

A farmer-friendly budget?

Our's is an agrarian economy with the farm sector contributing almost one-fourth of GDP to the economy, and nearly half of our labour force is engaged in this sector. To ensure food security we need to sustain the level of food self-sufficiency that we had achieved in 1999-2000.

REAZ AHMAD

RIDING high on a bumper boro production, the finance minister can well afford to inject stimulus in the export sector, widen social safety nets and even award the black money holders, who weathered the 1/11 storms, a three-year new lease of life. But the budget briefcase that he showcased before the nation on June 11 appears a little dried up when it comes to the point of supporting our economic lifeline -- the farm sector.

Last Thursday, when the finance minister earmarked Tk.5,965 crore altogether as both development and non-development budget for the agriculture ministry, which is significantly less than what the sector's budget was in the last fiscal, someone should have whispered in his ears that for the first time in recent years the country was going to boast a foodgrains output well surpassing the domestic demands.

Buoyed by last year's high market prices, subsidised fertilisers, and with zeal to recoup Sidr and other calamity-induced crop losses, farmers reaped a bumper boro this season. By conservative estimations, rice production will stand at

32.1 million MT by the time the country enters the 2009-10 fiscal, up more than 8.12% from a year ago. This will be more than the country's total estimated demand for 30 million MT.

But, just because the budgetary allocation in the farm sector has marked a downturn, should we instantly conclude that it's not a farm-wise budget this time around? If we do so, it will be oversimplification of the ground realities here, specially when the agriculture minister, in a post-budget press briefing, assured the nation of a prime ministerial commitment to allocate more in the farm sector, if necessary.

Whatever amount is allocated for the farm sector, success in farm growth will largely depend on ensuring quality and efficiency in implementing the plans/programs to be undertaken.

In the outgoing fiscal, the government heavily subsidised (Tk.5,785 crore) agro-inputs, but this time it lowered the allocation to Tk.3,600 crore as the finance minister said in his budget speech that prices of chemical fertilisers have marked a steep fall, down to one-third of 2008-level, in the international market. Against that argument, decreased allocation sounds logical.

If the outgoing fiscal's agro-budget was something to do with giving generous input subsidy to the farmers, this time it has to be ensuring fair prices to them so that any dampening effect in terms of price-fall does not affect them.

One way to ensure this is to increase public procurement of grains from the growers at premium prices, raise the government's food storage capacity and make best use of stored grains by timely and efficient channeling of the same into various food-aided development programs, thereby employing the rural poor.

One good thing about this year's proposed farm budget is that it has got all the guiding principles and allocations head in that direction.

The promise is there to significantly raise the procurement target to 1.6 million MT, 0.4 million MT up from '08-'09 fiscal, increase the food-security threshold level of grain storage in public granaries to 1.4 million MT, a significant rise from 0.8 to 1 million MT previously.

At the same time, the government spelt out plans to build a few more food godowns and repair the dilapidated ones. In his budget speech, the finance minister acknowledges that "because of negligence towards maintenance and expansion of food godowns over the past two decades, our food storage capacity remains insufficient compared with our requirement." It is interesting that the last two decades also include the 1997-2001 period when Awami League was in power.

It's encouraging to see that in 2009-'10 the government will allocate 0.4 million MT grains under test relief (TR), 0.55 million MT under vulnerable group feeding (VGF), 0.37 million MT under



They contribute the most, benefit the least.

food for work (FFW) and 0.26 million MT under vulnerable group development (VGD). If those are properly utilised under various food-aided projects it is bound to create a lot of economic and development activities and generate seasonal employments for many rural poor.

Our's is an agrarian economy with the farm sector contributing almost one-fourth of GDP to the economy, and nearly half of our labour force is engaged in this sector. To ensure food security we need to sustain the level of food self-sufficiency that we had achieved in 1999-2000.

To attain this, we need to give more money to the finance-strapped farmers. The finance minister proposed Tk.10,000

crore farm credit as target for 2009-'10, a modest rise from outgoing fiscal's target of Tk.9,379 crore. To gain maximum results from such increased volume of farm credit allocation, we need to, however, ensure that graft doesn't eat up a significant share.

Allocation of Tk.185.21 crore for research in agriculture should be treated as a step in the right direction, but it is not enough for significant research and development in the farm sector where cutting-edge neo-technologies are coming in and we have to use agricultural biotechnology to augment farm productions.

To increase crop production in '09-10 fiscal, the government proposed Tk.280

crore for developing high yielding seeds, and plans to increase the seed storage capacity from 40,000 MT to 1 lakh MT. The government-supplied seeds apart, we've to ensure the quality of the ones being marketed by the private seed growers and importers, which often deprive farmers of better grains.

Apart from gaining support from its own budget, the agro-sector will definitely be benefited by the government's huge allocation in the water resource sector. For instance, the government's plan of bringing in 15,000 hectares of land under irrigation facility by making 40,000 hectares of land flood-free shows bright prospects for the farm sector. Besides, it also proposes to excavate 40 km and re-excavate 65 km of irrigation canals, and construct 15 and repair 50 irrigation infrastructures. These steps will pay dividends for farm sector.

While the government lowered the budget for the crop sector, it, however, raised budgetary allocation for the fisheries and livestock sector by 19% at Tk.716 crore in 2009-'10. It unveiled plan for providing incentives to 12,000 farmers for increasing milk and meat production.

Here, the government must take into serious cognisance the disincentive factors that forced the homegrown milk producers to pour hundreds of gallons of milk on the streets in protest against falling prices. Only allocating budget won't do it all, policy support is vital.

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The revolution will bypass your filters

First Iranian friends, then larger circles -- shared activism spreads in concentric circles. A campaign convinces Facebook users to change their icons to green to show support. All surfaces are overwhelmed by this protest.

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

"Tiananmen + Twitter = Tehran"
- Facebook status line

SOMETIME on June 12th, the official news is announced: "Landslide for Ahmadinejad". Then, just as quickly, other news starts coming out, louder, drowning out the state machine. Data analysis showing votes between Mousavi and Ahmadinejad, as announced in six waves, in a correlation ratio of 0.995, a statistical near-impossibility. Professor Mebane's analysis, showing 9 locations with abnormal outliers. Results that defy political alignments (Mousavi losing in Tehran, which is flashpoint for anti-Ahmadinejad vote), ethnic loyalties (Azeri candidate Mousavi losing in Azeri capital Tabriz, Lur candidate Mehdi Karoubilosing in Luristan) and demographic shifts (young, women, first-time voters).

So far, all this is familiar. Election fraud stretches from Pakistan to Burma to our near and far, Southern and Northern

neighbours. Sometimes outrage over stolen elections is large enough to topple the government and force a re-election (Bangladesh). But other times, protests fade as the government waits until protestors are exhausted (Mexico).

June 13th to 16th, the attrition confrontation plays out differently. In 1968, protestors against the Vietnam War fought Chicago police and chanted at TV cameras "the whole world is watching". In 2009, the whole world is watching online, 24/7. The stage for Iranian activists are the streets, but also Twitter-Facebook-Flickr-Blogspot, and the censors can't stop any of it. As the Bangladesh government discovered after blocking YouTube, censorship isn't what it used to be. Just as we used proxy sites to get to YouTube (until our government gave up), Iranians are using anonymizers like Torproject.org. An Iranian tells The Independent: "The regime, can block Facebook today but they can't do it forever."

From the moment the Mousavi protestors hit the streets, Reddit, Digg, Flickr, LiveLeak, Facebook are flooded with



Graffiti on Iranian Cultural Centre, Dhaka.

links. Basij thugs beat protestors, and within minutes Youtube's Mousavi1388 channel ("Iranian professionals and students") has the mobile phone video online. Nothing is outside the camera frame. On my news feed, I see a link to protestors' "appeal to the world" reflected on eight accounts. Then sixteen, then twenty. First Iranian friends, then larger circles -- shared activism spreads in concentric circles. A campaign convinces Facebook users to change their icons to green to show support. All surfaces are

overwhelmed by this protest.

With so much data pushing through pipes, aggregators are pulling feeds together to find things quickly. Google is sub-optimal in this moment, because it's searches are algorithm driven. Aggregation sites Demotix, Global Voices, Tehran Bureau, Memeorandum are all running Google-like summaries of protest news. These are more effective because they are personal, editorialised collections. Crowd-sourced, human links beat algorithm pulls.

Dominating the net media is Twitter. 140 character burst messages sent from mobile phones, the twitterverse is most effective for instant information. Hash threads like #iranlection and #iran allow us to track anyone who sends messages with those tags. I look at the feed and it says: 12,138 updates since your last refresh. But my last refresh was a few minutes ago! The volume is so overwhelming that aggregators are taking the best of twitter and re-tweeting. Iran.twazzup.com, Tweetscan, Twitterfall, TwitPic, a family of "best of" tools.

The Iranian state is getting desperate, and tries to throttle internet traffic, block SMS flow, scramble satellite TV feeds. But every few seconds there is a twitter giving new proxy addresses that can be accessed from inside Iran. Even with net speed down to a crawl, activists keep pushing information through. We will bypass all filters.

One of the high-volume tags on twitter now, besides #iran, is #cnnfail-analysing how global news channels' have been to slow to cover this breaking news. Marshall Kirkpatrick writes on ReadWriteWeb: "Twenty years ago CNN's coverage of Tiananmen Square made its reputation. If in twenty more years it has become consensus that real-time, online, crowdsourced media is the best place to keep up with current events, [Iran] could be an important part

of that history unfolding."

Technology channeled into productive, political, networked, flattening activist work. This was the idea of some early net enthusiasts, even though so much was lost in the last decade of corporate hype and takeover. The internet is continuing to be the equaliser, making a solo vlogger the equivalent of the state's Information Ministry. But the technology is only an empowering tool, the power is still from people. Iranian citizens inside the country and in the global diaspora.

Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote a memoir of witnessing revolution: "The policeman's experience: If I shout at someone and raise my truncheon, he will first go numb with terror and then take to his heels. But this time everything turns out differently. The policeman shouts, but the man doesn't run. He just stands there, looking at the policeman. It's a cautious look, still tinged with fear, but at the same time tough and insolent. The man on the edge of the crowd...glances around and sees the same look on other faces. Like his, their faces are watchful, still a bit fearful, but already firm and unrelenting. Nobody runs though the policeman has gone on shouting; at last he stops. There is a moment of silence."

Kapuscinski wrote this in Tehran. 1979.

Naeem Mohajemen works on art & technology projects.

All's well that ends well?

If the axiom "all's well that ends well" is to be given credence, then General Moeen who rose above personal gratitude to the person who appointed him to his position that gave him the power to change the course of the nation, must be given due commendation.

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

FOR obvious reasons, General Moeen U. Ahmed, who retired from the army on June 15, is the most known and talked-about chief of staff of the army since the end of military and quasi-military rule that Bangladesh had to endure from 1975 to 1990.

General Moeen started his military career in January 1975. His service started as the distinguished "Chief of Army Staff's Cane" holder (which he took from Bangabandhu) of the pioneer Short Service Course-1 from Bangladesh Military Academy.

However, General Moeen's army career stalled to a certain extent until BNP was elected to power in 2001. General Moeen is from Noakhali, birthplace and bastion of BNP supreme Khaleda Zia and her family. His appointment as the chief of staff on June 15, 2005, superseding a few other generals (a common phenomenon in all democracies, however) was believed to be guided partly by the geographical proximity of his birth place to

that of Khaleda Zia's and because he was close to her brother, retired Major Sayeed Iskander.

It will always remain a debatable issue whether the declaration of emergency on January 11, 2007 was a necessity. However, given the fact that country was heading from the rubble of the BNP-Jamaat rule towards the ruins by the Iajuddin-led CTG, any form of deviation from this path was a welcome respite. The massive popularity that the Fakharuddin-led CTG enjoyed at the initial months of its tenure testified to the justification for 1/11.

Over the next two years, the action and inactions of the government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed would give rise to speculation about the presence of seemingly multiple governments within the government. The appointment of Dr. Fakharuddin Ahmed as the chief adviser was as laudable as the occurrence of 1/11 itself. However, many actions of the government, especially of the so-called joint forces, made such a decent person absolutely embarrassed.

While the arrest of many politicians who were widely known for their unbridled corruption was welcomed by the people, the lodging of legal suits and summary convictions, and in some cases for trivial reasons, cast a dent on the integrity of the whole process. It was not difficult to hypothesise the existence of political motives behind those arrests, cases, and convictions. Many of the arrestees had to endure severe atrocities at the hands of the joint forces.

But, unlike other generals who lectured the nation one time or the other, General Moeen's smiling face and soft style of delivery did not show that he was lecturing an ignorant nation or that he was an army general teaching the "bloody civilians" any lessons.

On the contrary, a few actions of the government (really of General Moeen) deserve special commendation.

Firstly, the history of our liberation war, which was absolutely distorted during the dark era of the BNP-Jamaat government, was reverted back, to a great extent, to its true form, thereby allowing our children to learn the true history of their nation's birth.

Secondly, the father of the nation was given due respect with the visit of the president, the CA, and the chiefs of three services to his mausoleum on his death anniversary.

Thirdly, no appeal was made by the CTG against the HC verdict overturning the cancellation of August 15 as the day of national morning, and the government



General Moeen U. Ahmed

observed the day with due solemnity and dignity.

Finally, the Election Commission was reconstituted from the rubble with persons of high integrity. The Election Commission, with the help of the army,

accomplished a historical task of making a fool-proof voter list, eliminating 12.7 million fake voters.

Shrugging off all the apprehensions, the general election was at last held with unprecedented 85% turnout of the eligi-

ble voters in a free and fair environment. The landmark election has not only given the country a popular and representative government, but has also greatly elevated the dignity of the nation in the international arena.

Helping to hold this free election, in the presence of thousands of national and international observers, was the prime purpose of 1/11. General Moeen has kept his words that: "Kadambini did not have to die to prove that she was alive."

If the axiom "all's well that ends well" is to be given credence, then General Moeen who, at the warranted moment, rose above personal gratitude to the person who appointed him to his position that gave him the power to change the course of the nation, which was otherwise heading towards an inevitable catastrophe, must be given due commendation.

During those turbulent days, his ability to maintain total discipline within the rank and file of his men reflected his strong leadership, failing which the nation could have plunged into turmoil. He did not follow the footsteps of two of his predecessors by usurping state power.

History will surely evaluate appropriately all that happened, positive or negative, during the said periods. When the dust settles, the commendations of his actions will surely greatly outweigh the condemnations.

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