

Graft undercuts economic growth

Stop the culture of impunity

THE Finance Minister's estimate that widespread graft takes 2 to 3 percent off the economy has serious implications for the country's development. The minister has quantified the loss to as much as Tk 24,735 crore in the last fiscal year. Earlier in parliament, he expressed his frustration in taking punitive action against corrupt officials involved in major financial scams because of political backing.

Thus the minister has very frankly pointed out to the cancer of corruption that plagues every sector and seeps into every sphere of public life. The World Economic Forum estimates that the costs of corruption equal five percent of GDP. A 2012 Transparency International Bangladesh report has shown that about Tk 22,000 crore is lost annually to bribery and unauthorised payments.

This is not news to the ordinary citizens who bear the brunt of this corruption on a daily basis. The PM's insistence that the government has 'zero tolerance' for corruption sounds like rhetoric amidst the conspicuous absence of steps to contain it. Till date we have not seen any minister, high level bureaucrat or high profile businessperson being held accountable for corruption. The culture of impunity enjoyed by errant functionaries of the state, which has been quite blasé about corrupt practices, has led to such corroding levels of graft.

We appeal to the Prime Minister to empower the government's anti corruption commission to investigate into cases of suspected graft and punish the offenders. Unless the government is serious about combating corruption, the country's goal of achieving a growth rate higher than the present six percent, not to mention overall social and economic development, will remain elusive.

Govt.'s failure to send migrants under G2G

Opportunity cost too great to ignore

WE are at a loss to understand how the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry has, for the third year in a row, failed to send the expected number of workers to Malaysia. Only 7,000 workers have been sent to the Southeast Asian country since 2013, even though Bangladesh had the scope of sending at least 50,000 workers each year. We were optimistic when the four-year embargo on recruitment of Bangladesh workers was withdrawn by Malaysia in 2012, and the process to hire workers under the government-to-government (G2G) mechanism was initiated in 2013. However, from the very beginning, Bangladesh has been unable to reap the benefits of the G2G because of the government's lack of expertise in managing such a huge number of migrant workers to a foreign market.

The Minister has argued that the government could not generate demand for workers in Malaysia in the same way private recruiters did, but could only process them. We feel that the Ministry should have taken urgent steps to address its inefficiencies, even involving the private sector, to enable our workers to access jobs in the Malaysian market. At a time when tens of thousands of Bangladeshi are desperately seeking jobs abroad – many even undertaking perilous journeys across the seas risking their lives – the government cannot afford to not take proper advantage of the bilateral recruitment process. The Malaysian government has pledged to hire five lakh workers from all sectors of Bangladesh within a year, but our ministry has to step up and deliver its end of the bargain.

The ministry's decision to allow private recruiting agencies to send the migrants to Malaysia to speed up the recruitment process is a constructive move, but it must ensure that the agencies do not engage in irregular and dishonest activities that jeopardise the workers' future.

COMMENTS

"BSF man's acquittal worries

SAHR"

(July 7, 2015)

Litu Neogi

It is really unfortunate. We condemn this brutal killing. The accused must be brought to book.

"Exports shake off effect of political turmoil"

(July 7, 2015)

Sadaqat Hussain

No one is calculating the source material cost which is approximately 60 percent of the cost of export goods; now time has come to promote and support value-addition and kick out low cost items from the export list.

More steps need to be taken for Bangladesh to put its footprint on the global map.

Md Tarequl Islam

We should concentrate on high-tech product export rather than textiles.

Shah Aziz

In 1984/85, China's export was 6 billion dollars only. Bangladesh's was about 1 billion. After thirty years, China has crossed the trillion dollar mark and Bangladesh has earned only 32 billion.

Sometimes khushi, sometimes gawm

CHINTITO
SINCE 1995

NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

THIS country has on and off been plagued by wrong decisions of several ministers, bureaucrats and public servants, shamed by unruly behaviour of, if not by some people in power but by their nephews and sons (nieces and daughters exempted for want of evidence), and embarrassed by the caustic remarks of all and sundry, and yet not many of us can recall a single categorical apology addressing the public; 'the source of power', let me remind ye all, vote-seekers. Thank you Shikha Montri, today we are that much more educated.

Background: The education ministry this year initiated an online/SMS system of admission to colleges. Students pick their college of choice (up to five from among institutions with over 300 seats). After being digitally sorted, the applicant is offered admission as per merit and seats available. It's all very convenient, as one principal gleefully explained, 'Look, no tadbir'.

This being the introductory year, there were obviously some glitches. Some students were in a quandary, finding themselves in the wrong college or out of any. The issues are being attended to and affected students have been given extended time without any fee for delayed admission.

Last Sunday, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid, like no other, offered his sincere apologies "for the hassle being faced by the students." (TDS, 6 July) "This year's admission process was new and it involved a huge task. The students faced some problems and I am sorry for that. Please see the matter with a forgiving heart," Nahid said at a press briefing at the secretariat admitting to the nation his shortcoming, albeit of his ministry.

We are not educated (at home from our childhood) to take responsibility of

matters that are our responsibility, directly or otherwise. After a mishap or a wrongdoing, our first line of attack is to point to a scapegoat or goats that have escaped, and the education minister had a choice of more than five.

Salute, Sir! Although I have some very biting academic issues that would embarrass you, you are nevertheless the cause of my *khushi* today. These pungent matters are not related to the usual complaints against your ministry, such as leaked questions, result-oriented system and poorly edited books, but concern university teachers who have

related to the Sao Paulo exporter), and said a 'Sorry' for putting the food minister on the dock. I tell you almost anything is bound to get rotten if you get it from as far as Brazil.

Another source of happiness is our cricketers because they apologise whenever they hurt their fans. They know their limitations, the fans do not. They may not say sorry after every defeat, but they do not mince their words when they know they could have done better. For instance, in June last year, bottling up India for a meagre 105, and then being bundled up for 58, was cause for

accountability of profit-hungry private healthcare providers and absence of proper rules and regulations". According to Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2014, "the figure rose to 690,000 or 23 percent (close to UK figures) of total deliveries last year from 355,000 or 9 percent of total deliveries in 2007". Clinics and docs making money is not a problem, but they should not do so through unnecessary procedures, short-cutting medical requirements and at the cost of patient safety. If the allegations are true, is anyone having taken the Hippocratic Oath willing to say sorry?



lied in their professorial applications and have been favoured by the authority.

Okay, so a few handful of *gawm* (wheat) from Brazil did get bad publicity, but judging by government agencies' reports, the rest are 'worthy' of human consumption. The 180 degrees difference between the two versions saddens us because somebody will be forced to eat one or the other. Judicial intervention was sought to give a verdict on the wheat's edibility, whereas the importing authority, which could have easily owned up, pointed the finger to Neymar (because he must be

a lot of heartaches. Captain Mushfiqur Rahim summed up his team's emotions, "I apologise to the nation on behalf of the team". But then they are the Tigers. Sorry to delve into memory lane despite our recent thumping triumphs against the two-time world champions. See, how easy it is to say sorry? It is, of course, always better if you mean it.

A matter of *gawm* is the stupendous rise in births through Caesarean section in Bangladesh. Porimol Palma reporting in TDS on July 5 wrote that "the number has almost doubled in the last eight years largely due to lack of

We as a nation also owe a big apology to our mango farmers. What a season they have given us, both in quality and quantity! No hint of formalin, and mangoes rotting in three to four days. And yet, no newspaper or channel has lauded the feat enough. We are truly sorry, *bondhugan*. Please do not hold this against us. We were too busy relishing every bite of *lyangra*, *himsagar*, *fazli*, and more. And, please do come back next season.

The writer is a practising Architect at BashaBari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

Are MPs trustees of people?

BETWEEN THE LINES


KULDIP NAYAR

Zia-ul Haq and Pervez Musharraf.

Once again, the Pakistan Supreme Court has made us see our face in the mirror. In an epoch-making judgment, the apex court has held that the "massive expenses" incurred on the palatial president's house, prime minister's house or the various governors' houses, as well as the extravagant lifestyles of their occupants and the perks enjoyed by government functionaries at public expense were "a matter of government policy" involving "political questions."

How radical is the judgment as compared to our functioning? The Pakistan Supreme Court said: "In a country burdened by foreign debt, where a substantial percentage of the populous lived under the poverty line with a lack of access to basic healthcare and education, such extravagant expenditure was not only against the traditions of simplicity of the Holy Prophet, but also violates the fundamental rights of the citizens."

This echoes the advice of Mahatma Gandhi to those elected to different offices in independent India. He said that they should behave like the trustees, not masters. He wanted them to draw salaries so that their emoluments are not very divergent from the average income of a person. MPs, MLAs and those elected to top positions in municipalities seldom recognise that. There is no escaping the fact, as the Pakistan Supreme Court's judgment says, that public property is "a public trust in the hands of public functionaries."

I wish the court had commented on the perennial demand of the elected members for increasing emoluments and perks. But it refrained from doing so on the ground that they involved political questioning.

Technically, the court was correct. But the judges' obiter

dicta would have helped because the judiciary, still respected, would have initiated a debate on lavish spending by political leaders and their assistants.

Their style of living is not matched by politicians even in advanced, rich countries in the West. Who would point out to them that they are already in a higher income bracket? The media once used to do so. But today the owners, the individuals and those in the corporate sector supervise and even dictate the headlines given to a story, apart from what the paper would print. Their personal prejudice or preference has played havoc with the media. This is, indeed, a sorry state of affairs. But no other better method has been found, not even in the West, where the press is more developed than in our part of the world.

The Press Council of India which was constituted to

Those elected should get one consolidated sum which should include all expenditures, including accommodation, transport, electricity, water, telephone, etc. This will enable the people to know how much an elected member costs the exchequer.

set higher standards in journalism has got lost in its assertion to be the No. 1 in telling journalists and newspapers what to do or what not to do. I recall as a member of the Council how during the days of press censorship the then chairman, a retired Supreme Court judge, curried favour with the government by writing to the then Information Minister, V.C. Shukla, that he, as the Press Council chairman, has been able to manage the Council members not to pass any resolution to criticise censorship.

The Janata government brought out a white paper to highlight this attitude even at the highest level during the emergency. But when Mrs. Indira Gandhi repeated the same thing after coming back to power in 1980, there was no one in the media or at the Council to point a finger at her. Even today, when the Press

Council has been reconstituted to give representation to editors and working journalists, it has hardly made any difference.

Probably, the Press Council of India has to be replaced by some other representative body as it has happened in the United Kingdom. There, too, it was found that the Press Council had run out of steam. In the eighties, the Press Council in the UK was replaced by the Press Complaints Council (PCC). The experience of media there has not been too happy, but none in the government or in the media has thought of anything innovative. The matter rests there. In India, I concede, there is no possibility of the re-imposition of censorship. Yet, the role of Press Council needs to be redefined to be more purposeful. Otherwise, it will be just an office on paper.

In the same way, I agree with former Speaker Somnath Chatterjee's suggestion that an independent pay commission should be constituted to look into the emoluments of parliament members. There is no doubt that they need to be paid more to meet the rising cost of living. But there should be a proper study undertaken to assess how much increase would be in order. There is merit in what Chatterjee has said. MPs themselves cannot decide about the hike.

Similarly, there has to be a parity on salaries and perks drawn by the elected members in different states. At present, the Kerala legislators who are not ministers are said to be drawing a salary of Rs. 21,300 every month while his counterpart in Delhi gets Rs. 50,000 and in Punjab Rs. 54,500. The break-up of the Kerala MLA's reported pay packet is Rs. 300 as salary, Rs. 3,500 as constituency allowance, Rs. 4,000 for telephone charges, Rs. 6,000 by way of fuel and railway coupons and a permanent travel allowance of Rs. 7,500.

Those elected should get one consolidated sum which should include all expenditures, including accommodation, transport, electricity, water, telephone, etc. This will enable the people to know how much an elected member costs the exchequer. The picture gets blurred and adds to confusion when emoluments are given under different heads. It would be better to have one yardstick for states and the centre. Only then will the nation know how far Gandhiji's advice on trusteeship has been followed.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedadystar.net

Drive against unhygienic food

The recent drives conducted by several mobile courts of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) in various food outlets and restaurants to thwart selling stale and rotten food items deserve appreciation. The drives reveal a grim picture of food safety for consumers of Bangladesh. Recently, we were exposed to the sorry state of our food safety through the official Facebook page of DMP. Renowned super shops were fined for selling foods without the approval of Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI). The mega-shops and restaurants were also fined for keeping expired products, rotten foods and the overall unhygienic conditions. The surprising fact is that the penalised stores are still experiencing the customer rush during iftar time. We, the citizens, urge the authorities to continue such drives. We also expect the media to cover special reports on the dreadful condition of the errant restaurants, super shops and local markets to raise public awareness.

Md. Rabiu Islam Rabi

Malibagh Bishwaroad, Dhaka

Traffic mismanagement at Tejgaon Link Road

Traffic control mismanagement at Tejgaon Link Road-Bijoy Sharani Fly-over has become a trap for the users due to the mismanagement of traffic control at Bijoy Sharani crossing. A large number of vehicles use this flyover to go to Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, New Market, Shahbagh and the Dhaka University area to avoid the traffic jam in front of the PM's office. But vehicles from Tejgaon to Bijoy Sharani and Farmgate are subjected to a gruelling 30 to 45 minutes wait on the flyover before they can pass the crossing. As a regular commuter, I find that the traffic police allow the traffic from this direction to cross the Bijoy Sharani Crossing only for 15-20 seconds, and that also after 2-3 cycles of turn. Obviously, this compels the users of this very important road to wait a staggering amount of time on the flyover and leads many vehicles to ply on the wrong side of the road to avoid the wait. May I request the traffic police management to be a little more rational and considerate in terms of crossing frequency and duration (at least 1-2 minutes) for the flyover users from the Tejgaon direction?

Kazi Ahmed

A daily sufferer