

A global concern- who wins the Whitehouse?

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AFTER the suspense of primaries it is waiting time for the gala party conven'ns in late August and early September to formally start one on one race for the Whitehouse. Looking for a running mate is the major concern of the summer. The election strategist, rumormongers, fate gurus, lobbyists, even mafias are meanwhile jockeying for advantage. When Obama is double digit ahead of McCain, his VP is so focused these days, as if Republicans are not going have one really. New Hampshire 'unite for change' call from Hillary and Obama sharing the same podium is good start for the Democrats. November is too far and it is too early to deduce how much healing is possible between Hillary and Obama camps.

Americans love drama, no wonder Hollywood was born there. With hard work during the day they need entertainment in the evening. The Presidential election is the biggest of the shows; many top guns of Hollywood disengage to get a bigger kick during election hype. Some breach the professional line never to go back. Ronald Regan - one such renegade of Hollywood, took the Whitehouse by storm and held it with his tantalizing smile for eight long years. You do not see another smile of his kind while delivering menacing words. He was so flawlessly natural in saying 'satanic Empire' while holding a spreading smile on his face - a true communicator. He was fighting wars without bullets that humbled many American adversaries and destroyed the Soviet Union. The politicians should all go to Hollywood to learn the steel and smile of his kind. Alas, Rambo-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California was born in Austria. Americans do not like outsiders to be their commander-in-chief.

Public opinion moves friskily during election time, lives exaggeration for needs and entertainment. The curtain finally draws on the Election Day to ask the people to go back to work- entertained and assured. Election is the heightened drama of promises and assurances, but offers nothing without hard



work. Fertile lands, seeds, fine weather- nothing is produced without hard work of the farmers. It is absurd to expect something without work and dangerous too. Where work ethic is fine and societal are advanced, election is a ripple in a teacup. In Singapore hardly anybody cares, in America it is a melodrama, where everybody gets entertained but few vote. But in Bangladesh it is a raging war. The poorer the society more is the expectation from an election. Without necessary checks and balances the hard work formula does not work in backward societies.

Forerunner Senator Clinton was destroyed along the way but bagged 18 million votes - not enough for the nomination but good enough to break the heart of the millions. It was a close fight and split decision. The immediate concern is to heal

the wound within the Democratic camps before the final showdown. America is a radical society that jumpstart on an opportunity, but doubt still persists about Obama. Hillary has gracefully accepted the fact, endorsed Obama and is campaigning for him. President Clinton has also promised to work for the party nominee. There are many cycles of high and low tide still to come before the climax on November 4. For a variety of reasons the divide between Obama and Hillary camps are too deep to heal without oozing. If it does, before the election. The lifelong dream of Senator Clinton has been shattered; VP is not a big deal for her but it could be much sought after healing for the democrats in a 'dream ticket' that Bill Clinton once proposed - but in reverse order.

The Democrats have a very high stake in this election, and merely

sharing the platform may not be enough indications that Hillary and Obama are reconciled. Races for many governors, one third of the senate, and the whole of House of Representatives are at stake along with the president and the VP. Americans normally honour the presidential choice by voting for his party in other races. People do not vote for VP but a popular choice can add millions for the presidential hopeful. And that makes the choice of the VP so important for Senator Obama. Hillary was the overwhelming choice of women, elderly and the Hispanics during the primaries and caucuses. Brilliant persons are available to fill the slot. But there is no one better than Hillary who can heal the party and add votes to Obama. It will be too risky for the Democrats to ignore the vote banks. The Clintons will remain heavyweight of American politics and have wide international connections. The cleverest thing Obama can do is to keep the Clintons in humour and leave indications that the ticket for VP is waiting for Hillary.

McCain will have difficulty walking out of the shadows of the unpopular administration. Known to be somewhat a slow thinker, temperamental and fiercely independent, many conservatives are not comfortable with his liberal voting records. At 71, some are concerned about his health. He needs a booster running mate. He worked on Memorial Day weekend in Arizona with Governor Charlie of Florida, former governor of Massachusetts and competitor Mitt Romney, Senator Brownback, and half his age Bob Jindal, Governor of Louisiana and talked about the probable. War hero (Vietnam) and senate experience are his strongest credentials; but the unflinching support for Iraq war is hurting his case. Some say that his best bet would be Joe Lieberman because of his ethnic background, once paired with Al Gore, now a crossover independent. McCain is professed to be only one time president. Hillary was a young Republican in her college days. Many not ready to reconcile with Obama in both the parties suggest Hillary could be baited as running mate of McCain with an understanding that she is given chance to run in 2012. A presidential candidate or VP must have popular appeal more than party loyalty.

Much of the day-to-day concern

of the people is with the states and county/city governments in the USA. These governments are fiercely independent and deeply engaged with the people. Only America could afford to get a daughter of callously powerful President Bush arrested on minor violation of law. It did not happen again because the policemen on the street are not afraid of the president but the sappings are afraid of law because dad is the president. I would not give that entirely to America - that is democracy in practice.

The primary concern of the president is foreign policy, defence and security management. The American President is obviously a global concern. Somebody suggested, at least 10% of the global population should be able to vote for the US President. Manmade or natural calamities, democracy and human rights, market or climate, all global concerns are hinged with America. It is possible to love or hate America but impossible to ignore. The world has increasingly higher stake in the American election. Most of the international decisions are on the razor's edge. The personality and feelings of the president matter a lot. If President Bush was not hurt by 9/11, frustration to get bin Laden - alive or dead, many feel that he might not have gone for the invasion of Iraq. Eight years after the hunt and wars, the world is more turbulent today. Unfortunately, nobody but the Muslims are identified with their religion. It is too late now; the billion plus Muslims and the emerging new US administration must have a strategy to walk out of the mess.

The world has suffered a lot; in the process thousands of Americans lost their lives, and spent trillions of dollars in war effort that staggered the largest economy into recession. My banker son tells me, Canadians were happy to see their dollar overpower the greenback; now they are worrying that their exports to the USA is hurting. With gifts of nature in abundance Canadians are one of the richest and happiest people on earth. If they need America, how much can Bangladesh really pretend?

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Recognition of Kosovo and Bangladesh

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It is reported Bangladesh has not yet firmed up its stance on the question of recognising Kosovo's independence, despite persistent diplomatic presentation by US Ambassador James Moriarty, who met Foreign Adviser Iftikhar Ahmed Chowdhury on 1st July for the second time to pursue the issue of recognition of the new Balkan state.

Ambassador Moriarty told reporters that the main purpose of his meeting was to urge the Foreign Adviser to consider the issue of recognition of Kosovo. In response, Adviser for Foreign Affairs Dr. Iftikhar A. Chowdhury told the reporters, "In such cases, perceived national interest is always the key."

The Foreign Ministry had already issued a statement on Kosovo, mentioning that the Bangladeshis were overwhelmingly in support of the people of Kosovo for a variety of reasons, he added.

The Adviser hoped that a decision in this regard could be taken soon in consultation with other Islamic countries. However, he admitted the fact that the OIC-member states are split up on the issue of Kosovo's independence, and the last Islamic Conference of the Foreign Ministers held in Uganda failed to reach a consensus on the subject.

Kosovo's recognition: Split between US and Russia

Kosovo's recognition seems to be the new "power game" between the US and its allies and Russia and China. The UN Security Council could not take the decision because of the split among the veto-carrying permanent members of the Security Council.

Kosovo (with about 2 million people with overwhelming majority of Albanian Muslims) received recognition as a sovereign state, notably from the United States and some major European countries, such as Britain, Germany, France and Italy, while Russia, China, Spain, Romania, Cyprus, Greece and Serbia did not recognise Kosovo.

The official position of these countries is that Kosovo is a Serbian province under ad interim UN control, formally known as Autonomous Province of Kosovo.

The countries that oppose recognition of Kosovo consider that its recognition as an independent state in the Balkans will boost the ethnic demands for greater autonomy or independence. They argue that recognizing the unilateral declaration of independence would legitimise the doctrine of imposing solution to ethnic conflicts.

They further argue that by the actions of some European Union member-states, every

would-be ethnic or religious separatist across Europe and around the world has been provided with a tool kit on how to achieve recognition.

Factors behind recognition

In 1950, the UN Secretariat summed up on the issue of recognition as follows:

"The recognition of a new state or a new government of an existing state is a unilateral act...while states may regard it as desirable to follow certain legal principles in according or withholding recognition, the practice of states shows that the act of recognition is still regarded as essentially a political decision, which each state decides in accordance with its own free appreciation of the situation."

The question is does a state assess its own appreciation of the situation? It varies depending on situations and circumstances. But one cardinal rule appears to be the attitude of the neighbouring countries of the new state to be recognized and that of the neighbours of the state that will accord recognition. This rule is to avoid third or distant countries complicating the political situation in the region by giving recognition to a new state.

The practice of Bangladesh during the 37 years seems to be that Bangladesh has been to insist upon certain conditions precedent to the grant of recognition of a state, namely (a) whether Bangladesh's neighbours recognized the new state and (b) whether peace and order prevails in the country and (c) whether the administration has been accepted by people within the new state.

It means (a) whether Kosovo has been recognized by its neighbours, (b) whether the neighbours of Bangladesh have accorded recognition to Kosovo and (c) whether all people in Kosovo including Serbs recognize the government of Kosovo. It appears that none of the three factors of recognition seems to have been met as of today.

Furthermore, on Kosovo issue, there is no uniform stand by the member states of Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), or by the members of Non-Aligned Movement, or by the members of the UN Security Council of the UN. Rather the issue of recognition has become a bone of contention between Russia and European Union/US. At a EU-Russia summit on 26-27 June, there has been no meeting of minds on this issue.

Against the above background, Bangladesh's position is understandable. The Adviser for Foreign Affairs rightly has pointed out "perceived national interest" and the "benefits" from such a political matter of recognition of Kosovo. He hoped that a formal decision regarding the independence of Kosovo would be mooted soon.

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Bangladesh defence budget 2008-09: An analysis

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ON 9 June 2008, the Finance Adviser to the Caretaker Government presented the national budget for the financial year (FY) 2008-09 in a live broadcast over the national radio and TV. The marathon address touched upon almost all aspects of the nation's economic life - the difficulties surmounted and the successes achieved. While highlighting the budget performance last year, he also laid before the nation the socio-economic targets for the coming year and how the government planned to achieve those. He covered a wide vista of governmental activities from agriculture to industries, from education to employment, from communications to power generation. However, there was not a word on 'defence', despite it being one of the largest expenditure sectors of the government.

In the past, there used to be a few cursory remarks by the Finance Ministers in their budget speech promising to "build a strong defence force, able to safeguard the national sovereignty" etc. etc; but not this time. In the official website of the Ministry of Finance (www.mof.gov.bd) the allocation is reported to be Tk. 6306 crore (US\$ 935 million). Defence came out as the eighth largest sector, representing about 6.4% of the Government spending, ahead of sectors like Transport and Communications (6.1%), Health (5.9%) or Public Order and Security (5.6%). However, like the previous years, the nation remained in the dark as to the rationale behind the defence expenditure. While we know how much electricity the government plans to generate, how many new schools, hospitals or industrial estates the government plans to build or how much additional food grain we plan to harvest, we do not know what we plan to achieve with the money spent for defence.

Bangladesh security scenario

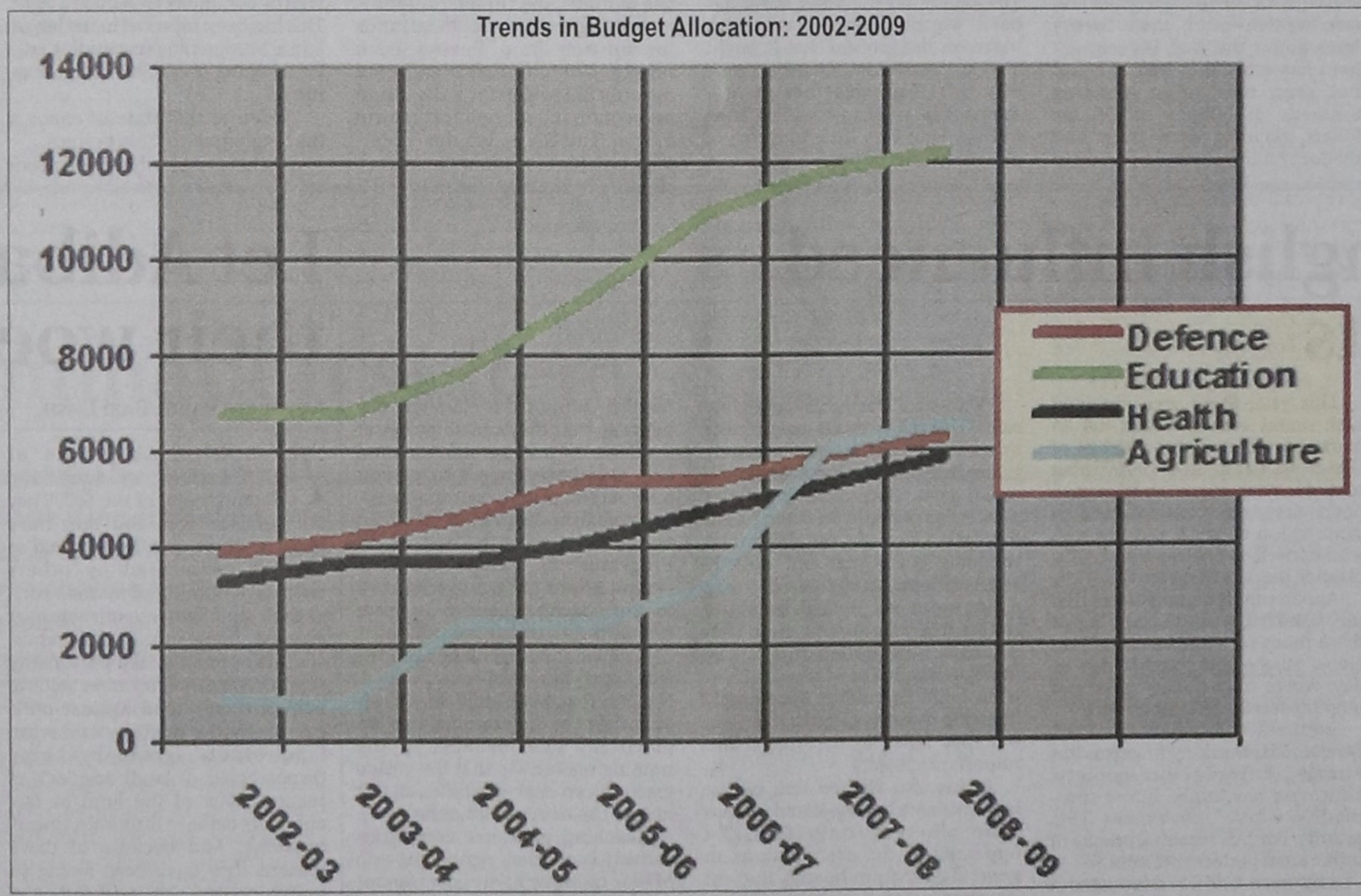
Military expenditure in South Asia is generally high compared to many developed countries of the west. India-Pakistan rivalry over Kashmir fuelled an arms race for decades that ended up with both countries acquiring nuclear weapons and the delivery systems. India-Pakistan rivalry had posed serious security concerns not only for those two countries, but also for the region and even beyond. More recently, Islamic militancy and ethnic conflicts have posed serious challenges to the South Asian states. In countries such as Sri Lanka, ethnic insurgency has turned into virtual civil war. Another reason for high military expenditure is military's authoritarian presence in the national affairs as in case of Pakistan and

Myanmar. In these two countries high military expenditure has resulted in a bloated military that is omnipresent in the national life turning the nations into militarised societies.

Fortunately, Bangladesh had long been an "island of peace" in an area of turbulent and violent interstate relations. Our more than 3000 km long land boundary with India and Myanmar is well demarcated. There are small stretches of undemarcated boundaries with India, totalling about 5 kilometres, which we inherited as a colonial legacy. These irritants in our relationship could be solved across the negotiating tables. Our long sea boundary, however, remains undemarcated and could be a possible cause of conflict with the neighbours. As trade and commerce, businesses and investment grow within the South Asian states and our economies are increasingly intertwined, the chance of an armed conflict between the nations reduces. In fact, one could argue that the possibilities of Bangladesh being engaged in an

armed conflict with any of its two neighbours is extremely slim at present or in near future.

The scenario changes, however, when we consider the unconventional threat to Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been the focus of international community because of the rising incidents of Islamic militancy in the country. The militants, although too weak to pose an immediate military threat, could be the source of external interference and internal instability. The nexus between the local Islamic outfits and their cohorts in India,



Pakistan and Afghanistan are now well established. After massive punitive action against the organisations such as JMB, HUIJ etc., there has been a period of lull in their militant activities, but frequent unearthing of bombs and explosives from the militant hideouts and the arrest of activists show that the militants are out there waiting for the opportune moment to strike.

While our primary focus had been on the Islamic extremists,

Bangladesh in the coming decades. Our internal political instability, especially lack of institutional democracy in the country, will only benefit the extremist forces and would invite external interference. We need to adopt a comprehensive national strategy to meet the unconventional threat in which defence forces will be one of the key players, along with law enforcing agencies, financial institutions and socio-economic

budget, there has been debates and discussions on it some welcoming its positive sides, others pointing out its shortfalls. In fact, as the budget season approached, there were spate of write-ups, seminars and symposiums on issues such as agriculture, education, health, economy or environment participated by government representatives, intellectuals, politicians and even ordinary people. There were free exchange of views and many

concrete suggestions to the government on the way forward. In the absence of a Parliament, these acted as useful forums for the government to measure the public opinion. However, it appeared that 'defence' is held as a taboo, kept exclusively for the military to sort out. Even academic research organisations that specialises on defence and security matters appeared to have ignored the defence budget issues.

One often quotes French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau's (1841-1929) witticism, "War is too serious a business to be left to the Generals" as a justification of civilian control and oversight of the military. Most democratic societies are based on the principle of a civilian authority (President, Prime Minister, Congress, Parliament) that acting on the advice of the military hierarchy sets out the defence parameters and exercises control on the budget. On the other hand, intellectuals like Professor Samuel Huntington believes that civilian interference inevitably degrades the military efficiency, civilian non-interference in things military is the corollary of military non-interference in things civilian (and hence political).

There is much truth in both the views and often a mutual respect for each other, civilian and military authorities, is the best way forward. In that light, popular participation in the defence debate should be welcome. In Bangladesh, like elsewhere in the world, there are essentially two views. One, we might call liberals, who view military expenditure essentially a drain on the national economy, taking scarce resources away from social and economic sectors. The other, we might call conservative, who urges more for defence because they believe that security can ensure peace and stability that boosts socio-economic progress. Therefore, how much is enough for defence depends on which side of the fence you are.

Unlike the West, we do not publish "Defence White Papers" that actually sets out the goal, strategy and objectives of the forces over a period. Changes in the White Paper reflect the changes in the threat scenario. The details of the US or UK defence budget are published and available on the websites. Before the US Congress passes the defence budget, which is half of the world's total military

expenditure, they call up the military bosses to justify their demands. TV channels broadcast these hearings live across the globe. In contrast, we, in Bangladesh have no knowledge of how the defence budget is spent. For a meaningful assessment and analysis one need to know what are the shares of the different Services Army, Navy and Air Force, how much of the money is spent for the administration i.e. pay, allowances etc. vis-a-vis on operation, procurement or training. What are the major procurements and what is the process. Ordinary citizen come to know of the procurement issues only when a scandal is allegedly unearthed. Thus, there is no meaningful response from the citizen. Even when the Parliament was in existence, there had never been any meaningful and critical discussion on defence matters. There used to be a Parliamentary Committee on Defence, but unlike other parliamentary committees, it did not really take off. The Parliament continued to guillotine defence budget every year on the last day of the budget session.

Conclusion

Bangladesh continues to make steady progress in all socio-economic sectors despite serious resource constraint and political turmoil. Our defence expenditure continues to be the lowest in the region. Despite resource constraint defence forces, over the years, have built up an impressive record of international recognition of efficiency and professionalism. We need to keep it up and in fact, bolster it. Therefore, every taka spent for defence must be well spent. The money spent for defence must buy us the "Peace and Security Dividend" that would ensure sustained social stability and economic progress for the nation.

While the finer details of the military budget will remain a matter exclusive to the military, its broad parameter and objectives may be made public so that the citizens have their say in the matters military. An honest, unbiased and rational analysis is possible only when sufficient data is available. At present, available data on defence expenditure is too insufficient for the citizen to draw any meaningful conclusion. The Government need to come forward with more information for the people so that they have a sense of participation in building tomorrow's defence.

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