

Frugality of Government Expenditure

The government has ordered spending cuts for its different ministries, departments and organisations. The move is nothing new; it comes with a ritualistic regularity about this time every year.

The original provisions under different revenue heads of the 1993-94 budget having been overshot in the first six months, the need arose for revising the allocations upwards to keep the government running for the next six months. The thing to note is that the Finance Ministry resigned itself to the fate that nothing could be done about the over-expenditure already incurred and that therefore it is under the painful necessity to have to arrange funds for the remainder of the year. Since the funds are in short supply to meet the additional expenses, the only alternative seems to be scraping from the development budget. A far worse scenario than just a break-down of the revenue budget discipline.

We have two points to make. One, the original allocations in the revenue budget get always surpassed in actual expenditures. If a sound technique, based on a realistic assessment of the requirements, prior to budget-making, was followed, there would be no question of overshooting the expenditure. Needless to say, realistic allocations can be self-enforcing. The government will have a strong leverage to pin down an official for any over-expenditure. Then, along the way, under certain heads there might have been surplus which was not allowed to be transferred under other heads starving of funds. May be such a transfer of funds could stave off any sudden haltage of work in a certain section or department. Why it has always to be the same old story of a massive revision of the budget half-way through a financial year?

The second point relates to making the heads of various departments accountable for over-expenditure in avoidable cases. The miscellaneous account which should normally figure at the tail-end of the revenue expenditure pattern is the real bottomless basket. Telephones are used with least compunction in the offices and at home. Inter-district and overseas calls are made for long personal conversations at government expense and they are hard to be made accountable. Ghost bills are a peanut to this otherwise prodigal use of the telephones. The monthly slab restrictions on telephone use are there on paper. But who is going to take such a step like asking for a deduction in the salary or a refund at the time of a government servant's retirement, if the limits are exceeded? We can at least announce such a measure and see what happens. After all, the tax-payer's money is not a play-thing. The misuse of government transport constitutes another wasteful expenditure that must be curbed.

It is also in the areas of foreign visits by our delegations, entertainment of foreign guests at home and the seminars and symposia where a good deal of money can be saved. The size of our delegations abroad may be reduced and the duration of their stays limited on a strictly need basis without detours allowed. Of course, some trips may be prompted by weighty considerations but generally the impression must be erased from the public mind that they were avoidable jaunts or won as rewards. Our missions abroad should be able to cut corners obviating the despatch of delegations from home in some good measure there.

The parting handshake with surplus employees on merger of some organisations or their placement in departments needing their services are still in abeyance draining out some resources.

If austerity were brought about all by circulars we would have seen it in our midst a long time ago. Judging by the number of directives gathering dust on the office shelves, we have to devise practical ways to make the habitually wasteful officials accountable, if necessary, on pain of some corrective punishment. But essentially good examples of respect for the tax-payers' money have to be set across the administration.

Airport Security Lapses

The Zia International Airport has become quite a news-maker. Every other day there would be some haul of contraband this or that. Perhaps that only admits it to a club of select elite among airports. But when a garments tycoon is roughed up by airport people for alleged misconduct shaming even a moron come from areas where aircraft do not exist — and a whole horde of mill workers descend on the place with revanchist machismo — ZIA most certainly cries out for some tighter security arrangements to be put in place.

The last big haul of gold worth Tk 30 million could be made thanks to a plucky guard staking his life to stop a goon. Trespassers on the apron such as the one who was driving away with these black bags of a king's hoard should — by the look of the incident — be an almost regular affair at the ZIA. Corroboration of that fear did not take months to come. And it came unbeatably. A stowaway was found on board a Biman DC-10 taxiing to take-off on a foreign flight. It was a full-house inside and the stowaway was standing in the aisle having failed to find a seat for himself. That helped things. Imagine it happening in a half-filled passenger cabin.

Mr Ujjal Kumar Roy, the non-passenger, a man from some Jessore village was found to be quite different from what his name could suggest. Apparently a simpleton, he walked on to the apron and asked his way to an Abu Dhabi or Dubai-bound aircraft — of some workmen at their job. He was shown the right plane. Reportedly he had no papers for the trip. This is a tell-tale case of the incredibly holed airport security system and inconceivable laxness of performance by the airport personnel.

The only ujjal or bright thing about the episode was the decision of the chief pilot of the plane not to fly it at all. Another plane had to be pressed into service to take the flight. His one and only concern in taxiing back and changing the plane was security in flight. While thanking him we call for a deep-scooping probe geared to healing the present dangerous state of airport security. Perhaps we should thank Mr Ujjal Roy as well for so effectively demonstrating the basal ineffectiveness of the airport security system.

Jamaat Opens a New Front: Khatme Nabuwat

THE campaign against the Ahmadya Muslims may well be Jamaat-e-Islami's new front in its bid to survive politically. The fundamentalists in Pakistan and India, and their parties, the Jamaat and BJP respectively, have fared poorly in recent elections. Their electoral reverses must have come as bad news for the Jamaat here. The Jamaat's alliance with the ruling party in Bangladesh has been under strain for some time past. The Gholam Azam issue has been an irritant, compounded by the way Jamaat student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, has carried on sporadically but systematically, a programme of intimidation through violence, not sparing the students loyal to BNP. The Shibir has given evidence of its striking power, not once but time and again. In pursuing a course of wounding, killing and destroying, it has antagonised the rest of the student body, putting the government in an awkward position. There are signs of a new turn in the nation's politics, a new wave of feelings, of harking back to the emotions of 1971. This last December, in particular has been a month of celebrations of a kind which the Jamaat could not have relished. The shameful record of its collaboration with the occupation forces that year was resounded from end to end of Bangladesh, forcing the party to devise new ways of diverting public attention from itself to

imagined enemies. The Ahmadya community was an easy choice. Suddenly — perhaps not quite so suddenly — the community became the target of a host virulent and concerted attack, not by Jamaat directly, but by an organisation — Majlis Tahafuz Khatme Nabuwat — acting on behalf of the party. The link between the two is quite clear. Khatme Nabuwat will not admit it, nor will the Jamaat, but it would seem that the former is but the religious wing of the latter, working in close cooperation with the same and identical object in view which is to exploit the religious sentiments of the people to attain political ends.

The origins of the Khatme Nabuwat are outside the country. The chief of the Bangladesh chapter of this movement, Maulana Obaidur Haq, the Khatme of Baitul Mukarram, is reported to have visited Pakistan, to enlist support for the international conference in Dhaka of December 24. The organisers had succeeded in giving the conference the look of an international one. Religious leaders and scholars, not from Pakistan only. But from a dozen countries also, came and spoke, addressing a mammoth gathering. The only thing that went awry was the non-appearance of Bangladesh President. He had first given his word to come and grace the function, but later realising the sinister implications of the conference, withdrew. The organisers had flouted the Home Minister's request to postpone the conference, in view of the ongoing SAF games. They even snubbed the minister for his temerity and exulted in the fact that Islamic zeal had triumphed over the obstruction of those with a flawed iman. The government in general, and the President in particular, came in for some very sharp criticism in the conference.

The administration failed in its attempt to have the conference postponed but at the same time it saw to it that the surging audience did not turn into an attacking horde. The questions, Does it realise that it is more politics than religion that made such a massive demonstration on December 24? Does it see the hand of Jamaat in the whole business? Does it see any thing wrong in the role of the Khatme of Baitul Mukarram, an employee of the Islamic Foundation who had played, and who is still playing, a thinly disguised political role? The government leaders, including Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, never tire of claiming Bangladesh as a land of communal amity, all its religious communities enjoying full liberty of conscience. Will this claim hold water when

This time also, it had had to strain its administrative muscles to ensure law and order. But, at the same time, it maintained a mysterious silence over the issue and failed to make an unequivocal statement of its policy about trouble-shooters. Like the Gholam Azam issue, it made a non-issue of a most urgent issue of a serious threat to communal harmony, and an assault on the concept of human rights.

The Khatme Nabuwat wants the government to play a role as the protector of Islam, — a most dangerous suggestion. No government today, anywhere in the world, except the Saudi government, has arrogated such a role itself. One speaker of the Manik Mia Avenue meeting of 24 December, if I remember rightly, went to the extent of charging the Prime Minister because she was not serving Islam as sincerely as her late husband, President Ziaur Rahman, did. It was both a criticism and an appeal, and the clear sense of the appeal was: Keep the flag flying. And the veiled warning was, if you don't, we will no longer be with you. You have had our support so far, but if you fail us in achieving our dear objective — declaring the Ahmadyas non-Muslims, following the example of Pakistan — you may soon lose it. And we predict a fall of your government.

So the Prime Minister has been given a clear choice: either be a leader of the community — the Khatme Nabuwat thinks it constitutes the community — or be a leader of Bangladeshis nation which does not make any sense to us. We are for the Muslim Ummah, we don't care for your Bangladeshi nation.

As I read the message, it is an open call to the Prime Minister to rethink her politics, to reformulate her policy: Will she lead the community or will she lead the nation? Personally, I have no doubt that the Prime Minister will have any problem in choosing between the two.

What, then, will be the next course of action of the Khatme Nabuwat? Well, it has made its plans, and has announced them. It will call upon the faithful to lay siege on the Parliament house, on three days' notice; and it has given an ultimatum, too, for the government to follow its advice of declaring the Ahmadyas non-Muslim by a certain date. If the government fails, it will show how to make it obey.

Such strong language even the leader of the opposition, known for her penchant for strong words, has seldom used, and in such a threatening posture. The Prime Minister will surely take notice.

The Tongi Jitima is just a few days away. It will be held with due solemnity; and it will once again establish the difference between religion and politics, between peace and war, between sanity and madness.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

memory of what had happened on October 29, 1992 was fresh in our minds, and there was an apprehension that the fury of a mob might once again be turned against the Ahmadyas and their establishments. The small community felt insecure and made an appeal to the government for its protection. University teachers in a statement, and individual writers in their writings, expressed concern.

After Babri Masjid, and its sequel, no responsible government can allow communal passion to be exploited in the manner the Khatme Nabuwat did. The government's handling of the threat raises a few

one of the smallest communities is threatened with expulsion from a section of their own larger community and when the government is urged to ban all their legitimate activities? The government is further urged to cleanse the administration of all Ahmadyas. This is McCarthyism at its most naked, and a most blatant attack on the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh — a denial of equal rights of all citizens. Perhaps, the government is not unaware of all these dangerous implications of fanning communal passions. Because it had had to deal with ugly law and order situation in the past,

Separatist Tail Irks Thai Dragon

by Tony Gillotte writes from Bangkok

The Muslim population has not benefitted significantly from Thailand's nearly ten year economic boom

Today, in the wake of a continuing economic boom, the situation has changed. 'Who cares about separatists?' said one young man from Yala province, who preferred not to be named. 'People now want to see their provinces become prosperous.'

The Thai military approach has succeeded in raising suspicions of using the Muslim problems to settle old political scores. If true, it becomes a risky strategy with high potential for Muslim separatist violence and, worse still, risks forcing local Muslims into an unnecessary and divisive choice — Islam of the state government.

'It's all still very confusing,' said Dr Chaiwat Sutha-Anand, lecturer at Thonburi University's Political Science faculty and attorney for the 'four separatist' suspects. 'Actually, there are really many different stories about what happened. There is the government's story, the military's position, the newspaper versions and the Muslim community's own account.'

Certain Muslim members of parliament are prepared to take the Leekpai government at its word. 'Despite the deep rooted problems in the south,' said Wanmuhammadnor Matha, a Muslim MP from Yala and advi-

sor to Prime Minister Leekpai, 'the southern people have accepted that this government is working on these problems.'

'Local people don't think that PULO or the other separatist groups have the capacity to carry out such a coordinated attack,' continued Mr Matha, casting aspersions in the direction of fractious southern Thai military leaders. 'So the movement behind these attacks must be very powerful, have money and good discipline.'

Another Muslim government representative, however, has a different point of view. 'Poverty is the most important problem in my province,' said Muk Sulaiman, also legal counsel for the four charged separatists and Pattani Province MP, 'but in one year of this government, I don't see that they have done anything to solve the problem.'

Although popularly known as a Buddhist country, Thailand has a long history of Muslim influence. Islam's arrival in the area considerably preceded Buddhism, Arab and Persian

Muslim traders became active in Southeast Asia as early as the 7th century while Buddhism began to thrive in the 11th century.

Thailand's first modern separatist organisation was founded in 1947 to realise Muslim independence and democracy. Subsequently fueled by the Communist Party of Malaysia, Muslim organisations conducted guerilla campaigns in majority Muslim-speaking provinces attempting to galvanise support for their secessionist goals.

The majority of the people in the south speak Malay and are Muslims, said Manmuhammadnor Matha, Deputy Speaker of the Thai Parliament and one of only nine elected Muslim MPs out of a total of 360 members of Parliament. 'Although Muslims came to Bangkok, Thailand went to Muslim areas in the south. So the history (of the area) is one of rebellion or subjugation, depending on your perspective.'

In 1990, religious antagonism flared anew over the controversial Krusee Mosque, a 200-year-old unfinished structure in Pattani Province. Sitting chock-a-block to a Chinese cemetery, local Muslim leaders claimed the mosque had been

desecrated by busloads of tourists and visitors coming to visit the Chinese cemetery.

The south's ethnically Malay Muslim inhabitants comprise 75 per cent of the local population, and up to 7 per cent (4 to 8 million) of the total Thai population of nearly 60 million. In the deep south, 70 per cent of local government bureaucrats are Buddhist including the four province governors.

'We (Muslims) are 75 per cent of the people in the area,' said Sulaiman, 'so 75 per cent of the government officials should be Muslim.'

The Muslim population has not benefitted significantly from Thailand's nearly ten year economic boom.

The per capita income is well below the national average of US\$1,900 per annum. The south is rich in natural resources (fish, minerals and lumber). But businesses are dominated by Thai and Chinese merchants while Muslims are relegated to low paying jobs in agriculture and the fishing industry.

The Leekpai government has begun discussions with Malaysia and Indonesia to introduce the concept of the Southern Growth Triangle, a development zone encompassing portions of the three nations targeted for industrial, agricultural and tourism development.

—Depthnews Asia

Sorry World : Apologies are the Rage in Foreign Affairs

AP reports from New York

Perhaps because Japan and the United States already have robust economic and political relations, they have never apologised for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor or the American nuclear attack on Hiroshima, though both countries have made noises of regret.

WHO'S sorry now? Just about everybody everywhere these days.

After years of silence, Japan, Russia, South Africa and the United States all apologised in 1993.

'Once it starts, every group with a grievance wants an apology,' says Donald McHenry, a former ambassador to the United Nations and professor of diplomacy at Georgetown University.

— Japan made its first official apologies this year for World War II, after decades of resistance.

— Russia apologised for Soviet abuse of Japanese prisoners.

— South Africa's government apologised for apartheid.

— And the United States told Hawaii it was sorry for overthrowing Queen Liliuokalani a century ago.

So what's an apology worth, especially one that comes years after the fact and is made to improve relations or gain some other political advantage?

Etiquette expert Judith Martin, author of the Miss Manners column and an expert on when to say you're sorry, says, 'You wouldn't think it would be worth anything, either privately or in an international context. This is a very practical, bottom-line world.'

'But the fact is, it makes an enormous difference.'

Apologies validate the suffering of people who have been wronged, Martin says. 'Satisfaction of the soul is a very deep human craving,' she explains.

Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa's recent apologies for Japan's forcing of thousands of women to serve as prostitutes for its soldiers, and for the brutal occupation of its Asian neighbors,

came only after years of official silence.

It was the first time Japan had fully acknowledged its wartime role even to its own people.

'I was deeply impressed by the Prime Minister's frank attitude, which past Japanese prime ministers have not had,' South Korean President Kim Young-sam said. 'We must open a new era.'

It was important for the victims that Japan finally took moral responsibility for its brutality, says Charles Doran, professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies.

'If people have been wronged,' he says, 'at the very least they want to have this recorded as a fact.'

But apologies are rarely made to make people feel better, at least in the hard-boiled, Realpolitik world of foreign policy.

Apologising makes sense only when a past incident gets in the way of current relations, some analysts say. Every 'sorry' has an ulterior motive.

Japan wants to improve its political and economic relations with the rest of Asia. Russia is looking for full acceptance into the international community. South Africa hopes to minimise the backlash when its black majority takes power.

And the US government's apology to Hawaii?

'Personally, I'm looking at this as a new beginning for the Hawaiian spirit,' says Sen Daniel K Akaka, who sponsored the bill.

Perhaps because Japan and the United States already have robust economic and political relations, they have never apologised for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor or the American nuclear attack on Hiroshima, though both countries have

made noises of regret.

Tokyo's relations with its Asian neighbors, on the other hand, have been plagued by fears of Japanese expansionism and bitterness over past brutality.

Apologising carries tremendous cultural weight in Japan, says John Curtis Perry, a Japan specialist at the Fletcher School of Diplomacy at Tufts University.

'The Japanese love apologies,' he says. 'When you apologise it's very wrong for the recipient not to accept.'

In the end, though, actions speak louder than apologies. Regrets over apartheid would be meaningless without the dismantling of South Africa's racist system, and Japan's apologies will mean less to its neighbours than its military and economic policies.

'An apology should not stop at words,' said Park Ji-won, spokesman for the Korean opposition Democratic Party. 'It will be judged by the extent of South Korea-Japan cooperation in the future.'

Will the flood of apologies continue? Diplomatic observers are divided over whether the deluge symbolizes something bigger, such as the end of the Cold War and a final closing of the book on World War II, or is just a fad.

Either way, don't hold your breath for apologies from the Israelis and Palestinians, or the British and the Irish.

'I don't think we're on the verge of a new wave where everybody apologises to everybody else for everything in the past,' says former ambassador Jerry Bremer, managing director of Kissinger Associates.

'If we were, we wouldn't see war in the Balkans. There's not a whole lot of apologies going on in Yugoslavia.'

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.

Neem tree

Sir, I like to join with other letter writers in recent months for the utility of a neem tree. Every home of Bangladesh must have a neem tree which can solve many of our problems. People of Bangladesh have a tendency to like imported things without giving importance to natural indigenous ones. Neem is a tall, spreading tree which is a relative of mahogany or other fast growing trees.

We must have more and more neem trees as neem's medical benefits are enormous. Thousand year old Sanskrit medical literature praises the tree called arishtha, the Sanskrit word for reliever of sickness. Its leaves are placed in books, beds or grain bins to discourage insects. Neem's leaves are used in tea as an anti-malarial agent. The tree is also ideal for use as firewood and for making soap, oils for lamps or lubricant to grease cart wheels. Neem steaks (miswaks) are used to scrub teeth and gums — this kills oral bacteria. Neem's leaf also can be used to clean the teeth. Neem leaf extract can be injected as an anti-dote for malaria and kalazar.

Though there is no pesticide plant by neem, in Bangladesh as in Bhopal, India, but the neem tree can bring pesticide within the reach of even the poorest people. Most of our people cannot conceive of purchasing pesticides but they can have a neem tree at their homesteads to save themselves from most of the diseases as stated above.

M Alauddin
West Nakhalpara, Dhaka

Nagar Bhavan

Sir, The state of our journalism is not very appreciable. No photo or statistics of the Nagar Bhavan was published when the huge building was opened. There were only speeches and speeches. What the newsmen and PR Dept of DCC were doing? Why are our news items always leader and personality oriented?

I want to buy a miniature model of the building for presenting to children (as also of JS, Savar Monument, etc.), but there is no such toy industry in the country. Why the average family cannot buy local toys (well designed for mass production)?

Editors please set a new trend by reporting the speeches in the last paragraphs (and edit it into a few lines), and no proper names please — only the designations. It is not necessary for the citizens to remember who said something but what was said has to be noted. Chase the news not the speakers.

Where is Nagar Bhavan? Is it visible? Why it was designed that way? What foreign materials were used, and the total percentage? How the traffic problem will be solved around the area (map please)? I am fed up of the amateurish reporting.

AZ
Dhaka

Narayanganj needs a park

Sir, Once upon a time Narayanganj was a town of joy, happiness and charm. It was the real home of the British colonial rulers. The town has its