

Reaching food to people

New measures of govt must succeed

A GAINST the backdrop of skyrocketing prices of essentials and untold misery of the people of every stratum, government has taken the decision to double the allocation of rice under the Open Market Sale (OMS) programme. To this effect, we understand, an additional 1,200 to 1,500 tonnes of rice will be supplied every day to the OMS outlets until end of April. But, we feel considerable time has been spent by the authorities in taking the vital decision of making food grains available on a wider scale, especially to the ultra poor. The other decision of extending the OMS programme to the rural areas down to union level is a worthwhile decision, but the union council leaders will have to ensure that the allotted rice will reach the needy in their constituencies.

We understand the government is also contemplating increasing the coverage of the ultra poor under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and also replacing a portion of rice given under VGF with potato. Since the country has seen a bumper crop this season, this nature-given bounty might also prove to be a temporary boon for the poor. Bringing diversity in staple food is a good idea but options have to be there for the people to take.

We feel the idea of bringing the urban and rural poor under some kind of safety net is the immediate task before the government. Availability of food is not all there is to the issue. Much more important is the question of affordability on the part of the vast majority of people. We suggest that employment generation should be given the utmost priority so that people have minimum money to buy food. At the same time, food for work programme needs to be extended throughout the country.

We believe medium to long-term solution to the problem is rooted in improved and effective planning incorporating timely procurement, proper storing and timely distribution of foodgrains based on reliable statistics all the way. The aspect of constant monitoring of distribution of food is an area the government will have to make foolproof for achieving better results. Besides, monitoring of the markets, greater vigilance has to be directed towards the distribution chain so that the middle-man factor can be eliminated or at best minimised to keep prices under control.

After trying out various measures the government has now decided on a massive OMS operation. So, the stake is very high; all-out efforts must be made to make it a success.

Vandalism on the highway

What a poor account we give of ourselves!

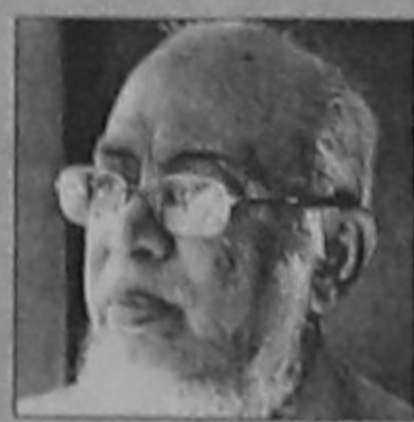
THE fact that a large number of private and public vehicles were damaged apart from the fact that the only highway, Dhaka-Aricha, connecting the capital with northwestern and eastern parts of the country was blocked for a greater part of two hours evokes instant condemnation. We must have minimum sense to avert such disruptive activities.

The incident occurred apparently from a fracas between the students of Jahangir Nagar University when the bus they were travelling was vandalised after it met with a minor accident with a light truck. Reportedly, several female students were also injured during the transport workers attack. One understands that the students' action was precipitated by the news that some of their fellow students travelling in the said bus had been confined by the transport workers. This is an equally reprehensible act and we condemn the transport workers for taking law into their hands and for assaulting the students.

We see every time an accident occurs, one or the other party or both resort to blocking the highway and indiscriminate behaviour including destruction of vehicles that happen to be plying through the area at that time. We have seen workers in factories alongside the main highways, demonstrating their grievances by coming on to the streets and blocking the main artery on many occasions, and also resorting to smashing of vehicles. Those that use the Dhaka-Aricha highway have had to suffer quite often in the past when the students' reaction to an issue manifested through violence and spilled on to the highway.

We would hope that sanity will prevail amongst all concerned, and no one should take the law into one's hands. But more importantly it must be ensured that our highways and the vehicles that ply on them do not become the object of ventilation of the grievances of the aggrieved, whether students or workers. There must be a civilised way of defusing tension before it snowballs. We need to put our heads together to evolve some kind of an auto-reactive mechanism in places vulnerable to disturbances.

The mother of all elections?



M. ABDUR HAFIZ

THE nation has been, with bated breath, awaiting what seems will be the mother of all elections. At least that's the impression we derive from the people concerned with election 2008. The ideas that have been hawked so far in this connection aim not only at ensuring the most credible election of the country but also one that would redefine Bangladesh polity and change its political ethos through a series of electoral reforms. The caretaker government undertook measures that will drive sleazy, corrupt and criminalised politicians out of the arena to allow space for

PERSPECTIVES
As regards a credible alternative, there are, at best, amorphous ideas and philosophy. Coined by a discredited Arab leader on the eve of the first gulf war, "the mother of all battles" did not go favourably for its author. In our case, we are at the moment toying only with the idea of an election -- let alone the question of the mother of all elections.

those who have been handicapped by the primacy and influence of black money and muscle power in the electoral process.

We have also been fed ideas that even technologically the next election will mark a tectonic shift from what it used to be earlier -- with the introduction of voter ID cards, transparent ballot boxes, and so on. There were ceremonies galore projecting these ideas and the technology adopted. In the process, the caretaker government, already well past its constitutionally mandated life-span, had to unavoidably dig its heels deeper to allow the changes and reforms to take place. But assorted groups of politicians, members of the civil society and experts in

various disciplines, particularly the economists, insist on an early election to hand over power to elected representatives of the people to avert a looming catastrophe -- especially in the economic sector. The major political parties demanded election by June next.

As the authority did not budge and went ahead with its functioning, it was presumed that in a worst-case scenario the election would be held next December -- the limit of the electoral time-frame given by the authority. Both the Election Commission and the caretaker government occasionally spoke of conducting the election before the year 2008 was out -- without, of course, specifying any date.

However, a reality check reveals that the work-load for the concerned agencies is disproportionately heavier than they can carry. During the next nine months that are left it is feared that the Election Commission may not be ready, given the long list of unfinished tasks. In retrospect, while the authority remained enamoured with projecting its ideas, the implementation does not seem to have proceeded in tandem.

It is learnt that 40 percent of ID cards have still not been prepared. Although it is over a year that the reorganised EC has been in place, voter list preparation earnestly started only from November last. It is also learnt that the enormity of errors incorporated in the list

prepared so far will require a big chunk of time for corrections. Moreover, the EC's dialogue with the political parties is still incomplete, with the BNP remaining out of its ambit due to legal glitches. Also, the electoral laws and code of conduct are yet to be prepared. The re-delineation of constituencies has been talked about, but not done. Even after the declaration of the election schedule, a lot of time will be required for political stakeholders to get ready.

As a result, the election, that is aptly looked upon as "a mother of all elections," remains uncertain as regards its timing, amid many similar imponderables. Doubts thicken with reports of "national government," "government of consensus" or a "national security council" gaining momentum.

The government often talks about the provision of level playing ground for a fair election. But where are the players? Thus far, everything appears barren. Neither the government nor the political

parties have reformed to bring about the desired changes. With the BNP down in the dumps as matter of comeuppance, and the AL shaken up with myriad corruption cases against its top leaders, there's really no platform for the potential political players to come from. As regards a credible alternative, there are, at best, amorphous ideas and philosophy. Coined by a discredited Arab leader on the eve of the first gulf war, "the mother of all battles" did not go favourably for its author. In our case, we are at the moment toying only with the idea of an election -- let alone the question of the mother of all elections.

Unfortunately, there is hiatus between what we desire and what can be done. We shall consider it an achievement only if an election of a sort is held. That alone, it is hoped, will be the harbinger of change -- and hopefully positive change. The nation desperately needs to be reassured of its destiny.

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The world is round



M.J. AKBAR

IF Dr Manmohan Singh loses the next general election -- predicted for October by the knowledgeable -- he will know whom to blame: his new best friend George Bush. Bush has achieved something unique. He has globalised defeat.

The reasons and means vary. In Britain, Tony Blair may be eased out and in Australia John Howard may be driven out, but the word in common is "out." Bush crippled himself long before time made him a lame duck. He began to cripple his friends at the height of his power, and the curse continues in the twilight of his term.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh escaped the swamps of Iraq, but he could become the victim of one bilateral Bush initiative, the potential nuclear deal with India, and the huge, chaotic mismanagement of the economy that has compounded the gushing fiscal wounds of the Iraq-Afghanistan war. Bush has financed this colossal misadventure with IOUs on history

and debt from the world economy, setting off a sinful (as opposed to virtuous) cycle.

Debt and war have destroyed perpetrator and victim alike in the past. They are doing so again. Bush's wars cost \$33.8 billion in 2002; they have ballooned to \$171 billion by 2007. Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the Nobel for Economics, has estimated that the cost of the Bush wars could cross \$3 trillion by 2017, that is, in another ten years. Go figure, as they say in America. Where has the money come from? Debt.

Debt has helped weaken the dollar. Producers who sell oil in dollars, seeking to keep their income constant in real terms, and oil companies that profit in whichever direction the wheel spins, have kept raising the price of oil.

A spiral effect has driven prices into the stratosphere. Oil was \$23 a barrel when the Iraq war began; it is over \$110 now. The pressure of prices has induced an impassioned chorus for alternative energy. Bush decided to subsidise the pro-

duction of ethanol to produce this alternative energy. American farmers switched from food-for-the-stomach to crops-for-cash. There is now a critical shortage of wheat and rice around the world.

The temptation of cash and higher prices impact on the pattern of agriculture. Cash crops replace staple crops. The prices of basic edibles join the spiral. India is now on the cusp of inflationary pressures that could go ballistic, even as the government has no solution in mind except a series of sops that will be throwing a bucket of water into a desert. Prices of basic food and oil in the Indian bazaar are rising at a dramatic pace. For the poor, this is a kick where it hurts most, in the stomach. Their pain will be reflected in the vote in the next general elections.

This too is globalisation, a chain of sequence and consequence that is linked across the world.

The managers of "globalisation," a vast and varied array of vested interests

that may not necessarily be in harmony on some issues but always closes rank to protect its core interest, take care to cohere globalisation to good news. It is a brand that needs protection in order to get promotion. Bad news, even when it becomes a worldwide epidemic from a single virus, is never called globalisation. No one uses the term when the New York Stock Exchange sneezes and Mumbai catches a cold. This would tarnish the image of globalisation as the panacea in a post-Marxist age, a libertarian answer to socialism's impenetrable dogma. Very few -- although Stiglitz is famously among the few -- wonder about the tipping point, when the liberty of this philosophy morphs into licence into virtually printing money.

One reason -- of course, not the only one -- why share markets today are as flat as the globalised world is because the meaning of capital has changed, shifting in the process the original goalposts of

capitalism. Capital was the means necessary for the production of goods and services that could be sold for a profit, creating jobs and higher-standard lifestyles. Profit, of course, has always been an elastic word, stretching as far as the market will bear.

Hence, marketing became a tool by which a need was enhanced into an illusion in order to raise prices and maximise profits. Thus soap, a need for the elimination of dirt, was elevated into a magic wand that would make you into a film star. Perfume is no longer a discreet veil over body odour, but a sex accessory. A handbag is no longer a convenience; it is a photograph of your bank statement. A watch no longer merely tells the time; it is a status symbol. But all this is acceptable because, at the core, there is a product, created out of capital.

But we have now moved into share markets and a world economy where there is illusion without a base, and value is attached to a fiction; and when the principal purpose of money is not to add to the quantum of goods and services but merely to make more paper or plastic money. The Sensex keeps rising in increasingly thin air, crossing peaks that are not made of rock but are arbitrary niches in the financial ozone layer. Even in the best of times, turbulence in the American economy, by far the

most powerful, would have sent shudders. But connectivity now honed to marginal shifts in value, a sub-prime crisis in America wipes out bank profits in India. There is little insulation.

The Congress theory of political success in the next election consists of simple arithmetic. Rural sops will bring the rural vote. The nuclear deal will bring in the urban vote. The message of promises and words will retain the Muslim vote. Hallelujah! We are all in power for five more years. The arithmetic could get disjointed by algebra. Prices cross the rural-urban divide, leaving anger in their wake. The minorities have heard the talk, and got nothing substantive; while Muslims are angry at the alliance with Bush, which makes India a possible ally in Bush's wars against Muslim nations.

The most consistent fact of democracy is its ability to surprise governments who think they have won elections before the votes have been counted. This happened with the last national government in Delhi. The BJP has still not psychologically recovered from the shock that told the party that India was not shining as luminously as it thought. If the Congress does not watch out, it could face some shock therapy soon.

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Right to information ordinance



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

The CTG has dealt with a number of policy matters of great national interest. So, there is no justification for it to skip the enactment of the RTI ordinance, as it is committed to restore democracy and wipe out corruption. The RTI is a cardinal factor for good governance, and the whole mechanism of governance in the country has been vitiated owing to lack of it.

eminent citizens on the draft RTI Ordinance, before giving it its final shape.

The draft RTI Ordinance contains 27 articles including one for formation of an information commission, which will have the power to impose a fine of up to Tk 25,000 and recommend punishment as per the service rules if any quarter fails to provide information to citizens in a stipulated time.

Article eight of the draft RTI says that information related to state security, sovereignty, dignity, foreign policy, defence, relations with foreign countries or foreign organisations, commerce or trade interests, technical or scientific interest, income tax, customs and excise duties, executive operations of finan-

cial organisations and disclosures counter to public interest will be exempted.

The list of exemptions is too long. The categories "dignity," "foreign policy" and "relations with foreign countries or foreign organisations" are likely to become a major impediment towards free flow of information. The people must have the right to know everything, except issues involved with state security. Exemption from disclosure of information counter to "public interest" should be deleted as it goes against the spirit of the ordinance.

According to the draft RTI, the president of the country will appoint a chief information commissioner and two commis-

sioners on recommendation of a search committee headed by a judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, having the cabinet secretary and the chairmen of the Public Service Commission and University Grants Commission as members.

The chairman of the press council should be included in the search committee instead of the UGC chairman. The criteria for selection of chief information commissioner and the commissioners must be laid down in the RTI Ordinance.

The information commission's independence may be hampered because of the budgeting process stipulated in the draft RTI. The information commission must be granted full autonomy to recruit and remove

its staff, and to place its own budget directly to the parliament instead of going through the ministry. Otherwise, the commission will be a toothless one.

The right to information became a fundamental human right with the passing of a law known as the "Freedom of Information Act" by the US Congress in 1966. In 1974, the then Labour government in Britain promised to enact a freedom of information law. But it took more than a quarter century for the law to reach the statute book, and a further four years to come fully into force in 2005.

According to Britain's freedom of information laws, anyone of any nationality, living anywhere in the world, may request information held by more than one hundred thousand public authorities and other designated non-governmental organisations in Britain and expect an answer within 20 working days, usually free of charge.

Most of the central government departments in Britain are now well geared up with a mass

of easily accessible information already on their websites.

There are, of course, exemptions. Any information relating to national security, most personal data, court records, information subject to parliamentary or legal privilege, and information likely to prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs are subject to an "absolute" exemption that cannot be overridden.

The independent information commission set up by the act has made it clear that aggrieved members of the public can seek enforcement of their "right to know" only through it. It is now considered as a criminal offence in Britain to destroy data for which a valid request has been made under the act.

The civil right groups in Britain are nevertheless worried at the right of the ministerial veto included in the act, which could be used to block any information deemed too sensitive or politically embarrassing to any government.

It is worth mentioning here that in New Zealand, on whose freedom of information legislation Britain's act is closely mod-

elled, the ministerial veto has not been used once in the 18 years since the present system was brought into force.

Bangladesh is in the list of 12 Commonwealth countries without RTI laws, and with the habit of secrecy that is sapping away the economic lifeblood of the nation. The remaining 42, out of the 54 members of the Commonwealth, either have specific laws guaranteeing access to information or explicit constitutional guarantees.

In Bangladesh, where democratic governments had been in power since 1991, there are some laws, like the Official Secrets Act 1923, still in force that are antithetic to the right of access to information. The RTI Ordinance will, however, have dominance over these laws.

No fewer than 75 countries, including India, Pakistan and Nepal, have since introduced the right to information laws under different heads. The people of Bangladesh are longing for RTI laws, and want the caretaker government (CTG) to take effective steps for enacting the laws.

Certainly, the RTI ordinance

bears significance for a country like Bangladesh, where the people are struggling to strike a balance between administrative transparency and accountability and their access to information. The RTI and good governance are intertwined aspects of same factor, i.e. a driving force in democracy.

The successive political governments did not make RTI laws as the vested interest groups had always influenced them with a view to keeping their misdeeds hidden in the dark. The CTG must not miss this historical opportunity to pass the RTI Ordinance within its tenure, to be ratified by the next parliament.

The CTG has dealt with a number of policy matters of great national interest. So, there is no justification for it to skip the enactment of the RTI ordinance, as it is committed to restore democracy and wipe out corruption. The RTI is a cardinal factor for good governance, and the whole mechanism of governance in the country has been vitiated owing to lack of it.

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