

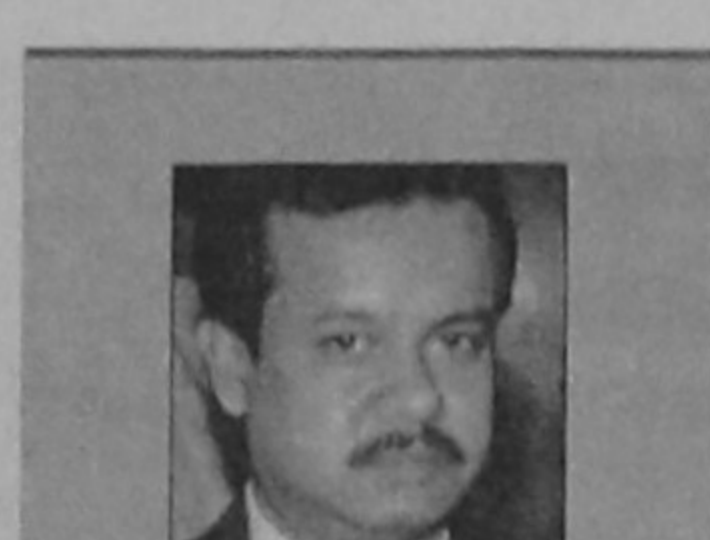
Providing rice at reasonable prices  
Synchronised move by the government imperative

THE government at long last is going all out exercising different options simultaneously to make rice available at tolerable prices to the people. The skyrocketing of cereal price to an unusual level over the last two weeks with the Adviser concerned betraying a certain helplessness evoking criticism from all around in the process seems to have nudged the government machinery into a dynamic mode. We are looking for results now. The government has decided to release huge quantity of rice to reach buyers through different distribution channels. In the present scheme of things, the Food Ministry is thinking of introducing OMS outlets to contend with the rising prices. We say just open the OMS outlets with a reasonable stock of rice in hand, and disperse it over a vast area rather than verbalising it. The BDR outlets are doing a good job but they are mostly urban-centred; the rural areas will have to be accessed. The government's procurement plans will have to be implemented expeditiously. The delegation that is planning to go to India to smoothen import of 5 lakh tonnes must be able to wrap up negotiations for quick delivery at reasonable prices. The Food Ministry's invitation of tenders for importing 2 lakh tonnes of rice from Thailand should bear results sooner than later. The government's plan to import rice from Vietnam and Myanmar ought to materialise now. There is a comfortable foreign exchange reserve and we must do everything to release foreign exchange to strengthen the supply side. Under the test relief (TR) programme, food for work (FFW) programme, vulnerable group feeding (VGF) programme and vulnerable group development (VGD) programme, it is learnt 75,000, 85,000, 38,000, and 10,000 tonnes of rice respectively will be distributed all over the country. Just do it. What we feel is that there has been no dearth of plans and programmes to replenish rice supply even amidst a string of constraints, but what is lacking is their quick implementation. Without wasting our breath on the impressive array of programmes what we need is expeditiously reaching rice to the commonman at reasonable prices.

Death of RMG worker and resultant uproar  
Troubleshooting mechanism needs to evolve in industry

THE chaos that descended around an RMG unit in Mirpur on Wednesday and kept traffic in a logjam is once more a sign of how matters keep going haywire in a vital economic sector. By closing down SQ Sweaters Ltd without any prior notice, the management of the unit only made matters worse. The clear issue here related to the death of a sick woman worker soon after she was allegedly forced to work overtime on December 30. Apparent failure of the management to reveal the contents of the autopsy report on the dead worker, Salma, only inflamed passions among the workers. The SQ Sweaters owners should have been more circumspect in handling the crisis. As it is, their turning a blind eye to the poor state of health of a worker was not only a demonstration of extreme insensitivity but also a sign of questionable management. It only goes to show the glaring absence of a sophisticated management mechanism in industry, especially in the RMG sector. Such a reality cannot but be cause for continued worry. In the present instance, the incident of the death of the worker quickly snowballed into a situation we are all too familiar with. The workers of SQ Sweaters went on a wildcat strike, in which they were soon joined by fellow workers from other units. The management chose to simply shut the gates and put up a notice of closure. In other words, the incident in Mirpur only reconfirms the popular notion that to date no effective troubleshooting mechanism has evolved, particularly where garment units are involved. Every action only leads to more trouble. In the present circumstances, we cannot but re-emphasise the principle that the garments sector remains a vital component of the national economy. It is also, because of a number of factors on a global scale, a beleaguered sector at present. The compulsions, therefore, for everyone to do nothing that will undermine it further need hardly be reasserted. Workers must know that their factories are their means of survival. And their employers must realise that profit motives must be tempered by thoughts of doing business that has a human face. It is a principle that the BGMEA can effectively promote both among workers and employers. We urge that a swift inquiry be conducted into the death of Salma. At the same time, let the management and workers of SQ Sweaters find an honourable, quick way out of the present crisis through dialogue.

Curse or coincidence?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LET us say it was a coincidence that Benazir Bhutto got killed at Liaquat Bagh in Rawalpindi, the same place where, in 1951, the first prime minister of Pakistan was cut down by an assassin's bullet. Let us say it was another coincidence that the doctor who tried to save her is the son of the same doctor who had tried to save Liaquat Ali Khan 56 years ago. But how many times should an outcome coincide with bad luck before it isn't a coincidence, but something else? Was it a coincidence that Benazir Bhutto should become the fourth member of her family to die an unnatural death? Should it also be a coincidence that, at 54, she was the longest surviving amongst the slain members of her family? Her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged at 51. Then her brother Murtaza was gunned down at 42, and another brother Shah Nawaz

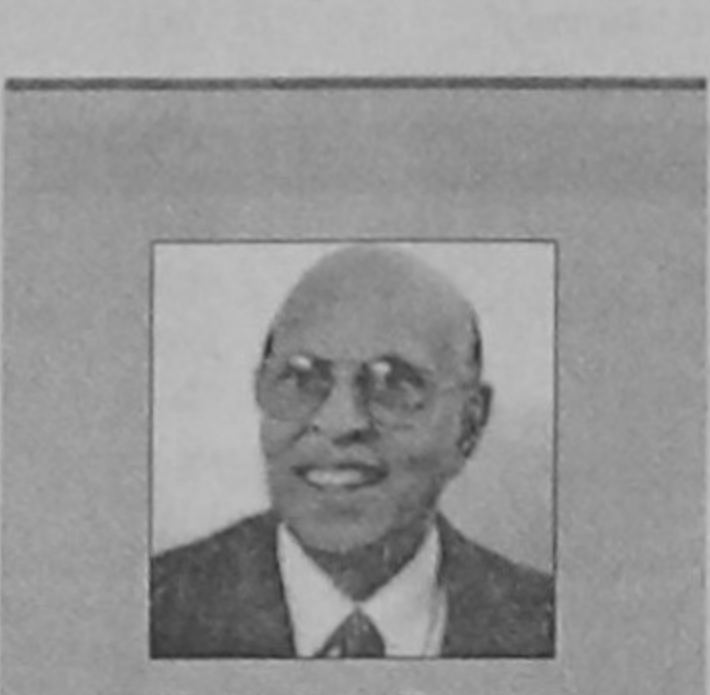
CROSS TALK

It always worked like the flip of a coin. Face they could win, tail they could lose. They were powerful and then they were dead. And it happened four times in a family that in less than three decades lost its bright and ambitious to the gorge of death.

was poisoned at 27. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto once told a journalist that the Bhutto men didn't live long. On December 27, the fallen two-term prime minister, and the leader of the largest political party in Pakistan, proved it wrong. The premonition of death runs in the family, irrespective of woman or man. For days to come, Benazir's death will raise debates. People will argue whether she was killed by sniper bullets followed by suicide bomb blast, or whether she died when the blast from a bomb slammed her head against the vehicle, as the Pakistan government now tries to claim. But, at the end of all analyses, allegations, ambiguities, what happened at Liaquat Bagh is irreversible. Another scion of the Bhutto family, educated, attractive, suave and charismatic, has fallen victim to foul play. The tragedy reminds one of the house of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, who had two sons and two daughters, just like the Bhuttos. He was exiled after he had committed incest and patricide. When his sons killed each other in battle over the throne, the new Theban king, Creon, declared that the younger son of Oedipus was going to be buried and honoured as a hero, while the elder's body should rot away and be eaten by dogs. Oedipus's daughter, Antigone, defied the king and tried to bury her brother against the advice of her younger sister, Ismene. An angry Creon banished Antigone from the city, to starve to death in a cave where she took her own life by hanging herself by a rope. Tragedies come in many forms, but it's said that they always come by the route of choice. Bhuttos also made their own choices. They decided to stare death in the face, the father by defying a military regime, the sons by raising arms to avenge their father's death, and the daughter by picking up the political mantle where her father had left. Benazir had served two terms as the prime minister of her country, and she could have lived rest of her life in her palatial mansions in Dubai or anywhere else. Instead, she returned to fight, to go to polls, to seek public office and come to power again. It always worked like the flip of a coin. Face they could win, tail they could lose. They were powerful and then they were dead. And it happened four times in a family that in less than three decades lost its bright and ambitious to the gorge of death. UK-based Pakistani writer, Tariq Ali, has written after Benazir's death that the Bhuttos shouldn't be asked to make any more sacrifices. The question is, why must it be one family that must make so many sacrifices? Is it just coincidence, or is it a curse that is culminating with each death? A curse can often cast a lengthy shadow. In 1642, a French jeweler by the name of

Jean Baptiste Tavernier visited India and stole a blue diamond from the forehead of a statue of the Hindu goddess Sita. For this transgression, Tavernier was torn apart by wild dogs on a trip to Russia. Louis XV had bought the diamond from Tavernier and, according to the legend, it was because of the diamond's curse that Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI were beheaded during the French Revolution. King George of England bought the diamond, which was sold again to pay off his debt. The next owner of the diamond and his family went bankrupt. After Evalyn Walsh McLean bought the diamond, she lost her first-born son in a car crash, and her daughter committed suicide. Ms. Evalyn's husband was declared insane and confined to a mental institution until his death. The diamond is currently on display in the National Museum of Natural History in the United States. Why does tragedy always coincide with the fate of a Bhutto? Where is the connection between cause and effect? If we go back to the '70s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the undisputed leader of West Pakistan. He dominated his country's politics until a military coup toppled him from power, followed by a grisly death. How was the seed of tragedy

South Korea's presidential election



HARUN UR RASHID

ON December 20, the conservative South Korean president-elect, Lee Myung-bak, (66) a former successful Mayor of Seoul, and a former executive of Hyundai, won the election in a landslide victory, defeating the ruling party's candidate, despite being hampered by allegation of stocks manipulation and other financial misdeeds several years ago. Lee had won 48.6% of the vote. His victory hands power back to the conservative Grand National Party (GNP). Lee, who had been widely expected to triumph in the ballot, will replace incumbent Roh Moo-hyun on February 25, 2008. Some say the victory of the conservatives over the liberals represents a shift from idealism to pragmatism. Lee, throughout the campaign pushed an "economy first" message. He presented himself as a get-things-done leader who could salvage the economy from a decade of low growth under the two successive liberal governments. South Koreans appeared to have favoured the economic growth message

BOTTOM LINE

The wish for peace is universal, and it is hoped that, with the pursuit of hard-line policies, the Korean Peninsula will not pose a threat to international peace and security. There are enough political global dynamics that cause concern about the ineffectiveness of the UN.

Chung, of the governing liberal United New Democratic Party (UNDP), had earlier conceded the election, saying: "I accept what the people decided today. I hope president-elect Lee Myung-bak will lead the country well," he told Reuters news agency. Lee's victory ends a decade of liberal rule, during which left-leaning South Korean policies led to unprecedented reconciliation with the North, including two visits of the South Korean presidents to North Korea for summit meetings. The summit last October resulted in a number of joint projects aimed at helping North Korea's economy while skirting around the nuclear topic. Washington and Tokyo have been critical of the "sunshine policy" introduced by Nobel laureate President Kim Dae-jung in 1997. Sunshine policy's main tenet is reconciliation with North Korea. The "sunshine policy" has caused friction with Washington and Tokyo, especially over how to address North Korea's nuclear program and its human rights abuses. During his last visit to Washington, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun put President Bush in an awkward position by asking him to explain and clarify US policy toward North Korea. Proposed tough policies On December 21, one day after his stunning victory, Lee declared that he would not hesitate to criticise the North Korean Communist government, pledging to get tough with North Korea. He said that the issue of human rights in North Korea was something South Korea could not avoid, and North Korea should know it. The new, tough approach may improve relations with Washington and Tokyo. Tom Casey, a spokesman for the US State Department, congratulated Lee and reportedly said: "We look forward to working with him and his new government." Lee has already met the Japanese Ambassador Shigeie and said that he would work to improve bilateral ties. Lee's victory would be welcome news for those South Koreans who believe that Roh and his predecessor Kim did not put enough pressure on North Korea to bring home thousands of relatives allegedly kidnapped by the North during and after the 1950-53 Korean War. President-elect Lee indicated that he would do something his predecessor avoided, vigorously raise nuclear issues during inter-Korean talks. Lee's government will review all the agreements with North Korea, and it seems that many of them may be scrapped. Serious economic agreements between the two Koreas can only be made after the North dismantles its nuclear weapons. There is a speculation that Lee might not continue aid on conditions of family re-unions separated between the Koreans. Lee's government would like to see overall improvement in human rights in the country before aid is committed. Will hard-line policies work? North Korea's inclusion in President Bush's axis of evil in 2002, US insistence that the UN watch dog IAEA complete its inspection of reactors, and cutting-off of supply of heavy fuel oil by US from December 2002 did not work, instead, North Korea cancelled all dialogues on the nuclear program, got out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and expelled the UN inspectors. President Bush had finally to revert to a policy of dialogue

with North Korea. Only when the US agreed to North Korea's terms, it conceded that it would stop its nuclear program at Yongbyon reactor. It is noted that North Korea has not yet completely destroyed all nuclear plants. There is a question whether South Korea's tough policies would be consistent with Washington's current flexible approach because Washington wants a completely "de-nuclearised" North Korea. It is not known how China will react to Lee's hard-line policies. It was China which brought North Korea to the negotiating table to halt its nuclear program. If South Korea puts pressure on North Korea, the Korean peninsula would likely be again the source of destabilisation in the Asia Pacific region. Some observers believe that the proposed hard-line policies of South Korea may be counter-productive because North Korea's leaderships generally do not bow down to pressure, they, rather, react negatively. Furthermore, the election was won to revive the economy, and North Korea hardly figured in voters' decision this time. Given this scenario, Lee's change of policy may not have the support of the majority of the people of South Korea if the Korean peninsula experiences tension. Furthermore, Ahn Byung Jin, a Professor at Kyung Hee Cyber University, said that with Lee's election, South Koreans were going on a "blind date" with economic growth, with both hope and fear about what the decision might bring. Many observers say president-elect Lee's proposed hard-line policies may not work for a regime that wants inclusion but not exclusion. A Washington-Tokyo-Seoul alliance to change the existing "sunshine policy" would arguably be a mistake. Another fact is that the South Korean conservative leadership tends to forget that South Korea hosts US military troops in the country, and that North Korea claims that its legitimate security concerns are not addressed by Japan and South Korea. It argues that when US allies encircle it, it has to rely upon its security by developing missiles and nuclear weapons. This is a cold reality. Dialogue, and not confrontation, seems to resolve interstate disputes. The European Union invested heavily for economic prosperity in Ireland, and the result is that prosperity has led to the reconciliation between the Protestants and Catholics. Accordingly, South Korea's soft policies may eventually succeed in bringing peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula. The wish for peace is universal, and it is hoped that, with the pursuit of hard-line policies, the Korean Peninsula will not pose a threat to international peace and security. There are enough political global dynamics that cause concern about the ineffectiveness of the UN. Barister Harun ur Rashid is Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Spurt in road accidents



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

IT has become a regular feature that when newspapers resume publication after each Eid vacation, their front pages are filled with gruesome pictures and reports on road accidents. This Eid vacation was not an exception. "Road accidents kill 41 during Eid holidays," was the heading of a front-page report in The Daily Star on December 24. A Bengali daily reported that road accidents claimed 62 lives and 264 were injured during the Eid vacation. According to the Daily Star report, 41 people were killed and

BY THE NUMBERS

Rash driving is also a leading cause of accident. A Daily Star investigation report revealed that nearly half a million people are driving motor vehicles on roads across the country with fake licences. Drivers are known to get their licences very easily on the strength of bribe. On the other hand, inadequate highway patrolling has given the drivers a free hand.

over 150 injured in separate road accidents in the capital and elsewhere in the country during the Eid holidays. At least 12 people were killed and 45 injured in two separate road accidents in Serajganj when a truck with around 70 passengers skidded off the road and another truck and a bus collided head-on. Six people drowned and 15 other were injured as they slammed into the beam of a bridge and fell into the river from the roof of a train on December 20. According to the report, the roof was crowded with home-going passengers due to the Eid rush. As the train entered the bridge, at least 21 of them fell into the river after being hit by the metal beam. Seven, including three women, were killed in the capital. Fatal accidents also occurred in Bogra, Dinajpur, Kurigram, Mymensingh, Jamalpur, Gopalganj, Sylhet and Chittagong. Eid in Bangladesh comes every year with worsening statistics of road accidents. At least 44 people were killed and 150 were injured at different places in road accidents during the Eid-ul-Fitr holidays in October. A tragic road accident claimed 70 lives in Comilla after the last Eid-ul-Azha festival. At least 13 people were killed and 34 injured in separate road accidents in different places including the city on December 24,

and ten people were killed in three separate road accidents on December 26. All the accidents occurred when overloaded buses skidded off the road or collided head-on with another bus or truck. The train accident that killed six people was surely avoidable, if the passengers were not allowed to travel on the roof of the train. Road accidents rise alarmingly every year during the Eid festivals, as there is heavy rush to go villages and to return to the capital. But there is no extra effort to make their journey safe. Festival-time slackness of the patrol police to check overloading and overtaking, reckless driving, and plying of unfit vehicles are the main causes of rising accidents. But nothing ever gets done about the peril as we consider it to be something divinely designed. In fact, most of the accidents can very well be avoided if precautionary measures are taken by the concerned authorities during the festival time. Of course, the active cooperation of the road users is essential to reverse the process. Unfit vehicles, inexperienced drivers, and rundown roads are three factors mostly responsible for all road accidents. Unfit vehicles are virtual death traps on the highways. Ironically, the vehicles that would not be allowed on the roads under normal circumstances are seen plying with impunity on the highways. Rash driving is also a leading cause of accident. A Daily Star investigation report revealed that nearly half a million people are driving motor vehicles on roads across the country with fake licences. Drivers are known to get their licences very easily on the strength of bribe. On the other hand, inadequate highway patrolling has given the drivers a free hand. Yes, there is a full-fledged department, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), to check and issue fitness certificates to all vehicles. We now have highway police. But plying of unfit vehicles and reckless driving of buses and trucks are still present. Traffic rules are violated all the way. Thanks to pervasive corruption, one is dissuaded from observing the rules. What is now badly needed is strict enforcement of traffic laws on the highways, especially those relating to fitness of vehicles and fake driving licences. It is incumbent on the BRTA to perform its duty with utmost honesty and sincerity to ensure road safety. Its cooperation with the law enforcing agencies must also be enhanced. Road accidents are rooted in slack laws and lack of vigilance by the government agencies. It is a truth that cannot really be denied. Under section 304-B of the Bangladesh Penal Code, a driver may be imprisoned for up to seven years for reckless driving that leads to a death. But almost no driver or vehicle owner has faced punishment for such accidents. An effective law is essential for promoting road safety. Bangladesh is ranked as one of the most accident-prone countries in the world. The annual fatality rate from road accidents in Bangladesh is 85.6 per 10,000 vehicles, which is very poorly contrasted even with 47.7 in Myanmar and 62.7 in Nepal. In developed countries, the annual fatality rate is below three, though the number of motor vehicles is huge there. The developed countries have evolved ways of reducing road accidents by applying modern technology. Technology has reached such a height that very little is left to risk. The application of risk reduction technology has reduced the number of casualties in all fields, including road accidents. Why don't we use the risk reduction technology? Road accidents claim some 12,000 people annually in Bangladesh, which makes one thousand every month or more than 33 deaths daily. The economic cost of road accidents, as estimated by the Accident Research Centre of BUET, is Tk 50 billion that is nearly two percent of our GDP. But such alarming figures have not yet been able to awaken the concerned authority to devise effective measures on a top priority basis for minimising road accidents and for casualty limitation. Ironically, most of these accidents represent callousness on the part of those whose duty it is to ensure safety of the passengers. Accidents will always be there. But let us not invite them through callousness and indifference. Road accident is a very dangerous peril in our country. But the safety of the passengers on the roads is the most neglected public issue in Bangladesh. This issue has been neglected partly because the rich inflict on the poor in these events and partly because road accidents are always dismissed as unavoidable contingencies. A.N.M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.