LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY JUNE 25, 2008

Transport fare anarchy

No more tokenism, effective action needed

VER since last Saturday's tragic incident in which a passenger belonging to a city hospital was pushed over a fare row by conductor of a running bus on to the street to be only fatally run over, things have hardly improved in the city transport sector. On the contrary, commotion among passengers resenting arbitrary fare hikes by transport operators has led to brawls, vandalism and loss of property.

Following the recent increase in gas price the government has refixed the fares of CNG-run buses and three-wheelers. But not only are these new rates being defied by the transport owners, they are even charging double the approved fares. They are tricking the passengers into paying more through two kinds of deception: first, the man at the counter feigns that he doesn't have the tickets of lower denominations, so that passengers are shortchanged into accepting the ticket of a higher value to be able to make his trip. Secondly, an investigative report in a prominent Bangla daily has cited several instances of passengers being charged different fares for the same distance.

This is happening in the organised segment of the private transport sector but the tale of overcharging, hardship and harassment is even more telling about the so-called local buses. The CNG-run three-wheelers and the taxis that were supposed to go by metres hardly comply with BRTA orders. The government's fixed deposit ceilings for the owners are not complied with and the drivers make much about it to demand higher fares from the passengers. These loose ends continue to fester as successive governments fearful of losing support chose to turn a blind eye.

Lately, in the face of public commotion over arbitrary fares, BRTA mobile teams conducted drives against unscrupulous transport owners, filed a total of 207 cases against vehicles overcharging as well as not having legal documents. They seized seven vehicles on charge of violating the Motor Vehicles Act. Simultaneously Dhaka Metropolitan Police filed a total of 1063 cases against vehicles allegedly violating traffic rules and for having no legal documents. Fifty-four vehicles have been seized.

This is all very good, but only seasonal and that's where lies the problem. We demonstrate energetic moves only when public rage mounts over hurting of a common interest. When the streak of public anger disappears the disparate efforts die down with the original nonchalance taking hold of the authorities. This will have to change.

Our stranded workers in Kuala Lumpur

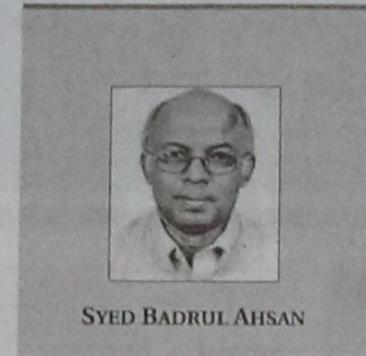
Firm action against offenders is called for

HE difficulties in which 32 Bangladeshi workers have found themselves in Kuala Lumpur raise once again the issue of what is yet not being done to ease the plight of our citizens abroad. We have earlier and on a number of occasions drawn the attention of the authorities. here in Bangladesh about the paramount need to ensure that recruiting agencies follow rules and norms aimed specifically at ensuring the welfare of Bangladeshis sent abroad to work in various firms. While we realise that a good number of such agencies have indeed been operating on the basis of standard procedures, there have been quite a few others which have not exactly been above board in their dealings with the workers they send abroad. At the same time, we think it is time to inquire into the workings of the overseas firms responsible for the shoddy deals with local recruitment agencies regarding our workers.

The 32 workers in question have been stranded at Kuala Lumpur airport, and that too in a depot, for a week because the firm for which they are supposed to work refused to receive them. The reason cited for their not being welcome is as regrettable as it is bizarre. The employment firm has made it clear that the Bangladeshi recruiting agency, Shikha Trade International, failed to pay it more than 70,000 Ringgit as part of their financial deal. Now, what emerges here is a situation in which the stranded workers are not at all responsible for their plight. They have all paid their dues and in a manner in which hard-up Bangladeshis have always done so. It was therefore natural for them to expect, once they arrived in Malaysia, to get to work and begin dreaming of a better future for their families back home. That has not happened because of the very sinister way in which the recruitment agency in Dhaka and the employing firm in Kuala Lumpur have been handling conditions.

Bangladeshi workers have of late fallen regular victims to the caprices of employment organisations in Kuala Lumpur. One now wonders if the Bangladesh ministry responsible for ensuring expatriate workers' welfare abroad has at all been doing its job. We will be happy if this new episode in misery spurs it into action against the bad eggs in the overseas employment basket.

These are not momentous times ...



TE are living through some rather interesting times. These are not momentous times and we are surely not making history that could leave an enormous impact on our future. But, yes, these are interesting times, and just as well, and they are because of everything that is happening and, conversely, for everything that is not happening. A former prime minister has flown out of prison and out of the country. Another insists that she will stay in it, but that should be no reason for her incarcerated children not to make it abroad for medical treat-

Every evening, therefore, there are all the images on television to tell us all of the uncertainties we as a people are going through. There are the whispers of people hauled up for wrongdoing over these past months already planning new futures for themselves once they are out of

Those whispers, for men like Kamal Hossain and for so many others, have begun to look like worries. And naturally too, for if after all these months of a sustained

GROUND REALITIES

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drive against corruption and sundry other crimes, conditions come to a pass where men who have played havoc with the politics and economy of the country are allowed to walk free, you cannot but be deeply concerned about the future.

while and focus on some of the bizarre that has lately been coming into politics. In these past few weeks, Begum Khaleda Zia has missed no opportunity to harangue the country in court on the thousand and one afflictions, in her view, the caretaker government suffers from. And that is not all. The former prime minister, having presided over an administration that has clearly left every other administration this country has ever had way behind in the corruption league, informs the media and through them the country that her last stint in power was a golden era for Bangladesh. No contrition is there. Not a bit of humility comes in those

expressions of sentiment. But more surprising, and galling too, is the reality that the powers that be have looked the other way

while the Begum made those incendiary political statements. Of course, she is a politician, but even politicians are barred from speaking to others when they are on trial before a court.

Sheikh Hasina, in the months But set aside your concerns for a between her arrest in July last year and her release recently, did not or was not allowed to speak to newsmen. That was understandable. Neither has anyone else now in custody found any opportunity to play to the gallery through the media. That is the truth. And if it is, there comes the legitimate query: why is Begum Zia being given the to provide him with. When that does liberty to engage in political theatrics when the law should be handling the charges against her?

You go back to history. Bangabandhu did not and could not make political pronouncements in the course of all the time he spent in jail, and that was, altogether, more than thirteen years. In 1968 and early 1969, not even the impetuous Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came by any chance of disseminating his wisdom before the media. There are after November 1975, when it was

in life. When you do not follow them, or when a government chooses to keep them in suspension for reasons that are either not there or are mysterious or spurious, it is a society that tends to lose its equanimity.

While you mull that over, move on to something pretty troubling. The young Tarique Rahman, it is being put about by his party and his lawyers, is seriously ailing in prison. Allegations are rife about the bad way he has been treated in custody. Now, in a civilised, modern dispensation, every prisoner is entitled to all the security the state is supposed not happen, when a prisoner falls ill or is unable to walk because of something that may have been done to his spinal cord, it is that

security which comes into question. Sergeant Zahurul Huq was murdered in the course of the Agartala conspiracy trial when the state should have ensured his well-being. And because it did not, it earned a bad name for itself. Our collective sorrow has continued all these years

odious it was under Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed, that took the lives of four of our pre-eminent men of history. Prison is always a galling affair and yet it is one place where security of life and continuity of good health become the responsibility of the state.

Which is why these fears about Tarique Rahman's health in police custody become deeply unsettling. The question here is not one that relates to the charges of corruption against him. We recall the long, dark shadow he cast on our lives through conducting a virtual parallel government in the country beside the theoretically real one administered by his mother. But we do believe and no one should be surprised that as a citizen and as a prisoner he must enjoy all the privileges the law allows him in his present state. Let there be no ambiguity in meaning

And speaking of ambiguity, there legislative body came in. are other matters that have of late by the Election Commission to go parameters of the law or the constitution, but it certainly is something over which a caretaker government ninety-day framework, such an administration is empowered only of it to organise general elections, see the results come in, hand over power to a new government and

walk away into the twilight. But that is precisely where all this question of interesting times comes in. This caretaker government has, always rules about everything we do the administration, no matter how in seventeen months, moved from

taking tentative care of us to making long-term decisions for us. Well, the circumstances have been extraordinary. And extraordinary has been the way the government has functioned, under the umbrella of a state of emergency.

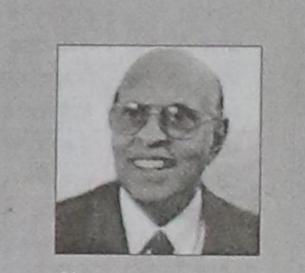
So you cannot really argue, seeing that the Election Commission, Public Service Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, the trials of corrupt elements, the adoption of a Right to Information ordinance, et al, have all been initiated by this government (and generally to our satisfaction), that it ought not to go beyond presiding over elections to a new parliament. It can organise other elections. Even so, in the fraught conditions through which the country happens to be passing, wiser counsel could have convinced the Election Commission that the corporation and municipality elections could wait until a new

But then, power is a most perexercised citizens' minds. The move suasive weapon, to those who wield it. The world, in that deeply ahead with elections to the city figurative way of speaking, is the corporations and municipalities hands of the individual or group may not exactly be beyond the that has come by it. There are, of course, all those limits to power, but you do not see them, you do not acknowledge them, because presmay not assert authority. In a ent exercise of it does not permit your peering into a future absence

> And so you can afford the luxury of seeing more interesting happenings up at the crossroads ahead. Happy watching! And waiting!

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Turmoil over US beef



HARUN UR RASHID

N politics, a week is a long time, as the saying goes. A flawed L decision of the government could change dramatically the political landscape. Volatile public opinion is one of the challenges politicians face. This has occurred in South Korea.

The popularity of South Korea's new president, Lee Myung-bak (66), who was elected with a landslide victory, plummeted to under 20% within a matter of 100 days. His repeated stumbles culminated in a televised apology last month for his mishandling of sensitive matters, including the import of beef from the US. On June 19; the president had to apologise again to people for the insensitive way his administration had handled the issue of import of beef from the US.

On June 20, he replaced 9 out of 10 presidential aides, hoping to restore public trust in his fourmonth old administration. He indicated that he was giving up his signature project and one of his key election promises -- digging a canal across South Korea -- in a gesture of changing his leadership style.

Reversal of political

fortune of the president Though Lee's margin of victory in last December's presidential elec-

The popularity of South Korea's new president, Lee Myung-bak (66), who was elected with a landslide victory, plummeted to under 20% within a matter of 100 days. His repeated stumbles culminated in a televised apology last month for his mishandling of sensitive matters, including the import of beef from the US. On June 19, the president had to apologise again to people for the insensitive way his administration had handled the issue of import of beef from the US.

tion was the biggest ever in South Korea, the import of US beef has diminished his popularity.

Lee had won 48.6% of the votes. His victory handed back power to the conservative Grand National Party (GNP). Lee took over on February 25, 2008, replacing President Roh Moo-hyun of the Party (UNDP).

In April, in a parliamentary election, President Lee's party won a majority (153 seats), and the three opposition parties about a third of the seats, in the 299-member National Assembly. So far he was enjoying his political honeymoon.

But a misreading of the public mood over import of US beef has sent Lee's approval ratings into a nosedive, leaving him caught between a promise to a key ally and the anger of his own people.

After weeks of protests, the government announced on June 3 --Lee's 100th day in office -- that it was backing away from an agreement to resume import of American beef, which was banned after the mad cow disease outbreak in United States.

Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun said that the government was acting to "humbly accept the people's will," following large street protests over the weekend.

the veterans believe has helped

A poll published in the national newspaper Joong Ang Ilbo on June 3 said less than 20% of Koreans supported him. "Lee cannot properly run the country with such a low approval rating," said Im Hyugbaeg, a professor of politics at Korea

The president's troubles began ful." liberal United New Democratic on April 18, just hours ahead of a meeting with President Bush at Camp David seeking to remove a major thorn in their relations, and the two countries announced that South Korea would resume importing American beef.

> This is a much-criticised decision because American beef has been absent from South Korea for most of the past four and a half years amid a ban prompted by the first US mad cow disease (beef tainted with BSE-Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) detected in 2003. In humans, eating meat products contaminated with the virus is could lead to a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, with fatal

The deal struck a nerve in South Korea, where it was seen as a brazen attempt to curry favour with Washington and win support from members of Congress for a freetrade agreement between the two

The people felt that Lee had acted

rashly and ignored their concerns about health. "The president neglected the process of collecting the people's opinions in the course of the beef negotiations," college student Ahn Kwang-soo said at a rally that drew some 40,000 people. "He should have been more care-

Critics also complain that rather than acting as the president of a nation, Lee has behaved like the corporate CEO he once was, treating South Koreans more like employees than citizens.

Lee tried to make amends last month, going on national television to apologise for his handling of the beef deal. The response from the public was an escalation in protests.

On June 10, the entire cabinet offered to resign following a public uproar over the planned resumption of US beef import into the country.

The decision by Lee's government to postpone implementation of the agreement is likely to raise hackles among members of Congress from cattle states, who say a free-trade agreement (FTA) with South Korea had little chance of passing unless US beef returned to South Korean markets.

The South Korean opposition decided to boycott the parliament to pressurise the president to recriticism for more than a month amid widespread public perception that it fails to protect the nation from mad cow disease. Why has the president

negotiate the deal of April 18. The

beef pact has come under severe

become suddenly unpopular?

· The beef dispute has placed him in an awkward situation. It is thought that he does not care about the health of his people, and bowed to the pressure of Washington to allow US beef into the country. Although protests started with the beef dispute, they have now broadened into a wider attack on Lee's administration. On the whole, Lee has been seen as a weak and

fault-prone leader.

Analysts say the US beef issue is being used by the opposition as to check the president's neoliberal policies, which include privatisation of numerous statecompanies and services. push through his pro-business measures, such as opening up more to foreign investors and getting tough on labour unions through parliament, because of lack of public support. Lee's economic agenda is now being threatened by his crumbling

With inflation at a seven year high, his promised 7% economic growth for the year seems unreachable. During the election campaign last December, he had raised high expectations from his economic agenda. But now he is in trouble, partly because of unforeseen high price of oil and slowdown of

global economy. He has unnecessarily pursued an

aggressive policy toward North Korea, rejecting the "sunshine" policy of the past governments (US was pleased with Lee's policy), which has stopped the South Koreans from meeting their near and dear ones in North Korea. Furthermore, economic activities with North Korea have taken a severe jolt. In the election, North Korea hardly figured in the voters decision to electhim.

President Lee, who is known as "bulldozer" in his country, is now seen more as a leader who has no time to listen or speak to the people, is insensitive to their sentiments, and has bowed to the pressure of the US.

The conservative newspaper Chosun Ilbo, South Korea's largest, said Lee must act quickly to salvage the rest of his five-year term. "He has a kind of stealth weapon in order no choice but to make a bold decision to change the state of affairs by humbly reflecting on his mistakes and coldly analysing the factors that pushed him and his administration President Lee seems unlikely to to this point," the paper said in an

> Choi Jin, director of the Institute of presidential leadership, said that people had expectations from President Lee for improvement of the economy, and when he could not deliver it in short time they became frustrated; and the beef debacle could be seen as the trigger for the explosion of the frustration.

Lee's sudden fall from grace is all the more stunning given his legendary status in South Korea as a "cando businessman." What a reversal of political fortune within 100 days has occurred for a new president!

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Mr. Obama's Washington

Obama stepped into this bachelor wilderness in 2005. Michael Strautmanis, Obama's chief counsel, recalls getting a call from the senator in the months before his term began. "Don't worry, this won't be in your job description," said the senator, "but I need you to help me look for a mattress."

JONATHAN DARMAN

HE life of a young senator in Washington can be lonely. After winning a Senate seat from Illinois in 2004, Barack Obama became a part-time bachelor. He lived three or four days a week in a one-bedroom apartment a few blocks from the Capitol. He worked all day, and at night he missed his daughters and his wife, Michelle, left behind in Chicago. "I have chosen a life ... that requires me to be gone from Michelle and the girls for long stretches of time and exposes Michelle to all sorts of stress," Obama wrote in The Audacity of Hope. "Rationalisations seem feeble and painfully abstract when I'm missing one of the girls' school potlucks because of a vote, or

session's been extended and we need to postpone our vacation."

The Obamas' separated life was of their own making. When they had first pondered a run for the Senate, the couple had weighed the pros Washington. Obama quizzed Democrats on the balance between work life and home life; Michelle toured D.C. neighbourhoods. In the end, they decided it was best to keep the home base in Chicago, where Michelle had her own career and the girls, Malia and Sasha, had a chance at normal life.

This is the stuff that people like about the Obamas -- their insis-

view the capital as a strange and foreign place. They aren't the only ones. The Obamas are part of new generation of political couples that doesn't assume election to the Senate means a new life in and cons of relocating to Washington. Connie Schultz, a columnist for The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer, works at home in Ohio while her husband, Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown, spends weekdays in Washington. "What better way to keep a senator grounded," she says, "than to bring him or her home on a regular basis to the people who elected him or her?" But while frequent-flier legisla-

tors have been a boon for constitutence on maintaining something ent services, they aren't necessarily approximating "normal." From the good for governance. Old-guard start of their presidential campaign, senators bemoan their new colthe Democratic nominee and his leagues' eagerness to get out of town calling Michelle to tell her that wife have been at pains to show they on Thursday nights, a tendency that

make Washington a more partisan place. It was easier to understand the gentleman from the other party, they reason, when you saw him cheering at St. Albans' soccer election campaign, Obama faces the question always asked of outsider candidates: how do you change a place you've never really known? And as they contemplate capturing the White House under a banner of bipartisanship, Obama and his generation of senators face a broader dilemma: how do they work with their opponents when, for so long, they've lived their lives apart? Members of Congress have

always led geographically divided lives. In the early 19th century, the House and Senate convened in mid-December and typically closed by March or April, in time for members to head home for the planting season. The Civil War, however, made service in Congress a full-time job, and the men stuck in Washington bar," says Warner. "We would just go sought to turn it into a real city. "They were trying to catch up with home. The fight was over."

New York and Philadelphia society," says Betty Koed, assistant historian of the Senate. "They needed women to do that." By the mid-20th century, it was standard for senators to bring their families to town. Each of the games. As he launches his general- last three presidents who had served in the Senate -- John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon -- raised families in the capital.

Senators' spouses and kids became creatures of Washington, for better and for worse. This was the heyday of the Georgetown dinner party, of men with martini glasses and hostesses in flowing gowns out Warner, the Republican from Virginia, retiring after six terms, remembers this Senate as "a closeknit family" where "a new senator had a big brother and his wife had a big sister." The collegial quarters made it harder to stay mad. "I remember in the good old days, there were several senators who were known to keep a pretty good

A series of revolutions swept that Washington away. First the women's movement made senators' wives wonder why they were expected to drop their own lives to be at their husbands' beck and call. Then the 1994 Republican revolt made it a badge of honour to live out of a suitcase on Capitol Hill. Money dealt the fatal blow: by the late '90s, re-election campaigns cost so much that senators begged their leadership for short, Tuesday-through-Thursday sessions so they could spend the weekends raising money at home. A Washington residence of "Advise and Consent." John for the family seemed pointless. By 2007, a majority of freshmen senators were arriving in the capital without their families. Without the civilizing influence

of spouses and children, Washington has receded into the swamp. Georgetown parties now belong to journalists and lobbyists. The influence peddlers have shifted much of the city's social center to Capitol Hill, where members of down and have a sip together and go Congress bunk together in town houses for three and four and make recently, he was certainly happy to

their way at night between fundraisers and receptions.

Obama stepped into this bachelor wilderness in 2005. Michael Strautmanis, Obama's chief counsel, recalls getting a call from the senator in the months before his term began. "Don't worry, this won't be in your job description, said the senator, "but I need you to help me look for a mattress." Obama shunned the party scene, confining his socialising to fund-raisers, dinners with policy experts and the occasional meal with old lawschool classmates. "I'm not aware that he ever went to a residential party," says Cassandra Butts, a lawschool friend who helped him set up his Senate office. "He could have developed much deeper personal relationships if he had spent more time in D.C," says a senior aide who would describe a weakness only

anonymously. All this makes for a sharp generational contrast between Obama and his Republican opponent. John McCain, too, never brought his family to Washington -- but, until

make his way to Georgetown for a party or a dinner with friends. Warner, who supports McCain, says the Arizonan's "long service in the Senate" has helped him establish "close personal relationships with many senators across the aisle, which is an essential element to bipartisan success." Obama's generation, mean-

while, scoffs at the notion that living in Washington makes for better public servants. "Don't tell me you're saying women are responsible for partisan discord," Schultz says with a sigh. "Just because [senators] don't sit around and drink a lot doesn't mean they don't talk." It's a fair point. But if they make it to the White House, the Obamas will have to live in Washington, full time. Obama often speaks about how he'd change the tone in Washington, appointing Republicans to his cabinet and encouraging open debate. He might also try some of the old customs -getting out to dinner, and opening up the bar.

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