

Waste telling upon economic future

Budget's silence over it inexplicable

THE proposed budget for fiscal 2002-2003 has given a new spin to the concept of internal resource mobilisation set as it seems to shake the tree at the wrong end to drop fruits on the ground. It has drawn up a roadmap for revenue collection that is heavily hinged on taxing the consumers leaving out more obvious sources to tap for money. If only we could stop the haemorrhage of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), we would have not only put existing resources to good use but more radically even obviated the need for foreign assistance. A World Bank study has shown that between FY 1998 and 2001, the SOEs-incurred losses amounted to a staggering US\$ 6 billion. If Bangladesh can cut the annual losses of the public enterprises, she won't require any foreign assistance, the WB report concluded.

Forty state-owned enterprises suffered a loss of around Tk 26.59 billion in FY 2000-2001 alone, according to Bangladesh Economic Review, 2002. As if to sharpen the sense of denial foisted on us by the SOEs, the total revenue collection figure projected in the new budget is Tk30,000 crore, which is pretty close to Tk26.59 thousand crore lost annually by the public sector corporations. That is, if we had break-even position at the SOEs, the quantum of taxation would have been less than Tk4000 crore.

The losses being synonymous with subsidies and loan default, we have, for all practical purposes, the added predicament of keeping alive unprofitable concerns on artificial resuscitation while some priority social sectors perennially starved of funding.

It's a matter of supreme irony, therefore, that we are financing mismanagement, wastage and corruption across the board under variegated sugar-coated labels. This has to stop if our economy is to stand on its own legs. Rather than taking the solid, cost-efficient route to self-reliance, Saifur Rahman has proposed a short-cut to fund collection viz. taxing the consumers heavily. While you tax us you must tell us what specific measures you will take to end public sector inefficiency and waste.

Welcome de-escalation

People relieved at the change of stance of India and Pakistan

NOTHING could make us happier than the prospect of the war receding in South Asia. We are still not completely out of danger but, as we have headlined yesterday, 'war clouds seem to be clearing'. As quoted by AFP an Indian government source said that it was looking at whole 'menu of options' which includes increasing Indian diplomatic presence in Islamabad, restoring bus and rail links and lifting ban on overflights. The last step has been taken by India, as of yesterday. Obviously this is music to our ears. We commend the Indian government for moving in this direction. The Indian change of heart took place following Gen. Parvez Musharraf's pledge to US Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, to "permanently" end military attacks by Pakistan-based militants on Indian targets.

There is little doubt that it was the US's involvement in negotiating the de-escalation process that made it fruitful. In fact the Indian spokesperson Nirupama Rao acknowledged the US role, especially that of President Bush. Donald Rumsfeld is starting his visit today. The most important lesson here is that we do need a third party to make the talks between these two arch-rivals fruitful. We think the latest development shows that India, which has been resisting this, has become amenable to the idea of a neutral mediator. The US is the obvious choice, and all indications are that both sides have come to terms with it. As members of SAARC we have always pleaded for averting an armed conflict at any cost. We are thankful to the US for trying to make that possible.

Once the de-escalation process officially starts it is hoped that genuine talks will commence between India and Pakistan about stabilising the situation in Kashmir. The real task will only begin then. But for the moment we would like to commend the leaders of both India and Pakistan for heeding the wishes of their people and that of the region as a whole and stepping back from what we all know would have been a disaster of unimaginable proportions for the region.

Is it your daughter's turn next?

In the land of 'Ghapachus'



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

BY now the name of Sony is known to all in Bangladesh who have access to the mass media. She was a BUET student who died caught in the crossfire between two groups of tender-box claimants, who are young, armed and ready to kill for money. The party in power also protects them. Sony will never come home again. Can you feel that as you read this?

I suggest you do the following exercise.

Call your child close to you and make her sit down. Watch her face as intently as you can. And then imagine her dead body lying on the floor. Watch the face as it slowly tilts down to the floor, the blood flow from her body and listen to the silence that shrouds everything. Think. She will never talk to you again.

That's what her family feels. That's what you don't feel today.

That's what you will feel tomorrow.

"HOW far?"

"Beyond that field and after the main road and into the field."

Nobody answered. A group of young warriors had been walking the whole day long in an area in Bogra district called Nandigram. It was a long tiring walk because these people were not used to such journeys. After sometime, they stopped to look for shelter and sent one of the boys down to see if the villages were safe or not, ready to let them be guests for the night. He returned with a blank face, a strange

stare. "I don't know if you want to go to the village. There has been a death in the family there. A girl was killed, a girl was killed. They have buried her but everyone weeps for her. I wept too. Do you want to go and weep?"

It was such a strange and unanswerable question from a boy who had already killed enemy soldiers but had wept for a stranger. They stood there and realized that amongst them all, the feeling of

expected when any party rules -- but of course none will be caught. The whole idea is to create a ruckus, close down the campus and then hope another will die soon so that the public forgets this one.

While hired killers are necessary to do away with Ward Commissioners with criminal pasts, records and connections, it's much easier to kill innocent people. No bullet needs to be aimed and fired, as innocents are everywhere. All one has to do is just

money by participating in University tenders. He was there with his gun to usher democracy along. He was a friend who was asking me to run away. A few others and I ran for a long time.

He later joined Gen. Zia's party. The tender business nurtured him into the mainstream.

***** PROVIDING money as incentive to maim and kill is the commonest way of managing the politics when poli-

other bodies and all the usual formalities were done. And then the matter disappeared. When I asked, I was told that nothing could be done about him because he was close to the "tender party", the people who kept the VC in office. You can't touch them even if they hit the VC himself. You can't become a VC anyway, most say, unless they back you.

***** I was sitting in the office of a Minister who had just been eased out of

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

I watch my own daughter study. Tomorrow she has an exam. I don't know if she will be able to sit for it. I shall not know if she will return home safely. I don't know what to tell her mother if a stray bullet too falls her. Like it may fell your own child...Maybe not enough died in 1971 so we have continued to die violently every year since then...This thirsty land. How much blood does it need before it is satisfied?

death of a young girl was so deep that they couldn't remain warriors anymore. Suddenly nothing meant anything except the sight of a burial mound where everyone's mother, sister, daughter sleeps for the final time.

How are the killers of BUET any different from the killers of Nandigram in that dreadful monsoon when those young men waded through hyacinth clad water to mourn with a village where a young girl had died? *****

AN infant died sitting in her father's lap. She was not guilty but a stray bullet fired by fleeing robbers killed her. The country mourned and the Home Minister added words that God had chosen to take away his own. The killers have not been arrested and few believe that they will be. God is busy in this land it seems.

And now a young girl has been killed by a stray bullet, a human being caught in a crossfire of the greedy and super-greedy.

Newspapers have given names - all belonging to the ruling party, as

rat-a-tat with the gun supplied by the authorities who shall hide both till public memory fades or is overcome by another death.

***** I was in the campus when the last students' election under the Awami League government was held before BKSAL was imposed. When it became clear that the JSD supported students would sweep the elections, the partisans of Chhatra League, slogan chanters of democracy and liberty descended on the halls with arms and made sure the election results were not declared.

I saw a group of men rush towards Surya Sen Hall. We were running towards the breach in the wall next to Katsur, where there was once a huge circular building, which served as a stable where the horses, which ran in the dead race-coupled.

"Run, Afsan, run. Are you mad? What are you doing here?" It was a friend who couldn't return to his hometown for what he had done during the war and had found shelter in the liberation party's camp.

He had also started to make

cities have failed. I suppose politicians consider ordinary people as "ghapachus", the most derisive possible term in the world of Punjabi commercial sex workers. I learnt the word from my friend that this meant those who couldn't do anything but just stood there and watched.

"You mean voyeurs?"

"Well yes, I suppose but impotent voyeurs. People who can't have sex even if the girls were to offer it to them for free."

I guess that describes us pretty well. Unable to do anything and condemned to watch everything happen before our eyes.

Ghapachu.

I was walking out of the arts building when I met a teacher of mine. He was disturbed and when asked informed that a clerk had abused him profusely and threatened to slap him when he had gone to the office of the University administration for some work. This kind of behaviour in the late '70s was unthinkable. He was calm but his colleagues took it seriously. The matter was taken up in the DUTA and

the cabinet due to a power struggle in the early '80s. He was bitter about all that had happened. Suddenly a young man came inside. The man was from his own faction and he wanted the ex-minister to call the office where they had dropped a tender.

He tried for a couple of minutes to wriggle out but seeing the futility of it made the call asking that the tender be considered favourably. The man left knowing the job was done.

"When we were in student politics we never did this tenderbaji."

But Dear Minister, when you began your adult politics, one of the first things you did was to introduce that.

If the liberation war was fought today, I think the two parties would fight over the tender box for dropping a bid rather than take up arms to fight the enemy. And the same number of innocents would be killed. Only by tenderwallahs. *****

THE Awami League and BNP probably think we are so stupid that we don't know that killers and criminals can't be caught. They keep the party

going in more ways than one and the power rests with them. I suppose the only safe place is the army where a gun is provided along with the job. Otherwise, who shall at least let us fire one last bullet in celebration of this wonderful land? *****

"SHE always looked back at me as she walked towards the gate. She didn't look back the last time. She just walked to the gate. She never came back." This was Sony's mother describing her last departure from home. Nowadays I watch such scenes on TV carefully. What do they say? What are their feelings? What are the latest examples of grief? After all, as things go, we shall soon be having one or two dead bodies in our family too.

How do you console parents of children dead just for being there while being a citizen of a country, which sends armed peacekeepers to other countries?

Are we supposed to bring peacekeepers from elsewhere to protect us? *****

I watch my own daughter study. Tomorrow she has an exam. I don't know if she will be able to sit for it. I shall not know if she will return home safely. I don't know what to tell her mother if a stray bullet too falls her. Like it may fell your own child. *****

MAYBE not enough died in 1971 so we have continued to die violently every year since then.

This thirsty land. How much blood does it need before it is satisfied? And these dead were not even born when we were involved. I don't find them guilty of a crime of thought even. *****

THE BNP and AL know that they will always be in power and being out of power is just like resting between tender bid drops. It doesn't matter. As for us when you are a ghapachu, you deserve every death that happens to you.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Military force is no solution

Dispel the clouds of war

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

GOING by signals from Almaty, New Delhi and Islamabad, the rhetoric of India-Pakistan hostility has come down by a few decibels during the past week. This must be heartily welcomed. But the border build-up remains frightful -- with a million soldiers eyeball-to-eyeball.

Not only is this the greatest military mobilisation anywhere since World War II. It has a uniquely dangerous nuclear dimension.

Yet, there are shrill calls for "decisive battles" to settle India-Pakistan disputes "once and for all". In India, these emanate from ministers (Uma Bharati and I.D. Swamy), political leaders (Jana Krishnamurthy and Giriraj Kishore), and Right-wing commentators.

Worse, there is generalised smugness about the danger of a nuclear catastrophe.

Hopefully, some of today's war hysteria will get diffused. The world is seriously alarmed at a possible nuclear outbreak in South Asia. Foreign nationals are leaving, tourist bookings are being cancelled, contracts put on hold, and the economy is hit.

Ahead of Mr Donald Rumsfeld's visit, General Pervez Musharraf seems to be acting on his assurance to end infiltration of militants into Kashmir. The Indian govern-

ment has intercepted messages to this effect.

If this trend holds, Pakistan will have substantively addressed the issue that precipitated the present crisis in the first place.

The time has come to defuse tension and demobilise troops, while reiterating the argument against war.

Politically, war against Pakistan today is the wrong means to resolve "cross-border terrorism". There is

building measures between India and Pakistan, to prevent escalation to full-scale war.

Full-scale war spells a nuclear catastrophe. In nuclear war, there are no winners. It doesn't matter if you have 15 or 60 atomic bombs or a first- or second-strike capability. One bomb can produce a Hiroshima -- lakhs of deaths. This is unacceptable.

Nuclear weapons are Great Equalisers. A single nuclear bomb

By chiding or challenging Pakistan to use them, our hawks are threatening millions of citizens with genocide. This is morally sickening.

Hawks like K. Subrahmanyam and Brahma Chellaney cavalierly dismiss Pakistan's nuclear threat in the fond hope that the US will "neutralise" its arsenal before it can be used.

They assume either that Gen Musharraf will voluntarily hand America the key to his arsenal, or

brinkmanship. This is now working against it, as against Pakistan.

There is worldwide condemnation of "irresponsible South Asians" - the caption of a New York Times editorial -- for causing today's stand-off. Public opinion in the West is turning against India and Pakistan, as the current exodus of diplomats and expatriates suggests.

Gen Musharraf seems to have understood this and ratcheted down

The greatest lesson from the present crisis is that there is no alternative to ridding the sub-continent of nuclear weapons. South Asia is the world's sole region to have had a continuous hot-cold war for half a century. Preventing a South Asian nuclear catastrophe is the legitimate business not just of India and Pakistan, but of the whole world.

no doubt that Islamabad has over the years supported such terrorism. But there is plenty of doubt about its involvement in the Kaluchak killings and Lone's assassination.

Pakistan's relationship to jihadi militants has changed post-September 11. With US troops on his soil, Gen Musharraf is unlikely to have ordered the ISI to conduct terrorist operations. If rogue elements carried them out, it makes no sense to punish the non-rogues.

Militarily too, war is a poor option. Even "limited strikes" will provoke major retaliation, with a spiralling potential for full-scale confrontation.

There are no crisis-limitation mechanisms, nor confidence-

will kill 800,000 people in Mumbai or Karachi, and poison vast swathes of land and water with over 200 radioactive toxins, some of which won't decay for thousands of years.

For instance, the half-life of Plutonium-239 is 24,400 years. And the half-life of Uranium-235 is 710 million years!

Some conventional wars can be just, e.g. against tyranny, or for liberation. Nuclear wars can never be just because they massively kill non-combatant civilians.

Yet, our hawks talk of "calling Pakistan's nuclear bluff". Pakistan isn't bluffing. There is no doubt that it possesses nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them.

that the US knows where each missile and warhead is stored, and can reliably destroy it.

This assumption is dangerously wrong. No Pakistani ruler will give up control over this jealously guarded "ultimate" strategic "asset". Islamabad has been reportedly trying to hide its nuclear weapons.

The US cannot find or destroy all of them without risking a catastrophe.

Diplomatically, India has not exhausted its options. It can invoke UN Security Council Resolution 1373 which obligates all states to act against terrorism on pain of sanctions.

New Delhi has practised "coercive" diplomacy based on nuclear

his bellicose rhetoric. Mr Vajpayee too must do so -- especially because there is a decrease in militants' border-crossing.

This is not a plea for naively trusting Pakistan. The interception of border-crossing must be rigorously verified, not by the US or UK, as being proposed, but preferably by a neutral, independent multilateral agency.

The road-map for restoring full diplomatic relations is now clear:

India and Pakistan should thin out and demobilise troops. They must hold a summit to formalise a commitment to oppose terrorism, negotiate serious confidence-building measures, sanitise the

border, and discuss their differences in the spirit of the 1972 Shimla Accord and the 1999 Lahore agreement.

Above all, they must move towards reducing the nuclear danger either through bilateral denuclearisation, or by creating a nuclear weapons-free zone in South Asia.

The greatest lesson from the present crisis is that there is no alternative to ridding the sub-continent of nuclear weapons. South Asia is the world's sole region to have had a continuous hot-cold war for half a century.

Preventing a South Asian nuclear catastrophe is the legitimate business not just of India and Pakistan, but of the whole world.

Even before nuclear-restraint arrangements are put in place, New Delhi and Islamabad must return to the Shimla-Lahore agenda after restoring diplomatic relations.

A Shimla-II will, of course, demand boldness on the part of Messrs Vajpayee and Musharraf. Mr Vajpayee must be pressed by the public to shed BJP-style narrow and devious calculation -- of diverting attention from misgovernance and Gujarat, while fomenting communalism.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

BUET student killed: where are we heading to?

A stray bullet fired by the BNP backed student-wings took an innocent life of a female student of BUET. She was the only daughter of her parents, who came to pursue higher studies, but returned to the parents as a dead body leaving us the commoners in grave concern about the law and order situation of the country.

Every time such a pathetic incident takes place the policy-makers express their firm commitment to bring the culprits to book. But this only remains statements, never becomes a reality. And only the sufferers know how it feels to lose the near and dear ones and not being able to receive justice.

The BNP government came to power with the commitment to curb terrorism. But in reality we see very much the otherwise. Not a single day passes by without a murder, rape and all sorts of heinous crimes. With such a frustrating state, can any one tell us where are we heading?

Al-Amin Mahmud

Zahurul Haq Hall, Staff Quarter, DU

Sony, a student of BUET was killed in crossfire during a gunfire between two factions of ruling BNP backed JCD on June 8 on BUET campus. The killers of Sony are known to all. If not, why did the police raid DU dormitories and arrested a few students of DU?

We are appalled at this tragic incident and hold the dirty student politics responsible for Sony's premature death. But it is the politicians who are to be blamed as they patronise student politics for their selfish interest.

I entreat the BNP leaders to bring those responsible for Sony's death to justice and ensure us a secure society.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept. of English, DU

On budget
Although at first glance this budget was detrimental to our country's economy, there are a few good measures in it.

I had no idea that multimillionaires like Scholastica didn't pay any taxes. That was a ludicrous oversight of the past governments. This has been an excellent move on the

part of Mr. Saifur Rahman. Another of his measures I am very happy about is the taxes on NGO's businesses. Now BRAC Bank, Aarong, Grameen's T-Shirt factory and textiles, Proshika and BRAC's ISPs will hopefully be brought into the tax system. Excellent move Minister, I am happily surprised.

I was also glad to see that the repressive duties on new cars have been made more logical. This will finally allow many people to buy new cars rather than reconditioned overpriced ones. However although I personally benefit from this, I must say that the middle-class families who would earlier have been able to afford reconditioned cars will no longer be able to do so. I would suggest that the ban be revoked.

This would have the excellent effect of forcing down the prices of all cars and thus being a great boon to all buyers, rich or middle-class. As for the rest of the budget the less is said the better.

MA Dhaka

1) Reduced tax-free income limit and 5-slab system in the new budget proposal benefits individual

taxpayers with taxable income of over Tk.1, 80,250. But taxpayers below this income will have to pay more as per new proposal than the existing system. As for example, a taxpayer with taxable income of Tk.1, 50,000 (as in my case) will have to pay tax of Tk.7, 500 whereas as per existing system, he will have to pay tax of Tk.5, 000.

That means the new budget proposal compels him to pay 50 per cent more tax. This is sheer injustice to the lower income group.

2) At whose interest, tax is reduced on air conditioner, fridge, television, new car (luxury items) and tax increased on soybean oil, milk food (essential items)? To carry coal to Newcastle should be stopped. Hypocrisy does not pay at the end.

3) Black money should not be allowed to become white, as it does not benefit the people/country at all. Rather, such facility encourages accumulation of black money by way of tax evasion, 'benami' wealth, smuggling, false import, drug laundering money, 'hundi' money etc.

4) Rental value/income of luxurious flats/houses in Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, Uttara, Dhanmondi etc. were made tax free

by the present Finance Minister during his last tenure. This is sheer injustice and partially depriving the country of huge income tax. This time rental value of such flats/houses in excess of Tk.10, 000-12, 000 per month should have been brought under tax net for the sake of justice and social equity. This will help huge tax recovery.

F. Ahmed Tejaon, Dhaka

I see that the US Embassy is inviting bids for used computers and peripherals (June 7). Now with the 7.5 per cent tax on computer hardware it might be a good chance to buy some computers. The prices have already started going up, so forget about buying a new one.

Peter Dhaka

1. Ban on import of reconditioned cars will surely doom the hopes of the middle-class people. And people will be held hostage to the commercial transport companies.

2. Supplementary duties on soft drinks mean people will now only drink water.

3. The 'whitening black money scheme' will encourage people to make more and more black money,

as there is no limitation now. Bribery, toll collection will be on the rise.

4. Tax on housing materials will increase the price of apartments. It will be harder for people to build houses.

5. 7.5 per cent tax on computer and its accessories. During the age of computer how can a government even consider such tax?

6. Tax on paper means that, now books and writing pads (khata) will cost more. Getting educated is becoming difficult and more importantly costlier.

7. Tax on NGOs means that, NGOs have to pay tax and work for the wellbeing of poor people without any profit. NGOs have to pay money for helping the poor!

8. Tax on import of powder milk and fruits will certainly help increase malnutrition problem of children.

Reaz Mohiuddin Outer Circular Road, Dhaka

Kashmir-Indo-Pak conflict

Escalating tension between India and Pakistan. I see in Indian newspapers the hysteria against Pakistan and in one of many articles it says "Gen Musharraf says no movement of terrorist across the International Line of control" and the paper

terms it as total lie by Pakistan. When the Indian Government denies any complicity of state and the provincial government in Gujarat in the mayhem there of innocent men, women and children in one of the most horrific pre-planned riot in modern times, and when the state policy is sanctioned pogrom of the Muslims in India, does the denial of Pakistan on LOC should matter at all? Look at the numbers what the Indian Government and its functionaries have done in one night of riot on unarmed innocent civilians, the Kashmir incident should be considered insignificant.

India's cry of terrorism by Pakistan is like the kettle calling the pot black or vice versa.

Z. Ahmed Dhaka

Driving licence and eye test

After being involved in a couple of accidents a friend of mine the other day sent his driver to me for an eye test, result of which was so shocking that I thought I should share it with the readers. This young man of 22 could see only the first line of the chart, which means his vision was only 10 per cent. To my amazement,

on questioning, he told me that he has been a driver for the last eighteen months and for 12 months he was a taxi driver before my friend appointed him.

I started probing on the methods he had passed through to get his driving licence. He said that at first he had a 'dui nombor' (fake) license for which he spent only Tk.200. It needed no test of any sort. The only snag with that license was that each time the traffic police stopped him he had to pay Tk.100. Then he went for a No.1 (original) license which, he said, normally cost Tk.700 as fees and one needs to sit for some tests in the BRTA centre but as he spent Tk.6000 he wasn't called for any sort of test whatsoever, nor even for an eye test. Only thing he did was to sign a paper and pay the money.

Why do we have so many road accidents? The answer is anybody's guess, at least part of the answer. What is the root cause? Does the problem lie with the poor driver or somewhere else? And who is responsible for all these? So many questions to ask.

My nice friend has decided to give this man some other job in his company but not as a driver.

Dr. Rashid Hyder Dhaka