people of one of the poorest countries of the world are now breathing a sigh of relief because of the freedom from anarchy and lawlessness.

We agree with the recent

comment made by Mr. Mainul Hossain, law adviser to the CTG, who said that the country would have been in a civil war if the CTG hadn't taken over. The army and the law enforcement departments of Bangladesh should be commended for their untiring, selfless efforts to help the CTG restore law and order, to recover crores of taka looted from the people, and to reclaim government land from the encroachers.

It is true that there is not a single country in the world that is completely free from corruption.

But if someone is convicted of corruption on a grand scale in an advanced country, the person often becomes remorseful and asks for forgiveness for his act.

Absence of remorse in Bangladesh felons

Contrary to being remorseful, convicted politicians and businessmen in Bangladesh are becoming hostile and belligerent towards the CTG. The family members and the affiliated party members of convicted persons, in Bangladesh and abroad, shamelessly and openly express

their ugly desire to take revenge when their time comes.

Under the circumstances, hurrying up the election before completing the cleanup task would not be a wise decision. We are afraid that the country will revert back to the old times. The unprecedented success of the CTG in curbing corruption and misuse of powers will be short lived.

The world is waiting to see the outcome

As a matter of fact, the whole world is looking to the CTG of Bangladesh, a tiny third world country, which has taken an unprecedented brave action to curb corruption and the misuse of powers of elected government officials, and is waiting to see the outcome of it. If the caretaker government succeeds in rooting out corruption, an evil of the society, it will be an example for the rest of the world to follow.

External pressure on CTG a hoax

We would like to emphasise that there is no external pressure on the CTG to stop what they are doing. The government should ignore the rumours circulated by the so-called expatriate party supporters of Awami League and BNP. As a matter of fact, the US government is very happy to see the action taken by the Bangladesh government to curb religious fanaticism in addition to corruption in Bangladesh. To the US government, fanaticism is tantamount to terrorism.

Erosion of goodwill

The initial goodwill of the people generated for the CTG at the beginning has somehow started dissipating. This is analogous to the US invasion of Iraq. When the government of Saddam Hussein fell, the Iraqis were jubilant, even to the extent of

hugging and kissing the American soldiers.

Soon, the Iraqis turned against the US occupation when they realised that their dream of freedom and prosperity may not materialise. The United States government cannot provide them, even the bare necessities of life.

They feel that their situation is now much worse than it was under Saddam Hussein's rule. The infrastructure of the country is in shambles, sewers are overflowing, electricity is scarce, jobs are fewer, and hundreds of thousands of people have no income to support their families.

Public housing

We would like to suggest that the CTG spend the billions of taka that it has recovered for a public housing project on reclaimed government land, similar to public housing projects in the US, to accommodate the millions of displaced and uprooted

poor people, instead of adding the money to the government coffers (general budget).

Several hundred thousand 2-3 bedroom flats will be a good start. This noble undertaking will be a permanent solution of a long over-due social problem, and it will also generate jobs for hundreds and thousands of unemployed citizens of Bangladesh. We believe this action will generate goodwill in the general public for the CTG.

Upgrading pay scale

We would also like to suggest that the government should upgrade the pay scale of all employees before handing over power to the succeeding government, so that nobody needs to resort to corruption to support his/her family.

Root of fanaticism

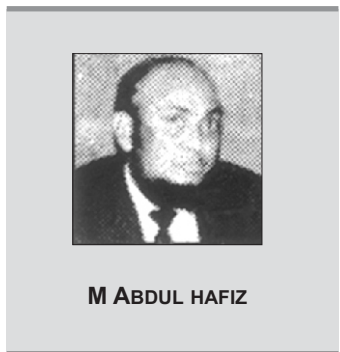
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poor country. Economic disparity in a society creates dissatisfaction in people. Once their needs are met (a decent house to live in, a decent income to afford three meals, the ability to educate their children, and the ability to afford consumer goods), then those ideologists and fanatics evaporate from the society.

We believe that the CTG is heading toward establishing a stable, corruption-free, democratic society, with equitable distribution of wealth among its citizens. We fully support the efforts of the CTG, which is determined to root out the evils in the society for good, and we appeal to the Bangladesh people to rally behind this government.

Dr. Sher Ali is an expatriate Bangladeshi scientist living in the US.

Is the Rubicon crossed?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE RE was hardly anything dissimilar in the dramas surrounding the apprehension and incarceration of the two top political leaders of the country, although the hiatus between the two episodes has roughly been one and a half months. The procedure followed and the drill adopted for the task as well as the sensation they created also were the same. But there were subtle differences in the way the two faced the ordeal.

For Sheikh Hasina, the miraculous survivor of August 15, 1975 and August 21, 2004, as well as many other undisclosed attempts on her life, it was almost a non-event. Resigned to fate, she courted the arrest more in a matter of fact manner and routinely hoped against hope for justice which too eluded her in the past. On the contrary, Mrs. Khaled

The political space vacated by the still popular political leaders and their giant political organisations can only be filled up if democracy's breeding ground is prepared by unfiltered political activism. Otherwise, are we not inadvertently encroaching the domain of the prerogative of the public? Ultimately, only the public, with its collective wisdom, is entitled to decide the fate of the politicians. But it is certainly not to deny the government of its prerogative to bring to book anyone who is found guilty of crimes against the public.

Zia was learnt to have been mildly defiant, but faced with reality she soon gave up. She, however, insisted on Koko, her younger son, accompanying her in the same transport. That too was rejected.

There was also a visible difference in the mood of the crowd that thronged along the way and in the court. There were outpourings of sympathy for Sheikh Hasina who never pretended either to be a Madam or a Begum and instead remained one of the common folk in her populist style of leadership, inherited from her illustrious father and perfected during her years of agitational politics in the street.

But there were curiosities galore for Begum Zia, because only months before she was undeclared queen of the country,

held in awe by her hapless subjects across the country. Now she was hoist on her own petard and reaping the whirlwind.

She ruled the country with imperial hubris and turned her tenure into a reign of plunder and terror. It was during her rule that the country witnessed the horrors of August 21, which, in public perception, could not have been enacted without her government's connivance.

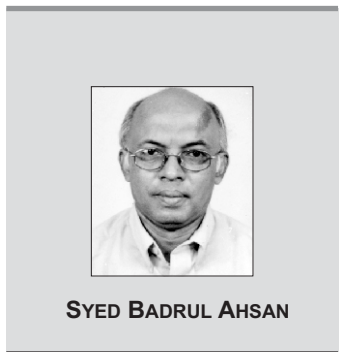
Many similar terror acts carried out by party goons against their political opponents were a routine feature of BNP-Jamaat dispensation led by her. She and her kith and kin along with their cronies and acolytes mercilessly looted the country to push it to the point of decrepitude, earning the ignominy of four consecutive years of being champions in

corruption.

Surprisingly, she suffered no contrition for what she wrought on the country, and like a hardened sinner continued to defend her corrupt cohorts -- particularly her thoroughly spoiled sons -- during the course of her recent tele-conferences. The imperious rulers do possess a measure of narcissism and cannot easily reconcile to the reversal of their fate. It was therefore no wonder that Mrs. Zia embarrassed even the court by giving vent to her misconceived notion of her clan's honesty.

It is an irony that Sheikh Hasina was never afforded a level ground during her role as the leader of the opposition in the eighth parliament and not even immediately before her arrest on July 16 last. It is

Pakistan, or how a dictator humiliates a country



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GENERAL Pervez Musharraf has just proved how fragile the state he rules by fiat remains. He has defied the Supreme Court and turned his back on civilised behaviour to demonstrate to the hapless people of his country and to the world at large that when it comes to a question of survival, a dictator will do anything and everything to ensure that he goes on and everyone else goes fleeing for dear life.

The unceremonious manner in which former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was bundled off into fresh exile in Saudi Arabia, a mere four hours into his return to Pakistan, on Monday simply reconfirmed our worries that government by illegitimacy remains a potent danger for nations economically deprived and politically tenuous.

There are some other dark truths that Nawaz Sharif's forcible deportation to Saudi Arabia have revealed through the high-handedness of the Pakistani military regime. A definitive one is that with men like Musharraf in power, it becomes rather easy for other nations, those with clear economic clout, to intervene unabashedly in the internal politics of a poverty-stricken country.

The representative of the Saudi royal family and the son of

All these sordid acts of successive Pakistani military regimes have sullied the reputation of a country yet unable, sadly enough, to define its reason for being. And now that a former prime minister has been handed over to a foreign country, to be kept in its territory as a prisoner, a whole new question opens up about the degree of national sovereignty and self-esteem General Musharraf has destroyed in the furtherance of his grasping ambitions.

Lebanon's late Rafik Hariri saw little that was immoral in the way they turned up in Pakistan to explain the case for the Musharraf regime in the Sharif affair.

The deposed prime minister, they noted without batting an eyelid, owed it to his conscience to fulfill his part of the bargain he had reached with Musharraf and the Saudi royals seven years ago, about staying in Saudi Arabia and out of politics for ten years. What was conveniently not explained was the universally acknowledged idea that any deal made under duress was not acceptable in terms of the law.

Neither did either of the two men care to tell Pakistanis that Pakistan's Supreme Court was a much more credible institution than any foreign-based monarchy.

You could go on exploring this entire issue of how badly, sometimes viciously, foreign nations interfere with the political process of a sovereign country, and thereby keep its people from fully realising their potential. There used to be a time when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took it upon himself, as prime minister, to warn anyone outside Pakistan and wishing to challenge its sovereignty to keep off. But that was for a few years, until early 1977 when Bhutto

himself was compelled to seek Middle Eastern support in his bid to tame the increasingly violent opposition to him after the elections in March that year.

Overall, though, you might argue that Pakistan's fate has, by and large, traditionally been decided by others. What the Saudis have just done is a mere continuation of that process, though you would be right to suggest that General Musharraf has carried this whole idea of foreign involvement in Pakistan's politics to ludicrous heights.

From a properly historical point of view, though, Pakistan's dependence on foreign powers, be it in conducting diplomacy or handling irksome democratically oriented politicians at home, began as far back as the late 1940s, when Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan spurned a Soviet invitation to visit Moscow and instead accepted President Truman's offer of a trip to Washington. It was the beginning of what would come to be Pakistan's dependence on the West, especially the United States, in its search for a place in the international community.

Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Mohammad Ali Bogra were ardent advocates of ties with Washington. Not even General Ayub Khan (and this was before

he seized control of the country in 1958) proved impervious to American charm. He may have earned a few plaudits with his address to a joint session of the US Congress in 1961, where he spoke of Pakistan's desire for friends and not masters; but in truth he remained a passionate believer in close links with the West.

It was policy that would benefit Pakistan in the short run, as in 1971 when General Yahya Khan would facilitate Washington's opening to China through making it possible for Henry Kissinger to fly to Beijing from Rawalpindi. In the long run, however, such a policy would prove disastrous. The China factor in 1971 did nothing to help Pakistan persuade the Nixon administration that it needed to be saved from destruction in East Pakistan.

In the 1980s, an enthusiastic General Ziaul Haq went overboard in cobbling, with the Reagan administration, the Mujahideen resistance to Soviet dominance in Afghanistan. Once Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew his soldiers from Kabul (and by then Zia was dead), it was Pakistan that paid the price. The Kalashnikov culture that swept Pakistan after Zia would lead eventually to greater tragedy. You only have to study the history of

the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

It does not help Pakistanis at all when the West cheerfully acknowledges Pakistan's role as a frontline state in the war on terrorism, and when men like Musharraf take that as a compliment. If anything, that is as patronising an attitude as any. Worse, it is a clever way of keeping Pakistan's democratic forces at bay, through suggesting that dictators like Musharraf are a guarantee that terrorism will one day, sooner rather than later, be beaten.

Almost invariably it turns out, though, that with military rulers in charge, terrorists get that ululating feeling in them, one that rekindles fresh energy in their misguided belief that they are right in everything they do, and the rest of the world be damned.

In these six years since September 11, 2001, you might note, General Musharraf has only made Pakistan a far more dangerous place than it used to be. Moreover, his writ in a number of areas simply has ceased to run. The frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the Taliban and al-Qaeda cheerfully plan their future, is something he does not control.

That embarrassment is compounded by the periodic intentions of his American patrons, publicly announced to the media, to bomb terrorist positions inside Pakistan with little thought to the country's sovereign status.

It is a truism that is not much at variance with the way Pakistan found itself in trouble over the U2 affair in 1960. The American Francis Gary Powers took off from a US base in Peshawar, infiltrated Soviet

territory and was swiftly shot down. Both the Eisenhower administration and the Ayub Khan military junta denied that the incident had actually taken place, until Nikita Khrushchev produced Powers before the media. It was a shame.

Ironically, however, every military ruler in Pakistan has perpetuated such shame in one form or another. And Musharraf holds perhaps the dubious reputation of embarrassing his country and its elected government when, as chief of army staff, he planned and executed the Kargil operation in the late 1990s without letting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif into the details.

All these sordid acts of successive Pakistani military regimes have sullied the reputation of a country yet unable, sadly enough, to define its reason for being. And now that a former prime minister has been handed over to a foreign country, to be kept in its territory as a prisoner, a whole new question opens up about the degree of national sovereignty and self-esteem General Musharraf has destroyed in the furtherance of his grasping ambitions.

It is an odd condition for a country to be in. General Musharraf has been handing over Pakistani citizens to be handled by American authorities on Guantanamo. Now he has initiated a process of finding prisons for Pakistan's politicians in a desert kingdom yet to know what intellectual and political freedom is all about. It is a hard slap across the face for all Pakistanis.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

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