

For a Better Parliament

The return of the Awami League (AL)-led Opposition to the Jatiya Sangsad, ending its eight-day boycott, removes such uncertainties which had overshadowed the parliament, especially during its present session. It is a pity that the move came too late for the mainstream Opposition to lead the discussion on the budget or to join in the deliberation on the supplementary budget for the out-going year, which was finally passed on Monday.

Here, the assurance offered by Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman on Tuesday that the proposed budget for the current financial year would be "amended and adjusted if required" is a helpful one, albeit slightly patronising, which underscores the need for the Opposition to make the best of the remaining three weeks' time of the budget discussion. Members of the mainstream Opposition, the so-called alternative government, thus have an opportunity of not only scrutinising the budget but also of making their position on the overall economic situation known to the nation. Herein lies a challenge for the members of AL and the Five-party Alliance to demonstrate that their solutions of the pressing economic problems facing the country are better than those offered by the present government. If they can do so, they will be taking a step forward in establishing their credibility as a responsible and effective Opposition in the parliament.

As it resumes its participation in the parliament, the AL-led Opposition must also take stock of its gains and losses stemming from its boycott of the Sangsad. There is little doubt that the issues that prompted the withdrawal of the Opposition from the parliament were serious ones which called for a dramatic, spectacular action like a walkout from the parliament. That the ruling party could have helped in ending the boycott by agreeing to the terms of the agreement announced on Wednesday much earlier cannot also be lightly dismissed. After all, even a casual reading of the joint declaration suggests that there has hardly been any sell-out by one side or the other on any of the four demands made by the Opposition. So, we share the view privately expressed by many moderate elements in both the ruling party and the Opposition that the prolonged boycott by AL and its principal allies got linked to the continuing power struggle between the two sides, in which the Sangsad was caught in the crossfire, like an unwilling victim.

In reviewing the situation, the two sides should maintain a dialogue for reaching a *modus operandi* for working together in the parliament, in their respective roles, without using the Sangsad as a tool in the pursuit of their political objectives. Such a dialogue should be kept up at the level of the two chief whips and, whenever the occasion demands, between the two deputy leaders, Badruddoza Chowdhury and Abdus Samad Azad. Both sides should agree that while they may not reach consensus on all national issues — the kind of consensus this paper has been pleading for — they should at least accept the need for free and fair debate on the floor of the parliament on all our problems, ranging from the campus violence to the transport strike, from a rise in the prices of daily necessities to the economic situation in rural areas.

If the ruling party and the Opposition are to give the parliament a new lease of life, a dialogue even at the level of the two deputy leaders may not be enough. It is important that in the changed scenario, the so-called back-benchers of the major parties play a more pronounced role in the debates as well as in the decision-making process of the parties concerned. This is possible if the leaders of both the ruling party and the mainstream opposition take urgent steps to promote inner democracy in their ranks, which would not only strengthen the parliament as a forum for free and constructive discussion but also give each and every member in the House a new sense of involvement in what goes on at the Jatiya Sangsad. Let us learn a few lessons from the recent deadlock in the parliament.

How to Let the Saplings Live

There is no doubt about the Prime Minister planting a sapling on the occasion of opening of the national tree plantation week. For there are pictures of the event in the newspapers with the PM and assorted hangers on doing a munajat very possibly invoking providential insurance that the sapling grow into a tree surviving human vandalism and animal appetite. This indeed could be a more meaningful prayer instead of one seeking success to the week. Very plainly because such weeks and campaigns — in the absence of any evaluating mechanism, both short and long term — are not designed to either succeed or fail beyond the usual going through the motions such as news paper supplements and a myriad inaugural plantings by the Forestry functionaries and other faces unfamiliar to the people. There is not such a standing with the society as would enthrone people into emulating them. It is guaranteed that not all such ceremonially planted trees live to become useful contributors to mother earth's health. By the same token it can be guaranteed that of the millions of saplings touted to have been planted by the end of the tree week a shamefully paltry percentage will live.

The nation hardly needs lectures on the virtues of planting a tree. It needs action on a very big, perhaps unprecedented visionary scale — and truly effective motivation of a tree-unfriendly society into one that would universally treat all of green life as sacred and believe adding to the member of such to be an act of supreme virtue. Instead of going about lecturing, the government, together with political, social and cultural leadership, should first of all mount a vigorous campaign against all kinds of tree-felling. Let there be a band of committed people who would rather give life than allow anyone to take the life of a tree — exactly as the early initiators of the great 'Chipko' movement in the sub-Himalayan region did.

While the tree plantation week is still here we want to suggest to the government a way to improve upon the survival rate of the planted saplings. While doing so we cannot help remembering the endeavours of the late lamented Dewan Mohammad Idris of Sabhar who first took very effective steps in the matter. He just grew 50,000 mango saplings to a minimum of 12 feet height and coaxed the government to buy and plant them. Before his death in 1990 he forcefully proved that saplings of this size can be moved about and planted with one hundred per cent chance of their survival. We urge the government to accept this point of going for taller saplings.

EVERYDAY from early morning, few thousand hawkers with their headloads of merchandise go on hawking all sorts of consumer goods throughout the streets of Dhaka as well as every other city and town of the country. Their daily turnover might amount to a subsistence living, perhaps slightly better than a day labourer or could be worse if the original financing was from money lenders. The numerous hawkers, the street vendors including panwallahs — all together, the number of such small time minuscule operators would run into millions all over the country. They perform a very useful trading service reaching the mangoes of Rajshahi, the oranges of Sylhet or the vegetables of Manikganj upto our door-steps and that too at very little cost since the hawkers face intense competition and therefore hardly manage to retain the small retailer's margin.

Over the years their number has increased much more than their turnover since the capacity of the headload cannot possibly be increased by any stretch of imagination. However, the business can be expanded if the hawkers manage to progress from headload to scooter vans and then to mini-trucks (pick-up vans). The turnover would increase by 100 times, it not more. But where are the farm produce to fill up the vans and trucks? Common sense dictates that production must increase first.

Lack of Communication

Unfortunately this is not correct, the Daily Star reported that hardly at a distance of 40 to 50 miles from the enormous consuming centre of Dhaka, vegetables are rotting in the fields or being offered to the cattle. With the onset of monsoon (transport strike coinciding) are getting reports of rotting mangoes of North Bengal and the wasted

Remunerative Markets

The conclusions are therefore not far to seek. The investment for increasing agricultural production will be wasted unless remunerative markets can be ensured. If agricultural diversification is the target, common sense dictates that we should identify the major producing areas of perishable fruits and veg-

Aiming at the Small Beginning

pineapples of Chittagong Hill Tracts. In fact, due to tremendous lack of communication as much as one-third of the highly perishable fruits and vegetables of our country are wasted. It is a tragedy of the worst kind inflicted as matter of routine upon our fertile, yet the hunger land.

At the same time, with initiation of the rural works programme since 1960s and food for works programme later on, at least Taka 500 crore in cash and food must have gone into the rural road construction efforts so far. Unfortunately these are only on papers. In reality, we are still in the deep mud and slush.

It is not widely known that the soil conditions of greater Rajshahi districts are such that during monsoon the rural roads can be negotiated even on foot with great difficulties. As a result, a sizeable part of the mango and the litchi crops have no alternative but to rot in the rains. It is also not known that excellent oranges are grown in the Sazek valley of the Hill Tracts but those can be brought to the market only by helicopters which is not a feasible proposition. Even where there are roads, the farm produce cannot reach the markets when the ferry crossings across Jamuna become uncertain during monsoon. The sight of the long line of trucks waiting for days to cross the river during July/August is far too common every year.

The market for mango juice is very substantial in the Middle East. Thailand earns over 200 million dollars by exporting canned pineapple fruit and juice, while the world trade in orange juice runs into one billion dollars with Brazil as the monopoly supplier. The existing programme for expansion of rural electrification is a very timely development to

open the way for the unfolding of the sustainable growth process. The support of small time operators are however tremendously lacking in our country. This is because we believe in the big show: set up an integrated textile mill where the fibres enter from one end and the finished fabrics come out from the other side. Instead, way not plan for the road and electricity networks connecting all the weaving villages of greater Dhaka, Tangail and Pabna districts. Arrange for easy credit as well as technical support services so that automatic looms replace the handlooms. Private investment for textile finishing would follow. Even garment factories would come up and the backward linkage to spinning mills for manufacture of yarn would also be realised.

Let us therefore think small at the beginning. If planning is correct, soon the mini ventures blossom into medium to large scale enterprises. A high rate of industrial growth will follow. The reorientation of development, I am suggesting here involve a fundamental change of the perception of economic growth. The headload hawker has a daily net earning of around Taka 50 only. If it could double every two years, the same meagre amount will become taka 1,800 per day within 10 years and over half a million within 20 years. The important factor therefore is to search and identify the potentials for geometric rates of progression of growth, not the scale of operation at the starting point. Thus our GNP per capita today is only 200 dollars but if we could double it every five years, then, by the year 2012 from today, our income level will be comparable to a developed country of today.

Of course development is not a case of simple arithmetic but like the fruit and vegetable sellers or the weavers, potters and blacksmiths are vigorously assisted by credit, infrastructure and the know-how, there are no reason why atleast few thousand units of ceramics and metal-working industries, small to medium scale in size, must not operating in our country within the next 10 to 15 years. Same ought to be the case with the fishermen of the coast: within the next 20 years atleast a million of them traversing the seas in modern trawlers should enlarge the export of marine foods into a multi-billion dollar export business.

Economic Growth Par Excellence

Economic growth did never come about through the smart young men prowling the corridors of power. And, there is nothing revealing in what has been stated so far. The streets of Calcutta are littered with stories of Marwaris who came to the "City of Joy" with simply nothing but their Lota (the typical water mug) and the Kambal (blanket). They started as door to door vendors of printed sarees but within few years managed to open their own shops and during the next 10 to 15 years, became big merchants — even starting their own factories. This particular culture of business and enterprise development is conspicuously lacking, both in West Bengal and Bangladesh. But never mind, let us start with the hawkers and the weavers, aiming big with a small beginning. We must be convinced that these small timers hold the future of Bangladesh.



come the inevitable course of growth provided easy access to marketing credit is also ensured. Take for example the national highway starting from Dhaka New Market and going upto Aricha Ghat; if all weather secondary roads connect all the Upazilas of Manikganj district including the major rural hats within a distance of 10 miles from the highway, then supply of vegetables to Dhaka all round the year could be vastly augmented and it is not only vegetables, supply of fresh milk, egg and poultry is also bound to go up. Next will be the emergence of agro-processing. The market for mango juice is very substantial in the Middle East. Thailand earns over 200 million dollars by exporting canned pineapple fruit and juice, while the world trade in orange juice runs into one billion dollars with Brazil as the monopoly supplier. The existing programme for expansion of rural electrification is a very timely development to

Support to Small Operators

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China's First UN Forces Now in Cambodia

THE traffic policeman was taken aback and stopped the military jeep and a convoy of trucks hurrying through the busy intersection.

So were a crowd of pedestrians perplexed by the blue berets and the new fatigues worn by soldiers — indeed an unfamiliar sight on Beijing streets.

The traffic policeman pointed to the "UN" sign on the side of the white jeep. "That stands for United Nations peace-keeping forces," the driver said. "We are members of the peace-keeping forces." The convoy was waved on.

China's first United Nations troops were on their way to embark for one of the most unsettled places in the world, Cambodia, impeded only momentarily by a curious policeman on point duty.

Chinese diplomacy played a major part in bringing a solution to the 20-year-old Cambodian dispute. Now its

"blue helmet" force of 400 is in the process of helping restore normality to the ravaged country.

The "blue helmet" tag comes out of the fact that UN forces usually wear blue helmets or blue berets.

A Chinese Foreign ministry official points out that since November 1956, the UN Security Council has sent peace-keeping forces on eight occasions, which involved 50,000 soldiers in total and cost US\$4 billion.

But it was not until this March that China founded its first "blue helmet" force, a military engineering unit, at the request of United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Ghali.

In October 1991, foreign ministers and leaders from 19 countries gathered in Paris to sign the Paris Peace Accord to end the Cambodian problem. To help Cambodia's four parties better implement the Accord, the UN decided to

Yu Jiagang and Chen Hui write from Beijing

They are armed with submachine guns and pistols. "But we are permitted to use them only for self-defence," says one officer.

dispatch peace-keeping forces to Cambodia. In mid-February this year, Secretary-General Ghali requested that China, as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, send 47 military observers and at least 3,000 peace-keeping army engineers.

The Chinese government promptly agreed, in April, 30 members of China's "blue berets" flew to Phnom Penh. Another 370 members carrying equipment and vehicles arrived on April 23 after more than ten days journey by train and ship. They will serve in Cambodia for 18 months.

China's 400 member force is responsible for such engineering work as the maintenance of airports, roads and bridges.

All the soldiers are competent, but they're not specially singled out from the army, says Lieutenant Colonel Li Jinyong head of the unit.

"In recent years, the combat effectiveness of all troops has improved a lot. So it is unnecessary to choose those we believe are topnotchers in the army," Colonel Li says.

Lieutenant Colonel Gao Jun, another UN blue-helmet, says the average age of the soldiers in this unit is 20 years and the average age of the officers is 30.

"More than 80 per cent of the officers are college graduates or with some years of university behind them, and more than 90 per cent of the soldiers are high school graduates," Colonel Gao adds.

The unit shifted to its "blue helmet" mission within six days after it received the order. The soldiers threw themselves into intensified training, which covered firing practice, mountain climbing, and gruelling cross-country exercises.

One night just before leaving, a bugle call broke the silence. In less than ten minutes, the soldiers were mustered and ready to move. A staff officer says this manoeuvre enhanced their adaptability, readying them to fulfil the 240-km deployment in tougher conditions after they arrive in Cambodia.

He notes that the present temperatures in Cambodia go as high as 40 degrees Centigrade. The heat is aggravated by constant rains over several months. Malaria is also common. And many areas are scudded with mines yet to be removed.

"And in the first 60 days of our arrival, we have to live off the rations and supplies we

carry, until the UN brings its provision. If we don't have good physical condition and military skills, we would hardly be able to carry out our mission," he says.

As they are engaged in international peace-keeping for the first time, the soldiers have received education on UN Regulations, the Paris Accord and the social and natural conditions of Cambodia.

An officer with the logistics department says that the blue berets, cap badges, shoulder emblems and scarfs are provided by the UN. The UN is to spend some US\$2 billion on peace-keeping operations in Cambodia. A total of 15,900 soldiers are committed, among which 2,230 are engineers from China, Poland and Thailand.

Colonel Li Jinyong says they are armed with submachine guns and pistols. "But we are permitted to use them only for self-defence," he adds.

— Depthnews Asia

WHEN Iran's religious leadership swept the Shah from power 13 years ago, a young man went off to Britain to study. He married a British woman and is now the father of three children.

He now believes the time has come to return home. He waits for his family's papers to make that trip, standing at the crowded Iranian embassy in London's posh district of Kensington.

The young man refuses to identify himself but says more than a decade in Britain has convinced him that "corrupt (Western) society" is not a place to raise children.

The young man is an engineer and he is confident about finding a job back home. But his rosy picture of the future is blurred by his wife's apprehensions. She fears the implications of life in a radically different society in which family control over the individuals is far tighter, the role of women far more restricted.

His story is similar to those of thousands of Iranians who left their country for either

Khomeini's Exiles Return Home

personal or political reasons when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established an Islamic republic in 1979. Now, many of them are streaming back for the first time to either settle in or visit their country of birth.

At the Iran Air office at London's Heathrow Airport, an official estimates that sales of one-way tickets from London to Tehran have risen recently by 30 per cent in the past year. The airline's three flights a week to Tehran are solidly booked.

"The situation has changed," the official added. "People left Iran after the revolution because they didn't trust the government. Years later they began to realize that everything is normal. The situation is under control, people are more secure."

Elected president after Khomeini's death in 1989, Hashemi Rafsanjani started a series of reformist economic policies and a subtle rap-

proachment to the West, thus breaking away from Khomeini's hardline policies. Parliamentary elections in May gave Rafsanjani's followers a majority of seats in the Majlis, Iran's Parliament.

The government is putting the word out for exiles, said Vahé Petrossian, a specialist in Iranian affairs at the London-based *Middle East Economic Digest*. "Ministers are speaking at gatherings of Iranians and assuring people they will get their properties back. Word has gotten round."

Rafsanjani's regime still has a tough battle ahead to erase Khomeini's legacy, Petrossian said. It has to tackle an inflated and inefficient government bureaucracy, move the economy from wartime central planning to a free market economy and devalue the currency.

But to lure wealthy businessmen, Petrossian said economic reforms must coincide with political liberalisation. Against this backdrop, exiles are returning: some because they have run out of money, others in search of new opportunities or to regain their properties, and still others because they are homesick.

Standing in the passport control queue at Heathrow before departure of a flight to Tehran, Iranians of all walks of life seem relaxed. Rafsanjani

is normal, not a crazy mullah, says Yacob Mirzal, a businessman whose daughter Laleh lives in London but plans to return to Iran.

Rafsanjani is better than Khomeini, Laleh says, articulating a view few dare to express openly. She thinks he is doing his best to improve the country and says Rafsanjani is "modern."

Laleh's brother, who is in his mid-twenties, returned to Iran to work with his father after spending 11 years in Britain. He says he would not have returned had he found work here. But a veiled young woman puts forward a radically different view. "I love Iran. I was born and raised there and I will go back when I finish my studies."

The exiles' perspective on events in Iran appears different from that of those who stayed in the country after the revolution.

Basic commodities in Iran

area sold at outrageous prices when at all available. This, say critics, has made life difficult for the average citizen. With their foreign currency exiles have a headstart. Given the exchange rate of 142 tumans to a dollar, the government has an interest in courting wealthy exiles.

Mehdi Khonsari, an adviser to Shah Reza II, the toppled Shah's son who claims the throne from his exile in Washington, concedes the Iranian government is presenting itself in a gentler way. "The facade has changed but whether the content has remains to be seen," Khonsari said.

"You cannot improve economic and social conditions if you don't allow people freedom," he said. Khonsari believes Rafsanjani is trying to liberalise Iran, but criticises him for not truly giving Iranians the right to choose their own leaders.

He points to the constitution, which says Iranians must relinquish political activism. "They must allow a situation where Iranian people count for something," Khonsari said.

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.

Lemon 'sharbet'

Sir, Most of our people are poor who cannot afford imported drinks available in the market. Home-made lemon juice (sharbet) is definitely better than imported drinks. We should also squeeze a lemon piece in each and every meal as pointed out in a news item... lemon may prevent cancer: published in a local daily on June 2. It was reported in Tokyo that squeezed lemon if juice can kill danger-

ous carcinogens. Vitamin C in fresh lemon eradicated carcinogens that formed on the charred surface of grilled fish.

The researchers developed an electronic device to measure accurately the level of free radical substances that have a high rate of chemical reaction and are believed to cause cancer and other diseases. Vitamin C successfully neutralised the high level of free radicals detected on the surface of charred fish, researchers said. Prevention is better than

cure. As we could not use expensive drug for cancer so we have to look into our food and environment to save ourselves from this dangerous disease. Incidence of cancer will be reduced if we squeeze lemon in every meal and drink home-made lemon (sharbet) with water and sugar juice every now and then avoiding smoking.

M Alauddin West Nakal Para, Dhaka

Late Dr Sattar

Sir, On June 11 The Daily Star published eulogy on late Dr Sattar, Mr A R Chowdhury's able hand painted a short but apt pen picture. What he narrated about Dr Sattar is vivid in the minds of those with whom he came in contact. Signifi-

cantly, people of Sharasti remember him with fondness and respect. Late Dr Sattar was untiring in his efforts to uplift the lot of school going students. His contribution toward female education of the area will be cherished with love and affection. It seems he was a life dedicated to service to the under-privileged. As detailed by Mr A R Chowdhury, it is remarkable that Dr Sattar could do so much in so short a time. Considering other aspects of his activities, it is not all the fact that he was a CSP officer. Basically, he attuned himself with the needs of the fellow beings — with their sufferings and helplessness. Herein lies the greatness of a man, that is Dr Sattar — a humane gentle soul. May Allah grant him eternal peace (Amen).

One feels small when in the second paragraph, the praise

manner, they seem to have succumbed to the element of arrogance luxury and monopoly of power and privilege.

It has been the combined might of the people to root that out. The hon'ble PM of the country said the other day, all cadres are equal in the eye of the government. Late Dr Sattar, at least, saw the equality of men.

All the same, Mr Chowdhury himself was, first and foremost a freedom fighter, and second, a brilliant student and a successful CSP officer. I beg to differ with him on his views of CSP officers as a class. And he, of all of us, should know, why. After all, he is one of us — the mass.

Afzal Hamid Dharmondil, R/A, Dhaka