

## BB's pro-active monetary policy

Cooperation of the banks imperative

**B**ANGLADESH Bank governor Dr Salehuddin Ahmed's announcement of an expansionary half-yearly monetary policy last week, setting aside IMF's advice for a tighter policy has generated favourable reactions from economists and trade and industrial circles. What it means is the BB has gone for expansionary credit growth with the objective of ensuring reasonable price stability and providing support to a sustainable and high growth paradigm.

There is a risk involved in this approach which cannot be made a short shrift of. If the Bangladesh Bank fails to direct credit to the productive sectors of the economy to replenish the supply side, the existent high inflation rate, largely caused by external factors beyond our control, risk being further fuelled. The high inflation rate is much more supply-driven than demand-pushed requiring a containment strategy in which higher domestic productivity is a key element leading to strengthening of the supply side.

This logic is incontrovertible. Yet, one may like to argue that bumper boro harvest has not been accompanied by lower rice prices. True, but the inhibitory factors are to be found in transportation and storage shortcomings coupled with hoarding and uncertainties surrounding import. So, the point is proved rather than disproved.

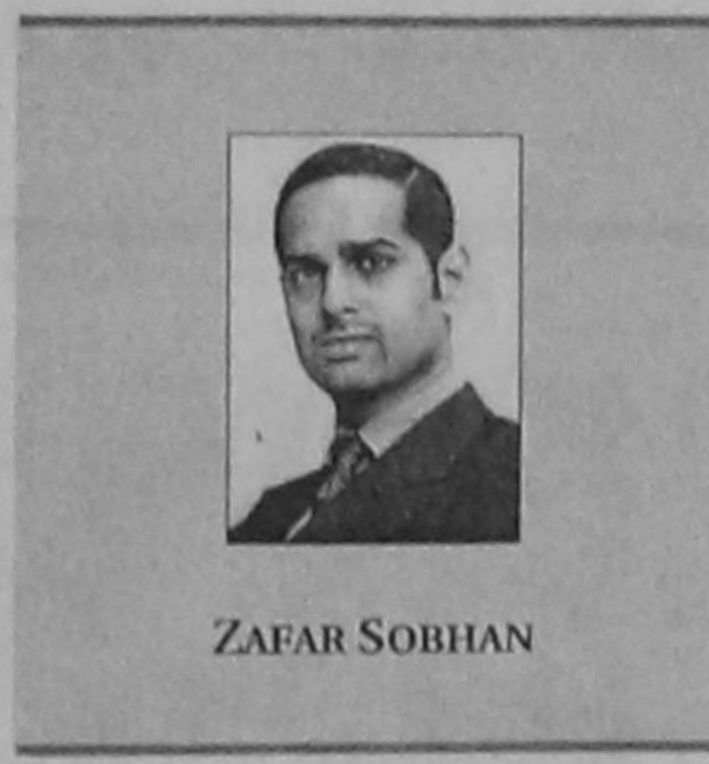
Coming to the industrial sector, the record 10 percent growth in 2006-07 has plummeted to 6.87 percent. Similarly, the service sector has shown a sluggish trend.

The new monetary policy has therefore prioritised unhindered flow of private sector credit to the economy's productive sectors such as agriculture, small and medium enterprises and rural economy as a whole. The banks will have to play a crucial role there. There are private banks which have limited number of rural branches, if at all, and very few are investing in agriculture. This is asking the banks to channel funds from high profit earning trading and other activities to the real productive sectors. The banks need to balance their profit motives with some development ethos.

Significantly, if the banks can rationalise the interest spread between deposit rate and loan rate that would be a big help in boosting investment and productivity. The rate of interest in our country is among the highest in the region leaving room for a downward revision.

One more important aspect of boosting productivity would be to import more of capital machinery and raw materials rather than pander to the high consumption-orientation of import.

## Deep in the heart of nowhere



ZAFAR SOBHAN

**I**T'S a spectacular sight. Bangladesh from the vantage point of a small, low-flying sea-plane is by any measure breath-taking. The silvery net of the innumerable criss-crossing rivers, the green on green patchwork quilts of the fields in planting season, the precise little boxes of the homesteads dotting the landscape, neat postage-stamp sized tin structures surrounded by shade trees, the occasional pond.

As one travels north, the landscape becomes more watery until the rivers eclipse the land as the dominant feature below you. But nothing can prepare you for the majestic swell of the Jamuna, stretching from horizon to horizon, as much as 30 km in breadth during the monsoon, it is like happening upon an opaque, cloudy sea.

Dotted here and there within the clean but murky waters are innumerable little islands, green and brown outposts of silt, sand, and vegetation, some uninhabited and no more than a length of a cricket pitch in diameter, some as much as few miles from end to end, supporting as many as a few thousand souls.

Landing on the river in the sea-

**More than fresh, clean scent of the fields waving the wind, more even than the endless stretches of muddy brown water sprinkled with brilliant splashes of emerald and jade, what I will remember the most about my trip is a small dimly-lit tin shack, with a circle of gaunt and weather-beaten men, one or two even with long white beards, sitting cross-legged on the hard-packed earth floor, hard at work learning their ka, kha, ga.**

plane is an experience to treasure. Circling the island, looking for a good spot to make an adjacent river landing, you are able to pick out more and more detail as the plane swoops lower and lower.

The islands are indescribably stunning. From the sky they look like little jewels of green and gold and up close they look like everyone's idyllic picture post-card of the lush and tranquil Bangladeshi country-side. It is the jute season and the plants are already at head height, the fields as ever divided into neat squares and rectangles. Not a paved road, not an electric line, not a single building of brick and cement anywhere in sight.

The *chars* are among the most fascinating and scenic parts of this most fascinating and scenic country of ours. In a sense the island inhabitants' water-logged existence is quintessentially Bangladeshi. They live not on the river like the nomadic river gypsies traveling hundreds of miles up and down the country but rarely far from the shore, and not by the rivers as the rest of us do, but right, smack in the middle of the river, surrounded on all sides as far as the eye can see by water, hours away from the mainland,

the nearest market town, civilisation as we have come to know it.

Here there is nothing. No police station, no electricity, no running water, no roads, no motor vehicles, no government offices. Nothing. For miles along the widest expanse of the Jamuna, in the north of the country, this is all there is. Hundreds of little sandbar islands strung out along its span, barely visible, one to the other, little blips in a sweet-water ocean.

I am on a trip to see first-hand how life is on the *chars* and to see the work done by Friendship, the only organisation, governmental or other, that works together with the people of the islands to make their lives safer and more secure.

Friendship's flagship project is a barge that has been converted into a floating hospital that goes from *char* to *char*, docking for two or three weeks at a time, offering all necessary primary health-care and secondary care, where possible. In addition to the floating hospital, Friendship also sets up satellite health clinics and medical camps, and one way or another, has now served hundreds of thousands of the *char* inhabitants, the vast majority of whom had never even seen a

doctor before in their lives.

No one else works here. Before Friendship came, the inhabitants had nothing. Literally. Now, in addition to health-care, Friendship has opened up schools, helped the locals to form co-operative communities and societies, sponsored income generation programs and savings and insurance schemes.

The locals are dignified and diligent, conscientious and committed to building a better future for themselves and their families, even in this seemingly most forsaken and vulnerable of outposts. Their kids look reasonably healthy and decently fed.

The floating hospital is clean and orderly and services as many as 600 patients in a day, many who have come by boat from even more remote *chars* farther up-river. The line is long but they wait patiently and everyone is seen, no one turned away.

It is a full day as we see everything that Friendship does on the island of Baitkamari. The school that has room only for a small fraction of the kids, many others spend their day wistfully looking through the windows. There is a camp on reproductive health and family planning being held by two

nurses who run the island's satellite clinic. We meet with the local society that has been set up and speak to them about their income generation programs, their bumper maize and sweet pumpkin harvests, and their plans for the future.

Then it is lunch followed by a quick dip to cool off beneath the late afternoon sun. The current is surprisingly swift, tugging at your ankles, and if you lift your feet from the river-bed you run the risk of being swept down-stream possibly all the way back to Dhaka.

Friendship's wooden house-boat moored next to the hospital that we are staying on is also home to a BBC documentary crew shooting a documentary on traditional child-birth. They have been there two weeks and are waiting impatiently to shoot their finale when one of the women they have been tracking, tiny but as big as a house, now almost as wide as she is tall, will give birth. The baby stubbornly refuses to appear until they after they have to pack up and leave for Dhaka.

The evening and night are idyllic. There is no traffic, no television, no noise. It is quiet, calm, tranquil, and serene. The night is lived by a boat-ride to the far side of the island to listen in on an adult education program that has to run at night, dim light provided by the island's one solar panel (no electricity), as this is the only free time the farmers and fisherman have.

The next day is a short trip to the even more remote *char* of Khamar

Kamarjani where we again get to sit with the local society and talk to them about their income generation programs and plans for the future. This outpost of 50 families who only a few years ago had nothing, no shelter, no tools, no crops, no seeds, not even a boat, they were living among the head-high long grasses and eating every few days if they were lucky. Now they have homes and fields and a communal boat. Their maize crop brought them almost six lakhs. They are raising cows and goats and sheep and even geese. Their next hope is for a school for the kids.

The *chars* were an amazing and eye-opening experience. I understand why people choose to live there in the middle of nowhere. They have nowhere else to go, but more than that it is a tranquil and in many ways idyllic life and it is the only life they know. It may be tough but it has its rewards.

The locals cannot do it on their own. Their poverty and isolation and insecurity is second to none in the country. But give them a small helping hand and they can do the rest for themselves.

More than fresh, clean scent of the fields waving the wind, more even than the endless stretches of muddy brown water sprinkled with brilliant splashes of emerald and jade, what I will remember the most about my trip is a small dimly-lit tin shack, with a circle of gaunt and weather-beaten men, one or two even with long white beards, sitting cross-legged on the hard-packed earth floor, hard at work learning their *ka, kha, ga*.

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## Deadlier than the sword



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**A** popular writer has been recently criticised because he claimed that writers enjoyed freedom in this country. Other things he said were incidental to the same line of logic. He slighted a writer who was brutally hacked for his writing. He claimed that the sedition charge brought against a prominent activist was stage-managed. Then he made insensitive comments on the food prices and showed his weakness for the current "army-backed" caretaker government. On all those counts, the critics argued, the writer who made those remarks during an interview with a Bengali newspaper put his foot in his mouth.

The news didn't make headlines, but created ripples in literary circles. It's possible the showdown won't go far, or will continue a few more rounds, before it fizzles out. Maybe the

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writer who made those comments will change his mind. Maybe those who are attacking him will forgive and forget.

Well, writers write for the same reason a rodent has to chew. If the rodent doesn't wear down its teeth by continuous chewing, then the teeth grow too big and cause pain. For a writer, writing is a talent in the first nature, a skill in the second. A lot of people feel the urge, but only the writer can urge the feel. He goes beyond where others stop seeking; sees beyond where others stop looking. The writer is more than a scribe because he has an uncanny sense of being.

But what sense of being has set off this contention? How could one side be so wrong that the other brands him with invectives like "ignorant," "ridiculous" or "pro-establishment"? In fact, there is no incomprehension between them, but only lack of agreement. Was the book by the

assailed author a vulgar one? Was the sedition charge against the activist real? Are people really okay with the price hikes? Is the caretaker government on the right track?

The answer is a Bosnian joke. A man named Ivek goes to a local tavern, and the moment he stands next to him is Moshe he kills him without thinking twice. When asked, he said that he had taken revenge for what the Jews had done to Jesus. The police inspector reminded him that it had happened two thousand years ago, and a nonchalant Ivek replied that he had only heard about it the day before he met Moshe.

The fact is that the ghost of the past doesn't go away, since for us its important not when something happens, but when something is remembered. What the writer said about the book of another writer, and the sedition charge against an activist, is

memory. What he said about prices and the government is contemporary. The irony is that the past always overlaps the present and haunts us like a spirit.

W.B. Yeats tells us that we make poetry out of our quarrels with ourselves, and politics out of our quarrels with others. Somehow, the latest quarrel amongst writers is a bizarre one. It sets them against each other, a poetic settlement of political scores. Between fighting to write and writing to fight, this writers' spat is dipped not in ink but in blood.

It's not that writers never fight. They take sides and fiercely fight as defenders of truth and custodians of conscience. American writer Norman Mailer used his influence to win parole for a murderer named Jack Henry Abbott because he was impressed by the quality of the prisoner's writing. But Jack went on to commit another murder within

weeks of his parole, which marked one of the lowest points of Mailer's life.

On the contrary, French writer Emile Zola put his life on the line defending Alfred Dreyfus, and proved that this captain of the French army was falsely accused and convicted. The writers of conscience write out of considerations for right and wrong. They don't write for gain and loss.

Throughout history writers have been persecuted, yet they enjoyed freedom as much as they wished to exercise it. A writer's freedom exists in his mind. He must be liberal in thinking, progressive in outlook, unbiased in judgment, courageous in expression, unabashed in honesty, thorough in knowledge and uncompromising in intellectual pursuit. His freedom lies in the opportunity of expression, not in the result of that expression.

In our case, the freedom of writers is undermined by the threat of religious fanatics and the failure of governments to keep them on leash. Daud Haider fled the country during the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Taslima Nasreen went into exile during the government of Khaleda Zia. A cartoonist went to jail during the tenure of this government. All of these happened because,

in each case, the target was the religious sentiment of the people in this country.

While we are compelled to think of freedom, we are also compelled to think of its limits. Does a writer have the moral authority to hurt the feelings of people? When a person can get slapped for insulting another person or hurling obscenities at him, how could one expect to go unscratched if one is rude to the emotions of many? Freedom doesn't mean immunity. There is hazard in every profession. The writers can't stay above it.

Needless to say, a writer's freedom ought to be defined by his environment. Yes, a writer has the freedom to criticise that environment. But he must criticise it as a "critical insider," not with an aim to undermine it. In India, the great 12th-century poet-mystic Basava, who rebelled against ritualistic and superstitious temple worship and caste system, was a critical insider. So were the Marathi poet Tukaram and the Hindi poet Kabir.

"Freedom means there's nothing left to lose," Janis Joplin sang in her song *Me and Bobby McGee*. When the pen writes in that spirit, it's mightier than the sword. But when it ingratiates with power the pen is deadlier than the sword.

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## Death by water in Pallabi

The incident raises some grave questions

**T**HE death by drowning of five young people in a lake in Pallabi on Wednesday is a good deal more than merely being tragic. Indeed, the incident raises a few questions not only about the nature of the deaths themselves but also about human nature. The first of these questions relates to the matter of why these young people, ten in all, suddenly decided to pile themselves on a boat that bore the risks of an accident. The lake (or jheel in common parlance) is these days brimming with rainwater on account of the on-going monsoon, which should have been reason enough for these young people to stay away from that fateful boat ride. It is understood that the boatman had earlier warned these young people about the risks involved. Unfortunately, no heed was paid to him.

But, of course, it is children we are talking about here. And it is pure juvenile adventurism that eventually led to this tragedy. But then comes another question, one that has a bearing on our collective response to tragedy. One of the survivors of the sad incident noted that despite their pleas and cries for help from bystanders around the lake no one came forward to help the young people out of the water. Only the boatman himself and one of the boys on the boat went desperately to work to help get everyone out of the water. It is doubly tragic that the boy himself ended up losing his life in his effort to save his friends. But no one who stood on the banks of the lake came forth to help these drowning young people out of danger. Why they did that is a question that disturbs us. The psychology involved in such behaviour often becomes inexplicable. Or have we become too desensitised as a society to care about the other person? Be that as it may, a few truths emerge from the tragedy. The first relates to the need for parental guidance for children about behaviour. The second calls for strict measures that will restrict the use of facilities of the kind which led to the five deaths on Wednesday.

Our heartfelt sympathies go out to the families of the dead. Our prayers are with them.

## Cambodia's one-horse election race

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LARRY JAGAN

**C**AMBODIA'S political parties are in their last day of campaigning before electors go to the polls on Sunday to elect a new government. Although eleven parties have fielded candidates, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) led by the longest-serving leader in Asia, Hun Sen, is expected to win a landslide victory, further fuelling fears of Cambodia becoming a one-party state.

This is the fourth election since 1993's UN sponsored elections. Hun Sen -- Cambodia's prime minister since 1985 -- has emerged as the prime minister after every election. In the past, he has ruled with the royalist party FUNCINPEC, forming a coalition government. But after two prob-

lematic months of forming a government following the 2003 elections, the constitution was changed, allowing the party with over 123 seats in the National Assembly to automatically form the next government, which will rule for the next five years.

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Few have come out to support the candidates. Even canvassers have been less than enthusiastic. A group of women, marching behind a truck with a blaring megaphone promoting the CPP, admitted being thoroughly bored.

The bystanders seemed even less interested in party propaganda.

"Why should I care, we know who's going to win," said Thy Thi Kaeng, a Chinese cab driver. "I voted FUNCINPEC the first time, then they joined Hun Sen's government, so I voted for Sam Rainsy after that -- but this time, there's no point, it's a wasted vote," he said.

The election commission is nonetheless confident of a strong voter turnout. A heavy media campaign has been running, urging Cambodians to exercise their right to vote. "I expect more than 70% of registered voters to cast their ballots at the polls," the NEC chairman told The Daily Star.

But many people are likely to abstain this time, according to most diplomats in Cambodia -- or

they will vote for the ruling party because they do not want to have unnecessary problems as a result in the future.

"There is certainly a growing apathy amongst voters. Firstly, they are more preoccupied with economic issues. Secondly, they have seen the same party in power since 1993, and many voters now believe that there is no alternative; they have become increasingly disinterested in politics as a result," UNDP's Strengthening Democracy and Electoral Procedures Project Manager, Aamir Arain, told The Daily Star.

The political platforms are almost indistinguishable -- with the opposition parties stressing the need to strengthen the rule of law and liberalise the economy. Most seem to be targeting rural constituencies, focusing their campaign on the countryside, especially in western provinces near Thailand.

The dispute between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple situated on the border has generated a

renewed nationalist fervour, further strengthening Hun Sen's hand. Already, there is a major underground anti-Thai campaign underway.

Since the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) awarded the Hindu temple World Heritage Status earlier this month, huge public celebrations have taken place. The decision, announced on the national channel, showed Hun Sen's image amid revolving stars. The temple is being hailed as an enormous national victory. "The CPP will clearly benefit from the national sentiment surrounding the temple issue," said an anonymous Asian diplomat in Phnom Penh.

This will only strengthen what was already the only possible result. Many fear that this will also be the final death knell for the last vestiges of Cambodian democracy.

"If there is no opposition party, the party in power can do whatever they want," warned Hang Puthea, executive director of the

local election monitoring group, the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC).

Others fear the election will make Cambodia a one-party state. "We're concerned that the balance of power will be lost, and we worry the CPP will control every level of administration, from the top government posts down to the village," said Koul Panha, executive director of the election monitor Comfrel.

Many Cambodians in the capital have taken extended vacations, planning to stay indoors during polling day -- there is an unofficial 3-day holiday to allow voters to travel to their villages to cast ballots. Residents in Phnom Penh are hoarding food, petrol and candles in preparation of the polls. Some have even sold their mobile phones because payday is still a week away and they have run out of money, said a Cambodian student.

"People always fear the worst, but there is little evidence that this election will be marred by the

violence and vote-rigging of previous elections," said Chhaya Hang, executive director of the Khmer Institute of Democracy. "Each successive election since 1993 has been more transparent than the previous one."

Since the campaign started, there have been only a handful of complaints of electoral abuse, all of which have been dismissed by the electoral body overseeing the polls. "So far there is no real evidence of election violence or fraud," the National Election Commission chairman, Im Soudsey, told The Daily Star. "But all cases referred to the commission will be thoroughly investigated," he promised.

In the worst incident so far, an opposition journalist, Khim Sambo, and his son were shot dead by unidentified assailants outside their home two weeks ago. The police are still investigating the incident and have yet to release their findings. "This election is proving to be the most peaceful since Cambodia's first real democratic elections fifteen

years ago," according to the Cambodian political analyst, Ok Serei. "The electoral process is maturing with every election," he added.

The opposition, though, still believes elections are being rigged. "There is less violence, less death, but the ruling party is using subtler means to achieve the same results," the leading opposition leader Sam Rainsy told The Daily Star during an election rally last week. He complains that the government is intimidating and bribing voters to support them.

The head of the other main opposition party -- the newly formed Khmer Human Rights Party -- Kem Sokha was even more blunt, accusing the ruling CPP of harassment, intimidation and vote buying. "They cannot win the election except by cheating," he told The Daily Star. "If they lose the election they won't hand over power -- they'll hang onto it just like Zimbabwe," he predicted.

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