

## Towards effective price monitoring

**Business community's proactive resolve should be matched by deeds**

AFTER months of wrestling with higher prices, marked by a recriminatory phase in the government-business relationship, both sides seem to have arrived at a common ground at long last. The FBCCI has formed a composite taskforce comprising representatives from business community, consumer rights protection association, ministries concerned and joint forces to monitor price situation in retail and wholesale markets and implement measures to keep the prices in check.

We have tried to make the point before that an initiative from within the business community is a much better option for keeping the prices down than market intervention by other quarters. In fact, the confidence building measures attempted from time to time to secure cooperation of businessmen did not seem to carry conviction in the face of an interventionist approach that were willy-nilly taken to the market.

The experts have identified the main obstacle towards effective forecasting and monitoring of market behaviour as lack of reliable data on demand and supply. Now this shortcoming is sought to be removed by the new taskforce designed to collecting, preserving and updating information on daily prices of essentials including commodity-wise details of supply and demand and production profiles. To top it off, it will publish weekly and monthly reports on export and import, stocks, market trends etc. The whole idea is to make possible well-informed decisions based on effective analysis.

It is thus that the prevailing disconnect between the business community and the consumers on the one hand, and that between the government and the traders on the other will have been overcome by building bridges between the stakeholders. It is good to see that manipulative hoarding is being separated from genuine stockpiling to meet scarcity situations. We are also heartened by the FBCCI tasking itself with the responsibility of putting in measures whereby prices wouldn't rise before or during the month of Ramadan. The FBCCI president is hopeful of the taskforce bearing results within next four to five weeks.

To our mind, there are three prerequisites for the success of the new move: first, the government's efforts to build confidence with the trading community must be tangibly complemented by facilitating private sector import; two, impetus must be provided for greater national productivity; and three, the business community should demonstrate a social commitment to easing the plight of the low and middle-income groups.

## Coping with disaster in Myanmar

**Providing humanitarian aid is the priority**

THE humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding in Myanmar leaves people around the world deeply concerned about the devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis. And we in Bangladesh are particularly worried because of the close neighbourly links we have always had with Myanmar. While we heave a sigh of relief that the cyclone missed us in a miraculous way, we feel extremely disturbed at the mounting casualties it caused in Myanmar. More than 100,000 people have lost their lives; and the infrastructure is in a mess. As neighbours, it devolves on us to come forth with all the succour we can in this hour of need in Myanmar. Happily for us, ours happens to be one of the few countries to have gone ahead with assistance. A team of our armed forces is already in Yangon with medical and related help for the survivors of the disaster.

Though reports of the disaster have been slow in coming out of the country, owing to Myanmar's self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world, it is becoming clear that in the days ahead it will be in huge need of aid to recover from the tragedy. There are therefore two factors which must be borne in mind regarding the provision of disaster relief in Myanmar. The first is that the regime in Yangon must break out of its cocoon and accept relief from countries which have come up with offers of assistance. And the second concerns those very countries ready to provide relief aid: they must base their offers on purely humanitarian considerations and not lead the regime to suspect that strings are attached to such offers. One must not forget that the situation in Myanmar, politically as well as in the post-cyclone circumstances, is rather delicate and so calls for careful, deft handling. At this point, it is the humanitarian which must take precedence over everything else. As for the Myanmar authorities, they must not let any political myopia come in the way of a speedy recovery for their battered, bruised people.

The relief programmes planned by the international community are indeed an opportune moment for Myanmar's rulers to open up the country to the outside world and join the mainstream of nations. The outpouring of sympathy in the aftermath of the cyclone should be taken good advantage of.

## Back to the days of Jaheliat



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LISTENING to the angry rhetoric of some of the so-called cleric regarding the National Women Development Policy (NWDP), 2008 one wonders whether or not we are heading back towards the days of the Jaheliat. All the arguments put forward against implementation of the bill, and also the CEDAW in the light of the 1995 Beijing declaration, actually run counter to the fundamental teachings of Islam -- equality.

Nowhere has the issue of women's rights merited mention more predominantly and unequivocally than in Islam. "Paradise is at the feet of mothers." So said the Holy Prophet (PBUH), while speaking on the manner we should treat our parents. And yet some of us are unwilling to accord equal rights, nay equal status, to the women in Bangladesh. It is even more disheartening that it is a section of the cleric in Bangladesh that has taken the lead in opposing the proposed women's development policy.

Perhaps no other religion has

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accorded women as much dignity and equality as Islam. At a time when the abhorrent female infanticide was a usual practice, it was Islam that put a stop to it. Women were no longer regarded as objects to be inherited, and men were enjoined upon by the Prophet not only to shun the practice of infanticide but also to give women equal treatment when he said: "Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise," and, "Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the day of judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together)."

Historically speaking, Arabia was not alone in its unjust treatment of women and in reducing the status of women to that of a secondary object. According to scholars, in the Indian civilization subjugation of women was the cardinal principal, and according to Manu: "Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence." And only those

women, according to Hindu scripture, whose mind, speech and body were kept in subjection, could hope to acquire high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband. Needless to say, the law of inheritance was agnatic. And what about the status of women in civilizations whose level of intellectual eminence and scientific excellence were sought to be emulated by others? This is what an eminent scholar has to say of the status of women in Athens and Rome: "Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male -- to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin. Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary and she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord, even though he were stranger to her."

A Roman wife was described by an historian as: "A babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of

her husband."

Such was the condition of women in Arabia before the advent of Islam -- a period better known as *Aiam-e-Jaheliat*. And Islam changed all that. A fear that it is shared by most right thinking Muslims in Bangladesh is that we might very well revert back to the days of *Jaheliat* if the views of those that oppose giving equal rights to women are not appropriately countered, and that should be done through logic and not rhetoric.

Therefore, let us briefly address a few of the points of the Ulema committee. Among other things it is the contention of a section of the Ulema in Bangladesh that:

"A woman cannot enjoy rights equal to a man's because a woman is not equal to a man by birth..." Not only is it impossible to establish equal rights for men and women in the country, but in some cases giving women equality would deprive them of their rights in many sectors."

As alay man I would like to ask these venerated men of religion to cite one verse from the Quran which supports their contention

that a woman is not equal to man by birth. On the contrary, according to religious scholars, the Quran unequivocally states the equality of men and women both in terms of their responsibilities and rights. To be dissimilar is not to be unequal. Three verses from the Quran make it clear:

"I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other (3:195)"

"Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds (74:38)"

"Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to their actions. (16:97)"

In fact, in no aspect of human existence -- social, political, religious and economic, has Islam made any distinction between man and woman -- from the spiritual to the temporal -- from the right to owning property, to seeking divorce and participation in politics.

And in Islam no woman can be married against her will. According to Jamal A. Badawi: "Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad (P.), and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it)." (Ibn Hanbal No. 2469). In another version, the

girl said: "Actually, I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them)" (Ibn Maja, No. 1873).

One also fails to understand how sending women to peace-keeping missions "would make women insecure and it could tarnish Bangladesh's image," as per the contention of the Ulemas. Women folk used to be a part of the Muslim battle train during the days of the Prophet. They would provide logistic and other support to their men folk during the course of the battle. And physical participation of women in battle is not unknown -- a well-known woman warrior during the time of the Prophet was Khawala the sister of the famous warrior Zarrar-bin-Yusuf.

Those who oppose according women equal opportunities and participation in wealth, employment, market and business have perhaps forgotten that Bibi Khadija was one of the successful businesswomen when the Holy Prophet married her.

Several things must be made clear about the women's bill. It calls for removing all forms of discrimination against women, and it is for all the women of Bangladesh not just the Muslim women. Also, the NWDP reinforces what Islam has provided for in respect of equality of women. Not implementing it would, in fact, be going against the teachings of Islam.

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## What is happening to marriage?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

FALLING in love, courtship, nuptials, bridal parades, guests, gifts, illuminations, dowries, honeymoons and consummations are still lined up. There is motion and speed in today's marriage, but the momentum gives away as quickly as it picks up. Sooner or later, a large number of marriages run out of steam, because men and women who are eager to take the vow do not have patience till death do them part.

In 1891, a Cornell University professor had predicted that if divorce continued to rise at the existing rate, then within the next hundred years more marriages were bound to end in divorce than in death. The prediction has been stunningly accurate. Divorce is now a menace to marriage.

Start with the United States, which has the highest divorce rate in the world. It's twice as high as the next highest country Sweden and 50 times higher than

some low incidence countries. China's divorce rate has soared more than 700% since 1980. Between 1999 and 2003, the number of marriages became almost half in Chile. In countries like Italy, Singapore and Japan, a much larger percentage of women avoid marriage and childbearing altogether. Even in predominantly Catholic Ireland, one out of three children is born out of wedlock.

Divorce rate has also shot up in countries where it was previously discouraged through legal, religious or cultural means. These countries include Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Greece, Mexico and South Africa. The billow of that wave has also reached our shores. It's hard to find any statistics, but a growing percentage of marriages even in this country are going kaput.

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### CROSS TALK

**So, what is happening to marriage? It's definitely shrinking as people live longer, marry later, exit more quickly and choose to live together before and after marriage, between marriages and as alternative to marriage. Among young men and women, social confidence in marriage is wavering. They don't show the same strong commitment to marriage as their parents. By and large, married people are less happy today compared to their ancestors.**

and as alternative to marriage. Among young men and women, social confidence in marriage is wavering. They don't show the same strong commitment to marriage as their parents. By and large, married people are less happy today compared to their ancestors.

Historically, marriage has transformed from time to time. Between ancient times and the Renaissance period, love had nothing to do with marriage, because politics and money trumped emotions. In ancient Greece love was honoured, especially between men. Wife-swapping as a career move was common in Rome. French scholar Montaigne reflected the spirit of his time. Any man in love with his wife must be so dull that no one else could love him, he wrote.

From the 16th century to the Victorian era love started taking lead in marriage, although people still turned to family, lovers and friends for intimacy and passion. It wasn't considered

polite if couples openly showed attachment or used endearing nicknames to call each other. It was in the mid-19th century that the tradition of honeymoon was introduced to replace the old custom when a newly-wed couple was required to visit those relatives who couldn't attend the wedding.

But the 20th century concentrated on love. Intimacy shrank to encompass just the lovers and love took the center stage in marriage. In the 1920s, Saturday night started in the USA as a dating craze spread across the country. Marriage flourished as the ultimate expression of love and emerged as a mandatory thing.

The irony is that just when love was recognised as the foundation of marriage, marriage started to wobble. Here, at last, marriage was liberated from the confines of money, power and survival. Finally, it was salvaged from the neglect of the Enlightenment and Victorian eras when adultery and friend-

ship were more passionate than marriage. That is when it plunged into a new contradiction. Love spread as the cause, not the effect of marriage.

It can be explained from many angles. Young men and women don't have enough patience. They are more impulsive in love than committed to it. Then there are the financial burdens, social pressures and family compulsions. Marriages are made in heaven, but married people go through hell.

Social scientists have worked hard to understand this contradiction. While causes remain subject to social debates, there are some interesting effects. Each 100 additional divorces worldwide cause two additional suicides, one additional murder, 6 additional rapes, 33 additional armed robberies, and puts another 100 men in prison. There is a disturbing connection between people and their planet. Unhappy marriages create social unrest, which is also true the other way around.

A survey conducted by Dr. Jianguo Liu of Michigan State University shows that the connection runs deeper. Increasing number of divorce increases the number of households, which has a negative impact on earth's environment. More households require more use of land, water and energy, three of the world's most critical resources.

Some data to back up the claim! In the USA, 15% of house-

holds are divorced, and in 2005 the country could have saved 627 billion gallons of water, 38 million rooms and 73 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity if the divorced people weren't divorced. Extrapolate and apply this calculation to rest of the world, you will be convinced that broken marriages are a threat to the world.

First thing first, why are marriages breaking up? The hero in Ayn Rand's fiction *The Fountainhead* says that to say "I love you," one must first know how to say the "I." Romantic love is a selfish passion, when two lovers are ready even to leave their families to become happily married. Unhappy marriage is when lovers recover from love's heady influence. It's a rude awakening that life is more than long hours on the phone, furtive glances, secret rendezvous in parks, cafés and movie theaters, and anxious wait for conjugal union.

There is one thing common between marriage and earth. Selfishness depletes both. When more is taken out than given, they become hollow. Marriage breaks and the earth snaps, while minds crumble in a vacuum. Men and women can be unhappy married or happily unmarried, but happy marriage is down to earth. Love without marriage is a tragedy. Marriage without love is a disaster.

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## The end is near for Hillary Clinton

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

**The reality is: it's all over for Hillary. She is not going to catch Obama in pledged delegates, and now that Obama has won the last big state, North Carolina, an avalanche of undeclared super-delegates are going to head Obama's way, putting him on top, sooner rather than later. The Clintons threw everything they had at Obama, and still came up short. They will continue to pursue the nomination, but will not win it.**

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

ADDRESSING a crowd in North Carolina two days ago, Hillary Clinton said that how North Carolinians voted could be a "game changer" in the Democratic Party nomination. It was -- for Barack Obama! In spite of Hillary's devastating attacks, his own "bitter" comment and the sudden reappearance of Rev. Wright at the most inopportune time, Barack Obama won the North Carolina primary by a whopping 15% margin (57.5% to 42.5%) on May 6.

Although Hillary was projected to win Indiana, the other state holding primary on May 6, by a big margin, she barely squeaked by (51% to 49%). Obama's victory speech in Raleigh, North Carolina was more like a nomination acceptance speech. He was complimentary to Hillary but talked past her.

Obama addressed the nation about his vision for a unified America. His speech was full of patriotic fervour, and ended with "God bless the United States of America."

In her speech, a less compli-

mentary Hillary promised to continue her campaign for the White House. She also vowed to fight for seating of the delegates from Florida and Michigan. Because Florida and Michigan had defied the party rules and brought their primaries forward, they were stripped of their delegates.

Both Obama and Hillary had agreed to the rules and did not campaign in the two states. Obama took his name off the ballot in Michigan. The two states held their primaries anyway, and Clinton "won" both. Now she wants that the delegates

from the two states should be hers!

The reality is: it's all over for Hillary. She is not going to catch Obama in pledged delegates, and now that Obama has won the last big state, North Carolina, an avalanche of undeclared super-delegates are going to head Obama's way, putting him on top, sooner rather than later. The Clintons threw everything they had at Obama, and still came up short. They will continue to pursue the nomination, but will not win it.

There is a reason why former president Bill Clinton is regarded as one of the best American politicians of the twentieth century. He knew that the only way to shoot down the high flying Barack Obama campaign was to play the race card. He caught a lot of flak for playing the race card after the South Carolina primary, when he equated Obama's victory there to that of the racially divisive

black candidate Rev. Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988. Three months later, Bill Clinton's strategy was vindicated.

Hillary Clinton's resurgence had coincided with the Clintons' success at labeling Obama as a black candidate. Sure, Rev. Wright and Obama's "bitter" comment hurt his campaign. But since Bill Clinton's masterstroke in South Carolina, working class whites had been steadily deserting Obama.

Given a choice between a black man and a white woman, working class whites preferred the white woman. The Clintons had turned the primary campaign into a contest between a black man versus a white woman, a white man and a white girl.

As Hillary concentrated on wooing white women, Bill became Hillary Clinton's campaign ambassador to rural America. Bill could be seen in every nook and corner of rural

Indiana and North Carolina, addressing rural and working class white folks in his folksy voice and adjusting his southern drawl according to the location.

He addressed not from an elaborately decorated platform, but from undecorated porches of modest houses, telling his all-white audience, "the great divide in this country is not by race or even income, it's by those who think they are better than everyone else and think they should play by a different set of rules." Translation: Obama, the "uppity N..", is an elitist! The writer was in Asheville, a small town in North Carolina, for three days last month. He failed to see a single Obama sign.

To neutralise or dampen Obama's tremendous support among college students, white and black, Chelsea Clinton was quietly visiting almost every important college campus in the states holding primaries and caucuses, addressing students

and pleading for her mom. Talking of playing by a different set of rules, Chelsea twice chastised students for asking her about her dad's Monica Lewinsky affair. "It's none of your business!" she said. The media applauded.

The media did not dwell on the double standard they indulged in vis-à-vis Barack Obama. Hillary Clinton's four-times-on-camera lying about dodging sniper fire in Bosnia was hardly ever mentioned. Neither did they dwell on Rev. John Hagee, whose endorsement Senator John McCain actively sought and received, and who had called the Roman Catholic church "The Great Whore." Neither had they accused Hillary Clinton of pandering when she proposed the preposterous suspension of the gasoline tax for three months, a move that would not have brought the gas prices down because of increased demand, but would

have resulted in the loss of high-way repair funds and cost several thousand jobs. Instead, they praised this disingenuous pandering as a brilliant election eve move. What they really meant was: "What a brilliant lie!"

When it came to Barack Obama though, things were different. His association with his pastor became a test for his fitness for office. His patriotism and Americanism was gauged by how quickly, completely and repetitively he denounced and disowned his controversial associates. A white candidate did not have to do that. She or he was held to a different standard.

At the end, none of these mattered. The wisdom of the American people prevailed. On May 6 they effectively handed the Democratic nomination to the better candidate, who just happened to be black.

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