

Transport fare issue

The right balance should be worked out

THE capital city's bus owners have rejected the government-fixed rates of fare for different types of transport.

The reason for their rejection is based on an apprehension that a chaotic situation may set in if transport operators begin to charge fares that are higher than that fixed by the government. The official fare chart is not compatible with the increases made in the fuel prices, according to them.

Instances abound of serious public resentments over hiked up transport fare. Transport operators had to face public wrath, because they failed to comply with the officially fixed rates. They are not willing to come up against another face-off with the commuters. Which is why they have been maintaining the old rates of bus fare, even after the government re-fixed the transport fares.

It is heartening to learn that the transport owners are showing some respect to the public concern over increased transport fares. Unlike what they did in the past, they have not only not taken advantage of the situation, they even tried to prevail upon the government to reconsider its decision for the upward revision of fuel prices. But it will only be vindicated if they refrain from arbitrarily charging fares well beyond the fuel prices.

The government's logic for raising fuel prices is understandable; if only it had not done it within a matter of months. It should have an equally logical outlook about the public's limit of tolerance against the backdrop of unbridled rise in the prices of essentials. Clearly, costs of living have crossed common people's affordability level. At the same time, the government has to bear in mind that it is the poor and the limited income people who travel in buses. It proves to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

We hope the government will pay due heed to the bus owners' concern about enhancement of transport fares corresponding to the elevated fuel prices. However, they should not bring in other factors to claim higher rates.

Primary school dropout

Review the realities

THE dropout rate in primary education, we have just been informed by the minister for primary and mass education, stands at 21 per cent. There are those who will not be unduly alarmed by the figures, considering that enrolment over these past many months has been nearly 100 per cent in the nation's primary schools. It would be quite in the fitness of things to expect a segment of pupils to drop out, for schools not to be able to hold on to them. That is how one could look at conditions philosophically.

On a more realistic observation of the situation, however, there is reason for worry. And it is there because of some stark truths we can hardly avoid. Foremost is the question of why pupils drop out after they have enrolled in classes. One explanation is that in a number of instances the children who stop going to primary school are often needed to help their families carry out different chores and sometimes even help to earn a little money. Another is the parental thought that in school their children will be guaranteed at least one meal a day, which for impoverished families makes a whole world of difference. Given that the national goal is the creation of an illiteracy-free Bangladesh, one would do well to ask if a system that ensures midday meals to the young could not be devised and put in place, through government efforts as well as philanthropic endeavours. A third and equally important reason behind pupils dropping out of school is either uninspiring teachers or instructors whose low income pushes them into a state of indifference to classroom teaching. It is here too that attention must be refocused if the old cliché of teaching being a noble profession is to be translated into a manifest reality.

In a world where inter-dependence is the unalloyed reality, it makes sense to ask that serious efforts be expended toward ensuring a hundred per cent attendance in the primary schools. That entails a serious look

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 23

1803

Second Anglo-Maratha War: Battle of Assaye between the British East India Company and the Maratha Empire in India.

1932

The Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd is renamed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

1941

World War II: The first gas chamber experiments are conducted at Auschwitz.

1952

Richard Nixon makes his "Checkers speech".

1972

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos announces over television and radio the implementation of martial law.

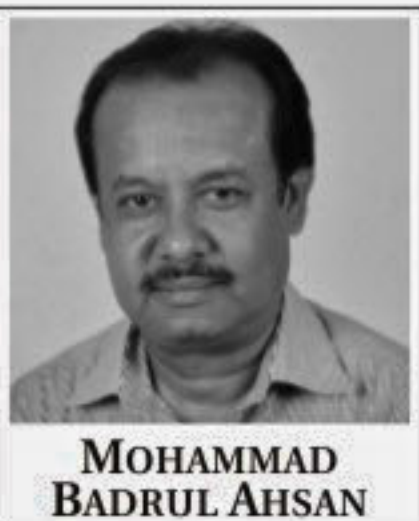
1973

Juan Perón returns to power in Argentina.

2002

The first public version of the web browser Mozilla Firefox ("Phoenix 0.1") is released.

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN 2005, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority came up with a nudge-nudge, wink-wink slogan. "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas," suggested that people could have all the fun they liked on vacation trips to that city and nobody was going to find out. A saucy Aussie named Julian Assange turned that game on its head. What happened in Vegas didn't stay in Vegas, metaphorically speaking. This one-man cabal of truthsayers took the fun out of U.S. embassy cables and leaked them out to the world.

In the midst of drooling frenzy to relish in other people's embarrassments, the WikiLeaks leaks have made that one thing loud and clear. Our politicians, who secretly talked to the U.S. ambassadors, must be embarrassed like drunks waking up next morning to hear about their nighttime indiscretions. I bet they are shocked that what they confided in full confidence months ago are coming back to haunt them now.

It must be equally shocking for the U.S. ambassadors. They thought they were dutifully and confidentially reporting to their headquarters. They were doing their jobs, picking up information and packing them off to Washington. How were they supposed to know that their classified information would turn into a class act of public humiliation?

That our political leaders have bared their souls to foreign diplomats was not unbeknown to us. Frankly, lot of us knew that they used to run to the U.S. embassy like a schizophrenic goes to his shrink. Even more relevant is the allegory of the church. The U.S. embassy has been like a confession box to the tormented souls of our disoriented political minds.

No wonder their thoughts got registered in Washington long before any-

Ravi Velloor

THE murder of former Afghan leader Burhanuddin Rabbani is a major blow to President Hamid Karzai's control of the peace process as well as to the Tajik community, a pillar of Afghanistan's ethnic scaffolding behind the dominant Pashtuns.

Mr. Rabbani, about 70 years old, was killed in his high-security Kabul home by Taliban assassins who had won his trust by pretending to be interested in the peace process he headed.

Analysts say the murder is a body-blow to the peace talks.

It also threatens to send the country into another round of blood-letting with Tajiks and Uzbeks likely once again to arm themselves to hold off the Pashtun-dominated Taliban, who will likely grow more powerful as Western troops withdraw post 2014.

Mr. Rabbani, who had two stints as his nation's president, was a key figure in the powerful Northern Alliance.

Widely accepted by Afghans thanks to his personal charisma and track record as a jihadi against Soviet occupation, Mr. Rabbani was invited by Mr. Karzai last year to head the High Peace Council, aimed at brokering peace with the Taliban and eventually, broader national reconciliation.

Even though he was fiercely opposed to the Taliban, he was in favour of peace and reconciliation with the fundamentalist group, whose strongholds are mainly in the south of the country.

The High Peace Council, which helps run a US\$200 million (\$\$255 million) government-backed trust fund meant to promote reintegration,



FRANK RENLIE

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Not one politician in the country has raised his voice against the startling facts of the leaks. Not a public meeting, human chain or even one protest rally. There is a hartal protesting fuel price hike, but nary a word when our national dignity was undermined.

body back home knew what was on their minds. The government complained against the opposition. The opposition bitched about the government. The military leaders discussed options. The think tanks analysed situations.

They all liked to do it within the earshot of the American diplomats. In other words, they ran our national affairs by the Americans, something that they should have run by their conscience first. Then they should have run them by their people. May be they could have debated those issues in the parliament, were it wholly functional. What happened in the country should have stayed in the country, which isn't how it happened. Whose shame is it? Should it be that

of our politicians? Should it be that of the foreign diplomats? In my opinion it should be that of the people, whose sovereignty was ignored because their politicians consulted foreign friends in the matters that concerned them most.

So, here is the bad news for the people of Bangladesh. If they are being entertained by the leaks, they are being entertained by their own humiliation. The daily dollops of sensationalism that have become their staple in the morning as they pore over the newspapers at breakfast tables are in fact lampooning their own embarrassments. They have been freebasing ridicule at their own expense.

Perhaps the politicians understand

Rabbani killing a costly loss to peace

gave him a measure of economic influence and autonomy, people familiar with Afghan politics say.

With his death, they add, Mr. Karzai may have lost the one figure capable of striking a deal with the Taliban and bridging the North-South divide.

Just as importantly, the murder is the clearest signal that the Taliban see little room for accommodation and seek nothing short of total power.

On Tuesday night, a Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for the assassination. He told Reuters to expect more killings of key figures.

A senior South Asian diplomatic source said Mr. Rabbani's killing follows a pattern seen in earlier political murders on the subcontinent where hardcore groups sought to eliminate moderate forces to hijack the political process.

They include the murders of Ahmed Shah Massoud, lionised leader of the Panjsher Valley who served as defence minister to Mr. Rabbani, former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the eminent barrister A. Amrithalingam, head of Sri Lanka's democratically inclined Tamil United Liberation Force.

Mr. Massoud was assassinated 10 years ago this month by Arab men from Al-Qaeda posing as journalists. Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Amrithalingam were killed by the Tamil Tigers in 1991 and 1989 respectively.

"In each case, just as with the Rabbani killing, the assassins worked for months to lower the guard of their targets by appearing to send peace emissaries or seeking their wise counsel," this diplomat pointed out.

Sadly, Mr. Rabbani appears to have fallen for the ruse even though everyone knew the Taliban had strong reason to want him dead.

Like the late Mr. Massoud, Mr.

Rabbani was dangerous to the Taliban because he had a near-spiritual appeal to those Afghans who despise the harsh interpretations of the Islamic faith projected by the Taliban, al-Qaeda and some of their Saudi Arabian backers.

In Kandahar province, the birthplace of the Taliban movement, officials voiced

their worries freely at the development and what it portends.

"It is a great loss not only to the peace programme, but for this nation as well," Mr. Atta Mohammad, who heads reconciliation efforts in the province, told wire services. "This bombing will have a big impact on the peace programme for some time."

The killing has lent credence to sceptics of Mr. Karzai's efforts to bring the Taliban to the table.

it, and that is why they aren't giving reactions to the shocking revelations. They do not even appear uncomfortable because they know they haven't lost any face. If anything, they have only suckered the people in for one more time.

In that respect WikiLeaks amounts to an encyclopedia of national embarrassment. As volume after volume of leaks are hitting the headlines, it only makes obvious how our leaders elected in this country are often selected elsewhere. It also tells us that if people are supposedly the source of all powers, then that source isn't powerful enough.

Which explains why we have been gleefully reading about the pathetic accounts of our own abasement. Our leaders were conspiring behind our back. And, they were conspiring against each other. All of these were happening in front of foreign guests, which makes it three times more preposterous.

"Who's the more foolish: the fool, or the fool who follows him?" asked Obi-Wan Kenobi, a fictional character in Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. If we must squeeze an ounce of wisdom out of the tons of leaks, that's perhaps one question we need to ask. We should be upset because our leaders set us up. They took us for a ride all that time we thought they were leading us.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Not one politician in the country has raised his voice against the startling facts of the leaks. Not a public meeting, human chain or even one protest rally. There is a hartal protesting fuel price hike, but nary a word when our national dignity was undermined.

Every fable has its moral. In whose country do we live? Assange, connect the leaks for us. You know the best. Tell us the rest. Please.

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"We should recognise and know our enemy from the lower ranks up to the top officials of the country because by any means, by any way, they are trying to kill us and eliminate all high-ranking officials and jihadi leaders," Mr. Abdullah Abdullah, a prominent Tajik who lost to Mr. Karzai in the 2009 presidential poll, told Associated Press.

The bomber, identified as Esmatullah, had stayed at a guest house used by the peace council, a council spokesman told AP.

The bomber insisted on meeting face-to-face with the ex-president and waited in Kabul for days to talk with him about brokering peace with the Taliban.

On Tuesday, the attacker went to shake hands with Mr. Rabbani at his home, bowing his head near the former president's chest and detonating a bomb hidden in his turban.

Meanwhile, condemnation of the murder poured in from around the world.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon sent "heartfelt condolences to the families of the deceased and wounded" and underscored the UN's commitment to "supporting Afghanistan and its people attaining peace and stability and to working in close cooperation with them."

President Barack Obama, meeting Mr. Karzai on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, said the killing will not deter the US and Afghanistan from helping Afghans live freely.

He said the former president's death is tragic because he was a man who cared deeply about Afghanistan.