

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA MONDAY APRIL 13, 2015

A long awaited closure

Death sentence of Kamaruzzaman carried out

AFTER 44 excruciating years the widows of Sohagpur, now known as Bidhoba Palli (Village of Widows) in Nalitabari, Sherpur, have had closure for their burden of grief. The man responsible for planning and taking part in the killing of at least 164 villagers including the husbands of these women, on July 25, 1971, finally had to pay for his atrocious crimes. While there is nothing celebratory in another human being's death, we cannot help but find solace in the fact that justice for the merciless torture, killing and rape of so many innocent people, has been served.

These widows and other family members of the victims have had to bear the agony of seeing the man behind the murder of their loved ones, the person who facilitated rape and torture on them, lead the life of a free man and even become an influential in the country's politics. Some of the widows who had also suffered sexual abuse that day have had the courage to testify against Kamaruzzaman. Despite the risk of their families having to live with the stigma, they were determined that the truth be revealed at all costs. We salute them for their bravery and sacrifice.

We also express our deep appreciation to Sheikh Hasina's government for steadfastly pursuing the case. Our respect goes out to the War Crimes Tribunal and the Supreme Court for being able to uphold the verdict arrived after months of proceedings, despite pressure from vested groups. May the martyrs of Sohagpur finally rest in peace.

Border killings on the rise

Don't dispense with non-lethal weapons policy

IT is disconcerting to see the rise in the number of deaths of Bangladeshis in BSF firing at the Bangladesh - India border, the most recent of which occurred on Saturday.

According to a report of Rights Jessore, a local non-government organisation, eighteen Bangladeshis have been killed by Indian BSF along the border between the months of January and February of this year. Also, according to it, the BSF allegedly tortured 17 Bangladeshi nationals and abducted 37 others during that time. And the unfortunate victims were mostly cattle traders. The BSF has apologized for the recent killings but that is little comfort to the relative of the victims.

We also note with concern the recent comment of the Indian Home Minister which virtually abnegates the "no non-lethal weapons strategy" for the BSF to man the India-Bangladesh border. This has been the accord between the two border security forces since March 2011 agreeing not to use lethal weapons along the more than 4000-km Indo-Bangladesh. We saw a considerable reduction in the number of killings following the understanding.

While one does not take away the right of any security force to fire in self-defense we have no evidence to suggest that the victims had posed threat to the BSF. None of the killed had any weapons on them that could threaten the lives of the well protected BSF personnel.

We repeat what we have said before regarding the management of the Bangladesh-India border. It needs a humanitarian and sensitive approach. Given the spate of killings it seems to be missing on the Indian side.

Redefining goals of the upcoming budget

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THIS is the time of the year that draws the attention of most people on economic and financial matters. The Finance Ministry and the National Board of Revenue are busy doing their math on annual income and expenditures for preparing the budget of FY2015-16. They are also engaged in organising consultations with professional groups, the business community and other stakeholders to discuss recommendations while professional bodies, economists, the private sector and non-government organisations actively make suggestions on the upcoming budget. It is encouraging to note that more and more organisations, associations, groups and individuals are taking interest in making their points on a subject which was typically an issue mainly of the government and the business sector in the past.

Most people are of course interested in the issue of taxation since it directly affects their income, purchasing power and lifestyle. How much tax they have to pay to the government, which items will be dearer due to the imposition of higher and new taxes, and how they have to adjust their expenditure patterns are issues that common people are concerned about prior to the budget announcement. Tax is also the most important agenda of the business community as they want to remain competitive both in the domestic and global markets.

Budget, however, is not only about collecting taxes from various sources and utilising those resources for economic activities. National budget also reflects the vision of a government for sustained economic growth to be attained through budgetary allocations and policy incentives. In the recent past, along with short term objectives, budget documents also included a number of medium and long term objectives such as securing and sustaining growth of gross domestic product, achieving self-sufficiency in food production, reducing poverty, generating employment and so on. Usually, these objectives are spelt out in line with the election manifesto of the ruling party. The challenge, however, is to support these objectives through sufficient allocation and efficient implementation.

Since resources are limited, priorities have to compete with each other. As a result, many issues do not receive adequate importance in the budget. Moreover, issues for which there are no strong lobbies tend to lose sight of budgetary allocation. While voices are always raised on issues such as maintaining macroeconomic balance, keeping budget deficit low, boosting investment, reducing tax for the business sector and special support for specific sectors and areas such as human development, social protection, environment and climate change do not feature as strongly in their agenda. This column picks up the subject of social protection in the budget, an area that comes as an add-on rather than a mainstream issue in the policy discourse. Of course, the recent initiative of the government to launch a National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in FY2015-16 that intends to tackle poverty and inequality is a noteworthy step. It aims to bring 3.57 crores of the poorest and most vulnerable of the population under a social safety net.

However, resources for social safety programmes (SSNP) have always been far below the requirement. During FY2014-15 allocation for SSNPs, that includes social protection and social empowerment programmes, was 2.3% of GDP. Therefore, the ambition of the Sixth Five Year Plan that intended to increase public expenditures on SSNPs to 3% of GDP in FY2014-15 remained unfulfilled. Allocation for SSNPs in Bangladesh is much lower than the South Asian average of 4% of GDP. East Asia and Pacific countries spend about 8% of GDP on SSNPs while the European countries make an expenditure equivalent to 20% of their GDP on social protection. Though the allocation for SSNPs has almost been doubled since FY2009-10, the share of this allocation in total budget has declined from 15.1% in FY2009-10 to 12.3% in FY2014-15.

The other aspect of SSNPs is the distribution and utilisation of resources. Access to SSNPs by the extreme poor is limited. Apart from the targeting problem, leakage of resources in these programmes reduces the efficiency of SSNPs. Considering the requirement of the poor, the upcoming budget should increase allocation for various programmes. However, we ought to be mindful of the fact that the nature and extent of poverty among the poorest of the poor are different from those who are 'poor' with the consumption threshold

of <=2122 kilocalorie per person per day. Therefore, separate and targeted programmes and allocation are needed for the 'ultra poor', who are the most vulnerable section of the population, with a threshold of only <=1600 kilocalorie per person per day. Without uplifting these people from their poverty trap, poverty reduction strategies will remain incomplete.

The efficiency of resources allocated for SSNPs could be improved through harmonising programmes. At present there is more than one programme in each category of SSNPs that deal with the same types of projects, target areas and groups. Similar programmes can be consolidated and merged to reduce administrative leakages, duplication, pilferage and spill over transfers to the beneficiaries. The selection processes of the target group could also be improved through a participatory process where the local community can be involved in selecting poor participants in the SSNPs since the number of potential participants is large in a country like Bangladesh.

The most important objective of SSNPs should be to empower the poor by creating employment opportunities for them. The Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP) that aims to enhance income of the poorest section through short-term employment generation during lean periods and develop small scale rural infrastructure has been very useful for the poorest section such as the unemployed, seasonally unemployed and marginal farmers. Programmes such as EGPP should be expanded through higher budgetary allocation. EGPP should also have a legal basis similar to that of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of India so that the poorest have a guarantee for employment.

The underlying philosophy of SSNPs should be meeting the right of the poor. These are not 'relief' programmes for the poor, but their 'right'. A modern democratic government will have the moral obligation to fulfill this right in order to make development long-lasting. As we are in the process of finalising another budget for a new fiscal year, both allocations and programmes for SSNPs should be guided by the broader objective of making development sustainable through empowering the poorest of the poor.

The writer is Research Director at CPD, currently a Visiting Scholar at the Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York.

Oil spills and Rampal power plant: Sundarbans under threat

Mahfujur Rahman

THE Sundarbans are one of the resources of Bangladesh for which we can take pride in. However, it is a matter of regret that the region has faced deep strains again and again. In 2007, Cyclone Sidr hit Sundarbans and commenced a huge damage not only to its vegetation but also its ecosystems. Then the oil spill of last December occurred very close to Sundarbans' world heritage site and a sanctuary of Irrawaddy dolphin at a time when we thought that this forest has recovered from the damage caused by Cyclone Sidr. As of now, the establishment of a power plant is under way by the government at Rampal, close to the Sundarbans.

The water vessel Southern Star-7 sank in the Shela River spilling 3.58 lac liters of furnace oil into the river of Sundarbans on 9 December, 2014. The spillage of crude oil over an 80-sq-km area along the Shela river and creeks of the Sundarbans caused detrimental damage to the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem of this mangrove forest. The final report compiled by the UN-Bangladesh joint response mission concluded that its ecosystem, including the bio-species such as deer, tiger and dolphin, were significantly impacted. The report also outlined the serious consequences on the life and livelihood of the nearby community people. The team of experts from nine countries representing several UN organisations, government agencies and academicians, visited the Sundarbans for six days, two weeks after the spill.

What caused such an accident? Is it not due to the negligence and lack of enforcement of existing laws? The tanker was carrying oil to Gopalganj from Padma Oil Depot in Khulna through Sundarbans' Shela River. Though it was banned for commercial vessels to use the inside routes in the Sundarbans, in 2011, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport

Authority (BIWTA) opened a "temporary" route through the Shela River. The move drew strident protests from environmentalists and forest officials. Though initially, about 20 oil tankers plied each day, in 2013, 150-250 tankers moved through the Sundarbans route every day, according to reports published in the daily newspapers.

Sundarbans houses immense resources and provides livelihood for millions of people. Its various resources include fish, honey, wax, timber and non-timber forest products. The Sundarbans also contain a

wild tigers left throughout Asia, a population of even a hundred is hugely significant. According to Joint India and Bangladesh tiger census of 2004 (using pugmark counting), there are 419 tigers left in the Sundarbans.

In 2011, the New York based Wildlife Conservation Society discovered a remarkable population of 6,000 Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans. The find led to the creation of three sanctuaries for Irrawaddy and the long-nosed Gangetic dolphins. The fact that the oil tanker was wrecked in one of the

by Khulna University (KU) said the presence of primary food producers like phytoplankton and zooplankton have decreased sharply in the contaminated water. Benthos species took a severe hit as well with the normal presence of 34 species whittled down to just seven species in oil-contaminated areas. The food chain of aquatic species living in the world's single largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, has been severely disrupted by the Shela River oil spill.

Considering the Sundarbans' economic as well as ecological importance, plying of commercial cargo should be banned permanently in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest (SRF). The government should develop an action plan requiring all stakeholders to strengthen the capacity of forest department for better management of the SRF. Continued support is needed to provide necessary resources for conducting mid and long-term monitoring of impacts of the oil spill.

Establishment of the proposed Rampal power plant, a development project of the present government, should be reconsidered after such an accident. In recent times, we have seen that the government is not giving due vigilance to environmental integrity in implementing its development programs. It is very close to the Ecologically Critical Areas (ECA) declared by the government of Bangladesh.

We need to consider and prioritise environmental and ecological impacts when implementing development programs. The very existence of our life, livelihood and sustainability of our development activities depends on the soundness of the environment. We must also be careful of the trade off between the short-term economic gains and long-term significant ecological consequences of a development intervention.

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PHOTO: STAR

variety of materials that fuel the local economy and provide ecological services to the coastal areas and to the nation as a whole. This huge resource base and unique ecosystem of our country houses 270 different species of birds, 400 species of fish, 35 species of reptiles, 42 species of mammals and supports 334 species of plants. The diversity of plants, animals and other bio-species that are the real resources of the Sundarbans faced a huge threat due to the spillage of crude hydrocarbon.

The mangrove forest famously holds one of the last major tiger populations on Earth. With only an estimated 3,000

sanctuaries has heightened concerns about its environmental impact.

Dolphins were the first to take the hit. We even saw the floating dead bodies of different fish and dolphins due to suffocation. The thick layer of oil on the surface of the river cut down the dissolved oxygen. The microbial community as well as other biotic groups living in the water was hugely affected. Once the water recedes, a thick layer of oil covers the vegetation. Deer survive on this vegetation and tigers feed on them. In the long run, both plant and animals will suffer. The study report conducted

COMMENTS

"Nightmare of Sohagpur hanged" (April 12, 2015)

Zafar Chowdhury

People who didn't see the Liberation War cannot fathom what terror was unleashed by these people during that time on their own people.

Ahmed Farhad Salim

Now justice has been served.

Akku Chowdhury

Thanks to this government for delivering their commitment to try and punish the war criminals. We waited over 43 years for this.

"Jamaat calls daylong hartal for Monday protesting execution of Kamaruzzaman" (April 12, 2015)

Mehedi Hasan Opu

It's a matter of surprise that they did not call 48 or 72 hours hartal. Maybe they did it because the Pakistan team is coming so they don't want to make any trouble for them!

Dattatreya Beatle

How many hartals will they stage? It will only ruin themselves. The truth is out and justice served! Jamaat, stay away!

"Rooftop Innovation: A potential growth industry" (April 9, 2015)

Shahriz Shahnawaz Aninda

It is a new idea with a lot of potential. People should start doing it. It's not very difficult. All we need is the willingness to do it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Death sentence of Egypt brotherhood chief

Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie was sentenced to death by a Cairo court over Islamist protest violence. The court also sentenced to death two Islamists who have fled the country, and handed life terms to 23 detained defendants. If they are guilty, we want them to be punished. But it should be made sure that they are not going to be the victim of state injustice.

Lipa Howlader
Kushtia



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Risky billboards

During storms, billboards fall over vehicles and people; causing damage and injury to them. Our city authorities have failed to check the mushroom growth of billboards. Many of the billboards of Dhaka city are illegal and built without proper safety measures. In fact in the capital's two city corporations, illegal billboards outnumber the legal ones. I urge the authority to look into this matter seriously to prevent mishaps in the future.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali,
Dhaka