

## Market behaviour needs self-correction

*Rhetoric and assurances cannot bring down prices*

**D**ESPITE the government's taking to the field early in the day and holding series of meetings with business community leaders and the latter's assurances galore, the prices of essentials instead of stabilising keep soaring, much to the consumers' chagrin. As a result, these sounded like a public relations exercise, for even though the intent might have been positive, it is the growing lack of coordination between the market players that keep hindering price stabilisation efforts.

The only redeeming part appears to be that the trading of blames between the wholesalers and retailers that had marked the previous episodes of price increases has not yet started but it may not be long in coming if the errant market behaviour is not rolled back soon enough.

Barring cereals, the prices of all commodities -- sugar, groceries, onion, garlic, potato, edible oil and lentil -- have been on the rise. This is despite a plethora of monitoring initiatives launched by the government. In addition to the monitoring efforts of the DCC and a special cell of the ministry of commerce, eight monitoring teams of TCB and the department of agriculture extension have been keeping in eye on the major kitchen markets of the metropolis. Mobile courts of the food ministry have also started their monitoring operations. Despite all this oversight, one very essential requirement for an effective price watch, namely displaying price lists at the retail level is being reneged on by the shopkeepers. And wherever these lists are found these usually show the items but hardly the rates.

Frankly, the TCB's role as a market player and price stabiliser seems rather limited at this stage. It cannot play to its full potential, given its present organisational setup, limited procurements and the distribution capacity. It so happens that the TCB on which the consumers pinned their hopes for wielding a moderating influence on the market is making a delayed entry into the Ramadan market. More to the point whereas the monthly requirement of edible oil during Ramadan is 1,50,000 tonne, the TCB is importing 25,000 tonne. Thus, the open market operators continue to be the major players.

Even with a sizeable government sector import unless the distribution network is strengthened, the consumers may continue to be ill served in terms of prices and availabilities.

Given the high profit motive-driven market, ad hoc measures are nothing but tokenism. What we need is an effective consumer rights protection law that is also enforced and creation of objective conditions for competition in the market through a suitable policy instrument. It is time we have a price commission. Through such radical measures, the markets will come to acquire self-correcting mechanisms that are completely lacked now.

## Filling in academic positions at public universities

*Non-returning academics must answer for their conduct*

**O**VER the past many years, it has become something of a bad rule for many university teachers to go abroad for higher studies and then choose to stay back rather than return to their academic institutions. What emerges here is the spectacle of academics committing not only an act that is less than moral but also plainly beyond the bounds of rules and regulations. When these teachers go abroad, they do so on behalf of the universities with which they are affiliated full time. In a number of instances, the public universities expend a lot of resources, in terms of finance and time, in sending teachers for higher studies at foreign universities. The normal expectation is that once their stay at those universities is over under the terms of their residence and study, they will return home. Unfortunately, not many of them do. A few years ago, under pressure from such authorities as Dhaka University to return home or compensate the universities for their unauthorized stay abroad, some teachers sent in their resignations.

The teachers who quietly decide not to return home and instead find themselves jobs at different educational institutions abroad are doing not only their mother institutions a disavour but also creating a bad impression among their students by not resuming classes for them back home. It is only natural that their departments will wait, once they finish their courses abroad, to come home and have new class schedules drawn up for their pupils. At the same time, it is their students who look forward to being taught by teachers about to return after quality education abroad. In both situations, it is often the teachers who cause disappointment by staying away. One would not be altogether wrong in suggesting they are absconding.

The prime minister has instructed the university authorities to take steps to fill the vacant teaching positions at the public universities. That is to be appreciated, but then comes the rather cumbersome rules regarding dismissing teachers if they go AWOL or absent without leave. Given the realities of the situation, one could rethink the rules with a view to easing the process of replacements. Meanwhile, the suggestion about ad hoc appointments of university teachers is one that could be seriously mulled over. But it is also necessary that action be taken against the offending non-returning teachers. The loopholes which currently exist about teachers going abroad and staying back need plugging. The sooner it is done the better.

## Of sovereignty and an inclusive society

Of critical importance today is the creation of an inclusive society that can in turn ensure the greatest good for the greatest number. And to do that it is absolutely necessary that those who have in the past been alienated by the policies of successive governments now have their confidence in the state renewed.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**T**WO former generals, both linked to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, are afraid that the withdrawal of some army camps from the Chittagong Hill Tracts might lead to bloodshed in the region. Their fears happen also to be those of a lot of their fellow travellers in the BNP and around it.

If you have lately been tuning in to television news or going through the rightwing newspapers, you may have noted the panic that is being attempted by a class of people whose prominence or the lack of it in politics today stems from the U-turn Bangladesh took in the mid 1970s following the assassination of the country's independence leaders.

Today, when the matter is one of a simple withdrawal of just one brigade from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the disinformation is being given out that the region is about to fall back into the kind of chaos which laid it low through the 1980s and much of the 1990s.

Let there be no mistake about what we as

a people achieved in the late 1990s through the accord between the government and the CHT insurgents. It was plain realism at work, the very cogent thought that what had gone on before could not be allowed to go on any longer, unless of course there were elements within the Bangladesh establishment and among the Shanti Bahini insurgents ready and willing to put the country to the torch.

It is, of course, another matter that the accord remains in need of some fine tuning, that men like Santu Larma have kept on complaining about the things that have not been done as a follow up to the treaty. But where the principle behind the deal is concerned, there will be few who will disagree with the notion that the accord was a breather for the country after years of what had at times increasingly looked like a gathering mess.

And now that an army brigade is being withdrawn, there is in us the feeling that peace, in that overall sense of the meaning, will eventually descend on the hills. But for that feeling to be translated into tangible form, it is absolutely necessary that the

government as well as the leading lights of the erstwhile insurgency plug all the holes that might yet be there or might yet open up, enough to cause new worries among both Bengalis and the original inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

That said, there is now the matter of how feeble Bangladesh's sovereignty happens to be at present. We raise that point because one of the two generals who have been giving expression to the fears about the withdrawal of the army brigade from the hill tracts feels that once those soldiers leave the place, this country's freedom will be at risk. That begs the question: before the soldiers went into the Chittagong Hill Tracts, was there any hint that Bangladesh's independent status as a nation was in a tenuous state? Of course, there was, but not because it had anything to do with the hill tracts.

Let us face facts. The foundations of this country were rudely disturbed in August and November 1975. And it came about in grating, grotesque manner. The secular principles upon which the country was founded in 1971 were dispensed with; the socialistic platform on which economic policy was based was cast aside; Bengali nationalism was exiled from the land it had inspired into freedom and replaced by thoughts sinister and spurious; and democracy became hostage to military dictatorship reminiscent of the Pakistan era. That was when national sovereignty took a bad mauling.

But look again at the Chittagong Hill Tracts question. Of critical importance today is the creation of an inclusive society that can in turn ensure the greatest good for the greatest number. And to do that it is absolutely necessary that those who have in the past been alienated by the policies of successive governments now have their confidence in the state renewed. What has happened in the Chittagong Hill Tracts -- and it all began in the 1960s through the Kaptai dam project of the Ayub Khan regime in Pakistan -- is a tragic episode we simply cannot airbrush out of our history.

There are too the various travails that other ethnic communities in Bangladesh have been put through. Their land has been commandeered because someone had the bright idea of building an eco park there. Indigenous men who have protested injustice have been shot. A tribal girl is abducted and no trace of her is there, despite years having elapsed since the incident.

There is today, ladies and gentlemen, a very real need for all Bengalis to acknowledge the mistakes that have been made, the insensitivities that have been demonstrated where dealing with the original inhabitants of the land is concerned. Their right to life and liberty is as much a potent factor in national politics as is our claim to power and privilege.

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## The prime minister's gamble

The prime minister decided to delay calling the election while passing a ¥ 14.7 trillion (\$150 billion) emergency economic package in May, and then delayed further hoping that the measures could take hold in the electorate before the poll date. The political and economic rebounds failed to eventuate.

HARUN UR RASHID

**O**N July 21, Prime Minister Taro Aso's cabinet endorsed his plan to call an August 30 general election, which is likely to tumble his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) out of government for only the second time in 54 years.

As prime minister, he can call a general election at any time, but had apparently been waiting, gambling that his political fortune could improve.

The decision to call the vote, which must be held by October, follows a crushing loss for the unpopular Aso's ruling LDP in a Tokyo election on July 19, which was seen as a barometer for the national poll. The Tokyo election seemed to have forced his hand.

Aso dissolved the Lower House of Parliament (House of Representatives) on July 21 in preparation for the campaign, which begins officially on August 18 but is actually well under way -- with the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) building a huge lead in opinion polls.

Aso, who is known for gaffes that have offended people from doctors to the elderly, was speaking after he dissolved the lower house of Japan's Diet, or parliament. "There might have been some inappropriate comments I made that might have led to the lowering of the support of the people of Japan. I would like to take this opportunity to apologise," he said.

Aso, who has led the LDP and the government since September 2008, is being blamed by people within his party for the acute deterioration their popularity.

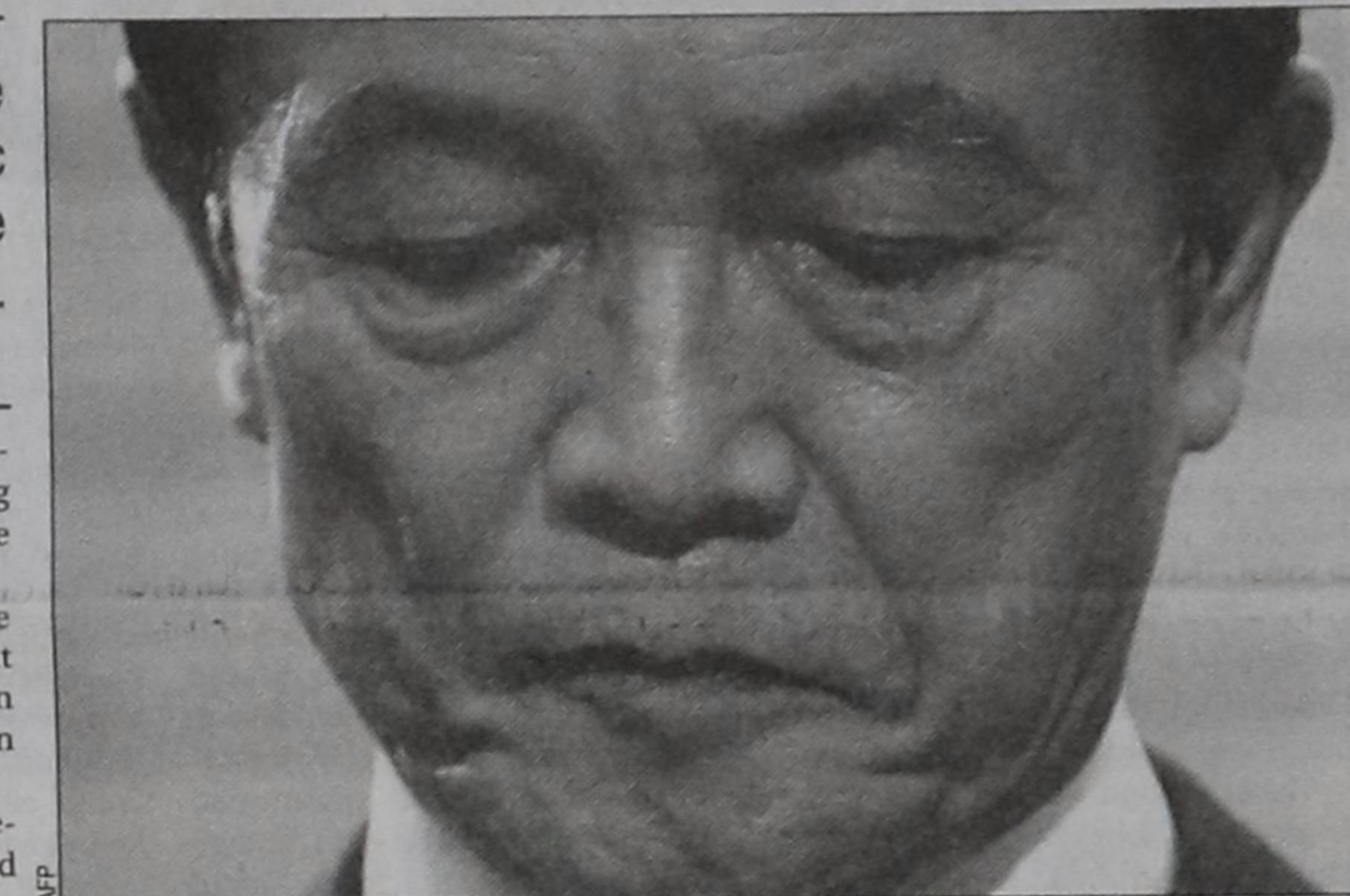
Elected to lead the party at virtually the same time the global economic crisis hit the Japanese economy, Aso had been expected by his supporters to call an election almost immediately.

Japan has been battered by an unprecedented collapse in global demand, and now faces its deepest recession since World War II. The country's GDP shrank at an alarming annual rate of 12.1% in the October-December quarter.

The prime minister decided to delay calling the election while passing a ¥14.7 trillion (\$150 billion) emergency economic package in May, and then delayed further hoping that the measures could take hold in the electorate before the poll date. The political and economic rebounds failed to eventuate.

After a succession of bad losses in recent regional and city elections, most polls now show the DPJ heading the LDP by 2-1 margin, and a similar distance between new opposition leader Yukio Hatoyama and Aso.

The trends are so pronounced they raise a possibility that the DPJ, which held only 112 of 480 seats in the old House, could win a simple majority, though it's more likely that Mr. Hatoyama will need a coalition with several small parties to govern.



Crunch time for Aso.

"It will be a revolutionary election that will end the leadership of bureaucrats and put the focus on the people," Kyodo news agency quoted Democratic Party leader Yukio Hatoyama as telling party members. "I feel we have a historic mission."

Established 11 years ago, the DPJ has never been in government, while the LDP has been out of power only once in its existence, for 10 months after it lost the 1993 general election.

The Democratic Party of Japan may usher in a new era of Japanese politics. Opposition leader Hatoyama said on July 17 that it was time for a new era in Japanese politics and that the country should be inspired by President Barack Obama's win in last year's elections in US.

The Democrats have pledged to pay more heed to the rights of individual consumers and workers than those of corporations, and to reduce bureaucratic

control over policy-making as a way to reduce waste of taxpayers' money and refocus spending. The opposition party has promised change to improve welfare measures and lower the cost of education.

"I think that, for the short-term, the hope that the Democrats taking power will cure the parliamentary paralysis and lead to smooth passage of bills and policies will outweigh any worries about uncertainty," said Noritsugu Hirakawa, a strategist at Okasan Securities.

The Democratic Party has pledged to adopt diplomatic and security policies less "subservient" to close ally US, so some analysts fear the US-Japan alliance may suffer. But the party appears to be toning down policies that are likely to worry Washington.

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## Civil bore

To play up how secure Iraq has become, just a couple hours after today's attacks, the Shiite prime minister spoke at a conference in the once-dangerous Sunni district of Adhamiya -- something he could not have risked in 2006.

LARRY KAPLOW

**E**ARLY this morning, two truck bombs in northern Iraq levelled a small village and killed at least 48 people. It hardly came as a surprise: Friday saw the death of 44 people in a massive explosion inside a local mosque. In recent weeks, there were simultaneous attacks during Friday worship at mosques and Sunday worship at churches.

Even Anbar province, quieted in 2008, has seen several small bombings this summer. The attacks, US and Iraqi officials agree, are aimed at rattling the post-surge security here and to re-ignite the sectarian strife that raged a few years ago. They look like the kind of attacks that could spark a cycle of reprisals leading to civil war.

They're not. Iraq today is a different place than it was when ethnic conflict threatened to engulf the country in 2006. For a combination of not-at-all obvious reasons, the powder here is wetter than it once was. It's true that Iraq is still unsta-

ble and violent. (In fact, even as the overall number of attacks remains relatively low, bombings have continued even throughout the last year of relative calm.) Most of the bombings, which are carried out by Islamist Sunni insurgents, target Shiite Muslims, just as they did in 2006. But they haven't elicited an escalating cycle of reprisals.

For one thing, it's harder for Sunnis and Shiites to get to each other now. Most Baghdad neighbourhoods were forcibly or self-segregated in round after round of violence and displacement. Barriers close off districts to strangers, and drivers simply can't go more than half a mile in the capital without coming to an Iraqi army or police checkpoint. Many of the turf battles, in which blocks and homes were captured, have been settled.

For another, while Baghdad was the crucible for past violence, the recent unrest has been worst in the northern region of Nineveh, where the high-casualty bombings occurred Friday and today. Shiites are a minority in Nineveh without the power of large militias

behind them, and, at any rate, attacks there do not shake the country as they would in the heart of the capital. The bombs here have also been smaller; instead of suicide attacks, they are more often small grenades or devices left in parked cars.

What's more, the agents of Shiite retaliation last time were loose bands of militias behind the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Today, they are scattered; several of them have cut peace deals with the government. Sadr himself has been living in Iran (he claims to be studying Islam) and has visited Turkey and Damascus, where regional leaders are trying to coax him into a political, rather than an armed, role.

Perhaps most important is how the central government has handled the violence. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is intent on maintaining at least the veneer of order in before January's election. His popularity is largely founded on the steep drop in violence. For that reason, news coverage of the bombings on the government channel was brief Monday.

To play up how secure Iraq has become, just a couple hours after today's attacks, the Shiite prime minister spoke at a conference in the once-dangerous Sunni district of Adhamiya -- something he could not have risked in 2006. He warned that violence would get worse before next year's vote as people try to

discredit the government. It was a face-saving and probably true observation.

He also wants to win over some Sunni voters, which requires keeping Shiite militias subdued. To help him keep a lid on his co-religionists, Maliki has more than 600,000 troops at his disposal now, more than twice as many as in early 2006. They have been accused of singling out Sunnis for arrest, a semiofficial way of striking back.

American officials warn that they cannot reduce the bloodshed much lower than it is now and talk about keeping the violence at "tolerable" levels. That means preventing it from sapping confidence in the government, spoiling the political process, or pitting the security forces against each other. All of which are still possible. Tellingly, however, their greatest worry isn't about Sunni-Shiite fighting; it's about the potential for warfare between Kurdish forces and Baghdad-run military units.

By evening, the Sunni speaker of Parliament was calling on the government to stem what he called a deteriorating security situation. But the streets in the capital were full of the usual bustle. Tolerance in Iraq is always precarious, but for now, it is holding.