

FPHP to HPSP

When it comes to fund allocation in the annual budget, the health sector usually picks up the crumbs. This should not be the case, given the enormous social and economic implications of health. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest ill health is one of the key reasons behind further pauperisation of low-income families. Lack of adequate health is one of the main reasons behind a person's poor physical and intellectual development, adversely affecting his or her productivity. Despite the abundance of such evidence, health has remained one of the more neglected areas in the broad social development scene of Bangladesh. However, there have been some efforts, promoted by donors, in recent years to provide well-targeted health and family planning services to the rural people in particular. One such programme was the Fourth Population and Health Plan (FPHP), which ended on June 30, 1998, and succeeded by the Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP). But there are serious doubts about the success of FPHP and whether the HPSP would be implemented in an effective manner.

The World Bank, which coordinated the funding of the FPHP has already given a clear "thumbs down" to the fourth health plan. A Bank evaluation of the FPHP found implementation of the programme to have been unsuccessful in terms of developing institutional sustainability. The Bank found that the programme had failed to reach the real poor segment of the population who were the specific targets for service delivery. In addition, the programme had also failed to address the gender issue. Given failures in such broad but crucial areas, one would be entitled to wonder whether the 755 million dollars spent on the FPHP had been thrown down the drain.

What the government needs to do now is to evaluate the institutional problems, which caused such failures in the implementation of the FPHP. This is vital because the HPSP cannot afford to fail in the same manner. The HPSP is designed to effect a number of important reforms in the health sector, and ensure village-level delivery of primary health care in a single package. This is too important to be allowed to fail through inefficiency at the implementation level. The government must delegate authority to the projects and decentralise the public health structure in order to increase efficiency and ensure accountability. Greater efforts need to be undertaken to ensure community participation in the health sector.

Tighten Your Belt

The post-flood slowdown in the economy has caused a shortfall in revenue collection during the first seven months of the current fiscal by Tk 804. The total receipt till January stood at Tk 7,621.86 crore which interestingly enough bettered the collection figure of the corresponding period of the last financial year by Tk 292.20 crore. One recalls that revenue receipt in the first financial year under the present government fell short of the target largely because of the car dealers obtaining legal injunctions on import duty payments. In other words, in spite of the century's worst floods we have not fared too badly in terms of revenue collection, which in turn means that tax administration performed somewhat better than in the previous year. This gives cause to hope that with redoubled efforts in the remaining five months of the current fiscal we should be able to make up for the 9.4 per cent collection deficit to close the year with a tally of Tk 15,700 crore as targeted.

There is, however, one likely variable, a much-dreaded roadblock, that needs to be taken into account and headed off if we are to meet the original revenue target for the current fiscal. If we cannot rid ourselves of the roadblock before long the revenue shortfall will keep on increasing bursting the dam of a balanced budget in end.

Floods left a ringing message for the government that it exercised an effective control over current expenditure in order that the process of economic recovery were helped, not hurt. But it seems the government could not avoid borrowing from the banking system rather heavily from July to November, 1998, with the over-all figure increasing by Tk 740 crore from Tk 121 crore recorded in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal.

The tendency to borrow from banks to meet current account deficits is far from healthy. This stands in contrast to the fresh levies of Tk 300 crore the government had imposed due to the flood exigency. The benefit from low international oil prices also accrued to the government. We wonder if there has been any laxity on the austerity measures announced in the immediate aftermath of the floods.

Quality of Roads

Experts met at a seminar organised by the Civil Engineering Division of the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh on Monday to analyse the pros and cons of the use of asphalt in building pavements and roads in the country. The highly technical aspects to the construction of durable roads and pavements were discussed and emphasised at the seminar. According to the findings of an expert, cracks in road pavement structures mainly occurred due to deficiencies in design, supervision and lack of proper quality control in asphalt. His remarks that mandatory criteria tests for 'retained strength stability are not done in most cases' call for immediate attention of the authorities concerned so that all such constructions conform to set standards.

The expert pointed his finger at the basic flaws which cause 'stripping of flexible pavement roads' and suggested use of cement as filler to ensure a durable design life. In fact, the malaise of poor quality materials used together with substandard supervision during construction of roads and pavements in Bangladesh drains away a huge amount of public money every year. Dishonesty in procurement of construction materials, awarding contracts to inexperienced and unworthy firms are too common in our context. We would strongly support the plea for properly manning the research wing of the Road Research Laboratory as part of an effective construction-cum-maintenance strategy. This will help minimise the annual maintenance cost by improving quality-control in the choice of road construction materials.

Dialogue Offers a Way Out of the Blind Alley

If the BNP does need to concentrate on a one-point movement, then that point needs to be articulated in parliament, and presented to the public for consideration at the next general elections. Otherwise, the people would be hard-pressed to understand if there is any point in the four, five or any other set of points, let alone one point.

THE municipal elections were supposed to provide the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with its biggest opportunity so far to put the government on the defensive. The BNP cobbled together an alliance of all opposition parties in parliament, jointly announced a boycott of the polls and staged the longest hartal in the Awami League's 32-month rule in an effort to foil the elections.

The BNP and its allies had probably calculated that these would be enough to isolate the AL, keep voters at home and discredit the elections altogether. Isolated and discredited, the government would have been shaken to its foundation. The stage would then have been set for the opposition alliance to storm out of parliament and launch an all-out campaign to force an early resignation of the government.

That was the script. But even did not quite run according to the script, not least because the "cast of thousands" failed to show up in the streets, while the other "cast of millions" did turn up at the polling stations. In effect, the opposition's poll boycott was voted out of existence.

The reasons behind the BNP's desire to force an early resignation of the government are still shrouded in mystery. The BNP would have the public believe that the government has failed to govern in every respect, and does not deserve to stay in power any longer.

While the AL's activities as a player in the political arena would make Machiavelli purr with delight, its performance in the field of governance has indeed left a lot to be desired. But the BNP's position is rather shaky, because performance of the government is open to interpretation. Industrialists who fail to secure bank loans may think the economy has gone to the dogs; but rural families who have survived the floods of 1998 and not experienced any famine or epidemics may think otherwise.

Either way, the final judgement on the government's performance rests with the voting public whose perception, rather than the reality of the situation, is what will matter in the end. Such a judgement can only come through the ballot box, at the appropriate time.

What is certain is that the opposition alliance now has a tough task on its hands. Reviewing the wreckage of their 66-hour programme to foil the municipal elections, they appear hard-pressed to find a way forward. The public's refusal to respond to their call for a boycott of the polls has left the opposition's agitation strategy in tatters. The BNP and its allies are now busy picking through the debris of the hartal, searching for clues as to what went wrong.

The boycott debacle has left the opposition with severely limited options. Nearly a week has passed since the end of the polls, but the opposition is yet to come up with a programme to follow up its poll boycott and hartal actions of Feb 23-25. With every passing day, the heat in the political atmosphere dissipates, making it more and more difficult for the opposition to regroup and re-launch their ill-fated movement.

So far, the opposition appears to be sticking to its four

point demands (which are, in fact, five). They have repeated their threats to launch a one-point movement to topple the government unless their four or five points were met. But there is, as yet, no clear sign as to what strategy the BNP would adopt in order to achieve the four points plus one, or go for just the one. There is a good reason why this is so.



The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

When a movement succeeds or is seen to be heading for success, then it unites the party, with all types of leaders clamouring to get on board and claim credit. The follow up actions come rapidly, building on the success of the immediate past. The strike is made while the iron is still hot.

But when a movement is seen to have been a disaster, then follow-ups are hard to come by. There is a great deal of soul-searching and finger-pointing. The party is thrown into a severe dilemma. One side demands immediate, tougher actions to overcome the failures of the previous programmes, while the other hesitates, preferring to weigh up the cost of agitation against possible gains from a moderate approach.

The BNP contains such poles within itself, and there are important leaders to back up both

sides of the argument. But the BNP has also allied itself with small, more rabidly right-wing parties, which have little stake in the functioning of parliament or political stability under the AL government. These elements are no doubt piling up the pressure on Khaleda Zia to stick to agitation and turn away from a negotiated settlement.

There is a great deal of talk

in the streets a high risk public relations exercise, as well as being self-defeating political blunders.

The BNP's failure to make its agitation have any effect on government resolve to go ahead with the municipal polls has undoubtedly had a demoralising effect within the party. On the other hand, the people's response to the polls has strengthened Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's hands.

With over 50 years of experience behind it, the AL is an astute political player. Even before the hartals were over, Hasina moved to seize the initiative, went into a higher gear and launched a support mobilisation campaign in Dhaka and Chittagong. The question was, what Hasina would do with the higher ground she had captured. Would she stake up the lines of confrontation and run the BNP into the ground, or would she reduce the temperature, open up to the opposition and try for a negotiated peace?

Judging by events of the past few days, it appears Hasina has chosen the wiser path. Awami League leaders have already spoken about their readiness to open a dialogue with the opposition, and it is likely that Hasina would take a personal initiative in this regard. What remains to be seen is whether the AL would try to set the agenda beforehand, and what the response of the BNP would be.

Khaleda Zia appears to be taking a tough stance on talks. She has told the BBC in an interview that she would not sit

down for talks unless results of the municipal polls were cancelled first. She knows very well this would be impossible for the government to even consider. Not surprisingly, AL leaders have warned the BNP against setting preconditions for talks.

The past few weeks should have given both sides ample food for thought. Hasina needs to realise that a strategy based on confronting agitation with counter-agitation only alienates both her government and party from the people. This would not bode well for the future. But if she is sincere about the initiative to open a dialogue with the opposition, without setting an agenda beforehand, then one would have to assume that the AL leader has learnt the lessons well and is prepared to act accordingly.

Khaleda Zia has already made one gigantic mistake, by trying to force the public to deliver a verdict against the government in the streets. The lesson of the municipal polls is that, if she persists with her efforts, then the verdict may not go the way she hopes. If Khaleda is as astute enough to learn the lessons of the past few weeks, then she would realise that her party has much to gain from engaging in dialogue, making its presence felt in parliament and expending efforts in strengthening its organisational and support bases at the grassroots.

If the BNP does need to concentrate on a one-point movement, then that point needs to be articulated in parliament, and presented to the public for consideration at the next general elections. Otherwise, the people would be hard-pressed to understand if there is any point in the four, five or any other set of points, let alone one point.

Municipal Elections in Iran and its Ramifications

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

President Khatami's bold experiment in conducting the municipal elections will be considered a turning point in the history of Iran after the Islamic revolution. His task of steering a reformist Iran in the 21st century will undoubtedly create some degree of opposition among the conservative elements in the country. But many believe that President Khatami will be able to consolidate his power through large scale social, political and cultural changes with the support of the majority of Iranians.

AN event of great consequence is taking place in Iran which seems to capture little attention of the media. It is the result of the election of the municipal bodies in the country. The reformist President Khatami is undertaking slow but steadily reforms in the political, administrative and social institutions in Iran. He realised that the instability of a country comes from the lack of accountability and the lack of transparency. He was determined to set them right through holding the municipal elections on 26th February.

Since the election of President Khatami in Iran in May 1997, fresh liberal ideas and reforms have percolated in many streams of society in Iran, giving a hard knock to the conservative clerical establishment. Although Iran's 1979 Constitution provided municipal elections, no past regime during the last twenty years since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 took up seriously to implement this constitutional obligation. At present the local Council officials were appointed by the Interior Ministry for a period of four years.

President Khatami decided that the municipal elections should be held to enable the local bodies to plan and implement the programmes for their own areas, rather than controlled by Tehran. Elected local

council should be entrusted with the responsibility to meet the local needs of the people. President Khatami's efforts to decentralise the administration is seen as a giant and welcome step by the people in Iran.

Approximately 39 million Iranians of 15 years of age or over are eligible to vote for the 200,000 candidates at 52,000 polling stations. The people are so enthusiastic to participate in the election that about 4000 candidates contested for 15 positions at the Tehran City Council. State radio said that 65 per cent of the voters cast their ballots in the elections.

The early results show that reformists look poised to seize control of the majority of the municipal bodies in the country and out of 15 seats at the Tehran City Council, 12 supporters of President Khatami won and the other three went to independents. There is a report that out of 11 city councils, at least seven would be held by pro-Khatami candidates. Reformists and independents are reported to be front-runners in

the city of Mashhad, the stronghold of conservative clerics. In central Isfahan, reformers are said to be leading by a wide margin.

This is a clear demonstration that the people overwhelmingly rejected the conservative candidates. It is interesting that the former Interior Minister Abdullah Noori who was forced out of Parliament last year because of his support for greater freedom in social, political and cultural areas won a seat with the largest number of votes at the Council in Tehran. This appears to constitute a rebuff to the conservatives who control the Parliament.

The results of the municipal elections appear to presage the outcome of the Parliamentary elections next year. The significant victory by the reformers is bound to undermine the conservative elements in politics in the country. They may see their fate writing on the wall at the next election. Once the conservative clerics do not control the Parliament there is a view that a

new era would unfold in the country.

Iran's isolation from the mainstream of the international range community seems to be gradually disappearing. The present leadership and the people are eager to play an important role in the world affairs. Iranians generally prefer having their country recognised as an important country, than being shunned by the West. The people in Iran want more freedom and more interaction with the outside world. Under the Presidency of Mr. Khatami gone are the days of conservatism where the views of young men and women had been ignored.

Modern technology plays a dominant part in accelerating economic growth in a country and Iran recognises that the western technology is necessary to modernise its oil plants and install them. The holding out the olive branch by Iran to the European countries has already begun. France and Italy have strengthened their bilateral relations with Iran. Oil explorations worth billions of dollars in Iran have been accepted by French and Italian companies, disregarding the US sanctions and penalties under US laws. Signs of change in US policies are being perceived

towards Iran. The Clinton Administration supported President Khatami's initiative to cultural, sports and academic exchanges between the US and Iran. As a result the US administration eased travel to the US by many Iranians.

Iran is emerging as a regional power and the testing of an intermediate ballistic missile indicated that the security of the Persian Gulf could not continue for long without Iran's participation. US Secretary of State last June admitted that although the global network had grown largely without Iran's participation, Iran would be welcome if it was willing to make a "constructive contribution."

Iran was able to mend its relations with Arab countries. The holding of the Islamic Summit in Tehran on 9th December 1997 demonstrated the standing of Iran in the Arab world. The Summit was participated by all the Arab leaders including Chairman Yasser Arafat.

There is a strong view that Iran's growing military strength and increasing diplomatic interaction with European countries will continue. Iran's position could be further strengthened if Iran is seen to be governed by democratic and

stable political institutions. There are several flashpoints in the Middle East region, such as Palestine issue and Israel, Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, Iraq and the US and Afghanistan. All these issues directly or indirectly affect Iran. Conscious of its role, Iran appears to have moved away from its earlier "shouting match" diplomacy.

President Khatami's bold experiment in conducting the municipal elections will be considered a turning point in the history of Iran after the Islamic revolution. His task of steering a reformist Iran in the 21st century will undoubtedly create some degree of opposition among the conservative elements in the country. But many believe that President Khatami will be able to consolidate his power through large scale social, political and cultural changes with the support of the majority of Iranians and the municipal elections may be the beginning of a new moderate and democratic Iran. President Khatami appears to be determined to leave behind the imprint and authority of his reformist personality in Iran.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the United Nations in Europe, Geneva.

CORRIGENDUM
In the article 'A Rich is a Poor or a Poor is a Rich' published yesterday, the Law and Justice Minister's name was distorted due to printer's devil. It should read as Abdul Matin Khasru. The error is regretted.

To the Editor...

Japanese Assistance on SMEs

Sir, We are thankful to the Government of Japan for showing interest to assist in the planned and scientific development of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Bangladesh (DS, Feb 13). This sector has vast potentiality in this country, enjoying a large population of human resources, both male and female, and a modest technical education base.

Even a cursory reference to the history of SMEs in Japan will reveal that this sector played a vital role in establishing and strengthening the industrial development of Japan during the post-War II decades, eventually leading to the establishment of giant industrial conglomerates and groups known world-wide as Hitachi, Mitsubishi, NEC, Toshiba, Sony, National/Technic and others. Thousands of small firms supplied the components to the giant factories, to push Japan into the forefront of the global market.

Better late than never. Our SMEs and the cottage industries in the informal sector need the setting up of basic technical foundation and sound O&M (operation and maintenance) and management practices, to ensure standard products through QC (Quality Control). The long years of Japanese experience and expertise will be of immense benefit to our young entrepreneurs, once adapted to the local working conditions. Bangladesh has one of the densest NGO networks in the world, penetrating to some depth in the rural areas. How this net could be utilised may be worth a survey while setting the infrastructure for the cottage industries.

In fact, we feel sad that Japan took a pretty long time to manifest her kind to show some interest in Bangladesh. Since the early 90s, the private sector has been showing an urge for stimulated growth, initiated with the government's kindness for the right reforms in the right direction, as evident from the accelerated growth of exportable products year after year.

Now the energy sector is due for a take-off, with the forthcoming US technical assistance

The royal campaign

Sir, The AFP reported from London that Queen Elizabeth II has with drawn her royal warrant from British tobacco firm. This decision was made after the Queen stopped ordering supplies of cigarettes for the royal households because smoking is no longer popular in the Royal family.

The press report stated that the Queen's eldest son and heir to the throne, Prince Charles, a fervent anti-smoker had been instrumental in the withdrawal of the warrant. Mentionable that the Queen's father, grandfather and great grandfather all died of smoking-related illnesses.

It is encouraging to learn that smoking is no more popular in the British Royal family and I heartily appreciate the Queen's above decision as well as Prince Charles's initiatives. I sincerely hope that people all over the world including Bangladesh would follow suit in appreciation of the present smoking state of the British Royal family.

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207.

Impending crash

Sir, After the financial crash in Asian and other Asian Tiger countries, similar probable minor calamities are being analysed in other regions of the world, in view of the compressed global economy due to closing of the communication gap and extensive use of electronic trading or E-commerce.

South Asia had been rather insulated from the direct fall-

outs due to lower and smaller scale of the market, but this should not encourage complacency, as there are other sources or causes for sudden failures or collapses of a nation's infrastructure.

Pervading corruption (or subjective short-cuts to money, power and influence) in a society has greater potential to initiate sudden damages, and at a deeper and wider level, which cannot be predicted or controlled (like an avalanche), because the whole structure starts cracking up all around, as in a severe earthquake. There is no EWS (early warning system).

Bangladesh has many weaknesses, most of them cumulative, and some brash and brazen, due to weak deterrents practised by the successive regimes (indirectly supporting evil practices - abatement). The nation has to pay the price for such shady collusions. The Law of Compensation will hit back, quietly and suddenly. The noise makers are never successful.

It is time to be mentally prepared, because nature will take its toll, but this time not at the poverty level, as happens during and after the floods and cyclones. Money and power cannot protect from the impending retribution.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

No barricade, please!

Sir, Recently it has become a regular feature to barricade roads and highways to ventilate grievances or to realise demands. These barricades on the highways are raised by the local mastans, factory workers, students and political parties. It causes immense sufferings to the public. The helpless passengers become pawn to these unscrupulous people. Especially women and children have to undergo untold sufferings for hours together with nowhere to go. Even patients in ambulances have to die for unwanted delay of medical care.

It has been seen that the government or the law enforcing agencies always turned deaf ear in eradicating unlawful barricades. The government is supposed to act in favour of the people, not against them.

GMF Abdur Rok
DOHS (New), Dhaka.

OPINION

US-Bangladesh Cooperation May Open Doors Of Opportunity in Energy Sector

by Khaled S. Ahmed

BANGLADESH visit of Mr. Calvin Humphrey, Acting Assistant Secretary of US Energy Department, who a 14-member US delegation of power experts and officials might open up an excellent opportunity for the two countries to establish mutually beneficial relationship in this sector. This opportunity might further be augmented because of Mr. Bill Richardson as US Energy Secretary who has genuine "love and commitment of cooperation" for Bangladesh.

We also believe these visits of various US delegations are prelude to forthcoming South Asia visit of US President Bill Clinton. It is a known fact that President Clinton comes from one of the poorest states of his country and does have deep sense of understanding of the meaning of poverty alleviation. It is time for Bangladesh government as well as opposition political parties to formulate a joint strategy to establish mutually beneficial relationship with the world's most powerful country as well as to address the world's largest 474 billions plus yearly import market. Perhaps, it is the last opportunity for Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries of the world, to secure a tangible US cooperation and assistance in the nation's overall development programme to avoid disastrous strain of population growth.

Although Bangladesh government is regularly bragging about its 'open power policy and firm plan to make maximum use of the country's gas and energy resources by blending together local and foreign expertise', it is also reported that foreign investors are often frustrated in the absence of transparency in dealing with them. US being technologically most advanced country, this visit is

also opening up scope and possibilities of much wider cooperation including in the energy sector. The following may be considered for inclusion within the scope of proposed study on strategic use of natural gas as agreed between the two governments:

A. Natural Gas being only marketable but non-renewable natural resource, its exploitation should be related to job generation in the country, through technology transfer with special reference to export oriented manufacturing and related infrastructure development. We need to identify areas where hundreds of thousands of new jobs may be generated to reach benefit of this precious natural resource to the common people of the country in its bid for poverty alleviation. Petrochemical, Textile, Automobile Tires, Iron & Steel and Energy Intensive Electronic manufacturing may be considered as potential areas. The United States leading in all of these, technologies and also importing billions of dollars worth of these products, is certainly in a position to help Bangladesh. Possibilities of every billion dollar new imports by the USA from Bangladesh may generate over 300,000 new jobs and if we can address 1 per cent of US import market we are looking at over 1.2 million new jobs.

B. Bangladesh certainly need to consider export of natural gas to generate funds to meet the import cost of technology and machinery for infrastructure as well as industrial development. Exporting natural gas by way of taking it to foreign country by pipeline may bring maximum benefit to the country. India being our immediate neighbour and also a major energy import, they will be our best buyer if we can negotiate mutually beneficial contracts

where US companies working in our gas fields may play a key role. With transparency in dealing with US companies it will unquestionably be possible to create public opinion in favour of exporting natural gas to India. Honest intent, well planned and innovative use of media including Radio and Television are essential to create such public opinions.

C. Information Technology and Telecommunication are major areas where through suitable transfer of technology Bangladesh may derive maximum benefit from highly advanced US technologies. It may be noted that in the past Bangladesh installed telephone exchanges (public switching equipment) importing from Japan at a cost of \$1100 per line while better quality AT&T equipment were available at \$240 per line. We believe Bangladesh would need a few million lines of telephone switching equipment during next two decades. Technology transfer from the US companies like AT&T and envisaging progressive manufacturing will enable us to create few thousand new jobs. Potential of exporting IT services and Telephone equipment may also be taken into consideration as long term strategy.

Signing of these accords between Dhaka and Washington will lead us towards a new horizon in the new millennium for a long-term mutually beneficial technical cooperation for our social development and poverty alleviation. It is our earnest desire that agencies those who are directly involved in implementing these accords may invite and consider public opinion where Bangladeshis including expatriates can play their appropriate role in this vital national development endeavour.