

CROSS TALK

The new budget

Tackling problem areas?

TODAY, we are giving our comments in broad strokes on the national budget. More exhaustive and deeper analysis would follow in our various pages in the coming days. This is the fourth budget to be placed before the House by the present government and it also happens to be the largest one standing at an estimated Tk1.97 trillion that is 17.2% higher than previous year's and GDP growth rate is targeted at 7.2%.

Looking into this year's budget structure, it is not surprising to find that there is carryover from the previous budget, a large number of unimplemented programmes. It is hoped that this year's planning on important projects like power and infrastructure will be prioritised for fast-track implementation. Moving on, the massive increase in outlay comes due to substantial rise in subsidy payments. Given NBR's stellar performance in outstripping all expectations in revenue collection, it is not surprising that the target has been set at around Tk1,397 billion, or about 18% higher than what was projected in the original budget for the outgoing fiscal.

There exist a number of problem areas that will have to be addressed in the current budget. These are high rate of inflation, investment, employment and accelerating institutional and policy reforms. Policymakers will have to address the issues related to power and infrastructure problems which unless addressed, threaten to drag down the projected GDP growth rate. The institutional weaknesses associated with failure to implement externally-aided development projects is another major hindrance, but perhaps the weakest link in government machinery that has become visible during last fiscal is public finance. The soaring expenditure coming primarily from mounting subsidies, coupled with a general lack of support from foreign and non-bank sources of finance have not helped matters. There is little to suggest that global oil prices will stabilise anytime soon and hence there is little scope to cut back on fuel subsidy in the current fiscal. It is however imperative that steps are taken to reduce dependence on banking system for budget deficit financing. Given the current domestic scenario, it is hoped the government will take moves toward greater mobilisation of foreign resources to meet its budget deficit.

Inundation of the port city

Get the corrective measures going

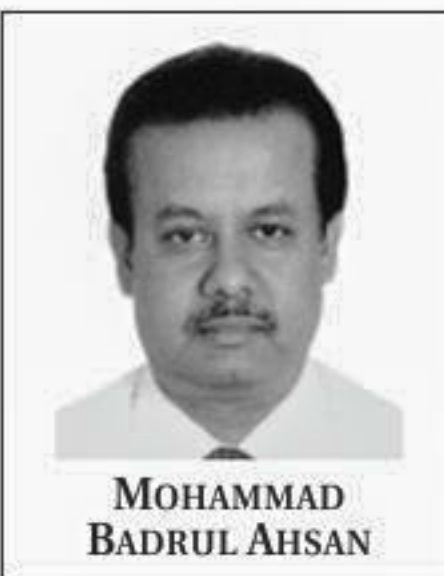
IT is unfortunate that Chittagong city has come to be ailed by the same problem that the capital and indeed most major towns in the country are plagued by water logging. What was quite an unheard of phenomenon in Chittagong even after prolonged deluge not many years ago has come to beset the city with the slightest bit of downpour. And all this because of filling up of the catchment areas, unplanned growth of the city and, to top it, all, illegal construction that impedes the natural flow of rainwater, and clogging of the canals that cater to the rain runoff. While this has been the case year after year we wonder why the authorities seem not to be bothered with the public misery.

We have said in the past that Chittagong port will gradually increase in importance by assuming a truly international character, it becoming a hub of regional and international trade, and more so after the deep sea port is built in that area. That being so the city shall have to keep up with the growth of the port in every aspect to be truly an international city.

We wonder whether the city planners and the Chittagong city corporation are aware of this and whether they are actually making long term plans to cope with the changed circumstances.

We watch with deep anguish not only the defoliation of the natural growths in and around the city but the decimation of the hills as well that not only disturbs the ecology of the area it makes living in and around a tampered hill a rather risky proposition.

It is not only water logging which must be addressed with promptness, starting with the excavation of the dead canals, but all other services shall have to be geared up to make life more livable by making the efforts of all the



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A High Court bench has accused the Speaker of the National Parliament of making seditious comments against

the apex court of the country. Transparency International Bangladesh has demanded that the parliament should expunge from its proceedings the adverse remarks made by some of the lawmakers against a member of its trustee board. Earlier a group of lawmakers had bitterly criticised this particular TIB member for allegedly calling them thieves and dacoits and demanded that he should offer them an unconditional apology. Welcome to the crosscurrents of mutual invectives. Never before in the history of this country have so many high-profile railings roiled this nation within the space of a single week.

Not to blame anyone, it's a good sign indeed. Things going wrong for years altogether are finally coming to a head. Essentially, we have been hearing the clamour of colliding consciences. Everybody is blaming everybody else, but nobody is accepting responsibility. Thank your lucky stars; you are at a critical juncture of your country's history. A nation is coming through its moments of collective catharsis.

Time has come and you will see more of it in the offing. More people

will blame each other and nobody will feel guilty. But the good thing is that everyone is recognising the most essential part of our national crisis. Many ways and many times, things are not going right in this country.

The first step to solution is identification of the problem. And, inasmuch as this country is divided into a number of vested interest groups, each group is identifying the problem from the vantage point of its own parochial interests. Each group is right now going through a denial stage. It refuses to see its own fault

manipulators were well within their right to take those investors for a ride.

What is happening here is social fragmentation in crime and recompense. Every body wants others to apologise for his or her mistakes. It brings us to the story of a clever monkey who stole a farmer's food and rubbed the gravy on the goat's beard to make it a suspect. In many cases, what we have is guilty people trying to give guilt trip to others who are also guilty like them.

So when one group criticises, oth-

This nation is coming off at the seams, because the various bodies that are supposed to hold it together are engaged in hostile confrontation. Given an inch, everyone has taken a mile. It will be difficult to cut them to their sizes. Many words have flown under the bridge of silence.

and likes to blame everything on somebody else.

For example, the state minister of home wisely asked journalists to maintain safe distance from police when police go into action. The chairman of a private channel made his vaunted claim that the brutal killing of a journalist couple is rooted in an extramarital affair. Many weeks ago the prime minister had snapped at reporters that guarding people's bedrooms was not her job. Going further back in time, our finance minister blamed the small investors for being too greedy as if the market

ers react. We never had this problem before, and although politicians have always passed the buck to their opponents, this malady was not so widespread amongst other sections of people. Where does it come from?

According to global consulting firm Robert Half, the search for someone to blame is always successful. It comes from our own obsession with success. Right or wrong, anything that works is fine. It is more successful to be successful than to have success. I know some of you are feeling dizzy. The words have gone over your heads.

Budget FY2012-13: Expectations from GRB perspective

MAMUNUR RASHID

THE journey towards gender responsive budget (GRB) has gained momentum in recent years. A concrete evidence of government's positive intention to make the budget gender responsive is that a culture of sharing with civil society representatives has started. Sharing and exchange of opinions takes place both before and after the budget declaration. The government now regularly publishes gender budget report as a part of its budget documents. We express our thanks for that. Over the years, the number of GRB reports has increased from 4 (in 2005-06) to 10 (in 2010-11) to 20 (in 2011-12).

This year, the government is going to publish GRB reports of 25 ministries, which is definitely a major boost towards establishing gender equality. However, with these achievements, there arises a need to specify the government's position with regard to monitoring of the programmes taken under GRB. We really need to monitor the impact and changes that have occurred through ongoing programmes as well as interventions taken so far. And if there are any gaps or challenges, we need to take measures to address those. That is because gender responsive budgeting is not just about making allocations for women's advancement and rights, but also about constant monitoring and evaluation. It is particularly so because of the changing issues and challenges facing us. What seems most suitable today might not be the same tomorrow. So we need to change the strategies and approaches at times. On the other hand, as a result of steps taken, there may arise various opportunities and scopes that should be utilised. Keeping these in mind, our specific points for further attention of the government are as follow:

Gender budget reports are published with an indication of how much of the allocations given in different sectors will benefit women. But there are no mechanisms to monitor what impact or result has

been achieved in terms of reducing discrimination and capitalising on the potentialities that had opened up through the allocations made for women's advancement in the previous year's budget. Without that, we cannot understand or justify which way we are going. In such cases, programmes or activities undertaken in a year's budget are nothing but scattered initiatives and cannot make expected impact on identified goals or targets. Keeping that in mind, women and human rights organisations have been demanding establishment of a national-level gender budget monitoring cell, which really needs to be recognised by the government.

In the backdrop of growing popu-

developed in order to ensure that women farmers obtain fair price of the crops or products they produce.

Early marriage, dowry, sexual harassment and domestic violence prevent women from playing an effective role in rural development. This is because gender issues are not considered in the planning and budgeting of local government institutions. As a result, most of the money allocated is spent for physical infrastructural development like bridges, culverts, repairing roads and building construction. Because of lack of directions or policy, local elected bodies and representatives cannot spend the money to address issues that affect women and girls. Special or separate allocations need

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lation and reduction of cultivable land, one major challenge Bangladesh is facing is achieving food security. Recently, the government took a bold decision, against the prescription of World Bank and IMF, to give agricultural subsidy. We all know the result -- rice and other crops have grown in abundance this year and Bangladesh is even considering exporting the surplus food grains!

Women farmers (though they are still not recognised as farmers) play a huge role -- e.g. in producing different types of food grains on the same piece of land. The budget needs to capitalise on this potentiality. Women need capital, skill and subsidy to be able to contribute more effectively in ensuring food security. They also need market management and cold storage facilities to be able to sell their products easily. Strategies to stop intermediaries have to be

to be made in the budget so that local government institutions can take effective measures against violence against women. If that can be done, it could also help resolve the debate on the role and responsibilities of the elected women representatives.

Bangladesh is recognised as the most affected country when it comes to climate change. Different initiatives have been taken to fight natural disasters and climate change. But we have not seen any specific policy to meet the gender needs and challenges of climate change. It is now widely recognised that women and adolescent girls are victims in this regard. Their sources of income become limited, girls' education get hampered, many women become widows and are abandoned, violence against women multiplies, and elderly women become particularly

You see, who has ever tried to force a rose to bloom? It's one thing to be successful, and another thing to have success. There is an element of force that separates the two. One can be successful by all means. A robber robs, a bribe-taker takes bribe, and a rapist gets his way with the victim. It's possible to be successful without having success.

The upshot is that those who have been successful in this country are now going at each other's success. Mind it, common people aren't involved here; it's the uncommon amongst us who are hurling insults at each other. They are the ones who are arguing about right and wrong, picking holes in each other's coats, and attacking each other with harsh words.

This country is now like a limb broken under its skin. It's one nation torn by contentious notions. Last week that reality came to surface in the clamour of conflicting voices. Whether the judiciary was lambasting the legislative or others were disparaging each other between themselves, it was unacceptable that things culminated in ugly exchanges.

It was also inevitable. This nation is coming off at the seams, because the various bodies that are supposed to hold it together are engaged in hostile confrontation. Given an inch, everyone has taken a mile. It will be difficult to cut them to their sizes. Many words have flown under the bridge of silence.

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helpless. All these create a huge barrier against women's rights and advancement, especially in the coastal areas. Women and girls can also be strong actors in addressing climate vulnerabilities. These realities can be addressed only through affirmative action. However, we have not seen any specific programmes in the previous budgets to address climate change from gender perspective.

Resource mobilisation is an important area when it comes to ensuring sustainable development and reducing aid dependency in budget planning. So far, the major sources of revenue generation for Bangladesh are foreign exchange, income tax and remittance. One important source, which we have hardly considered with much conviction, is local resource mobilisation. In Bangladesh, local resources are controlled by the central government. If local governments had the authority and control to utilise local resources, then they could easily generate the money to meet local needs. In that case, local government bodies could make their own budget to address education, health and other social issues. Government needs to pay serious attention to this huge potentiality. Such an initiative would definitely contribute towards ensuring self-reliance and reducing aid dependency.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in ensuring gender responsive budgeting over the last several years. What we need to do now is to capitalise on the prospects created by a series of programmes and interventions to date. It is undeniable that government's positive intention is the key for that. NGOs and civil society can play the role of pressure group or watchdog. We believe that the government will consider these recommendations seriously and urgently. If they are adopted, then another milestone will be set in ensuring equity, equality and social justice.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 8

- 1191** Richard I arrives in Acre (Palestine) thus beginning his crusade.
- 1690** Siddi general Yadi Sakat, razes the Mazagon Fort in Mumbai.
- 1928** Second Northern Expedition: The National Revolutionary Army captures Peking, whose name is changed to Beijing ("Northern peace").
- 1941** World War II: Allies invade Syria and Lebanon.
- 1967** Six-Day War: The USS Liberty incident occurs, killing 34 and wounding 171.
- 1967** Six-Day War: The Israeli army enters Hebron and the Cave of the Patriarchs.
- 1972** Vietnam War: Associated Press photographer Nick Ut takes his Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a naked 9-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phúc running down a road after being burned by napalm.