

## Prime Minister's decision to introduce ration cards

Full preparedness must precede the undertaking

**T**HE decision by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to introduce a general rationing system is no doubt a move motivated by considerations of public welfare and is therefore well-intentioned. With the rise in prices of food items going beyond the capacity of the common man and with ever-increasing armies of the poor making their way to the urban regions in search of livelihood, it makes sense for the government to undertake steps that will ease the plight of citizens. We certainly empathise with the government in its thoughts on the issue.

At the same time, though, it must be borne in mind that the move must not be rushed and efforts must not be hastily undertaken to put a rationing system in place. We may recall the experience of the rationing system in Bangladesh soon after liberation. Though the measure then helped millions in what was clearly a devastated economic condition, there were yet reports of pilferage of ration items by unscrupulous elements. The need now is for the government to ponder the magnitude of the challenge when a much bigger rationing network would have to be operated given the incremental rise in population. The government can only benefit by drawing on past experience and also that of other countries before undertaking the task. In other words, much scope exists for serious, well-considered thinking on the part of the administration, which is why there must be no hasty moves right now.

What is of importance is the setting up of a distribution network which will ensure that rations reach those in need of it without any difficulties coming in the way. If these intricate details are not taken care of before the rationing system is in force, there is the chance that middlemen will interfere with the process and undermine the benefits of the rationing system.

While on the subject, we might note that the government has already taken a move to introduce subsidies in such areas as agriculture, including fertiliser. So, some burden is already placed on the government's financial and administrative resources. That is all the more reason why the government should be well-prepared before adopting the rationing system so that it is fail-safe and can serve the purpose with which it is intended to be introduced.

## The moving tale of Selina

Need for return to core values

**T**HE tragic story of Selina Majumder, abandoned by her children, and now languishing in an old home, must have spoilt the breakfast of many Daily Star readers on Sunday. They had to pinch themselves to believe the plight of a mother falling victim to inhuman indifference from her immediate family.

The saddest part of the story is that all of her four children are well-placed in society; with no financial reason whatsoever to be ruthlessly callous to an elderly mother at the hour of her need. All she needed is a warm corner for herself in the household of those she considered her near and dear ones.

This brings to the fore decaying family values lost in the whirlwind of so-called modernity and selfish nuclear lifestyle. One might point to western societies where the old and the infirm are taken care of by society. This cannot hold good in our context. For, we don't have the infrastructure to render service to such people. Besides, they are not asking for too much either, given that they did so much for the family and society at large. The children of the abandoned lady might not have been what they are today but for her great care in their formative years. It is really unfortunate that they are completely oblivious of the debt they owe to the mother. Even in the West, many people feel that their high-paced life is pushing the elder citizens towards a lonely, precarious existence which they themselves regret a lot about.

Selina's story is perhaps an example of perverted modernization which is entirely out of place vis-a-vis our core family values. It negates our age-old culture of looking after the elderly as part of our familial, social and religious duty. See, how a plethora of phone calls were made to The Daily Star office after we published her story: the outpourings of empathy for her through anxious queries about how they could come to her assistance obviously brought out the best in humanity. Also add to the loving care of Dr Shah Alam and the lone attendant at the old home, you cannot but have an incremental faith in humanity.

## Road crashes, chaos, carelessness ...

SHAHNOOR WAHID

**W**E mourn with heavy heart the death of nine students of Chittagong College in a road accident in Bandarban area last week. The unskilled driver of the bus failed to keep control of the vehicle on the remote winding road and it eventually plunged to the gorge below.

Today, everyone is mourning the deaths but it seems no one was wiser before embarking on the fateful journey. I guess no teacher or guardian wanted to know whether the driver had driven on that road before, or wanted to see the driver's license or find out how skillful he was in negotiating treacherous bends on the hilly road. No one perhaps bothered to find out about the fitness certificate of the vehicle or check if the brakes were functioning well. No one perhaps warned the driver about the dangers on the road and tell him to be extra cautious.

As we express our deep sorrow, we at the same time want to ask ourselves as well as everyone in the administration some pertinent questions concerning the state of our roads and highways, and which authority actually oversees monitoring of thousands of vehicles plying on those roads. We want to know who makes sure that unskilled drivers do not venture on difficult roads, or for that matter, on any road with passenger buses. We want to know who are the people who issue fitness certificates to old and dilapidating vehicles.

We also want to ask why cycle-rickshaws, bi-cycles, rickshaw-vans, "korimons" (power tillers turned mini human and goods haulers) and CNG auto-rickshaws frantically compete with heavy vehicles like inter-city passenger buses, covered wagons and trucks for space on the narrow Chittagong-Dhaka highway? On a trip to Chittagong and then on to Cox's Bazar by road last week I counted various types of smaller vehicles plying recklessly on the highway, never bothering about the danger they exposed themselves, as well as the passengers of other vehicles, to in the process.

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Road to disaster.

To my horror I noticed that on many occasions, drivers of the smaller vehicles refused to go off the path of the heavy bus I was in. At the last moment, the driver of my vehicle had to apply its brakes and allow the CNG or "korimon" to pass by safely. Cyclists and rickshaw drivers also paid no heed to the horns of the bus and kept plying through one side of the concrete road, leaving only a narrow strip for the heavy Volvo bus to pass. Now, if that is not chaos and recklessness then what is?

The Cox's Bazar road is actually a virtual death trap where indiscipline, chaos and carelessness rule supreme. There are bazaars after every two miles

right by the highway where hundreds of people and children walk around and cross the road at will, showing little respect to the passing vehicles. The highway also has too many sharp turns and twists where it is impossible to see the vehicle that is coming from the other side. I guess it is sheer good luck that more lives are not lost on that road on a daily basis.

The other virtual death trap is Dhaka-Mymensingh road that goes via Trishal. This road takes dozens of lives every month and yet we see no activity on the part of the administration to take some useful measures. The road also has some turns and twists that need to be

straightened through redesigning. We suggest, take all the shops and bazaars one plot inside and keep the sides facing the road shop and market free so that small vehicles cannot stop or pick up passengers or goods, thereby blocking the highway.

In fact, all the highways of the country need to be redesigned to make them safer and easier to drive on. Alongside redesigning, the administration will have to create or reform laws to prohibit construction of shops or markets by the sides of the highways and prohibit plying of small vehicles. The administration will have to install highway-patrolling system to monitor violation of these laws and severely punish the violators. Highway patrolling cops do not need expensive cars. They can ride a passenger bus and watch the roads from inside. If they find a runaway vehicle, a phone call will warn a cop up ahead who will stop the rogue driver and book him for dangerous driving.

But the last word is, the laws will have to be implemented without fear or favour. I often wonder why no driver or owner of a vehicle who gave appointment to an unskilled driver has been given exemplary punishment for taking many human lives. Why do owners never come forward to hand over a killer driver to the police? Why do owners not offer money to the bereaved families of victims killed or injured under their vehicles because of the fault of the drivers? On the contrary, they reportedly get in touch with some corrupt police officials of the local police station and prepare the case in such a way whereby the owners or the drivers get away with total impunity.

The government should introduce a law that will force transport company(s) to pay for the full treatment and rehabilitation of people injured in accidents involving their vehicles. If voluntary social organisations can come forward to do so why can't transport companies do it?

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## Israel's biggest danger

FAREED ZAKARIA

**E**VEN before a new coalition could emerge, Israel's latest election was historic. It marked the collapse of Labor, the party that can plausibly claim to have founded Israel and produced its most celebrated prime ministers, from David Ben-Gurion (as head of Labor's predecessor, Mapai), through Golda Meir to Yitzhak Rabin.

The last vestige of old Labor is Shimon Peres, who -- with fitting irony -- is the country's president only because he quit the party. Israel's political spectrum is now dominated by three right-wing groups: Likud, Kadima (the Likud offshoot founded by Ariel Sharon) and Yisrael Beytenu, a party of Russian immigrants.

But while most commentators focus on the future of the peace process and the two-state solution, a deeper and more existential question is growing within the heart of Israel.

It's a question posed by the election's biggest winner: Avigdor Lieberman. His Yisrael Beytenu party won 15 seats, placing third but gaining enormous swing power in the Israeli system. Whether or not the new government includes him, Lieberman and his issues have moved to center stage. As fiercely as he denounces the Palestinian militants of Hamas and Hizbullah, his No. 1 target is Israel's Arab minority, which he has called a worse threat than Hamas.

He has proposed the effective expulsion of several hundred thousand Arab citizens by unilaterally redesignating some northern Israeli towns as parts of the Palestinian West Bank. Another group of several hundred thousand could expect to be stripped of citizenship for failing to meet requirements such as loyalty oaths or mandatory military service (from which Israel's Arabs are currently exempt).

The New Republic's Martin Peretz, a passionate Zionist and critic of the peace movement, calls Lieberman a "neo-fascist ... a certified gangster ... the Israeli equivalent of [Austria's] Jörg Haider." No liberal democracy I know of since World War II has disenfranchised or expelled its own citizens.

For Israel, handling the relationship with its Arab minority is more crucial even than dealing with Hizbullah or Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Israel needs to decide how it will deal with the Arabs in its midst. As extreme as it may sound, Lieberman's call to disown them seems to have resonated with many of his fellow Israelis.



Whose land is it?

Today's Arab Israelis are descendants of roughly 160,000 Arabs who stayed in the lands that became Israel in 1948. Their number now stands at 1.3 million, 20% of Israel's total population, and demographers predict that by 2025 they'll be a quarter of the country's people. Aside from their military exemption, they have the same legal rights and obligations as all other Israeli citizens.

They face discrimination in many aspects of life, including immigration, land ownership, education and employment. "This inequality has been documented in a large number of professional surveys and studies, has been confirmed in court judgments and government resolutions, and has also found expression in reports by the state comptroller and in other official documents," retired High Court Justice Theodor Or

concluded in an official investigation of the second intifada. "Although the Jewish majority's awareness of this discrimination is often quite low, it plays a central role in the sensibilities and attitudes of Arab citizens. This discrimination is widely accepted ... as a chief cause of agitation."

The antipathy is mutual. "The people who stayed here did not immigrate here, this is our country," declared Azmi Bishara, a former Arab member of the Knesset, after being charged with sedition for his expressions of support for Hizbullah. "That is why you cannot deal with us on issues of loyalty. This state came here and was enforced on the ruins of my nation. I accepted citizenship to be able to live here, and I will not do anything, security-wise, against the state. I am not going to conspire against the state, but

you cannot ask me every day if I am loyal to the state. Citizenship demands from me to be loyal to the law, but not to the values or ideologies of the state. It is enough to be loyal to the law."

For decades Israel's Arabs remained loyal to the law -- and loyal to the country during its many wars with its neighbors. Now that loyalty is waning. Israeli Arabs -- even those who are Christian, rather than Muslim -- no longer vote for Israel's mainstream parties. Despite low turnout, the Arab parties fared well in this election, winning some 11 seats in the Knesset. The Arab parties have never been invited into the government, which limits the influence of the Arab population in Israeli politics.

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Benjamin Netanyahu has warned that Israel's Arabs constitute a demographic time bomb. He calls it unacceptable. Benny Morris, the once dovish historian who chronicled the forced expulsion of most Palestinians from the Jewish state in 1948, has turned to arguing that Israel needs to protect itself from the Arabs now living within its borders. "They are a potential fifth column," he warned five years ago in an interview with Haaretz.

"In both demographic and security terms they are liable to undermine the state ... If the threat to Israel is existential, expulsion will be justified." It's a dangerous spiral: the worse the distrust gets, the less loyalty Israel's Arabs feel toward their country -- and vice versa. Last week's election has brought the issue into the open. Its resolution will define the future of Israel as a country, as a Jewish state, and as a democracy.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

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