

Criminals in PM's Backyard

WE wonder how many proofs does the Prime Minister need to be convinced that her own backyard is infested with criminals brandishing illegal weapons and springing all sorts of unpleasant surprises. The four activists of the ruling party-backed BCL, who were beaten and detained by angry employees after they had stormed into the *Shikha Bhaban* and shot three people protesting the attack on a guard who tried to prevent the BCL leaders from parking in front of a garage, certainly came up with the latest desperado act on Monday. The four taken into police custody and the other two who managed to escape the public wrath may very well slip through the fingers of law once the initial hue and cry over the incident dies down.

There have been countless instances where people somehow connected to the ruling party got away with impunity even after committing the most heinous form of felony. Even worse, offsprings of a few senior AL leaders, ministers and parliamentarians have also chimed in. Two of the Chief Whip's sons, one charged with forcible occupation of a flat in Kalabagan and the other with kidnapping a schoolboy, are yet to be arraigned to court. It does not look likely that they would ever be. Similar is the case with the son of a state minister who was involved in constructing an illegal shopping complex in Uttara. Although the building was eventually bulldozed, no case was actually filed against the offenders.

Such indulgence has bred an all-pervasive arrogance amongst leaders and activists of the ruling party and its offshoots, and their offsprings and relatives, and this sentiment has found expression in the most fascistic manner. The Prime Minister and her aides, we hope, would realise the far-reaching implication of such pampering and pandering. Unless dealt with an iron hand, continuation of the dangerous trend would not only lead to anarchy countrywide but could also internally destroy Awami League as a party.

Better Late than Never

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina seems to be in a hurry at the fleeting part of her current tenure to try and meet some of the major pledges she had made prior to the hustings four years ago. Although belated we would still like her to deliver on the promises she definitely put on the cold storage for the best part of her tenure. The PM has announced that she will give autonomy to the state-run electronic media and ensure separation of the judiciary from the executive before the next general election which is due a year on.

While we greatly value her renewal of pledges it is the previous such declarations of intent going off-course that we would like to recall by way of persuading the PM to keep at it determinedly this time around. Grant of autonomy to radio and television and effecting separation of the judiciary from the administration were not only her electoral pledges which she never tired of repeating whenever the opportunity presented itself but she also put on the roll some kind of a spade-work in those directions. But all of this was not evidently followed up to a point of fruition thereby reflecting adversely on the government's political will and sincerity of purpose.

In specific terms, it is worth remembering though that a national broadcasting commission was constituted, a delegation from it also visited places, including such prestigious institutions like the BBC and CBC and a set of recommendations was duly submitted by it to the government. But then the recommendations were not made public, they getting subsequently buried under a sheet of dusts, so to speak. In fact, nothing has been heard of it during the last two years or so which created an impression that the government's stake in keeping the electronic media under its control has grown all the time.

One might discern an element of expediency or hypocrisy in the belated renewal of promise to deliver on those two pledges as a pre-election vote catching ploy. Even so, we would like to see the Prime Minister live up to her words. As a first step she ought to immediately make the report of the national broadcasting commission public in full. This will form the right kind of a prelude to granting autonomy to the electronic media on an urgent basis to test its worth before the next election.

Simultaneously it is highly imperative that concrete steps are taken to secure the independence of the judiciary from the executive so that democracy strikes a deep root.

Kudos to Rajuk

THE photograph on the front page of the national press along with a small but important news item must have gladdened the hearts of many, particularly of those citizens who believe in the rule of law. We offer our sincere thanks to Rajuk and warmly congratulate them on their summoning enough courage to embark upon such a daunting task of reclaiming land from illegal possession, made all the more difficult by political muscle-flexing and string pulling by influentials. The size of the recovered land on Tuesday is not as important as the dent made in a hitherto unassailable area yet this is just the beginning and we hope Rajuk has a fairly long list of trespassers of its properties to go by in many areas of the town. We believe they will gradually move into other places and demolish illegal constructions and recover occupied lands without fear or favour. As a professional organisation entrusted with the very important task of building a new-look capital city, Rajuk has largely failed to play its due role for reasons best known to it. But we hope they will overcome their weaknesses and discharge their responsibility with impartiality and professionalism. Let not the roar die down into a whimper. What has begun must be brought to its logical conclusion. The recovered land and waterbodies must be protected from exploitation in future. Otherwise it will relapse, perhaps with vengeance.

Pause in the Middle East

In the shifting sands of the Middle East time has become a rare commodity. The US has played a pivotal role in finding a solution to the Middle East conflict. The credit for the fact that people of the world can breathe more easily on the question of the Middle East, must go to former President Jimmy Carter and more so to President Bill Clinton. President Clinton has invested more time and energy on this issue than any other.

The temporary halt in the Peace Process is due to the problem raised by his coalition partner, the ultra religious Shaas party. Their ministers in the coalition have withdrawn from the Cabinet. This in itself does not threaten the coalition although Barak is trying his best to keep Shaas within his fold. For what he is attempting — namely comprehensive peace settlement with all his Arab neighbours — is a matter affecting the entire Israeli nation and cannot be measured in terms of coalition support. In any case Ehud Barak has been treading a careful path and has attempted to carry the nation with him. Of course it would be too much to expect that Barak receives support from the main opposition, the Likud party.

There are some clearly plus points in favour of Ehud Barak. During the election campaign more than a year ago, he had promised to the electorate that he would withdraw Israeli troops from South Lebanon by September, 2000. The question of stationing Israeli troops in South Lebanon had become an emotional issue with successive Israeli Governments. The predecessor of Barak, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, hummed and hawed but did precious little and casually among the Israeli soldiers, faced with the die hard opposition of Hizbullah guerrillas, continued to mount. And so did the chorus rise within Israel to withdraw from South Lebanon. From what had started as a *cord-on sanitaire* around Israel turned out to be a plain *cord-on* around Israel's neck. Israeli forces evacuated South Lebanon very recently, with what appeared to be unseemly haste and we witnessed the triumphant return of the Hizbullahs in South Lebanon.

Palestine has been the heart and soul of the Middle East dispute for half a century. Successive US Presidents, starting with democratic President Jimmy Carter, have invested heavily in the peace process. Under the Carter presidency the Camp David Accord was signed in 1979 leading to the withdrawal of Israel from the vast Egyptian desert of Sinai and establishment of the first exchange of embassies between Israel and the most important

Arab country, Egypt. As a part of the Camp David Accord there was a provision for the settlement of dispute between Palestine and Israel. We must remember that during the half century of the Middle East dispute, the principal aggrieved party has been Palestine for, in the 1948 war between the Arabs and Israel, the Palestinians

President — Bill Clinton — in the White House for the Middle East Peace Process to make a spectacular take off. There was a clear breakthrough in Oslo, the capital of Norway, for the Palestinians and Israelis agreed to settle their dispute within a time-frame. A five-year period was set and the negotiations started in right

has been costly in terms of leadership slaughter.

The peace process has steadily moved forward. A peace accord has been signed between Israel and Jordan. Palestine and Israel are on their doorsteps to sign a final peace accord in September next. Israel has been withdrawing from occupied West Bank inch by inch. Sometimes the progress is excruciatingly slow. The good news, however, is that Ehud Barak has succeeded in establishing a rapport of mutual trust with his Arab counterparts, where his predecessor had miserably failed delaying the peace process by a couple of years.

With the question of South Lebanon out of the way, the only question that remains is a Peace deal between Syria and Israel. Israel occupies Golan Heights of Syria since the War of 1967. Negotiations have been held between Syria and Israel a number of times. Late President Hafez al-Assad of Syria had a few meetings with President Bill Clinton. Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria with an iron hand for three decades. He had of late

started grooming his son for his job. There can be no doubt that the new leadership in Syria will take a little time to settle down.

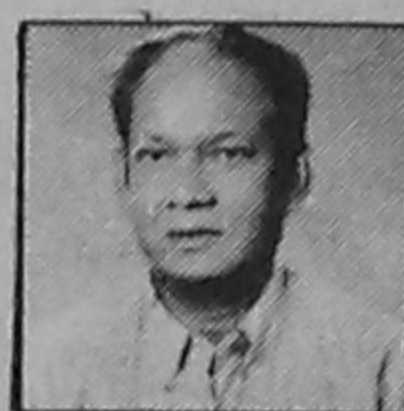
The truth, however, is that in the shifting sands of the Middle East time has become a rare commodity. The US has played a pivotal role in finding a solution to the Middle East conflict. The credit for the fact that people of the world can breathe more easily on the question of the Middle East, must go to former President Jimmy Carter and more so to President Bill Clinton. President Clinton has invested more time and energy on this issue than any other.

The best farewell gift that the leaders of the Middle East can offer to this young, indefatigable President of the USA, is to offer him a Comprehensive Settlement of the Middle East conflict. Indeed it is in the supreme interest of the leaders of the Middle East to take the bull by the horn and sign the Deal before it is too late. It is less than certain that the successor of Bill Clinton will enjoy the kind of personal trust and confidence, that has been the hallmark of Clinton presidency. And this insight of his detractors, particularly the Republicans, who have stopped at nothing in order to drag him down in the mud.

History beckons the leaders of the Middle East to wake to a brilliant tomorrow. Will they seize this opportunity?

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



were uprooted from their hearths and homes and became international refugees. I was Ambassador of Bangladesh to the White House with a beaming Bill Clinton in between. The spectacle was watched by millions around the world on their TV screens. This became the most watched handshake of the world. Rabin later paid with his life in the hands of an assassin as had President Anwar Sadat a few years ago. The peace process

earnest. The negotiations received a massive boost when Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shook hands on the terrace of the White House with a beaming Bill Clinton in between. The spectacle was watched by millions around the world on their TV screens. This became the most watched handshake of the world. Rabin later paid with his life in the hands of an assassin as had President Anwar Sadat a few years ago. The peace process

Shaukat Proposes, Who Disposes?

Shaukat's proposals are founded on one premise and one premise alone, drastic increase of revenues. It is not a matter of discretion anymore, Pakistan's economic survival depends upon having a revenue-Czar who will deliver. The road to economic apocalypse is becoming increasingly familiar if not any less uncomfortable.

incarceration, etc. till you caught up. However, CBR had the last laugh, importers will now be held to blackmail for 'under-invoicing' at the discretion of the Principal Appraiser (PA), the threat of confiscation by Customs Collectors (who will never dare disagree with the PA's observations) will be very real.

Shaukat optimistically expects to collect direct taxes of Rs 435.7 billion, in 1999-2000 this was revised downwards to Rs 351.6 billion. And indirect taxes are also projected to go up to Rs. 298.2 billion. GST revising 44 per cent to Rs 172.60 billion from Rs 120 billion. The figures are way beyond the realisation of present experience, skeptics predict that not one but many mini-budgets cloud Pakistan's immediate future.

The touchstone of any budget lies not in juggling with figures but in asking what is in it for the common man, given that the abolishing of their wealth tax. Why did Shaukat repeat the cliché 'the rich have become richer and the poor poorer' when the budget proceeded to do the same, rhetoric notwithstanding? Statistics show 10 per cent more people live below the poverty line than at the beginning of the last decade; presently fully 32 per cent of the population is desperately poor. The government has translated some of the rhetoric about poverty alleviation into substance by allocating approximately Rs 21 billion. However one does not agree with the proposed utilisation, it's focus should be employment generation at the lower end of the spectrum, particularly in Services

rather than handing out largesse. The relief of Rs 2000 as a lump sum allowance for poor employees is a mistake. People who get used to handouts never become productive, focus should have again been on employment generation and/or the means to earn more. The establishment of a micro-credit bank is an excellent initiative, let's wait and see how much credit will actively go to the genuinely poor. A mandatory allocation of 20 per cent of the loans disbursed by every commercial bank in the country to be earmarked for the poor, duly

increase it requires courage not to enter into an arms race but one cannot afford to be foolhardy, forget the glory of 'the Charge of the Light Brigade'. An increase of actual defence spending by about Rs 22 billion is the very minimum one can take a calculated risk with. How much longer will heavy armaments, small arms to heavy artillery, can be held off in a gambit that our military planners seem to be prepared to take in the face of Indian belligerency. Equating the threat perception with the state of our economy is

we must invest more for the future. Allowing 70 per cent of refund on duty drawbacks within 24 hours is also very commendable. However, the increase of diesel prices a few hours before the Budget snacks of another sleight of hand: in the face of such ambiguity are the housewives wrong in worrying that other utility rates will also rise? The diesel price hike will result in higher consumer prices, at the very least the transportation used by the poor will be dearer.

The reducing of customs duties and sales taxes across the board to 30 per cent is supposed to help invigorate industry, unfortunately it is not low enough as yet by about 10-15 per cent. Too many times we have erred in giving protection to local industry by increasing the duty on imported items, resulting in indifferent quality goods at high cost. Let us be very clear that rampant smuggling has sounded the death knell for local manufacture, not high taxes. High taxes has been the reason for unabated smuggling, a base-line philosophy established by CBR successive gurus with personal motivation over the years. Come to Dubai and find out who are the richest Pakistanis? Bring down the duties on most imported items, down to 15-20 per cent, (approximately the cost of smuggling any item), this would force local manufacturers to compete both in price and quality. By keeping duties/sales taxes on raw material and components at zero and eliminating other taxes, foreign manufacturers will have tremendous incentive to produce things lo-

cally, thereby increasing employment. What's happening in Dubai is no miracle, the city-state has been built on the follies of an errant bureaucracy conspiring to fill their own pockets at the cost of the government's coffers. The provision of having a Tax Ombudsman is excellent, this necessary initiative should go a long way in curbing the atrocities of the taxmen. The import of furnace oil to the private sector is a good decision, it will give the IPPs some heart, bringing down the price of electricity-production and easing the tariff hawt-burning.

As someone who pushed the consumer sector in his private banking' days, the Finance Minister was expected to give a solid hand to the Services sector, the lack of such support was rather disappointing. Jobs are very necessary and can be created in the Services Sector without foreign investment (or borrowing). As regards tax revenues, in the face of dire prediction of possible economic apocalypse, only an outstanding Albert Speer-like person should be the chief tax collector. Shaukat's proposals are founded on one premise and one premise alone, drastic increase of revenues. It is not a matter of discretion anymore, Pakistan's economic survival depends upon having a revenue-Czar who will deliver. The road to economic apocalypse is becoming increasingly familiar if not any less uncomfortable. Sane counsel is advising that even though the budget is very far from earth-shaking, reason and sanity requires giving the budget a chance to prove that it is worth the paper it is typed upon. Or throw it into the wind which cannot read, what does frustrated aspirations matter to the people of Pakistan anyway? We are familiar with that particular road.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

verified by creditable private sector agencies that the 'poor' are really poor, would be more practical.

Some people may call it a sleight of hand, some call the shifting of Rs 26.1 billion meant for 'military pensions' to the account of 'civilian administrative expenditures' realistic apportioning. It may push the cost of running the civil service up by a drastic 66 per cent in the projected Rs 80.2 billion, at least 17 per cent more is available for Defence expenditures than in 1999-2000. India has increased its military spending by Rs 148 billion, much in excess of what is proposed for Pakistan's total defence budget. Faced with this

singularly bold, they have obviously decided that the economy is the greater threat. It is also a major departure from the military mindset, a clear signal to the IMF and the World Bank that even a military government faced with very visible external dangers considers an economic threat to be more real.

The reduction of duties on newspaper from 10 per cent to 5 per cent helps the cause of education in the production of cheaper books. The reduction of income taxes vide a slab basis on the salaried class is also very welcome, this class desperately needs relief. The allocation for information development as requested by Dr Ataur Rahman is not enough.

OPINION

"Defence Budget of Bangladesh: An Analysis"

Professor Azam Siddique

Very recently I happened to come across the article 'Defence Budget of Bangladesh: An Analysis' in 'The Daily Star' dated 26 May 2000 written by Group Captain Ishfaq Ilyas Choudhury. In the article the writer has put forward his ideas and comments in favour of reducing the defence budget and defence forces of Bangladesh as well. While going through the article I could find that often it suffered from lack of true information and ground knowledge. It is also not clear as to what he wanted to convey by reduction of forces and to what strength and increase effectiveness of forces by what means? There is no denying the fact that we need to develop our nation in all respects particularly socio-economic. A delicate balance has to be worked out between security and development. Minimum security providing stability is essential for development.

At the beginning of the article under the sub-heading 'Worldwide trends in defence expenditure' the writer has tried to reflect that the defence expenditure in the whole world is in decline after the cold war. But here he has only referred to the West including North America which does not actually reflect the worldwide trends. Besides he also tried to relate Western trend in post cold war situation to us wherein our country is not affected by post cold war situation rather it is more affected by the regional security environment and situation. On the other hand under the sub-heading 'Defence budget in the developing countries' he made a mention about the growth of defence expenditure in Southern Hemisphere which also contradicts the sub-heading 'Worldwide trends in defence expenditure.' He has mentioned that the defence expenditure of less developed countries often reflect military's power and influence rather than the perceived mili-

tary threats. But the example of India can be drawn here for which it is not applicable.

From the above chart and information available in Military Balance Journal of the year 1999-2000 it is found that India accounts for two-thirds of regional military spending and India and Pakistan together account for nearly 85 per cent. On the other hand, our defence budget is not only one of the lowest in South Asia but also that among the least developed countries. Here I intentionally did not mention about Bhutan since they do not have any army. It is clear that India's population is about 7.5 times larger than ours, GDP is 14.21 times higher and defence expenditure is 22.78 times greater than ours. On the other hand, the population and GDP of Myanmar is half of ours. But their defence expenditure is nearly 3.5 times greater than ours. It can be mentioned here that the defence budget of a country depends on her overall security environment especially on her counterpart's regional defence expenditure and her own capability.

Again under the sub-heading 'Threat perspective of Bangladesh' it is mentioned that there is little likelihood of major conflict with our neighbours and in the short term threat of external aggression against Bangladesh is negligible as external threat environment remains calm. Again the writer has mentioned that some foreign intelligence agencies are using Bangladesh as a launching pad to prosecute their individual objectives. Now here remain few questions

to be answered: (1) What are the basis for these assumptions? (2) What about the external aggression against Bangladesh in the long term? (3) Who is responsible for handling the foreign intelligence agencies using Bangladesh as a launching pad to prosecute their individual objectives? Again from the above statements it can be referred here that in the context of regional and world politics and diplomacy nobody is friend forever. Because every country has its own interest and as such relationship changes with changing requirements and situation. Besides our country's geo-political importance makes or may make it vulnerable to the regional and world powers as they seem to have high point of interest in it. Moreover, recent discovery of natural resources i.e., gas and oil also makes it a high point of interest to other nations. A case in point is the ever conflicting Africa where the interest of Western powers loom large mawkishly to grab a piece of the pie, namely the gold and diamond mines. None of these fighting African countries possess a credible Army. Besides the probable security threats mentioned by the writer in many cases are not relevant to the military. Because those threats are related to law and order situation and internal security which is to be maintained by police and paramilitary forces; whereas military's main business is to protect and maintain the sovereignty of the country.

One should not mix up such things that are likely to confuse and mislead common people.

In another portion of the article under the sub-heading 'Socio-economic conditions vis-a-vis defence budget,' it is mentioned that there is an absence of immediate threat of external aggression. But the question is how long is the time frame for the most probable security threats against Bangladesh and how will they and what? Again under the same sub-heading the writer mentions that even if the defence budget increased to 2-3 per cent of the GDP, we still would not be able to create a balanced force structure because of a very small GDP. But if we cannot make balance at that rate, how can we afford to reduce further?

Under the sub-heading 'Meeting the national security objectives' the writer has mentioned that the forces should be asked to perform only those roles which they could do with the given resources and do fewer tasks effectively. But here we should remember that we cannot compromise on security of the nation because of the resource constraint. At the same time we should also remember that we create an organisation to perform a task — and do not create a task to suit an organisation. Besides, the writer has mentioned that on army's part there is a need to tailor the force to fight the type of conflicts that we visualise in the future. But he has not mentioned about the type of conflicts he visualises and what should be the size of the force. Then he has questioned the continuity of operating aircraft and ships which have no operational utility. Here I would like to mention that Air Force in Bangladesh may have less operational utility, and also may be Navy but the Army has been successful in Chittagong Hill Tracts and in

all UN missions so far, and so may be the former two in times of need.

In the conclusion the writer has mentioned that in recent years while the gross defence budget continued to grow in its share of the national budget, the GDP showed a declining trend. But this is not statistically true. Again he has written that Bangladesh shares a peaceful border with her neighbours. But it is disturbing at times in the remotest areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts. He has mentioned that there is no tangible external military threat against Bangladesh in the coming decades. This is perhaps a self-complacent statement for the writer only. Again he has mentioned that the aim should be to increase the forces' effectiveness and the forces should be organised, equipped, trained and motivated to meet security challenges of the future. But as per his previous statement there are little external and internal threats and as such military has no great role to play. Here we find a self-contradictory statement of the writer.

There are some discussion about tailoring the existing defence forces like reducing squadrons of airforce and size of the naval fleet. Here I think there could be an option especially as regards airforce. Aircraft are very costly to procure and maintain and at the same time it can be replaced and compensated to a great extent by air defence artillery with much cheaper cost. We can go for the option of a versatile air defence system which can be a highly mobile and widely dispersed covering the whole country with a combination of guns and missiles (long and short range). Besides, to match our potential adversary who may have very modern and versatile supersonic aircraft we also need to have multi-role supersonic combat aircraft even if they are very expensive for us.

Moreover we all know that our foreign policy is 'friendship to all and malice to none' and as such our overall defence policy is defensive and not aggressive. Since aircraft are normally used for a variety of role namely ground attack, interception (air defence) and fighter/bomber etc, we can reduce it to a minimum which is of critical requirement i.e. we may go for helicopter gunships, utility helicopters and transport aircraft operated under Army Aviation. In that case all radar, air defence operation centre may come under the Army and the country may be relieved of the huge cost of maintaining a full fledged Air Force as rightly pointed out by the writer who is also a senior officer of that service.

It can be mentioned here strongly that our defence budget does not solely affect the economic growth and human development of our country. Because there are many other highly negative factors like corruption, political instability, lack of accurate and genuine planning etc, which badly affect the economic growth and human development in the real sense. Defence forces cannot be measured on the basis of profit and loss. If you lose your sovereignty then you lose everything. Take the example of Sri Lanka, a classic picture of poorly organised and ill-trained defence force. Forty thousand regular troops being encircled by about 10,000 dissident insurgents. A major part of the country is now under the threat of dismemberment and disintegration from the mainland. Bangladesh Army has not allowed a yard or foot of land to the so-called Shanti Bahini in its 27 years of counter insurgency battle. This was only possible because of the immaculate training, vision, planning and reckless valour demonstrated by our troops in the remote jungles of Chittagong Hill Tracts.