

Government's stimulus package

Should reach the targeted sectors in time

THE stimulus package announced by the government to help absorb the knock-on effects global economic meltdown is a welcome step that could not have come a day later although not all affected sectors would receive cash incentive in the current plan.

In going about planning the utilisation and implementation of the allocation what should be kept in mind is that the fund is meant for the current fiscal year of which only three months are left. Hence, the time is of essence here to reach the whole amount to the targeted sectors in order to derive maximum benefit. And when time is the crunch, our experience shows that haste may result in injudicious use of the money. We suggest that the government devise a mechanism of sorts that would eliminate such a possibility. The issue, therefore, is accelerated and appropriate disbursement of funds.

We feel that the allocations of Tk 450 crore for cash subsidies to exporters, Tk 1,500 crore to agriculture, Tk 600 crore to power sector, Tk 500 crore as agriculture loan, and Tk 374 crore to social security are well balanced. We welcome the fact that the two largest chunks of the incentive have gone to agriculture and power as they should. Also, the three hard-hit sectors like frozen foods, jute and leather have been taken care of.

The garment and knitwear sector may feel unhappy at being left out of the cash support package. We, however, understand that the option for a bailout for the sector has not been discarded altogether, and there is time yet, and should the sector as a whole suffer a negative growth in future, we are certain that the government would come up with similar measures to help it tide over the slump.

We note that a measure of policy incentive has been given to the garment sector. We endorse the request of the garment and textile sector for greater policy support. That would to great extent help the sector offset the effects of the current global recession.

However, there is one area that the government has left out from the package plan. There is a need to urgently set aside adequate funds to rehabilitate the retrenched migrant workers returning home. We hope that the government will seriously consider this matter.

Sliding law and order

Tough action needed to check it

LAW and order is sliding in the city, as extortionists, drug peddlers and muggers have become very active in many localities. At least nine people were murdered and 20 others sustained bullet wounds in the last seven days. The law enforcers are apparently finding it hard to cope with the situation.

Traders and businessmen are the prime targets of organised extortionists who don't hesitate to commit even murder when their mission of collecting tolls is thwarted. That is precisely how some targeted people have lost their lives recently. These extortionists are trying to take control of places like bus counters and trade and business centres in the city. At times they turn extremely violent as was witnessed at a bus counter which came under gunfire, after the transport owners refused to pay tolls as demanded by the attackers.

Drug peddling is another menace which worries people in some areas. The desperation of the residents of Nazimuddin Road area was manifest when they formed a human chain on Friday last to bring the issue to public focus.

However, it is now evident that the unarmed and innocent people cannot face the criminals on their own, unless the law enforcers come to their rescue. The problem has been compounded by the fact that some of the criminals have political connections. The ruling party should stand firm against criminal elements who usually try to seek indulgence of powerful people. Otherwise, the law enforcers appear to lose much of their effectiveness while dealing with such elements. This is an age-old malady, the relapse of which is felt all the more acutely whenever the party in power fails to handle the issue in a non-partisan manner. Our politicians' pledge to curb crime and corruption comes under a shadow of doubt when they allow known criminals to settle down in their folds.

The crime situation was surely better, to begin with. And if it is true that the grip has slackened then we have genuine grounds to be worried.

The law enforcers have to be given a free hand, uninhibited by any extraneous factors, to deal with the crime situation. After all, scheme of ensuring people's welfare, a point high on the government agenda, must begin with perceptible improvement in law and order.

Chavez at it again?

If one-fourth of American cars are run on Venezuelan petrol, why can't the owners of those cars say 'Hi' to the Venezuelan people - including its president

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE photograph of President Barack Obama and Hugo Chavez shaking hands seems to have caused some furore of minuscule proportion amongst the cross section of American people. While some welcome the signs of improvement of relationship between the two countries, others feel the US president should have given the incorrigibly provocative dictator a cold shoulder. This is despite the fact that Venezuela is the fourth-largest foreign supplier of oil to the US So, you see, good old Chavez has done it again.

If you are curious, here are some of the comments I have picked up from the Net (Blog) that appeared immediately after the photo (given with this article) was published in the media. Here are some of them:

"Not impressed by this whatsoever. Chavez has nothing but disdain for our country though he loves taking our money when we buy his oil. He has dissed us at the UN. He has called our presidents idiots, yet, now the same man he called an idiot two weeks ago, is shaking his hand and smiling? What hypocrisy... on both their parts."

"This is disgusting. Obama is sickening. How in the world can he shake the hand of someone as despicable as that disgusting man? May god help us all. I am so glad that I did not vote for Obama. He has brought disgrace on this nation in so many ways"

"If bush smelled like sulphur, Obama and Chavez smell like trouble for America it never ceases to amaze me the stupidity of this administration. To openly apologise to a tyrant like Chavez is an embarrassment to this country and the citizens he is paid to represent and protect. I worry for my 6-yr old daughter and her future because of

Obama and congress. It is a sad day for Americans.

"Chavez is a democratically elected president! We are talking about Venezuela, not Saudi Arabia. Please, please, educate yourselves and stop depending on Newsmax and fox news to tell you what's happening in the world. You are getting mad and scared and you don't even know why!"

"President Obama's smiling/hand-shaking pictures with Castro and Chavez will soon be plastered all over Cuba and Venezuela and will be used as signs that America supports their repressive regimes. President Obama's behaviours continue to be just unbelievable."

"That picture makes me sick... just proves that Obama cares nothing about this country. When will people wake up and get this person out of office???? As I said in another blog the only reason Obama won in the first place was acorn taking people to vote and telling them who to vote for because half the people have no education and can't think for themselves. No more of my money to acorn..."

Wow! Plenty of angry people out there!

It seems Hugo Chavez still has the uncanny habit of picking up quarrels with America. No matter what he says or does, goes against him. First, he had baffled the world once when he said at the UN, "I can smell sulphur in the air. The devil was here yesterday." Outrageously naughty, isn't it? It had amused billions of world citizens who didn't consider George Bush their buddy in the block. Many even thought some of those grim-looking guys at the White House possibly had a good laugh over it, of course after locking themselves up in the washrooms.

And now, Chavez is being whipped for even doing something civilised -- a hand-shake! Come on, a handshake is a hand-



Chavez is being whipped even for doing something as shaking hands with Obama.

shake! Doesn't the guy have the right to shake the hands of the president of the United States of America? Not only that, he has also spoken about taking steps to improve relationship with America. He will soon send an ambassador to the US to start the diplomatic damage control bit.

Isn't it a wonderful way of recognising each other's right to live in this world that belongs to all of us? If one-fourth of American cars are run on Venezuelan petrol, why can't the owners of those cars say 'Hi' to the Venezuelan people -- including its president, leftist or no leftist? They need each other, don't they? It is apparent that Chavez has no grudge against the people of America. And if he has over-reacted to the policies of George Bush, then who hasn't? He may lack finesse, but surely not firmness in speaking out what he felt was right. If Chavez wants to look taller, if not in height but in demeanour and dignity, in stature and statesmanship, then why should the world criticise him?

And those Americans with anti-Hugo comments on Blogs don't really speak for every citizen of the US. I am sure, the major-

ity would want to see the Obama administration be proactive in making the list of US enemies shorter and that of friends longer. Is there any harm in that? Shouldn't each American, irrespective of political affiliation, be an US ambassador to promote peace in the world for the sake of America itself? One blogger wrote that she was worried about her 6-year-old daughter and her future. I feel she should have supported Obama or even Chavez if it comes to ending enmity and working for peace. Lady, otherwise, what would your daughter do in the war-torn world?

I wonder what makes people like Hugo Chavez so courageous and defiant. How dare they look in the eyes of the rulers of mighty countries and say something we can never think of saying? We cannot even lift our eyes before some under-under-under secretary, or nondescript MP, when they put words in our mouth. It is dignity, my dear Watson.

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There is nothing called the 'moderate Taliban'

History is uncomfortable with neat closures. Taliban and Pakistan are not what they were in 1994: the former is much stronger, the latter substantially weaker. The fall of Kabul to the Taliban could be a curtain raiser to the siege of Islamabad.

MJ AKBAR

IF necessity is the mother of invention then politics is often the father. Barack Obama has invented a phrase that did not exist on January 20, the day he became president. Anxious to win a war through the treasury rather than the Pentagon, he has discovered something called the "moderate Taliban" in Afghanistan. Joe Biden, his vice president, has found the mathematical coordinates of this oxymoron: only 5% of the Taliban are "extremists."

Welcome to Obama's first big mistake.

The war in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not simply against some bearded men and beardless boys who have been turned into suicide missionaries. The critical conflict is against the ideology of a chauvinistic theocracy that seeks to remould the Muslim world into a regressive region from which it can assault every aspect of modernity, whether that be in political space or the social sphere.

Washington has a single dimension definition of "moderate": anyone who stops an active, immediate war against the US is a "moderate." Let me introduce him to a

couple of "moderate Taliban." They are now world famous, having been on every national and international news channel these past few days, stars of a video clip from Swat.

Two of them had pinned down a 17-year-old girl called Chand Bibi, while a third, his face shrouded, lashed her with a whip 37 times on suspicion of being seen with a man who was not her father or brother.

Obama should record the screams of Chand Bibi and play them to his daughters as the "moderate" music to which he wants to dance in his Afghan war.

These Taliban are "moderate" by the norms of the Obama Doctrine: they have come to a deal with America through Islamabad. Pakistani troops are not engaged in their mediaeval haven, nor are American Drones bombing their homes. All that remains, one presumes, is that they are placed on the Pentagon payroll as insurance of their ceasefire.

Perhaps, in their desperate search for moderation, Obama and Islamabad will promote the denial being manipulated into public discourse. The unbearable Swat-

lashing video is now described as fake.

It would be nice to know the names of the actors who played such a convincing part in the filming of this 'fake.' Chand Bibi has "denied" any such incident. Sure! But was any doctor sent to check the scars?

Such compromise with 'moderation' has also taken place next door, in Afghanistan, under the watchful eye of American ally Hamid Karzai. He has just signed a family law bill, which compels Afghan women to take permission from their husbands before going to a doctor, seeking education, or getting a job.

The husband has become complete master of the bedroom. Custody of children can only go to fathers or grandfathers; women have no rights. A member of Afghanistan's upper house, Senator Humaira Namati, has called this law "worse than during the Taliban (government). Anyone who spoke out was accused of being against Islam." It makes no difference to the Taliban, of course, that the Quran expressly forbids Muslim men from forcing decisions on their wives "against their will."

Karzai's justification is the usual one: politics. He wanted the support of theocrats in the election scheduled for August this year. Under pressure, there is talk of a review but no one is sure what that means.

If it's democracy, it must be "moderate," right?

One can understand a post-Iraq America's reluctance towards wars that seem straight out of Kipling. But we in the region have to live with

the political consequences of superpower intervention, and the casual legitimacy that Obama is offering to a destructive ideology will create blowback that spreads far beyond the geography of "Afpak."

Benazir Bhutto and the ISI did not create the Taliban in the winter of 1994 for war against America. Its purpose was to defeat fractious Afghan warlords, and establish a totalitarian regime that would equate Afghanistan's strategic interests to Pakistan's. The ISI conceived an "Afpak" long before the idea reached the outer rim of Washington's thinking.

Pakistan worked assiduously to widen the Taliban's legitimacy and would have drawn America into the fold through the oil-pipeline siren song if Osama bin Laden had not blown every plan apart. In some essentials, things have not changed. Pakistan's interests still lie in a pro-Islamabad Taliban regime in Kabul. The "moderation" theory is a ploy to provide war-weary America with an exit point. India's anxieties will be offered a smile in public and a shrug in private.

History is uncomfortable with neat closures. Neither the Taliban nor Pakistan are what they were in 1994: the former is much stronger, the latter substantially weaker. The fall of Kabul to the Taliban this time could be a curtain raiser to the siege of Islamabad.

There is nothing called a moderate lash, or backlash, President Obama.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert.

Our main enemy is Al Qaeda

Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has long governed a tinderbox. His party survived armed clashes with separatist rebels in the country. Last month a suicide bomber detonated himself at a crowded archeological site in Yemen. Earlier this month CentCom chief Gen. Saleh spoke with **Newsweek's Kevin Peraino** at his palace in Sanaa.

Peraino: There have been two prominent terrorist attacks here in the past several weeks. Is Al Qaeda growing in strength here?

Saleh: Al Qaeda has cells in Yemen, but our security authorities are hunting them down and searching for them everywhere, every minute, every day and every month. It's a continuous fight. We're throwing them out.

The latest incident is worrying because it seems like someone must have had inside information. Are you concerned people within your security services might have been involved?

We believe (the bombers) might have some persons who are positioned in the streets or inside hotels. They can provide them with information. It's simple. Also, we have a free press. They write that this delegation is coming, that envoy is leaving. It's not secret. You don't think somebody from within the

regime tipped them off?

No, no, no.

What's a bigger threat to the stability of your regime: the socialists in the south or the rebellious Houthi tribesmen in the north?

There's no threat, either from the separatists or the Houthis or Al Qaeda. But of course Al Qaeda is damaging our economy. It's damaging our tourism and business. So we have more concerns about Al Qaeda.

You hear a lot of complaints from Americans that your regime is too close to Al Qaeda militants. Is that something that concerns you?

This is completely false. We're suffering because of Al Qaeda. They're targeting our cultural heritage. Those that are feeding this thing are extremists.

But in the past your government has supported Islamic militants, particularly in the south during the 1994 civil war. That's not true. We have not supported the

jihadis or Al Qaeda elements. But in the past, based on American cooperation, we supported the volunteers who went to Afghanistan, who used to be backed and supported by the United States of America itself during the war against the former Soviet Union. I believe you have gotten your information from elements within the United States of America who want to see Yemen as an obedient country. We have our own policy, based on our national interest, based on our common interests with others.

President Obama's counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan came here a few weeks ago, and the Americans said publicly after that meeting that they had "concerns" about Yemen's ability to absorb the detainees from Guantánamo Bay. What did you say to reassure the Americans?

We are not obedient soldiers of the United States. We don't say just OK to everything that they ask us. We believe the United States of America -- just like any other country -- can make mistakes. American officials have threatened to send at least some of the Yemeni detainees to Saudi Arabia instead. If the Americans have a bilateral deal with the Saudis, it's up to them. We will always insist that these people should return directly to Yemen. They should give us the files on these detainees in order to send them to the court of law.

One complaint, though, is that militants are released too easily here. One hundred

of them were reportedly released this winter. Why did that happen?

You want to close Guantánamo Bay. We want to do the same thing when the law is applicable. These people, according to the law, should not be held in jail without trial. If you don't have enough evidence that they committed a crime, they should be released. We released them after we made a thorough investigation that they were not involved in terror or any acts of violence. And we took big guarantees from their tribes, from their sheiks, to keep them under continuous control.

On Guantánamo, the Americans admit they made a big mistake. Are you saying that Yemen also made a mistake by arresting these men?

Actually, we're not sorry, because these people were arrested on suspicion of belonging to Al Qaeda. When we got enough evidence to prove they're not involved, they were released. At the same time, there are more than 150 people still in jail because the security services say these people are dangerous. Obama has said he wants to engage Iran in dialogue. Is that a good thing? The gestures President Obama sent to Iran are a positive thing. Can he persuade Iran to relinquish its nuclear program? No, but he might convince them to make this program for peaceful purposes.

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