

Holding down prices

Benefits of increased supply yet to accrue

PRICES of consumer items for Ramadan are on the rise owing to increase in demand which would normally imply that supply might not be enough to cater to the demand. But that is not the case as the market does not show any dearth of commodities; in fact it looks plentiful. There is, of course, an added dimension i.e. bulk or panic buying to the demand side which is instrumental in pushing up prices. For instance, consumers started buying commodities like onion, potato, sugar, lentil etc to store them for fear of any price hike during Ramadan.

A mix of countervailing measures need to be taken: first, consumers better apply some self-discipline and not resort to bulk buying out of sympathy for the people with limited purchasing power and also because they should not be unwittingly any party to the price hike through a simulated high demand situation. Secondly, public and private sector importers should try to be a step ahead of the market demand allowing for the fact that people will be buying more during Ramadan in any case. That is exactly where they can spread their profits thin over wide ranging and heightened demands and still earn significant amounts at the end of the day. They can hold their profit motive within limits in keeping with the Ramadan spirit.

The government has taken steps to strengthen the supply side. The BDR have started selling some essential commodities from one hundred outlets in the city. The members of the Ansar and private sector traders are to operate another 100 retail outlets in the city. Very importantly, the state-owned Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) are to sell some essential commodities at fair prices in four divisional cities including Dhaka. In the capital city they will sell the items from 46 spots through trucks.

These dispersed marketing arrangements are likely to cool off the prices somewhat. But they are urban centred so that there is a need for further dispersal of the network to include the rural areas with an emphasis on traditional market mechanisms.

Domestic violence

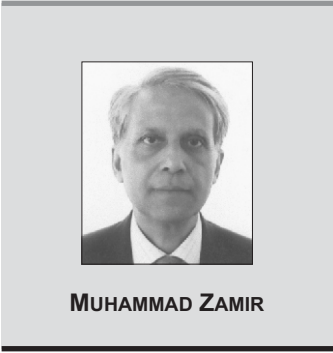
Implement legal framework at the earliest

RESEARCH findings of a number of relevant governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as UN agencies strongly point to the fact that domestic violence has taken an epidemic form in Bangladesh. A large number of women and children fall victim to atrocities committed on them by close relations at home or by strangers outside, which often result in deaths and disfigurement. These issues came up for discussion at a workshop styled 'National Workshop on Domestic Violence Legislation', jointly organised by CARE and ActionAid, Bangladesh.

Legal experts and rights activists deliberated on the critical issues incorporated in the draft 'Domestic Violence Bill' submitted by the Law Commission in 2006 and reiterated the need to monitor the implementation of the bill. We cannot but agree with the experts that there is the need for effective legislation as well as wider people's awareness to help curb the incidence of domestic violence in the country.

A look at the regional statistical figures would reveal that, in general, one in two women in South Asia experience violence of some kind in the hands of their husbands. Specifically, in Bangladesh, between 50 and 60 per cent of women experience some form of domestic violence (ICDDR,B). One Stop Crisis Centre, a Bangladesh-based NGO, reveals that almost 70 per cent of sexual abuse occurs within their own homes. An estimated 200 women are murdered each year in Bangladesh from dowry related violence, says Oxfam Australia. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment says that 60 per cent of women, including 44 per cent pregnant women, become victims of domestic violence. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-II) of India reveals that as many as 70 per cent of married women in India between the age of 15 and 49 are victims of beating, rape or coerced sex. In Pakistan, around 80 per cent women suffer violence within their homes (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan). According to Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) more than 50 per cent of women are victims of abuse within their homes. And according to a UNICEF report, nearly 275 million children worldwide witness abuse in their everyday life. In South Asia, the estimates range from 40.8 million to 88 million children.

There can be no second thought on the question of curbing violence on women and children - two most vulnerable groups in our society. We therefore feel the call for disseminating information on the nature of domestic violence, right to freedom from violence and available remedies is a timely one that needs to be implemented at the earliest.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE jute sector which has steadily been going downhill has recently attracted special attention because of the current Administration's decision to close down four jute mills - Peoples Jute Mills in Khulna, Karnaphuli Jute Mills and Forat-Karnaphuli Carpet Factory in Chittagong and Quami Jute Mills in Sirajganj. It has been claimed that they were shut down to help the government run the rest of the mills more efficiently.

This latest measure has not only raised questions about this industry's future but also given way to serious criticism within the business community and economists associated with this sector. The immediate human cost has been the termination of more than 6,000 employees of these industrial units. Unfortunately, alternative possibilities of employment were not thought of before the serving of their redundancy notices. There was also no effort to initiate any Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) whereby the personnel structure cost could have been downsized. Very understandably, such a step had led to rioting, work stoppage and unease within other existing jute mills in the public sector.

All this has been happening at a time when the United Nations has declared 2009 as the International Natural Fibre Year One would think that the significance and purpose for designating such an observance has been totally lost on our current interim Administration.

Jute, since the partition of India in 1947, has played an important role within the matrix of our country's economy. 'Golden fibre' as it is referred to, has been, in more ways

than one the mainstay of our rural economy. It has played an invaluable part with regard to providing employment and income generation to millions of farmers. In many parts of the country, jute stalks have also been the ideal source of alternative energy.

The primacy of this industry continued through the 1960s into the 1970s. In 1972-73, a survey indicated that the industry was directly or indirectly involved in providing income to nearly 13 million people, in producing about 450,000 metric tons of jute prod-

ucts that year producing about 500,000 metric tons of hessian, sacking, CBC, carpet and yarn and earned in the process about US\$ 300 million. This improvement was also made possible by the Bangladesh Bank according to the commercial banks facilities that were fair and equitable in nature. This movement forward encouraged this sector and the entrepreneurs associated with it.

One drawback however continued to haunt the scene. This fatal factor related to the cost of carrying the huge debt burden of jute mills

however did not move smoothly. After disbursing the first tranche of US\$50 million, the World Bank felt that the government had not fulfilled all its obligations. Consequently, all further disbursements stopped. One can only assume that it was probably due to incompetence on the part of the relevant authorities associated with the implementation of the Programme. What was required was proper planning and seriousness and that was lacking. Political partisanship also cast its shadow.

goods production due to closure of state owned units one by one. While jute goods production has gone down in Bangladesh, it has risen steadily in neighbouring India. In fact, India now imports nearly 700,000 bales of raw jute from us. There was a time, not too long ago, when state run jute mills in Bangladesh used to purchase about 1.3 million bales of raw jute from the local producers. That has now come down to less than 600,000 bales.

It is difficult to accept that jute can be on the way out in this coun-

about using jute with a plastic base to create construction sheeting and dividers as an alternative to wooden boards. I have seen this being already attempted in Europe. (c) Making it mandatory to pack food grains, sugar, fertilizer and cement in jute bags. This will increase consumption and demand for the product. (d) Supplying gas to jute industrial units at the same rate as paid for the Power Development Board. (e) Being more careful in spreading the message that the Ministry of Jute is not a dumping ground for bureaucrats. It is unfortunate that postings as Secretary to the Ministry lasts for less than the desired tenure, thus creating an impression of lack of seriousness and a breakdown in the planning of strategy or a perspective plan.

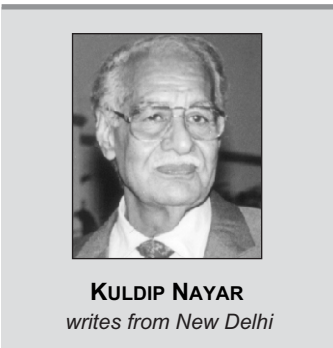
We have to get out act together.

There is no reason for the authorities concerned to consign jute to the back burner. A more pro-active national agenda needs to be agreed upon through consensus among the principal stakeholders -- political parties (that they will stop abusing this industry and using its meagre resources for narrow political ends), the labour force (that they, and their CBA, will refrain from taking advantage of poor supervision and stop assisting in corruption at all levels within the management structure) and the private entrepreneurs (that they will not only spend additional resources in making the industrial units more efficient but also set aside some of their profits for research and development of new products that rely on jute).

It will not be correct to just close down jute mills, lay-off workers and privatise the industry. Every government, including ours has to go beyond that and find responsible solutions that are not only profitable but also a generator of employment. We should try to emulate what is happening in West Bengal, India. If they can do it, so can we.

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First shot goes waste



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

THE Nawaz Sharif episode has made one thing clear: people in Pakistan are not yet willing to come to the streets to retrieve democracy. True, four to five thousand were detained before he landed at Islamabad, and some more when they tried to enter the barricaded airport. But they were mostly members and supporters of the Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif).

There was no uprising like the one witnessed in Nepal to oust the king, to be a republic. I had imagined that people at Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Sialkot or at least Rawalpindi, the next doors, would defy the police in bazaars on Nawaz Sharif's landing. The enthusiasm and the dedication with which the lawyers had conducted their four-month-long agitation for the reinstatement of Chief Justice Mohammad Iftikhar Chaudhary had led me to believe that if ever the chips were down, all would be there, from far and wide, from the haves and the have-nots, to register their demand to oust the military ruler.

Yet, when the time came and Nawaz Sharif was in the Pakistan capital, there was little protest even

in Islamabad. The people cannot say that they were taken by surprise. He traveled by PIA, the official carrier of the country, to make it clear that he was not entering the country furtively.

In fact, Nawaz Sharif had given out the date and place one week before his travel. He bearded the lion in his den. He dared President General Pervez Musharraf despite dire warnings. But there was no popular response.

then prime minister Morarji Desai was against any demonstration or protest.

People saw the spectacle of Nawaz Sharif's detention on their television sets. There was hardly any public stir that could make the rulers shaky. I am not dwelling on the people's feeling of alienation, which is writ large on their faces. I am only assessing the response to the arrival of a banished leader after seven years, a Punjabi in Punjab, which has 63 percent of the

The intelligentsia and others showed their stamina and strength during the lawyers' agitation. But why they did not participate in the political battle when Nawaz Sharif fired the first salvo?

What had been mentioned at indoor meetings has come out in the open. Political parties would rather blot out one another than join hands to oust the military-backed rule. Pakistan People's Party (PPP), headed by Benazir Bhutto, kept its distance from Nawaz

Bhutto, with all her liberal credentials, has negotiated with Musharraf and reportedly accepted him as president, provided he gives up the uniform. In other words, all that he did to the nation in the last seven years was forgiven and swept under the carpet.

Still, more important is the principle of military-cum-civil rule. What Benazir Bhutto is doing runs counter to the Charter of Democracy which she signed with Nawaz Sharif in London. The document is

one and defeat all the work done so far to restore democracy. Benazir has said that 80 percent of her deal with the military was through. I can understand her anxiety to return to Pakistan to fight against fundamentalism. But this cannot be at the expense of democracy.

The role of religious parties appears opportunistic. The Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA), the combination of six religious parties, is running the state governments in the NWFP and Baluchistan with the help of Musahrraf's Muslim League headed by Sujjat Hussain.

Whatever MMA's rhetoric, it wants Musharraf's support in the next election. He helped it to win numerous seats in the National Assembly to keep as many liberals out as possible.

Probably, Nawaz Sharif realised at the last minute that his would be a lonely battle against Musharraf. Shahbaz Sharif was asked to stay back even after he had collected the boarding card for travel with his brother. Begum Kulsoom, Nawaz Sharif's wife, has declared that she would travel to Pakistan to pick up the thread from where her husband had left it. No doubt, she can.

But she may not get much support unless the Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif) mobilises the help of other political parties and formations. For that, Nawaz Sharif would have to say goodbye to the religious elements he has gathered around him. He should think it over how to do so because his first shot has gone awry.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

What Benazir Bhutto is doing runs counter to the Charter of Democracy which she signed with Nawaz Sharif in London. The document is a primer in people's sovereignty in the whole subcontinent. There is no half way in democracy. Either people are sovereign or they are not. Sharing power, however limited, with the military will take back Pakistan to square one and defeat all the work done so far to restore democracy. Benazir has said that 80 percent of her deal with the military was through. I can understand her anxiety to return to Pakistan to fight against fundamentalism. But this cannot be at the expense of democracy.

There can be many explanations why people did not come out. They are too burdened by the task of earning their livelihood. Or it could be that in 45-year-old rule the military has sapped their energy to the extent that they lack the courage to stand up to the government. Maybe, these reasons are valid.

Yet, the fact remains that when Nawaz Sharif was at the airport for almost three hours, the Pakistanis were quiet as usual. Probably fear gripped them. It was like when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged, with no protest whatsoever in Pakistan. India exhibited its anger, although the

population.

It is apparent that the government was not deterred by the Supreme Court's judgment that a Pakistani national had an inalienable right to return to his country. Both Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Shahbaz, were mentioned by name in the judgment. For reasons best known to the Musharraf government, it must have considered the legal aspect lest it should invite contempt of court.

It goes without saying that the judiciary is one of the pillars of the democratic edifice. Its authority safeguards an individual's rights. Still, the judiciary, however free, depends on the support of people.

Sharif. She, in fact, attacked him by name. His "understanding" with Saudi Arabia to "escape" the rigours of jail was characterised as a sign of cowardice. Maybe, he should have preferred prison to the plush living, and kept the flame of defiance burning.

Still, he has not tried to make up with the military, which negates democracy. Despite his past -- his close relations with General Zia-ul-Haq -- Nawaz Sharif has rejected all of Musharraf's overtures. Nawaz Sharif has stuck to what he said after the coup in which he was removed, that he would have no truck with the military.

On the other hand, Benazir

a primer in people's sovereignty in the whole subcontinent. It says at the very beginning, "Drawing history's lesson that the military dictatorship and the nation cannot coexist -- as military involvement adversely affects the economy and the democratic institutions as well as the defence capabilities and the integrity of the country -- the nation needs a new direction different from a militaristic and regimental approach of the Bonapartist regimes, as the current one."

There is no half way in democracy. Either people are sovereign or they are not. Sharing power, however limited, with the military will take back Pakistan to square

Land dispute: Legacy of deprivation of the poor

Md ABDUL KADER

Land dispute is an existing old conflict linked to the socio-economic and political systems in Bangladesh society. It is harming quite a considerable number of people, directly or indirectly, each year. Specially the landless and poor fishermen community, other occupational mini communities, poor Adibasi groups residing on various char and khas lands of the country are falling hapless victim to this dispute to be harmed both financially and socially. At places this dispute has led to the eviction of socially weak landless people. Even incidents of killing and grievously injuring rivals their homestead loot and arson, oppression and harassment also happened centring such disputes. And this increasing trend of land dispute cases has caused serious negative impact on our society and economy.

Of late, a Samata conducted survey shows that more than 750 cases of land dispute have taken place over the past year in the

country. Of this 188 are direct land dispute cases which include incident of killing too. Land disputes left 47 killed and several thousand injured during 2006. Samata conducted this research on the basis of reports published over the past one year in six daily newspapers including, the Prothom Alo, the Ittefaq, The Janakantha. And it cannot be overemphasised that the number of incidents reported in the newspapers is much less than the actual happenings. However, it of course gives us an idea of the grave situation.

The research shows that of the innumerable social, political or economic reasons leading to land dispute, the most prominent one is establishing dominance of illegal occupants on khas land. In other words the neo land grabbers rising under cover and tacit support of political parties are the real actors in this dispute drama. And the most harmed are the landless people. The number of land disputes as well as clashes are more on khas land than anywhere else.

The state declares undisputed right of the landless on khas land and waterbodies, but in reality it is otherwise. Continuous negligence of government officials, absolute indifference of corrupt land officials and demonstration of muscle power by illegal occupants under political cover have led to a gradual increase in the number of conflicts over khas land. For instance, it may be mentioned that innumerable attacks have been launched on the landless around Bil Pakuria in Rajshahi district and Bil Kumari in Rajshahi district last year. Hundreds of landless people of Bil Pakuria were forced out of their huts by lodging thousands of cases against them.

Not only this, according to reports in newspapers, huge amount of government and non-government land has been illegally occupied last year. Much of such government land belongs to Roads & Highways, Railway, Water Development Board etc. very little amount of this could be recovered by the respective authorities (the

Daily Ittefaq, April 4, 2006).

As usual the poor suffer most in this land disputes, too. They have to fight most to stick to their ownership. Often they had to spend more than the price of khas land given by government. And to refrain the poor landless to establish their right on khas land the land-grabbers have chosen false litigation against them as an effective tool. The poor landless soon become unable to meet the expenses of running cases and give up. Among these victims those belonging to the minority communities and the Adibasis happen to be more soft targets of the land-grabbers. Their lands are rather 'safely' occupied by the land-grabbers. Their deprivation and the land-grabbers' illegal occupation are fast 'gaining ground' through the loopholes of Vested Property Act and in absence of a Separate Land Commission for the Adibasis.

Such illegal occupation of 'Debottar' property, often even lands of temple and cremation ground Adibasi land in the hills and plains are leading to wanton

Adibasi-Bangali and minority-majority tension and fracas in this country of communal harmony (The Daily Ittefaq May 1, 2006).

Now corruption has added a dimension to this scourge of land dispute. This is not only igniting but lingering it to the benefit of the corrupt. Three departments of two ministries (Ministry of Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs and Ministry of Land) look after all matters of land. But lack of coordination among these departments has allowed the corrupt to thrive. Proper records are seldom done and maintained and in the process false records and forged papers abound simply to the suffering of the powerless poor who have little ability to cut through the existing complex and clumsy land records to prove their ownership. 37.2 percent of the land disputes during 2006 were due to ownership and demarcation complexities. The Daily Jugantor, March 15, 2006) various classes of people are trying in various ways to gain ownership of and establish right on land. The influentials are at

the advantageous end to deprive the disadvantaged in the matter. Although the access of the landless to khas land is a legally established right they are seldom allowed to have it, while the powerful influentials can possess it even if it is illegal. The conflict and dispute over land is then created. Eviction of the landless from khas land in Satkhira and engaging 'lathials' against the landless in chars of Noakhali by the land-grabbers may be mentioned in this connection. (The Prothom Alo, May 7, 2006).

It is very much necessary to end this continuation of land dispute which is harming people both financially and socially. It is necessary to settle these disputes and allow the landless establish their constitutional right on khas land. It is necessary to formulate and adopt proper laws to save the landless poor from the powerful land-grabbers in the interest of having a just society. It is also necessary to make the poor and the landless aware of their just rights. And to achieve this end of prevailing

equity, justice and peace in society, the government, non-government organisations and the civil society -- all have to work together.

To gradually reduce the occurrence of land dispute and conflict it is necessary to create a general awareness. It is also necessary to conduct research to identify exact reasons. Then it will be easy to find acceptable solutions to the problems. Immediate steps to be taken may include:

- Establish coordination among the departments of the two ministries mentioned above and integrate the whole affairs of looking after land.
- Conduct regular 'Diara' survey. This will ensure the actual amount of land in river areas of the country and its ownership as well as lessen the complexity of demarcation.
- Free the whole system of survey from corruption and land record from forgery.
- Appoint land surveyors and record keepers on permanent basis instead of contract basis for establishing accountability.
- Introduce a system of land court

on site while conducting survey so that any dispute arising thereof can be settled then and there.

Now it seems necessary to constitute district courts to settle land disputes at district level. This will reduce the lingering of cases as well as unnecessary expenses. It has also become an imperative to award exemplary punishment to the proven illegal land-grabbers, so that this harmful tendency is checked for good. There are so many steps to be taken including publication of list of khas lands and water bodies in the country for public awareness, taking all the illegally occupied ones under government control and distributing that among the legally deserving ones.

This too much disturbing problem of land dispute really needs early resolution in the greater interest of the society and economy.

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