

# Trump's Riyadh rendezvous

## A dangerous move

### Additional budget allocation council

ACC's suggestion could help stem graft

THE Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has recommended the formation of an "Additional Budget Allocation Advisory Council" under the finance ministry. This Council would scrutinise demand for extra budgetary allocation by the various departments and ministries which has become somewhat a routine affair at the beginning of every fiscal year. We understand that such a report has been handed over to the President for his perusal.

Simple awareness raising will hardly be effective against misappropriation of funds and graft; the suggestion made by ACC is sound as putting together a specialised commission to scrutinise extra monies demanded by government bodies would allow policymakers to make a much more informed decision whether such expenditure is truly justified or not. With the ACC receiving some 13,000 allegations of graft in 2016 and the body able to conduct inquiry of a paltry 1,007 allegations, we wonder precisely how the ACC is expected to carry out this herculean task on its own.

We witness the inclusion of dozens of populist projects in every annual budget that make little economic sense and given the level of misappropriation taking place (by the ACC's own admission), a committee of this nature operating under the aegis of the finance ministry could help cut down many of these unjustified projects.

With the general tendency to expend funds allocated on many such projects in the latter half of every fiscal (where there is little oversight), the existence of such a commission would prevent the adoption of unnecessary projects to begin with and help curtail much of the problems associated with alleged graft, which is not being properly addressed presently.

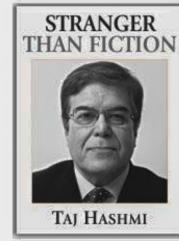
### Let price charts not turn into traffic lights

Strong monitoring needed to ensure traders do not hike charges

THAT prices of essentials are hiked without any reason and proportion every Ramadan need not be mentioned again. The question is: how should authorities respond to alleviate this hardship that plagues people, especially those from lower and middle and income families, every year around this time. This year, the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) through a view-exchange meeting with traders of different kitchen market has decided that price charts of essential commodities would be put up at markets from the first days of Ramadan.

A laudable initiative, surely. That these traders during Ramadan hike prices arbitrarily, without any justifiable reason is well-established. But, how much faith can be put in the traders' assurances now that they will follow the charts? Similar initiatives, over the years, to control the price of essentials do not give much hope. The DNCC has said it will monitor the markets to ensure compliance. This too is not new. Reports by newspapers over the years about such initiatives have shown that these charts are mostly disregarded by the traders and the authorities have been able to do little to enforce through monitoring.

Putting the general people through further hardship in the holy month of Ramadan is contrary to its spirit. But sadly we cannot rely on traders to refrain from hiking prices with this simple understanding. Therefore, we can only hope that the price charts will for once be beneficial. We urge that the DNCC stands by its words and monitoring efforts are not one-off shows of compliance. Only through strong monitoring and exemplary punishment of errant traders can this initiative be of help to the citizens. Otherwise, the price charts will be as effective as our our traffic lights: in place and out of use.



TAJ HASHMI

**STRANGER THAN FICTION**

ALTHOUGH there's no reason to take Donald Trump's erratic behaviour, and his ambivalent and unsavoury assertions seriously, we can't ignore what he staged in Riyadh

in the name of defeating Islamist terrorism on May 21. To paraphrase Shakespeare, Trump's so-called Islamic-Arab-American Summit was "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". The so-called summit was aimed at forming an anti-Iran coalition in the name of peace. Trump and his Saudi host in particular, singled out Iran as the sole sponsor of Islamist terrorism. Nothing could be more contrary to facts. All the ingredients of destabilising the Middle East were present in the rhetoric Trump and his surrogates used in Riyadh last Sunday.

Heads of state/government from forty-odd Sunni Muslim-majority countries – autocracies, "authoritarian" and "illiberal democracies" – from Indonesia to Bangladesh, and Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, reluctantly or enthusiastically attended the Riyadh gathering. The positive things emerging out of the summit are: a) Many of Trump's supporters in America might have learnt from his summit speech that Muslims are not that bad after all, and most victims of terrorism are Muslims; b) Trump, for the first time, used the politically correct expression, "Islamist terrorism" instead of "Islamic terrorism", which he had persistently used till the other day, defying all logic and criticism; c) Jordan's King Abdullah's stand on the Palestine problem was exceptionally brilliant. He spelled out in unambiguous terms, "No injustice has spread more bitter fruits than the absence of a Palestinian state. This is the core issue for our region, and it has driven radicalism and instability beyond our region and into the Muslim world."; d) Last but not least, one may agree with Trump that Muslims must fight their own war against terrorism without expecting any direct involvement by the US.

The summit signalled that some world leaders are more interested in making the world a more dangerous place than before by creating more problems, without resolving the existing ones. Those who think Trump has really transformed himself into a statesman from a demagogue are delusional. There's no reason to assume one who last year asserted "Islam hates us", and



US President Donald Trump, left, and Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud take part in a signing ceremony at the Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh on May 20, 2017.

soon after becoming the president wanted to impose a complete ban on Muslim visit and immigration to the US, has all of a sudden become pragmatic enough to assert Islamist terrorism doesn't indicate there's a battle between faiths.

The summit may be seen as a reflection of Trump's attempts to divert Americans' attention from the ongoing investigation into his alleged "Russian connections", and his opponents' demands for further investigation after Trump had abruptly dismissed the not-so-compliant FBI Director James Comey from his position. One has reasons to believe, projecting Iran as the mastermind of global terrorism by Trump and his surrogates is integral to the game he and his associates are playing to divert Americans' attention from the brewing "Russia Gate", which could turn very serious for the president à la Watergate. Presenting Iran as the new bogeyman also brings rich dividends to the president from the powerful Israeli lobby in America, which also wants to single out Iran as the biggest security threat to the Jewish State. The so-called Arab-Islamic-American alliance aims at destabilising Iran by overthrowing the Islamic regime to comfort Israel and Saudi Arabia and most Sunni monarchies in the Gulf that consider

Iran as an existential threat. The concept of the "Muslim NATO" – as contemplated by some people – has gained wide currency after the summit. As the summit is aimed at neutralising the adverse effects of the "Russia Gate" by salvaging the sinking popularity of the president, it's also about appeasing the overpowering Israeli/Zionist and military-industrial lobbies in the US. While the former influences and partially controls American administration, economy, media, think tanks, higher education and research centres, the latter profits from armed conflicts across the world. It often drags America into long-drawn out expensive wars in different parts of the world, mainly by selling weapons to the US and its allies. While President Eisenhower spelled out the evil influence of the military-industrial complex on US administration in his valedictory speech on January 17, 1961, US General (ret.) Wesley Clark spilled the beans in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. As Eisenhower and Clark have revealed, all US-led wars after World War II, invasions of countries, and demonising regimes right and left have only two purposes: a) establishing American hegemony on weaker states; and b) making as much profit as possible by selling arms and expertise to various countries and insurgent groups

throughout the world. The recent signing of the USD 350 billion US arms deal with Saudi Arabia (the largest arms deal in history) in Riyadh may be mentioned in this regard.

What's most shocking is Saudi Arabia excluded Shiite-majority Iran, and a couple of "undesirable" Muslim-majority countries from the summit. Paradoxically, they had no problem inviting countries like, Qatar, Bahrain, Turkey, and Pakistan to resolve the problem of Islamist terrorism. And we know the track record of some of these countries vis-à-vis direct promotion of terrorism across the world.

It's noteworthy that 15 of the 19 terrorists who attacked America on September 11, 2001 were Saudi citizens. We also know about the role of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan with regard to the promotion of terrorism to bleed their immediate neighbours. Thus, singling out Iran as the main sponsor of terrorism isn't only shocking, but also counterproductive to any effective move toward counterterrorism. Then again, we know the Riyadh Summit wasn't about countering terrorism, at all.

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## Inequality leads to dysfunctional societies



AMBASSADOR MARIO PALMA

ON a mild morning last February, I summoned my Deputy Giuseppe Semenza for the rehearsal of a joint performance to be staged next day at Shilpakala

Academy on the occasion of the International Mother Language Day. Being Giuseppe, a true Neapolitan, we chose to recite "A Livella" ("La Livella" in Italian, "Spirit Level" or "Bubble Level" in English), a poem written in

man. The marquis is complaining about the garbage man's tombstone being right next to his, but the garbage man remarks that it is not his fault, as it was his wife who had chosen where to bury him. Since the marquis keeps complaining, the garbage man loses his temper and tells him that, no matter what people are or do in life, once one is dead, he is equal to all others, at the same level.

Whilst in the February performance what we wanted to share with the audience was just the humorous aspect of the story, today I would rather like to dwell on the underlying message of that poem and its implications. Since

universally valued above equality, the underlying assumption being that inequality mattered only if it increased poverty. But the effects of inequality -- health and social problems alike -- are not confined to the poor, as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett rightly pointed out in the book *The Spirit Level* (2009). Since their book, an impressive body of data demonstrated how accurate was their description of unequal societies becoming more and more "dysfunctional" for the poor as well for the rich.

There is enough evidence also in contemporary Italy that "consumerism, isolation, alienation,

found within each class. "The current state of professions in Italy," the report goes on, "shows a growing complexity resulting in an increased diversity not only between professions but also within the same professional roles and in intensified inequalities between and within social classes."

"We find ourselves anxiety-ridden, prone to depression, driven to consume and with little or no community life", so reads the opening pages of the book *The Spirit Level*. This grim feeling, apparently also shared by the younger generations of Italian workers and professionals, could be left behind only by removing -- as correctly argued by Wilkinson and Pickett -- economic impediments to feeling valued such as, for instance, low wages, low benefits and low public spending on education.

What about Bangladesh? Just ten days ago Syed Yusuf Saadat wrote in *The Daily Star* an interesting article, "The threshold of inequality". "If we look at the data," he wrote, "we can easily observe that the level of inequality today is unbelievably high. The incomes of the poorest 10 percent of people increased by less than USD 3 a year between 1988 and 2011, while the incomes of the richest 1 percent increased by 182 times as much." After a long academic digression about the views of the Greek philosopher Aristotle on inequality, Saadat concludes that the degree of inequality, rather than inequality itself, is the fundamental stumbling block, "the real question in the inequality debate is how much income inequality is the best for society."

Personally, I would rather reformulate the question by also taking into consideration the wealth gap resulting from economic growth not having been fairly shared: how much income inequality and what degree of wealth gap could be tolerated in order for us to have a better society?

This is an excerpt from Ambassador Mario Palma's address at the Italian National Day reception. (Dhaka, May 2, 2017). The writer is Ambassador of Italy to Bangladesh.



Italian and Neapolitan by his fellow citizen Toto, a towering figure of the Italian comedy.

The poem is set in a graveyard. A person accidentally locked inside its gates overhears a conversation between two shadows: a marquis and a garbage

death is seen as the leveler of all wealth and social status, let's adopt the message in the 'Spirit Level' in our own lives by addressing inequalities that are more than ever damaging the social fabric of the whole society. Growth has been and is still

social estrangement and anxiety" are causally associated with less equality. According to the last annual report released by the Italian National Institute for Statistics (Istat), social inequality is no longer just the distance between the different classes, it can be

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**  
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**Remembering the Rebel Poet**

On the auspicious occasion of Kazi Nazrul Islam's birthday, it would be fitting to take a look at his opinion on religion as practiced in the society:

"No prophet has said, 'I have come for Hindus/ I have come for Muslims/ I have come for Christians.' They have said, 'I have come for the humanity for everyone, like light'. But the devotees of Krishna say, 'Krishna is for Hindus.' The followers of Muhammad [pbuh] say, 'Muhammad [pbuh] is for Muslims.' The Disciples of Christ say, 'Christ is for Christians'. This is the root of all trouble. Men do not quarrel for light but they quarrel over cattle." (Excerpts from Kazi Nazrul Islam's article titled 'Hindu Mussalman', published in 'Ganabani' on September 2, 1922).

Nazrul's comments are as relevant today as they were back then. Unless the world learns to draw inspiration from great humanitarians like Nazrul Islam, we are indeed on the way to very dark days ahead.

Kajal Chatterjee  
By email