

## New budget gives 'no free lunch' to consumers

Higher taxes should translate into improved services

As a fund raiser Saifur Rahman, perhaps, has few parallels. Strapped for cash, he is not the one to bat his eyes while robbing Paul to pay Peter. But the interesting thing about him is, much that he seems to be scrounging money, it's not the impression of a shoe-string budget he ends up giving. On the contrary, his calculations create the illusion of surplus and plenty -- at least that is how these have to be looked at, until they are proven otherwise at the end of the day. Some 'wizardry' one might marvel; but whether that is of an accountant's variety or of a finance minister's -- one has to wait and see on that to reach a conclusion.

The revenue collection figure for the next fiscal has been set at the record level of Tk 33,084 crore. Aside from other receipts, a lion's share is to come from taxes including VAT. A whole range of daily necessities including even perishables like fish and fruits will carry a new tax-tag on their prices. The price hikes will hit the consumers hard. The middle and low income groups are sure to be affected without any commensurate increase in their purchasing power to cushion off the shock. If the argument is they must be prepared to pay towards a higher growth rate and *per capita* income that would eventually raise their purchasing power, then we have to say it is a matter of grossly misplaced emphasis. Why more potentially revenue-yielding areas and big evaders from high income brackets are not required to shoulder the higher incidence of tax? The assumption that broadening of the tax base means involving the largest number regardless of their capacity to pay may be the most convenient option but it's morally flawed and economically unsound. Curiously, the income tax threshold is being brought down to Tk 75,000 to cover many more people while the corporate tax rates are going to be reduced.

Black money has received assurances of 'no questions asked' if invested in three years' time, this obviously sounding heavily discriminatory against those who pay taxes regularly. Actually, it would provide an indirect impetus to tax evasion and corruption by a very large body of *nouveau riche*, some government and corporation officials not excluded.

Some levy on the business segment of NGO activities was perhaps inevitable but then such business should not be treated at par with that of other profitable concerns which are not into the social sector the way that the NGOs are.

House building and travel costs are set to rise and so are those of IT and newspaper services. There was a plan to have IT village at each thana of Bangladesh with 150 computers in it. The cost over-run stares in the face with 7.5 per cent tax on computer, its parts, modem and CD disks. Exemption of tax on computer software enterprises for the next three years, welcome as it is, would have gone well if no tax were imposed on computers as before. The projected higher cost of printing paper and the VAT on print advertisement are likely to affect the newspaper industry. On the educational plane, the proposed free education up to class XII augurs well. Finally, the English medium schools are going to be taxed.

The tax waivers for agro-based industries and processing units could not have come a day earlier these having a great potential for stimulating productivity and export.

The macro-economic targets have been set at fairly ambitious notches: six per cent GDP growth and deficit contained to the level of five and a half per cent. Domestic borrowing cannot be ruled out while higher costs and flow of revenues might fuel inflation.

The Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan (PRSP) could, however, go down well with the development partners to steady their flow of aid to Bangladesh, a fall-back position Saifur Rahman perhaps can count on in the event that internal revenue collection fell short of the target. The tax expansion flair that Rahman has shown in the budget may have been donor-driven.

But higher the taxes greater the obligation of the government to provide better services to the people. Does the proposed budget give any guidelines for an improvement in terms of governance, environmental pollution and service delivery systems? Are there any provisions made in the budget for separation of the judiciary from the executive and setting up of an independent anti-corruption commission or an ombudsman's office? The answers are in the negative.

A budget cannot be just estimates of income, expenditure and growth rates. It has to have a forward-looking vision and be part of an overall planning perspective encompassing poverty alleviation, higher investment and greater employment on a sustainable basis. But Saifur Rahman's budget has been for the most part an exercise in calculations. Except for taxation his branchchild lacks a reform angle. But have we not urged every new government to take tough reform-related economic decisions during the first year of its incumbency? Hopefully, the intrepid finance minister would make up on this during his mid-term review of the budget.

## TO THE EDITOR

### "Budget blues"

I just read Mr. Hasnat Abdul Hye's column on the budget and the scope it may hold for reducing the deficit etc. I think Mr. Hye is in for a disappointment. He writes about prudent measures to reduce expenditures, curb extravagance and disinvest of public sector enterprises.

Unfortunately if Mr. Hye meant to prepare us or predict any moves by the government to right our shaky finances he scores a zero. BNP is set in its way to what I imagine it perceives as re-election at any cost. Even if it means destroying our economy, our country and any prospects we might have had for development.

### Beowulf Dhaka

### Taxes

The government is planning on widening the tax net. This means that even more of our fellow countrymen will now suffer the inequities that taxpayers like me have been going through for many years. Now even more people will come face to face with the evil incarnate that is tax inspectors and the inquisition of the Tax Tribunals.

In a way I am glad that government officials will also now pay taxes but this only means that the bribes I have to pay are even higher. What of the military? Military officers pay no taxes, why hasn't the tax net been widened to include them?

Come to think about it, why should we pay taxes? What will the money be spent on? Building vain-glorious monuments to past leaders clad in marble and stone, one in Tungipara and another on the way? All we'll see is more golf courses for army officers, luxury cars for Generals and Ministers and maybe more trips to NY for the PM's family.

The Minister says nothing of divesting the State Owned Enterprises or about the bloated ADP that will be used to fund the BNP's next campaign and the politicians' pockets.

A government is as strong as its income and the independence of the people is in direct proportion of their wealth they can enjoy. BNP is going about increasing its power for patronage and corruption. At the same time repressing the right of people to enjoy the fruits of their honest labour and all the while the millionaire meter reader goes on happily making even more money.

# America's war on terrorism and India-Pakistan stand off



DILARA CHOUDHURY

ONCE again ominous war clouds hang over South Asia. India and Pakistan -- two nuclear South Asian arch rivals -- are in an eye-ball to eye-ball situation along the LoC (Line of Control) of disputed Kashmir region over the "cross border terrorism" in the area. All war trappings and paraphernalia are in full view of the world including New Delhi's two-pronged war strategies in case the war erupts (The Daily Star, May 25, 2002) and Pakistan's testing of missiles, defying international condemnation, capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads and striking deep inside Indian territory. The most unholy component of the entire scenario is the potential risk of a nuclear holocaust.

Naturally we are all very concerned. The Government of Bangladesh and the Press have called for utmost restraint by both sides. The Government has also, perhaps to the displeasure of New Delhi, gone to the extent of requesting the United Nations Security Council to defuse the tension. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has written a letter to the present SAARC Chairperson Deuba stating that Bangladesh would welcome any statement by the SAARC chairperson calling for restraints by both. All these are in line with Bangladesh's prophesied policy of peace and denouncement of nuclear weapons anywhere in the world, especially in South Asia.

Needless to say that the international community is also asking the same from India and Pakistan. President George Bush and Russia's Vladimir Putin during their historic disarmament summit in May expressed "concerns" about the war rhetoric between the two. Barrages

of emissaries are arriving in both New Delhi and Islamabad trying to defuse the tension. But Indian intransigence in this matter is aptly evidenced by Vajpayee's declared refusal to even meet Pakistani President Musharraf during Summit of Council on Cooperation and Confidence Building Measures in Asia June 3-4, thwarting Valdamir Putin's expected role of a peace maker. India's refusal to sit with Pakistan comes in the backdrop of

China not to use the anti-terrorism campaign as an excuse for clamping on its own minorities while Beijing has been trying to link US-led war on terrorism to its own efforts in suppressing Muslim separatists in Xinjiang saying that there should be no "double standard" in the global struggle (The Daily Star, March 6, 2002). It is also easily discerned that India and Pakistan joined the coalition of War on Terrorism from the points of view of their very own

regard to dealing with the present situation in Kashmir.

It is, thus, not surprising when New Delhi by mimicking America's War on Terrorism began its own following the terrorists' attack on Indian Parliament building in December 2001 by massing troops along LoC, which was promptly matched by Pakistan. The rhetoric like 'striking terror in the heart of the enemy,' 'limited strikes,' 'limited war,' 'teaching Pakistan a lesson like the

threats of use of nuclear weapons as part of the overall war rhetoric.

This grave and dangerous situation perhaps could only be defused by the US which has vital national interests (anti-terror campaign in South Asia focusing on Afghanistan and mountainous Pakistani border areas where the remnants Al-Qaeda are allegedly regrouping) linked to peace in South Asia and has influence, however limited it may be, on both India and Pakistan. But US has

sure on it. US, on its part, is doing everything possible by using both carrots and sticks to make Islamabad see its point of view. However, the ground realities in Pakistan may be formidable impediments for both Islamabad and US to overcome the issue at stake: first, a 13 years old insurgency with indigenous elements, no matter how much India likes to think it as totally Pakistani sponsored, cannot be stopped overnight; second, there exists *real* constraining factors for Musharraf in handling the extreme Islamic forces given Pakistan's decades of Islamization (with active US help) as evidenced by Pakistan President's recent backing off from changing some of the Islamic laws; and third, Musharraf's dire need for some kind of assurance from the US in resolution of Kashmir, which is regarded as a strategic and economic jugular vein and a highly sensitive political issue for Pakistan, without which his own existence may be at peril.

However, hectic diplomatic activities by the international community, especially by US have made Pakistan somewhat reliant on the issue (The Daily Star, June 1, 2002) but President Musharraf, as mentioned earlier, cannot completely ignore his domestic compulsion. On the flip side, India cannot either. As such, the US will need all its diplomatic skill, first, to make these two nuclear adversaries defuse the tension, and second, to bring them to negotiating table. The visits by US Deputy Secretary of State Armitage and Defense Secretary Ramsfeld this month would be the acid test of US power of persuasion in bringing these two countries from the brink and persuading India not to launch its 'war on terror' so that Washington's own one is not jeopardized.

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## HECTIC DIPLOMACY

Hectic diplomatic activities by the international community, especially by US have made Pakistan somewhat reliant on the issue but President Musharraf cannot completely ignore his domestic compulsion. On the flip side, India cannot either. As such, the US will need all its diplomatic skill, first, to make these two nuclear adversaries defuse the tension, and second, to bring them to negotiating table.

alleged Pakistani sponsored "cross border terrorism" that manifested in the attacks on Indian Parliament on December 13 and recent gruesome incidents in Indian part of disputed Kashmir. Pakistan, as always, denies such allegations. Both parties are now locked in a precarious stand off, which if not defused, may spell the end of South Asia i.e. if the war breaks out escalating into a nuclear confrontation. The question is: who can really defuse the situation and bring them to the negotiating table? The answer to this query is complex and calls for a little back tracking that can shed some light in that direction.

The origin of the serious nature of present impasse between India and Pakistan appears to be the product of America's global war on terrorism following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the heartland of America. Washington's search for a broad coalition to fight against terror brought together countries like Russia, China, India and Pakistan and others. Interestingly, many countries seemed to have come forward not only strictly from moral point of view but also due to the facts that these countries themselves are besieged with minority problems ranging from demand for right of self-determination to outright independence. As such the paradox is already in the offing as US warns

perspectives and national interests.

Pakistan's *raison d'etre* has been two-fold: opportunities for bailing out of its economic woes and a lingering hope, though not overtly mentioned, that with so much support to the coalition, US would not be able to completely turn away from Kashmir dispute and may even convince India in allowing it to play a mediating role. Whereas India's willingness to support the coalition mainly emanated from its concerns of "cross-border terrorism" into the disputed State of Kashmir for which Pakistan is held solely responsible. New Delhi feels that it could have had military solution to be followed by a political process had there been no help from Pakistani *jihadi* groups to Kashmir 'militants.' As a matter of fact, many Indian analysts reported that now that the Americans themselves have become victims of terrorism, they would better understand the pain that has been inflicted on Indian polity by Pakistani ISI sponsored terrorists (The Hindu, October 29). As mentioned earlier that New Delhi is convinced that a political solution to Kashmir was possible if there were no "cross-border terrorism." Its eagerness to join the Global War on Terrorism by even offering the use of its territory by the American troops (The Daily Star, October 22, 2002) demonstrated New Delhi's mindset with

US did to the Taliban/Al-Qaeda, 'fight a decisive war to get the Kashmir issue settled once for all,' used by India have been reminiscences of President George Bush's initial reactions to the September 11 attacks on World Trade Centre. Pakistan's retorts have been equally interesting. In a defiant response it stated that it is neither Afghanistan nor Iraq and New Delhi not Washington. All these phrases succinctly bring to the fore the deep impacts of US's Global War on Terrorism on South Asia.

However, both India and Pakistan should realize that neither could win a decisive war without catastrophic consequences. India must have to remember that Pakistan is not Palestine, which is nothing but a municipal authority, and has nuclear arsenal with first strike nuclear doctrine whereas Islamabad should have full knowledge that New Delhi most likely has second strike capability. And both perhaps understand the futility of war. Only worry is when the troops are forward deployed and there are daily exchange of fire across the border the chances of a war in very much in the offing that may escalate into a nuclear confrontation. And since Pakistan and India have a rich history of miscalculation there is no guarantee for an inadvertent nuclear strike in the context that there has already been numerous

now real dilemmas in dealing with the situation. The reasons being that US's long-term interests lie not with Pakistan but with India. The latter is an emergent strategic partner (the first ever joint war game was conducted recently) and a potential market for a billion people whereas Pakistan, which is a nuclear power and has had always ambivalent relationship with it, has recently been turned into the most vital partner in its War on Terrorism. Withdrawal of Pakistani troops from its western border engaged in preventing Al Qaeda infiltration into Pakistan to LoC would seriously jeopardize US's War on Terror. Obviously even a limited war in Kashmir would serious compromise US campaign on terror not to speak of a full-scale war. US, thus, is caught in a conundrum, as a decision with one side, which could tip the balance of a conflict, could terminally damage its relations with the other. Particularly there is very little room for the US's maneuverability in the backdrop of Vajpayee's ultimatum of two months (mimicking Israel) before India runs out of patience and begins its 'decisive war' on Pakistan, and latter's defiance in this regard.

India expects Washington to make Pakistan prevent the "cross-border terrorism" by putting pres-

# Can Indo-Pak war finally be averted?

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

ALMOST everybody talks about an "imminent" India-Pakistan War. And what is more unavoidable, with a pause one would tend to ask how far away the war is! Indeed, this is the real scenario that exists surrounding the explosive situation between two South Asian arch rivals. The impression that a full blown Indo-Pak conflict is on the offing has been gaining ground for some time past but the fears of the war have heightened in recent days as Western nations like the United States, Britain, Germany and even the UN are evacuating their nationals from India and Pakistan and urged their citizens to keep away from these two countries. When these countries can take such decisions, this would obviously give credence to the widely held belief that a conflict appears inevitable. In a dangerously

bellicose situation like this, yet one tends to ask, can the war be averted? This is the million dollar question that strikes the mind of the peace loving people of not only India and Pakistan but also of the region as well as the entire world. Needless to say, South Asian tension is now the cynosure of all eyes. While most factors and developments suggest, unfortunately though, that the war is round the corner, saner quarters in both the countries still feel that sagacity and wisdom will finally prevail upon the leadership of both India and Pakistan to wean their nations away from the final outbreak of hostilities. Many piously believe that it is still nothing impossible and eventually

the much feared but anticipated conflict will be averted.

Is there any silver lining in the otherwise dark cloud? Frankly and once again to the dismay of the peace-lovers, not much. Nevertheless, there are hopes against hopes. It will be wrong to say that no positive signs are discernible at all. Who knows some good indicators, however insignificant they may be, would finally dominate over the overwhelmingly negative sides to force the two countries roll back

back from the brink of the war not too long ago. Just before the last SAARC summit in Kathmandu, they appeared to be on the verge of war but fortunately that did not finally happen. Several factors had contributed to that happy development. The tensions remained down to a large extent before they increased again. The impression of war at any moment had definitely subsided. One may differ about the extent of this diminution of enmity but there should be no difference in accepting

of whom supported the American actions. A conflict between them would certainly disturb the present achievement in Afghanistan and may provide a scope for encouragement of terrorism since Indo-Pak war would automatically bring "Kashmir" issue to the fore and also may make the remnants of the "Talibans" or hardcore Islamic militants in the region to be active on the scene. Besides, the extreme Islamic forces in Pakistan are lying low in the aftermath of the debacle

to ease tensions between them. Interestingly, leaders of India and Pakistan attended regional summit in Kazakstan where Russian president Vladimir Putin tried to initiate an effort to bridge the differences between two countries although a "Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting" could not be on the cards to the dismay of Putin. One can recall the mediation of former Soviet premier Alexi Kogynin when he brokered the Ayub-Sastri summit in Tashkent in the aftermath of the 1965 war. The

Pakistan cannot be oblivious to all these factors.

War-mongers are there in both sides and also in the international arena behind the façade of "peace talk" since their conflicts could facilitate more sale of arms. Regimes in two countries may also weigh their political gains from a war which could be counter productive as well. Feverish international efforts are continuing to head off the war even as foreign diplomats and their families are scrambling to evacuate from India and Pakistan. There are also reports that Islamabad is discouraging cross-border terrorism in Kashmir, a demand that New Delhi wants Pakistan to comply with, although there is no such announcement from Pakistan in this regard. It is understandable that Islamabad cannot officially go too far on this as it will be seen as coming down heavily on Islamic militants and pro-independence activists in Kashmir. No government in Pakistan probably can afford this. But a development in this direction can help arrest the escalating tensions.

No doubt, both the countries are on the brink of war but their leadership with more than one billion people can still demonstrate sagacity and not stubbornness and jingoistic approach, not only for their sake but regional and global peace. Fending off the conflict is difficult but not impossible.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

## NO DOUBT, BOTH THE COUNTRIES ARE ON THE BRINK OF WAR BUT THEIR LEADERSHIP WITH MORE THAN ONE BILLION PEOPLE CAN STILL DEMONSTRATE SAGACITY AND NOT STUBBORNNESS AND JINGOISTIC APPROACH, NOT ONLY FOR THEIR SAKE BUT REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PEACE. FENDING OFF THE CONFLICT IS DIFFICULT BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE.

from the conflict? Admittedly, the likelihood is less and one can go to the extent of describing it "much less" but despite the loud talks of the impending conflict, there is also toning down of the postures. Pakistan's president General Pervez Musharraf has said the other day that his country would not initiate a conflict and this is a guarantee from him. Indian defence minister George Fernandes told newsmen in Singapore that spectres of war are very much there but it may not turn into a real conflict. Such approaches can form a basis of delaying the conflict at least if not avoiding it and this delay will evidently provide breathing space.

The present grim scene notwithstanding, the good sides cannot be swept under the carpet as facts are also obvious to suggest something encouraging. Two countries did roll

back from the brink of the war not too long ago. Just before the last SAARC summit in Kathmandu, they appeared to be on the verge of war but fortunately that did not finally happen. Several factors had contributed to that happy development. The tensions remained down to a large extent before they increased again. The impression of war at any moment had definitely subsided. One may differ about the extent of this diminution of enmity but there should be no difference in accepting

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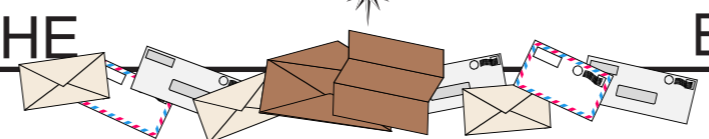
The European Union, Japan and some other countries too are not sitting idle. All these may result in creating some positive ambience although Indo-Pak problems are full of complexities and cut deep into the psyche of both nations. Tokyo sent its vice foreign minister to New Delhi and Islamabad, who made a passionate appeal to the two nuclear-powered rivals for refraining from war. Japan says only it knows how catastrophic could be the use of nuclear weapons, which cannot be fully ruled out in the event of Indo-Pak war. One report from the United States said that upto 12 million people may die because of atomic weapon's use in the region excluding others millions who may suffer the effects and later die. What an alarming forecast! India and

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## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



### Tristram Dhaka

### Do we need a censor board?

Yes, I am talking about the film "Matir Moyna" and the insensitive decision of its banning. Allegedly, the film was banned because the content is related to local religious trends and practices. It seems to me that Bangladesh censor board doesn't know anything about films. And there is no need of such an incompetent censor board.

### Badruddin Ahmed Bizon Dhaka

**Army businessmen**  
I routinely complain about the military expanding its business empire to include banking (Trust Bank) and the hospitality industry (Water Garden Hotel).

I have never commented on the golf clubs at Kurmitola, Savar, Gazipur, Bhatiari, etc. simply because no one apart from the army has so much land lying idle that can be turned into golf links. Nor have I commented on Sena Kunjo and Darbar Hall catering to the wedding parties since they are the largest

banquet halls in Bangladesh apart from the NAM white elephant which the government wants to keep to itself.

But today recently I've noticed the Trust CNG Filling Station in Tejgaon! What next? The Trust Garments Factory?

### Asterix Dhaka

### Tax the NGOs

This is in regards to Zeshan Hasan's letter asking for overpaid foreign consultants of NGO's to be taxed.

I completely agree with him that NGOs have strayed from their core focus and become nothing more than mere clones of any local business group. But I would really like to know if this is true. Do NGOs really hire foreign consultants for such high amounts? And do they really not pay taxes?

If that's the case then the government should immediately take steps to bring this under control. I am not sure, as the writer asked, if it's possible for local people to do the work of these consultants especially if they are so good as to deserve such high salaries. But at the very least they should be brought under

### T Ali Dhaka

### Encroachments

It has become a fashion nowadays to erect concrete/iron fencing outside the boundary walls of most of the independent houses. This leads to following hazards:

-The already over-burdened roads/lanes become narrower.

-Motor vehicles of the guests are parked on the roads at times, thereby, causing unnecessary traffic jams even in lanes and by-lanes.

A special drive should be undertaken by the municipal corporation to remove these illegal structures at the earliest.

### Fahim Haque Baridhara, Dhaka

### Awami League tirade

As a veteran voter for several decades (as a British Indian, then Pakistani, and lastly Bangladeshi) I am tired of the Awami League tirade against its opponents, forgetting its public duties and responsibilities. Narcissism in politics is to be deplored.

The party's political PR has

neither planning nor sense; as all the time it is talking against BNP, and its alliance. It does not talk about the problems of the country or the people in separate and detached way (as non-politicians do), and when it does, it links it 100 per cent to the failure of the opponents.

Such monomania is not at all in public interest. It reignited for five years, and the voters have given the verdict. But it is not accepted. With one-fifth seats in the JS, it is talking like a dictator and that too, in the streets. We are tired of street politics.

AL cannot live for a single day without being obsessed by its enemies. The party has boycotted the parliament twice, and is carrying out external propaganda against the society and the country, which its citizens find embarrassing-- washing dirty linen in front of the foreigners.

Also it is grossly misusing the name of Sk Mujib and Bangabandhu to absurd limits, lowering his prestige. This respected name should not be over-used for commercial, political, party or personal gain.

Politicians (any party) should believe in change, short and long-

term, and adjust accordingly. Visions, objectives and targets should be flexible, to suit the trend of the times (each new generation thinks differently, at least marginally). The trend of the times is shorts-cuts and short change.

### A cynical voter Dhaka

### Gas meters for residential users

It is very good to know that a decision has been taken to install piffer proof gas meters for all residential users. It should have been done from the very beginning to avoid pilferage and waste of this expensive natural resource.

The Energy Ministry should take immediate steps to install the gas meters on emergency basis for all residential users all over the country. If necessary users should be charged a nominal monthly charge to recover the cost of the meter like the electric meters. It is totally unjustified to charge a customer lump sum, which is the usual practice now. For example if a customer uses a cooking range with 4 burners and oven he is now charged a fixed amount of say Tk.800 per month whether he uses it at all or not. If

there is a meter installed then he will have to pay only for the amount of gas he would be utilising. This will also discourage a large number of users who keep the gas burners running to save the ignition cost. This way a substantial amount of gas can be saved from unnecessary burning.

I also appreciate the decision to withhold the Union activities in Titas but it should not only be for three months but forever. Because the Union representatives are interfering in the activities of management and taking undue advantage to make easy money like the murky millionaire meter reader whose story has recently been published in your daily.

Energy Ministry should also seriously consider allowing the customers all over the country to deposit the gas bill locally (if possible all utilities bill) in any branch of any banks. This will help mitigate the sufferings of customers by saving the valuable time and energy.

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Saudi Aramco