

## Our citizens in distress abroad

Whatever the reasons, we have responsibility towards them

TEN thousand Bangladeshis are said to be languishing in prisons in foreign countries under different charges like overstaying, violation of statutory conditions of visa including criminal offences. In bits and pieces we have heard about our citizens being stranded, detained, imprisoned and deported, but only when such a consolidated figure appears in print that we sit up and take note. Or do we? May be we would be nudged to feel for them, perhaps only momentarily, at their plight in in-hospitable conditions and curse their gullibility in keeping faith with cheats.

But in the ultimate analysis, there is a serious lapse on the part of our authorities concerned, notwithstanding the infringement of law they might have committed. For, they are our citizens and we can't abandon them either in weal or in woos.

Is there any database for these cases in the expatriate welfare ministry duly fed by Bangladesh missions abroad from time to time? That is imperative if we are to keep tab on the individual situations and follow up on these with host governments for their release and repatriation. All forms of consular assistance and legal aid will have to be provided to them at the appropriate time. If their illegal stay in a country or commission of criminal offence is scandalous and derogatory to the image of the country, so is our image undermined and further sullied by not making timely intervention with the host authorities and providing our citizens with any help.

Apparently, money from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund could be used for repatriating Bangladeshis who had entered a country through legitimate channels but it couldn't be used for repatriating those who entered a country through unspecified channels and thrown into jails including those guilty of overstaying. This rule should be relaxed in the interest of maintaining the country's goodwill with the host country as well as the rationale for bearing the burden of our own citizens.

Repatriation of workers should take place irrespective of the alleged offences committed. Once in the country, the entire matter could be reviewed and action taken under the laws of the land.

## Removal of judges in Pakistan

A wholesale infliction of paralysis on an institution

THE move by the Pakistan government to send 37 judges of the Supreme Court and the various High Courts into forcible retirement spells grave danger not only for Pakistan's judiciary but also for the future of its politics. At a time when the country's politicians, law-yers and other classes of people are engaged in a struggle to have democracy underpin the political process, the dismissal of the judges, for dismissal it is, smacks of a crude attempt to have a pliant judicial system in place for Pakistan's rulers.

The extent to which a subservient judiciary can serve the interests of the executive has just been seen through the alacrity with which the new judges, appointed to replace the retired ones, dismissed all court petitions against General Musharraf and had him reconfirmed as the country's president.

It all falls into a pattern. Earlier military rulers in Pakistan too were not averse to experimenting with the judiciary, the goal being a presence of judges ready and willing to legitimise the actions of unconstitutional re-gimes. If Field Marshal Ayub Khan inaugurated the process, it was General Ziaul Haq who perfected the system through dismissing Supreme Court judges who refused to take a fresh oath under martial law. General Musharraf has now played a similar game through try-ing to force judges to swear allegiance to him rather than the constitution under emergency provisions. The removal of the 37 judges, 13 from the Supreme Court and 24 from the various High Courts, is a clear, blatant infliction of paralysis on the institution of the judiciary. It is a gross instance of a paramount institution of the state being used as a tool for self-aggrandisement, to the detriment of the concept of rule of law and democracy.

General Musharraf and his friends would like to give the impression that by doffing his army uniform, the president has opened up a fresh new path to democracy. That, as the matter of the dismissed judges so amply demonstrates, is far from true. Judges who refused to abide by his orders have been kept under house arrest, an act which amounts to humiliating the entire system of the judiciary. General Musharraf has done irreparable harm to Pakistan in his own, narrow selfish interests.

## The gentle dragon

China labels its strategic foreign policy as "Peaceful Rising," reflecting cultural and historic experience while incorporating the concept of "soft power" as developed by Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Nye defines soft power as the ability to persuade through culture, value and ideas, as opposed to "hard power," or military might.

JOCELYN CHEY

THE media worldwide abound with reports about China's economic prowess and rising military capabilities. Little noticed is China's quiet effort to build "soft power" in its long-term objective of becoming a Great Power. China has found the source of its soft power in the millennia-old Chinese language and culture.

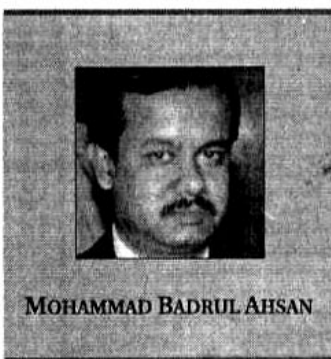
Not unlike France's Alliance Française or Germany's Goethe Institute, the Chinese government has set up more than 100 Confucius Institutes around the world in the last three years, teaching Mandarin, especially to overseas Chinese, to strengthen their cultural affinity with China. These institutes respond to a growing demand for learning Chinese, but there's danger in academic institutions worldwide relinquishing Chinese studies to institutes run by the government of China.

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In 2003, Nye remarked that China -- despite its growing economic power -- seemed inexperienced in the use of soft power. Beijing made note, finding that trade and culture rather than military action are in accord with the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs." Soft power also offered a possible solution to some of China's most difficult international relationships, particularly relations with Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

Cultural diplomacy is not new to Beijing, which relied on "panda diplomacy" and "ping pong diplo-

## Back against the wall



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WE eat to live, not live to eat. Try telling these lofty words to my man the court clerk and he will give a piece of his mind. With the price of rice hovering around Tk 40 per kilo, and the average price of the same amount of vegetable wobbling at Tk 20, while the prices of other essentials are keeping pace with these hikes, this man is now in a double whammy. His income has diminished since the anti-corruption drive forced him to stop charging his "facilitation fees." On the other hand, the rising prices are eating up his purchasing power within the existing income. At this rate, all his money will be spent on food. He will be lucky if he lives only to eat.

If the prices of essential commodities are compared to a horse, then this horse is surely galloping. Is it galloping only in Bangladesh,

though? Early this year, 75,000 trade unionists, agricultural workers and others joined in the biggest demonstration through Mexico City. They demonstrated against the rapid rise in the cost of tortillas.

In August, hundreds of shepherds clashed with police in Jordan to protest against an increase in the price of animal feed. Recently, rise in food prices also led to protests and demonstrations in Yemen and many countries in Africa.

The fact remains that prices have gone up everywhere in the world. In the last half of 2006, food prices rose faster than any other commodity group's after housing. In Britain, the price of a loaf of bread has risen by 15 percent in just 12 months. According to the research company TNS Worldpanel, in the 12 months to June of this year, the supermarket price of milk has gone up 11 percent, eggs have gone up almost 18

## CROSS TALK

The third reason for rising food prices is attributed to costly oil. Transportation and motorised tilling and harvesting have factored into the cost of food production. When eating becomes costly living follows suit, and makes eating costlier within that vicious cycle. My man the court clerk doesn't know much of it. He feels what he does, his back against the wall. Little does he know that what squeezes him comes after endless maneuverings between need of so many and greed of so few!

percent, butter has gone up 5 percent and meat 6 percent.

If you turn to the UAE market, where the house rents have more than doubled in some areas in last two years, the price of a cylinder of gas has increased by 20 percent, laundry cost by 15-20 percent, and cleaning and other services by 20-25 percent. Needless to say, the food prices haven't remained quite the same.

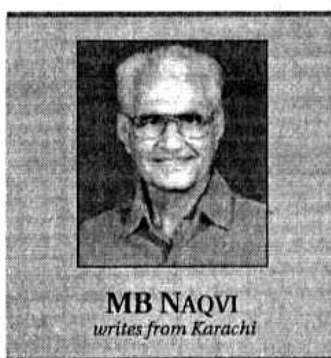
Let us face it, price hike is now a global phenomenon, which has been happening consistently over the last year across a wide range of commodities, including rice, wheat, soybean, palm oil and dried milk to name but a few. Average wheat prices have almost doubled in a year, causing misery for many across the world who rely on wheat as a cheap source of food.

For half a century, household expenditure on food was falling as a proportion of total expenditure.

Much of the disposable income was spent on other things, creature comforts and modern amenities, provided by advances in science and technology. Herbert Marcuse, in his book *One Dimensional Man* decried consumerism, which incessantly pushed luxuries to become necessities. Now it seems the tide has turned. Necessities are becoming luxuries again.

Why are the food prices rising? The answer is readily ascribed to two reasons. First, more and more land is being taken out of food cultivation and being given to industrial production. John Vidal reported in the Guardian that some 1.4 billion acres of land in India, Brazil, Southern Africa, Indonesia and Malaysia is proposed for turning over to crops for the bio-fuel industry. One of the outcomes is that the world's wheat stockpiles are forecast to drop to their lowest levels in 30 years.

## To boycott or not to boycott



MB NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

THE opposition parties are making a spectacle of themselves. The All Parties Democratic Movement, minus JUI of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, has decided that the January 8 election should be boycotted. The reason given is that it is unlikely to be free, and would only perpetuate Mr. Pervez Musharraf's rule.

Behind Musharraf looms the Pakistan army, whose new chief was his confidante. The PPP chairperson will contest the election, with a fig leaf of doing so under protest. Anyhow, both JUI of Maulana Fazlur Rehman and PPP are sure to contest the election.

The need for unity of all opposition parties arises from the absence of democracy and presence of entrenched authoritarian forces in the country. The army has cornered power, which has been running or manipulating the country for much of 60 years. But it has done so in a way that has made it the darling of the country's social elites.

Big business, bankers, major industrialists, and even the trading community as a whole, irresistibly warm towards a military ruler, because the army provides a supposedly strong government that keeps the people quiet, which

is good for business. Big business has, so far, liked all Martial Laws. That is unlikely to change.

But the need for united opposition arises from the fact that the ordinary citizens do not enjoy all the civil liberties the way western people do. In democracies, people's right to civil liberties is respected by courts, governments, political parties and all state agencies. In Pakistan self-perceived strongmen have ruled autocratically, whether they were democratic governments of PPP or PML(N) or a general's government.

Take the case of the treatment of the judges of superior courts. PPP's record is not a bright one; remember the harassment of Justice Sajjad Ali Shah and his family. Mian Nawaz Sharif's goons, led by a cabinet minister, stormed the Supreme Court and the judges had to run for their lives. What General Musharraf did on March 9 was a tad less crude than what happened in 1997. Factually, there is a strong element of commonality between major parties and the army itself.

The army flaunts its faith in Pakistan ideology, and makes others follow it despite its vagueness. It shares the value system of the feudals. It is a thoroughly conservative force dedicated to

keeping the society as it has always been. Now look at the major parties: PML(N), PML(Q), PPP, or take the innards of smaller nationalist parties that often pass as being left-inclined. Their leaderships belong to, or are descended from, the feudal class. Socially, they are as conservative as any Muslim Leaguer.

All these parties have an unwritten agreement with the military to leave the fundamentals of the social system untouched. Society with all its inequities must remain as it has always been. This is how the attraction of offices under the leadership of a general, or even a former general, is stronger than the facts about fundamental rights and democratic norms.

These parties implicitly accept the apologies to the west that these strongmen make about "doing things their own way." Pakistanis are supposed to be quite different from westerners; the police and other law enforcing agencies can beat them. They can be made to "disappear," "writ of the government has to run," and so forth in the name of Pakistan ideology.

Even the conduct of a PPP government, or the life within the party, is autocratic. The same applies to PML(N); the other day

its central body left the final decision about election participation to Nawaz Sharif alone. Their acquaintance with democratic working of parties and governments has been more theoretical than real.

The fact is that since the two main parties (JUI and PPP) will participate, all others will follow suit. They cannot leave the field to others. The sight of other parties' members becoming ministers in the government is unacceptable. "If A can get a ministership, or chairmanship of a parliamentary committee, why can't my party allow me to do the same," a feudalist argues.

While there is a case for unity because people should have the freedoms a democracy guarantees, so is there a case for disunity: the lure of office has been strong enough to overcome the appeal of democratic norms and methods. After all, participating in a military-led government is seen as doing no great harm to society or to their own standing. Since their ideas on social matters remain undisturbed, what is wrong in participating, in winning ministerships and being happy. Which is a basic case for disunity.

The sad fact is that the army, or army-dominated or army-controlled, governments are

The second factor leading to rising food prices is the big business control over the food industry. They have ensured that rising food prices aid their profitability. In the case of Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, turnover increased 12 percent last year while Britain's biggest food retailer Tesco saw its turnover increase 19 percent.

It may sound like a socialist rant, but while the poorest countries in the world have the highest proportion of national output going to agricultural exports, it is countries in the developed world which export the most agricultural products by value. So the price rises are not benefiting the poor farmers in the developing world. The manufacturers and retailers in the developed world are making another killing.

Somehow, the poor must always bear the brunt of big business ambition. Jody Clarke of the Free Money Morning has come up with what she calls the skyscraper index of stagflation. In 1929, the Chrysler building in New York was followed by the great depression. When the Sears Tower was completed in 1973, it brought in a decade of stagflation. The East Asian financial crisis happened after the Petronas Towers were completed in 1997.

The correlation between soaring buildings and sliding economy is common sense. Both come at the

top of a boom. In 2009, the tallest tower will be completed in Dubai. At 630 metres, Burj Dubai will dwarf all other skyscrapers in the world. With the price of crude exceeding \$100 per barrel, Dubai and other oil-exporting economies are awash with cash. There is a strong speculation that a slow-down in these economies is only a matter of time.

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That being the background, what lies ahead? Rising food prices lead to subsistence crisis. And, some of history's pronounced revolutions are culminations of this crisis. When the back is against the wall, one of two things must happen. Either the wall crushes the back or the back crushes the wall. Then desperate people take the law in their hands.

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actually acceptable to PPP, PML(Q), MQM, and many smaller parties. This is Pakistan's rightwing consensus, and it includes the army and all the other social elite groups. Their relationship with the free-enterprise west is historically close and ideological; their worldview is common with the west. There is, however, a new contradiction to be noted.

This is the emergence of a new middle class in the Punjab -- other provinces have not seen the process. Only Karachi boasts of a middle class that constitutes what is known as civil society. It is relatively affluent and educated. It is aware of the denial of political liberties that are freely available in democracies. Its love for democracy is genuine.

Today, civil society is being led by lawyers, who ran a four months long successful campaign for the restoration of the chief justice of Pakistan. They mean to continue the movement until they get the restoration of the chief justice and other judges now under internment. They need democracy keenly enough, and will not rest until they get it.

But civil society, luminous as it is, is politically weak. When pitted against the phalanx of the upper classes serried behind military-led governments they need the support of either the larger mainstream parties or of left parties, if there are any. As it happens, there are no cognisable left parties.

The destruction of the Left was the achievement of the past Pakistan governments. They destroyed students' movements, banned unions, and prevented teachers from having effective trade unions. The normal industrial phenomenon, trade union-

ism, has been all but destroyed. Most of the trade unionists have been purchased or co-opted; some stragglers are left. The lower social orders have no organisation; they have no voice. Their political clout today is zero.

The country's alliance with the West enabled Cento's anti-subversion funds to destroy the left groups, trade unions and students' movements. That happened in the 1960s and 1970s. The Pakistan that used to talk of social inequities, workers, peasants and the karigars has now disappeared. This weakens the middle class no end, because its natural allies would have been the leftists in the fight for all freedoms.

If the idea of a boycott means boycotting the election and going home to sleep, it will surely leave the field to all others, no matter if they are opportunists. To be significant, the boycott should accompany a fierce popular agitation for democratic freedoms, beginning with the restoration of the Supreme Court and High Courts as they existed on November 2 last, and the rescuing of the Constitution from the deforming amendments that had been forced by successive generals to make the president all powerful at the expense of a show boy prime minister, including what this latest PCO has done.

The question of provincial autonomy that will satisfy smaller provinces can no longer be postponed indefinitely. Without an all-out political struggle, boycott means nothing. It is a silly thing if it stands alone as some kind of virtuous gesture.

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as a threat to peace and security; US commentators note China's "charm offensive."

In October this year, Beijing scholar Zhang Tuosheng summarised objectives of China's foreign policy:

- Equal priority of domestic and foreign affairs, where domestic affairs are defined as achieving a "well-off" society by 2020 and developing a framework for reunification with Taiwan.
- Advocacy of a new security outlook.
- Development of bilateral relations with foreign partners.
- "Playing an active part in international affairs with emphasis on gaining 'soft strength' and acting as a responsible big country."

The foremost objective of Chinese foreign policy is reunification with Taiwan which, for Beijing, is an internal affair.

Ironically, Taiwan's political leaders also endorse the use of soft power to a greater extent than perhaps any other country or region: Republic of China Vice President Lu Hsiao-lien, visiting Europe in 2002, declared that soft power equated with values espoused by Taiwan, such as democracy and feminism. To some extent, Beijing's reliance on soft-power diplomacy is "me too"

tactics, motivated by a perceived need to outdo anything that Taipei can offer.

The second goal is to establish China as a "Great Power" in the world -- or "big country" in Zhang's words.

China's international relations also involve the overseas Chinese. This dates back to 1909, when the Nationality Law stated that ethnic Chinese anywhere in the world were citizens of China. The Communist government abandoned this position in the 1950s, but the relationship between Beijing and overseas Chinese communities is increasingly complex, with large numbers leaving China for work, study or business.

While the government recognises that Chinese who are citizens of other countries owe loyalty to those countries, its overseas missions monitor activities of local ethnic Chinese communities, especially university students. These make up the bulk of Chinese language departments in universities such as the University of Sydney.

China relies on nationalism to secure the loyalty of residents and overseas constituents, stemming from traditional views that China is the center of world civilisation and that Han Chinese are superior

to other racial groups.

This nationalism leads to the view that Chinese who live abroad lose their Chinese perspective. For instance, former Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui is seen as overly influenced by his education in Japan.

The same view is held about some Hong Kong Chinese -- that British rule, education and influence have led to inappropriate demands for democratic rights. The corollary of this line of thought is that people re-educated in Chinese language, with official government versions of Chinese history, would be more patriotic.

In 2003, as part of its soft-power diplomacy, the Chinese government unveiled a plan to set up Confucius Institutes around the world. Only 30 years ago, Confucius was reviled as a symbol of feudalism and entrenched power structures in society. Now, Confucius is a symbol of the cultural diplomacy goal to unite ethnic Chinese around the world.

The program is administered by the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Hanban), linked to the Chinese Ministry of Education and several other government departments. The first institute was set up in Tashkent in June 2004; Rutgers

University, New Jersey, opened one in November 2007.

Confucius Institutes are generally located in host universities, benefiting from sponsors' prestige in the competitive market for language courses. The arrangements minimise costs to the Chinese government; the Hanban subsidises institutes with small seed grants in the set-up period.

With a history of only three years, it's too early to analyse the extent of Chinese government control of the program, but some observations can be made. Countries welcome the program's resources for teaching Chinese. Nations that anticipate growing economic and political ties with China, such as Australia, benefit from greater proficiency in Chinese language and culture. Australians have just elected Labour leader Kevin Rudd, the first Chinese-speaking prime minister outside what is known as Greater China. He's a product of Australia's growing Chinese language program.

However, Australia already has many Chinese language and culture classes that face competition from the institutes, which offer Chinese government-backed curriculum and teachers approved by China. The institutes

have not yet revealed how they will handle students who support politically incorrect causes such as independence for Taiwan, full democracy for Hong Kong, human rights in China, religious freedom, a free Tibet or Uighur independence.

The institutes are expanding their teaching role. An institute offering undergraduate language classes opened at University College Dublin. In April, Waseda University, Japan, signed an agreement to establish a CI that the Chinese government announced was the "first research-based Confucius Institute."

Universities must preserve academic objectivity. The Confucius Institutes, insofar as they support culture and community outreach, are most valuable. If the program engages in university teaching or research, academic colleagues should beware of potential bias. The institutes' close links with the Chinese government and party, at best, could result in the dumbing down of research and, at worst, produce propaganda.

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