

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Big salary raise for public servants

Ensure service and performance commensurate with it

THE Pay and Service Commission has proposed a 100 percent hike on salaries of public servants on average, which, if implemented, would raise the government spending on salary and allowance by 63.7 percent. The proposal also recommended that the government provide additional benefits to its employees, including mandatory health insurance, a flat and, for officers of grade three and above, car loan facilities.

In principle, we are for reasonable and attractive incentive packages for government employees. We are also heartened to note that long-term interests of employees have been taken into account in the new proposal. However, before finalising the proposal and implementing it, the government should seriously consider the burden of the recommended hike on the budget, the brunt of which will be borne by tax-payers. Despite the finance minister's assurance to the contrary, the 100 percent increase will also likely exacerbate inflation in the country. We would like to know what measures will be taken to safeguard the economy from inflationary pressures although, as the finance minister says, these will be implemented from July 2015.

The increase in salary and incentive packages should have a curbing effect on corruption while improving the quality of services provided by public servants. In order to ensure public benefit, the government must establish a mechanism for objective and systematic performance audits. This would be to evaluate whether public servants and institutions are working efficiently and effectively to deliver on their remits. The long felt need for bureaucratic reform must be addressed to increase accountability and transparency of public servants across the board.

Plight of Dalits

Discrimination against them needs redressing

THE horrific form of oppression carried out against the Dalit community came to light in a public hearing organised by right groups on Sunday.

The community scattered across the country has increasingly been falling victim to various forms of injustice and discrimination by the 'socially privileged.' This sheer display of negligence shown to a lower caste is reflective of prejudice that shouldn't have any place in modern day society.

It is primarily a social vice to stigmatise a class of people. For this to be overcome the broader community's mindset will have to change from within. Simultaneous with it the government should spread its wings of security and care for the vulnerable segments of the society.

The incidents of torture and repression that have been revealed need to be investigated and legal action taken against the perpetrators. We are heartened by the fact that right groups have promised legal aid to them. Awareness should be built among the community to seek justice for infringement of their rights.

We call for government's intervention besides implementing whatever measures are needed for protecting the Dalit community immediately. The community should not be allowed to think they are alone to fight for their rights; human rights should prevail over social inequalities irrespective of one's standing in society.

Security threat

EDITORIAL: Dawn (PAKISTAN)

THE lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty in response to the Peshawar carnage has triggered a serious threat: terrorist attacks to avenge the executions by the state.

Already, intelligence agencies are issuing all manner of warnings to possible targets, especially state institutions and security installations across the country, and many educational institutes, including in the federal capital, have closed their campuses indefinitely ahead of the scheduled winter break.

Pakistan is bracing for a backlash. This is the moment in which the performance and capabilities of the intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus across the country will be assessed. Failure could have catastrophic consequences, not just in terms of lives lost and individuals injured but also in terms of the state's very ability to fight terrorism and militancy in all its manifestations.

For, a wave of successful attacks in response to state execution of militants could leave the resolve to fight terrorism in tatters, especially if the forces on the frontline are left exposed and vulnerable.

To be sure, in this long fight against militancy, there will be more suffering inflicted on the country. Given the willingness of the militants to attack virtually any target, hard or soft, and the reality that militants are embedded across the country, the possibility of more terrorist attacks is high.

But there is, or ought to be at least, a difference between the unexpected attack, the one that slipped through the cracks in the system, and attacks in major cities at a time when the country's security apparatus is in a state of high alert and mobilised essentially on a war footing.

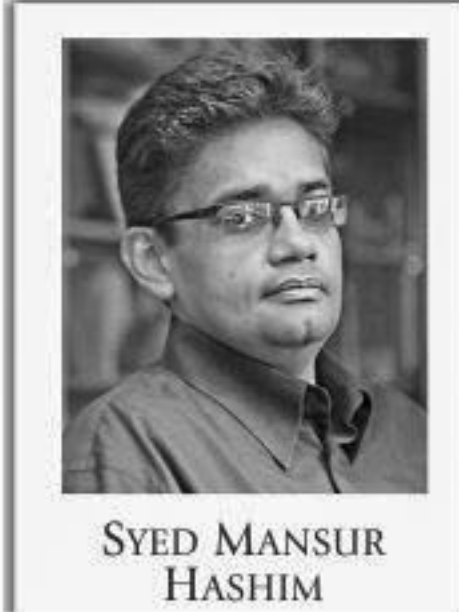
Yesterday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan gave his frankest assessment yet of the scale and size of the militancy problem in the country. But it is not enough to call on the citizenry to act as eyes and ears on the ground against militancy.

What is the government doing about the militant supporters and sympathisers within the state machinery? Time and again, the infiltration by militant groups into law-enforcement agencies and even the intelligence apparatus briefly emerges as a topic of debate at the national level before being quietly pushed into the background again. Beyond that, where is the public investigation into lapses that have made militant attacks possible and where is the accountability of those who are found to have failed in their jobs?

No system anywhere can improve if there is no transparency and accountability. In essence, it is about disrupting the militants' tactics and plans. Studying past attacks and disseminating knowledge within the security apparatus about how attacks are carried out help prevent future attacks -- but only if the state is willing to adapt and learn itself.

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Saudi oil bomb for Iran



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

Saudi Arabia's refusal to cut oil production despite the price of crude bottoming out in the vicinity of \$60 per barrel around mid-December serves to undercut Iran in a manner that the UN sanctions never could. With oil prices plummeting from a high of \$115 in August, 2013 to its present price, Iran's ability to finance overseas military operations in the Mid-East are sure to take a hit. This is not the first time Saudi Arabia has used its overwhelming presence in Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to send Iran into a freefall. Back in 1977, it increased production from 8 million barrels a day to 11.8 million barrels, forcing the market price plummeting. Iran was sent scurrying from the market and the effects on the Iranian economy were plain to see. Industrial output fell an estimated 50% and inflation rose to as high as 40%. The Iranian monarchy lost a lot of support amongst the middle class and paved the way, to a large extent, for the revolution in 1979.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been locked in a strategic ideological battle over the Middle East long before the

against Tehran is best exemplified in an article written in 2006 by Nawaf Obaid, a close associate of Prince Turki-al-Faisal (Ambassador to the US at the time) that appeared in *Washington Post*: "If Saudi Arabia boosted production and cut the price of oil in half...it would be devastating to Iran...[and] limit Tehran's ability to continue funneling hundreds of millions each year to Shiite militias in Iraq and elsewhere." Hence, this is a battle of supremacy between Sunnis and Shiites as viewed by Riyadh and oil remains the weapon of choice to reach that goal.

For all practical purposes, it is impossible for Saudi Arabia to ignore Iran as a major regional player. Given that 15% of its own citizens are Shia, it is a constant reminder for the Saudi royal family that, no matter how unlikely, this substantial population may rally to an Iranian call to arms. Indeed the Saudi paranoia over a possible Shiite takeover in Bahrain brought about troop deployment in that country in 2011. In that context, Saudi manipulation of OPEC prices in a bid to undercut the Tehran leadership, which it views as being dangerously close to obtaining nuclear arms, is perfectly acceptable. Undermining profits from oil proceeds is a tried-and-tested formula which the Saudis have used over the years with great effect as it has both the production capacity and deep pockets to weather the fallout from a price war.



With about \$765 billion in financial reserves, the Saudis can ride out a prolonged depressed oil market which will prove devastating to its neighbours, particularly Iran. The latter is already in a fix over its suspected-nuclear arms programme that has seen years of Western-backed sanctions.

Ayatollahs came to power. It has everything to do with downsizing Iran that is viewed as a trouble-maker for inciting Shiite aspirations for a greater say in the region. The timing to strike at the soft underbelly of an already depressed oil market during a global recession comes in very handy. It is not without reason that President Hassan Rohani has called the Saudi decision to keep pumping nearly 10 million barrels a day "treacherous" and "politically motivated." Yet there is little Iran or countries like Russia, Venezuela, Brazil and Nigeria can do to counter the financial clout of the royal kingdom.

With about \$765 billion in financial reserves, the Saudis can ride out a prolonged depressed oil market which will prove devastating to its neighbours, particularly Iran. The latter is already in a fix over its suspected-nuclear arms programme that has seen years of Western-backed sanctions. According to the International Monetary Fund, Iran requires oil price per barrel to hover around \$150 to break even. With sub-\$70 per barrel today, one can only imagine how Iranian policymakers are going to make ends meet. Riyadh's policy of using oil as a political weapon

The situation for Iran is getting dire. As expressed in an article in *New York Post* on December 14: "Tehran had learned to live with Western sanctions. But oil has been its lifeline. And to balance the books, oil has to sell between \$135 and \$140 dollars per barrel. Good luck with that, Supreme Leader! With the barrel price at barely 40% of Iran's requirement, the economy's going to haemorrhage. Iran's leaders will be under far greater pressure to compromise on the nuclear weapons -- unless we keep easing sanctions for nothing in return. This is the last chance for negotiations to bring results."

To what extent Iran can weather the downturn and how long it can ignore the fall in revenues is anyone's guess. There is little doubt that President Rohani may have to introduce new austerity measures resulting in loss of thousands of jobs if the depression continues over the near term. However, hoping for massive social unrest manifesting in large street protests in Iran may be somewhat far-fetched unless negotiations over its nuclear programme comes to a total standstill with the West.

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Why Cuba turned

JORGE G. CASTAÑEDA

THE phone call between United States President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro, followed by the exchange of an American prisoner for three Cuban intelligence agents detained in the US, marked the most important moment in the countries' bilateral relationship in decades. Shortly afterward, the US and Cuba announced that they would begin the process of resuming full diplomatic ties.

At first sight, the agreement looks like a great victory for Cuba, with the US finally backing down from its attempt to isolate the communist island. The reality is somewhat more complicated.

For starters, this is not the end of the American trade embargo, which can be lifted only by the US Congress. Nor will relations be fully normalised; there will be embassies, but not ambassadors.

But there is no question that the agreement -- brokered by the Vatican and Canada -- is an important step forward. Travel to Havana for Americans who are not of Cuban descent will become easier. It will be possible to conduct bank transactions between the two countries. Some commercial issues will be settled. The US State Department will remove Cuba from the list of countries that it accuses of supporting terrorism.

It is true that Cuba seems to have given up very little in exchange. In addition to releasing the American, Alan Gross, Castro agreed to free 53 political prisoners, loosen restrictions on the Internet, and grant access to United Nations human-rights officials and observers from the International Red Cross. These are concessions, to be sure, but not large ones in view of what Cuba stands to gain with the resumption of diplomatic relations after a half-century of isolation.

Nonetheless, Cuba is in trouble, owing to a crucial variable that probably motivated Castro's decision: the recent collapse in the price of oil. A series of factors -- the spectacular increase in oil and gas production in the US, the recession in Europe and Japan, the decision by Saudi Arabia to keep its taps flowing, and the economic slowdown in China and India -- have led to a supply glut. And the two countries most affected are precisely those on which Cuba has historically depended to keep its economy afloat: Russia and Venezuela.

Of the two, Venezuela and its troubles pose the biggest threat to Cuba's stability. Russia has not supported Cuba significantly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Venezuela -- especially under former President Hugo Chávez -- has been an important patron, sending Cuba about 100,000 barrels of oil a day, along with some \$5-15 billion in aid every year.

Those subsidies are unlikely to continue. Indeed, it is likely no coincidence that the talks between the US and Cuba started shortly after Chávez died in 2013. There is little doubt that, in the absence of Venezuelan subsidies, Cuba will once again plunge into depression -- as it did after Russian assistance dried up in early 1990s.

This leaves Cuba extremely vulnerable. Economic reforms have clearly not had their desired effect. Incomes have fallen. Widespread shortages have fuelled rampant inflation, with hyperinflation a growing risk. The currency trades on the black market are at little more than 3% of the official rate. A major political upheaval is becoming increasingly likely.

In their book, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana*, William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh describe how Cuba has consistently refused to offer political concessions in exchange for the end of the embargo or diplomatic normalisation. And, indeed, Castro did not offer any in the recently announced deal.

And yet the economic calculus makes it very likely that change will soon be forthcoming. In the absence of a rich and generous patron, the revival of the Cuban economy will depend on the full normalisation of relations with the US -- and this is certain to prove impossible without major changes with respect to democracy and human rights.

When the history of the present is written, it may very well turn out that it was not force of arms nor the efforts of diplomats, but disinterested interventions by remote oil barons in North Dakota and the Arabian Peninsula that finally unlocked Castro's Cuba.

The writer was Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs from 2000-2003, after joining with his ideological opponent, President Vicente Fox, to create the country's first democratic government. He is currently Global Distinguished Professor of Politics and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
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Hail to the garment workers



They go to the work wearing faded clothes, work at the factory with their devoted hands and spend from their low earnings to meet their basic needs. They are self-dependent and sometimes lead families. They are low-paid but high performing workers. They stood against all the odds during the critical moments of our apparel industry. By working hard with the sewing machines and other textile machinery, they're contributing to our national economy. They are our female garment workers, the real hero of our time.

The country secured an amount of 24.5 billion US dollar in the fiscal year 2014 from RMG export through the hard work of these poor girls, the much ignored section of the population. Their important roles in the apparel industries and many other economic sectors are behind developing the economy. Hail to you girls!

Kaisar Imran
On e-mail

Universal Health Coverage Day

On December 12, 2014, the first ever Universal Health Coverage Day was observed throughout the world. The United Nations in its 67th General Assembly unanimously endorsed Universal Health Coverage (UHC) as an important step in the global fight against health inequity and poverty.

It has been accepted universally that health is a human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development and global security. Universal Health Coverage means that every person, everywhere, has access to health care without financial hardship. Access to quality health care should never depend on where one lives, how much money one has or one's race, gender or age. So it implies that health care and treatment facilities of one country should be shared with another country ignoring geographical or political borders in the greater welfare of the global human community.

Let all the countries of the world form a global coalition and work together in accomplishing the goal of Universal Health Coverage mission.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Gifts of lasting meaning

Like everyone, we've got a full calendar for December ... shopping, presents, parties, plans, preparations, cooking, cleaning, hosting, visiting. But stop for a minute and reflect: Why am I doing all this? Who am I trying to please? Or just impress?

This holiday is meant to be a celebration of the purest, simplest, and most complete love ever known -- the love of a heavenly Father who sent His Son to live among us, to teach us how to love, to make our lives better and happier. He eliminated the need for complex rules and rituals and taught us that we didn't have to be perfect, get everything right, and live up to unrealistic high expectations. All we had to do was love Him and love our neighbour and with that, we'd please Him and find happiness.

Why not try something different this year and strive for simplicity in our Yuletide celebrations? Clear out some of the unnecessary clutter of events and expenses. Leave time to concentrate on the things that will have lasting meaning for us and others, find someone with fewer blessings than us and reach out to fulfill some need he or she has.

Ted Rudow III, MA
Palo Alto, CA, USA

Comments on news analysis, "Govt could not care less," published on December 18, 2014

Bangalee1971

The unelected government is busy with politics and bashing BNP. Of course, they could not care less for any calamity.

"Cruelty in hills" (Dec. 17, 2014)

Sandipan Khan

The government should give back the indigenous people their rights.

"Shajahan vs Sundarbans" (December 16, 2014)

Anwar

Shajahan doesn't deserve to hold the ministry and should resign. He is a good union leader only and I doubt any decisions he takes will be sensible. He doesn't have the minimum capacity to address such environment issues. The navy and marine experts should handle with urgency. BIWTA boss is also irresponsible and should be fired. Why couldn't they dredge the main route in last decade? The ministers have managed to make millions of dollars, why can't they just do their jobs? The nation can't suffer for these irresponsible wrong people on the job.