

Vacant posts in government sector

Efficiency requires not more manpower but downsizing

NO fewer than 8,000 cadre service posts in government have been vacant for a long time. As a report in yesterday's issue of this newspaper reveals, there has additionally been no new recruitment in the last three years. Against these vacancies, the Public Service Commission has, for the 28th BCS examinations, invited applications for a mere 1,720 posts in 14 general and 13 technical areas. Obviously, the situation is a difficult if not a complicated one, for it is somewhat a reflection on how the bureaucracy fulfills, or does not fulfill, its responsibilities to the public.

The issue raises quite a few questions here, especially where the performance or otherwise of government ministries and departments is concerned. While there is a shortage of manpower in the bureaucratic structure, there are also some fundamental questions that must be asked here. Those questions relate to how productive as well as accountable the bureaucracy has been in recent years. Questions regarding unutilised funds in various sectors have never been explained to public satisfaction. We are of the opinion that what the country needs at this stage, and in future as well, is not so much a big bureaucracy as an efficient one. Excess manpower, as has so amply been proved in some semi-government bodies, has led to sloth and corruption. Obviously, therefore, the question of a downsizing of government comes up here. And such downsizing must come on the principle that government will function with qualified manpower that is naturally committed to serve the nation. Of course, there is an important need to fill vacancies in the various areas of government. But with government being overstaffed already, as many would tend to think, let the emphasis be on filling vacancies that occur in specific areas of service. That way, a fair degree of rationalisation can be brought about in the system.

That said, there is the matter of how much motivation government employees have as they do their day-to-day work. The degree of impartiality and independence they ought to enjoy as servants of the republic has often been hampered through a politicisation of the bureaucracy. We have on a number of occasions heard of administrative reforms being undertaken, without unfortunately any concrete results emerging from such exercises. Will anyone care to explain what happened about those measures? For now, though, the question of vacancies in government departments can be handled through a proper evaluation of need. The results could make everyone happy. In the first place, let all unnecessary or redundant posts be abolished as an economic measure. In the second, let significant, recognised posts not be left unfilled for years. Efficiency tempered with austerity in government is an idea whose time has come.

Tarique's ailment

Health of people in custody is govt responsibility

TARIQUE Rahman's physical condition has been occupying the time and space of the media for sometime now. That he has suffered a severe injury to his spine while in the custody of the state is a matter that causes worry to anyone with the slightest concern for the rights of the common man - even those that are in custody on charges of alleged corruption. And Tarique Rahman cannot be an exception.

We take this position notwithstanding the fact that in the past we have been critical and vocal about Tarique's influence in the government of the erstwhile 4-Party Alliance. It was no secret that he ran a parallel government from the Hawa Bhaban, and we did not hesitate to call a spade a spade in exposing the dubious role he had been playing in manipulating the course of high stakes national and international deals, and the deleterious consequences those have had on the country's image. His alleged link with corruption and his imperious attitude -- of treating the country as his fiefdom, and his misuse of power, had cast a dark patina on the reputation of the country.

In spite of the foregoing, at present he happens to be in the custody of the state, on charges of corruption of various definitions -- but we strongly believe that it makes the government morally responsible to accord him all the facilities that are due to a person in custody, and above all, ensure his well-being as a prisoner.

It is appalling that while a raft of reports on his health condition have appeared in the media quoting the medical board that was formed on the orders of the government confirming the injury to his back, the administration has chosen so far to remain mute on the matter - little realising that silence at certain times on certain matters are more thunderous than words spoken. And the comment of the jail authorities, that they are ignorant about the cause of the injury, instead of helping has added to the confusion, and is bound to give rise to further speculations.

Let us reiterate that notwithstanding the gravity of the charges against him -- for which he must answer - and we are certain the state will provide him the due opportunity to defend himself - as a man in custody Tarique deserves to get the best treatment available for the remedy of his ailment. And the sooner the government does so the more will it be able to ensure that the ends of justice and fair play are met.

The "Mother of all Parties" to begin soon



SHAHEEN WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

So, you see my beleaguered countrymen, the "system" wins over everything else. Before it, everything looks so hollow -- propriety, morality, rule of law, accountability, logic, reason, aesthetics and so on seem meaningless. The system allows the VIP thieves and robbers to enjoy impunity from all sorts of crime. The system keeps loopholes in laws so that the VIPs can come out clean and grab state power again and again. The system talks about "people" all the time but in reality it is the VIP thieves who enjoy all the conceivable worldly benefits that are there.

BRING out your silver cape, chill your summer wine and put on your dancing shoes, for the time is coming to party with the VIP thieves and robbers. Ah! That motley band of men patent in their utter worthlessness! Aren't you excited beyond disbelief? Don't you look forward to brushing shoulders with people who should have been in the dungeon forever? But, no, nothing of the sort will happen. They are creeping out soon, like those "critters" in the Michael Jackson song Thriller. And then they will throw the biggest party the world has ever seen. Let's go and wait on the sidewalk and watch the cavalcade of world's most expensive limousines on the streets of one of the world's poorest countries. Bravo, brothers!

Oh, about the party. Yes, the preparation is very much on, cleaning and polishing is going on, a new coat of colour has been applied, chandeliers are lighted,

bunting, ribbons and garlands have arrived. In fact, that would be the "Mother of all Parties," and we shall have to take part in it whether we like it or not, because the "system" demands it. The system calls the shots, no matter what. The system determines our fate and nothing else. So, in the party, in that discomfiting evening, you shall have to dance with men who had gobbled up graves. You shall have to drink with men who had outrageously tampered with the country's constitution. You shall have to guffaw with men who had given safe passage to murderers. You shall have to dine with men who had let loose a reign of terror throughout the country for years together.

So, you see my beleaguered countrymen, the "system" wins over everything else. Before it, everything looks so hollow -- propriety, morality, rule of law, accountability, logic, reason, aesthetics and so on seem mean-

ingless. The system allows the VIP thieves and robbers to enjoy impunity from all sorts of crime. The system keeps loopholes in laws so that the VIPs can come out clean and grab state power again and again. The system talks about "people" all the time but in reality it is the VIP thieves who enjoy all the conceivable worldly benefits that are there.

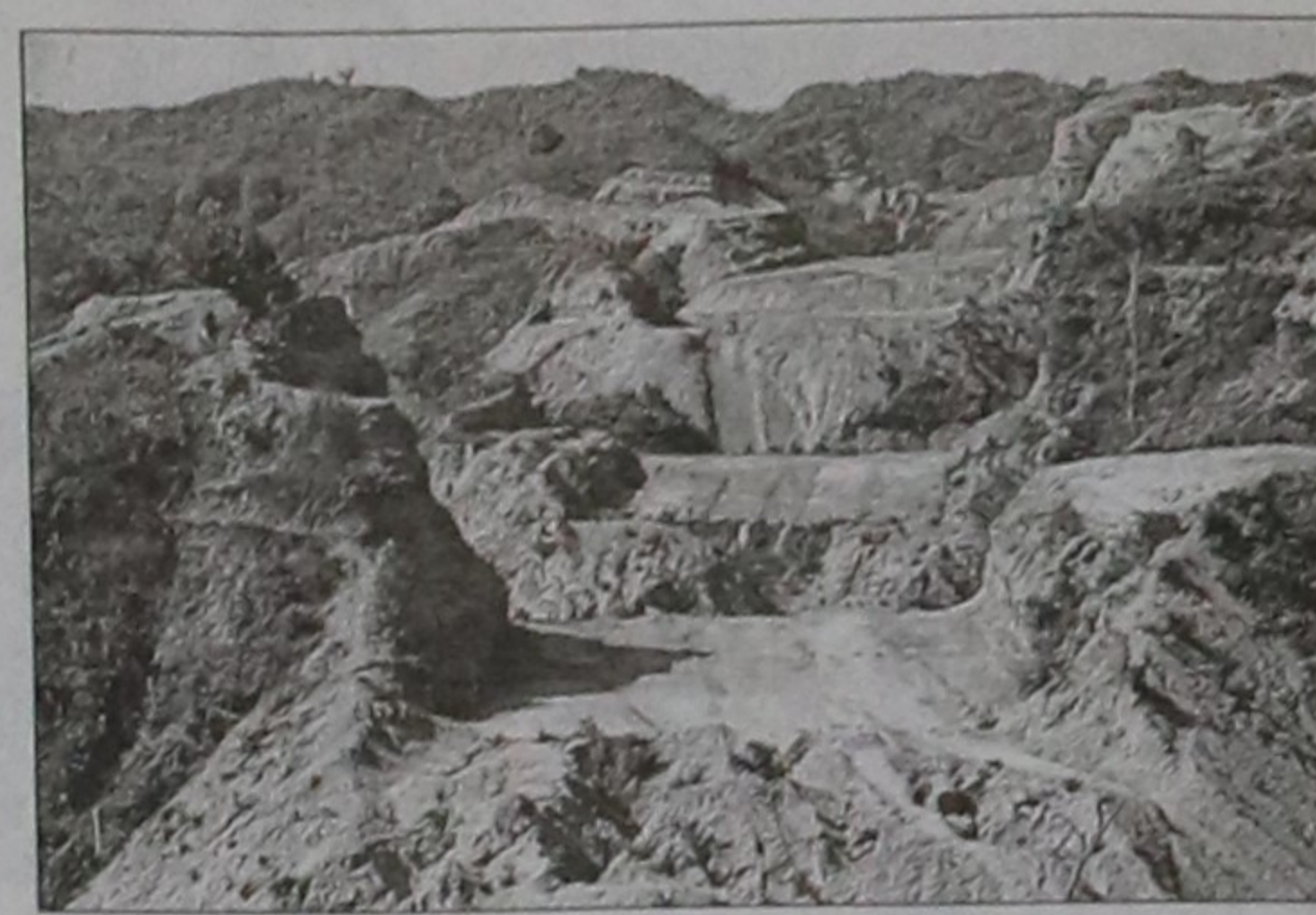
Tell me one thing, had there been no such worldly benefits coming in tandem with power, would the VIPs spend crores to become MPs and ministers only to serve the poor people? If there were no opportunity to get back the investment 1000 times or to import duty-free expensive limousines or to stay in luxurious flats paying almost nothing or to get all the perks our poor people cannot even dream of, do you think the thugs and hoodlums would ever express any desire to join the system? Therefore, if all the benefits and perks are

removed today we believe only the real patriots and devoted social workers would come forward to serve the country.

Do you agree, dear readers, that to become a public representative there should not be any extra benefit, not even a monthly salary, definitely no duty-free car, no free lodging, no free food from the MP Hostel canteen, no extra khair for violation of law, no fita cutting (cutting of ribbons) during office hours, no helicopter ride to catch a cheat at SSC exam in a remote part of the country.

Do you agree wise readers that the police department must work totally independently during the tenure of a government so that no MP or minister can "order" the IG or DIG or SP to arrest one and release another. Law must proceed according to its own course and the police authority must have the courage to stand up before such intimidation.

Discerning readers, should not



Hill grabbers are at large!

public service be considered a philanthropic work, which should be done by spending money from your own pocket? Why should a social worker expect a salary for doing something he volunteered to do? A philanthropist does not take money from the institution he/she establishes, because it is not fair, it is not proper, it is not expected. And then again, why should such work be done like a full-time professional?

The time has come to reject those corrupt to the core and glib-talking conjurers who take the people on a ride in the name of doing good for them. History tells us these people are best at exploiting the credulous people and know best how to make a quick buck stealing from the

public coffer. Except a few rare ones, most of our public representatives have turned into VIP brothers who are now planning the big party. So, let us oil our hair, trim our whiskers and get ready for the big show.

Bangladesh today looks like a huge stage where slapstick comedians are entering one after another to play their funny roles. But most of them most often are saying the same line again and again, knowing not what to say next or when to stop. No one knows when the clowns will leave the stage and real good actors will enter to enthral the audience with their powerful dramas. We are waiting for the day.

Shaheen Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Why are rice prices rising now?

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Bangladeshi farmers have become more informed and price responsive over the years. It would be unwise to assume that they would flood the market with paddy when the market signals an upward trend. It would also be wrong to assume that they are as distressed as they were in earlier decades. In such a situation, the government should cautiously step into the zone of growing rational expectation of farmers. Hopefully, next year could bring some relief from our agony. Meantime let us fasten our seat belts.



ABDUL BAYES

THE recent rise in rice prices at retail level seemingly goes to challenge the popular perceptions and theoretical underpinnings. The finance adviser apparently looks disturbed, and our "bare-headed" economists are taken aback by the unexpected outcome. After the much acclaimed bumper boro harvest, the perception was that the augmented supply would help ease the pressure in the market and thus lead to a decline in the price of the staple food.

Economic theory also suggests that in the wake of an increased supply, with demand and other things remaining constant, the price would fall. In both cases, however, the underlying assumption would be that immediately after harvest, a large number of producers are forced to fall back upon distress sales to bring comfort to the consumers (but at their peril).

Unfortunately, that did not seem to have happened: within the last few days, the price rose by Tk.50/maund as various reports say. Further escalation is not ruled out by any quarter. Let us have a brief look at our marketable surplus of rice for a clear understanding of the dynamics of rice price movements.

Four or five years back, 41% of the paddy produced by rural households was marketed, and 42% of total sales occurred within one month of the harvest -- generally known as "distress sales."

There seems to be little doubt that the proportion of marketed paddy increased over time as revealed in the book: Gramer Manush Gramer Arthonity Jibon Jibiker Porjalochona (by Abdul Bayes and Mahabub Hossain 2007).

In 2004, 52% of the farms participated in marketing of paddy and marketed 41% of the produce. Again, among all farms, 42% marketed within one month of harvest, and seasonal price variation was 6%.

In 2004, 36% of poor farms participated in market compared

to 85% of other groups. So, an inverse relationship between farm size and marketing is in evidence.

Poor farms marketed 15% of output compared to 28% for small and 56% for middle and 78% for large groups. Again, the inverse relation between farm size and market share holds true.

Poor farms generally sell two-thirds of production within one month. For small, middle and large, the shares are 59%, 40% and 27%, respectively. It is generally believed that poor farms engage in distress sales due to economic

hardships and, for this reason, they cannot take advantage of market swings.

But distress sales do not seem to deprive them of the due share as the yearly variation of price is not that high. Empirical evidence seems to show that the price spread between prices received in distress sales and yearly average price hovers around 6-8%. By and large, all types of farms increased their market participation where poor sell 15-16%, small 26-27% and middle 56% and large 72-78%. In rural Bangladesh, the surplus

farmers are those having more than 0.41 ha (or approximately 1 acre). They constitute 37% of household and supply 70% of the surplus. That is, one-third of rural households are net sellers and two-thirds are net buyers. Only 14% of rural households account for 92% of food surplus and keep the market in operation. Remunerative price is required for them.

We now draw upon the 62-village survey -- led by Bracin 2008 -- to update information. In 2008 -- covering the 2007 crop season -- 57% of farms reported to have marketed 37% of MV paddy throughout the year.

However, roughly 50% marketed 20% of output within one month. This compares with about 42% sold within one month of harvest in 2004. This is a very interesting result. The proportion of distress sellers seems to have halved over time. If the trend is assumed to have continued till today, there is no reason to believe that our a priori expectation of a large supply in the market would hold true.

The reasons for which distress selling would take place in earlier decades appeared to have lost ground in the wake of alternative credit supply from NGOs, government safety net programs, remittances, growing market integration etc. But that should not lead us to conclude that bumper crop bounced back.

In fact, had there been no such harvest, price rise would spike more biting, further bringing down the real income of the people.

It can possibly be assumed that out of 17 million tons of boro paddy produced this year, 70% were accounted for by farms having more than 0.41ha (surplus farmers), who could sell paddy after satisfactorily meeting home consumption.

They are one-third of total farms in rural areas. The rest 30% are deficit farmers -- who have less marketable surplus -- constituting

two-thirds of farms, and are net buyers of rice.

We assume that the surplus farms could have stored paddy to take advantage of the expected market swings. They are the conscious class with information on government storage, international market situation etc., and they also know that they are usually rewarded with higher price only when rice is at risk. The desperate poor might also have shelved sales for a while, and possibly enter the market with much lower amount than predicted.

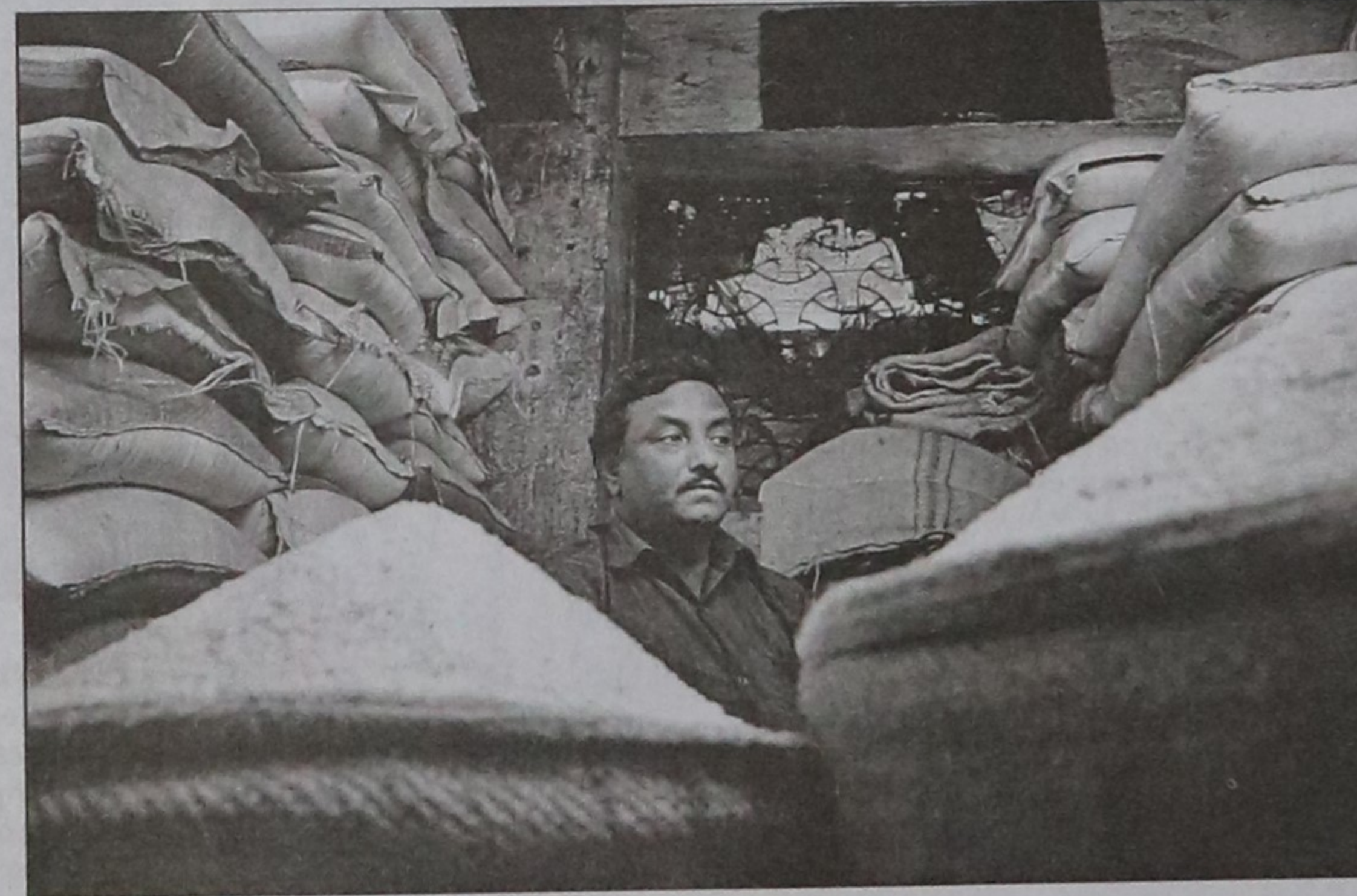
As a result, the market might have absorbed less than what it should have by now. Added to this is transport bottlenecks coupled with hoarding by the so-called unscrupulous (in fact rationally) businessmen.

It seems that the rice market may not be trimmed before the next monsoon harvest comes home. If everything goes well, the rice market could then gain its earlier resonance. We presume that until government resumes its various programs to stabilise the market, including imports, the rice market would remain relatively volatile. Only a good monsoon harvest and a large procurement drive to build up a large stock could go a long way in easing the market.

Bangladeshi farmers have become more informed and price responsive over the years. It would be unwise to assume that they would flood the market with paddy when the market signals an upward trend. It would also be wrong to assume that they are as distressed as they were in earlier decades.

In such a situation, the government should cautiously step into the zone of growing rational expectation of farmers. Hopefully, next year could bring some relief from our agony. Meantime let us fasten our seat belts.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.



Prices still rising!

In need of 'wins on the ground'

King Abdullah of Jordan sat down at Petra with NEWSWEEK's Lally Weymouth last week and reflected on the state of affairs in his part of the world. He emphasised the need for a settlement of the Palestinian issue and claimed that Iran was no longer such a big problem for his country. Indeed, he sounded a bit like Barack Obama in arguing for the need for dialogue with Iran -- a country he has in the past described as a major threat.

Weymouth: Is Annapolis dead?

Abdullah: I'm actually very concerned ... I think the peace process has lost credibility in people's minds in this area ... We're all very pessimistic at this stage.

Do you view Iran as the No. 1 threat in this region?

I think the lack of peace is the major threat. I don't see the ability of creating a two-state solution beyond 2008, 2009. I think this is really the last chance ... I am very concerned that the clock

is ticking and that that door is closing on all of us.

But aren't you concerned about Iran?

Iran poses issues to certain countries, although I have noticed over the past month or so that the dynamics have changed quite dramatically. For the first time, I think Iran is less of a threat. But if the peace process doesn't move forward, then I think that extremism will continue to advance. When it comes to Iran, I am quite

supportive of what I see in Europe and the West -- people who want to engage.

There are certain candidates in the US election who've been calling for dialogue with Iran.

We're a country and a region that supports dialogue as opposed to conflict. If there is conflict with Iran, I'm not too sure where this is going to lead us. I think you're playing with Pandora's box ... I think we've had enough crises in this part of the world.

Do you feel that you've been too loyal and staked too much on President Bush, on the Americans?

I think that since day one, the president and I have been very, very honest and very candid on regional issues, and I've always expressed my views on the different countries that surround us, and how we need to approach them. Advice is worth what you pay for it at the end of the day.

How do you see things in Iraq today?

I am actually optimistic for the first time on Iraq. I think that Iraqi society is moving in the right direction. It's the first time that I have felt that Iraqis have, as much as they can, bound themselves together into a unity. They have worked together -- Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis -- for the betterment

of Iraq in the last couple of months.

Here's an opportunity for Arab countries to reach out, which we haven't done in the past, and extend a hand of friendship to the Iraqis and give them the support that they need to get to the next step. If we don't, I think that it will be a loss for the Iraqis and for the Arab moderates.

Inside Jordan, things are difficult now due to the price of food and other commodities.

I think it is [the same] all over the world. We will have a major problem with rising prices, food concerns for the next couple of years. Oil prices have just been such a shock. Summer has been easier, but when you get to the winter, the issue of heating is going to be a major problem. We are pursuing alternative forms of energy. We're

looking at nuclear energy.

I saw your statement to Haaretz saying, "Everybody's going for nuclear programs" in the Middle East.

I had said that before in the United States, [but] when I said it to Haaretz, it was breaking news -- "Jordan is going nuclear!"

Reportedly, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are building nuclear reactors.

They don't have the [energy] crunch that we do, so for us the pace will be much quicker. We'll probably be the first in our part of the world to actually go through the private sector to get nuclear energy.

I remember a couple of years ago you warned against the danger posed by Iran to moderate Arab regimes. Aren't Iran and Syria the big winners today in this

region?

If we look at what happened in Lebanon two months ago [when Hizbullah routed government forces in street fighting to win major political concessions], I think the perception here is that that round was won by Iran and her proxies. We just have to be careful as to what happens on round two. Again, this is why I am so concerned about the peace process.

Why didn't anyone help the government of Lebanon? The United States and France worked so closely on Lebanon.

I'm just as shocked and surprised as you. The sad part is we have to be very careful. The lack of a peace process affects America's credibility in this part of the world. If we don't really show some wins on the ground, American influence and prestige

will be dramatically diminished.

It's hard to see how you do move forward with Hamas firing rockets at Israel every day.

What I said in the US last time I was there is [that] Hamas always comes up as an issue. But we are only looking at half the equation. Everyone is quick to talk about how to isolate Hamas, but there is not enough discussion as to how to support Fatah. How do we strengthen the other side?

Are you willing to live with a nuclear Iran?

I think that you need to engage with the Iranians. A military strike in Iran today will only elicit a reaction from Iran and Iranian proxies, and I don't think that we can live with any more conflicts in this part of the world.

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