

## TCB role in import of essential items

Key is to ensure a smooth distribution system

**T**HE move by the government to relax rules for the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) to import six essential items is a measure of the priority being given to consumers' needs. Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith clearly puts matters in perspective when he notes that a quick import of the items --- pulses, edible oil, sugar, grams, onions and powdered milk --- means that the government wants to be ready for Ramadan, obviously a time when consumers are generally put to great difficulties owing to an unnatural hike in prices. The fact that the TCB is once again being brought into the picture indicates a proactive role for the body after a long interval. That the government has embraced the idea of the TCB getting robustly involved in the task of ensuring market stabilisation speaks of the seriousness with which the authorities view the existing market conditions.

What is also important here is that even as the TCB comes back into the supply side of the economy, the private sector will continue importing the aforementioned items. A good step in this regard is a promised simplification of the procedures relating to imports by the private sector. So what will likely happen is a complementarity of work between the public and private sectors. The resultant competition (and the economy works best when competitive factors are there) should naturally lead to a decline in the local prices of items of daily necessity. Now, prices are of critical importance, given the fact that when they go up globally, local consumers run into great difficulties. And yet there is the other side of the picture where Bangladeshi consumers are concerned: when prices go down internationally, the same is hardly reflected in the local market. But, as commerce ministry officials point out, every time prices go up in the world market, businessmen in Bangladesh swiftly go for a hike in prices at home. Small wonder that bodies like the TCB have to be brought in.

By far the most important point about the TCB-related move is to have in place an elaborate and workable distribution system for the goods imported. That will be key to the entire programme. The fact is that at this point the TCB is not in a very healthy state. Its old network of agents and distributors is not there. A crucial first step, therefore, must be the establishment of outlets and the appointment of dealers. It is a job where only professional criteria must be applied, without any hint or taint of political bias and in transparent manner. Once that is ensured, it will be a good idea to have an inter-ministerial oversight body in place to monitor purchase patterns and distribution process of the goods through the TCB.

A smooth procurement and a quick supply of goods depend on the presence of a strong, dynamic distribution system. Ensure that and everything else will fall into place.

## RMG workers' disruptive behaviour

All concerned must prevent its recurrence

**I**T is unfortunate that several hundred RMG workers vandalised more than a dozen garment factories at BSCIC industrial area in Fatullah on Monday, thereby causing extensive damage to the units. The unruly workers then blocked the Dhaka-Narayanganj and Dhaka-Munshiganj roads causing severe traffic congestion in the entire area. In a separate development at Savar, reportedly another group of garment workers put up blockades on Dhaka-Aricha road and damaged nearly 30 vehicles. In both the places, workers clashed with the police and injuries were sustained by many.

The reason for the demolition spree was learnt to be the demand for salary hike. But, by all accounts, the manner in which the frenzied workers pressed for their demands at both locations smacked of fomentation by ring leaders. A small group suddenly went out of their unit and called workers of other factories to join them in creating an anarchic situation that spilled over to the roads.

Workers might have genuine demands but there are ways to have them met. What is the point in taking a self-destructive path? They should be encouraged to use negotiating methods. There is no reason why talks pursued sincerely should not succeed in reaching a common ground. With world economic downturn casting a shadow across the export sector, it is all the more imperative that workers behave responsibly and the employers are empathetic to the workers' plight. The garment owners, to maximise the skill of the workers, need to pay timely attention to their genuine grievances without letting these snowball.

We believe the authorities concerned would launch an investigation into the latest spate of violence and devise ways with the management and union leaders to stop recurrence of the same.

## Fees, students and private universities

There have been the frequent occasions when students as well as their guardians at these universities have been subjected to much psychological pressure through an enhancement of fees. Must that happen all the time?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**S**OMETHING must be going wrong with our private universities. If you have had cause to follow events, you just might recall the various incidents in which students of one private university have engaged in skirmishes with those of another. The reasons have been pretty petty and certainly peculiar. A young woman, pursuing studies at one university, is harassed by a bunch of young men putatively coming by education at another. The brother of the young woman protests such behaviour, justifiably. Soon after that, you run into these unsettling images of running street battles between large bodies of young men emerging furiously from the confines of their classrooms. It is not until those truncheon-wielding policemen swoop on them that matters somewhat get under control.

Now, you will agree it is all pretty disturbing. You do not expect students, and particularly at private universities, to go creating lawlessness on the streets. When the whole concept of private universities came into public focus in the early 1990s, it was given out (and we accepted that explanation) that the goal was a promotion of quality education that would not be interrupted by extraneous factors. The kind of political ferment that characterised the public universities would be absent. Besides, with the public universities unable to cope with the admission demands of the thousands of young men and women finishing higher secondary education, private universities would be the

places where these young could go for higher academic attainments.

In other words, private universities would reinvent the young, through turning them into citizens of the world. Of course, since private universities were, well, private, it was understood that they would be expensive. The fees they would charge would be high, naturally. Which would make these universities quite elitist in nature. That too would be understandable.

But what does not look quite comprehensible or even acceptable is the thought that private universities should be arrogating to themselves the right to go for an increase in tuition fees in arbitrary manner. Take a look at any private university. There have been the frequent occasions when students as well as their guardians at these universities have been subjected to much psychological pressure through an enhancement of fees. Must that happen all the time? If you were to ask any young person studying at any one of these institutions, you would know of the predicament he or she was up against before a system which operates in its own inscrutable ways.

A healthy aspect of education at the public universities is that they abjure the arbitrary; they scrupulously stay away from putting students and their parents into a state of discomfort. And so you have a clear view of what the public interest is. Stretch the term a little and you will likely arrive at the very credible thought that capitalism, in a country defined by gruesome poverty, does not much care about citizens' welfare. Where the goal is the acquisition of wealth



Will this be the result of fees hikes?

(and you do that these days through promoting basically education that promises instant, high-income jobs), you ought not to expect much from an education system which promotes such philosophies.

Now, what these young people at a private university were doing on Sunday (you condemn the hooliganism they resorted to once the police went after them) was fundamentally to inform the university administration that the recent hike in fees was a situation they could not cope with. A guardian put it in perspective: if a student who coughs up as much as forty five thousand taka for every semester now has to tell his parents that the university demands ten thousand taka more from him, what options are his guardians left with? Indeed, what happens to those who, unable to come up with the additional money demanded by the university authorities, find they cannot carry on with their studies?

It is here that you begin to wonder if a set of principles cannot be put in place about the working of private universities. The University Grants Commission has over the past couple of years gone after a number of

private universities on such issues as the quality of teaching staff and proper campus-related facilities. Some universities which clearly failed to meet the required standards were simply shut down. That is all very fine. But isn't it time for the UGC, for the ministry of education, to make a move where capping a ceiling on academic expenses at the private universities is concerned?

Even private enterprise must have its limits, must be reined in once it appears to be losing sight of its essential goals. When private universities are observed to be leapingfrogging across their stated objective of promoting quality education and aiming for financial gains not justified by circumstances, it is time for the state to come in.

And after the global recession, when capitalist governments have moved in with socialistic measures to salvage industry, you cannot quite say that private education in Bangladesh will remain a holy cow. Think about that.

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## Do we need a caretaker government?

The caretaker government is a unique institution, to be found only in Bangladesh, largely because the leaders of major political parties were of the view that the ruling parties could not hold a free, fair and credible parliamentary election.

HARUN UR RASHID

**S**INCE the last caretaker government took almost two years instead of three months to allow the Election Commission to hold the 9th parliamentary elections, questions have been raised as to whether the system should remain or not as it failed to achieve the desired objective.

The caretaker government is a unique institution, to be found only in Bangladesh, largely because the leaders of major political parties were of the view that the ruling parties could not hold a free, fair and credible parliamentary election as it would be manipulated in favour of the parties in power.

Three elections were held in 1996, 2001 and 2009 -- under the caretaker government system. All of them had been judged by losing parties as not being free and fair, even when international election observers considered them to be free and fair.

Losing parties cast aspersions on not only of the head of the caretaker government but also of the president and the Election

Commission for not being able to hold fair elections. Such allegations have tarnished the image of the institutions.

The system of the caretaker government suffers from major faults. They are:

- The language of the provisions of the Constitution (58B to 58E) that deals with the system is not precise and definitive, and conflicting interpretations could be easily provided leading to illegality of the institution.
- While the head of the caretaker government is a non-partisan person, the president is most likely to be politically aligned because he is elected by the ruling party. Therefore, there is a conflict of intent or goal between the president and the chief adviser in running the caretaker government.
- The system of the caretaker government is dyarchic in the sense that powers and functions are divided between the caretaker government and the president. Some constitutional experts say that the system created two separate but poten-

tially conflicting institutions: the president and the caretaker government.

For example, during 1996 the chief adviser had some difficulties in working with the president, and in 2006, four advisers had to resign from the advisory council because they could not work with the president cum chief adviser. This means that if the system were to work, the president would have to be non-partisan/non-political.

The advisers, though appointed by the president, cannot be dismissed unless they resign themselves. This is a departure from any system of government.

The 1972 Constitution has been amended 14 times as of today, often to suit political agenda. As a result, the organic character of the Constitution has fallen apart because many of the amended provisions in some chapters are inconsistent with those of the un-amended ones.

Furthermore, whatever powers the president had were totally marginalised by the 1991 Twelfth Amendment Act. It is believed that untrammelled powers of the prime minister, as the executive head of the government, have been the source of political ills characterised by gross abuse or misuse of power.

Accordingly, it is suggested that a Constitution Review Commission may be set up to examine many provisions of the Constitution that seem to be contrary to the spirit and letter of multi-party democracy.

The system of the caretaker government may be abolished, and one suggestion is to incorporate the following provisions in the Constitution:

As soon as the parliamentary election date is announced, a national government of all parties represented in the last parliament will be constituted with no policy-making powers. This means that the government would turn into caretaker mode, discharging only routine functions.

The tenure of the national government shall cease at the expiration of three months, and its primary function would be to assist the Election Commission to conduct fair and free parliamentary elections.

If elections cannot be held within three months, the president shall recall the dissolved parliament, and that will decide the time by which the national government will cease.

The Election Commission will have to be provided adequate powers to implement the code of conduct for party-candidates in terms of the Representation of the Peoples Order 1972 as amended.

The bottom line is that an un-elected government has no place in democracy and the Commission may devise some mechanism to ensure credible elections in the country.

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## The South Asian nuclear genie!

Former Indian Army General Shanker Roy Chowdhury said in a seminar in New Delhi in March that Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons prevented India from attacking it on two occasions, one after the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament and the other after the Mumbai mayhem.

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

**T**HIS month of May marks the eleventh anniversary of the eventful year the South Asian Nuclear genie got out of the bottle, with both India and Pakistan overtly conducting a series of nuclear tests. There was much consternation around the world when it happened, particularly in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, the only inter-governmental negotiating forum on disarmament.

The author was then the Bangladesh ambassador to the body, and being a regional member was expected to lead off the protests. Instead, Bangladesh urged calm. After all, India and Pakistan were not the first two countries to have nuclear weapons, and there was no palpable reason at that time to believe that these would be less safe in the hands of heirs to an ancient civilisation than in the case of other nuclear weapon states. Also, neither party had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), so there were no commitments broken!

This did not mean, however, that the

situation did not warrant careful monitoring. After all, the region had seen a number of wars, and was widely seen as a flash point. Between India and Pakistan, Indian capabilities, expectedly, are greater, as India also has to factor in China. The size of the Indian arsenal is estimated to be between 45 to 100 warheads, with the capacity to rapidly expand, 75% of which are reportedly maintained in assembled and the balance in unassembled forms.

Pakistan has approximately sixty warheads, and counting, stored unassembled with the fissile core separated from non-nuclear explosives, and all components distinctly from delivery vehicles.

India's delivery capability is far superior, with the ability to strike at targets both close and distant through such missiles as Agni (surface-to-surface), Akash (surface-to-air), Prithvi (medium-range), Shaurya (600 km range) and BrahMo (the product of a joint venture with Russia, and is the world's fastest cruise missile, with submarine-launch capability). Indeed India is looking to becoming a TRIAD country soon with nuclear capability in land, air and sea.

For Pakistan's "Islamic Bomb," as the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto described

it, China is not a factor indeed it was said to be built with considerable Chinese assistance and its nuclear-capable F-16 aircraft and medium-range Ghauri missiles are seen as adequate for her purpose.

India has a publicly pronounced nuclear doctrine briefly stated in a government document in 2003, which says that India seeks "minimum credible deterrent" and includes the principle of "no-first-use" and "no-use" against a non-nuclear weapon state. The Nuclear Command Authority, comprising mostly civilians, is chaired by the prime minister. The arsenal is believed to be well-protected.

The US-India nuclear deal of November 2008 of course raised Pakistani ire, and Pakistan has demanded the same perks, but has found no sympathy in Washington. Given the overwhelming conventional military superiority of India, Pakistan eschews the "no-first-use" doctrine, believing ambiguity would enhance deterrence. Interestingly, President Zardari once mentioned it, but his remarks were quickly retracted by officials who said that the president was "not fully informed."

Pakistan is currently striving to achieve a "second strike capability" which India already has that is, the capacity to absorb a "first strike" and still be able to retaliate massively. Theoretically, in its absence, the entire arsenal could be vulnerable to a "first-strike," and indeed could indeed "invite" it. That is why President Musharraf was said to have ordered the dispersal of the arsenal to "at least six different sites."

But herein lies the rub. While dispersal enhances security in one sense, it also

increases the vulnerability of falling into Pakistani terrorist hands, both during the transition process and storage in the deep countryside! Despite the strong statements with regard to security from Pakistani policy-makers, the international community remains nervous. There is another scenario, which no one dares to speak of: the control of the National Command Authority passing into terrorist or Taliban hands but happily the chances of that are far too remote!

So far, then, with regard to their nuclear capability, both countries have behaved responsibly. Former Indian Army General Shanker Roy Chowdhury said in a seminar in New Delhi in March that Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons prevented India from attacking it on two occasions, one after the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament and the other after the Mumbai mayhem.

Be that as it may, while conventional conflicts of some intensity cannot entirely be ruled out, it is clear that no level of such warfare can provide a significant victory to one or the other side! If that be so, the only rational corollary is collaboration between the two countries.

There is, of course, an obvious necessity for confidence building measures on the nuclear front. This can, and should, spread to other issues such as terrorism, since the perceived threats from it are mutually applicable. The leaderships of India and Pakistan must realise they have to cooperate, and have but a Hobson's Choice in this regard!

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