

Whitening black money

Time to close the loophole

IT is to his credit that Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has admitted that extending the provision for whitening black money that has been retained in the budget proposal was morally problematic, and that he is open to the idea of eliminating the loophole. We have argued before in these pages that the existing provision accomplishes little and sends all the wrong messages, and therefore reiterate our call to have the provision dropped in the finalised budget.

It has been suggested that eliminating the provision could create instability and imbalance, and other similar arguments in favour of the provision have been made before. It has been suggested that this is one way to at least bring a small percentage of the vast underground economy into the legitimate economy, and that in the absence of such a provision, the money will merely be kept outside of the country and will neither be taxed nor invested productively here.

Be that as it may, we feel that the moral imperative of not rewarding criminality dictates that the provision be eliminated, as the finance minister has even stated as his intention in the past. The new ACC chairman is correct when he notes that such a provision is not conducive to creating a corruption free environment, and surely bringing down corruption must be one of the principle priorities of the government.

Indeed, organisations as disparate as the MCCI and CPD have argued against the extension of the provision, and there is little doubt that if we wish to enhance our credibility in international markets as well as send the signal to legitimate domestic and foreign businessmen and investors that we are serious about tackling corruption, then this a good place to start.

It is of foremost importance that Bangladesh is and is seen as a country governed by rule of law and one in which the government is focused on stamping out corruption and creating an environment conducive to legitimate investment, both foreign and domestic. Extending the provision permitting the whitening of black money would be the wrong thing to do, both from a moral standpoint as well as a practical one.

Too hazardous to eat

Punitive inaction culpable

INDISCRIMINATE use of chemicals in foodstuffs poses a grave threat to public health as people are virtually ingesting poison under the labels of fruits, vegetables and many other edibles.

The issue has recently been raised by "Paribesh Bachao Anodolon", a forum of environmentalists. They organised a human chain in the city on Friday, demanding an end to use of detrimental chemicals in foodstuffs. They have also put forward some suggestions worth taking note of. Obviously, the elements responsible for using toxic substances for ripening fruits and preserving all other types of perishables need to be exposed and brought to justice. Indeed, enactment of a law that would protect the consumer rights has been long overdue; yet, the foot-dragging continues while the infringements on consumer rights multiply.

To tell the truth, the rights of consumers are considered dispensable by those who should be protecting them. Only that explains how people get away with crimes like adulteration and use of non-food grade chemicals which are as culpable as poisoning people to death.

The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has not yet succeeded in preventing the activities that are a threat to public health, including the use of toxic chemicals in foods. The problem here is that, although it is possible to get any message through to the wholesale dealers, who work under some kind of an organisational structure, the retailers' business is largely unstructured and chaotic. So it is the DCC inspectors' duty to keep the retailers under close monitoring. We realise that the corporation is short-handed, and that's where they need government's financial assistance to tide over staffing crisis there. Let's not forget, we are addressing an issue of grave public concern and it has to be handled with efficiency unless we want to expose people to the unscrupulous activities of food traders and sellers.

The human chain was a worthwhile attempt at giving vent to the worries of environmentalists over use of toxic substances in food. We share their concern and urge the government to take the necessary steps to set things right in this area.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

IT is getting increasingly difficult to describe accurately the depth of degeneration Bangladesh society is fast sinking into. While on television screen we watched the French and the Dutch rebelling against the government by casting no-vote on the proposed European Constitution and the governments in both the countries (Jacque Chirac sacked his Prime Minister) acknowledging the primacy of their citizens; in Bangladesh one is confronted with almost daily scenes of the police and the student cadre of a particular political party indiscriminately clubbing down the voice of opposition in the educational institutions.

Alongside the dehumanisation of student politics, Bangladeshis' sensibilities were assaulted by the sordid details of a family drama enacted by a prominent politician of the country, allegedly on account of threats to cut the fragile thread holding the sword of Damocles hanging over his head.

The current state of asphyxiation of dissent through threats of the use and the actual use of violence to mute any form of dissent is unprecedented. It might not be too much to suggest that if we are not careful that we will end up on the path of eventual rejection of liberal and democratic values and espousal of totalitarianism.

Political scientists argue that totalitarianism is not the antithesis of democracy, but is one of its extreme possibilities. This form results from the degeneration of democracy through its failure to resolve its crises of legitimacy. They further argue that totalitarianism is reflected through its total identification of political functions and powers that in a democratic system are conceptually thought to be distinct.

In the Kantian description, democracy is reduced to despotism where law collapses and decisions made are partial devoid of universal reason which should be the prime justification of law. Besides, despotism allows the majority to legislate

to its particular advantage, thus disregarding the will of the people which might have changed since the legislators were elected by the people.

The French and the Dutch referenda have proved this point, among others, that the legislators once

decision making rule.

But the tyranny of the majority can be avoided through "coherent majoritarianism" which requires not simply the most votes but the most votes produced by the best arguments. "The means by which a majority comes to be a majority,"

where violence will become unnecessary because absolute power will reign, remains to be seen.

But then the Actonian precept of absolute power corrupting absolutely would invariably set in, compounding the existential corruption in Bangladesh which by any stan-

possibility of fomenting religious extremism and suffering from wide-spread violation of human rights.

In these days of hawk-eyed scrutiny of domestic affairs of countries harbouring religious fanatics, and western impatience with human rights violations, unless a country is

In 1952, 1954, 1962, 1969, 1971, and thereafter Bangladeshis chose well. One hopes, given the present impasse, that Bangladeshis would be given another opportunity, sooner rather than later, to choose their leaders after appropriate administrative and electoral changes have been made so that a truly free and fair election can be held.

elected may not necessarily continue to reflect the will of the people. Though unlike France, in Holland it remains to be seen if the referendum results, albeit on an issue intrinsic to yet not totally identifiable with domestic politics, would result in any change in government; its ripple effect has already been seen in the UK where the British government have indefinitely postponed holding the proposed referendum on the European Constitution.

The essential point laboured at citing the European referenda is to emphasise the primacy of the will of the people in the determination of their fate. Both in France and in Holland the people appear to have rebuked their governments for surging ahead with the concept of a "corporate Europe" without consulting them. This process of continuous consultations almost perfected in Switzerland is the essence of democratic process.

German philosopher Jurgen Habermas stresses that the state's raison d'etre lies primarily "in the guarantee of an inclusive process of opinion-and-will-formation in which free and equal citizens reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in the equal interest of all." Since political consultations with the citizens at all stages, though ideal, may not be practicable, one of the bad outcomes of deliberative democracy can be majoritarian

writes John Dewey "is the important thing: antecedent debates, the modification of views to meet the opinion of the minority ... The essential need in other words, is the improvement in the methods and the conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion."

Essentially unfettered debates and discussions among political adversaries have to be internalised in the political process. If the way to such discussion and debate is barred by a political adversary who happens to be in power at any given moment, then violence is bound to follow. Since the state holds all legitimate means of violence, it can employ state agents to subdue their political adversaries.

But in an age of police brutality and humanitarian intervention, in an age of abridged sovereignty where governments are required to treat fairly their citizens and foreigners alike, the indiscriminate use of state agents to perpetrate violent acts may not be desirable.

In such cases, governments tend to use their political cadres (supported by state agents) to conduct violent acts against their political adversaries. At the moment this appears to be the case in Bangladesh. Whether perpetuation of violence will lead to a situation where opposition will be totally silenced, resulting in a situation

dard --national or international -- is endemic and has consumed all sectors of public life.

Morality apart, the sheer volume of corruption is regressing GDP growth and increasing the already unconscionable widening gap between the rich and the poor. Almost half of the total population of Bangladesh is believed to be living below the poverty line and the number of ultra-poor is increasing at an alarming rate. It is generally thought that the ultra-poor, unable to articulate their grievances and enveloped by utter hopelessness, can be easily manipulated and their votes easily purchased during elections. But the continuing inability of the authorities to deliver political goods to the people in the form of education, health, food, employment and other essential ingredients of life, as opposed to conspicuous consumption by a section of people living off ill-gotten wealth, may enliven the ultra-poor to stage a cold war against the oppressive rulers.

Devotion to God and poverty, seen by George Bernard Shaw as the greatest of evils and the worst of crimes, being closely inter-linked, there remains a distinct possibility of protest by the ultra-poor taking religious cover. Bangladesh is reportedly on the watch list of the West as a country pregnant with the

serving the vital interests relating to the war on terror, prudence demands that the government in countries suffering from internal political discord should try to be accommodative of views expressed by "identity politics" -- defined as fragmentation of political community into religious, ethnic, racial, and ideological groups -- instead of meeting differing views with an iron-fisted response.

Western countries and international financial institutions, so essential for the economic development of Bangladesh, have on many occasions been highly critical of the way the country is being governed. Governmental authorities have been accused of political interference, impeding the process of sound economic decisions, wide-spread corruption, leaving its devilish imprint on the politico-socio-economic personality of the country, money and muscle power, distorting the true reflection of the will of the people in the elections, and extrajudicial killings by state agents, raising disturbing ethical and legal questions.

It has been said that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel. Yet wars have been fought and people have been worshipped in the name of patriotism. However since decolonisation has become a matter of the past and the process of

globalisation continues to blur national identities, patriotism has gained a different meaning for people belonging to a defined geographical area known as a state.

To nurture patriotism it is necessary to make citizens proud of their country. Pride comes from achievement. It is therefore necessary that the political leaders of a country provide the people with opportunities and environment enabling them to achieve such feats of which they can be proud of. After all being branded as the most corrupt country in the world for years together can hardly make Bangladeshis be proud of their country.

Equally, being one of the poorest and ill governed countries can scarcely imbibe a sense of patriotism among the people. If a statesman is distinguished from a politician as being one who thinks of the next generation instead of the next election, then political leaders owe to the present and the future generation of Bangladeshis the responsibility to provide the country with exemplary leadership of which people can be genuinely proud.

But then the responsibility ultimately devolves upon the people to choose their representatives judiciously. If one were to go through the history of Bangladesh one would find that since 1947, the people of Bangladesh always rose to the occasion and voted correctly, only to be failed by their leaders time and again.

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Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

The modern slave trade

RON CHEPESIUK

THE extent of human trafficking and its consequences are readily to be seen in Bangladesh, where the problem is so serious that at least 24 national and international NGOs are currently working on the problem. But Bangladesh is not the only country grappling with what human rights activists describe as an epidemic.

Last June 3, the US in its annual survey of international human trafficking, accused 14 countries of failing to do enough to stop the modern day slave trade. The list included such close allies of Uncle Sam as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and some of its usual suspects, including Cuba, Venezuela, and North Korea.

What the report fail to mention, however, was that tens of thousands of undocumented people are entering the US annually, and given the War on Terrorism, the US government now considers human trafficking to be a national security risk. At a congressional hearing held on May 18, 2004, John P. Torres of the Department of Homeland Security said: "We know that these smuggling and trafficking pipelines serve as conduit for undocumented workers and criminals seeking entry into the United States in order to carry out their destructive schemes."

The case of the Likreddy family and the sensational trial that ensued in Berkeley, California, shows that the US is not immune to the modern day slave trade. In June 2003, Prasad Lakireddy was found guilty of importing young Indian girls to the US for the purpose of sex and cheap labour, and received a five year suspended sentence. Earlier, the head of the family, mogul Lakireddy Bali Reddy, who owned a restaurant and extensive real estate holdings, received an eight-year prison sentence.

The case came to light when 17-year old Chanti Prattipati, one of the

abused girls, died of carbon monoxide poisoning. "The details of the Lakireddy story were lurid and they shocked many Americans," recalled Ann Jordan, Director of the Initiative Against Trafficking in Persons, Global Rights, a human rights advocacy group based in Washington, DC. "They couldn't believe such a thing could happen in the US."

The US government estimates that the number of trafficking victims entering the US annually is some-

escape poverty in their own countries, will accept a phony offer from slick human traffickers for foreign employment in such occupations as restaurant work or child care. Many others are forced into prostitution.

They try to survive in a strange country, but they can't speak the language and are at the mercy of human traffickers, who force them to pay off a trafficking debt that can amount to thousands of dollars. If the victims are young girls working as

domestic civil rights laws that ensure protection of the rights of the victims."

While the international community has moved slowly to address the issue, the UN did take an important step to enhance international cooperation on November 15, 2000, when its General Assembly adopted a package of instruments against various forms of transnational organized crime, including the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and

Many countries realise that educating women and children who run a high risk of being trafficked, along with programmes to improve public awareness about the crime, are keys to curbing the trade. Unicef in Bangladesh, for example, has embarked on a project to train some 60,000 young people as potential role models to teach their peers about child trafficking.

where between 14,000 to as much as 50,000. About half of the victims end up in the sex trade, according to one CIA estimate. "Human trafficking is significant, but it's even larger in those regions where borders are not patrolled and guarded," said Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican legislator from Kansas, who has sponsored anti-human trafficking legislation.

Human trafficking is a complicated issue, wherever it occurs, but the reasons for the criminal activity are easy to discern. Poverty and gender inequality are the key factors. In many poor countries, women and children are marginalised and uneducated, and as society's most vulnerable members, they become prime targets for human traffickers. In Bangladesh, India, and other countries of South Asia, many of the women and child victims come from rural areas and urban slums, and their families expect them to work to supplement the family income.

Some women and children even become eager participants who are willing to go with someone who promises them what seems like a better life. Other victims, looking to

prostitutes, they are often moved from one brothel to another, where they can contract diseases such as AIDS. In Pakistan alone, an estimated 150 to 400 women are being trafficked weekly from Bangladesh, according to a report by the Karachi-based League for Human Rights and Legal Aid.

Many governments refuse to accept that human trafficking is a problem in their country and don't want to address it because of the high and levels of corruption involved. It is not uncommon for corrupt officials to accept bribes in exchange for passports, visas and safe transit across borders. In some countries, the corruption extends to high level foreign officials, according to the US Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Frankly put -- many governments refuse to treat trafficking as a serious problem. As Jordan explained, "Few governments have educated their immigration officials, investigators, prosecutors and other civil servants on how to identify potential and actual victims of trafficking. Nor have governments insisted compliance with international law standards or

Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. The protocol relating to human trafficking provides a framework for international cooperation and includes provisions for the extradition of human traffickers and for assistance to victims in the areas of housing, education and health care, although they are not obligatory.

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"Education should also meet the demand side to teach potential perpetrators who are often adult men -- that trafficking is wrong," said Saisuree Chutikul, Vice Chairwomen of a UN committee on the rights of the child.

In the past few years, the US has made some progress in creating tools that can combat human traffick-

have already been made.

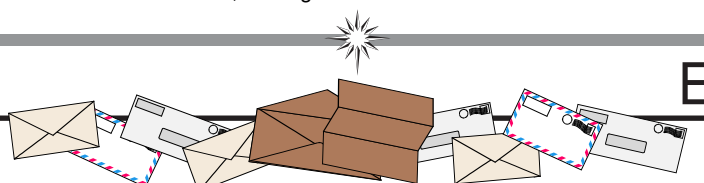
Still, the US needs to do more, according to human rights activists. "The federal government has done a lot in the past few years, but it needs to provide more, resources, particularly money, if we are to get the message out," Jordan said. Michelle Clark, the Washington-based co-director of the Protection Project, a

research organisation focusing on trafficking issues, pointed out that only two states (Washington and Texas) have specific anti-trafficking legislation. "States have to do more if we are to curb trafficking within the country," Clark said. The Protection Project is a part of John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Baltimore.

Most importantly, individual Americans can also do their part to curb human trafficking, for many of them have probably come in contact with the trade without realising it. As Jordan explained, the victims of human traffickers are "all around us [Americans]. They cook our food in neighbourhood restaurants or in their own homes, sew our clothes or pick today's fresh vegetables. They could even be the foreign-born "wife" of a co-worker or the woman held in isolation in forced prostitution in a quiet neighbourhood.

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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.

Buffeted budget

Unholy speculations were rife in the metropolis on the budget announced by the finance minister. Save the party or the budding nation? Accept the rise and fall of political parties, or go by the short-term, viable ripple-effect of the budget; oblivious of the economic tsunami which might hit later? Ad hoc brains are not real thinkers. It is cosmetic thinking and planning of the have-not minds, keen on immediate impact on powerless voters and captive citizens (speaking of the political approaches to national policies; in contrast to the technical manipulation of budgetary details). Good citizens have few options in the field of choosing good governance from contemporary demonstrations.

The fate and plight of the fluctuating economies in Latin America was focussed in an article in The Daily Star of May 28. The situation in the other third world nations is not much different. Bangladesh is an example of frozen assets and flowing black

money for three decades since independence (1971). Power before service. No service is possible while in the Opposition! The flow is one-way; and that too, outside the august parliament.

We have a very experienced Finance Minister, but he has to process and filter uncharitable proposals from a shady political world full of smoke screens. In the same issue of The Daily Star there was an article by a local professor on the coming mega-earthquake around Dhaka, based on the return-cycle of the huge Bengal earthquake of 1885, predicted to hit the high-rise buildings around 2015-2020. We need flattened egos, not buildings!

Add the absence of political consensus at the national level for the last 15 years, and superimpose ethical factors such as corruption, violence and religious bigotry, and you have a dismaying picture of the shape of things to come in the near future. Protect the self, the family, or the paranoid party? When insecurity

haunts at domestic and public levels, how citizens could contribute to national richness?

A Mahasen
Dhaka

We abhor

"Pickets delight, driver's plight" the news item published in The Daily Star on May 22, 2005 under the above heading made us numb with horror and disgust. It has been reported that Ameer Hossain the sole bread earner of his family was severely burnt during the hartal of May 21, 2005, when he took his three wheeler out on the road in the hope of passengers.

These guys live on their daily earnings, what will happen to his family, how will they survive? A picket's inhuman prank has brought doom to this family. Is this democracy, is this the way to win people's support?

The Awami League called hartal on the day of HSC exams twice. It displeased and outraged the students and the guardians. Doesn't

the Awami League want youths of Bangladesh to be educated?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Black Gold

This is no more secret that vast deposits of minerals Zircon, Rutile, Magnetite, Monazite, Garnet and Elmenite etc. worth millions of dollars are found in some of our coastal areas like Cox's Bazar, Kutubdia, Teknaf, Moheshkhali NijhumDip, Kuakata etc.

But due to apathy and lack of coordination among the concerned ministries and government institutions, research centres, the valuable minerals are left uncared for, utilised and wasted for a long time.

It is also very unfortunate that most of our people, especially those living in the coastal areas, are ignorant and unaware of the importance and availability of the beach sand minerals.

In 1970, I found huge deposits of beach sand minerals which I call

'Black-Gold' of Cox's Bazar.

Ever since I have been trying my best for the commercial utilisation of the valuable minerals either in the public or in the private sector but in vain.

Sometimes the government authorities concerned tell me that beach sand minerals are not economically viable and sometime they say that commercial utilisation of the minerals would involve crores of taka, which a poor country like ours cannot afford. The private sectors entrepreneurs discard me saying that I am (the undersigned) neither a scientist nor a geologist.

I wonder how many of our political leaders, policy makers, journalists, industrialists and businessmen are aware of the utilisation and value of the beach sand minerals and how many of them have actually seen the minerals 'Black-Gold' of Cox's Bazar?

If the beach sand minerals are not economically feasible why is our government spending crores of taka for the last several decades on

Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission's so called beach sand plant at Cox's Bazar?

The Australian Titanium Company has applied to the Government of Bangladesh for granting them a mining lease licence for extraction of minerals at Cox's Bazar sea beach. The fact is that the average heavy minerals content of our sand is 15 per cent which is 10 per cent higher than the Australian sand. But Australia is reported to be the biggest beach mineral exporting country capturing the world market.

It is true that development, separation, refining the beach sand minerals involve a heavy expenditure and a colossal capital investment. So should we give up, surrender and lose our national wealth for our incompetence and foolishness?

Let us move step by step, slowly but steadily within our limited means, utilise and export minerals in whatever quantity and quality we can, and thus march forward.

O. H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Time to take stern action

The US state department again criticised Bangladesh for it's inability to combat the operation of some militant groups and specially named "Harkat-ul-I-Zihad-l-Islami-Bangladesh", that is running its operation in Bangladesh.

Though it praised the government for its role in the war against terror, the criticism is clear.

Once again our foreign minister sharply reacted to this report. But we, the general people of Bangladesh, know that the existence of such organisations in Bangladesh is something that cannot be denied any more.

Recently the govt has banned two organisations named Jagrata Muslim Janata Banladesh (JMJB) and Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). But the members of these groups have not yet been arrested.

Sharply reacting to a report does not prove the sincerity of the administration. We just want to see proper

steps to be taken by the government to stop these organisations from operating inside the country.

RARigan
University of Dhaka

Who is responsible?

One fine morning while driving my car I noticed that yellow coloured 'cat's eyes' had been placed on the roads and traffic signal points in Dhaka city. As far as my knowledge goes, these 'cat's eyes' are supposed to illuminate in the dark or to reflect lights when the vehicle lights fall on them. But to my astonishment our 'cat's eyes' on the road do neither of this. They are not even sturdy enough to take the weight of heavy vehicles. They are now crumpled and broken creating a huge problem for smooth driving.

As a tax payer of this country I have the right to know what is the point of wasting our money in such a senseless manner? Who is responsible for this?
Kabir Hossain Taposh
New DOHS