

Illegal housing schemes

Those responsible should be held to account

SOME powerful real estate agents have been developing a number of housing projects through changing the character of lands within the Dhaka Master plan areas since long. Most of these lands fall in the category of wetlands, floodplains, croplands as well as homesteads.

The projects are illegal both according to a High Court order of 2011 as well as the private housing land development act of 2004.

Oddly though, the developers claim to have obtained approval from Rajuk and the housing ministry for the projects. How could these realtors get such approvals?

According to reports, while giving approval to those illegal schemes, the housing ministry had bypassed parliamentary standing committee in altering the relevant rules.

However, upon recommendation of the parliamentary standing committee, the controversial approvals of those housing schemes are being scrutinised. And the secretary to the ministry is learnt to have informed that those would be cancelled if any anomaly is found in them.

Clearly, rules have been flouted in approving the illegal housing schemes. But what is still not clear who is or are the culprit(s). The minister is reported to have been misled by Rajuk and his secretary in giving the approval.

There must have been some strange goings-on over giving approval to the illegal housing projects. This is simply beyond the pale.

We demand that the government take the issue with due seriousness and institute a thorough no nonsense enquiry into the matter.

The culprits including the realtors must be found out and punished.

Our peace standing Leaves room for improvement

THE Global Peace Index has placed Bangladesh in number 105 this year. 162 countries were measured in terms of security in society, the extent of conflict and the degree of militarisation and Bangladesh has dropped 14 places down from last year. According to the global peace index the world is less peaceful in 2013 than 2012 and 5 percent less peaceful since the year 2008.

As we stand in the month of June, and look back at the past six months of the year, it is full of strikes, political upheaval, fighting man-made disasters and unnecessary violence. The combination of it all has influenced our society, and fear is in the mind of our general population as well as uncertainty.

But it is once again a wakeup call for Bangladesh as we take the big drop in standing on global peace index. No matter how much we write and talk about the sensible thing to do if our government and political parties do not realise the harm they are causing not just in Bangladesh but to the impression we have worldwide we are bound to be stuck at the bottom of the list.

Perhaps all of us are not affected by this peace index, perhaps many of us are still living in our bubbles and some of us living in our security bubbles are calling some of the shots which is building a restless Bangladesh. Our only request, if you are in your security cocoon of peace, please step out for a second, feel the trouble in the hearts of the average Bangladeshi.

Safe Food Day

Lt COL QUAZI SALIMUDDIN

THE government has drafted a Safe Food Law (2013) which is likely to be passed by the parliament soon. To prevent widespread food adulteration and to ensure availability of safe food in the country the government is also in the process of forming a single agency styled Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA).

It is common knowledge that the whole population is being slow poisoned through all types of food, be it agricultural, diary, poultry, fishery, bottled, canned etc. These products contain chemicals which are highly toxic like synthetic chemical pesticides; chemical fertilisers; preservatives like formalin; growth hormones; synthetic colour-sweetener-flavour-test enhancer etc. Either the food contains these chemicals which are not fit for human consumption or contains a higher level than the maximum safe limit allowed for use.



The effect of this slow poisoning on public health is very dreadful. The challenge to provide safe food to people is daunting. To be effective, only the law and an agency will not be sufficient at all. It has to be an all encompassing movement. Public in general, various ministries like agriculture & commerce, NGOs, trade bodies, organisations engaged in social activities etc., has to be brought on board to be a partner of the movement. To build up public awareness and also to rejuvenate the movement, ministry of food should earmark a day in a year as 'Safe Food' day.

In the year 2012 during the month of June, 14 children died in Dinajpur and Thakurgown due to eating insecticide sprayed litchi. Hence, we appeal to the government to declare the 14th of June as Safe Food day.

The writer is a retired Lieutenant Colonel.
E-mail: bishmukto.bangla@gmail.com

The Dadaist budget won't fly

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

called it 'indecently' ambitious. A BNP stalwart compared it to a colourful balloon. The Center for Policy Dialogue described it as a 'surreal' budget. I would say, while all of those descriptions come close to it, one that hits the nail on the head is calling it a Dadaist budget. The finance minister has flouted conventional wisdom by producing something 'marked by travesty, incongruity and nonsense.'

Now those aren't my words, but taken straight from the definition of Dadaism. It's a 20th century movement when painters and writers in France, Germany, and Switzerland revolted against complacency in traditional art and the Western society. Their work illustrated absurdity through purposeless machines and collages of discarded materials. They expressed their cynicism about conventional ideas of form and their rejection of traditional concepts of beauty.

That's exactly what our finance minister did with this budget. He shunned the conventional concept when revenue and expenditure drive budget rationale. Even if the estimates are realistic, a budget isn't always implemented in its original form. Occasionally, amendments are made in midcourse to meet revenue constraints or projects aspirations.

What has driven this budget is anybody's guess. It's a politically motivated budget that hasn't followed economic instincts. Salaries have been raised, luxuries made affordable, amnesty for black money renewed, minimum tax ceiling raised and all other things offered to all other people to pamper them ahead of the election season. Those who are looking for economic meaning in a political underpinning are scouring a mango tree searching for jackfruit.

This budget hasn't been prepared so that the country can

THE controversy surrounding the national budget announced last week has something of the humour of Jackie Mason about it. This American comedian once quipped that he had enough money to last him the rest of his life unless he had to buy something. That's also true for this oversized budget. It's implementable so long as one doesn't worry how it should be implemented.

Different people have characterised this budget with different words. The finance minister has

build on its success, but so that the ruling party can manifestly build on its game. The ruling party wants to rule again, and, in all fairness, this budget is a part of its contrivance to make that happen. The biggest weakness of this budget is that it won't get enough time to work due to election year preoccupations.

The ruling party has nothing to lose either way. If it wins the next election, it will have a fresh popular mandate. Nobody is going to be bothered how much of this budget will be implemented in the end. If it loses, who will blame an outgoing government for leaving behind an unfinished budget? Instead, this budget will be used in its future campaigns as a glaring example of wonders that could be done if the ruling party were to rule again.

It's unfortunate that the biggest budget in the history of this country has to be an election ruse. Hand on heart it will be difficult for those involved in its preparation to deny that this budget has been made big for demonstration effect. We



It's unfortunate that the biggest budget in the history of this country has to be an election ruse.

can cut the finance minister some slack because he didn't give us a silly budget out of his ignorance. If this budget is a pie in the sky, he knew it before anybody else.

By now we should be convinced that what we have got is a Dadaist budget, because it has illustrated absurdity through questionable numbers and impractical projects. The timing is also of essence. In another few days it will be all quiet on the intellectual front as our thinking and talking minds exhaust themselves like the chamber of a pistol firing sporadic shots. The budget will get approved in the

parliament. A new fiscal year will rise on the horizon.

Look at the sunny side of the new budget. It's twice the size of 2009 budget and half its implementation should give us that full year's impact, no? Then why are we being so critical? What does it matter where the revenue will come from and how the deficit is going to be met? This is an unreasonable budget for the same reason two birds in the bush isn't as good as one in the hand.

It's another story that this country is going to suffer. Another good year of economic prospects will be sacrificed on the altar of political shortchange. But honestly, an ambitious budget would have made the ruling party look weak. It couldn't have taken that chance.

Time will tell why this budget won't fly. The finance minister hurls a habitual barrage of clichéd expletives while scoffing at unpleasant questions. History will decide which particular one of those words best describes this questionable budget. May be all of them, altogether!

The writer is the Editor of weekly First News and an opinion writer for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

DEFENCE BUDGET 2013-14

Trends and imperatives

AIR CDRE (RETD) ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

SINCE the finance minister's budget speech, there has been a spate of reactions from various corners. It is a sign of the vitality of a democratic society that people from all strata are speaking out their minds on an issue that touches their lives.

Somewhere in the middle of the detailed plan on expenditures, he had two short paragraphs on national defence. He stated that Bangladesh armed forces is till date the largest contributing force under the UN flag and that in the FY 2012-13 they have earned US\$72million from peacekeeping operations.

He also mentioned that the government in the past years had taken steps to induct modern fighters, tanks, missiles and ships for the 3 services, so that they are operationally ready to undertake any mission either for the defence of the country or an overseas mission under the UN flag.

The total allocation for the defence forces for FY 2013-14 was Tk.14,564 crore.

The minister's speech this year was a welcome departure from the previous years when the defence budget had always been a 2-line statement stating what the government is going to spend for the armed forces.

However, although he stated some of the defence projects which were implemented during the recent years, it did not clarify what was actually achieved with the allocation last year or what he wants to do with the money this year.

Statements such as "building strong armed forces for the country" are too vague, and leaves much room for conjecture. Traditionally, there had never been a debate on the defence budget in the floor of the Parliament; the defence budget is generally guillotined on the evening of June 30, as the deadline for the passing of the budget nears.

Although we have a Parliamentary Committee on Defence, they spend more time on innocuous subjects such as cadet colleges or pay, pension or other privileges for the armed forces, rather than debating on the forces' goal, organisational structures or weapon procurement.

There had been attempts from the government in recent years to make the civil society, academia and the politicians more aware and interested in defence matters. One such attempt has been a fortnight-long capstone course on national defence, run by the National Defence College (NDC), participated by politicians, top civil bureaucrats, military commanders, academicians, journalists and other opinion makers.

It is hoped that such courses will bring a better understanding of civil and military issues to all segments of the society. Despite these steps, however, there is often mistrust and acrimony between civil and military leaders. While the civilian leaders think that military is exerting pressure to take away vital resources that would have been better used to build infrastructures, the military leaders think their civilian counterparts are insensitive to their genuine needs for a credible military force.

The competition of choice between the bread and bullet continues in every country.

Going back to why we should have the defence forces or what the rationale is behind defence spending, we find that defending the citizen from enemies is the prime responsibility of the state since its inception few millennia ago. The state collects taxes from the citizen with the promise that it will protect and defend its citizen from all enemies.

Citizens need to be assured that their life and property are secure from external aggression and internal subversion. A credible military force provides that assurance. A standing military today is the hallmark of an independent state, a symbol of its sovereignty.

However, national defence is only a part of a broader concept of national security. National security involves not only physical security provided by the military, but includes food security, environmental security, energy security etc.

together called human security that are essential to lasting prosperity of a nation.

While we cannot neglect physical security, we cannot ignore human security either. Emphasising military security while neglecting human security leads to a state like North Korea where people go hungry while the state spends billions on nuclear weapons. Too much militarisation could also lead to a Praetorian state such as Pakistan, where military for decades interfered with the running of the government.

Striking the right balance between national development and national defence is, therefore, most important.

Bangladesh is fortunate to have no major border dispute with her neighbours. Although she shares more than 3,000km of a densely populated border with India, the border is well-demarcated except few stretches totaling about 9km. The land boundary with neighbour Myanmar is also demarcated. The sea boundary with Myanmar was settled through arbitration last year, while our maritime boundary with India is still awaiting arbitration.

We have a number of irritants along the Indo-Bangladesh border, such as adverse possessed land, enclaves, border fencing or firing across border by border guards, none of these demand military response. Most important outstanding issue with India is the sharing of water resources, while the issue of Rohingya refugees strains our friendly relation with Myanmar.

But these issues can only be resolved diplomatically.

Geo-strategically, however, Bangladesh continues to hold a very sensitive position. It straddles across Indian mainland and its NE states. With the Indian state of Arunachal being claimed by China, there is always a possibility of military conflict between China and India, as happened in 1962.

In such a scenario, Bangladesh will have to play its cards well and our military credibility will come into focus. Besides these issues, the threat of international terrorism, cross border infiltration, coastal piracy, arms and drug smuggling by anti-state elements continue to pose serious security challenges that might demand military response.

Starting in 1972 with only 3 brigades of infantry, no aircraft for the air force or ships for the navy, Bangladesh today has an army of over 7 divisions, armed with modern tanks, artillery, missiles and guns. Navy today has a blue water capability with guided-missile armed ships, maritime aircraft and helicopters. Air force has a number of combat squadrons armed with modern fighters, besides transport and helicopters. High professional standard of our armed forces attract trainees from across the world into our military training establishments. Our forces under UN flag continue to be our best ambassadors around the world.

All these achievements have come with a price. Bangladesh has traditionally spent about 1.5% of its GDP and about 6.5% of its national budget on defence. As our GDP and the size of the national budget rises, so rises the defence expenditures. Over the last 10 years, the defence budget has grown from less than Tk.4,000 crore in 2003-04 to over Tk.14,000 crore today. It is going to rise further in the next few years as the payment for the arms purchase from Russia and China falls due.

The important question today is not how much should be spent for defence, but what the process is of decision-making. Transparency in procurement and resource distributions is vital. At a time when we have serious resource constraints, 6.5% of budget going to defence will surely raise a few eyebrows.

People would like to be assured that their money is buying the best defence for the country. Politicians, civil and military leaders, civil society, and media -- each have a role to play. Only through a national consensus can we have a robust military force.

The writer is Registrar, BRAC University.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR
letters@thedailystar.net

Week's Best

Justice denied

Justice delayed is justice denied. The Ramu incident took place about 10 months ago, but no one has been punished so far. A couple of months ago, Hindu temples were attacked and vandalised after war criminal Saydee's verdict was declared. The government has raised its finger at Jamaat-e-Islami for those attacks on minorities. Both the major political parties are still blaming each other over this issue. Our question is, will the victims ever get justice?

M. A. Kashem
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Nuclear plant: Safety first!

Bangladesh is heading towards commissioning nuclear power plant. It is true that power generation from nuclear plant is much cheaper but extreme safety measures are required to keep a nuclear plant protected against accident; be it natural or man-made. We should take lesson from the recent nuclear power plant disaster in Japan. Experts say decommissioning of Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant will take nearly a half-century! Bangladesh government should keep it in mind while going ahead with nuclear power.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Govt being kind to criminals?

The lavish budget for the fiscal year 2013-2014 has kept the scope for whitening black money. It sounds very unpleasant. We all know that black money is the money that is earned through illegal means. Ours is a country where corruption is rampant. Influential people with political affiliation earn huge amount of black money. Is the state showing mercy to them? Then why does Bangladesh Bank warn commercial banks to be very cautious about the source of fund while opening accounts and monitor abnormal transactions? What message is sent to the criminals through this procedure?

Pushpan Chowdhury
Fatickchari, Chittagong

Help two Nintoli orphans

Tamanna Khan's front page report of 5th June vividly reflected the principles and sensible approach of Shamsunnahar, widow of late Ripon, a volunteer who sacrificed his life trying to save others from the devastating Nintoli fire.

Can I, therefore, appeal to your renowned daily to set up a trust fund, with donation from your readers, so that the young children can get education? I am sure many of your readers will contribute generously for such a fund, including this writer. I will also request 'Rotary,' 'Lions,' PM and the leader of the opposition to come and help the two orphan children in their hour of need.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "No big name except Abul," published on June 12, 2013

Niloufar Sarker

If the only name that WB can come up with is Mr. Abul, then it is a sad state of affair. We all remember how WB would not sit in the discussions until an influential adviser of this government was sent packing. Now if they cannot implicate him, should they not apologise to him for damaging his lifelong reputation? Character assassination is not child's play.

Triple Ace

It's kind of sad how selfishly a few always get their ways at the cost of suffering of millions of others. Lowest of the animals take only what they need; these thugs of Bangladesh always succeed in proving themselves to be lower than the lowest of the animal kingdom.

Ash C.

Please don't disgrace the 'lowest of the animal kingdom' by comparing them with the thugs of Bangladesh!

Iftekhar Hassan

The way Awami League government is protecting the ex-communications minister Syed Abul Hossain is creating doubt in everybody's mind. The ex-minister must be grilled to know the truth, which is people's right.

Shafiqur Rahman

Let's not mince Mr. Muhith's comments.

deepjelejai

WB should publish the full report. Otherwise, it will be suspected for exaggeration of corruption, as claimed by PM. Besides, the people of Bangladesh have the right to know the case in details. WB should not give Bangladesh government a chance to play with its own citizens.

"Formalin in fruits" (June 12, 2013)

Raf Chow

Take them to jail for conspiracy to murder.

K. T. Rahman

It has been going on, and will go on. We are truly helpless. We are being poisoned by our fellow countrymen. What an irony!