

## Exemption of taxes

*Will it be enough to make rice affordable?*

COMMERCE Adviser Zillur Rahman has given the media to understand that the government is seriously considering exemption of import duty on rice and that there could be duty cutbacks on some other essential commodities. Before taking the steps, the government would have to be first assured of the majority benefiting from such action, he was quick to add. We read a certain hesitancy into the adviser's conditional statement which appears out of steps with the urgency of the price issue requiring quick anti-dotes.

Lowering of customs duty or zero-tariff will definitely reduce the landed cost. To that extent, the prices should fall, even though admittedly, previous cutback on duties did not translate into proportional reduction in prices. In our peculiar context, with the international prices rising domestic prices go up but if those should decrease internal prices do not go down, not at least commensurately. Thus, there is an element of hoarding or artificial scarcity mongering and speculative trading which could only be offset by saturating the market with timely import and internal procurement. Domestic procurement affected by natural calamities having been low, we should have negotiated rice deals much earlier in the day with the same urgency we are doing it now. But only to see the international prices go higher by notches. We are now having to turn to World Bank to persuade India for reduction of their import price from US\$600plus per metric tonne. The roller-coaster ride in regard to getting the promised rice from India has been unfortunate.

The crux of the matter is availability alone cannot ease the plight of consumers, because the real problem lies in affordability. Studies by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) clearly indicate substantial drop in real income of people. Income generation hitting a low and the purchasing power of fixed income groups taking a dip, most people cannot afford higher prices of food items, let alone their chain effects on prices of other essentials, transportation, education cost, health cost, and what have you.

This is the condition of fixed income groups; just imagine the unbearable plight of the landless and the ultra-poor. The underutilisation of the ADP has meant reduction of seasonal employment, especially under food-for-work programme. The answer lies in vigorous pursuit of VGD and VGF programmes as determined efforts are made to import more foodstuffs.

There is a limit to subsidisation in a resource-poor country. Let's not forget, advanced countries subsidise from their own resources, we don't. How much we can divert resource from other heads is to be carefully considered. In the short term, we may have to go for some subsidisation, but in the medium term, we must go all-out for higher productivity.

## Modernise the railway

*Corporatisation may be a way forward*

ALTHOUGH the number of railway passengers has dwindled because of the improvement in other areas of surface transport in Bangladesh, in terms of actual volume more than 45 million avail the railway to get about within the country annually, a substantial figure indeed given the size of the railway. Yet Bangladesh railway has seen very little substantive improvement to speak of. Apart from occasional addition of imported coaches one finds very little to write home about by way of its development. The basic infrastructure remains archaic.

Very few will contest the fact that rail travel remains the safest and perhaps one of the cheapest mode of transport in the country, and yet it continues to run up huge losses every year; added to the declining state of passenger service Bangladesh Railway indeed is a pathetic picture.

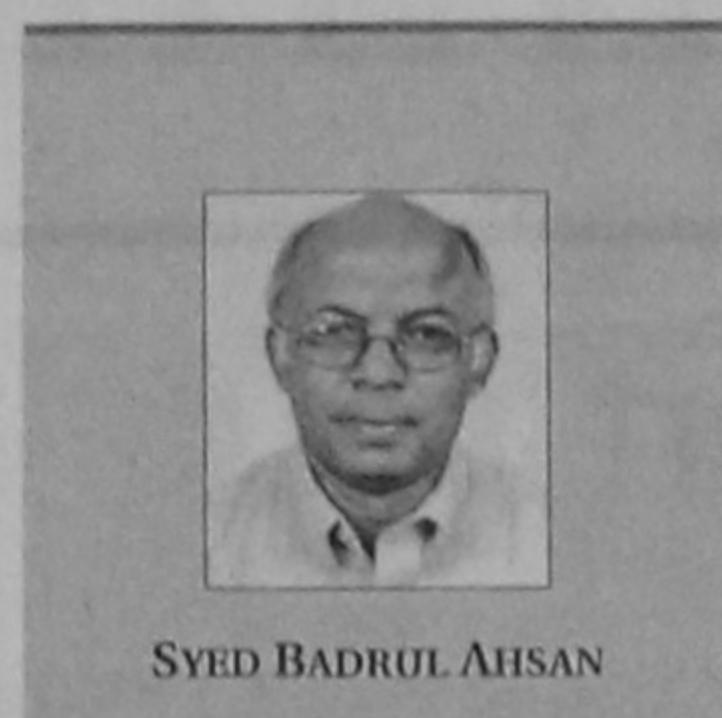
While one cannot take issue with the comments of the railway secretary that the sick service cannot be revived without turning into a business organisation, and that it is likely to be changed into a limited company, what begs the question is why has the reality taken so long to dawn -- on the policy makers? Can the pressing need for improvement wait for the 44 months that will be needed to complete the study that has been undertaken from October 2007? We would like to suggest that the study be completed sooner than the projected timeframe.

But, while bringing in all the necessary reforms is all very good, the fact remains that unless the standard of service is modernised, the state-run enterprise may well have to continue in the red for many more years.

For one thing, the manpower needs rationalisation, apart from inculcating a service orientated attitude in them. More people should be recruited if need be, but based on strict professional criteria. And this is where we find a contradiction in the railway secretary's position when he levels criticism at the railway staff's poor service records yet unwilling to retrench them because of, according to him, their 'efficiency'.

The full potential of our railway can be realised if the proposed corporatisation leads to the improvement of passenger service including on board service, as well over the counter, punctuality, regular maintenance of the tracks and upkeep of the bogies and compartments. In this regard certain services can be privatised as is being done now in respect of a few passenger trains running between the capital and other cities, with good results.

# Faces that are hollow, eyes that are sunken



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

FINANCE Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam believes the economy is getting better. That presupposes the thought that the economy is at present in a good state. And yet, when you observe conditions around you, you tend not to agree with the adviser. And you do that because of all the realities you live through on a quotidian basis.

But, certainly, in terms of figures and facts, the adviser may have a point. He has a right to his opinion. The trouble, though, is that the encouraging economy he speaks of does not percolate down into our lives.

One place where you find evidence for your position is the market, that forbidding place where, despite all your reservations, you need to go everyday. There is your family after all, a proper middle class bunch, forever and properly worried about its next meal. And these days, it is that meal that seems to be shrinking, in terms of quality and surely in terms of quantity. There is that sinking feeling in you. Is the economy still getting better for you and

## GROUND REALITIES

**In the villages, a few kilometers outside the nation's capital, you will stumble into what you think are thin, and thinning, men in search of commodities to buy. The emptiness of the bags they carry and the hollowness of their pockets is what strike you in those markets or haats as we knew them once upon a time. Those faces are hollow. The eyes in them are sunken.**

me?

And all the nightmares in our lives come through the terror we confront in the market today. The price of rice goes beyond the capacity of the common man. Everything becomes coarse, and not just the rice we consume or try to buy in the open market. Our vegetables go out of our reach. Meat is something most of us in this country are beginning to recall within the parameters of memory.

The fish we once loved and ate in an abundance of pleasure, and still crave, are a dream we hold on to. Do not, if you can, dwell on lentils, or call them pulses. They are a rarity, not because you cannot pay to buy them, but because those traders expect you to cough up everything you have if you are in a mood to eat them.

My friends, we are speaking of the horror that stalks us in the market these days. In the footsteps of that horror come all the telltale signs of misery. That misery is in the urban streets, blown about by the dust. It is in the dark corners of your increasingly gloomy home.

In the villages, a few kilometers outside the nation's capital, you

will stumble into what you think are thin, and thinning, men in search of commodities to buy. The emptiness of the bags they carry and the hollowness of their pockets is what strike you in those markets or haats as we knew them once upon a time. Those faces are hollow. The eyes in them are sunken.

Sit back against an ancient tree somewhere in your village, or just outside it, and reflect on all the excuses some good people are coming up with, to tell us why prices have been going up in our shops and in our markets. Prices have been going up in the global market, say these people, and with a straight face. Which is why, you are told bluntly, we have all these rising prices in our own markets. But these men do not tell us if the kind of sharks who masquerade as traders in Bangladesh happen to be out there in the world beyond our political frontiers as well.

Do traders in the United Kingdom or France sell a jar of edible oil for twenty pounds or francs one day and have the price climb to forty pounds or francs the next? They obviously do not, but in Bangladesh that is how prices

have been going up.

No one on the perches of authority understands that such an attitude on the part of the government to a price hike only emboldens the dishonest trader, that it offers a defence shield to those who stand ready to fleece the people of this country with impunity. If government speaks for those who cheerfully raise the prices of household necessities in rampant form, who will speak for the huddled masses?

When an advisor informs us, much to our consternation followed by swift indignation, that prices have been going up because the purchasing power of Bengali citizens has registered a rise, you wonder if it is an unreal world you inhabit. Suddenly, you comprehend afresh the entire thought behind that old concept of the ivory tower. You do not see the ground from such heights of grandeur.

Elitism is always a danger to men and women who struggle from dawn to sundown for bare sustenance. You watch all these noble men pontificating at so many round tables and on such a profusion of talk shows on the issues that

affect our lives from day to day. How many of these men, you ask yourself, are truly aware of what it means to go hungry?

When powerful men accomplished in the ways of the world suddenly seek to enlighten you on your dietary habits, on the need to discard them in favour of new ones, you are left with that bizarre notion of being part of a world where sensitivities have gone missing.

Must I eat less only because that great man and his colleagues do not have it in them to rein in a runaway market? If I must do away with rice and go for potatoes, let me do so at my convenience. But when individuals in government inform me, glibly and without a thought to the ramifications of their advice, that if rice is going out of my reach I have all those potatoes to fall back on, it is the theme of incompetence that reveals itself before me.

You cannot fix the electric bulb in my room. Fine. I understand. But why must you try glossing over your inability through asking me to use a paraffin lamp from now on?

An advisor takes umbrage with the way the media deal with economic realities. They do not throw light on the positive aspects of the economy, says he. It is time to get real. When your citizens move around in a daze, with nearly empty pockets, constantly needed by thoughts of their hungry children back home, there is nothing positive there. The state may have its foreign exchange reserves. Readymade garment exports may have gone up; and foreign invest-

ment opportunities may be looking up.

But then, how do you explain the poverty in the villages, the man in a tattered lungi and the half-naked child beginning to show signs of nutrition-related illnesses? And what response have you to the local swindling that goes on in the name of rising prices in the international market, the criminality that threatens to make paupers of your honest citizens?

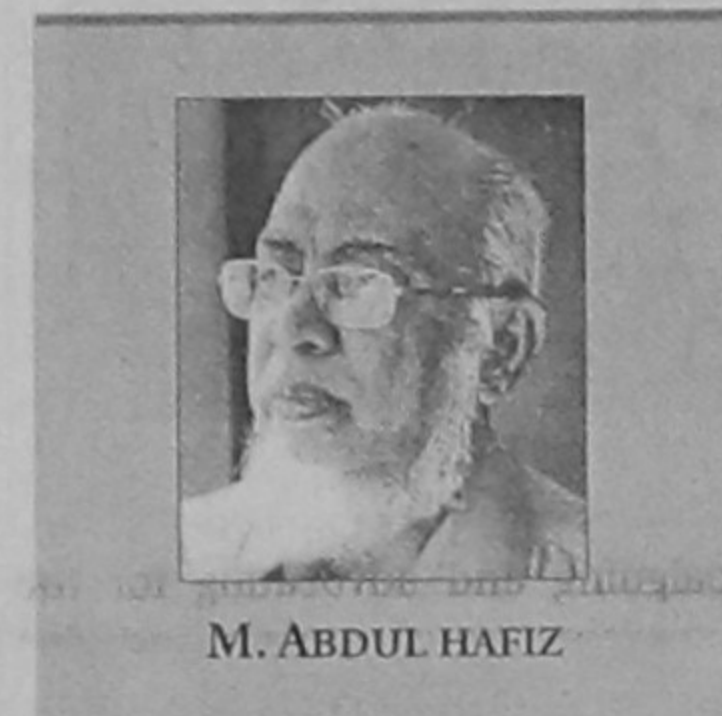
You may talk of politics as much as you wish. You may spend days in hair-splitting debate on the upcoming elections. But all these gentle, necessary exercises clearly get submerged in a gathering mudslide of terrible reality if you cannot guarantee each of your citizens a decent meal.

All politics is local. Go a little further, and you will know that politics is fundamentally about full stomachs and contented sleep. History has essentially moved forward every time people have felt those cramps inside the vacuity of the stomachs in them. Do not push that lesson aside.

By the way, does it not worry you that, in these critical times, no one in the corridors of power has so much as whispered in your ears that there is a paramount need for austerity in these days of sadness? That we need to strip an outsize government of all the fat it has accumulated over the decades, and redirect the resources thus retrieved to where it matters?

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# Australia's stolen generations: Bringing them home?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IT was a defining moment when the country's rock band 'The Midnight Oil' displayed a bold 'sorry' emblazoned on their costumes in the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000, even if the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd failed to bring himself to articulate the same sentiment for what is widely known as the lost generation of Australia's first people -- euphuism for the victims of a state-sponsored kidnapping of Aboriginal children.

Yet, the labour prime minister went somewhat towards allaying the concerns that he might be another version of John Howard, his predecessor, on the issue. History might absolve him, but the stigma will persist.

Being a prisoner of conscience -- back in 1995 -- Prime Minister Paul Keating for the first time instituted an enquiry into the forcible removal of Aboriginal children that took place in every Australian state from the late 1800s until 1969.

## PERSPECTIVES

**The Aborigines had been living in the immense island for tens of thousands of years before the British "discovered" it, and turned it into their penal colony. The indigenous cultures of Australia are among the oldest in the world, and at the time of occupation there were 700 different indigenous languages spoken in Australia. When the Europeans first came to Australia the assumption was that the Aborigines had no religion. But for thousands of years the land was steeped in an ancient system of belief called Dreaming.**

As many as 100,000 children, called the "stolen generation," were removed. This took varying forms -- by putting them in government-run institutions, having white families adopt these children, or by having whites foster them. The policy had semi-surprisingly been followed until as recently as 1970.

Two years later, an enquiry yielded a report -- titled Bringing Them Home -- packed with harrowing details of children being snatched away from their mothers or being lured away on false pretences and thereafter being denied all contacts with their families.

The profoundly racist motivation behind the practice was to breed out aboriginality to introduce an Australian version of apartheid, and nourish the hope of Aborigines eventually ceasing to exist. Of special attraction to the authorities were the mixed race children, born of white men and aborigine women, for the

ease of assimilation.

However, the Aborigines had been living in the immense island for tens of thousands of years before the British "discovered" it, and turned it into their penal colony. The indigenous cultures of Australia are among the oldest in the world, and at the time of occupation there were 700 different indigenous languages spoken in Australia.

When the Europeans first came to Australia the assumption was that the Aborigines had no religion. But for thousands of years the land was steeped in an ancient system of belief called Dreaming. Spiritually looked at -- the indigenous Australians had their religious beliefs anchored to a sense of belonging to the land, and the sea around it.

Interestingly, many of the aboriginal tribes had a profound sense of accommodation, and weren't altogether averse to sharing the land despite their deep cultural and spiritual

attachment to it, of which they considered themselves as only the custodians and not the owners. In spite of such magnanimity of the indigenous people the white settlement was frequently accompanied by massacres.

Notwithstanding such savagery on the part of the colonisers, it was the original inhabitants of the land who were denigrated as barbarians and often treated as if they were animals.

The massacres eventually diminished, not least because the reports from the antipodes caused a certain amount of consternation in British political circles; but they gave way in the 20th century to genocide by other means.

Aborigines were generally corralled in barren tracts, and were not even considered Australian citizens until a watershed referendum in 1967 empowered the federal government to legislate on their behalf.

In the 40 years since then, their

relegation to the margins of the society has hardly been reversed. Most of them subsist in dysfunctional communities where the standards of health and education are way below the general Australian standard, reflected in the ghastly statistic that the aboriginal life span is at least 17 years shorter than the Australian average.

Sexual abuse and misadventures involving alcohol are relatively common in these communities. This is not entirely surprising, given the absence of opportunities for intellectual advancement or gainful employment. A high proportion of Aborigines tend to be imprisoned even for minor offences and deaths in custody are shockingly frequent.

The use of the word "genocide" in "Bringing Them Home" raised a few hackles, even though it accurately summed up the intent of the policy in question, but the term "stolen generation" was readily accepted as an apt description of the victims.

The report recommended a formal apology and generous compensation. Unfortunately, by the time the report was tabled in 1997, Keating had been replaced as prime minister by John Howard, whose views on race relation were not as enlightened as those of Keating. He refused to accept the recommendation and, instead, made mocking references to the "black armband" view of history.

Howard's myopic vision, steeped in bigotry was, ironically, endorsed by a couple of ideologically motivated historians, but wasn't completely accepted by his own Liberal Party. White Australians by the tens of thousands signed "Sorry books" and participated in reconciliation marches.

Since the Labour Party returned to power last year, and has been enjoying a comfortable majority recently, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd chose to rise on his feet in the House of Representatives and delivered an eloquent and unequivocal apology to the "stolen generation" and to Aborigines in general for their maltreatment over the decades. In doing so he demonstrated the power of words to alter perception.

It was a symbolic gesture, but it suddenly felt like a different country -- the sort of Australia presaged by 'The Midnight Oil's' mildly rebellious gesture in the Olympics.

The apology does not, in itself, spell the end of the Australian version of apartheid. But it was, at long last, a step in right direction. The Rudd government has indicated that it intends to travel far down the road to a demonstrably non-racist Australia. How it proceeds in the months and years ahead will be watched with an abiding interest.

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# Guilt by association

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

**Here is the irony. "Patriots" like Hannity, O'Reilly, Limbaugh and Cheney never picked up a gun to defend America. These "chicken hawks" could not run away from combat fast enough. The only time they pick up a gun is to shoot an unarmed duck! On the other hand, the "unpatriotic" blacks, only 13% of the population constitute 30% of the US military and are disproportionately dying in Iraq. Rev. Wright, the "traitor," is a former US marine who put his life on the line to defend America!**

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

RIGHT-wing Republican television and radio talk show hosts were ecstatic on Friday, March 14! Finally they had found Barack Obama's fatal flaw, a crack in his armour -- in the person of his pastor Jeremiah Wright.

They had been peddling videos of Rev. Wright's fiery sermons suggesting that the US brought the September 11 attacks on itself and the government had a role in spreading the Aids virus in the black community. Now the videos were on YouTube getting millions

of hits.

Since Rev. Wright has been Barack Obama's spiritual mentor for twenty years, had married Barack and Michelle, and baptised their two girls, Wright's opinions are Obama's, they argued. "This is the end of Obama's quest for the presidency," prophesied Fox News's Sean Hannity, a sentiment echoed by talk radio's uber-hatemonger Rush Limbaugh.

In his Sunday sermon after September 11 Wright suggested: "We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in

New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost."

In a 2003 sermon he complained: "The government gives blacks drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God

damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme."

In a sermon last December he argued: "Barack knows what it means to be a black man to be living in a country and a culture that is controlled by rich white people. Hillary can never know that. Hillary ain't never been called a nigger."

Calling Wright his spiritual confidant and the inspiration behind his book, The Audacity of Hope, Obama addressed the controversy head on: "I categorically denounce any statement that disparages our great country or serves to divide us from our allies. I also believe that words that degrade individuals have no place in our public dialogue, whether it's on the campaign stump or in the pulpit. In sum, I reject outright the statements by Reverend Wright that are at issue."

He has looked to Wright for spiritual advice, not political

guidance, Obama said, adding he has been pained and angered to learn of some of his pastor's comments when he had not been present. Without repudiating Wright the man, Obama described him as "like an uncle" who says something that he disagrees with and must speak out against. He also said he expects his political opponents will use video of the sermons to attack him.

He is absolutely right on that. Independent 527 groups that "swift boated" John Kerry in 2004 will hammer Obama with negative ads invoking Pastor Wright, Hannity and O'Reilly (Fox News), and Limbaugh promised to paint Obama as unpatriotic and unfit to be president because of his association with the pastor.

Fiery sermons are the staple of black churches. With an excruciating history of slavery, lynching, and discrimination, African-American experience is vastly different than white American experience.

In 1853, freed slave-statesman

Frederick Douglass refused to speak at a function on July 4, American Independence Day, saying that blacks had little to celebrate on that day. Television commentator David Gergen, a Professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and former advisor to Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton said that many of his African-American students tell him the same thing about July 4 today.

They are not less patriotic, cautions Gergen; they are patriotic on a different plane. They want white America to acknowledge the indignity, torture, lynching and discrimination that it had inflicted on the blacks for centuries. Rev. Wright embodies such hurt, bitterness and grievances, Obama said.

Obama on the other hand, wants to get beyond the politics of victimhood and usher in a post-racial era of change and hope. Bigots like Hannity, O'Reilly, and Limbaugh are not interested in blacks' genuine grievances; they want blacks to be patriotic on

white America's terms.

On February 26, Senator McCain appeared at a campaign rally in Cincinnati with his "spiritual guide" Rev. Rod Parsley. In his book Silent No More, Parsley claims that Islam is an "anti-Christ religion" predicated on "deception."

The Muslim prophet Muhammad, he writes, "received revelations from demons and not from the true God." And he emphasises this point: "Allah was a demon spirit." Parsley does not differentiate between violent Islamic extremists and other followers of the religion:

"There are some, of course, who will say that the violence I cite is the exception and not the rule. I beg to differ. I will counter, respectfully, that what some call 'extremists' are instead mainstream believers who are drawing from the well at the very heart of Islam."

Has Senator McCain condemned Rev. Parsley's incendiary remarks? No, Hannity, Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Fox News and their ilk?

Absolutely not! This is the magnitude of hypocrisy Obama is up against.

McCain surrogates and Fox News will fan the flames of Rev. Wright's comments to destroy the candidacy of Obama because they believe that Hillary will be easier to beat in November. In open primaries Limbaugh asks Republicans to vote for Hillary. In Mississippi 24% of Hillary's votes came from Republicans.

Here is the irony. "Patriots" like Hannity, O'Reilly, Limbaugh and Cheney never picked up a gun to defend America. These "chicken hawks" could not run away from combat fast enough. The only time they pick up a gun is to shoot an unarmed duck! On the other hand, the "unpatriotic" blacks, only 13% of the population constitute 30% of the US military and are disproportionately dying in Iraq. Rev. Wright, the "traitor," is a former US marine who put his life on the line to defend America!

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