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Pakistan's Wheat Management and the South Asian Hunger Bomb

Hunger's direct victims: Every year in Pakistan, over 420,000¹ children under the age of five die because of malnutrition that affects their health. In June 2008, the annual food price inflation was running at about 20% and this figure is feared to be looming at 34% by mid December because of widespread unemployment, economic meltdown. Price hike of the sensitive commodities also increased in some cases to 40% during the same period of the year when compared to 2006. In a country that boasts to be a nuclear power and leader of the "Muslim Ummah," the UNICEF report estimated that 38% of all Pakistani children were underweight, 37% stunted and 13% "wasted or unable" to attain the expected weight in their entire childhood. Pakistan made "insufficient progress" in tackling the hunger and children malnutrition. In addition to these hunger indicators, an appalling 44% of the Pakistani population does not have access to tap-water and only 42% use fixed toilets.

What's actually happening? Like many developing countries, Pakistan has been facing food shortage as an international phenomenon particularly in 2007. Not that the domestic management was perfect; the government's miserably failed to control the smuggling, black-marketing, stockpiling and price hike of the edible items, including almost all the sensitive daily commodities. Smuggling via a very porous Pak-Afghan border becomes natural for the "wheat traffickers" because of the nearly double price of wheat and flour in Afghanistan. Therefore, town-center district Attock in Punjab has 24 flour mills as compared to bustling urban Lahore district that has 21.² Many blame the weak administrative and political control of the Federal and Provincial government which failed checking the wheat and flour's movement across the country. Instead of taking corrective measures to fixing the problem, the district governments were further blamed for mishandling the issue. At the level of district governments, the "ball of responsibility" kept rolling between the politically elected District Mayors and the civil bureaucrats, District Coordination Officers.

Government's wheat-management: Pakistan's wheat consumption is estimated at a little over 22 million tones including 50,000 tons for Afghanistan. Government in May decided to import 2.5 million tons of wheat out of which, the WFP estimated that 1.6 million tons had already been imported by end Oct 2008. Nearly 1 million ton of the

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imported wheat is estimated to have already been sent to the provinces for grassroots level supply.

No good news now: As the politics of blame-labeling of flour shortage

and price hike continued, ordinary people suffered and faced a price hike from Rs. 18/- (Dec 07 – Jan 08) to Rs. 30.2³ (Nov 08) i.e. 72.2%. As opposed to this increase in price, the incomes did not grow; poverty rather increased by 4% taking it to 74% from 70%.⁴ By end November, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) recorded an overall inflation of 25%. The individual items in the CPI also portrayed a dismal picture with food, transportation & communication, fuel and lighting inflation at 31.67%, 39.30% and 21.69%⁵ respectively. The price of edible oil almost doubled from Rs. 395/- in Sep 2006 to Rs. 775/- in Sep 2008.⁶ FATA which is already poverty and conflict stricken suffers from extreme wheat shortage and the price of wheat and flour is 30-35.3% higher⁷ than the national average. Also the purchase power in FATA declined by 10% in FATA and 2.6%⁸ at the national level.

(and) No good news in future: The official target to keeping the inflation during fiscal year 2008-2009 is 12% but independent economists estimate the inflation to be at 20%.⁹ After the increase in the wheat procurement support price (WSP) by the government,¹⁰ the price of the bread at commercial ovens will rise from an average price of Rs. 5 to Rs. 9-10 and that too in areas where wheat flour is abundantly available.

The prices touched an unprecedented level of Rs. 20 and 30 in few parts of NWFP, FATA and Balochistan. According to agriculture experts, the wheat production during 2008-09 is not expected to reach the target of 25 million tons. Less water, high production cost, fertilizers' cost and energy crisis can severely damage the yield. According to Prof. Dr. Rajab Ali Memon, former Vice

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³ WPF, Oct 08. Prices of wheat flour were nearly double in large parts of Balochistan, NWFP & FATA.

⁴ Pakistan Economist, Dec 08.

⁵ Federal Bureau of Statistic, Nov 08.

⁶ Dawn, Sep 13.

⁷ WPF, Oct 08.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Daily Times Nov 11, 08.

¹⁰ WSP/40 Kg: Sep 07 = Rs.480; Jan 08 = Rs.610; Apr 08 = Rs.625; Dec 08 = Rs.950 (Rs.81=1\$, Dec 15)

¹ UNICEF report in June 2008

² Abid Qayyum Sulehri, The News, May 18, 08.

Chancellor, Sindh Agriculture University, Pakistan would need 30 ± million tons of wheat in year 2010 for its domestic consumption alone and the bad news is that land in the wheat-hub of Pakistan, Punjab, does not have that capacity to contribute enough for this national aggregate.

Policy on Hunger: Virtually non-existent. ActionAid, an international NGO, in its policy document titled Pakistan – Haunted by Hunger, noted that “Unlike China and other Asia nations, Pakistan signed WTO without any major reservations (and) did not negotiate the protection for the interests of its vulnerable sections such as peasants and small landed farmers.” The document also noted that the number of hungry people is “reported to have risen.” For millions across the nuclear nation, crushing poverty, massive hunger, and helpless misery continues unabated and government still needs to come up with a concerted policy to addressing these issues. Interestingly, providing food to the citizens is not a fundamental right, according to the constitution and is mentioned in the Chapter 2, Principles of Policy, article 38(d). “As a result, the state authorities treat it as a charitable endeavor.”¹¹

PS: After the Mumbai attacks on Nov 26, 2008, India media cried near-war while the government adopted a very aggressive posture. Here are some “bubble-bursters:”

- According to UNICEF in 2006, South Asia is the world’s “most hunger troubled area” with 46% of all the children are underweight.
- India, Pakistan, Bangladesh “account for half of the world’s underweight children.”
- International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) ranked India at 66 and Pakistan at 61 on the 2008 Global Hunger Index.
- The author of the report, Purnima Menon said that lower nutrition, educational status, poor nutrition, (insufficient) health program, inadequate (and contaminated water) and sanitation services were the major problems.
- The report also calculated the hunger levels for 17 major states in India that represent more than 95% of the population. 12 of them fell into the “alarming” category with Madhya Pradesh at “extremely alarming” level of hunger. Punjab, Kerala, Haryana and Asam fell in the “serious category.”
- The report said that economic development and growth stories had helped little to eradicate hunger in India. It placed India’s most developed state, Gujrat, even below the Central African country of Haiti.

Anyone for moon-missions, missiles & nukes and war with Pakistan?

Both of these countries, their peoples and governments should put aside the historical and traditional biases and must work together for regional stability, prosperity and economic growth. Neither government should let a bunch of lunatic terrorists dictate the diplomatic path between the two nations.