

Huge allocations

Greater scope for eating up money?

ONE major challenge to face the government during the fiscal 2004-05 will be effective utilisation of the increased amounts of money proposed to be pumped into different sectors. The higher allocations will have to be matched by the availability of a highly efficient implementation machinery.

Admittedly, this does not exist in the country; it never did. There is no effective mechanism to ward off corrupt practices and wasteful use of money that accounted for poor project implementation. The anti-corruption commission is still some way off. In any case, it is too early to say how independently it will perform; for, this will be critically dependent on the newly-formed selection committee choosing the right people for manning the commission. Even the Ombudsman's office, despite the passage of law in this regard, hangs fire.

Too many stages are involved in between project approval and implementation. It is a many-layered rigmale with all the ingredients for slowing down the pace of project work. Moreover, projects are often taken up on political, rather than economic considerations, so that they are doomed to be non-starters or abandoned halfway. Delayed project implementation has often led to cost overruns.

The Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division of the Planning Ministry found, during a recent survey, that the magnitude of corruption, malpractice and irregularities in 289 projects, out of 1345 undertaken during the last two fiscal years was quite staggering. Need we mention that the study of a limited number of projects only showed the tip of the iceberg -- in terms of the overall corrupt and wasteful resource utilisation pattern?

We need not, therefore, labour the point too much that proper utilisation of project funds will not be possible until the routes of leakage and wastage are sealed. This is a far more compelling necessity this time than anytime before, having regard to the higher allocations envisaged in the revenue and development budgets. One would have thought that the author of the national budget would have given a framework of guidelines for resource utilisation in such bigger quanta. Actually, the budget should have provided a recipe for implementation reforms as a strategic requirement.

Meeting revenue target

Collection structure must be reformed

THE target set for revenue collection in this year's budget -- a 16.7 per cent increase over the amount collected in the last fiscal year -- is both laudable and problematic. It is laudable in that the tax burden in Bangladesh has historically been low as a percentage of GDP, and if we wish to grow economically, then we must all be prepared to pay our fair share. It is problematic, however, in that few, if any, reforms in the collection structure have been contemplated that would indicate how such an ambitious target might be reached.

The principal obstacle to the collection of revenue is the collusion between tax collectors and tax cheats that enables the latter to pay only a fraction of what they owe. Until this problem is addressed, and concrete measures are put in place to ensure that assessments are fair and scrupulous, the government will never be able to reach its revenue collection targets. There will always remain those who will do everything they can in order to pay as little tax as possible. However, if such people do not have colluders within the collectorate to abet them, then it should be possible for the National Board of Revenue to collect the amounts due.

The institution of the position of tax ombudsman is a very positive step that can be expected to ensure that tax collection remains fair and impartial. We urge the government to quickly fill the position and to appoint a non-partisan ombudsman of such stature as to be above suspicion, and to empower and equip the department under him or her to ably fulfill its stated function.

However, the reforms must not end there. In addition to a tax ombudsmen who will ensure that assessment is equitable and even-handed, the government must bend its mind towards instituting further reforms to ensure that there is no corruption in the tax collection process. It is a tall order, but there is hardly a more pressing need if the government is serious about meeting its revenue target.

Will Iraq be democratic at long last?

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE United Nations has unanimously adopted a resolution providing for a political structure for post-occupation Iraq. The very fact that several drafts of the resolution had to be gone through before the final version was agreed upon reflects the American realisation that unilateralism, at least in the UN, is a matter of the past, and that universal acceptability of a plan is better than one implemented by-passing the UN. The Algerian delegate, the only Arab representative in the UNSC, aptly observed that the resolution though not perfect was undoubtedly the best under the circumstances which managed to recognise the two extremes: the concept of Iraqi sovereignty and the need to maintain on Iraqi soil the presence of an effective and fully operational foreign force requested and invited to remain in Iraq by the Interim Government.

Algeria, conscious of its position as the only Arab member in the UNSC, had put forward four critical demands for incorporation in the resolution. The demands were: that full and undiminished sovereignty be restored to Iraq; that the Iraqi government exercise full authority and responsibility in governing the country including on security issues and over its financial and natural resources; that all armed Iraqi forces be placed under the sole authority of the Iraqi government; and that the Iraqi government's consent be required in respect to sensitive military operations undertaken by the multinational force (MNF) as well as the engagement of its own forces in the operations by MNF.

The US saw the passage of the resolution as a vivid demonstration of broad international support for a federal, democratic, pluralistic, and unified Iraq where Iraq's sovereignty would remain undiluted with its government having sovereign authority to request for or decline assistance, including in the security sector, and having a final say in the continued presence

of the MNF. Perhaps, the most important factor in reaching unanimity in the passage of the resolution was the support given by France which had been waging a running battle with the US in promoting the primacy of the UN in the Iraq saga. One may recall that the Anglo-US abandonment of the UN route in the invasion of Iraq was occasioned by Jacques Chirac's and Russia's threat to veto any UNSC resolution that would legitimise the armed intervention

throughout history coalitions of countries have arisen to balance dominant powers, and the search for new state challengers was well under way. The combine of challengers to the US hegemony was joined by Germany. All these countries, two pillars of Atlantic alliance and the others erstwhile enemies, refused to accept Charles Krauthammer's assertion that an unprecedentedly dominant US was in a unique position to fashion its own foreign policy, and that this

The Bush administration, like the preceding ones, remains paralysed between American desire for deep rooted change in the region and the useful and co-operative relations the US has with the governments of the region. Besides, any paternalistic attitude by the West trying to foist upon the Arabs the concept of Western modernity ignoring or relegating the Palestinian cause to the background will not be acceptable to the Arabs in general.

in Iraq, a position immediately adopted by China. This prompted President Bush to declare that the UN risked fading "into history as an ineffective and irrelevant debating society."

This Kaganite (a la Robert Kagan) display of American muscularity has been explained by Michael Glennon (of Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy) as reflective of an earlier shift in world power toward a configuration America unipolarity that was simply incompatible with the way the UN was meant to function. Since the end of the cold war, the French, Russian, and Chinese efforts were directed to ensure a return to a more balanced global system. President Chirac wanted a multipolar world in which Europe would be the counterweight to American military and economic power. He felt that any community with only one dominant power was always a dangerous one and provoked reaction. Joseph Nye (of Harvard Kennedy School of Government) agreed with the position held by Jacques Chirac. Warning about the dangers of a foreign policy that combines unilateralism, arrogance and parochialism, Nye argued that

freedom of action impelled the US to ignore restrictions imposed by international institutions, regimes, and treaties.

It was made crystal clear by President Bush in 2002 that America had and intended to keep her military strength beyond challenge and thereby making the destabilizing arms race of other eras pointless. This was in sharp contra-distinction to the European approach to a globalist foreign policy. What escaped the European thinking was the fact that, with the end of the cold war, the centrality of Europe in the American global matrix was lost, and that the terrorist attacks of 9-11 had totally changed the way the US looked at the world. The war on terror completely blanketed the American conscious and sub-conscious mind leading the US policy-makers to decide, as recently accused by Human Rights Watch on maltreatment of detainees by US troops, that the war on terror permitted the US to circumvent international law and the Geneva Conventions.

But Secretary of State Colin Powell, supposedly the dove in the den of hawks, disagrees. In a recent article (Foreign Affairs Jan/Feb 2004) he forcefully argues that US

strategy is not unilateralist, imbalanced in favour of military methods, obsessed with terrorism, or biased toward pre-emptive wars on a global scale. He states that pre-emption refers to undeterrable threats by non-state actors/terrorists. He adds that critics' assumptions otherwise have sprung from "using their own mottled political histories as reference point and have mistakenly projected their own Hobbesian intentions onto our rather Lockean sensibilities."

He emphasises that the US strategy is one of partnership that strongly affirms the vital role of NATO and other US alliances including the UN. He reiterates American concentration on relations with major powers especially those with whom US had difficult relationship in the past, notably Russia, China and India.

It is in this context that one should see the UNSC resolution 1546 of June 8, 2004. France's goal had been to ensure that the Iraqi Interim Government should have the attributes of sovereignty and complete authority to govern the country beyond June 30; to give the Iraqi people credible assurance that political process was continuing and that the presence of MNF was temporary and limited in time and that the transition period would end as soon as possible; and no less importantly to bestow a mandate to the UN enabling it to preserve its role in settlement of crises. The Russians were happy that the UNSC had managed to work out a decision ending the occupation and transferring full sovereignty to the Iraqis.

The UNSC resolution has been detailed and specific. It called for a federal, democratic, pluralist, and

unified Iraq and endorsed the formation of an interim government; holding of elections by this year end or by next January to form a Transitional National Assembly and a Transitional Government and draft a permanent constitution leading to a constitutionally elected government by the end of next year. The resolution gives the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to play a leading role in the political process of Iraq and empowers the Iraqi govern-

ment to terminate the mandate of the MNF which will now be staying in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government. Both the request of the Iraqi government for the continued stay of MNF and the agreement of the US administration acceding to the request are integral part of the resolution. Significantly however MNF will continue to be under US command and the Iraqi forces will be under the command of the Iraqis.

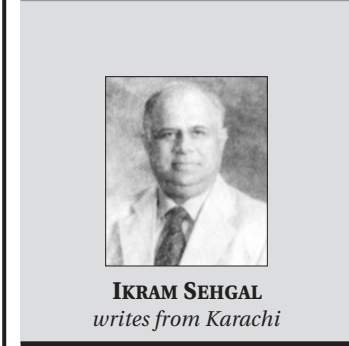
Almost simultaneously with the passage of the UN resolution, the G-8 Summit, which was also attended by the new President of Iraq was held in Georgia, USA. The summit fully supported the UN resolution on Iraq, but President Chirac opposed sending NATO troops to Iraq. Briefing the press after the G-8 Summit President Bush spoke of a consensus emerging across the Middle East on the need for political, economic and social change and pledged G-8 nations' help to "further the causes of freedom and reform to help an increasing number of people join in the progress of our time." Interestingly Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Kuwait, three close allies of the West in the Middle East, chose not to respond to the invitation sent to

them to attend the G-8 meeting. Their non-attendance notwithstanding, the G-8 decided to establish a Forum for the Future which will bring together senior government officials from the Middle East and their counter parts to discuss ideas relating to socio-economic and political advancement in the Middle Eastern region.

This, in sum, is the Greater Middle Eastern Initiative built on the diagnosis of the Arab world's shortcomings presented in the 2002 Arab Human Development Report. This initiative is likely to be non-assertive as the Bush administration, like the preceding ones, remains paralysed between American desire for deep rooted change in the region and the useful and co-operative relations the US has with the governments of the region. Besides, any paternalistic attitude by the West trying to foist upon the Arabs the concept of Western modernity ignoring or relegating the Palestinian cause to the background will not be acceptable to the Arabs in general. Regarding Iraq, President Bush's proposals on the transference of sovereignty to the Iraqis is a little late in the day considering, in the words of the New York Times, "After nearly 14 months of policy failures, none of them acknowledged by the President, which have left Iraq increasingly violent and drained Washington's credibility with the Iraqi people and the international community." Perhaps, in the face of US lack of credibility as a pro-democratic actor and the Arab rulers hold on significant US economic and security interest a gradualist strategy for democracy in Iraq and the Greater Middle East would have a better chance to succeed than coercive measures to democratise societies inherently wedded to non-secular values.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Uneasy lies the head



IKRAM SEHGAL

writes from Karachi

AS an important event, the Federal Budget has been overshadowed by rumours fast and furious that the Prime Minister's crown on Zafarullah Khan Jamali's head is wobbling precariously, his position being further undercut when PML President Ch. Shujaat Hussain volunteered that there are about 50 potential PMs in the Federal Cabinet. Most political crisis in Pakistan take life with the motivated creation of a credibility gap (and widening thereof into mutual suspicion) between the Head of State and Head of Government. As matters stand today, and in the absence of an emphatic denial from Pervez Musharraf, Jamali's exit is increasingly being proclaimed a fait accompli, even though Ch. Shujaat and Pervez Elahi demonstrated a hand-holding photo-ops with the PM. This being Budget season, if something is likely to happen it may happen in July or later, certainly before the shuffling of the Army's hierarchy in October. In the meantime Pakistan will continue to be subjected to (and buffeted by) rumours and speculation. What's new?

Zafarullah Khan Jamali has not changed in the nearly half century that I have known him, he is not a dual (or triple) personality as almost all our (and one dare says all over the world) politicians are.

Three or four years older in years, he was only one class (that being the average age of students for that class) ahead of us in Lawrence College, Ghoragali. Some older boys in public schools tend to be bullies, not so Jamali's perennial sidekick Inayatullah Khan Niazi and Jamali, "Jaw" and "Jabal" (along with other heroes of my schooldays, Jaffer Khan and Farooq Adam) were among those older boys who stood up for the younger lot against the bullies. That Jamali still stands up for the poor and the impoverished four decades later is not surprising.

histrionics, he is a populist without being demonstrative. In a country where the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto set his own political pace for populism by engaging in studied public histrionics, the comparison can be a problem. A patient man, beneath that amiable exterior Zafarullah has a steel-like personality that only reacts at a time and opportunity of his choosing, and when necessary. In the predator world of Baloch tribal culture where Marris, Mengals, and Bugtis tend to throw their weight around, the Jamalis are basically survivors, and Zafarullah Khan is the ultimate

themselves needs containing, the lack of submitting to one authority makes for a situation readymade for disaster. How can anyone function effectively when he (or she) knows that a number of his (or her) team are not fully committed to his (or her) policies, and that they are all out to let him (or her) down so as to advance their own candidacy? It is morally repugnant for PM-aspirants to sit in the Cabinet while not giving their loyalty to the PM. The 50-odd number given by Ch. Shujaat reflects a wide-spread character flaw. How can anyone profess fealty to anyone

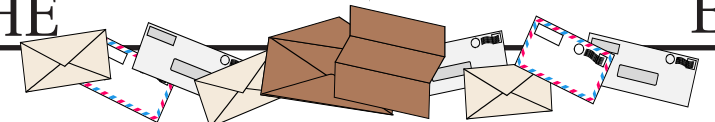
frontation Achilles killed Hector and dragged his body behind his chariot. Later Hector's brother Paris shot the arrow that hit Achilles in his heel and killed him. Insecurity is every leader's Achilles heel, the motivated foster and exploit this insecurity assiduously. Someone is deliberately contriving a rift between the president and the PM to perpetuate his own nuisance value, so what's new? As a mature thinking person the president would be well advised to find out motivation of the person trying to orchestrate the cleavage, his own crass ambitions and interest or that

his "private-banking" career cynosure that may be difficult to contain politically. As for Zubaida Jalal, are we really serious? For whatever reason, the "education ministry" is already immersed in controversy. Why not look at other dark horses if we have to have a technocrat as PM? Why not think about Dr. Abdull Hafeez Shaikh, or for that matter Mushahid Hussain, both clean of any controversy. Dr. Hafeez Shaikh's strong suit is the need of the times -- the economy -- and his pragmatic hands-on approach to it. At first glance I thought Mushahid was a square peg in a round hole for the Secretary General PML's job -- on closer inspection it turns out that given the lack of organisation and method in PML, the president made an inspired choice for a structured Mr. Clean. Besides being exceedingly articulate, Mushahid has clear-cut views on foreign policy that reflect the views of the military hierarchy, a great asset in domestic, regional, and international context. Even today either he or Shaukat Aziz should be in the Foreign Office slot -- at least Pakistan's position will be presented with knowledge and reason.

Jamali is a proud man and has reason to be proud. As an independent CM of Balochistan he proved to be an able administrator, as a PM he is in the Mohammad Khan Junejo-mould. Jamali is in a "revolving door" situation because he is not the dummy he was probably meant to be by those who supported the president's choice of PM in late 2002. Zafarullah has reason to hold his head high, he has done well enough in the circumstances allowed to him, with the dignity and self-respect befitting his heritage.

Ikrām Sehgal, a former Major in the Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

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.

Administration in doldrums

The two incidents concerning a senior official in the PMO and another in the Crime Investigation Department (CID) are completely unrelated. In one incident an official has been sent to retirement prematurely and in the other an ill-fated official, who was to go on retirement in 16 months' time, ended up in jail in a bribe offering case. But there are some similarities between the two exposing the inadequacies in our administrative system. Both the officers had survived the purge that the present government initiated since taking power. Both of them were promoted, one in quite meteoric speed, by the same government. Both of them, though in different perspectives, held sensitive positions till falling from grace. But they met inglorious exits with dubious allegations.

The government versions of the incidents have raised more questions than the clarifications that they are supposed to offer.

MSH
Uttara, Dhaka

Faith-based politics

Many wonder whether our politics is based on faith or science. Is politics a religion to be followed with religious fervour blindly without any feeling for the other human members of the society? Evolve society or control it? The party comes before the social factors?

The present political culture as practised in Dhaka is low on rationality. It is ruled by the heart rather than by the head. We have a good head but we cannot use it and surrender to emotions and sentimentality-not only in politics but in practically all spheres of life.

This is costing the nation dearly and we are enmeshed in a vicious cycle for more than a generation. The new and young generations are guided by the wrong principles and guidelines on the approach to politics. We are sowing the future seeds now and the future is not at all bright based on the wrong premises.

Our leadership has failed and failed miserably as they cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. How can the followers follow? What is the message in a wrecked smoking car on the roadside on hartal days? It is an ominous symbol of having lost sight of the options available. It is for the leaders to advocate the option to choose and not create new options every now and then.

What is more disturbing is the academic mind working in student politics. The main purpose of education is to make us think and choose the possible right course in a situation. For three decades we cannot choose a political ideology suited to the majority and at the same time applicable to the minority of dissenters.

Today we are fighting a full-fledged political war, instead of developing our country. It is a huge waste of time, money and energy. The conclusion is clear enough: the political leadership (not politics) is totally unfit to run politics and the country.

Vacuum in political culture is dangerous, for entry of unwanted virus, as we see in Africa elsewhere. The politicians, regardless of party affiliation, have to maintain continuity, for self-survival and survival of the political culture. What we see today is adhoc politics based on confrontation.

The latter has to go, as we are not dealing with foreign subjugation. The local discontent and foreign domination have to be treated separately. Why do we still have agitation politics and street demonstrations? Impress whom? Each and every opposition accuses the regime of autocracy. The self-centred leaders expect too much from the followers in a procession, and the public watching it.

Our leader cannot stand alone, on principle, and suffer. He is always looking for props, like a lame or blind person. This is ridiculous. The followers will lead the leader, as a child is led by the elders?

There is something wrong with our mental make-up. The top in the society have to point it out, not unknown citizens like this one.

Abdi
Dhaka

Medical allowance for the retired

As at present, medical allowance for retired persons is only Tk 300.00 per month. This amount is very insufficient in view of the current high prices of medicines. Even a doctor of high reputation charges an amount of Tk 500/ as his consultation fee. To speak of the prices of medicine, now-a-days, it has gone beyond the purchasing power of the common people. In addition, whenever we go to any hospital, nothing happens if we do not satisfy the ward boys or ayas with some gift or incentive. This amount has also increased tremendously.

In view of the above, it is our request to the government to kindly consider the matter favour-

ably during the preparation of this budget. We, those who served the govt. with all our dedication, can at least demand the medical check-up with the support of the government in these hard days.

It may be pointed out that there is enough fund lying idle in the group insurance and benevolent funds of the government servant welfare fund. The budget wing of the Ministry of Finance may consider utilising the money for the greater welfare of the retired government servants in a more pragmatic way.

KP Nath
Dhaka

Amullah

A man who shaves his head, grows beard, keeps a hat on his skinhead, wears long sleeves Jubba, puts on a loose trouser, walks bare feet, is known to village people as their traditional rural "mullah". It means infam, a front line person.

A mullah is treasure to the village people. In the event of an epidemic of cholera, fever from malaria or

migraine headache from too much talking, the help of a mullah is sought. The mullah can instantly solve those common problems of the rural people.

By the time I was growing up in the village there was no medicine man in our area. In case of an emergency we always had to call a mullah. He would come and sit on the exposed mud floor, then he would start reading some lines from our holy book. Occasionally, he would make a sad face to make us believe that he was concerned. Tears would roll down from his cheeks, at the end he would bless the victim, and then he would wait to see the results. In most cases action took place immediately, but not always.

The man who was a religious teacher in our village once got caught for an act of sin. At this news the village farmers stormed the house of the mullah only to find out that he had left the house the day before. They are humans and are far from infallible.

Saleh Ahmed

On mail

Kidnapping business

It is alarming to note, from the daily reports in the press, the kidnapping for ransom (Chittagong leads). In Mexico, it is already an established institution, I heard on the BBC.

Now (in Bangladesh), kidnapping has spread into more sectors of the society, namely students and children. It is a quick way of making money, depending on the sentimental value of the transaction.

The government has to announce stringent measures to curb the menace, with deterrent punishment. This is not possible without police and judiciary reforms (there is soft-peddling in these areas), and cleaner and more transparent politics.

The politicians, specially the MPs, should not keep quiet-even at the risk of being kidnapped: Lead boldly, taking risk, for the love of the people;

A Husnain
Dhaka