

Fine-tuning the Budget

General discussion on the proposed national budget has commenced in the Jatiya Sangsad with the opposition still opting out of it. So, ideally it is not a parliamentary debate on the subject that is going on at the moment. While budget-making is the ruling party's natural prerogative, and it would defend its proposals to the hilt, what happens at the end of the day is that, far short of re-writing the budget, some of the view-points of the opposition are accommodated when finally adopting the document. This is a standard gesture made to dissenters as part of parliamentary conventions, the guillotining of the opposition's major proposals notwithstanding.

There is another kind of grist to the mill at the budget's consideration stage, this coming from various practitioners in the economy like the chamber leaders, in particular, together with the crystallized opinions of academic experts and various lobby groups. In the form that the budget is finally passed, there is a reflection, marginal though it may be, of their inputs as well.

We thus welcome the occasional brainstorming among private sector leaders and experts hoping that this will yield some useful suggestions by way of mending the loose ends of the budget. The latest one relates to a panel discussion organised Wednesday by the Bangladesh-American Economic Forum.

The participants made a critical assessment of the investment and growth trends rounding it off with some specific suggestions as to how a shot in the arm can be given into the sluggish economy. If the widely known ADP under-utilisation in 1993-94, which basically reflected a poor investment performance, what with good internal resource mobilization, is any guide then the projection of the GDP growth rate at 6 per cent for 1994-95 is bound to sound unrealistic to most people.

Internal resource mobilization and local productive investment are obviously not the same thing. The former is domestic revenue collected by the government while the latter represents self-inspired investment by the private sector entrepreneurs. The first one should pave the way for utilisation of foreign aid; but it seems this has not been happening in our case — mostly because project implementation went wrong. It is not clear as yet how much of the underperformance was due to cluttered foreign aid funding procedures.

It is not as a rule though that local private investment must precede foreign investment. What however can be said to be influencing foreign investment in our country is the poor signal beamed by cumbersome government regulations, rent-seeking and poor utility services blended with political agitation and disturbed law and order situation. The bottomline is therefore minimum bipartisan understanding to keep the economic wheels moving, regardless of political differences, like we see in some democratic countries.

In specific terms, the budget's manifest tilt towards export-led growth should be balanced out with protection accorded to the domestic industries which serve the internal market. We are bringing down the tariff walls opening the floodgate to products from countries in the region. But the latter are yet to do the same. The survival of small industries can be at stake. Secondly, the government should keep from resorting to extra-budgetary measures like issuing SROs which irk the consumers across the board. The evasion of VAT by some sectors at the expense of others who are having to pay at a disadvantage has to be checked.

Koreas Calm Down

Due to a surprise move, the credit for which goes almost entirely to former US President Jimmy Carter, and a change of heart on the part of North Korean President Kim Il Sung, the heightened tension in the Korean peninsula seems somewhat defused, to the relief of many. When the process of making North Korea an international pariah was about to be complete, through the imposition of an economic sanction, Carter stepped in as a messiah.

At the centre of dispute is nothing less than the capability of North Korea to manufacture nuclear bombs. Reports are sketchy on the north's nuclear capability. Some say it already possesses bombs, others say it has diverted substantial amount of processed materials from its nuclear facilities for making the bomb. Needless to say that neither of them is conclusive. North Korea's behaviour has made the matter no less complicated. Once it would seemingly allow international experts to inspect its nuclear facilities but then it would not, giving the impression of fishiness about it all. The international pressure led by the USA grew as a result.

Yet Washington knew it well enough that the proposed economic sanctions would not be able to do anything beyond hurting the communist North. The threat of war in the peninsula was heightened to a frenzy with American troops and arms, including Patriot missiles, getting massed on the South Korean soil. When on June 13 North Korea pulled out of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the shadow of war on the peninsula deepened and there were a flurry of activities — both diplomatic and military — that made the looming threat of war all the more real.

Carter has worked wonders by persuading the feuding parties to agree to talk to each other across the table. The South has proposed a summit meeting between the presidents of the two Koreas and the North has also readily accepted the offer, thanks to Carter's mediation. After some initial variations between Carter's version and that of the Clinton administration, Washington has also expressed its satisfaction over the North's acceptance of a set of conditions that include among other things: i) the removal of the apparatus used for producing nuclear fuel for bomb; and ii) permanent inspection of its facilities by international experts.

Those in the West who were bent on likening North Korea with Libya or Iraq will now be silenced by this sudden turn of events. That it is not a villain like others will be specially comforting for South East Asia and even entire Asia. We can only hope that the international isolation earlier thought to be a remedy might prove its futility and in its place the new initiative will give a better chance to peace and progress through a more integrated partnership.

THE sheen of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's tour to the US is wearing off. Enough information has filtered through official and non-official sources to enable one to assess how he fared.

The visit was neither a success nor a failure: eight annas in a rupee.

This reminds me of an adage. One man, seeking a woman he liked, was asked by his friends what were the chances of matrimony. He said: 50-50. When pressed, he said he was ready but the girl was not.

So far as Rao's own performance is concerned, there was hardly any false step. His speeches at Houston and Harvard were candid and impressive. And the address he gave before a joint session of the US congress, the high point of the tour, purveyed India's fears and aspirations, without pretence or pontification. He exuded confidence which surprised even his critics. The first lap of his journey went off very well.

Jarring notes began to be heard as soon as the American administration came into the picture, the other 50 per cent. Vice-president Al Gore received the prime minister outside the chamber where the joint session was held, but withdrew soon after. He was expected, as the senate's chairman, to sit by the side of the speaker. Poor Rao assumed he was there and committed the mistake of saying Mr Vice-president twice during his speech (also a lapse of our diplomats, who should have warned the prime minister).

The attendance at the joint session made America's lack of involvement still more evident. Only 18 out of 100 senators

Eight Annas in a Rupee

Before Rao left for America, the three points that distanced it from India were: nuclear programme, Kashmir and human rights. The same differences were highlighted in the briefing on the Rao-Clinton meeting and the joint statement issued by the two countries.

were present. US Congress representatives, members of the lower house, were still fewer: 30 out of 435. Even most of Clinton's cabinet ministers stayed away.

US newspapers and TV and radio networks, which set the tone for the nation and, at the same time, reflect the administration's mind, ignored the speech, nay the entire tour. True, US media tends to be superficial, sensational and even silly. But it also watches straws in the wind. It is apparent that it came to the conclusion that the visit was of no consequence.

The Indian side was agog with excitement and expectations, not the State Department and the White House. Their non-chalant attitude emitted such messages as made US media write off the visit even before it began. This became doubly clear at a joint press conference by president Clinton and the prime minister. Rao was just ignored.

But for some homilies, nothing concrete has emerged from the visit. Before Rao left for America, the three points that distanced it from India were: nuclear programme, Kashmir and human rights. The same differences were highlighted in the briefing on the Rao-Clinton meeting and the joint statement issued by the two countries. No doubt, the prime minister held the ground and put across India's case cogently. Full marks to

him. But he failed to win Washington.

America's main interest in the visit was to bring around India to discuss some sort of bar on its nuclear programme. It knew that New Delhi would neither agree to the non-proliferation treaty (NPT), nor to a regional arrangement of five countries, including Pakistan but excluding China. Still Washington wanted to see

much less agree to a multilateral arrangement.

Not that Clinton was convinced after Rao had said his piece but he appears to have left the talks at that. This is evident from the reply he gave to a pressman: If Japan and Germany (which have no nuclear programme) did not feel insecure, why should India?

However, the last word on the nuclear programme has

tioned in the joint statement indicates that Washington has not put it at the backburner. Of course it has once again said that India and Pakistan should sort out the matter between themselves through the Shimla agreement. New Delhi's allegation that Islamabad is helping militants in Kashmir has not been taken seriously. As Clinton said, some individuals were helping but not the Pakistan government.

Apparently, the constitution of the Human Rights Commission has not satisfied Washington. Admitted, it is not a body that evokes confidence even in India but some effort at least. The tragic part is that some groups in America are using human rights for their political ends. That the government machinery has got brutalised in India is nothing new; but this is happening all over the world. America is no exception.

Strangely, very little has got published on Clinton's concern over China. He asked Rao during their meeting what would happen to China after the death of chairman Deng. Washington is also worried because of the military power Beijing is emerging through the modernisation of its armed forces. India is seen as a bulwark, but not adequate enough at present.

However, America is not willing India to become too important. New Delhi has been wanting to become the Secu-

lity Council's member for a long time. Wisner said openly at the hearing of his nomination that America would support Japan or Germany, not India. Clinton confirmed it at the joint press conference. But seeing Rao standing by his side, he added that there was no reason why other countries could not be considered. New Delhi knows that it cannot bank on Washington's help on this point.

The hullabaloo over India's economic reforms and American investors' favourable response was expected. It looks that more investment (the figure mentioned is \$25 billion) will be pouring in, particularly after Rao's statement that India is the biggest free economic market in the world. The economic aspect is the only thing that has excited Americans including the media. If the yardstick to measure Rao's visit is whether he has been able to sell India better to American investors, the answer is yes.

How far that investment would make India strong is debatable. But there is no denying that until the country gains economic prowess, it will not become a story that the world leaders and the media may pursue. It is no use complaining that US media ignored India; once it is a success story, everybody will be queuing up.

This process can be hastened if India were to have friendly relations with its neighbouring countries. Defence is essential but it requires less money if the countries around you are at peace. America is important, but more important are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. It is a pity that New Delhi's priorities are different.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

whether it could retrieve the proposal of a conference of nine countries, including China and Pakistan (5+2+2), to which Rao had agreed in September 1993. (India had proposed Israel's participation).

Clinton seems to have tried to revive the proposal or something similar when he was alone with Rao (the talks between the two went 20 minutes beyond the schedule of half-an-hour). The prime minister appears to have wriggled out of his earlier commitment on the plea that India's security demands did not allow it to forego its nuclear option straightaway. After the debate in parliament and the press, Rao was in no position to give any undertaking to Clinton,

not been heard. The US administration, as an official put it, does not reside from the position it takes. The American ambassador-designate to India, Wisner, and the US ministers, who are scheduled to visit New Delhi in the next few months, will pick up the thread from where Clinton left it off. Washington feels confident that it has given the message and New Delhi will adjust its stand in the days to come. Clinton reportedly said that confidence is not a permanent feature.

As regards Kashmir, America seems to have stuck to its earlier line that it is a disputed territory, although Rao reiterated that Kashmir is an integral part of India. The very fact that Kashmir has been men-

Bhutto Walks out of Jail — and into a Political Soap

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad

PAKISTAN'S ruling Bhutto family is at war — with itself.

Following his release from prison, Mir Murtaza Bhutto is fighting his sister, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, for leadership of the party of their executed father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, while their mother, Nusrat Bhutto, is simultaneously trying to keep the government in power and supporting Murtaza's leadership bid.

In a further twist to the dynastic soap opera, both mother and son share a strong aversion to Benazir's husband, who they claim is virtually calling the shots in the party.

The opposition watches from the wings, hoping that the family feud will tear the party into two.

The latest round in the struggle began in June with the appearance of banners and posters to herald the release by an anti-terrorist court of 38-year-old Murtaza, the Prime Minister's younger brother and only surviving male member of the Bhutto dynasty.

Murtaza, whose aggressive political style has many similarities with that of his charismatic father, left Pakistan in 1977, when Zulfikar Bhutto was overthrown in a military coup.

He took refuge in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, working to avenge the 1979 execution of his father by the military dictator, General Zia ul Haq. He allegedly operated through his own terrorist group, the Al-Zulfikar Organisation (AZO).

A total of 78 cases of murder, terrorism, the hijacking of a Pakistani airliner, subversive activities, sedition and hatching a conspiracy to topple the government were registered against him during military rule.

Murtaza chose not to return to Pakistan during Benazir's first stint as Prime Minister in 1988 after General Zia's death in a plane crash.

Last November, however, with Benazir back in office, he returned after winning a seat in the Sindh Assembly in the general elections that he con-

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto says that Pakistan is now free of the political instability that plagued it for the last five years. But now she faces a threat not from the military or the opposition, but from her younger brother, newly released from jail, and her mother. Gemini News Service looks at a family feud that is gripping the nation.



Mir Murtaza Bhutto and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto: Crossed swords

tested from his hide-out in Syria. On landing at Karachi airport, he was arrested and jailed. The charges against him were merged into six major cases.

Now he is 'out on bail,' and by a twist of history, has emerged as a political threat to his sister rather than her main opponent, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, once the protégé of General Zia.

The young Bhutto's objective is to take over the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which his father founded in 1967.

The main hurdle is party chairperson Benazir.

"The real battle will start now between the real supporters of Shaheed (martyr) Z A Bhutto and those misusing his name," Murtaza declared as he walked out of Karachi prison. "I urge Benazir to disown daicots (bandits) and opportunists and join the real PPP."

And he predicts: "Her government cannot last beyond December."

But whether voters will accept him as a saviour or a terrorist is still an open question.

Says Senator Malik Mohammad Qasim, an ally of Benazir: "No doubt, Mir has immense political potential. But it is still a big question mark whether or not he will be able to capture the stewardship of the Pakistan People's Party as early as he wants. A lot depends on how the Prime Minister performs and works for the welfare of the people during her incumbency."

During martial law, Benazir backed her brother and defended AZO, but she has turned against him and his organisation, which she now calls a terrorist outfit.

In the family feud for control of the PPP, Murtaza has the staunch support of his mother, Nusrat, until recently

the leader of the party. Fearing that as PPP chairperson, Nusrat might decide to hand over the party to the son, Benazir forced the central executive committee to dislodge her mother.

"Ms Bhutto acted absolutely democratically and it was the decision of the PPP's highest body to make her the chairperson," says Law Minister Senator Iqbal Haider. But the move was resented by many PPP stalwarts.

Though like a traditional Pakistani mother, Nusrat sees her son as the true heir of his father, she does not want to bring down her daughter's government.

She shares Murtaza's strong aversion to Benazir's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who Murtaza believes exercises enormous influence on both party and government.

Benazir's supporters are unsure how to react to Murtaza's harangue against Zardari, who he has called a "chief of thieves."

Says Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, professor of International Relations at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University: "It is too early to comment on the political relevance of Murtaza. He has a lot of 'baggage,' which he has to get rid of first. His political future is directly linked to his clearance from several crimi-

nal charges and his performance in the Sindh Assembly. He may get extra and sudden relevance if Ms Bhutto commits too many mistakes and annoys many leaders of her party."

The Prime Minister and her supporters have avoided any public reaction to Murtaza's diatribes. But sooner or later they will have to respond, as Murtaza embarks on a country-wide tour and intensifies his attacks on the government.

If the feud is not sorted out, the party risks a split, which even General Zia failed to bring about.

In the past, everyone who left the party or tried to create a cleavage was rejected at the hustings. But none of the deserters was a Bhutto. This time, it is a thorough-bred Bhutto who is on the warpath.

TARIQ BUTT is on the staff of 'The News,' Islamabad.

OPINION

Taslima Nasreen and the Society

I did not know much about Taslima Nasreen and her writings until October 1993. I was attending, a seminar in Bangalore, India when somebody informed me that Bangladesh cricket team was not allowed to play (which was scheduled to be held at the local stadium on that day) by BJP members. I was worried as I know many of the players personally and I rushed to the stadium. As a matter of fact, the match was stopped for rain. But a procession led by the BJP members came and gave a memorandum to the Bangladeshi players in which one of the points of demand was to protect the life of Taslima Nasreen. I was surprised. I did not know that Taslima's life was in danger in Bangladesh! Then again on my way back home I stayed in Calcutta for one day and the first question asked by one of my friends there was, "Why are you behaving this way with Taslima when she is trying to advocate the cause of women?"

I was confused. Was Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India trying to lodge protest on behalf of Taslima because she is advocating for the rights of women? Is that why they have printed 'Lajja' in India and has given much publicity? Or have they liked the idea of her criticising the belief and way of life of Bangladeshi people? If BJP is so much concerned with the condition of women in the society, why are they not loud over the cause of the Indian women? Or do they think the Indian women are already liberated, all are equal in the eyes of law, or for that matter, many of the Hindu priests of India; and there are no communal disputes in India?

I have not read 'Lajja' written by Taslima Nasreen as it is banned in Bangladesh. For that matter, we have not read 'Satanic Verses' written by Salman Rushdie. But we know something in them which hurt people's religious sentiments and may disturb the communal harmony. If Taslima had tried to say that a section of Muslims has been repressing Hindus particularly, I must say, that is not correct.

If any section of people or religious fanatics, or miscreants oppress or harm somebody, they do it for their own benefit not community's. It is not because of any religious belief. Bangladeshi people in general are peace loving, hospitable, tolerant and secular. Islam never teaches people to hate anybody or any other religion. Either in our home or in any mosque we are all equal in the eyes of Allah. Nobody can be superior until and unless he/she can prove to be superior than others.

The other day Taslima gave an interview which was broadcast on Star TV where she told that Islam had no patience. But she did not elaborate why she thought so. I believe, she confuses religion with traditional practices. When she writes in her book or columns that she dislikes and revolts when her mother directs her not to stretch her legs towards west as 'Kabasharif is situated west of Bangladesh or asks her to read Quoran written in Arabic, she forgets that our mothers' faith in religion and religious practices has come by tradition — from mother to daughter and so forth. There is nothing to be agitated about it. If she or anybody does not like Arabic she can read the Quoran in Bengali or in any other language if she wants to read it of course. No language can be bad as she expresses.

As a matter of fact, Islam has given us enough liberty. If we analyse Islam as a religion properly and practice honestly we can lead a very balanced life. In our daily life, in our legal rights, in our family life we can maintain a balance if we judge properly and act accordingly. Many Muslim countries have prohibited marriages more than one at a time and changed family and inheritance laws. Even if we do not change we can always give our daughters whatever we like by 'Heba Nama'. Muslim women have all the rights to be treated equally, to marry, which is a marriage of contract, or to seek divorce. Actually, the main cause of the unequal status of women in Bangladesh is illiteracy and poverty. We are inferior in our position because we are economically dependent on men

and our literacy rate is very low. Some quarters take the advantage not only of our weaknesses but of our family members. Some Moulanas allegedly are taking the advantage of the ignorance and religious sentiment of the simple villagers for their own benefit and power. When Noorjahan of Sylhet was stoned, was it not a fact that her whole family including her father, brother, husband, all became victims along with her? When a girl is victimised for dowry her father and brothers also suffer with her. It all depends how we look at it and in what way we fight with the oppressors or the fanatics in the society.

If Taslima really wants to be a friend of women and a champion of women's cause she will also have to be balanced in her writing. As every individual, every family, every society, every country are different from each other in approach towards life, in custom, culture, tradition and way of living, we are to look at the problems facing all of us from different angles and solve accordingly. If my husband can marry four times, why can't I or if my boy friend uses slang, why shouldn't I attitude cannot solve the problems we women are facing. To solve our problem we are to seek and get cooperation of all the women. At the same time we are to seek help and goodwill from the whole society including its male population.

We face inequality in access to education, health and related services and other means of maximising the use of our capacities. For realising that equality, we have to fight together against the opportunists, fanatics and evils of the society. Taslima or anybody else cannot deliver the goods by antagonizing the community. She can at best be named with Salman Rushdie and like him has to take refuge in a foreign land and regarded as a controversial writer. While we fight for our positions and rights in the society we should never forget that we women are the origin of mankind. Essence of life of a woman is to help mankind grow properly.

Munira Khan
23 Green Road, Dhaka

To the Editor...

Democracy and opposition parties

Sir, I am a simple voter not knowing much about politics. It is interesting to read the news that the Leader of the Opposition while exchanging views with editors and news agencies (on June 15th) said that the whole nation was passing through a crucial phase and she urged the prohibition and pro-democratic forces to unite. Like me, millions of voters perhaps are baffled with the question — how democracy will survive when on the one hand the opposition makes firebrand speech to eradicate anti-liberation forces and launch movement, while on the other, the same opposition party unites with them to continue struggle for democracy?

During the autocratic regime hundreds of valuable lives, including that of Nur Hossain, were sacrificed at the call of the opposition parties to throw out undemocratic and autocratic forces. Now the same opposition parties and exponents of democracy sit on

the same table with the so-called undemocratic and autocratic forces to institutionalise democracy!

The opposition parties and, for that matter, all parties, should realise that the voters are not fools and their memories are not too short. They have not voted the members of political parties to the parliament to play this sort of double role and make mockery of politics. But they voted them to ventilate the grievances constituencies and solve problems wherever necessary.

G M F Abdur Rob
22 Shantinagar, Dhaka

Parliament and caretaker govt

Sir, Observing their stances and reviewing the debate on caretaker government issue it seems that both the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League are almost over confident of their popularity. So none should fear election under a caretaker government. However, boycotting the par-

liament by the opposition members has created a problem. We the general public urge the opposition parties to join first the parliament and then encounter the ruling party by arguments on the necessity of caretaker govt immediately.

Md Mizanur Rahman
Dhaka University, Dhaka

A condemnation

Sir, I vehemently condemn the bomb-attack on the residence of Dr Ahmed Sharif, a renowned scholar who has contributed immensely to our literature for the past few decades. The attempt is a sheer barbarism might have been committed by someone imbued with anti-liberation spirit. The security of Dr Sharif's life and exemplary punishment of the miscreant(s) concerned is a must to be executed by the democratic government.

Bhuj Barman
Godenall Hazaribag, Narayanganj