

KALEIDOSCOPE

BNP abstaining from JS

Putting conditions not acceptable

WE are sorry that the opposition BNP has decided to remain absent from the parliament in the current session. It is all but clear to us that the reason it had joined, and that too very briefly, the last session of the parliament, was possibly only to prevent their seats being declared vacant. We feel that the party's position is not only irrational, it is impolitic and dysfunctional for democracy, for itself and for the state, and above all, it is a letdown of its supporters who are being kept unrepresented in the parliament for a long time.

We fail to understand why attending parliament should be made an issue at all. And with every passing day there is an accretion to the list of conditions. It is unfortunate that something that a party is obliged to the people, particularly to its supporters, to do of its own volition, is being tied up with preconditions. This time a new addition to the list is the demand on the government to commit to holding mid-term polls. And in this regard BNP leaders are not speaking in one voice. Barrister Maudud Ahmed has set a different precondition, that of withdrawing four cases against Begum Zia.

The current session is important not only because of the budget but also for several matters of great national significance. The issue of constitutional amendment is likely to come up for consideration, and in which the future of the caretaker government will feature prominently. The only place to call for midterm polls is the parliament, and the BNP will do a great disservice by not putting up its points of view in the House. These issues are being flogged day in and day out in every forum, and on some of which BNP's stand is opposite to the ruling coalition's, and understandably so.

BNP's position regarding the issue of joining the parliament has assumed a flippant character, which, to the eyes of the people has caused erosion of the party's credibility. The only reason that the BNP should join the parliament of its own volition is that it is elected to do so.

When the ground caves in

The accident calls for answers

THE subsidence of a construction site in the city's Nakhapara area on Saturday demonstrates once more the near impunity with which some owners of projected new buildings operate. There have been instances in the recent past of buildings collapsing owing to faulty construction, putting lives at risk. And every time such incidents have occurred, there have been fresh calls for inquiries and the need for a strict monitoring and implementation of building codes. It now appears that while a new disaster may ignite calls for corrective action, such calls remain confined to being lip service in the end.

In the present instance, the ground simply caved in even before the building, a proposed fourteen-story medical college and hospital planned by Islamic Trading Construction Limited, could come up. The ITCL was reportedly digging sixty feet deep into the ground when everything collapsed. The worst part was that the caving in took with it a road as well as three tin-shed buildings nearby. It also left nearby multi-storeyed buildings with cracks. Why did those responsible for the projected building fail to note that the ground was essentially part of a wetland filled in with debris. It should have occurred to them that the soil needed to be strengthened and stabilised before construction work could be undertaken. One would be inclined to pin the blame on the engineers for the disaster. At the same time, clear questions about the quality of materials used to prepare the soil for construction also need to be answered. The Rajuk chairman has stated that his organisation had given approval for the construction of the building. But then he also noted that Rajuk's instructions had not been followed. Two questions arise here. First, what was the nature of those instructions? Second, if instructions had not been followed, was Rajuk around to hold the owners to account?

The simple truth is that such disasters cannot go on happening. Unless action is taken against individuals and firms responsible for such accidents (we still do not know if transgressors in earlier instances have been penalised), tragedy will become a repetitive affair. Will Rajuk wake up,

Hike in bus fare and its fallout



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

RAISE in bus fares in the government-run transport service, the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), within the

span of a week of increasing the price of Compressed Natural Gas by the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) has enraged the regular commuters in the city. Unsurprisingly, altercations while charging fares by transport staff from bus passengers often lead to fisticuffs between them. Such scene has become common on the different city bus service routes since May 19, the day the officially announced fair hike took effect.

Transport operators in the private sector, who are never found wanting in excuses to hike up bus and autorickshaw fares, have not missed this fresh opportunity to double the fares in passenger buses after the government decision to increase the prices of petroleum products and then CNG. The increase had already created enough reason for the bus operators to charge higher rate of fares from the passengers. When finally BRTC itself decided to enhance fares in its passenger buses, the private owners took it as a licence to start fleecing the passengers at will with impunity.

Strangely, the government raised the price tag on its ticket without making any official announcement, though during its meeting with the private transport owners on May 16 it had said that fares in the BRTC-run transport service would not be raised. Small wonder those who use mass transit service to travel from place to place or office commuters were shocked by this sudden government decision. Why is this volte-face? What prompted them to increase bus fares in the state-run mass transport keeping the public in the dark?

The hush-hush fare-hike decision aside, the argument that BRTC management produced in support of increasing bus fare is both self-defeating and ludicrous since the BRTC authorities had stated that the

objective of the fare-hike in government-owned bus service was to adjust its rates with those in the privately-owned buses. If that is the case and if the government has to follow the private sector taking its decision in fixing bus fares, then what is the justification of having public trans-

ports and scuffles between transport staff and the passengers are but nothing unexpected in such a situation.

The entire situation is undesirable. Is it not the government decision to increase CNG prices, followed by re-fixation of transport fares, that lies behind such a state of affair in the

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MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/DRIK NEWS

port service under its control, in the first place? What special benefit the common commuters and travellers, who use state-operated transport, would draw from the service that is not within their means?

Now that the private transport owners are making the most of the opportunity to charge the helpless passengers at their whims and caprices the government has launched its drive to discipline the private bus operators. The bus operators, on the other hand, are playing cat and mouse with the government's mobile courts. And whenever they find gap, for example last Friday when there was no mobile court, they again relapsed into their old habit of extorting fares at an exorbitant rate from the passengers. And the sporadic

transport sector?

The government's argument on raising fuel prices, especially that of CNG, was first to discourage the more affluent section of the population who have private cars from using the cheaper fuel. But this logic, too, runs at cross-purposes with its own stance on reducing environmental pollution. Private cars and public transports that earlier used petroleum, diesel, etc emit smoke polluting the environment. It was the same reason behind driving the two-stroke-engine autorickshaws out of the city limits. Hence was the introduction of the CNG-run vehicles in the densely populated urban centres. Then what is the basis of this new line of reasoning in support of further inflating CNG price?

Revenue increase has been shown as another reason for increasing CNG tariff and a comparison has also been made between the prices of this type of fuel in other countries like Pakistan, India and the developed nations. But one has to keep in mind that each country has its own unique situation for re-fixing their fuel prices and that unlike octane, diesel and other petroleum products, Bangladesh still produces its own natural gas. But the government produced such conflicting excuses in support of raising the price of CNG, which first witnessed about a two-fold hike in its price from Tk.8.5 to Tk.16.75 per cubic meter in 2008 when the last caretaker government was in office. The price has again been raised by around 50% this time.

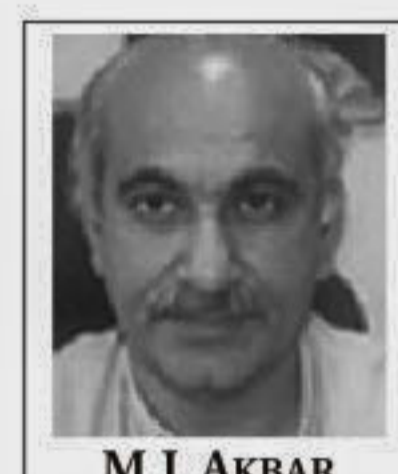
It may be recalled that the apex trade bodies, the Bus and Truck Owners' Association, Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) and all others stakeholder who participated in the public hearings organised by BERC in support of the proposal to increase CNG price, opposed the move on the ground that it would place an extra burden on the people. The move will further escalate transport cost of goods and services and as such have a knock-on effect on the already dear essentials prices as well as create added inflationary pressure on the economy. And the inevitable has happened. This only emboldened the recalcitrant transport operators further to make the most of this situation.

The situation calls for a rethink and revision of the step taken by BERC to further enhance CNG price and thus ease burden of higher cost of living on the common people, arrest further hike in essentials prices and reduce inflationary pressure on the economy. And the drive against errant bus operators should not be a one-shot one. It should rather be continuous process by the law enforcers. However, that will require a law-enforcing department that is corruption-free and has no nexus with the dishonest bus operators.

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BYLINE

Claim game, blame game



M.J. AKBAR

WHEN is a man at his most generous? When he wants to forgive himself, of course.

Home Minister P. Chidambaram

is in need of extra supplies of magnanimity. The "Star List" of 50 names he sent to Islamabad, charging Pakistan with giving these wanted terrorists sanctuary, has exploded spectacularly in his face thanks to some incisive reporting by the Times of India.

One of these chaps is selling zari in Thane when not visiting court on the dates of his trial. Two more are far closer to the home ministry, since they are being hosted by the police in Hyderabad and Mumbai jails. A fourth, fortunately or unfortunately, is dead. And buried, along with the home ministry's credibility, in India. The home minister coyly attributed this to "human error" and asked us mere citizens to get on with life.

Is "human" sufficient mitigation for error? What would make an error unforgivable in Chidambaram's estimation? Would it have to be as degenerate as "animal" error, or some savage "sub-human" error? The last time we checked the home ministry consisted largely of human beings, although a few did tend to sound more pompous than should be legally permissible.

To err may be human, and to forgive divine, but this blessed advice does seem a trifle skewed when you are forgiving yourself. When does

accountability kick in, or do we need something as tragic as the terror attacks on Mumbai (masterminded by Pakistan's ISI, if some of the evidence being given during a trial in America is to be believed) for a home minister of India to accept guilt?

Chidambaram has an extremely elastic approach towards crime and

the Marxists were still a potent force in Bengal, a foreign mercenary flew into the state on a private plane that had apparently escaped the country's air defence system, and dropped arms in a district called Purulia. To cut a pretty long story short, the pilot Kim Davy, a Danish citizen, has given an interview saying that this was a

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punishment, or error and consequence. He is clearly no fan of the American President Harry Truman who put a sign on his desk saying that the buck stopped there. The buck can stop anywhere it likes, as long as it is nowhere in the vicinity of Chidambaram's office.

So far, a superintendent of police, a deputy SP and a junior officer have taken the rap. The first two have been transferred so that they can sleep on duty in some other corner of government. The junior officer has been suspended. At different times, Chidambaram has blamed IB or the Mumbai police. He has even, in a different context, blamed the prime minister.

Since error has clearly become a genetic disease in the contemporary home ministry, the much-vaunted CBI could hardly be immune from its toxic effects. Long years ago, when

Delhi plot to destabilise the Left Front government. Delhi wants to extradite Davy. When CBI went to plead its case before a Constitutional bench it carried an expired arrest warrant.

This is not a screw-up on the scale of the "Star List" but it is certainly not an advertisement for efficiency. When the BJP laughed, as any opposition party has a perfect right to do, Chidambaram accused BJP spokespersons of "monumental ignorance." The chaps who went to Denmark, he said, report to the ministry of personnel, which comes under the prime minister, and not him.

Go ask the PM to resign, in other words.

When cabinet ministers slip from the claim-game to a blame-game, you know the rafters have begun to creak. You have only to contrast the array during UPA1 with the disarray now,

and that will give you the clue to election results. Something seems to have been unhinged.

Rahul Gandhi's advisers cannot even count correctly when he wants to raise the political temperature against Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh. Common sense would have told them that there is some distance between an inflamed accused made by agitators and reality. But the need for hype was so great that no one bother to check anything. End result: what could have been an effective riposte to Mayawati collapsed in its own contradictions.

The real issue is not that police or politicians make mistakes but the context in which you make them.

When the home ministry was preparing a list to be presented to Pakistan, on a subject as vital to India's core interests as the sponsorship of terrorism by Pakistan, one has a right to expect that the police will not behave as if they are entering a First Information Report on petty theft on a sterile afternoon in a thana. This list could not have been passed without the personal clearance of the home secretary and the home minister. If it was, then they are doubly at fault. This is too important a document to be left to someone else's signature.

Dr. Manmohan Singh's Cabinet is in slippage mode. If he does not intervene, it will go into free fall.

The columnist is Editor, The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 23

1915
World War I: Italy joins the Allies after they declare war on Austria-Hungary.

1945
World War II: Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, commits suicide while in Allied custody.

1949
The Federal Republic of Germany is established and the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany is proclaimed.

1951
Tibetans sign the Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet with the People's Republic of China.

1967
Egypt closes the Straits of Tiran and blockades the port of Eilat at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping, laying the foundations for the Six Day War.