

We are Relieved

We express guarded sense of relief that the Friday prayer at the Baitul Mukarram mosque which many had feared could be desecrated by violence stopped short of an all-out clash between the Islamic Oikya Jote activists and the Awami League supporters. Although a show of strength was averted and the sanctity of the place was preserved by not letting a fight start in the mosque itself, its premises were used for the purpose all the same.

We are disappointed there and deplore the heinous side-act by hell-bent design outside the mosque in the strongest language we are capable of. The fact that the country's president had to leave a function at Baitul Mukarram organised in observance of Eid-e-Miladunnabi without inaugurating it in the face of rumpus was an indictment enough on the politicisation of a profoundly religious occasion. The role played by the khatib in warding these off and then when they occurred in containing them, left much to be desired. In his position he was only expected to distance himself from any political party whatsoever. Even though he might privately have support for one political party or the other. A show-cause notice has been issued on him and let the law take its own course.

We appreciate the common-sensical decision by the Religious Affairs Minister Nurul Islam not to attend the Jumma prayers at Baitul Mukarram. He did not give any provocation but then those who plan mischief do not need one.

The House of God has to be kept beyond politics at any cost. No khatib or minister should try to make the most of a volatile situation — be it religious or political.

The Rohingya Residue

The abrupt stalemate in the process of Rohingya repatriation to Myanmar caused by a resistive flare-up in the refugee camps has prompted some sort of a review of our arrangements in this behalf. The preparations apparently fell short of taking the UNHCR people along which is why they are purportedly urging the Bangladeshi authorities, now to ensure voluntary repatriation.

Technically, the Refugee and Repatriation Commissioner AQM Qamrul Huda may have followed the procedure of sending the local UNHCR a list of would-be returnees, but seemingly there has been some communication gap between the two offices down the road. But it is ironical that we are having to undergo a sensitivity test at the fag end of the send-off process involving the last batch of 21 thousand plus refugees. Most of the quarter of a million Rohingyas who had fled Burmese persecution and taken refuge in our territory have already gone back to their hearths and homes in Myanmar.

Nearly all of this happened under the benign supervision of the UNHCR. As the UN-mandated authority, its concerns over voluntary return of the refugees and their safe and secure rehabilitation at the place of destination are understandable. So far as the government of Bangladesh goes on the question of approach, the state minister for foreign affairs Abul Hassan has reminded all concerned in an interview with the BBC the other day that when the incumbent Prime Minister was the leader of the opposition she was the one to have demanded supervision of the repatriation process by the UNHCR.

She, in fact, had met the UNHCR chief Ogata at that time labouring this point. Bangladesh's compulsion in the present case stemmed from the fact that Myanmar authorities wanted the repatriation process to be completed by August 15.

The meeting such as the one that was held in Cox's Bazar on Friday with our representative Qamrul Huda, UNHCR mission chief in Bangladesh and UNHCR mission chief in Myanmar attending does reflect a concerted sense of urgency to get the repatriation process over with. We take heart from this.

Road Dividers

The Dhaka City Corporation's biggish new project for planting trees on road dividers has netted the DMP's traffic division. The traffic police can make a common cause with road users in demanding a scientific approach from the DCC to this undertaking in what appears to be a healthy improvement upon their usually recriminatory relationship.

With the benefit of hindsight the DMP (Traffic) and vehicle operators are saying that the foliage and the commercial hoardings put across the tree-branches would block the view of drivers making the traffic quite inexorably accident-prone. The deeper roots of the trees could also tear apart the concrete soiling with a crumbling effect on the medians (the two-strip oblong stretch in equal parts) or the straight single-strip dividers.

The medians and dividers in big cities all over the world are invariably landscaped and greened, but seldom with leafy bowers and drooping branches that obstruct vision. On the contrary, it is either flat lattice-work, plot of grass, flower-bed or narrow vertically rising plants kept the trimmer by periodic prunings.

All that the DCC needs for nipping this controversy in the bud is to replace the purely engineering point of view by a horticulturist's expert angle of vision.

Meanwhile, let there be authentic clarification on the subject of divider plantation from the Mayor's office.

The CHT Problem and the Role of Army

by Dr M Masum

RECENTLY, I had an opportunity to listen to a heated debate on the problem of Chittagong Hill Tracts — particularly on the role of Bangladesh Army. The issue was raised in a paper on "State, sub-State Nationalism and Sub-Regionalism: A Retrieval from Beyond the Mask," by Dr Amena Mohsin at a seminar on South Asian Growth Quadrangle: Bangladesh Perspectives' organised by International Studies Association, Bangladesh. She was critical of militarisation of Chittagong Hill Tracts, and, particularly of a scheme of taking selected intellectuals — academics and journalists — in groups on a conducted tour to Chittagong Hill Tracts at public cost.

Professor Shahiduzzaman the designated discussant on the paper contested many of the points raised. There was participation also from the floor. The discussion, however, was cut short due to time constraint.

As a participant of one of the above 'conducted' tours to Chittagong Hill Tracts at public cost, I think, I have a moral responsibility to share my experiences with the people at large. Why were such conducted tours organised at all? To provide the intellectuals an opportunity to acquire first-hand knowledge about the problem and also to observe the role of army from close quarters. Although the problem of insurgency by Shantibahini and counter-insurgency operations by security forces in Chittagong Hill Tracts has been a national issue for almost quarter of a century evading all attempts at solution, there exists a dearth of reliable information and objective analysis of the problem.

As the problem of insurgency has been successfully contained within the region thanks to Bangladesh army with no ripples reaching even the Chittagong city, not to speak of Dhaka, the capital, the national press and electronic media had, for a long time, ignored the problem. Whatever information that reached the nation or got disseminated abroad, were either through writings of a limited number of intellectuals based primarily on secondary materials, books and journals published mainly from abroad, and reports of Amnesty International and other human rights organisations, national and international, or through programmes broadcast/telecast by BBC which took special interests in the area. PCSS and Shantibahini through its front organisations, e.g. PCP, PGP, and HWF, maintained regular contact with intellectuals sympathetic to their cause; organised literary

meetings/cultural festivals in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where leading playwrights, literateurs and cultural workers were invited; maintained liaison with embassies/NGOs at home and abroad; and participated in specially convened seminars abroad which provided them a number of avenues for airing their partisan views on the problem with their own interpretation of historical events.

The Bangladesh Army, however, had no such opportunity. Because of long direct or quasi-military rule in Bangladesh which was rightly opposed by the intellectuals in general, even after transition to democracy in 1991, the scope for formal contact between the army and the intellectuals is extremely limited. All military matters, including those relating to Chittagong Hill Tracts were regarded as state secrets, and very little information other than a few press releases through ISPR were divulged to the press and the electronic media. The army as an institution cannot maintain contact/liaison with foreign embassies, and had very little scope for participation at national and international seminars, other

deliberations at the meetings were absolutely free reflecting all shades of opinion.

Let us concentrate on the role of Bangladesh Army in Chittagong Hill Tracts. The problem was not created by the Bangladesh Army. A look at history reveals that none of the major tribes, the Chakmas, the Marmas and the Tripuras were Chittagong Hill Tracts' indigenous people. Driven from other areas, over the last few centuries, they came and settled in Chittagong Hill Tracts along with Bengalis who went there to pursue trading and farming activities in the valleys. To ensure that the Bengali revolutionaries, who were quite active in Chittagong, did not get a sanctuary in the area, the British government declared Chittagong Hill Tracts an 'excluded' area in 1900 which put a break on natural migration of Bengalis to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Had not the British pursued the above exclusionary policy; had the British treated this area and its people at par with other areas and people of British India; through natural processes, the area and its people would have got well-integrated with the rest of British India particularly with East Bengal. In 1947, when the British India was partitioned

into independent states of India

their users and maintain supplies of necessities throughout the region. At present, roughly one-third of the entire Bangladesh Army are engaged in carrying out counter-insurgency operations and other functions mentioned above in Chittagong Hill Tracts. The above overwhelming presence of the army in Chittagong Hill Tracts has possibly led many to conclude that Chittagong Hill Tracts has been 'militarised', but did any other option really

exist?

At the initial stage of counter insurgency operations in Chittagong Hill Tracts, due to lack of experience, a number of incidents involving possibly violation of human rights occurred but as the army gained maturity, such incidents have become a thing of the past. Despite provocation by Shantibahini which has been able to re-organise itself taking advantage of ceasefire since 1992, the army showed great restraint.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts has common borders with India (Tripura and Mizoram) and Myanmar. In the absence of roads in the border belt, regular patrolling of the borders is not possible. As a result, the insurgents can freely move across the border to carry out any insurgency operation and escape when chased by the army. Since the option of sealing out the

army camp was indeed a lonely man. The plight of those serving in more remote areas can easily be imagined. Malaria is a menace. Since 1980, 160 security personnel including 68 army personnel lost their lives suffering from malaria.

On return to Dhaka, I was narrating my experience to a leading intellectual of the country, highlighting the life of army personnel in Chittagong Hill Tracts. I was told, "Well, they are performing their duty."

Surely we all have our respective duties to perform. Had we all performed our duties sincerely, at least as the army had been doing in CHT, much of the Golden Bengal, by now would have been a reality.

The Shantibahini. Peace and security has generally been restored at least at the district headquarters. We enjoyed in the evening of 7th July, 1997, a largely attended cultural function organised by Kachi Kanchar Mela at Khagrachari and were happy to see both tribals and Bengalis participating at and enjoying the programme.

The army has definitely succeeded in controlling insurgency in Chittagong Hill Tracts to limit it within acceptable level besides protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. Total number killed in counter-insurgency operations over the last twenty-two years has been 173 only for the army, and 343, when all security forces are included (up to June 30, 1997).

As mentioned earlier, the army had demonstrated great restraint despite 1076 cases of violation of ceasefire by Shantibahini over August 1992-June 1997. The presence of the army in Chittagong Hill Tracts has also contributed to minimising ethnic conflicts.

I had the opportunity of visiting an army camp not far from Rangamati. On the way, I saw the jawans in uniform, with arms, patrolling the road in the rain. I climbed up a hill to reach the camp and gasped for breath. For security reasons most of the camps had been set up on top of the hills. Carrying water to hill tops, and procuring fresh food from the neighbouring tribal villages development of a friendly neighbourhood was essential. In the absence of different organs and personnel of civil administration, the army took the responsibility of providing basic services, and also got involved in development functions which, under normal circumstances would have been carried out by the civil administration.

The above strategy endeared them to tribal people. The road network and the waterways also needed to be regularly patrolled to ensure security of

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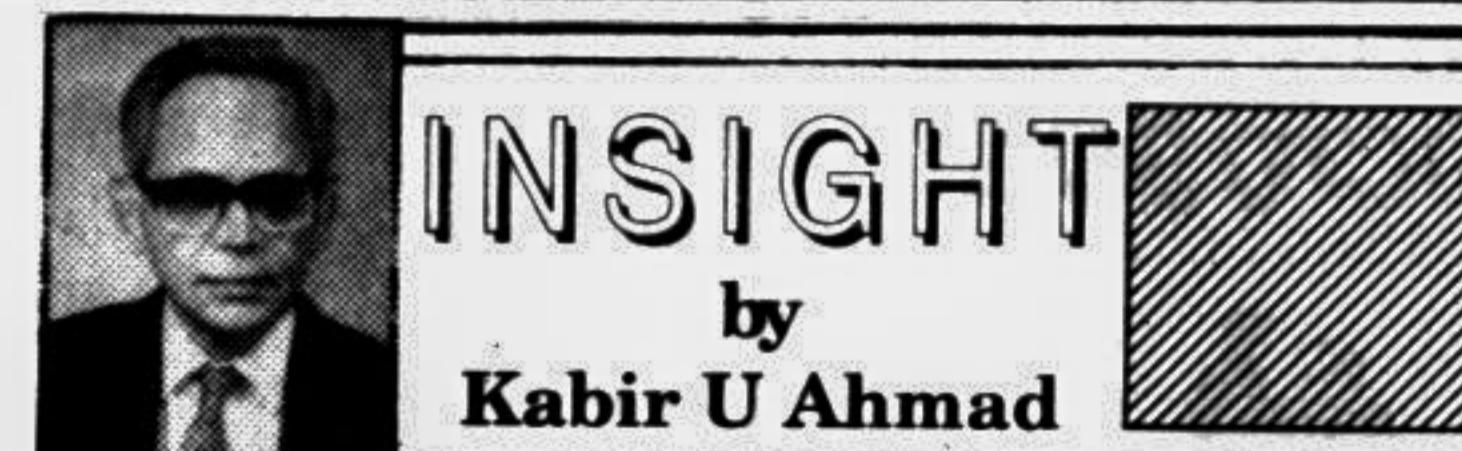
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How High should Public Expenditure be?

Knowing the process of decision-making in Bangladesh, it is perhaps fair to say that once a government comes to power, its main thrust is on expenditure and then it looks for the sources of revenue increase. In this perception, it looks like expenditure determines revenue.



INSIGHT
by
Kabir U Ahmad

than all the expenditure items while the DE has done better in the more recent past which is closely followed by RR. There is a question of causality here: what causes what? Does revenue growth causes the growth of expenditure or the latter causes the former? This can be quantitatively settled by doing a Granger Causality analysis. But knowing the process of decision-making in Bangladesh, it is perhaps fair to say that once a government comes to power, its main thrust is on expenditure and then it looks for the sources of revenue increase. In this perception, it looks like expenditure determines revenue.

One interesting side point

should be noted here. The RE has recorded an increase every year over its initial budget estimates while the DE has been lower at year-ends almost every year over its initial budget allocations with the exception of only two years — 1988-89 and 1989-90 — when expenditures were greater than the allocations. There are special reasons for this feature of expenditure behaviour which cannot be dealt with here.

Public Expenditure Growth in the Next Ten Years

It is worth noting that the TE has already reached 17 per cent

of GDP in 1996-97, which is coming close to 20 per cent level which even some developed countries are maintaining at present. However, the main result of this paper is that it will reach about 37.44 per cent of GDP in the year 2006-7, ten years from now, if the recent rate of 14.2 per cent AARG of TE observed in 1991-96 and 5.7 per cent of RG of GDP is maintained in the next ten years.

The RE/GDP ratio will reach 16.23 per cent in the same terminal year, if the recently obtained AARG of RE is maintained throughout the period. Since 1991-96 was a reasonably stable period and the observed inflation rate was below 4.5 per cent and the economy was substantially liberalised, a conservative projection on the basis of these factors doesn't seem out-of-place.

Too high expenditure levels, especially unproductive and underperforming ones, carry with them danger signals for the economy. Policy makers

must be fully aware of these hidden danger signals. One may of course argue that the prospect of GDP growth may be higher than 5.7 per cent, in which case, everything else remaining the same, the TE/GDP ratio will come down. But it will still be in the range of about 30 per cent. Further, it may also be argued that the high rate of DE/GDP ratio of about 21 per cent will stimulate high rate of growth and hence may be a boon for the economy.

One wishes that all these expected favourable factors work to the advantage of the economy, but the obstacles and risks of faster growth with heavy involvement of the government machinery should be reckoned with. Government machinery is more constraining than facilitating.

Whatever might be the expected rate of growth, the results of the present calculations are quite forbidding for Bangladesh. TE/GDP ratio of 37 per cent and the RE/GDP ratio of 16.23 per cent are on the high side. The latter raises the question of fiscal sustainability. With the given range of difficulties that the public sector has been facing in terms of heavy borrowing from the banking sector, huge burden of SOE losses, high interest rate which is constraining the growth of the industrial sector and the difficulties that the export sector has been experiencing, one feels somewhat sceptical of the bright scenario. It would be advisable for the government to be careful about the fiscal sustainability. One step in this respect would be to trim the size of unproductive public expenditure by introducing the strict criteria of fiscal efficiency, accountability and justifiability at every level of expenditure.

staying at home, utilising their extra time by poking nose in every household affair. They would rather prefer to receive their tired husbands with a welcome smile.

People are already bored by this extra holiday, since there are hardly sufficient interesting places to go for weekends or sources of recreation.

The Prime Minister is said to have expressed pride in being able to keep the decision a secret. But isn't it a discredit for a democratic government to take a vital decision, keeping the majority of the people in the dark?

Before it is too late, the members of the parliament instead of creating those noisy pandemonium in the Sangsads should enter into a debate to see whether we can afford such luxury.

Mrs Lulu Ahmad
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

To the Editor...

Ports: Essential service

Sir, All works and activities in the two seaports under CPA and MPA may be declared as 'Essential Service' till normal conditions return. It is sad to fire the labour unions unitly decide the fate of the nation.

Labour should not become a political issue. Leaders of all sectors may agree to some basic principles so that development of the country may be speeded up.

The writer continued: "This is, in effect, another popular step taken by the government next to the appointment of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as President. This must be applauded even by the government's worst opponents."

It was further stated: "We

praise the government despite my own political differences with the ruling party. Why should a good deed go unnoticed, unrecorded or unapplauded if

the bad ones are criticised. We should learn to be honest in the first place."

We strongly feel that in democracy differences of opinion is always acceptable. A political leader in power may always defend the government for governance sake and a political leader in opposition may always oppose for opposition sake. But it is for people to appreciate or deprecate the activities and performances, promises and pledges, errors, inefficiencies and irregularities, successes and failures, merits and demerits of the ruling as well as the opposition parties, and to examine, monitor and arrive at a conclusion of their own through their own conscience and wisdom.

We should neither side