

## Triger Happy?

Actions by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) has caused the death of three persons in Mahasthangarh Hat (local market), 10 kilometers from the north western town of Bogra. According to reports the BDR went to the market and laid siege to about 150 cattlehead, confiscating them on the ground that they were smuggled across the border from India. The seizure led to conflicts with the cattle traders. Later the traders started throwing brickbats at the BDR personnel who responded by restoring to rifle firing. Three people according to the BDR, but 6 according to eye-witness reports, were killed as a result.

The incident gives rise to two sets of questions. The first concerns the conduct of our law enforcing body and the use of fire arms to control unruly crowd. According to reports about 20 rounds of bullets were fired that killed either three (confirmed) or six (claimed) and injured 20 others. It is obvious that the BDR men were in no mood to 'waste' their precious bullets and were shooting to kill. There is no evidence that the BDR men tried to give any warning to the crowd about the possibility that they would open fire. Normally police, when they decide to use fire arms to control a mob, first fire into the air. If that does not work, then they fire into the ground just in front of the crowd, and after that they shoot at the lower limbs so that death is prevented. The BDR men appear to have followed no such norm and started off with a shot-to-kill formula.

The second set of questions concern the facts behind the incident. It is curious that instead of catching the smuggler at the border, or near about, the BDR men should invade Mahasthangarh market which is quite some ways from the border. It is common knowledge that a large number of cattlehead come into Bangladesh everyday. This is not to accept illegal trade but to face the fact that when there is demand, the goods will flow from wherever it can. Therefore to stop the illegal trading in cattlehead we will have to increase our own output of cattle. That is a long-term process. Meanwhile the government may take up anti-smuggling measures which will stop the flow at the border.

Riding into a regular market, disrupting normal business, and then shooting people down when the situation goes out of control, is no way of controlling smuggling. An incident that results into the killing of three persons and injury of another 20 is not one that should swept under the carpet. A full-fledged inquiry into the matter should be conducted by some independent body and punitive measures taken against the guilty will help to restore public confidence in our law enforcement bodies.

## Taking Tagore Seriously

Today is a special day for the Bengali-speaking peoples of the world. This day, a hundred and thirtyone years ago, Rabindranath Tagore was born to a family whose contribution to the shaping of modern Bengali culture is both stupendous and all-pervasive. Celebrating Tagore's birthday, or the Rabindra Jayanti, on the public level has become an important institution of the Bengali way of life. The state of Bangladesh, however, caught up with the Jayanti rather late. Today the government will lead nation into paying homage to Tagore for only the second year running. Although it is always better late than never, it is sad that the state founded to realise the aspirations of Bengalees as a people, taking so much time to recognise one who shaped those aspirations and made Bengali an identifiably different state of being—made it worth to be a Bengali and through that the universal man.

One can, in the same vein, grieve about our having nothing in the city named not an avenue, not an auditorium, not even a university chair. It is clear that, in spite of the official celebration of Rabindra Jayanti, a resistance runs deep in the establishment. University education, for one thing, could have been something better. Even there you get so many chairs and not one after Rabindrahath.

One sure way of negating any Savant's teachings or the influences emanating from his life's examples is to canonize him. The Jayantis and chairs and such other things do have a tendency to do exactly that. The people of Bangladesh have already put Tagore to far better use than that. Tagore himself would be proud to see a people—one hundred million of them—rise and resist colonialist machinations and fight that successfully away guided by his songs and teachings.

Although his music is finding ever new admirers, in the post-independence period Bangladesh—both the nation at large and its state leaders and leading politicians—has moved away from truly caring about the social and political teachings of one of the greatest mind ever born to Bengal. He strove to become his own ideal universal man all his life but this he did through loving and knowing his own people and his milieu the most. We have failed to take him seriously as a great thinker on politics and education, sociology and anthropology, literature and the arts. The politicians are keeping off Tagore or for that matter any kind of serious studies to the peril of not only themselves, but of the whole nation and its destiny. We would indeed be happy if our academics put up a better performance in this respect. It was the writers' and the academics' duty to make the people aware of Rabindranath's uncompromising positions on social inequality, economic exploitation, poverty etc. It was for them to explode the myth of his leading a princely life.

Tagore's deepest longing coming out of his late years was to the effect that 'Let this be my last true identity that I belonged to you'—remains yet to be fulfilled through the uncaring indifference to him by that 'you'—the people who cannot in a thousand years repay his debt. They can only increase it. And in there lies the surest way to truly accepting him as one of our fold, as one of the underdogs fighting on the side of life and light.

## For the Attention of the Finance Minister

## Some Thoughts on the Coming Budget

by Jamal Uddin Ahmad

IN Bangladesh, the months of April, May and June are never comfortable for the Finance Minister or his Ministry. These are the months when final assessments are made in respect of financial and fiscal policies embodied in the national budget to determine whether these have fared well or badly. These are also the months when, at least in theory, midnight lamps are burnt to balance the books, prepare convincing papers and memoranda for donors, identify areas to impose new taxes to make up budget shortfalls, provide cosmetic touches to make the budget appear pro-people and finally prepare the budget speech which is usually long on rhetoric and short on substance. This is the set tradition which has been going on without break since independence.

M Saifur Rahman, our present Finance Minister, is an old and experienced hand in the art of preparing and managing national budgets. Since he is more a professional than a politician, his approach to the concept of public finance and management smacks of professionalism. There can be no doubt that his knowledge, perception, devotion to duty and dogged determination are second to none. He is in full command of the knowledge he needs to perform his job. One may not agree with him or for that matter, thoroughly dislike him but the fact remains that he is totally honest in what he says and believes. A lot of people do not like the way he airs his views publicly on highly sensitive and politically explosive subjects without caring to use sugarcoating or political finesse but he drives his message loud and clear regardless of backlash or discomfort it creates.

At this time of the year, it is also customary for the National Board of Revenue, in its capacity as the department responsible for internal resource mobilisation to seek the views of industry, trade and professional bodies as to what should be included in the forthcoming national budget to further promote and develop the in-

terests of business community. Scores of meetings are held within the various chambers of commerce and professional bodies to identify and recommend areas where extra relief from taxation could be given. A grand meeting consisting of all these bodies, senior officials of NBR and other relevant ministries is held which is normally presided over by the Finance Minister. Although the objective of this day-long gala meeting is to discuss the proposals submitted by the trade bodies, hardly anything is achieved excepting a lot of sound and fury culminating in nothing, at the end of the day. For all practical purposes this is an 'eye wash' to give the impression that the government had involved the business community in the budget making process. Be that as it may, this is the only occasion when the Ministry of Finance meets the 'People' prior to preparing the budget.

Now that the entire government machinery responsible for financial management both at macro and micro level, is geared only to find ways and means how to meet the never ending conditionalities of donor agencies, there is hardly any elbow room for the Finance Minister to use budgetary allocations to meet political commitments, to correct social injustice, to create right environment for investment and economic uplift etc. He has far too many demands and compulsions heaped on him but he is totally helpless. The lines are drawn for him and he has very little room to deviate. The fault is not his. It is the price we have to pay, as a nation, for the monumental mismanagement of our national and financial resources in the past.

Despite his little flexibility to manoeuvre, I still think I should draw attention to a few areas which need immediate resolution.

**TAXATION DEPARTMENT:** No one is more aware than Mr. Saifur Rahman himself that his Ministry, particularly the revenue collecting departments, need a thorough cleaning. If the system loss in the PDB is 42 per cent revenue loss in the Finance

Ministry must be 60 per cent, so goes the saying. The Finance Minister has expressed his exasperation many times, both in public and private discussions, about the rampant corruption, graft, carelessness and indiscipline of the officials and employees of his Ministry. It is also known that he had initiated some departmental measures to correct the situation but these are known to be only a 'tip of the iceberg.'

There is a popular belief in the country that for every Tk 100 of tax revenue, Government gets Tk 40 and the balance Tk 60 is devoured by system loss of departments. If, by some miracle, this missing Tk 60 could be brought within the Government coffers as tax revenue, then our Tax-GDP ratio would be something for which the Finance Minister and the nation could be proud of. We would also be relieved of some of the unpalatable conditionalities of the donors. Shouldn't charity begin from home, Mr Finance Minister.

**SAVINGS:** It is a common economic knowledge that unless one has savings, he cannot invest; and if he cannot invest, he does not earn profit; and if he does not earn profit, he can pay no tax. Therefore, the first thing of public finance management is to ensure that there is enough savings in the country. All good governments believe in this elementary philosophy and they create healthy environments in their countries for people to save. Saving, to say the least, is the life blood of national economy. Simply put, it is the hen that lays the golden eggs. But in Bangladesh, we have killed the hen because we were too greedy. Unlike other countries, in Bangladesh, only lower middle and middle income group of people have the propensity to save. This they do for old age and to meet social and religious obligations. Rich and neo-rich people do not believe in saving and they thrive on non-returnable bank loans which they borrow against non-existent or bogus collaterals. The essential point that emerges is that these

small savers who are the main providers of whatever savings we have in the country need to be protected and their number expanded manifold for national interest. But no less than twenty per cent of their savings is now taken away by one form of taxation of another. This must stop. If this section of people is squeezed too hard, their savings will go underground. The signals already evident are none too happy. The Finance Minister should take note of it.

**CAPITAL GAINS:** This is an area which needs a clear and courageous handling. The waiver of TPC requirement for registration of land documents, in the current year's budget, was a timely and correct step. It has already eliminated a nasty chain of corruption in the tax offices. Similar bold step is now needed to streamline the whole gamut of capital gains. Since capital gain arises mainly due to reduction in the value of money over a period of years, there is in fact, hardly a gain in the real sense of the term, if it is adjusted for inflation. This complex matter needs to be approached with a sense of equity and fairness. Because this is a special type of gain, this should qualify to be treated separately and not lumped with other sources of income. To provide some relief to take care of inflation would be perfectly in order before computing the gain. Furthermore, instead of too many tax slab, only two slabs should be enough, namely 7.5% for assets under 10 years and 10% for assets over 10 years.

Investment of capital gains in approved investments such as industrial undertakings or house property to avoid payment of tax, should be restricted to tax part of the gain and not the whole gain. If one were to invest the whole gain, then there would be no incentive for people to sell the property. This is more relevant in the case of sale of land and ancestral property. People sell these kinds of property, which have very little acquisition

cost, only to have access to liquidity. If by selling they find that they would have to invest pretty well the whole of the sales proceeds, as they are required to do now, then they would, invariably, be pushed to become tax dodgers. Additionally, there must be some alternative choices given to invest capital gains apart from house property or industrial undertakings. In this connection, special 7-year Saving Certificates to be issued by the Ministry of Finance solely for this purpose with the stipulation that these could not be sold during the maturity period, could be considered as one of the alternatives. The idea should be to encourage people to pay tax voluntarily or to provide attractive sources of long-term investments.

**WEALTH TAX:** It is ironic that income tax and wealth tax should co-exist side by side. This, to say the least, is a contradiction of terms. By making people to pay taxes both on the income as well as on the capital, we have created a complex anomaly. The Government must make its mind which is to be taxed—income or capital. Taxing both amounts to double taxation.

We now have a tax on consumption as well known as Value Added Tax. On top of all these taxes, we pay taxes on imported commodities we consume, utility services we use, house properties we build—all out of the same taxed income. Would the Finance Minister please decide how many times he would like to have the same source of income taxed.

**GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONARIES:** Government functionaries from the President of the Republic downwards including Members of Parliament and Ministers pay no income tax on their salaries and perquisites. MPs even get duty free motor vehicles. Finance Ministry has never disclosed the amount of subsidy the tax payers pay to keep these people in style. This must run into several hundred millions of Tax Takas. Why a person holding the position of the President of the Republic or a senior Government functionary shouldn't pay tax? Isn't he a

person like any other citizen in the country? Does he not enjoy the same infrastructure facilities provided by the Government which are financed out of the tax revenue to which he contributes nothing? Doesn't our Constitution say that all citizens are equal? What stops you, Mr Finance Minister, to bring these so called 'extra ordinary' people within the tax net?

**TAX LAWS AND TAX RATES:** Bangladesh is really a country full of glaring contradictions. Whilst, on the one hand, even the poorest of the poor pays some kind of tax, we have, on the other hand, people belonging to top 1% of income bracket who pay no income tax at all. Our direct taxes which contribute only a small fraction of total taxes have an administrative outfit which pretty well devours all the revenue it collects. Not even 1% of our population pay any direct tax. Well over half of our GDP is outside the tax net. Whereas the objective of taxation should be 'less from more', in Bangladesh, we believe in 'more from few'. That is the reason why we are fast becoming a nation of tax dodgers. Would the Finance Minister please take note of this situation?

I was in India when the last Indian budget was announced. Night before, everybody I had met—professionals, businessmen, ordinary people—were worried expecting a harsh budget. But the situation changed radically as soon as the budget was announced the next day. Everybody, regardless of his or her social status, had something good to say about the budget because they could find something for themselves in the budget either by way of tax relief or opportunities to improve their earning capacity. I am sure, our Finance Minister too has something up in his sleeve to surprise us all and, I am sure, pleasantly.

A former Deputy Prime Minister in the government of the late President Ziaur Rahman, the writer, a noted expert on economic matters, is currently the President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh.

## Who's Who in the New Afghanistan

by Hazhir Teimourian

*It was only a matter of time. Those who watched the Squabbling Mujahidin forces over 13 years and followed the rivalries of their ambitious leaders expected they would fall out immediately the single object of their hatred, the Soviet-installed regime in Kabul, fell. Gemini News Service reports on the dominant figures in the new Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.*



Sibghatullah Mojaddedi

the new strongman of Kabul and northern Afghanistan.

A long-time associate of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (see below), he was born in the Panjshir valley, to the northeast of the city, and educated at a French school in Kabul. He studied architecture at Kabul Polytechnic for three years, then fled to Pakistan to escape persecution for clandestine Islamic agitation.

In exile, he slid further under the ideological influence of 'professor' Burhanuddin Rabbani, fundamentalist leader of the Jamiat-e-Islami party. During a visit by Rabbani to Egypt, Masood was sent by the Jamiat's then deputy-leader Hekmatyar to the Panjshir to start a rebellion there.

This was crushed by the government of president Daoud Khan (who had overthrown his cousin king Zahir Shah in 1973) and Masood returned to Pakistan to quarrel with Hekmatyar, before Hekmatyar broke away from the Jamiat to found his own party.

Masood returned to the valley of his birth again after the Communist coup of 1978 to start yet another rebellion under the banner of Rabbani.

He succeeded this time chiefly because of the foreign occupation of the land, but also because he realised he could not afford to alienate too many tribal leaders in the region by interfering in their affairs.

Instead, he trod softly and incorporated hundreds of fighters from other districts among his forces for training in guerrilla warfare. In the end, continued warfare decimated the tribal structure of the Panjshir Valley.

Masood's survival in the face of periodic incursions by Soviet troops and heavy bombardment of the valley's irrigation system soon turned him into a legendary figure, attracting yet more recruits.

While formally still a follower of Rabbani Masood has now gained enough power and prestige to be his own man.

GULBUDDIN HEKMATYAR, a fierce Pashtun nationalist and the most strict of all the Muslim leaders, is the new rebel leader and would seen unable to accept the supremacy

of his former underling.

He has a reputation for tolerating no criticism—Afghans criticising atrocities committed by his gunmen have been shot dead—and is a self-professed critic of Western liberalism, despite receiving the bulk of American military help earmarked for the Mujahidin over the last 13 years.

At 46, he was born in the Konduz region of eastern Afghanistan, studied engineering at Kabul university under Zahir Shah, then fled into Pakistani exile on account of, among other acts, resorting to violence against unveiled women.

As deputy leaders of the Jamiah Islami in Pakistan he organised unsuccessful rebellions in Afghanistan, then broke away to found his own Hezbe Islami party.

His success after the Soviet invasion is chiefly due to his long-time association with the Pakistani army and his ideological affinity with the late president Zia-ul-Haq.

Hekmatyar has supporters spread all over the Pashtun provinces of the east and the south. The new leadership in Kabul may, despite the recent clashes, find it prudent to keep on the table their offer to him of the post of prime minister. Such a post would be largely without power.

SIBGHATULLAH MOJADDEDI, the new official head of state, is a non-nationalistic

Pashtun from the eastern

Jalalabad region and the founder of the National Liberation Front of Afghanistan, one of the seven Pakistani-based Mujahidin guerrilla groups.

A graduate of Egypt's Al-Azhar university, where he supported the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood organisation, he taught theology for many years in Kabul, tending towards fundamentalism.

He formed close links with the royal family under Zahir Shah, making him acceptable to traditional-minded Afghans as well as to some orthodox Muslims.

Mojaddedi also has a potentially large social base of his own. His family, whose founders settled in Afghanistan in the last century from Arabia, are known as the HAZRATS (saints) and believed to have supernatural powers.

Most male members of his family were murdered in 1979 by Hafizullah Amin, the second communist president, leaving him as the hereditary spiritual leader of the Naqshbandi sufi order.

Aged 67, he speaks several foreign languages, including English, and headed the divided Mujahidin government formed in exile in Peshawar in 1988. His own forces were probably the weakest of all the Mujahidin factions.

BORHANUDDIN RABBANI, a Tajik aged 52, is the founder of Ahmad Shad Masood's Jamiat

Islamic party and a former

teacher of Sharia law and organiser of fundamentalist students at Kabul university, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

He fled the country in 1947 under a crackdown by president Daoud Khan as received money and military help from the Bhutto government in Pakistan to mount guerrilla raids into Afghanistan.

His group was then known as the Ikhwani al-Muslemin, the Muslim Brotherhood, and consisted largely of college students and small merchants.

Under 'professor' Rabbani, the Jamiat remains an ideologically fundamentalist group and, in step with Hekmatyar, has opposed suggestions from Mojaddedi and other royalists to make approaches to the exiled king Zahir Shah in Rome.

He is to be the head of the 51-man Islamic Council, an appointed parliament, before elections are held.

SEYYED AHMAD GAILANI, 60, hereditary spiritual leader of the Qaderi sufi order, is to be Foreign Minister of the new Kabul regime.

A member of the royalist camp among the Mujahidin, he is a relatively urbane figure, due to his travels in the West, and tends towards a liberal interpretation of Islam.

The founder of the National Front for the Islamic Revolution maintains a home in London, is a prosperous merchant and landowner, and was once an adviser to king Zahir Shah. His followers are mainly tribes in the south-east. Alone among Mujahidin leaders, he believed that a negotiated withdrawal of Soviet forces was possible.

HAZHIR TEIMOURIAN, an Iranian Kurd, writes on the Middle East for The Times of London.

## To the Editor...

## Justice

Sir, Those who have retired from govt., semi govt. corporations etc. before the current Pay Commission, implemented from July 1, 1991, used to get one, two or three dearness allowances given at different times on the basic pay. Each of the DA amounted to ten per cent of the basic pay. Unfortunately those retired before July 1, 1991, got the benefit of basic pay alone while fixing pension or gratuity benefit. On the other hand, those retired after July 1, 1991 will get the benefit of higher pay scale while their DA's have also been merged with the basic pay. Thus their

retirement benefits have been nearly doubled or so.

In the above context, can we call it a justice? Let the government of a democratic states think over the matter in the light of equity, justice and fairness. Lastly the pensioners may get the benefit of higher pay in some form or other but gratuity getters are deprived as their names are struck off on retirement! The government should also see to this.

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**BTv: News headline**  
Sir, It was 13th April. Monday and as my usual habit I watched both the English and

Bengali main bulletins of BTv. The headlines of the bulletins mainly drew my attention.

Sometimes there comes some change (as inclusion of updated events) in the headlines if badly necessary. But I was really surprised to see a newly included headline in the 10 o'clock news — it was 'Nelsen Mandela announces his separation from his wife Winnie'.

I first thought it was Mandela's cessation from ANC which indeed affects South Africa.

Was it an item that deserved a headline for TV news where only a few headlines are strictly selected? The Mandela items could definitely have

been included in the bulletin as it was published in all the newspapers.

If BTv's Foreign News Editor thought Mandela-Winnie event was worthy of making TV news headline then why did he not make it a headline also for 8 o'clock news?

It is learned that earlier BTv's two top officers were transferred for their mistakes, one of which involved in handling the headlines. Then what is in store for the folly of BTv's Foreign News Editor for the recurrence of the same kind of mistake?

Abdul Matin  
Dhanmandi, Dhaka

**Trees and laws**  
Sir, Setting up of saw mills at sites adjoining forest reserves, tea estates and other highrise tree planted areas indicate a process of diminishing local forest products. As far as law is concerned no saw mill should be set up within 10-mile radius of such places as mentioned above. So setting up of a new saw mill within the area simply increases the diminishing process by a further step.

In a recent meeting of Tea Estates Executives in Juri Valley Club it was stated by a manager that a new saw mill at a very short distance from a number of tea estates and only

about three miles from government forest reserve is going to be set up there. Tea estates shade trees and other forest trees very likely will be its first raw materials and gradually it will begin to grab valuable trees of the forest reserves. This is possibly the most crude way to help deforestation.

So, in true sense, do we really want to preserve our forests? If the answer is yes, then why such 'executors' are being allowed to set up? I hope this should not go unnoticed by the concerned authority.

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