

Macro-economic strains

Govt faced with hard choices

THE increasing monetary expansion which is synonymous with domestic credit expansion is a worrying development especially in view of the existing high rate of inflation.

As if this is not enough, the balance of payments situation has a matter of concern as well. Forex reserves have dwindled by half a billion dollar. Even the fact that remittances from abroad saw a hefty rise could not make much of a difference to external current account deficits caused primarily by increased fuel bill. Also, export growth slowed down vis-a-vis import growth creating an imbalance there.

While a lid has been put on private sector credit growth the public sector borrowing has gone on unchecked. The tightening of private sector credit can only impede industrial growth at a time when capital goods and industrial machinery imports have increased. This will have a limiting effect on export growth too.

What is striking about the government's net borrowing from the banking sector is its increase by 2.42 per cent to Tk 620 crore in the first quarter of the current fiscal in stark contrast to a decrease by 4.76 per cent or Tk 1510 crore in the corresponding period of the last fiscal. This study in contrasts reads more edifying when one sees that last year there was net repayment of government loans to the banking system instead of net borrowing.

Basically, a budgetary balance has to be struck by non-sense austerity measures to keep inflation from rising further with attendant stagflation in prospect. The forex will have to be kept from further depletion by an extended tightening of the belt.

The revenue receipts are slightly behind target with a room for improved collection. Aid disbursements are likely to have fallen behind budgetary provisions and expectations in view of the World Bank programme of lending seemingly being on a deferred course.

Tightening of the belt is a hard choice for the government to make in an election year which has already seen incremental expeditions in the name of development. But it is one tall order the government must either be prepared to meet or see the economy in ruins with the voters making their own judgement.

Preventing spread of AIDS

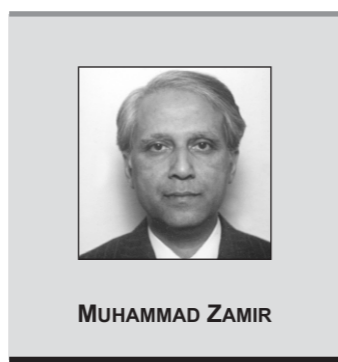
Appropriate awareness needed

THE current statistics on the incidence of AIDS in the country may not warrant any drastic measures right at this moment but there is no denying the fact that Bangladesh has all the potentials of turning out to be yet another country with high incidences of the deadly disease. With our neighbour India having 5.1 million cases, second only to South Africa, we have therefore every reason to be highly concerned. Added to this the level of awareness is also far from desirable. On the other hand we have a large number of labourers and low paid unskilled workers in various countries of the world staying for extended period of time away from their spouses and family. While they return home unknowingly some of them may also be carriers of the deadly disease. There are threats of the spread of the disease from within the country too. The number of floating sex workers particularly in the metropolitan cities is on the increase alongside the drug abusers who might use infected needles amongst themselves. Many hospitals and clinics in the country have no standard procedures for checking if the blood for transfusion is free from the deadly virus. We are, therefore, of the opinion that concerns expressed at a recently held round table discussion are not only timely but also deserve our serious attention.

With our resources, proper planning and the will on the part of the Administration, we should be able to prevent any spread of the disease. For Bangladesh the right strategy would be going the preventive way rather than the curative one, simply for the fact that it is uncertain and the drugs are too expensive and certainly beyond the affordability of those who have the maximum vulnerability. It is already high time that we embarked on an aggressive awareness campaign collectively consisting people from amongst the civil society, the NGOs and the governmental authorities.

We believe that given the will and sincerity of commitment, any spread of AIDS in Bangladesh is quite possible to contain.

Living with Alice in 'Shantrashiland'



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

HERE is no harm in confronting reality. It is time that our Administration took off their pink glasses and called a spade a spade.

We have had a flashy SAARC Summit against the backdrop of a munga-stricken situation. Mutual back-slapping on the 'success' of the Summit was however interrupted with the brutal assassination of two Judges in Jhalokati. The perpetrators, members of the radical Islamic Jamat ul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) acknowledged that they had committed the reprehensible act. In fact, the survivor also revealed that this was a suicide attack. By doing so, he raised the stakes. In the course of the next few days and weeks, religious extremists have further re-prioritised the socio-political agenda in the country. Two bombs were recovered from a residence at Haquepara, Chudanga and terrorists hurled a bomb on two on-duty policemen in Daulatpur, Khulna. Around the same time, the police were fortunately able to foil a plan of serial suicide attacks on Judges in Panchagarh.

They were however ineffective in stopping the unfortunate mayhem on 29 November in Chittagong and Gazipur.

Various issues have taken center-stage in our socio-economic and political horizons over the past year and quarter. That has included lack of accountability, corruption and poor governance. However, the most significant dimension appears to be that of confrontational fundamentalism and extremism.

We in Bangladesh took up arms in 1971 not only against injustice but

also against abuse of Islam. We achieved a State where we celebrated our freedom through the spirit of secularism. We endorsed the values of democracy in subsequent years and reiterated the need for moderation and constitutional equity. In the recent past, despite constitutional amendments, assurance was given that the entire population would be able to practice their religious belief and faith without any threat.

Today, because of many factors, we are entering a dangerous phase

Communist Party meeting held in Paltan in Dhaka, in a cultural gathering in Ramna Park in Dhaka, in Gopalganj, in the Narayanganj Awami League office and in Bagherhat and Sunamganj during Awami League meetings. This was followed by a grenade attack on the British High Commissioner on 21 May, 2004 in Sylhet in contravention of all democratic norms. In the recent past we have also witnessed the dreadful grenade attack that took place on 21 August, 2004 in front of the office of the Awami

engagement against various extreme leftist and Marxist parties who operated from the underground in these regions. In other words, policemen looked aside when vigilante justice was being meted out in the name of Islam fighting atheists. This was best reflected in the open support accorded to Sidiqqur Rahman Bangla Bhai. Media reports or concern over such action or inaction was disregarded.

This attitude on the part of the BNP looking the other way while religious elements implemented their own agenda appears to have undergone a slight change because of several factors over the last few months. There was the nervous reaction to the August 17 bombing incidents, the realisation that this soft approach was unacceptable to India as well as the development partners, foreign reports that Bangladesh was sliding into a 'failed-state' and severe reaction within the general public and the electronic media and the press.

The government seems to be finally understanding that you can proverbially fool some of the people some of the time but not all the people all the time. The last meeting held in Dhaka with the development

partners has clearly underlined the gravity of the existing situation. Donors already gravely worried about pervasive corruption, have pointed out in no uncertain terms their feeling that this downslope in law and order will not only adversely affect Bangladesh but might lead to export of insecurity in the neighbouring areas. In other words, the international alarm bell has rung.

The ruling Alliance must clearly understand that the people at large are worried about the evolving

ground for extremist outfits like the Purba Bangla Communist Party (PBCP-Marxist Leninist), the JMB and some other leftist groups.

Mr. Abu Hena's comments might not have been received very kindly by the BNP hierarchy but he was not the only one to allege BNP's inability to deal with 'Shantrash' effectively. Mr Mizanur Rahman Minu, the BNP supported Mayor of Rajshahi, while endorsing such disciplinary measures has however had the honesty to admit that the terrorist situation had exacerbated because of the government taking the whole matter 'lightly'.

Like many others, I have followed the administration's recent steps with care. At this point of time, such religious radicalism has created panic and social unrest. It is also creating unnecessary suspicion among different groups of people. It is the incumbent government's duty to ensure that there is peace and stability.

If necessary, that enlightened non-partisan extra step has to be taken in the interest of the nation. Party interests must not overtake the coordinated measures that are necessary for containing this threat. Let the Islamic components in the Alliance prove that they are against terrorism. Their party workers can help the concerned agencies to identify the extremist activists. They can also track and reveal the shadowy lines of communication through which such fundamentalists obtain their financial resources.

Cooperation in this regard is incumbent on all of us for the sake of our future generation. Let us through such action, renew our commitment towards the vision that created a moderate country in this month of December, 34 years ago. We cannot let the blood of our martyrs go in vain. We cannot suffer an ignominious defeat in the hands of 'the enemy within'.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador -- any response to mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

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in our national life. More so, than ever before, peace, stability and prosperity for the citizens will lie in the hands of political activists in general and the reaction of the politicians in power. The political scenario is bound to become more restive once again ahead of the general elections. One does not need to be a Cassandra to observe that we have a crisis in the making, which left unchecked, will affect our image abroad and our economic progress at home.

Religious extremism has been growing in Bangladesh over the past few years. It all started on 6 March, 1999 in Jessore when the Udichi cultural function was bombed resulting in 10 deaths and many serious injuries. The same year on 8 October, an Ahmadiya religious centre came under a bomb attack in Khulna leading to 8 deaths. This was followed by the attempted assassination of the then prime minister through the planting of explosives in Kotailpara on 21 July, 2000. Subsequently, we have watched with horror the effect of explosions at different times during political meetings of progressive parties including Awami League. This list includes explosions in the

League in Dhaka. Many died and many more were seriously injured. Earlier this year we also had the brutal killing of the former finance minister Kibria in Habiganj. Then came the widespread, well-coordinated bombing attacks all over the country on 17 August, 2005. And of late suicide bombers, attack at Chittagong and Gazipur. This list does not make pleasant reading. It also does not reflect very well about the effectiveness and efficiency of both our intelligence agencies and our law and order units.

For quite some time, politicians from the progressive parties have been alleging that the present Alliance Administration have failed in their responsibility to tackle this menace. It has been pointed out that extremist religious activists have been associated not only in planning such attacks but also in the carrying out of such explosions. This has consistently been denied by the politicians in power. Some of them even suggested that the Opposition was involved in this nefarious activity. Some others raised the finger towards India and even Israel. This consistent ostrich syndrome impacted on both fact-

engagement against various extreme leftist and Marxist parties who operated from the underground in these regions. In other words, policemen looked aside when vigilante justice was being meted out in the name of Islam fighting atheists. This was best reflected in the open support accorded to Sidiqqur Rahman Bangla Bhai. Media reports or concern over such action or inaction was disregarded.

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religion militancy. It is also apparent that voting in the next election will be greatly affected by the perception about how the government has tackled this problem.

It is this awareness that has led to rash of admissions from members of the ruling Alliance. Mr. Abu Hena, sitting law maker from the Bagmara-Mohonpur constituency of Rajshahi had the courage to assign blame on the government and some members of the Cabinet for the volatile situation prevailing in the country and for harbouring members of militant outlawed groups. His admission had direct personal consequences. The BNP high command expelled him from party and the Speaker of the Jatiyo Sangshad had no hesitation in declaring him to be 'an independent lawmaker'. Curiously, the Hon'ble Speaker also clarified to journalists that there was no possibility of Mr. Hena 'losing his parliament membership as he did not violate party's decision or cast vote against the Party'. Mr. Hena spoke up because he has been symbolically 'under the gun' in his constituency. It may be mentioned here that his area has become the breeding

Protecting media freedom at all costs

DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

BANGLADESH Press Council (BPC) Chairman Justice Ahmed's recent proposal for adding a punitive provision to the BPC act to make it effective and to strengthen the council is simply a misguided venture apparently born out of desperation of the cocktail alliance government. It is really disquieting that a former man of Justice overseeing BPC wants the power to infringe on the rights of the citizens' voice by using leash on "media freedom".

A few weeks ago, the foreign minister attempted to make the news media the scapegoat of our image problem associated with the 'most corrupt country' ranking, because the media reports on corruption. Mr. Matiur Rahman Nizami, the Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islam on November 25 finally identified The Daily Star as the principle agent helping the rise of the demons of religio political terrorism. He gave an impression that shutting down these news media will thwart the Islamic militancy (ATN Bangla TV news).

I read similar statements from other ministers as well from time to time. This only makes me conjecture how a group of people think alike, talk alike and act alike. One also wonders to know if these people eat alike, dress alike, and also look alike. Although making the media the scape goat is common to countries where politicians run for shelters from the press to hide their sins and sinister doings, many of us thought our politicians will be somewhat classier.

Freedom of press is threatened most in East Asia (with North Korea at the bottom of the entire list at 167th place, followed by Burma 165th, China 162nd, Vietnam 161st and Laos 153rd) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia 159th, Iran 158th, Syria 155th, Iraq

148th). Bangladesh already belongs to this club with a ranking of 151. Now with all the warnings and growing threats of imposing censorship on press freedom its ranking will only slide downward to match its highest corruption ranking and all other disparaging statistics.

When working to thwart social wrongdoings, the media employ investigative journalism to divulge inequities, and violations and, in an edifying sense, reinforce social values that lessen the incidence of corruption in both public and private sectors. Because of lack of transparency, the journalists often

"news and views", "points and counterpoints".

The media have been regulated in different countries both through legislation and their own ethical rules. International organisations and conferences such as the UN, WO, UNESCO, ECOSOC and CSCE (The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe) also have formulated journalistic codes of ethics. Moreover, different countries have their own ethical codes of press behaviour.

Regardless of the existence of codes of conduct the media gets rebuked in all countries for inadvertent errors and omissions

No government ever failed anywhere because of transparency, upholding the rule of law, and the freedom of media. Francois-Marie de Voltaire once said, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. But that does not mean I waive the right to argue with you! That is as much my constitutional right as it is yours."

write stories from unofficial and anonymous sources. What a good government would do is open up all files and channels to the journalists in absolute transparency to enrich their stories with official information.

A fair question to examine whether the media gives fair treatment to public officials suspected of crimes or immoral acts. It is here that the roles of the criminal justice system and the media diverge. The justice system operates within the bounds and on the authority set by legislation. The legal decision is usually months and years away. In contrast, the media, which deal with current events, publicises social injustices by stressing its immorality. Although it is not an explicit function of the media to prevent transgression and social injustice -- corruption included -- they do have an extremely vital role in maintaining the values and fulfil their social function in satisfying people's yearning for

but that government does not rush to legislate new acts to hold back press freedom.

Where the media infringe on people's rights, for example, by publicising allegations or suspicions of wrongdoings that later prove false, the conventional means of legal protection cannot repair the damage inflicted. However, the media could be restrained and the tensions and conflicts between the media and the government will disappear if there exists

- uniform rule of law for everyone,
- judiciary is not politicised,
- absolutely no interference by political functionaries in the execution of fair trials,
- there is unblemished transparency and unhindered access of media to information it asks for (barring national security),
- no intimidation from the ruling elites for punitive actions on the journalists or on the freedom of media.

breaks down once the politicians find that the media is not patronising their greed and wrongdoings. The politicians then engage in media bashing with intimidations of introducing constitutional provisions to tame the power of the media.

Mr. Nizami's quirky accusations about The Daily Star and justice Ahmed's obsessive proposal for adding punitive measures may have helped the cause of free media in the following way:

- Increased the circulation and readers of The Daily Star. People in the West cannot wait to click the Internet version of the paper and line up to know what other stupidities the government is set to incubate.
- Bangladeshi people everywhere wakes up every morning to see where the tussle between the government and the media is heading and how it is shaping up.
- People now know for sure what it would be like if Mr. Nizami's party

ever comes to power - rule similar to those of the Middle Eastern countries.

- Dispel my long held notion that Mr. Nizami and his colleagues do not read newspapers. I am glad that they do.
- Mr. Nizami and his colleagues pick and choose what they don't like and discard those that help the country and the people who elected them to power.
- Exposed Justice Ahmed's ignorance about the power of the Internet in disseminating information in utmost transparency across national borders in a timely fashion. Can Justice Ahmed and his

several politically neutral Bangladesh Associations in big cities in the US functioning in absolute harmony on many issues of public interest. We all communicate with each other on issues of mutual interest via the Internet and emails. None of us regardless of political affiliations would ever endorse compromising the freedom of media.

Bangladeshi people living in Michigan are politically very active. At this stage we certainly do not want to make a mountain out of a mole concerning Justice Ahmed's move of adding punitive acts on media freedom. But we will certainly remain alert and watch his next move. We hope sanity would prevail and no punitive act would be introduced in any form or shape to denigrate the country's image any more.

No government ever failed anywhere because of transparency, upholding the rule of law, and the freedom of media. Francois-Marie de Voltaire once said, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. But that does not mean I waive the right to argue with you! That is as much my constitutional right as it is yours." What a mind shattering statement!

Voltaire did not have to die to preserve the freedom of press, many thousands met deaths and persecutions and many more will give life for the right to read, write and speak freely.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics, Eastern Michigan University, USA

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.

Future of Saarc

This is in response to the letter from Jamilla Razzak published on November 11, 2005. The writer stated that Saarc nations did nothing for Pakistan while Turkey provided \$150 million.

Perhaps the writer forgot that Pakistan spends over \$5 billion every year for defence against Saarc co-member India. Pakistan is coincidentally requesting \$5 billion in foreign assistance for recovery from the earthquake. Turkey's generous offer is unfortunately a drop in the bucket.

If Saarc's vision is implemented, member states such as Pakistan will no longer need to hold out their begging bowls. The people of South Asia are beginning to realise that most of their debacles from mass poverty to religious strife to arms race are self-inflicted. If we can put

our egos aside and work collaboratively together, we can reach our potential and win more respect from the outside world.

Siddhartha Basu
Boston, USA

Saarc fantasy

Voila! Dhaka looked so cute, beautiful and disciplined. We ventured to take a drive through the Airport Road up to ZIA in a jeep on 11 November, Friday noon. We were in relaxed and happy mood since government had declared three days of holiday like 'Eid' holiday. Somebody remarked it's Eid ul Saarc!

The streets were deserted as if curfew had been imposed. There were beautiful tree lined, flower bedecked shoulders along the Airport Road. Weather was sunny and elements of various law

enforcing agencies lined up along the roads. It looked so peaceful and serene that we feared of developing some hypertension as we are used to the stress and tension of traffic jam, honking buses, trucks, CNG, impatient private jeeps and cars, various tricks of rickshawpullers etc.

Alas, that tranquil situation would last for four days only and then we dropped to the reality of polluted, indiscipline fast growing mega city named Dhaka.

SN Mamnoon
Dhaka

Fundamentalists' threat

I regret to say that terrorism and fundamentalism have spread rapidly to many parts of the country in the name of Islamic governance

aiming to establish an Islamic state - a rule of Allah as opposed to man made laws. They are well-organised and well equipped in terms of access to funds on the basis of international contact.

The present government is blamed for this situation. Many leaders of the government party understood it but could not express in fear of losing their ranks. A central committee member of BNP has left the party due to alleged patronisation of the militants by a section in the government. He also said that it was not possible to raise the militants rapidly without their knowledge.

A senior BNP lawmaker told in the Parliament that the recent killing of journalists and judges reminded him the killing of intellectuals in the country before the independence in 1971. Abu Hena lost his membership only for speaking

against fundamentalism and extremism. He also blamed a section in the government and the party for patronising the militants. Md. Ashraf Hosssen who is the whip of the ruling party supported his statement. I think his statement is a credible evidence in this situation. Expelling Abu Hena from BNP otherwise proves it.

Recently, the militants have killed two judges and many others in suicide attacks and we have just started to see these. Now it is very difficult to save the judges by providing gunmen. Militants are issuing continuous threats to blow up the offices of courts, jails, even Secretariat and markets. They are threatening that they will kill officials and employees, journalists, top leaders even ministers. It is a threat to the future of democracy. We are losing our credibility among the international community. The

donors are warning that if the government doesn't do something about it very quickly, Bangladesh will become known more and more as a place of terrorism and violence.

Government should find out those providing assistance to militants in northern region since 2002 and take stern actions against them for their involvement in promoting terrorism.

Md. Mostafa Kamal
Mirpur, Dhaka

Biogas electricity?

About twenty years ago I discussed and asked some electric engineers and scientists as to why natural gas of our kitchen oven is not used for lighting electric bulb and tube light. They laughed at me and said that kitchen gas cannot be used for lighting electric bulb or tube light. When I asked to

state reason they could not give me any satisfactory reply.

Only a few days back I was surprised and dumb founded watching a BTV programme showing poultry farm lighting (electric bulb and tube light) with the help of poultry biogas.

I wonder if we can produce electricity and put on electric bulb and tube light with the help of poultry biogas why can't we put on electric bulb and tube light from kitchen oven natural gas through some technique or mechanism?

Would the concerned poultry farm engineers, our learned scientists and electric engineers as well as experts of ministry of energy and mineral resources kindly enlighten us on the matter?

OH Kabir
Dhaka

Stop JMB, also Jamaat

Terrorism is the great problem for the country, for the democracy and for the world. Now Bangladesh is one of the risky countries in the world. The reason is JMB terrorists.

The members of JMB who have been arrested in different places at different occasions are stated to be workers or ex-workers of Jamaat-e-Islami or Islami Chatra Shibir. This means that, Jamaat encouraged the people to be militants and they made the JMB. So we request to government to stop all the activities of not only JMB but also of Jamaat by making law, if necessary, to save the country, and democracy.

A reader
Dhaka