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Haunted by Shah's ghost

FROM CHAITANYA KALBAG

TEHRAN, JAN. 24.—There was a strong rumour here last week that the Shah is not really dead. Many people swore that they had never seen a photograph of his dead body and pointed out that only his wife and son were shown in pictures of the funeral, along with "co-conspirators" like Anwar Sadat. The United States, it was implied, was hiding the Shah somewhere.

This story is symptomatic of the lack of information in Iran today. The Mostazafin Foundation a foundation to help the poor) has taken over all the assets of the Pahlavi Foundation, as well as some newspapers that, according to oldtimers, used to be excellent. The foundation is said to have its fingers in dozens of plum pies. The story of the crown jewels illustrates this.

Iran's opulent crown jewels, such as the famed Daryaye Noor, Naderi, the peacock throne, and the jewellery of

the Qajar era, were on exhibition in an underground museum beneath the huge monument in central Tehran put up by the Shah called the Shahyad monument (now re-named Azadi). Since the revolution, the museum has been sealed and no one has set eyes on the jewels. A rumour began to circulate that the Mullahs had secretly sold the jewels abroad.

An official of the Central Bank of Iran had to issue a statement last week that the jewels were safe and sound. Ali Asghar Kashani, vice-chairman of the bank, said that the jewels were in the vaults of the national jewellery museum. He said following the revolution, large amounts of jewels were confiscated and handed over to the Central Bank. These were catalogued and would soon be placed in a special section of the museum. He added that the public prosecutor had seized considerable amounts of gold and jewels from

smugglers, which were also turned over to the bank.

Ayatollah Khalkhali, the man who sent many enemies of Islam to their deaths, passed on their gold and jewels, too, it was revealed. But people refuse to be taken in by such statements. "Seeing is believing", they say.

The most popular brand of cigarette in Iran during the heyday of the Americans was Winston. It was manufactured locally by the Iranian Tobacco Company under licence from A. J. Reynolds Company of Salem-Winston, Massachusetts. The revolution clamped down on imports of Winston and the Iranian manufacturers began to produce a local brand called 'Azadi', with the pack having identical colours to the Winston pack.

Yet, the commodity most in demand today is Winston. At every traffic signal, on every sidewalk one finds boys carrying cartons of Winston and loudly advertising them. The cigarettes are smuggled from

Dubai and are sold at an exorbitant rate of 17 toman (about Rs. 19) per packet (the old price used to be 5 toman).

Suddenly, last week, there was a rumour in Tehran that Azadi cigarettes caused sexual impotency. People who used to smoke Azadi (and there were not many of those) stopped buying the cigarettes. This compelled a spokesman of the Iranian Tobacco Company to strongly deny the rumour and to allege that the manufacturers of Winston in the U.S. were behind the conspiracy. This struck many Tehranis as incongruous and amusing. Why should A. J. Reynolds complain, they said, when their cigarettes were selling in such huge quantities in Iran's black market?

When the war broke out, there was a strong rumour that all bank accounts would be summarily confiscated by the government in order to

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Construction work hit

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augment its diminishing reserves. All sensible Iranians, therefore, hastily withdrew their savings. The result is that everyone in Tehran has huge quantities of money at home, and there is a terrible shortage of currency notes in the market. All the notes in circulation are badly mutilated and dirty but are accepted without complaint. All of them still have the Shah's imposing profile on them, a profile reproduced in the watermark. Ayatollah Khomeini apparently forbade his picture's reproduction on the revolutionary regime's notes. Not that the regime has money to get new notes printed. It has to make do with old, torn, notes and new 10,000 rial (about Rs. 1,100) 'cheques' which look easily forgable.

But considerable expenditure has been incurred on sending new notes which the Central Bank had at the time of the revolution to London, where they have been over printed with florid Islamic designs to obliterate the Shah's visage.

Prime Minister Rajai recently disclosed that notes worth 850 billion rials bearing the Shah's face were destroyed after the revolution. The same amount was printed at the British printing house. But the deliveries have not been received yet.

At the same time, business transactions based on cheques, drafts and promissory notes are no longer carried out. Increased cash transactions have, therefore, pushed up demand for notes to impossible levels. The incomplete merger of the country's banks has also put a spoke in the revolution's wheel. Rajai's solution: A fervent plea to his brothers and sisters working in the banks "to adopt an

Islamic attitude in dealing with your clients".

Rajai asked the people to ignore "counter-revolutionary" rumours and to trust the banks. He revealed that 20 printing houses were busy placing the 'red lion emblem' (the regime's trade-mark) over the Shah's 'satanic' face.

Meanwhile, the continuing tussle between President Bani-Sadr and Rajai is affecting the government in more ways than one. The President is supposed to approve of all cabinet appointees, but Rajai, backed by the militant hardliners in the Majlis, has succeeded in forcing most of the cabinet's members upon the President. But Bani-Sadr has put his foot down in regard to three key ministries—commerce, economy, finance and foreign affairs. Periodically, Rajai complains about this in the Majlis and the Khomein. But Khomeini has refused to intervene. Rajai is also very upset that Bani-Sadr has refused to approve his nominee for the managing directorship of the Bank-e-Melli Iran, one of the country's largest. In a letter to Rajai, he wrote:

"The nomination of the managing director of the Bank-e-Melli from your side opposes the law and is invalid. I have also told you about the illegal nomination of the deputies of the minister-less ministries. Regretfully, it has had no effect. Insistence on committing acts against the law is not in the dignity of a prime minister. In view of the legal banking (merger) bill and the absence of appointments of commerce and economic ministers and the non-formation of the general banking association, your nomination of the Bank-e-Melli managing director is illegal. You cannot be the

substitute of the people yet to be approved."

The only viable products being exported by Iran today are carpets. Between March and August last year, 2,665 tonnes of hand-woven Persian carpets valued at rials 15,457 million were exported—an increase of 38 per cent in value and a decrease of 28 per cent in weight over the same period in 1979. Obviously, carpet prices have been pushed up considerably.

Real estate values had crashed after the revolution, but they are on the rise again. But Tehran's skyline is full of cranes standing atop half-built skyscrapers. The war has badly affected construction activity, and import of cement and iron is at a standstill. In any case in quake-prone Tehran, many buildings are prefabricated, which makes them highly unsafe.