

MiG Matters

OPPOSITION legislators on the Parliamentary Defence Committee—Major (retd) Aktheruzzaman of BNP and GM Quader—have definitely heated up the lingering debate on the government's somewhat arbitrary decision to purchase eight MiG-29s from Russia by raising a few disquieting questions about the whole deal at a press conference Wednesday. Their allegations of 'foul play' could have been brushed aside as political rhetoric had the Committee not abruptly excluded the 124 million dollar deal from its agenda in the meeting a few hours before. The very premise of their arguments—whether a least developed country like Bangladesh can afford to spend prodigiously on defence when there are compelling social issues to concentrate on—is, even if implausible, certainly appealing to the commoners. Therefore, the government's ostensible reticence towards any discussion, let alone a debate, may well send wrong signal across the society.

The 'MiG deal' has certainly generated a lot more controversy than one may have expected it would. While mainstream opposition political parties have harped on the familiar note of gross irregularities, voicing relentlessly suspicion of an underhand deal, the government's arguments in favour of the decision has been rather inadequate in the line of the strategic significance of shoring up the country's defence system. Meanwhile, strictly on defence consideration, many gave precedence of strengthening ground-based air-defence mechanism over "long pending requirement of the BAF to augment its depleting number of aircraft" as put by the Chief of Air Staff Air Vice Marshal Jamal Uddin Ahmed. Besides, questions regarding the efficacy of the state-of-the-art aircraft without adequate ammunition have also been raised. In this context, the opposition legislators' claim that the BAF "has raised a query and requested the government to sanction another Tk 40 crore to fit guns, weapons and missiles with the aircraft which are not included in the original contract" strikes at the very rationale of the procurement.

In our view, the government should immediately come out of its 'cocoon of indifference' to the increasing public concern over the whole issue of the MiG deal and outline, in definite terms, the rationale behind its decision. We believe that it has its reasons and would certainly accommodate the people's right to know the nitty-gritty of a matter of such grave importance.

Unabated Moonlighting

DHAKA University teachers need not give up a part-time job or consultancy. They will have to take prior permission from the authority and forego a certain percentage of their extra earning to keep doing it. The university authority is only interested in the last part of the previous sentence. An influential Bangla daily on Tuesday quoted the Dhaka University Vice Chancellor as saying that the authorities have no wish to stop part-time jobs or consultancy, only that those intending to do the same are to part with 10 per cent of the fees earned by them in pursuit of the side-work. The question of the teachers being engaged in a part-time job and consultancy arose because a number of teachers of various departments have from time to time behaved 'irresponsibly' so far as their substantive job of teaching, paper-setting, script-examining and maintaining schedules for timely publication of results were concerned.

The news report quoting the university ordinance says that teachers can legitimately have relations with legally constituted bodies without permission of the authority but there should not be any pecuniary gains from such association. But hardly any teacher who maintains this ethical standard. There are, however, teachers who oppose the idea of a DU teacher holding a part-time job in other organisations and managing more than one job at a time much to the peril of the academic enrichment of students for which they are primarily responsible.

We are not opposed to the idea of a teacher doing consultancy or research work for the improvement of this own faculty which in the long run may benefit the students. But we are opposed to the idea of teachers holding more than one job. This should be discouraged and the trend halted. We find fragmented logic in the argument that if the government needs any help from the teachers why should they not respond. Very right. But does the government need more consultancy from the DU teachers than the NGOs, international organisations and other unofficial bodies do?

We're Embarrassed

THIRTY-SIX out of forty-nine police personnel of the Bangladesh contingent, sent for keeping peace in Kosovo, are on their way home. They have failed certain qualification tests. The Foreign Minister may have had reasons to be surprised, which is why he is forwarding the issue to the UN Secretary General, but their failure in the KOFR in-mission tests of proficiency in English, driving and firearm shooting has embarrassed us. Judging by the reputation Bangladesh earned from her participation in peace-keeping missions involving Bosnia, Somalia, Angola etc., this particular episode, isolated though, has been a shocker nonetheless.

Bangladesh police chief, reportedly, wished that his men had got a second chance to prove themselves, citing the reason that language proficiency has been raised from 60 per cent to 80 per cent without prior notification, and that the Bangladesh contingent was informed of the requirement of carrying "side arms" only three days before their departure. But he admitted that there was inadequacy in terms of testing facilities here to meet the UN requirements. All this proves that we have a lot to improve on this front. The UN Peacekeeping Authority, on the other hand, must consider the stakes which officers who are sent out have on being locally selected for a prestigious assignment like that.

Despise Daughters, Deter Development

Our daughters are despised everywhere. But development demands their active participation in every sphere. Let our daughters be drawn to the mainstream of development. Daughters and developments seem to be synonymous since the age-old preference for boys could hardly deliver the development we needed.

deliver children within eight years or if she delivered only daughters.

In a patriarchal society, sons become successors to the properties of father and are expected to protect them. There are mainly three reasons for which sons were preferred to daughters: (a) sons become owners of the properties of father; (b) they engage in income earning activities; (c) they help parents in their old age by providing food and shelter. So, what's the use of giving birth to a daughter? And if due to 'bad luck', a daughter is born then it is better not to send her to school but prepare her to produce children (especially boys). The scholars of ancient time thus suggested that only sons should be sent to formal institutions for learning.

Has the nation changed since then? Admittedly, songs only for sons were sung about two thousand years back in the context of a particular socio-economic scenario. Unfortunately, the same is being done even today in many families in this part of the world. The gender-disparity that is in evidence

in South-Asia appears to be deeply rooted in the strong preference for sons—the sources of parents' economic gains. Thus still sons are considered to be assets and daughters, liabilities.

In many countries, including Bangladesh, parents are found to stay with their sons in their old ages. This could, possibly, be one of the important

world like this, the safest strategy is to invest on boys who are certain to stay in the same house. The 'isolation paradox', to use Amartya Sen's terminology, tilts parents' preferences in favour of boys.

Abul Bashar, a BIDS researcher, opined that as the level of education goes up so is the cost of education. In most of the low and middle income

girls constitute about 81 per cent of the total students while the share is 51 per cent in secondary level and 33 per cent in higher secondary and degree levels. The reason being that at secondary, higher secondary and degree levels, the high costs of education tend to force low and middle income families to choose education for either, not for both. It may be mentioned here that the acute disparity could be observed in the case of university education where girl students constitute only 12 per cent of total students.

From the above mentioned point of observation, subsidy to university education not only contributes to growing economic disparity but also to gender disparity. Under the existing social structure, a smaller proportion of educational expenses goes to educate girls since they would add very little to parents' future income. In relatively insolvent families education for one group crowds out the other group. And since families—for economic reasons—are forced to create gender-disparity in education, the responsibility lies on the state

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

reasons as to why they tend to invest relatively more on sons than on daughters. For example, the education of the boy in the family gets more preference to the education of the daughter. Researchers appear to argue that the lack of interest in daughters' education springs from the fact that daughters' future incomes might not be spent for the benefit of parents. Therefore, in an uncertain

families paucity of funds tend to turn the expenses for sons and daughters as mutually exclusive. And when the choice is to be made, sons' education get preference over that of daughters. The said researcher addressed this kind of preference to the growth of gender disparity in education—where the degree of disparity is higher, the higher the level of education. For example, at primary level,

Rajuk Dramatics

by A B M S Zahur

IT is unfortunate that we see a democratic government's action (as has happened in case of Rajuk's allotment of 301 plots) is only comparable with any action of a mediaeval despot who had to distribute favours only to satisfy the courtiers and sycophants because they were the main sources of power of such despots. At least in one respect Rajuk's latest allotment of 301 plots is worse than the distribution of favours by those despots. Extending favours to the sycophants were not done so openly and foolishly. Certainly this act has damaged the image of Awami League government more than whatever damage has been done so far by the combined opposition.

Rajuk is a fairly old institution (1953). Initially known as Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT), this organisation was rightly placed under the Ministry of Local Government. Later on, because of a former weak minister of Local Government and a strong minister of Public Works, this body was transferred from Ministry of Local Government to Ministry of Public Works. In fact, Rajuk remained more or less a neglected organisation satisfying various whims and caprices of the governments-in-power, be it autocratic or democratic. The master plan of 1959 could never be executed properly because of lack of sincerity and commitment by the governments. This has resulted in making Dhaka city roads as one of the most unplanned even compared to roads of the capitals of many developing countries.

With the establishment of Awami League government, the Rajuk authority was unhappy and the chairman chosen by BNP lost his job. The new chairman, a retired government servant working on contract basis, is supposed to be of a weak and obliging type. One thing, however, he should ensure is that he should not be a party to any illegal decision or illegal implementation of any legal decision or illegal implementation of any illegal decision. (See the case of MD, Agrani Bank) As the chairman he cannot just be a tool in the hands of the political elite. He must point out the legal implication of any act. He should be able to guide his minister to take decision only in the public interest. He should be tactful enough to help the minister to serve the interest of the party-in-power without sacrificing the public interest.

In the present case what appears to have happened is mischief done by some junior officials not conversant enough with rules, regulations or precedents and sensitivity of an issue. It appears that both the

minister and the prime minister have been misguided by the officials concerned, particularly by the chairman, Rajuk and the secretary, Works to commit this kind of scandalous act.

Even in cancelling the allotment of these 301 plots, the Prime Minister has not been properly advised. It is questionable whether the Prime Minister can cancel the allotment of the plots. The Prime Minister may express her wish for cancellation but the decision for cancellation must be taken by the board. In cancelling the allotment, the board must be convinced of the overriding considerations for cancelling so many allotments. I am afraid even a single allotment cannot be cancelled on flimsy ground. The procedure of cancellation needs a thorough review by a separate body to see how many of the allottees fully satisfy the standards or requisite qualifications. Only on receipt of recommendation of such body, decision to cancel allotment can be taken by the board.

Needless to say that if no punishment is awarded for any lapse, it helps in encouraging the wrong doers for committing greater mistakes. We wish that the political acumen of the Prime Minister should dictate her to take the following steps in the interest of her party as well.

(a) Constitute a high-level inquiry committee. Cabinet secretary and the secretary, Works may be members on the committee;

(b) Establishment Division may inquire thoroughly the involvement of the ex-secretary, Works (now on LPRI) before he is granted pension;

(c) Inquiry may also start against the chairman and the members, Rajuk to assess their role in the scandal. If chairman and the members are found guilty, appropriate punitive action may be taken against them immediately.

If no tangible strong action is taken immediately I am afraid a considerable part of the Prime Minister's efforts to build image for Awami League will be lost permanently. Democratic government may not be as 'efficient' or as 'strong' as the government of a dictator or a despot, but it can never be allowed to touch the level of stupidity or insanity.

The author is a retired Joint Secretary, Govt of Bangladesh and ex-member (Finance), Rajuk.

IT was a strange coincidence that the decision of the cabinet to allow transit to Indian commodities in sealed containers was announced when the 4-party jote was just back to the city after its multifaceted 'road march'. The jote was to have an agitation programme on August 3, to supplement the enthusiasm of the road march and to keep the spirit of the party workers in place. The transit issue provided an unsolicited additional impetus to the August 3 programme. A 30-hour hartal commencing from August 2, at 6 am was instantly called by the opposition combine. Prior to it, BNP and other opposition leaders had a number of press conferences rejecting the decision of the government to allow transit facilities to India through Bangladesh mainland to the former's eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura etc.

Commerce and Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed had discounted the objection raised by the opposition alluding to the SAFTA agreement of 1993 when BNP was in power. So, in fact it was nothing new but only an implementation of the decision taken by the previous government. FBCCI leader Abdul Minto and other chamber leaders had already thanked the government for this 'correct and timely' decision. They thought this new arrangement would eventually proffer new and newer business opportunities with the eastern states of India. Besides, it would create huge employment opportunities to Bangladeshi labour to the engaged by our truckers who would do the transhipment of those sealed containers. On the top of everything India would pay us in US dollars for the services rendered by Bangladeshi trucks and workers.

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Unsolicited Impetus

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

lic meeting at Beani Bazar, Sylhet. She disclosed that late Ziaur Rahman had himself allowed transit facilities to India back in 1980 and Begum Zia had renewed it in 1993 signing the SAFTA agreement. In both the related documents India was to enjoy transit facilities through mainland Bangladesh carrying goods in their own trucks and lorries. But the present government had proposed an improvement by way of asking India to agree to a transhipment arrangement instead. This would mean India delivering sealed goods containers to Bangladeshi trucks at western border and in turn, those trucks would carry them to the eastern border wherefrom again Indian trucks would take them inside their own territory. By such arrangement huge employment opportunities would be opened to Bangladeshi workers besides engaging our trucks on payment in foreign exchange. Sheikh Hasina wondered why then the opposition objected and called hartal in protest.

The funniest part of the whole news about the transit issue was even revealed later than it ought to have been. A belated clarification coming to the press told us the actual status. It was made known that it was in fact not a decision of the cabinet, rather it was a consensus in principle to allow transhipment facilities to India on revised transportation arrangement. This proposal would now be examined by a joint expert committee who shall ultimately make its own recommendations to the governments. If the two governments approved the recommendations then only it would be implemented. In any case Bangladesh will agree to it if its transhipment proposal is endorsed by India.

More information on the subject was catered by Bangladesh Television in its 8 o'clock (night) news on August 2. An interview with the Commerce and Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed was telecast with it where the minister told the nation that Ziaur Rahman agreed to give transit facilities to Indian goods through Bangladesh land route on their own transportation arrangement and this agreement was signed on October 4, 1980 by the state minister for commerce in Zia's cabinet Chowdhury Tanveer Ahmed Siddiqui. Tofail's statement was corroborated by a file photo on the signing ceremony. And on the 1993 episode another file picture showed the

then Prime Minister Begum Zia speaking to a gathering on SAFTA agreement vis-a-vis on the transit facilities given to India.

The gentleman who signed the agreement in 1980 on behalf of GoB made a statement to the press on August 2, 1999 that Sheikh Mujib had himself allowed transit facilities to India in 1973 but former commerce minister in Begum Zia's cabinet Mr Shamsul Islam said 2/3 days earlier that though Sheikh Mujib didn't allow it to happen, his daughter was giving transit/corridor to India now. Mr Tofail Ahmed however removed the confusion created by these two BNP leaders in two different views. He confirmed that such facilities were given to India in 1973 but it was never renewed till August 15, 1975. However, Ziaur Rahman made a fresh agreement and there was no ready evidence to show that Ershad wrote it off formally at any stage of his 9-year rule. And Begum Zia made a new deal through SAFTA in 1993. So this has been the whole truth about the subject. But pitifully BNP either disowns the truth about its own doing or pretends to be forgetful of the past as usual. The main objective remains one and the same of misleading the people. Though they have had an appropriate revelation from Mr Tofail Ahmed's startling disclosures they are not expected to make due and logical amends to the mischief already perpetrated on the issue.

Barrister Nazmul Huda has come back to news, as it were rising from the debris of his political backyards. Taking the cue from Sheikh Hasina's claim of earning about Tk 200 crore from the transhipment agreement with India the BNP crack-jack suggested that more money would be available from the sale of the country to India. He forgot altogether that his leader chairperson Begum Zia had long ago concluded that the country was already sold to India—at least the entire Chittagong division down to Feni!

Anyway, the former minister for information appears to have been not well-informed. And that is how words appear very much consistent with his role in 1971. He does still hold Bangladesh a salable commodity. Such unwholesome, sarcastic and outrageous suggestion tantamounts to a direct insult to the 30 lakh martyrs of our liberation war. He has proved again that he is capable of saying anything that suits his stony tongue.

The credit of this success of Bangladesh cricket team entirely goes to the team and members of the management. Those who cannot accept this success should not be given any publicity or discussed at all and we should not get involved in any controversy.

There is also no scope to link this World Cup achievement with our day to day national politics, any 'ism' and our great freedom struggle.

Shahid Iqbal

5/4 Block-D Lalmatia, Dhaka-7

Ruppur project, rather than MiG-29

Sir, It is more important for a government to ensure the basic needs like, water supply, food, cloths, communication etc. And all these depend on the supply of electricity. The money will be properly used if the AL government completes the Ruppur project by building a reactor for 10,000 MW rather than buying MiG-29s.

Dr. Farid Majumder Denmark

Traffic and pedestrians

Sir, The authorities have already built quite a number of overbridges and underpasses for pedestrians in Dhaka to ease traffic congestion at important points of the city. But the traffic lanes remain as crowded by pedestrians as before when there was no such provision built. Why?

A citizen

Dhaka

Cricket is above any 'ism'

Sir, Bangladesh cricket team

has earned everything that was

possible for them in World Cup

1999 and all sports-loving people

will agree that this was a

great achievement for the nation

and not a gift or donation

from anybody.

Omar Farooq

314/5, Khilgaon, Dhaka

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pedestrians

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