

## TCB's role in Ramadan market

*Should ensure adequacy and timeliness*

THE state-owned trading body, Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB)'s entry into the market ahead of the Ramadan with a view to supplying some daily essentials to the citizens at a fair price as well as having a stabilising impact on the otherwise unsteady market is a welcome move.

Reactivating the TCB, which has been in hibernation for years, is a difficult task. But the government seems to have overcome it. Now after formal launching of the marketing activity through allotment of the essential commodities like sugar and edible oil by TCB to its appointed dealers, questions are being raised even by some dealers as to the efficacy of the present arrangements. For there is the challenge of meeting the huge gap between the actual demand and the scanty stock so far of the commodities at TCB's disposal. Moreover, the selling prices for the supplied commodities fixed by the government have a rather low margin of profitability compared to the existing price level in the open market.

However, the question of creating necessary motivation among dealers to sell at a low profit margin has no simple answer. To overcome this drawback, the TCB may consider its own selling outlets at the city wards and other important points in the capital.

So far as the price stabilising potential of the TCB's present move is concerned, it will be oddly matched against the open market operators, if only due to its rather low market coverage at 15 per cent. So, to be able to deliver properly, the trading wing of the government will have to make the most of the resources in its hand and do that most efficiently. Otherwise all the fanfare made thus far over TCB's intervention in the market runs the risk of ending on a whimper.

The high hopes created over TCB's participation in the market during Ramadan in particular had to do mostly with volatility in the prices of essentials blamed largely on the machinations of some syndicates. But that TCB has meanwhile started its operation with the help of its appointed dealers, the people will now expect it to perform.

It is hoped that the government is well aware of the limitations of its present arrangement vis-à-vis the actual demand to be made on its service. At the same time, the threat from the evil nexus of so-called syndicates, as well as the unscrupulous market operators will be there. So, to deliver according to its promises will remain an uphill task. To face up to this challenge, it will also have to ensure a round-the-clock monitoring of the prices at the important points in the market and keep law-enforcers ready for action against the market manipulators.

## Time to secure expatriate workers' rights

*Global and national efforts should combine to ensure this*

GIVEN the Bangladesh context, the issue of protecting migrant workers' rights assumes critical importance. It is particularly the Middle East which has been instrumental in changing the fortunes of tens of thousands of Bangladeshis through making available to them opportunities of employment over the past two decades and more. The social and financial progress that previously poor families have made as a result of their members' employment in a number of Middle Eastern countries is a reality that no one can ignore. It would be pertinent to ask, therefore, how vastly different matters might have been if such opportunities had not been there.

That being the truth, there is too the fact that of late Bangladeshi expatriate workers have been coming up against certain forms of behaviour in the countries where they are employed, behaviour that has all too often bordered on discrimination. They have been harassed, imprisoned and sacked from their jobs. In many instances, their employers have forced them to take jobs which clearly violated the terms of their contracts. Worse, a very large number of them have simply been rounded up and sent back home. In other words, Bangladesh's workers have lately found themselves at the receiving end of unacceptable behaviour, a fact that has been causing us in the country much and natural worry.

The worry was once more highlighted at the two-day national consultation on 'Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD)' in Dhaka last week. Foreign Minister Dipu Moni has been speaking for all of us through her assertion that migrant workers are not merely money-making machines but are also people who deserve to be treated the way everyone else is. And that basically is the point. If migrant workers are not treated with dignity and are not accorded human rights, a point will certainly come when it will all build up into a mess. Which essentially means that when the doors are closed, or nearly closed, on countries which need to send their citizens abroad for work, the result can only be social unrest in those countries. As it is, workers from Malaysia, Singapore and the UAE, besides those from Bangladesh, have returned home in large numbers over the past one year.

The need today for Bangladesh is to take all those steps that will secure the rights of migrant workers, and not just from Bangladesh, in the employing countries. That can be done through formulating as well as strengthening international instruments geared to protecting the rights of migrants. Words must now be replaced by deeds.

## The personality of a nation

Now, it doesn't matter who influences who, individual and national personalities are bound in a symbiotic relationship. An individual is the least common denominator of his nation. He must cherish the nation, and the nation must let him flourish.

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IT'S said that America began to form a national personality even before it obtained political freedom from England. The American national unity was based upon an abiding commitment to the constitutional principle of liberty. That unity was strengthened by a reverence for the accomplishments of past individuals and institutions. These ideals constituted the underpinnings of America's national character. The bottom line is that nations have personality like persons have nationality.

Michael Lynn, an Associate Professor of Consumer Behaviour, argues that nations indeed have their characters. In his study on "National Personality and Tipping Customs," he shows that nations with extroverted populations like Greece, Mexico and the United States tended to have many tipped professions. Extroverts are outgoing and sociable people. They enjoy the attentive treatment from servers who are motivated by tips.

Lynn's study further suggests that the number of tipped professions was also greater in countries scoring high in traits associated with anxiety. These countries are Egypt, Spain and Italy. Tipping is important to people of these countries, because it reduces their anxieties about being served by strangers.

So, the personalities of a nation and its people have a seminal connection. The Georgian political theorist Chia Nodia explains that national consciousness is "patterned on the blueprint of the individual human personality." The national self only makes sense in terms of the personality

concept.

Does a nation take after its people, or do people take after their nation? It can be debated like which of the two between chicken and egg came first. Vaclav Havel, the Nobel-winning last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech republic after it separated from Slovakia, gives us his observation.

He says that a nation not only has the politicians it deserves, but politicians also have the society they deserve. Because, it largely depends on the politicians which social forces they choose to liberate and which they choose to suppress. It makes a difference whether they choose to rely on the good in each citizen, or on the bad.

Bill Maher, an HBO host, recently raised that issue when he called America a stupid country. Faced with a barrage of criticism, Maher backed up his claim with statistics. Before the Iraq War, 69% of Americans thought Saddam Hussein was personally involved in 9/11. Four years later, 34% still did.

He further added that polls showed a majority of Americans couldn't name a single branch of government, or explain what the Bill of Rights was. Another 24% could not name the country America fought in the Revolutionary War. Nearly half of Americans didn't know that states have two senators and more than half couldn't name their congressman. A Gallup poll reveals that 18% of Americans think the sun revolves around the earth.

Often nations outshine their people. In America, it was a result of the cultural unity of its people, their national pride, respect for the constitution and the unflinching faith in



An individual is the nation in microcosm.

the American Dream. But the people also outshine nations. A New York Times story revealed that when asked what would happen to Netherlands should the levees break, most of the Dutch expressed their confidence in the capacity of their engineers and government to protect them against flooding.

All of the above are the ingredients of national personality. Now, it doesn't matter who influences who, individual and national personalities are bound in a symbiotic relationship. An individual is the least common denominator of his nation. He must cherish the nation, and the nation must let him flourish. Proud people often make proud nation.

Havel looks at it from a different angle. He recognises that every day an individual might take orders in silence from an incompetent superior. Every day an individual might solemnly perform ritual acts which he privately finds ridiculous. He might even unhesitatingly give answers to questionnaires, which are contrary to his opinions.

But none of these means that "he has entirely lost the use of one of the basic human senses, namely, the sense of humiliation."

If pride of an individual speaks of his personality, so does humiliation. It's also true for a nation. What uplifts it is as important to know as what lowers its self-esteem.

We are divided as people. We let foreigners poke their noses in our affairs. We aren't ashamed to be corrupt. Our respect for our constitution is atrocious. Not to say, we have questionable confidence in our government.

This says that we have not only lost our sense of pride, but also our sense of humiliation. Our expression of honour is as impaired as our perception of shame. It's a kind of personality disorder. Whether person is responsible for nation, or nation is responsible for person is the critical question.

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## Digital Bangladesh with analogue politicians?

Our politicians should understand that the world has changed; the language and the concepts that made sense 20 years ago do not make sense now. We need politicians with the skills and expertise to handle the pressing and difficult economic and diplomatic challenges that the country faces today.

ANAM A. CHOWDHURY

PERHAPS Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina realises that it is rather difficult to build Digital Bangladesh with analogue politicians and accordingly dropped some of them altogether from important party portfolios and pushed a few upstairs. Such clans often prevent fresh political groups from emerging and tend to focus mostly on historic legacies because they cannot articulate fresh policy ideas. These moves may change the political complexion of the party and pave the way for new generation of leaders to play an active part and help rejuvenate the party. Well-educated politicians can view impending issues through the prism of overall national interest.

The path to democracy in Bangladesh is one that has too many signposts of inactivity, of promises made and not kept, and of hard decisions not taken out of populist concern. Political analysts believe that our leaders have mastered the art of ruling without taking hard decisions. Politics is for people's welfare, not merely a means to attain power. It is about drawing up an action plan to maximise growth and fulfil election promises.

The recent election of a strong and stable

government may have re-ignited new hopes and the expectation of a better tomorrow. Ordinary people think that this government elected on certain promises will not turn its back on the mandate it has received. An almost surreal air of optimism permeates all levels of society, and now the time has come for decision makers to move from preaching to practicing.

The year gone by has been one of the most challenging for the world economy. The unprecedented financial crisis has shaken the foundations of some of the strongest economies of the Western world, but Asia still remains the most dynamic part of the planet. Both China and India are growing at annual rates of about 8% and modernising at ferocious clip. Surprisingly enough, never in human history have so many people improved their lifestyle so rapidly as in China today. This is mainly due to their massive investment in human resource development. Many economists feel that we should not miss the boat -- we should follow China's lead.

Quality education is central to a country's economic growth and social development. In our country, nearly half of the children cannot read a sentence correctly in English, nor do a

simple division of two digit numbers, after several years of schooling. Rather than producing ordinary graduates on a massive scale, our education system should be revamped in a way that it becomes more job-specific. Most academics reckon that our higher education is in a big mess and unless drastic steps are taken immediately, the country will lose out in terms of growth and economic development.

Another area of critical concern relates to energy. Clean and cheap energy is required to create cost competitive economic environment to lure "big-ticket" foreign investment. The rising energy cost and unstable Middle East have turned energy into a security issue. Countries around world began investing in nuclear energy. France generates 80% of its electricity from nuclear power.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for the construction of eight new reactors to build what he called "the post oil economy." Our government should adopt a coherent strategy to construct at least a couple of nuclear power plants over the next few years to fulfil our developmental requirements as well as enlarge employment and income opportunities for the masses.

Our political leaders are yet to recognise the fact that people's growing mobility needs should be matched by the presence of efficient, affordable and decent public transport. Unfortunately, our cities are centered on the personal vehicles, causing environmental and social damage. Cities like London, Singapore, Paris and Frankfurt are urging people to abandon personal vehicles and use public transport.

Our governments have done nothing, and

are still not doing enough to provide quick and safe travel opportunities for all. We are suffering because of long vehicle queues, unbearable traffic jams on congested roads and dangerous walking conditions. In many East Asian countries, advanced passenger trains, and in India super fast trains, are covering vast distances, but some of our locomotives could be priceless treasures for railway museums.

The food crisis is real, and more immediate than we might think. With climate change and dwindling water resources, it is essential that we explore all possible options to increase food production. Bio-technology offers the best hope of producing enough food for everybody. The US and many European countries are already producing genetically modified (GM) food crops. After proper testing and research we should also introduce GM food crops in our country.

India and the US signed a science and technology endowment agreement on July 21 last, which permits US companies to build nuclear parks in India. The US has identified two nuclear sites, which will kick off US nuclear business in India. According to Jane's Defense Weekly, Myanmar is clandestinely trying to attain nuclear capability. Such moves will surely trigger an arms race and alter the geopolitical equation of the region.

Our politicians should understand that the world has changed; the language and the concepts that made sense 20 years ago do not make sense now. We need politicians with the skills and expertise to handle the pressing and difficult economic and diplomatic challenges that the country faces today.

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## Policy for indigenous peoples

What is important for the government is starting deliberations for a national policy for the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh to save them from various harassments, uncertainties and insecurity.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007 includes areas like self-determination, culture and language, education, health, housing employment land and resources environment and development, intellectual and cultural property, indigenous law and treaties and agreements with governments. Except the right of self-determination (which has the scope for independence movements) the government may take positive attitude toward other areas.

The following rights need special consideration:

(a) to exist as distinct people; (b) to stay on their land; (c) to retain their spiritual and religious traditions; (d) to their histories, languages, oral traditions, stories, writings and their own names for people and places; (e) to education, the media and employment; (f) to participate in decisions and developments affecting them; (g) to maintain their spiritual relationship with the

land, waters and resources and to return to the land taken without their consent; and (h) to protect their property and their intellectual property (indigenous knowledge such as medical plants, agricultural bio-diversity and environmental management).

The Declaration sets out guidelines for exercising through self-government their right of self-determination. It recognises the right of indigenous peoples to determine their citizenship, their own laws and customs, to relations with other peoples across borders, and to treaties and agreements with governments.

In a total population of about 150 million, the indigenous population in our country is around 3 million. The Tribal Welfare Association (TWA) has demanded constitutional recognition of the indigenous peoples and a separate ministry to protect the ethnicity and rights of the people. They feel that tribes are treated as ethnic minority, pushed to the periphery and denied equal status with Bangalees. These people are deprived of land, education and social rights.

Like in other post-colonial states, ethnic conflict haunts Bangladesh. In a multi-racial state like India ethnic violence continues to be the very basis of democratic norms and values. The Indian government has reacted, as far as possible, peacefully with ethnic problems. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, dealt with ethnic problems violently.

In Bangladesh the ethnic crisis started in the early '60s with the setting up of the Chittagong hydroelectric power, which resulted in displacement of a large number of hill tribes in Rangamati. In the late '70s, by allowing thousands of Bangalees to settle and leasing out land to some Bangalees for rubber cultivation, the crisis intensified and resulted in increased alienation -- giving rise to a force to challenge Bangalees settlers.

The AL government (1996-2001) signed a treaty with the PCJSS in 1997 to bring peace in the area. However, due to non-implementation of the treaty, the indigenous people are totally frustrated. This has resulted in impairment of homeostatic balance of power in tribal communities.

The signing of the CHT Accord was certainly a good step to bring peace in the CHT, so that we can accelerate our economic growth through improving the infrastructure facilities in the area. However, we are constrained to point out that the treaty was concluded in a hurry. In agreeing to the

Accord there should have been closer analysis of the problems.

The major weaknesses were lack of land survey to determine settlers' rights on the land, and the role of army in the area. This lapse resulted in continuation of hostility of a major part of the tribal people. There should have been a decision about the safety of settlers on withdrawal of the army. Enough discussions were not, it appears, held between the government and the settlers. Thus, implementation of CHT Accord can hardly be possible without adequate safety and security of the settlers.

In its quest for peace in CHT, the government decided to withdraw a brigade of the army by September. On the directive of the High Court, however, the government has suspended the withdrawal for the time being. What is important for the government is starting deliberations for a national policy for the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh to save them from various harassments, uncertainties and insecurity. This is all the more necessary to build the image of Bangladesh as a truly democratic, secular and moderate country. The earlier the policy is adopted the better for us.

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