

## Hosni Mubarak goes, finally

People's will has triumphed

After Tunisia, it is now Egypt that has accomplished the seemingly impossible task of removing a long-serving autocrat from power. The fall of Hosni Mubarak eighteen days after Egyptians began to come together on January 25 to bring his regime down is remarkable not just for the people of Egypt but also for the region as a whole. Rare has been the instance of people rising in revolt against entrenched regimes. With both Tunisians and Egyptians now having proved the determination with which they can do away with governments that do not fulfill their expectations, it is clear that a new era of popular participation in the politics of the Middle East is at hand.

The movement against Mubarak was a spontaneous uprising against the regime. It was one more example of people rising up against a regime that had ruled with an iron fist and gone out of touch. Two specific points are to be noted about the way things have happened in Cairo. The first is that the struggle against Mubarak had no clear or definable leadership but did bring together Egyptians of all classes and religious as well as political denominations. The second is the peaceful way in which the protesters conducted their struggle with no thought or propensity to violence. A third factor is certainly the professional way in which the army conducted itself. For the soldiers, the people's demands were legitimate, an attitude that they maintained till the end.

Now that Hosni Mubarak is gone, the more difficult job of where Egypt goes from here assumes critical importance. The army knows that having respected the people's wishes and seeing Mubarak off, it will need to have all the arrangements in place for democracy to take off in a post-Mubarak era. Between now and September, or even earlier, the military must ensure that elections based on national consensus are speedily held, giving the Egyptians a real taste of democracy. Indeed, with all the deficit of democracy in the Middle East, the events in Cairo should be a harbinger of change elsewhere in the region.

We congratulate the people of Egypt on their momentous victory.

## For better managed hospitals

Have monitoring cells to oversee

CONDITIONS of most of the public hospitals in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country are far from satisfactory. Pitiful service, acute shortage of beds, scarcity and lack of maintenance of equipment in almost all departments, notoriety of lower class employees and the brokers, unsanitary conditions and frequent non-availability of nurses and duty doctors make for the general scenario in our hospitals.

Apart from shortage of logistics, the hospitals are plagued with mismanagement which has in some cases given rise to a parallel administration of lower level employees and brokers. They conveniently carry on their trade in selling of spaces and beds, managing admissions in cabins or wards, making medicines, foods and other services available on payment. Some of them even entice gullible relatives of patients away to private clinics or diagnostic centers.

Sometimes negligence on part of the doctors in attending the patients and deaths caused due to faulty treatment add to the woes of the hapless patients and their relatives.

According to a 2006 estimate, there are about 1683 hospitals in Bangladesh. Of which, 678 are government and rest private. Such small number of hospitals just cannot cope with the growing figure of patients that throng these places everyday. Scenes of patients lodged on the floor are a common sight. Can they feel cared for? In some hospitals, the hygienic conditions are so poor that the stinking corridors and washrooms makes a visitor fall sick.

The government should monitor the overall quality of services in the hospitals, with special focus on maintenance of equipment. It should also clean the hospitals of notorious elements that thrive on the woes of the sick. Such practice will not only help raise professionalism of the country's health care providers, it will also ensure a better deal to the poor who turn to public hospitals for affordable medicare.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 13

1668

Spain recognises Portugal as an independent nation.

1931

New Delhi becomes the capital of India.

1951

Korean War: Battle of Chipyong-ni, which represented the "high-water mark" of the Chinese incursion into South Korea, commences.

1960

With the success of a nuclear test codenamed "Gerboise Bleue," France becomes the fourth country to possess nuclear weapons.

1961

Ex-Congo PM declared dead. Officials in the Congolese province of Katanga have declared former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba dead.

1984

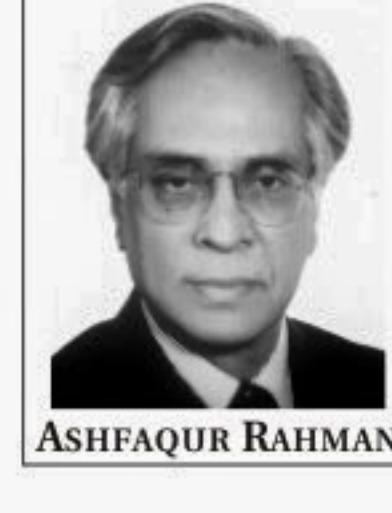
Konstantin Chernenko succeeds the late Yuri Andropov as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1991

US bombers strike civilians in Baghdad.

## SUNDAY POUCH

# Jittery grain market



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, three unrelated events worldwide drew our attention. First, was a tour by the President of China Mr. Hu Jintao to the

Shandong province in east China. The second was an alert from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) that severe drought was threatening the wheat crop in China this year. Lastly, our Food Minister Mr. Razzak making a trip to Delhi to sign an agreement with India to import rice from that country.

So what is causing this flurry of activity around the world?

Last Monday, the state run media in China warned that its major agricultural regions were facing the worst drought in sixty years. The next day it also alerted that Shandong province, which is the main area of Chinese grain production, was readying itself for the most devastating drought in 200 years, unless rains came, by the end of February.

The world wheat price has already started surging. This has had an impact on consumers in many parts of the world. It is reported that one reason for the political protest in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world is the rise of grain prices. The United Nations tells us that in January this year, global food export prices reached record levels.

So, is the world in for a huge spike in food prices, which will lead to more political unrest? Or is this just a cyclic rise in food prices that can be managed by the existing mechanisms and addressed by politicians?

The Bangladesh food minister's travel to New Delhi and signing an accord after India lifted a ban on exports of non-Basmati rice is welcome. Last August, India had similarly lifted a ban on export of non-Basmati rice to Bangladesh. This year, three varieties of rice will be sent to Bangladesh. For other varieties the ban continues.

In the meantime, it is reported that our prime minister informed our Jatiya Sangsad that the government would ensure food for all people at any cost, even by stopping all development activities if necessary.

Keeping the developing situation in mind, it may be important for all of us to know the present state of the world's grain production, the stocks available with each country, the medium and long-range weather predictions, the artificial export bans imposed by grain producers if any, and whether the grain markets are jittery or

But in southern China, the world's largest rice producing region, it has been drier than most years. The success or failure of crops, including the rice crop, would depend entirely on rainfall this coming spring and summer and not the paucity of rain this last winter. All eyes need to be focused on weather conditions in China in the



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otherwise.

We are all aware of the heat wave in Russia and the floods in Pakistan last summer. We are also aware of the devastating floods in Australia this year. Both Russia and Australia have historically been big exporters of grains. But China's wheat industry has existed in isolation from the rest of the world until last year when modest imports began. But China accounts for 1/6th of global wheat output. It produces almost twice as much wheat as the USA or Russia and more than five times as much as Australia.

The weather in northern China, especially from Beijing through the provinces of Hebei, Henan and Shandong to Jiangsu (north of Shanghai) have been exceptionally dry this year, so much so that trees and houses in these provinces are coated with top-soil that has been blown off parched fields.

The winters in China are usually dry.

coming months.

China has about 55 million tons of wheat in its stock from last year. This is equal to half its annual harvest. But if there are less than the required rains in China, then she will need to import from the world. And it is then that trouble can begin.

China has \$2.85 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, nearly three times that of Japan. She has more than adequate buying power to prevent any serious food shortage in her country. She can buy whatever she needs, and can outbid anyone in the world. The rest of the world can only watch and wait for the next season.

But let us look a little closer and recap what happened when food prices rose in 2007-08 and in 2010. We know that price volatility in international grain markets can arise from various secondary or false explanations.

Grain markets often plant the fear of

price rises, which they themselves fear.

Two years back, when Russia banned exports and Ukraine put quotas on grain exports, wheat prices had peaked at 236 Euros per ton. It was then said that prices were high because of low stocks. This was not true. Global wheat stocks were 50% higher. Stocks in the US, Argentina, etc., some of the biggest wheat exporting countries, were at a 23-year high.

The other explanation given at that time was rising import demand of China. But that was not correct. Only since last year China was a modest importer.

So, from global experience one can say that prices of grains rise whenever minor supply or demand shocks occur. But this triggers export restrictions by big suppliers. Although such control tends to stabilise domestic prices in exporting countries it drives up the price for importing countries. Then importers accelerate their purchases and thereby worsen the food crisis.

It is, therefore, important for all actors in a grain market to know real stocks of each country, the reason for any price disturbance, the reaction of exporters and the likely action to be taken by importing countries. Understanding this matrix and behaving in a rational way can help avert any crisis.

Imposition of export restrictions by large grain producers is, therefore, an important reason for market distortion. Not only do prices rise due to such action but the exporters can lose their reputation as long-term and reliable suppliers, and in the long run lose their markets. Thus, when Russia had banned exports, the USA had immediately won the huge grain market in the Middle-East and North Africa. Russia, as an important supplier, has now learnt its lesson.

This time round will the USA and India, both large exporters of grain, learn their lessons too? Will they allow grain exports without restrictions, as the weather remains vile, the stocks deplete and the increased demand waits for the prices?

The international grain market is always subject to irrational behaviour of a few players. This can trigger chain reaction by others. We hope this will not happen this year.

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# Keeping nuclear genie in bottle

RICHARD WEITZ

THE processes associated with globalisation -- the spread of sensitive nuclear technologies throughout the world, improved means of communication and transportation, and the worldwide diffusion of knowledge through the internet -- have exacerbated nuclear terrorist threats.

On December 21, 2010, US and the Democratic Republic of Congo signed an agreement to prevent trafficking of nuclear and radioactive materials. US has completed similar pacts with Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine.

Whereas in public US officials have offered reassuring comments about Pakistani nuclear security, the cables warn that growth of Islamist extremism and Pakistan's nuclear-weapons complex is raising the risk that both phenomena could fuse with Islamist terrorists detonating a Pakistani nuclear device -- perhaps in Times Square, the target of a failed Pakistani car bomb earlier this year.

A conventional explosion in Times Square during theater hours could cause horrific casualties. But if such a weapon included radioactive materials smuggled from Pakistan, US would suffer the most devastating act of terrorism in world history. The resulting losses would be worse than those from the 9/11 attacks. People would avoid contaminated areas, those at risk would seek medical care, and global transportation networks would freeze.

Islamist terrorists have launched several attacks against Pakistan's nuclear sites in recent years, including a nuclear-missile storage facility at Sargodha, a nuclear air base at Kamra and a nuclear-weapons assembly site

at Wah. Leaked cables cite Russian and US concerns about "insider access" to the country's sprawling nuclear complex, pointing to the obvious risk that some of the 130,000 people working in

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the Pakistan's nuclear establishment might aid Islamist terrorists to attack Western targets.

In February 2009, US Ambassador wrote that "our major concern is not having an Islamic militant steal an entire weapon but rather the chance someone working in GOP [government of Pakistan] facilities could gradually smuggle enough material out to eventually make a weapon."

Fortunately, globalisation has also provided defenders against nuclear terrorism with tools to counter it. US government is erecting a multi-layered defense of self-reinforcing initiatives to counter these threats based on international coalitions of governments, some of which are longstanding security competitors.

The first layer involves locking down dangerous nuclear materials; the second stratum seeks to interdict nuclear materials "on the move" through various international smuggling networks; the final layer consists in barriers erected at US border posts and other

points of entry.

Prevention involves constraining the amount of unsecured nuclear material through various arms control, disarmament and threat reduction measures. In addition, prevention includes physical security measures such as consolidating nuclear materials at a limited number of protected and monitored sites, something US has done with its own nuclear complex in recent years.

The second layer of measures focusing on interdiction encompasses initiatives to intercept or retrieve nuclear material that has escaped secure control. In late December, the US Domestic Nuclear Detection Office delivered its long-awaited "strategic plan" to Congress for establishing a global nuclear-detection architecture. The idea is to create a worldwide network of sensors, communications, personnel and other elements to detect and report the potential movement of illicit nuclear and radioactive materials or weapons.

Other assistance seeks to enhance the capabilities of their coast and border guards to interdict nuclear traffickers. For example, the February 2007 US agreement with Georgia identifies 50 priority areas for joint action to improve Georgia's capabilities, especially those related to law enforcement, to counter nuclear smuggling.

The final US line of defense aims to fortify US ports of entry as well as other unauthorised border crossings against nuclear smuggling. For instance, almost all container cargo now entering US seaports is screened for radioactive materials that can be used to make either a nuclear weapon or more likely a "dirty bomb," a device that uses conventional explosives to spew radioactive material over a large

area even in the absence of nuclear detonation.

These measures are complemented by various domestic programmes to secure US nuclear material and technologies from misuse. To take one example, new regulations now better control the sale and storage of radioactive substances to US hospitals and universities.

The threat of nuclear terrorism has even had a benign impact on international politics. Despite their differences on many international security issues, Russia and US collaborate well against nuclear terrorist threats. In 2006, for example, then presidents Vladimir Putin and George Bush launched a new Global Initiative to Counter Nuclear Terrorism. Many other countries -- including nuclear-armed China, India and Pakistan -- have joined this initiative, which unlike many general nonproliferation initiatives focuses on reducing nuclear terrorist dangers by engaging a wide range of public and private actors. For example, local law-enforcement personnel exchange best practices with foreign counterparts under its rubric. They also work with private corporations to strengthen security at civilian nuclear plants.

Although China and US may disagree over how to respond to the nuclear activities of Iran, Pakistan and North Korea, they and other governments share an interest in fighting transnational nuclear terrorists that might attack any target on the globe, whether that's Washington, London or Beijing.

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