

## We welcome HC move on adulteration and prices

*Government must go into the roots of the problems*

THE High Court directive to the police to file criminal cases under the Special Powers Act of 1974 against those behind an adulteration of foodstuff and a spiralling of prices of essential commodities reflects the concerns of broad swathes of society about prevailing market conditions. It has been observed for a very long time and especially since the beginning of Ramadan this year that traders have with impunity continued to raise the prices of goods, to the great discomfiture of citizens. At the same time, the fact that every so often reports surface about the adulteration of food items throws up the image of a situation which, unless it is handled firmly, will lead to a culture of impunity on the part of dishonest traders for whom nothing other than profiteering matters.

We welcome the directive of the High Court and we do expect some concrete action to follow from such a directive. That the HC has decreed that mobile courts function for another two months to check unscrupulous activities in the market is another move that should lead to positive results. Having said that, we feel that the time has come for the authorities to take firm action to ensure that order and discipline are maintained in the market. We have observed with deep regret that all exhortations on the part of the government relating to foodstuff adulteration and food prices have fallen on deaf ears. Not even ministers, through their visits to the markets, have been able to influence trading circles into falling in line with the government's -- and citizens' -- expectations. That ought not to have been the case.

We believe that the High Court directive comes as a huge opportunity for the government to take stock of the situation. It need hardly be said that police measures against dishonest traders, while they may be feasible in the short term, are hardly the practice to follow in the longer term. What now must be done is for a systematic, concerted strengthening of those institutions whose responsibility is to keep watch on the market and ensure that citizens are not thrown into panic by hazards like adulteration and unbridled prices. The Bangladesh Standards Testing Institution (BSTI), for all its seriousness of purpose, has woefully lacked the manpower and the back-up mechanism to stamp its authority on the market. It is here that the government must focus, seriously and purposefully, if morality is to be a part of market operations. A toothless BSTI serves no one's purpose and only emboldens dishonest elements in their criminality.

There is then the Dhaka City Corporation which must be so energised and so armed with authority that it can keep tabs on market conditions. Along with the DCC, such ministries as commerce and industry including chamber and industry bodies must play a proactive role in upholding citizens' interests in the market. The point here is that the authorities must go into the roots of the problems. Obviously, a racket is involved in foodstuff adulteration. Similarly, an organised cabal is clearly behind the skyrocketing prices in the market. The point is simple: go after those who sell adulterated and pricey foodstuff to citizens in the markets, but also make sure that the elements pulling the streams from behind are exposed and penalised -- all in the larger public interest.

## CNG filling moratorium

*Rethink the long hours*

IMPULSIVE response to a deep-seated crisis, be it handling traffic congestion or suspending CNG gas filling for a big block of time appears to have been something of a signature emblem of governance. The ostensible purpose behind pre-mature closing down of educational institutions for the Ramadan and Eid and now behind the six-hourly daily prohibition of CNG supply at the filling stations has a ring of 'yureka' chant about it. As though an answer to nagging civic problems has been ingeniously hit up on. Panacea to long-standing diseases has been found at long last -- such is the self-congratulatory mode! But how are the organisations and users taking it?

What cost the surprise solution is bound to extract from education and public mobility, the fact that it would generate more problems than solve was hardly ever carefully weighed before jumping to conclusion. It looked expedient and convenient, so why not?

But look at the consequences of the six hour moratorium on CNG filling stations. Just into its second day, the cessation of gas supply between 3pm and 9pm has come to a crunch bearing down heavily on civic life. The stated purpose this time around is to scrounge gas for power plants and to increase gas pressure for domestic use at peak hours. How much it is served with all the systemic flaws there are, only time will tell. Nevertheless, the negative fall out in terms of long queues impinging on road space around a large number of filling stations is manifest through traffic jam, sudden stranding of transports, a large number of which are only CNG fuelled, to say nothing of waste of man hours and hikes in fare. Who is going to calculate the losses and recompense for it?

Other seminal questions arise: why CNG conversions were not tied in with gas generation figures, why these were not linked to other uses of gas in an overall planning framework. We allow things to happen unbridled and then pass the burden of failure, both of planning and management, on to the people?

Our final point is, for whatever reasons if you have to suspend gas supply then reduce the number of hours, which are excruciatingly long.

## Of birthdays, of respect for the dead

Sensitivities matter. And because they do, we humble ourselves in mosques, churches and temples and at graveyards. We do not play music in our homes when a neighbour dies.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LET us say happy birthday to Begum Khaleda Zia. She has now arrived at the age of sixty six which, by any measure, is a point where experience translates into maturity and a clear appreciation of popular sensitivities. For an individual who has been prime minister of Bangladesh twice and has been a significant political figure for as many as twenty seven years, it is especially important that Begum Zia do all those things that will garner for her as much political support as possible. Celebrating her birthday on a day where Bangladesh grieves for its founding father is not one of those things.

We will not argue, despite all the questions we may have about it, that the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was born on 15 August. We understand too that a noted actress in Bangladesh and ruling Awami League functionary was born on 15 August as well. And there are a good number of people who happen to have come into marriage on 15 August in Bangladesh. These are realities you cannot wish away. And what you cannot also cast to the winds is the

truth that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family were gunned down on 15 August. If you now try to put it across that Bangabandhu does not matter in the country he caused to be free, that indeed there can be celebrations of birthdays and marriages even as an entire nation mourns his tragic passing, you would be turning morality on its head and you would be telling us that mourning, in a bizarre sense, does not become those who are content to sing and carouse and laugh.

Our actress-politician informs us she does not observe her birthday on 15 August. And she does not because like millions of other Bengalis who have not forgotten their history, she understands the meaning of mourning in both its moral and religious aspects. Begum Zia and her acolytes may not appreciate Bangabandhu's place in history, but the least they could do is to stay away from eating slices of the former premier's birthday cake on a day of national mourning. Or, again, if that cake must be consumed, why not do it as part of a private celebration, behind closed doors? Sensitivities do matter, you know. And they must matter

even more in people who have taken to politics as a profession. It is, by the way, quite a discovery (assuming that you go for a trek into the past) knowing that in the era of all that concerted struggle against the Ershad regime in the 1980s, neither Begum Zia nor her fans thought up the idea of observing her birthday on 15 August. What has happened between then and now to bring about such a tectonic change in BNP thinking?

Religion, whichever one you may be an adherent of, does not permit insulting the dead. Which is why we condemn those who for years after Bangabandhu's murder celebrated 15 August as najaat dibosh or day of deliverance. Which is why when some Awami Leaguers raised questions about the authenticity of General Ziaur Rahman's remains in his grave, we swiftly swatted them down. Which is why when, long ago, the ayatollahs razed the grave of the deposed Shah's father in Tehran, we were shocked beyond measure. Hate which mutates into palpable insult is an explosive thing. Not many have admired the propensity on the part of recent Japanese prime ministers to make a pilgrimage to the Yasukuni shrine because the spot holds the remains of men who caused the deaths of millions in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s.

Pakistan did not observe its independence day this year because its priorities were greater than a celebration of free-

dom: millions of its people face death and starvation as the rains and rising rivers make a havoc of life. We do not imagine good cheer and raucous celebrations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. We do not make music before Auschwitz and Treblinka. Life is much more than a celebration of the self, which is why we remember those Tamils who perished at their land was overrun by the Sri Lankan military even as the Colombo authorities refuse to countenance a United Nations inquiry into human rights violations in the country.

Sensitivities matter. And because they do, we humble ourselves in mosques, churches and temples and at graveyards. We do not play music in our homes when a neighbour dies. We do not gorge ourselves with food when the emaciated children of the poor, staring fixedly at us, give us lessons, through their long silences, in what it means to be conscientious. We stand, in silence and in profound respect, as we remember the dead at the Shaheed Minar and at the Wailing Wall and before Ground Zero.

On 15 August, dark treachery ran riot in our land and high treason commandeered our values, to burn them to cinders. It is an expiation of collective guilt we go into every time the day returns to us. Birthday songs are far from our minds.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanareq@yahoo.co.uk

## Religion-based political parties

The matter was laid to rest when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reportedly made it clear in one of her cabinet meetings that her government had no intention of banning religion-based political parties. Her reported statement is pragmatic, and based on sound assessment of the political environment in the country.

HARUN UR RASHID

A question was raised as to whether political parties based on religion could exist in Bangladesh after the verdict of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court confirmed the illegality of the Fifth Amendment Act of the Constitution (judgment was released on July 28).

The matter was laid to rest when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reportedly made it clear in one of her cabinet meetings that her government had no intention of banning religion-based political parties. Her reported statement is pragmatic, and based on sound assessment of the political environment in the country.

In Britain, Queen Elizabeth is the "Defender of the Faith," not "Faiths," meaning that the monarch defends only the Protestant branch of Christianity as distinct from Catholic Christians and other major faiths.

Furthermore, it is argued that in all Western nations religious ceremonies play a dominant role in state functions. Even academic terms in England, such as "Michaelmas," "Easter" and "Trinity" go back to the roots of Christianity.

In many European countries, political parties have prefixed the name of a religion, such as Germany's Christian Democratic Union and Christian Union in the Netherlands.

However, such religious terminologies

do not compromise the secular character of laws and systems of government. Although many political parties in Europe have prefixed the word "Christian," there appears to be no intention to change the basic structure of the state's existing system and laws on Biblical doctrines.

In this context, analysts say that the core issue appears to be whether a political party wants to change the structure of the constitution and laws of a state on the basis of particular religious doctrines.

When political parties want to change the structure, system of government, judiciary and laws of a state in accordance with the principles and beliefs of a particular religion among many religions, people of other faiths in such a state perceive discrimination on the basis of religion.

Many linguists say secularism is not a good English substitute for the Bengali word dharmanirapekhata, which means that a state remains neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine and practice.

Neutrality has to be distinguished from non-involvement with religion. Neutrality implies governmental engagement with religion for the purpose of treating all religious groups fairly, equally and equitably, while non-involvement implies governmental isolation from matters of religion. Neutrality in religion, in other words, is religious pluralism.

It is argued that religious pluralism and Bengali-language based nationalism

constituted the spirit of the Liberation War of 1971.

The basic fabric of the Bangladesh Constitution is the "solemn expression of the will of the people" (Article 7.2 of the Constitution), and religious pluralism is a golden thread running through the Constitution that was adopted in 1972.

The concept of freedom of religion as stipulated in Article 41 of the Constitution is as follows:

(1) Subject to law, public order and morality:

(a) Every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion;

(b) Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain, and manage its religious institutions.

(2) No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or to take part in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship if that instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than this own.

Article 41 is founded upon on the belief that the state neither favours nor discriminates against any religious faith. The belief may be called "equidistance."

Bangladeshis of various faiths are deeply religious, and most devoutly religious people are also the staunchest defenders of religious pluralism. If the state has the power and authority to favour one religion over another, then it has the power and authority to do the opposite as well.

Bangladesh, despite a few extra-constitutional bumps in the road, has been very successful in keeping harmony among people of all faiths, which is consistent with the long-standing political and cultural history of the Bengali people.

Pakistan fell apart in 1971 because Muslim soldiers of Pakistan perpetrated

barbaric atrocities on Bengali-speaking people in former East Pakistan, about 88% of whose population was Muslim, and demonstrated that a common religion could not act as a unifier in Pakistan.

In the above context, can religion act as a bond in a nation? Many scholars argue that it cannot, because 22 Arab countries are separate nation-states although they speak the same Arabic language and their populations are overwhelmingly Muslims. Why could not they be merged as one state on the basis of religion?

Furthermore, Islam is not a monolithic religion. It is made up of a variety of strands of thought and multiple interpretations of the Holy Qu'ran. The Muslim world is arguably severely fractured along ethnic lines -- all having very different views on precepts of Islam. It demonstrates that Islamic ideology is not uniform or rigid.

The difference in the practice of Islam between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims remains. Many of the practices of Islam in non-Arab Muslim majority countries, from Iran to Indonesia, have their underpinnings on local customs and traditions that are very different from those of Arab Muslims.

Finally, let me quote former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad who said at the OIC Summit in 2003: "We are now 1.3 billion strong. We have the biggest oil reserve in the world. We have great wealth. We seem more helpless than the small number of Jahilliah converts who accepted the Prophet as their leader. Why? Is it because of Allah's will or is it because we have interpreted our religion wrongly, or failed to abide by the correct teachings of our religion or done the wrong things?"

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## Anti-war left grows in Congress

The bad news? The anti-war caucus is growing by leaps and bounds. One hundred and two Democrats, including Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-Wisc) voted against the bill (although Obey shepherded the bill to the floor, so his was a protest vote).

THIS has been a tough week for the Defense Department. WikiLeaks released thousands of government documents on the Afghanistan War, and an even bigger treasure trove on Iraq may be next, while a government audit just reported that the Pentagon cannot account for over 95% of \$9.1 billion in Iraq reconstruction money.

But at least their cash will keep com-

ing. With the August recess looming, the House just approved a \$59 billion bill to continue war funding, and increase spending on operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, by a comfortable 308-114 vote. That's the good news for the Pentagon.

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Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-Wisc) voted against the bill (although Obey shepherded the bill to the floor, so his was a protest vote). That's a substantial increase when only 32 Democrats declined to support a larger war-spending bill a year ago.

With only 12 Republicans joining them, the anti-war Democrats in the House do not, by themselves, have the power to reverse the escalation in the Af/Pak theatre.

But what their displeasure signals, amid rising casualties, rumblings from Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry (D-MA), an anti-Afghanistan War gaffe from Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele, and the recent controversy over comments by

ousted Afghanistan Gen. Stanley McChrystal, is that the once near unanimous support for the US presence in Afghanistan is becoming controversial, particularly on the left.

That, in turn, could mean that there will be pressure on Obama to move more quickly towards Afghanistan withdrawal from within his party's grassroots in the run-up to his re-election bid in 2012. Just this week, liberal commentator Arianna Huffington told *Newsweek's* Daniel Lyons that the editors of her popular Web site, the *Huffington Post*, uniformly oppose the Afghanistan War as unnecessary. That may be a bell weather of rising sentiment on the left.

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