

Budgetary Thrusts

The backdrop against which the budgetary exercise for fiscal 1997-1998 was undertaken needs to be briefly described at the outset for the sake of a critical appreciation of the directional thrusts envisaged by it. The positive outcome of the present government's last ten months in office has had four major elements: the outgoing year yielded a growth rate of 5.7 per cent in place of 5.3 per cent of the last fiscal; agriculture sector grew by six per cent topping last year's 3.5 per cent by an evidently large margin; the external current account deficit was three per cent of the GDP in contrast to five per cent in the 96-97 financial year; revenue earnings were estimated at 15 per cent higher than those recorded during the foregoing financial year; and last but not the least, inflation could be contained at around four per cent.

The negative aspects of economic performance included: (a) industrial sector grew sluggishly at 5.7 per cent markedly out of character with the average growth rate of 12 to 13 per cent recorded over the years; (b) the forex reserve was estimated to be around \$ 1.8 billion; (c) new pay scales called for mobilising an additional sum of Taka 16 billion or thereabouts in a context where the government's borrowing from the banking sector was estimated to be as high as Taka 13 billion.

The new budget accords importance to agriculture as the mainstay for attaining higher growth figures by proposing increased revenue and ADP allocations amounting to Taka 843.03 crore, Taka 1000 crore as crop loan and Taka 130 crore for the fisheries and livestock sector. The agricultural subsidisation is to continue. The industrial sector is sought to be revamped by a growth in the small and cottage industries sector and a protective umbrella spread over industries through some fiscal measures.

The budget does not specifically address the question of efficiently dealing with the losing SOEs except to catalogue some steps to recover outstanding loans in the public and private sectors. While 61 public sector industries were targeted for privatisation, the measure of success was not even one-third, yet 65 new units have been taken on for divestiture in 1997-98.

The budget sounds quite elaborate on infrastructure development, upgradation of environment and human resources development. There is a welcome tilt towards knowledge-based development but the allocation for scientific research is a paltry Taka 12 crore. The special programmes for poverty alleviation of the most vulnerable groups are innovative elements of the budget no doubt; but the funds have to be very carefully utilised to avoid squandering.

Strapped for cash, the budget has gone for spreading the tax net far and wide. Quite a number of consumer items will sell dear. However, investment is likely to pick up from a reduction in corporate taxes and other fiscal waivers, specially the removal of discriminatory taxation between the non-resident Bangladeshis and those domiciled in Bangladesh.

The incentives being proposed to rapid mass transport system and a taxi cab service in the metropolis as opposed to discouragement of import of the polluting two-stroke three wheelers are welcome features.

Regulating Pathology Tests

Complaints against the country's private pathological laboratories, until now muted, are going to be louder this time. This is not because the Population Council, a New York-based international organisation, has come up with any sensational revelation but because its findings have confirmed all the allegations earlier aired in the country against the city's testing facilities — ones that are supposed to be at the forefront among their kinds in the country. What people generally know need to be vindicated by competent authorities.

Poor quality work of several pathology centres as established by the Population Council's study has frustrated the very objective of allowing them to be established in the private sector. Instead of being competitive in quality and service charges, most of the testing centres are resorting to manipulative means to stay in the business. The pathology centres often rely on what is known as contact physicians for collecting patients. In exchange, the medical practitioners receive from a low 20 per cent to a high 50 per cent commission on each referred case of testing. The commission comes from the extra higher charge realised from the customers. Without calling into question the ethical ground of such practices, it exposes the flaws in pure business terms. The patients are not getting their money's worth.

To judge the aberration from the medical point of view, we can easily realise how damaging the results of unreliable pathological tests can prove to be. Evidently, testing laboratories are demanding a higher charge for services that can at times lead to the concerned patients' undue hardship, further complications of diseases or even death. No government can allow this to happen. There is a need for enforcing strict regulations for the pathological laboratories.

Cyclone Shelter

A project called Ashrayan (sheltering) has been thought of and launched at the personal initiative of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The aim is to provide the landless people of the coastal areas with barrack-type houses that might withstand the onslaughts of cyclones and storms. One such house will accommodate 10 families, each of which will have a room and two verandas to live in and one tubewell, four toilets and two bathrooms to share.

The merit of the housing project is beyond question because in the cyclone-prone coastal area taking frequent batterings from the nature's fury, the government has to spend quite an amount on a piece-meal or lump basis after each onslaught. The accumulated cost might be more than that incurred in constructing such houses that are expected to last for a long time. Then its other benefits too are going to be substantial as people will not be worried about their shelter both in normal times and in natural calamities, so that they would be able to concentrate on income-generation.

The prime minister has handed over the first house of its kind to 10 families in St Martin's Island and has assured that other cyclone-hit areas too will be brought under the scheme. The construction materials used in the houses must not be of low quality by any means. Greedy contractors better be kept at bay.

Conflicts after the Cold War

by Brig (Retd) M Abdul Hafiz

The regional balance of power conflict like the Persian Gulf wars with wide and lasting regional implication are more probable than a war with global implication.

there are more clashes among competing identities within a grand civilization and they are small differences — the tendency to focus on the 10 per cent which is dissimilar instead of 90 per cent that is similar. We see these differences exaggerated by the combatants in Somalia, Northern Ireland and elsewhere although they belong to same grand civilization and are bound by numerous threads of civilizational links.

Nevertheless, through much of the history the conflict has been the norm rather than exception in relation among the nations. For last half a millennium there have been wars among the great powers for 60 per cent of the years since 1500 AD. Even if it does not conform either to traditional pattern or the pattern predicted by the sponsors of the great debates the conflicts rage unabated and at places they have escalated and intensified. The hegemonic wars in the past have been most devastating in their physical effect and had the strongest impact on international system. These wars, and the efforts to prevent their recurrence, reflect both continuity and change in the causes of the war in the post cold war period. Although the conflict among the great powers is the most important, they are least likely to take place at least in the present milieu.

The existing balance and nature of power indicate that the most dangerous kind of conflict — a direct hegemonic clash — among two or more of the five major power centers of the United States, Russia, China, Europe and Japan is very unlikely. There is no temptation for the United States to overreact to the rising powers because

she is not in a steep relative decline. On the other hand she still enjoys command over all key dimensions of power. Also the rising powers, on their part, have fewer incentives for territorial acquisition through aggression because in the present context, the road to prestige, power and success lies in high technology and human capital. Even more important than this is that three of the leading power centers — Japan, Europe and USA — consist of democratic states that are allied with each other and they largely share the same view of the world order. Notwithstanding certain areas of frictions shared values, stable expectations, and interlocking institutions have become so powerful among these three power centers that wars among them are high improbable, if not impossible. There are however snags with regard to Russia and China and both of which in time long and uncertain process of transitions with profound implications for international security. However the cooperative relationship between Russia and new security architecture emerging in Europe as well as West's policy of constructive engagement with China — something in line with concept of Europe in 19th Century — has so far proved to be conducive to global security.

A more likely and near-term risk than the great power conflicts is that of aspiring regional hegemonies attempting to acquire nuclear arsenal and establish regional hegemony. The wars initiated by these regional powers can draw in the great powers either to oppose the former or as her allies. In both such events the conflict

can have global implication. However the regional balance of power conflict like the Persian Gulf wars with wide and lasting regional implication are more probable than a war with global implication. They are less likely than in the past to catalyze the direct military clash between the great powers as the developments in the Balkans did during both the World wars.

On the contrary the ethno-communal conflicts scattered around the world and often taking place within the states are the most dominant form of conflict after the cold war. Although this kind of conflict is not unique for the post cold war period but the time, due to the combination of many allied factors, seems to be ripe for an ethnic explosion. The post-1945 period has already witnessed a rapid decline on 'traditional' interstate conflicts, and a comparable rise in the internal kind: civil wars, anti colonial wars, ethnic-religious conflict, war over regime legitimacy and other repressive system and wars of territorial fragmentation (secession, failed states etc). This trend appears to be holding and out of these categories ethno-communal conflicts are the most likely kind of post-cold war conflict and have already proved to be the most frequent. This is not without a reason. Less than ten per cent of the 180 states in today's world are ethnically homogeneous. Only half have one ethnic group that accounts for as much as 75 per cent of their population. Africa in particular is a continent of a thousand ethnic, tribal and linguistic groups squeezed into some forty old states, many of them with borders determined by colonial powers with little regards to

traditional boundaries. The former Yugoslavia was a country with six nationalities, four languages, three religions and two alphabets. As a result of such disjunctions between borders and people there have been some thirty ethno-communal conflicts since the end of the cold war, many of them still ongoing. The most likely scenes of these conflicts are the region of collapsed empire — rise of the Soviet Union, Africa and multi ethnic large states as in South-Asia. They are not a new phenomenon but are occurring or recurring now and threaten many more places where an established order has collapsed or there is an economic dislocation.

The ethnic conflicts often arise in states undergoing a legitimacy crisis. Because established mechanisms for mediating such conflicts also breaks down in those countries. Secondly, those who aspire to attain power within delegitimised states are tempted to appeal to ethnic or other identities as a means of establishing a new claim to legitimacy. It is thus not surprising that many ethnic conflicts have arisen within former Soviet empire where the identity crises are the sharpest and have multiple roots in the collapse of communist government, the economic dislocation of individuals and re-emergence of ethnic identities long suppressed or mediated by the Communist regimes. The other categories susceptible to ethno-communal conflicts include so called 'failed states' lacking a strong central government like in Afghanistan. They include also countries like Somalia and many others in Africa where politico-economic developments undermine already

weakened central authority. The ethno-communal conflict also result from tribalism, ethno nationalism, radical fundamentalism, scarce resources and real or perceived inequities the syndrome of which are writ large across the world with a little exception here and there!

Although few communal conflict by themselves threaten security beyond their regions, many impose risks of horizontal escalation, or the spread to wider geographic region. This can happen through the involvement of affiliated ethnic groups that spread across borders, the sudden flood of refugees into neighboring states, or the use of neighbouring territories to ship weapons to combatants. The use of ethnic propaganda can also raise the risk of 'vertical' escalation to more intense violence, more sophisticated and destructive weapons, and harsher attacks on civilian populations as well as military personnel involved. There is also the danger that communal conflict can become more numerous if the concerned agencies lose the credibility, willingness and capability necessary to deal with such conflicts. On the other hand an emotional, virulent nature of these conflicts can result in massive humanitarian crises and human rights abuses and even a tendency to genocide as witnessed recently in Rwanda, Bosnia and Somalia. The communal conflict over competing identities, territorial claims and political institution are of course not unique to the modern era. What has however definitely changed is the complex interplay of international, national, and sub-national identities with rapid and far reaching social, technological and economic changes. This potent mix can spark latent tensions into sudden conflicts because of instantaneous communications.

Scars of Insanity on Our Souls

by Ekram Kabir

Now, words like 'equality' and 'empowerment' are just dull rhetorics when violation and insecurity of women and girls have almost become order of the day

So, "we" have violated 60 women and disfigured 16 innocuous faces by throwing acid in "one" month. Seven of 60 unfortunate victims were also murdered. The acid-burn receivers, however, survived only to spend the rest of their lives with deep mental anguish. Supposedly not much of concern to "us" who did it and who allowed it to happen.

These figures were documented by Ain-O-Shalish Kendra, a non-government human rights and legal aid organisation, based on the published news items in nine different dailies. And reports came in the newspapers recently, paralyzing the pulse of the sane faction of the society. The feeling was not of anger, but of sickness. And it becomes more intense when a member of the law enforcing agency is identified as one of the offenders.

This number of the rape victims should be enough to raise questions on our morality — both at individual and national levels — but it doesn't seem to be understood at any tiers of the society. It is, possibly, these days people are failing to draw the correct line between 'morality' and 'immorality'. On the other hand, the actual number of victims of male's unfriendly lasciviousness would be hair-raising, because it is never reported by the media and always go unnoticed. For, on the girls' or women's part, being raped will make them social outcasts, there's a "lot" out there who don't even tell anybody that they have been violated.

The country representative of Oxfam-Bangladesh, Tahera Yasmeen, told at a recent workshop that she met quite a number of female garment workers in the city who were physically disfigured more than once but had to keep silent about it because they didn't want to sacrifice their jobs which are controlled by a section of male-dominated management structure in the factories. Many would argue these sexual assaults are taking place because women now draw quick attention coming out of their home-premises as labour forces. Yes, there are more working women seen in the street now than in the past. But this does not qualify in any way that they will be "forced" to become sex partners of the male members of the workplaces or the society.

Does this bigotry-situation implies to which way our society is drifting? Well, take the four-year-old kid who was raped on May 25 as an eye-opener incident. This minor girl was found unconscious at Distillery Road under Sutrapur thana at around 9 pm. The police, quoting the local people, later said the girl came from Keraniganj to visit her uncle's house and was raped in Dhupkhola Matkh which is nearby. Words like 'equality', 'discrimination', 'empowerment' etc., are dull rhetorics if this feat is taken into account. Can "we" claim ourselves as human beings after all this?

Sociologists and psychologists may churn out many theories about it; and in fact, they should if they feel that it's time to stop the plight of our moral degradation. If a conscious person is asked to define a bottom line in this regard, s/he will definitely come up with the simple reply that "as a society, we have not yet learnt to respect our womenfolk". Well, there are people who represent the sane section of the society. But they come into the scene only when an act of insanity has already taken place. When Yasmeen

died after being violated, people went violent and took action in their own way; and when Seema Chowdhury died at the "safe custody" in the same manner, there were uprisings from the activists and some actions were taken by the lawyers.

Then again, when everybody was busy protesting and asking for justice of Seema's death in police custody, another heinous incident was almost going unnoticed until the Daily Ittefaq of February 21, 1997 reported it. The report said Sufia Begum was lying on the floor in severe physical pain with handcuffs on in a ward of Barguna Hospital. Before that on February 13, according to the report, she was taken to the safe custody of Barguna police. The report further said that a group of terrorists beat her by undressing her, and later they pushed marbles into her private part. What happened just before this heinous act is anybody's guess. The OC of the police, however, was suspended in this regard. But it was only after

the newspaper report everybody could come to know about it, and the home minister ordered to transfer Sufia to Barisal Medical College Hospital. It can be mentioned here that she was the defendant in a case.

And later, three human rights organisations filed a writ petition challenging the continuing practice of taking women and girls in "safe custody", upon which the High Court issued a rule nisi on the government on February 24. The High Court directed the government to show cause as to why Sufia should not be brought before this court so that it may satisfy itself that she was not being held in custody without lawful authority or in an unlawful manner. The result of this rule nisi, however, could not be known to the people and faded away from our memory, possibly, due to our fickleness.

What everybody seems to have missed here is the inhuman act of those terrorists. There seems to be nobody to protest what "we" are doing to

our mothers, sisters and daughters!

At the state level, the administration has failed to ensure "social security" for the women of this country. Where do the acid-throwers get the stuff from? And why is it so easily available? There must be some loopholes in the sales-ethics making acids available (may be, unknowingly but it is happening) to the rejected lovers who are completely irrational. When the country's existing laws cannot stand as resistance to all this madness and insanity, then living as women and working as development partners will remain disheartening as ever, thereby branding the National Women Development Policy — announced by the prime minister on International Women's Day last year — as another of those high-sounding dictions, never to be translated into actions.

If we fail to stop the rising trend of this madness soon, there will be no time left to wipe out these scars from our conscience when our own children will hold "us" responsible for everything. And we will go down the history lane as a nation of lesser human beings. Is it too difficult to live as a sane "man" in the society?

Why Terrorism, Torture, Murder and Mastani?

by Kazi Aulad Hossain

Not only our respected politicians have a very important role to play in this regard, simultaneously the members of the law-enforcing agencies may also take courage in both hands and rigidly enforce the relevant laws of the land without fear and favour ...

OUR society is at the moment afflicted with terrorism and torture, hijacking and hooliganism, mastani and murder, and, of course, rape and robbery. No one knows when we will get rid of such pernicious activities of misguided people most of whom are from among our youths, and as result we have all become victims of despair and disappointment. A country like ours minus its much needed social values and norms, and certain very important basic principles, will not be able to make any significant progress in this fast moving world when many developing countries of this continent are seriously and sincerely competing with each other, and even with developed West in some cases, with a view to reaching the highest rung of the ladder of development. It would certainly be painful that the second largest Muslim country — and the world's eighth largest — Bangladesh would remain somewhere at the bottom of the ladder vis-a-vis other developing countries of Asia who are aspiring to reach the pinnacle of success in the near future.

Hardly a day goes by when we do not find in the newspaper an item relating to hijacking, say, of a few lakh of Taka from a helpless innocent person. And as regards the most detestable crime, murder, it may be said without any fear of contradiction that, the number of its incidence is also not few and far between. For instance, on April 23, according to a newspaper report published in a leading national daily, there were seven murders during a short period of six days only in Sylhet area alone. It may be mentioned here that all such crimes committed in our society are not published in the newspapers. Actual number of crimes including murder is obviously far greater than the

number we get through our national dailies.

Now the question is, why one must terrorize the people around him? Why one must hijack an innocent person's hard-earned money or a helpless lady's necklace in broad daylight? Why one should murder a man over a trifling matter? Why a mastani should storm a factory owner's office chamber along with his accomplices and force him to part with a large amount of cash for buying bottles of alcohol or pouch of drug? The reasons, perhaps, are not far to seek. The people who normally commit such nefarious activities in the society are mostly our kith and kin, our own misguided youths; and these youths, if not gone astray, undoubtedly could have been the nation's hopes and aspirations. But they were not properly guided and trained when they were at their impressionable age. During their formative years priority was not given by the parents and guardians as well as the teachers while imparting basic education to these otherwise promising youths on lessons so vitally required for formation of their moral character. Needless to say that imparting of right type of basic education (including basic Islamic education to the Muslim children) at that time is bound to influence their whole career. Parents, guardians and teachers belonging to any faith or religion or area are expected to be very careful about the seemingly conduct and good behavior of the children. And this is exactly what our Holy Prophet (SM) had said: "14 centuries ago while preaching the basic principles of Islam, let me quote here one of his inimitable sayings: 'No parents can give a better present to their child than to teach him good conduct and good behaviour.'"

In this context it would be most unfortunate if our position as an independent nation is more or less at the same place where we were before achieving political freedom more than 25 years ago. So, with all humility I may say that unless we are fully prepared to lay the greatest stress on formation of moral character of our countless youths on the loftiest of the standards, it would be next to impossible to build our nation on sound footing and compete with other developing countries of the world. It is, therefore, imperative that parents, guardians, and teachers of all educational institutions from nurseries to universities, should play their important and commendable role required for proper upbringing and also for moulding the minds of millions of our youngsters.

Let us mould their minds and groom them from their very childhood in their own interest as well as in the interest of our dear motherland. And this would surely be in conformity with the saying of our Holy Prophet as indicated above. Apart from this, may I take the liberty to point out that not only our respected politicians have a very important role to play in this regard, simultaneously the members of the law-enforcing agencies may also take courage in both hands and rigidly enforce the relevant laws of the land without fear and favour with a view to curbing the undesirable and pernicious activities of our misguided people. And in that case we may reasonably hope that society would not be terrorized and pestered any more the way it is being terrorized and pestered now by the terrorists and pesterers quite a number of whom are, somehow or other, according to newspaper reports, linked with political parties.

To the Editor...

Weekly holiday

Sir, With the declaration of Friday and Saturday as holidays, Bangladesh is now a member of the elite club of the developed world having 5 working days. The initial debate was whether we should change our weekly holidays from Thursday half and Friday full to Saturday and Sunday. There was hardly any discussion on Fridays and Saturdays as holidays as there was no justification.

In this fast end of the 20th century, when the world is constantly moving towards extreme competitiveness, we must weigh our decision very carefully and be satisfied that we do not lose our competitiveness at any cost. In fact, we have to take bold steps, which might not be popular, to increase our competitiveness.

The developed and the developing countries in the East such as Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore etc., have much more difference in time with Europe and USA than us, yet they have managed to do better than us. The difference in time is a geographical reality and cannot be a yardstick of measurement for our weekly holidays. What we have to consider is the uniformity of our weekends and our trading partners' weekends so that no time is wasted due to different weekends.

In the context of Bangladesh, Friday as holiday bears an additional burden as we are closed when the rest of the world is working and followed by Friday are the weekly holidays of Saturday and Sunday of the trading partners of Bangladesh. Therefore, three days are lost and this is the crux of our problem. Can we afford this luxury or should we be prudent and offer more access to our market? There is hardly any doubt about the precarious state of our economy and instead of a pragmatic decision like declaring Saturday and Sunday as weekly holidays, we get a shock therapy — Friday and Saturday as weekly holidays? Who will be benefited from this?

It is an impossibility to find government employees in their

chair during working hours — either they are in a meeting, sick or nobody knows where they are! On Thursdays, they leave office before 12 O'clock noon and on working days hardly anybody comes at 8 am or leaves office at 2 pm. The traditional motto has been and still is "late to arrive, early to leave."

With the changed office timings and weekly holiday, what can we expect? The government servants will now have less time to devote to their private business, buying apartment etc., and while working hours will continue to remain till 5 pm, officials will promptly leave office by 2 pm/3 pm. How will productivity increase?

The huge number of cases pending at the various courts and the recent deliberation of the President of the country to the lawyers is a testimony of our productivity and added to this is the star attraction "Friday and Saturday holidays"! There will always be people to welcome it, but at what cost? It takes very little effort or thinking to make a mistake but to admit it and make due amends to uphold the greater interest of the country needs courage and sincerity. I am sure there will be no dearth of these qualities in the government and amendments will soon be made declaring Saturday and Sunday as weekly holidays.

LA Ahmed
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Two-day holiday

Sir, Two-day holiday is being observed in most of the countries in the world. It is also observed in the neighbouring country. It gives the government servants better rest without reducing working hours. In fact, working hours have increased by one and a half hour in the new arrangement. 2 (two) days holiday should be retained on Friday and Saturday. Friday as working day will not be acceptable to the majority of the people. Such a move will create unnecessary turmoil in the society.

If the government decides to

revert to one-day holiday, then Friday should be the one as it was before. Bangladesh should not follow Nawaz Sharif in this regard. This has been an unpopular move there.

It is not true that international trade suffers because of holiday on Friday. No export, no import, no remittance (incoming or outgoing) was ever disrupted as a result of Friday. There is not a single proof in this regard. Trade adjusts with holiday as people adjust with Railway or Air timing. It is simply a propaganda that 3 (three) days are lost due to Friday.

The United States or the Gulf countries' trade never suffered due to Friday. Bias for Sunday and against Friday is due to ignorance or allergy against Islam. Friday helps Muslims to offer juma prayer in a better way as Sunday does it for Christians.

Abu Faisal
Dhaka

Worldly wise

Sir, A front-page story in most of local papers recently about a Kashmiri boy, who was allegedly arrested by Indian troops for celebrating Pakistan cricket team's victory over India in Madras during the Independence Cricket tournament, was found dead on a Saturday in a lake, is an eye-opener for those who support so-called "secularism".

These days, regional cooperation, particularly transit and trade, has been the buzzword in our nation's media. If trade with India under the present conditions is agreed, we would be fulfilling the old New Delhi dream of making into an Indian outlet. Some people in neighbouring countries looking only for solution of economic problems through free trade with India. They are living in fool's paradise and must see past and present record of trade exchanges between India and its neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh.

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