

Let's See Them in Jail

NEVER mind the delay, the Prime Minister ought to get a credit for realising that the sharp deterioration in law and order and the criminal activities of her party MPs' sons and relatives have a correlation. The PM has not stopped short at this, she has even warned the party influential of 'dire consequences' should they fail to rein in their "near and dear ones". It was too obvious that they were bringing bad name to her party in an election year so that she could not overlook the 'liability factor' anyway.

Much that she sounds serious with her words, could she be the same with her deeds? This question figures in the backdrop of her previous roars dissipating into whimpers. We have heard her say many times over that terrorists will be dealt with as terrorists and not as any favourites of a political party. She has never tired of counselling the police to act without fear or favour, but what we see on the ground is something opposite. Many cases are not entertained at the police stations for their supposed 'sensitivity' and arrests of persons claiming links to the ruling party or its wings have been hard to come by.

The feudings in AL party units and front organisations which often erupt into violent encounters with spillover effects on social peace could not be stopped by the PM. Then some of the MPs who created havoc with local law and order situations, like in Dhaka and Feni for example, have not been put in the dock, far less proceeded against. We wrote volumes about a certain bank capture by a party stalwart only to see him removed from party position, but no legal action was processed against him for his criminal offences. He did not have to even account for his banking transactions. One leading MP's son for a time held two apartments of a city building in his illegal possession throwing his weight around and intimidating even policemen with impunity. Despite accusations of murder against another MP's son he roams freely around.

The Prime Minister is asking her MPs to control their offsprings but could she rein in her own party stalwarts and MPs who have been playing football with the rule of law? None has been touched so far. Her maximum action against them was only to strip them of party positions.

So, the Prime Minister has to take some legal action against her party culprits to inspire public confidence in her words. Otherwise these will be rhetoric as usual.

Child Abuse by State?

UNDER different circumstances, round-the-clock sentinel for one severely wounded prisoner – his legs cuffed – at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital could have well been a proud testimony to police efficiency and sincerity. The fact that the **imprisoned** is a minor boy, somewhere between six and seven years of age, and that there is no definitive charge against him makes the law enforcement agency guilty of highhandedness and child repression. With so many cases of murders, rapes, abduction and other grievous crimes going unresolved and the accused at large, the police's preoccupation with Jewel, the hapless kid from the old city's Dayaganj area, is simply outrageous. It not only highlights the law enforcers' distorted sense of priority but also reflects their total apathy to the very notion of human rights.

Worse still, Jewel's is not a unique case. On many occasions, we have read and heard of the police rounding up street urchins on the eve of opposition programmes or in times of street violence and keeping them detained for days, weeks and sometimes months together. Detention without definitive charges has become a salient feature of police activism, the detainees ranging from minor kids to old people. Not long back, the higher judiciary had to intervene for the release of a man in police custody for several years on no specific charges who had gone mentally deranged in captivity.

Despite sustained pressure from the media and other members of the civil society, the police's human rights sensibility remains as poor as before. The report on Jewel, front-paged by a Bengali daily, adds insensitivity to child rights to their growing list of dubious distinctions in the domain.

We demand an immediate end to Jewel's predicament. Even if guilty of the charge the police seem to have against him, namely pickpocket, he cannot be held in custody and that too in chains for so long. At the same time, we solicit intervention of the judiciary in this matter. It should decide whether the boy is guilty as charged and if so issue directive for the boy to be sent to correction centre. More importantly, the degree of culpability of those who held the boy in detention should be determined. Whoever he, she or they may be, their act amounts to child repression in particular and human rights violation in general. By no means, should they be allowed to get away.

Utility Rates up, Again

THE government decision to raise power tariff by five paisa per unit and water and sewer rates by five per cent just before the presentation of the budget for the next fiscal is reflective of an almost annual ritual. Done through issuance of circulars the move is devoid of any explanatory note about the reasons why the rates had to be raised. So, the answerability to the public is missing here. This gives the government the logic to call the budget as one for the poor containing no fresh levies. Government also knows people can see through their game but could not care less. Much has been said and written about systems loss caused by inefficiency, corruption, mismanagement, etc. The suggested improvements in these areas have fallen flat on the bosses and the ordinary mortals of organisations concerned. Neither has corruption decreased nor services improved. The situation has come to such a pass that it has become wholly unmanageable and unwieldy.

But the consumers, or shall we say sufferers, have been assured of a reduction in the systems loss from 41 per cent to 32 per cent by 2002 by the WASA chairman. What about the PDB's time frame about cutting back on systems loss? Be that as it may, with every increase in the utility rates the responsibilities of PDB and WASA increase to provide better services to consumers.

Budget: Its Rhetoric and Economic Expansion Path

by Anu Muhammad

The local and global policymakers always emphasize GDP growth for locating development path. Bangladesh, according to that criterion, is in fairly good condition. More than 5 per cent GDP growth is not low in present global context. But the question is what economic activities are behind this growth? What sort of economy is it expanding?

BUDGET always is supposed to give a picture of the sources of resource mobilisation necessary to take the economy ahead and also the direction of the expenditure by which the nature of the economy is determined. The finance minister proudly declared last year that his budget was "free of new taxes". It had just expanded tax-net by expanding VAT-net. It does not need any rigorous analysis to understand that the meaning of yes or no tax does not carry equal meaning to everybody. Expansion of VAT is not a new tax for employer or big houses because this is a very efficient system of indirect tax for shifting burden on the shoulder of general consumers. For the general consumers this is nothing but a new burden of taxes.

It seems that the governments, always love to take the steps, outside budget, those affect people's economic life. For example, devaluation of Taka, rise of gas-electricity prices etc are effective measures of taxing people and transfer resources from one end to another, but these are not discussed in public forum or in the budget. In mobilizing resources necessary for running state machinery the governments seem to feel comfortable to squeeze people, remain complaining that the tax-base is too small keeping option to expand it by imposing more indirect tax open but at the same time keeping man about the high potential taxpayers, i.e., multimillionaires. According to different estimates, we have thousands of multimillionaires and according to UNDP, 'black' money running

in our economy equals to approximately one-third of that GDP. But these people are not used to pay but to accumulate. Maintaining the role as the sincere-most protector of these criminal-accumulators cannot solve the problem of low tax-GDP ratio. So, the last resort is to squeeze people in and outside budget.

What is the trend of resource flow?

And what happened with that resources mobilized mostly from hard working people? Where does it go? What is the priority?

From the tables given below we get a linear picture. In 1997-98 revised revenue budget expenditure increased by more than 8 billion taka, it did not spread evenly amongst sectors. In fact, highest growth in expenditure budget.

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development budget shrank by 6 billion taka, revenue budget was reduced by only 440 million. In the next year things got worse. The increase in revenue budget nearly equals to the amount the development budget loses. The priority of expenditure and pattern of resource transfer is very much clear. Resources are virtually stolen from announced development budget for mere maintaining

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