

Dhaka, Friday, June 14, 1991

The Budget

For Bangladesh, a country suffering from such severe resource constraints as known only to a few developing nations, a problem compounded by its overwhelming dependence on foreign assistance and gross mismanagement coupled with unbridled corruption affecting almost every sector of its economy, the preparation of its annual budget poses a formidable challenge. To this challenge, a new dimension is added by the devastation caused by a severe cyclone that hit the southeastern part of the country in late April. This awesome combination of the affect of a natural calamity and a shattered economy inherited from an ousted authoritarian regime has placed the new elected government in an unenviable position.

The Finance and Planning Minister, Mohammad Saifur Rahman has met this challenge, in the budget he presented on Wednesday, with a measure of boldness, a sense of realism and a strong commitment to long overdue reforms in different sectors of the economy. While it is obvious that many of these reforms proposed by Mr Rahman have been prompted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) and, therefore, come as no surprise, the seriousness with which the government seeks to push for these measures is commendable. So, judging by the overall approach taken by the Finance Minister and by the measures suggested by him, the budget undoubtedly reflects a search for a new direction, against the background of conflicting demands on our meagre resources.

Among the pressing issues tackled in the budget, an important one relates to the mobilisation of domestic resources for the Annual Development Programme (ADP) which has been raised from a pathetic one per cent this year to 14 per cent for the 1991-92 period. It is an ambitious target, like the plan to raise an additional Taka 4.5 billion by plugging the holes in the tax collection system, through procedural amendments. We regard these measures as long overdue and even practical. After all, external resources accounted for a reasonable 65 per cent of the development expenditure in 1980-81, which eventually jumped to 99 per cent in 1989-90. However, we believe that these targets can be reached only by restoring to all our institutions and to the economy as a whole a sense of discipline based on productivity, a relentless drive against corruption and a competitive economic environment.

While the broad approach is sound, some of the measures proposed by the Finance Minister call for further study. The level of indirect taxation may be just one of them. The excise duty on gas could well raise the price of fertiliser. However, the general feeling is that most consumer items will be spared from any price hike.

If this is welcomed by a cross section of people, there is bound to be some concern over the plan to reduce "the size of the government for which necessary steps will have to be taken." The Finance Minister is justified in thinking that one important reason for the growth of unproductive revenue expenditure is the large size of the administration. For the same reason, there may be difficulty in the implementation of the latest Pay Commission Award. One only hopes that in dealing with the problem of redundancy, the authorities will find ways, perhaps with the help of the private sector and autonomous organisations, of creating new jobs for those who may be losing their positions in government departments. Here, much really depends on the revival of our economy, especially of our industries where the overall reaction to the budget may remain positive but cautious until assurances and promises are translated into concrete measures.

Let us hope that these measures will go a long way not only in raising the level of cooperation between our representative trade bodies and the administration but also in paving the way for the emergence of a new business culture in the country.

Lynching in Mirpur

A 21-year-old young man was killed on Tuesday evening as a result of mob violence. Hironuz-zaman was lynched in Mirpur Section 12 by a crowd of local people who believed he was involved in a case of mugging that day. Guddu, another young man, trying to rescue his friend got a bad beating and has somehow survived. He will take long to recover in his DMCH bed.

This is the second case of lynching in a very short spell. One cannot condemn such modes of social retribution strongly enough. In the other case occurring earlier this month — doubts were raised as to whether it was a genuine 'hijacker' that was killed or an innocent passer-by. Wrong people have a way of being caught up in the eruption of mob violence and get killed. But lynching is the most horrid of crimes not for that. It speaks not of derelictions and derangement of this or that individual which is happening all the time ever since man started walking erect. The crime testifies to a kind of degradation and dehumanisation that rings the bell signifying an end to society.

As such this is a matter not for expressing one's abhorrence of it, but to heal the society of the wounds that make such exhibition of inhumanity possible. But that is a tall order. Even seventy years of socialism has failed to heal social wounds and imperfections a promise of which was its main justification. Such wounds take an awful lot of time to go.

Closer to a practical solution is going for the more immediate reason for such outburst of mob crime. Why cannot the cases of mugging be stopped altogether? Is it all that difficult? It is not an easy job as muggers hard to catch and still harder to punish. Because of connections, lynching is, at least now, an expression of lack of faith in the efficacy of both penal law and the police. Each case of lynching, more graphically illustrated by those meted out to cow-thieves — further stigmatises the police administration by an evergrowing loss of confidence in them. We wish they heeded the signs in appropriate measure.

Press Rights: Unscrambling a Scrambled Egg

In times of crisis Sri Lankans have often had to tune in to the BBC to know what was happening in their own country.

It is not surprising then that the Youth Commission — appointed by President Ranasinghe Premadasa to investigate the traumatic events in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1989 — attributed the widespread disenchantment and violence among the youth partly to the loss of media credibility.

Sri Lanka is a country where large sections of the media are under state control, where press and media censorship has often been imposed and where foreign journalists are closely scrutinised by the Customs as a matter of routine and sometimes impounded.

"By liberalising the media, Government has nothing to lose except its lack of credibility," says Neville Jayaweera, a UN Development Programme consultant to the Presidential secretariat which helped draft the new Media Commission Bill.

He quite rightly argued in an interview that technological developments today have ensured that people have access to the truth.

In Sri Lanka newspapers were started over 150 years ago in the early British colonial times. Radio was established over 50 years ago and TV just over a decade ago. In a country with over 90 per cent literacy, the media has had a good spread.

In the early days newspapers were started by local en-

trepreneurs to campaign for the country's independence from the British Raj and by some to boost their own political images. But these publications in English, Sinhala and Tamil helped to educate the people politically.

With the technical changes in the newspaper industry, the big newspapers soon came to be concentrated in two or three private companies. Radio, and later TV, were state-owned.

The biggest newspaper group after Independence in 1948 was the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. (ANCL) owned by the Wijewardene family.

Post-Independence politics saw the Associated newspapers solidly behind the ruling United National Party (UNP). Thus when the UNP was beaten at the polls in 1956 and the Freedom Party led by Solomon Bandaranaike was installed in power, there gradually rose an outcry against the Associated Newspapers.

It was argued that a family was controlling this powerful group and the group was trying to control the country and so on.

Then, when Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first-ever woman Prime Minister in July 1960, she announced that boards would be appointed to run the country's major newspaper groups. She did not pursue

Harold Pieris writes from Colombo

this immediately but this was the beginning of state intervention to curb the media.

In 1973 when Mrs. Bandaranaike was in power again, the shares of the Associated Newspapers were vested in the State with the promise that they would be sold to the public and the company broad-based. But this broad-basing did not take place. Instead the State controlled the company.

Soon after that, the Independent Newspapers Ltd. was shut down by the same government. During this period a Press Council was also set up to quickly look into petitions

about media coverage. It was a council appointed by the Government.

In 1977 the right-wing United National Party led by President Junius Jayawardene came back to power. But the UNP which had opposed the vesting of ANCL shares in the State continued to run the Associated Newspapers as a state venture. Mr. Jayawardene made no major changes in the media setup. TV emerged during this time as a state-owned media.

Privatisation had not gathered momentum in the late 1970s. It was argued it was difficult to privatise again the Associated Newspapers group — "difficult to unscramble the scrambled egg." But now it looks as if this difficult task

with different political parties represented in Parliament.

A Nominations Commission of members selected from a panel of persons recommended to the President by a Committee of Parliament is to be established. This Commission will recommend to the President names for senior positions.

The composition of the Media Commission membership is thus expected to reflect the interests of the Government and the Opposition and the various professional and sectoral interests in the country.

Once the Commission is appointed, neither the President nor the Minister nor any officials can issue directives to it. It is answerable only to Parlia-

tise one state TV service. The privatisation of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. is also expected to be considered.

The Media Commission will also take over the functions of the present Press Council which has turned out to be not a simple forum for the quick and easy redress of grievances. The Commission will look into petitions, with or without legal support.

The Media Commission can also act on its own, without a petition. If the members of the Commission think that a particular feature or programme is biased or distorted or lacking in good taste, they can call the offending institution to explain and to take remedial action.

The Commission can look into the ownership of private groups and break up cartels and monopolies. It can arrange for the broad-basing of ownership, if required or feasible.

The Media Commission will certainly be equipped with a wide range of powers to protect the public and journalists. But media liberalisation cannot be effected unless the attitudes and fears that have developed over the last 30 years are changed quickly.

Certain analysts feel if the media is to be freed the Government must take its hands off it completely. Both Government and Opposition leaders must accept the right of the public to criticise within the limits of the law.

It is pointed out that political figures being over-sensitive to public criticism has been the principal cause for imposing clamps on the media. Therefore, there has to be a complete change of attitude at the top levels of the political hierarchy of the country. Otherwise, there is very little the Media Commission and laws could do.

Presidential media Consultant Mr. Jayaweera has a very telling comment on this aspect which illustrates the situation in developing countries like Sri Lanka: "It is an extraordinary thing that however much a party, when in the Opposition, agitates for the liberalisation of the media, when elected to power, it seems to lose the wisdom and the insights it enjoyed when it was in the Opposition."

— DEPTHEW NEWS ASIA

Public criticism has been the principal cause for imposing clamps on media

Army Merger May be the Easiest Bit in Angola

by Keith Somerville and George Bennett

The ceremonial withdrawal of the last Cuban troops from Angola, even more than the signing in Lisbon six days later of the formal peace agreement between the MPLA government and UNITA, symbolised the end of civil war and external military intervention. Present in Lisbon was US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen. He had just pulled off an astonishing settlement in London on Ethiopia.



DOS SANTOS



SAVIMBI

After 15-year war, handshakes in Lisbon.

Now the hard work begins. It was tough enough bringing together Angola's two warring sides after 16 years of war. There were six rounds of talks between 1990 and May 1, 1991, not to mention the farcical deal made in Gbadolite, Zaire, in June 1989.

What may appear the hardest task — integrating the rival armed forces — may not be so tricky. The examples of Zimbabwe and Namibia show that once the fighting is over integration works, although there might be hitches.

The plan is to create an army of 40-50,000, plus the existing air force and navy. Half the army will be made up of government forces (FAPLA) and half of Jonas Savimbi's UNITA army (FALA). UNITA will not, in the early stages, contribute any personnel to the naval or air forces.

Portuguese military advisers are expected to help merge the forces and UN peacekeepers will monitor the disengagement and demobilisation.

A harder task than demobilisation will be providing for the tens of thousands of soldiers, militiamen and guerrillas who have to be disarmed and sent back to civilian life.

The Angolan army numbers 91,500. Only 25,000 at the most will be retained in the new army. This means demobilising 66,500.

UNITA has at least 50,000 men under arms. In early 1990 Savimbi claimed a regular and guerrilla army of 75,000. He may have scaled down the number as an insurance policy, hiding 25,000 men in southern Angola, or the higher figure may have been for propaganda purposes.

Whatever the actual numbers, at least 100,000 Angolans will suddenly be unemployed. They must be disarmed and resettled.

A danger is that if arms are retained, both sides will have a potential to fight or, just as dangerous for peace, armed bands could roam the rural areas preying on the already ravaged peasant farmers. Some of this has occurred in northern Namibia. In Angola it could happen on a massive and destabilising scale.

On the political side, Angolans must get used to non-violent political competition — something they have never known. In colonial days the Portuguese banned all politics.

After the 1974 coup in Lisbon, the political competition between rival guerrilla groups rapidly turned to war. Now, war must evolve into party politics.

The MPLA has the largest structure in urban areas, though little presence in the countryside beyond the Luanda region. UNITA has virtually no presence in the towns, but a military and political presence in the south, south-east and centre.

The old northern Angolan FNLA movement could re-emerge in some form, perhaps under its dictatorial founder and long-time exile, Holden Roberto. Meanwhile, a variety of small and rather anonymous parties have sprung up in Luanda.

Multiparty political activity is now legal, but this will not ensure that the political system works. Angolans have little experience of the processes of

debate, compromise and acceptance of defeat that are necessary.

UNITA has no history of internal debate. Savimbi has always been autocratic. His lieutenants have been his appointees, totally dependent on his patronage. His style is charismatic and forceful, but he has no great attachment to democracy.

Until the re-emergence of multipartism in Africa and the need to keep his American backers happy in mouthing the right slogans, Savimbi wanted power for himself and UNITA (in that order) rather than to create a participatory system.

The MPLA has rule days sole legal party with no opposition allowed. It has no experience of competing on equal political terms with other parties. Curiously, though, one of its weaknesses may turn out to be a future strength.

The MPLA has always been made up of competing factions. The first president of Angola, Agostinho Neto, had to manoeuvre cunningly to win party leadership against other factional leaders and to hold

power. President dos Santos has had to do the same.

Although the MPLA will not necessarily be the favourites to win the first election scheduled for September-November 1992, they could prove to have the experience of party infighting which will enable them to adapt to the new circumstances in a way which a one man party like UNITA cannot.

One of those at the Lisbon signing was Herman Cohen, United States Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. He had flown to Lisbon from the peace talks in London with groups from Ethiopia following President Mengistu's flight from Addis Ababa.

Cohen had just pulled off what appeared to be an audacious act of American arm-twisting diplomacy over Ethiopia, before joining in the celebrations in Lisbon.

Cohen has the reputation of being a tough negotiator. On May 27 he met the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This is an umbrella organisation of four groups — the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation and the Ethiopian Democratic Movement — the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement.

The group was dominated by the TPLF led by Meles Zenawi, a young Tigrayan known for his Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and support for Albanian socialism.

Other groups present were an Ethiopian government delegation led by Prime Minister Testaye Dinka, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front.

Cohen began bilateral talks with each organisation and within two days he was pack-

ing his bags for Lisbon, mission accomplished.

The Assistant Secretary's approach was direct and simple: there could be no co-operation Ethiopia without democracy. In other words — get your act together for a new democratic constitution or there will be minimal US aid.

He announced that Americans had invited the EPRDF forces to enter Addis Ababa, which they did, and a ceasefire was announced. Cohen said Washington reasoned that the EPRDF was the only force capable of avoiding a

bread down of law and order. The Ethiopian Prime Minister protested and quit the London negotiations. In fact, the Ethiopian government had ceased to exist.

Next day, May 28, Cohen said he had invited the EPRDF to establish itself as the government in Addis Ababa.

Quite apart from the extraordinary situation of the US offering control of a country to its own people, it was the first time an American administration had invited a Marxist rebel movement to take over from a government the American had previously supported.

— GEMINI NEWS

OPINION Eidul-Azha and Sacrifice

It is a universal practice all over the Muslim world to sacrifice animals during the Eidul-Azha. This practice came into vogue as a religious obligation from the time of our Prophet (SM). Sacrifice means giving up a part of one's wealth for the benefit of others. During the time of our Prophet (SM), the only wealth the inhabitants of that region possessed was their live-stock, such as sheep, camels, etc. Money as a mode of exchange and representing wealth was then more or less unknown. A small number of the people of that region were wealthy in the sense that they owned large herds of live-stock. The vast majority were poor and they worked more or less as slave labour for the former. It was, therefore, rightly ordained during that period that at least once a year the wealthy should share their wealth with the poor by way of sacrificing some of their wealth, i.e. the live-stock, and share the meat with the poor. The concept was indeed revolutionary, for it was the beginning of the human thought about the distribution of wealth and social welfare. Since then, and with the progress of civilisation, the meaning of wealth has undergone fundamental changes. Nowadays, money is the most powerful of all wealth, for money can buy everything. As a result, sharing of wealth with the poor by way of sacrificing animals has lost its original meaning. It will serve the same purpose for which animal sacrifice was ordained and, perhaps, better if, instead of sacrificing some animals, an amount equivalent to the cost of a sacrificial animal were spent on the welfare of the poor. If this is done on a community and, preferably, on a national basis, the benefit derived therefrom will be much greater than individual animal sacrifice, for then it will benefit a larger number of the poor and over a long period of time.

Assuming for argument's sake that only 1% of our population of about 120 millions sacrifice an animal during the Eidul-Azha and the average

cost of such an animal is, say, Tk. 1,000, the total amount comes to a staggering figure of as much as Tk. 120 crore per annum. While equally serving the religious purpose, it would, therefore, be much more sensible if this amount were spent more profitably to rehabilitate the poor on a permanent basis. The recent cyclone, the tidal bore and the floods have dangerously depleted our live-stock wealth and it would simply be imprudent if we deplete it still further by sacrificing, for it will create yet more problems for our farmers to till their land.

Keeping the welfare concept intact but just changing its application, i.e. sacrificing wealth in terms of money instead of sacrificial animals, will have a far-reaching impact on our national economy. On a long term basis and nationally organised, a vast sum of about Tk. 120 crore per annum could well permanently rehabilitate most of our poor and also provide them with basic education and medicine which they so sorely need. It will also instil in our people the concept of self-help on a community as well as a national basis. This is a matter to ponder by all our educated and enlightened people.

According to our Holy Book, the ultimate result of all our actions depends on what our intentions are. If our intentions are one of sacrifice, it will equally serve the purpose of our religious obligations if we sacrifice our wealth, i.e. money, instead of some poor animals. It has also been said that our Holy Book has as many meanings as there are waves in the oceans, which means that, gifted with the knowledge the Almighty Allah has bestowed upon us, we should make use of our wisdom according to the need of the time, circumstances and our progressive mental evolution. Allah has made us the best of all his creations and it is entirely upto us to conceive thoughts which will be beneficial for us as well as for all mankind.

A. Qayyum
Guilshan, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Adoption and Muslim law

Sir, Sylvia Morozza's letter appearing in your column under the caption 'Adoption' on June 7, might have been written due to her ignorance about the 'Muslim Personal Law on adoption'. The Mohammedan Law does not recognize adoption as a mode of filiation. Therefore it is not correct to say that a Muslim can "legally adopt" or that "adoption is a social problem.... but more so here than in the west because in our society, family background is of prime importance". In our country it is more a legal problem than a social problem.

A Muslim can take a child, rear him up and can rift away his entire property during his life time, but after his death he (the child) gets nothing except by way of will, if any in his favour.

M. Saleem Ullah
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A controversy

Sir, I had thought that The Daily Star was not partisan toward any particular party or person and, so, I had started subscribing to it. But I was surprised to read your editorial captioned 'A Plea to BTV' on June 2 where, in one place, you have described Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as "the man who founded this very country."

Sir, you are well aware that it is only the Awami-Baksalites who consider Sheikh Mujib as father of the nation. His birthday, death anniversary, homecoming, etc., are observed only by Awami-Baksalites and their front organizations. No other parties, nor even the allies of AL, have ever observed these days. In fact, I may recall for you, that once AL had wanted to treat a public meeting of August 15 at the stadium gate as being held in observance of

the death anniversary of their leader. But other components of the then 15-party alliance had stubbornly refused to accept the proposal of AL and the meeting was held as a protest against the Ershad regime, as programmed.

You would have done better if you had only suggested telecasting a programme on Sheikh Mujib without that controversial appendage after his name. The title Bang-abandui, is, however, all right as it was given to him before independence.

You have also not upheld the right of general students to watch that BTV programme. The video film could be run any time. You have merely counselled for tolerance, which I think is just a platitude.

Tarek Shamim
Dhaka.

Objective journalism

Sir, After the fall of the autocratic government, a democratically elected government has taken over the sacred responsibility of running the state. And people have many expectations from this government.

The government has of course started their mission of fulfilling the people's expectations. But in case of newspapers, it seems some black laws are still in force, may be under different covers, because the newspaper men are still facing as is apparent in cases impeding on their way to do objective journalism.

We would honestly request the government to take all possible measures to ensure smooth development of the institution of objective journalism in Bangladesh.

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