Dhaka, Sunday, June 13, 1993

# **Promises and Fulfilment**

Realistic, ambitious or pragmatic - no matter how the new national budget is described, we have started getting a comprehensive picture not only of the government's intentions but also of reactions from a cross-section of our people, especially of the private sector. On balance, the emerging scenario, especially after it was outlined at the press conference on Friday by Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, remains positive. In fact, it is even a hopeful one if one takes the reaction of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) the praise of which for the budget, we hasten to add, has been tempered by constructive suggestions. The same has been done by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), but on a sharper note of criticism on a number of issues than the MCCI.

If these reactions augur well for a constructive nation-wide discussion and an in-depth parliamentary debate on the budget in coming weeks, we are pleased with what looks like the beginning of an interaction between the government and the private sector, two major players in our much-promised economic resurgence. Now that the Advisory Committee of the opposition Awami League (AL) has also met to discuss the party's position on the budget, said to be a departure from the past practice, our expectation for a constructive debate gets

another welcome boost.

How the debate now proceeds or, for that matter, its outcome depends largely on the government, especially on the Finance Minister. Judging by the way Rahman defended almost every provision of the budget, he may well be tempted to pay less than adequate attention to suggestions made by the trade bodies or to criticisms coming from AL. We hope, this will not be so, because, all said and done, even a realistic budget like the one we have this year has serious gaps, ambiguities and contradictions. Some have already been identified in initial reactions. Others may surface during the parliamentary debate. We urge Rahman to treat them in all seriousness.

Among the points already raised by the trade bodies, the government's inability to offer a comprehensive plan for the rehabilitation of sick industries seems as serious as its unwillingness to spell out a time frame for many of the measures proposed in the budget, such as the introduction of the convertibility of Taka for trade accounts, to start with, the formation of a committee to remove tariff anomalies or the enactment of the antidumping law. These specific cases — there are a few others — focus on the most important problem that can make or unmake a national budget and the entire development process. It is implementation. During the press conference, the Finance Minister opined, and rightly so, that the inefficiency of the public sector was causing an "economic hemorrhage" and those which had become "irrelevant" should be closed down. What the Minister did not offer was a plan, with time schedule, in this regard. Again, Rahman's own frustration with various ministries, presumably other than his own, is well-known, like his outbursts against the cumbersome bureaucracy. As we all know, herein lies the reason why the disbursement of funds under the Annual Development Programme (ADP) for 1992-93 could not reach even 50 per cent during the nine months of the current fiscal year. If it jumps to 90 per cent by the end of the fiscal year. as suggested recently by Planning Minister Zahiruddin Khan, it may be no more than transferring funds from one book to another, without projects concerned necessarily getting off the ground. In short, what we do not have are signs, definite ones, of the improvement of the process of implementation or that problems in the administration, as identified by Rahman, are being tackled with a sense of urgency. We also do not have the assurance that ministries do not operate as separate entities but as part of a cohesive team committed to an effective and efficient implementation of the national budget.

## Somália's Trial Continues

When the saga of bloody confrontations in Somalia seemed close to be over, the cowardly murder of 23 Pakistani soldiers engaged in peacekeeping under the United Nations' aegis has dealt a rude shock to the expectant world community. The country to which nature is not particularly kind, has however more than a fair share of man-made tragedies mostly in the form of internecine feuds. So indisciplined and lawless the various gun-totting groups have become that the latest casualty, instead of exposing the weakness of the UN forces stationed there, has indeed brought to the fore the bankruptcy of the Somali politics. A defiant patriotic resistance to foreign occupation forces is one thing and banditry of some rag-tag war-mongers undermining humanitarian aid operation supervised by UN forces is a completely different proposition.

Somalia after all is a test case in that the UN in the post-cold-war era has exerted itself to bring peace in some troubled spots of the world. Barring a few stray incidents, initially the UN peace mission in Somalia went ahead quite smoothly. Gradually the UN forces took control even of the hinterlands. The sceptics who doubted the ability of the peacekeeping forces to establish control over the rugged terrain were soon proved wrong. The success of the UN could be measured in terms of the capacity of the peace-keepers to feed the hungry millions in Somalia. Before the arrival of the UN forces, most of the food aid made available by the aid organisations working there was either looted or misused by

the different warring factions. The peace formula has held until the attack on the Pakistani soldiers. Accusing fingers are pointed to Mohamed Farah Aldeed, one of the Somali warlords, for this flagrant breach of truce. The blamed man however has tried to sidetrack the issue, but the threat he has issued in response to a possible retaliation by the UN leaves little scope for doubting his part in the fray. The UN military might bolstered by the news that the US carrier Wasp is on way to the Strait of Hormuz should be more than enough to overcome the defiance of Aideed. The precision attacks that is likely to follow on the arms depots of Aideed with the arrival of sophisticated US gunship aircraft will force the rebel gunman to come to his senses and knees. Indeed he must be taught a lesson or two for the crime committed. The international body will thereby also send a warning to such trouble-makers elsewhere - not excluding those in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The UN must prove its point, and firmly so. If the international body were not just so overwhelmingly dependent on the US military fire power and could be equally sensitive to all such burning issues!

## AN ORDEAL FOR CITIZENS

bank to make the payment?

comes — surprisingly regularly

- but every month it brings a

surprise. Together with the bill

for the preceding month there is

a large sum included as

"arrears". One is upset because

the bills are being paid every

month regularly. Where does

this so-called arrear amount

come from? One runs to the

telephone office with the re-

ceipts of the previous months to

prove that there is no outstand-

ing bill. If the official concerned

is kind and conscientious he

will cross out the arrear sum in

red ink and write the correct

amount. One is happy in the

belief that a big problem has

been resolved. The corrected bill

is presented to the designated

bank and the payment is made.

But the poor fellow does not

know the telephone department.

Next month the arrear

reappears with a vengeance

This time the amount is much

bigger than the earlier month.

Apparently it takes several

months for the payments made

to the bank to be entered in the

ledger. The computer records.

based on the records in the

ledger, does not, as a result

have any record of the pay

payments of the bills of the pre-

ments. It prints the unrecorded

vious months as arrears. I am

told that occasionally the en-

tries are never made and the

computer, after many months

and some times after a lapse of

several years, comes up with a

phone holder does not have the

old receipts, he is in real trou-

ble. He can get out of the jam

some official. Is the trap delib-

only by greasing the palm of

erately set for this purpose?

fantastic bill. If the poor tele-

# Running from Pillar to Post Just to Pay Bills? holder is given the choice to se-

The Finance Minister, while presenting the budget estimates, will no doubt wax eloquent about the macro-

economic miracle that we are supposed to be enjoying today. Will he also think for a moment about the poor

bill payer running from office to office to sort out a huge arrear bill or to get his bill corrected or from bank to

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

HE budget session of the Parliament has started. My friends who ask me to write on some serious national issues hope, perhaps a bit optimistically, that this column might draw the attention of the law makers to some

of these pressing problems. In Bangladesh we have no dearth of serious issues. The list will be so long that it will be difficult to decide where to begin. Last week, I wrote about the plight of the farmers. Will the Parliament have a debate on it? Let us wait and see. Law and order situation, lack of invest ment and a lacklustre economy, rising unemployment, the Ganges water problem, widespread corruption, all these and many more serious problems, deserve the urgent attention of the Parliament. But today I intend to write bout a problem which is making life unbearable for a lot of people but neither the high dignitaries of the government nor the learned economists seem to attach any importance to it. I am referring to the ordeal that one faces in paying bills. The telephone bill, gas bill, water bill, electricity bill and the municipal tax — the bills that an ordinary urban resident has to settle every month or every quarter. I am not referring to the income tax or other taxes which, no doubt, fall in a different category. The trial and tribulations of the tax payers as well as the scale of corruption involved in the collection of these taxes, are also different. But my subject today is the harassment, the frustration and the agony of an ordinary house holder who just wants to pay his bill. I see many letters to the newspaper editors in which the writers describe their harrowing experience but no one seems to pay any attention to them. Perhaps my article will fare no better.

phone bill. Every month the bill

phone office every month to get the bill corrected? Most of my working life I have lived abroad but I have never had such experience, even in a developing country. I will not talk about the telephone service which is perhaps one of the worst. But even for such a poor service one is obliged to run from pillar to

Supply of electricity, I am sure, is a sore subject even for the most patient and forgiving individual I lived in Thailand for over a decade but never saw anything like it. Thailand can

not be compared to Germany or

America or France or UK: it is

an Asian country like

Bangladesh. Yet one does not

suffer either the agony of fre-

quent interruptions in power

supply or the destruction of the

cleetrical appliances. The people

tims of the sea surges; they

have also to live with the

"surges" of power supply. All

kinds of machineries and appli-

ances are getting ruined simply

because of the erratic and ir-

regular supply of electricity.

What about the bills? These are

also erratic. A large bill can

magically become small if one is

smart enough to master the

magical trick. The self-billing

system, I am told, is being re-

placed by the direct billing sys-

of Bangladesh are not just vic-

post just to pay the bill. Is there

any special reason for which we

are destined to suffer in this

more corruption? Recently the owner of a newly established garment factory told me that his electricity bill we in arrear for two months. The bill collector wanted to make a deal which the owner declined. As a result the factory owner was served with a court summons and threatened with immediate suspension of power supply. If this is the kind of treatment that an export industry can get from our benign power authorities,

what can others expect! Just before the last Eid festival there was a team of Titas gas officials going round a par ticular area threatening to disconnect those who did not pay

their bills. A laudable campaign

indeed. But why just before the

Eid festival? Well, the experi-

enced readers will understand

the significance of the elever

timing. No one wanted the has-

sle just before the Eid. So the

bill collectors netted a substan-

tial sum which must have been

very useful in meeting their Eid

expenses. The meter system has

been discontinued. Why? One

hears all kinds of explanations.

The meters imported were de-

fective and there were too many

complaints etc. It is inexplicable

to me why meter system does

not work in Bangladesh while it

works perfectly all over the

world. The result is that a fam-

ily of twenty members is paying

the same amount as a family of

two though the gas consumed

seem to bother the Titas Gas authorities The problem of paying mu

nicipal tax is so complex and difficult that it deserves a separate article. The basis on which these taxes are calculated is a mystery to ordinary human beings. Of course this can become a simple process if one is "reasonable and kind" to some employee of the Corporation. He will then make it his business to find a more sensible basis for the calculation of the taxable amount. I am told that these days it is the standard practice in Bangladesh. These "give and take" arrangements are hardly considered illegal. As regards WASA the letters column of the daily newspapers will melt the heart of even the stone-hearted person. Supply of water, a basic need for supporting life, can be a convenient means for extortion as well.

The authorities of these agencies seem to take delight by inflicting punishment on the bill payers in another way. Most of these utilities collect their dues from their customers through a designated bank. However, each one of these agencies designate a different bank or a different branch of the same bank for collecting the bill from a particular customer. For example, a resident of Banani or Dhanmondi may have a branch of the Janata Bank or some other designated bank closest to his house. Unfortunately the agencies will not designate that bank or that branch for collecting their bills. The poor bill payer will have to go to several banks every month and stand in line in each one of them to settle his bills. This problem

lect the bank branch so that he can pay all his bills at the same time in the same bank branch. But who cares? Perhaps the authorities will consider the coordination among themselves as too much of a trouble just for the sake of the convenience of a customer. Their aim is surely not to make life as difficult as possible for their customers though regrettably, it often appears to be the goal. Most probably the top officials of these organizations are not even aware of the trouble that they cause by designating different bank branches for their customers. Rarely the senior officials in the government or autonomous bodies have to go through the hassle of personally paying these bills. They are surrounded by the privileges of their official position which shield them from the harassment that a private person is inevitably confronted with. I can understand this because I have had the privilege of having personal assistants to help me with these chores.

However, for a private individual this means visits to several banks every month and standing in long que just to pay his or her bill. The Finance Minister, while presenting the budget estimates, will no doubt wax eloquent about the macroeconomic miracle that we are supposed to be enjoying today. Will he also think for a moment about the poor bill payer running from office to office to sort out a huge arrear bill or to get his bill corrected or from bank to bank to make the payment? From his high macro-level pedestal he may not see these harassed individuals sweating in the long que but it is they who fill the coffer of the state and keep the system running. Is it too much to expect that the honourable members of the Parliament will spare a few moments for these humble bill

#### tem. Is this going to be more cfby the latter family may be far Take, for example, the tele-Who knows? Why should any can be easily solved if the house ficient? Or, is it going to spawn less. These inequities do not one have to run to the tele Pakistan Business Cheers the Return of Sharif

ESTORATION of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's **L** government by the Supreme Court has fundamentally changed the political situation in Pakistan. It is far from stable, despite a speedy vote of

confidence from Parliament. In the 39 days Sharif was out of power, after President Ghulam Ishaq Khan had dismissed him, the President used his influence to arrange in house changes in two of the four provincial assemblies.

It means Sharif's loyalists have lost charge of all four provinces while he is back in power at the federal level. However, he has started making efforts to regain government in at least his own home province, Punjab - the biggest, with almost 57 per cent of the country's total 125 million population. Many believe Sharif will be successful

Soon after being restored to office on May 26, Sharif said he would abolish the controversial eight amendment of the constitution. The amendment, brought in by military dictator General Zia ul Haq, who died in a plane crash, has been used twice before by the President to send elected governments home, when they did not perform according to his dictates.

Sharif has also sought coopcration of his principal political rival, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, "the sake of continuation of democracy. Bhutto says she will cooperate if her demands are met. These include fresh general elections. According to her, the 1990 clcctions that brought Sharif to Javed A Malik writes from Islamabad

The return of Nawaz, Sharif as Prime Minister of Pakistan after 39 days out of office has pleased the business community and boosted the integrity of the judiciary, which restored him. Sharif still has a lot of political repair work to do, but his opponent Benazir Bhutto has suffered by the episode and Sharif could now complete the second half of his five-year term of office.

# President against PM

May 26: Court puts Sharif back

power were rigged. However, she has lost out politically because she sided with the President when he ousted Sharif two months ago.

Khan dismissed the Bhutto government in 1990, citing reasons similar to the ones used to oust Sharif. Her party is finding it diffi-

cult to explain to the electorate

the reasons for this volte-face of the party leadership. But she is leading a strong opposition of around 60 members of the National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament.

The assembly's present strength is 203. Of this, 123 members gave a vote of confidence to Sharif. Around 60 are with Bhutto and the loyalties of those remaining are not clear. Though facing difficulties,

Sharif has gained politically as

a result of his dismissal. In a

country where popular politics

is based on the charisma of a leader and ability to rally the masses, he has gained. Sharif started a mass contact campaign soon after his dismissal and he proved his ability to launch a huge agitation campaign. This surprised many, as he was never known

to be a leader of the masses. Such new-found strength will go a long way to further his political career. Also, he can now rule for the rest of his tenure of almost two and a half years without any

pressure from the President The Supreme Court has effectively curbed the presidential discretionary powers. If the conditions favour, he

can even get his own man elected as president when the elections become due at the end of this year. The confidence reposed in this first industrialist Prime Minister of Pakistan became obvious when the Karachi Stock Exchange Index rose by 29.01 points the day after he was reinstated.

The reformist Premier, successful in converting a relatively

closed economy of Pakistan to a free market, has vowed to continue the liberalisation policies even more forcefully. Sharif said his dismissal greatly damaged

His dismissal has also shown the strength gained by the country's business community during his tenure. Soon after he was turned out, the business community, traditionally known to side with every sitting government, for the first time decided to support him. Strikes and protests against his dismissal resulted.

the country's economy.

Sharif's free market policies have benefited the business classes and given them the confidence to take an active part in politics. This new phenomena in the country's feudal dominated political structure is going to last. Many believe the legislatures may now find it difficult to resist any longer the demand to bring agricultural incomes into the direct taxation

The first daunting task for the restored administration is to present the budget for the next fiscal year, starting July 1. When ousted, the government was in the middle of budget making. All indications were that it would be a tough budget, given the fact that the deficit had exceeded a level of seven per cent of Gross Domestic Product.

The standstill in economic activity which resulted from the change in government has further worsened this situation. An even tougher budget is now required. But the government cannot annoy people by burdening them further with a tough budget at the risk of losing political support.

Moreover, it cannot provide a opportunity to the now much strengthened opposition to launch an agitation against the budget. On the other hand, it badly needs balance of payments support from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to continue its reforms. The conditions for these \$1.5 billion in loans include a reduced budgetary deficit that will mean more

The decision to restore the Sharif government has raised the image of the judiciary. Sharif was the seventh chief executive of Pakistan to be dismissed, but the first to be brought back to power by the judiciary. In the past, the judiciary, mostly under pressure from the government, has decided such cases in favour of the sitting governments.

In Sharif's case, the judiciary took an objective view and the prompt decision has strengthened the democratic institutions. Prominent people from all areas of life are praising this role of the judiciary.

The army, which has ruled Pakistan under martial law for more years than the civilian governments in the last 45 years since independence, has been neutral during the whole episode. This is a welcome move, since earlier this year Chief of Army Staff General Abdul Waheed was appointed by a President who ignored the advice of the Prime Minister.

The appointment was the start of the intense tug of war between President and Prime Minister that led to Sharif's - GEMINI NEWS dismissal.

JAVED A MALIK is a reporter on The Daily News in Islama-

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.

### 'Eid-ul-Azha and Thoughts on Sacrifice"

Sir, Mr. Mujibul Haque's article entitled "Eid-ul-Azha and Thoughts on Sacrifice", published in your esteemed daily on June 1, has shocked and surprised me not only because the author is shrouded with the blessed ignorance about the sublime significance of the glorious sacrifice of Eid-ul-Azha but also because he has the audacity and temerity to cast reflections on the Ability and Competence of Benign Providence. I do not know which particular doctrine he believes in, but it surely pains me much to know that his "Allah seems to have failed in his mission...." But my Allah, the Rabbul Alameen, whom every Muslim worships and eulogises and adores, never fails! His mission can never fail! As a God fearing Muslim I believe, and am bound to believe, in every word of the holy Quran, and

the Pak Kalam so eloquently

testifies to the fact that Allah is the Best Disposer of Affairs, that He is the Doer of all He intends, that He is the Best of Planners, that He is never unjust, that He is Exalted in Power, that He is Lord of the Throne of glory Supreme, that to Him belong the lorces of heaven and earth, that His Word always finds fulfilment, that His Decrees are unalterable, that His Command must come to pass, that over all things He has Power, that He is the Lord of Power, that He is irresistible, that He never fails!

Syed Ashraf Ali 121, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue

## The spirit of 1971

Sir. Letters of Mr. Akku Chowdhury (The Daily Star. 1.6.93) and Swatee Majid (7.6.93) on the above topic would naturally make many a patriotic Bangladeshi wonder about the matter. It is a fact that, the politicians, sadly enough, give undestrable impor-

tance to their party. It is known to all that, all parties (except for the anti-liberation force) unitedly fought for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. No individual party/person/leader can claim sole credit for it.

In this connection I would like to mention the improper behaviour of another party, which is not even hesitating to spoil the image of its own founder leader, in its effort to increase the importance of the party itself. The party I am referring to is BNP, and of course the founder leader is Ziaur Rahman. Inspite of the fact that, casettes are available in Bangladesh, recording the voice of Ziaur Rahman himself, declaring the liberation war on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, BNP tends to disregard the latter part of the declaration. The book "Lakkha Praner Binimoye" by Rafiqul Islam, mentions the mistakes made by "Major Zia" in 1971. Zia did not ban the books, on the contrary he appreciated the author. "To err is human", Zia, being a human being made mistakes too. But it is rather unfortunate that instead of glorifying his appreciable qualities (his honesty and broadness) the party is suppressing these facts

All narrowness and self interest should be suppressed, while making statement regard-

at the cost of spoiling his image,

in their effort to upgrade their

ing 71 war, which cost the lives of millions.

Z Nessa University Staff Quarters,

## Pakistani version

Sir, While publishing in your widely-read Sports Page on 13 May 1993 Mr. A M Chowdhury's article entitled "Windies walk away with the rubber", you did not mention whether the same was lifted from a Pakistani daily/periodical. It certainly appeared to be so. The writings were the doings of a Pakistani

bigot and were undeniably the Pakistani version of affairs. On the other hand, it would be very unfortunate if the author is a Bangladeshi. It would be a greater misfortune if the author has to be reminded that as far as Bangladesh is concerned. Pakistan is another nation and another country, whether or not we want to keep sports clean of politics. When two countries are playing and Bangladesh is not involved, is it not in the interest of politicsfree sports to view the matter neutrally? Let us please read more about the achievements and failures, the pleasures and anguish of the West Indians; after all, not only were they the other team, they won!

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed

BUET, Dhaka.

## OPINION

# Death without a Pension

heart attack at the Rajshahi every nook and corner. railway station in the night of If there were some special Monday the 31st of May '93, reasons, such as meeting the without getting a paisa of his Audit objections, Mr Zulmat Ali hard earned pension money. A could have been given anticipafew days before the 31st of May, tory/ad-interim pension from Mr Zulmat Ali had come from the date of his retirement, on Bheramara for 'tadbir' in the the basis of furnishing a bond. ing his pension money.

personnel. We can only guess, loss of more than Tk ten lakh. how Mr Zulmat Ali survived for Is it not worth taking the long eighteen months. But the risk, when the delay in settlenon-settlement of his pension ment of the pension cases leads case could only have hastened to immeasurable suffering of

his death. cases, in all the offices, that children? linger on for months and years. During Mr M Syeduzzaman's time in the Ministry of Finance.

As reported in the news me- the pension rules were very dia, a railway worker of the much systematized and the Western Zone Mr Julmat Ali, pension cases were speeded up. who had retired on 22nd But even the best systems fail November, 1991, expired of a as there are "system losses" at

Western Zonal Office at Pension cases must take Rajshahi with the fond hope of precedence over all other cases, celebrating the Eid, by obtain- and these may be settled even if there are some risks involved. A poorly paid railway worker The bottom line of such settlecan hardly make his two ends ments, in the worst possible meet even when he is a serving scenario, would not involve a

the living pensioner, and in But there are scores of such many cases of the widows and

> Shahabuddin Mahtab Siddheswari, Dhaka