

Between a rock and a hard place



Choice between neutrality and succumbing to pressure.

Civil servants often face a stark choice of either disregarding pressures from political leaders at their own peril, or yielding to these pressures and losing their neutrality. Refusal to yield to political pressures by a civil servant is often viewed by a political boss as disloyalty to the party in power, and hence the government.

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IT is not an easy task being a civil servant these days in the country, I guess. For that matter it never was, only it has become tougher. In the forty years of our existence we have seen many times tussles over turf, roles and responsibilities between civil servants and elected officials. It has always been challenging to work with a fine line of distinction between local politics and administration. Yet people went to work for the government in droves. It was not simply because the government was the biggest employer, but a government job also carried the stamp of authority, safety and security -- although not much money.

Most important of it all, however, was the dignity and respect for civil service that attracted most people to these jobs despite the subsistence level wages. These are also values that professional civil servants were expected to display in their conduct with

the people they served. It now seems that we have reached a precipice where all these values are headed downhill.

The Pabna incident and the whirlwind of protest and counter-protest that followed is a grim reminder of the crisis that we face today. This is a crisis of confidence in people who are expected to uphold law and order. This is also a crisis of confidence in those who are expected to lead and protect the enforcers of law. The image that flashed through the media of an administrator and his colleagues breaking into tears spoke not of dignity but of helplessness.

Helplessness that arose from their inability to discipline a section of people with political connections who stormed into the collector's office and disrupted a recruitment examination in progress for hiring low level employees. The helplessness was stark because that unruly section of people was seemingly allied with the party in power, and the officers found themselves in a corner. Could this incident

or the subsequent helpless image have been avoided?

Political interference in administration at local level is not unknown in our country. This has happened before, and probably will continue in the future so long as we have vague definitions of roles and responsibilities of legislators and administrators in local decision making.

Interferences came in many forms and in many dimensions in the past. Some were requests for award of procurement or construction contracts, some for jobs, and others as trivial as transfers from one job location to another. Some seasoned civil servants viewed such requests not so much as interference, but as necessary job hazards and handled them with tact.

In some cases, the requests would really turn out to be testy and the matter would escalate to higher authorities. Sometimes this would lead to the removal of the civil servant from the scene, but never would the civil servant and his cohorts be targets of abuse or harassment.

Have we ever wondered why there is political interference in such mundane matters as local recruitment for a government office? Is it because this is an avenue for finding jobs for unemployed political supporters? Or is it simply an attempt by a local party boss or legislator to reward party workers with government jobs?

In a spoils system where the government party in power can and does fill

many government jobs with party loyalists this would not be a problem at all. But in a government that draws its employees through an impartial and competitive recruitment process a demand of this nature would pose a serious problem to administration.

Civil servants often face a stark choice of either disregarding pressures from political leaders at their own peril, or yielding to these pressures and losing their neutrality. Refusal to yield to political pressures by a civil servant is often viewed by a political boss as disloyalty to the party in power, and hence the government. It takes a statesman to separate government from the party, and to separate a government job from party work.

In the mid-seventies, when I was working for a cabinet minister, a party boss from the minister's district came to him one day with a demand that the deputy commissioner of the district be removed. His complaint -- the official did not care for the party as he never listened to the many requests that the party boss had made to him.

To this, the sage minister's response was that the official was assigned to the district to do government work, not party work. For party work the party boss should come to the minister, for government work he should go to the official. In simple words, the minister would draw the line between politics and duties of a government official. The deputy commissioner was never even informed that there was a complaint against him.

It has been a long journey for the civil servants and political leaders of our country since then. In the interregnum of the democratically elected governments of early seventy and nineties, when we had military dictatorships and autocratic rules, tussles between bureaucracy and political leaders were rare. The civil servants in the districts were much of the time left uninterrupted to do their jobs. But these are transitional times when we would expect to see a greater devolution of work and responsibilities to elected officials and a more well-defined role of elected officials in local administration.

However, until that happens the professional bureaucrats who would continue to provide the traditional services at local level would need protection and safeguards to perform their jobs for the greater good of the people they serve. They should not appear helpless nor their performance feckless because they are prevented by a mob from doing the job they are tasked to do.

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Magic in market

The market manipulators have clearly played the trick of shooting up the prices of rice from Tk.30 up to Tk.42 within weeks. If the government fails to thwart the dirty trick of the manipulators the people will continue to be the helpless spectators of the cruel magic in the market.

A.N.M NURUL HAQUE

A great magician's actual show takes place not on the stage but in the hall where the spectators sit. His performance does not depend so much on the magic he creates, but on the people whom he fools. Similar is the case with our businessmen. The way they have started to manipulate the market, particularly in foodstuff, is nothing short of magic.

The only difference is that the spectators clap and cheer while the magician makes an object vanish into the air, but the helpless consumers become bewildered when the magic in the market works and they truly see that all the essential commodities have vanished from the market, creating an artificial crisis.

The daily *Prothom Alo* carried a report on its front page on October 5, based on a study of the retail food prices by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). According to the report, the food price has increased more than 28% on an average in a year and over 9% month-on-month. What is worse, the prices of major foodstuffs went up by up to 122% year-on-year.

The TCB study revealed that the prices of rice and wheat have increased 44% and 52% respectively in a year while the prices of edible oil have increased 35%. Among 30 food items in different categories, prices of at least 20 items had increased sharply in a year and of more than 25 items month-on-month.

The poor and limited-income group people are badly hit, as the price of rice has gone up by at least Tk.4-5 a kg in recent days. The wide gap between the prices in the retail market and the supply sources of millers and importers is the main reason of abnormal increase of rice price.

"Rice sells in the retail market for prices at least Tk.6 a kilogram higher than the mill gate prices. This is an abnormal difference. We need to find out some ways to reduce the gap," said Food Minister Abdur

Razzque while talking to reporters. On the other hand, the wholesalers said that they were not responsible for the price increase as they get only Tk.0.20 a kg, and blamed transport cost and other expenses for rice price hike. This is really a puzzle that needs to be done away with.

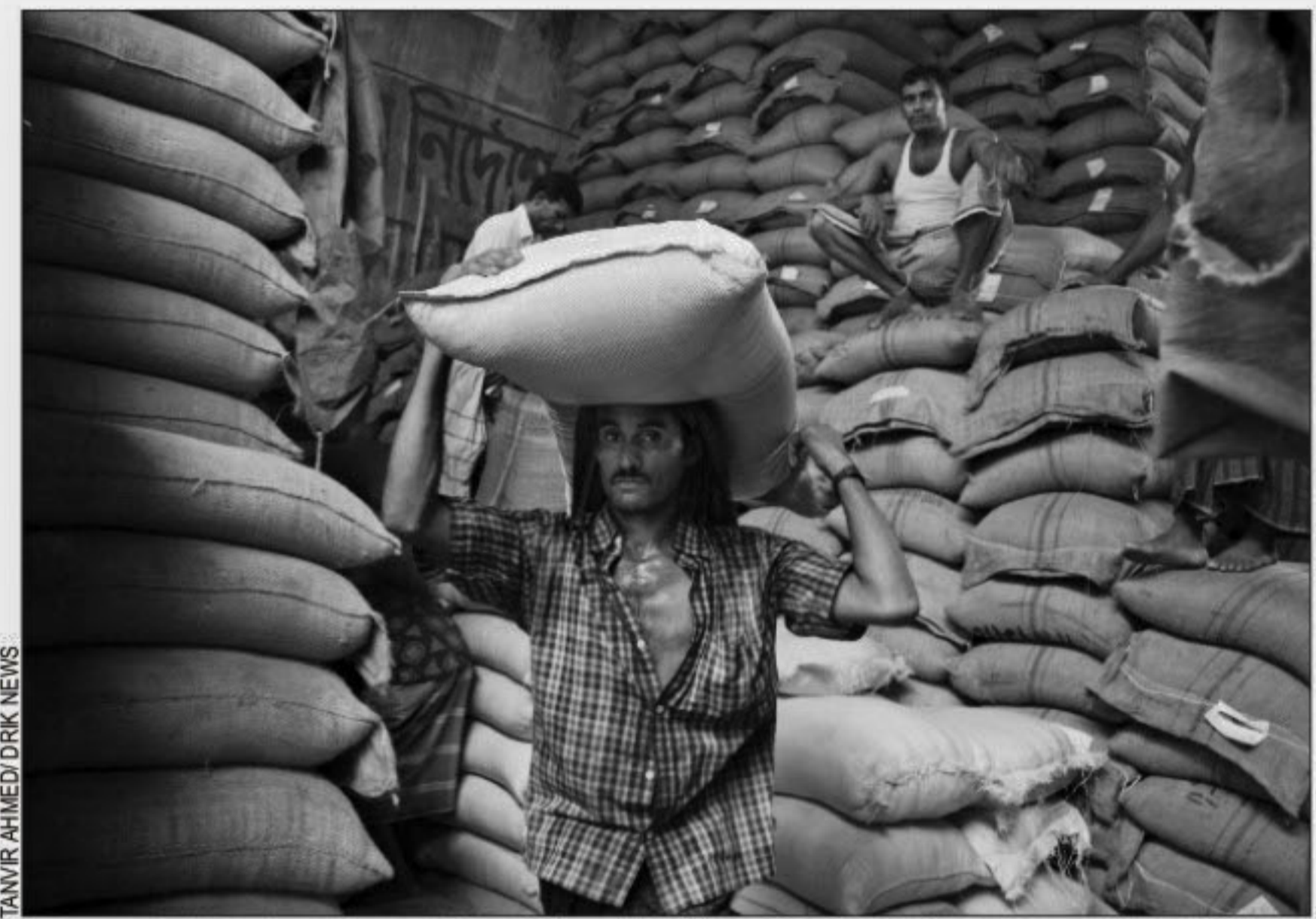
The government has resumed countywide open market sales of rice at Tk.24 a kg to ease price shock to low-income group people. It has also directed the authorities concerned to monitor the market chain to identify the businessmen involved in price manipulation, which is hitting the poor very hard.

According to the food ministry, there are about 6.60 lakh tons of rice and 1.20 tons of wheat in the government's stock, and import of more rice and wheat from India and Vietnam is under way. Twelve ships from Vietnam have already reached Chittagong port and four more at Mongla port with a total of about one lakh tons of rice and 90 thousand tons of wheat.

Admittedly, the production of wheat in US and Russia had fallen remarkably, causing rise in price. But the price of wheat has marked an abnormal increase in comparison with the prices on the international market. Coarse rice is selling at Tk.33 and Tk.36 a kg this week, fine rice between Tk.42 and Tk.47, and flour at Tk.38 a kg.

The government's market monitoring body has listed 11 food items -- coarse rice, flour, edible oil, red lentil, potato, onion, dry chili, sugar and milk powder -- under the category of most sensitive essentials commodities. Sadly, almost all the commodities under the list have become costlier month-on-month and seven commodities year-on-year.

The price of flour increased by 53% in a year and 11% month-on-month, and soya bean oil by 19% and 10% respectively. Onion price rose 14% year-on-year and 43% month-on-month. Garlic price increased 24% month-on-month and 100% year-on-year, turmeric 7% and 122%



respectively, egg 28% and 6% and pulse 21% and 39% respectively.

Although these statistics are quite frightening, the government's response to the market volatility has not been reasonably prompt. The measures so far taken to protect the poor and fixed-income people from the price shock are inadequate. However, open market sale of rice has provided the poor people a little respite.

If the government really wants to keep the market stable by thwarting the evil designs of the syndicates, it needs to reactivate the TCB. But it has only talked about TCB's reactivation without taking any effective step to translate that into action. The TCB thus remains dysfunctional, reeling under all sorts of constraints.

The government should realise that keeping the prices at a tolerable level is not enough, and it needs to ensure enhancement of people's purchasing capacity, as there has been significant erosion in their real income. Employment generation has not gained momentum in accordance with the government's promise.

The galloping prices of all essential commodities have plagued the common people for quite some time now. Though the trend of price hike caught on around five years ago, it has now started a fresh upward movement, which is too unpredictable and has surpassed acceptable limits.

The prices of foodstuffs including rice, wheat, edible oil, pulses and baby-food have registered another round of steep

increase in the recent days and are now exorbitant prices. The majority of the people have been groaning under the crushing burden of galloping prices of essentials.

The government should take a realistic overview of the market situation and evolve a mechanism to bring efficiency in market management. An efficient market management mechanism based on the information on domestic and international market trends can play an all-important role to keep the prices of essentials in check. Proper collection of information and coordination of activities based on it is the bare minimum of doing what is indispensable to establish a long-term and effective control on prices.

The market manipulators have clearly played the trick of shooting up the prices of rice from Tk.30 up to Tk.42 within weeks. If the government fails to thwart the dirty trick of the manipulators the people will continue to be the helpless spectators of the cruel magic in the market.

Price of foodstuffs is a crucial factor that directly affects the life and living of the majority people of the country. The government, however, has taken some steps to stabilise the volatile market. But in view of past sad experience, it may be difficult for many to be hopeful that the government's measures this time it will be quite enough to bring stability of prices in the face of the market manipulation by the syndicates.

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Tragic deaths in Turag

Dire vulnerability of highway travel in focus again

THIS is true to our ranking among one of the most accident-prone countries in the world. Anything between 12000 and 15000 deaths occur annually on our highways -- easily one of the worst figures to hang our heads down on. Most of the dreadful accidents when dissected by experts are found to have been largely avoidable. The issues of erratic road engineering and bridge construction notwithstanding, the high incidence of accident is almost always attributable to man-made factors seen in their broadest spectrum.

The horrific story of a bus plunging into Turag off the Salehpur bridge in the city suburbs rakes up all the dreadful visuals of highway dangers lurking around the corner. The bus Baishakhi carrying some 50 passengers speeding in from Amin Bazar bridge alongside another vehicle attempting to overtake the latter, also in high speed, simply lost control a few steps ahead of Salehpur bridge nose-diving into 50-feet deep Turag river. This being in a spate of swirling high-velocity currents dragged the vehicle in, instantly. By one account, a burst tyre precipitated the deadly plunge. Several question arise from the tragedy. First the buses usually are in a race with each other, totally oblivious of the lack of maneuverability on the highways most of which scarcely have the space for two vehicles to pass each other by, let alone overtake. The ill-fated bus was clearly over-speeding and if one of its tyres burst, its roadworthiness was suspect. On a close scrutiny, it is almost certain to be found out that the driver was not trained, or he had a fake license, or the transport itself did not carry a proper fitness certificate. There is an almost complete lack of supervision on the highways, although we have heard of highway patrol squads having been formed.

Not long ago, the High Court had ordered installation of speed governors on vehicles but it seems alternative sophisticated options of CCTV and speed camera are being toyed with. Let there be speed and load checks on the highways without further ado. Moreover, vulnerable bridges should be identified on the basis of recorded accidents near them and danger markers set up at both ends.

A word about built-in safety pre-cautions for the buses and coaches. The regulation numbers of seats and exits and provision for space between rows of seats are tampered with, putting commercial consideration above that of safety. Many Baishakhi passengers could have perhaps escaped through the bus windows if these were not closed junkies or the rows of seats had leg-room between them for any desperate bid to escape. We need application of rules there, too.

Coming of the masked men

Ominous signals that we cannot overlook

NO sooner had we condemned the dastardly murder of Boraigram upazila chairman Sanaulah Noor Babu in the hands of some ruling party goons, there we saw an instance of outrageous gun-running between feuding armed Juba Dal groups in Comilla. The pictures carried by this newspaper as by so many others yesterday of masked men totting guns, some of which appears to be of prohibited bore, are enough to send chills down one's spine. They are youths, we are told, belonging to the youth wing of the BNP. And they were after, as reported, another section of the Juba Dal, having fallen apart due to intra-party feud.

Two feuding groups of Juba Dal literally turned a portion of Comilla town into a battle zone where bombs, cocktails and weapons of different kinds were used with indiscriminate ferocity. Public life was brought to a stand still and about thirty people were injured including students and policemen. And all this happened because one faction of the district Juba Dal wanted to disrupt a programme of the other faction.

While the culture of political intolerance has appeared with a repulsive tone, made worse by its association with aggressiveness, what is disconcerting is that such differences manifest not only between two different political parties but also within a political party, particularly within its appendages. And what we were presented with was a horrendous spectacle of rotten polity eating into the entrails of politics. So far we have had the misfortune of witnessing various feuding factions of the Awami League going after each other; it seems that the BNP followers do not want to be outdone in such acts.

While the environment of political intolerance must be abhorred there are several things that worry us. What is equally disconcerting in this matter, if not more, is the deliberate effort to hide the identity of the feuding youths behind masks. It indicates that these people were expecting a fight and had prepared well in advance for it. And thus the use of masks, so that they cannot be identified. But the most distressing aspect is that they had armed themselves with lethal weapons and did not hesitate to make use of those.

How came people with hostile intent manage to flaunt weapons in public? We wonder why they were not anticipated by the law enforcing agencies and stopped before they could do damage to life and property. And it was for quite some time that they had gone about with their beligerent acts.

The government would be remiss to see the matter as merely a manifestation of intra-party rivalry. The matter is indicative of a deep seated malady that of intolerance mixed with hostility and backed by lethal weapons, a combination that no country can endure.