

## OMS to stabilise rice price

*For sustainability, adequate food supply necessary*

**T**HAT the government has started its Open Market Sales (OMS) of rice ahead of the Ramadan at a lower price than the kitchen market price is a welcome move. The price of OMS rice at Tk 24 per kg, which is less by Tk 6 to Tk 7 than that in the kitchen market should be helpful for the poorer section of the population. However, for the OMS rice to leave any impact on the market price of rice, the government will have to ensure that the quantity of rice on sale under OMS is adequate and that it is spread over different parts of the country, with special emphasis on the poverty pockets and flood-hit areas. And since, questions sometimes arise about the quality of OMS rice, it is important that the dealers who have been employed by the commerce ministry to sell the rice are brought under close monitoring.

However, the success of the OMS, firstly in curbing price spiral, and, secondly in addressing the needs of the poor and the vulnerable groups on a sustainable basis, the authorities concerned will need to take stock of its overall reserve of food grains kept in the government godowns.

The government's assurances about its position of rice stock at 0.7 million tonnes notwithstanding, the fact remains that it is going for importing another 0.7 million tons from the overseas market. But it has to be kept in mind that price of food grains in the international market is on the rise. In Canada, for example, there have been floods affecting its food grain production. The vagaries of nature have also been affecting other traditional food grains surplus countries. So, the government's drive to create a buffer food stock may face some hurdles in the international market.

On the home front, on the other hand, the procurement of rice from growers through public purchase has fallen short of expectation, if only because of the price differential between procurement and market prices. So, all these factors will have to be taken into account for a long-term sustainability of the overall food stock situation. It has also a direct bearing on the government's capacity to maintain the supply of adequate rice through OMS, fair price cards and other means such as VGF and VGD cards meant for the poor, ultra-poor and the calamity-struck population.

On an overall basis, it will be necessary to further activate the state-owned trading body, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). It is worthwhile to note that this government trade body proved to be rather sloppy in maintaining supply of essentials to contain Ramadan price hike last year. So to improve its capacity, the government would do well to increase its manpower and remove its other shortcomings, so that it may efficiently handle its tasks of ensuring adequate supply of essentials.

The government's success in offsetting the volatile market of the essentials created allegedly by the so-called syndicates depends on its ability to maintain the supply of food grains and other essentials through timely off-takes from silos and proper distribution mechanisms. It depends on how the government will fare in its ongoing drive through OMS and how dynamic the TCB proves to be.

## Unfit vehicles rushing in!

*Yet again a debacle*

**A**PPARENTLY, the drive against old and unfit vehicles has come nowhere near achieving its target. The ramshackle buses and minibuses, identified as a threat to safety of commuters, have returned to the city roads taking advantage of the glaring flaws in the enforcement of law. Out of the 16 mobile courts that went into operation on July 15, with the objective of driving out the dangerous vehicles, only eight are now working as the law enforcers are facing an acute shortage of manpower and logistical support. Furthermore, the drive is being conducted on only four days a week. So, there is ample room for the old vehicles to start operating again, particularly during nighttime when law enforcers are not seen on the roads.

There can indeed be no better example of enforcement failure than this much-vaunted drive against unfit vehicles. It is now clear that the transport owners enjoy some kind of clout, which enables them to run the worn-out vehicles which are a big hazard to commuters. Accidents take place on a regular basis as the buses and minibuses flout all traffic rules and create a sense of great insecurity among the commuters.

The government's plan of banishing the unfit vehicles was long overdue. But it certainly required a law enforcement system capable of overcoming the stiff resistance of a rather powerful and devious quarters. The drive was going on reasonably well in the first few days, but it has clearly lost steam down the road making it rather easy for the unfit vehicles to stage a comeback. The dilapidated vehicles went out of the city to undergo some renovation work and were back in business as soon as the grip of the law was slackened.

It seems the BRTA has no real control over the situation. It has failed to do anything against forged or fake driving licences. This adds considerably to the traffic mess in the city.

The drive against unfit vehicles was launched quite a few times in the past and by this time such vehicles should have been a thing of the past. But things are not improving and one gets the impression that the drive is nothing better than an occasional raid that has more bark than bite.

When the authorities decided that the unsafe and unfit vehicles would have to call it a day, they should have been ready with an enforcement mechanism. It is no use telling that they do not have the wherewithal to stop the ejected vehicles now rushing in from all sides. Realistically, as we have suggested before, these should be progressively phased out with a replacement plan implemented simultaneously to cater for the required public mobility.

## Exemplary punishment

Though the Chittagong University authority's handling the student agitation issue has raised a few eyebrows, giving punishment to a teacher guilty of sexual harassment has set the trend insofar as dealing with the issue of sexual harassment is concerned.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

**A** few days back, Chittagong University hit the headlines following unprecedented vandalism on the campus coupled with complaints against the law enforcers' excesses. This time, however, Chittagong University has come up with positive news by meting out exemplary punishment -- sacking from the job -- to a teacher proven guilty of sexual harassment of a female student.

In fact, punishment in such cases has been the exception rather than the rule in our universities due to the authorities' inexplicable and untenable clemency to the perpetrators. Some cases of punishment even tantamount to farce. Demotion of a Jahangirnagar University teacher following proven sexual harassment -- the demotion itself testifies to the allegation -- of a female colleague has been termed by many as a farce.

Other than cases of intermittent violence on the campuses, alleged cases of moral turpitude of a few teachers have brought real shame to the universities in recent time. Allegations of sexual harassment against teachers of Chittagong University, Jahangirnagar University, and Jagannath University and so on, along with demonstration of the students for justice must have shaken the nation's conscience to a degree.

Admittedly, eve-teasing has reached unbearable proportions these days and stalkers have gone literally rampant in turning lives of many girls unlivable in the country. A good number of innocent girls have already fallen prey to the young goons' predatory attitudes and acts. Ironically, countrywide awareness programme against eve-teasing and casualties related to eve-teasing seem to be going hand in hand with the law enforcers

being found invariably wanting in reining in the vice.

Painfully more, moral degradation has become the order of the day and oppression of women, especially in the form of violation of women's modesty and other forms of sexual harassment, has remained consistently high in the country. What is more, the rot seems to have spread to the universities as well.

People sympathetic to the alleged university teachers might raise the point that the alleged and convicted teachers might have been victims of conspiracy of some quarters. True, conspiracies are there at the universities for grabbing various lucrative posts, and instances of the use of students and cadres for attaining such objectives are not few either.

In fact, a good number of clashes -- sometimes extremely violent and causing casualties -- take place on campuses at the behest of a few teachers hankering after the top posts. And, these very few teachers are always denting the image of the general university teachers.

I have, however, this conviction in the students that they will not go to the length of raising a grave charge like sexual harassment against their teachers just for amusement. I also believe that they will neither desire nor dare to do so unless there is pressing reason, and that they will go for such ultimate action only when level of forbearance crosses all limits.

I think, such teachers -- though few, of course -- should bear the fact in mind that female students take the pains of going to universities -- many of whom stay at residential halls equipped with very scanty amenities -- for the sake of studies, knowledge-acquisition and psychological enrichment.

In the process, their trust is reposed in the teachers -- both male and female --



Come down hard on the culprits

and, in our social realities, their way of life is still pretty difficult. Thus, for God's sake, things should not be made more heavy-going and unbearable for them by trying to sexually exploit them. More to the point, the teachers can ill afford such activities as they are regarded as the moral guardians, and rightly so.

We, thus, should be guided by our scruples and moral sermons. If, however, virtues fail to contain the evil, there should be stringent mechanisms and their manifestations in checking the devil inside. Though the Chittagong University authority's handling the student agitation issue has

raised a few eyebrows, giving punishment to a teacher guilty of sexual harassment has set the trend insofar as dealing with the issue of sexual harassment is concerned.

Hopefully, other universities and institutions will follow suit in really deterring this deadly human frailty and in giving effect to the High Court's directives against sexual harassment, to be followed throughout the country, so as to turn the country a little more liveable for the womenfolk.

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## No short cuts in governance



Incomplete. Where did the money go?

Does government need to worry about opposition fulminations if there is no election visible? That is the only accountable moment that the ruling system takes seriously. Since we do not have the law of recall, governments tend to dismiss street anger as an emotion that can be assuaged nearer an election.

M.J. AKBAR

**G**OVERNMENTS never seem to understand a basic fact of the democratic dialectic; no opposition wants its demands met. It prefers a government to be stubborn, so that it can string out the accusation long enough for it to sink so deep into the public consciousness that it cannot be extricated by delayed redressal. There is not much political value to an accusation unless it becomes an intrinsic part of campaign rhetoric.

In theory, the opposition turns a day in parliament into a verbal festival over the Commonwealth Games because it wants accountability for corruption. In practice, opposition parties need to maximise the advantage by being able to go to town -- and village -- with the message that the government has not only stolen the people's money, but is so thick-skinned that it will do nothing about the thieves. The obduracy of authority is the ultimate gift to opposition.

In real terms, it hardly matters whether Suresh Kalmadi goes now or after the

Games. His role as the sports czar of India is effectively over. It is only a question of whether he gets a nice gift at the farewell party -- which, of course would be the closing ceremony of the Games -- or he is sent towards the sunset in lonely isolation. As far as the people are concerned, the difference between grace and disgrace has evaporated.

It could hardly be otherwise given the scale and sheer audacity of the corruption. It is possible that the bunch in charge of this lucrative extravaganza thought they had squared all sides.

There were junkets aplenty, across the political divide. The BJP's Vijay Goel went to Beijing for "technical studies," as did the Congress' Jagdish Tytler; neither had anything to with CWG but must be worthy of technical doctorates by now. Perhaps they were being given early training for the Asian Games.

Delhi's Congress legislators Haroon Yusuf and A.S. Lovely went to Melbourne to find how they run city transport, which of course is why Delhi's traffic has already become better than Australia's. Naturally

they travelled first class. This is nothing but big-budget back-scratching between pals, an insurance policy against exposure; if everyone is guilty then no one is guilty.

The officials have piled up enough flying miles to look after family holidays for a couple of years. They might all have got away if they had not all been so confident about the spread of the swill. But there are always a few who refuse to be co-opted. They keep our democracy democratic.

Time turns corruption into a milch cow. If A. Raja had been dropped from the cabinet after the telecom storm burst, the collateral electoral damage would be limited. Now that he is being retained, he will become the perfect, mobile target for Jayalalitha during next year's Assembly election; "mobile" is the perfect metaphor, of course, since Raja will be wandering around the state. A good cartoonist could do wonders with Raja posters, if Jayalalitha has one -- and has the will to leave her anger with a bit of wit.

Governments do understand a second fact of our political debate; the issues that agitate parliament and media are seasonal. Their expectation is that they will seem less important to the voter once the initial froth has subsided. If the big tent does finally manage to produce a circus, the memory of the gravy train that brought it will dissipate in the merriment. Who will bother to hold anyone accountable after the Games are over? It is not in the government's vested interest to do so. It is not within the opposition's capability to do so.

The tendency to elide through crises with token gestures can become a self-defeating habit. This was the initial approach to the building anger in Kashmir, and now the people do not take even a well-meaning gesture seriously.

Omar Abdullah was literally driven away, and had to be bundled out to his waiting helicopter by a frantic security posse when he visited a hospital. He cannot travel a few kilometres through his capital in a car; he needs a helicopter.

He reached the flood-distressed region of Leh with far more alacrity than he had shown in the city from which he rules, because, for the moment at least, he has become chief minister of Jammu and Leh rather than the chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir.

Perhaps he, and Delhi, believes that Ramzan, the month of fasting that begins this week, will bring calm. It could. Surface calm, however, is not peace. There are no short cuts in governance.

Does government need to worry about opposition fulminations if there is no election visible? That is the only accountable moment that the ruling system takes seriously. Since we do not have the law of recall, governments tend to dismiss street anger as an emotion that can be assuaged nearer an election. Lack of popular support, however, saps the energy of authority.

A weak government weakens the nation.