

Budget: Can We Deliver?

Moving towards greater self-reliance, reducing unproductive expenditure and raising the volume of public sector development expenditure are the goals of the current budget, our Finance Minister declared in his press conference last Thursday. While we applaud the goals, we cannot but broach the question, can we deliver? We do so, not so much to express our scepticism concerning the objectives set forth in the budget, but more to find out reasons, if there is any, as why they should be not attained. Our own answer to the question is a qualified yes. We think the core objectives as announced in the budget speech of Mr Saifur Rahman are attainable if some essential conditions are fulfilled.

The most important of these, and perhaps the decisive one, is that of instituting an honest and effective government. As to its honesty the present government has not yet given the public any reason to question it. In fact through its handling of the massive relief effort it has further strengthened its reputation in this regard. But in instituting an effective government, the ruling party faces an uphill task. Years of corruption, nepotism and arbitrariness, forced upon it by the autocratic leadership of the Ershad regime, has created a credibility gap about our bureaucracy's efficacy and honesty.

Thus an overhaul of our bureaucracy's norms and practices, transforming it from a mechanism of control and suppression to one of assistance and promotion of the country's development process will be necessary if the goals of the present government are to be realised. Particular emphasis needs to be laid on closer inter-departmental cooperation within each ministry and a far greater co-ordination between the various ministries of the government. Closer links between our central administrative units and those in the districts, upazilas and thanas will also have to be brought about to achieve the goals that the government has set for itself.

Many of the public sector bodies such as the Railways, the Power Development Board, some of the Corporations, etc. continue to be a drain on the scarce government resources. In almost all such cases the reasons lie in their inept management. If not bring profit to the government, these bodies must at least run on their own, without adding to the tax payers burden. Herein lies a test for the government.

As regards making our tax collection system more efficient, we will wait to see the reforms that seem to be in the offing.

The government has pinned its hope on the private sector to bring about a turn around in our economy. All sorts of measures have been proposed to facilitate their activities. However it must be added that their performance leaves much to be desired if judged on the basis of what they have done in the last decade or so. There is definitely a strong case for soul searching on their part. They must prove to be, what they are traditionally supposed to be — innovative, bold, efficient, cost optimiser, risk taker, etc.

The successful implementation of the budget really hinges on instituting an efficient and effective government. That is where the real challenge to the ruling party now lies.

News Bad and Important

Luck is always good unless it is qualified to be otherwise by a preceding adjective evocative of some satanical handiwork. News is more newsy if it's bad — and when it spreads like fragrance some good tidings — it too has to be qualified by an adjective to that effect. This is some wisdom that comes infecting us out of the district news pages of our newspapers.

Any need to illustrate the point? Take The Daily Star, open the National page of any one day's issue. Say Wednesday. Here's a fair-minded calling of headlines for you: Fodder scarce in Kishoreganj. Debt-ridden farmers sell standing paddy in Madaripur. Growers apathetic to jute cultivation in Jhenidah, so on and so forth. All this is bad, some of them too bad. But are all of them news? Particularised information on any single reportable occurrence like, to take other headlines of the same issue — Girl commits suicide. Body recovered. Diarrhoea breaks out, are very obviously news. But where is the news in Jhenidah farmers growing apathetic to jute cultivation or fodder being scarce in Kishoreganj or in the Madaripur farmers' being burdened with debt?

Should the correspondents be discouraged to despatch such 'reports', should the editors desist from publishing such dirges over someone not yet dead but continually dying? The dilemma can be looked at from a radically different angle.

A great many farmers in Madaripur have raised a wonderful crop of paddy this season. But they cannot harvest the same and pass a year shorn of food anxieties — and even sell some and buy other necessities with the proceeds. This has been happening to all small farmers all over the land for many many years. They are caught in the vicious circle of poverty and indebtedness. This is the most important news — the villages are all dying because of this.

And jute? Shall we call it a tragedy? Jute is not only agriculture — it is big trading, big industry. Most farmers grow jute. And that they do at a loss. Why? Because, the state has failed to build a very strong internal market for jute by putting it to the many important and pricey uses it is capable of. A strong internal market based on a thriving industry catering to the needs of, to name two, certain cloths and specialised housing materials, can capably cut the international operators' stranglehold on jute-price. Jute has for too long been a suckers' paradise. But it is indeed a golden way out of our present economic situation which can, in spite of all our very laborious and articulate budgets and five-year plans, be compared to quick sand. The more you exert the more you go down. If jute is not news, what else can be news in Bangladesh?

Fodder. Bangladesh doesn't produce any fodder whatsoever. Yet this is a land having one of the highest livestock population in the world. What do they live on then? Naturally growing grass, paddy-straw, water-hyacinth — and in the rich farmers' cattle-sheds bran and oilcakes and what not. Pastures have vanished, patches of fallow land are rare to come by. Where will the cattle graze? Yet we need the cattle — for meat and milk, for drawing our ploughs and carts — and importantly for the best and safest fertiliser in the world. A farmer's life and well-being revolves round his land and his cattle. His land is going. His cattle is dying. Is there any better news than that?

THE corruption syndrome has plagued Bangladesh probably more prominently than many other evils. By all reckoning Bangladesh has now an important, sizeable and self-propelling black economic sector, guesstimated at around fifty percent of the country's gross domestic product. Unearned incomes have flown in like manna from heaven for those who have grown adept at the art of bribery, smuggling, political kickbacks and grafts, embezzlement, counterfeiting, drug-trafficking, fiddling, skimming, moon shining, 'time theft' and so on and so forth. The more skillful and talented are the players in the game, the greater the demand over the Akada, the lamp, and the multiple effect of wealth is caused by the outstretched hands of the interacting administrative-political framework.

Heads of successive governments and their deputies have vowed to wage a crusade against this menacing social vice. Appeals have been made and warning shots fired all too often and the latest to join this flurry has been the newly elected government.

This article attempts to show that the current political administrative set-up in Bangladesh is not appropriate to wage a serious battle against corruption. Seven basic propositions are developed to explain why. It will be seen that on each count, unless countered by appropriate strategies, corruption will maintain

its winning spree. **Government Controls** It is widely recognised that the control mechanism in Bangladesh is not only elaborate but also excessively cumbersome. This constitutes my first premise as to why corruption flourishes in Bangladesh. It involves dispensation of government decisions at numerous points and at various layers of the administrative structure. This entails the dangers of serious delays in actions which legitimately enter into the cost calculations of those seeking government services. According to one study in the early eighties it takes about 112 days on average between opening of a file and taking the final decision. In some extreme cases, it may even stagger to 1770 days. In addition, the average time between final decision given and communication of such decision was found to be about 12 days. Just to get an Import Registration Certificate, an individual has to submit ten different documents which have to be obtained from different offices. If he is issued with a Registration Certificate and a Pass Book, he has to submit another four documents to the

nominated bank. Moreover, another seven types of documents are to be submitted by the private sector importers. The problems relating to customs clearance have become almost proverbial in Bangladesh. One government study in 1977 found that about 50 percent of all delays at customs clearance occurred due to discrepancies in description of goods and the classification numbers used by the licensing authority and the customs tariff authority. For customs clearance one may have to cross at least 50 steps which, in some cases, may rise even to 66. Although in recent times considerable changes have been introduced in cutting through the controls, the picture is still far from satisfactory. In such situations, the discretionary power of the bureaucratic authorities to dispose of the files naturally runs the potential risk of becoming a saleable commodity. No wonder then that in order to save time and the botherations as well as to extract a decision in one's favour, many people will be willing to bribe. The control mechanism of the government should there-

Propositions in Favour of Corruption Hint Cures

by Prof. Sadrel Reza

fore be brought down to a minimum. The government should act more as a facilitator rather than as an intimidating Leviathan standing as a toll collecting road-block for the economic actors.

Foreign Aid The influence of foreign aid is all-pervasive in our socio-economic life and this constitutes the second reason for the high level of corruption. Almost hundred percent of the annual development programme is currently financed by aids and loans raised from multilateral as well as bilateral sources. To negotiate and manage the large quantum of foreign funds a huge administrative machinery has been set up. While ceaseless efforts are made to maximize the inflow of assistance, economic rationale of different projects often is deliberately neglected and national interest sacrificed. At the same time, as the import trade flourishes with external funds, commissions and kickbacks become the major determining factors of particular awards. Lobbyists and rent-seekers become the greatest beneficiaries in the

process. This is by no means meant to undermine the important role that foreign aid can play in a country's development efforts, but as experience has shown, excessive dependence on such a regime has the danger of degenerating into an unholy alliance of different interest groups from both within and outside. The end result usually is some show-piece projects and ostentatious life-style of the corrupt. All the while the overall economic situation deteriorates with the impending danger of the country being debt-trapped; its outstanding debt liabilities as a percentage of GNP already exceeding 50 by 1986.

Moreover, foreign aid involves a number of other economic costs including its depressive effects on domestic savings and an undue pressure on local administrative talents, besides the fact that foreign consultants and other interest groups siphon off a significant chunk of the loan money. Unless extreme discretion is applied in this regard, the strings of policy dictates and conditionalities will mean that the future of the society will be completely mortgaged to foreign donors.

Pay Structure Unrealistic pay structure of public servants is another of the factors contributing towards corruption. The first major blunder in this direction was committed almost immediately after independence when the government pay scale was completely delinked from the pricing pattern. As the purchasing power of the people earning fixed incomes sharply dwindled, prices spiralled. For a time, people were probably ready to make sacrifices in their living standards had they not simultaneously witnessed a flourishing in what has since been notoriously known as the brief-case business. If anything, the situation has only worsened in course of time. According to a World Bank estimate, the real earnings of high level civil servants had dropped by 1985 to one-seventh of what they were even in 1974. On the other hand, the magic world of graft and business and industrial corruption spawned a new breed of free-wheeling, fabulously rich, multi-millionaires.

(To be concluded tomorrow)
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South Africa Seeks Formula for Returning Land

Arthur Maimane writes from Cape Town

In enforcing its policy of racial separation, the South African government over years dispossessed millions of black people of their land and resettled them in the nominal homelands. Now many of those people are seeking to return to their ancestral lands. The government is abolishing the Acts which reserve most land for whites, and the Group Areas Act, and replacing them with legislation which puts the onus on white councils to prove that their by-laws are not discriminatory.

to prove, at its own expense, that was not the case. In its reluctant about-face over land reforms, the government has also made what the Urban Foundation calls a 'partial deal' on another hot issue — restitution of land

taken during years of forced removals. The White Paper which outlined the reforms said restitution would not be practical and could cause racial conflict. The Minister has been forced to change his view to

is more important than the ideological reasons — those of apartheid's "social engineering" — for which they were banished in the first place. Kriel also claims that it would be impossible to find an equitable cut-off date for restitution. Land disputes, he argues, not for the first time this Parliamentary session, started long before Jan van Riebeck's landing in Cape Town in 1652 with the first Dutch settlers.

Instead, the government is to appoint an advisory commission which will investigate claims for restitution, including those by whites who, he says, have lost seven million hectares since the 1936 Land Act. This is the second of the two Acts now being repealed.

The commission, claimed to be representative of the broad population, will not have a blank cheque to buy back expropriated land, because financial resources are limited. The land was taken from blacks and sold to whites at below market prices. With subsequent development it has risen enormously in value and any blank cheque to redeem it would have to be very blank indeed.

A case in point concerns 4,000 Fingos who were forced from their fertile Tsitika Valley in the southern Cape in

1977 and dumped on inferior land 300 km away in Ciskei, a nominally independent homeland.

Their land was sold at an estimated one third of its value to white farmers who received government bonds, subsidies and bank loans not available to blacks. The 19 farms involved were bought for R1.35 million in 1983, and are now, just eight years later, valued at R29.3 million.

The Fingos are demanding their land back, but at those prices it is very unlikely that the commission would offer to buy it back for them.

Claimants whose land is held by the state may fare better. A group of such people has returned to Goedgevonden near Ventersdorp in western Transvaal. They were forced from their tribal lands at gunpoint 13 years ago and into the Bophuthatswana homeland. Police are now protecting the claimants from rightwing farmers who claim it is white land, and have tried to evict them again.

The claimants are still to be prosecuted, for returning home illegally because, according to Minister Kriel, it "is not conducive to orderly planning."

The government will not say how much confiscated land is still held by the state. The guess is, however, that it can only be a fraction of the millions of hectares seized by the state in the past 40 years to make apartheid work by partitioning the country into homelands. — GEMINI NEWS

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Oxton 1981: millions of people were forcibly resettled in bleak areas like this. Now many want to return, but are told that total restitution is not possible.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Restrictions on off-shore islands

Sir, Bangladesh is one of the largest deltaic regions in the world, the rivers bring down about two billion tons of silt annually. Over the years, hundreds of 'chars' or islands have come up and more land masses are forming, and coming up. Satellite pictures might be available with the national space agency.

Thousands migrate to these chars and settle down with families. Up to date survey maps are not readily available on these new land masses. This hampered the relief operations after the recent cyclone.

To prevent unnecessary loss of life or hardship, these chars should be surveyed, and those considered unsafe be declared as such, and entry into such areas be controlled, restricted, or banned.

It would be necessary to issue entry permits, for which individuals have to carry identity cards. These ICs may be of small size made of plastic (as are the credit cards), and worn around the neck (rural dresses are short of pockets). Entry of women, children and livestock should be strictly prohibited. Building of residential structures may not be allowed, but temporary camps

Pesticide research

Sir, Bangladesh is an agricultural country and pesticides are extensively used in agricultural fields to increase the crop yield, in order to meet the demand of growing population. But this practice creates hazard for the soil itself not to speak of the harm it does to human health and environment.

A severe soil pollution may lead to 'no crops' in the field which means no food and no food means no life! So efforts must be made for the survival of human life in Bangladesh.

In developed countries thousands of scientists are working in the field and laboratory to minimize the pesticide pollution. Pesticide has residue effect on all crops produced with its help. Pesticides are considered as superpoison chemicals; however, none can say anything without appropriate research, and a good research and strong regulations are working as universal check and balance guidelines in pesticide use.

Bangladesh, a third world country, faces severe pesticide pollution because of the poor research. Experts say, the reduction in fisheries wealth, erosion of soil fertility diminishing, social forestry are results of extensive misuse of pesticides.

Thus under the present circumstances, we need urgently a pesticide research facility. I urge upon the concerned highest authorities to look into the matter and estab-

Sanitation at ZIA

Sir, Being utterly displeased as well as ashamed of the sanitary predicament at the Dhaka international airport, I would like to propose a formal complaint on behalf of the people.

I am residing and studying in the United States. On a yearly basis, I come to visit my family and friends in Bangladesh. But on this occasion, I brought an American girl friend with me. After a long and tiresome journey, we arrived at ZIA and rushed to use the bathroom facilities. Entering the bathroom, we found it unclean, sanitarily unhealthy and with a towelbox providing cloth for wiping hands — too dirty, unchanged and soiled. The situation was looked upon with disgust by my American friend, specially since this was the bathroom facility at an international airport.

My plea, subsequently is that for how long we will have to suffer because of the negligence of the airport staff on such matters?

It is a common fact that Bangladesh is a poverty-stricken third world country. But if we continue to expose such unsanitary measures in a government institution such as the ZIA, where dignitaries and foreigners frequently travel through, a worse impression regarding us is further created. Authorities concerned please take notice upon this matter.

How can we expect her wards to study in Bangladesh when those who have killed her entire family in one of the ghastly political killings of the sub-continent are still at large? Who can read their minds?

In view of this I believe, Saleem Ullah will appreciate that Sheikh Hasina is likely to have some reservations in educating her wards at home.

Hasan Shaheed Dhaka, Nita Jyotola, Dhaka.