

Poultry industry in dire straits

Bail it out with special measures

FOWLS and eggs have dropped off the household menu due to heightened incidence of bird flu. Many restaurants, especially the wayside food vending shops are suspected to be selling curry made of cheaply bought off sick chicken to poor consumers. Due to their initial denial mode, the authorities failed to take timely precautions. The spread of avian flu has overtaken the livestock department's containment measures. Thus we face a fully blown crisis.

There are a few ways in which we have been hard hit: first, the rather affordable source of protein in a market boiling over with highly priced mutton, beef and fish, the nutrient intake among the poor and middle income groups has touched a new low. More seriously, in the last one year, the poultry industry has sustained losses of at least Tk 4100 crore owing to outbreak of avian influenza, on and off -- thanks to poor surveillance and monitoring.

This has had ominous ramifications on the rural economy in particular and the national economy in general. As it is, livestock took a severe battering from two successive floods followed by cyclone Sidr last year. As though that was not enough of a blow to the rural economy we now encounter the fallout of bird flu. Poultry industry has been a fast developing sector with bank loans and micro-credits funneled into it fostering a whole range of medium and small enterprises. Millions of people are dependent on the poultry industry, either by employment or through wholesale and retail networks.

We can suggest three specific steps to revitalise the industry. First and foremost, bank loans on concessional rate of interest should be given to poultry farmers. Secondly, those who had taken loans from the banks their repayment must be rescheduled. Last but not least, the consumers need to be sensitised about cooking fowls and eggs in temperature above 70 degrees centigrade which makes it safe for consumption. Insofar as handling chicken is concerned gloves and masks need to be used.

There seems to be a flurry among poultry industry owners in seeking bank loans and compensations. We must be able to separate the chaff from the grain and provide support to the eligible ones.

Welcome return of artefacts

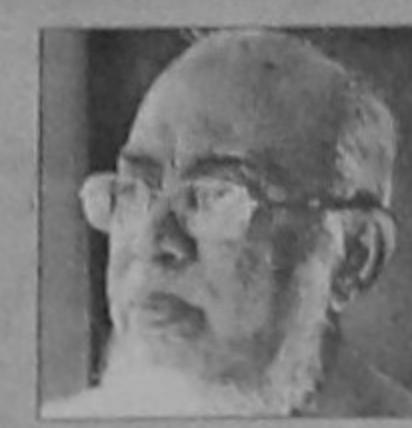
Ensure better handling in future

THE return of the priceless artefacts to their country of origin, Bangladesh, is no doubt an occasion to exult. We are happy that all the 42 pieces of supreme intrinsic value taken in a cultural exchange programme to the Paris-based Guimet Museum have come back in good condition on Saturday. And we take the occasion to thank the French government for sending them back to Bangladesh as per schedule.

Exchange of relics like paintings, touchstone, black stone statues, wood carvings and terracotta items is a common practice among countries of the world. These timeless relics, dating back to thousand years, provide rare glimpses of the unique and rich cultural heritage of a country. And such programmes help enhance friendship between two countries and educate people of one country about the cultural history of another. No doubt, it is in the same light, the Guimet Museum authorities had given the offer to put some of the relics of Bangladesh on display for their visitors. Bangladesh government had responded in good faith but unfortunately, right from the beginning, because of unprofessional handling of the entire programme and subsequent theft of some items at Zia International Airport, people were dismayed over lack of transparency and demanded a ban on such exchange programme.

The arrival of all the artefacts will have put everything behind now and we hope the ties between Bangladesh and France remain as friendly as ever. It however needs to be said that we may agree to similar offer from a museum overseas in future but our advice to the authorities concerned would be to involve all relevant quarters to remove any trace of ambiguity about any contract signed. We take great pride in our rich cultural past, and therefore, it is natural that we would be protective about it.

Beyond the Pakistan elections



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

Now, let's take a look at the election itself. It was a free, fair and peaceful election, with no instance of rigging reported anywhere. What Musharraf already did under the cover of his mini-martial law obviously spared him from soiling his hands with rigging. Instead, he has the confident look of a master player of the game.

Pakistani leader, returned in style, ostensibly with American blessing. Relatively conservative Nawaz Sharif, formerly a blue-eyed boy of the establishment, followed suit, presumably under the patronage of the Saudis who extended him royal hospitality for years. Both returned clean -- thanks to the provisions contained in the specially crafted National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO).

The PML(Q), which came into being with the full blessings of intelligence agencies, served Musharraf perfectly well since 2001 by providing political support to his undemocratic takeover from an elected government, but it had no roots in the masses who were fast losing faith in the general amid widespread violence by the Jihadi extremists and countrywide economic hardship. Worried over Musharraf's falling approval ratings the Americans, desperately dependent on the general

to fight their war on terror, wanted, in a last ditch effort, to burnish his tainted image by interfacing it with the charisma of Ms Benazir Bhutto, their favourite.

There was an undeclared deal of a sort between the general and Benazir Bhutto, which, however, never came to light. But implementation of some of the US-brokered arrangements under the deal has started. Bhutto returned in October to a tumultuous reception in Karachi, which perhaps unnerved the general as to his standing vis-à-vis Bhutto's.

There seems to have been a cover-up of the Karachi mayhem, for which the finger of accusation was raised against the establishment. A course change was apparently underway at the behest of the top echelons of the power wielders who, perhaps, found it difficult to face the combined power of the mobilisation by the erstwhile

political archrivals -- Bhutto and Sharif.

Musharraf's gambit, like that of an astute chess player, succeeded when he transformed himself into a civilian head of the state by doffing his uniform that had so long been like his second skin. But he followed a path that does not auger well for democracy. He first used his powers, which he assumed under a mini-martial law imposed on November 3, and in preparing for assuming the civilian office he transferred all those extra powers to himself as president. Heads he wins and tails as well.

The "extraordinary conditions" for declaring emergency, which he claims forced him "to act or to give in," were reminiscent of the choice he had made leading to his 1999 coup: "To accept retirement or to fire Mr Sharif." It is a bit mind boggling that this kind of mental outlook will stand him in good stead in his role which, in essence, does

not allow such a stark either-or course of action.

Unlike the culture of the military, a democratic process needs a strong propensity to not only give leadership but also to accommodate public opinion. General Musharraf does not possess either the practical experience or academic credentials to make ponderous statements about the political system.

Besides, the statements made by President Musharraf after the tragic death of Benazir Bhutto clearly indicate that he intends to remain a key player in the post-election power structure. The glaring aspect of his determination is the introduction of the concept of a troika, in which power is to be shared between three power centers -- the president, prime minister and COAS. In this way, Musharraf intends to leverage his influence by institutionalising a system that informally existed during the 1990s, when Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were prime ministers.

The power to amend the constitution was given to President General Musharraf by the PCO, of which he publicly stated that the only illegal and unconstitutional act he had ever committed was on November 3 when he declared an emergency, dubbed mini-martial law by the opposition and media, and promulgated the PCO, wherein the die was already cast. All that the elected body can do now is to play second fiddle to real power -- more or less in the manner the PML(A) did.

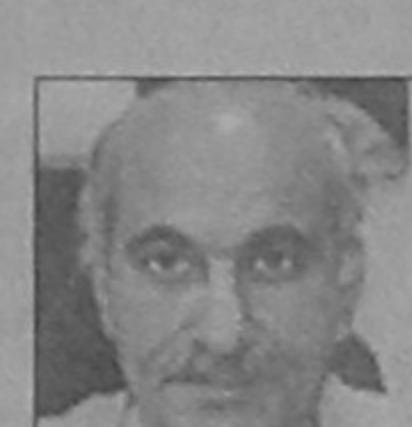
instance of rigging reported anywhere. What Musharraf already did under the cover of his mini-martial law obviously spared him from soiling his hands with rigging. Instead, he has the confident look of a master player of the game.

In the meantime, the results turned out to be one prognosticated by most observers. Even the number of the seats won by the parties is according to prediction. Now the crucial question is about the end result. In other words, to what extent will this result be of use in transforming Pakistani polity; because the new equation for the country's future had already been put in place earlier on November 3rd through the Provisional Constitution Order (PCO).

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Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIS.

Queue and collect



M.J. AKBAR

BYLINE

It is perfectly understandable that Dr. Manmohan Singh would want to do the deal on his watch, for personal as well as political reasons. He has pushed the agreement with a passion uncharacteristic of his personality. The Congress wants to sell this deal to the voter as the panacea that will bring electricity to every village, and would have already done so if those awful, China-loving communists had not sabotaged it.

Reddy, has speculated that he would like every farmer to get a handsome loan; perhaps he got it the other way around.

Leaders across the UPA spectrum have begun to demand that farmers should get waivers on their loans, and the Congress has trundled truckloads of farmers from neighbouring states to call on Mrs. Sonia Gandhi in Delhi.

With so much political preparation, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram would be very foolish not to announce such a gift when he stands up to present an account of his accounts in Parliament on the last day of February. One of the reasons that brought this government to power was rural anger over farmers' suicides.

For four budgets, the finance minister has done a whole deal of nothing about farmers. Now that elections are back on the horizon, naturally he must remember they exist. Far from the political course. It only needs to be pointed out that when you claim that a particular budget is going to be for the much-valued Common Man, it is implicit admission that previous budgets were not quite for him.

The World Bankers who infest

the government believe that the best economic policies are those that lead to indirect benefits for the Common Man; they are Trickledowners who are convinced that economic policy must be oriented to the objective of overall growth, from whence benefits will eventually trickle down to the famous Common Man.

Alas, this Common Man expects a far faster rate of delivery than Trickledowners can offer. In a dictatorship this would not have been much of a problem, but a democracy has this inconvenient problem called elections. Voting takes place on the Day of the Common Man. Some governments have convinced themselves that the voter can be persuaded by last-minute lollipops.

For a journalist, the best thing about a Common Man's Budget is that you can review it before it has been revealed, largely because there will be no great revelations. This is probably going to be a "Queue and Collect" budget.

The government will, but naturally, seek to cover all bases as it steps into election mode. The timetable has been dis-

closed from what might be described as supplementary sources. The American senators, including John Kerry, Jo Biden and Chuck Hagel, who dropped in on Dr. Manmohan Singh on their way back from Pakistan, offered a major clue. They extended the deadline for the completion of the Indo-US nuclear deal to July. The threat of death has been variable.

Last year, American and Indian government voices suggested that if the whole process were not complete before January, all would be over. January came and the deadline was stretched to March. The Senators would apparently be too busy electing a new President of the United States to find time for a bilateral deal. Three Democrat Senators, Kerry, Biden and Hagel have now extended the time limit to July. The elasticity is one measure of bipartisan American keenness.

If you think about it, there is no reason why the deal cannot go through even with a new president in office, because all three potential presidents, John McCain, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are members of

the present Senate.

In other words, they are all committed to the deal and have signed on it with their vote. All are agreed in principle. A new president in Washington might want to alter a detail, but so might a new prime minister in Delhi.

However, it is perfectly understandable that Dr. Manmohan Singh would want to do the deal on his watch, for personal as well as political reasons. He has pushed the agreement with a passion uncharacteristic of his personality. The Congress wants to sell this deal to the voter as the panacea that will bring electricity to every village, and would have already done so if those awful, China-loving communists had not sabotaged it.

The Senate needs three months to pass legislation, so, working backwards, Dr. Singh might need to sign the deal sometime in April. The Left objects, and Dr. Singh can offer a thin smile, which he is good at, and happily recommend a general election in October. This would merge with Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, states in which the BJP is in power.

The Congress can, therefore, expect to gain from an anti-incumbency depression, hoping that the carryover effect of regional anger will translate into more seats for the party at the national level.

There is an additional, and more crucial, reason for an early election. Food prices have risen sharply across the world, and

India cannot be isolated from this pattern. The markets and bazaars are already telling us this much. The inflation rate, like a good statistic, hides far more than it reveals.

The price of basic food items has risen far more than the average of all prices might suggest. If this year's crop is less than bountiful, the pressure on prices will be unmanageable. Nothing hurts a voter more than a kick in the stomach. An aching stomach takes its revenge through the ballot box. The longer the government waits for an election, the worse it will probably be for the principal ruling party, the Congress.

The Common Man is getting a budget; does the Common Man have a face? Actually, yes. That brilliant Times of India cartoonist, R.K. Laxman, has given us the emblematic face of the Common Man.

I chanced upon a Laxman original of Mahatma Gandhi in a friend's office, and it struck me that Laxman's Common Man, who has appeared for decades on the front page of the Times, is a variation of Gandhi. Gandhi redefined India and Indian nationalism, took it away from the grasp of elites and handed it over to the Common Man for safekeeping.

Six decades after Gandhi's death, the Common Man is getting one budget out of five. I suppose the Common Man should be grateful for small mercies.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Scandal hits McCain, Hillary fades

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Being romantically involved with a female lobbyist is not a crime. However, it does not bode well for someone like Mr. McCain who espouses family values. This will provide added fuel to his detractors who accuse McCain of "hypocrisy." If it can be proven that Senator McCain misused his Senatorial powers for sexual favours, it is a very serious allegation with the potential to destroy his candidacy.

FAKIRUDDIN AHMED

Pickering: "Excuse the straight question, Higgins. Are you a man of good character where women are concerned?" Higgins: "Have you ever met a man of good character where women are concerned?" George Bernard Shaw: Pygmalion, Act II

APPARENTLY, the extramarital love bug had bit the presumed Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, eight years ago. According to a front-page story in The New York Times on February 21, during his first presidential run in 2000, candidate McCain's staffers had to intervene to keep

him away from a female lobbyist. Married for the second time in 1980, John McCain was 63 in 2000, and the lobbyist, Vicki Iseman, 30. Senator McCain was the chairman of the powerful Senate Commerce Committee, and the McCain staffers told The New York Times that, in exchange for sexual favours, Mr. McCain did some business favours for the telecommunications company Ms. Iseman lobbied for. Both Senator McCain and Ms. Iseman flatly denied the allegations.

Being romantically involved with a female lobbyist is not a crime. However, it does not bode well for someone like Mr. McCain who espouses family values. This will provide added fuel to his detractors who accuse McCain of "hypocrisy." If it can be proven that Senator McCain misused his Senatorial powers for sexual favours, it is a very serious allegation with the potential to destroy his candidacy.

It may be recalled that last month The New York Times endorsed Senator John McCain for the president among the Republican candidates.

Philandering by US presidents is nothing new. The woman present at President Franklin D. Roosevelt's deathbed was not his wife! General Dwight Eisenhower's affair with his British chauffeur, Kay Summersby, is well documented. President Kennedy's multiple affairs with famous actresses of his time are common knowledge. To this day, people queue up to have their DNA tested to prove they are President Lyndon B. Johnson's children! Of course, everybody remembers Monica.

Getting involved in sex scandals before winning the nomination or presidency can spell disaster. Democratic front-runner Senator Gary Hart dared the press to delve into his personal affairs in 1987. They did; complete with a front-page photograph in the National Enquirer, of a model, Donna Rice, on the Senator's lap on a boat appropriately named, "Monkey Business."

That was the end of Gary Hart's quest for presidency.

Through his categorical denials, Senator John McCain has left himself little wiggle room. If more sources come forward and corroborate the allegations, Senator McCain may be forced to pull a Gary Hart.

Since Super Tuesday (February 5), Senator Barack Obama has won eleven primaries and caucuses in a row. And they have been blowouts. On February 19, Obama won Wisconsin primary by 58 to 41%, his home state of Hawaii by 76% to 24% and the Americans abroad by 65% to 35%. Mathematically, it is almost impossible for Hillary Clinton to win more pledged delegates than Barack Obama. With Obama winning every contest with lopsided margins, the only way Clinton can hope to win is thematically. She has to convince the Democratic Party voters that she is the only one who can beat John McCain. That will be a hard sell, because most Democratic voters believe that Obama has a better shot at beating McCain than Clinton has.

Nevertheless, in their debate at the University of Texas at Austin on February 21, Hillary Clinton tried her best to label Obama as someone full of words, in contrast to herself, "full of solutions." As she tried to accuse Obama of plagiarism, she was booed! Although she scored points on health care, she failed to deliver a knockout punch, and Obama did not help her with any gaffes.

Asked about super-delegates, Obama said that they should not overturn the will of the primary and caucuses voters. A tired Hillary concurred, saying something like, "Que Sera, Sera (What-ever will be, will be)." At this point, she seemed resigned to her fate. "I am honoured" to be in the presence of Barack Obama, she said, adding wistfully, "whatever happens, we will be fine."

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and Daily Star columnist.

