

State of the economy

Bad politics negates progress

THE Bangladesh Bank board gave out an optimistic assessment of the economy to the press on Monday. It has highlighted the state of the economy in upbeat terms as it stood between July and February of the fiscal 2003-2004.

Two politically volatile months have passed since then with more uncertainty in prospect for the last two months of the current fiscal. That is why a timely warning has been issued to politicians to exercise restraint and let the economy off the political hooks.

The pre-Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF) meeting in Dhaka having got underway on Tuesday, one would have thought the Bangladesh central bank's assessment came in handy for it. Also perhaps the call for better politics and law and order.

The political atmosphere has become highly torrid. It is rife with verbal abuses and incendiary threats being traded between the ruling party and the opposition. In the face of a growing sign of destabilisation, it is felt on all hands that the interest of the economy will have to be asserted. That's why it is important to know where our economy stood so that we get a feel of where our stakes truly lay.

During the first eight months of the current fiscal, exports notched a 14 percent growth compared to last year's 7 percent; and imports of raw materials, intermediate goods and capital machinery registered a significant rise. Concomitantly, industrial output grew by 7.2 percent. Significantly, industrial term loans increased by 76 percent from the previous level.

Total foodgrains output for FY 2004 is projected to be 281.01 lakh MT, representing a 5.3 percent increase over 166.95 lakh MT recorded in the previous year.

Good agricultural and industrial growth prospects together with strong foreign trade performances are likely to benefit the service sector.

Foreign exchange reserve is high and external payments position has improved. But internally, the total revenue collection lagged by Tk 582 crore against the target of Tk 18,735 crore.

The ADP has been implemented up to 40 percent over the last three quarters. It is little consolation that the figure was 36 percent during the corresponding period of the last fiscal.

The economy could even grow beyond the projected 5.5 percent, by Bangladesh Bank's reckoning, if other things remained the same, as is customarily stated in economic parlance. Should we allow non-economic factors to tyrannise the economy? That puts a premium on political parties pulling themselves from the brink of what looks like an imminent political and economic disaster.

Three-year-old accused for murder!

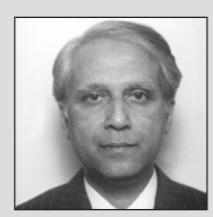
How can we make such a farce of our judicial system?

A three-year-old baby boy, Iman Ali, was made an accused in a murder case and on being brought to court last Tuesday was granted bail upon a bond of Tk. 5,000 as the prosecution very kindly did not oppose it. Of the many bizarre things that happen in our country accusing and then granting bail to a three year old should feature among the very top.

It happened because a complainant implicated the three-year-old while filing a murder charge with the Sutrapur police station in the city. The question we would like to ask is how could the police accept such a complaint even if some one made such a charge. On the very face of it, it is clear that Iman Ali was implicated simply to harass the family. Doesn't our police have that simple common sense that a three year old cannot possibly commit murder? To accept the complainant, and then to process all the necessary papers and then to bring him to court the Sutrapur police had to do a lot of paper work on this boy. Wasn't there any senior officer in the whole station to prevent such an abuse of law when the whole process was taking place?

Our second question is to the Honourable judge who granted him bail. Couldn't he have seen through it all and dismissed the charge against the three year old. Why didn't he question the police about it and punish them for this harassment of an innocent child. We know justice is blind but does it have to be so blind that it does not see when the judicial system is being made a mockery of.

We commend the law minister for seeing the news in the media and being proactive enough so as to question the IG and ask for the suspension of the involved policemen. This boy's life would have been forever ruined but for the media coverage. We now ask the minister to go further and have the boy saved from further harassment. The law should also be amended in a way that such absurdity does not recur in future.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THREE weeks have nearly passed since the massive arms seizure was made on the night of 1-2 April from the Chittagong Urea Fertilizer Ltd jetty located in the Anwara coast of Chittagong.

The fact that such illegal cargo was being unloaded in a jetty, in a highly protected area, has raised several questions. The entry into and exit from this factory area is strictly controlled by representatives of several law enforcement authorities (The Independent, 8 April). The jetty in particular, according to an analyst, 'is exclusively dedicated for loading fertilizer into barges and trollers.'

Consequently, questions are being raised as to how this could have happened. It has also since been found that 'FV Amanat' the fishing trawler seized for carrying the illegal weapons had just been released following a writ petition in the High Court. Apparently, it had been seized earlier by the Customs for being involved in smuggling operations (The Daily Star, 8 April).

I have refrained from making any comments on this matter, as any superficial speculation might have been construed as interference in an issue which is subjudice. The restraint has been exercised in view of the ongoing investigation and inquiry.

I believe that the situation is serious in nature and scope and that it should not deteriorate into a blame game. The whole scenario involves national security and that has to be respected. Criticism and

politicisation will not assist the process of judicial investigation. The last thing that one wants is confusion and misunderstanding.

The government has constituted a high-powered committee and also associated the Criminal Investigation Department in its efforts to ascertain the background details of this smuggling of sophisticated weapons. The Home Ministry has also remarked that they are trying to determine who are involved.

It is only natural that the

has been taking place through the porous coast-line in a sensitive region.

In the late seventies, someone called 'Mensharu Mian' was regularly identified as the person who was most concerned with smuggling high value commodities. Such nefarious activity appears to have evolved over the years into the lucrative profession of gunrunning.

This is not the first time that such arms seizures have hit our headlines.

A string of large arms

Assam, the All Tripura Tigers Force in Tripura and the Arakan rebel groups of Myanmar.

The disturbing nature of the whole situation was highlighted in a recent newspaper report published in the Indian newspaper 'The Daily Telegraph'. Director-General of Indian police CM Srivastava was quoted in this paper as saying that insurgent leaders of India's northeastern states held a meeting in Bangkok on 16 March this year and decided to send two major

truth. I do not know if we will ever know the truth. One can only hope that the high-powered inquiry committee will be able to backtrack the path by which the shipment reached Chittagong. It will be difficult to trace the source of all the different weapons and the various kinds of ammunition. Obviously, international gunrunners were involved in this clandestine operation.

There were probably many sources. The process of shipment and delivery, in all

insurgents who are using Bangladesh as a conduit.

Whatever be the destination, the smuggling of such weapons raise the fundamental point that there are people in this sub-region who are sufficiently trained to use these weapons. It also suggests that 'whoever it was meant for is well organised and trained to indulge in open hostility ... conventional combat or classical military operations' (Brig. Gen. (Retd) S. Anam Khan).

The last question is not only difficult but also very sensitive. It relates to the identity of those inside Bangladesh who are assisting these arms smuggling operations.

The inquiry and post-investigation efforts might not be fully transparent. It will probably be restrictive in nature. That is quite understandable. One hopes however that the probe will be thorough, conclusive and non-politicised. The local accomplices have to be exposed and prosecuted and the public kept informed of actions taken. We have no other alternative. The inquiry has to be seen as a success.

All sides have to recognise that we are living in an extremely volatile situation where there has been not only an erosion in law and order but also where guns are being used indiscriminately in all parts of the country. We also have to understand that we are grappling with a smouldering problem in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and that there is also active armed insurgency in the neighbouring region.

Both our internal and external security demands that we treat this as a serious threat and in a bipartisan manner. This is a matter of the greatest concern for all of us. The failure to take prompt and effective action to check trafficking in arms will affect our national well-being.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

The inquiry and post-investigation efforts might not be fully transparent. It will probably be restrictive in nature. That is quite understandable. One hopes however that the probe will be thorough, conclusive and non-politicised. The local accomplices have to be exposed and prosecuted and the public kept informed of actions taken. We have no other alternative. The inquiry has to be seen as a success.

composition of the committee should have included the officials who are entrusted with the serious responsibility of national security. These are professionals who are expected to carefully and dispassionately examine all facts of this case. One hopes however that earlier remarks by political personalities will not influence their process of investigation.

The seizure has been described as the 'largest single' illegal arms consignment to have been intercepted by law enforcement officials in Bangladesh. A subsequent inventory published in the papers indicated that the arms and ammunition seized included sub-machine guns, automatic carbines, Tommy automatic rifles, rocket launchers, Ugo rifles, hand grenades, magazines of SMG, pistol and rifle bullets.

There have been many reports, since the early 80's, of arms smuggling through the Chittagong coastline. Over the years, newspapers and seminars have repeatedly drawn attention to the ease with which arms smuggling

hauls in the last few months indicate that insurgent groups in South Asia are targeting Bangladesh as a transit point for gunrunning not only because of its strategic location but also because Chittagong Hill Tracts has a 172 km porous border with India and Myanmar.

The Bangladesh Armed Forces, the BDR and some police detachments have shown enterprise in their 10 recent hauls of firearms in the three hill districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. Another illegal arms haul took place in a remote village in Bogra on June 27 last year. On November 30, police recovered several sophisticated weapons after a gunfight with criminals in Dhaka. Between September and October, the BDR has also recovered bombs and explosive materials from Bandarban. Unfortunately, people believe that such seizures scratch only the surface.

The catalytic factors that appear to be encouraging such gunrunning are probably associated with the underground separatist movements of the United Liberation Front of

consignments of arms and ammunition to militants in Northeastern India through Cox's Bazar. He also claimed that top leaders of five major outfits including the Tripura Tiger Force and ULFA were represented in this meeting. There have also been other Indian speculations that the truckloads of arms were being imported clandestinely by ULFA to replenish the stock that they had lost due to the joint military operations in Bhutan carried out by the Indian and Bhutanese armies.

Such statements unfortunately do not help anybody. It would probably have been preferable if the Indian intelligence authorities had shared their information with the relevant Bangladeshi agencies. One presumes that sub-regional security is sought by all countries in this region. This massive seizure in Chittagong has underlined once again the need of intelligence cooperation in this part of the world.

This time God was kind. He expects however that we tie our camels and then keep our faith in Him. One does not know the whole

likelihood, must have been undertaken through different infrastructural units. Nevertheless, the government, in keeping with suggestions that they seek international assistance, should get in touch with Interpol and also with the intelligence agencies of those countries whose weapons have been seized. There is an existing UN control regime in respect of small arms and light weapons. Each producing country of such weapons must be keeping a proper inventory of their production. I will probably be naive, but I believe that with hard work and cooperation we might be able to identify the groups who might have been involved. If necessary, we should also seek the assistance of the USA and the UK.

It appears unlikely that such sophisticated weapons were being brought into Bangladesh for possible use within the country. Some of the items might have joined the stream of illegal weapons that already exists here. However, rocket propelled grenades and other similar offensive weapons were probably destined for

BJP's overkill backfires

Towards a hung Lok Sabha?

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

163. The unambiguous trend? A narrowing of the gap between the two coalitions.

Now, two new polls, by Zee-TV and Star News, say the NDA might pass the 182 mark just by a whisker. It might even fall short. Zee's lower-end estimate gives it 265 seats. And the Star poll predicts 271 to 283. The lower figure falls below the magic mark of 273. The NDA cannot possibly feel secure about its prospects.

confidence, the BJP's top leadership knows it'll be difficult to reach, leave alone exceed, the 1999 tally of 182. Ten allies have deserted the BJP. Some of those which remain, like the JD(U) and Nationalist Trinamool Congress, are likely to do badly.

There are indications that BJP leaders recognise that this will prove a hard slog and have drawn up contingency strategies:

- The BJP is tapping xenophobia,

image and trying to give the campaign a "presidential" spin.

But the electoral process in a parliamentary system, with multiple national, local and caste factors influencing the voter, is qualitatively different.

- The BJP hasn't fielded senior leaders as candidates other than the Vajpayee-Advani-Joshi trio. It doesn't feel assured of their victory. Key NDA leaders are changing seats--including Mr

- anti-Opposition smear campaigns.

- The party's second-generation leaders are furiously commissioning survey after "private survey", with huge samples such as 200,000 for Uttar Pradesh. Their typical results aren't mutually compatible, and not reassuring either.

The BJP's "overkill" has boomeranged. It itself admitted (April 1) that "India Shining" hasn't

Congress. If the BJP cannot do well in UP, it's unlikely to reach the 180-seat mark nationally.

None of this gives the Congress a decisive edge over its adversary. It has to create that edge by offering an attractive, radical new vision to the masses, and by broad-basing its alliances.

The Congress has suffered setbacks in building coalitions in the North, barring Jharkhand. It can make up by both strengthening alliances elsewhere, and by infusing enthusiasm into cadres through imaginative people-oriented programmes.

Sights of this happening are vague and uncertain. The Congress isn't taking bold steps because it's afraid of being branded "populist". But there is nothing wrong with populism. The Congress will only gain if it revives and universalises the Public Distribution System and subsidises food for the poor (and not fertiliser for the rich, as at present).

The people will welcome the Congress if it guarantees free primary healthcare and decent-quality elementary education.

SUCH is the Bharatiya Janata Party's hyperbolic publicity campaign, and the media's soft corner for it, that many people have come to believe that the outcome of India's coming Parliament elections is already a foregone conclusion.

Yet, going by sober political assessments, and successive opinion polls, India could have truly indecisive results, in which neither the National Democratic Alliance nor a Congress-led coalition emerges a clear winner.

The earliest large-sized poll, by India Today (in January), gave the NDA an emphatic 330-340-seat majority in the 545-member Lok Sabha, and the Congress and allies only 105-115 seats.

Two subsequent polls by Outlook (late-February) and Indian Express-NDTV (mid-March) put the NDA's tally much lower (respectively 280-290 and 287-307), but still gave it a majority. The Congress and allies' tally improved to 159-169 and 143-

(anti-foreigner hatred) by making the "foreign origin" issue a central campaign plank. As a senior BJP leader says, this is an insincere, opportunist strategy. It will end with the elections.

- The BJP isn't sure that "normal" campaigning can energise its cadres. So it launched the Advani rathyatra. (But this has drawn a painful response.)

- It drafted the "Vision 2004" document mainly to reassure Hindutva hardliners that it still remains wedded to the RSS's core-agenda.

- The BJP knows Mr Vajpayee's acceptance rating is twice as high as its own. So, it's milking his "soft"

Vinay Katiyar, and Messrs George Fernandes and Nitish Kumar in Bihar.

- The BJP blackmailed Ms Mayawati (vulnerable because of the "Taj Corridor" case) into rejecting an alliance with the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. That alliance would have resulted in a turnover of about 60 seats, nationally tilting the scales against the NDA.

- BJP leaders abusively attack Ms Sonia Gandhi and her family--to capitalise on prejudice and hatred prevalent within the VHP, RSS and other sangh outfits. This is necessary because their support isn't automatic. The BJP is also desperately running "surrogate"

The BJP is especially vulnerable in Uttar Pradesh, where it won 25 seats in 1999. In the state Assembly, it trails behind the SP and BSP. Worse, its Thakur vote is fast shifting to the SP. Some Brahmin BJP supporters too may vote for the

found favour with the middle class, its main target. As for ordinary people, Zee reveals that 73 percent haven't even heard of the "feel good" campaign.

The adverse reaction to Mr Vajpayee's 54 pictures in the 48-page "Vision" album has prompted a second edition. Modi's tactic of abusing Ms Gandhi as a "Jersey cow" and someone unfit to become a shop clerk has put off people.

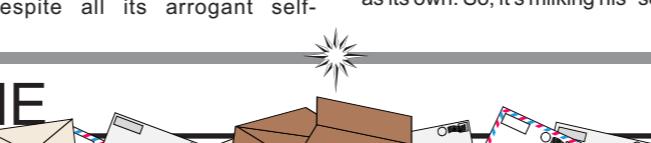
The BJP is especially vulnerable in Uttar Pradesh, where it won 25 seats in 1999. In the state Assembly, it trails behind the SP and BSP. Worse, its Thakur vote is fast shifting to the SP. Some Brahmin BJP supporters too may vote for the

people will welcome the Congress if it guarantees free primary healthcare and decent-quality elementary education.

The Congress hopes that Priyanka Gandhi's entry will energise the party. She can certainly put some icing on the Congress's electoral cake. But the base of the cake needs bold, imaginative "populist" schemes and slogans.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Imbecile statement

When a colossal arms cache was captured in Chittagong, State Minister for Home Mr Lutfuzzaman Babar blamed Awami League without any hesitation. But the probe body