

Conspiracy to oust government

Just accusing is not enough, PM must take the nation into confidence

THE Prime Minister in her budget session address has mentioned that conspiracies are on to topple the elected government spearheaded by the opposition involving ex and retired members of the armed forces and some others. The PM has directly accused the main opposition party of this conspiracy and said that timely actions had foiled these conspiratorial moves. The statement deserves utmost concern and must be dealt as a matter of highest priority.

This can't be seen as part of the typical trite rhetoric of Bangladeshi politics. It's a matter of national security and involves the future of democracy in Bangladesh. In view of our national history and the role of conspiracies in shaping it, the remarks of the PM, if true, needs to be seen as a crisis of national proportion. Given the nature of the events, it's imperative on the part of the PM that she reveal the details of the conspiracy to the nation as a whole so that everyone may unite and fight such evil designs.

The matter is so serious that it has gone beyond the realms of partisan politics, and the media, civil society and all other forces, who shall also be as affected should there be an extra-constitutional conspiracy, be fully informed and plans taken for action. Every fact must be told to the people so that they can guard themselves.

One is reminded that during the first innings of BNP rule under Khaleda Zia, we did not hear much about conspiracies. About half-way through the rule of Sk. Hasina, 'conspiracy' became a regular phenomenon in our political life. The former PM's frequent reference to conspiracies were never proven, nor any evidence shared with the public. But this is only the eighth month of her rule and Khaleda Zia has 'discovered' a plot to oust her. That's why it's such a critical matter.

National security matters ultimately belong to the people and the evidence of conspiracies must be presented publicly. It is not a crisis of a single political party, nor can the PM keep the nation in the dark about it.

This is the time to disclose all the facts before the people, expose the enemies as she has described and take prompt action taking the people along. Surely the time for making vague and politically inspired charges of such serious nature is long past gone. Charges without any evidence are mere rhetorics which must be disdainfully ignored.

Let us know all the facts. This right to know belongs to the people.

Budget prunes taxes to meet lobby demands

Consumers remain uneasy

HAT Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has an adroit finger at the calculator is driven home once again. This time he has shown it while altering the proposed budget, albeit at the peripheries, to cater for certain segmental demands without affecting its basic character and thrust.

He has made additions to and subtractions from his original taxation proposals in such a way that his projected total revenue earning at Tk 35,000 crore plus remains more or less in tact. So, he did not even have any necessity for a footnote to bemoan the so-called loss to the national exchequer that finance ministers are apt to sigh over each time they declare renunciation of a tax proposal. His uncanny genius in levelling the 'losses' comes right through his calculations.

The withdrawal of import duty on computer (dovetailed to 3 per cent AIT imposed plus the mandatory Pre Shipment Inspection) sits in well with the government or the private sector plans to expand usage of IT. Secondly, the suspension of 'ban' on import of maximum four-year-old vintage cars for a period of two years with 10 per cent supplementary duty on 1350-1649 CC vehicles gives the reconditioned car dealers a respite for a switch-over to other forms of business. Notably, the principle of a 'ban' on import of reconditioned cars has been adopted. Thirdly, shopkeepers in the city corporation area will have to pay a minimum annual VAT of Tk 4200 instead of the proposed Tk 5400. The rate for shopkeepers outside the municipal limits has been brought down by Tk 600 from the proposed level. The small but numerically powerful business lobby has been assuaged there. Finally, the lowest slab of taxable income remains at Tk 75,000 as in the original budget but it seems somewhat tempered with a reduction of the rock-bottom tax at Tk 1200 from Tk 2400 as proposed earlier.

All that is on the debit side, so to speak; but on the credit side to the kitty the finance minister has imposed sizeable new taxes and supplementary duties on bank profits and import of cigarettes and alcoholic beverages.

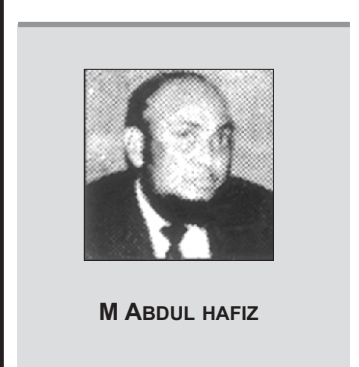
The supreme irony however is, while Saifur Rahman has balanced his calculations, the poor and middle class consumers remain completely unrelieved of the high incidence of taxes the original budget had ordained on them. They will have difficulty making both ends meet. Moreover, as the inflationary pressure builds on the economy it risks reducing their purchasing power. Only productive investments can ease their plight.

'Cross-border terrorism': Deployment of international force is the only way out

A T last a flash of relieving light has been visible at the end of the dark, dangerous tunnel. Both India and Pakistan seem to have felt the heat of the international pressures, exerted by world leadership, particularly, USA, Great Britain, Russia and China, besides the European Union (EU) leadership and a number of Asian leaders. The high tempo of war rhetorics, coming from both sides of the Indo-Pak borders seemed to have calmed down to a great extent, following the recent visits to the two nuclear-powered arch rivals by US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of State Armitage.

Armitage was quoted as telling pressmen, on return from his talks with Pakistan President Gen Musharraf and Indian PM Vajpayee, that he had been able to get the assurance from Gen Musharraf that he would take all possible measures to permanently end the infiltration of militants from Pakistan into Indian territories, which has been welcomed by India. In response to Pakistan's firm commitment, India had announced several de-escalation measures, including, lifting of ban on Pakistan's commercial flights over India and removal of

The Subcontinent's deepening crisis



THE likelihood of a war between India and Pakistan has somewhat receded recently after another cycle of military escalation began on both sides since 13 December terrorist attack on Indian Parliament building. There were conciliatory gestures from either side of the tense border. An inference that the war was not imminent had been conveyed by the absence of Indian Prime Minister from the national capital. Everything short of troops' withdrawal was moving towards normalcy. Meanwhile May 14 incident killing the soldiers' family members including women and children in military family housing area near Jammu by militants suspected to be sponsored by Pakistan has triggered fresh war hysteria that appears uncontrollable. The Indian military which has mobilised nearly one million troops along both LoC in Kashmir and international border with Pakistan is evidently eager to seize the opportunity and avenge Pakistan's repeated 'cross border terrorism'. The senior Army officers buoyantly claim that the 'war genie' has already been let loose and will be difficult for

the beleaguered Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party to bottle it again.

"If we do not attack now, we never will". The military in Jammu sector is visibly in a mood to strike now because to wait again after nearly six months of deployment and acts of intense provocation like guerilla action in Kaluchak garrison will be counter productive. Never had the decision makers in India been so united on taking actions

against the terrorists, if required, in their bases in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). In a coercive diplomacy the world opinion has already been mobilised in favour of India. Yet the members of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) are still weighing the option for a full-scale war in case Pakistan refuses to succumb to global pressure with regard to alleged infiltration across the LoC.

The nuclear dimension of Indo-Pakistan war has so far been a matter of speculation and a topic of academic discourse. Now the rivals are openly flaunting their nuclear prowess. Pakistan has threatened India with the first use of nukes to balance Delhi's conventional arms superiority. Her permanent representative in the United Nations has

publicly declared that Pakistan would resort to her nuclear option if the country was overwhelmed by India's superior conventional forces. The international community is nervously watching the development with a measure of trepidation at the prospect of the history's first nuclear war.

As both India and Pakistan are readying their delivery system and putting in place their nuclear-capable missiles and bombers

obviously an international pressure has been mounting on an isolated Pakistan on the issue of 'cross border terrorism' considered responsible for the worrisome prospect of nuclear confrontation. All major nations -- the US, EU, Russia and Japan -- insist that Pakistan must prevent the Islamist militants from crossing the LoC. A distance is also growing between the US leadership and General Musharraf whom it finds misbehaving ally, unwilling to comply. From President Bush to Colin Powell and Rumsfeld and even Jack Straw of Britain to Kris Patten of EU -- all seem to be in a mood to bully and balk at Pakistan for not effectively reining in its militants. This could not but happen in an alliance or coalition where its constituents have diver-

gent interests, expectations and, above all, perception of issues involved.

In the days after September 11 General Musharraf appeared ready to play to the West's tune. He moved quickly to cut off years of military and financial support to the Talibans, against the wishes of several of his more hardline generals. Little did the west realise that Kashmir was always going to be different. The struggle for the dis-

puted Himalyan state virtually defines Pakistan's national identity. The general hoped to continue unhindered the army's covert support for militants' guerilla war in Kashmir. Only under mounting pressure from London and Washington and threat of retaliatory strikes from India has Musharraf begun to curb their activities. At a series of government meetings two weeks ago General Musharraf issued the orders to stop Islamist militants crossing the LoC. The order was discussed at the joint meeting of the cabinet and the National Security Council on My 22. At another meeting at Joint Staff Headquarters the following day the generals debated the decision for hours before agreeing to support General Musharraf. The sources

close to the militants say the order will apply for six weeks at first.

The following week in Islamabad Musharraf assured the British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw that 'cross border terrorism had ended'. Contrary to previous occasions he made little effort to deny that infiltration had taken place in the past. He also promised to close the militant training camps in Pakistan controlled Kashmir but was vague in his answer when Straw asked him how

long would it take to do so. While it appears that the order to stop infiltration is temporary, intended to last just six weeks, it is unclear whether the General has complete control over his intelligence agency which runs the militants. Soon after Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, said, "Instructions have been given to halt infiltration" adding that "it is too early to say that it has stopped". The move goes some way to meeting international demand, but it may not be enough. Yet the general who walks the razor's edge cannot do more. He is under immense pressure from the country as a whole, and from the top ranks of his army, not to concede an inch.

"No military or elected government has ever been able to change the policy on Kashmir or our com-

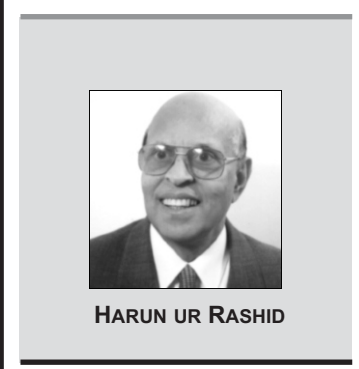
mitment to nuclear weapon" said General Aslam Beg, a former Army Chief, "you cannot go back after the sacrifices that have been made."

And so, appearing ashen-faced for a crucial television address on May 27, Musharraf played the defiant leader promising that Pakistan would respond with "full might" to any Indian attack implying that Pakistan's military help to Kashmiris' freedom struggle would continue. He also clearly feels he has made huge concessions. "I personally feel that I have taken actions which could not have been imagined before", he told CNN in a 'recent interview'.

Notwithstanding his liberal credentials his only problem, so far as the west is concerned, is the issue of Kashmir and particularly Kargil, the 10-week battle in the northern Kashmir mountains in 1999 which made him appear a dangerously unpredictable hard-liner. Musharraf and his generals covertly masterminded the capture of a handful of mountains in Indian-held Kashmir, secretly prepared Pakistan's unclear warheads and militarily delivered a bloody nose to their Indian rivals. Even during the last two months' tight-rope walk Musharraf has shown that when it comes to the conflict over Kashmir he is an extraordinary risk-taker. Pakistan's adroit military ruler will be repeatedly prepared to take such risks forcing India to respond at some stage. If for nothing, just to fend off the charge that it is capable of only empty threats. The situation that may then unfold is at the core of worldwide anxiety over South Asia's crisis today.

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Bush's blueprint on ME conflict



ON 24th June President Bush revealed his long-awaited plan for peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He was supposed to declare a week ago the US response to the current political impasse but the suicide bombings intervened and he postponed it. Simply put, his plan is that political and security reforms in the Palestinian lands are conditions precedent to establishing a Palestinian state. He stated that within 18 months there would be a provisional Palestinian state and within three years a fully-fledged state provided the conditions were met.

The President also made it indirectly clear to the Palestinian people that time had come now to reject the leadership of Yasser Arafat. The decision to reject Arafat (whom Mr. Bush appears to have never trusted) seems to have been influenced by the briefings of Prime Minister Sharon of Israel. The President met Sharon six times since last year and did not meet once Yasser Arafat. Even the Vice-President Dick Cheney did not meet Arafat when he was in Israel early this year. This amply reflects the attitude of the Bush administration to the Palestin-

ian leader.

It is believed that because of the suicide-bombings the President had made harder conditions for the Palestinian leaderships than before. Another factor to be weighed in is the coming re-election of his younger brother Governor Jeb Bush in Florida and it is reported that much of Governor's success will depend on the votes of sizeable Jewish electorate in Florida. President Bush cannot let down his brother in the election and he should be perceived

accept by and large the President's blueprint for peace in the region as the future road map. President Mubarak of Egypt said that "I do not see in the speech the removal of Arafat but a demand of reforms of the Palestinian Authority and the formation of a new administration." Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa (an Egyptian) said Mr. Bush's proposals deserved careful considerations. The European Union welcomed it as a sign of renewed American engagement in

the Middle East conflict.

However President Putin of Russia has warned against sidelining the Palestinian leader Arafat from the Middle East process. At a news conference on 25th June with some 700 Russian and foreign journalists, he said "It would be dangerous and a mistake to remove Arafat from the political arena because in our view that would lead to radicalisation of Palestinian society." Iran said that it was a repetition of Washington's "hard-line and one-sided" position towards the Middle East. China welcomed the US's effort but said that Arafat's status as an elected leader was "an internationally recognised fact." The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said that Mr. Arafat was a legitimate leader while praising the vision of

President Bush.

The Palestinian people were wondering whether President Bush was voicing Ariel Sharon views. This is perceived from the fact that the President was in effect urging the removal of Yasser Arafat, the man whom they consider symbolises the aspirations and hopes of Palestinian people. They think that the plan is a sugar-coated bitter pill prescribed by the US President, i.e.-removal of Arafat with hope of a Palestine state at a future uncertain date. Further-

more some of the Palestinian leaders criticised the plan for several reasons.

First, no one however powerful can dictate the choice of the leadership for Palestinians. It is the sole prerogative of Palestinian people to choose their leader. Even the former US State Department senior official Pelletreau said that President's call to reject Arafat was unwarranted. In fact many observers believe that Arafat's standing has rather been boosted among the ordinary Palestinians after the President's speech and his re-election success seems to be assured unless Washington produces strong pressure to force Arafat out of seeking re-election.

Second, if Arafat is not allowed to contest election, who are the Palestinian leaders acceptable to the US?

Like any one else, Palestinians don't like to be told who to vote for by a man they see as Sharon's biggest international supporter. To show their anger they might elect some person who is much more radical than Arafat, say from Hamas group. If that occurs, many believe peace in the Middle East will come to a full stop.

Third, the question of election in the Palestinian territory does not arise in view of the Israeli re-occupation of Palestinian major

cities. It begs the question whether there can be a free and fair election under the present climate. An election is only possible according to Palestinian leaders when Israel withdraws from its territory given to them (42% of the occupied lands) under Oslo Accord of 1993.

Fourth, the plan offers no solution to the most difficult issues, such as, the status of Jerusalem, the borders of Palestinian state and the fate of Palestinian refugees expelled from Israel after 1948.

Finally, many legal experts maintain that the concept of a provisional state as envisaged by President Bush is misconceived under rules of international law. Either a state exists or not, irrespective of recognition from other states. Provisional government may be formed in

a territory constituting a State.

Many political observers believe that initially the administration of President Bush was not interested in the Middle East conflict. That position was changed after September 11 attacks and his reported plan to extend the war on terrorism to Iraq. Any armed action against Iraq needs some kind of calmness in the conflict in the Middle East if the US wants co-operation from Arab States in its goal to change the regime in Iraq.

The bottomline appears to be that Yasser Arafat has become a *persona non grata* to the US administration. Sharon's view that Arafat has been and is a supporter of terrorism seems to have been accepted by the US administration. Some observers believe that President Bush's earlier speech on the Middle East on April 4 effectively gave Arafat one last chance to tackle terrorism. It didn't happen.

Whether this was because the Israelis had destroyed Arafat's security apparatus or whether it was because he was not interested or incapable of in stopping terrorism is a matter to be debated among the interested parties.

The proposed peace conference in September as suggested by the Secretary of State Colin Powell seems to have disappeared from the horizon. It seems to be a win for hard heads such as the Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney. One may suggest that an exciting but very unpredictable period appears to be looming large in the Middle East.

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OPINION

Let the Western leaders take the initiative for ensuring peace, stability and security in the region. The earlier it is done, the better for all. Let the Indo-Pak leaders not forget the saying that standing in the middle of the road is very dangerous. So a safe side is the best side for the two nuclear-armed Asian nations.

A similar scenario was witnessed in 1999 when Vajpayee refused to attend the SAARC Summit scheduled to be held in November at Kathmandu as he was reluctant to sit with the Pakistan's Army ruler at the same table! But, ironically, he attended the Summit after two years at the same venue, sitting at the same table with Gen Musharraf. Earlier, a tragic earthquake in Gujarat at least brought the two leaders 'voice to voice', if not face to face, when Gen Musharraf phoned Vajpayee to express sympathy for the loss of lives and properties, after

dispatching two plane-loads of relief good, for the victims. At that time, Vajpayee made a very touching remark before the pressmen, when he said: "It is at times of distress that people come together and share their grief." Unfortunately, for the peoples of the two countries, this spirit of coming together and sharing of grief at times of distress didn't last long.

Now time has come when India

stan. Apart from visit of peace envoys from USA, Great Britain, Russia, China and EU countries, what a tremendous effort was made by Russian President Putin at the recently concluded Asian Security Conference at Almaty, Kazakhstan. But the whole exercise ended in smoke for the rigidity and unwillingness shown by India not to meet Musharraf on the plea of cross-border terrorism.

stance of India has been indirectly not accepted by the world leaders when they had been recently advocating for solution of the Kashmir problem in order to defuse the tense situation created by both countries, amassing lakhs of soldiers on their borders. And hardliners like Home Minister Advani, in his recent statement, had again ruled out the possibility of either withdrawal of troops from the border, or resumption of

dialogue with Pakistan until Pakistan totally ends cross border terrorism. But who will be the judge to decide whether infiltration is continuing, or has been completely stopped? India being an accuser can't be a judge at the same time. It will have to make room for a third-party to oversee how far Pakistan had fulfilled its commitment given to two US peace envoys. And for this, India will have to get rid of its third party, or mediation allergy. Whether India admits or not, a third-party has already started working in the backyards of both India and Paki-

supporting an international force, preferably under UN umbrella, maybe by enlarging the 'micro-force' of the existing UNMOGIP, by many times with troops from different member countries, particularly, from USA, Great Britain, Russia and European countries. Because, for India and Pakistan, who have been suffering from distrust and mistrust of each other, an overnight deployment of joint Indo-Pak force for patrolling the disputed borders to check cross border terrorism is physically impossible and unworkable.

Kashmir is no more an internal or domestic problem, either of India or Pakistan. It is the problem of the Kashmiris and the two contending parties would ultimately have to agree to ascertain their views. Let the Western leaders take the initiative for ensuring peace, stability and security in the region. The earlier it is done, the better for all. Let the Indo-Pak leaders not forget the saying that standing in the middle of the road is very dangerous. So a safe side is the best side for the two nuclear-armed Asian nations.

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