

CROSS TALK

Budget blowback

Compassion for the dispossessed International community must step forward

ACCEPTING foreign refugees fleeing persecution in a neighbouring country is always done on humanitarian grounds. Today, we stand at a moral crossroads when we refuse entry to Rohingyas who are fleeing, in their hundreds, to escape the communal violence that has been raging for nearly a week.

Yet, for the international community to ask a cash-strapped country like Bangladesh to simply open the doors to a trickle that could soon turn into a sea of humanity flooding over the border is simply unrealistic. These people need to be housed and fed in proper camps that need to be built along the border areas, so that they may be easily repatriated to their country of origin once the situation has stabilised. Setting up of such facilities and their maintenance with proper administration requires substantial financial commitment and it is at this juncture that the international community needs to step up and share the burden through firm commitment instead of merely issuing statements of what Bangladesh should do.

It is imperative that bilateral relations between our two countries, which have always been amicable, remain so. Equally important it is to convey to Myanmar authorities that it is their constitutional duty to protect all its citizens regardless of creed or ethnicity. Any such flare-up between communities leading to exodus of members of a community over the border into Bangladesh is not only undesirable, but accepting the responsibility of taking care of thousands of refugees over the long-term on Bangladeshi territory is simply unacceptable. But that is precisely what Bangladesh has done over the successive waves of Rohingyas who have arrived to flee from persecution since 1978. Despite our troubles, Bangladesh cannot in good conscience turn its back on helpless people, but as stated before, Bangladesh can under no circumstances be expected to shoulder the financial burden of this humanitarian disaster alone. The UNHCR and the greater international community as a whole must come forward with more than words so that Bangladesh may do the right thing.

Mob lynching

Police must act fast to stop it

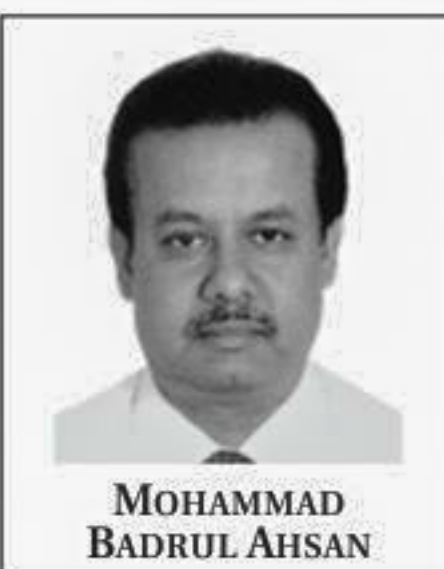
WE have yet another report of a mob beating up a youth brutally at Morelganj in Bagerhat. Frenzied villagers brutalised and damaged his eyes on the mere suspicion that he was a criminal before handing him to the police.

The victim youth was reportedly planning to shoot at the local municipality councillor. The exact circumstances of the incident, however, seemed somewhat murky, as the details of the police version and that of the injured youth do not match with each other. Had the police been able to act fast the untoward incident could have been avoided.

It is worthwhile to note that many such unfortunate incidents of beating up and savaging persons by infuriated mobs took place based purely on suspicion. There are even instances in which the police just looked on as the mobs swooped on their defenceless victims. We may recall here the killing of six youths at Aminbazar near the capital city last year.

Such mob action is often excused with the logic that frustrated at police inaction, or seeing that the criminals get away with their offence even after their arrest, people have started to take law into their own hands. But this is by all norms of law unacceptable and should not be encouraged.

All these constitute serious violation of law by mobs and hence punishable under law and hence punishable under law. Repetition of such barbaric incidents reflects badly on our image. While the police must be more active the community must also be involved to avert such mob



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

In 2009, our finance minister had admitted that whitening of black money was unethical. This year he is defending it as a step that is going to inject investments

into the economy. To borrow a term from economics, here is an example of Pareto efficiency. This is a change to allocation of wisdom that makes the minister wiser without making others more ignorant. In plain English, he may be convinced of the utility of black money, but rest of the country doesn't believe in it.

The issue of black money keeps turning up like a bad penny. But the finance minister has learned something in last three years that rest of the nation cannot figure out. In 2009, he admitted that he wasn't sure how much investment it was going to generate. Without telling the country how much black money was whitened in last three years and how much investment that money has generated in the economy, the minister did it again. Instead of bringing reforms, he is behaving like someone who himself has come out reformed.

All these years we have been hearing that investment is declining in Bangladesh. Only recently the World Bank in its appraisal of Bangladesh economy has mentioned declining investment and shrinking national savings. If whitening of black money

hasn't helped for last three years, how is it going to help now?

The fact is that the argument of investment boosting is a lot of hogwash that in effect is promotion of legal corruption in this country. The black money whitening has failed to bring any tangible benefit for the economy except for the comfort it brought to a handful of people, who would like us to believe that they are doing us a favour with their ill-gotten money. It's a shame that a liberation war veteran like the finance minister has come to terms with such a phony

expenditures. In fact, our budgets sound like the government is an accounting clerk for the rich and greedy. It's busy calculating how much money they earn and spend. It's raising taxes from them. It's busy calculating the worth of their homes, cars, air-conditioners, mobile phones and other valuables.

But a budget is supposed to achieve more. It's supposed to allocate resources, redistribute income, maintain economic stability and manage public enterprises. But how does whitening of black money come

makes illegal means 90% as good as honest living.

Is that what we wish to tell our children? Can the finance minister share with us what he has learned in last three years that made him change his mind? How could he transform from a doubter to a defender of what is an open-and-shut case of moral opprobrium?

Former US president George W. Bush, known for his many follies, once tried to make a profound statement. "It's clearly a budget. It has got a lot of numbers in it," he said. But anyone with higher IQ than Bush would know that a budget is more than numbers. It's supposed to reflect the philosophy of a nation, its mission and vision for a collective future instead of being sort of a ledger book for a kleptocratic oligarchy.

This is where this year's budget leaves us in doubts. It's an ambitious budget; it's also a big budget. It has a lot of focus on the upcoming elections. Many of the promises could be eyewash or genuine, depending on how the government likes to use them to win votes.

But whether it's a people's budget is a million-dollar question. When some people are given special benefits, the budget is definitely discriminatory. A government cannot in the same breath talk about two opposing things. It's a double-standard to hunt with the hunter and run with the rabbit.

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baloney.

It's one thing that the whitening project isn't working. But it's another thing that even if it works, where is anybody going to invest the whitened money? New industries or expansion of the existing ones cannot happen because there isn't enough supply of gas and electricity in the country. Where is the money going to go, even if hypothetically we want to think that black money should win reprieve?

A national budget ought to be more than a book balancing exercise between government receipts and

under any of these objectives? It only helps rich getting richer, while distorting the whole concept of fairness and justice.

Black money refers to funds earned on the black market, on which income and other taxes haven't been paid. Possible sources of black money, to name a few, are drug trafficking, weapons trading, extortion, terrorism, selling counterfeit or stolen goods, bribery, and selling pirated books and CDs. If the money earned from these immoral sources can be legalised after a payment of 10% penalty, it only

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Demonising anti-nuclear protests



PRAFUL BIDWAI

SO monumentally arrogant is India's nuclear establishment that it brazenly brands its critics insane and in need of psychiatric

treatment. It has asked the state-run National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS) to "counsel" the tens of thousands protesting against the Koodankulam nuclear power station in Tamil Nadu that it's perfectly safe.

This marks a new offensive to impose nuclear power upon people who have resisted Koodankulam's Russian-made reactors since 1988. After Fukushima, the presumption that fears about nuclear hazards are irrational betrays delusional insensitivity.

The police have filed 107 First Information Reports against an incredible 55,795 people in Koodankulam, charging 6,800 of them with "sedition" and "waging war." This sets a new record in harassment of popular protests anywhere. Leave alone sedition, there hasn't been one violent incident during the seven-months-long Koodankulam protests.

NIMHANS psychiatrists, to their shame, are striving to help people "understand the importance of the nuclear power plant." They treat opposition to nuclear power as a disorder like schizophrenia, paranoia, or craving for victimhood.

By their criteria, more than 80% of the population of Japan, Germany, France and Russia, which opposes new nuclear plants, must be considered insane. As an academic research institution, NIMHANS shouldn't act as a nuclear propaganda agency.

NIMHANS seems to have taken its cue from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who attributed the protests to the "foreign hand." But the real "foreign hand" is Singh himself, who is hitching India's energy trajectory to imported reactors, including French reactors at Jaitapur (Maharashtra), and American reactors at Mithi Virdi (Gujarat) and Kovvada (Andhra). After Fukushima, nuclear safety can

no longer be analysed from the usual "expert" probabilistic perspective. As the official German Ethics Commission on safe energy says, Fukushima has decisively changed nuclear risk perceptions: "More people have come to realise...that major accidents can indeed occur." As physicist Alvin Weinberg said: "A nuclear accident anywhere is a nuclear accident everywhere."

Fukushima occurred in an industrially advanced country, still hasn't been brought under control, and exposes flaws in the global nuclear industry's technological risk-assessment methods. Says the Ethics Commission: Fukushima "has shaken people's confidence... [They] are no longer prepared to leave it to... experts to decide how to deal with... the possibility of an uncontrollable... accident."

This applies to India too. Its

NIMHANS psychiatrists, to their shame, are striving to help people "understand the importance of the nuclear power plant." They treat opposition to nuclear power as a disorder like schizophrenia, paranoia, or craving for victimhood.

Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) has a poor safety culture and record. DAE parrots clichés about the Russian reactors' safety. But it doesn't even have full access to their design.

It's the DAE and Nuclear Power Corporation, not the protesters, who are delusion-prone. When the Fukushima crisis decisively turned for the worse with hydrogen explosions, DAE secretary Sreekumar Banerjee said these were "purely a chemical reaction and not a nuclear emergency..."

Of course, the explosions were chemical reactions. But the hydrogen indicated severe nuclear fuel damage. The explosions ruptured plant structures, aggravating the nuclear emergency with three reactor-core meltdowns.

Last September, the government suspended work on Koodankulam until people's safety concerns are fully allayed by a 15-member "expert

group." This failed to convince anyone or furnish any documents, including the Environmental Impact Assessment report. It refused even to meet the independent scientists nominated by the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE).

Koodankulam raises two sets of safety issues: specific to the reactors and site, and generic to nuclear power. The reactors haven't been certified safe by an independent international or Indian agency. A recent report by nuclear safety experts on Russian reactors shockingly reveals that they are grievously under-prepared for natural or man-made disasters.

Russian reactors are marked by 31 "serious flaws," including: absence of regulations to deal with contingencies; inadequate protective shelters; lack of records of previous accidents, which would enable learning from

fully depend, could fail.

These issues were highlighted in an impressive 84-page report by PMANE. The official committee hasn't answered them.

NPC is now bypassing Atomic Energy Regulatory Board safety procedures. It's rushing into starting the first reactor, which gathered rust for five months. Prior to nuclear-fuel loading, it should be put through another "hot run," similar to last year's, says former AERB chairman A. Gopalakrishnan.

In this operation, the core is loaded with dummy fuel and hot water is circulated through it at the same temperature as its operating level to check its vessels, piping, valves, etc. The AERB also mandates an emergency evacuation drill in the Emergency Planning Zone covering a 16-km radius, before fuel loading. Nothing suggests this will happen.

Koodankulam violates the stipulation that there must be zero population within a 1.5-km radius, and only a sparse population within a 5-km radius. Several thousands live in the 1.5-km radius. At least 40,000 people live within a 5-km radius, and 100,000 in the EPZ.

The generic hazards of nuclear power include radiation at each stage, from uranium mining, fuel fabrication, reactor operation and maintenance, to waste storage. Cancer-causing radiation is harmful in all doses. Routine emissions from reactors also pose grave hazards.

Even graver is the problem of nuclear wastes, which remain hazardous for thousands of years. Science knows no safe way of storing, let alone neutralising, them.

Nuclear power is the only form of energy production with a potential for catastrophic accidents like Fukushima. These problems make nuclear power uniquely, irredeemably, hazardous.

Koodankulam concentrates these hazards, dangerously. It must be scrapped.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 15

763 BC

Assyrians record a solar eclipse that is later used to fix the chronology of Mesopotamian history.

1215

King John of England puts his seal to the Magna Carta.

1389

Battle of Kosovo: The Ottoman Empire defeats Serbs and Bosnians.

1909

Representatives from England, Australia and South Africa meet at Lord's and form the Imperial Cricket Conference.

1940

World War II: Operation Ariel begins Allied troops start to evacuate France, following Germany's takeover of Paris and most of the nation.

1978

King Hussein of Jordan marries American Lisa Halaby, who takes the name Queen Noor.

1992

The United States Supreme Court rules in United States v. Alvarez-Machain that it is permissible for the United States to forcibly extradite suspects in foreign countries and bring them to the USA for trial, without approval from those other countries.

1994

Israel and Vatican City establish full diplomatic relations.