

## Mass transit in the capital

*A quick and transparent start needed*

THE sheer immobility and the pollution overhang in the capital has been allowed to reach such a debilitating state that most people have grown cynical about the livability status of the metropolis in the near future. Many people thought that any government could acquire a messianic image by simply solving the problems of traffic congestion and belching carbon monoxide fumes from stranded and slow-moving vehicles in Dhaka. But in our culture of distorted priorities, the obvious often gets ignored.

The answer to burgeoning Dhaka's transport problems is two-fold. First, we need to have a mass transit system including metro rail, circular train and human hauler as are in vogue in some South East Asian countries. Even though it's a longer term vision, yet the idea could be taken forward on the basis of some spade-work that had already been done and the best practice model available. The second option, the short-term one, which the government has pragmatically adopted given the limited time at its disposal relates to projects under Strategic Transport Plan. An elaborate system of link roads, bridge communications and underpasses will girdle the city.

The chief adviser has inaugurated work on four-lane Airport Road-Rokeya Sarani link road on the western side of Tejgaon Old Airport. This will be completed in October this year. The Hatirjheel project has already got underway as a potential environmental boon and traffic jam reducer. Construction of link road from Zia colony to Mirpur cantonment, link bridge between Banani and Gulshan lakes and construction of roads from Mirpur Grameen Bank to Agargaon are envisaged. All these will help smoothen the east-west and north-south transport movements.

The time-table sounds realistic: some of the projects will be completed within the current year, some by 2009 and others by 2010.

This interim non-party government has a few months left to its tenure and all that it can hope to do is to set the process rolling within a concrete frame-work. If a serious beginning is made by them, it will have a salutary impact on the progress of the Strategic Transport Plan to the overall freeing up of the traffic across the city.

## CPD study on plight of the poor

*The recipe for alleviation merits consideration*

THE Centre for Policy Dialogue in a timely study has fathomed a new depth in the sea of poverty. In the 15-month period from January 2007 to March 2008 the gross income of poor people plummeted by 36.7 percent. The income erosion of up to 30.5 percent alone has resulted from paying for the high food bill, the predominant item in the rather bare purchase list of the poor.

In consequence, 8.5 percent people comprising 25 lakh households have fallen below the poverty line. This aggravation of the poverty situation being the outcome of the unprecedented food price hike and the inflationary pressure is not likely to significantly ease off. This is owing to the high international oil price introducing imported inflation into our import dependent economy together with high cost of inputs for productivity.

We are entirely in agreement with the CPD suggestion that the government distribute rice and wheat amounting to 30 lakh tonnes through the social sector and social safety net programmes in the next fiscal year. In this context, we take heart from the news that the government is going to incorporate four new social safety net programmes worth Taka 3000 crore in the next budget. The flagship project worth Tk 2400 crore envisages employment of two million ultrapoor for hundred days in a year. Another important component of the safety net approach is Tk 300 crore fund to face climate change related adaptation challenges.

It is estimated that the subsidies for the current fiscal year amounting to Tk 6000 crore might need to be nearly trebled to cushion off the effects of the fuel, food and fertiliser price hikes on the mass of the people. The developed world community should feel obliged to give grants for food and agriculture inputs to the developing countries falling prey to the global climatic changes which are largely the creation of the environment unfriendly development strategies and lifestyles of the big economies.

While raising the fuel prices the government ought to be sensitive to the purchasing capacity of the people who use kerosene and the farmers who have to buy diesel for irrigation.

## Nepal: The difficult road ahead



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

NEPAL'S newly elected leadership has just changed the country from a monarchy to a republic. The approved proposal stated that Nepal is now "an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular and an inclusive democratic republic".

This has been a historic move and has ended about 240 years of autocratic rule in that country. As a follow-up, a letter was sent to the 60-year-old King Gyanendra and his family, asking them to vacate the royal palace in 15 days. It is generally expected that the ousted monarch can continue to live on in Nepal as a private citizen.

This was probably a better format than taking recourse to violence. Apparently, out of 564 members of the Assembly, present and voting, only four voted to keep the monarchy. This underlined the popular distaste quite firmly. In a manner of speaking, such a step has completed the process whereby King Gyanendra was forced to end his royal dictatorship and restore democracy after widespread protests two years ago.

A full circle has been completed. It has seen the unexpected victory of the Maoist rebels in Nepal's

elections, surprising both the former rebels themselves as well as political observers and the international community. The general expectation had been that the rebels would trail behind the country's two largest political parties, the Nepali Congress, and the mainstream-left, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist. However, both parties were left far behind and the Maoists won half the seats chosen by the first-past-the-post system. This also enabled them to gain about 30 per cent of

blamed for many incidents of intimidation and extortion.

After this will come the difficult task of planned military integration of the former Maoist fighters into the national army. The army has said they will have no problem in working under a "legitimate" government. It has however also repeatedly made it clear that politically indoctrinated former rebel fighters cannot be part of the professional national army. This situation has become even more delicate given the alleged bad blood

that wants transformation of the government from conformist-communist bourgeois democracy to socio-cultural democracy. The unexpected results of historic Constituent Assembly (CA) elections have invigorated the CPN (Maoist), now the largest political party, on the one hand, and have enervated the former power holders, the National Congress (NC) in particular.

The NC, quite understandably, not very happy with the results, immediately publicly demanded

Among these demands, priority has been particularly given to the issue of amending the two-thirds constitutional provision to a format of simple majority. Prachanda initially disagreed, but has now agreed with such a measure. India, a major player in Nepalese politics also appears to have accepted the decision. The NC has been adamant about amending the constitutional provision because they believe that this will bring about a counter-balance to a Maoist leadership, that has control over the

polling places'. Former President J. Carter, present in Nepal at the time of the elections has also endorsed the electoral process. Their views are important for Nepal because the USA has still not removed the terrorist watch tag attached to the Maoist party. Hopefully, to assist the process of democracy, the USA will now take necessary steps to remove the current designation of the CPN (Maoist) as a terrorist body on the Terrorist Exclusion list. This is vital if the issue of reduction of poverty is to be addressed meaningfully. International communities who want sustainable peace and security through social justice in Nepal will now have to take the bold step of trusting the results of the elections being a milestone that can drag Nepal out of its ancient feudal mould into the modern era.

I believe that whatever be the policies, programmes and strategies of the Maoist led national government, the prime movers in the new scenario will be the bureaucrats, diplomats and technocrats. Hopefully, there will be less politicisation than before. The security forces and the judiciary will also have to play an integral role in ensuring that there is a decline in extra-judicial killings, terror, violence and extortion.

The Maoist led government, in the seat of power for the first time, will have to tread very carefully and act with responsibility. This could start by ensuring that there is a political consensus incorporating all major parties including the MJP and the TMLP. They have to find necessary least common denominators and then act on them.

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## POST BREAKFAST

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the votes for seats given by proportional representation.

Historic changes have been made but more difficulties lie ahead for the new Nepalese leadership.

The first will be shedding the latent violent image of the Maoists themselves. The Maoist leader, Prachanda, has been quick to try to reassure the public political parties and the international community about his party's commitment to multi-party and peaceful politics. However, skepticism still abounds. In this context, senior leaders of other parties have urged the Maoists to dismantle their radical youth organization, the Young Communist League that has been

between the two sides and the use of derogatory language against the army chief by the Maoist leader.

Apart from these challenges, the former rebels will also have to deliver peace, stability and "economic revolution", all of which have remained their mantra for several years. The first, in this regard for the Maoist leadership will be to deal immediately with soaring price rises of food, fuel and construction material in the country. Failure to deliver might affect public euphoria.

It will be a complex journey but one that will be most interesting.

The initial strategic measure will have to address most of the factors that are associated with a mandate

the disbanding of parallel state-mechanisms like the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Court, setting a fixed date for integration of the displaced people; immediate return of the seized property of displaced people; amending of the constitution to form and oust government with a simple majority instead of the current two thirds provision; an immediate end to threats, looting, beating, kidnapping, killing, extortion of donation and arson; creation of an independent judiciary, a constitutional authority, and separation of the government media, executive, police and army from the political arena. To say the least, the list is a tall order.

state mechanism, the security forces, and their own parallel local forces, the "People's Courts".

Nepal, for quite some time has been the focus of attention of the two major powers in the region-India as well as the USA. China has also taken keen interest in the evolution of the Maoist political presence. Communist ideology's triumph in that country has now added a twist to the tale for all these three countries.

The US Ambassador to Nepal Nancy J. Powell has said that the election appears to have been a credible one, 'despite reports of widespread intimidation and violence prior to the elections and problems on election day in some

## When mob justice takes hold



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE past one week ending on May 31 has been one of the blackest in recent times. The fragile peace that held the country for more than a year after 1/11 has been shattered. The recent spurt in the incidence of crime like murder, lynching to death, burglary, rape, extortion and kidnapping has created a feeling of alarm in the citizenry once again. The capital city and even the rural outbacks in the country seem caught in a frightening coil of fear.

People saw the most chilling report in all the dailies in the morning of May 31. The report indicated that a group of students of S.M. Hall of Dhaka University beat to death a student of Bangladesh Medical College at Dhaka suspecting him to be involved in stealing a mobile phone. The victim, a 22 year old Riad as the newspaper report indicated, entered a certain room of S.M. Hall at about 9-30 in the morning on that fateful day and picked up a mobile phone while its owner was in the bathroom. The report further said that the mobile phone was later found in his pocket and students beat him unconscious. Police rescued Riad in a critical condition and admitted him to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and later shifted to Bangladesh Medical College, where he succumbed to his injuries

at about noon on that day.

In another incident in the third week of May, people learnt from newspaper reports, that agitated bus passengers beat one robber to death as the gangsters were fleeing after committing robbery in a passenger bus on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Media reports earlier revealed that two youths were beaten to death at Mohakhali on May 21. There is a general sense of alarm across the country aroused by a recent spurt

Besides, they look helpless and dumbfounded in presence of a thousand-strong mob that eventually swells around the scene of looting or hijacking.

In fact, the mass frenzy is because of police inaction in most cases. In many cases as reports carried by the media reveal, fed up with the increasing incidence of theft, extortion looting and even repression of young girls in their areas that brought no response from the law enforcing agencies,

death by the neighbours for causes that still remain shrouded in mystery. While analyzing the causes of such frenzied action and lawlessness, crime watchers find to their dismay that other than police investigation and intervention that are highly flawed and corrupt, judicial system has been highly insensitive and dilatory prompting such frenzied action

But the gruesome murder of medical student Riad by lynching

## BITTER TRUTH

People tend to believe that any stirring in the police administration and a persistent pressure from the power that be, especially the non-party CTG of the day, have much to contribute in preventing or controlling crimes. For that the country needs a comprehensive crime code to spell out violations of the law, a truly determined professional and well-paid police force and a functional judicial system.

in violence involving mostly the youth and including everything from mugging to robbery to arson to murder. Two days after the Mohakhali lynching, people learnt with stunned disbelief that three alleged river pirates were beaten to death at the confluence of the river Norai and Balu in the Khilgaon thana area.

Unhappily, ill-equipped small contingents of police deployed in some areas who appear to be immobile and most often gossiping among themselves sitting in a tranquil zone are unlikely to bring such gangsterism and lawlessness under control. That they are ill-equipped and lack proper training to overpower these dreaded criminals is demonstrated by the fact that in different situations at Bagmara, Rajshahi and Gazipur and Kochukhet area of the city, the gangsters snatched even weapons from their possession.

the villagers and locals out of pent up anger took law in their own hands and had beaten these gangsters, sometimes on suspicion, even to death. Despite the IGPs commitment to build a people-friendly police force in the country in a salient departure from the past tradition and practice, things have fallen far short of people's expectation.

The report carried by the media (The Daily Star) on May 28 last about the suspension of the Dhanmondi Police Station O.C and two S.Is on charges of recording a robbery case as a theft case at a house in Dhanmondi suggests that policing work like recording a case and preliminary investigations at the ground level are still largely flawed. In another report on May 28 last (The Daily Star) it was learnt that Sajib, a garments worker living at Khilgaon, was severely beaten and stabbed to

neighbour.

Understandably, much of the street justice is a reaction to the country's ineffectual criminal justice system. There prevails a crisis of confidence in police as evidenced by many a report carried by the media. Winning court cases, convictions and prison sentences against even the notorious offenders like extortionists and traffickers is a "Herculean task", say legal experts.

It has been revealed in a Judicial Commission report made public in recent past that about 75 per cent cases end up in acquittal of the offenders because of weak and flawed investigation report. Many of the hit men, even if can be identified, are often untouchable in the courts as well as outside. They routinely terrorise witnesses and the relations of the victims and thwart investigation. A failure to

bring crime of any sort under control could cost not only the image of the government but the whole experiment with democracy. Peace loving citizens hate chaos, and the unremitting violence and lawlessness they see everyday have shaken them to the core. A noted social scientist in the country says, "Most people exhibit their frenzied behaviour as a protest against the 'helplessness' or inaction of the government in dealing with crime".

While admitting the deterioration in the law and order situation with a marked rise in murder, kidnapping, robbery, snatching of police weapons and hostage bid demanding ransom money, the Adviser to the Home Ministry and the IGP have asked the law enforcing agencies to step up their activities in curbing crime. But when one sees a report appearing in some Bangla dailies on June 4 last that a four year-old Sourav, son of Anwar Farazi in Datterhat village of Madaripur sadar upazila has been indicted as the no.1 accused in a murder case with a photograph showing Sourav attending the District Judge's court in Madaripur in the lap of his father, then one is led to believe that IGP's words have fallen on deaf ears. And that's the reason that things are not improving.

People tend to believe that any stirring in the police administration and a persistent pressure from the power that be, especially the non-party CTG of the day, have much to contribute in preventing or controlling crimes. For that the country needs a comprehensive crime code to spell out violations of the law, a truly determined professional and well-paid police force and a functional judicial system.

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## High price of rice to prolong

SHAHIDUR RAHMAN KHAN

RICE is no longer an economic substance only, it has already become a political commodity. A US sponsored study of 15 April 2008 predicted that world would face social upheaval, environmental disaster if agriculture is not really reformed to better serve the poor and hungry. Food-riots have already taken place in Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mauritania, Senegal, Thailand, the Philippines, Uzbekistan, Yemen etc. General strike over rising food prices have already taken place in Burkina Faso and India. Riots over high food prices have led to the dismissal of Haitian Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis.

World's exportable rice has been advance-booked upto 2010 by now. There are occasions when money fails to buy food grains. This is true for individuals as well as nations. In April 2008 the Philippines invited international offer for procurement of 0.5 mil. tons of rice. They got offers for a total of only 0.32 mil. tons at prices varying from \$870 to \$1200. Sun Wing Long Rice Trading Company of Hongkong

informed in May 2008 that for the last three months they were receiving 50-60 tons against orders of 100 tons. Recently Bangladesh could procure only 0.487 mil. tons against a programme of 9 mil. tons even after floating tenders for 43 times.

Present price of world rice price benchmark a Thai variety has become 3 times its price of January 2007. The price has jumped from \$512 in January 2008 to \$998 in April 2008. The recent price surges apply to all food and feed stuff. Recent UN's World Food Report has found the present food price to be 10 years high and does not expect the price to come down much within next 10 years. None among FAO, WFP, IRRI, WB, IFAD, ADB and other stakeholders has any doubt about high price of rice in the coming years. At least they do not think of any possibility of normal rice price going down to previous level. The flip side of high price is that countries producing surplus can get lucrative amount for their products. Some of the reasons for prolonged high food prices (particularly of rice) in the coming days may be attributed to-

Limited supply compared to demand: According to USDA, per year 0.9% rate of rice demand

Against the looming backdrop of supply crisis and prolonged high prices, 'Net Food Importing Low Income Countries (NFLICs)' have to strive for food security for survival. 'Business as usual' cannot be an option for them. Long term strategy aimed at maximising food production can only protect them from uncertainty of unpredictable volatile external market.

increase in Asia is outpacing the 0.7% rate of production increase.

Non-availability of effective substitute (synthetic or otherwise). Markedly positive income elasticity and negligible (or nil) cross elasticity.

Latest information availability and bargaining adeptness of the agents representing the sector.

Price speculation/ precautionary storage: Crisis in the market coaxes the supplier to hoard. Rice exporting countries stop/restrict export of rice to protect their own storage at the time of global crisis. There are instances of export ban or price floor fixations. Precautionary demand/storage makes the demand-supply situation more unbalanced creating volatility in the market generating price spike. Thailand has been trying to form a cartel of rice exporting countries. Presently, it is trying to form "Council of Rice

Trading Countries" incorporating China, Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Pakistan and Vietnam with the motive of controlling price.

Urbanisation: Urbanisation is eating away agricultural lands worldwide. Even in Bangladesh about 1% of cultivable lands are being taken away for different development works each year. Cumulative effects of such reduction in availability of cultivable lands are significant in crop production.

Climate change: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted that climate changes in the coming decades will cause more floodings in the northern hemisphere and droughts in the southern hemisphere as well as in some arid zones, consequently reducing agricultural output considerably. Conversion of crops into fuel:

USA, Canada and Brazil are converting maize, soyabean and sugar cane into ethanol. Fuel E85 made from 85% crop ethanol and 15% gasoline is becoming very popular because of 12-19% less emission of greenhouse gas carbon. 80% Brazilian cars are now dependent on ethanol. 20% of last year's US production of maize has been used in ethanol production. Bush in his 'State of Union Address' on January 2007 called for replacement of 15% of gasoline burned by American transports by ethanol. 'Energy Independence and Security Act' signed by Bush in December 2007 calls for six fold increase in production and use of ethanol to 136 billion litres by 2022. EU is requiring 5.75% and 10% transport fuels to come from plants by 2010 and 2020 respectively. Conversion of crops into fuel is going to make their world supply tighter leading to rise in prices of rice.

Diversion to non-food crop production: Farmers in many major food stuff producing countries are diverting from food crops to other crops for economic and/or environmental reasons. Production of raw materials for ethanol is financially more lucrative than food crops production. New York Times reported that Australia has been passing through severe drought for the last six years which has reduced its rice production capacity by 98%. Many Australians have already given up the water intensive rice farming. These are going to reduce rice supply in the world market with its consequential negative impacts.

Increased demand for meat and other protein food stuff: General affluence in China, India and other emerging industrial countries has increased the demand for meat and such other protein food stuff. On average a Chinese now con-

sumes 50 kg of meat and other high protein food per year compared to 20 kg in 2001. Production of meat and other protein food require cereal and energy, which otherwise would have been available for direct human consumption.

Increase in prices of agricultural inputs and petroleum products: Increase in prices of agricultural inputs are taking place as an outcome of general world wide inflationary pressure. Rise in price of petroleum directly affects fertiliser production, transportation of agricultural inputs and products. Modern farming is highly energy dependent. Jumping rises in petroleum price is bound to push up agricultural input prices ultimately leading to higher rice price.

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs and preferences. A household or a nation is considered food secure when the people concerned do not live in hunger or fear of starvation. It is a proven fact that even having sufficient money may not always ensure availability of foods at individual or national level. Availability of food is a necessary pre-condition of food security.

However availability by itself may not ensure access to food for all, as access is also related to economic capability.

Against the looming backdrop of supply crisis and prolonged high prices, "Net Food Importing Low Income Countries (NFLICs)" have to strive for food security for survival. 'Business as usual' cannot be an option for them. Long term strategy aimed at maximising food production can only protect them from uncertainty of unpredictable volatile external market. Production of food grains involve different stakeholders having a process of complex interaction over a period of time. So a holistic approach encompassing all the players is necessary to enhance agricultural output in a sustainable way. Agricultural production is highly dependent on and related to weather. So there has to be a comfortable buffer stock to meet eventualities of weather as well as internal/external shocks. Attainment of individual food security, cumulatively leading to national food security is the most preferred of all the options in this regard.

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