

Mid-term budgetary review is a good move

The task is to speed up and ensure quality of resource utilisation

It is encouraging that the finance ministry has carried out, for the very first time, a mid-term review of the current fiscal year's utilisation of ADP and revenue budget allocations. On the other hand, it is disappointing to note that ten major ministries could not even utilise 40 percent of their allocated resources.

However, the mid-term exercise pertaining to utilisation of both the revenue and development budgets can serve in two ways: first, it keeps the nation posted on how the various ministries and departments of the government are performing or under-performing. Secondly, more to the point and operatively, the findings will hopefully help push the ministries to strive hard in the remainder of the year to fulfil the targets set for them. But then comes the question of quality which should not be compromised by way of hurrying things up.

Budget is an instrument whereby public expenditures are made with the attendant benefits of employment generation, subsidisation of agriculture and above all infrastructure-related developments. So that it is not only the speed but also the quality of implementation that are crucial.

The half-yearly review reveals that ministries of education and primary and mass education have come up with the best performance in terms of budgetary allocation implementation. But it has given the country quite a bit of disappointment where the performance of some major ministries is concerned. These ministries, with an allocation of 41.5 percent of the total national budget, have sadly failed to go beyond a 35.3 percent implementation of their budgetary provisions. Of course, attempts have been made to explain away such a performance through a reference to delays in tender processing and an absence of competent officials in the ministries. Unfortunately, such explanations may not sound credible in view of relaxation of the procurement policy and the administrative steps that were supposed to have been taken to speed up disbursement of fund.

National budgets being the key to implementation of revenue and development objectives, it is important that the ministries, both at the political and administrative levels, ensure a swift, efficient and red-tape free utilisation of the allocations given them. Actually, greater co-ordination between the finance ministry and the line ministries will have to be ensured at the decision-making levels. At the operative levels, project implementation machinery needs to be revitalised with project directors being not subject to transfers.

One final point, while periodic review should augur well for guidance, it is the implementation, monitoring and evaluation division (IMED) of the planning commission, which, if re-strengthened and empowered, could prove to be efficacious.

Death, hardly a matter for casual remark!

Such an utterance can only erode government's credibility

WHILE the family and friends of the slain Dhaka University student Abu Bakar have been mourning his untimely demise, the comments of the home minister Shahara Khatun came as a rude shock to all of us. One wonders what prompted her to say that it was an isolated incident and suggest that such things could happen anytime? Her remarks may have been construed to make light of a tragedy in which a whole family is reeling and the nation left shocked. This is completely out of sync with her position as the home minister.

A number of student organisations, especially Bangladesh Chhatra League, have been acting in a reckless manner in the public universities and colleges for the last one year, mostly in relation to controlling construction and business tenders, admission and allotment of dormitory seats. The signs of the campuses becoming restless over these issues were there and media have been diligently reporting on professional agitators and armed goons visiting student hostels and flexing muscles. Those reports and government agency intelligence reports should have prompted timely action on the part of the law enforcing agencies. But, to be candid, we have not heard of any ground-shaking steps taken by the government to contain the situation before it blew up in its face. To our utter dismay, what we find is irresponsible comments from none other than the home minister.

No, we do not believe that the death of Abu Bakar should be treated as an isolated incident. It must be thoroughly investigated and those found responsible exposed and brought to book. Irresponsible utterances have a way of not only feeding impunity culture but also of derailing investigation. We must beware of this.

The murderous transports

A comprehensive approach to ensure road safety will be necessary. The killer driver, who faces the music, is only the fault line of the entire systemic mess in the traffic administration.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

DEATHS due to road mishaps are on the rise. Reports on such fatal mishaps, taking a human toll, appear routinely in print and electronic media. Each death is a tragedy and, if given

ing a death trap for pedestrians.

Who is responsible for the untimely death of Hamim Sheikh? On the face of it, it is the bus that ran over him. There is no doubt about that.

Reckless driving, the illegal habit of picking passengers from undesignated

what happened in front of his vehicle, until he sensed the impact of something being crushed under the wheels.

How did he react when he realised there was something wrong? As in most such cases, his instant urge was to flee. The helper, primarily to avoid public wrath, signalled him to speed away. Even some of the passengers, too concerned to waste any time before they reached their destination, prodded the driver to leave as soon as possible. Members of the traffic police on duty were not far from where the tragedy took place, but they were perhaps too busy to notice what happened.

accident-related deaths occur every year in Dhaka. Of all vehicles plying our roads, the minibuses are particularly to blame for these accidents. As for the victims, 75% are pedestrians.

In other words, most deaths occur during road crossings. Occasionally, reckless drivers, in a competition to overtake other buses, mow down unsuspecting bystanders. To avoid traffic jams, small vehicles like motorcycles and rickshaws, often use pavements, to the dismay of the pedestrians.

So, all issues leading to a single accident has to be looked into when discussing road accidents and looking for ways to ensure road safety.

First, and foremost, the road transport authority must ensure that inexperienced people cannot get driving licences. The police, on the other hand, will have to bust the rackets that issue fake driving licences. In this connection, we would like to see the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) commissioner succeed in meeting his deadline of March 31, issued to the owners of fake driving licences.

Minibuses are notorious for delinquent movement on the roads. They are also largely behind the road tragedies. We know the reasons. The drivers of these vehicles, in the majority of cases, are promoted from erstwhile helpers. These irresponsible vehicles need to be replaced by bigger buses. This is also necessary for road space economy.

Besides checking for the faking of drivers' licences and removing delinquency-prone vehicles from city roads, authorities need to focus on the discipline of the traffic system. Police patrol on the roads has to increase so that vehicles do not escape easily after mishaps. However, in this connection, passengers, and particularly, the crowds on the roads, have to become more aware. This is because, in most cases, the driver who caused the accident is more fearful of the mindless mob than the police. In such a situation, he often runs over other pedestrians or crashes into other vehicles while fleeing the scene.

A comprehensive approach to ensure road safety will be necessary. The killer driver, who faces the music, is only the fault line of the entire systemic mess in the traffic administration.

Syed Fatahul Alim is a Senior Journalist.



Our lives are not playthings.

a closer and deeper look, has a moving human side to it. But all those deaths are not lucky to get wide media coverage and draw the general public's attention. Only a few of these sad incidents, that get extensive public attention thanks to the media, make the public aware and the authorities concerned to a new level.

The death of a five-year old child, a kindergarten student of the city's Kakrail area, is one such incident that has plunged the nation into the reality of roads becoming

spots, unqualified drivers, of whom few have genuine driving licences, and so on, are increasingly to blame for these road accidents. Most buses are ramshackle and without indicator lights or side-view mirrors. In the case of the particular bus that killed Hamim Sheikh, the driver had complained that his bus had no side-view mirror. As a result, he had to depend solely on his assistant, called 'helper,' to guide him through the city's messy traffic. So, it is hardly surprising that he was unaware of

All this provided the driver with excuses to remain 'nonchalant,' as a reporter noted when interviewing him.

Therefore, it is not hard to understand why drivers like Shamsur Rahman are growing in numbers, since the entire system is seems to supporting them in carrying on with their murderous trips everyday.

According to Prof. Shasul Haque, director of the Accident Research Institute of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), some 380 such road

Afghanistan: An exit strategy?

Money for peace is a bad proposition. The Taliban fighters will seemingly defect, cross over to Karzai, accept the money and return to the Taliban fold. The way forward is to make the Taliban a real partner in peace by sharing power.

MAHMOOD HASAN

BRITAIN, Afghanistan and the United Nations co-hosted the 70-nation International Conference on Afghanistan in London on January 28. The main themes of the daylong conference were: security; governance and development; and regional support. Actually, the focus of the discussion was on reintegrating the Taliban into the current political system of Afghanistan, and devising a strategy for Western forces to quit Afghanistan. This conference came ten months after the one held in The Hague on March 31, 2009.

The idea of reintegrating the Taliban was mooted by Hamid Karzai in his inaugural speech, when he was sworn in for the second term as president on November 19, 2009. "We must reach out to all our countrymen, especially our disenchanted brothers who are not part of Al-Qaeda or other terrorist network," Karzai told the meeting.

Suffering mounting losses in the war -- US and Britain seized upon the idea as a possible way of ending the insurgency and allowing the ISAF/Nato forces to leave Afghanistan. The Western Alliance has been fighting the Taliban insurgency for nearly 9 years without any sign of quelling the Taliban. There is virtually a stalemate in the war. The war has not only become prohibitively expensive, it has become unpopular in the UK and US, with increasingly louder demands for the return of troops back home.

The outline of the plan is to create a fund of \$500 million to woo moderate Taliban soldiers into the Afghan society. The fund will not be handed out in cash, but used to create jobs in the army and police and provide housing to the Taliban defectors. There is however a condition the Taliban has to dissociate itself from Al Qaeda. US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke said that many low and mid-level Taliban fighters may be motivated by the offer. The problem is how to identify non-al-Qaeda Taliban who may be willing to switch sides.

Karzai, in his statement to the meeting, has called upon King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to "kindly play a role to guide peace and assist the process." Some senior Taliban leaders have been maintaining contact with Saudi Arabia since being ousted from Afghanistan in 2001. Karzai is keen to see Saudi involvement in the upcoming *Loya Jirga* (tribal council) in spring.

Gordon Brown in his statement said

Afghanistan has entered "the transition process. ...By the middle of next year, we have to turn the tide in the fight against the insurgency." He outlined the plan to raise Afghan forces to 300,000 and hand over security responsibilities progressively to Afghan forces by 2011 -- the time set by President Obama to start withdrawing US troops. Strengthening the Afghan forces will in turn weaken the Taliban, and compel them to come to the negotiating table, Brown said. He further said that those who will not accept the offer will be hounded out militarily -- the old "carrot and stick policy." "The first thing is to strengthen the Afghan forces, and then to weaken the Taliban by dividing them," Brown told the BBC. It smacks of the British imperial strategy -- "to divide and rule."

Meanwhile, before the conference, Western Army chiefs had been elaborating on the exit strategy. British Army Chief General David Richards said that negotiations with the Taliban have to be done from a position of strength. "It is matter of timing, not the principle," he remarked. General David Petraeus of US Central Command and General Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan have both said that an additional 30,000 US troops will break the current stalemate in fighting. They hope that negotiations with senior Taliban leaders and the Kabul government will lead to a peace deal. Nato Chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen also joined the conference to draw up strategies for the transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan forces.

On January 26, Turkish President Abdullah Gul organised a meeting in Istanbul with Pakistan President Asif Zardari and President Hamid Karzai to support the London conference. Ministers and officials from Iran, Russia, China, Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE attended the meeting to discuss a common position on the Afghanistan reconciliation plan. Iran, a major stakeholder in Afghan affairs, was conspicuously absent from the London conference.

Karzai plans to buy peace with Western money. Money for peace is a bad proposition. The Taliban fighters will seemingly defect, cross over to Karzai, accept the money and return to the Taliban fold. The way forward is to make the Taliban a real partner in peace by sharing power. One must also remember that in feudal Afghanistan, West-imposed democracy will not solve the problems of the corrupt Hamid Karzai government.

Besides, the fraudulent presidential election last year has actually made Karzai's position precarious. Some of his



Afghan soldiers: Where does their loyalty lie?

Cabinet members have been thrown out by the parliament. The Taliban is quite aware that lack of legitimacy has made Karzai desperate to strike a peace deal. To achieve peace, the traditional system of *Loya Jirga* will have to be restored in Afghanistan, where tribal elders wield indisputable powers within their clans. This is, indeed, another kind of traditional democracy that Afghans value and uphold.

Interestingly, the Taliban have not, so far, shown any willingness toward Karzai's reconciliation plan and possible peace deal. The reasons are evident. Taliban leaders feel they are in a commanding position in the war. Publicly, the Taliban often reiterate that they will oust the foreign forces before peace can be achieved in Afghanistan. "We cannot say how soon we will achieve victory. Our mission is sacred, victory and defeat are in the hands of God," Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf told Reuters. There are reports that

the West has been talking to lower level Taliban leaders, as they still have difficulty dealing with Mollah Muhammad Omar.

Although US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that handing over security to Afghans was "not an exit strategy," it is evident that the war-weary US administration is keen to close the Afghan adventure.

In my column on August 24, 2009, I suggested that the US should start a meaningful dialogue with the Taliban to bring them into mainstream Afghan politics. The exit strategy seems achievable, provided the West gives up the policy of "divide and rule." Peace can be achieved only if power is shared with the Taliban and other major tribal leaders. It is a welcome development that the West has realised that there is a need for a peace deal with the Taliban before they can get out of Afghanistan.

Mahmood Hasan is a former Ambassador and Secretary, and Policy Advisor, Center for Foreign Affairs Studies.