

ABUNDANCE IN SCARCITY

MY FRIEND ARIF, a brilliant economist, came to see me the other day with this observation: he had noticed, he said, a curious counter-productive pattern to all the measures taken by the government to control price increases, black market activities, scarcity and shortages of essential commodities. Whenever the government takes such measures, the effect is always the opposite of the one intended and the situation usually worsens instead of improving.

'Take the recent measures to inspect and control bakeries in order to ensure an adequate supply of bread,' he said. 'Before these measures were announced, one usually went straight from one's work at about 2 o'clock, queued up for say 2 or 3 hours and then returned home, bone-tired for sure, but nevertheless with that small treasure of bread loaves. Now, after these measures, one goes home at 2 o'clock... without the loaves. Because almost all the bakeries run out of supplies by mid-morning!'

I had to admit that there was a certain truth in what he said. 'But,' I asked him, 'What do you expect the government to do... stop taking any measures?'

'That would be a step in the right direction,' he answered. 'However, more positive steps can be taken.'

'Such as?' I enquired.

'For a start,' he said, 'the government can issue counter-measures — for instance, ordering all bakeries to dispose of at least 90 per cent of their allocation of flour on the black market. We can all wait and see what happens next.'

Seeing the puzzled look on my face, he continued, 'What's more, this policy can be applied in other fields as well. Order a blackout of the Three Towns and nobody will complain about electricity cuts!' Arif grinned and added, 'I bet even the Electricity and Water Corporation wouldn't be able to do that!'

'But will it work?' I asked, incredulous.

'Of course it will,' he replied firmly. 'It makes good economic sense. After all, I call it the theory of abundance in scarcity.'

'Look,' I said at length. 'Why don't you go and see the Commissioner of Khartoum and put your ideas to him?'

Arif pondered over my suggestion for a while and then he said, 'Yes, I think I will.'

He must have done. Because on the afternoon radio news I heard the following 'local orders': (a) All bakeries are henceforth to use only one per cent of the flour allotted to them for baking bread; (b) The Electricity and Water Corporation is to cut off all supplies for 24 hours a day from all districts in the Three Towns; (c) Petrol is to be distributed free to all car drivers and the tank of each car must be topped up every time it stops at a gas station. The announcement said that more 'local orders' along these lines would be forthcoming shortly.

The next morning, I went to my local bakery. The place was deserted except for the owner who sat staring gloomily at the heaps of bread, of all sizes, piled in front of him.

'Can I have five loaves, please?' I asked.

'Sure,' he said resignedly. 'Wouldn't you like a hundred?'

'No, thank you,' I said. 'But what has happened to the queues?'

'There are no more queues,' he sighed. 'There is so much bread available now that we don't know what to do with it. This new local order is the ruin of us all. The black market has been so glutted with flour that people don't know what to do with it. Some are trying to sell it back to the bakeries at a loss. I have heard of one baker in Omdurman who has been arrested for exceeding his allotted quota in making bread.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said. 'It's certainly no fun any more buying bread without having to queue up for it.'

'Still,' the man said 'Our situation is not so bad compared to what's happening at the gas stations. I heard they are offering a spare-tyre with every gallon you take. But people are still refusing to take petrol unless they have to queue and pay for it. Old habits die hard, you know.'

The man refused to take any money from me, saying that I was really doing him a favour by taking any bread at all. As I started walking away, he shouted pleadingly to me, 'I'll give you a pound of sugar for every extra loaf you take!' I had to move away quickly before he made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

That same day, the newspapers reported that the Commissioner of Khartoum had made an inspection tour of the Three Towns the previous night and expressed his satisfaction that not a

single ray of light had broken the darkness of the capital.

However, there were rumours that the lights were still on in El-Sahafa, El-Thawra and Haj Yousif areas. At first the Commissioner's office issued strong denials of these malicious rumours.

But it soon became public knowledge that there were local demonstrations protesting against the continuation of electricity and water supplies to these areas. In El-Sahafa district, a citizens' committee was immediately formed to demand 'blackout parity' with the rest of the capital. Said one infuriated member of the committee, 'We won't stand discrimination, we want a blackout too! We will cut water and electricity supplies ourselves if the government doesn't do it for us!'

An official statement from the Commissioner's office announced the sacking of the Director of the Electricity and Water Corporation for his incompetence in disconnecting supplies. The statement said that efforts to cut supplies from El-Sahafa had finally succeeded (due largely to self-help on the part of the residents), but admitted that difficulties were still being encountered in disconnecting the other two districts because two generators simply couldn't be shut off. The statement said that the Commissioner was having talks with the Army Command to explore the possibility of enlisting the Army's help in blowing up the two generators.

The next day, an Army spokesman said that a demolition team would shortly be flying to the U.S.A. for more advanced training. 'The turbines of the two bloody generators just won't stop rotating!' he said.

Meanwhile, the Commissioner of Khartoum announced that in deference to the wishes of the people of the capital, who wanted to demonstrate solidarity with the residents of the two afflicted districts, the lights would go on all over the Three Towns, until the two generators were finally dealt with.

Nobody has complained of bread queues, petrol shortages, or electricity and water cuts since then. And rumour has it that, because the next cabinet reshuffle, my friend Arif is sure to end up with the portfolio for Economy and National Planning. I haven't met him since these rumours started but I have been told that the mere thought of it is already driving him crazy!