

## Costly import of rice

*How did we get here in the first place?*

**B**ECAUSE our rice stock is at an all-time low, the government has sanctioned import of 2.5 lakh tonnes of rice from Vietnam. Despite the fact that the price for this import is higher than a similar sanction from two weeks back, we realise the necessity of this move: the rice from Vietnam, though costlier, will be available earlier.

But, the issue here is not about the necessity of buying the rice, spending Tk 56.53 crore in total more compared to international prices, but how we got to this vulnerable position in the first place. Our public granaries now have only 1.98 lakh tonnes of rice left compared to the normal five to six tonnes. The shortage has led to a price hike, which resulted in ordinary citizens having to bear the burden of excessively high price of rice. The stock of rice dwindled from last year's reserve because of the laudable distribution programmes such as VGD, open market sale etc. that the government had pursued. But, the failure was in restocking: traders had refused to sell to the government at prices lower than the market price. This created an imbalance and, ultimately, only 15,000 tonnes of rice could be procured against the target of 15 lakh tonnes – a mere 1 percent.

The signs were there for months that we were heading towards this situation. Mismanagement of the food ministry, expecting that traders would sell rice to the government at such low prices, and the late response, brought us here. Then, why had the food ministry failed to ring the alarm bells in time? Why was the crisis stock allowed to dwindle so low before action was taken? And, given that a section of people are set to make windfall profits from the intermediate situation, questions can be raised if the situation was artificially created.

We appreciate the measures the government is taking to tackle the price hike and rice shortage. But, with that, we urge that an immediate inquiry be launched to find out whether there was collusion which has led us to this lose-lose situation.

## Bus stop that risks lives

*Authorities must take heed*

**D**HAKA is known for its haphazard bus stops. There is no planned stop where people can get on and off a bus without risking lives and oncoming traffic. Regrettably, the authorities have shockingly continued to turn a blind eye to this, despite the consequently numerous deadly accidents leading to loss of lives. We cite two flagrant examples of two dangerous bus stops.

One example of this is at the Sonargaon intersection where buses are regularly loading and offloading passengers risking their lives and of others. This is one of the busiest intersections in the capital and mishaps are common here.

Another can be seen in a picture published by this newspaper on Thursday, where a bus stop has been created on the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Flyover. Road barriers have been placed on the flyover to slow down the oncoming traffic. A heavy-duty metal staircase has also been installed there so that people can get on and off the flyover at will. What then is the purpose of creating flyovers if they are going to be turned into bus stops? Moreover, it is difficult to make sense of either the road barrier or the staircase as the whole purpose of a flyover is the swift movement of traffic that is clearly being impeded by both of these. Unfortunately, the only thing that can explain this strange scenario is bad planning and engineering mismanagement by the authorities.

The authorities must take cognisance of the dangers that people are being exposed to, rationally plan where to place bus stops and take steps against busses that stop anywhere other than the designated ones.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Monsoon woes in the streets of Chittagong

With the arrival of summer, rain with water logging and traffic woes will come back to haunt city dwellers in Chittagong. Water logged streets, failure of traffic signals, potholes on roads and uprooted trees will cause traffic to intensify.

If, according to the City Corporation's claims, major water logging-prone areas are identified and pointed out to the civic agencies every year, why doesn't the situation get any better? Businesses have been badly affected as trade in Chaktai and Khatunganj wholesale markets have been hampered. The stagnant water has even entered many residential homes and businesses. Many areas have gone underwater. The expected heavy downpour in the next few days may cause further landslides.

Under the circumstances, it is crucial for people to stop cutting down hills immediately. Drains must be freed of clogged rubbish and plastic bags. The list of water logged areas should be updated regularly by the City Corporation. Water pumps need to be installed in low-lying areas to increase drainage capacity. And over the long run, encroachment on water bodies need to be stopped significantly. It is the City Corporation's responsibility to look after these issues in a city that is vital to our national economy.

Zubair Khaled Huq  
By email

## BLOCKADE OF QATAR

# Saudi bid to dominate the Middle East

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

**S**AUDI Arabia, in its bid to become leader of the Arab world, has once again raised tension in the Middle East, albeit at Donald Trump's instigation.

On June 5, 2017, the House of Thani of Qatar woke up to a sudden diplomatic onslaught from its close Arab neighbours in the Gulf. Led by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Maldives cut off diplomatic ties with the gas-rich emirate accusing it of funding terrorist organisations, its relations with (Shia) Iran, and the "controversial" role of its state media group *Al Jazeera Media Network*.

Then on June 7 suicide bombers attacked the Parliament building and the shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran killing 12 people. Iran indirectly accused Saudi Arabia of supporting the Islamic State and being behind the assaults. Were the attacks linked to the Saudi-UAE diplomatic offensive on Qatar putting Iran on notice?

Two GCC members – Kuwait and Oman – did not cut off relations with Qatar. But as the diplomatic spat developed into a full scale blockade the ruler of Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani found his back to the wall. Food supply situation became precarious as air, sea and land transport with Qatari peninsula were suspended and Qatari citizens in neighbouring countries ordered to return home.

Interestingly, the Saudi-led blockade came following some reportedly fake news, allegedly planted by hackers in the state-owned Qatar News Agency. The planted reports appeared sympathetic to Iran, criticised Riyadh and Donald Trump. Qatar furiously dismissed the reports saying that its state media was under attack by hackers. US and European media pointed fingers to Russian hackers as the culprits.

However, Qatar's *Al Jazeera Network* has been a bone of contention for the Gulf states primarily because of its open support for democracy. Qatar is said to have close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and have used *Al Jazeera* to foment unrest in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt during Arab Spring uprisings. One wonders whether *Al Jazeera*, which ostensibly propagates Qatar's foreign policy, will survive the current crisis.

The crux of the dispute lies in Qatar following an independent foreign

policy, maintaining relations with Iran, refusing to suppress political Islamism and of course funding Sunni terrorist groups. All rich Sunni Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, fund Sunni groups, while Shia groups are funded by Iran. Qatar's foreign minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani has vehemently rejected the allegations and so far, refused to capitulate to Saudi demands saying his government was open to mediation to resolve the disputes.

Riyadh wants Doha to correct its policies and engage in a transparent manner in counter-terrorism efforts. In other words terminate its friendly relations with Iran and accept Saudi

(May 20-22). Trump addressed 50 Muslim heads of government and state asking Muslim nations to take the lead to fight Islamic terrorism and cut its funding. By speaking to such a gathering, opportunist Trump, keeping chary eyes on Iran, has deviously dubbed Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Muslim world. Trump's views on the Middle East are largely shared by Saudi Arabia and Israel. Trump also signed military deals worth USD 110 billion to supply Saudi Arabia with sophisticated arms. Fourth, while US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called upon the GCC to ease the blockade and engage in negotiations to resolve the crisis, Donald Trump in his tweets

and cripple it economically. Ankara has a military alliance with Doha and was ready to dispatch 3,000 Turkish troops to Qatar, just in case Saudi Arabia decides to intervene. Erdogan's move indicates that Riyadh may be considering regime change in Doha. Clearly, Turkey and Iran are strongly challenging Saudi-UAE accusations against Qatar.

Qatar is one of the richest countries in the world with per capita income exceeding USD 68,000 (2015). It has the third largest proven natural gas reserves in the world after Russia and Iran. The total population is 2.6 million of which only 313,000 are Qatari citizens, the rest being expatriate



Qatar's gas reserves are the third largest in the world after Russia and Iran.

SOURCE: PRESSTV

Arabia's hegemony in the region.

The context of the present crisis is well-known. First, the House of Saud was terribly upset when the US-led P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran in July 2015. Removal of sanctions allowing Iran's reentry into the global economy was deeply resented by Saudi Arabia. Saudi King Salman's relations with President Obama were unfriendly because of JCPOA. Second, in December 2015 Riyadh formed the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMA or IMAFT) which now has 41 countries. Third, what is significant is this diplomatic fracas has come only days after President Donald Trump's bizarre trip to Saudi Arabia

supported Saudi actions against Qatar. Trump is definitely aware that the largest US Air Force Base in the Middle East is located at Al Udied and a large military camp at As-Saliyah in Qatar. Washington's role in this dispute seems dubious. America is unlikely to mediate in the dispute and Pentagon can always relocate these bases if Qatar becomes unwelcoming. And finally, all these developments have emboldened Riyadh to assert its supremacy in the Middle East.

Meanwhile Turkey, Iran and Russia have called upon Saudi Arabia and the UAE to resolve the crisis through negotiations. Turkish President Erdogan condemned Saudi-UAE efforts to isolate Qatar

workers. Bangladesh has nearly 400,000 workers mostly involved in construction sites of Qatar.

This dispute has made Qatar an unwitting battleground for Saudi-Iran tussle for supremacy. Donald Trump would probably like to see a *casus belli* against Iran that will be a boon for his defence industries.

Qatar has so far tried to play above its weight. Perhaps this time it has to step back because of US pressure and fall in line with Saudi Arabia. Besides, prolonged economic blockade will ruin Qatar's economy that may jeopardise hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup tournament.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

# What is the criteria for nominating Indian presidents?

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

**I**NSTEAD of building consensus behind the candidature of Hamid Ansari for president, the party has appointed its top three leaders to find a candidate who commands the consent of most political parties.

I cannot understand what is wrong with vice-president Ansari. He has handled the Rajya Sabha extremely well and before that, he made the Aligarh Muslim University a thriving academic institution during his tenure as the vice-chancellor. His erudition is beyond doubt and his commitment to secularism is without any blemish.

The non-BJP parties have come together to adopt vice-president Ansari, who is acceptable to all the other parties, as president. It would be embarrassing for him to be the opposition candidate when he is the country's vice-president. Dr Abdul Kalam, former president, was the popular choice of several opposition parties for a second term but had to face a similar predicament before pulling out. Thus, all that he got was the re-naming of Aurangzeb Road to Dr Abdul Kalam Road.

BJP is ultimately going to go with the choice of the RSS. It has indicated that it would keep in mind the secular ethos of the country, but the party is neither here nor there because when it comes to selecting a person for the top constitutional post, a Muslim candidate would be far from the thought of the RSS. It would ultimately depend on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to nudge the party to choose a person of his choice. And the speeches made by BJP president Amit Shah, quite clearly indicated that the person thus chosen would be anybody but a Muslim. He has been touring the different parts of the country, including the southern states, and exhorting that the choice of a presidential candidate should be someone who is acceptable to the ruling party.

The two Houses of Parliament and the state legislatures, which comprise the Electoral College, suggest that the BJP will have its way. BJP's appointment of a three-member committee comprising Rajnath Singh, Arun Jaitley and Venkaiah Naidu - who are all members of Prime Minister Modi's cabinet - makes it clear that the party's top leadership will ultimately decide who should live in Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Speaker Sumitra Mahajan, who was initially supported by the ruling party, has been dropped. She is not being considered by either the DMK or the AIADMK. Understandably, the person has to be

acceptable to the southern states like Andhra, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

It seemed like L.K. Advani could be BJP's preferred candidate for presidency. However, the court verdict on the Babri Masjid demolition could have forced the party to look elsewhere, as he has been charged as part of a conspiracy to destroy the Masjid.

If one were to look back, controversies between presidents and prime ministers have not been rare. Of the seven previous presidents, only Dr Zakir Husain and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed left office without any public confrontation. Zakir Husain, who died in harness, confined himself to scholarly pursuits while Ahmed was one of the most pliable heads of state



Hamid Ansari

India ever had. It was during his tenure that the Emergency was declared and he signed the proclamation without verifying whether it had Cabinet approval or not.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr Rajendra Prasad had many constitutional run-ins. Dr S. Radhakrishnan had even succeeded in getting Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon sacked after India's debacle at the hands of the Chinese at the Sino-India war in 1962. In 1967, Radhakrishnan embarrassed the ruling Congress by allowing the Swatantra Party to parade its MLAs at Rashtrapati Bhavan to prove their majority in the Rajasthan Assembly.

Even V.V. Giri, a prominent trade unionist who was elected with the help of Mrs. Indira Gandhi - then Congress president - to the presidency, often expressed his reservations over anti-labour legislation. Thus, he objected when the Centre wanted to dismiss the striking railway employees. He also registered his protest over the supersession of Supreme Court judges.

Former acting president B.D. Jatti, who temporarily succeeded Giri, proved more assertive. When requested by the Janata government to sign the ordinance dissolving nine assemblies in states ruled by the Congress, Jatti stalled, pleading that the Centre had no powers to prematurely dissolve duly-elected Assemblies without proper reason. Then Prime Minister Morarji Desai was forced to hold out the threat of his resignation if Jatti delayed the ordinance and the Janata Party even organised angry demonstrations against the President.

Matters hardly improved even after the Janata Party chose Neelam Sanjiva Reddy as the country's president. Reddy and Desai could not get along and the latter prevented the president from going abroad even on ceremonial visits. Reddy, nursing a grouse against the Janata government, made constitutional history when he invited Charan Singh to form a government after Morarji Desai lost his majority in the Lok Sabha. Reddy set yet another precedent when he dissolved the Lok Sabha on the advice of a prime minister who could not prove his majority.

Even President Zail Singh installed Rajiv Gandhi soon after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination even before he was elected to the parliamentary party. It is another matter that both Zail Singh and Rajiv Gandhi were at loggerheads more often than not.

I wish Pranab Mukherjee had utilised his term to erase the memory of the decision which he took during the Emergency. He was apparently the right hand man of Sanjay Gandhi, an extra-constitutional authority. Hence, his name will not go down well in history. Like his predecessors, he too was mired in controversies, particularly when he published his autobiography while in office. He could have waited for his retirement to pen down his experience at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Meanwhile, the present government at the centre must explain how secularism can survive when soft-Hindutva is spreading in the country. By elevating Ansari as President, the BJP would have assured the people that the country's ethos cannot go astray and no action will be taken that do not fit into the idea of India, which is a democratic and secular one.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.