

Budget and the expectations of biotech scientists

We want the government to be more committed in developing a vibrant biotech industry in order to increase GDP by taking the right steps in the first year of their governance and by making the right budgetary allocations. Is anyone listening?

HASEENA KHAN

QUITE often, especially at this time of the year, we get treated to delicious lunches, courtesy of students who have obtained either a US, European or Japanese scholarship for pursuing research leading to a higher degree. They simply cannot wait to work in these advanced laboratories and use their skills in biotechnology to solve the many problems in health, agriculture etc. that afflict mankind.

Every time this happens I cringe and think here goes another one. One by one we are losing the best sons of the soil. Most of them have research in their blood, and would love to come back after their higher degree and work to lift the country out of poverty. But most cannot come back. Why?

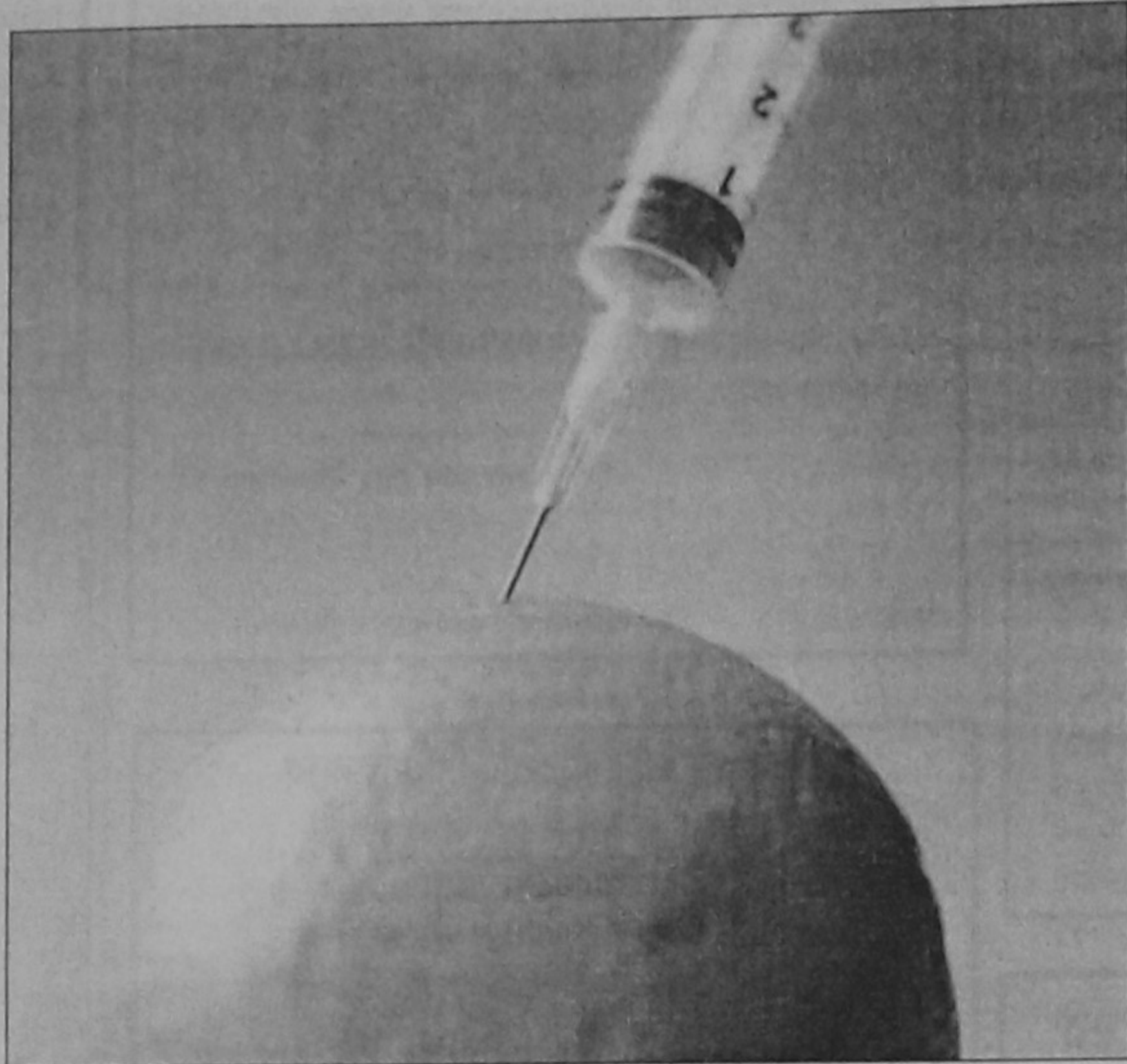
When trying to bring some senior economists and policy makers to a round-table conference we had arranged just before the national elections, I realised that the answer may lie in our mindset. We wanted to bring politicians from the major political parties to this conference in order to impress upon them the necessity of using biotechnology in national development, so that they would include the same in their manifesto.

We were turned down on the pretext that they were busy campaigning in their constituencies. We believed them, ignoring the thought at the back of our minds that they were not interested in biotechnology.

We had also approached some senior economists and those who had played a big role in the past in the policy making of the country. One such individual said that he would be out of the country at that time. However, when I insisted that we would even consider changing the date of the conference to suit his availability, he bluntly said that he would never have time for biotechnology. It took me a few days to get over the shock.

It has to be the mindset! There are some people who simply jump up at the name of biotechnology. Please give me a break! Biotechnology is not only GMOs, it is not just cloning and creating "Frankensteins." This is exactly what we wanted to discuss in the roundtable conference where no one who mattered turned up, because it was a meeting on biotechnology.

I was also trying to find an answer to this question while listening to our finance minister as he unveiled the 2009 National Budget. This year's budgetary allocation includes a hefty Tk.142 crore annual devel-



Technology is transforming agriculture.

opment program for the science and ICT ministry, a special allocation of Tk.100 crore for ICT development, and Tk.200 crore for equity and entrepreneurship fund for ICT promotion.

As scientists we were supposed to feel happy because of this allocation in the science and technology (S&T) sector, which is much higher than previous budgetary provisions for S&T. But, unfortu-

nately, the budget has failed to carry the aspirations of most scientists like us. It does not require doing extensive homework to know that, like ICT, biotechnology holds the keys to economic development.

Where is biotechnology in the budget? We feel ignored (you may very well ask when did the scientists of this country ever feel important?). Our frustration stems from the fact that to our policy

makers ICT is the only science and technology worth pursuing.

What is Digital Bangladesh supposed to mean? I give the present government more credit than to think that to them Digital Bangladesh only means an ICT driven knowledge-based society where all government, semi-government, including the private spheres, chores will be processed using information technology and digital gadgets.

Rather I would like to think that, to them, Digital Bangladesh means creating a scientifically proficient Bangladesh where a vibrant young generation will work in all spheres of science that will lift Bangladesh out of poverty.

Biotechnology is one of the key technologies that can improve the quality of human life by leaps and bounds. Food security has, as it should, enjoyed importance in the budget, but unfortunately all the incentives are in the form of subsidy and tax reduction to reduce the burden on the farmers.

The government should be looking into transforming the agriculture industry into a high-tech industry with the help of biotechnology. We need budgetary allocations to develop an atmosphere for innovation and entrepreneurship for active interactions between academics and industries for the development of new technologies, and its rapid transfer to industries through setting up start-up companies in the emerging areas of biotechnology.

Biotechnology incubation funds, dedicated to start-ups in the area of bio-

technology and life sciences, have to be provided by the government for our young researchers. I wish the high-ups would read the discussions in the group mails of our young researchers working outside the country. How they crave to come back, how they wait for an opportunity to use their skills in Bangladesh.

A reminder: We have a national biotechnology policy in place. We certainly need a biotech friendly budget to implement this policy and the government's Vision 2020 for eradicating hunger and, yes, also the shortage of power.

With the right enabling policies, and the budgetary allocations, our talented biotech workforce could develop kits for screening our shrimp exports for contamination so that we are not threatened with withdrawal of orders, develop molecular kits for diagnosing diseases afflicting our society so that we do not have to run to neighbouring countries for diagnosis, discover drugs that best suit our genetic make-up, develop alternate sources of renewable energy, sequence the jute genome to find means of reviving its lost glory, and numerous other biotech related activities associated with national development. Please address this issue now. Budget 2010 might be too late.

We want the government to be more committed in developing a vibrant biotech industry in order to increase GDP by taking the right steps in the first year of their governance and by making the right budgetary allocations. Is anyone listening?

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Tapping the potential

The introduction of a national service scheme is a timely and constructive step towards creating opportunities for unemployed educated youths, reducing unemployment, and facilitating youth development at the grassroots level.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IT is good to see that in his budget speech on June 11, Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith proposed allocation of Tk.200 million to introduce a "National Service" program on a pilot basis from the next financial year.

The salient features of the national service program, as revealed in the budget speech and earlier press briefing (June 6) of the finance minister, are:

- Introduction of the program from the financial year 2009-2010 in the districts of Kurigram and Barguna on a pilot basis;
- Gradual expansion of the program to other districts;
- Imparting three-month training to the youths, having educational qualification of Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) or equivalent, in youth training centres under youth and sports ministry;
- Employing the youths, on completion of their training, for two years in fields in line with their training, which will include agriculture, social welfare, and

housing and public works; (e) ensuring security of the jobs as the concerned ministries will not recruit anyone to the posts meant for the youths;

- After two years, the employed youths will decide whether to go for higher education or continue in their current jobs;
- The labour ministry's district bureaus will register the unemployed youths. The finance minister has confirmed that the national service program was in line with the Awami League's (AL) election manifesto, which promised job opportunity for at least one person from a family. Providing employment opportunities to the vast pool of unemployed educated youth has been a great socio-economic challenge for the successive governments in the country. The Labour Force Surveys (LFS) of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) recognise youths aged 15 to 29 years as youth labour force.

The last three reports by LFS show higher rates of unemployment among the educated youths aged 15 to 29 years. The LFS 1999-2000 showed that the rate of unemployment among the youths with

educational background of class IX-XX, SSC/ HSC and equivalent, degree and above stood at 17.5%, 23.5%, and 8.1% respectively.

The latest LFS 2005-06 (published in April, 2008) shows that the unemployment rate of youths in the same categories stands at 15.06%, 10.96%, 5.73% and 2.20% respectively. Although a decrease in the rates of unemployment is noticed between LFS 1999-2000 and LFS 2005-06, the rates of unemployment continue to be high among the youths with SSC/equivalent and HSC/equivalent certificates.

The LFS 2005-06 further shows employment rates of youths by major occupation. It shows that as high as 44.56% were engaged in agriculture, forestry and fisheries, followed by production and transport labour (30.63%) and sales work (13.06%).

Proliferation of schools and colleges, particularly in the rural areas, incentives given to female students at secondary and higher secondary levels in the form of exemption of tuition fees up to class XI, awarding general and merit scholarships, providing financial support on a selective basis for purchase of books, and payment of examination fees required for public examinations have helped enroll a good number of students from the lower strata of the society. But most of these students cannot go for higher education after passing the HSC/

equivalent level primarily due to two reasons: one, financial hardship of their guardians, and two, guardians' insistence on seeking a job.

A jobless educated youth, particularly a male, becomes a burden for his family. He gets little respect in his family or in the society. This forces him to resort to criminal activities such as joining hijackers, working as a trafficker of dangerous drugs, working as a musclemans of a corrupt politician, or joining a group of militants.

The introduction of a national service scheme is a timely and constructive step towards creating opportunities for unemployed educated youths, reducing unemployment, and facilitating youth development at the grassroots level. But its success will depend upon the fulfillment of a variety of requirements, which, inter alia, include the following:

- The recruitment and utilisation processes of these youths should, among other things, be fair, transparent, accountable, apolitical and non-partisan.
- Knowledgeable people have stressed the need to ensure that those youths who are trained by the military will not serve the purpose and interest of terrorists and other anti-social elements.
- *Bangladesh Today* of June 10 commented that developing and imple-



Waiting for the opportunity.

menting a national service scheme for Bangladesh is a good, maybe even necessary, idea, but before that the government has to work out the aims and objectives of the national service. Further, the scheme has to be supported by appropriate structures and legislations because without such necessary support the idea will soon run out of steam. It cannot and must not be restricted to providing jobs in government service because jobs in

government are finite and limited and cannot absorb the total youth force. The young people must be organised, trained and provided with the expertise which they are most suited to, as well as imbued with certain ethical and moral imperatives and let out into the real world every 18 or 24 months, thus starting a cycle which will bind the nation together.

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Political leadership and our armed forces

The new army chief needs this support from politicians, both government and opposition, to help regain army's due position and honour. Let's give the army chief the space he needs, the support he seeks, but not the interference he would rather not have.

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

GENERAL Md. Abdul Mubeen took over charge as the new Chief of Army Staff (CAS) yesterday. Retirement of the outgoing and emergence of the new army chief is a routine administrative affair that is not supposed to evoke interest in the general public. However, the current circumstances are a little different due to the unexpected events that happened in the last two and half years, during which army's role had come under scrutiny and debate for many reasons. Time has come to move on, and a new chief is expected to help us to move towards a functional and sustainable democratic system.

Gen. Mubeen faces the daunting task of restoring confidence in and respect for an important and powerful institution whose morale had been badly affected in the recent past. From irresponsible castigations by some quarters, political upheaval during 2007-8, to the BDR tragedy, the army has gone through

a stormy period which saw it entangled in issues that are otherwise supposed to be outside the purview of its regular activities. Hence, Gen Mubeen has embarked on a journey in which he will need all his acumen and professional skills to ensure that everyone -- from soldier to officer -- has his pride restored and honour upheld; as it always should have been.

Over the last two decades, the army has acquired a reputation for its highly professional services, both within and outside Bangladesh. From being the largest contributor to the UN's peace-keeping operations to their supportive role during times of natural calamities, from preparing a flawless voter's list to maintaining law and order during elections, time and again the army has proved its competency and reliability. Since the '90s, the army has come out of the cloudy period of the '70s and '80s, which were marked by coups, assassinations, seizure of state power, and embroilment in civilian affairs.

Today's army is a disciplined and professional force, which should be



Defender of the country.

treated with professional respect and given the required space for it to continue excelling in the tasks mandated by our constitution and enshrined in their institutional code of conduct. The successful democracies in the world have done a good job in this aspect, and have not dragged their armies into issues which are not their cup of tea.

Politicians and the government must let the army function on its own with needed political guidance, and without

undue interference that negatively affects the morale and the efficiency of the army. Unfortunately, during the fifteen years of parliamentary democracy, AL and BNP managed to politicise almost every sphere of our lives -- and even religion. Many competent and honest people, who are not loyal to any party, have become "endangered species" whose survival is at stake -- if not under the wings of either of the two political albatrosses that we have.

One of the most important lessons of 1/11 is what can happen when political parties, in their orgy of confrontation and hatred, lose sight of common sense and push both the country and democracy into uncharted territories. If there is one single lesson for both AL and BNP from 1/11 -- it is that using the army for political ends does more harm than good. BNP through the then president, tried to use the army to achieve its political agenda -- the price of which it still is paying.

It was widely believed that Gen. Moeen was chosen by BNP with the hope that he would serve them well during the elections. The irony is that BNP had never run into more trouble than it did at the hands of the army under Gen. Moeen. Even during the rule of AL, BNP was not as badly affected as it was in the aftermath of 1/11.

This should serve as a lesson for AL as well -- do not use the army for political objectives, do not drag the army into situations where its professional mandate is jeopardised, and last not the least, do not politicise the army through promotion, transfer, and postings that are based more on political allegiance as opposed to professional competency. There is nothing wrong in having competent and professional army officers who enjoy the government's confidence being posted to important positions. What is not good for the army or politi-

cians or democracy is a culture that either rewards or penalises army officers for reasons that are inherently unprofessional or political in nature.

No army chief can effectively lead his institution if his professional endeavours are not supported by the government. The new army chief needs this support from politicians, both government and opposition, to help regain army's due position and honour. The army is not an alien institution, and its members are part of our circle of family and friends. We hold the army in high esteem for their readiness to sacrifice their lives to safeguard our independence and territorial integrity. Let's give the army chief the space he needs, the support he seeks, but not the interference he would rather not have.

As a part of the state machinery the army is not above accountability and fair evaluation, but it should not be a target of regular bashing by some irresponsible individuals whose own credentials are not beyond question. Let democracy work, let the army work as well. They are not mutually exclusive propositions, but are complementary, the evidence for which abounds in the functional and successful democracies of the world.

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