

Let This be the Norm

This came as a soothing balm to many a wounded soul. A newspaper headline on Thursday read — Police accountability: Similar views of government and opposition in Parliamentary Standing Committee meeting. Two years were squandered on constituting the Standing Committees. Now here was not only a fully constituted meeting of one such, with all members present including the concerned minister and his top officers, but very reassuringly, also the absence of a fracas, either vocal or brutal. This is what should have been from the very beginning of the seventh Parliament and this is what shall be for the rest of this Sangsad, if the parties are not bent on self-aggrandisement at the cost of people's weal and the state's integrity. It is the Parliament which constitutes the totality of governance process and not certain members of it. And when a duly elected member of the Sangsad is sworn in, he becomes a part of the process, this or that side of the divide, as either administering or watch dogging. If we must follow the Westminster model, we must also have members committed to the two-part governance. No one has the right to undermine this. No individual, no party.

Let Wednesday's closeness of approach to national problems, overcoming mutual recriminations, augur well for the next three years of this Sangsad. Parliamentary Standing Committees are the place for all the parties to come close, physically as well as attitudinally. There is no compulsion of posturing here, as there is on the Sangsad floor. These committees are for ironing out differences and ensuring the smooth functioning of the Sangsad. Let the committees bring sanity and health to the governance of this nation.

That day the parties saw eye to eye in the matter of ensuring police accountability and infusing efficiency into it, bringing back the chain of command into effect and taking up the task of law reforms with dispatch. The past successive governments had been instrumental in the police forces' getting literally out of hand. Every caring soul in our society was feeling that none other than a consensus front of the parties could make this Frankenstein yield to governmental discipline of accountability and transparency. Wednesday's proceedings of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs were a very encouraging first step towards that.

Sincerity is the Key

The three-day international seminar on good governance ended in the city yesterday. Among other things, management and service of the municipal corporations featured in the discussion as one of the major components of the agenda. More autonomy for the corporations was the universal demand. Indeed the municipal bodies are hamstrung by too much control of the central government. There are many areas where the withdrawal of direct control of the government can enhance efficiency. One suggestion which the government should seriously concentrate on is that of direct negotiation with the investors by the corporation authorities.

It was however disappointing to see the representatives of the local municipal bodies roam around trodden tracks of complain while highlighting the importance of coordination. There is no doubt municipal corporations in our country suffer from serious fund constraints. But then this is the reality for all municipal authorities in the poor developing countries. One cannot help feeling there is some fundamental lacking in our City Corporation authorities when it comes to innovative thinking to meet a challenge. We can refer to the example of Indian cities of Surat and Calcutta eloquently cited by speakers in the seminar. One of the Municipal Corporations was in the red so much so that it had to pay its staff from by borrowing from the bank. That same body, we are told, now has a surplus fund of 75 crore rupees and it pulled off this apparent miracle without increasing municipal taxes. Amazing! How could they do it in an area where people are not very different from that of ours in terms of urban responsibility and sensitivity? Actually all this ameliorative giant leaps boil down to sincerity and the innovative skills of the authorities.

Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Md. Hanif, one of the speakers in the seminar, has a habit of lamenting over things he does not have at his disposal, things he thinks would radically change Dhaka's face. More often than not he would either dwell on Metropolitan Government, rather its absence, or it is the only promise he has been able to live up to — not increasing the holding taxes. Well, it's time he unlearned harping on things beyond reach. This seminar has shown that there is a lot one can do to make a difference if one has drive, sincerity and vision.

Taliban Bigotry

Fiercely factional gun fights between power contenders are not perhaps where Afghanistan's present woes lie. Rather it is the Taliban Islamic militia's thoughtless imposition of its obscurantist will on women in particular and social life in general that is the country's prime anguish at the moment. From a footfall the menace of orthodoxy is assuming critical proportions threatening to spread tentacles. For, the Taliban military control might just extend over to the north. Although in a last ditch move the opposition commanders are regrouping after the fall of the northern Faryab province for a showdown in Mazar-e-Sharif under the leadership of former defence minister Shah Masood, military initiative is largely in the hands of the Taliban.

With that kind of a political spectre rising across Afghanistan we must be seized of the problem of Taliban's denigration of Islam in the name of Islam. They have closed down the Kabul Television Centre and atrociously executed a ban on the use of television sets by the Afghans. Girls' schools were shut down some time ago on a vindictive plea that a respite was needed to change the curricular in accord with their ideas. And, in a latest tale of where forced bigotry has lapped the people, a poor pregnant Afghan woman failing to buy burkha could not just hazard a trip to a clinic with the result that she had to die. If television and normal schools were regarded un-Islamic these would have been tabooed in many an Islamic country. But they really are not. So?

The Taliban must be made to see the point by the OIC in particular that with a military and not an electoral claim to power, they cannot do as they please. Power may originate in the barrel of gun but it cannot be sustained through anti-life measures.

No, there is no money. Therefore we are a poor country. The overwhelming majority of the working population struggle very hard to survive on less than a dollar a day. The rich, on the other hand, have borrowed money well beyond their capacity and those who make a business out of money, the banks now with empty tills, are running after them to square off the accounts. The biggest spender of all, the government, is also engaged in the same struggle. Its revenue earnings are in perpetual short supply to meet salary and subsidy payments — the two most important items of government expenditures.

Under the circumstances, where do we find the precious money to invest, in particular? The traditional approach has been beg, borrow or steal. We beg money from abroad which end up as official development assistance or ODA. In cash and kind, such assistance over last 25 years averaged at around 1.5 to 2.0 billion dollars per annum. It is not small amount and most of it, say 75 per cent, ought to have ended up as productive asset, contributing to human and physical capital development of the country. If 25 per cent of ODA, on the average, were absorbed as expendable, then over US\$ 32 billion worth of asset in terms of physical infrastructure, trained manpower, other social overheads should now be in existence. Where are these assets? No doubt, some of them are quite visible, the latest addition being the 11th long bridge over river Jamuna. However, will they all add up to 32 billion dollars?

Borrowings have taken place on an enormous scale. It is well known that from one single

Reduce subsidies and turn loss making enterprises into profit making companies through essentially private, profit seeking management. Land, factories and buildings as non-liquid asset have proved to be useless. There is a limit to losses which can be sustained and we have reached that critical limit.

party, the banks together owe Tk. 4,000 crores. Government, through state owned enterprises (SOEs) accounts for a substantial part of the huge bad debt. The continuous accumulation of non-performing loans have eroded the vitality of the banking system. The credit crunch is indeed very serious. There is not enough money left for lending unless large part of overdue loans are realized and new funds are put in as fresh deposits.

Rampant corruption is a major source of money for many in Bangladesh today. This is what I term as stealing. For those who are corrupt, money should not be a problem. Unfortunately, it is a non-taxable income. Government revenue budget cannot be augmented through this source. Also, it is termed as black money and cannot easily find its way either into the banking system or as productive private investment resource. There are also strong suspicion that a large part of the black money have been converted into foreign currencies (when it loses its black color) and benefited foreign banks and their economies as well. This is an ideal example of reverse development. In fact we have, by this time, completed the full round of the vicious circle of wasted foreign aid, stolen bank credit and squandered public revenue. As a consequence, conserving and augmenting resources for directly productive purposes should be the one and only guideline for the government, banks and

donors. The political authority who can and do profoundly influence the course of the national economy, must fully appreciate the predicament. Unless and until we get out of the vicious circle through large scale reversal of existing policies, we are all doomed when politicians will definitely go down first. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate that loss-ridden state owned enterprises (SOEs) annually absorb Tk. 2500 crores as subsidy while another 1500 crores are owed to the banks as bad debts. The two amounts put

However it has got no access to its own earnings. Hence essential investments are being denied and tele-density in Bangladesh today is lower than in Nepal. In the process, Government is losing more revenue over a period of time. Government owned lands in Dhaka City alone can earn Tk 5,000 crores within through proper planning and investment in urban development. With millions of Bangladeshis working or visiting abroad, why the national airline should not be a money earning enterprise of the Government? The same

outrage against shortage of long term lending could have been partly obviated.

Where is the money? The problem is money will always be scarce. The golden rule is to conserve and prudently use the little bit that we have in order to generate more money in the shortest possible time. Payment of Tk.2000 crores subsidy is anti-conservation and highly imprudent use of scarce resources. Instead, privatize state owned enterprises. It would not only stop colossal waste but bring in additional private investment. Even if the industries are closed down, it really does not matter since loss making enterprises cannot ever be justified. On the other hand, government will get rid of subsidy burden year after year. In case where total privatization is ruled out, like Biman or BTTE, efficient management should be ensured through private participation and profit oriented corporate organization.

The vast majority of Bangladeshis working abroad are not high paid or even middle level professionals. They earn a modest income by the international standards, spend as little as possible and send money home to their families. The wage earners development bond was therefore an excellent device to divert as much as possible of this remittance to savings by offering attractive rates of interest. There was no risk from depreciating exchange rate; while purchasers of those bonds are interested in Taka funds only. However, it is widely known that a large part

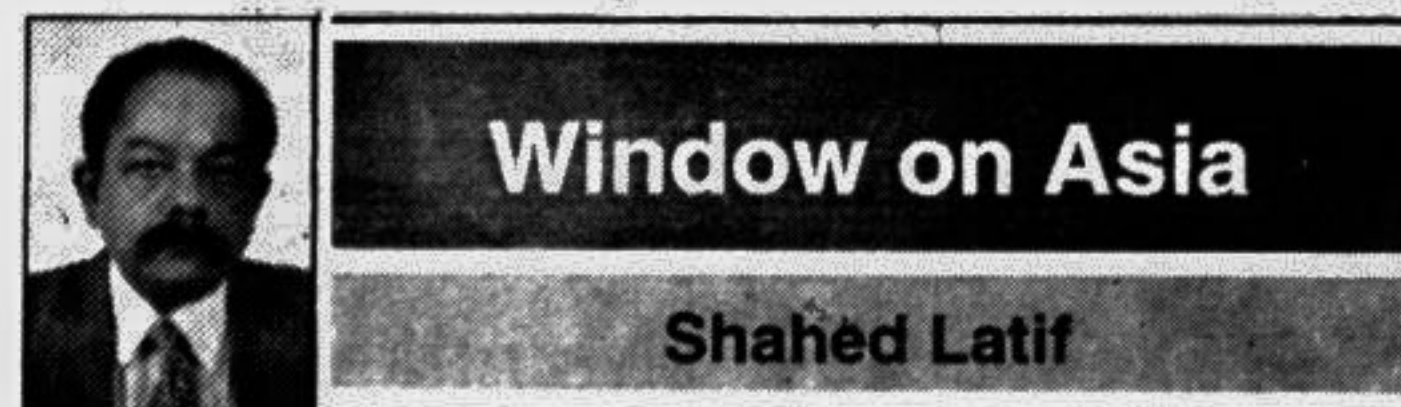
of remittance comes through unofficial channels and helps finance a large part of the crossborder informal trade. The wage earners development bond also failed to emerge as a significant instrument for mobilizing private savings of non-resident Bangladeshis.

The proposed dollar denominated bond as a source of industrial development fund (IDF) seems to be a non-starter from the very beginning. Who will buy those bonds? They are very few. The bond must carry an attractive rate of interest. The big question is the exchange rate.

The risks are too high. The results of high inflow of dollar funds which have to be paid back in dollars, were not too happy in the recent past elsewhere in the region. Taking all these factors into account, cost of capital from IDF is going to be high.

Given the above background, the best course under the circumstances will be to reduce subsidies and turn loss making enterprises into profit making companies through essentially private, profit seeking management. Land, factories and buildings as non-liquid asset have proved to be useless. There is a limit to losses which can be sustained and we have reached that critical limit.

Therefore, unless the political authority behind the government is determined to keep us poor, bold and positive actions ought to be the headline news tomorrow. One of the Ministers recently stated that we would be one of the ten richest countries of Asia within the next ten years. Unfortunately, it would remain a distant mirage if the present inertia on the economic front continues for the rest of the year.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

together could have financed 100 modern textile mills each year — meeting 100 per cent requirements of ready-made garment industry. It is not only SOEs. According to reports, the Jute Research Institute in 40 years of existence has had zero impact so far. Same is the status of several other research institutes and so called development institutions funded by the government. Bangladesh Railway and large national utilities for electricity, gas and water all survive because of subsidies doled out by Government. There are few cash cows of government like the Telegraph and Telephone Board (TTB).

question may be asked about the postal department. In Japan, postal savings constitute a significant source of public savings. If properly organized, money orders alone should be a big business for the government.

If the annual salary bill of the government including state enterprises is assumed to be Tk.10,000 crores and out of it 12.5 per cent is deducted at the source as contributory provident fund, then Tk.1,250 crores should be the annual accumulation in that fund. If this fund is deposited in commercial banks as the source for industrial, and housing finance, then the present

Can Reforms in Bhutan Consolidate the Democratic Process?

by Mahendra P. Lama

To a majority of Assembly members, the term "elected" is unpalatable. During deliberations on the first proposal in the royal edict, they pointed out that elections could result in partiality, vested interests, divisive politics, corruption and subsequently to the election of candidates who are not best-suited for the post of Cabinet minister.

BHUTAN'S King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's recent kasho (edict) introducing three major changes in the politico-administrative structure of the Himalayan kingdom is a long-awaited measure towards the consolidation of the democratic process initiated by his father King Jigme Singye Dorji in 1953.

In a fast pace of events, in an otherwise politically rigid and docile Shangri-La, the kasho was made operational within a few weeks during the 76th session of the Shogdu Chhemo (National Assembly). In fact, exactly 30 years ago, in 1968, then King Jigme Dorji tried to introduce more revolutionary changes in the political structure of Bhutan to form a government combining the monarchical and democratic systems. At times, he seemed to be in a great hurry to transform the traditional monarchy into a constitutional one.

He surrendered his power of vetoing legislative bills cleared by the National Assembly and also offered to remit the office of King if a no-confidence vote was passed against him in the Assembly. The King also established the first High Court in Bhutan and introduced the Council of

Ministers. Somehow, successive regimes could not maintain the pace of reforms.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's latest kasho aims at promoting people's participation in the decision-making process and clean and efficient governance. An in-built mechanism of checks and balances to safeguard national interest and security has enlivened the debate among pro-democracy forces within and outside the kingdom.

In order to achieve all this, the three-fold political changes introduced by the King are a) the election of Cabinet ministers by the National Assembly, b) the role and responsibilities of the Cabinet to be decided by the National Assembly and c) the adoption of a mechanism to move a no-confidence vote against the King. Although the National Assembly, established in 1953, is considered the most crucial body in the current system of governance in Bhutan, its legislative functions have till now been overshadowed by the omnipresent

executive. So far, it could play only a second fiddle to the King.

The Assembly has 150 members, 105 of whom are chimis or representatives of the people elected by the heads of families, ten are monastic representatives and the remaining 35 members are representatives of the government and are nominated by the King. The very composition of the National Assembly, in fact, brings in most ardent advocates of the status quo, thereby making the entire structure very anti-reform.

This time also, by issuing the kasho, the King appeared to be a lone radical as the Assembly representatives sounded totally reluctant to sponsor the change. The emotionally-packed two-day deliberations on the royal edict in the Assembly speak volumes about the anti-reforms mindset of the representatives. It is quite a unique situation of "the King proposes and people dispose." This has been the case in Bhutan for the past four decades.

To a majority of these members, the term "elected" is unpalatable. During deliberations on the first proposal in the royal edict, they pointed out that elections could result in partiality, vested interests, divisive politics, corruption and subsequently to the election of candidates who are not best-suited for the post of Cabinet minister. As a result, the King had to nominate the Cabinet ministers and announce their portfolios.

In the process, a seven-member Cabinet has emerged that has a tenure of five years. The roles for at least some of these ministers are well carved out. The articulate and dynamic Foreign Minister Jigme Thinley replaces Dawo Tshering, the longest-serving Foreign Minister in the world.

What fresh approaches Thinley introduces to resolve the long-standing problems of Bhutanese refugees is to be seen. Over 96,000 Bhutanese refugees are living in five make-shift camps in the nearby eastern districts of Nepal. The presence of Yeshey

Zimba, the man behind the economic resurgence in Bhutan, as Finance Minister is also expected to inject an element of openness in the Bhutanese economy. It would be worth watching the approach of Home Minister Thinley Gyamtso in addressing the sensitive question of Indian separatists seeking shelter in Bhutan's forests.

Details of the key issues of kasho are given in the table on the right. The role of the Cabinet, which figure in the kasho, are yet to be revealed. In fact, most of the pro-democracy activists were looking forward to an animated deliberation on these issues.

This would have definitely provided some indications on what the King had in mind about separating the three organs of the executive, legislature and judiciary and introducing some kind of basic checks and balances among them. This is one reason why the India-based leader of the United Front for Democracy in Bhutan, Rongthong Kuenley Dorjee, called the contents of

the kasho a mere "eyewash and of no consequence."

The third proposal in the kasho has been introduced in the National Assembly for the second time, after exactly 30 years. This proposal mentions that "a two-thirds vote of no-confidence by the National Assembly shall require the King to abdicate in favour of the Crown Prince or the next-in-line of succession to the Golden throne."

Once again, this time, like when it was introduced in 1968 by King Dorji, the National Assembly very reluctantly agreed to consider it. Earlier the Assembly had, within a couple of years, decided to surrender this privilege.

This time, although this proposal has been endorsed by the Assembly, it is yet to be seen how sustainable this particular kasho will be. Given the fact that the King is considered an "object of veneration" and going by the intensely emotional tenor of the debate, the repetition of the last surrender remains a possibility.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Lest we forget

Sir, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a student of Islamia College (now renamed Maulana Azad College) and a resident of Baker Hostel. The hostel room in which he spent his time, preparing for his future service and sacrifice, was reopened by the West Bengal Minister for Higher Education, commemorating a great Bengalee. In Calcutta they have Raft Ahmed Kidwai Road and Shakespeare Sarani. Late Profulla Chandra Ghosh and Mr Jayoti Basu were born in this country, but have we remembered them in our thoughts? Could we have Bangladesh, if there was no Pakistan? Do we remember the great Muslim League leaders of the time? Do we remember late Dharendra Nath Dutta and his services for East Bengal?

We have renamed the IPGMR as Bangabandhu Medical University. But where are the constituent colleges? It would have been more befitting to have laid the foundations of a 500-bed cancer home, for the patients of the most dreadful disease, and a 500-bed mental hospital, which Dhaka needs most and then, naming them after the great leader.

It is good to see that there is now Tajuddin Ahmed Road, our great prime minister, and the first one.

And at the end, I have an humble suggestion — to rename Topkhana Road as S M Ali Road. This proposal and suggestion came up soon after his demise in October 1993. On the 16th of September '93 I met him for the last time in his office with Mr A Z M Shamsul Alam of the Election Commission. Both of us could clearly see that he was in excruciating pain, perhaps being in the last stages of cancer. But like a brave sol-

dier, Syed Mohammed Ali went on with his writing for his beloved paper to the very end, which was only a few weeks away. May his soul rest in peace.

Shahabuddin Mahtab Siddheswari, Dhaka

Breakdown of systems

Sir, The government's monitoring and inspection systems under almost all the ministries appear to have broken down, because the needed outputs are not providing the desired results in public interest. Where are the inputs and processing (detection, prosecution, punishment), to maintain the system at a healthy and clean operational level?

The basic concept of checks and balances has therefore been rendered ineffective. As these are vital components of good governance, the administration punch has been diluted. It may be noted that the same personnel and regulations are in force. Then why this dismal picture? What aspect has changed to render the long-practised system inoperative? The elusive human factor, not seen in data, statistics, charts and graphs. It is the quality of the service, while publicity looks only at the quantitative aspect of development. How to bring down the systems loss in administration?

The main reasons are increasing corruption, bribery, rent-seeking and nepotism. The deterrent factor has disappeared from the system; more so in the SOEs. Both the government and the public are aware of the moral and ethical erosions taking place in the society; but successive regimes have failed to tackle the misdeeds of the corrupt groups.

One reason is that corruption has now become institutionalised. Hence individual and case-to-case prosecutions will not solve the malady. So far the remedial measures noticed so far at the official level are sporadic and ad hoc. A well-planned, integrated and vigorous anti-corruption campaign has to be launched without any further delay for an extended period, so that positive results are obtained within the remaining three years of the current regime.

There are many political ifs and buts on such a sensitive campaign. A people's regime is running the show. Where is the initiative? What has been done during the last two years? This is not a popular issue for noisy propaganda. A low-key campaign will be fruitless. Backing is required. Whose?

A Zabr Dhaka

Promotion of 154 officers

Sir, Though late, I refer to the letter of Faqer Abdul Mannan published in your esteemed daily early last month (5.7.98).

I agree with him that the promotions of 154 officers made in early part of this year to the posts of Deputy Secy./Joint Secy./ and above were motivated since this time too like other times, in particular that in Feb, 1992, (mass promotion), many seniors were superseded illegally and thereby their fundamental right was grossly violated. The upgrading ACR marking system was unconstitutional being not covered by any promotion criterion and was arbitrary and might give advantage to some chosen people at the cost of the seniors.

It is unfortunate that this government came to power with people's mandate to do justice on all counts but I am sorry to say that the government has been miserably failing to do so. It seems that the government has been practising a dual policy in matter of promotion. On the one hand it is becoming too liberal by allowing notional seniority to the juniors and

promoting them. It so happened that some officers earned galloping promotions by being promoted to the post of deputy secretary now and then, a few months later, to the post of joint secretary etc. This was done ignoring the gestation period of around five years in a particular post to attain maturity to qualify for the next higher post. And, on the other hand, it is not only becoming unjust but even cruel with seniors by subjecting them to be deprived of lawful promotion by imposing higher bench mark illegally. By doing so a senior deputy secretary of 12-14 years standing experience lost to an officer as junior as 3-4 years with little experience ranging from 12 weeks to 12 months. There can hardly be injustice like this.

Mr. Faqer has correctly pointed out that there is very fine line of difference between the marginal cases like average and good and good and very good. And hence evaluating an officer by mere numeracy and that too with marginal difference can hardly be justified. This is unethical too because of the discriminatory treatment. Hence in the interest of equity, justice and fairness, the authorities concerned are requested to kindly review the promotion cases immediately and promote the deprived seniors to the posts of joint secretary and above and also restore their seniority and allow all the benefits from the time they were made to undergo deprivation. This is the minimum that can be done to help them out else it would be construed that the government has been following the same unjust practice which their predecessors hand done in 1992.

Syed Shah Suft Sanaulah, Sher Shah Suri Road, Dhaka.

Leaders' lies

Sir, We are dismayed to see that many of respected leaders are telling lies in public and private meetings. It has become a cancer of the society. Our new generation is taking this as fashion/culture of high standard and are following the leaders. This will ultimately cripple

our society and will ruin our country. Leaders are leading us to hell. We find nobody on earth to help us in this situation.

So we are praying to the Almighty Allah for 'Hedayet' of our leaders, to show right path to them.

AFM Moeenul Islam Chandgaon R/A, Chittagong.

Kosovo's ethnic Albanians

Sir, The ethnic Albanian Muslims who constitute 92 per cent of Kosovo's population, have been passing through a period of terrible suffering at the hands of the Serb rulers. Since the start of the crisis in February last, the Serbs have launched their bloody campaign of terror and killing. The wanton killing of the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo drew world-wide condemnation. The six-nation contact group under NATO at the behest of the US told Serbia that it must not do what it did to Bosnia's Muslims just a few years ago. The US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared: "We don't want a repeat of 1991, when the international community did not react with sufficient vigour and force."

The tragedy is that, we are witnessing a repeat of 1991 killing of Bosnian Muslims, in the current situation in Kosovo. So far more than 1,80,000 ethnic Albanians have reportedly fled their village homes to seek shelter across the border. A large number of them are also said to be hiding in the forests near the border to escape the onslaught of the Serbian forces. The TV satellite channels present poignant pictures of their plight.

Despite the previous determination of the US and its Western allies to check Serbian aggressive designs, there has been in evidence lately a dithering on their part. This is helping Serbian President Milosevic to pursue his reckless policy in Kosovo.

The agony and suffering of the ethnic Albanian Muslims in Kosovo seem to have no prospects of relief as the international community watches

on impotently, as they did in the previous case of Bosnian Muslims.

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Gas price

Sir, We are pleased to know that the government in a recent move did not okay a proposal for raising the price of gas in two phases with immediate effect by 26 PCT and 6 PCT respectively. It may be remembered that on an earlier occasion the government also did the same, considering its effects on the end-users at large.

At the moment we may feel complacent but we cannot rule out the possibility of a further raise in the near future due to several obvious reasons.

Md Muhibbul Abrar Choudhury Chittagong

Income-tax Return form

Sir, National Board of Revenue recently notified in the press on the 4th July, 1998 that the old 4-page income-tax return forms shall not be accepted from the 1st July, 1998 instead now 6-page forms shall be accepted by the Tax Offices. The above notification of NBR is surprising and unfortunate as the said forms involve several lacs of income-tax payees in Bangladesh who were quite ignorant about the abrupt change in the above return forms from the 1st July, 1998 and the NBR officials should have been prudent to notify the above change at least six months back.

On the other hand huge number of 4-page old forms are still lying unsold or unused in the Government Press and with vendors and tax-lawyers — and a sudden change in policy will not only create problems to the innocent tax-payers but also will cause huge financial loss to the government.

Md Khalilur Rahman Income-Tax Advisor 40, Purana Paltan Line Dhaka.