

## Foolish Steps These

The Jatiya Sangsad was told on Sunday that various measures have been taken to check the air and sound pollution of four cities including Dhaka. What measures? Letters have been sent to the chief metropolitan magistrates of these cities to set up mobile courts. What will the mobile courts do? They will 'check' the vehicles emitting black smoke. Checking those vehicles means identifying the culprit contraptions, not stopping the lethal effusion. The mobile courts can fine the owners of those vehicles. Will that be enough to force all black-smoke spewing vehicles off the road?

The government is not serious about the problem and that is showing. They haven't done anything better than wishing the problem away. The whole approach as betrayed by minister Sajeda Chowdhury is shamefully wrong. She has been possibly advised by bureaucrats who are trained not to end a problem but to keep it alive by half-way and impracticable measures. When did mobile courts succeed in preventing ticketless railway travel? And why hasn't the other supreme bureaucratic mechanism been sought to be reformed and reactivated? Namely, the road-worthiness certifying mechanism. If only those that have been certified fit were indeed fit, the pollution problem could be cut by three-fourths in a matter of days. With the officially fit vehicles playing hell with the atmosphere as well as life in the cities, it remains for the uncensored ones only to complete the deadly game by bestowing upon the populace an inexorable *coup de grace*.

Who is the single largest owner of motorised gas-guzzling machines? It is the government itself. If the government seriously wants to reduce atmospheric pollution it should get all its spewing vehicles off the road in a phased manner and repair them or throw them out and ensure that all government vehicles — including those of agencies depending on government in any manner — will come clean on the road within a time frame.

And then there is the question of importing less harmful fuel for the vehicles. Why hasn't government moved an inch towards importing only unleaded petroleum? How can we then take the government's foolish assurances at least to be sincere?

What is a traffic policeman there on the intersection for? And what are the traffic sergeants doing with their expensive motorcycles and walkie-talkies the daylong? Are these not enough to ask a smoke-belching truck or tempo or scooter to get off the road for some hours and take down their particulars, and if need be, take away their documents — in order to prosecute them?

## Happy Augury

Chairman of the National Committee on CHT Affairs and Chief Whip of the JS Abul Hasnat Abdullah has returned from Agartala with a good piece of news. Having met the tribal refugee leaders in the Indian State of Tripura he conveys the message that 'a consensus' has been forged between the two sides for an early repatriation of our tribals camped in India to their hearths and homes in Bangladesh. The announcement of a concrete programme for their home-ward movement is expected inside of a week to reinforce the political dialogue which is already in an advanced stage with the PCJSS and headed for a crucial round on March 12.

We wholeheartedly greet the emerging prospect for an early resumption of the repatriation process. Most of the tribal refugees had taken shelter in India as far back as in 1986 with only a half-hearted, intermittent home-coming taking place in the long-drawn-out interregnum. What is even more to the point is that repatriation is designed to offer the second leg to the normalisation endeavour for the sake of strengthening the entire process of a political settlement of the hill people's long-standing problems relating to land, security and identity. This integrated and holistic approach taken by all concerned is highly welcome in the prevailing political atmosphere of mutual trust, confidence, accommodation and cordiality shared in right proportions by the Bangladesh government, Indian government, Tripura government and the tribal refugee leadership.

The moot points on both sides insofar as their return is concerned have been narrowed down to basically two: some extra-facilities in addition to those contained in the government's 20-point rehabilitation package and assurance of security in the CHT. As for the second point, holding on to any misgiving would be misplaced in view of the changed ambience and also because the mainstream PCJSS is taking the path of peace.

## Dy Speaker's Reminder

At the JS sitting on Sunday Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid addressed an important point to an absentee home minister who even after two full days of the brazen-faced Savar firing incident hadn't made any statement on it. The Dy Speaker's observation on a point of order raised by a BNP MP — which could have been even an adjournment motion on a matter of urgent public interest — came as a telling reminder that the home minister had better make his already delayed report to parliament.

A government's first duty in the event of a law and order breakdown taking a toll of some peasants' valuable lives should have been to inform the parliament about it with utmost promptitude and through it to the public at large. Who is in the best position to authentically furnish the details than the government?

It is on the basis of such information given to parliament and the opposition's observations thereon by way of alerting the government to the do's that the latter could hope to minimise any controversy in its handling of the aftermath while taking guard against any recurrence in the future.

It is a standard parliamentary practice the world over that no time is lost by any government in putting the top-order public representatives and the country's citizenry in picture about any serious miscarriage of law enforcement.

# The State of the Economy: Illusions and Realities

**The optimistic views of the Finance Minister were in sharp contrast to the findings of the ADB which were not outright pessimistic but cautionary pointing out to the dangers into the future. Like the weather forecaster, ADB was perhaps trying to raise distant cautionary signal.**

ON the eve of the recently-held Donors' mid-term review meeting, the Finance Minister revealed that the rate of inflation is low at 2.6 per cent, the reserve is stable at around two billion US dollars, exports are rising while imports are concentrated more on productive sectors such as industrial raw materials, and capital machineries and remittances increased by 23 per cent.

The picture, the Minister said, is equally satisfactory in other areas of the economy. Revenue collection is about 11 per cent higher during July-December (1996), compared to the corresponding period of the previous year (1995), though it is 2 per cent short of the target.

Domestic credit expansion is "satisfactory". Government's net borrowing during July-December 1996 is less than the borrowing in July-December 1995. "Thus the overall macro-economic picture is healthy and on a sound track".

The ADB in a position paper for the same mid-term review meeting said that the inflation rate was below 3 per cent mainly because of the good rice harvest which led to a decline in paddy prices below the cost of production for which the next crop may suffer from a negative impact.

About foreign exchange reserves, the report stated, were plummeting and may sharply fall in coming months if imports pick up from its present depressed levels. Finance Minister claimed that exports were rising but ADB was concerned since they were below the projections. Revenue performance

were also behind targets while government borrowing had gone up by about 14 per cent. The Finance Minister stated that domestic credit expansion was satisfactory but the ADB report claimed that low growth of credit was currently reflective of stagnation in economic activities.

The optimistic views of the Finance Minister were in sharp contrast to the findings of the ADB which were not outright pessimistic but cautionary pointing out to the dangers into the future. Like the weather forecaster, ADB was perhaps trying to raise distant cautionary signal.

Basic to the problem is the combination of illusion and reality in the state of our economy. It is difficult, sometime impossible, to clearly identify an unmix blessing in the trouble-ridden economy of Bangladesh. For example, a non-inflationary growth is indeed welcome.

At the same time, slow rise in prices must be dominated by the price of the staple commodity which ought to remain static or may even fall due to the pressure from huge market arrival immediately following the good Aman harvest. On the other hand, the farm gate price for the Aman paddy notwithstanding its favourable influence on the state of inflation, would generate a negative impact on the following Boro crop which is already facing the prospect of an

increase in fertiliser prices as well as lack of adequate irrigation due to load-shedding. Stability in foreign exchange reserve, if influenced by lack of imports is clearly a negative sign in terms of economic performance. If there has been a change in the composition of import with a rise in import of capital machinery and raw materials combined with an overall decline in the import of consumer goods, then

spite of all the difficulties, we must try to identify the reality and keep the illusions away as far as possible.

But first of all, I must mention, there is no reason for the government to prove, in whatever way possible, that all is well on the economic front. Neither it is appropriate to make all the strenuous efforts to establish that all is ill in the economy today. Let us not try to be Prophets either way — boom

duty if I only harp on the contradictions between what the Finance Minister said and what ADB reported. It is not the reality.

My third point is to establish the reality in any review (mid-term or otherwise) of the state of the economy. The reality is we never had a boom in our economy. Pre-conditions to sustain rapid economic growth have to be established first and this is the all important task which no Finance Minister alone can ever perform anywhere in the world. It is the joint responsibility of all the citizen of this country — me included.

The macro-economic framework where the role of the Finance Ministry is of paramount importance is largely in place. Perhaps in no other country of the world so much of incentives are offered to so few investors. The major failure to achieve the preconditions is due to (no priority implied) trade unions opposing privatisation of state enterprises and thus draining away a significant part of public revenue; the big loan defaulters who have visited the entire banking sector resulting in the present credit squeeze; the dominance of mastans exacting a heavy toll from the smallest street vendors to the big industries; and above all, the phenomenal inefficiency and corruption in the bureaucracy with no commitment to promote the private

sector in particular or the economic growth in general, are eroding away the prospects for achieving the much-sought after preconditions for economic growth.

I think, in the present Bangladesh context, the Home Ministry and the Establishment Division have more important role in promoting the economic growth. Tell me why no one in the government has lost his or her job because of inefficiency which is so rampant? Establishment Division has the overwhelming role in setting up the standards and develop a performance-oriented bureaucracy — committed to development and poverty alleviation. In other sectors — why there is a record 40 per cent systems loss in electricity distribution; or, why thousands of trucks are clogged up at Aricha Ghat? Bureaucracy must be made responsible with commensurate authority. Otherwise, no accountability can be firmly established.

What is more important now is a firm and determined government effective enough to control or eliminate if appropriate, the black sheep of all kind. Macro-economic policy is relegated to the second position. There is must be law. There must be order. There must be justice.

These three are the priority tasks which all of us must share. No mid-term review or the most sophisticated economic analysis would deliver the desired result, and the economy will continue to remain mired in illusion and realities.



## Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

either there was a substitution by domestic manufacturing or a fall in consumer demand as a whole. Which is correct? No significant growth in manufacturing have been reported. In fact, ADB reported about tightening of bank credit which should have a negative impact on manufacturing. On the other hand, if it was the case of a fall in demand, stagnation in economic activities, as reported by ADB, seem to be more relevant.

What is then the truth behind all the favourite jargons of economists. The trouble is, any three economists will always have four different opinions. In

or doom.

Second, it is not the responsibility either of the Finance Minister alone nor of the government as whole, to bring about a booming economy. It is a task which must be shared by all. Starting from the Prime Minister as the head of the government, it goes down to the municipal sweeper responsible for keeping garbage out of the way from near the BOI office. Dirt and bad odour would also negatively influence the intended foreign investor.

It is a task before the nation — before every citizen. As a columnist writer, I will fail in my

# Mosquito Menace : A Question of Survival

by Kazi Ihtesham

**Are we going to replay that epidemic? We may do so as we have embraced mosquito so bravely or so innocently. Not a single regime is responsible for our environmental degradation, but one has to pay a price, for the little load that broke the camel's back may have come at last.**

LONG time ago I read a book written in 1862 by Colesworthy Grant, an English subaltern artist, in the form of a diary about his experience in what is now Bangladesh. In fact it was a collection of letters and a sketch to his mother about the kinds of bugs that were bothering him the most. He has drawn a sketch of a medieval Knight clad in armour, fighting the deadly enemy, the swarms of mosquitoes, with a shield and spear. The cartoon shows a defensive posture of the Knight. It conveys at least a serious message: the armoured personnel in jeopardy. The same kind of unfriendly presence of bugs had been expressed by our 18th century poet Ishwar Gupta. He was talking about Calcutta, then the second largest metropolis of the world. What he expressed in his poem can be rendered like this:

"At night the mosquito, at day the fly, / I am in Calcutta driving them to play." What he died of in 1859 I am not sure, the possibility of death because of anopheles mosquito bites is quite heavy.

West Bengal of today was terribly devastated by malaria in the middle of nineteenth century, is historically very certain. What was true of Calcutta yesterday in the days of Ishwar Gupta and Grant is true in Dhaka today, one of the ten largest metropolises of the world, and the capital of a sovereign nation. What Ishwar Gupta and his fellow dwellers experienced at night we face them day and night, night being the most opportune moment for them. If somebody asks me to identify three problems of Dhaka, I would say: mosquito, money market and motorized vehicles that emit carbon monoxide. Today, however, I will write my experience about mosquito alone.

The horde of mosquitoes are swarming at every place — at home of hospitals, at school or swimming ghats, at bastis to the best of abodes, except to the ones that are protected by fine nets. Mosquitoes are not only nuisance, an irritation, a disturber of peace, above all blood suckers. These minuscule singing *ababils* are one of the deadly disease-carrying parasites in the entire world. At the time of writing this essay, swarms of mosquitoes are running around, singing, dancing as the cannibals were doing around Friday, the rescued companion of Robinson Crusoe, and stinging me as they please, sucking my blood stealthily, and leaving me only when their bellies are filled like ripen pomegranate seeds.

When I start scratching the wound, which already started itching, I find it bulge out like a mole. My legs, hands or nose, nothing that is bare is safe; they even penetrate their proboscis through stockings and single layer clothes. I am trying to protect myself with shields of long stockings, a full sleeved shirt and a *chador* around my head and nose. Sometimes I had to stop typing and use my hand to drive them out, or clapping with the heinous desire to smash them in between my palms. They are taxing my patience and stealing my time.

I wonder how these minuscule enemies affecting the daily routine of study of young kids. I am more concerned with children who cannot study because of mosquito bite in every few seconds. We don't have a tail

like four footed animals to get rid of the vermin while eating or resting. We have to use our hands with which we work. I inquired school kids how long they study apart from school hours. Most of them have a range of three to four hours of regular study. Out of that time at least one hour is lost in driving out the little neighbours, and the cost of stealing attention, and missed time beyond the calculation of best statisticians of Bangladesh.

There was a time mosquitoes were a great deterrence against foreign invaders either in Bengal or in Vietnam: The days of external macro-parasites is over. Instead of external macro-parasites, the internal macro-parasites and micro-parasites are sucking the blood of the emaciated people, lying on the streets or living in pigeon holes. Even the average well-to-do's living is becoming unbearable. Unfortunately, Dhaka city, the metropolis of the emerging nation, is the worst place of mosquito-menace than any other part of Bangladesh.

I visited some villages in recent days and slept without mosquito nets. But here in Dhaka a mosquito net is not enough to protect oneself from the attacks of mosquito. They will find the uncommon hole in the net and get the most-sought after blood meal without which female mosquito cannot produce eggs. In the battle for survival the mosquitoes are far ahead of us especially in this dear city of ours. I would not like to be very prophetic but I am sure our dear city would be a

dead city, like other cities of the past, if we fail to take corrective measures.

I should not be forecasting such a bad omen which I am less competent to do. But with some knowledge of malaria epidemic in Bengal in the nineteenth century, I cannot be less alarmed today. With alarming news coming from the border, we are in real danger. People are dying of Falciparum malarial infection, and the parasite, become resistant to most of the current available vaccines, the enemy is at our doorsteps, and has breached the beachhead Sylhet.

Mosquitoes with their small guns killed many big guns through the spread of malaria that included Alexander the Great, Chittaranjan Das, the case of last personality is confirmed, not with others. But the symptoms of their sufferings before passing away have left some proof of malarial bouts. By bringing the example of these great personalities I wanted to put forward my point that big bosses of our metropolises, the mayor, the minister or the prime minister are not immune from this menace. I don't have exact figure of how many petty people died because of malarial epidemic in the last century. But I am pretty sure almost one third of the population of modern West Bengal was decimated by malaria. Those who survived had one of the pathetic existence. It is not too far a distant time, when we were little kids, every house had a big pot of quinine tablets, and the pot-bellies of the villagers were

reminder of the enlarged spleen because of malaria.

Are we going to replay that epidemic? We may do so as we have embraced mosquito so bravely or so innocently. Not a single regime is responsible for our environmental degradation, but one has to pay a price, for the little load that broke the camel's back may have come at last. Mosquito problem is part of the environmental problems in Dhaka, nay the whole country. I am sure the high-powered administrators are not unaware of it, but they have lost the battle before it started. They spent their fuel of big guns when the mosquitoes are using guerrilla tactics from the stagnant trenches of Dhaka city. Unfortunately, the drains that were built to flush the city have become the choking noose for it, and the breeding grounds of mosquitoes. No one should forget the devil is in the ditches and drains of Dhaka city.

When the cause of malaria was unknown, when the knowledge of medical science was very rudimentary, the administrators of the cities of Rome, Paris, Delhi, or even Dhaka knew that a clean city keeps the city dwellers healthy. They built cities by the side of rivers not only for easy access but for swift flushing of city accumulations too. The canals that were there in Dhaka city, Dholai Khal, or Motiheel which acted as arteries are not only closed, they are being used as roads. The culverts and underground drainage system built 10 or 20 years ago are filled up. We have no clear vision of a modern

metropolitan city.

Because of too much concentration of office and business from poultry-feed to police-headquarters, the city is choking. All this concentration has a cumulative effect, — beggars to peddlers, hijackers to high commissioners make an undue burden to the city facilities. Sewage lines are bursting out, the manholes are overflowing, and drains are filled with dirt, the drainage system is completely choked. Worst of all, there is hardly any public facilities, and gentlemen's respond to the nature's call on walls and foot paths make the city a nightmare for travellers. Our callousness to environment made the city a heaven for mosquitoes and other vermin and bugs. And in due course of time these proven creatures will take over of it. Mosquito menace is one aspect of it.

We must not forget what happened when the rat population in one city in India was about to bring it to the edge of black deaths. One problem leads to the other, one epidemic can bring other epidemics. Like a human body, once the environment is degraded it becomes weak, all kinds of parasites and viral infections will set in. And with the resistance of the parasites to many vaccines we are heading for a disaster. This is what is known as man-made disaster because knowing full well about the impending danger we are silent or less active about it. The time is running out and we must take some positive steps about the mosquito menace.

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## 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.**

## Whither NGO culture?

Sir, The NGO culture in Bangladesh is coming in for increasing public attention, as more than a thousand NGOs have spread their benevolent presence in all the nook and corner of the country. These new micro-engines of development are becoming more visible now in the cities and villages. The villages are aware of their field presence in their areas. Their efforts have succeeded in making the womenfolk come out into the open, to participate as equal partners along with the menfolk, in the micro development projects targeted at the majority of the population hovering above and below the poverty line.

Typically, there is more interest in the official monitoring of the activities of the NGOs, both the local and the foreign ones. The mood of the public appears to be right for an official public review of the NGO culture in the country, to remove the kinks and the grey areas, after the experience gained during the 1990s, to enable the NGO culture to cross over into the next century with a more transparent image.

The NGOs' world is complex, comprising many areas and sub-areas, such as: the foreigners (donors and NGOs), local NGOs, the superb NGOs and the mini NGOs, the government regulation, coordination, and monitoring mechanisms; and the targets, that is, the underdeveloped human resources

whose fortunes are sought to be elevated through recognised humanitarian and philanthropic activities not conflicting with national or public interest.

According to international press reports, some donor administrations are said to be inclined to divert increased funding through the foreign NGOs, rather than through the normal and traditional routes. The public needs to be briefed on the implications.

Unfortunately, one more aspect has to be added for examination: the presence or absence of political overtones in the world of NGOs; and whether politicking is allowed and accepted officially, and by the local and foreign donor agencies.

Obviously, the reference is the stand taken by an apex NGO agency during last year's political street agitation. What happens if similar movements start again, encouraged by the precedent? The right code of NGO culture has to be defined, and practised.

A Husnain

Dhaka

## Be more positive please

Sir, It refers to some very pessimistic comments made by our TV cricket commentators, especially the two former cricketers during the inaugural Bangladesh and Pakistan A, which comprises 8 Test players. In my opinion the injury-hit

Bangladesh national side did not do too bad. Hitting 115 for 7 and then reaching 182 for 9 in 49 overs is indeed scintillating efforts. When Pakistan was bogged down with 42 for 2, then too the expert commentators showed no signs of any excitement. Instead, they kept finding faults on the fielding side and went on talking about days when they used to play.

Over and above, Pakistan was critically placed to be 42 for 2 and had the catches were not dropped the result of the game would have been a different one. But our expert commentators made it feel absolutely sure of the visitors' victory right from the very cautious and blance situation of the match. We don't understand what made the expert commentators naggingly repeat over and again, "Let us not worry about this game. Let us hope we do better in the ICC matches." What are these Pakistanis — an invincible army? When a team like Kenya could defeat the mighty West Indies, I see no reason why Bangladesh can't.

We hope that our cricket commentators should be more attentive towards the game than recalling the glorious past and they should be more positive and optimistic rather than underestimating our national team.

Khawaja Viqar Moinuddin

Dhaka

## A change in Pakistan

Sir, Following general elections held on February 3, 1997 PML(N)'s Nawaz Sharif was ebullient, PPP's Benazir Bhutto looked crestfallen and Pakistan's cricket hero-turned-politician Imran Khan was clean bowed out.

In the throes of Pakistan's 50 years of immense political and economic crisis, army has ruled for 25 years, because her generals believed that politi-

cians were incompetent. Now the country's President Farooq Leghari has given the army a role in the government forming a national security council. Major parties, however, are split over this decision.

Benazir Bhutto cut a sorry figure in the general elections because it is felt that although she was the Prime Minister, but in fact it appeared that her husband Asif Zardari was all in all who is alleged to be involved in serious corruption. Secondly, Benazir Bhutto antagonised the people of Karachi, as she refused to accept the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh as citizens of Pakistan.

With Benazir Bhutto twice elected and twice dismissed, Nawaz Sharif once elected once fired and having been in opposition for more than three years, but now once again, elected for the second time as the Prime Minister, he (Nawaz Sharif) has onerous tasks to accomplish like revitalising the comatose economy, rooting out violence, eradicating corruption, arranging return of the stranded Pakistanis from Bangladesh, solving Kashmir dispute peacefully with India, strengthening relations with SAARC countries and putting Pakistan on the right track.

We wish Nawaz Sharif all success. We also expect a better and close relation between Bangladesh and Pakistan in time to come.

O H Kabir

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## Outstanding Telephone Bills

Sir, I was going through a news item titled "Telecom Minister owes Tk 2.59 lakh to T&T", published in your daily on 20 February 1997. It was also mentioned that a total of over taka five crore was outstanding from members of the past and

present Parliament.

I think, the news item might have a true and a false side. The true side may be that the T&T Board could at least determine the actual quantum of outstanding bill from this group of clients, which till now could not be claimed due to obvious reasons. The false side may be that finding an opportunity under the "transparency" umbrella of the government, the T&T Board is trying to cover up the false expenditure (which till date had been known as system-loss).

Another possibility could be that the authority concerned for payment of telephone bills for telephones which were connected to the above-mentioned clients against their official entitlements. Rather they had been neglecting their duty, and now suddenly, have come out to hide their faults. My question is: if the outstanding bills are genuine, then why regular action could not be taken against the defaulters, even after so many years? In a poor country like ours, outstanding telephone bills to the tune of crores would surely speak bad about the administration.

Here, I humbly request authority concerned to kindly look into the matter and make necessary arrangements to release the outstanding bills provided they are genuine. If it cannot be done, then surely this amount of default would have to be borne by the innocent mass who cannot even touch a telephone.

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## Rajuk's non-transparency

In support of Dr Anwarul Iqbal's contention (letter in DS, Feb 27) it may be pointed out that RAJUK has yet to dispose

off several hundred pending cases on allotment of plots to approved allottees under the 1986 Baridhara-Gulshan residential plot scheme, under which many Bangladesh serving abroad applied, and deposited foreign exchange.

I know at least of one case where in a gentleman deposited 100 per cent of the price of the plot, but no plot has yet been handed over after 10 years! The files will reveal many other suppressed cases. Reminders and personal visits and *tadbirs* during the last 10 years have proved useless. There is something rotten in the state of RAJUK. Fresh air has to be introduced and the whole set-up reviewed with a firm policy directly under the watchful eyes of the PM, as successive regimes have failed to fight against the vested interests entrenched inside RAJUK — of course, with the connivance of the higher ups.

Can "Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government" (the expression used by the sycophants!) bring in transparency in this land-grabbing agency? The allegations against RAJUK are legendary. The PMs may insist on a full-dress debate in the JS on the performance of RAJUK and ways and means of regulatory measures for transparent paper work. Where administrative decisions are necessary, the bureaucracy is always lethargic, even when the policy directives are clear from the top.

The government may ensure that compound interest on the amounts deposited are included in future calculations of 'balance due'. The time is ripe for a probing Committee to pull out the 'fat' skeletons in the wardrobe.

A Zabr

Dhaka