

NOTES FROM HISTORY

When the Shah of Iran lost his throne . . .

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Editorial Desk

ON January 16, 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Aryamehr, Light of the Aryans, Shahinshah of Iran, left Tehran with his royal family for what was given out as a holiday. Within Iran and in the outside world, though, it was known only too well that the Shah and his family would never return to take charge of their kingdom again. The kingdom had reached its final stages of collapse, even though the increasingly beleaguered monarch had put his final hopes on Shahpour Bakhtiar, the prime minister he was leaving in charge.

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him to leave the country, told Bakhtiar: "Your government has my complete confidence and I hope that its members' patriotism will enable each of them to bring their difficult tasks to a successful conclusion." The conclusion would be different, though, from what he expected it would be.

It would be Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who would soon be returning from exile in France, from where, in the preceding one year, his taped messages of defiance had, more than anything else, led to a growing tide of revolt against the Shah. It was an arrogant Shah who told US News and World Report in June 1978, a bare seven months before the world collapsed around him, "Nobody can overthrow me. I have the support of 700,000 troops, all the workers and most of the people."

Earlier, in December 1977, US President Jimmy Carter, on a visit to Tehran with his wife, praised what he saw as the rapid progress

Iran had made under its monarch and expressed his appreciation of the Shah who enjoyed "his people's total confidence."

In October 1978, the Shah thought the clouds over his future had lifted with the forced removal of Khomeini from Iraq, where he had been in exile since 1963, and his arrival in Neauphle-le-chateau outside Paris, France.

But the monarch had gravely miscalculated things. In asking the Iraqi authorities to expel Khomeini, who had been fomenting dissent across the border into Iran, he had not realised that in the democratic atmosphere of the West the cleric was likely to have bigger opportunities of getting his message across to the people of Iran. And that was precisely the way the denouement came.

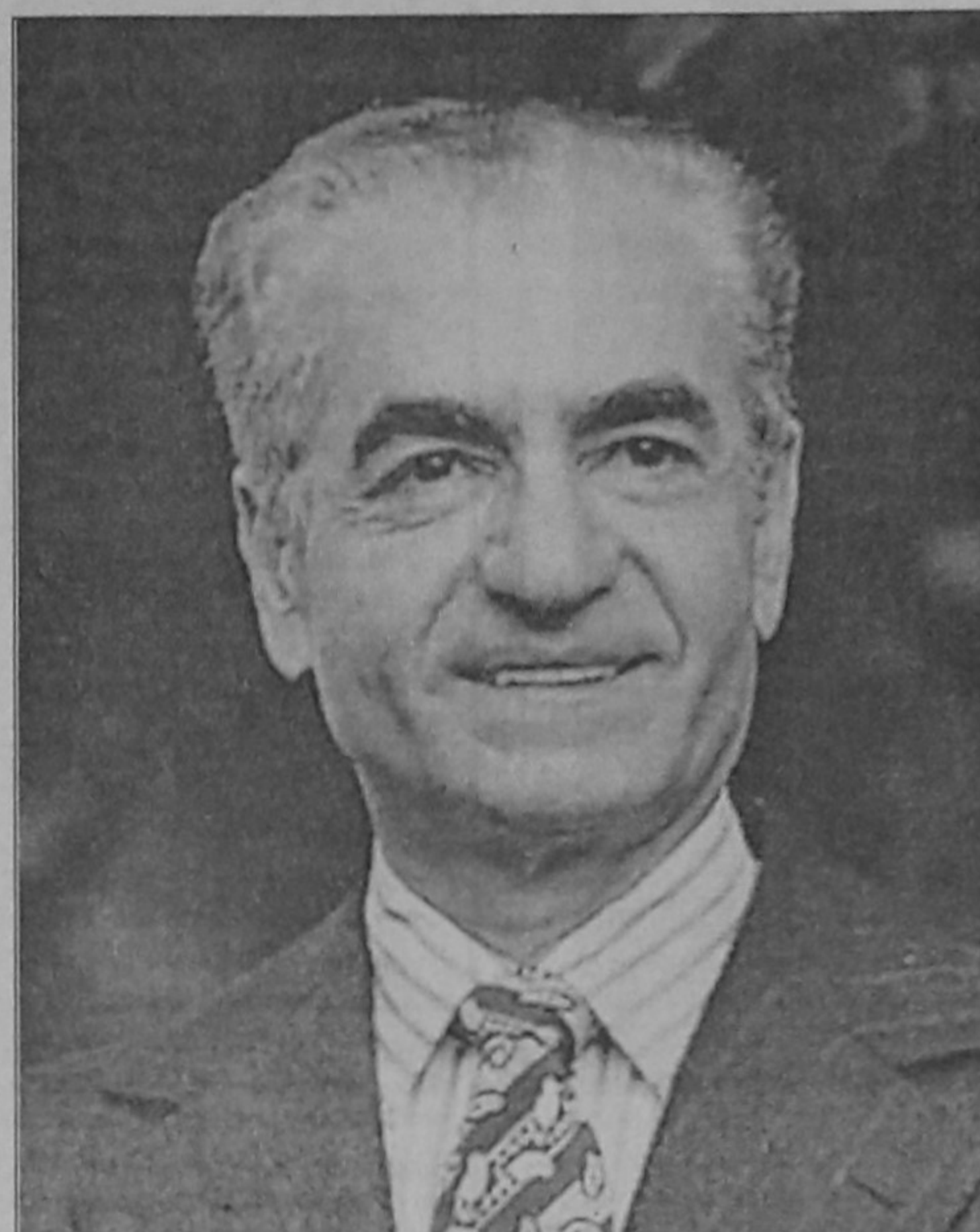
As more and more Iranians poured out into the streets, the army, police and men of the secret service, Savak, mowed them down. That only led to even bigger

demonstrations against the monarchy. The Shah resorted to the artifice of changing his prime ministers, each of whom proved unable to contain the rising tide of violence.

At a point, the respected former prime minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda was placed under arrest by the monarch, who assured him that he would be freed soon. The Shah was clearly looking for scapegoats to blunt the assault on his corrupt system. He was convinced that, as in 1953, when the fall of the nationalist Mossadegh caused the CIA to place him back on the throne, he would be able to tide over this new crisis in his life.

The Shah's rule crumbled rapidly in the last few months of his reign. On December 18, 1978, soldiers refused to fire on demonstrators in the city of Tabriz. It was a day that Khomeini had declared would be spent in mourning for those killed by the regime in the previous few months. Two days later, on December 20, the Shah and the Shahbano went skiing near Tehran, a clear move to demonstrate that he was cool and confident despite the growing troubles.

Meanwhile, leftwing leader Sanjabi made it clear at a meeting of the opposition National Front that calm would not return to Iran as long as the monarch stayed in

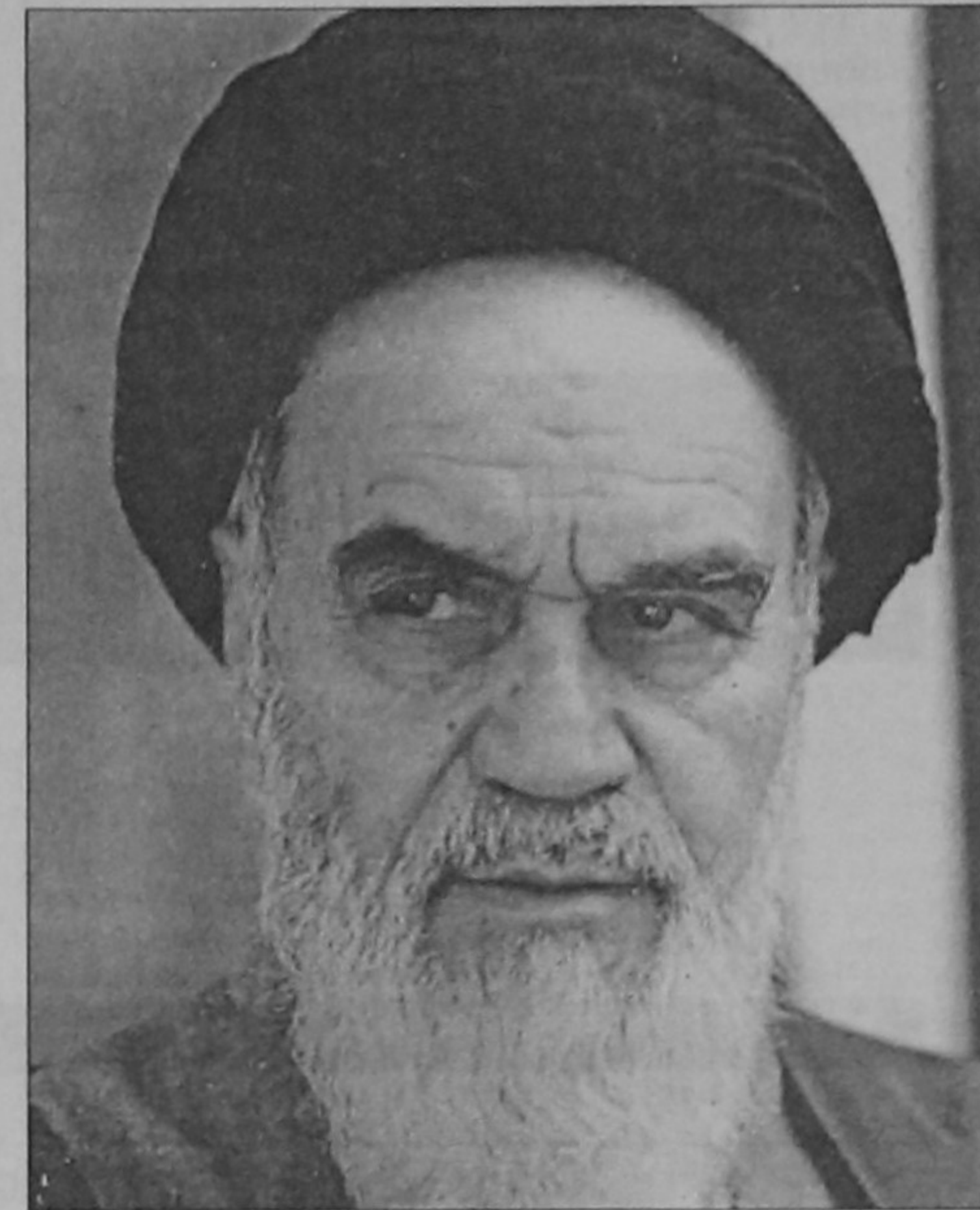


the country. On December 27, violent clashes erupted in the capital around the funeral of a young teacher killed by soldiers.

On January 1, 1979, Bakhtiar, designated prime minister by the Shah, assured the country that the monarch would leave Iran as soon

as a new government was in place. Bakhtiar formed his cabinet on January 6.

In France, Khomeini denounced the new government and called on Iranians to prevent the new ministers from entering



their offices. On January 13, a regency council comprising men loyal to the sovereign was set up, obviously to take charge once the Shah left. Khomeini responded by setting up a group that would supervise Iran's transition to Islamic rule.

A fortnight after the Shah flew off into exile, a triumphant Imam Khomeini came home to Tehran on February 1. The Shah, who had gone to Egypt, travelled on to Morocco. His remaining days would be spent in search of a home. He would die in Cairo.

If only . . .

To my mind, the success of this administration has been diluted due to the fact that it ignored and brushed aside "human elements" in all its management interventions, besides refusing to "learn" from the experience of others. From here onwards, it should limit its areas of interventions and base them on a firm schedule of priorities, proceed with caution, and finally, listen to the voice of the people.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

If only we could stick to our respective assigned tasks and did what we knew best, instead of unduly interfering into others' territory of operations and expertise, surely things would have been far less complicated and it would have been easier to salvage and sustain whatever progress we have made so far. Just consider this, how would the scenario appear if the cobbler all too suddenly turned into a goldsmith, likewise a rick-

shaw puller into a racing car driver or, for that matter, a fruit seller into an economist. Frankly, most of us are doing exactly all that we are not supposed to, and for which we are not duly qualified either.

If only we had fewer "turn coats" and more honest and committed from the very core of their hearts people, and called a spade a spade instead of calling it some kind of golden hammer, we would have been far better off today.

If only we could hold on to some of those cardinal values of morality

and ethics our parents and grandparents so painstakingly taught us, things would have been far better today. Not only that, sadly enough, we do not say what we mean and do not do what we believe in.

If only we could stop indulging in self-deception, self-righteousness and self-pity surely things would have looked better and brighter.

If only we could shed off our colonial mentality once for all and be a little more rational and objective in our thinking, we would be

looked upon as a respectable nation. By the same token if we could come out of that decadent mindset that the rest of the world owes us a living."

If only our neo-rich and the affluent in general were a little kinder and more considerate towards the less fortunate and were less wasteful in their lifestyles and living, things would have looked brighter than what it is now.

If only our teachers at all levels concentrated more on teaching than indulging in politicking and politics, we would have been better off today. Look at the state of affairs at our universities. Our public universities have become havens for both teachers and students who are lackeys of various political parties.

If only we could make education, and education alone, the

most important mission of our lives, the rest of the maladies would disappear by and by.

If only we could say no to drug addiction, we could have a workforce of young men and women who would contribute more to the development of the nation.

If only our bureaucrats were a little more honest and attentive to their obligations, instead of indulging in self-glorification and vanity, they would be subjects of our respect and admiration.

If only we made brotherhood our motto rather than jealousy and revenge, if only we were a little more disciplined and not take to the streets at the slightest provocation, things would have been better and we would be happier.

If only we refrained from such extreme corruption and corrupt

practices, we would not have landed in such a precarious situation.

If only we could stay clear of the mounting cultural invasion of the west, for instance the invasion of the food culture, and stuck to our superior culture of music and exotic cuisine, we would not only be better off but also happier.

If only we could stop buying and acquiring things we do not really need and are not critical to our lives and living, our lives would have become simpler and we would be happier still.

If only we had the realisation that none of us can be good Muslims, Christians or even Buddhists if we do not discharge our obligations to our fellow beings on earth, no matter how strictly we follow the other dictates of the Holy Book. If only if we

remembered that it is the sacred duty of every Muslim to allow peoples of other faiths to pursue their religion freely and without any fear or hindrance. Islam has no provision for extremism in any form. Prophet Muhammad (SM) himself asked his followers to "adopt the middle path."

**Epilogue**  
Spirit, good intentions and ambition by themselves do not always guarantee success. There is more to it. One has to know one's limitations and the realities on the ground. We should have known; there is often a very thin line between success and failure. A wise person knows that leaving a job half done is often worse than not doing it. No one has ever been able to outrun his or her own shadow. Besides, others being incorrect does not make you correct, or vice versa.

To my mind, the success of this administration has been diluted due to the fact that it ignored and brushed aside "human elements" in all its management interventions, besides refusing to "learn" from the experience of others. From here onwards, it should limit its areas of interventions and base them on a firm schedule of priorities, proceed with caution, and finally, listen to the voice of the people.

I would like to conclude with the words of that famous British economist Lord Beveridge: "The object of government in peace and war is not the glory of rulers or of races, but the happiness of the common man," unquote.

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Self reliance for food security

However, the main emphasis should be on the production side, on input factors for food production with improved technologies and knowledge, and appropriate incentive to producers. Again, food aid should not be prolonged, because it will act as a disincentive to the poor farmers. There will come a time when aid will be unable to feed us, unless we learn to feed ourselves.

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

WITH empty shelves in Caracas, food riots in West Bengal, Mexico, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Yemen, warnings of hunger in Jamaica, Nepal, the Philippines and sub-Saharan Africa, soaring prices of basic foods all around the globe have brought into light a looming global food crisis. In the recent past, Argentines boycotted tomatoes when the vegetable became more expensive than meat; and in Italy, shoppers organised a one-day boycott of pasta to protest rising prices; the Russian government, hoping to ease tensions, announced a price freeze for milk, bread and other foods.

In this backdrop, Bangladesh is passing through a desperate time, when the devastating cyclone Sidr in November, on the heel of two successive floods, causing widespread damage to standing rice crops and winter vegetables and wreaked havoc on the government's demand and supply mechanism.

Nearly every region of the world has recently experienced drastic food price inflation. Retail prices are up 18% in China, 17% in Sri Lanka and 10% or more throughout Latin America and Russia.

Zimbabwe tops the chart with a more than 25% increase. Double-digit price hikes for almost every basic foodstuff have driven that inflation over the past year.

Dairy products are as much as 200% more expensive since last year in some countries. Maize prices hit a 10-year high in February 2007, while wheat is up 50%, rice up 16% and poultry nearly 10%.

The price of any commodity rises only when its supply dwindles or becomes uncertain, and that is exactly what happened with rice, wheat and a number of food and milk products. Prices on the global commodity markets have been in turmoil as a series of poor harvests -- especially in Australia -- which have led to lower supplies of wheat.

This has been combined with surging demand from India and China. The combination of falling supply and rising demand has led to soaring grain prices, which, in turn, increased the cost of meat and dairy products as farmers seek to recoup the money they have had to pay for feed that is more expensive.

On the demand side, one of the key issues is bio-fuels. Since virtually all the crops we currently grow for food can also be converted into fuel, either in ethanol distilleries or

in bio-diesel refineries, high oil prices will open a vast new market for farm products. Those buying commodities for fuel producers are competing directly with food processors for supplies of wheat, corn, soybean, sugarcane, and other key crops.

Thus, the price of oil is setting

the price of food simply because, if the fuel value of a commodity exceeds its value as food, it will be converted into fuel.

The scale of the change is mind boggling. The Indian government says it wants to plant 140,000 sq km acres of bio-fuel crops, and Brazil as much as 1.2m sq km acres. South Africa is being touted as the future Middle East of bio-fuels, with as much as 4m sq km acres of land ready to be converted to crops for fuel.

Indonesia has said it intends to overtake Malaysia and increase its palm oil production, from 64,000 sq km acres now to 260,000 sq km

acres in 2025, for energy.

A year or two ago, almost all the land where maize is now being grown to make ethanol in the US was being farmed for human or animal food. As of today, since America exports most of the world's maize, its conversion to fuel is resulting in food scarcity with price hike. The competition for grain between the world's 800 million motorists, who want to maintain their mobility, and its two billion poorest people, who are simply trying to survive, is emerging as an epic issue.

Demand for grain is increasing with the world population, and

more is diverted to feed cattle as the population of upwardly mobile meat-eaters grows. The boom in emerging markets such as China and India has meant increasing wealth. As a result, in China the population is now consuming expensive food such as beef in greater quantities than ever before -- consumption of dairy products there has doubled over the past five years.

According to an Australian report on food demand in 12 Asian countries -- representing more than half the world's population -- upto 2020, beef consumption will increase by 50%, pork 30%, chicken meat 40% and dairy 55%.

It requires about two kilograms of feed to produce one kilogram of chicken, and the ratio is 4:1 for pork and 7:1 for beef. It is estimated that the additional demand for feed grain by 2020 will be 350 to 450 million tonnes -- a 20 to 30% increase on present global production.

At the same time, on the supply side, reserves of cereals are severely depleted. World wheat stores declined 11 percent in 2007, to the lowest level since 1980. That corresponds to 12 weeks of the world's total consumption -- much less than the average of 18 weeks consumption in storage during the period 2000-2005.

In seven of the past eight years the world has actually grown less grain than it consumed. To crown it all, global warming has decreased crop yields in some crucial places.

The knock-on is being felt across the world. In rich nations, soaring food price means a few

more pence for breakfast cereal in the short term, and a slightly higher cost for toys, clothes and other China-made goods. However, for the world's poorest communities, the rises have a potentially devastating effect. In the present food crisis, Bangladesh had to ask for half a million tonnes of food aid -- a severe blow to our pride that we had been trying to wean-off international assistance.

The price of cooking oil -- of which it imports 1.2m tonnes a year -- has almost tripled in the past two years because it is now valued as an alternative to diesel oil. More worryingly, our main staple of rice is hard to buy at any price because India, Vietnam and Ukraine have recently cut exports.

Among the losers from higher food prices are big importers. Japan, Mexico and Saudi Arabia will have to spend more to buy their food, which they can easily afford. More worryingly, some of the poorest places in Asia (Bangladesh and Nepal), Africa (Benin and Niger) and other developing countries as a whole will spend over \$50 billion to import cereals this year, 10% more than last year, which will have lasting impacts on their future development.

As Gary Becker, a Nobel laureate in economics, points out, if food prices rise by one-third, they will reduce living standards in rich countries by about 3%, but by over 20% in very poor ones.

In our context, back to back floods and a cyclone have heavily damaged our crops, and the ensuing food scarcity and mad rush out of panic to hoard grain at house-



Growing for food, or fuel?

PHOTO: ISLAMIC NEWS

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