

100 days of Mohajote Government

Economy off to a steady start

This reduced cost of cereal production by up to Tk 2.5 per kg. Boro cultivation, the mainstay for food security, received a boost with a message going out to the peasantry that it is in character with the new government to be friendly and caring to them.

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

FROM day one of its assumption of office, the Mohajote Alliance, led by the Awami League, took a firm grip of the economy. At its very first cabinet meeting, fertiliser prices were halved and diesel price decreased by Tk 2 per litre. This reduced cost of cereal production by up to Tk 2.5 per kg. Boro cultivation, the mainstay for food security, received a boost with a message going out to the peasantry that it is in character with the new government to be friendly and caring to them.

The first moves along with the falling international oil and commodity prices triggered a fall in domestic prices, almost across the board. In the process, the syndicates were roundly left without any wind in the sail to be playing around with inflationary expectations in manipulating the market forces to serve their ends. It so happens that warnings were

issued by the finance and commerce ministers early in the day through all conceivable fora that illegal syndication, hoarding and speculative trading would be dealt with severely. With market intelligence available to a well-structured winning political party such as the Awami League, it has had the advantage of watching market behaviour on the radar.

Basically, the cautionary words carried weight because of the convincing electoral mandate the Awami League received and the relative ease with which the BNP reconciled to its defeat, accepting the popular verdict. Normalcy got quickly established from the hang-ups of uncertain and stormy two-year-long caretaker governance.

Altogether, the smooth transition of power from an un-elected to an elected government did generate a sense of confidence across various sectors of the economy.

Awami League was quick to turn its

attention to the urban and rural poor with a pragmatic realisation that any failure to provide food to hungry mouths was a sure-fire way of courting social tension. So, we have seen the introduction of well-targeted safety net programs by way of test relief, food for work, rural rationing and OMS sale to urban poor. The initial sale price of rice had to be scaled down from Tk 18 per kg to Tk 16 per kg to give a slender attractive edge over the ruling market price.

This brings us to the justified fear that the declining price of cereals could force the farmers to shy away from food production due to lack of remunerative prices in the market-place. Responding to such a concern, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury assured the farmers of price support in the government's procurement drives, much the same way, she added, that the 1996-2001 AL government had done.

With the existing subsidy package looking large and that in prospect being equally so, the need for belt-tightening is very compelling indeed. Nevertheless, to put it mildly, if people were to read some negative signals in the big, rather prodigal, purchase of luxury cars for newly elected MPs and upazila chairmen would they be wrong? The previous batch of cars was of 2004-vintage. And, even if it is

assumed that all of them are too ramshackle for use, could they not be replaced with a less costly variety?

It simply does not sit in with the government's otherwise robustly populist and inclusive series of economic policies.

By external dependence we have traditionally meant reliance on foreign aids, loans and grants, but now as our economy has had to navigate the rough waters of the knock-on of global economic meltdown, the externality of our dependence seems widespread, encompassing as it does foreign trade and migrant remittances.

In both the areas, we are having to face twin problems; fall in garment export volumes topped off by decreased earning from under-pricing and the steady trail of returnee Bangladeshi employees from abroad. A word for the plight of returnee migrant Bangladeshi workers, which seems poignantly depicted through reported arrival of some corpses lately.

The finance minister's plan to garner funds through private-public participation, including contribution from NRBs, aimed at rehabilitating the returnee Bangladeshi wage earners is a good idea that will, however, entail considerable institutional preparations to materialise. The government's public spending needs



Prices are falling.

to be geared to employment creation and the best channel for doing so would be provided by the ADP.

On the closing day of the first 100 days, the finance minister has announced broad outlines of a bailout package for recession-hit export industries worth Tk 2,500-3,000 crore. The cash subsidy comes on the back of introducing banking facilities in the shape of lower interest rate, and loan rescheduling in six sectors for as many months.

A new window of opportunity can fling

open on our garment products if we can negotiate duty-and quota-free (DFQF) access in the US market, an agenda that should be taken up energetically with the Obama administration.

Finally, we ought to join with other LDCs in a bid to persuade the WTO in securing a better bargain in their trade with the developed economies. If this is not the time for the WTO to take a role, then what is?

Mr. Shah Husain Imam is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

Those ministers, after a hundred days

And there you have it, this seemingly clever attempt to judge those presiding over our fortunes. Don't take our word for it. Watch these ministers and all the other ministers and ministers of state and make up your mind. These men and women, after all, will be the arbiters of our common destiny for the next five years.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SOMETHING there is that we have learned from the Americans. And they of course got it from the late lamented John F. Kennedy. The first hundred days of a government, these Americans (and by now many non-Americans around the planet) believe, is a good hint of how it will fare in the future. If that is a good barometer for judging performance, why must we fall behind as the Awami League grand alliance completes a hundred days in office? Let us be judges too, not of the whole government as such but of some individual ministers insofar as their performance, or the lack of it, is concerned.

Begin with Dipu Moni. Jaws dropped, eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when her name emerged as the nation's new foreign minister. Who was she? That was the basic question. And could she hold her own before diplomats at the global level? Well, after a hundred days, it is pretty much obvious that she has done a fairly good job. Hers has so far been a steady hand in Shegun Bagicha. She speaks perfect English and equally perfect Bengali. And she appears to have mastered the job, despite the faux pas of not responding to that rather irritating Indian journalist's question on

Bangladesh being a buffer state for Pakistan in the latter's secret wars against India.

There is then Motia Chowdhury. The problem is that you run into problems trying to find fault with her. She has done well, as she did well in her past stint in government. The good thing about her is that she is forever ready to give sceptics and wayward bureaucrats a good tongue-lashing when they are in need of it. At agriculture, she is a safe pair of hands. Much the same goes for the soft-spoken, ever-smiling Abdur Razzaque at food. His performance has been creditable. And when you add humility to it (he apologized for some problems over the VGF cards), you have a fine gentleman at work. He does not ruffle feathers.

And that is what you cannot say about Sahara Khatun. In her early days as home minister, she sent shivers down a lot of spines when she accused the opposition of fomenting trouble. As if that was not enough, she ran into trouble over the BDR tragedy when she brought some families out to safety. That was a heroic act, until it became clear that many other families were still trapped inside Pilkhana. Hers was a premature move, one that disturbed sensibilities all over the country.

Questions have been raised about her ability to lead such a sensitive ministry. And since those sad BDR days, she has fallen silent. The wicked ones think she has been compelled into silence.

A good, outgoing soul is what you spot in Abul Maal Abdul Muhit. You may not agree with everything he says about the state of the economy, but you do know that an honest man presides over finance at this critical stage in national history. Yes, he did raise a few hackles when this vexing question of black money being transformed into white came up. The next day he came up with a disarming smile --- and a remark. 'Today there was absolutely no discussion of black money,' he beamed. And we beamed with him. Muhit has done well. And should be

doing well in the coming years. Age cannot wither him.

Abdul Latif Biswas created a scandal when he refused to pay heed to the rules set by the Election Commission and made himself present at a polling centre during the elections to the upazila parishad. The EC censured him and one expected him to quit the cabinet pending a resolution of the issue. He stayed on. The prime minister saw no reason to ask him to leave. As for Syed Abul Hossain, his emergence as a minister took many by surprise, considering especially the unceremonious manner in which he had to quit the Awami League cabinet in the late 1990s. It is yet too early to comment on his performance in his new avatar, but what did lately rattle sensibilities was

his demand for a luxury car. The resultant uproar dampened him, which was a good thing.

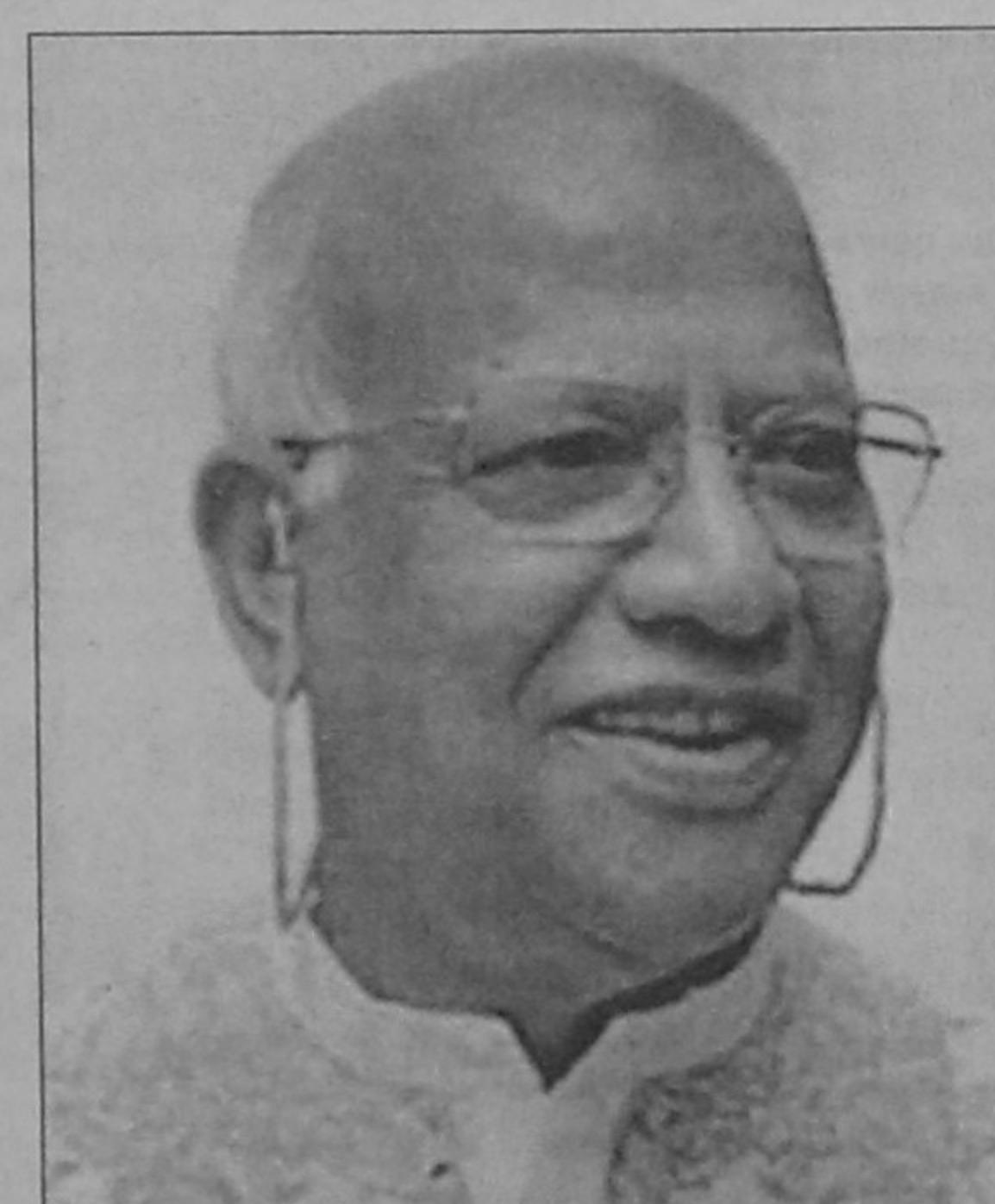
Planning minister A.K. Khondokar, always a decent individual, is yet to throw up some sparks. The trouble, though, is that he is associated more with the demand for a trial of war criminals than with his portfolio. For all that, however, he is one man you can be reasonably sure will not rock the boat. And then there is Abul Kalam Azad at information. People who have met him speak of his goodness and spontaneity. He has been doing quite good work, except for the one time when Bangladesh Television failed to telecast the speech of the Leader of the Opposition live from the Jatiyo Sangsad and he failed to rise to the occasion. He

should have answered the opposition criticism of the act. He did not. As he watched silently, it was the treasury chief whip who spoke for the government.

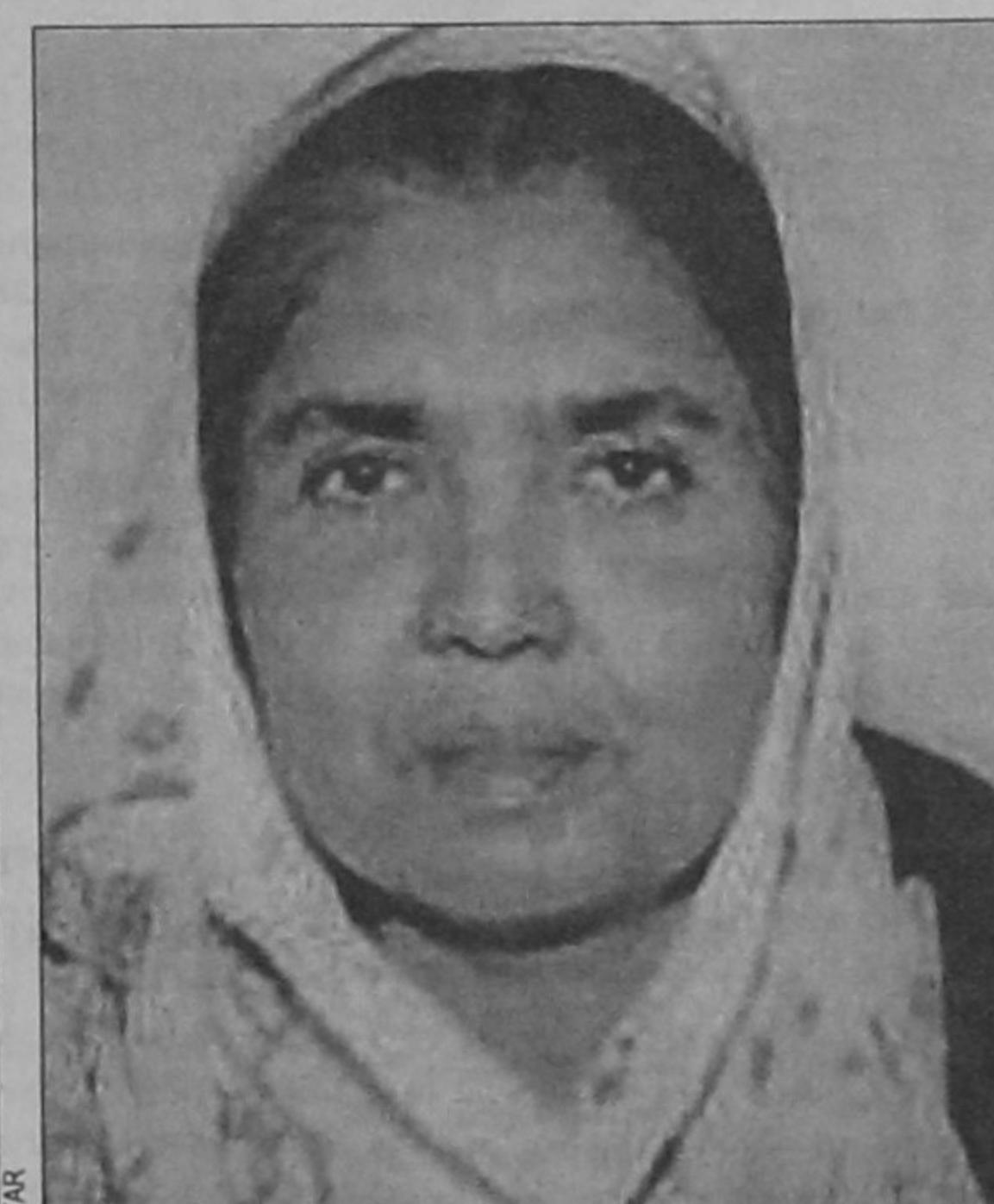
And there you have it, this seemingly clever attempt to judge those presiding over our fortunes. Don't take our word for it. Watch these ministers and all the other ministers and ministers of state and make up your mind. These men and women, after all, will be the arbiters of our common destiny for the next five years.

Ah, but we haven't said anything about the prime minister! Not to worry. We will. We will cross the bridge when we come to it.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star



Abul Maal Abdul Muhit



Motia Chowdhury



Dr Dipu Moni



The crisis was overcome peacefully.

There is need to address the genuine grievances of the BDR troops, as also the need for the authorities responsible for tasking it to avoid using it in any and every manner and situation that it feels. The BDR is supposed to man the borders; it has no business selling rice and daal in the cities and towns, nor controlling traffic in the metropolis.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

WHILE one goes about assessing the government's performance in its one hundred days in office, no single issue with the potential of having grave impact on the country's integrity than the sad and despicable events of February 25 and 26 catches one's imagination more.

No government could have expected to be confronted with a situation like the BDR killings so very soon after it assumed the reins of the government, and nobody could have wished for a worst denouement, it ended with the death of sixty eight people, including fifty eight army officers seconded to the paramilitary force.

The jury, one feels, is still out on whether the outcome would have been

less costly, in terms of lives, or more, had more aggressive action been resorted to. But there are certainly grounds for conjecture, and many feel that saying we got off "lightly" (with sixty eight lives) is a very cynical position to take and does no credit at all to those that are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring the safety and security of the people under their command. There are also those who consider the government action a credit to its cool headedness and the triumph of peaceful approach to a crisis.

However, even while giving the benefit of doubt to the government that what it did was the only option available under the circumstances, there are a few things that one feels should be highlighted so that lessons may be drawn and lapses corrected so that actions and reactions are done more skillfully in crises situations in future than what we have seen in the case of the Pilkhana tragedy.

The government's role, insofar as the negotiation phase is concerned, has created some reservations in the minds of the people that could have been avoided.

Even if the strategy was to solve the issue peacefully, nay politically, what we have found in this case is that politicians are

not necessarily the ones best suited for the role of negotiators, although they may form part of the team.

There are also grounds to assume that those given the responsibility to negotiate, neither knew, nor had the benefit of expert advice, as to how to go about dealing with a group of wanton killers who had used the so called grievances of the

BDR jawans only to perpetrate a most heinous crime.

The very rudimentary principle of negotiation was disregarded. No one in his correct senses would have allowed the last resort to a final decision to be the first for the killers to meet. It was most unwise to accede to the rebels' demand of meeting the prime minister in the very first instant. What if the talks between the PM and the killers had failed? Would the authorities have gone to any supranational body for mediation in that case?

It must be kept in mind too that utterances and statements of people holding public office need to be made after careful consideration. To refer to the killers as "my children," as was done by the home minister at a time when most people knew that these "children" had perpetrated the worst carnage since 1971, not only lacked in sophistication it was also utterly incongruous under the circumstances.

There is concern too about the investigation. Giving the inquiry committee seven days initially, to complete the task, gives one the impression that that the government had very little idea as to what was involved in the process of investigation of an incident like that of February 25. And every seven days time was

extended by seven till it dawned on the authorities to make a "bold correction" and gave it an extra month to finish -- which is a very realistic step.

The country is waiting eagerly to hear the findings of the committee. Given that our experience with such committees in the past has not been pleasant because people did not get to know the findings of these committees, the BDR incidents too important for the people to be kept in the dark about its major conclusions.

It is good that the process of reorganising of the BDR is underway. Officers down to the lowest possible tactical level must man the border force. All the talk about having only persons organic to the force to command it is only to avoid the strict oversight exercised by the army officers, which for reasons everyone is aware of, the BDR jawans on the ground resent.

There is need to address the genuine grievances of the BDR troops, as also the need for the authorities responsible for tasking it to avoid using it in any and every manner and situation that it feels. The BDR is supposed to man the borders; it has no business selling rice and daal in the cities and towns, nor controlling traffic in the metropolis.

Brig. Gen. (retd.) Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.