

Finance minister's predicament

Govt should step up reform process to keep its election promise

SAIFUR Rahman's exchange of views with economists and civil society leaders on Saturday was marked by some praiseworthy frank admissions on the part of an apparently embattled finance minister. The consultation revolving around the under-preparation poverty reduction strategy paper which the government has to place before the donor community by the year-end, was important in itself. But it carried an extra bit more significance for the fact that it has flagged off a process of discussion on the strategy paper which is to last till its finalisation in December.

Even allowing for the finance minister's characteristic flair for frankness, his latest string of remarks has something to make one sit up, take note and wonder about the way out of the *cul-de-sac*. Saifur Rahman says he is facing resistance from within on his reform initiatives. This is taking the issue beyond the point of desperation about lack of coordination between his ministry and the line ministries one has grown familiar with so far. Resistance is obviously worse than want of coordination. Coming from a senior government minister with a reputation for hands-on, even hard-driving approaches to things, this only goes to confirm the persisting public impression that not all in the ruling party are on board for the reform process.

Who will not share Saifur Rahman's impatience over the delay entailed in separating the judiciary from the executive and in setting up independent anti-corruption commission, office of the Ombudsman and national human rights commission? Such steps would have not merely provided a fillip to good governance but also locomotion to the entire reform process as such. The finance minister has done some finger-pointing to the 198 BNP members of parliament suggesting thereby that they need to be activated for a turn-around to happen in the situation.

While appreciating Saifur Rahman's frankness, let's venture to counsel him that he has to convince the government about accelerating the reform programme with the argument that this has been an election pledge with the BNP they can hardly turn a blind eye to. How long can the government drag its foot on their electoral commitments without losing their standing with the people? Party MPs and ministers better pose that question to themselves to find the right answer.

Saidabad water plant to operate from July

A crisis partly resolved, shows direction too

FRESH water starved Dhaka will soon hear the gurgling of water being supplied from the Saidabad Water Treatment Plant-1 using the resources of nearby Shitalakhyia river. This is great news in more ways than one. It will not reduce dependence on ground water reserves, already depleted from overuse but show the way for alternative safe water sources.

This new plant will supply 22.5 crore litres of water daily which will meet about 18 per cent of the city dwellers' needs. This is all the more significant because the 750 crore taka plant will cover a large swathe of the old city and portions of the new city as well. This is one of the most acutely pressurized areas of the city and this will provide respite to the deep tubewells which have been going out of operation regularly. Falling water tables and poorly managed supply system had both contributed to creation of this crisis which now will be less now.

But water scarcity is a crisis of a proportion that seems to be taking an overwhelming nature and this needs to be recognized. Safe water supply crisis is a problem that goes beyond that of urban water supply. Rural areas are already under severe stress due to various kinds of water pollution including arsenic and other contamination. It's a deadly situation out there but while safe options are partially available in the rural scene the urban areas are bereft of any such choices. These have to depend on piped water more than others. But there are no major plans for mitigating actions nationwide.

What we lack is a realistic national water policy for both urban and rural areas and this is a critical matter. The Saidabad plant is an expensive project for Dhaka's dwellers and has taken all of five years to implement even though it's happening before schedule. The rest of the country can't afford such initiatives and they need to be more affordable.

While river water is a good source of safe water, it carries a huge price tag and is favoured by major donors. Meanwhile, there are other options too and the government will do everyone another bit of service if they can also put some energy behind other projects including those which are low-cost and intermediate technology based.

Al-Qaida: Defeated but defiant



M ABDUL HAFIZ

OVER six months after the AQTs (Al-Qaida/Taliban) were routed, humiliated and subsequently pulverised by some of the deadliest bombings of the coalition forces in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan when Air force General Richard Myers, chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff still calls them 'real threat', it, at once, conjures up something of an enigma. The threats become scarier when they continue to strike lethally in an atmosphere of quietude and impenetrable secrecy giving no clue even to their existence. Even in case of the investigations into September 11 attacks which is perhaps the most comprehensive the world has ever known -- after wading through mountains of the papers seized in Afghanistan, checking out hundreds of computer discs and interrogating scores of Al-Qaida detainees the investigators found not a single reference to September 11 hijackers. After all this time when the allies have claimed victory at least in the first phase of their global war on terror, 1600 Al-Qaida operatives are arrested in 95 countries and the red alerts are on the world over there are no documents, no evidences and nothing in human intelligence to suggest the spookiest possibility of all -- that there could be another Al-

Qaida cell out there. Just as good, and potent as one that mounted the attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon.

Yet according to Francis Taylor, the US State Department's counter-terrorism coordinator -- the similar campaigns, if not of the magnitude of September 11, continue apace. In April last, a truck bomb, now thought to be the work of Islamic terrorists with link to Al-Qaida, crashed into synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, killing

staged the Djerba attack or who financed Karachi suicide bombing. All that can be sensed is that they are Islamic terrorists galvanised by same common ideology. Although Pakistani officials are cautious about ascribing the Karachi bomb to Al-Qaida they however acknowledge that the militant groups in Pakistan do share informal link with bin-Laden's organisation. The Djerba synagogue bomb also is not without Al-Qaida linkage although

and strategic purpose, is today in a phase of incoherence and confusion. The US Special Forces and Royal Marines who were flown in to hunt down the remnants of the al-Qaidas are engaged in a futile ground campaign in the mountains of Eastern and Southern Afghanistan. The AQTs, if any, are sensible enough not to present themselves as objective to superior coalition forces fighting on the ground. As a result whatever they engaged so far

another report they were celebrating a wedding by shooting AK-47 in the air. The Ministry of Defence in London modified the report saying that they were AQT, but the Marines had not made contact with them.

About war in Afghanistan for past six months there is a ludicrous pattern of the claim of the victory first, then a few discordant details trickle out and, finally an admission of failure. So by now it is established that Tora Bora was one of the grav-

eastern Afghanistan. Although it could be useful, Al-Qaida like any terrorist organisation doesn't need a base in Afghanistan to launch its attacks, while the Talibans can sit tight quietly recruiting and regrouping before reemerging in Afghan politics.

As complained by a British commander the AQTs are at this time lying low showing no predisposition to reorganise and regroup to mount offensive operations against the Anglo-US ground forces. The defeated but defiant AQTs may do it at the time and place of their choosing when the US Special Forces and Royal Marines are totally worn out. At the moment it's an ignominious ending to the triumphalism of the fall of Kabul just over six months ago. By the time of the first anniversary of the fall of Kabul it will no longer be possible to ignore the accumulation of many awkward failures of the war on terror and the initiators of the war will be embarrassed to be reminded of their naive triumphalism. It was a war -- crude and clumsy -- which did little for the wretched Afghans and even less for the struggle against terrorism.

In December last, Downing Street put out a memo castigating the pundits who got it 'wrong'. The war, it declared, had made the world 'safer for you and your families'. Try telling that to Mrs Pearl or the families of French technicians blown up recently in Karachi. Try telling that to Americans who have been warned that there is a danger of a terrorist attack on a nuclear installation on July 4.

AQT might be now priming a device in deadly silence generating nerve wrecking fear which can be over only with the detonation itself. With the AQT remaining defiant the world may await developments never experienced before.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

In December last, Downing Street put out a memo castigating the pundits who got it 'wrong'. The war, it declared, had made the world 'safer for you and your families'. Try telling that to Mrs Pearl or the families of French technicians blown up recently in Karachi. Try telling that to Americans who have been warned that there is a danger of a terrorist attack on a nuclear installation on July 4. AQT(Al-Qaida/Taliban) might be now priming a device in deadly silence generating nerve wrecking fear which can be over only with the detonation itself. With the AQT remaining defiant the world may await developments never experienced before.

19 including 14 German tourists. On May 8, apparently a suicide bomber in Karachi pulled his car up beside a military bus loaded with French submarine technicians killing 14. September 11 was almost repeated when in December last shoe bomber Richard Reid attempted to blow up an American airliner over the Atlantic in an incident that the investigators have long been convinced was an Al-Qaida plot.

So it goes on even though the AQTs spend most of their times these days hiding and running. It is mindboggling how they yet plot, scheme and execute them with surprising precision. It is that fuzziess of the Islamic extremists' networks that makes it virtually impossible to tackle them. It is indeed difficult to answer who

the responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Islamic Army for the Liberation of Holy Sites -- the same group that said it bombed the US embassies in 1998. Moreover when the German police investigating the Djerba bomb raided the Duisburg home of a Moroccan immigrant they found there the telephone number of Ramzi Binalshibh belonging to Hamburg al-Qaida cell that masterminded September 11 attack.

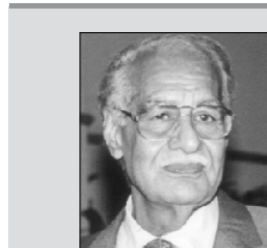
In the meantime the opening chapter of global war on terror in Afghanistan has become intractable. The western intervention in Afghanistan, the analysts are unanimous, has done little to improve the situation in already strife-torn country and less to beat terrorism. The global war on terror, far from following the script of unrelenting moral

claiming a measure of bravado were later found to be wrongly targeted while AQTs remained as elusive as ever in the wilderness of Afghan mountains. They carried out a series of ground operations -- Anacanda, Pearnigan, Snipe and before them famously fought Tora Bora -- which all proved farcical.

For example, operation Condor -- the latest in the series -- was claimed to be a great victory because the British Marines engaged in operation Condor had for the first time encountered and killed some AQTs. The claim soon proved baseless as several explanations as to what the British Marines actually encountered trapped up. Far from being AQT they were tribesmen in a shootout over some woodland. According to

est error of the war. The US depended too heavily on unreliable Afghan fighters. Osama bin-Laden and many AQT fighters managed to escape. The capture of Abu Zubayda, one of the al-Qaida's key figures in a joint US-Pakistan operation in March after a gunfight in Faisalabad could have been a setback to al-Qaida's battered network but it does show the inexorable spread of the network in some parts of Pakistan and the influence it wields on some segments of its society. It is not only the spread, also the resilience of the network points to its undiminished potentials. Any AQT strategist can rely on the fact that their commitment and patience will comfortably outstrip those of the coalition soldiers currently trudging up and down the mountains of

An act of grace



KULDIP NAYYAR

writes from New Delhi

SOMETHING shocking happened to India 27 years ago on June 26. A democratic polity, established by the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was turned into an authoritarian state by his daughter, Indira Gandhi. She imposed an 'internal emergency' upon the already existing emergency in the country. It was worse than Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's civil dictatorship.

West Bengal Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a lawyer who was notorious for his government's cold-blooded murder of hundreds of young Naxalites, was the one who gave Mrs Gandhi the idea of subverting the constitution. Her handpicked man, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, was the President who signed the proclamation even before the cabinet endorsed it.

There was no threat to the nation from sources external or internal. The only reason for imposing the emergency was that the Allahabad High Court had declared the election of Mrs Gandhi invalid on the ground of corrupt election practices. In her anxiety to continue in power, she brought about a situation which, no doubt, saved her Prime Ministership but generated forces which sacrificed the interests of many to serve the ambitions of a few.

The press was gagged, thousands were detained without trial and a series of totally illegal and unwarranted actions were taken to silence the opposition. This brought untold misery and sufferings. Never before had a political decision was taken by an interested Prime Minister to save herself from the legitimate compulsions of a judicial verdict against her. For the first time New Delhi saw the emergence of the extra-constitutional authority of

ters emerges in every government to rule the country. High-handed and arbitrary actions are carried out with impunity. The nation does not even know what is really happening. The Bofors scandal has ended in a whimper and the Hinduas have gone scot-free. Crime and politics have become intertwined since the emergency. In Bihar, half a dozen MLAs are in jail and three times as many out on bail. In Uttar Pradesh, several are absconding. The

hardly any difference now.

Top officials readily indulge in falsehood. It has become a way of life with them. The politicians do the same. The Right to Information Bill, cleared by the Home Ministry's Standing Committee more than a year ago, is yet to be brought before parliament. There will be yet another assurance by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in its election campaign that it will give the people their right to know. The

that we held a meeting at the Press Club on June 27. More than 100 journalists, including a couple of editors, attended it. We passed a resolution to condemn press censorship and demanded the release of journalists who had been detained under MISA. The people present did not have to sign the resolution but they did.

Yet the same lot was reluctant to stand up and be counted when I tried to pick up the thread after a few

General Zia-ul Haq proved to be more courageous and more tenacious. One hundred of them received lashes and more than 200 were detained. They dared the martial law under which anyone could be shot dead. Here we collapsed like a house of cards when the maximum that the government could do was to detain us.

I have pointed out some infirmities, not with the object of finding fault but to extract a lesson for the future. Unfortunately, the authorities both at the centre and in the states did not look at the cases in which the violations of law and order was recorded by the Shah Commission, appointed to look into the excesses during the emergency. It favoured punishment of the guilty officers and politicians so that no ruler in the future would dare to do the kind of crime committed during the emergency. The return of Mrs Gandhi to power in 1980 ended all the possibilities of pursuing those who had become a law unto themselves during the 19 months of emergency. Even the much-needed report on police reforms was put on the shelf because the post-emergency Janata government had appointed the commission.

What hope can we entertain on this count when the Congress, which may emerge as the largest party after the next general election, refuses to say sorry for the emergency. The cruel and agonising impact of the emergency was felt by the man in the street, in villages and in the factories. Mrs Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, does not seem to realise this. If she does, it will be an act of grace on her part to say that the Congress is sorry for what happened during the emergency.

Kuldeep Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Twenty-seven years is a long period during which we should have learnt some lesson. The important one was how to restore confidence in institutions which the mother and the son had ruthlessly destroyed... What hope can we entertain on this count when the Congress, which may emerge as the largest party after the next general election, refuses to say sorry for the emergency. The cruel and agonising impact of the emergency was felt by the man in the street, in villages and in the factories. Mrs Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, does not seem to realise this. If she does, it will be an act of grace on her part to say that the Congress is sorry for what happened during the emergency.

her son, Sanjay Gandhi, who played havoc with the country's institutions.

Twenty-seven years is a long period during which we should have learnt some lesson. The important one was how to restore confidence in institutions which the mother and the son had ruthlessly destroyed. The governments succeeding her, headed by some of those suffered during the emergency, did little. They used the same machinery that she had pulped into a rubber stamp. Political considerations and personal prejudices never allowed the nation to come back to its original moorings.

That machinery, an unhealthy combination of government servants, police, and politicians, is the main problem even today. A clique of top civil servants and top minis-

authorities are hand in glove with the criminals in many states. Over the years the public servants have imbibed the habit of acting as tools of the government's tyranny. None of the officials resigned during the emergency. Today they preach values in their writings and speeches. But the moment a minister wants it, they are willing to argument in favour of any side involved in a case.

Is there any alternative to the government's illegal functioning? But the desire for survival or out-of-turn promotion is enough incentive for government servants to carry out the minister's blatantly wrong orders. During the emergency, a large number of officers -- district magistrate and commissioners of police -- obediently carried out the instructions of politicians. There is

worst that has happened since the emergency is that fear has come to stalk the land. Mrs Gandhi had MISA to detain critics without trials. The NDA has POTA. Any democracy worth the name should be able to prove a crime in an open court. Otherwise all its claims will be suspect.

Fear is perceptible in the media. Still worse is the saffronisation taking place in its midst. I wonder if we would pick up the gauntlet thrown down to us by the government in the shape of media management. We failed when the emergency was declared. Press censorship was part of it. LK Advani, then Information Minister, made an apt remark: Journalists were asked to bend but they began to crawl.

It was not so bad when the emergency was declared. I recall

months of my detention. Fear -- or comfortable living -- had taken over the press community and there was hardly anyone willing to join issue with the government. So much so, even the Press Council of India, the highest non-official body to uphold freedom of the press, did not want to go on record to say anything against censorship, much less the emergency. I initiated a resolution at the Council to criticise the censorship but there was none to support me. It was talked over. Many years later I found in the white paper on the media, which the Janata government issued, Press Council chairman Gopalaswamy Iyengar had written to VC Shukla, then Information Minister, that he (Iyengar) had managed to stop the resolution.

In contrast, the Pakistani pressmen living under the martial law of

OPINION

Budget 2002- 2003: A ground level perception

MOHAMMED FORKAN UDDIN

THE budget speech of the experienced finance minister M Saifur Rahman has been published and the budget is welcomed and the reforms of fiscal measures are appreciated by many people and different organizations of the country. We have no doubt about the sincerity of the finance minister and the government as well. But to some extent the budget is not accepted by the general people. I have tried to discuss on the extent the general peoples are aggrieved.

Para 18 (a): Tax exemption limit has been reduced to Tk. 75,000 from Tk. 1,00,000 which is not totally accepted by the general people because the low income group is put under tax burden. The present tax slabs have given opportunity of tax exemption to high income group people. This is simply an over burden to

the people of low income group and this will not increase revenue of the government because the slabs have reduced the tax burden of high income group people. The amount which will be realised because the difference i.e. 100000 and 75000 will be lower than the amount of tax relief in reducing tax burden on those earning more than Tk. 25,000 per month. So the finance minister and the government may reform the new tax slabs and the maximum limit of exemption in the interest of the general people.

Para 18 (b): Increase of minimum tax i.e. Tk.2400 is also a burden to the low income group people.

Para 21: It is very good to avoid discrimination of tax payment between government employees and others but the question is, how the government will take action for avoiding underhand arrangement of the government employees? For such arrangement the government is losing a bulk amount of revenue.

The government may examine the owning of property by the government employees and how has it been earned. The general people think that the government will be able to realise more revenue if respective government employees pay tax on their 'extra' earnings.

Para 38: The finance minister proposed to withdraw the provision of advance tax collection on personal vehicle at the time of renewal of fitness. On the other hand he imposed tax on low-income group people on the basis of the logic of per capita income. He withdraws the above tax on the basis of question of law which is not just and equity based. But the people who are maintaining car or vehicles are very much able to pay the tax at the time of renewal. The amount of tax on renewal is not so high that the owner will suffer. The exemption will only cause lower collection of tax. The government and the finance minister may

reconsider the proposal.

Para 40: The finance minister proposed to reduce dividend exemption from Tk.100,000 to Tk.25,000 of individual income.

The capital market remained sluggish since 1996. The election manifesto promised to revamp the capital market. In this situation the proposal appears as a question mark. The government may rethink the matter and reconsider it as previous with other facilities given by the finance minister to restore the interest of the investor in the capital market.

Para 44: The finance minister of the past government declared in his budget speech that all unrealisable arrear income tax prior to 1988 would be written off which was totally detrimental to the revenue collection of the government. The present finance minister proposed to write off prior to and including the assessment year 1985-86 that also may cause lower collection of revenue. The question of

unrealised tax should be settled through realisation in the grater interest of the nation. This is also the demand of general people. The government and the finance minister and the tax authority should take stern action for realising the unrealised taxes because no government should be just follower of another government. If the government is willing to realise the taxes it is possible to realise most if not all.

Para 54: The finance minister proposed to impose 30 per cent supplementary duty on mango, orange, grapes, apples, dates and other fruits. Most of the people of our country are in a state below nutrition level. Such imposition will simply restrict the low income group people from buying such fruits and their nutrition level will be further decreased. We dream of earning foreign currency through export of manpower, on the other hand decreasing their capability through such implementation of duty. The

government and the finance minister may reconsider it in view of meeting the demand of nutrition of the general people.

Para 63: The finance minister proposed to reduce the customs duty on the import of colour and black and white television. Such reduction will give privilege to the financially sound people and is detrimental to the government revenue collection. The ground shown for reducing duty is mass communication medium. But it may be mentioned here that the people using television are very much able to pay 10 per cent exempted duty. They why go for less revenue collection?

Para 68: Reducing supplementary duty on new motorcar. Maximum revenue of the government is collected from import duty. As such the proposal makes the general people astonished. On the other hand maximum exemption limit has been

determined at Tk.75000. This proposal may encourage the neighbouring country to export their cheaper cars to our country because most of the people of our country are using reconditioned car due to their financial limitations. It is announced that new cars will be available within Tk 300000-900000. We the general people feel that Indian cars will be purchased by the majority of car users that would widen the trade gap between us and the neighbour. We welcomed the decision of the government for changing cars and vehicle in to CNG ones to protect the environment but the logic of importing new car through reducing duty is questionable because five years old cars are running in the developed countries also. The general people think that the high rate of supplementary duty on motor car is perfect. The lowering will only increase discrimination of tax burden between rich and poor or middle classes.

The total budget speech of the

finance minister is acceptable to the people except the above mentioned points. These are really detrimental to the interest of poor and general people. I like to give some suggestions. I like to mention here that some departments of the government are blamed as leading in corruption and for this the country and the government both are suffering. If corruption is rooted out from the government administration then all corruption from the society will also be rooted out. The question is will the government try to get rid of the prevailing corruption situation in its departments?

CORRIGENDUM
In the article "The legendary poet" published in the "91st Birth Anniversary of Poet Sufia Kamal" section on 21 June the second sentence should be read as "Born ... residence of her grandfather ..." instead of "Born ... residence of her father ...". The inadvertence is regretted.