

## A Budget sans Novelty

It is one of the many ironic reversals of our expectations that Mayor Hanif has not given us many opportunities to thank him. But the man seems to have developed a fine faculty for pleasing our ears when laying out the economic statistics of the Corporation for the next fiscal year.

While country's Finance Minister is drawing flak from many quarters for slapping new taxes in the proposed budget for the fiscal 1997-98, the DCC Mayor in a welcome display of repetition, unveiled a Taka 402.71 crore budget last Thursday. The beleaguered city dwellers, grovelling under the pressure of a ever shooting index of living cost, have been spared from new taxes.

However, more than the presence of something discernibly new in it, what annoys one most about the budget is the absence of any direction to fight some of the worsening problems of the city. We sympathise with Mr Hanif's observation that the government assistance has been far from satisfactory and actually commend the constancy in his conviction that the answer to city dwellers' increased suffering lies in the integrated Metropolitan Government but that does not stop the common citizen from forming a dim view of this charismatic person as a city father. Mr Hanif should realise that constant harping on inadequate co-operation from his party would not really provide any cover for his failure in delivering the goods.

If Awami League is not going all the way to facilitate the job of a public figure whose political moorings are with it, then it can be said the ruling party is doing so at its own peril. But then, what stopped Mr Hanif from using his charisma to raise fund for the cash-strapped Corporation if money is what that has been coming on the way of its good intentions. Resource constraint is an inherited curse with every body or agency in a poor developing country like Bangladesh. And this has to be overcome with innovative dynamism.

We do not have to go far, a resurrected Calcutta will show what good results can be obtained if someone is keen to fuse vision with dynamism. For all the banal optimism and abject helplessness of Mr Hanif, Dhaka as a city, has been inching every day towards a state of unlivability. But panicky though we are at the unabated deterioration of Dhaka, we nevertheless believe that Mr Hanif is capable of much better than what he has managed so far. If only he can revive his glorious role in organising AL before it came to power, Dhaka dwellers no doubt, will have many occasions to thank Mr Hanif.

But for its part, the government has to ensure the payment of the revenue arrears owed to the DCC by its various agencies. If it cannot comply with the Mayor's requests aimed at improving Corporation's efficiency then it should at least do something to help it recover its due money.

## Science Universities

According to the Education Minister, government has taken up a project to set up twelve science and technology universities in the old headquarters of greater districts. We welcome the project. For a population of 120 million we need many more institutions of higher learning in the fields of science. However, we would like to draw the attention of the minister to the condition of the existing such institutions. These bodies are suffering from acute shortage of funds, qualified teachers and equipment. Should not we try and enhance the performance of the present institutions to their peak before going for new ones? Even if we are compelled to begin work on the new institutions, we should at least, have simultaneous projects devoted to the cause of making the existing ones perform better.

Here we would like to suggest that a special effort should be made to further improve the quality and state of the existing science laboratories in the colleges. Better training of the lab teacher and assistants should also be provided for.

There is a tendency in our country to focus more on making new institutions and less and less on running them properly. In fact it is now widely acknowledged that there has been a drastic fall in the level of performance in our educational institutions including our universities.

However, we would like to emphasize the fact that we do need the planned science and technology universities to equip our nation better for the world that is coming. The faster they are established, the better.

## Endangered Turtles

Greed is a mighty destroyer. According to a report of a recent study conducted by the Bangladesh Wild Fauna and Flower Conservation Society (BWFFCS), rare sea turtles have fallen into a rut of widespread destruction in the coastal areas. Deep sea fishermen who previously killed the chelonians only when they clashed with their interests like damaging their nets, reportedly indulge in indiscriminate turtling these days from an irresistible commercial incentive. Turtle meat sell real well and dear.

We deem this as an alarming trend from the point of view of bio-diversity. Unless the authorities wake up now, very soon we might run into a situation where many varieties of turtles may simply go extinct from our water. It seems the time has come for tightening the relevant laws; constant vigilance should also be maintained for their strict enforcement. If need be the extant export quota should be reviewed in consultation with the agencies committed to the cause of conservation.

It is indeed a pity that in a country where the demand for turtle meat is naturally scaled down through religious prohibition for the majority population, this long-living harmless reptiles have to come under such a devouring rage of greed.

# PM Faces Public: Hallmark and Landmark

*There is no doubt that despite heavy controls by successive governments, BTV sometimes click with some good programmes and the programme that we talk about is one of them.*

LAST Monday, Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina appeared on the television and subjected herself to a volley of hard-hitting, nerve-wrecking questions from a group of independent panelists, randomly selected participants and phone calls. It was, perhaps, an indomitable courage on her part given the indubitable fact that never ever in our history any head of state or of government chose to be cross fired and cross examined. The most powerful rulers often appeared the most coward to face the public. However, another programme of this kind with the PM was also shown before. But that was ill managed and, allegedly, cooked to some extent.

That a PM can or should face public questions or be answerable to the public is usually not something that the people of Bangladesh could expect to witness. Our rulers (be elected or self-installed), allegedly, care very little for public opinion and dare not to face them. Accountability and transparency — pillars of democracy as they are called — are thus lost in the first stroke. So, when the PM chose to face the public, quite expectedly, throng of the millions — rural and urban — could be in evidence before TV sets to watch her and her performance.

We can only hope that the PM could make herself available at a regular interval. But in the realm of accountability and transparency, the presence of the PM on such occasion fills in only a part of the existing gap. The other part owes to the leader of the opposition who is supposed to be no less accountable to the public than the PM. As the PM had to swallow tough questions on her government's activities over the last one year, by the same reasoning, the leader of the opposition should also provide an overall account of the activities of her party during the last one year. Since the parliament decides the fate of the nation, the opposition bench in the parliament also, to an extent, shares the blame or credit for the bad or good fate of the nation. We think that Sheikh Hasina's consecutive appearance, including the pre-election one, to the public through TV cross-fire imposed a democratic obligation on Begum Khaleda Zia to follow the suit otherwise, we think she may lose her credibility. The leader of the opposition should pause and

realize for a moment how herself and her party lost by her not attending the pre-election TV show. On the other hand, this is the only way that Begum Khaleda Zia can reach the millions effectively with her basket of allegations against the government. Hope she does not miss the train this time.

How was the programme on Monday? To put it simply, it was far better than the earlier one. The PM appeared very con-

stant so often. These two limitations, seemingly, often robbed her of her more important time to be allocated to provide more quantitative defence in her answers. However, about the overall improvement of the show, we would like to lay the following suggestions for consideration.

First, in the event that the leader of the opposition also agrees to continue to make her presence on such occasions, the

would be drawn from those who are known to be relatively non partisan (like The Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam who is equally loved or hated by both BNP and AL depending on the type of the comment he makes in his newspaper). Second, the members of the panel should be different for different programmes. That is, same group of people in the panel should not be set for the PM or the leader of the opposition all the time.

Third, instead of making the programme wider and time consuming, the show should be cast in terms of sectors. For example, the PM or the leader of the opposition could face questions on agriculture on a particular day while on industry on another day. And in these sectoral questions, they could be assisted by their respective aides.

Fourth, why only the PM? We think that Cabinet Ministers should also make their presence and be cross examined. But the type of the programme should be a different one. For example, a particular Minister and the Secretary of

the Ministry should be questioned by one or two randomly selected renowned journalists and leave the floor open to the public.

Fifth, the presence of audience in the TV hall should be stopped. Because that makes management difficult and also, in the face of influx of supporters, makes the programme less credible. We think that the PM should face a limited number of questions from panel and then the rest from the phone calls which could be the most randomly selected. In the selection from phone calls two questions from each Division could be entertained so that it represents not only Dhaka people but also others.

We hope that the authorities would take our suggestions into proper cognizance. There is no doubt that despite heavy controls by successive governments, BTV sometimes click with some good programmes and the programme that we talked about so long, is one of them. We thank BTV for that. We also thank the PM and her government for having decided to face the public. This is one of the most important demands of the civil society. It is an important plank of democracy. It is a hallmark and a landmark.

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



ident, she accepted some of the mistakes and ingeniously faced the questions from the bench. In fact, her presence of mind and few witty replies also impressed us. However, the PM could, possibly, improve further by not taking larger time in landing on the point in question and by not narrating the

PM should be cross-fired by a panel mostly drawn from opposition camps (BNP, Workers Party, Jatiya Party, Communist Party etc). On the other hand the leader of the opposition should be cross-fired by a panel from government supporters. The size of the Panel should be such that at least two

## Should Taka be Made Fully Convertible?

by Dr A R Chowdhury

*Given the political, social, and economic linkages being established by the present government with various countries in this region, it would only be prudent that the government follow policies which are consistent with those undertaken by our economic partners.*

FOLLOWING the budget announcement, there has been some discussion regarding the desirability of full currency convertibility in Bangladesh. The Taka is now convertible in current account only. The government has yet to make the currency convertible on the capital account. One of the ultimate objective of exchange rate liberalization is to make the domestic currency fully convertible so that the economy can attract cheap foreign capital.

The question that needs to be asked at this point is how desirable is it to make the Taka convertible on the capital account. I would argue that, given the current economic condition in Bangladesh, full currency convertibility is not a viable option. Such convertibility requires, among others, a reasonably developed financial sector,

a mature capital market and an efficient banking sector. None of these conditions are currently present in our economy.

It would take a significant amount of time for the economy to develop the necessary safeguards against the negative shocks associated with full currency convertibility. In the absence of such safeguards, Bangladesh can face the same unpleasant economic problems experienced in several other developing countries who embarked on a similar path of full currency convertibility.

The immediate task of the government would be two-fold. First, to initiate a process by

which the necessary conditions for introducing full currency convertibility could be established. This would understandably be a long-term process. Second, to manage the exchange rate in the interim period.

Now the policy issues relating to the management of the exchange rate in the years to come. Such an exchange rate policy should facilitate the inflow of foreign capital as well as raise the level of domestic economic activity. In other words, the policy should be pragmatic as well as transparent. This would not only establish the credibility of the government in

maintaining the real value of Taka, but also help in its initiative in eventually making the Taka fully convertible.

Currently, a downward pressure on the value of Taka clearly exists. This can be attributed, among others, to the rising cost of production due to the inflationary pressure in the economy, the large amount of bad loans in the banking sector, and the subsidies provided to the state-owned banks and enterprises. However, a devaluation would not only be politically undesirable but would also undermine the foreign exchange reform that has been initiated during the last several years.

Given this background, a possible scenario would be the adoption of the 'managed floating' system by the government. This would be done while the government is preparing for full currency convertibility. The 'managed floating' system is currently practiced in several developing countries including Singapore.

Under this system, the Bangladesh Bank could announce a target rate of change of

Taka over a given period, say, one fiscal year. For instance, given the current economic condition in Bangladesh, the Bank could announce a certain per cent depreciation during the 1997-98 fiscal year. Major economic indicators, such as, trade balance, domestic inflation rate, growth rate of economic activity, etc. can be used to set the target rate.

By aligning the currency with the underlying economic fundamentals in the country, which are transparent to both policy makers and investors, the Bangladesh Bank would be able to negate any upward or downward pressure on the value of Taka. Such policy would also reflect the flexibility of the exchange rate policy. This, among others, would help to discourage foreign investments that are purely aimed at arbitrage opportunities. Moreover, the regular review of the external value of Taka would help to minimize the shocks to the country when and if the Bangladesh Bank decides to adjust the target rate.

During the fiscal year, the Bangladesh Bank would maintain a stable Taka by letting the

currency fluctuate within a narrow band. During periods when the change in the value of Taka rises above the target range, the Bangladesh Bank would respond by selling Taka and buying foreign currency in the foreign exchange market. On the other hand, the Bank would buy Taka and sell foreign currency anytime the change in the value of Taka falls below the target range.

Policy authorities in a number of countries in the Asia Pacific Region, such as, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and China, have either adopted the 'managed floating' system or are seriously considering its adoption. Given the political, social, and economic linkages being established by the present government with various countries in this region, it would only be prudent that the government follow policies which are consistent with those undertaken by our economic partners.

The Ministry of Finance and the Bangladesh Bank can explore the possibility of initiating such an exchange rate policy as a prelude to the full convertibility of Taka, which for all practical purposes is not likely to happen within the next few years.

The writer is an Associate Professor of Economics at Marquette University, Wisconsin, USA.

## 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.

### Punish the wife-killers

Sir, According to a report released by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) on May 28, 1997, up to 50 per cent of the murders committed in Bangladesh are due to husbands' violence against their wives.

We are appalled and greatly distressed by this disclosure. What a horrible destiny for women! Home is considered as a safe place for one but it seems that women are not lucky in that sense, as many a times a grim fate awaits them there.

We often hear of women being murdered indiscriminately by their husbands, but being punished for it is very rare. That is why husbands do not hesitate to commit this heinous crimes.

These days, women are passing through a very insecure — they are not safe anywhere. They are becoming victims of murder, rape and acid burns, even small girls are not spared from these extreme horrifying experiences.

The government must take the matter seriously and do almost to protect women — they have a right to lead a life free from fear and anxiety.

We hope the government will give highest priority to ensure protection to the women of our country and will make their lives worth living.

NurJahan  
East Nasirabad,  
Chittagong

### Polluted Dhaka city

Sir, Few days back, BBC telecast the live scenes of polluted Dhaka city under caption "Dhaka is the worst polluted city in the world". Few months back, similar news item was also published in a vernacular daily. We all are now worried about this problem and its dangerous consequences on our daily life. The government has also set up a separate ministry to deal with this problem. But so far no positive steps are taken to cure this civic problem. I think the following steps are imperative to fight against pollution.

1) Bangladesh is the thickest populated country in the world and so is the Dhaka city. Urban population must be kept within certain limit. Uncontrolled and excess population is itself a major factor of pollution. Influx of innumerable rural people and their free-style living in the city must be stopped. Growth and expansion of slum must be checked. Open toilets here and there must be stopped.

2) City's clogged and defective sewerage system should be made serviceable to stop flowing of raw sewerage water in the drains.

3) Vehicles emitting black smoke must be kept off of the road and two-stroke vehicles

(scooter and tempo) should be gradually withdrawn from city's road.

4) Industrial discharges (water, liquid waste, chemical wash off) should not be allowed to drain off in the natural water flow before neutralising in the reservoirs within the factory premises. The effluent industrial gases must be neutralised before releasing in the atmosphere as practised in all the industrial countries. Mushroom growth of any type of industrial units within the residential areas must be restricted.

5) The government should enact a broad-based pollution law without further delay after consulting similar legislation of other countries.

Pollution is now considered as the major disturbing factor in living comfortably all over the world. Both the developed and developing countries of the world have been taking necessary precautionary measures to curb pollution. Our problem is now at its worst, and unless we are serious to stop pollution, a painful future awaits for our future generation.

Al-haj MA Jalil  
372/B, Khilgoan, Dhaka.

### We fail to understand

Sir, "This strange but true: for truth is always strange, — Stranger than fiction," wrote Byron in *Don Juan*.

We are bewildered and appalled to use some prevailing trends. Our questions are: why gruesome murders are committed, why acid is thrown on women by men, why 'illegal toll tax' is collected by mastans, why 1800 rich men are apathetic and unwilling to refund Taka 13,000 crore they took loan from banks, why there is no discipline, no punctuality and no efficiency in government offices and public sector corporations, why there is systems loss, why there are red-tapism and corruption in the government offices and public sector corporations, why there is smuggling and flight of capital in the name of market economy, why people are being addicted to foreign drugs, why we are being deprived of our right share of the Ganges water, why we are bereft of our ownership of Tin Bigha and Talpatty, why are we being hit by flood, cyclone, drought, tidal surge and river erosion round the year, why there are misuse, abuse of power and misappropriation of public money, why there are traffic jams, deteriorating law and order situation, why there are no accountability and transparency in government offices and public sector corporations, why handful of rich people are getting richer and vast majority of poor people are getting poorer day by day, why there are no proper medicare, housing and education arrangements, why there is no job opportunity in the coun-

try, why thousands of cases are pending with our judicial courts for years together?

O. H Kabir  
6 Hair Street,  
Wari, Dhaka.

### Woman and Children Affairs Ministry

Sri, The Women and the Children Affairs Ministry was formed in 1972 by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for the welfare of the woman and the children in our war-ravaged country.

It is surprised to learn that there are only 22 District Women's Affairs Officers who are performing the duty for total 64 districts and there are only 136 Thana Women's Affairs Officers covering total 470 thanas in our country.

It is very difficult for them to carry on their duties smoothly. The posts of Deputy Directors of Women's Affairs in the Divisional headquarters has not yet been created. The creation of the said posts are most essential to supervise official works in the respective divisional areas.

It is imperative to create the posts of Deputy Directors at the Divisional Headquarters, to appoint more District Women's Affairs Officers in all districts and more Thana Women's Affairs Officers in all thanas to pave the way for performing the official duties properly.

I, on behalf of the women of the country, earnestly request our government to request by Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina to look into the matter and solve the aforesaid problems at earliest convenience.

Begum Fatema Ali  
Rajshahi.

### Condolences from the Himalayan students

Sir, We the Nepalese students studying in the various institutions of Bangladesh express our shock and profound grief over the loss of valuable lives and extensive damage to the properties caused by severe cyclone over Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Moheshkhali, St. Martin, Teknaf, Sandwip, Noakhali, Bhola, Baneshkhali, Kutubdia, Ukhia, Barisal, Patuakhali, Barguna, Laxmipur and other affected areas.

We are deeply saddened by the havoc caused by this tragic calamity for which I feel so much aggrieved I cannot express my sorrows in words. On behalf of all the students studying here as well as the whole nation of Nepal I would like to express our heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the bereaved families.

I, along with my fellow students and the whole country, pray to Almighty to give strength and will power to overcome the havoc caused by this tragic incident, especially to those who lost their near and dear ones, as well as their properties. I am very optimistic that the havoc caused by the devastating cyclone will be overcome by the courageous people of Bangladesh, especially those who were affected.

Sanjib Rajbhandary  
International Hostel  
University of Dhaka.

## New US Thinking on Indo-Pak Conflicts

by Sayed Eqbal Reza

*In fact, by promoting meaningful economic relations with India and Pakistan, the United States can create suitable conditions whereby the intensity of the nuclear issue could be reduced.*

### Kashmir dispute.

THE report clearly accepts the failure of the US non-proliferation policy in South Asia by saying that, "despite US non-proliferation efforts, both India and Pakistan have become de facto nuclear weapon-capable states and show no sign of changing course. Such behaviour has triggered US sanctions, which in turn have restricted US bilateral relations with both countries. This is unfortunate, because the current situation calls for more, rather than less, US engagement. For increased engagement to occur, however there needs to be an understanding across both the executive and legislative branches of the US government that reversing these countries' de facto nuclear weapons status is currently extremely important." The question is: what the United States should do in order to cope with the nuclear impasse in South Asia? Should it accept nuclear programmes of India and Pakistan as a fait accompli or should it launch initiatives aimed at softening the headline Indo-Pakistan policies? The report suggests that, "in the non-proliferation arena, US policy should focus, instead, on establishing a more stable and sustainable plateau for India and Pakistan nuclear relations. This would involve concentrating on persuading both countries to refrain from testing nuclear explosives, deploying nuclear weapons, and exporting nuclear weapon or missile related material, technology, or expertise. The United States should also urge both countries to refrain from missile deployment and cease unsafe-guarded production of fissile material."

In fact, by promoting meaningful economic relations with India and Pakistan, the United States can create suitable conditions whereby the intensity of the nuclear issue could be reduced. This would require closer Indo-US relation based on shared values and institutions, economic collaboration including enhanced trade and investment and so forth. As far as Pakistan is concerned, the report suggests that Washington should work to restore normal and close working relations with Pakistan. This would require providing credits for trade and investment, cooperation on energy related issues, helping in debt reduction or wriggling off providing aid to support social welfare, economic modernisation, privatisation,

and the reform of tax, electoral, and development mechanisms which could promote Pakistan's political and economic stability.

The most important point which has been stressed in the Council of Foreign Relations Task Force Report is better establishment of links with the Pakistan military. The reason is, in the absence of a closer relationship between American and Pakistani militaries, Washington will lose its influence and leverage which it has so far enjoyed in GHQ. The report also suggests that the International Military Education and Training (IMET) should be extended to help keep Pakistan's armed forces professional and linked to the West. In this regard, the US should also consider the resumption of limited conventional arms sales to Pakistan provided such a step doesn't contribute to Pakistan's nuclear weapons programmes or delivery capabilities or undertake to alter the military balance in South Asia.

As far as the Kashmir dispute is concerned, the report has expressed its helplessness in offering any solution or improvement. The reason for pessimism expressed in the report about Kashmir is based on the argument that the United States enjoys no great deal of leverage over India and Pakistan and hence it is not in a position to change things for the better. That, time is not ripe for the United States to launch a major initiative on Kashmir. However, Washington's interest in India and Pakistan could best be served by working with other governments on a step by step approach toward a series of practical interim objectives, rather than "final status." The report suggests the methodology for the step by step approach by establishing an international contact group which should engage in quiet, multilateral diplomacy for easing tension in the region.

The facts and analyses discussed in the report reflect a new American thinking based on the post-Cold War realities in South Asia. It is yet to be seen how the United States will transform its objectives in South Asia into a reality. But one thing is certain: Washington has learned lessons from its failures in its South Asia policy and the Council on Foreign Relations Report is aimed to deal with the Indo-Pakistan conflicts from a fresh approach despite regional security complications.

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