

Big budget big deficit

No direction on employment generation

BIG budget is inevitable for a developing country, but when the revenue earning is heavily reliant on value added tax and supplementary duty, as this budget is, it is the people across the board that will have to bear the brunt of it. The NBR has an uphill task too, given that its target this year has been increased by 30 percent from last year's target, which was not fully met.

However, there are some positive elements in the budget. We welcome the reduction of tax on agriculture and removing some agricultural inputs from the taxable list. The increase of allotment for health and education is also laudable. However, insofar as the education sector is concerned, we wonder how much of the fund allotted will be utilised for the purpose of enhancing the quality of education.

Of the revenue expected, nearly 37 percent is anticipated to accrue from VAT. For the first time, the government will levy a flat rate of 15 percent. Although some common use items have been kept outside the ambit of VAT that will hardly ease the effect of the 15 percent levy. We are surprised that the finance minister shifted from his assurance to reduce VAT duty and came back to 15 percent. However much the government denies, this will spike up prices and will affect the rich and the poor in equal measure.

We fail to understand the logic of borrowing more than Tk. 28,000 crore from the banks but subsidise the non-performing ones to the tune of Tk. 15,000 crore. This we feel is a total waste of public money unless discipline is ensured in the banking sector. It is like pouring water in a leaking bucket.

Enhanced excise on bank deposit is a disincentive since it affects the account holders in at least three different ways, particularly the small savers who will be snared in the web of tax-vat and duty. It is also surprising that there is no direction in the budget about employment generation.

We repeat what we said yesterday, it is indeed an election oriented budget where the people will be under severe duress to meet the funding for the development wave of the government. It is a budget that will squeeze the tax payers evermore. And unless the government ensures quality spending and restores discipline in the financial sector, the implementation of the budget will remain a chimera.

Water crisis in the city

Improve logistics

A picture published by this newspaper on Thursday showed residents of Mirhazirbagh, Jatrabari demonstrating on the road with empty pitchers and placards. Their plight due to the scarcity of water supply led these people to take to the streets as was highlighted by the accompanying report. And yet, given that the problem of water scarcity is not new, and every year we hear of communities plagued by the lack of this absolutely essential item, the response by authorities to fix it seems far from adequate.

Residents of Banasree, Kaderabad Housing, Katasur, Dakshin Khan, Kalshi Mirpur – to name just a few areas – have been affected. According to officials, the crisis has been due to load shedding, malfunction of deep tube wells and ground water depletion: nothing that could not have been predicted. Yet, residents of these areas are having to wake up at odd hours to collect a few drops of water. The Wasa supply trucks that remained a hope are too few in number and irregular to be of any lasting consequence. Add to that the month of Ramandan, and the scenario that now plagues residents of these areas can be understood in its full intensity.

The Managing Director of Dhaka Wasa has said that this is a common scenario during the dry season since deep tube wells malfunction during the time. If this trend is known, then the question is, why adequate preparation was not taken ahead of time to deal with it? The MD has himself stated that there has been no reduction in water production. So the problem must be one of logistics rather than one of supply. We understand that Wasa itself has infrastructural constraints. But, given the seriousness of this not so uncommon crisis, and the fact that it is the socially vulnerable that suffer the most, we demand Wasa deals with it with the importance such an issue deserves. Better management of logistics could ease the suffering, if not fully eradicate it.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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What a waste of natural resources

When natural gas was first discovered many decades ago, there was no meter system. People used to burn gas for 24 hours in order to save matchsticks, because it was almost free. Now the gas reserve is on the verge of depletion.

Similarly, Bangladesh is surrounded by rivers and canals that are vital for agriculture. Illegal encroachment of these water bodies has been going on for a long time under the nose of the authorities, who merely issue statements from time to time against such illegal activities. No definite action has been taken to stop illegal grabbing and save our water bodies.

Our forest in the Sundarbans and other parts of the country are getting depleted day by day because of illegal felling of trees by powerful quarters who seem to be above the law.

The authorities must take appropriate actions to put an immediate stop to such illegal activities to save the situation from getting worse.

A.K.M. Ehsanul Haque
Dhaka

Visa is not a right, courtesy is

CHINTITO SINCE 1995

NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

EKUSHEY Padak awardee, sculptor Hamiduzzaman Khan Sir was my senior colleague at university. It's been quite a while, close to a decade, since we last met. After all these years consulting Sir was critical, because I was exploring the possibility of his art objects adorning the garden of a bungalow I designed. Ever since my client mentioned their preference for abstract forms on the plus-two bigha land, I was hoping the mark of the celebrated sculptor would befit the green.

The predilection for "abstract" creations was not for fear of otherwise being accused of idol worship, but because the memory of and controversy surrounding Her (bandaged) Ugliness at the Dhaka High Court premises remains fresh. Who said love was blind? Visual Art cannot be. That too because lovers see beauty in a paramour not by optics alone. The statue lady has her eyes covered to convey that justice is blind, and yet justice seeks the truth with eyes, ears and the mind wide open.

Lady Justitia, as the icon of impartiality, featured in the earliest Roman coins with a sword in one hand and a scale in the other, (and Ciao!) her eyes were uncovered. In predominantly the Western World, a blindfolded Lady Justitia has symbolised the notion that fairness is delivered without regard to wealth or power, relationship or position, colour or creed, but only towards the end of the 15th century. It was sculptor Hans Gieng who granted Justitia universal fame by making her statue the centrepiece of the Fountain of Justice in Berne 1543. Do we assume then that corruption in the Swiss (or the larger European) judiciary was becoming apparent at around that time? Which fact also leads to cynicism, why a sullied and *saried* version of Justitia had to debut in Dhaka almost five hundred years later? Could there not be a more aesthetic *deshi* variety, impassioned by abstraction, if you will?

Back to my Sculptor Sir, who did recognise me over telephone and pondered, "Do you now stay in Australia?" A bit startled at the timing, my mind plummeted down and under while frantically denying. I could not tell Sir, embarrassed and confused as I was, that merely my application for an Australian tourist visa was lying with the High Commission then for forty days. As such, the question of residing there struck me as fortuitous mockery. Incidentally, the Scout programme for which purpose I had

intended to visit the land of kangaroos and duck-billed platypuses had come to pass on the fifteenth day of my application.

In spite of dawdling with me, online visa processing is rather convenient, and yet, the irritable element is that some missions (and their agents) will not give you a date of a decision. You are then in a seemingly eternal limbo; not knowing when (it's coming), who (to contact), why (the delay), how (to expedite), which (embassies to avoid), and where (you might end up). This after having paid a hefty amount for the visa, etc.

Real-life encounters are no less memorable. My singular experience at the Japanese embassy three years back

have not seen a people more well-behaved and courteous as the Japanese.

More recently, my friend's trusted travel agent quoted about Tk. 6,000 for a Malaysian visa. No interview was required, and my friend had only to submit a signed application with all required documents. In much less than a week, the passport was stamped for 'Truly Asia'. My friend was pleased with the service (who wouldn't?) until he discovered that only Tk. 600 was printed on his visa as the fee. "But I paid ten times more?" he exclaimed. The travel agent explained that the larger amount was indeed deposited to the agent at the Embassy, but only the smaller amount was acknowledged.

overnight queues on the roadside. Sale of space 'reserved' by a brick at thousand taka and more is history. Gone are days of frustration in trying to glean out an elusive online e-token, the *tamasha* of which had generated an entirely new line of business. Now, freedom fighters and those aged 65-plus are granted five-year multiple-entry visa in a simple, decent and preferential manner. Those seeking medical treatment receive priority. General applicants get a response in a number of known days. The fees are nominal.

India has demonstrated that a system turnaround is possible for the better, and in quick time. About a year ago,



made me realise that a certain Bangladeshi employee considered it his right to be rude to visa applicants. He was so bad-mannered in his dealings that I gathered my papers and walked out. Ah well, that is also because my planned visit to Japan was not absolutely necessary.

International relations would greatly benefit from better PR from those who serve in the visa section, which verity the Japanese realised I believe soon enough because the *beyadab* was not in sight when I revisited several months later. I was indeed very well served by another Bangalee *bhadrolok*. Since then I have visited Japan thrice, and I must add that I

High officials at the Embassy as well as the Ministry of Labour and Employment should investigate this huge discrepancy, particularly because we have thousands of grateful workers serving in Malaysia. Mind you, each of them, many from very humble economic base, have difficulty in arranging extra money. It is no less than sucking the workers' ultimate resource. The issue here is of integrity. Many would not mind paying the actual visa fee if only the total amount would be officially acknowledged.

One mission which has most successfully brushed off the ills of the past is India. Gone are undignified

dalals were in control and uncertainty was the norm. If the mission with by far the largest number of Bangladeshi visa hopefuls can revamp its *modus operandi* to provide much improved service, it should be a cakewalk for every other country. This is not a plea to grant every aspirant a visa, but to make a case that people from every country deserve to be treated with courtesy and honour.

P.S. The Australian visa did come, after 48 days. So kangaroo lovers, apply early! Happy hopping!

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Donald Trump's historic mistake



LAURENCE TUBIANA

US President Donald Trump has announced that the United States will no longer participate in the 2015 Paris climate agreement, the landmark United Nations treaty that many of us worked so hard to achieve. Trump is making a mistake that will have grave repercussions for his own country, and for the world.

Trump claims that he will try to renegotiate the deal reached in Paris, or craft a new one. But leaders from around the world have already hailed the agreement as a breakthrough for the fight against climate change, a victory for international cooperation, and a boon to the global economy. That remains true today.

Among the many challenges we face today, climate change is unique in its global scale. It affects every element of life on this planet – from ecosystems and food production to cities and industrial supply chains. Viewing climate change as strictly an “environmental” problem misses the point entirely.

We might charitably assume that Trump simply does not understand the implications of his decision. And yet, regardless of what Trump thinks, we know that he is surrounded by advisers who know very well what is at stake.

On the campaign trail, Trump promised to create jobs and protect American workers from the ravages of the world. And he signed off his tweet announcing that he had made a decision on the Paris accord with the words, “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”

But Trump's decision undermines every one of these goals, and it goes against the wishes of a vast majority of Americans, including many of his own supporters. By turning his back on the Paris agreement, he is increasing Americans' exposure to the devastating effects of climate change – many of which they are already experiencing. Moreover, he is undercutting jobs in the thriving renewable-energy and electric-vehicle sectors, which are increasingly employing the very workers he purports to represent.

More broadly, Trump has diminished America itself, and abdicated its global leadership role. When I was a member of the French government participating in a global tour to build consensus for climate action – an effort that eventually culminated in the Paris Agreement – I experienced firsthand what American leadership can achieve. It is tragic to watch that force for good be subverted by denial and myopia.

By burying their heads in the sand, Trump and his advisers must be hoping that reality will simply go away. They have somehow concluded that America will be

we will not wait; in fact, we are already moving on.

The world's response will be clear at the G20 meeting in Germany this July. Already, Europe, China, India, Canada, and Pacific Rim and South American countries have recommitted to the goals of the Paris Agreement. These countries understand the dangers of climate change, as do ExxonMobil's global shareholders, who, just this week, rejected that company's attempts to ignore the impact of climate change on its business.

By placing America in the company of the only two countries that have not



US President Donald Trump announces his decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Climate Accord.

PHOTO: AFP

spared from the droughts already destroying farms in California's Central Valley, the rising sea levels already flooding coastal cities, the storms and wildfires routinely ravaging vast swathes of the American countryside, and the water and food supply disruptions that threaten us all.

Other parties to the Paris agreement have responded to Trump's decision with strength, thus proving the resilience of the agreement itself. The rest of the world will be sad to see an America that has been left behind, owing to Trump's decision. But

joined the Paris agreement – Syria and Nicaragua – Trump's decision is completely at odds with the current global atmosphere of cooperation. The world's major economies are reaching new agreements every day to collaborate on research and development, infrastructure investment, and industrial strategy. They are working together to achieve a low-carbon economy, and to make 2020 the year that global greenhouse-gas emissions will have peaked.

European leaders are already meeting

with their Indian and Chinese counterparts to find areas where they can cooperate on developing clean energy and green infrastructure. Massive investments will be made in these areas, and the European Central Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and many other institutions are devising mechanisms to finance them. Likewise, sovereign wealth funds with immense clout in the global financial system are redirecting their investments toward the green economy.

Even the most optimistic among us did not predict that the old fossil-fuel paradigm would change so quickly. But Europe is phasing out coal-fuelled energy production. And India, China, and South Korea are rapidly shifting their investments away from coal, and toward renewable-energy sources.

Worldwide, the competition is about “who can go green the fastest.” New industries are springing up, at scale, in areas ranging from electrification and smart-grid design to electric vehicles, green construction and recycling technologies, and organic chemicals. The renewable-energy revolution, now spreading at an unprecedented rate, is already transforming entire sectors, not least transportation. In all of these sectors around the world, the excitement and growth potential is palpable.

It is a shame that Trump has decided to shirk America's global responsibility and turn his back on these developments. His decision is a blow to so many people – including a great many Americans – who have worked hard to be a successful part of the new economy.

Still, Trump cannot take all of America with him. State- and city-level climate action is sweeping across the US, increasing in scale and ambition. Trump's historic mistake represents an obstacle to that collective action; but it can hardly stop it. Just as Chinese companies are now training US coal workers to build wind farms, the rest of the world will continue to work together, and build the markets and workforce of the future.

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