

## Backlash after India hikes fuel prices

AFP, New Delhi

India's government was confronted by strike threats and a political backlash yesterday after hiking the price of diesel by 12 percent.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh approved the rise at a cabinet meeting late Thursday despite protests from coalition allies and even an acknowledgment by his own party that it would cause pain.

Demonstrators took to the streets to express anger at the move, including a group of women who staged a cooking protest in downtown Mumbai, while transport workers met to discuss strike action.

However newspapers said the move had become inevitable as state-run refiners had been incurring massive losses as a result of government price controls.

India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party hit out at the rise saying the diesel hike will have a cascading effect and prices of all essential things will go up.



PHOTO: AFP

**Indian President Pranab Mukherjee is greeted with a shawl by West Bengal state Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee upon his arrival at the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport in Kolkata yesterday. Mukherjee is on a three-day visit to his home state of West Bengal and his first visit to the state as the country's president.**

## India opens retail to global supermarkets

OUR CORRESPONDENT,  
New Delhi

Pushing through a major economic reform measure against stiff political resistance, Indian government yesterday decided to permit 51 per cent foreign direct investment in multibrand retail.

The proposal to allow FDI in multibrand retail was cleared at a meeting of the Indian cabinet presided by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who is credited with introducing India's economic reforms way back in early 1990s.

The federal government, however, decided to leave it to states to choose whether to operationalise 51 per cent FDI in multi-brand retail in their territories.

In November last year, the government had approved 51 percent FDI in multibrand. This was, however, put on hold due to political opposition, including from ruling UPA constituent Trinamool Congress led by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

## A telling refusal

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Sheikh Hasina decided to add to an already outsize cabinet in the final year of her government's five-year term in office.

This surprise would not have been there had men like Tofail, tested in the crucible of politics since the late 1960s, been inducted into the cabinet in January 2009. The surprise, at that point, was that Tofail and all the other heavyweights of the Awami League had not been taken into government. What was offered to the country was a brand new cabinet, comprising basically newcomers. Most ministers were first timers and quite naturally questions were raised about the level of performance they would put up.

In these nearly four years since the Awami League and its allies took office, many of the worries caused by the prime minister's selection of ministers have turned out to have been well-placed. This fourth

tinkering with the cabinet does not promise any change in conditions.

A rather disturbing thought has been raised by the induction of new ministers in the cabinet. It is that the prime minister and her colleagues, battered by scams a little too many, and other crises and public perceptions of their inability to be in control, have now embraced the idea that new people in the cabinet could help revive the ruling party's fortunes as it approaches new elections.

For the new ministers, it will be a difficult calling. In the first place, the party will expect them to turn things around for the government before the elections. In the second, like so many others already in the cabinet, most of them are inexperienced in ministerial office. More important than all this is that contrary to all expectations of a cabinet reshuffle, the country has been treated to the spectacle of a cabinet expansion. Now, accommodating the new entrants will

entail a redefinition of the work of the ministries, indeed a possible bifurcation of some of them. An unwieldy cabinet, much like the sixty-member council of ministers formed by the BNP when it returned to power in 2001, is now in office in an Awami League dispensation.

The cabinet expansion raises anew the issue of those ministers who ought to have been dropped because of poor performance. Changes have for long been expected in such ministries as home, information and culture, shipping, overseas employment and expatriates welfare and a few others. To what extent the foreign office needs a new minister has also been in the air. Whether planning should be part of the responsibility of the finance minister is a matter which calls for careful reflection. The fact that none of the individuals manning these ministries has been asked to leave or has been taken off will certainly disappoint the country.

Whether the inclusion,

on second thought, of two former diplomats-turned-Awami Leaguers in the cabinet will inject vigour into government will exercise the public mind.

It is a gamble the prime minister has gone for. And now that Tofail Ahmed and Rashed Khan Menon have, in an unprecedented move, opted to stay out of government, the stakes for Sheikh Hasina have gone a little higher. The last year before a nation elects a new parliament is decisive for a government, especially if it is perceived to be weak or incompetent or besieged or all these three. Such a government is pushed to the wall. Or, fighting back in miraculously inexplicable new strength, it comes back for a fresh tryst with power.

For now, though, much of the excitement that could have been generated by the arrival of these new ministers has been dampened by Tofail Ahmed's patent refusal to take up an offer that others are only too ready to accept. The same holds true for Rashed Khan Menon.

## 2 top passport men involved

FROM PAGE 1

The seven-member probe body headed by Lt Col Mohammad Abu Nasir Bhuiyan, also deputy project director of MRP, submitted its report to the Prime Minister's Office and gave the home ministry a copy of the report on August 23.

The probe committee was formed on June 21, after the immigration at Shahjalal International Airport had detected several forged MRPs early that month.

After the submission of the probe report, the passport and immigration authorities filed a pilferage case against the 11 employees of iPeople and IRIS JV with Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Police Station.

Mohammad Abdul Momin, officer-in-charge of the police station, told The Daily Star that the 11 personnel had gone into hiding since the case was filed.

Meanwhile, the probe ascertained that a total of 2,382 MRP booklets, not 2,280 as quoted on July 11, were stolen from the Personalisation Centre of the Agargaon Passport Office between June 2010 and June 2012.

On July 11, the passport department revoked 2,280 stolen MRPs. The authorities on July 22 discarded a total of 89,425 MRPs, which had been reissued due to printing errors or some other faults but still bore mistakes.

According to the probe report, the MRP booklets

might have been stolen from the Personalised Centre or the trolley, which was used to carry the booklets but did not have a door or a lock.

It also held IRIS JV responsible for the pilferage, as the company did not introduce the Inventory and the Reporting System software to keep accounts of MRP booklets stored in the Agargaon office. According to contract, IRIS JV was supposed to provide security at the Personalisation Centre and Data Centre.

The IRIS JV has been implementing the MRP project in the country since April 1, 2010 and the firm had also been tasked with supplying the booklets.

Investigators suspect the

booklets might have been stolen for quick cash.

The probe report recommended introduction of Standing Operating Procedure (SOP) in the Management System of the passport office to stop such incident.

It also recommended that the IRIS JV develop inventory management software, reporting system and other software in the next two months and hand those over to the Project Management Office.

Meanwhile, iPeople Chairman Syed Ahsan Habib denied the involvement of his company's and IRIS JV's employees in the theft. He said several persons had already been arrested with stolen MRPs. If the probe body had interrogated those

detainees, the whole network involved in the pilferage could be unearthed.

The IRIS JV also defended itself through a statement to the probe body.

The probe report quoting IRIS JV statement said, "The Project Management Office refused to follow the suggested scanning process for the passports needed from the warehouse."

The project management office had supplied a new trolley with a door and lock to carry MRP booklets from warehouse a month after the pilferage incident had been revealed, added the IRIS JV statement.

It also stated that carrying MRP booklets by an insecure trolley was unsafe.

Deputy Director Mohammad Abdullah Al Mamun told The Daily Star that the booklets were prepared in Poland and imported by IRIS JV. The booklets are stored on the 8th floor of the Agargaon Passport Office.

He said he had no involvement in the process as the project management

office looked after it.

The activities of the project management office are overseen by army personnel and there were certain classified jobs that other officials could not attend to unless they were allowed by the army personnel, said several high officials in the home ministry.

But the probe report said had DD Mamun sat inside the personalised centre, he could have played his role properly.

On this, DD Mamun said he was posted at the personalised centre in September 2010, but he could not enter there until April 23, 2012 as he was not issued an access card.

About Major Shariful Islam, the probe found that he used to leave the office at 5:00pm while the printing of MRP booklets at the personalised centre used to continue until 10:00 to 11:00pm. He would not even ensure any replacement for his absence.

Maj Shariful Islam could not be reached over the phone or at his office after repeated attempts.