

Death threats galore

These cannot be trifled with

DEATH warrants are being issued against an increasingly large number of people, most of whom are prominent citizens of the country. Twenty-two journalists received such threats, followed by some teachers of Dhaka University, and finally 10 more important persons have been put on the hit-list by the dark forces lurking behind the smog of a persistent lawlessness. Let's not forget, leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina, also received a similar threat recently.

We would like to know about the government's response to the series of death threats which has understandably created panic not only among the persons who received these, but also among the people in general. If well-placed people have such a sense of vulnerability, how terribly insecure ordinary people must be feeling! It speaks volumes of the state into which society has plunged due to deteriorating law and order. The lawlessness fuels all kinds of subversive activities, including issuance of death warrants by extremist elements. Even a cursory glance at the hit-list reveals that the targets are by and large people having progressive outlook and liberal views.

Regrettably, such threats are not taken seriously until they are converted into gruesome killings. There is absolutely no way we can take things lightly. The recent deaths of two journalists in Khulna should leave no one in doubt that threats can be executed.

The prime minister's reaction to the purported death threat against the leader of the opposition smacked of casualness suggesting that it was not believed to be credible. It has been even stated that an investigation into the matter had failed to establish its veracity. But the summary rejectionist attitude was not expected of the government, only because the threats bode a highly unstable condition, particularly in terms of the already confrontational state of politics in the country. Matters have been made worse by the fact that none of the bomb attacks or assassination cases has been solved so far, far less any conviction handed out.

So it follows that the government must act preemptively without waiting for people to fall victim to the assassins' bullet. A quick response is needed since the lives of such a large number of prominent citizens are at stake. The imperative for surveillance should not be downplayed simply because the vulnerability involves some opposition political figures.

Laid off employees

What are the government's plans for them?

IT has been this paper's consistent policy to oppose hartal in all circumstances, both on principle as well as a matter of practical economic necessity. The daylong hartal enforced by workers and trade unionists across the country on Sunday couldn't be an exception. Moreover, we roundly condemn the regrettable instances of violence that marred the day, with damage done to motor vehicles and other private property, including five factories in Dhaka.

The striking workers and trade unionists called the hartal to press home their demand for reopening closed state-owned mills and factories that have left thousands without employment. While we do not condone the methods used, it must be conceded that they do have a legitimate grievance which needs to be addressed by the government sooner rather than later.

The closing down of loss-making state-owned enterprises is something that is long overdue, and there can be little argument that the closures are a necessary part of the government's broader plan for economic growth. But it is important that the government does not lose sight of the fact that in consequence of its policies thousands of previously employed workers could find themselves without a livelihood, and that the government has a responsibility towards them. It is not just a question of responsibility - finding productive use for the thousands of laid-off workers also simply makes sound economic sense.

The questions we have for the government are whether it has any plans to find alternative employment for those whose jobs are disappearing with the closing down of enterprises, what manner of safety net the government has budgeted for and whether it is sufficient for a crisis of this magnitude, and, finally, whether the government has any plans afoot to retrain the retrenched workers.

It seems to us that these are questions the government must have good answers to. The social and economic costs of adding thousands to the rolls of the unemployed must be factored in when calculating the fiscal benefits of such closures, and it is short-sighted in the extreme for the government to not have in place a serious employment generation plan for the retrenched workers.

Seeds can save seven years!



ABDUL BAYES

IN a recent research paper, Dr Mahabub Hossain of IRRI deliberates upon the dynamics of food and mouth misalignment facing Bangladesh. No doubt, perhaps, that we have achieved remarkable success in containing the growth of population. But despite the success in population control, complacency should be ruled out as Bangladesh meets an additional two million mouths every year. And to feed them, the country requires an additional production of 300,000 tons of rice every year.

Past pillars

In the past, technology was the treatment for our ills. The introduction of HVs (high yielding varieties) and increased food production that it resulted in is a pointer to this. However, grappling for decades over the gap, we now seem to face a new dilemma in technology development. The easy means of managing food shortages have already been exploited. For example, ground water potentials have already been overutilised, adoption of MVs already reached the technically

suitable regions, and there is now evidence a declining trend in yields following unbalanced use of nutrients. Scientists' search for new options such as 'super rice' or 'hybrid rice' is progressing at snails pace to keep the wheel move slow. Apparently, in the near future, no new technology of a tall order is likely to make a dent in the impasse created by the food and mouth misalignment mentioned before.

from NGOs, BADC and others. We, therefore, suggest that we should not spend 80 per cent of the efforts for 10 per cent of the seeds. Rather, we should devote 10 per cent of the efforts on 80 per cent of the seeds. That implies that technological teachings on seed management need to be taken to farmers so that they can emerge as seed entrepreneurs themselves. The mercy of the markets for seeds on them could be

they cultivated and also sowed their own seeds traditionally used. Other things remaining same, the difference was roughly 10 per cent. Besides, application of seed rate was found to be 25 per cent lower for trained farmers than non-trained ones; savings on account of seed was 19 per cent for trained farmers. Environment? Yes, healthy seeds help maintain healthy environment. For example, only 38 per cent

year of rice output of the 14,000 farmers receiving research inputs. A production function analysis shows that farmers who participated in the research and training programmes on seed management tend to reap home, on average, about 455 kg/ha more rice than those without such training do. The function was a good fit with explanatory factors accounting for about 60 per cent of the yield changes. This

Directorate of Agricultural Extension (DAE) steps into the scene. Dr Mahabub Hossain spells out a project of how DAE could deliver the dividends to farmers. The 'back of the envelope' calculus shows that training should be imparted to about 21,000 resource poor farmers on seed management. These farmers would emerge as 'seed entrepreneurs' in their respective villages. To take the technology to them, again, 15,000 block supervisors would come under the umbrella of the training project spanning for five years. At the end of the project after 15 years, the discounted benefit cost ratio would stand at 62:1. That is, if we spend one taka today for training on seed management, we shall fetch home Tk 62 after 15 years. The DAE could easily claim this money from the government.

Money is not all

But money is not the only thing. DAE needs a dash and a determination to deliver the outputs. Admittedly, DAE has played a pivotal role in the past in taking rice technology (mostly variety) to farmers. It should now equally equip itself with non-rice technology transfers including rice seeds and other crops. It has to come out of its traditional tone of extension services. The government should see that logistical supports and other resources do not constrain its operations. The DAE nowadays has to compete with NGOs in reaching the resource poor and they should also face a level playing field as far as knowledge and resources are concerned.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

A production function analysis shows that farmers who participated in the research and training programmes on seed management tend to reap home, on average, about 455 kg/ha more rice than those without such training do. The function was a good fit with explanatory factors accounting for about 60 per cent of the yield changes. This means that if quality seeds had been used in 7 million hectares of land in Bangladesh in which MVs are grown, annual production could be increased by additional 3.2 million tons.

New horizon

However, there is no denying the fact that there is still some yield gap, which could be reduced with improved crop management practices. The average yield gap could be about 0.9 (tons/ha for the boro season and 1.3 tons/ha for the aman season. If this gap could be bridged, paddy production would rise by an additional 7.5 million tons every year. And that would not be out of reach provided farmers are taught about the proper preservation of seeds. It should be mentioned here that more than four-fifths of farm seeds originate from farmers' own stock, another 10 per cent from neighbours, and only 10-15 per cent

curtailed to a greater extent.

Enviably empirics

In my recent visits to some of the villages in Bangladesh, I was told that good quality or healthy seeds could raise yield by about 10-12 per cent. Farmers also informed me that healthy seeds, on average, save roughly Tk 350 per bigha (33 decimals). The training on seed management was provided by a project of IRRI through a participatory approach. Both 'formal scientists' (researchers) and 'informal scientists' (farmers) sat together to try out the technology.

Farmers sowed clean seeds from laboratories on a part of the parcel

of the trained farmers used pesticides compared to 62 per cent of control farmers. The cost of pesticides was cut to half: Tk 310/ha vs Tk 600/ha.

The project package includes research on seed health under different conditions and imparts training on the outcomes. Farmers gained knowledge on roguing, threshing, drying, preservation and other activities that are directly or indirectly related to seed health. However, the research component embraced only 14,000 farmers from seven key sites in Bangladesh. A cost-benefit analysis shows that the total cost of the research component could be recovered with only one

means that if quality seeds had been used in 7 million hectares of land in Bangladesh in which MVs are grown, annual production could be increased by additional 3.2 million tons. This crosses by far the critical imports that the country had to bank on during a time of national distress. The additional production could feed 12.7 million people at the current rate of per capita rice consumption. Thus, the adoption of the seed quality management technology itself can supply rice for the growing population for another seven years.

DAE and development

But that would demand that the

Summing up



M.J. AKBAR

AN accidental government can only present an incidental budget. The most honest statement made by finance minister P Chidambaram was that we should wait for seven months. Only by next March will we know whether this government has legs: you need legs to walk towards an economic horizon. At the moment, it lives on friendly crutches that want to travel in harmony but can tilt in different directions. The finance minister assured Parliament that he would be around when he said, 'Main Hoon Na.' In July 2004 that has a poignant resonance, imbued with personal faith, a government's hope, and a coalition's charity. In March 2005, that claim will presumably be backed by more assurance.

Every budget has a constituency, which is why politicians vie for the finance and railways portfolios. Two budgets were presented last week. There was clarity in one, because railways minister Laloo Prasad Yadav is not troubled by any confusion. He is his own constituency. Everything he has done since winning the general elections has been geared to one objective: winning the specific elections of Bihar, due soon (possibly as soon as in October). He wanted to be home minister not only in recognition of his self-esteem but also to use that office to reinforce the Muslim vote in Bihar. We would certainly have had some sharp announcements on Gujarat,

POTA and Ayodhya by now if Laloo Yadav had got the job. As railways minister, he is preparing an enquiry into the incident at Godhra. Every signal he has sent, from earthen pots in trains to virtual-ticketless travel to photographs showing him cleaning his teeth with a neem twig, has the same message: he is working for the Backward castes, artisans, and Muslims, the framework of his electoral alliance. He has found 7,000 vacancies and created some

around. But the Congress and the NCP also took away Rs 500 crores in drought relief to ease the pain before the Maharashtra state elections, so Laloo cannot be faulted alone. The BJP looked after itself and its partners when it had the chance, the most infamous case being the world tour of Andhra Pradesh MLAs that was funded by Delhi.

The politics of the budget was evident in the punishment handed out to those who have dared to

Defence and planning eat up half the budget (note, however, that twice as much is spent on plans than on defence). Subsidies and salaries account for some 20 per cent, and 27 per cent is paid out on interest. Add a few packages and there is not much left. The finance minister could not raise taxes on income or wealth for fear of alienating the urban middle classes, and he could not raise resources from disinvestments since that was a whipping boy of

and Chidambaram know their responsibilities. (Note: Subramanian Swamy helpfully points out that in 1996 Chidambaram inherited a growth rate of 8 per cent and brought it down to 4.6 per cent after two budgets.)

The simple truth is that there is no money to pay for any of the stated objectives, minor or major. It was politically necessary to advertise a thrust towards agriculture, but look

and the commitment worse. It would have been far better to incentivise the private sector into rural education, and ensure better quality on a wider base.

But, as noted earlier, problems of detail are not the real problem. It is evident that there was not enough time for the government to put together a theme and make its first budget into a launching pad for five years of power. The Prime Minister said recently that he wanted the Indian economy to follow the Chinese model. I presume he means that in only the vaguest sense, because the Chinese model cannot be created without a party dictatorship that ensures minimal wages and draconian discipline upon assembly-line labour while ensuring the highest returns to foreign capital. A report in the International Herald Tribune by Keith Bradsher from Guangzhou might serve as a further warning. It is headlined 'Some regions thrive, others stagnate.'

This budget will not create any problems in the coalition, since everyone understands the need for give and take. The criticism by the Left about some of the provisions, like the increase in foreign direct investment in insurance, is par for the course. The Left never expected to agree with everything a Congress finance minister did, and will restrict itself to verbal distance if it cannot force any changes. If there is a problem, it might be with the electorate, which has high expectations from any new government, particularly one born in surprise.

This, after all, is the first chance that the Congress has had after 1991 to give a new shape to the Indian economy. The moment was right for a big idea. Instead, we got neither a good budget nor a bad one. We merely got a boring one. A government cannot afford to look stale so quickly.

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BYLINE

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30,000 new jobs (Indian Railways is already the second largest employer in the world after the Chinese Army). These carrots are going straight to his voters in Bihar. Populism? Sure. If you are not populist how can you get the popular vote?

Chidambaram's constituency was compulsion. He had to hide a coalition survival plan into the budget by rewards to the victors. There is nothing particularly wrong in this, except that there were too many victors. At the top of the list was predictably Laloo Yadav, who got a 'Bihar Package' worth Rs 3,350 crores. There is no clarification about whether this is fresh money or simply the funds left over from the Rs 4,000 crores offered to Bihar by the previous government but not utilised because in the bad old days money would be given only against defined schemes. This time the money will be handed over to Rabri Devi to be used as she wishes. In all likelihood a good part of it will be used to clear the backlog in government salaries so that there is relief when Assembly elections come

oppose the government. And so Uttar Pradesh got nothing. The message was that as long as UP does not vote for the Congress, it would not be paid any attention. Orissa had the temerity to vote for Naveen Patnaik, so it went off the financial map of India. On the other hand, free electricity to farmers in Andhra Pradesh is getting every bit of sympathy from Delhi.

The problem with this budget, though, is not in its politics. Since every government is political, every budget will be, to some extent, political. The problem is that it was not anchored on any new idea, or perhaps any idea at all. It was an accountant's budget, a summing up rather than a vision; with a lot of red herrings strewn about to make it look prettier than it really is.

This is not Chidambaram's fault, really. No finance minister can afford a large idea unless he is permitted the flexibility needed to raise resources that can back up that central objective. Nearly 90 per cent of a budget feeds upon itself, year after year. The rough calculus is this,

both the Left and the Congress in the elections. And so the service sector, which furnishes the biggest chunk of our GDP, is bound to get hit. He cannot have a revenue-neutral budget, can he?

The last budget that Chidambaram produced, when L.K. Gujral was Prime Minister, is widely described as a 'dream budget.' Well, this one is full of dreams. It is full of good intentions, without offering any clue as to how to achieve them. The finance minister wants to cut the revenue deficit to 2.5 per cent by the end of this financial year and eliminate it by 2008. I too dream of owning the Buckingham Palace. How he can do so without a whisper on cutting government expenditure, or ending the profligacy of states is beyond rational understanding. But to be fair, maybe this is a subject he will take up when he presents his 'real' budget in March. The government is fortunate that it inherits an 8.2 per cent growth in GDP. A bullish economy does not taper off unless hugely mismanaged, and both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

at the figures for spending on irrigation: Rs 829 crores. Compare this with the outlay on civil aviation, which is Rs 1,603 crores. At the very least this should have been the other way round, particularly since Air India and Indian Airlines should be either profitable or privatised. (Curiously, the finance minister has actually made life harder for the nationalised airlines with his tax on leased aircraft, but that is another story.) Similarly, there is much talk of a Suez Canal between the east and west coast etc, but the outlay on water bodies is just Rs 100 crores. I suppose there should be enough to pay for an initial project report, which can then be described as progress.

There are other problems. Investment in primary education, for instance, will emerge out of a two per cent cess. This is an excellent intention patched together in a hurry. Any careful study of the state of education would prove that government-administered primary education is the problem, not the solution. The infrastructure is rotten

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

River training projects

In a huge deltaic region such as Bangladesh, the river training projects are difficult to plan, execute and maintain; as the dimension of scale is just too big for any nation, large or small, or even for developed nations. Three big rivers flow into narrow Bangladesh, with two hundred small rivers adding to the problems of water flow and diversions. The situation changes during the monsoon, with regular flooding (the country is only 15 feet above the sea level on average).

It is too naive to believe that spending money on regular basis will improve the situation, even semi-permanently. Just consider one single factor: two billion tons of silt annually (also calculate the total volume of water flowing. How to handle it, year after year? There is no point in fighting AGAINST such magnitude of problem (fighting the superpower by the mini terrorist bands is a similar problem). One has to be in tune with the natural forces, and make lives worth living in the affected areas on both or one side of

the rivers. If the approach is right, then the completed projects would be more manageable, and show visible results.

There are two basic factors: the amount of silt matter involved (silt and erosion); and, the huge energy generated in the process, including the hydraulic power generated. In non-deltaic areas, the theoretical parameters are more controllable. It is like a big water tank or reservoir with many holes, all of which cannot be plugged simultaneously. Here the problem is three-dimensional on a megascale, and the majority of the inputs are variable irregularly regular (compare with forecasting the weather). It is rather discouraging to fight a losing battle decade after decade, because the inputs, (which cause the damage) cannot be controlled from within the country.

The Farakka Barrage just outside the national border is said to have adversely affected the residents downstream (Bangladesh even the arsenic problem has been linked to it). Hence deeper coordination with neighbours is required during the drafting of the plan concept papers. There are many preconditions, starting with political goodwill. We need more awareness seminars

for a more graphic picture of the magnitude of the tools and other resources required to handle this mega project for decades ahead. Nature is not cruel. But the question is how to be in tune with it. Abdali Dhaka.

Protests against budgetary measures

Every year, the local manufacturers, traders, importers, exporters, and other business groups raise a hue and cry whenever some tax/levy is increased, even marginally, pointing out a host of rather irrelevant reasons. We all know that the cost of production of any product in Bangladesh is much cheaper than in any industrial country, and it is one of the cheapest in the world. If the QC is maintained, and systems losses reduced, our exports would rise exponentially (compare our RMG sector). The public/consumers should be shown both sides of the coin. Rich tyrant business tycoons exploit the poor workers and put pressure on the government so as to increase their profits. The ministers have to be

tough in dealing with such hypocritical presentations, trying to remain popular in the wrong camps. Abu Abd Dhaka.

Nod from Singapore

At long last Bangladesh got the nod to enter the club in Singapore, with the first ever visit of the prime minister of Singapore to Bangladesh after decades. This was confirmed by our foreign minister. It is good news, as a top Asian hub nation will include Bangladesh in its trade and investment exercises.

Dhaka has much to learn from Singapore, specially in the fields of port and dock management, development and discipline of chambers of commerce and industries, municipal technology, industrial QC, assembly of hi-tech components. Since Singapore enjoys a high standard of living, this is the right time to ponder on transfer of some of the factories to Bangladesh, to produce more quality goods at cheaper costs.

It is nice to see Singapore taking interest in business ventures in Asia positive shift from the earlier vision focussed on business from

the West. The Saarc region has huge untapped business potential, and these have not been fully explored by the local and foreign entrepreneurs. The local political itch has to be shifted to the background, for more visible economic activities, anchored on labour-oriented ventures, as there is no shortage of human resources, (and of energy and water). Some 130 million of us can easily accommodate 3m friendly Singaporeans! Welcome, Singapore! Perhaps we need you more than you need us! No objection to make it 50:50. A Mahasen Dhaka.

Political 'IF'

The Letters to the Editor column in the newspapers is a window indicating the feedback from the silent majority. Most do not bother to write, and those who do are part-time amateurs in holding the pen for a few minutes, to get some hiccups out of the system, in sheer desperation (I am busy, minding my own business, solve your own political problems). The reality is the opposite: the political ghapla are increasing day by day. No political ambu-

lance service or political EW (Emergency Ward). But the politicized police is over-active!

It is because nobody is listening to the national and social problems. We are bad listeners, but possess the gift of the gab (note our MPs trying to speak elaborately in the few minutes time allotted by the Honourable Speaker). We don't believe in terseness and economy in operations.

The message from this feedback is that the voters (citizens) are not at all happy with the political performance (regardless of the regime in power and the unpredictable opposition). The people are tired of political impositions, right, left, and off the centre. The negative political image is a warning to the political leaders to reform the political bases and start on new tracks. Even old distilled water in new bottles and packages won't do. The workers will change with the revised preamble to reformed political approaches (theoretical guidelines sound so abstract and uninteresting, compared to vociferous lathi misil).

If our politics could be better, we would have passed the seven per cent Growth Rate mark (as India is reported to have done) by this time

(14 long years of democratic practice!). If the political camps could have displayed more accommodation and tolerance (the latter is also an Islamic virtue, like planting trees, as BTV tells us). What we have is the Intolerance Factor (IF) in politics! We are trapped in IF-politics! We need a new tune: iffy-iffy band music.

If wishes could come true, then the sky would be the limit. Nobody is willing to look down at the feet, planted on the ground (matri bhumi). There is a problem in choosing options: start with the root or the branch? The evasive question is: if a tree has no root or trunk, then the branch came from where? Plant more trees!

There are more items on the Option Check-list. Which comes first: nation or party? Charisma: when to ditch? Internal democratic practices: How's that? Too many political gophers (dusrd). Too many appeals for low No empire? Well, we are slow movers; try to hit sixers all the time, and get angry when we get caught. Our political bouncers do not travel at 100mph. The political ground is bumpy, water-logged, and has no boundary. The weather never right for (political) cricket, a gentle-

men's game (during leisure hours). Our politics is not only a full-time job, it is overtime-voluntarily, laced with ardent dedication! The fielding side do not relish the job all want to bat for ever. Too many lara-lappas around! There is no conclusion to this tirade. The debate continues! Alif Zabr Dhaka.

BTV technical QC

Now that TV commercials and package programmes can be produced outside BTV, the latter's engineering department has to be more strict with the technical quality control before these are broadcast by BTV for the viewers. It is very irritating to continuously adjust the sound level, brightness, colour and contrast (and sometimes re-tuning is necessary). Now semi-automatic and auto controls are possible through digital technology, for which BTV has been recently upgraded. All the BTV news readers are not properly trained, compared to the readers in Bangladesh betar. Alfa Ahmad Dhaka.