

Mayor Hanif's Options

In a meaningful departure from normal practice in Bangladesh where a revised budget at the year-end invariably reflects an upward adjustment, the one for the DCC in the outgoing year showed a whittling down of figures. The original budget estimate of the corporation for 1994-95 was Tk 367.29 crore but when the curtain was drawn the revised budget came down to Tk 304.50.

So, when Dhaka's Mayor announces a budget worth Tk 358.10 crore for 1995-96 with a development expenditure component of Tk 241.75 crore we cannot be too sure that his calculations will prove right in the end.

His sources of income are the holding tax and the revenues he collects from markets, trade licences, bus and truck terminals and graveyards and cremation centres. Then, there are, of course, the government grant and the grants from external sources, both individual donor countries and multilateral financing agencies which the government make over to the DCC. In negotiating the latter category of assistance we believe the Mayor should have a free hand. The government grant for 1994-95 was reduced to Tk 37 crore from the promised figure of Tk 70 crore. And there was a collection shortfall across the board including payment delinquency by different government bodies.

So, a budgetary indiscipline seems built into the very working of the DCC. While the government should see to it, we believe that Dhaka's Mayor himself can do something tangible to come on top of this problem. For instance, he can have projects along the lines of the one which is to be undertaken next year to produce organic fertiliser from garbage with a Japanese grant of Tk 3 crore. The beauty of such a project is it will clean up the environment, give a solid agricultural input and above all fetch money for the corporation.

Our other suggestion is, why not the DCC think through a new approach to associate professional private sector parties on contract basis to do some garbage-cleaning and mosquito-fighting which seem necessitated by the DCC's less-than-expected success in these areas?

Hanif will be well-advised also to make a mini-development plan exclusively for the slum dwellers and destitute women and children who go shamefully begging in traffic intersections. They need minor employment and roofs overhead. He can bank on steady financial support from the international NGOs, not to speak of some UN bodies for the purpose.

Hanif may not be the boss of different development agencies at work in the city but he has the clout of the first elected Mayor of the city and a robust public support seeking change in city-life.

Second year in office, he should be knowing by now all the ropes for making a breakthrough. The public demand for a change in city-life is growing at an overpowering pace.

Menacing Pesticides

Toxic pesticides are viewed as a pernicious devil of our times. Many countries have unsurprisingly banned the import or use of these environmentally harmful substances. Bangladesh seems not to be perturbed by the indiscriminate use of toxic fertilizers or pesticides. In a situation like this, a campaign against such chemical-based materials should naturally have been launched by private organisations and individuals. But environmental campaigning here is at its embryonic stage.

However, it is important to note that three organisations in the country have not only issued a call against import and use of the harmful substances, they have, in a sense, gone further than that. They had done enough ground work before embarking on the campaign. So, when they argue that 7,000 farmers in 6,000 villages are now practising organic farming with results unmatched by the farming method based on chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides, they present the case very strongly indeed. In this light, the sensational revelation that the application of toxic pesticides in the country has gone up by 338 per cent really gives us a big scare. The 12 toxic pesticides, appropriately called the "dirty dozens", are taking a heavy toll not only on our soil but also on our health.

Earlier an experiment with the vegetables that land on Dhaka markets showed that many of these retain an alarming proportion of pesticides posing a direct threat to the consumers' health. The authenticity of the experiment is beyond question because it was conducted by the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission. But what is the way out? A ban on the substances is going to be preventive at the root. Yet as long as the farmers are not made aware of the harmful effects of the pesticides, the latter may find their way into the country through illegal routes. The three organisations have rightly suggested the need for an integrated pest management system. That, we believe, will help promote organic cultivation among farmers.

Feuding Tories

It is not only the Tory Party but British politics as a whole is passing through a crucial phase. The ruling Conservative Party has been in power for one and a half decades and now it is seemingly showing signs of decay. Margaret Thatcher's unchallenging rule had come to an abrupt end when her partymen thought her leadership was growing dictatorial. John Major was admittedly a compromise candidate and his win in the national election was rather surprising. Still Major has managed to survive many a close call through a kind of political manoeuvring.

His surprise announcement for resignation as the leader of the Conservative Party has opened the lid of the Pandora's box. When speculations were rife in the political circles about who the contender against Major might be in his bid for re-election as the party chief, John Redwood emerged nearly from nowhere to challenge the prime minister. This has given a further twist to the already volatile British politics. If John Major's earlier decision to step down from the post of party chief was aimed at bringing unity in the Tory Party, Redwood has moved to indicate all kinds of possibilities.

Astute political analysts are unanimous about one thing which is that Redwood has little chance of winning the contest. But then they hasten to add that the turnout will be damaging enough for the prime minister. The likeliest scenario is that the party may have to go for a second, even third round of polls to elect the party leader. In that case, political heavyweights like Michael Heseltine and Michael Portillo who are waiting in the wings could predictably step into the fray. That happening, Major will have with chance of either leading the Tories or completing his term at the Downing Street, let alone seeking another term.

That the squabbles have so surfaced bodes ill for the party in the next general election. Redwood's lightweight challenge may ultimately prove highly costly for the Tories.

THE highly complex, sensitive and volatile issue of sharing of waters of the Ganges between Bangladesh and India came to the fore once again this week. The just concluded third round of talks between the two foreign secretaries in Dhaka came as a prelude to the long awaited dialogue at the leadership level. The pledge was made at the SAARC Summit in Dhaka two years ago that the Indian Prime Minister will visit Bangladesh for holding talks on the long unresolved issue. The pledge remains to be fulfilled. Apparently, the Indian side is not yet prepared for it, hence the present talks. The previous rounds were held as per wishes of the two prime ministers at the last SAARC summit in New Delhi.

One is happy to note that some positive decisions have been taken in the Dhaka mood. The long dormant Joint Rivers Commission, which held 88 meetings till about 3 years ago, is being reactivated. The two new monitoring points have been added to the existing two at the Farakka and the Hardinge bridge in order to ascertain the correct figure of the quantum of water released during

the lean season, January to May, at Farakka. The figures supplied by the two sides have varied a great deal.

The differences between the two sides have been fundamental and apparently irreconcilable. India has been insisting on linking the long-term augmentation with the short-term sharing by transferring what it termed surplus water from the Brahmaputra to a deficit Ganges. The Bangladesh contention stipulates construction of storage dams in the upper reaches of the Ganges so as to ensure availability of water to meet the desired requirements of both the countries.

The rationale of the proposal of either party has been off-repeated and needs little elaboration. However, the twin never met and the outcome of negotiations became stalemate. To break the deadlock, a new approach is called for. This is what has been achieved at the foreign secretaries' level talks. The two groped for, discovered

and finally decided upon a third option — a permanent sharing of the waters of the Ganges. What is also important is that the option is to be discussed independently and is neither linked with nor contingent upon other plans of action and issues.

So long the agreements concluded between the two close neighbours have been temporary. The first interim agreement was signed in 1977, the second and the third (MOUs) being in 1982 and 1985. All dealt with the sharing of water for a specified number of years. The exercise is repetitive, cumbersome and uncertain due to political vagaries, hence unsatisfactory and consequently undesirable. A permanent sharing, on the other hand, eliminates the need for holding periodic negotiations with its concomitant acrimony and bitterness.

On the positive side, it is held that a permanent sharing will impart a degree of self-reliance on Bangladesh having been convinced of receiving a steady supply of water when water is most needed. Assured of the availability of an agreed quantum of water by evolving a modality of sharing, Bangladesh will then be able to undertake, with a measure of confidence, projects like the proposed Ganges barrage in order to provide, once again, irrigation facilities to vast tracts of land, on both sides of Padma, presently laid barren during the dry season. Besides, the navigation in the river and its tributaries will improve and the environmental damages will be arrested. The danger of increased salinity in Khulna region, threatening closure of factories like the newsprint factory there, will be averted.

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vogue. A permanent sharing of waters of the Ganges, therefore, is seen as a positive step in the right direction. This is more so in view of the fact that, in the absence of any agreement, the quantum of water released or made available for Bangladesh at Farakka is progressively going down every year. Furthermore, India has agreed to provide relevant information in regard to the construction of other dams across the borders on her territory on the common rivers.

The discussion also explored the possibility of the use of satellite and of extensive application of computers in order to augment the quantum of water in the Ganges on the Indian side. Constant dredging to clear up newly formed land masses on river bed detected by satellite is a new concept in scientific advancement, which, inter alia, may help improve the situation, though at a significant cost.

It is heartening to learn that the talks were held in a cordial atmosphere. Many a times in the past, it was not held so, specially at the official level. The present talks thus sets a happy precedent for the forthcoming negotiations. The breaking of new grounds on a dispute, which represents the single most serious stumbling block on the way to improving relations between the two otherwise friendly neighbours, augurs well for the future. The removal of this impediment will no doubt be desirable for and welcomed by all. It would also be in line with the SAARC spirit.

For India, it not merely relates to the primary consideration of withstanding domestic pressure but also of her value for moral compunction, respect for international usage and the need for a contented and friendly neighbour. For Bangladesh, it is the question of life and death for a vast number of its people. The issue, therefore, invokes the cooperative spirit of both the peoples and their leaders for striving hard, sincerely and relentlessly, to seek a fair and equitable solution in furtherance of their mutual benefit.

WHEN I was in Bangladesh last, some seven months ago, I discovered that the Opposition of 147 was determined in its boycott of the 330-member Parliament. This time I found them firm on their resignations, which they submitted on December 28. The Speaker, however, has not accepted the resignations.

The issue is who should be in power when the parliamentary election is conducted next year. This also epitomises the political confrontation in the country. The opposition, comprising the Awami League, Jatiya Party, the Jamaat-e-Islami and a few other small groups, demands that the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) should step down before elections. And it should allow a neutral, non-partisan caretaker government to hold the polls so that there is no doubt about their fairness and impartiality. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has rejected the proposal.

There were hartals, agitations and processions following the breakdown of efforts for rapprochement. Threats and abuses were hurled by both sides. Still people did not come on the streets as the opposition expected. But so tense was the atmosphere that Khaleda Zia announced that she would step down 30 days ahead of elections. She did not, however, indicate the complexion or composition of the caretaker government.

Awami League president Sheikh Hasina, who is heading the opposition, made it clear that Khaleda Zia or the BNP would not be acceptable to them in any shape or form in the caretaker government. There the matter rests at present, although I found BNP Secretary General Abdus Salam Talukdar talking, behind the scenes, to Awami League Secretary General Zillur Rahman.

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While talking to some of them, I was reminded of the people surrounding Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan. They are equally intractable. In contrast, there is some equation between the government and the opposition in India, despite their divergent perceptions on most subjects.

To the Editor

The biggest budget

Sir, We congratulate Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman on presenting perhaps the ever best and biggest national budget amounting to Tk 38,620 crore (Revenue income Tk 15,450 crore plus revenue expenditure Tk 1,1070 crore plus ADP expenditure 12,100 crore) for the fiscal year 1995-96.

Though the budget has an overall deficit of Tk 9257 crore, a shortfall of Tk 6591 would be financed with foreign grants and loans and the rest of the balance (Tk 2666 crore) would be met from our own domestic resources.

View from Abroad

No Way out in Dhaka

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The predicament that Bangladesh faces is how to constitute a caretaker government which is acceptable to both sides. The practice in democratic countries is that the government in power acts as the caretaker government when the Election Commission conducts the polls. Seemingly stung by the style of Khaleda Zia's governance, the opposition has no faith in her even as prime minister, much less as head of the caretaker government.

If outsiders are to be injected as members of the caretaker government, the constitution will require amendment, presuming Khaleda Zia goes along with it. This option is not available because nearly half the parliament members have resigned. Although their resignations have not been accepted, there is no question of their coming back and participating in constitutional amendment proceedings.

If the Khaleda Zia government decides to go ahead with elections without compromising on the caretaker government, the opposition parties are determined to boycott them. It has happened once before in Bangladesh and the outcome of elections was never accepted by the public. She may not push things to that extent. But what does she do?

The stalemate is so serious that the entire nation is kept up. Investment, foreign and domestic, has been affected. Donor countries, who meet most of the Bangladesh foreign exchange needs, have reportedly conveyed subtle threats to stop their contribution. It seems, the country, like Greek tragedy, is knowingly going towards its undoing.

There are rumours that the armed forces may step in for the interim period and return to the barracks after holding elections. This is not impossible to imagine in a country where several military interventions have taken place to 'put back' democracy on the rails. The nation, for whose liberation the armed forces fought alongside the people,

To the Editor

Import of fish

Sir, An agreement has been signed between the governments of Bangladesh and India for export of hilsa fish to India. This will no doubt, fetch some foreign exchange for the country. During Pakistan times fish price in erstwhile East Pakistan was much lower than that in neighbouring West Bengal. But thanks to total economic mismanagement, the trend is now just the reverse. Most of the fish now sells at lesser price in West Bengal due to their good planning and execution although rivers, ponds and haors are much fewer there.

While hilsa fish is being exported to India, may we request our Commerce Ministry to import "Rubi", "Katla" etc from India which reportedly sell at Rs twentyfive to thirty per kg in India?

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

does not look down upon the military.

Former Prime Minister Moudud Ahmed has just brought out a book, tracing the history of interventions in Bangladesh. He justifies them, arguing that "the rise of the military in politics comes about not only because of the failure of the political institutions; it may also occur because of the neutral disposition of the army itself." He says that the crisis facing democracy in Bangladesh cannot be appreciated unless the reasons why the armed forces intervene are understood.

I do not know how far Moudud's analysis is correct. But the following that the Jatiya Party is building indicates that military personalities have come to acquire a base in Bangladesh. The Jatiya Party is headed by Lt Gen Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who is in prison. He was chief martial law administrator for nine years. Like Gen Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, he too wants a constitutional role for the armed forces in the governance.

I do not think that the Bangladeshis, liberal and intelligent as they are, will accept a permanent place for the armed forces in the government. But economically, weak one may favourably consider acquiring chains if they are made of gold. The rise of Jatiya Party is a straw in the wind. This does not, however, mean that the party will come to power in the next elections.

Awami League is the front runner. But the pro-India image stuck to it since the rule by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founder of Bangladesh, may pull the party down. Hasina has denounced the Indo-Bangladesh treaty, coming up for renewal, but it cuts little ice. She has threatened even an agitation on the Farakka Barrage, which has reduced

the inflow of Ganges to 9,000 cusecs of water against 34,000 cusecs, agreed upon through an interim accord that ended nine years ago. The anti-Indian card will still be played

OPINION

Political Impasse

Many of our political scientists, bureaucrats and intellectuals have written a lot to find a solution to our political impasse but the solution does not seem to be in sight. The politicians of opposite poles and in between have expressed their views on many occasions. Recently the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) secretary general Abdus Salam Talukdar has communicated the ruling party's offer to begin dialogue with his opposition counterpart Zillur Rahman Choudhury. Mr Choudhury has not so far replied. It appears from the public statements of the opposition leaders that the chance of positive response is very remote. It means that the political stalemate will continue for some time. However, the Prime Minister's (PM) offer to resign with his her entire cabinet 30 days before the election still remains valid. The Leader of the Opposition had earlier agreed to participate in the coming election under the President provided a neutral caretaker government runs the administration. Now she has indicated to withdraw that offer. Furthermore she is demanding Government to resign 90 days before the election. During this period a national caretaker government will run the administration. The ruling party considers both the demands (resigning 90 days before the election and forming a caretaker government) are unconstitutional. A faint ray of light was there in Mr Talukdar's subsequent statement that the dialogue may include all the issues once it starts. The BNP's earlier stand was not to accept anything 'unconstitutional'.

The Leader of the Opposition leader has raised a new objection about the appointment of the new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) that he is not acceptable to them. Reason is that the ruling party has not honoured the earlier agreement to consult opposition parties prior to the appointment. Government representative has said that the consultation attempt would have become a futile exercise as in no case they would have accepted the appointment. There may be some element of truth in it because so much mistrust between the ruling party and opposition goes on for some time. Which is why the Opposition has ignored the PM's repeated invitations to a dialogue.

Concerning the constitutionality of the caretaker government, only the constitutional experts can give the

against her and it may cut into her present lead if and when the votes are cast.

Jatiya Party Secretary General Anwar Hussain Manju is of the opinion that both India and Pakistan will play an important role in the next elections. He told me that Ershad would not have been removed in 1991 if India had not put the necessary pressure. This 'disclosure' should be taken seriously by

My assessment is that it will be a hung parliament, both the BNP and the Awami League winning around 100 seats each. The Jatiya Party, with 50 to 60 members, may hold the balance. This itself will show the people's inclination. The bigger the win for Ershad, the greater will be the acceptance of the formula that the armed forces should have a say in the running of the country.

New Delhi because it can become a poll issue.

The BNP has been hurt by Khaleda Zia's acts of omission and commission. But it is ultimately depending on the good reputation that her husband, the late President Ziaur-Rahman still enjoys. Moreover, the party believes that the opposition to Hasina and still limited support to Ershad may give her the negative vote to pull the BNP through.

More than one and a half years time is lost in the political wrangling. Now the politicians should settle the constitutional question once for all. In the interest of democracy, our young country cannot afford to play with the unending political debate on constitution. Quoting again, Churchill's argument with the Duke of Windsor about his marriage with Mrs Wallis Simpson seems appropriate here: "When our kings are in conflict with our constitution, we change our kings." Our context is different but the substance remains the same. The pertinent question is, have we come to the stage where we should change the party leader? And at this stage, the answer is probably 'yes' or 'no' nothing short of or beyond.

For quite some time the politicians have disillusioned the general public. People believe that the ruling party leader's indecision and delayed decisions have not only contributed to but also deepened the political crisis. Of course, there are some opposing views too that it was the appeasement that had acted as catalyst in the crisis. Since the beginning of the crisis the ruling party has shifted from its staunch stand to accommodate some of the combined opposition parties' demands. On the other hand, some opine that the opposition has not shown its flexibility while the crisis was deepening. However, the differences between the ruling party and the opposition seem to have narrowed down considerably. Once the dialogue starts and discussions follow between the political parties, hopefully they may eliminate the remaining differences. The unconditional dialogue is desirable for the reason that all the concerned parties may start it with open mind to include all the related issues. However, if one party or the other considers that the discussions are not moving in a way the party likes, then the concerned party may withdraw from the discussions at any time.

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