

Undeclared income of Khaleda and Saifur

Make their wealth statements public

THE National Board of Revenue has been trying to give legal sanction to the undisclosed income of former prime minister Khaleda Zia and former finance minister Saifur Rahman. There arises the very pertinent question of how two such individuals have evaded paying taxes and are now being let off through a special device. A head of government is especially considered to be the repository of public trust and embodies the highest principles of legality as well as morality. Sadly, though, now that Khaleda Zia has proved that she has not been paying her taxes regularly causes a fresh new dent in her reputation as a public leader. As for Saifur Rahman, in his years as finance minister, he constantly berated everyone who he thought was not paying taxes. Now that it turns out he himself has been evading paying taxes, how does he defend his position?

The fact that Begum Zia and Saifur Rahman have been caught not paying taxes on their undisclosed income raises other disquieting questions. One of them is that during their time they made provisions in the law for black money to be turned into white, but curiously enough there is a gap in their tax records. Was that because of a feeling that the law would not catch up with them? Again, in civilised societies it has always been the norm for public figures caught violating the law, in any sense, to resign through an acknowledgement of their mistakes. In the case of the former prime minister and her finance minister, no such moral compunctions seem to have worked. It was one more sign of the culture of impunity which they and their friends applied to the way they ran the country. Such behaviour on the part of these two individuals remains, to our deep regret, a ringing commentary on the quality of our national leadership.

Finally, it is now for the NBR to clarify its position regarding the opportunity given to Khaleda Zia and Saifur Rahman to have their undeclared income regularised through a payment of taxes, when their wealth statements have been sought to be put under scrutiny. To what extent the NBR has taken a correct step, especially after the issuance of a June 4 circular categorising people not entitled to the concession of regularising their undeclared income on payment of taxes, needs to be explained to the country. Finally, let the NBR make the details of their wealth statements public.

Women garment workers' woes

Call for urgent attention

AT a recent seminar Prof Rehman Sobhan lamented that although we have engaged in extensive discussion about the garment industry and it has also developed considerably over the last 20 years, there has been no commensurate improvement in the lot of women workers in the sector. Even after the withdrawal of "quota system" under the MFA, which had provided a sheltered market for us, the industry as a whole has progressed signifying its resilience and inner strength. But the women have reaped little benefit out of the sector's growth and development.

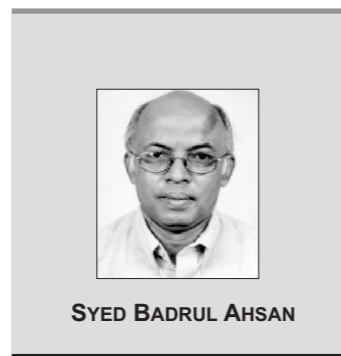
A sample survey recently carried out amongst 87 workers in 41 factories, out of whom 55 were female, revealed some interesting statistics. Only 25 percent of the women were given formal appointment letters. Less than 50 percent of women workers were granted maternity leave with pay.

We find the problems faced by our women garment employees simply appalling. The truth is our garment industry remains weighed down by various drawbacks in management practices. It is high time that both the owners and the industry's apex body BGMEA put their heads together and attend to the problems of the women workers in particular having regard to the huge contribution made by them to the industry and consequent export earnings.

Let us not forget that these very workers serve as a window of excellence in building our image abroad, particularly amongst the various developed countries who buy our RMG products.

One of the major problems that continue to haunt the industry has been the labour unrest stemming from poor and unfair treatment of the workers, more so, the women workers. The provisions for minimum wage and job security still remain elusive for workers in a number of garment factories. Their compliance with tripartite agreement will have to be secured by the government.

Let us speak of good, purposeful government . . .



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

It is not always the job of a people to ensure the happiness of the government. It is not right that the people be expected to uphold the power and strength of a government, especially when that government begins to feel at sea. And a government feels at sea when it begins to lose focus, when it gets its priorities all wrong.

When, therefore, an adviser to the government suggests, with that tinge of desperation in the voice, that his government cannot afford to fail, that it is in everyone's interest to make sure that the government stays on its feet, one cannot reasonably agree with him. Throughout history, people have entrusted their faith in men who they thought were ready or able to provide them with good, purposeful government. When these men fail, it is not because of the people but because of themselves.

And what precisely do we mean by good, purposeful government? There are, in Bangladesh, quite a few good instances of such a government we can fall back on as we try coming up with an answer to that question. There was purposeful, well-meaning, government in the nine months of the war of liberation we waged against the Pakistan army in 1971.

The integrity of the men who

GROUND REALITIES

Government does not work through improvisation. It does not shift the goal posts. Indeed, every government must consciously strive for a place in history, through putting in place all the stones and all the bricks that will render it into a structure able to withstand the vagaries of time. And government is best formed and operated by men and women who know how the soil smells and which way the river flows, who understand the tears of sacked mills workers and the churning of an empty stomach. Yes, we speak of politicians.

constituted that government, the ethics that drove that government, clearly refute the argument that Bangladesh has not had an efficient administration in all the years since it turned into a credible idea for its people.

A singularity of purpose is what defined the politics of Tajuddin Ahmad, Syed Nazrul Islam, AHM Quamruzzaman and M. Mansoor Ali, as they went about forging the elements necessary for the poetry-driven idea of independence to transit from dream to reality. In those very dark days of national existence, the government did not go around asking to be saved from impending doom.

On the contrary, it moved from hamlet to village to town informing embattled, beleaguered Bengalis that they had nothing to fear for they had a government behind them, willing and fully prepared to defend their cause.

That is not the kind of reassurance you see in these times of gathering despair. Thousands of jute mills workers are suddenly pushed out on the streets as the mills they have sweated in for years on end are closed down; and no one in the government has any idea about what to do for them. That would have been excusable had it not been for the fact that there are people in the govern-

ment who really believe that shutting down jute mills is but one more step toward economic streamlining.

Nothing – not the pain creating the faces of the dismissed workers, not the tears of their children who cannot go to school any more, not the stunned silence of the wives – touches these functionaries of the government.

They will tell you, with all the glibness at their command that corruption has been eating away at the vitals of the jute industry. How many of the men responsible for such corruption have been penalised by the law? You will get no answer.

Meanwhile, as you watch these dismissed jute mills workers raise their bootless cries at the heavens, you remember how, a few years ago, thirty thousand men at Adamjee jute mills were turfed out of their jobs because the mills had turned into a "white elephant." How many of us have cared to know what eventually happened to those workers and their families? And we still tell ourselves that sooner or later we will have Golden Bengal arise out of the ashes of our misery?

A government ought not to ask that the people whose fortunes it presides over save it from impending doom, when it cannot ensure that these very people can afford to buy what they need to eat at the market place. Your

green chilli shoots up in price, your vegetables go beyond your reach, and meat and fish are fast receding into the region of memory.

And yet no one in government is concerned, except to tell you and me that there are syndicates, which have a stranglehold on prices. It is not the job of the hapless citizens to go after those syndicates. It is never the responsibility of men and women leading ordinary lives to go looking for the men who ratchet prices up, and then hand them over to the law. No, Sir, it is the business of the government to ensure that those syndicates are spotted and then hammered into pieces.

But when a government cannot do that, when the price of rice goes beyond the capacity of the common man, those who man the machinery of the administration must sit back and reflect on all those matters that cause discontent among the huddled masses. You cannot explain prices away in terms of economic theories you learnt in school decades ago.

And, no, you cannot simply tell us that prices have gone up because income has registered a rise. Where is the rise? And why do the wise men who try their wisecracks on us not see the pernicious thing that is inflation arising, and subduing everything before us in a vise-like grip?

Government is not about mouth-

ing platitudes. It is about doing things, even in the most adverse of circumstances. Between January 1972 and August 1975, we certainly did not live in the most ideal of circumstances, and we surely did not believe that miracles were about to be. The roads were potholed, the bridges had been destroyed, whole villages lay plundered, and millions of people lay murdered at the hands of a blood-thirsty foreign army.

And yet the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not falter. It suffered from the usual problems of bad administration, of pilferage of relief goods. But it did put the elements of the state in place. It did give the country a sense of being, a particular feeling that it belonged in the wider association of nations around the world. It fought its enemies within, and it was constantly on the lookout for snipers looking in from outside.

Foreign forces willed that the state of Bangladesh wither and die, through turning away ships carrying food, and into distant territory. Inside the country, men all too ready to undermine the government produced a woman in sackcloth, to demonstrate how miserable conditions were getting to be.

But the government, wobbling and unsteady, managed to survive. You may have your own opinions about Bangabandhu's Second Revolution, or Baksal. But place your hand on your heart and tell yourself the truth – that by early 1975, Bangladesh was on its way to political stability and economic progress. A murderous coup set all of that at naught.

When you speak of government, of what it can and must do, you essentially talk of politicians who understand the lessons of history, and who then apply those lessons to the ways in which they would like to conduct administration.

Good, purposeful government

defined our lives in 1998, when the Sheikh Hasina administration tackled the long drawn-out floods and, in effect, proved once again that Bengalis were capable of giving to themselves a government as good as themselves. You judge the quality of government, you call it substantive government, when a political administration keeps the lid on prices and does not allow the market to fall prey to predatory elements of corruption.

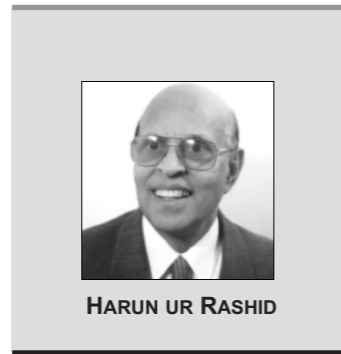
The Awami League government between 1996 and 2001 did not push people into a panic over prices. That is the unadulterated truth. If that does not embody good government, what does? If reaching deals with India, and with insurgents in the hills, is not sagacity, what is?

Government does not work through improvisation. It does not shift the goal posts. Indeed, every government must consciously strive for a place in history, through putting in place all the stones and all the bricks that will render it into a structure able to withstand the vagaries of time.

And government is best formed and operated by men and women who know how the soil smells and which way the river flows, who understand the tears of sacked mills workers and the churning of an empty stomach. Yes, we speak of politicians.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

From farce to fiasco



HARUN UR RASHID

AUSTRALIA is in need of foreign trained doctors. The Queensland state (Brisbane: its capital) recruited many doctors from England for public hospitals. One of them happened to be an Indian-born doctor, Mohammad Haneef (27), who left England last year for Australia.

Meanwhile, in Britain, on June 30, two second cousins of Haneef, Sabeel Ahmed and Kafael Ahmed, attempted to set fire in Glasgow airport by burning a jeep. They are now charged in relation to the London and Glasgow bombing attempts.

When Haneef learnt from India (his young wife lives in Bangalore) that British police wanted to interview him about the SIM mobile card, which he had given to one of his second cousins in England before he left, he arranged a one-way ticket from Brisbane to Bangalore via Malaysia, but he was stopped at Brisbane airport.

Gung-ho approach

On July 2, he was arrested in Australia on the charge that he had

BOTTOM LINE

The Indian media see a wider implication in Dr. Haneef's detention. The detention is likely to have a backlash in many countries in recruiting Muslim doctors from South Asia. Furthermore, in Australia, Indian Doctors' Association said that the government had damaged their reputation and trust in dealing with their patients. Australia was responsible for such a huge damage to the reputation of Indian doctors in detaining Haneef, but the prime minister ruled out any apology to Dr. Haneef for the gross miscarriage of justice.

given his mobile SIM card to one of his second cousins in Britain, who has been charged with failed terrorist acts. There was a suggestion that he had lived with his cousins in Britain.

Observers believe a few factors went against Haneef. First, he is a Muslim. Second, he wears a trimmed beard. Third, he hails from India, and South Asia has a bad name for harbouring Islamic militants. There is a view that every young Muslim (18-45 age group) in Australia is a potential suspect for carrying out terrorist acts, and Dr. Haneef is no exception.

When the magistrate in Brisbane released Haneef on conditional bail, the federal Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews, controversially intervened, and cancelled his working visa, using a provision generally intended for the deportation of non-citizens who served sentences after convictions. Haneef was detained under immigration laws. The minister had overriden the magistrate's order.

That gave the case a political edge, with critics of the Howard

government claiming that Dr. Haneef had been caught up the turbulent undertow of an election year.

The media, eminent lawyers, and civil liberties groups protested against the detention of Dr. Haneef. They felt that the government had been abusing the powers under the terrorism law.

Finally, the Federal Director of Prosecution, Mr. Damian Bugg, intervened and withdrew the case from the court. The case against Dr. Haneef was dismissed because the charge against him was totally wrong. His SIM card was discovered in Liverpool and not in Glasgow. Furthermore the suggestion that he lived with his cousins was not substantiated.

Officials red-faced when charges dismissed

All the persons including the ministers are now red-faced. Every agency is blaming the other for Haneef's illegal detention. The police blame the directorate of prosecution and the directorate blames the British police for wrong

information. The ministers blame the police.

Things looked different four weeks ago when Haneef was charged. The attorney general (law minister), the federal police commissioner, and the minister for immigration were eager to be seen associated with the detention of a suspected terrorist. Australians were advised that the government was protecting the community from the threat of terrorism, and the detention was necessary.

Political undertone behind the arrest

Haneef's incident drew parallels with the Tampa boat incident, ahead of the 2001 election, when the shrewd prime minister Howard controversially blocked a boatload of mainly Afghan asylum seekers to Australia. He sent them to a Pacific Island, Nauru.

Howard became "the hero of Australia" for many conservative white Australians, because he knew how to keep Asian refugees away from Australia, and eventually won the election.

Howard faces the general election at the end of the year, but the polls are not in his favour this time. He thought that Haneef's case would provide him another political lifeline. He attacked lawyers who questioned the legal process, accusing them of desiring to destroy national terrorism laws.

For Prime Minister Howard, Haneef, a suspected terrorist, was a big catch in the election year. He always exploited immigration and terrorism issues to his advantage. He instills unnecessary fear in the minds of the community (especially among women), and projects himself as the only political leader who can make Australia safe and secure from terrorism.

The prime minister told the media that he did not know every single detail of information about Haneef. Suddenly, for the prime minister, ignorance was bliss. When his minister for immigration was in trouble, he defended him and said it was better to be safe than sorry. The lawyers say that the prime minister failed to explain why his own minister for immigration decided to keep Haneef under detention even when the prosecution withdrew the case in the court.

Certainly, Haneef's case has become the subject of fiery debate among members of the Australian enlightened public. One female university student reportedly put the finger on the button saying to BBC: "Maybe I am cynical. But John Howard is always trying to capitalize terrorism."

Dr. Haneef left Australia for his home on July 28 as a free man, although his reputation was temporarily tarnished. He said that he had nothing to do with terrorism, and had never thought he would be defamed in this way.

Credit goes to the robust Australian media, lawyers, and civil liberties groups, for questioning and protesting the detention of Dr. Haneef. If they had not raised a hue and cry there would have been little incentive for the director of public prosecution or the government to review the case and release the suspect.

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Barrister Harun ur Rashid is former Bangladesh Ambassador to UN, Geneva.

A hawk's tale

The frustrating, inconvenient thing about all this is that, when you meet the people up close, it is often the hawks who seem the most shrewd and competent, at least tactically. They sometimes appear a little paranoid, but in the unforgiving Middle East they are also often the most determined survivors, the ones you would want on your side in a street fight. At one point while we talked the other day, Bahar jumped up out of his chair in one quick movement and darted over to his garden. He tore a branch off his olive tree, and then stuffed the whole thing into his mouth -- wood, leaves and all. He chewed it and swallowed hard. "I can eat the grass and the trees, but I will never hold the white flag," he said.

KEVIN PERAINO

It is not a fact that he particularly likes to advertise, but, if pressed, Abdel Hamid Bahar will acknowledge that his business is at its best when people are dying. Last Sunday I went to see the black-market arms dealer at his home, a squat, dilapidated structure made of cinderblocks and tin sheeting, in the central Gaza village of Moghraga.

We sat on pink plastic chairs in the shade, next to a slightly sickly garden with a couple of banana plants and a slender olive tree. The weapons merchant's business varies widely, of course, depending on how much fighting is going on.

Last summer, when Gaza was at war with Israel after the kidnapping of Gilad Schalit, Bahar was pulling in almost \$3,000 per month, more than most Gazans earn in a year. How is business now, I asked, with Hamas in power and the streets relatively calm? "Zero," the gun dealer complained, without bothering to hide his frustration.

Bahar nodded to one of his sons, who had been leaning against a cinderblock wall and watching us without saying anything. The lanky young man disappeared for a moment inside the house, and then returned carrying a new-looking semiautomatic rifle, slick with resin

and grease. For my notes, I asked for the kid's name and age. The arms dealer frowned. "I don't know how old he is," he said, a little disdainfully. "I have 13 children. I don't even know all their names."

He paused for a second, and then added: "All my children, the girls and the boys, know how to use guns." He took the rifle, a Chinese-manufactured Kalashnikov, and slid out the clip. "This is well made," he told me. "Seventeen-hundred dollars each. If you need 50, I'll bring them to you. While you're drinking tea, I can get you 100. I am the No. 1 for weapons in Gaza."

The arms dealer has a rangy,

mangy look to him. His head is almost entirely shaved, but he wears a long, scraggly black beard over his gaunt features, which makes him resemble a Palestinian Abraham Lincoln. A net of thick veins bulges from his sinewy forearms. He smiles every now and then, but the desired effect is lost when he reveals a mouthful of yellowed and rotting teeth.

He chain-smokes cigarettes from a pack of Royals stashed in his left breast pocket, and keeps a 70-year-old, German-made 9 mm pistol tucked into the waistband of his jeans. (He refers to it as a "Hitler.") The arms dealer is 43 years old, and has been selling guns for the past two, since just before Hamas won the territory's legislative elections.

Bahar grew up in Gaza's Bouraj refugee camp, and eventually moved to Moghraga, a poor farming village of about 5,000. He married when he was 16 and got a job as a construction worker with his father in Israel for a while.

Later he earned a living as a taxi driver and auto mechanic. During the first intifada he fought against Israel as a militant in the Tanzim, the Fatah-affiliated militia. Still, despite his youthful loyalties, it is bad busi-

ness for an arms dealer to be taking sides; he says he now sells to both Hamas and Fatah.

One of his kids had scrawled the word Hamas in black spray paint on the side of the house. "I started my business in order to feed my children," he told me. As the rivalry between Hamas and Fatah intensified last spring, "all the factions began to buy weapons."

I had come to see Bahar because arms sales were the talk of the Middle East over the weekend. On Friday the Bush administration said it would like to sell Saudi Arabia and its regional allies billions of dollars worth of sophisticated weaponry.

Washington has also promised Israel -- which, in a sign of its concern about Iran possibly obtaining nuclear weapons, has dropped its traditional objections to US arms sales to Saudi Arabia -- another \$30.4 billion in weaponry. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates were set to tour the region this week to help work out the details of the proposal.

Israel also promised to allow 1,000 M-16s to pass from Jordan to Palestinian Authority security forces in the West Bank -- an effort to prop

up the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas.

Against that backdrop, it seemed like a good idea to visit one of the trade's real-world practitioners. In the news stories about American support for proxies in the region, the recipients of such weaponry are usually described as "moderate," while their antagonists are inevitably "radical." Those are cartoon descriptions, of course, and are often carelessly applied.

In the four years since I've been working in the Middle East, I've met plenty of radical American proxies, and just as many moderate "radicals." The labels "Islamist" and "secular" don't reveal all that much about character either, although they're slightly better than "terrorist" and "stooge."

If I were forced to divide and classify the Gazans I meet, I'd say they tend to be better described as hawks and doves, and there are both of those in all camps. Bahar, the arms dealer, is one of the former by trade.

The frustrating, inconvenient thing about all this is that, when you meet the people up close, it is often the hawks who seem the most shrewd and competent, at least

tactically. They sometimes appear a little paranoid, but in the unforgiving Middle East they are also often the most determined survivors, the ones you would want on your side in a street fight.

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"I can eat the grass and the trees, but I will never hold the white flag," he said. "There are many here like me who are ready to eat anything." Sanctions against Hamas won't work, he argued. He told me that he considered Abbas feckless and weak, too unwilling to resist the Israeli occupation.

"We will never return to Abu Mazen," he added, using the president's nickname. "Israel and America are so foolish." There was some obvious theater in the tree-eating bit, but it was effective all the same. I tried to imagine Abbas -- the quiet former schoolteacher -- jumping up and eating a tree, but the image would not come.

About halfway through our con-

versation, my translator, Hassan, pointed out a faint buzzing sound in the air overhead -- an Israeli drone. Bahar shrugged. "Before you hear the noise of the plane, I hear it," he said. "I'm sensitive to it."

After drinking cups of thick, sweet coffee, Hassan and I eventually got up to leave and walked back to the car. On my way out I noticed that Bahar's front yard was almost entirely scorched. A few lonely blades of grass shot up through the large black stains covering the turf like oil spots. I asked the arms dealer what had happened to his yard. "I burned it," he told me. "So I can see the snakes." He said it without the slightest hint of irony.

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