

# Tax imposed on newsprint

## It will cripple the print media

THE finance minister's proposal to withdraw the concession on newsprint does not augur well for the print media or the readers. It will cost nearly 27 percent more per ton under the new proposal.

The argument that the newspaper industry is getting undue advantage over commercial importers creating an "uneven competition" for domestic producers also rings hollow, especially since there is only one domestic producer of newsprint. That hardly constitutes an industry. Furthermore, the quality of locally produced newsprint is also poor, which will add to the cost of printing.

Hence, in the government's effort to end this discrepancy, as put so eloquently by the honourable minister of finance, the entire newspaper industry is apprehending a near-doubling of cost of production. The end result will be a significant increase in retail cost of newspapers across the board – a price that will have an adverse impact overall.

The newspaper industry is representative of the freedom of expression. It helps in ensuring that the fundamental rights of the people are upheld. The print media acts as a watchdog on government activities and serves the nation by bringing news and views that is representative of the people, and which helps to create an informed citizenry.

The proposal on the cards is a step in the wrong direction as it will not add significantly to revenue earnings for the national exchequer. On the contrary, it will result in reducing access to information by making newspapers less affordable for a large section of the public.

# The taxman cometh!

## Let his new powers not be abused

TAXMEN under the provisions of this year's budget will be able to exercise powers of a summary kind. They can instantly freeze the assets of tax dodgers, which means they can have banks freeze accounts if they are convinced that some foul play is going on. The new powers mean a change. Where earlier the National Board of Revenue could ask banks to freeze the assets of defaulters or tax dodgers, it will now be these taxmen who will immediately clamp down on people engaged in financial wrongdoing.

On the face of it, the decision appears to be a well-considered one given the extent to which tax evasion has gone on in Bangladesh over the past many decades. Indeed, where an aversion to a payment of taxes has been something of a norm, such an empowerment of officials responsible for ensuring that the state is not deprived of what rightly belongs to it is welcome. But then comes the necessary question: what guarantee is there that the job will be done to public satisfaction? There are, after all, the old questions related to corruption on the part of the powerful. In the new circumstances, the nation must be convinced that these taxmen will use their powers in the public interest, that they will not themselves fall prey to the temptation of greed. Again, in a society where the powerful, despite the wrongs they have committed, have always gone free and where the weak have been pounced on, it makes sense to ask if such a measure can indeed work.

# Rohingyas' right to belong legally

EDITORIAL DESK

AFTER all the years that Thailand has been involved with sheltering refugees from neighbouring countries, one would think that our authorities' handling of sensitive humanitarian issues would have improved over time. But as a recent report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) suggests, Thai officials have learned little and haven't improved their overall attitude to those in vulnerable situations.

HRW has called on the Thai government to immediately end the detention under inhumane conditions of more than 1,700 ethnic Rohingya. The statement followed the release of shocking video footage of an immigration facility in Phang Nga province, aired by ITN Channel 4 News on May 31.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra should be reminded that in January she agreed to permit Rohingya arriving by boat from Myanmar to stay temporarily, initially for six months, until they could be safely repatriated to their places of origin or resettled to third countries. She needs to understand that she can't go around making these promises to the international community and then turn a blind eye to the appalling conduct of her officials.

Moreover, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has not been permitted to screen the Rohingya in Phang Nga. The embarrassment that would be caused by revelation of the dreadful holding conditions is likely the same reason why the government is reluctant to permit foreign governments and international organisations like the UN from visiting the violent deep South, where a Malay-Muslim insurgency has raged since 2004. There are just too many things to hide, like the culture of impunity and extrajudicial killings by government and pro-government officials.

The Rohingya are stranded along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Southeast Asia's construct of "nation-states" has passed them by. Post-colonial governments drew up national maps, most of which were in line with boundaries left by the European powers. Neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh wants them, thus making them one of the most pitiable people in the world. And neither country seems willing to do anything about resolving the problem.

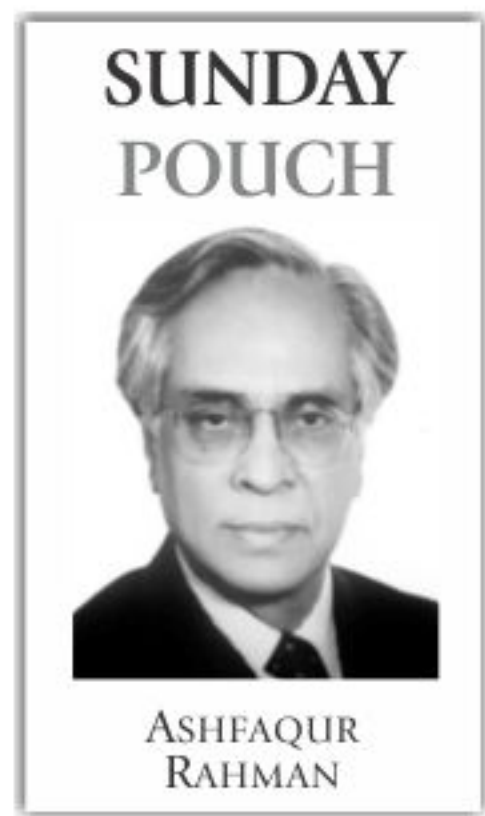
The stateless hill-tribe people along the northern and western Thai border are not much different from the Rohingya. The only difference is that most, if not all, of the northern hill-tribes have been documented, even though they might not have been granted citizenship and the privileges that come with it.

But documentation is a start. And perhaps this is where Myanmar should begin. The Rohingya issue should be about legality. It's a humanitarian crisis that stems from an unwillingness to give them legal status anywhere.

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# India's nuclear strike capability : Some questions



IN April 2012, India successfully tested a long range (5000 km ) ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and striking the Chinese cities of Beijing and Shanghai. The missile was launched from a small island off the coast of Orissa close to Bangladesh and to the Bay of Bengal. This year India has announced that it is likely to reconfigure this missile to carry multiple nuclear warheads. This will enable a single missile to target independently several targets.

By successfully demonstrating this intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) called Agni—V, Indian policy makers can no longer confine their argument that the country's nuclear strike capability is there to meet limited strategic objectives. They must now be ready to argue the legitimacy of possessing an ICBM capable of causing havoc so far away from India. Indeed, Agni—V can now 'punish China if she crosses (according to India) the red line'. The country is on the way to attain great power status. Only a handful of other countries in the world like the US, the UK, France, China, Russia and Israel possess such missiles that with a nuclear warhead can cause mass destruction at such a distance.

India began its quest to develop short, medium and long range missiles more than five decades back. In the fifties, India concentrated in building anti tank missiles which had only a 3 ton thrust. But due to organizational shortcomings of the Indian Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO), the government agency set up to develop such weapons, as well as weak support from politicians, the project was terminated. The second phase was in the decade of the seventies. Two important projects were then taken up. The first project called Devil was started to 'reverse engineer' Soviet SA-2 surface –to-air (SAM) missile. The other was project Valiant to develop a 1500 km ballistic missile. But due to lack of engineering and scientific infrastructure the last project was abandoned.

In the eighties India seriously began its program of building a family of strategic and tactically guided missiles through an Integrated Guided Missile Development Program (IGMDP). Two types of short range missiles (Prithivi) and a medium range technology demonstrator (Agni) were produced. At the same time India started to also build a series of tactical missile systems. In mid nineties, the 150 km range Prithivi was built to strike Pakistan. It also fabricated Agni (with 1400 km) range with 're-entry vehicle' technology to see whether in course of time it could build missiles to strike China. Thus Agni—II and Agni – III, and a supersonic cruise missile (BrahMos) with Russian collaboration, were built to do just that.

Indian defense scientists are also developing a new cruise missile system called Nirbhay (Fearless) which is a 1000km subsonic missile that can suitably be launched from various platforms. This missile is also able to avoid radar detection. Another ballistic missile called Sagarika



Agni-V missile being launched from Wheeler Island off India's east coast. SOURCE: AP

which can be launched from a submarine and is likely to be positioned in its nuclear powered submarine INS Arihant is being built.

The big question before India's neighbours is, can she restrain herself from abusing her nuclear status when confronted with many of the intractable problems she has with each one them? Can India be trusted to behave responsibly while in possession of such powerful weapons of mass destruction? Are there any options available to the weaker neighbours?

India has never disclosed the size of her nuclear arsenal. But analysts estimate that she has 80 to 100 nuclear weapons. At the same time she has produced weapons – grade plutonium for 75 to 110 nuclear projectiles. India is not a signatory to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). But in 1999, she declared a nuclear 'No –first-use' policy based on 'credible minimum deterrence'. She asserts that the policy she follows is 'for retaliation only'. For this India has set up a joint staff 'Strategic Nuclear Command' which is the custodian of all of India's nuclear assets including its missiles. This Command however takes direct orders from the Cabinet Committee on Security (CSS) which only can authorize a nuclear strike. The Cabinet Committee is obviously under the Prime Minister and so he has his finger directly on the nuclear button.

Curiously in 2010 India through its National Security Advisor signaled a change in its policy of 'no-first-use policy' to 'no-first-use against non-nuclear weapons state' policy. So a policy shift has discreetly taken place. It makes India's claim to use her nuclear capability for deterrence questionable. In this context, deterrence seems to be a highly elastic concept.

But let it be clear that India's nuclear strike capability though alarming to some of her neighbours is not as dizzying as that of China. According to analysts, Beijing has an arsenal of 240 or more nuclear warheads and it continues to add on to it. Its missiles have ranges between 2000km to 11000km.

If India and China are so far ahead can Pakistan be far behind? Far from it, Pakistan boasts of the 'world's fastest growing nuclear stockpile' i.e.90-110 nuclear weapons. It uses 'Chinese supplied' missiles named the Ghaznavi, Shaheen and the Ghauri. It is now developing long range missiles and cruise missiles called the Babul and the Raad. The nuclear race among the countries in our region is therefore alarming and indeed regrettable.

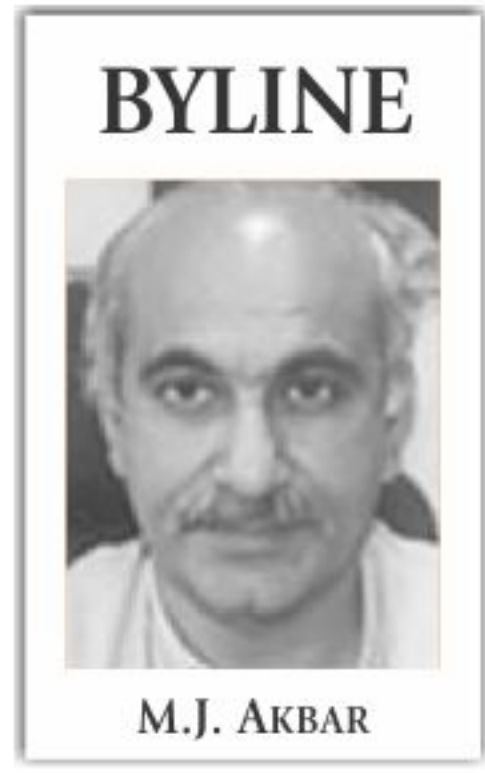
But the key question now is, will the success of Agni -- V act as a game changer? Would India for the time being stop developing more sophisticated missiles to deliver warheads to more distant capitals? Or Agni -- V is a bridge to a yet more advanced arsenal? All this would depend on how India looks at China's growing nuclear arsenal. If political and military importance of China grows in the coming years, it is likely that we may see a new round of a nuclear arms race in our region. But the recent declaration of reconfiguring Agni -- V to carry multiple warheads partially answers our question

For small nations like Bangladesh in the Asia Pacific do we have any choice? We can only watch and despair.

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# The negative side of positive



PRIME Minister Manmohan Singh urged us all recently to shed "negativity". I kept looking long and hard for "positivity" between the rolling hills of scams, the deepening crisis in the economy and the emotional brotherhood between cricket and bookies, but alas, "positivity" proved to be as elusive as the pimpernel. And then suddenly there it was, in the middle of Kolkata.

Let us all stand up and praise Mamata Banerjee.

This is not for winning a byelection in Howrah, a partially urban district that begins just across the Hooghly river from Kolkata, although the importance of this to her fortunes should not be underestimated. This victory has given her government oxygen till the next test, the panchayat elections, and beyond. Her detractors, mostly concentrated in urban Bengal, were baying for her defeat. Her foes on the Left were enervated; the Congress was back in nowhere land, but ranged against her. Mamata Banerjee managed to do unto the Left what the Left did unto its opponents for more than three decades. She shrugged off the urban middle class and picked up the underprivileged vote.

But that is reason for only her party's applause. Our congratulations go to Mamata Banerjee for being the one major politician to accept the suggestion that political funding should be covered by the Right to Information Act. She welcomed the move to bring political parties under RTI when even the Left opposed the possible arrival of daylight in safe boxes where parties keep their cash.

If a government can be answerable to RTI, why can't political parties who run government be subject to the same scrutiny? Their defensive arguments are dust in our eyes. Political parties do not belong to private shareholders; they are created for a public purpose, and they wield enormous influence over our lives through the public monies they control, and the policies they put in place. The very least that we should know is the route map of their cash flow.

Note that at very best exposure will only ascertain how much political parties have received officially. The greater proportion of their money comes not in cheques but in cash. Something however is always better than nothing. Cynics might suggest that Mamata Banerjee does not care because she gets very little in either form, and her only source is chit fund businessmen of the minor sort. Even if this is true, she is willing to face questions through RTI. Why can't others? Why should we condemn the good merely because it is not the ideal?

As the situation stands in political space, minnows are rushing to the defence of sharks, terrified that their little feed might be threatened.

I suspect that many parties are more worried about



details of the outflow of funds than they are about inflow. Outflow would strip aside the hypocrisy that shields their lifestyle, their travel style and their political style. Once an RTI process begins it will become virtually impossible, for instance, to disguise whose aircraft was used for which bit of travel, or indeed how many planes were hired when one might have been sufficient. The cadre who sweat it out in the base camps of party politics might not be too amused.

In the nexus between business and politics, there is nothing called a free lunch, although there is something called paying too much for a sparse meal, as many industrialists will ruefully confirm if you talk to them off the record. If an industrialist is not paying for a deal with a ruling party, he is buying insurance from the opposition. The cost of the second is less than the first, but you still pay.

We cannot blink away a fundamental problem. The financing of political parties is a core dilemma of democracy, and no one has a satisfactory solution. America attempted transparency in the minute form that modern technology can permit, and then created large loopholes for vested interests to mobilize massive advertising for their preferred candidate, in total violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. The greatest fun that British newspapers have had in a long while is from the endless exposure of how MPs fudge and fiddle their bills, or how eager they are to sell their individual influence to any corporate interest. For every MP or Lord caught, there are ten giggling away nervously, praising God that they escaped the media dragnet.

The Indian problem is not mere inaction, but the inability to do any serious thinking. This could be because there are no adequate answers. Government funding would be a disaster; parties would merely take from the public as well as private sector, creating the worst of both worlds. And if the Election Commission denied certificates to those deemed to have spent above the limit, half the Lok Sabha might be empty. Is anyone ready for such a prospect?

I tried my best to be positive, and look where we ended up.

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The writer is Editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi and London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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**Over-enthusiastic home minister**

Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir has been rewarded by the prime minister Sheikh Hasina for the role he played when Awami League was in the opposition. Now he is in charge of the home ministry.

To impress the prime minister, he has become over-enthusiastic and has been taking steps that are unbelievable. Lately, the home minister issued an order that no meeting or demonstration can be held for one month, as reported by BSS; and talking to the BBC Bangla Service, he said that the ban was imposed in the capital for an indefinite period.

This sort of ban is unprecedented. We hope the home minister will lift the ban so that the political parties can function freely.

Nur Jahan, Chittagong

**No work, yet full pay!**

Your front page reports of June 3 on "JS boycott" and "Unholy race" should make the MPs concerned ashamed. Is this the example of moral standard they are setting for the country's youth? Elsewhere, hardworking low-paid workers are toiling in unsafe garment factories and other industries, where "no work, no pay" is the accepted norm. Such waste of national revenue needs to be stopped. MPs should also be governed by the "no work no pay" rule, like many of their voters. To earn the full month's remuneration, an MP has to be present in the JS at least eighty percent of the days the assembly is in session.

This can now be easily programmed with electronic swipe cards, so that the full record of an MP's coming to and leaving the house can be maintained.

Frustrated voter, Dhaka

**ICC Champions Trophy 2013**

The International Cricket Council (ICC) Champions Trophy 2013 has begun on June 6, 2013 in England. The tournament, however, will be staged against the backdrop of a series of spot-fixing and corruption allegations which took place during the recently-concluded IPL and BPL that have rocked the cricket world once again. The two teams that I reckon will exceed all expectations in the tournament, despite not being amongst the pre-tournament favourites, are Pakistan and West Indies. Let us hope cricket will be in the news for all the right reasons after all the negativity surrounding the sport during the last month.

Aranya Syed  
London, England

**'Listen to people'**

Our prime ministers always talk too much. They should talk less and let people talk about their problems, aspirations and dreams. People understand their problems better and know what should be done to solve them. It is not the PM but the people who will decide how the forthcoming national election will be held. We believe our PM can be a successful leader if she follows a simple rule: listen to the people.

Md. Shahjahan Mia  
Development Professional , Dhaka

**Comments on news report, "Budget lavish, plan poor," published on June 7, 2013**

**Iftekhar Hassan**

Taka 2,592 crore earmarked for export incentive is nothing but sticking dagger on the back of workers of Bangladesh and awarding people like Rana Plaza owners. Parties like Awami League or BNP will continue to whet their greed.

**M.Ashraf**

It was very irresponsible for the opposition not to be in parliament to challenge the statements made.

**subterraneo**

Is it possible to elaborate on the last paragraph ('boost for industry')?

**Ahmed Sadat Kamal**

I think it's a good budget.

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**"Padma to choke other projects" (June 07, 2013)**

**Anisul Haque**

Corruption of Padma Bridge is going to choke AL also.

**Snr Citizen**

It is easily understood that Padma Bridge project is an election issue of AL, even if that puts a serious burden to the nation. All other projects, whatever little, will terribly suffer. Generating home-grown funds in such a huge scale is atrocious when masses are being oppressed under the burden of inflation.

**Shahin Huq**

May I request the government to stop playing politics with the Padma Bridge project, please? Padma Bridge will be built only when our PM will appoint ministers, not 'cashiers'.