

Storm warning systems failure

Time for a complete overhaul

THE abandonment of salvage operations for the capsized MV Raipura with over 100 passengers still missing and poignancy of the recent riverine tragedies. The spate of recent accidents suggest that we need to overhaul our inland transportation sector from top to bottom to ensure that such death and suffering can be minimized if not eliminated in future.

There have been 3000 deaths in launch capsizes in the past three and a half years. This is an appalling figure that should shock and anger every conscientious citizen. We have already commented on the fact that the principle problem is the abdication of authority by the shipping ministry and that greater control needs to be exercised to ensure that unfit and overloaded boats are not permitted to ply the waterways.

A major part of the problem is the out-dated storm warning system we have in place which is unfit for safe navigation. It boggles the mind that the system, which was introduced in 1962, has been considered unsafe for over 20 years, but that no government has taken the effort to update it. The apparent indifference of our leaders to the plight of the people is appalling.

The main problem is that the current signal system is hopelessly unrealistic. Boats are permitted to sail even in conditions where they should be prohibited. For instance, signal 2 (winds between 41 and 61 kms an hour) prohibits only vessels below 65 feet from plying on the waters, even though at that wind-speed even vessels longer than 100 feet remain highly vulnerable. Similarly, signal 1 permits all vessels to sail, even though we have seen that there have been a number of accidents at this wind speed. In addition, there is a different system in place for river ports and sea ports, adding to the confusion.

It seems that at long last changes are afoot. The reforms to the storm warning system should be carried out as soon as possible. It is a shame that it took so many deaths for the government to pay attention to this matter. The fact that the matter has lain neglected for so long is a disgrace, and there can now be no excuse for the reforms not being implemented on a priority basis.

This savagery must stop

Social resistance can help

IT is really sad news that a minor domestic aid died from torture by her employer and two others are lying in hospital with marks of savage beating all over their bodies. This is cruelty on helpless minors in its worst form. Most of these poor boys and girls driven by grinding poverty land up as domestic servants, the fact of their servitude being a shame on us for our failure to protect their childhood. Many of them were abandoned by their pauperised parents and cannot even remember where they came from. Often they are made to work for long hours, even their tender age failing to draw an iota of sympathy from their employers.

Their childhood is wasted in a nightmarish environment where brutal torture is the punishment for the slightest mistake or the failure to please the employer.

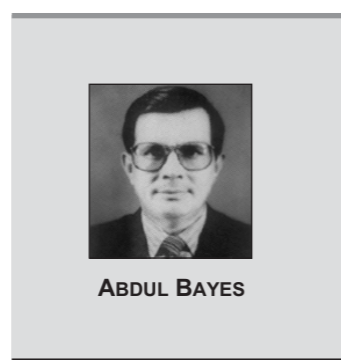
The jobs are not guided by any kind of rules. They get very little for working beyond their endurance and are subjected to all kinds of harsh treatment. Quite a few torturers have been exposed to full public glare by the press and some of them have even faced legal proceedings. But the situation has not changed.

Torturing minors on any pretext whatsoever is something no sane human being can approve of. But it is still taking place and more and more budding lives are being threatened by extreme forms of maltreatment in different households.

It is, however, a positive development that people in general are showing a greater sensitivity to the problem. Such incidents are often reported to police by neighbours. Obviously, a social resistance against the invidious practice would make the perpetrators realise that their inhuman activities are condemned unequivocally by the people. It must also be ensured that the torturers are brought to justice under the child repression act.

Finally, a rehabilitation scheme for such helpless children must be adopted. The number of existing homes for children that give shelter to the abandoned minors is far from adequate. We need a radical capacity-building there, given the ever swelling number of rootless children.

Before-thoughts on the budget



ABDUL BAYES

THE Finance Ministry will quite possibly be finishing up all its preparations regarding the next fiscal budget to be presented by the Finance Minister in the parliament very soon. It may be the last or the last but one budget for the government. Constitutionally, the government has to present estimates of expenditures, on both current and capital account, before the parliament. Although, intuitively, it implies transparency and accountability of the government to the public regarding sources of income and expenditure, some of the heads of expenses – mostly dealing with defense – are, however, not usually scrutinized in the name of state secrecy. That means, almost half of the budgetary allocations do not come under scrutiny. This makes things non-transparent and unaccountable. One would have expected that all expenses of the government should be discussed to death in the parliament so that the trade-offs between producing more guns and butter do not remain shrouded in mystery.

This year's budget starts with a few important events. First, the

government has declared the national pay scale very recently. Unusually too, the pay scale declaration came before the budget. Sweet or sour, the new pay scale stands to claim a clarification from the Finance Minister on its impact on the price levels as well as its sources of funding. Already the economy is poised to erode the real income of the earners with rising prices. If the extra doses of a few thousand crores of takas tend to

been widening over the years. Admittedly, economic growth has been up, and so is the gap between the rich and the poor. That means, perhaps, poor people have less access to growth promoting factors than the richer ones in the society. The sources of income such as property income, income from skilled profession, and unearned or black income have traditionally been the domain of the richer segments and of the few. One would

tions to education to claim credit. But what, how, and for whom is the education? If it is madrasa education rather than scientific education, the results are likely to be perverse from an economic point of view. If the allocation goes for construction of buildings and hiring more teachers, rather than for logistic support to teachers or teaching materials, higher allocation might return lower output for the nation. One of the innovative ideas of recent years has

processing activities should attract the attention of the government in terms of incentives, institutions, and innovation. Bearing in mind that agricultural activities carried out in rural areas are mostly done by poor farmers, the directional change would turn out to be pro-poor.

The Finance Minister is also expected to say something on creeping corruption in the economy. Having stood first in corruption for a third consecutive term (and the

British High Commissioner go unheeded and unearthed, when the image of the country has already reached its lowest ebb ever, a Finance Minister should not bypass the issue on the plea that such things happen everywhere in the world. When Judges of the Supreme Court are alleged to have taken bribes and some others are on the path to eking out a living the same way, one can hardly accept the argument that corruption prevails even in India or China. For the sake of the society, the Finance Minister should call a spade a spade.

The upcoming revised budget could witness a rise in revenue expenditures. Public administration and defense might march ahead in terms of resource allocation. In economics, these expenditures are mostly bracketed as unproductive. It remains to be asked as to why revenue expenses should be hiked and what benefits the society is getting from them. How many children could be immunized or sent to schools or how many mothers could be saved from anemia if we forgo the purchase of a frigate? How much if resources could be earmarked for infrastructure facilities if we cut the cabinet size in half?

The upcoming budget could also be a big budget with "political projects" paving the way for winning the hearts of voters. That could worsen the already fragile macro-economic stability and a big budget might invite big trouble for the government in its next election. Hopefully, the Finance Minister will address our before-thoughts.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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come from banks, the impact could be to adversely impinge on the macro-economic stability. But if the extra bucks come from additional taxes or other means of revenue generation, the negative impact could be minimized partially. If the second option is chosen, with a very low income tax base of the country, one could possibly conclude that the axe of indirect tax burdens would fall on the low-income groups. By and large, once the money illusion is forgotten, people would discover that their increased salary has already been earning less with rising prices of essential commodities.

Another event needs urgent attention. According to government surveys, inequality of income has

also argue that the trickle down hypothesis does not seem to work at the moment in Bangladesh. The citizens of the country have the right to know from the Finance Minister as to why inequality has been increasing over the years and what steps the government plans to take up to mitigate the inequality. The fact that the gini-coefficient – an index of inequality – is relatively low in Bangladesh compared to our neighbouring countries cannot not be an argument of consolation. A pro-poor growth strategy needs to be on board to arrest the upcoming upheavals and social unrest emanating from inequality.

Education is one of the mitigating factors. Successive governments have been granting larger alloca-

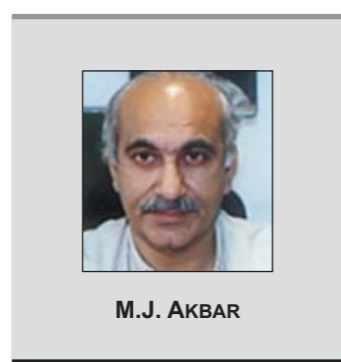
been to encourage girls' education. But taking the education system in the country as a whole, different institutions harbour inequality in their mode of teaching and hiring of inputs. Primary schools or colleges in far-flung rural areas lack the basics such as black-boards, benches, good teachers, etc. while the schools in urban areas abound with such facilities.

The third important aspect is agriculture. The sector has been starved of due funds for research and extensions for a long time, whereas our agriculture has already displayed its competence, not only in terms of attaining self-sufficiency in rice, but also in terms of producing competitive crops. High Value Agriculture as we call it and agro-

fourth in the offing), taxpayers would like to know for whom the economic bell tolls. More specifically, the budget speech should bring forth the steps the government has taken to downsize corruption in the economy. According to economic experts, about 2-3 percentage points of GDP growth rate is being lost due to corruption every year.

The Finance Minister is also expected to delve deep into the governance issue. There is no doubt that grievous governance and creeping corruption are eating into the heart of our economy. The situation, allegedly, has not improved over the years. When a series of grenade attacks on opposition leaders including that on the Leader of the Opposition and the

Victimorious



M.J. AKBAR

THE Indian voter has a simple formula for Indian democracy: he votes for himself.

This may seem an obvious reality, but there are nuances. I do not mean that he votes for a party that claims it will serve his interests, for the simple reason that everyone claims the same thing. Every party promises to eliminate poverty, end corruption, provide water, and ensure law and order. No party's manifesto declares that it will pollute the environment, take bribes in defence deals, institutionalise nepotism, incite violence between people for votes, and leave you angry, frustrated and miserable after five years.

Since there is not much to choose from in manifestos, the voter needs a different measure to define the difference. It is pertinent to enter a caveat: we are talking about most voters, not every voter. However, since the majority trends determine the result, the qualification is probably irrelevant.

When I said that the voter votes for himself, I meant that he votes for the party or leader that comes closest to his image of himself. The Indian voter used to see himself as poor. As long as this was the case, the sway of the Congress was unassailable, culminating in the massive victory of 1971. By the 1977 election the self-image had switched. The voter now saw himself as a victim. The Emergency of course was a significant reason for

the switch, but it was also a sign of greater democratic assertion, and stress on the rights of an individual rather than the largesse of the government. The stability of British rule depended on the concept of the government as mai-baap, both the mother who nourishes and the father who protects. The Congress, as the successor government, inherited that legacy, bolstered additionally by the fact that Mahatma Gandhi was the grand-

interlocutors were too well-fed and spoke in the rotund tones of a success they took for granted. The voter punished smugness by turning towards Mrs Sonia Gandhi, who represented the victim.

This is the difference between the Jayalalithaa of 2004 and the Jayalalithaa of 2005 in Tamil Nadu. Last year she was seen as the woman who had thrown the elderly Karunanidhi into jail, tried to impose her will on the free media, snubbed

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year is phenomenal. Moreover, she did it alone. She has distanced herself from the BJP in the last year. Her foes, on the other hand, stuck to their alliance. As she put it, she had the coalition of the people behind her in the battle against the coalition of the parties. And she did it while remaining in power. In opposition you have to do nothing to look like a victim.

How many apple carts, and whose, did Ms Jayalalithaa

there. A little more of this and it might get frozen in political cement. The Prime Minister is an honest man. He commemorated the first anniversary of his government by giving himself six out of ten. It might have been seven were it not for the fact that the one area in which his personal expertise is unquestioned, the performance of the government is being questioned. The growth rate of the GDP has already been formally lowered to 7.5 percent and could slip below that. The victim-voter is not going to be terribly enthused since employment cannot be reduced unless growth rate is over 8 percent, and with half of that growth coming from industrial production (the projected share of the service sector in the growth rate is 65 percent). Industrial production is in fact sinking, and this year's budget offers no reason for hope that the curve will change direction. Curiously, Dr Singh's one chance of dramatic success, and perhaps the rescue of his government, lies in an area where he has no expertise: Pakistan policy. But to move forward on that dramatic front (the fortunes of peace with Pakistan incidentally are more dramatic than the fortunes of war) needs a Prime Minister who will rise above himself, and carry both his government and his nation towards a historic moment. Will that happen? That is a question that only Dr Singh can answer.

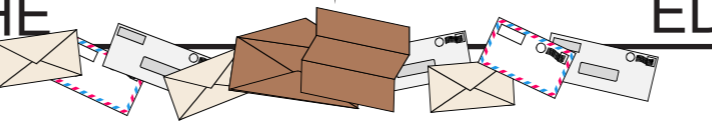
For the moment, the only victim in Indian politics is the voter. He is still awarding grace marks all around, but the day the victim feels that he is being deliberately victimised, the silence on the streets will become a murmur, and the murmur will turn into a roar.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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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.

Aeroplane makers

The new era of civil aviation was opened by the Airbus-380 on 27th April. Appropriately there was a large and enthusiastic crowd welcoming the event on a week-day morning at Toulouse, France.

It has opened the commercial air traffic duel between Airbus and Boeing the only two large passenger aeroplane makers. We have the Airbus Super jumbo A380 and Boeing Dreamliner 787 both are competing for the growing air travel market.

While Airbus believes in A380 to economically fly over 700 plus passengers from point to point, Boeing is betting on its 787 to be more viable for the future air travel growth.

travel trends.

Can we see the A380 landing in Dhaka on its round the world demonstration flight sometimes next year? It makes one remember the first landing of the 747 in Dhaka more than a decade ago!

However, I wonder if airport-wise poor ZIA will ever have a chance to see the A380! Even today two 747 within half an hour of each other makes a mockery of ZIA as far as passenger and luggage handling is considered. On top of it all the illegal high rises ignoring ICA safety regulations will possibly relegate ZIA only to smaller planes in the future from a hub in India or Bangkok. While others move forward, we despite all the cacophony of high sounding development seminars and what not are as usual moving in the reverse gear! May be the threat from ICA will herald a further round of seminars and workshops and

nothing else.
S.A. Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka

One-stop centre for SMEs

The press report on the SME fair and activities make dismal reading. The politicians, under the influence of big business magnates, show step-motherly attitude towards the systematic development of the SMEs in Bangladesh.

The SME sector is like the middle class in the society. The catalyst at the vertical and horizontal levels. Today's wealth-oriented political governance has sidelined the small players (although the rural sector is getting more attention now).

1,000 per sq km). More avenues of livelihood have to be created.

We have to remember that our huge RING industry started as SME mini-projects, and then took off after several years. SME is a base for take-off in different directions. Where is the long-term Integrated Plan? All quiet on the SME front!

SME offices and Centres should have its own big signboards to draw public attention. The majority of the investors have low-level education, hence need guidance at every step. Where is the SME First aid Brigade?

There are no One-Stop Centres in any Dept or district MQs. Where to go for information, guidance, and assistance (formalities, financial, technical, raw materials, marketing, etc)? The official PR is poor (change the bureaucratic outlook; it is zamindari-oriented).

and allowed to run in the routine way, with the VIPs, and CIPs busy in 'Very Insignificant Pursuits.' SME sounds like "small, mediocre effort!"

The annual awards do not motivate sufficiently. Why no business familiarisation trips for the winners by Biman? Where are the R & D Centre, and Technical Assistance Advisory Centre network? The local market is flooded with foreign goods, many of which we can produce cheaper. Where is the Study Report? Consultancy services are available through genuine channels.

The above is an outline of the general trend of dissatisfaction all around. Pay attention to the *chota businessmen and mini-industrialists*. Micro-credit concepts need more official touches. Small is beautiful!
Abu Abd
Dhaka

Turning the clock back

There is no solution to the Kashmir problem in the current context. It is the context that has to change. Recent developments have produced encouraging signs that perhaps the context can indeed be changed. The Muslim nation that was Pakistan has split into two. The three nations; India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are not unlike the three groups of provinces that the British had proposed as Plan-A. The cold war between India and

Pakistan has thawed. One can now envisage that maybe, just maybe, the clock can be turned back. Incremental changes to the status quo can reverse the disaster produced by Plan-B and achieve something akin to Plan-A. By undoing in stages what Partition has wrought the two countries as part-

nens rather than adversaries can quite likely achieve peace, prosperity, and increased leverage in global affairs. The co-operation will yield synergistic gains to both parties. It is a win-win proposition.

These changes might begin with relaxation of travel restrictions. Pakistan and India might consider liberalising and simplifying their bilateral passport and visa regulations with the objective of encouraging cross-border tourism; something that has already been achieved by India and Bangladesh.

The recent announcement by Tata Industries of India of their intent to invest \$2 billion USD in Bangladesh is indicative of a significant capital flow potential among these countries that is waiting for the right conditions. Reform and liberalisation of laws governing cross-border capital and labour mobility along with an FTA will

create a single economic entity of over 1.5 billion people. At that point it would serve their best interests for these countries to enter into a multilateral defence treaty. They may elect to hold joint military exercises and form joint rapid action battalions to defend the sub-continent from international crime and terrorism.

If that happens the clock will have been turned back.
Jamal Munshi
Thailand

Supporting Pakistan

Much has been said and written about the reasoning behind and justification for supporting Pakistan. Enough is enough! It is totally a personal opinion of every Bangladeshi.
Akhter Salim Fahmi
On e-mail