

Digital promise unmade

HABIBULLAH N KARIM

On Thursday, the third budget of the Awami League-led government was placed at parliament. In continuation of the upswing in budgetary outlays of recent years, the latest budget marks an increase of Tk 33,578 crore which is 26 percent more than the revised budget for 2010-11.

The budget speech highlighted the "Digital Bangladesh" vision of the present government both at the beginning and at the end, while a specific section was devoted to Digital Bangladesh initiatives.

The Digital Bangladesh section of the budget speech even mentioned the ICT Policy adopted by the government in 2009 and the government's commitment to fulfil the 306 actions embodied in the ICT policy. However, when it came to budgetary allocations the budgetary documents gave no sectional tallies on Digital Bangladesh.

The budget documents have added the allocations for the science and ICT ministry together with education while primary and mass education has a separate section. Allocations for the ministry of post and telecommunications have been added together with transport and communications.

Digital Bangladesh seems to be the only major theme of the budget speech without a sectional tally. In the absence of a sectional tally, it is very difficult to tell the extent of total budgetary allocations earmarked for ICT development.

However, it is clear from the development allocations to the ministries of science and ICT and post and telecoms that no significant changes are afoot even compared to the budgets prior to 2009. The development allocations of Tk 215 crore for the science and ICT ministry is 26 percent higher than last year's which would put it at par with the overall increase in budgetary outlays but utilisation in the last one year is at least 31 percent below allocations as is evident from the revised budget for 2010-11. The allocation of Tk 222 crore for the post and telecom ministry is 39 percent higher than last year but is below the allocations in 2009-10.

The finance minister highlighted many achievements under the Digital Bangladesh agenda such as increasing internet and telecom penetration rates, gradually enveloping the country with fibre-optic cables, setting up computer laboratories in schools, introducing e-procurements and others, all of which are in continuation of incremental developments in these areas for many years now.



Students browse through internet on laptops in a Wi-Fi activated zone at TSC in Dhaka University.

We are yet to see a clear thrust on Digital Bangladesh beyond policy guidelines and directives. In fact the quantum leap in thrust on digital workplans as set forth in the national ICT policy 2009 never came. While acute deficiencies and long-term investment needs in power generation, food security and climate change rightly merited continued special allocations but even in the third budget of the "Digital Bangladesh era", I am disappointed not to see allocation for the modest \$100 million ICT development fund, as postulated in the ICT policy 2009.

In fact the last three budgets have a long way to go to meet the ICT policy stipulation of 2 percent

of revenue budget and 5 percent of development budget to be allocated for ICT development across all government agencies and activities. The ICT policy made this provision so that the state can harness its resources optimally; increase accountability, transparency and productivity; and recoup many times more than the ICT allocations through lowering wastes and increasing efficiency.

The long-term return-on-invest from ICT development activities are just as important as ensuring adequate power, food and climate adaptation. The incremental developments in ICT will go on as the natural endowment factors are in our

favour (large Anglophone population, low wages, low establishment costs, etc.).

However, to leapfrog into the ranks of digital nations by 2021, the government needs to provide adequate push through setting up ICT skills development centres, software parks, business-focused research and development projects and fostering an active import-substitute ICT procurement agenda by granting contracts to local firms only. Without that the "Digital Bangladesh" will remain a feel-good slogan only.

The author is the immediate past president of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services.

Foreign workers in Singapore 'bear the brunt'

AFP, Singapore

After shattering his left heel bone when he fell off a ladder, Chinese national Ah Ping's already difficult life as a labourer in Singapore took a sharp turn for the worse.

His Singaporean contractor boss refused to file an injury compensation claim with the manpower ministry, fearing it would sully the company's record. When Ah Ping applied for it himself after nine days in hospital, things turned ugly.

"He came up to me while I was resting and asked me why I filed the claim," said the 23-year-old from Shandong province, in eastern China, his youthful face creased in a frown.

"He got angry and slapped me in the face, then he raised his fists and punched me," said Ah Ping, who cannot give his full name because he is assisting police with investigations.

Fleeing the dank, mosquito-ridden warehouse he says his boss forced him to stay in, Ah Ping went to aid group

Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) seeking refuge in their shelter for exploited foreign workers.

Social workers in Singapore are reporting a rise in the number of foreign workers such as Ah Ping who approach them for help with cases ranging from wage disputes to assault.

Maligned by some Singaporeans for supposedly stealing jobs and causing overcrowding, foreigners holding work permits numbered more than 870,000 at the end of 2010 out of Singapore's total population of 5.1 million.

They often do the dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs that Singaporeans shun, toiling as maids, construction hands, street sweepers, garbage collectors, cooks and dishwashers as well as lower-end factory workers.

Most come from China, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

"We see an average of about 120 to 150 workers a month... four years ago it was less, maybe about 100," said

Jolovan Wham, executive director of HOME.

"The cases that we see are mostly about labour exploitation," he told AFP in his office as more than 10 workers waited their turn to consult him and his colleagues about their woes.

Even though the manpower ministry reported a fall in foreign worker complaints from a three-year high of 3,774 in 2009 to 3,200 last year, Wham said the figure was "not reliable" as it focused on only salary-related issues.

Wham said the liberalisation of Singapore's immigration policies in recent years to bring in more workers to power the labour-starved economy contributed to the growing number of abuse cases.

"The government sees foreign workers as economic digits, here to help grow the economy, so they look at them as commodities," he said.

The government has slowed down the intake of foreigners since the 2009 recession but says the economy cannot function without a steady stream of blue-collar workers.

The presence of so many foreign workers in a densely populated city-state has become a hot issue in Singapore and the debate reached a crescendo in the campaign for last month's general elections, raising fears of more abuse.

Migrant worker rights advocacy group Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) reported an increase in the number of foreign workers seeking help to 2,178 last year, from 2,087 in 2009, and fears the number may rise again.

TWC2 executive director Vincent Wijeyesingha, who lost as an opposition candidate in the May election, said the manner in which immigration was discussed during the campaign could hurt foreign workers even more.

"Unfortunately what the elections did, and we politicians must shoulder our share of responsibility for it, is that a xenophobic approach to foreigners could become widespread," Wijeyesingha told the news agency.

"In other countries, when a politician says something that could be viewed as xenophobic, a spike in hate

crime sometimes results. It may not be entirely different in Singapore."

Before the elections, xenophobic sentiment had surfaced in scattered incidents, including one in 2008 when residents of an affluent suburb protested against the building of a foreign worker dormitory in their estate.

The residents petitioned the government to drop the plan, saying the dormitory -- separated from the estate by a road -- would "create security and social problems and spoil the ambience of the estate".

Authorities still approved the project but advised the dormitory operator to consider chartering buses to ferry workers to popular destinations in order to prevent them from congregating within the estate.

Ah Ping, the Chinese worker who accused his boss of beating him up over an injury compensation claim, now worries about how he is going to repay a 470,000 yuan (\$72,400) bank loan he took out to pay a middleman to get a job in Singapore.

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Construction workers wait to cross a street in Singapore.