

SUNDAY POUCH

Tax on mobile usage

Is the plan well thought out?

THE proposed 'tax at source' for both prepaid and post-paid users @2% has created some consternation among end-users and policymakers alike. This new tax envisages a deduction of Tk2.00 on every recharge of Tk100.00 for prepaid users and an additional 2% levy on top of the VAT charged @15% for post-paid users.

Moving beyond the legalities involved in whether at all this new levy can be termed 'tax at source' since it is in effect taxation on expenditure rather than income; today the cell phone can hardly be called a 'luxury' item. On the contrary, consumers utilise mobile phones for a variety of economic activities and availing essential services that have far reaching socio-economic impact on the rural economy. The rural populace use mobile services to gather information on market price of various inputs and outputs. Such information help farmers get right price for their agro-commodities and reduce risk of getting swindled by middlemen; the rural youth do not necessarily have access to the major national newspapers, but can get access to information about job opportunities using mobile value added services. All these constitute direct and indirect monetary benefits that come from availing mobile services offered by the telecom industry. Looking beyond economic benefits, mobile phone users benefit socially, i.e. access to information on health issues are available and with millions of expatriate Bangladeshi workers living in far off lands, the mobile phone plays an essential role in maintaining communication.

The proliferation of mobile phones in a relatively low Tele-density country like Bangladesh has made it possible for people of lower-income brackets to bring about significant changes in their lives. For farmers it has meant fetching better prices of agro-products, for others, the cell phone has helped reduce costs associated with communication and health treatment. The question being asked today is whether such levy will encourage the 90 million users to use their phones more sparingly, which in effect would threaten the government's existing significant earnings from the hefty VAT charges that have been in effect for some years now.

A killing spree?

Arrest and punish the killers

THE ghastly murder of Nishat Banu in front of her old mother in the city's Topkhana area is the height of perverse criminality fed on sheer greed for property. It is also reflective of lack of security of citizens owing to slack in law and order.

Three miscreants strangled Banu to death in what was one of a spate of gruesome killings in the capital lately. Barely a week has passed since police recovered the mutilated body parts of a young girl from a city hotel, which was another horrendous instance of a killing motivated by personal vengeance. The situation is no better outside the capital. In Mehendiganj Upazilla under Barisal division some locally influential people abducted a young girl after critically injuring her parents with sharp weapons on Thursday.

As we understand it, these killing incidents and the kidnapping were caused on purely personal grounds. We nonetheless believe those were largely motivated by a culture of impunity. It is with a deep sense of shock that we of late have noted that murderers have gone scot-free in a number of instances either for lack of evidence or police inaction. Such undesirable trends only serve to spread a sense of immunity among criminals and miscreants. Therefore, we demand immediate arrest of the killers and abductors.

Compared with other major forms of violence and crime that attract wider attention, somehow the abductions and murders referred to above tend to recede in the background. But we believe such crimes require prompt legal action to impart a sense of security to households and stem the dehumanising trend.



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

Edinburgh, is 91. The couple had now been married for almost 65 years. In 1,000 years of the history of that country, this queen is the second longest reigning monarch. The longest reign in that country was by her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria. She reigned for 63 years.

Yet Queen Victoria does not hold the record for being the longest serving monarch in history. That distinction goes to an African king, Sobhuza II of Swaziland who ruled for almost 83 years. In Asia there was a monarch, Muhoji IV Rao of the small state of Phaltnan in India, who ruled for 74 years. Today, the longest reigning monarch in Asia is King Rama IX Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand. He ascended the throne in 1946 and has been ruling for 65 years.

So what makes a sovereign reign for such long periods? This is a relevant question in the modern day and age. Take the case of Queen Elisabeth II of Britain. What is remarkable about her monarchy is its capacity to adapt to change with the changing times. It is also about the "ability of the British to mix reverence for tradition, with the capacity to innovation." This queen had knighted the pop group Beatles. Winston Churchill was her first prime minister. She was the one who accepted the resignation of Anthony Eden after the Suez crisis. She had hosted President Kennedy of USA and greeted the release of Nelson Mandela from an apartheid jail in South Africa. She also came out of the storm over the divorce and death of her first daughter-in-law Princess Diana.

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the mind of her people and "respond creatively" to their demands. To many, she is known as the "enabling monarch." She has never interfered with the affairs of the government of the day. In fact, she does not rule but only reigns. Her quiet advice, therefore, on many national and international issues have been listened by all 12 British prime ministers who have served her since her accession. From Churchill to present day Cameron, they have all given her their undivided attention. She has in

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these 60 years of her reign also seen 12 US presidents from Harry Truman to President Obama. Yet, this queen never attended any formal school or college. She had been tutored privately at home. A recent poll shows that over 80% of her people support the queen.

In her personal life the queen maintains a strict schedule. She happily mixes her work as a monarch with her duties as a wife, a mother and a grandmother. She enjoys certain unique privileges. She does not need to have a driving license or to register her cars. She also does not need a passport. In her spare time she likes to read mystery novels, work on crosswords and watch wrestling on TV. Her passion for dogs and race horses are well known. There is no doubt that she is one of the richest people in the world. Her net personal worth is over \$500 million. This does not include her crown, lands and castles.

She personally owns several properties, like Balmoral castle in Scotland and Sandringham House in Norfolk. She has stud farms, fruit farm and an extensive art and jewellery collection. She also has

the largest stamp collection in the world. But some of her real estate, like Buckingham Palace in London worth over \$5 billion alone and Windsor castle, as well as other prize properties (about 60 of them) and collections are held in a trust.

For sixty years now she has put up with relentless public scrutiny and yet she has not been tarnished by any personal or financial scandal. She is now given an annual state grant of around \$59 million for upkeep and protocol.

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But she pays taxes like other British citizens for the revenue she earns from her properties.

In 1961, Queen Elizabeth came to Dhaka, which was then the capital city of the eastern province of Pakistan. She stayed at what is known as the Sugandha State Guest House, located next to Ramna Park (now the Foreign Service Training Academy). This house was a villa built during the British colonial era. It was remodeled and refurbished for her overnight stay. She visited the Adamjee Jute Mills in Narayanganj, which was the largest jute mill in the world. The queen revisited Dhaka in 1983 on her way to Delhi to attend the Non-Aligned Summit. This time she stayed for a couple or more days in independent Bangladesh. A sprightly lady, she impressed the people here on both occasions with her warmth and interest about their welfare.

It is unknown to many that Queen Elizabeth's coronation gown, on her instructions, had been embroidered with floral emblems of Commonwealth countries. Thus the English Tudor rose,

the Australian Wattle, the Canadian Maple Leaf and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) Jute found their place there.

The queen is so much on public view that an institutional wall protects what remains of her private life. This job is done by her courtiers. Do not forget that this queen had to guide the social role of the royal family. This was from a "starchy and unrealistic model of conventional middle class values at the time of her accession, to more accepting of human failings in the wake of her children's divorces." In the middle of all this, the queen performed her role not only in 16 countries where she is still accepted as the constitutional monarch but also the ceremonial role as the head of the Commonwealth of Nations.

The queen, however, had to observe silently some of the notable changes that took place in 20th and early 21st century in her country. First, her reign saw the demise of Britain as a global power. In 1815, Britain was the biggest empire in history. It was so huge and far flung that it was said that "the sun never sets in the British empire." At that time the empire had 43 colonies in five continents.

During her watch that empire shrank. Majority of them became independent countries. She now has only 14 "overseas territories," of which some of them have not acquired independence or have voted to remain with her. These tiny territories ranges from 6.5 sq kilometer (Gibraltar) to 12,200 sq km (Falkland Islands). The British have also experienced tectonic changes in culture and class in their island country. The British nation is now very multi-cultural. She has also seen the lobotomy of the British economy and its present whimpering state. But through all this the queen upheld British national pride and self-belief.

We felicitate Queen Elizabeth for 60 years on her throne. May she reign longer over her realm, longer than Queen Victoria, and in good health.

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Myanmar must grapple with even more challenges

TULSATHIT TAPTIM

THE streets of Yangon can probably be summed up in two words: "Anything goes."

Or maybe "everything mixes" is another way to describe it. The relatively rich walk with the obviously poor. Trishaws, once a dominant city symbol, try to hold their ground against an ever-increasing number of automobiles, old and new. Roadside stalls refuse to be humbled by big hotels. Jeans have made a timid but noticeable inroad and co-exist peacefully with sarongs.

Political changes are responsible for much of the disorder. A young man who was practically my guide during my four-day stay said he couldn't recall a time when Yangon traffic was this bad. We mostly talked trivia like football and nightlife, and kept politics out of it, which was an easy thing to do, because the presence of troops was next to zero.

"You will feel the vibrations of the city's potential," a Nation Multimedia Group executive who had been to the former capital of Myanmar three weeks before me said. Four days was too short a time to confirm that, especially for someone who was visiting Yangon for the first time. One potential I managed to see, though, has to do with the first "real" generation of Myanmar journalists in a few decades.

"We don't have mentors," said a man who had started off in IT at a publishing company and is now having to virtually double as chief of a news unit. "Journalism in Myanmar has lost a few generations." He was not overstating the case. At Eleven Media, a

major publishing company, for example, every senior newsroom position up to news editor is filled by people under 30, with the exception of one, who is 31.

"In most other countries, these people would be just interns," said a representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, who was assessing the media situation in Myanmar for possible assistance. In their own country, these young journalists struggle to learn by themselves, against a backdrop of harsh state control. When I taught some of them the "telephone call" trick of writing the first news

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paragraph -- "If you have 20 seconds to tell your mother what happened, what you tell her is your first paragraph" -- they were so grateful it made me feel embarrassed.

In fact, the lead paragraph is the easy part. What they should, or can, write about remains a murky issue, pending the government's next moves concerning media restrictions. Myanmar's young reporters know that writing what the government wants them to is not journalism, but the opposite of that can result in raw threats, serious legal action or persecution.

It's "anything goes" on the streets, but not yet in Myanmar's newspapers. The challenge for journalists is also becoming more complicated as the country slowly opens up. Fighting against dictatorship is at least straightforward, as you know exactly who you are up against. In Myanmar, corruption has many faces and is not fading as things loosen up. In fact, there are legitimate concerns that rampant graft will soon present itself as the country's biggest problem.

Corruption now comes to journalists with a smile and its hair combed. Nepotism has become so common-

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place it doesn't seem so wrong, and nobody can tell if re-emerging "freedom" will help expose it or disguise it. The good news is that the new generation of journalists in Myanmar seems to be getting to know their responsibilities, and many veterans who have been living outside the country will be returning to give them help.

In many ways, Myanmar's changing political situation is like the streets of Yangon. A lot of things co-exist without clear boundaries. Good signs are competing with bad ones. That opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi virtually represented her country at an interna-

tional forum in Bangkok would have been unthinkable last year, but the state media made her visit look like it never happened. Reporters not working for the government also wondered how far they could go in covering her historic trip.

You can easily feel that the trishaws' days are numbered. Sarongs may hold sway for some years yet, but the poor man's roadside stalls could soon be edged out of key streets. Pubs and late-opening restaurants are sprouting up. (Even one of the world's most ruthless dictatorships is helpless against K-pop penetration.) Young people are enjoying nightlife, and, thanks to the country's still-slow IT progress, they are doing it with heads looking up. One great thing about Myanmar, a foreigner commented, is that people don't walk like "cellular zombies" as in other countries.

Most people say more big changes are in store, and they will come fast. Even Suu Kyi has urged caution, calling on those who matter to think of the people first. She certainly knows that democracy means a free-for-all, which is not necessarily good. What happened over the past three decades has become a way of life, and greater freedom will come at a certain price.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 10

1190
Third Crusade: Frederick I Barbarossa drowns in the river Saleph while leading an army to Jerusalem.

1793
French Revolution: Following the arrests of Girondin leaders, the Jacobins gain control of the Committee of Public Safety installing the revolutionary dictatorship.

1898
Spanish-American War: U.S. Marines land on the island of Cuba.

1940
World War II: U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt denounces Italy's actions with his "Stab in the Back" speech at the graduation ceremonies of the University of Virginia.

1957
John Diefenbaker leads the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada to a stunning upset in the Canadian federal election, 1957, ending 22 years of Liberal Party rule.

1965
Vietnam War: The Battle of Dong Xoai begins.

1967
The Six-Day War ends: Israel and Syria agree to a cease-fire.

1980
The African National Congress in South Africa publishes a call to fight from their imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela.

1996
Peace talks begin in Northern Ireland without the participation of Sinn Féin.

1999
Kosovo War: NATO suspends its air strikes after Slobodan Milošević agrees to withdraw Serbian forces from Kosovo.