

Improving government apparatus

ARMS ZAHUR

WE are encouraged, inspired and certainly happy to hear from the Chief Adviser that there is a strong possibility for Bangladesh to become a middle-income country by 2021 AD if certain conditions are fulfilled. The most critical of them appear to be (a) improving level of efficiency in formulating and implementing government plans, (b) reducing administrative corruption to minimum,

(c) bringing political stability, (d) upgrading standard of our education,

(e) strengthening the base of our agricultural society, and (f) less visitation by natural disasters. During the last 36 years our achievements cannot be belittled though we have to admit that our growth could have been much higher had there been political stability, democratic rule, less number of natural disasters and tolerably efficient bureaucracy.

Improving the quality of the civil service is a long range problem and only modest short-term expectation is held. Total revenue collected by government expenditures and project aid constitute the administrative output of development administration which involves setting up of machinery for planning economic growth and mobilizing all allocating resources to expand national income, to improve industrial development, to manage new state economic enterprises, to raise agricultural output, to reform the educational system, to develop natural resources, to improve communication networks and to achieve other developmental goals. It is the conscious study of the conditions of public

administration in the less developed country like Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a classic example of bureaucracy inadequate for the task of planning and executing coordinated programmes. To improve upon the present level of efficiency appreciably is not only difficult but also time-consuming. We have been impressed and inspired by some really good reforms by the CTG within a short period of eleven months because of establishment of a fairly good governments amidst so much of hindrances and hurdles. We strongly feel that to make the achievements more meaningful and effective urgent attention of CTG is needed for true administrative reforms.

Effective public administration is the key to modern state building. For effective administrative capacities sustained progress is needed. To achieve its ultimate goal of providing substantial benefits for the citizens at large, a level of administrative development must be attained so that various modern knowledge can be transformed into action programmes. The essence of effective bureaucracy is wise and sound personnel development. Personnel administration is a very critical art in the process of political development and modernisation. It is also an extremely difficult art. There cannot be any automatic guides or fixed formulas for

building effective bureaucracy and civil administration. Mature skill and judgment are needed to determine whether the secret of success in one country can be applied in another. The history of organised bureaucracy in Bangladesh is more than 150 years (since 1854) old. However, due to political turmoil and instability its quality gradually went down. Whatever was left there had been quick deterioration due to too much of graft, politicization and unrealistic pay structure. Due to loss of prestige and unattractive compensation pattern Bangladesh can no longer attract the majority of better students (as in the past) to bureaucracy.

Though the CTG has been able to show impressive performance in certain sectors during the last one year it has not yet been able to do enough to strengthen the capacity of public administration. Reorganization of Public Service Commission or Election Commission or modernisation of custom office of Chittagong etc. are not enough.

There had been a number of studies on development of administration in Bangladesh during the last 36 years. These may be considered useful for starting fresh thinking about capacity building of administration. The new measures when proposed, may consider the

following points:

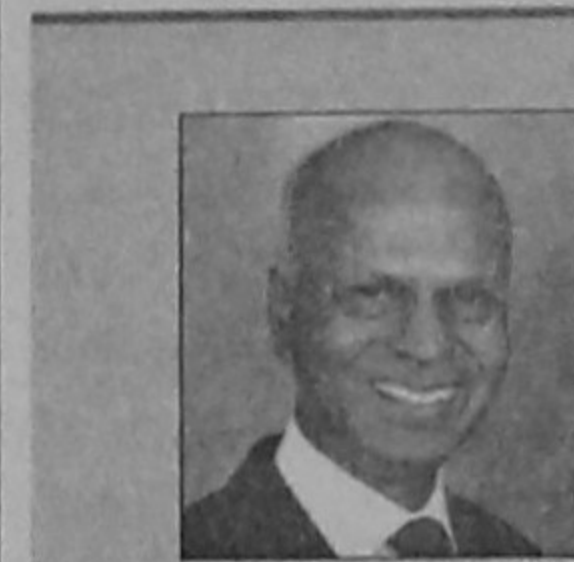
- Majority of our people are illiterate and poor. As such they need simple administration with simple rules and regulations;
- Administrative costs need immediate reduction as much as possible;
- The top and mid-level bureaucrats may be allowed decent pay and other benefits to enable them to devote their attention whole heartedly in performing their duties; and
- Enough provision be made for incentives for truly honest and hard working officials, such as accelerated promotions and monetary and other benefits.

The fulfilment of the wish may be possible if the level of efficiency and motivation of bureaucracy can be raised. Despite high inflation, price hike of essentials the CTG has been able to show us the ability of good governance which we never could enjoy during more than three decades.

Achieving the level of a middle-income country is not an outlandish dream. What is needed is good leadership, capacity building of administration and stable political situation. It is time that the government starts working for upgrading the level of public administration so that the next elected government may reap the benefit of good governance.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

Volatility in the oil market



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

ON January 2, 2008, crude oil price briefly touched the psychologically important \$100 barrel mark on the New York Mercantile Exchange. On January 3, it even crossed the threshold and surpassed the \$100 barrier. Although it almost immediately retreated to under \$100, the record high price sent shockwaves across the economic world. The price of a barrel was \$11 in 1998 and below \$25 as recently as 2003. Even in the summer of 2007, the price had fallen to \$60 a barrel. So, why is this sudden surge in the price of oil?

Under ideal market conditions, like any other commodity, oil prices should be determined by the forces of demand and supply.

There is no doubt that worldwide demand for oil is rising steadily. According to the Energy Information Administration, in 1964, world's total oil consumption was only 30 million barrels a day and in 2008 it is estimated to be close to 100 million bpd. The United States alone is responsible for nearly one quarter of total world consumption.

No discussion on demand for oil can be considered adequate without mentioning the rapid industrialisation of China and India. Even now, China accounts for only about 9 percent of world

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Many experts conclude that current supply is adequate to meet current demand. So what pushed oil over \$100 a barrel? War in Iraq, rebel activity in Nigeria, rough weather in the Gulf of Mexico, turmoil in Pakistan and Bush's recent decision to increase the SPR have all played a role in hiking up the price of oil. The falling dollar has also forced the hedge funds and traders to take refuge in oil.

consumption of oil. But China's demand for oil is rising at such a rate that in recent years, China alone has been responsible for about a third of the increased demand for oil in the world. According to the CIA World Fact Book, China's consumption of oil is expected to equal that of the United States by mid 2020s. Since the Americans are not capable of changing their habits as far as excessive oil consumption is concerned and the Asians, particularly the Chinese and the Indians are determined to pursue a policy of rapid industrialisation, the inevitable conclusion is that world oil consumption will continue to grow in the foreseeable future unless, of course, there is a serious economic recession.

On the supply side, things are much more complicated. One has to take into consideration four factors -- production, exportation, capacity of the refineries to process and turn crude oil into usable commodities for industrial and private use and reserves under the soil. Although these factors are interrelated, they do not have the same impact on world's oil markets.

Few governments, if any, are prepared to disclose the truth about their countries' reserves. According to data available today, the OPEC countries are reputed to have close to two-thirds of world's known reserves. Saudi Arabia holds a unique position, not only because it has the largest

proven reserves but also because it is the only OPEC member which has got a spare production capacity of close to 1.8 million bpd which can be activated at short notice. Its cost of extraction is also relatively low.

According to current estimates, although Canada's oil reserves come second to those of Saudi Arabia, it may actually have the largest oil reserves in the world because until recently it was difficult to estimate with accuracy the vast Alberta oil sands deposits. Now that the oil prices are hitting \$100 per barrel, it would be economically viable for Canada to invest in new oil sands projects.

Also there are doubts about the accuracy of Russian, Alaskan and Venezuelan reserves. According to the Bureau of Land Management, the United States has the largest concentration of oil shale in the world, which is estimated to be 2,500 gigabarrels of recoverable oil, enough to meet US demand for oil at current levels for 110 years. As conventional oil fields in the United States and Mexico dry up causing prices to rise, mining of oil shale may become economically viable.

From all this many experts conclude that current supply is adequate to meet current demand. So what pushed oil over \$100? War in Iraq, rebel activity in Nigeria, rough weather in the Gulf of Mexico, turmoil in Pakistan and Bush's recent deci-

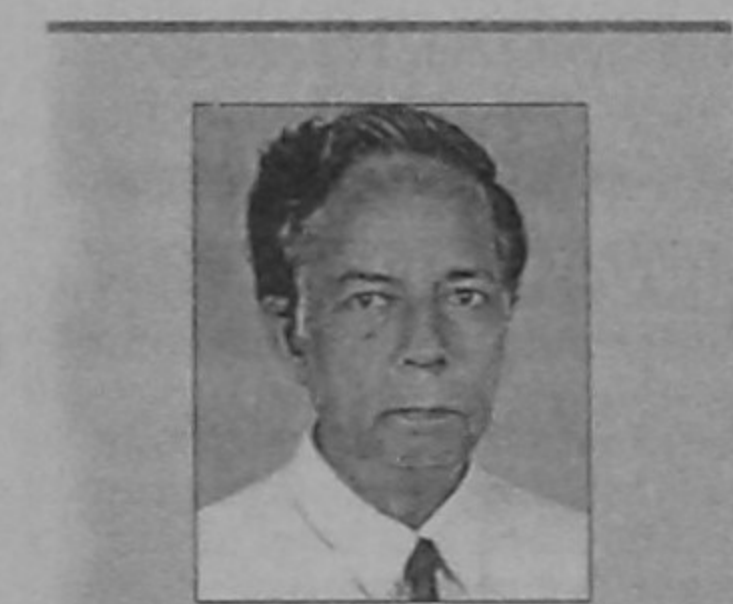
sion to increase the SPR have all played a role in hiking up the price of oil.

The falling dollar has also forced the hedge funds and traders to take refuge in oil, gold (spot gold rose to \$880 an ounce) and other commodities. But the most insidious role is being played by the speculators whose activities besides being nefarious are having a destabilising effect on the entire world economy. Many of these speculators have no knowledge of the real oil market. In the words of the prestigious columnist William Pfaff, the oil exchange has been "transformed from a real business that bought and sold oil to be delivered to refineries and put to use in the world economy, into a gambling house in which a barrel of oil was no more or less than a casino chip". Mr. Chakib Khelil, this year's OPEC president, has just issued a similar statement.

So what is the conclusion? How will the oil market behave in the next twelve months? My guess is that since under current legislation, it is difficult to curtail the activities of the speculators; the market will remain volatile -- oil price oscillating between \$75 and \$125. However, if the US economy enters into a prolonged recessionary period, oil price will most probably fall below \$75 a barrel.

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Life after Sidr



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

EVEN after one month and a half the grim memories of the super cyclone Sidr that hit the coast of Bangladesh haunt the people there. Much is being done to help the victims officially, but it clearly isn't enough. Hundreds and thousands have been left destitute, families are torn asunder. No matter what is being done, the extent of the tragedy and the spread of devastation is such that we can make little difference to the survivors, especially the poorest of the poor among them.

Now that the immediate rescue and relief operations are over, we can concentrate on the long term rehabilitation of the neediest and the most vulnerable. Now we have to focus on the rehabilitation of a displaced people and rebuilding a collapsed region. In most of the affected areas government has ensured survival of the cyclone victims by providing long term food supplies but what is needed is an effort of rebuilding homes and finding livelihood. The task is daunting one crore destitutes, several lakh homes to be rebuilt and lakhs needing medical help.

True, November 15 pitted man against nature. The devastating cyclone has warped the psyche of people. Their minds have turned as insidious as the sea that crept upon them. They still fight everywhere. Over wrecked homes, wretched relief, and ruined lives. Those who have nothing to fight over as in Borguna and Sharonkhola, give you a guided tour of the giant graveyard. If it was the tidal

BITTER TRUTH

Precisely true, long term rehabilitation project is the need of the hour and in order to achieve that there is need to build partnership with voluntary agencies in the area. The agencies have to be chosen for their contact with the community, especially the poor in the selected area and their commitment, honesty and transparency in functioning.

waves that gobbled them then, it is the over whelming despair that is swallowing them now. It is hard to give pain a statistic. Months from now, even weeks this will be an old story, forgotten with time. The concern so silent, and minimal as it is, will have vanished like the sea from their homes. But hardship has no regular tides, it does not recede so easily. For these people the cliché that life will never be the same again fits perfectly.

Zayeda Begum (50) a widow of late Abu Hanif Farazi of Sonatola village of Southkhali union of Bagerhat lost her four sons Iman Farazi (26), Emadul (23), Tajel (21), and Billal (18) in the super cyclone Sidr, while they were out on fishing in the high sea. Shockingly, Zayeda Begum did not get any assistance because the death of her sons could not be confirmed either by locating the dead bodies or by identifying their graves. Driven to destitution, most of the families in Sharonkhola, Borguna, Golachipa, Dublar char and Alor kol are a disenchanted lot. Piecing together the shattered life of Rehana of Rayenda village who lost four nearest kith and kin, including her husband Firoze Hawladar, nine year old son Rabbi and two daughters of her five member family is never easy. Village after village bear a haunted air. Healing is a slow process, a wretched one. The thought at the present moment is how much can we help these battered people to overcome their distress, so that those dreadful memories do not haunt them too much through the rest of their life. None of the blankets, biscuits, clothes or rice or cash money can make up for a son or a

daughter washed away or a wife still not accounted for. The image of Dholon Howladar (35) of Char Anda village of Bhola district grieving over the loss of 13 members of his family and Shahjahan Molla (50) of Kalagachia village weeping over the lifeless bodies of his wife Anwara and two children Shahabuddin and Monira brought home the grief and utter helplessness of the families living in the coastline in the face of the fury of the cyclone and tidal surge that time and again continue to batter the lives of these hapless people. The damage is around several thousand crore taka and in the agricultural sector alone the damage comes to about 1000 crore taka as per the initial estimate. There are more than one crore people who must be fed, clothed and given medical help until the next Boro harvesting season because they are barely in a position to do things on their own. The damage to the Sundarbans is colossal and an unofficial estimate suggests that one fourth of the heritage forest has been destroyed and it will take years for the Sundarbans to come to its previous life form. The battle must now move from survival to subsistence. Training centres have to be set up in the affected areas to impart livelihood skills, such as mat making, vermin-composting and manufacturing micro-concrete roofing tiles to women. They must know that there are other ways to survive. They need not depend on the sea alone. Side by side, efforts must be afoot to educate their children and train them for other jobs. With rush of relief materials

and assistance in cash and kind from home and abroad in the affected areas, the trick at the present moment is efficient utilisation. NGOs may be asked to choose their area of function such as shelter, livelihood and comprehensive village development and they have to be selected and allocated work based on their past performance and reputation. Survivors are still living in the open. What is needed is speedy and coordinated decision making about long-term rehabilitation measures. NGOs and other agencies conducting relief operations and rebuilding the lives of the battered people might recall that during the last Tsunami tragedy of 2006 in Tamil Nadu, India, Tata Projects Limited, Hyderabad rushed to Nagapattinam with a desalination mobile van that could produce 3500 litres of potable water an hour. Let us take a look at the coastal region of Bangladesh that was swept by the tidal surge that turned all available sources of water highly saline and unfit for drinking.

From now on the government of the day must give serious thought about procuring some desalination plants to be used only at the time of such disaster. It is worth noting that after the mobile van, the Tata team installed a static plant that would continue to operate for two years with a capacity of 1250 litres per hour. On the other hand, dearth of building materials and sizable funds to reconstruct their houses have clouded their hope of returning to a normal life. This may not be the last disaster, believably, as global warming mounts up.

With the coordination committee set up and its functioning placed in charge of the Adviser, communications ministry, things may be moving in the right direction. Disaster management officials and affluent sections of the society including business groups who have come forward to do something meaningful for the survivors in an effort to rebuild their lives and give them protection against such colossal disaster in the future might take cue from the Tsunami disaster management efforts undertaken in Tamil Nadu. In an effort to ensure flawless and tangible result, rehabilitation projects must be carried block by block in the devastated villages by individual groups with accountability. Reports reveal that in Devapattinam in Tamil Nadu there is now a new orphanage built by Vivek Oberoi, a cinema star, that can serve multipurpose use: rehabilitation at the present moment and shelter as and when a disaster strikes. Like the SOS Children's village constructed in Bhubaneswar, Orissa after the super cyclone with assistance from the Care Today society (India Today Magazine group) for providing home and education to 100 youngsters orphaned by the cyclone, media groups here collecting funds for relief to the cyclone victims could take rehabilitation measures on that line. The society also constructed 100 disaster-resistant houses in Erasma, Orissa for women who lost their husbands and bread winners. Other than that different philanthropic groups in association with UNDP constructed eight multipurpose community shelters in Jagatsinghpur district that are now being used for various other purposes: as class rooms for pre-primary centres, mahila mandal offices and as venues for community meetings and functions. Can we not replicate these models here in the affected region of Bangladesh?

In addition to the community ownership of the assets, a special feature of the project has been the use of low-cost, disaster-resistant construction technology that makes use of locally available materials. The walls have been built using the "rat-trap bond" brickwork that uses lesser bricks and cement-mortar than usual and does not require external plastering. The roofs have filler-slab concreting, which is 25 per cent cheaper than conventional RCC roofing. Other disaster resistant features include plinth and lintel bands and anchorages in the construction. The shelters, therefore, serve as demonstration units for a construction technology that is crucial in a region living with the spectre of a tidal battering looming large over it. Precisely true, long term rehabilitation project is the need of the hour and in order to achieve that there is need to build partnership with voluntary agencies in the area. The agencies have to be chosen for their contact with the community, especially the poor in the selected area and their commitment, honesty and transparency in functioning. Adversity brings with it opportunity and the Sidr in the coastal areas of Bangladesh offers us one. If we fail them now, we would have failed ourselves.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.



Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.