

Unnatural hike in onion prices

Excuse of shortage is a fig leaf

THERE is no good news for onion lovers in the city these days. According to what has been reported in the press lately, local onion is trading at Tk 60 per kilo, up from Tk 45 to Tk 50 a month ago. Traders have been stating that transportation costs have increased dramatically of late. But that is not the whole story. Allegations have risen that despite having sufficient stocks of local onion, artificial scarcity of the essential commodity has been created at wholesale level. With the government allowing for duty-free import of Indian onions, there is no reason for an 18 percent rise in price per kilo of imported onions either despite claims by traders that prices are on the rise in India.

We see this trend in hiking up prices before the two Eid festivals and this year is no exception. Traders have been trying to point out the shortage of trucks due to the clampdown on unfit vehicles which do not have the necessary papers. Unfortunately, that argument does not hold up in the face of the fact that there is no shortage of supply of onions. Rather, it is the same old story of hoarding to extract stupendous profits from consumers.

The government needs to step up its monitoring at all stages of the supply chain. If transport companies are indeed hiking up prices on the pretext of having fewer transports, then steps must be taken to bring them to task because such a move by truckers is probably being taken to exert pressure on authorities to go slow in their on-going efforts to make roads safe. Anti-hoarding measures need to be enforced with equal vigour so as to spare the consumers from the devious machinations of the hoarders.

Introduce emergency pad corner in schools

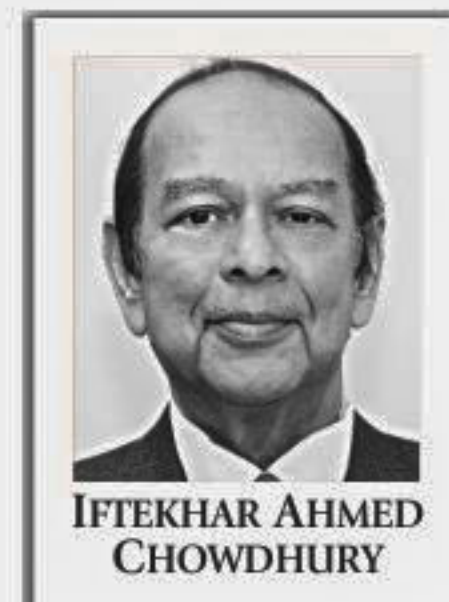
Breaking a long-held taboo

WE appreciate the initiatives taken by Bojromushthi, a voluntary organisation, which has been working to set up emergency sanitary pad corners at girls' schools across the country, as this daily reported yesterday. School-going girls in our country face a lot of problems during menstruation since there is a serious lack of hygiene and awareness in society. According to a study, over 40 percent of girls in Bangladesh do not attend school during their periods for three days in a month on average.

Despite menstruation being a biological and essential part of women's and girls' reproductive cycle, it is still treated as a taboo in our country and we rarely talk about it in public. This silence has made it more difficult for girls to manage their periods safely. The situation is much worse in the rural areas where plenty of misconceptions and false beliefs prevail. Also, limited access to affordable and hygienic sanitary materials and disposal options leave many girls to manage their periods in uncomfortable and unhygienic ways, leading to many health hazards.

We need more initiatives like this from other private organisations as well as the government because access to proper menstrual hygiene management materials will make our girls more confident and also increase their potentials. Needless to say, the work to raise awareness in this regard needs to start from the school level.

Balancing Bangladesh's foreign policy



IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE relationship between a smaller and a larger neighbourly state, as also between a weaker and stronger one, is often tricky on both sides. Though not always, it requires greater dexterity on the smaller protagonist. This is because more "power" tends to reside with the larger, which is also usually the stronger partner.

The French philosopher Raymond Aron has defined "power" in international relations as the "capacity of a political unit to impose its will upon others". When one party enjoys such capability, it would be normal for the others to endeavour to erode it. Or at least tame it, in a way so as not to continuously have to play second fiddle to it.

With regard to smaller state options, political theorists have sought to delineate a pattern, to better understand, appreciate and predict it. Regionally, one is what the Scandinavian writer Erling Bjøl called the "pilot-fish behaviour". It implies tacking close to the shark to avoid being eaten. Finland's relations with the Soviet Union to him was an example. A second option would be for the smaller power to go outside the region and enmesh itself in a web of international linkages, drawing strength from beyond the region to redress the regional imbalance. Just as Pakistan sought to do during the cold war by building alliances with the west to counter India. Third, over half a century ago, the British political author Martin Wight stated that weaker states prefer greater international order as a protective measure, a fact that remains valid to this day. Finally, small and weak states have a penchant for joining multilateral bodies in order to seek security in greater numbers, as also to build a stake for others in their sovereignties.

These elements were factored into Bangladesh's behaviour pattern in the regional and international matrix from its very inception as an independent country in December 1971. This was done both wittingly, and at times, unwittingly. Quite often, foreign policies are not formulated by cool-headed rational thinking. More often, for smaller and weaker states in particular, it becomes a series of tactical reactions to global situations rather than a strategic response as a product of careful calculations. In other words, it tends to be reactive rather than pro-active. The challenge is to balance both in a way that the international environment is rendered into a supportive backdrop to facilitate domestic good governance, development and prosperity.

Bangladesh's nascence came with some additional peculiarities. It was a rare case of secession, a recognised member of the United Nations breaking up into two. This was at variance with the existing global club rules. Secondly, Bangladesh was totally "India-locked", just as some countries are "land-locked", which made "Indo-centrism" an inescapable feature of its policies. When Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned from Pakistani incarceration in January 1972, his government had two aspirations which formed ever since the core of foreign policy. One was the strengthening of the young nation's security and sovereignty, and the other was the quest for resources for development. The aspirations were co-terminus rather than mutually exclusive.

identity remains secular, external linkages have also fed tendencies that in some have led to the encouragement of fundamentalist thought-processes, though not alarmingly. India has, of course, progressed into a power to be reckoned with globally. Still, there are swathes of poverty that in some parts exceed that of Sub-Saharan Africa. But one significant change has been the ascendancy of majoritarian sentiments, reflected in the concept of Hindutva espoused by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). According to Shashi Tharoor, an Indian scholar-politician, it could alter the nature of Indian nationhood, eroding its secular and even constitutional character. This could have an impact on the mind-set of Bangladeshis, who are overwhelmingly

that policy outcomes are often the result of competition between pressure-groups, which by logical definition would make policies "irrational".

So, for Bangladeshi policymakers, India should be seen as an amalgam of many elements, often with conflicting views. Secondly, Bangladeshi policymakers need to be aware that the existing global "order", which America had helped shape, is giving way to a new "disorder", which ironically is also being replaced at the initiatives of America. It is undermining multilateral institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the WTO. To be specific, we cannot bring our multilateral linkages into determining our relations with India. The "decline" of America is being accompanied by the "rise" of what Fareed Zakaria has called "the rest". Changes in international norms, as at times in economics, are often cyclical. So, as before, we are seeing the burgeoning importance of individual nation-states like China. It would also be in consonance with the ideas of my intellectual mentor, Professor Hedley Bull, often seen as the father of Anglo-Saxon school of international relations, who had held that state-systems have come to stay. This would propel into play theories like "balance of power" of the classical nineteenth century, whereby we may need to create a set of bilateral linkages to enhance our negotiating capabilities in league with those with whom we share commonalities of interests.

It may seem like a tall order. But Bangladesh is blessed with high diplomatic thought-leadership skills. This is a part of Bangladesh's non-technological or intellectual resources. In the past during the Bangabandhu- era, against many odds, Bangladesh was able to establish itself firmly in the comity of nations. At present, during his daughter's stewardship, we have a new genre of diplomats who have the requisite potentials. Of course there is a need to further sharpen and hone such capabilities with a view to greater capacity-building. For instance, apart from key diplomatic agents appropriately located in the field abroad, there should be adequate "back-stopping" in the line-Ministry itself to adopt requisite pro-active initiatives and adequately respond to evolving situations in the neighbourhood. This should be resourced as necessary. Think-tanks and the vast available thought-capacity existing in the community must be adequately tapped, as one sees done in Singapore and elsewhere. For as is the case with Singapore, how Bangladesh relates to the world is critical to its destiny, its consolidation as a strong nation-state, and its progress and prosperity.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.

Both cases demanded the building of extra-regional linkages. Foreign policy rested on four pillars: one, the (then) superpowers; two, the Islamic Middle East; three, China, and four, international organisations (the United Nations, and GATT, later turned into the World Trade Organization). Four and a half decades down the line, with Sheikh Hasina at the helm, the broad parameters of Bangladesh's behaviour remain the same—with some variations to accommodate the changes in the ethos of both Bangladesh and India.

Bangladesh was born with massive support from India. That was nearly five decades ago. Both societies have changed enormously since then. Bangladesh is by no means the "basket case" that Henry Kissinger had once the temerity to describe it as. It is about to graduate into the list of middle-income countries and its social indices have surpassed in progress many of India's. Still, its infrastructures remain weak, its institutions inadequately developed, and its intellectual resources not optimally utilised. While the essence of national

Muslims. We may like to believe that the largest country in the region should also have the largest heart. But then, we must also recognise realities of structural constraints and that policies are not necessarily a function of generosity.

All this render very complex the manner in which Bangladesh authorities should organise themselves to deal with India. First, India cannot be seen as a single entity. There is the New Delhi government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP, but at times for Dhaka, Delhi is *hanoz dur ast*, "much too far". Modi is powerful, but is also constrained by the domestic political compulsions. These limitations are often exacerbated by interests of the Indian states that surround Bangladesh, like West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and the like. Also, there are pressure groups like the right-wing Rashtriya Sevak Sangha (RSS), the champions of Hindutva, the intellectuals and culture-gurus, the regional parties, the oftentimes shrill Indian media, and so forth. Graham Allison, describing American foreign policy-making, has broadly extrapolated

ROAD SAFETY

Are we tackling the broader issues?

MOYUKH MAHTAB

THE enormous support that school and college students who had taken to the streets received, when they started directing traffic as an act of protest after their fellow students were killed by a speeding bus, goes to show that no one had any grounds to disapprove of what they were asking. Yet, just two days after the protests had been quelled, when I asked the driver of the CNG I was travelling to work in why he was not keeping to a lane, he replied: "*Ei desh-e shombhob na*" ("It is not possible in this country"). His answer, as I found out in the ensuing conversation, was not one based on lack of belief in his countrymen's willingness to follow the rules but rather because he thought that road conditions did not permit such behaviour. When I pointed out that in neighbouring Kolkata, vehicles followed traffic rules much more stringently despite the heavy traffic, he had no answer. Simply put, he did not want to follow the rules and that was it.

In the past week, travelling on rickshaws, insisting they keep to the right side of the road, I was met with similar refusals or only grudging acceptance. Given the chance, no one on the roads, it seems, has any qualm about breaking every rule if they think it would get them to their destination a minute faster.



A man holding a sleeping toddler picks up a key he dropped while jaywalking on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue near the underpass at Karwan Bazar.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

motorcycles without papers thinking they could get away with it. One reason for this, as exemplified by the numerous high-ranking officials who were caught breaking the law during the student movement, is that the law is enforced only selectively. When the law does not apply equally for everyone, it ceases to be something that is respected by everyone.

This brings us to the broader issues related to road safety. As I pointed out in an earlier op-ed when the protests initially started, clear provisions in our existing laws such as enforcement of speed limits remain unimplemented. The process of getting licenses remains mired in corruption—what good are licenses if one can get them without proper knowledge of the laws and without proper evaluation of driving skills. Traffic signals have all but gone extinct in the city. Bus stops are non-existent, or rather the entire city is one big stop, and passengers can embark and disembark wherever they please. Zebra crossings are there on some roads, but almost always there are cars parked over them. There is no coordination between the different city authorities, and construction and maintenance work are carried out without considering traffic flow or offering solutions to divert the traffic. And worst of all, no one in authority seems to care about the conflict of interest of public officials also being representatives of transport workers.

Without fixing the glaring gaps in the system, sporadic traffic weeks and new laws cannot bring safety and order to our roads. Take, for example, the more than 50-thousand cases that have been filed against offenders in one week. It burdens our already overlogged courts but does nothing to fix the reasons why these many vehicles without permits or drivers without licenses managed to get on the roads. Instead of ad hoc responses, formation of an inter-ministry committee with experts, transport owners, drivers and citizen groups to take stock of the entire situation and then move forward in a planned manner would be much more cost-effective. We need to update our laws, yes, but we also need to ensure that the laws once passed are effectively followed.

The best thing I witnessed in the week when students directed traffic was ambulances getting the right of way, something I have not witnessed in my lifetime on Dhaka's roads. And that is something that will happen organically on the roads, without police or student intervention, only if we decide to tackle the broader issues at play here. Implementation of the law with a stick in hand can only go so far if political will is not directed at fixing the anarchy that has made its home on our roads.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Plastic bags endanger the environment

The mass production of plastics started nearly 70 years ago. Over the next two decades, the volume of the production increased twice.

A new study by the University of Hawaii has found that plastic bags are responsible for greenhouse gas emissions when they're exposed to ultraviolet radiation. Plastic bags release methane and ethylene, two dangerous greenhouse gases.

Plastic bags have now become a great threat to our environment. Bangladesh was the first country to ban plastic bags, but people still use them because of the lack of enforcement. These bags are clogging up Dhaka's drainage system. The authorities should enforce the ban again and encourage people to use alternatives such as jute-made or paper bags.

Md Bakir Hossain
East West University

Issuing bus tickets should be made mandatory

Most bus services in the capital do not issue tickets to passengers. This practice needs to be stopped immediately.

Last week we saw school and college students demonstrating and demanding road safety for all. The government has agreed in principle to meet their demands. The road authorities should, as part of the overall improvement to the transport sector, make it mandatory for bus owners to introduce bus tickets to avoid any unpleasant incidents in this regard.

Passengers are entitled to receive tickets as proof of payment of fares.

AKM Ehsanul Haque

Dhaka