

Inking of deals with China

We move on to a new trajectory

FIVE deals have been inked during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Beijing besides marking a renewal of contacts at the highest level. Ranging from the large coal-fired plant to be set up in Patuakhali to other large infrastructure projects that include the construction of a surface water treatment plant, the prospects for enhanced economic cooperation between the two countries herald a new era in bilateral relations. What is of import here is that all the projects are geared towards tiding over key infrastructure weaknesses that have held back direct foreign investment for too long.

We would like to congratulate Sheikh Hasina's government on the impetus it has provided to take Sino-Bangla relations to a higher stage.

Chinese involvement in the establishing of a large power plant, upgrading existing road and rail links and other major areas like the setting up of a second oil refinery only goes to show that Bangladesh is being viewed as a country of promise in terms of investment. It also gives greater impetus to the idea of regional connectivity where Bangladesh becomes a hub between East Asia and regions to the West. The dilapidated state of infrastructure has held up the idea of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor for some years now. It should be noted, however, that for Bangladesh to transform these joint-ventures and other deals into tangibles, it will have to be more than proactive on the implementation side.

The culture of red-tape has to be dealt with decisively. The machinery of government must move faster so that we may take advantage of the goodwill and support that have been extended by the government of China.

SoEs mark a turnaround

Consolidate the trend

LOOKING at the recent performance of the State-owned Enterprises (SoEs), it appears they are finally getting to grips with their past negative image and are rolling back a constant drain on the national exchequer. The finance ministry says, out of a total of 48 SoEs, 34 have made profits in the outgoing fiscal, while 14 are still in the red. This is undoubtedly a welcome piece of news after a long time.

Among the best performers in the list is the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), which earned Tk. 93.98 billion in the last fiscal. This whopping 76 percent surge in its income year-on-year basis has, however, come from the BTRC's issuing 3G licences to mobile telephone operators. The other major income earner has been Petrobangla, which compared to last fiscal has quadrupled its earnings at around Tk. 35 billion.

With the good news, we have also the not-so-happy report of further dip in the performance of the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPD), which, thanks to its purchase of power at higher prices from the quick rental power plants, has cost the national exchequer over Tk.70 billion in the outgoing fiscal. The losses notwithstanding, there is still a brighter side to it, since, benefited by enhanced electricity supply in the power grid, industry and commerce have started to contribute positively to the country's GDP.

With the exception of PDB, some loss-making industries, such as Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), have been able to cut their losses significantly. This is no mean achievement. Overall, this marks a turn-around auguring well for the SoEs.

Unexamined expenditure of Tk. 8,000 crore

SHAKHAWAT LITON

SECTION 233 (4) of the Rules of Procedure of the Jatiya Sangsad provides the Public Accounts Committee of the House with sweeping authority over the supplementary budget. This section categorically says if any money has been spent on any service during a financial year in excess of the amount granted by the House for that purpose, the committee shall examine with reference to the facts of each case the circumstances leading to such an excess and make such recommendation as it may deem fit.

But the Public Accounts Committee was once again denied the right to examine the additional expenditure of more than Tk. 8,000 crore by 35 ministries and divisions in the current financial year. The parliament was made to pass on Monday the supplementary budget for the current financial year of 2013-14 legalising the excess expenditure by those ministries and divisions. The committee made no move to examine the excess expenditure since the supplementary budget was placed in parliament on last Thursday. The government was also silent about it.

In fact, the additional expenditure stipulated in the supplementary budget was passed hurriedly. The House held a discussion over the supplementary budget for only four hours before it was passed. So, the reasons behind the excess expenditure remained unknown. The ministries and divisions did not need to justify the additional expenditure. And the House could not know whether they were justified.

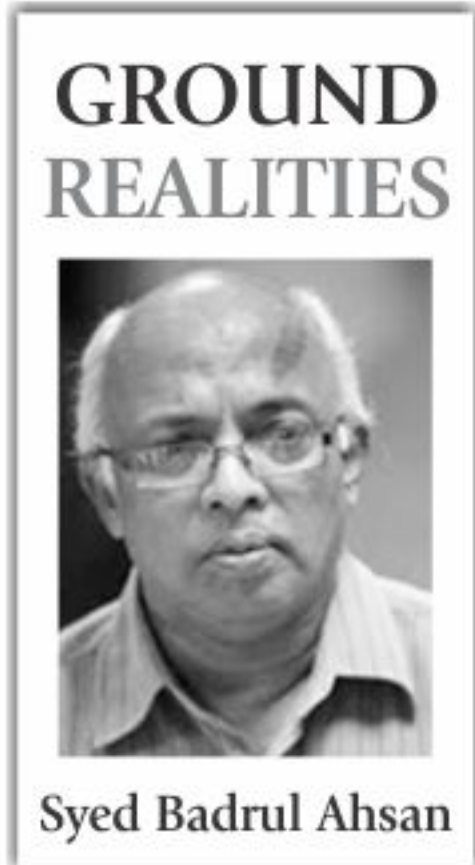
This provision has existed in the rules of procedure since 1974. But it was never exercised to allow the Public Accounts Committee to examine excess expenditure by the ministries and divisions. This culture has been benefiting the successive governments over the decades as they have not been made accountable to the parliament through the Committee for the excess expenditure.

The successive governments have remained silent about allowing the committee to examine the excess expenditure. Similarly, the parliament has also refrained from taking any step to exercise its authority through the Committee. MPs have never spoken for sending the supplementary budget to the Public Accounts Committee.

Is this the way we are strengthening parliamentary democracy and turning the House into focal point of all activities? By making the parliament unable to keep effective control over the public money, how will the government ensure proper utilisation of budgetary allocations?

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Generals rising, nations falling



Syed Badrul Ahsan

You could, of course, argue that General Sisi has been elected to the presidency. There is little question about that. Then again, observe the manner of his rise to power. As army chief and defence minister under President Mohammad Morsi, he felt little remorse in planning the coup that would result in the ouster of Egypt's only properly elected president. Morsi is in prison. And we are not quite sure how long Sisi will be in office. If you observe the history of post-1952 Egypt, you will not fail to note the long years an earlier generation of the country's military leadership spent mapping its political landscape. Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak allowed no room for democracy to take root. General Sisi has now spearheaded democracy and risen to power in brutal fashion.

There have been all the moments when army officers have without embarrassment turned against their political leaders and pushed their countries down the road to disaster. Augusto Pinochet, elevated to the position of Chile's army chief by President Salvador Allende in 1973, only weeks later led the bloody coup that left the president and thousands of Chileans dead. He presided over a reign of terror that would not end till 1990. Chile yet bears the scars inflicted on it in those dark times.

There is the unforgettable tale of Indonesia, where six generals were murdered in what was given out, in 1965, as an abortive coup d'etat by the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), the Indonesian communist party. It was left to a seventh, surviving general, Suharto, to use the tragedy as an excuse to push President Sukarno from power, have the respected PKI leader DN Aidit and at least a million Indonesians, on suspicion of their being communists, killed between 1965 and 1967. Suharto turned out to be not only a ruthless dictator over the next three decades but also a foremost kleptocrat, along with his family. His come-uppance came when a popular revolt pushed him from power. Indonesians have since then remained busy trying to find peace for themselves.

There is a strange malady among some soldiers. They honestly believe theirs is a God-given right to sort out the mess politicians sometimes make in a country. Of course, there are politicians who do upset things, which sometimes and justifiably has the army coming in. Had the Bangladesh army not stepped into the political arena in

January 2007, the Iajuddin caretaker administration would have caused bigger disaster than it already had in the country. But observe the earlier instances of military involvement in Bangladesh's politics. General Ziaur Rahman felt little compunction in pulling Bangladesh away from the principles around which it had waged a War of Liberation against Pakistan. And General Ershad simply wished to Islamise the state, to our collective horror. Both these men have left politics deeply wounded. Zia would not tell Bangabandhu's government of the coup being planned against it. And Ershad had only one desire: to push the elected President Sattar from office.

The record of generals taking charge has never been a clean one. Justice M.R. Kayani spoke for a whole lot of people when, soon after General Ayub Khan's overthrow of civilian government in Pakistan in 1958, he praised the Pakistan army tongue-in-cheek. For the first time in history, said he, the Pakistan army had done a most remarkable thing: it had occupied its own country. And the army was to occupy the country three more times. Incredibly, it would turn into a band of murderers in 1971 through putting three million Bengalis to death. Incredibly, again, 93,000 thousand soldiers of this army, which prided itself on being the world's best fighting force, would surrender to the Bengalis and the Indians and spend three years in prisoner of war camps.

Now you have General Prayuth Chan-ocha in Thailand. At a time when the country was on a democratic course, he and his soldiers should have stayed loyal to the Yingluck Shinawatra government when a rowdy opposition called for its departure. Every army owes it to itself to defend the elected government of its country. Prayuth did not do that. He simply took over, proscribed a few media organisations and imposed censorship on news. When even Myanmar is gradually opening its windows to the world, Thailand has rudely been pulled back into the past. Memories of men like Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn have not yet faded away. Prayuth joins that club of unprincipled men.

The damage that military rule does can be fathomed through the experience Nigerians have gone through. Civilian government was laid low in 1966 and men like Aguiyi Ironsi, Yakubu Gowon, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha were systematically to reduce an oil-rich country into an impoverished society dependent on foreign largesse. Nigeria is today a sad country, with villains of various sorts prowling around.

You read of the dictators of the past—in Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia; in Ghana, Algeria, Sierra Leone; in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia. You read of the ruins they made of their countries. And now read of the democracies of Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines; of India and Sri Lanka; of Peru and Mexico. There are the wounded civilisations on the one hand. And there is the vibrancy of life and ideas on the other.

Which is why Abdel Fattah al Sisi's emergence in Egypt is reason for worry.

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NATIONAL SECURITY

Implications of recent incidents

ISHAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

A number of recent incidents have raised important questions on national security. National security implies providing citizens an environment where they are free from fear of aggression, violence and subversion from enemies -- within and without. While the defence forces are primarily responsible for providing security from external aggression, internal security, safety of life and property, is provided by the police and other law enforcement organisations. While these agencies provide physical security, national security encompasses broader issues such as food, water and energy security, health and disease control, climate change and adaptation strategy etc.

The on-going investigation of seven murders in Narayanganj involving a few members of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) has raised a number of issues. Rab was raised as an elite force in March 2004 to curb Islamist terrorist forces then active across the country. It was manned by selected members of the police and the three services: Army, Navy and Air Force. As Rab expanded, it also inducted members from the Border Guards Bangladesh and Ansars, a village-based volunteer force. All members of the force are on deputation, serving for a limited period.

Rab dealt swift and decisive blow to the militants. It had been successful in checking drugs and arms smuggling, breaking up criminal gangs, and militant leftist extremists. The force won support and respect from the law-abiding citizens. However, Rab was increasingly used in activities that were ordinarily police jobs. From child-lifting to gold smuggling, from ransom seeking to drug peddling, Rab was used in mundane operations that demoralised the regular police force. More ominously, Rab increasingly resorted to killing suspected criminals in what they euphemistically called 'crossfire.'

The people, having lost faith in the police, saw extrajudicial killing as a short-cut to peace and security. However, it soon became apparent that in many cases the victims were innocent, caught up on the wrong side of the power game. Extra-judicial killings lowered the image of the country abroad and drew serious criticism from human rights organisations.

The investigation into the Narayanganj incident has so far revealed that some Rab officials turned themselves into hired killers. The façade of high ethical standard, so meticulously weaved, peeled off in one stroke. The image of Rab has been so badly tarnished that there are calls ranging from its total disbandment to major reform. In my view, the force should be reorganised as a small strike force located at administrative division level. It should be composed of full-time police personnel, not a cocktail of deputed personnel from half a dozen organisations. Officers and personnel who are now in Rab should be given an option -- either to remain in Rab or return to their respective services. A small, highly mobile, anti-terrorist force, much in line with the Indian "Black Cat," is what I contemplate.

The second incident involved Myanmar. On May 28, a small party of Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB), while on a routine patrol, was suddenly attacked by the Myanmar border police from across the border, resulting in the death of one of our border guards. The Myanmar border guards are reported to have crossed the border and taken away the body of the fallen soldier. Bangladesh lodged a strong protest with the Myanmar authority and demanded an explanation. After initial denial, Myanmar authority called it a case of mistaken identity. They said that Myanmar guards thought the BGB group to be from Rohingya

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Refix tax for fixed income group

The income tax rates proposed for individuals in the budget is unrealistic and irrational considering the increasing living cost. In these days of hardship, the main victims of this irrationally high income tax will be the fixed income groups (mainly whose incomes are just their salary) who, unlike the wealthy, cannot evade tax, as their income tax is deducted at source. Therefore, the government should refix the personal income tax rates of honest taxpayers with limited income, thus encouraging people to pay tax voluntarily.

K. Gyasuddin
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Good initiative by finance ministry

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is one of the most important responsibilities of the profit-making companies around the world. It's a good sign that the government is planning to increase tax rebate benefit from 10 percent to 20 percent to encourage the companies play their CSR role. Obviously, the decision taken by the finance ministry is good for the country's development.

Another commendable step the government has recently taken is that it offers 20 percent tax rebate to industries with the stipulated condition of relocating their facilities outside of Dhaka city in order to increase the city's liveability and help the regions lagging behind economically become robust. The tax incentives will surely encourage the industries to get their units relocated outside Dhaka.

Thanks to the finance ministry for taking such time-befitting steps that will have ripple effect on the entire economy.

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Bad practice of leaving rubbish on roads

Recently the city corporation has done a very good job by repairing the streets and constructing new drains and footpaths in the Mohammadpur area. The city corporation deserves appreciation for this.

But with much concern I have noticed that rubbish is still being heaped by the side of the roads. One more thing, whenever the city corporation cleans the sewerage lines, they leave the sewage just by the side of the manhole, which eventually spreads around the area and again finds its way into the manhole when it rains.

I would like to draw the attention of the city corporation to the above matters. At the same time, they should take appropriate measures to get their digging work done without cutting the underground cables, especially those of telephones.

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Comments on news report, "Buyers duped," published on June 8, 2014

Mofi

What will the law enforcement agencies do with these abandoned fishes? It also indicates that their items are adulterated with formalin. So, just destroy those items, and then they will not leave their place again.

Anonymous

Buyers are always duped in this country. There is nothing new in it to wonder about.

Snr Citizen

Formalin is in our blood and brains. We go for formalin-free drives by buying detection kits etc., etc., but do not take concrete steps like making formalin unavailable. Why not prevent? Why offer 'cure'? We have been consuming this for the last 6 to 7 years.

"Happy JP unhappy now" (June 8, 2014)

Aasfisarwar

JP is not unhappy rather they are extremely happy. All they are trying to do is to pretend to be unhappy, a self defeating move, though.

Anonymous

A domestic opposition party unhappy? So what? It doesn't matter at all!

"What a local community can do?" (June 7, 2014)

Monju Huq

We believe it was not only the Nimtoli community which alone achieved this miracle. There must have been other positive factors and driving forces which worked together with the community for a long time.

A study is needed to find out the forces and factors that helped achieve the goal. Unless the whole facts are known and made public, this example cannot be replicated effectively. Will TDS make an effort to this end?