

CROSS TALK

Drop in essentials prices

The trend needs to be sustained

APPARENTLY driven by increase in supply, prices of essentials like onion, egg, soya bean oil and green chilli that were selling at a higher price at the beginning of Ramadan have started coming down.

This is undoubtedly a positive trend that marks a departure from the past behaviour of the markets at the beginning of Ramadan. Obviously, we have a long way to go.

Though the drop in prices has been visible both at the major kitchen markets and supermarkets, most benefits are being enjoyed by the high-end consumers. The supermarkets, as part of their sales promotion drive, are selling at a discount. But common buyers at the city's kitchen markets are deprived of such a benefit.

The need is to remove the impediments to increased supply of essentials commodities in the wholesale as well as retail markets so that consumers in the middle and lower income brackets may get a wider choice and range of affordability.

It is worthwhile to note that the major barriers to smooth flow of essentials commodities to markets include delays in the movement of goods due to long tailbacks of transports carrying them at ferry terminals, at different junctions and road-crossings. Add to these the rent-seeking at different points on the road by extortionists and some dishonest members of the law-enforcing agencies.

Apart from these, the middlemen are the primary agents behind manipulating prices at the growers' level. And then follows the long chain of extortion which at every step adds to the price of those products. And the consumers have to ultimately bear the cost.

Reducing highway jams and keeping a strict vigil at the crime-prone points on the roads and highways, river terminals and railway stations would have a dramatic impact on smooth supply, availability as well as prices of the essentials.

Another imperative is to mount strong monitoring of the kitchen markets so that coordination between wholesalers and retailers is smooth to stabilise the price line.

The government will need to keep close tabs on every phase of the movement of goods to ensure their smooth supply as well as to see that lower price trend in the markets could be sustained throughout the Ramadan and beyond.

Celebration of International Indigenous Day

Impeding it to send wrong signal to the world

PRECISELY how the State benefits from stopping the celebration of cultural diversity in the country is bewildering. If one goes by recent newspaper reports, the district level administration has been directed not to extend any support in celebrating the 'World Adivasi Day', an event that has been held since 1994. Apparently such a decision was handed down as it is in line with the controversial law the government passed in 2010 that termed all indigenous groups as "minor races" and "ethnic sects".

Such sentiments when propagated at the government level is tantamount to giving out the message that the overwhelming majority of homogenous people may be ignoring the cultural and ethnic minorities who are a part and parcel of Bangladesh. Surely, we do not wish to be seen as a nation that has minimal respect for the indigenous people living in the country and be likened to countries such as Myanmar that has recently bulldozed the right of the ethnic minority living in Rakhine State. The fact that the government banned the use of the term "indigenous" effectively sidelines all such groups living in the country and diminishes their political, economic, socio-cultural and land rights.

With nearly three million people of 46 indigenous groups living in the country, such attempts at undermining them cannot be the hallmarks of a secular, democratic nation. We must celebrate the rights of cultural multiplicity these groups have had since time immemorial as they are communities with separate and distinctive language, culture and identity. Nothing could be further from the truth when government officials declare nationally and internationally that there are no indigenous people in Bangladesh and this is not the sort of message we should be sending out to the international community. Instead of banning an event that celebrates our differences, the State should embrace a policy of inclusiveness where diversity is

Abul in a China shop



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

"Abul is down." "Abul is a patriot." Neither of these hyperbolic statements is my choice. The first one is from our finance minister, who, in his staccato style of cryptic delivery in a stentorian voice, meant to say either that Syed Abul Hossain, former ICT minister,

who was also former communication minister, had stepped down or succumbed to the pressure to quit his job. If brevity is the soul of wit, our finance minister is amazing at times. He can be brief even in his wit and soul.

The second one is from the prime minister, who wants the world to know that her former minister has made a supreme sacrifice by resigning from his post. Those who have been in the run for a ministerial appointment know that's true. Tough as it is to get a posting, it should be even tougher to take a decision to quit. Abul Hossain took that tough decision and he deserves a standing ovation for it. A round of applause, please!

Except that it sits in the stomach like a log: Why should the World Bank want to single out this one man in a population of over 160 million? If you have read the paid advertorial, which appeared on the front page of leading dailies in this country, the former minister explained his position prior to his resignation. In his own words, the international lending agency is not alone in its sinister attempt to undermine him. There is a group of people who are jealous of his success. They have been on his case since his first day in office.

The former minister repeatedly mentioned in that paid paean of patriotism that he has never engaged in anything that should hurt his country.

He flaunted himself as a consummate patriot, a man who is dedicated to his leader, party and country. If everything he wrote in what reads like a Greek tragedy is fact, the World Bank and those who doubted his integrity should be on their knees begging for his forgiveness.

But the question that circles the mind with the fury of a black cat in a dark room is why he alone has been getting all the attention? Why should he be the only one to get all the praise and criticism?

A bull in a China shop, Abul is in a fix. If he doesn't take the blame, he can destroy reputations. If he takes the blame, he can destroy what is left of him. He can be a patriot, if he stops hurting the country with his balancing act.

Why should he alone run an advertorial defending his position?

If we are to believe what we hear, Abul is only one of the names that appeared on the World Bank list of culpable people against whom it claimed to have credible evidence of plausible corruption. Has the former minister been somewhat a Jesus to suffer for the sins of others? It looks like he became the concentrated expression for a slander campaign launched against this country. In that remote sense he is a patriot, a living martyr to a dead cause. He is our poster boy for patriotism, someone who went down taking the blows for his

colleagues who are his compatriots.

Most people still believe that he should have resigned long before the World Bank cancelled the loan. He would have been a true patriot only if he had shown his good judgment before the international bank made its move. By the time his conscience came alive, we were already flashed before the world as yet another example of moral failing.

By all means, it has been too late for Abul to quit. He should have stayed on the job to fight to the end to prove his innocence, if that is true. We cannot be elated by his belated resignation, because it came at a stage when there was nothing left to lose.

If anything, Abul is going to be remembered as the central character of the longest-running slapstick comedy in this country. Every time someone calls him a patriot, it draws a roar of laughter from the audience. He will also be remembered for dragging us into a moral muddle that not only destroyed our credibility to the outside world but also forced us to look at each other in striking disbelief.

Abul is a one-man bubble in our national psyche. He is like a veil on our collective brain that deprives us of our lucid moments. Every time someone calls him a patriot, we are staring into the abyss. Every time Abul calls himself a patriot, the abyss is staring back into us. A house of horror, things look disguised if we look at him.

A bull in a China shop, Abul is in a fix. If he doesn't take the blame, he can destroy reputations. If he takes the blame, he can destroy what is left of him. He can be a patriot, if he stops hurting the country with his balancing act.

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Turmoil in the Arab world

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BY the time this article appears it is possible, though not certain, that President Assad's heavily armed forces will have re-established control of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city and its commercial and economic hub.

What is certain, however, is that hundreds if not thousands will be added to the list of over 20,000 Syrians who have lost their lives in the last 17 months of conflict. The heavy artillery and helicopter gunships that Assad has deployed will add tens if not hundreds of millions to the estimated billions of dollars of damage to property and businesses that has already been inflicted.

Assad's beleaguered regime shows no signs yet of being willing to accept the rebel demand for him to step down. There are good reasons for this. The Alawite sect to which Assad belongs comprises no more than 10 to 12% of the population in Syria, as against the Sunnis who comprise 70% of the population. The Assad dynasty, which came into being when Bashar's father Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970 in a bloodless coup termed the Corrective Revolution, was notable particularly in the time of the older Assad for his ruthlessness and for building the entire ruling structure around Alawite loyalists. Under Hafez al-Assad Syria did make some economic progress, but he is now most remembered for the 1982 order to attack the town of Homs to eliminate Muslim Brotherhood adherents, resulting in the death of more than 30,000 people.

A similar destruction of Homs has occurred now under Bashar. If Assad steps down now there is little hope that he will be able to survive, and more importantly, since he has used an Alawite militia -- the Shabiha -- to attack the Sunni majority rebels, there is even less hope that the Alawites will be spared once their grip on the levers of power is gone.

Assad's days may well be numbered. There have been defections from within his inner circle. A bomb was planted in the meeting at which his senior-most aides were present and which killed the defence minister and the head of the National Security Bureau. Clearly, his security forces are no longer the trustworthy bulwark that they had been in the past.

There are reports prompted by a statement by the Russian ambassador in Paris that Russia would offer him and his family asylum, but these have been denied. There are other reports that Assad may decide to retreat to the Alawite enclave along Syria's Mediterranean coast. Both seem improbable and it is likely, as has been suggested by one Syria expert, that "Assad might fall but he will do his darndest to leave behind a burned down country." An equally important problem might be that the Syrian insurgents may well be united in wanting Assad's ouster but there may be little else on which they agree. Assad's departure may not herald peace and calm in Syria but rather a return to a conflict between the secular Sunnis, the extremist Sunnis -- some with al-Qaeda connections -- and the minorities. No easy solution is in sight.

In the meanwhile it is clear that the struggle to oust Assad has sectarian dimensions and that, as is perhaps inevitable in such situations, the extremist Sunnis have come to dominate substantial seg-



Spurred by the Syrian uprising and no doubt reinforced by the flow of funds and arms into the region, al-Qaeda in Iraq announced a new offensive called "Breaking down walls" and gave it concrete shape by launching 40 coordinated attacks across Iraq that killed more than 100 people.

ments of the insurgency. It was equally inevitable, perhaps, that they have the support not only of the Sunni states of the Persian Gulf -- Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc 00 but also of the Sunnis in Iraq, who after years of ruling the roost there now find themselves relatively powerless in a Shia-majority and Shia-dominated Iraq.

Al-Qaeda in South Asia may, by American estimates, have been decimated, but it or its franchisees have certainly gained a fresh lease of life in the heart of the Middle East. Spurred by the Syrian uprising and no doubt reinforced by the flow of funds and arms into the region, al-Qaeda in Iraq announced a new offensive called "Breaking down walls" and gave it concrete shape by launching 40 coordinated attacks across Iraq that killed more than 100 people.

As a result, Syrians who have tried to seek shelter in Iraq have been treated virtually as enemies confined to camps under effective arrest. More than 120,000 Syrians have fled their country, and given the strong family ties between Syrians and Iraqis and the shelter Syria provided to the million of Iraqis who fled during the Iraq war, Syrians had every right to expect better treatment at the hands of their Iraqi brethren. But this has not happened and the majority have had to find shelter in Turkey since even Jordan, given its own turbulent political dynamic and difficult economic situation, has been reluctant to allow the Syrians in.

Turkey has certainly burnished its credentials in the Arab world with its support for Assad's ouster and for the generally pro-Arab stance of the Erdogan government, but it is now hard-pressed by the inflow of Syrian refugees, by its role as the prin-

icipal conduit for arms and other supplies for the Syrian insurgents, and most importantly by its concerns about the activities of the PKK in the Kurdish enclaves in Syria. It has to manoeuvre carefully to ensure that turmoil in Syria and Iraq does not lead to a resurgence of the Kurdish problem that has for long been the main issue between Turkey and these two neighbours.

Internationally, even while Russia now seems to accept that Assad is not likely to survive, it has no intention of changing its policy of opposing any move in the UN Security Council to sanction a Libya-like no-fly zone or other military action in Syria.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has now rather belatedly asked for the convening of an extraordinary summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on August 14 and 15, at which one assumes that the main subject for discussion will be the effort that the Islamic ummah can make to help resolve the Syrian problem. This is not likely to go anywhere. The Syrian delegate will be joined by the Iranians in opposing any call for Assad to step down or to grant some kind of recognition to the "freedom fighters."

Unfortunately, the summit will only serve to highlight the inability of the ummah to achieve any thing worthwhile in resolving problems such as Syria or repairing the sectarian rifts that have been brought to the fore not only by Syria and Iraq but also by developments in Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia's own Eastern Province.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 3

- 1914**
World War I: Germany declares war against France.
- 1934**
Adolf Hitler becomes the supreme leader of Germany by joining the offices of President and Chancellor into Führer.
- 1972**
The United States Senate ratifies the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.
- 2005**
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad becomes President of Iran.
- 2010**
Widespread rioting erupts in Karachi, Pakistan, after the assassination of a local politician, leaving at least 85 dead and at least 17 billion Pakistani rupees (US\$200 million) in damage.