

Economy and expenditure over-run

Be warned of crippling distortions

ORMALLY, the last quarter of a financial year is marked by an ADP-centred spending spree in our country. But if the quarter in question coincides with the end of a government's incumbency, as in the present case, one would not know how frenetic project expenditure can get. Surely, there is nothing 'lame-duck' about that pre-election spending smacking of partisan rather than fair economic considerations.

Where more than half of the total development budget has to be implemented in the last quarter of a fiscal with the disadvantage of reduced foreign aid disbursements the pressure is obviously on local financing. In other words, the government will have to borrow heavily from the banking and even non-banking system. Such development expenditure based on borrowing is not an evil by itself but it is the lack of quality in such expenditure that makes it so pernicious. This will raise the rate of inflation which continuing good harvests have enabled us to keep at a low level thus far. Higher inflation would mean increased cost of investment and that of production, both agricultural and industrial. The rapid growth of the manufacturing sector that has broken the cycle of industrial sluggishness could be halted much the same way that agricultural productivity might come under strain.

As it is, payments in hard currency to foreign companies producing gas for us are putting a strain on our forex reserve which seems ill-put to cover imports for three months. The imports are outstripping exports, so that a balance of payment deficit stares us in the face.

We warn the government against any unbridled pre-election expenditure that by one fell stroke might wreak a havoc on the fledgling macro-economic indicators.

We have seen Ershad create a spoils system in a bid to legitimise his hold on power he had usurped. Begum Khaleda Zia, who democratically replaced the autocrat by virtue of an electoral victory did not need any crutch but her government, too, came to be associated with a degree of bank loan escalation in the prelude to 1996 elections. Are we to see the present government exceed the previous scale of economic distortions as a pre-election phenomenon?

Vigilante action is risky business

Highlights gaps in law and order

ICKSHAW puller Mizanur Rahman is to be commended in no uncertain terms for heroism and quick thinking. Overhearing a conversation between two male passengers in the Dhaka University area on Saturday, the rickshaw puller realised that they were planning a mugging. Mizanur Rahman took the huge risk of pedalling furiously towards a police station and raising the alarm. He, himself, wrestled one of the men to the ground. Eventually, both were handed over to the police. In a similar incident earlier this week, a woman travelling by rickshaw who was actually mugged, managed to nab one of her assailants. Sufia Malek and her companion, Jahanara, were attacked near Asad Gate. Sufia grabbed her attacker and aided by passersby, held on until the mugger had been subdued.

These two incidents highlight not only the escalation in crime, but also increasing resistance by victims. Heroic as these acts might be, they raise the disturbing question: why are ordinary people being forced to resort to protecting themselves? If the physical presence of police patrols for a large population is a tall order, the minimum expected is an implicit fear of the law. But this is hardly the case. Muggers are encouraged to commit offences because trust in the law enforcement system has been eroded. This leaves ordinary people at the mercy of random muggings, and faced with pervasive insecurity in the public space.

By fighting back against armed assailants, victims run untold risks. In the two recent incidents, the muggers were nabbed, but there are scores of other cases in which the victims are injured or even killed and the attackers escape, only to repeat the offence. The rickshaw puller and the women could have ended up as statistics, adding to the death toll or the list of injured. Will the authorities wake up to their responsibilities?

Back-to-the-future policy in Putin's Russia



BRIG (Rtd) M ABDUL HAFIZ

In 1993. While Putin does assert his leadership, the Russians for the first time after Lenin stand solidly behind him. How has this come about?

Putin's magic is simple. He is only exploiting the Russians' irresistible nostalgia for the Soviet past. Weary of endless economic miseries, corruption, violent crimes and above all, disillusioned and embarrassed by their fall from a super-power status Russians seem to be

power under the communists both Putin and his 'Unity' party are rather at odds with them on policy matters. Only recently the president announced an ambitious programme of liberal economic reforms that made the community blanch. In fact, Putin has only brought back the kind of strong central regime that sustained not only the ideology but ensured job for every one, a crime free society and an orderly civic life. Putin's idea is

to KGB adorned its headquarters with a plaque praising Yuri Andropov, a former KGB chief and later the president of Soviet Union as an 'outstanding Soviet figure.' It became further evident when he expansively drank a toast on Stalin's birthday or revived the Soviet-era national anthem. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin is not apologetic for Russia's Soviet past and its confrontation with the Western World. He has no qualm also in

ing, all of his throwbacks have however not been welcome. In reviving the Soviet past it is feared that the democracy under trial for last ten years will be the first casualty. The symptoms are too obvious to be ignored. Putin has already consolidated enormous personal power which is diagonally opposed to fostering democratic spirit. Recently his loyal political organisation, the Unity Party has announced its merger with three other parties

from among the 'foreign intelligence organisations.' The new spy cases have been cropping up almost everyday, since then. Recently an FSB spokesman accused a leading member of Chechen separatist movement of being a 'CIA agent'. Also back are the practice of declaring foreign critics of the government policy 'persona non grata.' Gulags are not perhaps making a comeback but solitary confinement is already there with trials closed to the public.

However, at the end of the day several questions with regards to Putin's magic remain unanswered. How far Putin intends to ride the wave of nostalgia for Soviet past? Can nostalgia alone sustain his brand of reforms aiming both at achieving Russia's greatness and keeping his grip tight over an unwieldy polity? Is there a coherent ideology behind Putinism? After all, it is the ideology that provides an all encompassing world view, only through which one has to organise and understand everything: from history to politics to even the familial relations. Putin is sure to be mired in the morass of confusion unless he devises and sets his ideology right.

While he has apparently rejected communism as the ideology to be adopted by him he will also find it difficult to strike a balance between his inclination for democracy and liberal reforms and an inherent instinct working in him to achieve them through authoritarian means.

PERSPECTIVES

Is there a coherent ideology behind Putinism? After all, it is the ideology that provides an all encompassing world view, only through which one has to organise and understand everything: from history to politics to even the familial relations. Putin is sure to be mired in the morass of confusion unless he devises and sets his ideology right.

searching for a new mooring and they are rushing back to the past to find it. In a recent poll 79 per cent of those surveyed said that they regretted the collapse of Soviet Union. Not only Putin knows that the dissolution of the Union has been the biggest emotional setback for his people, he himself is also known for his sentimental regard for the country's totalitarian past. Therefore, steering the course of Russia he is simply putting himself on the same wavelength as that of the vast majority of Russians who miss the USSR and have enduring respect for leaders like Brezhnev and Lenin. Obviously, Russia today is witnessing an extraordinary revival of things that were Soviet making. No one understands it better than Putin, the man of the moment, and in his actions and policies he is just answering to those popular urges.

But Putin is certainly not a communist; neither does he have any predilection for its ideology. Notwithstanding his ostensible admiration for Russia becoming a super-

not to return to the ideological past but to give most Russians the promise of what they yearn for a strong Russia once more able to stand its ground in a hostile world. It is the old Soviet system bereft, of course, of communism but immersed in nationalist zeal allowing its leader a free ride onto the road to glory. Its hall marks are politics organised tightly around the president, his powerful Kremlin administration, his 'Unity' party and a new elite drawn from the military and KGB.

With his objectives in no ambiguity Putin has literally thrown Russia back to the past. In refashioning things from popular attitude to institution he has played significant role in Russia's back-to-the-future movement. He consciously rehabilitated many things that carried Soviet-era symbol. Not only he exploits his people's weakness for the Soviet past he himself is no less imbued with the spirit of those heady days of Russian glory. This explains why he, during his term as the head of the FSB, the domestic successor

embracing the leaders of Cuba, Vietnam or North Korea.

The Russians are already grateful to the man giving them a sense of pride. This has led even to the emergence of a Putin cult which Putin himself seems to be savouring. He has a hidden desire to match the popularity of another Vladimir in Russian politics irrespective of whether he believes in the latter's ideology or not. Because Putin is indeed overwhelmed by the respects of the Russians still reserved for Vladimir Lenin. Putin enthusiasts also abound in the country and have penned songs and poems glorifying Putin's deeds. A kind of Putin-mania sweeps Putin's home town St. Petersburg where thousands of copies of his biography are distributed among the city's elementary school children. This adulation testifies Russia's belief in his ability to lead them to the country's lost glory. Indeed, Putin's approval ratings hover around 70 per cent.

Putin's populism notwithstanding

including its erstwhile rival, the Fatherland party thus reducing the political opposition. It obviously aims at creating a hypertrophied 'party of power' that will give Putin undisputed control over the parliament. According to critics it will ultimately create a 'Politburo' of sorts. To limit the number of political parties to manageable few is not Putin's only intent that cuts at the fundamentals of democracy, he is also averse to independent media. He has already started muzzling the press in Russia.

An unusually intense adoration

of the past is inadvertently leading to the reincarnation not only of authoritarianism but many darker practices of Soviet days like the militarization,

spycraft, repression and show trials.

Putin has already proposed

compulsory military training for high

school students as part of the larger

campaign for the 'patriotic military education' of Russian Youth. In

1999 Putin declared that ecological

activists in Russia were actually

OPINION

Open statements by diplomats: How much within norms?

MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

As a citizen and also as the chairman of a non-political and neutral civic body, I felt dismayed over the "citizens' role" played by diplomats of some donor countries by making open statements on May 8 at two different public forums one provided by the Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU) and the other by Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA). These diplomats have delivered open statements on country's governance, state of democracy, law and order situation, electoral process and their concern over ensuing election, confrontational politics, all political parties participation in the election and acceptance of the election results, pre-election pledges to take seats in the parliament and on hosts of other issues. This is not the first time that such a thing has happened. Earlier also some controversies arose over the remarks of an envoy of a European country. Being dependant on aid, our governments are obviously at the receiving end and very often swallow bundles of unpleasant words.

However, during over 12 years of my diplomatic assignments in several European countries I never came across any open discussion forum where the envoys delivered some heavy remarks on governance and also on the opposition's role in the parliament and in the street.

The recently held presidential election of a country which rightly boasts of its strong democracy had faced a series of electoral problems including voting procedures, vote

counting mechanisms etc. There were several protests, discussions, comments on the issues but these were not at all openly and jointly commented upon by the envoys of the countries of the world. Indeed, that was not the business of the envoys of other countries. The country concerned sorted out its problems on the basis of its prevailing laws and regulations.

However, the countries involved in the development process of another country through aid may have some obligations to point out the problems in the implementation of the development projects where the donor countries' funds are involved as the respective governments are expected to explain to the taxpayers the correct use of taxpayers' money. But while doing so, the countries concerned need to follow the internationally accepted norms and use the official and diplomatic channels and not open forums. **Everything cannot be said by everyone at all places. Even a good thing is not said at a wrong place. For diplomats, however, even "freedom of expression" has restricted meaning circumscribed by the diplomatic norms.**

It's not for me or any one else to tell what the envoys should or should not do. They are all very senior diplomats with extensive experiences. This is why I did not go into the details of the statements which include very friendly comments but unfortunately also include words that do offend the sentiments of many of the citizens. My comments here are intended to focus on the methods used so that we could avoid misunderstanding in the future.

To my mind, the envoys would have been fully within their diplomatic rights and jurisdiction if they had resorted to official and diplomatic channels to vent their genuine grievances. They have access to even the top leaders of the government and the opposition. And such actions would have been more effective as they could have raised the issues directly with the leadership concerned. The present open forum strategy has created a lot of confusion and anxieties in the minds of many citizens. The reactions that I could gather from some other people including some former Bangladeshi ambassadors, journalists, executives etc were all against the open forums used by the envoys for expressing their views. Undoubtedly, the envoys' remarks, though many of them are valid, tend to undermine the sovereignty of a country. I am sure, the same envoys would not like such thing to happen in their own countries. However, the argument could be that these countries are not recipients of any aid from any other country, but aid does not change the internationally recognised diplomatic norms and practices.

The people of Bangladesh fought Liberation war and then again fought under the leadership of two major political parties and with the support of other like-minded political parties to get rid of the dictatorial rule and thereby established democracy. These struggles were well recognised by an envoy while making the statement at the roundtable, which deserves appreciation. As a young democracy, it is expected that Bangladesh would take some time to remove all the

bottlenecks that stand in the way of firm democracy. We have, however, some special problem like absence of communication between the leaders of the ruling party and the opposition. As civic bodies we are making efforts in different ways sometimes with publicity and sometimes without publicity. The Trade Organisations led by their apex body have also been working on the problems and we hope things would improve as a result of the efforts made by all. Let the citizens themselves work and solve their own problems. However, the friendly countries and particularly those concerned with our development process may help by taking up the issues through official and diplomatic channels and insisting on quick remedial measures. There they would even be within their rights to tell the government that aid quantum would not only be reduced but may even be brought to zero if the governance situation does not improve and the ruling party and the opposition do not observe the internally recognised rules and procedures for holding free and fair election.

The envoys representing those countries may, however, publicly announce their decision to send some election monitoring teams with the prior permission of the Election Commission. This will certainly help the electoral process. The decision of a major power to spend \$1.5M of its tax payers money to monitor election in Bangladesh shows its deep interest in the matter. However, the issue of training local poll observers involved in monitoring may need the permission of the Election Commiss-

ion. The Election Commission and the upcoming caretaker government should be kept informed of all the election work undertaken by the envoys for and during election. Let's insist on transparency at all levels and by all concerned. I am sure, the Care-taker government and the Election Commission would ensure transparency at all levels, which is a sine qua non for holding free and fair election.

While expressing views on the matter, I need to say a word about the role of the DRU and BILIA the bodies which organised the forums for the diplomats. These bodies are entitled to organise seminars and debates and one must appreciate their work. Particularly DRU has been very often doing so which make people conscious of the country's problems and these certainly benefit the society. However, the forum provided this time to the diplomats of some donor countries turned out to be an open place for letting their grievances out. It's not clear whether it was intended to be so or it turned out to be so as a result of queries and questions from reporters.

My discussion in the matter with a senior journalist gave me the impression that DRU might have only followed, if it was so intended at all, what happened earlier in terms of discussion with diplomats. Earlier the successive governments and the oppositions called the diplomats to meetings on various occasions and briefed them on issues, apart from aid matters, which should normally be treated as internal matters. The arguments used to be so one political party did it, so the other party must do it. Indeed, such brief-

ing meetings often embarrassed some of the diplomats. Our government and the opposition, whichever parties these are on the basis of election results, should avoid such fit for fat briefing meetings with the diplomats and this would certainly discourage others in doing so.

BILIA's discussion topic "Parliamentary Election: A critical Challenge for Bangladesh's Developing Democracy" to my mind and also to others with whom I discussed, was inappropriate for a diplomat. Some clearly said that that topic obliged the envoy to say some of the things which turned out to be controversial. Indeed, some went to the extent of saying that 'it's not diplomats' fault; we ourselves invite diplomats to say so.'

However, it is true that the envoys, honorable as they are, are invariably invited to speak in different open forums but those generally are on academic, social and intellectual matters etc. Often they speak on issues like international relations, environment, human rights, women's rights and empowerment, poverty alleviation etc and also on issues that do not directly involve the countries they are accredited to. These allow them to remain within internationally accepted diplomatic norms. Let's provide such non-controversial forums to the diplomats and benefit from their wisdom and experiences.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary, Ambassador and founder-president of North South University



Fiends or friends?

We are pained to see in your esteemed newspaper the photograph of an unfortunate boy Haris Khan, 15, who died at DMCH as a result of being tortured by Police Sub Inspector Sattar and ASI Shah Alam at Tongi thana.

We urge the authorities concerned to take necessary steps against those involved with this heinous crime and make them beware of such cruel and inhuman acts which they are committing, one after another. We have seen a lot of misdeeds by the police.

The government should pay special attention to the police force because the police serve the people. People should consider police to be their best friend but when they commit such acts, they are not friends but fiends. Try to be people's friend!

Saghir Ahmed
Azampur, Dhaka

Bold article
Dilara Choudhury's article published on April 25 is a bold narration of facts. In her concluding paragraph, she shows that she still holds some hope in the political parties. Perhaps, such expectations are a little too high and she might, or rather

become frustrated. Her article should make the people of the countries she dealt with aware, alert and thoughtful.

She has written that, "Only heaven, perhaps, knows the answer." Heaven, of course, does know the answer, but the voters do have a responsibility as well. If they fail to be responsible then they shall find themselves in situations far worse than any experienced so far.

Her 'guesstimate' of the amounts plundered might be on the lower side. For instance, the disappearance of US \$50 billion from Pakistan in the last 20 years.

And in respect of the USA, with reference to the statement by the Peoples Republic of China on games played on human rights, I feel this statement cannot be totally ignored. It is the first time that a country has come forward to cover 213 years, from 1737 to 2000, and break the monopoly of the USA on human rights in other countries. The days of bullying by any individual or group of individuals or this or that country are over.

Human rights are human rights.

Tulu Zaman
Abhay Das Lane, Dhaka

Our intellectuals

I have been touched by the reactions of the Indian intellectuals about the recent border crisis. Intellectuals act as the conscience of a nation. When a nation's territory is attacked or transgressed or trespassed, it is the duty of the border forces to defend it at any cost. In performing this noble task, three Bangladeshi BDR men have been killed by the BSF. While the Indian intellectuals appreciated the role of the BSF and asked for restraint on both sides, Bangladeshi intellectuals have been remarkably silent. Doesn't this border crisis mean anything to them?

However, there is one silver lining on the horizon. The letter "Burden of gratitude" (May 11) breaks the silence. I salute the writer.

M Anisuzzaman
Uttara, Dhaka

Saying "No"

A global programme, organised by UNICEF to say 'yes' to children was inaugurated in Dhaka on April 28th. The prime minister met children in front of the parliament building and later children met with the president

which left nine persons dead. I am really afraid of attending any public meeting, as I don't feel it is secure for our children.