

A matter of rights with obligations

Let our lawmakers pay taxes

HERE is something self-evident about the way a modern state conducts itself. It is that all citizens are equal before the law and, being equal, they enjoy all the amenities the state has to give them. At the same time, the state enjoins upon them all the responsibilities they must carry out in order for the state to work well. A particular responsibility of citizens is a payment of taxes. In Bangladesh, any citizen who earns more than Tk. 1,62,000 a year must pay taxes. In these last few years, a concerted drive has been made to convince citizens that they must not avoid such payment, that indeed it is a moral and legal duty to cough up the taxes their earnings make mandatory for them. While the system is yet to be perfect and foolproof, we notice that the culture of giving something back to the state is a lesson the larger body of citizens has been learning happily.

That brings us to the issue of why, in all this talk of equal rights and equal responsibilities, our lawmakers must stay away from a payment of taxes. As a report in a local newspaper has shown so graphically, Members of Parliament in Bangladesh have refrained from paying taxes where every other section of society must pay those very taxes without fail. An MP belonging to the ruling party has tried to explain the matter away, rather unconvincingly. He thinks an MP does not get a salary but an honorarium, meaning taxes are not for him. On the other hand, another lawmaker, this time from the opposition, argues that like every other citizen an MP must pay his dues to the state.

Look at the figures, for they certainly make the case for an MP to pay taxes. Every month a lawmaker earns Tk. 99,000 as salary and allowances. On the other hand, a secretary to the government or an official of similar rank earns Tk. 63,000 a month, which again is taxable. Annually, with all his salary and allowances, a lawmaker earns Tk. 11,97,600. And yet the MP does not have to pay taxes. Something is wrong in such a system.

The wrong comes in the knowledge that it is the responsibility of Members of Parliament to formulate laws which must be equally applicable to all. In the present situation, it is clear that MPs, while decreeing laws and rules for other citizens, have kept themselves free of the responsibility of paying taxes. That is as unfair as it is unacceptable in a modern state. Even in neighbouring India lawmakers must pay income tax, though their other perks and privileges remain tax-free. Conditions are similar in other countries as well. That being the reality, it is time for the government, indeed for the Jatiyo Sangsad, to ensure that income tax is imposed on lawmakers' earnings as well. On the moral plane, if citizens can pay taxes despite all the difficulties they face in everyday life, in coming by essential items of daily consumption, indeed in living honest lives, it does not make sense for our lawmakers to keep themselves away from paying income tax.

Governance is a matter of setting moral standards for everyone to uphold. It begins at the top. That being the truth, let our MPs correct the situation and convince the people of Bangladesh that lawmakers are not and cannot be above the law. Let them begin paying their dues to the republic.

A laudable move

It needs bolstering and replication

THE initiative to set up a call centre to receive complaints related to stalking and provide legal aid in case of need, couldn't have come a day later. For, chasing and pestering young girls have assumed a menacing proportion. So much so that victims have even been driven to committing suicide sending shock waves across society lately.

It has indeed become a deeply entrenched and pervasive social malady acquiring a certain electronic dimension, to top it all. Incidence of stalking through e-mail and mobile messaging has gone up alarmingly, much of which goes unreported just as the incidents of sexual harassment generally were veiled in a culture of silence for long. As a matter of fact, victims at the initial stages, for the most part, keep their agonies to themselves for fear of reprisal or feel socially inhibited to be sharing their problems. Whereas timely intervention could have alleviated their suffering, there being no tangible avenues for redress that has had to be ruled out. But now, Windmill info Tech Limited, a call centre operator and a local NGO, The Hunger Project have signed a deal opening a hotline to heed complaints and offer legal assistance respectively.

Since the High Court directives for law-making on the subject and the specific steps the judiciary had ordained in the interim for the various institutions, something tangible has been awaited in this direction. While society has woken up to the malaise in part also due to demonstrations by girls of schools and colleges, some concrete steps needed to be taken.

In this perspective, we welcome the move made by a call centre company to provide hotline connection to girls in torment and an NGO to arrange legal aid support for the victims. Our hope is that the police, intelligence agencies and the community should reinforce this initiative by saving the victim girls and their families from threats to their security and helping to prosecute the offenders punishing them in a deterrent fashion. Also, the move should be replicated by others.

Washington Summit: No peace, no war

Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, former editor of Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, wrote after the 1967 war that the situation in the Middle East was in a state of "no peace, no war." That holds true even today. The Americans have nothing to worry if the Palestinians fail to accept what the Israelis would like to offer. In that case there will be no peace, but the Americans will make sure that there is no war.

MAHMOOD HASAN

AMID widespread scepticism, the Palestinian and Israeli leaders started direct negotiations in Washington on September 2. Talks with Israel were suspended by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas when, on December 28, 2008, Israel mounted a brutal three-week long military assault on Gaza.

President Barack Obama, after long and arduous efforts, finally got Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas to agree to restart the dialogue in Washington. Obama also invited Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, King Abdullah of Jordan and Tony Blair, Representative of the Middle East Quartet, for the summit. Egypt and Jordan have already signed peace deals with Israel and recognise the Jewish state. Mubarak and Abdullah were thus in Washington to give a helping hand to Obama.

The first session of the summit concluded amid high optimism that the "Final Status Negotiations" would be completed within a year. The next round of talks will be held in the Middle East on September 14, where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Special Envoy George Mitchell will be present.

The "Final Status" has been under discussion for a long time now. It includes five core issues -- delineation of the borders of Israel; future of the Jewish settlements on the West Bank; future of Jerusalem; return of Palestinian refugees to their homes; and security guarantees for Israel.

Among the top priorities of President Obama, when he took office in January 2009, was to appoint former Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy to the Middle East, and push for a settlement of the conflict. In June 2009 he travelled to the Middle East and met leaders of the Arab world. He then went to Egypt and made his "Muslim-appeasement" speech at Cairo University, where he outlined US policy in the Middle East.

He asked Israel to freeze all Jewish settlements in the occupied territories and to accept the two-state solution for lasting peace in the region. Since then, George Mitchell has been working to get

the Palestinians and Israelis to talk directly and settle the core issues.

It is interesting to note that every US president since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war has been deeply involved in "resolving" the Middle East crisis. For US presidents not to attach "top priority" to the Arab-Israel conflict is inconceivable. But none of the Republican or Democrat administrations in Washington has resolved this seven-decade long conflict yet.

The US has always held a bi-partisan policy towards this intractable conflict -- keep the United Nations and other major powers out of Middle East (Russia, China, EU countries); never press Israel to comply with UNSC Resolution 242, which required Israel to vacate all territories occupied in 1967; consider the Palestinian issue as a refugee problem; and above all keep the Arabs nations divided and press for separate deals with Israel. Thus came the Israel-Egypt peace agreement, the Jordan-Israel peace agreement and now the Israel-Palestinian negotiations.

American policy on Israel has been largely formulated by American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a powerful Washington-based lobby group. It is understandable why Washington could never "condemn" Israel for its violations of numerous UN resolutions.

The United Nations is involved only marginally through the ineffective Quartet, which groups UN, US, EU and Russia. After the 1967 war the UN was fully involved when Dr. Gunnar Jarring was appointed Special Representative of the Secretary General U Thant. It is unfortunate that the Americans have elbowed the UN out from the scene. There are 65 UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict to which Israel has never adhered.

Both Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas are hamstrung leaders. Netanyahu (Likud) leads a right wing coalition government in Israel. His partners have been warning him against any deal with the Palestinians.

Mahmoud Abbas (Fatah) also lacks legitimacy because of deep divisions within the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). His tenure as president of PNA expired in January 2009, but he unilaterally extended it, without the approval of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).



Striding towards peace?

Militant Hamas, the majority party in the PLC, does not recognise Abbas as president, who only controls the West Bank. Hamas controls Gaza and has declared that it will not accept any deal made by Abbas.

Many within the Palestinian and Israeli camps have expressed their doubts about the success of these talks. Abbas has repeatedly demanded that all Jewish settlements have to cease for talks to be successful. He is a worried man, as he has no weapon to wield. His only strength is the world opinion demanding justice and fair play.

Sadly, the Arab League, which could have strengthened Mahmoud Abbas, has made itself irrelevant. Its mandate was to protect the rights of Palestinians when it was established in 1945. The last Arab summit held in Libya (March 2010) once again exposed how divided the Arab nations were.

Netanyahu said before going to Washington that he was returning to the negotiations without any preconditions. He is unwilling to stop Jewish settlements in occupied land. Israel has continued with its policy of "creeping annexation" of land and "creating facts" on the ground with a view to altering the demography in the occupied areas.

As for the Israelis, the status quo suits them fine. There is no challenge to its military might and with US backing it can do anything. The attack on the Gaza Aid flotilla in May this year is a case in point.

It has to be remembered that Jews are a persecuted people and are looking for security. Now that they have a land it is

unlikely that they will give it up through a fight. Even if Israel agrees to the establishment of Palestine, it will be a state devoid of sovereignty. Late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser said after the 1967 war: "What has been taken away by force can only be recovered by force." Only force can possibly compel Israel to give the Palestinians their rights.

As for the Palestinians, they are an aggressed nation evicted from their homeland and are fighting for sovereignty. The land on which they want to build Palestine did not originally belong to Israel before 1948. Nearly 78% of the land of original Palestine (under British mandate) is what constitutes Israel now. The remaining 22% of the land belonged to Jordan (West Bank) and Egypt (Gaza), which were occupied by Israel in 1967 war.

President Obama's popularity has dwindled over the past months and he faces Congressional elections next November, when his Democratic Party is likely to lose heavily. The White House expects the summit will help them earn some points against the Republican Party.

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Fiction? Non-fiction? Just a horror story

A European cartoon shows a puzzled London bookstore employee asking her manager whether she should place Blair's memoirs in the fiction or non-fiction category. It should really be among the horror stories.

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THE most reassuring aspect of Tony Blair's just-released memoirs was evident in the Reuters photograph of a bookstore shelf stacked with copies on opening day. A red sticker on the hardback cover bore the legend: "Half Price." This is poetic justice. A man who sold lies to his nation has been peremptorily discounted by its public.

All the oily self-pity that has stained the book's pages -- tears for the dead, alcohol for the living author -- was placed in perspective by the cold reception that this unapologetic misleader has got from a people disgusted by his malodorous past and continuing hypocrisy.

Blair's problem is not that he was mistaken when, in March 2003, he became a poodle-partner in George Bush's gratuitous war against Iraq. Anyone in office during a time of turmoil will make mistakes that could easily blemish an otherwise favourable record. Blair's problem was and is that he is an unrepentant liar who ordered the fabrication of excuses to launch a war and destroy a nation that had never threatened Britain militarily or shielded Al Qaeda. His foreign minister knew that Blair's thesis for war was a lie, and resigned, but the rest of the Labour Party mortgaged its conscience for power.

It was a coincidence that Blair's story (in the circumstances, an appropriate word) appeared on the day that America officially declared the end of combat operations in Iraq. The formal cessation of hostilities seems to have released many American commentators and officials from pretence.

While some analysts struggled hard to justify the war with contorted definitions of victory, America's defense secretary



Robert Gates admitted, at Camp Ramadi, 100 km west of Baghdad, that he no answer to a fundamental question: "The problem with this war for any American is that the premise on which we justified going to war proved not to be valid. Even if the outcome is a good one from the standpoint of the United States, it will always be clouded by how it began."

Blair knows how it began in 2003: Bush ordered his secretary of state Colin Powell to lie before the United Nations. Powell compromised his personal credibility by arguing that America had discovered incontrovertible evidence that proved Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Blair, never to be out-

shone in the deception stakes, told his Parliament that they were only 45 minutes away from mass destruction itself.

The natural growth trajectory of a serial liar is to become fantastically self-delusional. And so when Blair is forced, in his book, to admit that he lied, he compares himself with Nelson Mandela! After all, Mandela could spin a fast one

been a manipulator. Princess Diana was another one, wasn't she, he giggles. So that's all right, then; if you are as good as Diana you can safely destroy the world.

Blair is unable to come to terms with the Great Mystery: why didn't the Iraqis roll over before advancing Anglo-American armies, and welcome the Bush-Blair Viceroys who would lead them towards civilisation and McDonald's, whichever came first? Why, after Saddam had been vanquished, did the people resist the onward march of such impregnable armies and air forces?

Since his porous intellect cannot find an answer for the behaviour patterns of the world, the reason must lie in heaven: Islam. He writes he misunderstood the hold that "extremism" had on Islam. Only "extremists" could fight the toy soldiers sent by Pentagon and Whitehall, carrying chocolates and democracy; "moderates" would have welcomed the liberators while they looted the museum, took over the oil ministry and extended their march to the capitals of other nations on their "axis of evil," like Syria and Iran.

There are laws of libel; why are there no laws against hypocrisy? Or would that mean the end of bombastic memoirs? One record, with relief, that no Iraqi Arab memoir has, to my knowledge, called warmongers like Blair and Bush examples of extremist Roman Catholicism or American Puritanism.

Bush-Blair had a bizarre sense of humour; they contrived to name Blair a special peace envoy to the Middle East after he lost his job as prime minister. When Barack Obama hosted Israel and Palestine for talks on Thursday, along with Egypt and Jordan, he should have explored the potential benefits of amnesia. Alas, he forgot to forget.

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