

Revenue Collection

We are not losing heart on the reported revenue collection shortfall of Tk 220 crore in the July-September quarter of fiscal 1997-98. The deficit, in relation to the target set, should be more than met during the last three quarters of the financial year. The total tax collection figure set for the current fiscal is Tk. 15,000 crore. Our hopes for a recovery in revenue collection stem from the fact that despite an extra-ordinary plethora of court cases pertaining to duty on reconditioned cars, revenues collected during the quarter in question showed marked improvement up on the trend of the corresponding quarter of last year. As much as Tk. 200 crore did not reach the coffer as a result of writs filed by the car importers.

It won't, however, be quite a cake walk to full realisation of the revenue target for the 1997-98 fiscal. Our suggestion is the government take adequate precautionary measures in the shape of a stratagem to stave off any down-trend in resource mobilisation.

Records show that every time the Chittagong port went on wildcat strike — thanks to the nefariously faitious trade unionism and subversive politicking by vested quarters — a whole range of taxes cease to be collected, to say nothing of severely affecting export-earning. The port, therefore, needs to be kept operational, regardless of what the political or labour union related circumstances are, locally as well as nationally.

The fiscal measures in the last budget included simplification of tax assessment and collection procedures. Specially the provision made for early disposal of appeals merited a good deal of praise. The NBR is hopefully monitoring the applied aspect of the procedures by way of plugging the holes of corruption or hindrances.

The internal finance division of the finance ministry including the National Board of Revenue had better opened a channel of communication with the business leaders to avert flurry of court cases on duties and likes which upset the revenue collection applecart.

The Intangible Bars

Ten link roads connecting main traffic points of Dhaka have been planned to reduce the city's road jams. This is a big project estimated to cost about 2.5 billion Taka. Two of these roads are shortly going to be embarked upon. The rest would await ECNEC approval expected very soon. Very encouraging indeed. There is talk of flyovers and bypasses in the air. And overpasses and underpasses are already serving the city. These must be signs of the coming of a city of wonderfully managed roads. But these evaporate when one has to spend hours to go a distance of say three kilometres.

It was Dudintsev who brought in the phrase 'not by bread alone'. We question the government, can Dhaka's traffic woes be healed by a recourse to public works treatment alone? Three billion Taka is a tremendous sum but the state can scoop it up now that it has felt the need. What is far more difficult is to heal the human part of the ailment. How can the tens of millions in the city be induced to imbibe and practice road ethics and how will the drivers be made to be careful about road-etiquette, even the educated owner-drivers?

Not by the uncivilised means practised by the city's traffic policemen. Their ignorance and their ways, including very much their weakness for easy money and their illegal and frequent recourse to brutal assaults, are things that have to be treated first. The enforcers of the traffic norms or the field force of the police on the roads are themselves a formidable bar to improvement of the Dhaka roads and movement situation.

Certain firsts and basics seem to be quite unknown to drivers of all kinds of vehicles. Such as you cannot simply stop your vehicle on your course, you must signal you are slowing as also that you are careering to your left to stop. The incredible thing is that the policeman is equally ignorant. The Farmgate area is choked wholly by empty rickshaws by the kind collaboration of the policeman. What then?

Doctor, heal thyself first.

Playing with Flights

Biman has been lately in the news for two lapses, which even by its standards of springing surprises seem horrifically inexplicable. A New York-bound Biman flight set off for New Delhi as the first stop-over with the knowledge that landing at the Indira Gandhi International Airport was under prohibitory orders for certain hours due to an IAF exercise. It had aimed at arriving before the restriction time began, but having failed to actually do so, the DC-10 had to return to Dhaka before resuming the flight an hour later on receipt of clearance from the IGI authorities.

The New Delhi airport had, according to the standard practice, issued the Note to Airman urging not to approach the airport for a specified time-span. It was not only a sheer waste of money but also a close shave with lurking dangers in the airlanes on its way back with as many as 165 on board.

In an earlier mind-boggling incident, captain of a Dhaka-Jeddah flight made a delayed landing — by 38 minutes — at the destination because he had apparently forgotten to carry the landing code with him.

Two inquiry committees have been set up — one by the Biman authorities and another by the civil aviation ministry — to go into these omissions and commissions with a special focus around the first incident. As for that one, a junior flight operation officer has already been suspended, but we would like to get an authentic version on the systemic flaw that contributed to the scandalisation of the New York flight. The truth must come out.

Paddy: In Quest of a Fair Price

The same groups of poor households paying a much lower price today — might have to compensate by paying a much higher price tomorrow... stability in agricultural prices is a must to ensure an assured food supply and food security in Bangladesh.

THERE is, perhaps, little doubt that the economic growth rate of the last fiscal at 5.7 per cent stood reasonably high to inject some hope for the future. After all, an economy that has been reeling on an average growth rate of four per cent, suddenly appeared to have jerked. Behind this satisfactory level of economic performance, however, the contribution of agricultural sector — that grew at an "enviable" 6 per cent — needs to be duly recognized and evaluated. The industrial sector performed poorly languishing at "intolerable" growth rate of only three per cent. For any move to push up the growth rate further or to arrest any debilitating decline, two challenges need to be faced. First, beef up industrial growth through enunciating investment-friendly policies — pursuing right kind of reforms in a regime of good governance, worthy law and order situation. Second, adopt policies that would instill spirit among farmers to sustain these laudable efforts in the coming years.

For the moment, we would like to present few observations in the light of the successive bumper crops that our farmers, buttressed by good nature, reaped home so far and in the wake of a steep fall in paddy prices all over the country. While agricultural growth rate occurred at 6 per cent last year, prices of paddy, allegedly, went down by 20 per cent. As a result, the net income accruable to farmers fell to an intolerable level. The same thing

happened with the procurement's import policy also militates against the procurement drive. More often than not, import of foodgrain stands out as a lucrative option to bureaucrats and politicians because "rents" are easily available from such imports. The most disconcerting thing to note is that the food shortage, in most cases, is overestimated by relevant agencies. Suppose a severe flood or drought hits Bangladesh in a particular year, quite obviously, there would be a deficit in foodgrain production. What government agencies fail to do is to take note of the fact that a fall in production should lower households' income, and to that extent, lower foodgrain demand in the market. But the overall assessment of food shortage assumes that market demand would remain constant. However, when sufficient quantity of imported foodgrains are placed into the godowns, large quantity of procurement from local sources lose space. The 1995/96 level of import of foodgrains is a clear pointer to the impact of imports on domestic price level.

Given these weaknesses, in the whole process, it is unlikely that government's attempt to stabilise prices are going to be successful and in fact it is not. Drawing upon these drawbacks, some donor agencies, reportedly, are advising the government to withdraw its hands from the market and let it be to buyers and sellers alone. We are sorry to disagree with the proposal. We strongly feel that government intervention is still of utmost importance for price stability. Price stability has a further ramification in terms of political stability and "vote banks". For example, one can argue that the vote bank of the present ruling party Awami League is offered by medium and

large farm households. These groups are shattered by a steep fall in prices and might bounce back in future to take revenge.

Assuming that government intervention is necessary for price stabilization, we would like to suggest the following. First, it is not necessary that government has to go to farmers to procure paddy. The operation should be organized around government godown areas (and create more storage facilities, if necessary) and there should be specified months to procure paddy from farmers (e.g. December-January for Aman and May-June for Boro). Second, government should attempt to buy or sell to businessmen and traders a large chunk of their paddy. There should be a price band beyond which buying and selling would take place. Critics might argue that this would mostly benefit traders. Yes, initially it might be so, but the huge demand generated by the government would have to raise prices at farmers' level also. Third, the government can reap a small premium from the band set for prices and bear the costs of its management on the basis of "no profit, no loss" game. If such policies are adopted, we feel that a small staff could handle the huge show much more efficiently and effectively.

There was a big crash in paddy prices in 1992/93. From Tk. 268 to Tk. 177 maund. The crash was considered as "blessings" by the then policy makers who boasted of a negative inflation rate. Then we observed that agricultural production, especially of paddy, stagnated for two consecutive years. In 1995, paddy prices again shot up to Tk. 330-340/maund (Feb-March). Price responsive farmers were encouraged by the hike and in consequence, produced more paddy. But prices again dipped from Tk. 314 in May 1995 to Tk. 224 in 1996 to Tk. 200 in 1997. The spectre of stagnation again seems to loom large.

A steep fall in rice prices cuts in both ways: it helps the poor, landless and near landless and middle class households who tend to buy from the market and thus ensure their food security. But this also severely hurts medium and large farmers who supply rice to the market — and, in the event of a drastic fall in prices, might revolt by cutting down production. So the same groups of poor households paying a much lower price today — might have to compensate by paying a much higher price tomorrow. Once again, stability in agricultural prices is a must to ensure an assured food supply and food security in Bangladesh. Let farmers not be paid by the pains of lower prices for the gains they give us in terms of food production and overall growth rate of the economy. We are dependent on each other for our survival.

Over the past year, the television, radio and the government news agency BSS has censored the President's statements several times, have broadcast them in part. This reportedly annoyed the President, and for quite a few days in June this year no news of the President's programmes were broadcast over television or censored by the BSS. The news were only sent directly from Bangabhaban by the PID (Press Information Department). Such incidents are certainly unfortunate.

The government and the ruling party are at times quite pleased with certain statements or actions of the President. Then again they can be quite unhappy too. The BNP also has the same attitude. Even the smaller parties and the NGO leaders have conflicting views on the President's statements and his role.

But what can the President do? What power does he have?

In the light of Bangladesh's Constitution, there is nothing he can do. He has no power at all. Article 48(2) of the Constitution states that, as head of the state, the President is above all other persons of the state. And according to Article 48(3), the President shall carry out all his duties in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, other than in the case of the Prime Minister's appointment. However, Article 48(5) states that the Prime Minister will inform the President of all matters of the state and foreign affairs. By enforcing the twelfth amendment to the constitution in 1991, BNP and Awami League jointly brought about this description of the President's powers. Even the President himself once remarked about this powerless position saying that the President of Bangladesh has no function other than attending funerals.

Unless the political leaders are adequately trained in the act of public administration, the bureaucrats will be at work for the glory and fame of the executive machinery of the government.

If they falter, the nation will face the shadow of a hate-culture the effects of which would be bad.

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Spiritual harmony

Sir, To build Ram Temple on the ashes of Babri Masjid and sow the seed of hatred between Hindus and Muslims is a sheer dishonour to Ram whose very name is synonymous with Bharat.

To demolish a place of worship where the same Lord — the only Lord — was worshipped to whom we all owe our allegiance, it makes no difference to call him — Allah or Brommo. His greatness, might and devotion could only be achieved in peace within the soul. Hatred which creates hatred is not path to spiritual harmony. We ask only one question: Is it not paying greater tribute to Lord Rama that we call Bharat Ram Janmo Bhumi instead of just Ayodhya.

The very unique character of India lies in its unity in diversity both in religion, culture and civilisation. For centuries, the saints and sages of all religion committed to build an ideal abode of spiritual harmony. The ancient hymns recited by the gurus reverberate with a sombre sense of serenity and peace — not violence or hatred.

The people in India must realise that millions of Muslims visit Ajmer to pay homage to Hazrat Khawja Moinuddin Chisti (RA) and they intermingle with the Hindus, Christians, Jews and Buddhists.

Is it not a situation of perfect religious harmony?

Al-Haj SM Khalid Chowdhury
Dhaka

What will the President Do?

by Matiur Rahman

THE President has recently been rather politically active. He took some initiatives prompted by certain issues which emerged on the political scene in September. The issues included the question of public meetings on the streets, selection of suitable sites for such meetings, police action against street meetings and processions, hartals and other such matters. He endeavoured to pacify the agitation created over these issues and incidents. He tried to bring about a peaceful compromise between the government and the opposition. But, yet again, no understanding was reached. However, at least, further deterioration of the situation has been checked for the time being.

President Shahabuddin's moves have given a glimmer of hope to the country. Even foreign diplomats and officials of the donor agencies were hopeful at his efforts. No one would like to see yet another long drawn-out squabble between the government and the opposition (BNP) that would just lead to political instability once again. Many people left that someone like President Shahabuddin, a neutral and highly respected personality, would be able to do something.

But has President Shahabuddin actually been able to do anything? The people want political stability and a peaceful environment. With this in mind, President Shahabuddin Ahmed makes frequent attempts to bring about an understanding between the government and the opposition. He does this on his own accord, from his own neutral sense of duty. The feeling that the country is more important than a person or a party has induced him over the recent past to make several stern statements against student politics, campus violence, political clashes and groupings and the intolerance between the government and the opposition party. The people seem to support his sentiments. But there has been some displeasure within the leadership of the ruling party regarding the President's initiatives. They feel that since they have made him president, why then he shall criticise them.

Over the past year, the television, radio and the government news agency BSS has censored the President's statements several times, have broadcast them in part. This reportedly annoyed the President, and for quite a few days in June this year no news of the President's programmes were broadcast over television or censored by the BSS. The news were only sent directly from Bangabhaban by the PID (Press Information Department). Such incidents are certainly unfortunate.

When President Shahabuddin Ahmed meets with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina or other ministers, we know that he speaks of the problems put forward by the BNP leadership. He informs them of all the problems and crisis of the country which the government can solve. He gives his well thought-out advice. He perhaps differs with certain government decisions. Whether they listen to his advice or not, is entirely the government's or the Prime Minister's matter. One or two important ministers also call upon the President when they are confronted with a particular problem or they need his advice. This has proven to be fruitful.

President Shahabuddin retains an honourable position both to the government and to the opposition. The fact that the President can really do nothing. He does not have any such power. And we all know that though President Abdur Rahman Biswas was BNP's President, Begum Zia, as Prime Minister, did not show him the smallest amount of courtesy. Even in 1996 when the political agitation of the country had its height and opposition leaders including the present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon the President in its self a big strength for the government. After all, if any urgent political problem crops up, perhaps the President can talk to Khaleda Zia. He may be able to influence her even if to the slightest extent. It is the decision of the Prime Minister or the government as to how they will utilise, if they utilise at all, the position of the President. If the country faces any serious political crisis, President Shahabuddin Ahmed will play a vital role. The people will look to him as the last resort, the role Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had hoped from President Biswas.

Even so, is President Shahabuddin Ahmed doing anything? President Shahabuddin Ahmed is doing something. While constitutionally he has nothing to do, he is consciously endeavouring from his national patriotic position to neutrally keep the country's democratic process on track. He is also making an effort to mobilise consensus on important national issues.

What more can President Shahabuddin Ahmed do? Begum Zia and the BNP leadership are aware that the President can really do nothing. He does not have any such power. And we all know that though President Abdur Rahman Biswas was BNP's President, Begum Zia, as Prime Minister, did not show him the smallest amount of courtesy. Even in 1996 when the political agitation of the country had its height and opposition leaders including the present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon the President in its self a big strength for the government. After all, if any urgent political problem crops up, perhaps the President can talk to Khaleda Zia. He may be able to influence her even if to the slightest extent. It is the decision of the Prime Minister or the government as to how they will utilise, if they utilise at all, the position of the President. If the country faces any serious political crisis, President Shahabuddin Ahmed will play a vital role. The people will look to him as the last resort, the role Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had hoped from President Biswas.

Even so, is President Shahabuddin Ahmed doing anything? President Shahabuddin Ahmed is doing something. While constitutionally he has nothing to do, he is consciously endeavouring from his national patriotic position to neutrally keep the country's democratic process on track. He is also making an effort to mobilise consensus on important national issues. His statements help to keep people of all quarters alert regarding student politics, campus violence, manipulations of the loan defaulters, lack of understanding between the government and opposition as well as other issues. Public opinion is gradually growing in favour of his position. By doing so, President Shahabuddin Ahmed is carefully carving a path, not simply for the present, but for the future as well; so that the nation can forge ahead on the basis of national consensus. Herein lies our hope for the country's future.

The author is Editor, Bhorer Kagoj.

OPINION

Mobile Telephones and BTTB

M.G. Pir

Dubai or an old mother can talk to her beloved son struggling to improve his lot in the USA — the land of opportunity. Perhaps the old mother could not see her son off or cannot write to him since he left Bangladesh 10 years ago. Today the old woman can at least talk to him from her own village. My mother did not have this opportunity 40 years ago when I was away for two years.

With the competition and novel ideas of Grameen Phone to start with and the others in the market, mobile phone is within the reach of the lower strata of the society. They should be encouraged. BTTB's logic is not clear. They seem to want that the mobile telephone companies should charge for incoming calls. This is a very wrong logic and surely against the interest of development of the system. I know subscribers of some companies, who charge for the incoming calls, switch off their sets unless they require to call someone.

Bangladesh is great talkers. Most of us talk on phone for hours at a stretch keeping two telephones busy thus depriving others to contact on either of these lines.

What the BTTB should do is to introduce local call charge on units of three minutes after six/10 minutes free time irrespective of whether the call is on BTTB or on mobile. This will discourage long conversations.

In short the principle should be that caller number whether on BTTB or on mobile should be made to pay not the called number. Callers charge should cover the expenses of air time or the land-line time of the called.

Let open competition make modern systems within the reach of maximum number of people. Grameen for now is having troubles but with their advanced technological knowledge they will be able to overcome these problems. Perhaps they have been a little too aggressive in selling their product ahead of full development of their system. Let them and others in the line introduce newer products at cheaper rates. BTTB for that matter should not restrict any of them in any way.