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Ministries free to outsource manpower to execute budget

Finance adviser says

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Ministries are now free to outsource manpower and required guidance for implementing the FY 08 budget as the finance adviser told a discussion in Dhaka yesterday.

"The ministries have been allowed independence with regard to disbursement of their budgetary allocation. If outsourcing of expertise to execute budgetary programmes is felt urgent, any ministry is free to choose it," Dr A B Mirza Azizul Islam said.

Private television company Channel i organised the discussion on Agriculture Budget and the Budget for Farmers at the National Economic Council (NEC) auditorium.

The adviser also informed the function of the government decision on a change in the traditional distribution system for fertiliser with a view to improving the prevailing crisis of the farm input.

He said progress in the budget implementation by all ministries will be reviewed on a time-to-time basis.

On the changed system of fertiliser distribution, Agriculture Adviser

CS Karim said from now on the dealers having warehouses at union level are eligible for being a fertiliser distributor.

He also laid bare a card system under which fertiliser will be distributed among the peasants.

Responding to a query, the finance adviser said unfortunately a bad experience is gathered by distribution of fertiliser through the private sector, although opening up such a distribution to the private sector appeared to be the best solution.

He admitted to the fact that a huge quantity of fertiliser is being smuggled out to India and Myanmar through the private sector, as the price of the item in Bangladesh is comparatively low.

He also expressed his fear about a rise in such smuggling in case of private sector dominance on fertiliser distribution.

Energy Adviser Tapas Chowdhury in his speech said, "We have lot of agriculture technologies. However all of them did not reach out to the farmers at grassroots level."

He suggested that the private sector can play a significant role here in reaching out the modern technology to the farmers.

Brac Executive Director Mahbub Hossain pointed out that the landowners usually do not cultivate lands. So when fertiliser will be distributed through card system, it should be looked into that marginal farmers are not missed, he suggested.

Describing the fertiliser crisis as a problem round the year, he suggested formation of a committee that would assess the total demand for fertiliser and other agricultural inputs.

He also felt it urgent to fix up fertiliser prices by the government.

Dwelling on the recent fertiliser crisis, Rahim Uddin Ahmed, director general of the Agriculture Extension Department (AED), blamed the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) for not distributing the item on time.

He said, "Following widespread coverage of the need of fertiliser by media, the BCIC has now started distributing it among the farmers."

Every ministry can constitute

separate advisory committee to formulate one's own budget by taking recommendations from stakeholders, economist Atiur Rahman said, suggesting establishment of an agriculture commission to further develop the farming sector.

Rafiqul Islam, a farmer from Natore district, came down heavily on government's 'failure' in assessing the needs of fertiliser in a particular area while narrating his experience of not getting the farm input on time.

He lamented that the AED field officer in Natore unfortunately is not aware of the quantity the farmers need, which is considered a reason for fertiliser crisis.

Shykh Siraj, director and chief of News of Channel i placed 24-point recommendation at the discussion and urged the government to implement those in the interest of the toiling peasants who produce crops for the nation.

Siraj, who has been working with the farmers for the last three years at field level, formulated these recommendations.

Diversification of product stressed to boost exports

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Speakers at a seminar yesterday stressed the need for giving priority to agro-based, light engineering, electronic and herbal medicine products to diversify the country's export items.

They also put emphasis on leather, frozen foods, raw jute and home textiles products to boost export.

They were speaking at the seminar on 'Export Diversification: Strategies and Imperatives' organised by the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) in Dhaka. Mohammad Shah Alam, member of Planning Commission, moderated the seminar.

Addressing the discussion, Privatisation Commission Chairman Abu Solaiman Chowdhury said experience reveals that the country's export needs to be diversified, not depending only on a few product range such as garments and traditional items.

"To survive in the global competition, diversification of product, market and method appears to be an indispensable strategy for us. Agro-processing, light engineering and leather products, shoe, pharmaceuticals and software have tremendous potential for export diversification," he said.

It is also necessary to look at markets beyond USA and Europe, the Privatisation Commission chairman said. Export is suffering from lack of diversified products and proper concentration, FBCCI Director Abdur Razzak said, adding that the country should increase export items and destinations.

To diversify export items and create new markets, the FBCCI director suggested formulation and implementation of export diversification programmes, removal of procedural bottlenecks in export, and providing updated policy support for exporters.

HILSA EXPORT THRU' BENAPOLE LAND PORT

Under-invoicing costs govt revenue

A CORRESPONDENT, Benapole, Jessore

A section of traders are depriving the government of a huge amount of revenue as they export hilsa fish to India through under-invoicing, Benapole land port sources have said.

Hilsa fish are being exported at \$3-\$3.5 per kg only, said the sources, adding that the export price should be between \$6 and \$7.

The delicious fish sells at Tk500-Tk800 a kg in local market whereas the export price of hilsa in local currency is Tk210-Tk245 a kg.

The sources said the Indian importers force Bangladeshi exporters to go for under-invoicing as they [Indians] evade duties through the malpractice.

Later, the Bangladeshi exporters receive the rest of the export money through hundi, an illegal way of money transfer.

If they receive, the authorities will take actions against any malpractice, he added.

Hilsa are usually exported to India from Barisal, Chittagong, Chandpur, Jhalakathi, Bagerhat, Khulna and Jessore.

The months of July, August and September are the peak season for hilsa export.

According to statistics, hilsa valued at around Tk.200 crore are exported to India every year.

Primary voter list for FBCCI polls announced

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The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) yesterday published the primary voter list for its biennial election to the Board of Directors scheduled for August 16.

As per the primary list, the number of voters is 1427 - 311 from 64 chambers and 1116 from 238 associations.

The final voter list will be announced on July 5.

Banks open June 29-30

UNB, Dhaka

All commercial banks will remain open on the weekly holidays on Friday and Saturday (June 29-30) to facilitate government transactions, including revenue collection, at the end of the current fiscal year.

Bangladesh Bank issued necessary instructions to the commercial banks to this effect yesterday.

Local electrical goods show begins

A two-day fair of local electrical goods began at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday, says a press release.

Locally made goods such as fan, light, electric motor, electric meter and transformer are put on display at the show, titled Bangladesh Electrical Products Fair 2007.

Bangladesh Electrical Merchandise Manufacturers Association under the auspices of IFC-SEDF (International Finance Corporation's South Asia Enterprise Development Facility (IFC-SEDF) organised the fair, which is open to visitors from 10am to 8pm.



PHOTO: STAR
Visitors crowd a stall at the two-day fair of local electrical goods at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday.

Women's share less than one-fourth in budget

RANJAN KARMAKER

Amidst huge expectations, the caretaker government has addressed a number of issues in the budget for the FY 2007-08. Government's good intent regarding gender equality has been focused. There are also terminologies used to make public a clear intention to achieve gender parity through introducing different modalities and approaches. Like others, we are also happy that the government has paid attention to women's needs and concerns and addressed some of the important issues raised by different women's rights groups and organisations. This year's budget has for the first time conspicuously recognized gender-budget to be a weapon to ensure transparency and accountability concerning the share for women. It has been mentioned smugly in the budget that Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world that are working on the modalities of gender-sensitive budgeting. We would like to highlight some important aspects of the budget from a gender perspective.

The proposed budget has mentioned that as part of its ongoing reforms, pro-poor and gender-budgeting approach have been triggered along with MTBF, allowing an opportunity to measure poverty and gender-sensitivity inherent in each of the objectives of medium-term strategic plan. As a result, the budget has been able to specifically mention that gender equality expenditures altogether (direct and indirect) currently stands at 22% of the total budget, and by next year this share will be increased to 24%. While the introduction of such modalities/approaches to ensure gender parity in each allocation is more than appreciable, there is a need to introduce strong monitoring system to ensure that these new features are being implemented properly and are sustained to further the causes of gender equality and women's human rights. Most importantly, rather than keeping 'women development' under the head of social empowerment and safety net, it should have been considered as an overall goal (like poverty alleviation) of the national budget. A national commission led by gender experts and women's rights activists can be formed to ensure regular monitoring of gender-sensitive budgeting process.

In the budget for FY 2007-08, some positive initiatives have been taken for women. For example, "Maternity allowance for poor lactating mothers" will be a huge support to 45000 poor lactating mothers from 3000 unions receiving Tk.300 per month. A total of Tk.17 crore will be spent for this purpose. But our observation is - there is a need to limit the number of children in order to discourage frequent childbearing. For example, maternity leave is accepted only twice in a lifetime for a working mother. The government also needs to specify whether this allowance will be given to pregnant or lactating mothers or both. However, considering existing poor emergency obstetric care

EOC) facilities for safe birth delivery in the rural areas, the budget should have provided some extra allocations. Bangladesh's maternal death rate is still one of the highest in the world. We should not forget that in addition to women's reproductive healthcare rights, their general health rights are also nowhere near expectation. For that, women should be given more advantage in disease detection (e.g. TB) and treatment programmes through an increased allocation.

Allowance for the widowed and destitute women has increased to Tk220 from Tk200 per month with an increased coverage of 7.5 lakh than last year's 6.5 lakh women. In the past, there were reports of widespread irregularities in the distribution of such allowances. To prevent this, women representatives of the local government can be involved in the selection and distribution processes of such allowances.

Tk100 crore is proposed for the Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Foundation to foster small- and medium-range industrial/entrepreneurial activities. But there is no separate mentioning of women as equal beneficiaries to this initiative. Women have already achieved success in small entrepreneurship ventures. Now it's time to capitalise on that through widening loan and technical supports for women.

Tk550 crore has been allocated for employment generation of the rural poor families. This is in addition to the ministry-based employment generation programmes and will particularly help hard-core poor women to survive, especially during the lean agricultural seasons like monga. Moreover, the programme taken under the 'Rural Employment Opportunities for Protection of Public Property' will also help create employment opportunities for 24000 destitute women in 387 unions. If properly implemented, these initiatives will significantly help achieve our national targets in poverty alleviation.

The government has decided to appoint 15000 new primary school teachers, of whom 60% will be women. The decisions to provide training to 10000 teachers and construct 18,186 new classrooms are expected to benefit women along with men. In the same way, women will also be benefited from the decision to provide income-generating training to 600000 newly literate persons (products of mass literacy), since around 50% of these literates are women. Technological and higher education has been duly emphasised, but given their socio-economic constraints women's access to these opportunities should have been outlined separately. Besides, other than teachers' training and construction of new classrooms, there should have been further measures taken to improve the quality of education (e.g. introducing gender-sensitive, real life education curriculum etc.) at primary and secondary levels so that girls can make the best use of what they have learnt in schools even if they drop out early.

The writer is Executive Director of Steps Towards Development, an NGO.