

Proliferation of fake TINs

Such fraud can only undermine economy

IT is indeed disconcerting news that more than 35 per cent of the Tax Identification Numbers in a sample survey conducted by the National Board of Revenue have turned out to be false. That raises the very pertinent question of how the individuals owning these fake numbers came to acquire them. One cannot in any way deny the fact that 35 per cent is an inordinately high number, especially in a matter as serious as TINs. Which again leads to a new question: how did the mechanism involved in the preparation and provision of TINs come by such a grave flaw? The answer to that question, as also other questions relating to TINs, must come from the NBR itself. It must explain its own failings in this regard. Obviously, there have been lapses along the line which have spawned the proliferation of TINs. Why those lapses have been there and what is being done to plug the holes is a question that now calls for a credible answer.

The entire purpose of introducing Tax Identification Numbers was to establish a secure and purposeful tax system through identifying the extent of taxation coverage in the country. Besides, TINs are prerequisites for a provision of certain facilities to those who pay regular taxes. But with reports emerging of duplicity in the acquiring and use of TINs, and in a number of areas too, there cannot but be grave worry. Observe the figures. Of the altogether 371 TIN samples surveyed in five sectors (of the mandatory fifteen), 131 TINs were revealed to be false. We noted a few days ago the matter of fake TINs being provided by people intending to acquire Rajuk plots in Gazipur and Uttara and what action the authorities plan to take, against them. Now there seems to be a whole Pandora's Box opening up before us. Entire new areas, such as credit cards, land purchase, opening L/Cs, car purchase and bank loans, have now been infected by the presence of fake TINs. Action against those who have procured such false numbers has now become necessary. The NBR has promised to move against them. The NBR must also unearth the racket involved in the sordid job of supplying fake TINs and take action against them as well.

Beyond such action, it becomes important for the NBR authorities to streamline and update the entire system of issuance of TINs to individuals and organisations. For now, it is essential that a wholesale inquiry be instituted into the manufacture of fake TINs to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the extent of the fraud that might have already been perpetrated and, then, move to ferret out the culprits and prevent further recurrence of it.

Cheaper prices of fuel

The effect must be reflected in all the sectors

IT is good to note that the government has reduced the prices of fuel further, the second time in the last two months. Howsoever slender the decrease maybe, it has come at a time when the next cropping season is round the corner. We hope that the farmers would be benefitted from the reduced cost of a very important input of cultivation.

One feels though, the size of reduction could be bigger. One would have thought that the decision makers would have kept in view not only the increase in petroleum prices in the country the last time in July this year, of around 35 percent on average, but also the huge fall of prices of petroleum in the international market, since then, but particularly over the last two months, which allowed room for a further decrease.

However, the redeeming feature in this case is the fact that unlike in the past, where prices in Bangladesh have always suffered from a ratchet effect, once the price of a commodity went up it never came down, we see a reduction in fuel prices. It is also heartening to see that for the first time the government does not have to give subsidy on fuel.

That said, it is quite one thing to reduce the price of fuel and quite another to ensure that the benefits are reflected in the prices of other commodities, particularly the essential ones like food. In this respect, our experience has been rather dismaying. In the past no sooner had the prices of various grades of fuel been increased than we saw an immediate, and sometimes irrational, increase in prices of the other commodities.

We suffered from what is commonly known as imported inflation and this came in handy for government to explain higher prices and be resigned to the phenomenon.

Contrary to expectations, we did not see a corresponding decrease in prices, either in food or transport fares, when fuel prices were reduced the first time in October this year. It would be our hope that the administration having decided to bring down the cost of petroleum, would also see to it that benefits of such a reduction are reflected in the prices of other essential commodities.

Of moral governance and predatory politics

GROUND REALITIES

On December 29, we face a stark choice. We elect a new, morality-driven government. Or we revert to the predatory politics that left our lives a shambles more than two years ago.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

POLITICS appears to be turning towards the hypocritical, while we thought it was the art of the possible. You only have to watch Begum Zia haranguing the country on the immense darkness that will surely descend on the country should the Awami League triumph at the general elections. The people will not accept, she tells, a puppet government the caretaker administration and the Election Commission might be planning to foist on us after the elections. She does not explain, but everyone knows where she is pointing.

But men have been going around whispering in our ears the sordid truth: that a victory for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party will mean a credible voting process but one for the Awami League will certainly be the outcome of an engineered exercise of the franchise.

And that is not the end of hypocrisy. These days, there are people ready to impress upon you the grave truth of the damage Sheikh Hasina has done to herself by taking Ershad on board. She has befriended autocracy, these BNP-leaning men will inform you, with that sure glint in their eyes. You feel crestfallen, until you remember that the Begum has herself been poaching quite a few of the smaller autocrats who once glowed in the light of the bigger one.

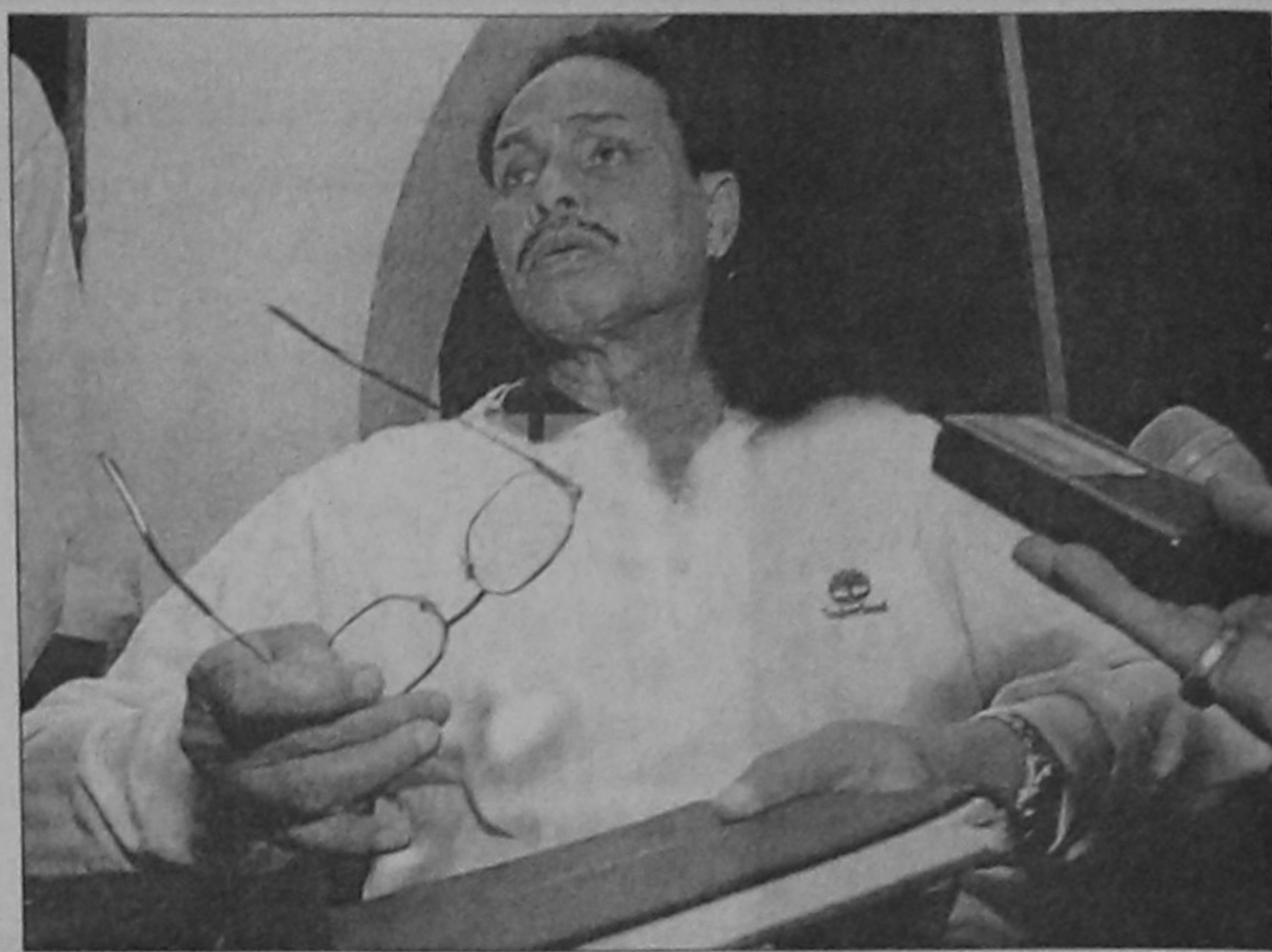
Before the imposition of the state of emergency, Khaleda Zia welcomed into her party Shah Moazzam Hossain and Syeda Razia Faiz, both of whom had long been

Ershad loyalists. What would the BNP say if these two individuals had gone over to the Awami League? Drop the question. And focus on another. Not very long ago, Ershad linked up with the Begum and was spotted sitting at her feet at a public rally. No one said a word at the time about the BNP's developing relations with autocracy. Not a whisper was heard about the old bitterness between the two sides.

In the aftermath of Ershad's fall from power, Moudud Ahmed, a Zia loyalist before serving the dictator as minister, deputy prime minister, prime minister and vice-president, went back to the BNP and ended up being law minister. No one in the party that Ziaur Rahman cobbled into shape in 1979 had any qualms about welcoming a man who had been a spokesman for autocracy for years on end.

Mahmudul Hasan, another soldier known for his links to Ershad, was warmly welcomed into their fold by the BNP. Begum Zia did not seem to recall that Hasan had once represented a regime determined to smash her party into pieces. The legacy and memory of autocratic rule conveniently went missing. But that is what politics has been all about in this country. Ethics have not mattered, principles have been dumped overboard.

BNP men will tell you about the many moments in which the Awami League has committed nefarious deeds in its pursuit of power. In 1986, the party legitimised the Ershad regime, these men will inform you in blazing anger. Today, it is conspiring to go back to power on the back of the old



The bone of contention?

autocrat and the caretaker government. And, of course, there have always been the charges and accusations pertaining to the Awami League's being in cahoots with the Indians.

Forgotten is the BNP's marriage of convenience with the Jamaat-e-Islami, its careful looking away from the war crimes of the men it welcomed into government in October 2001. And here you have a curious malady, for these Awami League baiters: while they see nothing wrong in being in bed with those who helped Pakistan to rape and murder their fellow Bengalis, they seriously believe that the new-found camaraderie between Sheikh Hasina and Ershad is a deadly sin even the gods blush thinking of.

Begum Zia has been questioning the motives of the Election Commission every step of the way. Conspiracy theories now form the base of the politics her party pursues at this point. And such theories have a

certain force in galvanising the faithful. But how many of the admirers remember the sheer scandal that the Election Commission dwindled into under Justice M.A. Aziz? And why must Begum Zia and her acolytes forget the shame that was the Magura by-election in 1994, a disaster that left us all unable to go for a change of government without the interregnum of a caretaker administration?

Begum Zia now asks us to vote for her and save Islam. That was what the Pakistanis used to say, before we ran them out of town in 1971.

On December 29, we face a stark choice. We elect a new, morality-driven government. Or we revert to the predatory politics that left our lives a shambles more than two years ago.

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Needed diplomacy

Dr. Manmohan Singh outlined a two-pronged approach: galvanising international opinion for effective action against terrorism, and diplomatic pressure on Pakistan.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

ULTIMATELY, it wasn't superior firepower, sophisticated interception methods or commando training that helped arrest one of the Mumbai attackers. It was the courage of the policemen in overpowering Ajmal Amir Iman (Kasab) with nothing more than lathis.

Assistant Sub-Inspector Tukaram Ombale pounced on Kasab even as he took a burst of fire, allowing his colleagues to arrest him. Ombale died, but his bravery ensured that a key attacker would live to tell the tale.

Kasab's interrogation has produced evidence about the preparation for and execution of the attack. He must be tried following the highest norms of criminal law and with scrupulous respect for his right to legal defence. His conviction cannot be a foregone conclusion merely because of the attack's barbarity.

After Kasab's disclosures to the police, there's little doubt that Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba carried out the attack. The UN Security Council has confirmed LeT's involvement through the ban imposed on Jamaat-ud-Dawa under Resolution 1267.

LeT had a special relationship with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency. LeT is Salafist, and doesn't believe in fighting "Islamic" governments. LeT doesn't actively oppose the army's anti-Taliban-al-Qaeda operations.

It's not clear if the ISI or its "rogue" elements logistically supported the Mumbai attack. But it's reasonably plain that the attackers' main motive was to provoke a military response from India at Pakistan's eastern border.

This would create a rationale for redeploying Pakistani troops from the western border and allow al-Qaeda-Taliban fighters to regroup and overrun the area.

The attackers' motive was to increase disaffection among Indian Muslims and provoke a backlash. Mercifully, this hasn't happened -- despite the Sangh Parivar.

The attacks have triggered unprecedented Hindu-Muslim unity and an spirited condemnation of terrorism by many of the Muslim organisations.

Military retaliation would play straight into LeT's hands, further destabilising an already precarious Pakistan -- with disastrous consequences for the whole region.

The Indian government has acted with restraint, using diplomatic, not military, means. Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee strongly rejected a demand for attacking Pakistan: "That is not the point [...] I am making it quite clear that that is not the solution. Let us be very clear and frank that that is no solution."

The meaning of the military option, advocated stridently by hawkish "experts" and by Bharatiya Janata Party MPs like Arun Shourie, should be plain. Shourie

wants overwhelming retaliation: "Not an eye for an eye; but for an eye, both eyes. For a tooth, (the) whole jaw."

Any India-Pakistan conflict is liable to escalate into nuclear war. In Nuclear Armageddon, there are no winners -- only mega-deaths. Even a limited nuclear exchange will kill millions.

An India-Pakistan conflict has one inevitable outcome: full-scale war, in which Pakistan will use nuclear weapons if it fears loss of territory. This will invite nuclear retaliation from India, with consequences too horrifying even to contemplate.

The idea of "surgical strikes" against terrorist training camps is equally hare-brained. LeT camps are makeshift affairs, and poor targets for strikes. Any strike, however "limited," will invite armed conflict.

Pakistan isn't Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which America could attack without fear of resistance. Even covert action, requiring the creation of a new monster -- "India's own ISI" -- will trigger escalation.

Dr. Manmohan Singh outlined a two-pronged approach: galvanising international opinion for effective action against terrorism, and diplomatic pressure on Pakistan. Domestically, he promised reform of internal security arrangements.

US and UK pressure has been useful. But India must develop a broader multi-lateral approach to avoid getting drawn into Washington's parochial plans for the region.

It would be best to press Pakistan through UN Security Council Resolution 1373, which mandates sanctions on a state that fails to "deny safe haven to those who finance, plan, support, or commit terrorist acts [...]" and violates its duty to "refrain from providing [...] support [...] to entities or persons involved in terrorist acts [...]."

India can achieve much by sharing evidence of LeT's role in the attacks with Pakistan, and acting demonstrably to defuse suspicions about its covert operations in Balochistan and Afghanistan.

While revamping India's security system, the Singh government should have followed the advice of Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan against using "questionable methods" such as "indefinite detention of terror suspects [...]" coercive interrogation techniques and the denial of the right to fair trial.

The government has done the opposite by having a law passed which replicates all the obnoxious provisions of the discredited Prevention of Terrorism Act -- except for making police confessions admissible as evidence.

The National Investigative Agency Act, too, has flaws, including over-centralisation of powers, and their illegitimate extension to areas affected by insurgency and Left-wing extremism.

These Acts must be undone.

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If the shoes fit ...

As the juggernaut of the war against terrorism moves inexorably towards and across our frontiers, we need to remind ourselves that fairy-tales are the product of peace-time tranquility.

F.S. AJIAZUDDIN

IF only President Bush had consulted a fairy godmother before he embarked on his final visit to Iraq. He might have been warned that instead of losing a glass slipper, he would be receiving a used shoe.

The presidency of any country contains all the ingredients of a fairy tale. The central figure is supposed to overcome all odds and adversities, battle on behalf of righteousness, destroy demons and vanquish ogres, restore order in the world, provide reassurance that nothing untoward will ever happen again, and then retire and live happily ever after.

That is what Aesop, the Grimm Brothers and J.K. Rowlings, have always led us to believe. Like us, our children have grown up in a magical world, in which right always prevails over wrong, and conflicts and wars are justifiable because they restore social order and equilibrium.

One wonders which bedtime fairy tales Mrs. Barbara Bush had read to her son -- George W. Bush. It is obvious that at some time during the night, somewhere in the laboratory of his fermenting mind, the experiment went horribly awry. As a result, today, Iraqis and non-Iraqis alike are being made to suffer the consequences.

President Bush blundered into Iraq, relying on intelligence that was "flawed." Unlike President Kennedy, who lost his innocence over the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba and then wept for having relied on his errant military advisers, Bush has not wasted a tear either on his misadventure or over the damage caused by it.

Ordinarily, persons with blood on their hands rarely revisit the scene of their crime. Did Bush seriously imagine that his visit to Iraq would be welcomed as a last hurrah, an opportunity for an avuncular valedictory address by a victorious Caesar to an audience that had been cowed into grinning submission?

Had he forgotten that the Iraqis had celebrated the demolition of Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square by beating it with shoes?

Did he believe that Iraqis would feel grateful that in place of Saddam Hussein and his iron-brained militia, they now have the steel frame of 150,000 US troops underwriting their fledgling democracy?

Had he been deluded by his own propaganda? In 2003, President Bush told his troops: "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, US and our allies have prevailed." Five years later, he professed the same optimism, with diminished conviction:

"The war is not over, but it is decisively on its way to being won."

Bush could have done worse than to have read Winston Churchill's wartime speeches before he left for Iraq. He might have understood why many Iraqis find less comfort in his own fading reassurances than they do in the defiant words of Winston Churchill.

Harassed by German onslaughts and a wavering French government, Churchill addressed the Canadian Parliament in 1941. He quoted the advice given to the then French prime minister by his timorous generals, that "in three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken." Churchill added laconically: "Some chicken; some neck."

Iraq's neck has been stretched for over five years already, and may well be elongated for as long a period again. Whatever may be the crucial determinants that hasten the end of a war, they are not visible at the moment. Over 4,200 American lives have been lost. No one has the time to calculate how many Iraqis have been displaced -- a hundred thousand? More than million?

The cost of the war is also not the tourniquet. Over \$570 billion have been spent already. With US economy in a state of recession, the last jobs president-elect Bush and president-elect Obama will want to touch will be those of America's Military Inc.

That might explain why Obama has chosen to include key components of Bush's national security team in his own administration. To many -- and they are not all necessarily Iraqis -- who had hoped to witness a change in US policies, the continuity of the same faces signals, instead, a linear persistence.

For the 170 million in Pakistan, life has never been a fairy tale. Our frogs do not transform into coachmen, our rodents do not become footmen, and our undersized pumpkins do not balloon into golden coaches. Most importantly, our fairy godmother has changed gender. Our former fairy godfather is paying more attention to our step-sisters than to us.

Living in a world of one's making is challenge enough; living in a world of someone else's making is even more difficult. Living in a world of our own make-believe is unforgivable. As the juggernaut of the war against terrorism moves inexorably towards and across our frontiers, we need to remind ourselves that fairy-tales are the product of peace-time tranquility. War spawns its own stories, in which the footwear is not a glass slipper, not even a size 10 shoe, but a hob-nailed boot.

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