

Tannery relocation and river demarcation

Long overdue steps must be implemented at once

We welcome the recent High Court judgment that directed the capital city's tanneries to shift from their present location in Hazaribagh to Savar by February 28, 2010, as per an earlier HC directive.

We are particularly gratified to note that the HC directive is time-bound and has a concrete time-frame specified, both for the shifting of the tanneries, and also for the demarcation of the rivers around the capital which the HC has directed be completed within the next four months.

It is this time-framing that is the key to action, and we urge the government to be expeditious in carrying out these directives. Indeed, much field work has already been done on the issues of industrial waste and how to alleviate the problem, and now is the time for us to build on the existing knowledge and bring it to bear on resolving the crisis that the capital city faces.

Of course, there remains the possibility that influential parties whose bottom line will be negatively affected by the reforms contemplated may try to delay this action. They may even produce documents of ownership for encroached-upon land and try to tie up the entire processes in legal complications. This has happened in the past and is undoubtedly likely to be attempted this time around, as well.

The courts are expected to be alive to any attempts to try to derail this bold reform process that they have now initiated, and to be vigilant that steps to circumvent their directives are not successful. Too often in the past seemingly overly-generous grants of stay orders and other legal maneuvers have continually stymied efforts to safeguard the public good, and it would be a shame if that were to be repeated.

The HC directives have electrified the citizenry and made people hopeful that wholesale change for the better and in service of the common good is possible. We at The Daily Star share this enthusiasm and fervently hope that the HC directives are fully complied with.

BNP's reform agenda

Internal democratisation has no alternative

THE BNP's reform plan, at least the first phase of it, has been executed as the party announced formation of the convening committees for its district (organisational) units. It will pave the way for the participation of the grassroots workers and leaders in the party's overall reorganisation scheme.

We welcome the move that will initiate the process of internal democratisation of one of the two major political parties. It should also ensure collective thinking, while broadening the base of decision-making, which has so far been highly centralised with the powers vested in the party's chairperson alone. The real benefits of internal democratisation can be reaped through developing a system that will enable the upcoming, committed and dedicated leaders to rise to prominence within the party hierarchy, while discarding the failed and the disgraced who have outlived their utility.

BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia has to bear in mind that the defeat suffered in the December 29 general elections could be attributed as much to the corrupt party men as to lack of internal democratisation which made it impossible for the party to face the situation as a compact outfit. The distance between the top leadership and workers at the grassroots was far too visible.

The stalemate arising out of the same committees at all levels retaining their positions, year after year, with no election and no chance for the upcoming leaders to have their turn, had to be broken. And what is particularly important here is to view the last election results as part of the cyclic ups and downs that any political party has to undergo in the highly volatile world of politics. The results were not really a debacle for the BNP; rather they were an object lesson for it.

A party has to face such political crisis by reinvigorating itself through new ideas, new plans and new faces of integrity and commitment. This is the standard practice all over the democratic world. But we notice that some of the leaders, having questionable credentials, have retained their positions in the committees. It may be rather difficult for the party to start anew while retaining the elements responsible to a great extent for the obloquy brought upon the party. The party has to concentrate on finding out the areas where things went wrong, instead of crying foul and holding certain "conspirators" responsible for their election defeat.

The first cut is the deepest

The first budget of this government is being announced at a desperate time when our exports and employments are threatened by the global economic recession and worsening power shortage.

SYEED AHAMED

THE finance minister is set to put forward the national budget for fiscal year 2009-10 today. This is the first budget of this government after the restoration of democracy and also the first budget of this finance minister under a democratically elected government.

Over the last few months numerous proposals/demands have been made to the finance minister from different stakeholder groups. At the same time, scores of speculations have been printed about the probable size and composition of the budget. Today, as the finance minister rehearses his budget speech, let's go over some of the key issues that will be fundamental to assess the new budget once it is announced.

Legal framework of PPP

The government is announcing an off-budget financing feature for development programs in its budgetary mechanism which may account about 15 percent of total national budget. The budget speech and the budget documents should outline how the government plans to formulate the legal framework of PPP projects; how the risks, resources and rewards of the projects will be shared among the public and private partners; how the procedural delays and bureaucratic bottlenecks will be reduced; and how the preference of social responsibility over profit will be ensured in these projects. As I discussed in a previous piece on PPP (DS, May 18), the success of the PPP initiative will depend largely on how transparently and efficiently the government sets the legal mechanism.

Record high deficit

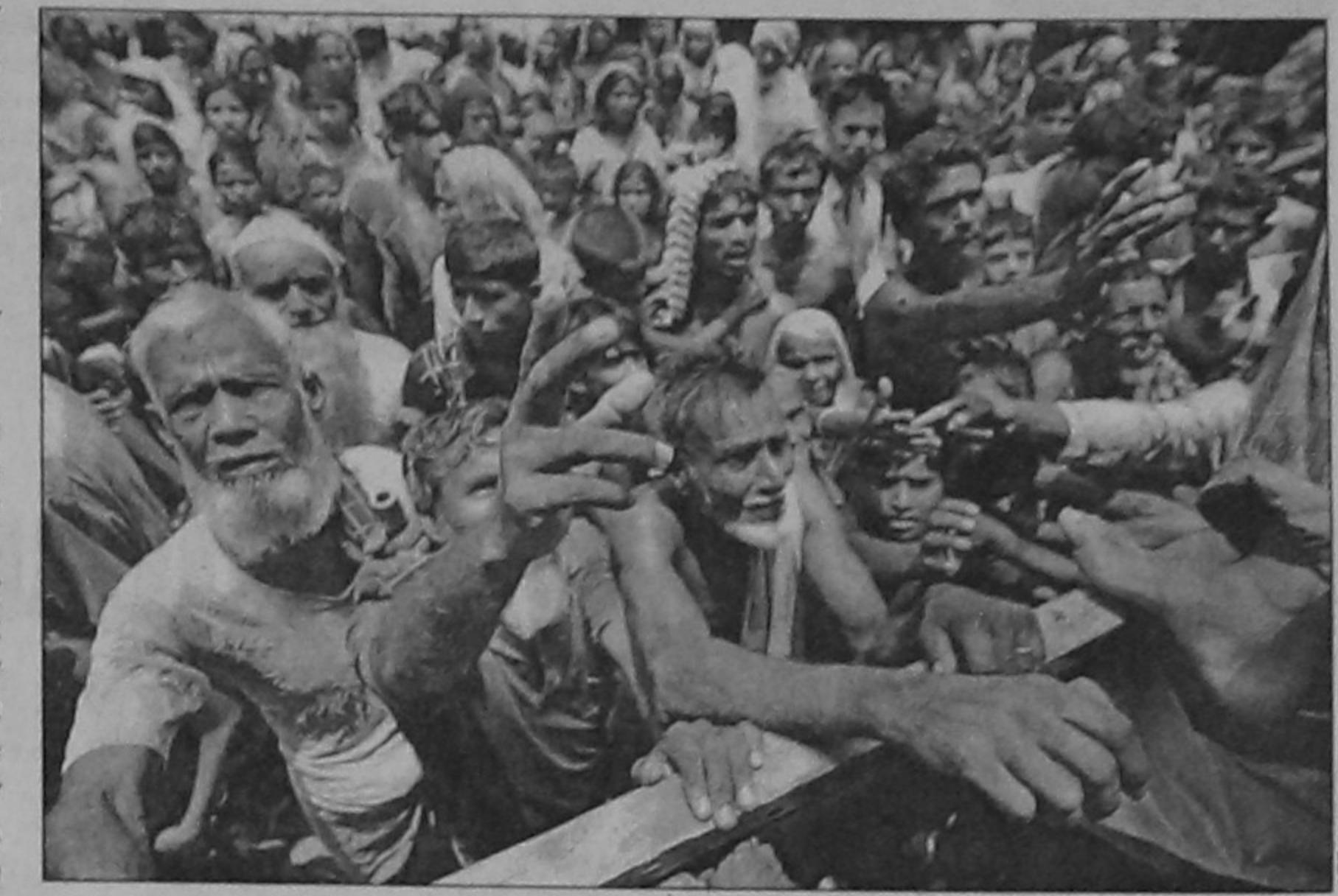
Economies, large and small, around the world are counting high budget deficits mainly due to their increasing revenue expenditures to tackle the looming economic recession. Bangladesh is most likely to follow the trend and record high budget deficit of over 5 percent of GDP has already been anticipated. Implementation of social safety net programs; block allocation for the PPP initiatives; implementation of new salary scale; and supplementary allocation to previously announced stimulus package will add up to this record high budget deficit.

The government is likely to go or foreign sources to finance the three-fifth of its total budget deficit. However, the finance minister may also increase the duties on luxury imports, target new income tax payers, broaden the tax base for VAT, and bring an end to sectoral tax holidays to reduce the revenue earnings-expenditure gap.

Politics of rice price

Too often Bangladesh's politics circles around the price of rice. During the run up to the last national election, rice price was a highly contested issue and even after the election, the two political parties exchanged barbs on an alleged promise to bring the rice price to Tk 10. Alas, they forgot how a farmer will survive after selling the crop at that price when the production cost was almost double! The fall in rice price in international markets and subsequent bumper crop in Bangladesh has brought down the price of rice at the end.

A series of suggestions have been made over the past couple of months including imposing duty on rice import, purchasing the grains directly from the farmers and



What has the finance minister got for them?

increasing government's storage capacity to develop buffer stock to protect the farmers. As the country awaits another good harvest of Boro, it would be interesting to see how the budget aims to safeguard the farmers from further decline in price.

Election manifestos and budget proposals

It is expected that the first budget of the newly elected government will address its election promises. While the finance minister goes over the budget speech, let's revisit AL's election manifestos to see if it resonates with the budget proposal. AL's election manifestos promised that highest budgetary allocation will be given to education, science and information technology sectors; power production will be increased to 5,000 megawatt by 2011; special emphasis will be placed on expansion of facilities for research in agriculture; subsidy for agricultural inputs will be enhanced; employment guarantee scheme will gradually be made effective to provide

100 days employment to one youth per family; and a project will be undertaken for young men and women with HSC degrees for appointment in the "national service" for two years. These are some key promises taken from AL election manifestos and let's keep the manifestos handy while we listen to the finance minister's speech.

Traditionally, major reforms are initiated during the initial years of an incumbent government, since the political government become reluctant to take drastic approaches towards the end of its tenure, especially before the next election. The first budget of this government is being announced at a desperate time when our exports and employments are threatened by the global economic recession and worsening power shortage. Desperate time calls for desperate measures and what better time than now for finance minister to take bold steps to revive the financial sector! The first cut should be the deepest.

Syed Ahamed is a public policy analyst currently based in Australia and can be reached at dpwihlers@drishipal.org

Some dangerous liaisons in July

Terrorists who hate everything India stands for will not disappear quietly into a soft sunset. But nothing could be potentially worse than two nuclear nations trapped by intrinsic virulence on the one side and contemptuous indifference on the other.

M.J. AKBAR

At turbulent whisper is surging through Washington. Barack Obama wants peace in the life of his first term. He has discovered the magic potion that will kill the roots of two poisonous plants, Palestine and Kashmir. He told Israel that he wants a definite route map towards an independent Palestine state by July. July is also the month during which Hillary Clinton is scheduled to visit the Indian subcontinent. In her baggage will be a war manual for Af-Pak and a peace prescription for Ind-Pak.

Here is some good news for Hillary Clinton. The Kashmir problem has already been solved.

It was solved on January 1, 1948, the day India and Pakistan froze their troops along a Cease Fire Line recognised by the United Nations. In 1972, through the Shimla Agreement, they renamed this the "Line of Control." There are few international pacts that have stood the test of so much turmoil. This one has been tested by war in all its forms, regular and irregular.

Pakistan tried to change the map of Kashmir in 1965. In January 1966 it sheepishly reaffirmed its relevance at Tashkent

when India and Pakistan exchanged territories won and lost across the Cease Fire Line in the battles of 1965.

Six decades of conflict have not shifted six inches of grass from one side to the other. Six more decades of furious sabre-rattling or squalid impotence will not change the geography either. Hillary Clinton could sort it all out in the minute it takes India and Pakistan to affix their signatures to a document converting de facto into de jure, and declaring this Line an international border. Punjab and Bengal were slashed; Kashmir will become the third major province to be formally divided, and the ashes of 1947 can finally be interred with the bones of Partition.

India is ready to accept this reality. Pakistan might need persuasion. It has to be told that there is nothing to be gained by the complications of discussion, and everything to achieve through clarity.

What about the aspirations of independence widely attributed to Kashmiris? This is a chimera. The terms of British departure in 1947 were unambiguous. No part of the British empire or its surrogate dependencies, the princely states, was offered independence. The list of those who flirted with the possibility is long:

Pakistan could have opted for a peaceful resolution in 1947 and 1948. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir had been kept in abeyance. Nehru, in a note to Lord Mountbatten, suggested that talks could begin after the spring thaw of 1948.

It is possible that Pakistan might have gained a shade more territory through a negotiated partition of Kashmir than it did through violence. But history does not offer premiums for stupidity. The sensible thing to do now would be to close this hideously expensive chapter on the page where history left its bookmark.

It is common knowledge that Washington acutely wants the next round of Indo-Pak talks to be between the chiefs of the two armies, rather than the heads of the two governments. There is a substantive challenge, from terrorists and ideo-

logically motivated theocratic groups like the Taliban, to the stability of the region between Kabul and Delhi.

This can best be met by cooperation between Indian and Pakistani forces. That will not happen until the warriors are tired of war without objectives. India does not want any parcel of land inside Pak-Occupied Kashmir. Pakistan cannot get a yard of what India holds. So what is the conflict about except a self-destructive ego?

The elimination of war, even were it to come about, is not synonymous with the arrival of cooperation. It will take time before India and Pakistan fully appreciate how much they can mean to each other. Trade, the true lubricant of prosperity, is susceptible to more factors than Islamic identity. Dread of India's industrial power and capital will need to be carefully eased through sedatives.

Terrorists who hate everything India stands for will not disappear quietly into a soft sunset. But nothing could be potentially worse than two nuclear nations trapped by intrinsic virulence on the one side and contemptuous indifference on the other.

The obvious can stare you in the face, but you must also have the vision to recognise it. Hillary Clinton would do well to pack some specially-powered spectacles in her handbag. They would make a good present for her friends in Islamabad.

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

'Not the same America'

The day after Obama's speech in Cairo offering a "new beginning" in relations between the US and the Muslim world, Newsweek's Christopher Dickey sat down with the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Saud al-Faisal, to discuss the speech and its implications.

You've seen presidents -- and promises for peace -- come and go. Is there anything different about Obama?

We haven't tested this yet, but he showed sincerity in his talk. Different people came away with different impressions, but for me it was positive, balanced, comprehensive and many parts of it were very personal and touching. It hit the right tone from the opening salutation, *Assalaamu alaykum*, to the quote from the Qur'an at the end.

President Obama is very good at atmospherics.

But the key point was that America is changing policy. It is not the same America. He talked about humility, not power. He talked about democracy -- that the US wished the world to be democratic -- but is not going to force the world to be

democratic. If he was looking for converts to his way of thinking, I think he achieved it with the audience there, and with audiences everywhere in Arab and the Muslim world.

People were looking for concrete statements.

We told him this when we saw him before the speech. But we did not expect him to be so specific. He called Israeli settlements in the West Bank "not legitimate" -- and this is more important, and stronger, than "not legal," which has often been repeated. He could have done more on atomic weapons, because proliferation is not going to resolve itself.

What are Arabs prepared to do now that Obama has come out so firmly against Israeli settlements?

The speech is one stage, but it has yet to be

translated into actions. Arab countries have learned through 60 years of experience with Israel that it's not the agreement you reach with them; it's the implementation.

Now you have an American president who understands you, as you say. What is it you actually expect him to do to pressure Israel?

The US has the means to persuade the Israelis to work for a peaceful settlement. It needs to tell them that if it is going to continue to help them, they must be reasonable and make reasonable concessions.

Should the US cut off aid to Israel if it doesn't comply?

Why not? If you give aid to someone and they indiscriminately occupy other people's lands, you bear some responsibility. I would be very frustrated if I were Obama having this conversation with you. You've got Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying he won't budge, and you saying, "we made our offer. Take it or leave it."

What can we do more than that? The land that is occupied is in the hands of Israel. We don't have anything to offer Israel

except normalisation, and if we put that before the return of Arab land we are giving away the only chip in the hands of Arab countries.

When Obama talked about his commitment to religious freedom and women's rights, did you think he was pointing the finger at Saudi Arabia, which has none of the first and little of the second?

We don't mind talking about these things. We are moving in our reform process quite significantly -- and indeed he mentioned Saudi Arabia in quite a positive light when he talked about King Abdullah's interfaith dialogue.

In Washington, much was made of the image of President Obama leaning down in front of King Abdullah when he first met him. He bowed. But remember, he is also of a culture that respects age. It was not demeaning or servile bowing to somebody. When you see an older person, you respect him. I think those who made a fuss about it would do well to take such good manners to heart.