

Tax Coverage

The latest World Bank report on reform targets as carried in yesterday's issue of The Daily Star comes as an analytically precise vindication of what the Prime Minister observed in her address at the annual function of the civil service officials of the taxation department. It found that although an agency named Survey Zones of the Taxes Department (SZTD), responsible for internal and external surveys to identify new tax payers is very much there, its efficiency has so far been far below the desired level. Whether for the reason of its being under-equipped or for the absence of professional excellence among the concerned officials, income tax and Value Added Tax (VAT) as two sources replenishing the government coffers have failed to yield to their potential. Efforts are badly required as the report observed to 'expand the low coverage of income tax and VAT'. The message is loud and clear. We have a system in place but it is bedevilled by loopholes that can range from procedural complications to individual inefficiency.

The report spotted some specific areas where a touch of improvement is immediately sought. It does no good to the conception of performance and efficiency that no effort has been made yet to compile available information from various official and business sources and to consider how the information provided by the VAT and importers' registration list could be exploited for the purpose. A similar absence of drive has been detected in the case of internal surveys. These are agonising revelations that only serve painful reminders as to how much we need to gear ourselves up in this sector for a really effective tax system to be in place.

More than anything else the element we need for a discernible improvement in this sector is as the report observed strong political commitment. The government and the opposition both have to wake up to the evaluative surveys of international financial institution like the World Bank. Harping on the legacy of crippled administrative system will do us no good. The civil servants entrusted with vital job of operating the whole system of revenue collection have to place professional obligation and excellence ahead of any other consideration.

Water Figures

Bangladesh got substantially less water in the last eight-day cycle of February than stipulated in the recently concluded Ganges Water Treaty with India. The difference stood at 112, 274 cusecs for the cycle. And for the last day of the cycle, February 28, Bangladesh received just about half of what it had received the same day in the previous year — 24.5 thousand cusecs as against 48 thousand. These are figures from an agency report quoting official sources now busy monitoring water movement at the Hardinge point.

There must be explanations for how this could come to pass and when would the flow pick up to agreed levels with the extra quanta required to make up for the February shortage.

But such explanations are not simply forthcoming from the government or any authorised joint agency of the two nations. If no irremediable and unforeseen hydrological problem had hit the supply arrangements, the Bangladesh quota should be on an even keel very soon. The important thing to realise is, if the broad masses of our people as well as the opinion shaping classes are somehow persuaded by these figures to mistrust the intentions of India, the clock of progress in the relations between our two nations could be set back.

This all for what? For lack of transparency. Why shouldn't the Hardinge point readings be published daily along with the ten-day cycle figures contained in the treaty for comparison. Why shouldn't this be published with explanations of discrepancies between the two, if any? This is not much work. Even it were, government must not pain of losing ground, undertake and perform it in order to keep things clear and set the records straight.

To have inked the Ganges water sharing treaty opening the portals to the solution of problems of several other rivers running through both our two nations, at the very outset of this government's tenure, was truly heroic. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and water minister Abdur Razzak were till the very last moment subjects of incredulity but they pulled it off all right, beating expectations even of the most optimistic. Why should the government be found wanting now in operating a mechanism to keep the nation posted with all the information relating to the implementation of the treaty? We demand that Mr. Razzak take a particular interest in setting this awful lapse right.

Deplorable Act

What happened at the CMM's court yesterday is not desirable. One cannot possibly resist demonstrations around the court specially if these are made by lawyers in their professional black attire. And the occasion is universally known as quite capable of arousing a sense of outrage in even the most equanimous of men — persons charged with 15th August assassinations of Bangabandhu and his family filing into the court. But the expression of the outrage could be more poignant if done with restraint.

What was quite unacceptable was the shouting inside the court — and by lawyers themselves. Rather than the noisy castigations compromising the sanctity of the court-room and its proceedings with the presiding judge present and at work, an atmosphere of serious calm would have made the atmosphere more tellingly that which the worked up lawyers wanted it to be. After all it was punishment that was being sought against the charged ones, and the demand gains weight if done with solemnity, not otherwise. The sanctity of the court-room in session must at all cost be maintained — not by external pressure but by all those who are allowed in.

It is deplorable that Mrs Zobeida Rashid, one of the accused was even spat on her way out of the court. No demonstrator should be allowed to trifle with the state protection that the accused are under.

This is possibly the most serious case coming to any law court in Bangladesh in the past hundred years — involving the murder of a ruling President and his entire family. This seriousness must not be allowed to be compromised.

People's Dwindling Faith in Politicians: Which Other Community Enjoys it Better?

by A R Shamsul Islam

Awami League has now been catapulted to power for the second time after a waiting for twenty-one years. While imploring voters it vowed for, inter alia, terrorism-free society and poverty alleviating reforms. Nobody has reason to expect them to be realised as early as now, but how the government has begun working to meet those objectives is under people's cautious watch.

WHEN the Liberation War of 1971 began almost the whole nation threw in its lot with the political leaders who announced action programme for the independence of the country. Preceding years also saw the people courting the political leaders as they unleashed protests and movements against the oppressions of the Pak regime. Politicians of those days seemed to have enjoyed full confidence and high esteem of the people.

When independence of Bangladesh was won at an immense cost of life and property the prime need was reconstruction of the war-battered country. The war caused not only material devastation but also moral wreckage — to heal which leadership of prudence and pragmatism was demanded. The fact is that Awami League was not groomed for armed revolution which was practically thrust upon by the Pakistani military junta. As a result, the situation that arose in the post-liberation Bangladesh was such as Awami League was not supposed to cope with. This is a historical truth. As for example, following the French Revolution of 1789 when the moderate party (of the extremists) Girondin was called upon to face the problems particularly in the teeth of external aggressions, it failed time and again. Welding a national consensus on acceptable programmes by combating dissonant forces, some of which came as a by-product of the war, by an iron hand, if necessary, was the right answer in the newly-emerged Bangladesh. The situation was no doubt very complicated but not wholly unfavourable as, barring a few, the vast majority of the people were for peace and rebuilding the country. When (the Father of the Nation) Sheikh Mujib told the people in gatherings across the country that he would not be able to give the people anything in the following first three years on account of war wreckage and asked them whether they agreed to this non-receipt proposal, the people magnanimously forgot their personal sufferings and profusely replied in the affirmative. Indeed, it is the people who can, on demand by occasion, sacrifice to be great though their political leaders often cannot.

No one questioned Awami leadership in the Liberation War. Partymen claimed freedom of Bangladesh as their sole performance. It was better to be recognised as a collective achievement of the nation as a whole. However, as in the Liberation War, for post-liberation

recovery of the country too, the people believed in Awami leadership. They were ready to sacrifice more than what they did during nine months' scourge. Bangladesh won global sympathy and help during and after the war. Aids from across the world flowed to the state coffers. Compared to the war damages these were no doubt very meagre, but suspicions about their honest utilization arose painfully in the minds of the people. Amassing fortune through questionable means by scores of partymen together with their lawless activities began to shake the faith of the people in the party leadership. As time advanced, so also the disbelief of the people. Henry Kissinger's terming Bangladesh as "a bottomless basket" may not be fair. But the ruling party should have been fair enough to prove transparency of their activities to retain confidence of the people.

After the most heinous and tragic killing of Bangabandhu with his entire family political scenario was changed but to the worse. That power politics was the end desire of the politicians began to appear clear and vivid. The extra-constitutional regimes (the most liberal term that may be attributed) coming in succession which sometimes laboured to hoodwink the people by a self-donning mantle of democracy did much to sap the left out confidence of the people in the politicians. Plundering of exchequer by political leaders and hangers-on in collaboration with the bureaucrats, civil and military, became rather an open game. To loot people's money needed to deny people's rights, and this called for musclemen and terrorism which began to play full course. Political game of fishing and fussing evolved and developed by leaps and bounds. Money minting through commission charging, lobbying price and bank loans (non-refundable) emerged as a political and economic culture. In the consequence doldrums, self-aggrandisement oriented, changing of and joining political parties, factionalism, cult, vice, personal slandering flourished. From Mushtaque to arch autocrat Ershad the same tradition continued unabated shaking people's confidence in the politicians to the very foundation.

Worse is that the elected government of Khaleda Zia could not fare better. There were profuse pronouncements of democracy, transparency and accountability but their physical presence was found wanting. The old contrivances of money minting gained in speed. Hoodlumism and toll collection became omnipotent and omnipresent. People's confidence

in politicians suffered further setbacks.

Awami League has now been catapulted to power for the second time after a waiting for twenty-one years. While imploring voters it vowed for, inter alia, terrorism-free society and poverty alleviating reforms. Nobody has reason to expect them to be realised as early as now, but how the government has begun working to meet those objectives is under people's cautious watch. That the government has already broken the stalemate in Indo-Bangladesh relations and fetched much needed Ganges waters to Bangladesh by signing a long-term and respectable bilateral agreement is quite refreshing. A lot of reforms like changing the role of business, forming parliamentary committees without ministerial headship, separating judiciary from the executive, education reforms, etc., taken in hand by the government are good in principle but to translate them into a reality needs not only utmost honesty, industry and skill but also an unquestionable democratic mind which can go a long way in allaying the much-heaped-up suspicions of the people. Are the ruling party stalwarts and activists behaving in a way different from what their predecessors were guilty of? Have they proved themselves clean of practices of making money by political ploys? The Awami leadership should constantly monitor these things in order to regain people's shattered confidence.

It is not only the politicians who as a class have forfeited people's confidence. Other communities of the society like the teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, journalists, etc., have also alienated the faith of the people in no mean degree. Today teaching voyages to tutorial houses, treatment to clinics. Many lawyers fatten their pockets believably on wilful lengthening and manipulation of cases, many engineers allegedly ensure quality of bribes instead of constructions. Even journalists are often found on the network of gangsters. A lot of these communities have courted membership of national political parties with the ulterior motive of achieving personal gains. The "Brain Trust" of the political parties is done by university ex-VCs, top journalists, agriculturists, doctors, engineers, etc. It is an irony that while people have so far increasingly and reasonably lost confidence in the politicians, there is hardly left out any other community for them to pin hope on for the future of the country.

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Strengthening the Parliament

by M Arshad Ali

THE round-table on 'Strengthening the Parliament' hosted by The Daily Star may be marked to have been an occasion of great import to the nation viewed from more than one point. One cannot but appreciate the service of inestimable value it has rendered to the nation. The round-table could bring to light many things that lay hidden in the deep recess of the heart of the parliamentarians belonging to both government and opposition parties — things that they have not been frank enough to admit of or give expression to earlier. The candidness of the leading parliamentarians demonstrated in defining the causes preventing the parliament from playing the role that has been constitutionally assigned to this supreme body — the centre of national policy — deserves wide acclaim and ample admiration. The catalyst — this time a human one and media men, The Daily Star management — is no less deserving since it is they that have engineered to bring afore and make public the confident ponderings of our leaders both inside and outside the government including the opinion builders and intelligentsia.

Good things in life do not drop from heaven, they are to be achieved nay, to be hard earned with travails. More so has been the case with our form of government — the parliamentary democracy that we have chosen for ourselves to be best suited to the genius of our people and their hopes and aspirations. The struggle that culminated in its achievement is, in its genesis almost synchronistic of our movement for freedom from the

to face reality squarely and galvanise him into action bringing his latent energy into full play — a process resulting in the flowering of his personality to the betterment of his own as well as of the society he lives in. With the release of the forces so long dormant in him he rises to the pinnacle of his glory by contributing to the larger interest of the nation.

One loves to believe that our leaders have been able to self-diagnose — through what may better be termed as self-criticism and self-realisation as evidenced in the roundtable — the diseases that are eating into the very vitals of our Parliament. Now that the realisation has dawned, one likes to look forward that the parliamentarians play no more to the gallery but to the furtherance of people's interest they have made commitment, both oral and written, in manifestoes and broadcasts, meetings and gatherings during pre-election days, to safeguard and uphold. Would they repeat the game the capricious cow-boy played to the frogs, deriving the sportful pleasure at the cost of death to the people? The gallery representing the people cannot lend itself to be played upon, though instant action cannot be taken as the members are unassailable, immune from the jurisdiction of the court of law as to what they say on the floors. But the people's court will not fail to pronounce its verdict in the next election if the play to the gallery continues unceasing to the neglect of popular interest. Then the people cannot afford the luxury of maintaining such

energy to resolve the pressing national issues — the avowed object that called them to their high office of the membership of the Parliament.

One likes to mark it as a positive turn, as another very vital, though unpleasant, fact of our life has fired the imagination of the parliamentary leaders of both government and opposition parties alike — the baneful role that muscle power and black money play in the elections. The writer has earlier pointed out that terrorism and black money have started exerting so malignant and menacing influences that the honest and less propertied find the race of election a competition of inequality. They are either found withdrawing from the race giving a walkover or even if they made a good start initially, finally end up in being vanquished, the victor doubly strengthened by the booty that comes his way during his tenure to make greater investment in future.

There is a happy correlation between the black money and the muscle power, the one usually reinforcing and revamping the other. A continuance of this evil process that has started with their collusion is, without fail, fraught with the ominous consequences of the nation being totally deprived of the services of the true representatives at all levels, thus paving the way for maladministration and mismanagement in all spheres of national life to its ultimate ruination and extinction — the bleakest prospect everyone will shudder to think of. Have we not sometime earlier heard students caught while copying defend themselves with

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shackles of Pakistani domination. Our Parliament has indeed had a chequered career with so many conundrums besetting its way that many worthy sons of the soil have had to buy it at the cost of their sacred blood. Their sacrifice has engendered an inalienable belief in the nation's psyche that Parliament is the forum to find solution to all the problems the country is confronted with, and that nothing short of the fulfilment of the Parliament's due role can earn its entire satisfaction. The whole nation is keenly desirous of seeing the Parliament resolve all political conflicts on its floor and not on the streets. Streets are full well content to be streets, the traffic populations have outstripped their capacity of accommodation perhaps desperately requiring Malthusian positive check.

Streets do not hanker after upgradation into venues for depositions and meetings with political parties desperately trying to gain what they have supposedly lost in the parliament house. They (streets) entreat that they be allowed to traffic unhindered and unhurled to maintain the normal flow of economic life. The streets no longer tend to lease themselves to stage dramas causing political instability which has been the root cause of our backwardness in agriculture, industry, education and in all other sectors of the national economy and life, the last casualty being foreign investment which could have rushed forth had the opposite conditions prevailed. The popular mind is ever expectant that parliamentary democracy in its full measure is established with the Parliament assumes and performs the role of the central institution, in letter and spirit, of our political life.

The round-table seems to have removed the rusts that gathered to corrode the alertness of our leaders. They seem to have been brought to their real self — they were all valiant fighters for the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the country. One is inspired to learn that the leaders are not oblivious or unaware of the responsibility devolved on them. Self-confession bred by self-criticism and self-exposure goes a long way to embolden a man

a degenerated parliament at an enormous expense, something simply inexplicable, impoverished as we are. An essentially good thing put to constant bad use of long takes on an appearance that detracts its value and poisons the people's mind as to its usefulness and efficacy, may even be fraught with popular revulsion. The original intention that went to its contrivance may then be misunderstood and its purpose of existence frustrated. And it is in such a situation that the anti-people element and vested interests spring up to seize the opportunity and put the good things in total disarray and disrepute to achieve their selfish motives. Thus we have in the past been witness to the system itself being held responsible for its failure to deliver the desired good as a pretext to usurp power though at fault were the persons who were entrusted to run it. And the nation had to pay very dearly. God forbid such history does not repeat itself.

The confession by way of diagnosing the shortcomings of our parliamentarians is doubtless an achievement on their part. They have come to call a spade a spade. Further more an attempt at reformation calls for a stock-taking and an assessment of the existing state of affairs. Since they have done these exercises and found out the causes of ailment one can reasonably hope that the parliamentarians will shake off their infatuation with playing to the gallery and extricate themselves from the apprehension of high price like the one paid by Antony for his over-ambitious passion for Cleopatra with loss of both life and kingdom, a colossus though he was.

Gimmicks do not pay any ultimate dividend, however gainful they seem at the moment. Our parliamentarians, seasoned as they are, are more aware of the drab reality of life than many of us electorate. They will therefore, dissuade themselves from further resort to gimmicks. Will they not stop playing the doubly deadly game to themselves and the people like the one indulged in by Antony and the other by the cowboy? In other words they will abide by self-criticism, arrived at after self-diagnosis to devote their time and

the argument that if the high office of the country is chosen through voterless election why will they be held responsible for their simple offence? Now that the parliamentarians belonging to two major opposite camps share the same views as to the disastrous consequences of black money and muscle power, it is high time they enacted electoral laws that will enchain the monsters of muscle power and black money and put them to nullity so that their influence comes to naught.

That our leaders are really concerned with the people's welfare and that they can rise above petty partisan considerations and see eye to eye in matters of national importance is demonstrated in the roundtable. Leaders both in power and opposition have not only equally volunteered to self-criticism but expressed the same concern over precious time lost in the parliament for gimmicks, thus manifesting their sincere desire to be "no more in gallery show than in concentrating on issues of real importance." All of them were unanimous in their opinion that committee system in the House should be strengthened and made more effective. The two opposing camps shed away their differences when they underscored the necessity of making the elections free from the menace of black money and muscle power. They were equally vehemently critical of the invectives of mutual acrimony and denigration, harassment and embarrassment on the floor of the House in stead of applying the tool of constructive criticism for the betterment of public life.

Since the leaders demonstrated that no fundamental differences stood in their way of forging a united stand in facing some issues of national importance they dealt with, we have reasons to be optimistic that they will keep the flame of consensus lit in the days to come. The patriot in them will hopefully keep ever awakeful to sink the petty differences in order to flourish the democratic culture of toleration and moderation — an honest spirit of give and take which is one of the most important prerequisites for the successful functioning of democratic institutions.

New UN Secretary-General's Programme for Reforms

by A S M Nurunnabi

WHEN the end of Boutros Ghali's term as UN Secretary-General was approaching, the United States took a firm stand opposing his re-election for a second term on the ground that his efforts on UN reforms were too timid. For the US made it known that unless there was a change in the top UN post, the US Congress would not approve the release of American contributions owed to the UN. Against this background, Kofi Annan, who had already been in the United Nations as Head of Peace-keeping Operations, won the UN Security Council's approval to become the next Secretary-General.

According to observers, one of the big problems that Annan inherited was the refusal of the Republican-controlled US Congress to pay the outstanding US contribution on the ground that that organisation reported inefficiency and wastefulness. Most observers think that Annan is more familiar with the system and thus well-placed to undertake serious structural reforms of the UN. He had earned a well-deserved reputation for smoothness of operation in his administration. It was, accordingly, felt that this might be of big assistance in helping him perform the onerous task of leading an organisation which was believed to have fallen on bad days.

Annan might start off by going for recovery of the financial dues to the United Nations by some member states, an important one being the United States. The 185 member-states together owe the United Nations \$2.3 billion. After addressing to that issue, the very unavoidable question comes of inaugurating a reforming process for the world body.

According to observers, during his fence-mending visit to Washington after taking over his new responsibilities, the new UN chief told President Bill Clinton and leaders of the Congress that the United Nations was finally committed to the sweeping reforms that the last three US administrations

had demanded. That was a message that conservative critics on Capitol Hill wanted to hear. Annan's aim was to convince Congressional leaders that as UN chief they would work with him and to persuade them to pay the \$1.3 billion which the United States owes. The arrears complicated relations between Washington and its major allies. The issue is critical to the United Nations' future, with the United States responsible for 25 per cent of the UN budget.

Kofi Annan lately announced his new senior management team, dropping five officials and bringing in new comers for such key posts as peacekeeping and political affairs. Annan asked 23 senior UN officials to submit resignations. Most of the new key positions went to nationals of developed countries with few to citizens of Africa and Latin America. The changes announced did not involve such positions as directors of independent UN agencies, which require approval by the 185-member General Assembly.

According to a UN spokesman, the decisions for the changes were taken based on the "need to bring new talent into the organisation.... the need to recognise performance by promoting and the need to retain competent and experienced people to maintain continuity. Annan indicated that the changes were "a major shift in the way we do business." A UN spokesman also described the changes as "only the first step" and said other changes would be made during the year. Among those re-appointed were Nitin Bose of India and Jin Youngchina of China, both as undersecretaries-general. Yasushi Akashi of Japan was re-appointed head of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

According to an experienced critic, "the UN is often used as dumping ground for bureaucrats whom national governments want to get rid of." Some critics feel that the reforms started should not stop at being a pale reflection of what needs

to be done. In the opinion of observers, some basic principles are obvious: UN budgets have to be cut, and the central UN has to get some kind of "authority over the spending of the agencies, duplicating functions have to be harmonised, themselves consolidated and some perhaps killed.

The UN may never be a model of a streamlined organisation, but if it is to survive, it needs to be more efficient than it is now, as opined by analysts.

To the Editor...

BTV and JS proceedings

Sir, The AL government deserves credit for introducing JS proceedings live on the BTV. It was a new attempt in Bangladesh that the people really accepted, although the role of BTV may be in question in showing the scenes neutrally.

BNP claimed it is not tele-casting the proceedings in the manner it should. However, it was a very pragmatic step on the part of the government as well as the BTV to show the proceedings to the public. People are really knowing what the country's law makers are doing there. But people all on a sudden became disappointed when they found nothing in the 3rd session of this Parliament. It was really frustrating to deprive them from a good TV programme.

Did the AL make any secret deal with BNP for the sake of taking back the latter in the Parliament? Whatever is the case, people want to see it back on the BTV as usual. I hope other readers will support my view and will make comment on it.

A Citizen

Chandgaon R/A, Chittagang

USA and sub-regional grouping

Sir, Ms Robin Rahel, US Assistant Secretary for South

Asia is not a stranger in Bangladesh. She visited our country several times and won the heart of many people because of her amiable manners and friendly qualities.

Very recently she has successfully held a meeting in Dhaka with US ambassadors in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenia.

Addressing a press conference at the end of her six-day visit to Dhaka, Robin Rahel said Dhaka was chosen for holding the US regional meet because not only the timing suited but Dhaka was increasing its focus in the arena of international politics. She further said that South Asia was strategically important for the United States, as it borders China and South East Asia besides being the home of nearly one-fifth of the world population. Robin Rahel also told reporters that she considered the idea of sub-regional grouping among Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and eastern states of India as a good concept.

Ever since the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign and independent country, Dhaka and Washington have been maintaining a very close and friendly relation for the mutual benefit of the peoples of the two countries which, we hope would be further strengthened in the years to come.

In fact, Bangladesh is a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia and Dhaka is also the gateway to China, Europe and America. The geopolitical importance of Bangladesh cannot be overemphasised.

While we appreciate some of the views of Robin Rahel on Dhaka, South Asia and South East Asia, we wonder what made her commit a diplomatic mistake by defending the formation of a sub-regional grouping interfering in the internal affairs of our country knowing fully well that there are differences of opinion among our national leaders as well as among the members of SAARC countries on this issue. It appears that Robin Rahel lacks in-depth knowledge and information about Indian hegemony.

We strongly feel that peace, progress and political stability in South Asia and South East Asia would ever remain incomplete and half-done without active participation of China. It is, therefore, imperative that side by side with India we should welcome and include China in the sub-regional grouping for the sake of check and balance of power, political and military accountability and transparency and welfare of peoples of all countries.

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Bureaucracy

Sir, Our former Finance Minister Mr Saifur Rahman was an outspoken person. As a new minister in early 1991, he gave a very nice interview with The Daily Star. He said: "The less government is the best government and wherever there are control of bureaucracy, there are corruption. It is interesting that we are afraid of telling about corruption of our bureaucrats. We prefer to joke with shortcomings of them, although this is a life and death question of our nation."

The World Bank, IMF and the developed countries now very critical about this situation. They said very clearly to reduce the size and power of the bureaucracy. Please remember our ex-Finance Minister's opinion. But unfortunately, we do not understand the real problem. Our media is always in favour of bureaucracy. The press is always friendly to them. We know from our experience that due to easy access to the bureaucracy, the mediemen are their agents to locate mokkel from common people for clearing the files from bureaucrats.

Let us tell loudly and very clearly that less government is the best government.

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