

Sensible on Push-in

An avoidable irritant in Indo-Bangla relations which also stood in ironic contrast to good neighbourliness of the Ganges water sharing and CHT peace accords has at long last been put behind. With Delhi eschewing the push-in of alleged Bangladeshi immigrants in favour of solving the problem through mutual consultation, a time-honoured norm in inter-state relations paid put by India so far comes auspiciously redeemed. In their recent border talks home secretaries of India and Bangladesh have signed agreed minutes committing themselves to the standard procedure of determining the identity of suspected illegal entrants through verification at the source in the country of purported origin, that is, rather than arbitrarily putting any label on them. During the earlier part of the BJP rule we have seen what looked like hounding out these so-called illegal immigrants from their shacks in Bombay followed by their hurried onward despatch through West Bengal to certain border points with Bangladesh. The train they had been put into was stopped at a railway station inside West Bengal by mobs who in an apparent state of excitement freed some passengers from police custody yelling that they were Bengali-speaking folks from their own state. Reports emanating from India about it suggested that most of the passengers in that train were Bengali speaking Muslims involved with some specialised trades in Bombay.

Thereafter, the 'push-in' campaign intensified and by the admission of the BSF chief himself it appeared that they were sparing no efforts to carry it forward including even attempts to push small groups into our side of the border in the darkness of night. Resistance from Bangladesh citizens in certain pockets made them try it on the sly. And we made an observation that it hardly befitted the atmosphere of neighbourliness that otherwise existed in the wider bilateral arena.

All that should change now, and perhaps more. It should be a border of peace with tension and skirmish on this particularly sensitive issue consigned to oblivion.

The issue of illegal immigration has to be dealt with on a steady, permanent footing. Those people cannot be pawns in the chessboard of Indian politics nor preys to arbitrary policies of any administration. That is because they are human beings, not certainly chattels to be banded about. India and Bangladesh are friendly enough to be able to work out a system whereby the question can be handled free from hiccups.

Controlling TB

There is a new fear of an old disease in the air. The World Health Organisation has warned that threat of tuberculosis is real, and it is emanating mainly from Asia. Six Asian countries including Bangladesh are estimated to account for 4.5 million of 8 million new cases of TB occurring every year. This has led the WHO to warn that controlling TB in Asia is a must if the disease is to be controlled globally. This issue has assumed greater urgency in recent years, as the linkage between TB and death from HIV/AIDS is now part of the battle against TB, and vice versa.

Tuberculosis has re-emerged as a major killer disease in Asia for three reasons. First, failure by Asian countries to sustain effective treatment of TB has allowed the disease to spread and become a serious public health threat. Secondly, wrong treatment or failure by patients to complete treatment has led to the emergence of drug-resistant TB. Thirdly, HIV infection is known to trigger latent TB, leading to rapid deterioration of health and eventually death. On the other hand, effective control of TB, through the Directly-Observed Treatment-Short course (DOTS) could impact favourably on efforts to mitigate the threat of fatality from HIV-related illnesses.

The rate of HIV infections in this country is thought to be very low, but TB is a major public health problem. Unless TB is controlled effectively, the public health scenario would become highly volatile indeed, particularly with the looming threat of HIV. Fortunately, Bangladesh now has one of the finest TB control programmes in the world, and the extensive use of DOTS by the health system, has been a resounding success. Proper DOTS application is likely to greatly reduce the chances of emergence of drug-resistant TB in the country. Therefore, it is vital that the health system spares no effort to apply DOTS and motivate people to continue the treatment for the prescribed period. Where TB is concerned, a little complacency on the part of a few could prove fatal for many.

Unrepentant Law-breakers

Two hundred and sixty-six members of the Fifth Parliament owed the T&T Board a sum of 3,858 core taka in unpaid telephone bills. The debt was incurred during their membership of the JS, and it continues unadjusted till today. Before that 178 members of the Third and Fourth Parliament had not paid outstanding telephone bills amounting to about 2 crore taka.

Why is this money unrealisable? This is people's money and cannot be allowed to be squandered in this callous manner. What steps have T&T taken to get the money back? Their excuse to the effect that as these persons are mighty important and powerful, the T&T chooses not to disconnect them in the usual manner is absolutely unacceptable.

And this is not simply true that the 178 defaulters of the Third and Fourth Parliament are all still members of JS. So is the case with the defaulting 266 of the Fifth. And why have they to fear even standing members, not to speak of those that are no more in the JS? It is long 12 years that the 178 of the Third and Fourth haven't paid to settle their debts. If the Board doesn't seriously go after them, it is likely that members of the present Parliament might get the message that they are not really required to pay telephone bills although all the defaulters today have religiously drawn from government four thousand Taka per mensem as telephone allowance.

And what is the responsibility of an august member of the Jatiya Sangsad? Is it not of utmost importance to law-makers that they are not law-breakers?

Is Taxation Too Taxing a Thought for Politicians?

Tax revenue in general remains a neglected area, as political parties refuse to face up to the reality that Bangladesh can no longer carry on with such a meagre national income, and still hope to accomplish all those things that need to be accomplished.

RECENTLY, a group of journalists from Denmark came to visit Bangladesh, with an agenda to see how human rights are protected (or not), within the framework of democracy. Once here, they hit upon something that rarely, if ever, raises political temperature in Bangladesh. This had little to do with human rights or democracy in its narrow political sense, but everything to do with development.

Taxation, or the lack of it, caused a great deal of eyebrow-raising among the Danes who are used to paying up to 70 per cent of their annual salaries to the Copenhagen exchequer in various forms of taxes. They grumble, of course, but not too loud, because they do get one of the best social services and welfare anywhere in the world in return. Even Danish diplomats, and not just home-based government employees, have to pay taxes on their salaries.

The situation in Bangladesh, where hardly half million come within the income tax bracket, caused a little bit of a surprise. But perhaps the biggest surprise lay in the fact that taxation was not a political issue of any sort. This surprised the Danes for good reasons, since taxation is probably the biggest talking point other than the weather in Denmark. This should also surprise Bangladeshis, since taxation, whether direct or indirect, is the only way the government can generate the resources with which to provide the services everybody demands from the state.

It is noteworthy that, on budget day every year, all attention is glued to the macro-economic situation analysis presented by the finance minister, which gives lots of talking points in terms of growth rates, performance of industry, rate of investment, balance of payment etc. The next in the league

of attentions comes the finance minister's proposals for tariff changes. The issue of direct tax, particularly income tax, causes little flutter except when no reduction in corporate tax is proposed.

This remains the case even when Bangladesh is heavily dependent on foreign assistance due to its failure to generate adequate internal resources. There was a time in the late 1980s when 100 per cent of the government's annual development programme (ADP) had to be financed from external sources. During the same period, the government even had to seek foreign aid to meet current expenditures. Was this because Bangladesh was so poor and unproductive that few individuals and enterprises had anything in the way of taxable income or revenue? That was hardly the case, because it was also at this period that palatial homes were going up in plush suburbs, and increasing number of parents were sending their children abroad for studies.

The money was always there, as it is now, but the government did not have the will to cast the tax net wide enough, just as the government of the day does not seem to have any idea about how to substantially increase tax-revenue. Over the years, the contribution of tax revenue to the national income has remained small. In fiscal 1996-97, tax revenue accounted for just 9.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). With 2.2 per cent non-tax income, total national income came to 12 per cent of GDP. The situation has hardly improved, even with new drives to ensure better tax collection and changes in pro-

cedures ostensibly to simplify things for the taxpayers. The point here, however, is not tax collection within the existing tax structure, but changes in the structure to bring more people into the tax net. Although tax revenue currently contributes around 10 per cent of GDP, it is mostly due to indirect tax such as import duties, VAT etc. Direct tax such as income tax accounts for less than a fourth of total tax revenue. This does not come as a surprise because, out of 20 million households in Bangladesh, at

least half of whom probably own several acres of land, or money-lenders do not earn more than 5,000 taka a month? The interesting point to ponder here is that, no political party details a taxation policy in its election manifesto. As a result, tax proposals contained in the budget are usually the work of bureaucrats in the National Board of Revenue and, in the case of import duties, the Tariff Commission.

Members of parliament rarely ever question why the government remains so heavily dependent on foreign aid for development programmes or constrained when it comes to expanding regular budget allocations for education, health and law and order (police and BDR). The budget is passed without even a murmur of suggestions

that the contribution of direct taxes to national income be raised through expansion of the tax net. Or that tariff policies should be rationalised to generate greater revenue, which could be achieved through reducing duties and not necessarily by increasing them.

It is expected that parliament would recognise the need to increase domestic resource mobilisation and encourage the government to adopt a forward-looking taxation policy. After all, the money is needed to invest in common social and economic goods and provide a social security system to help those in difficult circumstances. In addition, the government badly needs revenue to reduce dependence on foreign aid to finance capital projects.

Unfortunately, parliament remains oblivious to the need.

There is, of course, good reasons for this indifference of parliament and political parties to such a critical question of governance. Note the furore that greeted the government's decision last year to increase price of petrol by 60 per cent. Although a tiny fragment of the population uses petrol, the increase was viewed with enough alarm to even compel the opposition party to call a hartal! This, more than anything else, exemplified the refusal of the social elite to consider shouldering an appropriate burden for the collective good. Note also parliament's refusal to accept the finance minister's proposal in June 1997 that all those owning cars and telephone lines should file income tax returns.

It is perhaps not surprising, after all, the domination of politics by the small moneyed

elite ensures that the burden of revenue generation is placed disproportionately on indirect taxes which hits the rich and poor equally. Tax revenue in general remains a neglected area, as political parties refuse to face up to the reality that Bangladesh can no longer carry on with such a meagre national income, and still hope to accomplish all those things that need to be accomplished.

It is clear that the problem is not so much with income-poverty of individuals or enterprises, but vision-poverty of the policymakers themselves. But the poverty that afflicts half the population cannot be alleviated, unless the government begins to demonstrate a degree of realism. Nobody expects the poor in the villages to pay taxes when they can barely eat. But a proper evaluation of taxability of all categories of citizens and commercial enterprises need to be made without delay, in order to identify the real potential.

A progressive taxation policy which rewards the honest tax-payer with generous rebates and punishes the dodger with exemplary fines, would be one way to encourage people to pay voluntarily. More simplified procedures involving greatly reduced paperwork and discretionary powers of NBR officials may have similar, positive effects. But above all, the government needs to show political will to put the interest of the economy above pressures of special interest lobbies.

It would be a tough call, since too many people have got accustomed to not paying for the services they regard as their 'right'. But the message from the government ought to be unequivocal: there is a cost to everything, from street lighting to construction of the Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge, and society, collectively, have to pay for it all.



The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

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The Cry of the Hour

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

The adversity of hartal appears now to have taken a new turn with the declaration of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina not to go for it even if her party is in the opposition. The response from BNP continues to be conditionally negative. Yet, let's hope for the better.

TWO separate statements made by two leaders belonging to opposing political parties have attracted my attention. The first was from Mr S A M S Kibria, Finance Minister of the present government. In a press briefing he informed the nation of the quantum of daily loss sustained by the economy due to hartal. It was, in his words, around taka four hundred crore a day in terms of direct production. Besides, he cited numerous other elements that created stumbling blocks to the smooth progress of the national economic development with corresponding financial loss.

Mr Kibria was not at all pretentious about the vicious onslaught of hartal and its menacing effect on the whole country. He didn't try to avoid replies to questions on his party's indulging in frequent hartals while in opposition. However, he reminded the waiting journalists that, in opposition, his party had only one issue — the issue of a caretaker government and all other issues including financial indiscretion, political coercion and gross negligence to the desired uniform policy of development of the country, were eventually kept frozen. Still then, the Finance Minister told the members of the press that 'hartal' was a veritable malady, nay, a positive nuisance in our body politic.

Upon such realisation, though belated, Mr Kibria made an appeal to BNP leadership to refrain from calling hartal offering simultaneously, a sort of blank cheque, that if ever in opposition, his party, Awami League, would also remain committed in all respects not to take to the path of hartal. He foresaw that this could be a gentleman's agreement for all political parties in future.

BNP leadership instantly brushed aside the proposal, os-

tensibly on grounds that such a stance from a government leader could be yet another bid to divert people's attention when their movement against the government was gaining momentum. The lesser ones in the party even likened Kibria's offer to one born of fear of being ousted. At certain stage later, the Finance Minister had politely retorted that his party was strong enough to withstand any threat and so would not nurse any such weakness.

It transpires now, or may be, I could not keep track, that the offer was in fact, made by Begum Zia herself in a public meeting in Chittagong a couple of months ago. The current expression of the Finance Minister could have been a most equitable echo but the intervening lapse of time doesn't embrace it as such. Sheikh Hasina perhaps could seize the opportunity instantly. The truth is that she didn't respond. On the other hand, she was found deeply engrossed with trading sharp remarks against her political adversary on many counts. The desired response coming or not there still emerged a thin ray of hope to keep ourselves engaged for some more time. The early turning down of Mr Kibria's public offer came back on BNP's table again at the responsible level. It has been casually opined by some of the leaders that they could consider the offer if it had come from Sheikh Hasina herself. They thought that Mr Kibria had no authority to speak for the party as a whole on this important and sensitive issue involving policy decision. His attention being drawn to such observations Mr Kibria

emphatically reiterated that his offer had prior clearance from the party chief and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina or else he would never have said so.

But, at this point, when everyone would have been anxiously awaiting the reaction of the recipient of the offer thus clarified, the Telecom and Works Minister raised a very sensitive but highly controversial issue. Speaking apparently from the records in the Ministry of Works and perhaps supported with complementary documents at the Cantonment Board, Mr Mohammad Nasim made a statement in the Jatiya Sangsad on the legitimacy of Begum Zia's occupation of a spacious house in the Dhaka Cantonment area. The house in question was said to have been leased out to the wife and children of the slain President Ziaur Rahman by an executive order of the successor President Justice Abdus Sattar. General Ershad, upon assuming power, steered through the formal documentation at his personal initiative. The Works Minister questions the legality of the whole deal alluding to the ownership of another abandoned house at Gulshan by Begum Khaleda Zia, as widow of the valiant freedom fighter General Ziaur Rahman who was killed by some army men on May 30, 1981 at Chittagong when he was the President of Bangladesh. The possession of this house was documented for a consideration of Tk 1.00 only. Mr Nasim has appealed to the Leader of the Opposition to vacate the Cantonment house honourably. It appears that the

minister is seriously bent upon to get the house back which has been the official residence of the Army Chief for long. This tricky, contentious issue will be legally settled in the court as, some of Begum Zia's lawyer-leaders have already indicated.

Although said nowhere the provocation behind Mr Nasim's unfurling a sensitive story can be very much palpable. The Dhaka Cantonment Board was recently erecting a divider on the Shahid Moulvi Road overlooking the above disputed residence of Begum Khaleda Zia. At it she was reported to have been furious and practically laid a "dharma" in protest at site for over two hours along with her eldest son Tareque. Her objection was not registered in silence. She was rather stated to have been very angry freely haranguing at the army personnel there on duty. She was reported to have accused them of being not at all true to their 'communal' orders. Her charismatic articulations on the road attracted the on-lookers' attention. Nevertheless, she achieved her goal. The work had to be suspended without extending the scene.

There is a great saying: "emotions are masters, intellect the servant." The incidence stated above and the remarks attributed to Begum Zia could have been the results of emotional outburst on the part of the Leader of the Opposition. She was reported to have been so much overtaken. The press could have added some hue to it. Even then it was very unfortunate, not behaving a leader of

her stature. Reports about the incidence came in the national newspapers. This was followed invariably, by disowning at least the most intriguing part of the fray — inciting the army.

It would be a strange coincidence that equally outrageous public speech attributed to the former bureaucrat-turned politician Mr M K Anwar. He was reported to have recalled the 'great role' played by the army on November 7, 1975 and have foreseen that they would again rise to the occasion if needed, to save the country and the nation from the clutches of the 'oppressors' — an oblique reference to the present government. Indeed, barring such inciting statements, most of the leaders of BNP have so far given an impression of how much formidable they are. They gave out open threats. Except on one occasion so far when some of the leaders of the ruling party made identical threat, there has not been, so far, any other instance of such awful statement. On both the counts we express our condemnation and ask the eerie over-enthusiasts to display restraints and sensibility in their utterance. These are attitudes not befitting them. However, the government may not be able to ignore or overlook altogether the terribly irresponsible public speeches of our respected leaders.

The general apprehension of trouble following the historic verdict in Bangabandhu Murder Case, appears to have been effectively forestalled. Still then, the political turmoil otherwise may continue to be a veritable camouflage for troublemongers.

In this, Sheikh Hasina and her government, the party leaders and workers must also display utmost restraint and must not be provoked or create provocation. Simultaneously the law enforcing agencies must also keep vigilant eyes on hoodlums and hirelings of any quarters suspect to stir up commotion through subtle machination. They are the people ever ready to create trouble themselves for blaming others. This is a most popular gamble with our political parties but the onus of responsibility is hardly substantiated. Logically however, such shifting of blame apart, the actual contrivers have to bear the brunt themselves. They are the ones who are capable of exploiting the opportunities proffered by their leaders. The crude objective is to draw public sympathies or to mislead them at will.

Ordinary, non-political people when implicated for acts of corruption during their tenure in public offices can seldom escape the long hands of law. They have got to defend themselves in the court. But, when it comes to the ruling political leaders they are branded more often than not, "false cases" and "political victimisation". The good thing, however, is that in spite of the initial furore, the implicated political leaders appear in the court and in opposition of the party workers! Often this show of strength is an indirect threat to the smooth process of justice. Let us not take on this slur any more in favour of the corrupt. Let the court of law pass the judgement freely.

The first thing — the adversity of hartal appears now to have taken a new turn with the declaration of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina not to go for it even if her party is in the opposition. The response from BNP continues to be conditionally negative. Yet, let's hope for the better.

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.

Dogs in the squad

Sir, I was quite sad to see that Dhaka Metropolitan Police have received beautiful dogs from the British police authorities to be used as detective dogs. As an avid dog lover, my heart went out to the puppies because these poor little creatures have landed in a country where canines are generally feared, and abused due to lack of understanding.

I hope that those who handle the police dogs first learn about dogs and come to appreciate them as part of their training before being assigned to them and care for them as part of their families.

Maybe we could have a chapter of the RSPCA, regularly check the dogs and the horses, which is used by the police forces so as to keep a check and balance on the welfare of these animals.

Zarah Quaddus
34/A Old DOHS
Banani, Dhaka

VIPs and VOPs

Sir, I am disturbed and disappointed by two news items in two consecutive days i.e. 20 and 21 November 1998. The former prime minister and present leader of the opposition has passed through the Banga-

bandhu Jumuna Bridge and has refused to pay the toll. The psychology behind probably was that she becomes a commoner by making a legitimate payment required by law of the land, and power and status can be shown by ignoring law. What can common people like us expect from such uncommon people who are voted to power by us.

On 21 November 1998 some office bearers of Chhatra League in Sylhet demanded that the VIP lounge in Sylhet Airport be made available to some of their guests. The Airport Manager rightly expressed his inability to accommodate their unlawful demand. The result was rampage of airport property and assault on government servants on duty.

While I am writing this letter in a state of despair, the Daily Sangbad of 22 November, comes to my hand and there is another shock. Two VIPs of whom one is the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and the other is a high police officer were to travel to Sylhet by train. Therefore, there were brisk activities in the railway station by police and railway employees whisking away general passengers who were VOPs (very ordinary people).

We are happy to see that the historical Road Number 32 in

Dhanmondi residential area has been improved and beautified using money paid to the government exchequer and the City Corporation of VIPs and VOPs. But the thoroughfare has been closed to the VOPs. Located on this road are the Bangabandhu Museum and some residential houses. By closing a part of this road to traffic, hindrance has been imposed on the visitors to Bangabandhu Museum and the residents have been exposed to harassment.

Who do these things? Who can prevent these? VIPs?

A M Choudhury
House 27, Road 13A
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

An appeal

Sir, This is an humble appeal to the Hon'ble Prime Minister from an aggrieved retired officer of BCIC.

I retired from service on 23 November 1989. The Administration (R&T Sec), BCIC advertised for appointment of Manager (Com/Pur/Mar) on 09 March 1997.

There are sufficient examples in BCIC that the dependents of retired persons were provided in the service according to their suitability and fitness.

My son Mirza Mohammed Farooque Alamgir, who is educationally qualified with sufficient experience in the relevant fields, accordingly submitted his application dated 18 March 1997 with required documents. But he was not issued the required letter to participate in the interview. I could never think of this, whereas less or not so suitably qualified candidates were issued with having.

With a view to having re-

dress I submitted several applications to the authorities concerned, besides having had personal interview with Chairman, BCIC. But all my attempts were in vain to my avail.

Even the Hon'ble Minister for Industries was informed and he was pleased to speak over telephone to Chairman, BCIC on 06 August 1997 in my presence, but ultimately with no result except creating false hopes and tension in me.

But still optimistic I submitted appeals to Hon'ble Prime Minister praying for justice. As such instructions were issued vide the Prime Minister's office (Petition cell) letter No 62.23.3.0.0.1.98 (Part-3)/19 & 20 dated 05 January 1998 to Secretary, Ministry of Industries with copies to me followed by a reminder.

On 06.23.3.0.0.1.98 (Part-3)-737 dated 25 March 1998 for necessary action after due enquiry into the matter. Unfortunately, instead of holding enquiry the Admin (R&T Sec), BCIC was asked to submit their comments against my complaint. In the manner the Ministry rather provided them with opportunity to hold stand on their position not to unveil the truth, which could have been proved if enquired by a neutral enquiry committee.

Lastly, having found no remedy, I submitted an appeal petition dated 19 July 1998 to Hon'ble President for justice. Accordingly a letter No RAKA-27/1998 (227)/98-178 dated 27 July 1998 was issued to Secretary, Ministry of Industries for necessary action after due examination of the matter. Now, four months have passed neither the enquiry held nor any action taken. What solace

an aging poor soul can derive after all these efforts in vain except painfully bearing in my mind that, "if one does not have earthly riches or muscle power, he is destined to be deprived of his legal rights" in Bangladesh now.

Under the circumstances, with reference to the PM's Office (Petition cell) letters mentioned above; I humbly beg to appeal again to Hon'ble Prime Minister, through your columns for looking into my complaint against the BCIC Administration for intentional violation of the set principles of BCIC Service rules 1988 and abuse of office in connection with the appointment of Manager (Com/Pur/Mar) as stated above and do justice by (a) holding due enquiry into the matter with the representative(s) from the Ministry of Industries to conduct such enquiry, and (b) taking necessary legal action(s) as provided by BCIC Service Rules 1988, against those responsible for creating such anomalies with harassment to me and my son and rendering undue favour, if any, to others.

This case in point if kindly attended to will also serve public interest at least related to BCIC administration.

Mirza Muhammed Abdur Rashid
House No. 221, Block 'B'
Road No. 12, Mirpur Housing Estate, Mirpur-12, Dhaka-1221
Tels: 807971 & 9007002 (Res).

Ineffectiveness of pesticides

Sir, Reports of pest attack on rice fields of the northern districts are there in the newspapers almost everyday. It is ap-

prehended that due to pest attack, there will be colossal damage of the standing aman crop resulting abnormal fall in production. It is also reported that the pesticides available in the market are found to be ineffective and adulterated. It may be mentioned that price of pesticide in Bangladesh is the highest in the world. As a result, farmers cannot afford to buy and spray the required quantity of pesticide in their fields and therefore do not get satisfactory result. They always try to apply minimum quantity of pesticide which is far below the recommended doses. Besides, in absence of strict quality control measures, pesticide market is flooded with spurious and adulterated products which are sold in the market as number two brand. At present over 300 brands of pesticides are in the registration list which are being marketed by several thousands dealers. Some brands are formulated locally. It is alleged that some of those plants do not have modern quality control equipments. About 80 per cent pesticides are imported and there is no system of post-shipment inspection to examine the quality. Under such situation the allegation of ineffectiveness of pesticides are not baseless. Although government used to collect a good amount on account of pesticide revenue through registration fee duty, tax and surcharge; but for the last few years no amount has been spent to procure any new quality control equipments and to strengthen the pesticide quality control and the administration.

M. A. Jallil
Founder & Ex-Chairman
Pesticide Association