

A peasant-friendly move

Further reduction in fertiliser prices is laudable

THE ministries of agriculture and industries certainly deserve kudos for slashing prices of non-urea fertiliser by 36 percent on an average. The newly fixed prices are way below the previous levels which themselves carried a 50 percent cutback in prices effected by the AL government barely a week into its first week of power.

At that time it was felt though, had the price cut come about in December when the boro season peaked it would have been ideal. Even so, it impacted positively on boro output in the end, for all we know. This time around the price reduction is more timely as the boro and potato seasons, winter crops, so to speak, are peaking to benefit from.

There are likely to be three-fold benefits to accrue from the latest move: price per kilogram of Triple Phosphate (TSP) drops to Taka 22 from Taka 40; that of Muriate of Phosphate (MOP) to Taka 25 from Taka 35 and that of Diammonium Phosphate (DAP) cut down by Taka 15 per kilogram. First of all, cost of production should fall by that extent; secondly, a balance would likely be struck between use of urea which the farmers are more inclined to and the use of non-urea fertilisers which become quite affordable now. Above all, by one broad stroke, the agriculture ministry gives a robust signal to the farmers that: (a) whenever the international prices are down the government is ready to pass on the benefit to farmers; and (b) for this if an additional subsidy is entailed, the government is ready to provide it. Actually, in spite of the falling international price, the government would still add Taka 500 crore to Taka 2500 crore package for the slash back.

Such a timely and well-intentioned move will have to be implemented through a fair and efficient distribution network that reaches out to the farmers in times of their need. The ministries count on a dealership system that will have to work completely free of the middlemen's or faria classes' intrusions. It has worked well so far, as the minister has indicated, but still the need for supervision is there.

One more important point: supply sufficiency and lowering of prices carry a possibility for opportunist elements to try and smuggle fertiliser into neighbouring countries. A closure surveillance needs to be mounted in the border districts to prevent this happening.

Rohingya question acquires new complications

A thorough-bred policy required on the issue

REPORTS of Rohingya refugees making it out of Bangladesh on Bangladeshi passports and finding employment in the Middle East are pretty disconcerting. Matters get worse when it is noted that the frequent troubles these 'Bangladeshis' get into in places like Saudi Arabia are causing a fairly good number of problems for our bona fide workers there.

We thus have a pretty peculiar situation here. While the Bangladesh government, which sent a three-member team to Riyadh last month to discuss the issue with the Saudi authorities, has said (and with good reason) that these men are Myanmar nationals, the Saudis have cited the Bangladeshi passports that let them into the kingdom. Obviously, one cannot wave off the Saudi position since it is grounded on a reality.

Which brings us to the question of how these Rohingyas acquired Bangladeshi passports. As citizens, albeit persecuted ones, of another country, they are supposed to enjoy the status of refugees under the appropriate international conventions. Obviously, though, in the past many years, even as efforts have been underway in Bangladesh to persuade the Myanmar authorities to take them back, some unscrupulous groups of people have been engaged in organizing Bangladeshi passports for them. Reportedly as many as 700 Rohingyas are now under arrest in Saudi Arabia as Bangladeshi citizens and that on the basis of the passports they possess. It should have been for the Bangladesh authorities to investigate the mystery when reports first began to appear some years ago of Rohingyas being given Bangladeshi passports. The upshot of that failure not to inquire into the situation now seems to be giving us a bad name abroad. The Saudis plan to deport the detained Rohingyas to Bangladesh rather than to their home country.

There is little question that the Rohingya issue is a humanitarian one. Every effort should be expended in persuading the Myanmar authorities to create the conditions that will allow them to go home. Despite the long period of time which has elapsed since they first were pushed into Bangladesh, there is an urgent need for Dhaka and Yangon to find a solution to the issue. At the same time, for the Bangladesh authorities, it is of critical importance that a strict supervision of Rohingyas, in line with accepted international laws, be undertaken and maintained. With reports of Rohingyas having become voters in Bangladesh, acquiring passports and setting off for the Middle East as migrant workers, such supervision is today a necessity. We cannot afford, at least not in countries where a huge number of our citizens are employed, to be embarrassed by people who have travelled abroad as Bangladeshis through fraudulent means.

One expects that the Bangladesh government is seized of the problem. Its responsibility at this point should be to devise a Rohingya policy that takes into account both the short term and mid term aspects of it. Being a resource-strapped country, Bangladesh cannot afford to house the Rohingyas endlessly. Neither can it have them become its citizens by questionable means.

Shooting down the emaciated poor

Meanwhile, what should we be doing about the men who called the police in Tongi and had them shoot those bullets into the exhausted beings that were the poor? It was murder. There were the murderers and those who instigated them into firing into the crowd. How should the law be dealing with them?

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE problem with capitalism being foisted on poor societies is not hard to understand: it demeans the individual. And it makes a mockery of the poverty-stricken through humiliating them at nearly every turn. Reflect, if you will, on the mayhem and murder that ran through Tongi a few days ago. The police felt little qualm in shooting down men whose only fault was in asserting their right to a livelihood.

The owners of the garments enterprise they had been employed in had decided, stealthily and without any moral scruples, to shut the factory down. And this they did knowing full well that the workers, all those emaciated men and women struggling for bare survival from sunup to sundown, had not been paid their wages for months.

And then observe the irony. The owners quickly made it known that the workers had indulged in disorder. Their fellow garments manufacturers in the BGMEA swiftly drew the conclusion that a deep conspiracy had been hatched to destroy the sector. There are too the intelligence agencies of the government, with their dubious reports on arson being in the pipelines at the various garments units in the country.

Watch all those talk shows on television. You will come by the spectacle of garment industry chieftains waffling in their bid to explain their position. Not a sign is there in them of regret. Not one of them is apologetic about the sufferings of these workers, about the wages that have not been paid. And that is capitalism for you. You inform the country loudly that your mills are incurring losses because of global competition, because of a worldwide recession. But that hardly stops you from going off on junkets around the world.

There are all the telltale signs of how these new capitalists, many of whom scaled the heights of prosperity through hanging on to the coattails of all the bad men in power, are

today pushing the poor to the fringes even as they go around projecting a sophisticated face for themselves at home and abroad. These men have homes abroad.

These men spend endless money on their elitist parties at home day after day. And yet they feel little shame in not paying their lesser employees the meager salaries that are theirs by right. And what else do you stumble upon in a poverty-driven capitalist society? Think. And you will likely come by realities that will leave you reeling.

Transport owners in the northern region of the country have for years waged a "movement" to get the vehicles of the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation off the streets in order for their buses to run on those routes. Hooligans and hoodlums have pelted stones at BRTC buses, have set up barricades on the roads as a way of instilling fear in citizens who have always been dependent on public transport. Go into the antecedents of these private transport owners. In politics, they tear one another apart, for they belong to different parties. But on the BRTC, they come together. They are not embarrassed at all.

It is a lopsided social order we have set into motion. And now that we have that bizarre idea called globalisation (really a condition where the world's powerful nations dump you with their products and refuse to take yours), the power to exploit has gone up by leaps and bounds.

Industrialists borrowing from public banks are given waivers on their interest (ask the prime minister, for she knows). But have you noticed the barbarity with which these same banks hound the poor farmer who may have borrowed as little as three thousand taka, and will not leave him in peace until he coughs up his miserable interest? Or dies?

Note the anti-poor fundamentals on which we have operated ever since the free market made an entry into our lives. The poor rickshawpuller no more has a view of the highway or avenue, for that has been given



Will those responsible for this be punished?

over to owners of second hand and reconditioned vehicles. The not very healthy-looking police constable feels no pity as he lets the air out of a rickshaw tire (the puller has committed an offence). He does not do a similar act when the driver of a car commits a similar offence. You own a car and you are a VIP!

When you humiliate the poor and let the affluent off, when despite a decision that ministers and lawmakers too will be taken to task for breaking traffic regulations they barge through the roads in unauthorised manner, you know you have a quasi-feudal society at work. Which takes you back to that garments question.

For years these businessmen have refused to let workers form or operate trade unions. That is not only undemocratic but also goes

against the principles of modern political thought. Now that the government has agreed that trade unions in the readymade garments industry will be there, we should be happy. But will those unions work without inhibitions? You raise that question ... and wait for an answer.

Meanwhile, what should we be doing about the men who called the police in Tongi and had them shoot those bullets into the exhausted beings that were the poor? It was murder. There were the murderers and those who instigated them into firing into the crowd. How should the law be dealing with them?

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Turkey looks to the East

As international circumstances change, national interests are redefined. Turkey has to adjust its foreign policy with the changes in the international and domestic environment, which has led the country's foreign policy to look towards the East.

HARUN UR RASHID

BIGGER than France, Turkey is a part of Europe and Asia adjoining oil-rich Iran and sitting astride the Dardanelles, through which the Russian navy's Black Sea fleet passes.

Turkey, a member of Nato, marks the Eastern end of the Nato defense line. Its strategic significance for the US and its allies is immense.

Turkey's growing diplomatic initiatives have led it to offer mediation in regional disputes -- such as those between the US and Iran, Iraq and Syria, and between Israel and Syria -- and enhanced its international stature.

Turkey has also played a positive role in trying to remove misunderstandings between Pakistan and the Karzai government in Kabul. The last trilateral meeting between the heads of states was hosted by Turkey months ago, following which hostile statements against Pakistan by President Karzai and his spokespersons have ceased observers say.

Turkey acts as a bridge between oil and gas producing countries in the Caspian region and the Middle East and Europe. Turkey, a country where energy needs are rapidly growing, has also become an important market. The main goal of its energy strategy is

to strengthen the transit role of the country on the axis of the East-West and North-South, as well as to transform Turkey into the energy center of the region.

Turkey occupies an important place in several pipelines from the Caspian Sea in the field of oil and gas. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (Turkey) (BTC) pipeline is of great importance from the point of view of global energy security. The pipeline ensures transportation of Azerbaijani oil along the route, and since the opening of the pipeline in 2005 about 700 million barrels of oil have been transported.

With Turkey's prospects of joining the European Union growing more elusive because of opposition from France, Germany and Greek-dominated Cyprus, Turkey has been reassessing its foreign policy. Furthermore, as the economy has contracted in the European Union, Turkey, a large export-nation, has to seek different markets.

As international circumstances change, national interests are redefined. Turkey has to adjust its foreign policy with the changes in the international and domestic environment, which has led the country's foreign policy to look towards the East.

Senior Turkish officials reportedly said that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was mediating between Israel and Syria just

weeks before the conflict in Gaza broke out, felt personally betrayed by Israel's aggression in Gaza and what he regarded as needless killing of innocent Palestinian women and children.

Turkey cancelled air force exercise with Israel, straining ties that frayed in January when the Turkish prime minister, in front of world leaders attending the World Economic Forum at Davos, castigated Israeli President Shimon Peres for waging war in Gaza.

On October 25, Prime Minister Erdogan visited Pakistan for three days. The extraordinary warmth and high importance extended to the prime minister was evident from the opportunity afforded to him to address the Pakistani Parliament on October 26 as well as being decorated with the highest award of Nishan-e-Pakistan.

Local media reports said that Erdogan was the fifth world leader to address the joint session of the Pakistani Parliament.

The Turkish prime minister was accompanied by a strong trade delegation, characterising Turkey's desire to expand its economic ties with Pakistan. In an effort to facilitate this, the two sides signed a MoU whereby businessmen would be granted 90 days visa on arrival at their respective airports.

Significantly, this came in the wake of the container train service launched between Pakistan and Turkey in August this year, which will strengthen the bilateral economic contacts and help expansion of trade and investment.

The Turkish prime minister's visit will have a positive impact on bilateral relations, particularly in the aspects of economic contacts, trade expansion and institutional linkages.

In August 2008, Turkey welcomed President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for a formal visit. No Western country has issued such an invitation to the Iranian leader. Moreover, in contrast to its Western allies, Ankara announced recently that it would not participate in any sanctions aimed at preventing Iran from going nuclear.

On October 27, the prime minister of Turkey visited Iran. During the visit, he reportedly said that the West was applying double standard in pressuring Iran over its nuclear program. "Those who are chanting for global nuclear disarmament should first start in their own countries," he said.

Although questions have been raised in Western capitals about Turkish foreign policy, Turkish officials and analysts insist that the country has no intention of abandoning the West. Rather than re-orienting its policy towards the East, Turkey's minister for European Union affairs argued that the opening of its border with Syria, the signing of the historic agreement to establish diplomatic relations after a century of hostility with Armenia, and the engagement of Iran and other Muslim-majority countries will help Turkey become a more effective interlocutor for its Western allies.

To balance its relations, the Turkish prime minister is scheduled to visit Washington on December 7 to discuss a broad range of issues with President Obama.

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A time to think

At this point in time, if our leaders look around, there is no dearth of countries, which have carried themselves with integrity and grace in their relationship with the US. A rethink of our 'friendship' with the US is definitely in order.

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HILLARY Clinton's love affair with Pakistan was short-lived. Back in the US she flatly denied the charge that India was sparking unrest in Balochistan. She also observed that since Pakistan could criticise the Kerry-Lugar Bill, the US also had the right to protest Al-Qaeda's presence on its land and demand action against it.

Furthermore, she went to the extent of saying that Islamabad had gone into the fight against militancy of its own accord out of the

threat it faced from the terrorists.

The tone and tenor of her words convey the usual tendency of viewing Pakistan with a jaundiced eye.

Keeping in view her trip, her interaction with people from all walks of life, many fell prey to wishful thinking. Some might have even assumed her assurance of turning a new page on Pak-US relations was genuine. Her posturing has now brought all those living in a fool's paradise back to reality.

But the sight of the US Secretary of State or any other official for that matter spewing

venom against Pakistan should not worry us anymore. This is part and parcel of the old practice of ditching and stabbing us in the back. On the Kerry-Lugar Act, far from accepting the fact that the act runs counter to our sovereignty, she further upped the ante by badmouthing Pakistan as a terrorist safe-haven.

So far as her statement that it is Pakistan's own war, the truth is that soon after the 9/11 we had gone along with the US literally at gunpoint. The country was warned either it was with the US or with the terrorists. And slowly but surely, we were sucked into a deadly maelstrom. Suicide attacks became more frequent afterwards.

The US then forced us into signing our death warrants by compelling us to resort to the use of force rather than dialogue with the tribals. To add insult to injury, it started bombing our tribal areas in violation of our sovereignty and international law. The real pur-

pose was to brush its failure in Afghanistan under the carpet.

Focusing on Pakistan and labelling it as the centre of all terrorist activity was a much more convenient way of doing away with the 'Afghanistan syndrome'. Equally distressing was to see her laugh away the Balochistan crisis and India's role in it.

Couldn't she recall US Gen Stanley McChrystal, who had observed that increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan would exacerbate regional tensions and would encourage Pakistan into countermeasures?

At this point in time, if our leaders look around, there is no dearth of countries, which have carried themselves with integrity and grace in their relationship with the US. A rethink of our 'friendship' with the US is definitely in order.

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