

Price monitoring by business community

Nothing like it, if it succeeds

In a meeting organised by FBCCI with representatives from wholesale and retail trading communities and BDR taking part, a consensus was reached to the effect that the importers, wholesalers and retailers will constitute a market monitoring mechanism of their own to keep the prices at reasonable level during Ramadan. Should they fail in their mission, however, the joint forces will come in to monitor.

The business community is tasking themselves with a responsibility they did neither volunteer nor were they trusted with beforehand. It seems to us that they have matured into realising where their stakes lie.

We have been consistently advocating a policy whereby the marketing forces are allowed to operate without interference from any quarters that would disrupt equation between demand and supply eventually pushing up prices. Nobody is contesting the need for occasional oversight by the government of the market behaviour and its intervention, where necessary to beef up supplies; but that should not end up creating panic or a feeling of alienation among the business community.

The success of this approach is, however, equally dependent upon adherence to some business ethics, or call it social responsibility, on the part of the market players or the operatives. It has been unfortunately observed that if the prices increased abroad the businessmen in no time would raise the domestic prices. But conversely, if the prices decreased internationally, the internal prices seldom fell. The other unseemly feature is that if the wholesale prices decline, the retail prices take time to fall proportionately.

But thankfully there is a departure from the pattern lately, and that too, prior to Ramadan when the price pressure usually builds up. Prices of essential commodities like edible oil, pulses, rice and flour have dropped at the kitchen market over the last four days. Even though the drop in the wholesale prices is yet to be commensurately reflected at retail level, a declining trend has apparently set in.

Such trends will have to be furthered by the new price monitoring mechanism led by FBCCI. The disconnect between the manufacturers, importers and wholesalers on the one hand and the retail networks on the other will have to go at the operative level just as the coordination between the government ministries and the business community will have to be ensured through continuing consultations.

On the specific issue of monitoring, we believe, it's a very good idea to introduce voucher system both in the wholesale and retail markets so that price manipulation can be checked on a verifiable basis.

The conflict between Russia and Georgia

A swift resolution is now an imperative

THE American demand for a withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia is but the latest in a conflict that threatens to destabilise the region. The determined manner in which Russian forces have pounded away at Georgian positions in and around the breakaway republic of Ossetia have resulted not only in a serious loss of innocent lives but also in huge damage to Georgian infrastructure. Not even the capital Tbilisi has been spared; and despite the brave claims by the Georgian authorities that they have been inflicting blows on the Russians, the bigger truth is that Moscow's superior firepower may now have caused a situation where Georgia could collapse unless a cessation of hostilities comes about soon.

But that possibility even now appears rather remote, despite Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's quick acceptance of European Union proposals for a solution to the conflict. Meanwhile, Moscow has called for the resignation of President Saakashvili. The impediment, till this point, has however been the Russian leadership. US President George Bush and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have already had a testy exchange on the issue in Beijing, where both men happened to be present at the opening of the Olympics. While one can hardly disagree with the thought that it was Saakashvili's attempt to bring Ossetia back into the Georgian fold through military means that led to the crisis, there is little doubt that the Russian response has been unnaturally unnerving. For once one is inclined to agree with the Bush administration, which thinks Moscow's response to Tbilisi's actions has been disproportionate. That said, it is now imperative that a swift resolution to the conflict be arrived at. The French and the Finnish are already at work on behalf of the EU. As for the Americans, Russian charges that they have been sending back Georgian soldiers from Iraq to Tbilisi to resist Moscow only underscore the degree to which Washington may not be in a position to influence events.

It should have been for Moscow to explore every peaceful, diplomatic avenue before deciding on a military response to Georgia's actions. That it opted for a bare-knuckled response is regrettable. Be that as it may, it is now for the global community to have the two sides arrive at a solution at the earliest. Unless the hostilities stop, there is a terrible chance that it might lead to a wider conflagration.

Time to strengthen the IAEA

In the commission's report, we make recommendations on issues that world leaders need to tackle as a matter of urgency. These include strengthening the non-proliferation regime, accelerating nuclear disarmament and meeting rising demands from developing countries for access to nuclear techniques to combat poverty, disease and drought.

ERNESTO ZEDILLO

G8 leaders meeting in Japan noted that a growing number of countries look to launch peaceful nuclear power programs. The leaders stressed the importance, as the nuclear club expands, of ensuring the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and the safety and security of nuclear facilities.

Yet the organisation responsible for maintaining the global nuclear order -- the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) -- despite being a remarkable institution for its achievements throughout its half a century existence, is struggling to do its job because of a chronic lack of resources.

This year, I chaired an independent 18-member international Commission that was asked to look into the future of the IAEA. My colleagues and I were impressed by the agency's technical competence, whether in assessing Iran's

nuclear program or helping to fight hunger by using nuclear techniques to breed more resilient varieties of rice.

But we were frankly shocked to learn that the IAEA, one of the most respected international organisations, has been operating virtually on a shoestring for nearly two decades.

The cost to the world of a single act of nuclear terrorism or a serious accident in a nuclear power plant would be incalculable. In contrast, the cost of strengthening the IAEA to help prevent such catastrophes is modest.

The resource situation of the IAEA is now critical. Years of zero growth policies have left the organisation with a failing infrastructure. Vital elements of its work -- for example nuclear safety and security -- are funded largely on an unpredictable and unstable voluntary basis.

IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei, was abso-

lutely right a few weeks ago in telling its Board of Governors: "There is a disconnect between what you are asking the Agency to do and what you are ready to finance."

Core agency activities, such as monitoring the shutdown of North Korean nuclear facilities, have had to be paid for through voluntary contributions solicited from member states because there are insufficient funds in the regular budget.

Likewise, the agency's ability to analyse samples taken at nuclear facilities worldwide -- essential for its independence and credibility in determining the nature of a country's nuclear activities -- is in serious jeopardy because of the obsolescence of its laboratory equipment and chronic under-investment in its infrastructure.

With a regular budget this year totaling just \$289 million, the agency has rightly been described as an extraordinary bargain by many eminent persons.

In the commission's report, we make recommendations on issues that world leaders need to tackle as a matter of urgency. These include strengthening the non-proliferation regime, accelerating nuclear disarmament and meeting rising demands from developing countries for access to nuclear techniques to combat poverty, disease and drought.

Ensuring safety in the use of nuclear energy, and the security of nuclear and other radioactive materials, must also be high priorities. Unless the IAEA is given adequate human and financial resources, it will be unable to properly fulfill its crucial role in addressing these issues.

First, we recommend an immediate once-off cash injection of \$80 million to enable the IAEA to, among other needs, refurbish its Safeguards Analytical Laboratory (SAL) and develop its Incident and Emergency Response Center.

Investment in infrastructure and IT projects, for example, has been deferred because of budgetary restraints. The SAL, which evaluates sensitive samples taken at nuclear facilities and which must maintain accuracy, confidentiality, speed and cost effectiveness, was built in the 1970s, and both maintenance and invest-

ment in new equipment, have suffered under the constrained budget.

Through its Incident and Emergency Response Center, the IAEA coordinates international notification and assistance to help states to respond in the event of a nuclear accident or a terrorist attack, and to cope with the consequences.

In such a crisis, effective plans for public communication are critical to reduce the likelihood of panic, but the center does not yet have the resources to fully carry out this role.

Second, the effective budget freeze must end. Funding needs to be made secure and predictable. The budget ideally needs to double by 2020. The extra resources would be used in a whole host of areas, from making sure that vital programs to combat nuclear terrorism are adequately staffed and equipped, to helping countries embarking on nuclear power programs to develop the necessary infrastructure, safety regimes and waste-disposal mechanisms.

But it's not just about money. The report calls for a reinforced global nuclear order, involving increased collective action, more transparency, tougher safety and security standards and new non-

proliferation measures. The IAEA's authority to go after possible nuclear proliferators needs to be strengthened. Its inspectors should be given more powers to follow up suspected nuclear weaponisation activities.

As has become clear from recent events, sometimes transparency going well beyond the measures called for in the Additional Protocol is needed to provide confidence that a state's nuclear program is entirely peaceful.

The Additional Protocol of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) called for enhanced access and more intrusive inspections of countries' nuclear programs in an effort to strengthen and expand verification and safeguards.

Although nuclear safety has improved enormously in recent decades, the risk of an accident at any given reactor must continue to be reduced. The IAEA's role in persistently improving the global safety regime is critical and must be reinforced.

Therefore, the agency should work with member states to coordinate research to design reactors that are economical, safe and proliferation-resistant.

It should be given a key role in managing new multinational

is the one instrument with which you can do wonders, with which you can light up lives around you. That should have been the reality in Bangladesh, as it is the reality elsewhere. And yet we will not easily discard the thought that what has been passing for politics in this country over a number of years is but anti-politics at work. And, yes, many if not all the men who have been part of city corporations or municipalities or other local bodies have not lived up to public expectations, have indeed undermined the high calling of public duty through their overzealous work in their own and in their parties' favour. They and their rivals or adversaries, in the opposition, have not mattered. And, of course, corruption has gone on. That has passed for politics. It has been anything but politics.

Beyond them, it has been our members of parliament who, in more instances than one, have spectacularly failed to take an objective view of social conditions once they were elected. But that is what you get in a country where even prime ministers cannot quite bring themselves to overcome their parties and their politics.

To you they constitute values and no matter how much you try, in the interest of the non-partisan, to push them aside even if momentarily, you cannot. That has been the reason why mayors and councillors all over the world (and that includes Bangladesh) have always been political beings.

And politics is important, for it

Obama and John McCain will remain, until they do a miracle or reinvent themselves, symbolic of the parties that have pitted them against each other in the battle for the White House.

That is very true. But what makes Bangladesh's political circle different from those outside it is that they generally have remained confined to the parameters of a narrow pond. Mayors and councillors and ward commissioners have demonstrated conclusively over the years that it is always the party that matters. Their offices (and it does not really matter what political ideology they have upheld) have been crammed with their followers (and their goons); their rivals or adversaries, in the opposition, have not mattered. And, of course, corruption has gone on. That has passed for politics. It has been anything but politics.

Which is why politics needs to be restored in all our local institutions, as it must be restored at the national level. Just as it is risky business to keep parliament vacant for months on end, it becomes positively inflammable to decree that local bodies operate without a political base. Politics is power exercised in the enlightened interest of the larger social community. You take it out of life lived at the grassroots -- you might as well suggest that life and all the good it implies come to a dead end.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: behsantaeq@yahoo.co.uk

Politics cannot but be local

GROUND REALITIES

THE point here is that you really cannot do without politics, not even at the local level. Recall the old American who once spoke of all politics being local? And that is the whole point. Observe all these mayors who were elected to office a couple of weeks ago in Bangladesh. They may not have used their party symbols during the campaign; they may not have invoked their leaders while seeking popular electoral support. But it was obvious that they were men who actually (and naturally) identified with their political organisations.

even De Gaulle, as the French leader was to realise soon enough, needed politics to keep himself going. He fashioned the Fifth Republic and encouraged the growth of politics around his personality. Which is how you see all those right-of-centre French politicians today describing themselves as Gaullists. The point here is that you really cannot do without politics, not even at the local level. Recall the old American who once spoke of all politics being local? And that is the whole point.

Observe all these mayors who were elected to office a couple of weeks ago in Bangladesh. They may not have used their party symbols during the campaign; they may not have invoked their leaders while seeking popular electoral support. But it was obvious that they were men who actually (and naturally) identified with their political organisations. Khairuzzaman Liton will always be an Awami Leaguer, as Sadek Hossain Khoka will forever be

associated with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

There is no point pretending that men and women who seek office at the local level are not loyal to parties. There is the brazen truth out there, after all: all these men and women have risen to prominence because of their parties. Why should they then be expected to turn their backs on those parties, to push away the ladder, as it were, once they have reached the top?

Perhaps questions of this sort have now begun to lead to new thinking within the Election Commission and indeed within the government. That is a reason why the upazilla elections may not be non-partisan after all. Before you go into any serious reflection on the issue, consider what happens in the rest of the world. In London a few months ago, it was the Conservative Boris Johnson who unseated Labour Ken Livingstone and took charge as the new mayor. Note the operative terms here. It was a "Conservative" trouncing a "Labourite" rather than simply one individual demolishing another. In the United States, politics focuses, right from the local levels and all the way to the White House, on the policies pursued by the Republican and Democratic parties.

No one asks candidates for office to do away with their party affiliations, for a logical reason: no matter how often and how vociferously you proclaim your ascent from a parochial plane to a higher moral ground as you go for the bigger things of life, you know that somewhere in the core of your heart you uphold certain political principles. To you they constitute values and no matter how much you try, in the interest of the non-partisan, to push them aside even if momentarily, you cannot. That has been the reason why mayors and councillors all over the world (and that includes Bangladesh) have always been political beings.

And politics is important, for it

is embedded within a circle, and all government officials including the head of the government are entitled to use it on their letterheads while communicating with other agencies. Parliament has its own emblem, and so also has the apex judiciary, the Supreme Court.

From 1975 until 1990, the country was governed under presidential system, where all executive powers were vested in the president. The prime minister, under the presidential system, had no executive powers and was given a portfolio (a ministry) to manage. Post-1991 period

It appears that the use of state/national emblem and other trappings of the office of the president, such as the military secretary and ADCs, had been transferred to the prime minister's office when the presidential system was converted to parliamentary system in 1991.

The prime minister is not the supreme commander of the armed forces, therefore, officials from the armed services should not be placed with the office of the head of the government. Of course, adequate personal security must be provided by appropriate agencies.

Does the British or Indian prime minister have a military secretary and ADCs attached to the

office? Does either of them use the national emblem in his letterhead? The answers are in the negative.

Some say there has been a law or rule since 1991 that gives the prime minister such privileges. It is argued that the law or the rule is untenable under the constitution.

It has been strongly argued by constitutional experts that the prime minister (the chief adviser) may not use national emblem on his/her letterhead.

The separation between the head of the state (the president) and the head of the government (the prime minister) must be seen to exist in terms of the constitution, and it is argued that the national emblem (Shapla flower) may not be used by both the head of the state and head of the government. It is exclusively reserved for the head of the state.

Under the parliamentary system, the position of the president is largely ceremonial. However, the Republic is run in the name of the president. The president is the supreme commander of armed forces. All the appointments in the Republic are made by the president (on the advice of the head of the government). The president consents to legislations and appoints the chief justice.

Many argue that the fact that the president is the supreme commander of armed forces emphasises the point that the armed forces are under civil authority and, accordingly, officers from three services are placed as ADCs under the president.

Traditionally, administration of the President's House (Bangabhaban) is managed by the military secretary.

The national emblem of the Republic is the national flower

Shapla (শাপলা/শাপলা) resting on water, having on each side an ear of paddy and surrounded by connected leaves of jute with two stars on either side of the leaves. Ordinarily, only the president, as the head of the state, is entitled to use it.

Bottom Line

The separation between the head of the state (the president) and the head of the government (the prime minister) must be seen to exist in terms of the constitution, and it is argued that the national emblem (Shapla flower) may not be used by both the head of the state and head of the government. It is exclusively reserved for the head of the state.

Under the parliamentary system, the position of the president is largely ceremonial. However, the Republic is run in the name of the president. The president is the supreme commander of armed forces. All the appointments in the Republic are made by the president (on the advice of the head of the government). The president consents to legislations and appoints the chief justice.

Many argue that the fact that the president is the supreme commander of armed forces emphasises the point that the armed forces are under civil authority and, accordingly, officers from three services are placed as ADCs under the president.

Traditionally, administration of the President's House (Bangabhaban) is managed by the military secretary.

The national emblem of the Republic is the national flower

mechanisms to assure supplies of nuclear fuel, at market prices, to countries with peaceful nuclear energy programs.

This means that countries would not need to master the enrichment and reprocessing technology that would give them nuclear-weapons capability.

What is needed is an ambitious reinvigoration of the grand bargain that was struck 40 years ago in the NPT. The renewed grand bargain will need to combine immediately with a vision for the longer term, and to draw in states that are not parties to the NPT.

The international community has unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges to tackle as the world moves into its seventh nuclear decade. Whether or not the much-heralded "nuclear renaissance" materialises, the use of nuclear technologies throughout the world is certain to increase.

They offer immense potential benefits to humankind, but also pose complex and wide-ranging safety and security challenges. Reinforcing the IAEA is a vital first step towards meeting those challenges.

Emilio Zedillo, director of the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, was president of Mexico from 1994 to 2000.

©Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.