

## PM's 'no' to duty-free cars for ministers

*We read a sign of wider austerity into the approach*

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has been forthright in her rejection of the cabinet colleagues' demand that they be given the privilege of importing duty-free cars. It is patently unreasonable when they get official transports befitting their positions and functions.

They are perceived to be driven by the thought of material acquisition, not any principle, when they asked for a privilege in addition to perks and privileges they already have. As high elected functionaries of the government, if anything, they are only expected to be alive to public sensibilities and set examples of austerity and sacrifice.

The ministers cannot be unmindful of the fact that it is the government which is deprived of revenue when duty-free luxury cars are imported, apart from the prodigality of it in the public eye. Their argument that they too are lawmakers and, as such, entitled to the privilege is not tenable for two reasons. First, the very high position of the ministers and the costs involved in terms of their other perks and privileges should oblige them to conduct themselves impeccably in every sense of the term. Secondly, the decision to give the privilege of duty-free cars to MPs in itself has not been above criticism. The whole idea is incongruous with what is generally thought to be fair and just.

The ministers may perhaps look around to see for themselves how their counterparts in neighbouring India are traveling in economy class. Their perks and allowances have also been cut. It is worthwhile to note that the conservative government in UK is currently engaged in cost-cutting measures across the board in order to fully regain its feet after the global recession. This should be an object lesson for a country like ours, whose economy is striving for a breakthrough, primarily in the interest of the majority who are poor.

In fact, the government should go about identifying areas where it can save public money in terms of stationery, refreshment, foreign travels, including daily allowances drawn from frequent trips overseas that can be cut back in number as well as erection of costly welcome arches and decorative platforms.

## Tension along Jaintiapur border

*Utilise the existing guidelines fully for border management*

NEWS of Bangladeshi civilians falling victims of firing by some Indian civilians is distressing. Ten Bangladeshis have sustained injuries from fire resorted to by a group of Indian tribesmen at Jaintiapur in Sylhet on 4th July. It is alarming that the Indian nationals trespassed into Bangladesh territory and carried out the firing. Reportedly, these people were supported by the BSF. The locals inside Bangladesh eventually chased the intruders out of our territory, and they must have felt agitated enough to have expressed their resentment at the apparent 'inaction' of the BDR by barricading the Sylhet - Tamabil highway. The BDR 'inaction' is perhaps due to exercise of extreme restraint on their part, since retaliatory fire may have resulted in Indian civilian casualties.

The border point in Sylhet - Tamabil- Jaintiapur - Sreepur in the Sylhet sector has been restive for some time now. And the cause has been the unprovoked BSF firing and the civilian casualties suffered on our side as a result of that. The matter has aggravated further due to trespassing and forced tilling of croplands, as much as between 100 and 200 meters inside Bangladesh, by Khasia tribesmen under cover of the BSF. The intrusions have been repeated despite BSF assurances to prevent this happening. It is surprising that when no civilian is allowed to carry firearms inside the zero line, the Indian Khasia should enter Bangladesh territory and resort to shooting.

We have said it before, and feel it worth repeating, that such incidents do very little to engender confidence between neighbours. If anything, these unprovoked acts create bad blood and tension, something that must not be allowed to happen. It seems strange that at a time when the highest political authority in the two countries have expressed their political will and had committed themselves to taking the bilateral relationship to a new height of goodwill and amity, such incidents should be take place at all. And when there are mechanisms in place to manage the Bangladesh-India borders, such occurrences are even more deplorable.

The issue calls for urgent re-look at the entire gamut of border management. One understands that the principal cause of such incidents is the matter of lands in adverse possession of the two countries. And the 1974 border guideline stipulates that the matter of APL should be resolved mutually. That has not come about even after 34 years of the border guideline coming into force. And when the border Joint Working Group, set up exactly to address the border issues, has not met since 2006, it is no wonder that it is so.

Border tension between two friendly neighbours is unwarranted. And that can be prevented if the provisions of the existing guideline are fully utilised, and orders from the top permeate down to the field level. That, regrettably, is not the case at the moment.



Neglected, yet they struggle on.

## Floods: Rude reminder of false promises

**Why flood control never comes to the top of the agenda? Because floods and rural folks are not glamorous topics or people, so politicians and bureaucrats have no time to think much about them. They argue: Isn't Bangladesh naturally prone to floods as the largest delta in the world? What can we do if waters rush down from the mountains all around the country?**

SHAHNOOR WAHID

FLOODS are here once again. Every election time, those sly and devious vote seekers give promises to the credulous villagers of taking effective flood control measures so that waters would not inundate their villages anymore. Those peddlers of pledges tell the villagers that they would raise the embankments or build new dykes to protect their villages.

Those measly men and women, like their measly predecessors, continue to give mouthful of promises that they would dredge the rivers and canals so that flood waters would not overflow the banks. But after every election they totally forget about those promises, as they were never meant to be kept.

As a result, every year, we watch with impotent fury floodwaters entering the rural households, washing away their belongings, crops, seeds, poultry and sometimes their little children too. We search for the elected representatives among those flood affected people. But they are not to be seen anywhere around. Where are they, you wonder? I know where to find them.

When thousands of our people undergo tremendous hardship in chest-deep floodwaters, their elected representatives remain busy wheeling and dealing in the capital. When our flood-hit brothers and sisters frantically look for a boat to carry their belongings, their representatives remain busy looking at various models of luxury cars they would import under the

"Special Quota" system, having to pay no import duty.

When those flood-affected people wait for days for relief givers to come with some food, their representatives attend dinner parties in five star hotels organised by big corporate houses or some other organisations. In the dinner speech the representatives talk about the sufferings of the flood-affected people and request the corporate houses to donate money to the flood fund.

When those flood-affected people are forced to leave their houses and search for a raised land or a highway to take shelter, their representatives "cool off" in the Gulshan-Baridhara house after a day of "hard work for the people." Before turning in they call senior journalists to make sure their "fiery speeches" (filthy language in parliament) get printed in the next day's newspapers.

On the other side of the story, one could make comedy serials with what goes on before flood season in the name of flood control. One cannot but laugh out loud to see some sand bags or concrete slabs being thrown on the banks of rivers that are about to be devoured by the river current.

The photos of government officials supervising the work are taken by government photographers to be shown to the countrymen the next day. Every year a huge fund is allocated for the purpose but no one has ever seen any flood that has been effectively "controlled."

Why flood control never comes to the top of the agenda? Because floods and rural folks are not glamorous topics or people, so

politicians and bureaucrats have no time to think much about them. They argue: Isn't Bangladesh naturally prone to floods as the largest delta in the world? What can we do if waters rush down from the mountains all around the country?

They argue further: You see, those are illiterate rural people and they are quite used to getting inundated by floodwaters. Don't worry; they will bounce back to life once the waters will recede. You should not worry so much about them. You see, we have bigger projects to think about, like constructing a twenty-mile-long bridge over a dying river or a fifty-mile-long express super highway or a mega airport, the largest one in Asia.

More argument: You see those mega projects would result in huge employment and income generation and we would then have enough money to think about taking care of rural problems like floods. A dozen or two more floods would not harm them much. They would survive, don't you worry, brother.

Now you ask them: What about billions of dollars that have come into the country in the last thirty years for flood protection? Where has the money gone? To this, they would answer: In project proposal preparation, project evaluation, project site visit, tender document preparation, pre-qualification of contractors, and appointment of local and foreign consultants.

There is more. In purchasing two hundred cars and jeeps, four hundred motorbikes, renting fifty houses in Gulshan for consultants, purchasing four hundred air-coolers, fridges, washing machines, television sets, gas ovens etc for those houses; hiring cooks, drivers and gardeners for the consultants and then whatever was left it was spent to purchase some sand bags and concrete slabs to throw into the rivers. You see, we need more money. So, dear readers, don't you think floods create fantastic opportunity for begging for money showing the pictures of the stricken people.

Floods are patent examples of failures of the people's representatives and the gov-

ernments that came and went since 1972. Flood control was never given the topmost priority by anybody. It is a glaring example of how far governments can go in remaining oblivious to the sufferings of the majority of the citizens of this country. It is possible to divert excess water through application of technology but it has never been done.

One should read the history of other countries that were known to be flood-prone once upon a time. Let's say, the Netherlands. Today, their villages do not get washed away every year because their elected representatives used technology instead of giving false promises. They gave promises alright, but they kept those. And they kept those more than one hundred years ago.

They gave flood control the topmost priority as they respected the rights of every citizen. Their representatives never could imagine living in comfort in the dry lands while their own people drowned in floodwaters. They planned well in advance and they implemented the plan. Today, their expertise is being used by many other countries.

This is what is lacking here -- respect for the people. Our public representatives, except for a few, do not have any respect for the people of their own constituency. They consider them as mere vote banks. As a result, when the people suffer in floods or in cyclone or in severe cold you hardly see the representatives taking any pre-emptive actions and staying with the people until they come out of their problems.

The flood-affected citizens of this country have the right not to be inundated by floodwaters every year. They have the right to a better life. And this can happen only when governments will have respect for the people. But respect is in short supply in this country.

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## A long ride on a wagon of words

**Lay out the sequence, measure the consequence, and then check whether you have been taken for a short ride or a long journey on this wagon of words. A station will eventually turn up. It is called a polling booth.**

M.J. AKBAR

NEWS is the subtlest form of advertising. Perhaps we should be generous to journalism and qualify that; news can become the most subtle form of advertising, particularly when it comes dressed in quotation marks. The subtlety becomes more oblique when the quotation is used for collateral advantage, through a coy positioning adjacent to the Big Story.

There was a classic instance on the day the Union government decided to decontrol fuel prices. The news appeared in print on Saturday June 26. (It coincided, incidentally, with the 35th anniversary of a long-forgotten event called the Emergency. In those foolish old days governments needed mass censorship; in these more sophisticated times a careful, selective feed is more productive.)

On the same morning appeared a story sourced to the meteorological office that the monsoons were in splendid health, that Delhi would be drenched by July 1, and by September we would in fact have rains in excess of normal, climbing to 102%, four

points higher than the earlier forecast of 98%.

On July 1, with the Delhi sun still baked in Sahara, we read another story from the same Met saying that, er, the monsoons had stalled, on June 18, along a flat line that began in south Gujarat and did not show any upward mobility till east Bihar. The agricultural heartland of north India, from west Bihar through UP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, north Gujarat, Haryana and Punjab, was still as dry as a throat in a desert, and if rains did not appear by July 4 crop damage would begin.

For all I know, you might be sitting in Noah's ark within a week's time, but that is not the point. The point is that on June 25, when the Met planted the lie, it knew for a week that the monsoons had weakened. But it fabricated a projection only so that ministers, spokesmen and government economists, and those in queue to join the group, could go on television to reassure Indians that the inflationary effect of the fuel float would be offset by a good monsoon.

Does this work? After all, claims cannot change facts. Amul will not stop a rise in the

price of milk to help out a government at the cost of its balance sheet. And yet there is some purchase in cushioning the blow at the point of impact, since it deflects memory at least partially towards a positive hope.

A second blow might still ache, but it does not startle. Examine the media and public reaction to the massacre of 72 CRPF men at Dantewada and the recent killing of 27 jawans from the same force by the same Maoists in the same area. The first time, Home Minister P. Chidambaram was forced to offer a mock-resignation. The second, there was not even a half-resignation on offer, nor was one demanded, although, in terms of strict accountability, the second was a far greater lapse. Surprise was no longer an excuse. Instead, the home minister escaped on a rope of words.

He told state governments that the CRPF should, in future, be sent only on specific objectives rather than "routine" jobs like road-clearing, which could be done by the state police. Is there anything more specific than clearing a road in a conflict where IEDs and mines are potent Maoist weapons? What Chidambaram was suggesting was that the state police should be sent where the potential of casualties was higher. Why? Is the life of a Chhattisgarh policeman less valuable than that of a CRPF jawan?

The real answer is politics. If state policemen die, the responsibility ends up with the local chief minister. If central

forces die, Chidambaram has to take the blame. On his visit to Bengal Chidambaram was happy to taunt Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya with the thought that the buck stopped at the latter's desk. That is the sort of equation he prefers. Let the buck stop in the states, and the applause, whenever it rises, ring through his office in Delhi. This is perfectly normal in democracy, by the way.

We customers of democracy buy words without enquiry about their value. This encourages those in power to embroider words with whatever we will be fooled by; sometimes peppy to enhance the taste, sometimes frippery to brighten the look, sometimes nothing more substantial than packaging.

When you reach home, tear up the glittering paper, and open the box you find lots of straw under which is hidden a shrivelled raw mango instead of the array of Alfonso's you were promised in the marketplace of politics. Since there is no one else to blame for the transaction, you make pickle out of that mango and console yourself with the illusion that it is sustenance.

Lay out the sequence, measure the consequence, and then check whether you have been taken for a short ride or a long journey on this wagon of words. A station will eventually turn up. It is called a polling booth.

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