

## MP and minister wealth statements

*Good for the country, good for the government*

**G**IVEN the fact that it was a manifesto pledge, reiterated by the prime minister after election, and now confirmed by the finance minister, we have every confidence that the wealth statements of the MPs and the ministers will indeed be released next month, as promised, and we await their publication with eager anticipation.

We also hope that this is the start of a new and sustained process of disclosure in which the MPs and ministers would continue to release their wealth statements annually and also to release one on exiting office, when the time comes. We firmly believe that this kind of continuous scrutiny can only have a beneficial impact.

However, even as we congratulate the government for its initiative, we would like to point out that this should not be seen as something that is being consented to only due to public expectations, but that it is in the government's own self interest to take the issue of full disclosure seriously, as it appears to have done.

Rampant corruption all the way up to the highest reaches of the government was the cause of the last BNP-led four-party government's downfall, and if the current government does not wish to suffer the same fate as its predecessor at the polls, then it must keep a lid on official corruption, and releasing wealth statements is an integral part of that process.

Not only will it cut down on corruption, but it will cut down even on the appearance of corruption, which will itself have a salutary impact. Taking such a step will enhance the government's moral authority and send a strong signal to the entire country. When the government sets the example, we can expect private individuals to follow its lead, and thus setting a good example helps create the right moral tone.

In conclusion, we hope that this pledge is implemented as promised, and that the disclosure is meaningful. There must be some kind of mechanism in place to ensure that the information disclosed is accurate and that nothing is hidden. It is important that the statements are not a mere whitewash. The independent media pledges its full support to the move and will itself follow the process closely. We caution that any lapses will be seriously taken by the media.

## Israel continues killing Palestinians

*Watching it silently amounts to abetting in the crime*

**I**SRAELI military operations continued with greater ferocity and virulence yesterday -- the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the Jewish state's assault on Gaza strip. Civilian casualties among the Palestinians have risen sharply to over 900 in a rather one-sided use of sophisticated war machines by Tel Aviv against the people of Gaza.

The only argument that Israel has advanced so far to justify its military operations is that it had to stop the rocket attacks launched by Hamas. But the Israeli response to sporadic rocket attacks by a desperate Hamas has been far from proportionate, to say the least. Yet, Tel Aviv is not showing the slightest qualms for the dead Palestinians that include a large number of children and women. The Jewish state, having a record of killing Palestinians at will in the past, is convinced that it can stop hostilities in the region by liquidating Hamas. But if history is anything to go by, the Israeli atrocities will only harden the Palestinian resolve to continue the fight against the oppressors. The world is unlikely to be a safer place when military might is being used by a state to ruthlessly suppress a beleaguered people.

It is not difficult to say how we should react to Israel's friends' meaningless expressions of concern for the Palestinians now dying in hundreds every day. Our feeling of outrage is only deepened. It is highly regrettable that the international community is doing absolutely nothing to stop the state terrorism unleashed by Israel. Even the greatest exponent of the war on terror -- US President Bush -- has seen only Israel's right to defend itself in its genocidal scheme! A EU commissioner was only less kind to Israel when he said that the Jewish state was not respecting human rights laws. What an expectation from a terrorist state out to obliterate the people whose land it occupied forcibly! It is clear that the Western leaders are still not moved by the deaths in Gaza; perhaps they will never be.

The UN, for its part, is once again demonstrating its helplessness vis-à-vis the lone superpower in the world today. Thanks to the shockingly inhuman US stance on the Palestine issue, Israel knows very well that it can get away with anything.

The world leaders should see something beyond their own interests in the Palestine issue. After all, they are the ones who often talk about human rights, democracy, freedom and so on.

## Our foreign policy challenges

It is only when we are able to reconcile our respective national interests while conceding to various demands dictated by economic, security or geopolitical compulsions of the other party, can we have a win-win situation for all.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

**T**HERE were very few who were not surprised at the choice of the foreign minister and her deputy under the new dispensation. What one hopes of the two is that, in the present context of hard reality in a realist world, the sooner they come round to seeing and acknowledging the reality, the easier it would be to tackle the foreign policy challenges that face Bangladesh.

One should not be unduly bothered about them restating a very hackneyed cliché that has been used in the past to define the thrust of a country's foreign policy in the most ideal sense. By saying that the country's relationship with the outside world would be guided by the principle of "charity towards all and malice to none" they have rightly expressed a very holy precept and demonstrated an inclusive attitude in laying out the way the government of the grand alliance would like the country's foreign policy to be modulated in the future.

We must certainly not bear malice towards anyone, but in the field of human relationship transcending beyond to relationship between countries, charity

plays very little role, and in fact being charitable is seen as a weakness. In today's world nothing is given out for free, and to expect others to do so is living in a fool's paradise.

Even in the dole that is given out by the international financial institutions no one can fail to notice the strings attached. What we have got so far through our foreign policy projections has been a function of our diplomacy and not, one must emphasise, because of anybody's charity.

What our foreign policy planners must not lose sight of is that our policy must preserve our national interest. Regrettably, to many the expression has acquired a malicious connotation without realising that pursuit of national interest remains the be all and end all of foreign policy objectives of all countries. It remains constant, although the different governments that happen to be in power may define it differently.

One feels that the present government must not only be alive to the real issues that confront us but also tackle them head-on without shelving those, hoping that they would take care of themselves eventually.

What the Awami League must start off with is to dispel a perception held by most of its opponents that it is a pro-Indian party. It is principles and pragmatism and not emotion that should dictate the course that Bangladesh should steer in its relationship with other countries, particularly its neighbours.

Unfortunately, during the erstwhile regime, our relationship with the neighbouring countries was largely weighed down by a mindset dictated by preconceived notions. And when heart dictates the head, there are all the chances of going wrong.

If we were to accept that diplomacy is predicated on three concentric circles, each one circumscribing the neighbours, the region and beyond the region -- in that order, we have one country that predominates two of the three circles -- India. It is a fact that over the entire period of our independence our foreign office and the policy makers had remained busy with devising the ways and means to best co-exist with India. And that, perhaps, was as it should have been.

Over the last 38 years, we have behaved like a country with one neighbour (we took Burma for granted) -- a compulsion brought about by many factors, but most of all by the fact that we are horribly India-locked, and we cannot wish this away. By the same token, India is aware of Bangladesh's importance given its geopolitical location, and would like to pursue a cordial and friendly relationship.

It is only when we are able to reconcile our respective national interests while conceding to various demands dictated by economic, security or geopolitical compulsions of the other party, can we have a win-win situation for all. And here, perhaps the foreign minister's comment that there are many things for Bangladesh to offer to its neighbours and the international community assumes great relevance.

There are a host of issues for the government to address urgently, of which I mention only two.

First, no time must be wasted in addressing the transit issue with India. It is not only an economic issue but also one that relates to other strategic factors. While the government must make it known to India that there is apprehension in certain quarters regarding granting transit to it, it must do the necessary economic and tell the people the likely economic benefits of such an arrangement.

Secondly, the maritime boundary issue has acquired such an importance that it brooks no further delay in getting India and Myanmar to arrive at an amicable solution. If left unattended we risk losing an area almost three times the size of the landmass of Bangladesh.

These two issues will severely test the new government's mettle in diplomacy. And as the US secretary-of-state designate said the other day, diplomacy is hard work, and when we work hard diplomacy works.

The author is Editor Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

## Foreign Ministry needs to be revamped

We hope the new foreign minister will revamp the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In all countries, the Ministry or Department of Foreign/External Affairs has the primary and coordinating role in dealing with foreign countries.

HARUN UR RASHID

**T**HE appointment of Dr. Dipu Moni as foreign minister is a dramatic way of breaking tradition, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has demonstrated her desire to put gender equality in practice. In Asia, Japan, Philippines and Nepal had female foreign ministers. There are many countries where females had held, or are holding, the position of foreign minister.

We hope the new foreign minister will revamp the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In all countries, the Ministry or Department of Foreign/External Affairs has the primary and coordinating role in dealing with foreign countries.

Currently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has no role in many of the vital areas in foreign relations. For example, in economic and foreign trade matters, or negotiations in climate change, MFA has a marginal or no role at all.

### Role of Foreign Ministry

Bangladesh foreign policy stands primarily on two pillars: security and development. Foreign policy covers the entire gamut of foreign relations in such areas

as security, trade, manpower export, foreign direct investment, foreign aid, cultural matters, curbing terrorism, and humanitarian and environmental issues.

Foreign policy is no more confined to traditional diplomacy. It also includes economic and environmental diplomacy. The myth that foreign policy does not affect ordinary people is wrong. Let me provide two examples.

Imagine two countries negotiating over fishing rights in the Bay of Bengal, or think about two countries sharing a common border and working out agreements on water-sharing, the migration of animals, or trans-border drift of ash or chemicals or pollution. Any agreed arrangements would directly affect ordinary people.

The price at which our people sell or buy a commodity, or the price common people pay for their food at a given time, is affected by global trade policy. Global trade negotiation is an important component of foreign policy because the outcome affects "bread and butter" issues of common people.

Let me give an example of the diminishing role of MFA. In recent years, the Board of Investment (BOI) agreed with

Taiwan to open its trade office in Dhaka. The Foreign Ministry was not consulted. When it created a diplomatic row with the People's Republic of China, the MFA had to deal with it and sort out the mess.

Some go to the extreme and say that if the arrangement of presenting credentials and farewell calls to the president by accredited ambassadors to Bangladesh could be managed by Bangabhaban or the Prime Minister's Secretariat, no one would miss the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The diminishing role of the foreign ministry is due to many factors. Some of them are:

First, in the past, foreign policy did not get as much importance as it should have because it does not bring votes. Second, the Prime Minister's Secretariat had been so powerful that it either interfered with or rejected the policy recommendations of the Foreign Office on a given issue, to the detriment of national interest. Finally, each ministry, under the current rules of business of government, deals within its jurisdiction with a foreign country.

In my view, at least foreign trade and economic relations with foreign countries should come within the ambit of the foreign ministry. In many countries, such as in Australia, the Department of Foreign Affairs has been re-designated as the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade.

Restructuring of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs needs restructuring in the context of the politi-

cal and economic environment of the 21st century. Two new divisions -- Research and Evaluation as well as International Legal -- with adequate manpower should be created as soon as possible in the foreign ministry. Without these two divisions the MFA is a boat without a rudder.

The Research and Evaluation Division will conduct in-depth research of regional and global events and their anticipated impact on Bangladesh. It will provide the government short-term and long-term policy options within which Bangladesh may operate in the next 5 or 10 or 15 years. The International Legal Division will examine the ramifications of an issue from international law point of view, for example, maritime boundary, and sharing of common river waters.

Bangladesh foreign policy operates in an external environment, for instance, how Bangladesh should work to ensure greater regional and global security, how it should advance economic and trade interests, how it should address the adverse effects of climate change, and how it should respond to some of the issues of the new international agenda -- food security, energy security, water security and terrorism.

The new foreign minister should take a hard look at the functions of the foreign ministry if Bangladesh needs to successfully position itself and advance its national interests in the coming years.

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

## Deconstructing Israel's mantra

While demonising Hamas as a terrorist group, the current Israeli leadership should remember that some of their former prime ministers were branded as terrorists by the British. After all, it was Menachem Begin, who personally led the terrorists of Irgun to blow up the King David Hotel in 1946, killing 91 people

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

**S**HAME on Israel for unleashing its latest murderous assault on Gaza, and shame on the US for giving its unconditional support for it. Shame on the Arab governments for acquiescing to it, and shame on Europe for its cowardly inaction! As I write, the humanitarian situation in Gaza is worsening by the minute -- Israeli tanks are entering deep into densely populated areas, Israeli F-16 jet fighters are firing missiles and their helicopter gun-ships and naval vessels are bombarding Gaza indiscriminately, killing and wounding civilians. If there is a hell on earth, this is it.

To justify all this, the Israeli leaders are repeating the mantra that it is an act of self-defence, and its objective is to put an end to rocket firing on the peace-loving citizens of the southern Israeli towns by the Hamas "terrorists" from Gaza. They are also trying to sell the idea that Gaza's history started in 2005 when Sharon withdrew Israel's soldiers and settlers from Gaza, thus technically ending the Israeli occupation.

They are also repeating that, instead of developing Gaza's economy, the ungrateful Gazans under the leadership of these

"terrorists" have been busy rearming Hamas militia and firing rockets on the Israeli civilians. But did Gaza's history begin in 2005? Of course not.

First of all, Israel's leaders and the West seem to have forgotten that the majority of the 1.5 million Palestinians who now live in this narrow strip of land are the descendants of the Palestinians who were driven out of their homes in towns and villages like Ashkelon and Beersheba (now part of southern Israel) by the Israeli army in 1948. Even prior to that, during the days of British mandate, the Jewish terrorist organisation Irgun terrorised Palestinian villages with clear intention of driving them out of what is today Israel.

While demonising Hamas as a terrorist group, the current Israeli leadership should remember that some of their former prime ministers were branded as terrorists by the British. After all, it was Menachem Begin, who personally led the terrorists of Irgun to blow up the King David Hotel in 1946, killing 91 people

Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, and both are still under Israeli occupation. With nearly half a million settlers in Jerusalem and West Bank, the idea of a two-state solution is rapidly becoming obsolete.

Although now there are no settlers in Gaza, it is under virtual siege. Nothing and nobody can enter or exit Gaza without Israel's permission -- not even the sick seeking medical attention or Fulbright scholars to attend universities in the US. Israel controls Gaza's air space, and sea-coast -- so much so that Gaza's fishermen cannot fish off the coast without permission from Israel. It controls all of its imports and exports, including fuel and water supply. In spite of all this, Israel tries to maintain the fiction that it ended the occupation in 2005.

To make things even worse, in 2006, Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza after Hamas earned democratic legitimacy by winning the internationally supervised legislative elections by an overwhelming majority. Gaza now occupies a strange legal status -- it is an occupied territory, yet at the same time it is suffering from a total blockade imposed by the occupying power.

The blockade was further tightened after Hamas expelled Fatah forces in June 2007. Living conditions in the "concentration camp" of Gaza are so precarious that many Western intellectuals have compared them with those of the rat-infested Jewish ghettos of Warsaw under the Nazis.

Between July, 2008 and October 2008, Hamas observed a tacit truce with Israel by not firing rockets on the understanding that Israel would lift the blockade and open the border crossings. Since Israel did not fulfil its part of the agreement, Hamas resumed firing rockets on southern Israel when the truce came to an end in November 2008.

Although Israel and its friends never miss an opportunity to demonise Hamas as

a terrorist organisation, it is worth mentioning here that in the eighties, the US and Israel helped create Hamas to weaken Yasser Arafat's Fatah. They had hoped that a large number of religious-minded Palestinians, fed up with Fatah's corruption and frustrated by Israeli occupation, would devote much of their time in the mosques praying and reciting the Koran.

Of course, they never imagined that Hamas members, besides praying, would also build up huge support among the ordinary people by creating an efficient network of social services. They also did not think that, like Hezbollah, Hamas would eventually build up a disciplined military force capable of waging a guerrilla war against the Israelis.

Sooner or later, this carnage will come to an end. Israel may be able to degrade Hamas's military capability. It may even be able to achieve its stated goal of stopping rocket fires from Gaza. But it will only be for a short while.

Israel will fail to achieve its principal objective of isolating Hamas by driving a wedge between the Palestinians and the movement. The popularity of Hamas will rise and the resistance to Israeli occupation will grow because occupation is the root cause of the conflict.

This carnage will create more entrenched hatred for Israel in the wider Muslim world. By its barbarous actions Israel has also contributed to the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe. Israel may now have a short-term tactical victory but it will be at a terrible long-term strategic cost.