

**A Priority to Austerity**

Finance and Planning Minister Saifur Rahman, in the South Korean capital to address the 47th session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. In an exclusive interview to The Daily Star said on Wednesday, "The first priority of the government would be to reduce current government expenditure by cutting down on costs wherever possible, reducing wastage, improving the efficiency of the government machinery and introducing strict austerity measures in every sector of government activity."

This sounds encouraging! Austerity is a sure answer to Bangladesh's groping for a way out of the impossible economic morass it is at present stuck up in. And true austerity coupled with true efficiency of the government machinery can heal most of Bangladesh's chronic and consumptive malaise.

Governmental efficiency is a tough thing to fashion. It is not for nothing that this epitome of social organisation—so distinctive and distinguished as to earn a separate name for it—political—dwindles over time into the most disorganised jumble of jostling humanity without any orientation, any aim and direction and knowing not what they are there for except vying for power and milk and honey. It would be quite a job even to catalogue the diverse and wide ranging factors that contribute to inefficiency of government. Austerity is another matter, lending capital to identification of the areas and ways of it.

Mr. Saifur Rahman has talked of cutting on wastage. On the government part alone? Piped water, electricity and gas—the three most important bases of our economy are being squandered like anything at the consumer's end. The consumer who is using these gifts of modern science for the first time maybe, will need generations to get to an ethics using these to the optimum benefit of all. Government has some unpardonable complicity in this crime. It should have packaged supply with metering gadgets for all cases of piped water, electricity and gas.

Government's wasteful ways cannot be better illustrated than what obtains in the manpower and materials sector. For a job that can at best need one man-day, twenty man-days are expended. When work is expanded to engage more people over more time, it is natural that it will expand also to use of at least 20 times more material.

Unutilisation is another name for wastage. All the buildings in the nation, starting of course with the tall ones in Motijheel and including also the 30 thousand-plus school buildings are all matchless studies of underutilisation. Fortunately there is a talk of introducing two more shifts in the schools. What about office buildings and palaces that the businesses build?

However cutting on wastage is not austerity—it's only step towards it. Just as charity should begin at home— austerity also can be meant better if started at the base whence exhortations go out. Mr Saifur Rahman knows it and we thank him for owning it as well. While the spirit is all right, it should be borne always in mind that government, or to be precise, its constituents and functionaries, cannot practise austerity in any isolated manner. The moneyed and propertied classes must be disciplined to refrain from all display of ostentation which not only infects society with all the wrong kinds of ambitions and obsessions, but also exerts a strong influence on government.

And just as justice needs to be shown as much as done, austerity has to be worn for all to see. And is it that government leaders—elected representatives and executive top-brass, show with due pride to the people? Let everyone be made to pay for all the services they get. All people outside of the pale of government privileges—make do that way. Government must set an example of paying for everything, accounting for everything. This, if practised, would be the surest and quickest way to what we want to achieve through austerity.

**Graham Greene**

At least three generations of lovers of English novels always regarded Graham Greene as some one who was around, who would just come up with yet another book, perhaps a thriller, a travel story, a political novel or just a sympathetic portrait of a Latin American military ruler. Those who were captivated by Mr Greene's "The Power and the Glory" and saw it on London stage and came under the acting spell of Orson Welles in the thriller "The Third Man"—the expression now forms part of the international spy vocabulary—were often amazed that, long past the age when most writers retire to their homes in South of France or in some other tax haven, Mr Greene was constantly on the move, from Europe to Nicaragua and then off to the Soviet Union. At some point, it might have become a little too exhausting. He died on Wednesday at his home in Geneva at the age of 86.

The life and work of Mr Greene are full of paradoxes and puzzles, almost bordering on contradictions. A converted Roman Catholic, some of his best-known novels deal with morality and ethics, but the writer himself called them 'entertainment'. Then, what made the novelist turn from his thrillers to semi-travel stories based on Panama and Nicaragua and finally to his crusade against the underworld corruption in France at the highest police and administration levels? It was this crusade which, in 1982, became the subject matter of Mr Greene's 25-page pamphlet, called "J' Accuse", a title borrowed from Emile Zola.

A critic once said that a passion for truth continually burnt inside Graham Greene and that he used his creative energy in the most unorthodox way. In this sense, he remained an outsider and thus never won the Nobel Prize for Literature. For Mr Greene, it was not much of a loss. It should be the Nobel Committee which should regret what some regard as a "deliberate omission".

**Accountability of Government can Foster Good Impression**

by A. M. A. Muhith

Special to The Daily Star

In order to put the democratic process on a solid foundation it is necessary to find ways for preventing the rise of one-man rule or of an oligarchy. Dictatorships have been justified in Bangladesh on the following grounds: i) Arresting economic mismanagement and decline; ii) Uprooting corruption in government; iii) Improving law and order situation.

Military coups have further been justified on the plea of removing unpopular but irremovable leadership. Essentially it is lack of accountability and absence of responsiveness in the state system that have invited either military intervention or irresponsible one man rule. In Bangladesh with its pressure of population, lack of resources, abundance of wants and needs and its myriad problems, difficulties with economic management, law and order situation and ethics in government are only natural. The issue is one of improving the situation for all citizens and controlling any slide or deterioration.

It is only accountability and responsiveness of government that can foster an impression of good government. On the other hand when economic activities of the government are carried out through the intermediation of a few cronies and pimps of high government functionaries, you have to stage a revolution of the kind Bangladesh went through in the last three or four years. Under a system of constitutional autocracy or one party rule the responsiveness of the government to public pressure depends on the sweet will of the dictator. Accountability under such a system is reduced to a farce. All the country knew of the fraud in the Sylhet oil deal (even government MPs shouted about it) but the deal was made at the sweet will of the rulers. The world witnessed the fraud of 1988 parliamentary elections (it was very similar to the elections held by Yahya in the vacancies declared by him in 1971). But the same parliament had the audacity to amend the Constitution not once but thrice (8th, 9th and 10th amendments).

How do we ensure accountability and responsiveness?

This has to do with the form of government in our country. Autocracy seems to be natural with our leaders, while individualism (veering on to nihilism) is the national trait of our people. We have suffered dictators but invariably we have uprooted them. Our Constitution as it stands now does not actually provide a "framework for autocracy" as Barrister Ishfaq Ahmed says, but it is designed to ensure "constitutional autocracy." Pakistan's Chaudhury Mohammed Ali coined this phrase for Ayub's constitutional system and interestingly enough the fifth amendment borrowed heavily from Ayub's Constitution of

1962. The fifth amendment, however, did not provide for reelection of the President and that way restricted dictatorship to one term of a President. It is the sixth amendment that made reelection of President possible and provided for perpetual dictatorship of the same person. The ninth amendment however, restricted it to ten years for General Ershad's successors. It is argued that by reducing some powers of the President like the authority to dissolve parliament, or to authenticate annual financial statement for six months, it is possible to check the supreme authority of the dictator President.

But experience with the Presidential system show the following disturbing features: (i) The

environment is a financial nightmare for a candidate and a proven instrument for destruction of the national character and moral values. The cost for a candidate covering 25000 centres must be a minimum of a hundred crore Taka.

For establishing an accountable and responsive government as well as for ensuring peaceful succession, it seems that there is no option other than a parliamentary form of government with expanded powers of the parliament in supervising administration and economic activities. In order, however, to strengthen the role of the head of state he may be vested with some discretionary authority

**For establishing an accountable and responsive government as well as for ensuring peaceful succession, it seems that there is no other option other than a parliamentary form of government with expanded powers of the parliament in supervising administration and economic activities.**

President collects a bunch of sycophants around him. The cabinet never challenges his authority;

(ii) The control over the purse and intelligence agencies by a demigod creates monolithic elite which is self seeking, anti-people and extremely corrupt.

(iii) The President is able to fragment political parties and create numerous parties who function only as pressure groups and divisive elements in politics.

(iv) The President becomes remote and the wall of secrecy and flattery that is built around him makes the government totally unresponsive to public sentiments.

(v) Accountability of the President is minimal and the cabinet of ministers that is picked by him and who function at his pleasure also becomes completely unaccountable.

(vi) An incumbent President or his nominee gets a permanent lease on Presidency. Change in government is invariably through violent means and must take place extra-constitutionally.

(vii) Destruction of the integrity of the electoral process is so easy under an all-powerful President. How the entire administration can be imported the expertise in election, rigging need not be recounted.

(viii) Worst of all, Presidential election in our

other than only one relating to selection of the Prime Minister. For some constitutional or statutory offices the President may be given discretionary powers to appoint qualified people. This will also help non-partisan approach to governance. But simultaneously the authority of parliament should be extended.

First of all, allocation and transaction of business of the government should be determined by parliament. What should be the organisation of government and how work should be distributed are matters for parliament to decide.

Second, as ordinances are required to be approved by parliament, so should all pieces of delegated legislation. This is necessary for greater openness of government rules and regulations as well as for checking the caprices of bureaucracy.

Third, legislative committees as empowered in the Constitution should function in the capacity of overseer of the functioning of government. The committees should be provided with experts and adequate staff to discharge their responsibilities.

Fourth, Presidential or executive authority for expenditure in excess of budget provision or to sanction budget for 120 days should be

reverted. Complete budget authority should be with parliament and supplementary budget statement would have to be made in advance of incurring any expenditure.

Fifth, the parliament in view of its expanded role and activities would have to be in session all the year round. However, as parliamentarians must also keep in touch with their constituency it may sit for at least 200 days in a year.

At the same time, to get the proper value out of the high office of the President and ensure stability in administration, the President, as earlier stated, may be given some powers.

In addition to the selection of the Prime Minister, he may select the Chief Justice and Chief Election Commissioner at his discretion. He may nominate at his discretion some members of neutral bodies like the proposed Media Authority covering television and radio. Similarly in various other trustee or governing bodies of statutory organisations he may nominate some members at his discretion.

In the declaration of emergency he may be given a role. If he disagrees with the Prime Minister he may oblige the p.m. to call a session of the Assembly and get the declaration approved before declaring the emergency.

In the dissolution of parliament also a role may be given to him in exceptional circumstances. If coalitions crumble and the frequency of change of government is too much, say twice in twelve months, he may dissolve the parliament at his discretion calling for a fresh election.

All these measures are designed to place the President above party politics and provide an useful role to such an exalted office. The fifth amendment provided the opportunity for second consideration of legislative measures in a serious manner. A bill not assented to by the President needs majority vote of all members (not of members attending a session only) for becoming a law. This is a good provision and should stand the nation in good stead. In view, however, of giving extra powers to the President, his reelection or holding any office of profit under the Republic or contesting for any other elective office in the country should not be permissible. A President, whether he completes his term in full or in part, should be debarred for reelection or reappointment.

The exercise in constitutional amendment must be completed speedily. Presidential election has to be held between April 15 and October 15. There is time for it but a constitutional amendment on the form of government must be ratified in a referendum. This will take time and negotiating for a constitutional compromise will also be time consuming. [End of Part-II]

**Karachi Loses Ground to Land Speculators**

Babar Ayaz writes from Karachi

**Cumbersome land allotment procedures and long waiting period are some of the reasons why the poor do not benefit from the schemes .... The vacuum in supply and demand for urban land has been filled by speculators**

EVERY third person in this city, the country's richest, lives in sub-human condition in Katchi Abadis (squatters settlements).

These steepsons of Karachi dwell in 362 such settlements spread around the city under extremely unhygienic conditions in small shanty houses.

Their children play in water puddles and on city garbage dumps before they die of one disease or another. Or they grow up with malnutrition, chronic diseases and irritable psyche.

Against the estimated demand of 40,000 housing units for the low income population, the Karachi Development Authority (KDA) has been able to provide for hardly 5,000 plots a year at an average.

Even this land does not reach low income people. After including the high development cost its price goes far beyond the reach of the poor.

Mostly the middle income groups and land speculators are benefitted by these schemes, which are announced with pomp and show for the poor. The cumbersome land allotment procedures and long waiting period, absence of any formal lending agency which can offer loans to the poor without a collateral—these are some of the reasons why the poor do not benefit

from the KDA schemes.

This vacuum in supply and demand has been filled in by land speculators who have become parallel housing authorities in the city. They can take pride in settling 37 per cent of the Karachi population. This unscrupulous class of land grabbers occupy government land with the collaboration of government officials and then subdivide and sell them to the poor on prices within their reach.

Since the land is free, perhaps the only cost is that of the bride, the development cost is nil so that the cost of such land is very low.

The purchaser of such land is forced to make shanty houses overnight before authorities take notice of the emergence of yet another Katchi Abadi.

The whole operation is clandestine. Land grabbers assist settlers, on exploitative terms, to acquire some of the civic amenities like re-routing of public transport, community water connection or bowser supply and in some cases street lights by collecting

money from the settlers and bribing the concerned officials.

In some cases the community action group managers to get these facilities through persistent lobbying with the government. They are more successful before every elections.

However, one of the major problems which are not attended by dishonest speculators is that of sanitation. In most of these settlements sewerage disposal is done through open drains, which are just dug in the lane and are often seen overflow. These drains are then channelled to the nearest rain water drain. These open drains are the root cause of gastroenteritis and malaria—the diseases which are quite common in these settlements.

A study in contrast is the path shown by a non-governmental organisation which has successfully carried out the Orangi Pilot Project. It has proven that the KDA schemes are too expensive. For instance, KDA's sanitation cost

was proved nine times higher than that of the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP).

The project is located at Orangi, Karachi's as well as Asia's largest squatter settlement. Nearly 1 million people live there.

The Orangi Pilot Project started in 1980 to upgrade the settlement's sanitation, education and health. It organised the community and involved them in self-financing and building sanitation lines and flush latrines in some 50,000 homes. Its sanitation outreach has been 85 per cent successful.

The Orangi Pilot Project is one example of how counties can tap Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to help urban settlements. According to a earlier ESCAP seminar on low income settlements, government policies should enable more NGOs to counter the role of illicit speculators. The seminar noted this does not mean that governments can shed away their responsibilities towards the urban poor. Indeed, one major role of the

government is to provide land prices within the reach of the

poor. In the case of Pakistan, its government has been reluctant to lower land prices, meanwhile losing substantial ground to land speculators. Because of the market demand, the government should take up the role that these speculators are playing. —Depthnews Asia

**OPINION**

**POPULATION : Poverty Amelioration**

Bangladesh is over populated with a density of about 2,000 people per square mile, one of the highest in the world. It has been revealed in a recently concluded survey that 92 per cent of our total population live in the rural areas which are mostly neglected. The national development is very much dependent on the development of the rural economy.

Stressing the need for massive development efforts late president Ziaur Rahman once said, 'the rural institutions should be strengthened and well organised'. And with this objective in mind he had introduced the system of "Gram Sarker" which aimed at ameliorating the lots of rural people and where people from all walks of life were welcomed to participate in uplift programmes.

It goes beyond saying that our foremost problems are population and poverty. Besides, there are some other hurdles which hamper our

development. These are subdivided and fragmented land holdings, poor facilities to support agricultural development, high rate of unemployment, shortage of capital, lack of technological knowhow, discriminatory rural social power structure, lack of proper leadership quality, lack of housing and literacy etc.

Moreover, the economy of this country is mainly agrarian with only 22 million acres to land under cultivation. The average size of holding being less than 2.5 acres per family. Unemployment is estimated at about 40% of the total work force. So without ensuring the development of the rural economy, no development of Bangladesh is possible.

The government of Begum Khaleda Zia should, therefore, take steps to identify the problems that confront us today and take steps to resolve them one by one on priority basis.

Md Atiqul Karim Zigatola, Dhaka.

**SIN**

110 million is the total of people Bangladesh is blessed with, and the number is growing every year. The statistics of Population Census (carried out generally at ten-year interval) reveal one of the highest increases in the growth rate in the world, which is relatively a tremendous pressure on an LDC like Bangladesh and is causing various problems to all the functioning subsystems of the country.

The management inefficiency is oftentimes attributed to the deficiency in controlling the enormous populace that turns out to be one of the dominant factors responsible for the country's decaying infrastructure. Added to the multiplying natives are the foreigners, many of who look like Bangladeshis and get around freely, unnoticed in the crowd, making an issue for the national welfare authority. Some establishments, however, do require identity of anybody to interact with and to enjoy any privilege from.

Following the trail of the developed countries that have succeeded in managing their nationals and aliens alike should LDC Bangladesh sys-

tematize each sphere of her administration for efficient management of the national development actions destined toward self-reliance; and the prime task is obviously the productive management of her citizenry.

The related authority may consider the aforesaid factors and other concerned reasons vis-a-vis national well being. Therefore, in addition to the existing birth registration system, a national Social Identification Number (SIN) system, similar to that of other developed countries, may be introduced in Bangladesh, especially for the purpose of keeping each individual citizen of the country documented since birth and properly identified all through. In other words, every citizen must have his/her national identity—SIN—with him/her all the time, which will facilitate the administration in effectively managing the nationals and in executing fruitfully advanced plans and policies with a view to improving the life of the nation.

M. Rahman Zila School Road Mymensingh.

**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.

**Safe drinking water**

Sir, We are all aware of the fact that water should be boiled and cooled before it is taken. Thus, assumably, almost all households have been following this method, in case of drinking water.

We have to be more careful, when we have small children in the house, as safe drinking water is a must for them. Otherwise, it exposes them to the danger of a number of diseases, namely diarrhoea, and dysentery.

The modern age has brought to our households a number of it's good sides, one of them is mineral water or in other words, water processed and made safe for drinking. Thus this is one of the benefits of the progress of science. We should remember this and be grateful.

Thanks to scientific progress, mineral water is now available in third world countries like ours too. And we hope increase in its supply would decrease the price strain.

Raju Ahmed Arambagh, Dhaka.

**Songs as pastime**

Sir, Those of us who are fond of songs—both listening as well as singing them—are the lucky ones. I say this because, this is indeed a very good hobby that stimulates and relaxes mind with a favourable effect on your health.

All songs of standard being good lyrical poems tuned as good, are one of the best ways of spending (or using, too) time.

Not only does it help us improve our sense of language, it also improves our

taste and brings out whatever latent qualities we may have within ourselves, in understanding and appreciating our own languages, art and culture.

Listening to songs of an alien culture and society, helps to understand those too in a finer way.

Songs also help us spend our lonely hours in pleasure. Therefore, we can easily say, that songs are beneficial both for our health and mental peace.

I would suggest to those among us who have plenty of time and not much to do, that this is a way of passing time, quite interestingly and beneficially!

Rehana Taher Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

**Electric bulbs**

Sir, Electric bulbs used for lighting domestic or office areas are becoming more and more expensive with every coming day.

An essential commodity of our daily life, it is one of the things the price of which we would like to be constant or even if variable, but not increasing with every moon. Light is required by all

alike. Be they students, writers, office workers, garments employees or others. Therefore, we request the people involved in this industry to please keep this factor in mind, when next they intend to increase the price of electric bulbs.

It is something without which we cannot do absolutely. Not after we have become civilized and become used to the comforts brought by the industrial revolution.

Rauf Ahmed Rajar Bagh, Dhaka.

**Mastans**

Sir, I am terrified to see that Mastans are causing problems to the peace-loving people again.

People voted for a corruption-free, peaceful society. But the same 'mastans' seem to be enjoying their lion's shares at the cost of national welfare. So I am under the impression that our government is reluctant in containing 'mastans'.

Raushan Zahan Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Dhaka.