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FOUNDER EDITOR  
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# Police accused of colluding with AL leader in local trader’s death

*A thorough and impartial investigation must be conducted urgently*

THE recent discovery of the body of 45-year-old trader Hasan Ali by Gaibandha police, found hanging in a toilet of ruling party leader Masud Rana’s home in Gaibandha town—as well as the allegation from his family that the police looked the other way and allowed Rana to torture and eventually kill Hasan—must be investigated urgently and impartially. According to Hasan’s family, he was abducted by Rana, who is deputy office secretary of Gaibandha Awami League, on March 5, and kept confined to the house and tortured because he owed Rana money and was unable to pay.

What is truly sinister is their allegation that not only did the Gaibandha police fail to take them seriously after his family filed a complaint on March 6, but that they acted as Rana’s agents and asked them to pay Tk 2 lakh to Rana in order to guarantee Hasan’s safety. And because they failed to produce the money, Hasan’s family allege that, after primarily rescuing Hasan from Rana’s home and keeping him in police custody on March 12, they promptly handed him back to Rana the next day.

So far, the police have denied these allegations, saying that they tried to broker a settlement at the police station between Hasan and Rana and did not know what happened after. This statement in no way explains why the police failed to pursue any actions against Rana for what was clearly an initial case of abduction on March 5. It also does not explain why the police failed to follow up and give Hasan any protections, only to finally recover his dead body from Rana’s house on April 9. This casual attitude of the police was translated into their treatment of Rana after the discovery of the body—in fact, it was only after locals protested and blocked the policemen that they decided to handcuff Rana and treat him as a murder suspect and not a ruling party leader.

We ask the authorities to urgently conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into these allegations. It is a matter of great concern if the police, who are in charge of upholding law and order, allow influential people to take the law into their own hands and become complicit in the injustices they perpetrate. A lack of trust in the police will inevitably translate into a lack of trust in the government and its ability to govern and have wider repercussions in our society. We hope the government will treat this case with the utmost seriousness and ensure that Hasan’s family is given justice and the perpetrators are held to account.

# A freedom fighter deprived of his dues

*There is no excuse for this*

IT seems that the case of mistaken identity has become endemic with us. We have heard of people suffering in jail because of it, we have heard of people released from it because of it and now we have a genuine freedom fighter being deprived of his allowances because of it. Some of the so-called “mistaken” identity, we believe, may not be “mistaken” but deliberate. Protap Chandra Roy, a freedom fighter from Kazirchawra village in Harati union of Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila, has never received any allowance or housing from the government. And that too after he was duly scrutinised and certified in 2019 as a genuine participant in our Liberation War. In his place, another person by the name of Protap Chandra from Gangachara upazila of Rangpur has been collecting the benefits, illegally of course.

One of the good steps that the current AL government has taken is to provide increased allowance to the freedom fighters. Unfortunately, we have never received a “final” list of them yet. With every new government in power, efforts were renewed to “finalise” the freedom fighters’ list, only to be told by a new government that the old list was not accurate. And every time there was accretion in their numbers. We hope to get a final list of freedom fighters in June this year. However, what we have at hand now is a provisional list. But be that as it may, we hope that the new list would be able to identify the fake persons drawing allowances illegally. And we believe that in this regard too, the government should deal with a heavy-hand with those who have faked documents to establish themselves as freedom fighters. In this regard, we recall that quite a few very senior members of the administration had faked documents just so that they could claim freedom fighters’ allowance. We believe that these people should be called to account and pay for their unethical and illegal act. As for Protap Chandra Roy, the administration should ensure that he gets his due immediately, including his past dues.

LETTERS  
TO THE EDITOR

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Caring for the next generation

The lack of proper mental development of adolescents and the absence of proper parental supervision are among the main reasons why young people between the ages of 14-18 are getting involved in unlawful activities in the country. To overcome such undesirable situations, parents should give children more time of their day, even though it may be difficult sometimes. Children should also be kept involved in constructive and intellectually rewarding activities.

Wares Ali Khan, Sadar, Narsingdi

# The pandemic budget has to be based on realistic assessment

MACRO  
MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

AFTER suffering for more than a year since March 2020, when we were just about to have some respite following the decline in infection and death rates, the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic has returned with greater vengeance. With the virus spreading fast, uncertainty is looming large. And the concerns are compounded by the inadequacy of health infrastructure and economic opportunities. There is uncertainty about health and treatment. Uncertainty also prevails in case of livelihoods, income and overall economic situation of the country. Bangladesh economy, like the global economy, is still struggling to recover from the adverse impacts of the pandemic. About two thirds of the fiscal year (FY) 2021 has passed. Economic indicators are not showing much promise. A number of macroeconomic and sectoral indicators have performed below the expected level compared to a normal year. We were happy to see that Bangladesh economy had done far better than other countries in FY 2020 in terms of economic growth. And after about halfway through FY 2021, we started to discuss whether the economy is on its way towards a recovery and what strategies should be taken to make the recovery happen for all sectors.

Unfortunately, that discussion for the time being has taken a back seat as the world is once again struggling to deal with the health crisis. After a somewhat relaxed lockdown for seven days from April 5, the government now plans a week-long stricter lockdown from April 14. In view of the sufferings of the people and consequences for the economy of the lockdown in 2020, the government has been mindful this time and is taking steps in a measured way. While the health crisis seems to be unstoppable, the economic crisis is no less serious.

Indeed, the government had to undertake a large amount of expenditures in 2020 due to the outbreak of the pandemic which was unforeseen and unplanned. These were to mitigate the economic losses of the people and the businesses in various sectors. The government announced a number of stimulus packages equivalent to 4.4

percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) for the large businesses, export-oriented industries, small enterprises, agriculture sector, and social safety net programmes. Since the stimulus packages were mostly in the form of liquidity support through commercial banks, the government had also introduced expansionary monetary policy measures to create liquidity for the banks. However, these support measures were not adequate compared to the losses



Bangladesh economy, like the global economy, is still struggling to recover from the adverse impacts of the pandemic.

PHOTO: REUTERS

incurred by people. Exports are yet to rebound, employment has not been regained, and many micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) have not received stimulus packages even though the allocation remains undisbursed. As for the poor, allocation under the social safety net programmes has been inadequate and distribution remains flawed.

In this context, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) is preparing to chalk out the national budget for FY 2021-22. The task is a daunting one. During the ongoing fiscal year, the MoF had the difficult task to generate additional resources to finance higher government expenditure on the one hand, and utilise those resources efficiently for employment generation without creating inflationary pressure, on the other. Unfortunately, this challenge will continue to exist in the upcoming fiscal year also. This job could be more difficult since the government had limited success in achieving this

objective. During July-December of FY2021, growth in revenue collection was 8.6 percent. However, this growth is far too low if the targets have to be met. Thus, in order to meet the target for FY2021, revenue collection has to grow by more than 74 percent during the next six months (January-June 2021). This seems unachievable, if the past records are considered. Growth of income tax has been negative (-) 5.2 percent during July-December of FY2021. So, income

The target budget deficit in FY2021 has been set at six percent of GDP. However, till now the trend in fiscal balance indicates lower deficit. As of December 2021, a deficit of Tk 8,408 crore was observed compared to Tk 35,751 crore in December 2020. Lower deficit in fiscal balance is due to a fall in the public expenditure. This is opposite to the suggestions of stimulating domestic demand and strengthening supply response by expansionary fiscal policy.

So, the MoF will have to take a more realistic approach in estimating the numbers for the upcoming budget. The need for a stronger fiscal framework is felt more than ever before. While the revenue targets will have to be met for more resources to tackle the fallout from the pandemic, the reform of the tax system should be initiated and continued parallelly. The budget must also make higher allocation in a number of priority sectors such as health, education and skills development, rural infrastructure, and social protection. Sadly, the budget for FY2021 did not see much increase in these areas. For example, despite a pandemic year, allocation for health sector as a share of GDP increased from 0.84 percent in FY2020 to only 0.92 percent in FY2021. The reason for low allocation is often attached to utilisation capacity of resources by the respective ministries. Moreover, despite low allocations, the numbers are revised downwards toward the end of the fiscal year due to the lack of spending capacity. Therefore, the allocation will have to be utilised in an efficient manner.

Finally, in order to formulate a “pandemic budget” which will plan and implement higher public expenditure targeting larger population and with higher efficiency, the MoF should review the effectiveness of the measures announced in the ongoing budget. The MoF must not focus too much on growth, but on protecting the livelihoods of people and helping the economic sectors and enterprises survive. It does not matter much if we have lower growth in a pandemic year. But what matters is to have a hospital bed for the Covid patient, a job for the youth, cash in people’s hand and food to feed themselves and their family. Budgetary measures should be focused towards achieving these objectives.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Is the Asian Century Really Here?



LEE JONG-WHA

THE Covid-19 pandemic has not been the west’s finest hour. Most western governments failed to contain the deadly outbreak and the resulting economic damage effectively. And by pursuing inward-looking and protectionist policies, they have contributed relatively little to an effective international response to the coronavirus.

Against this background, some regard the current crisis as a tipping point that will accelerate Asia’s global resurgence. They point out that Asian countries managed the pandemic better than the west did, and argue that the region’s robust and resilient economic performance over the past half-century demonstrates the superiority of its governance systems.

In fact, the twenty-first century will belong to Asia only if the region can develop unified, collective leadership. Asia is already a major global power, accounting for 60 percent of the world’s population and about 40 percent of global GDP in purchasing-power-parity terms. And with eight of the world’s 15 most populous countries (China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam), Asia is

McKinsey & Company forecasts that by 2040, the region will account for more than half of world GDP and 40 percent of global consumption.

Sceptics argue that several domestic challenges could jeopardise the region’s long-term growth. Some East Asian economies, including China, Japan, and South Korea, have rapidly aging populations that are now shrinking. This means they will no longer enjoy the demographic dividends that previously supported the region’s strong growth.

Naysayers also point to growing income and wealth inequality, which is undermining social cohesion and political stability. And political upheavals may become more likely if authoritarian Asian governments fail to deliver higher living standards and satisfy growing demand for democracy.

But Asian policymakers have successfully addressed previous obstacles to strong and sustainable growth. East Asian governments in particular have been pragmatic and relatively uncorrupt. Many have committed themselves to providing important public goods such as education, health care, and information and communication technology infrastructure. Good governance has also supported the effective functioning of markets.

Asian countries have nurtured competent private sectors, too. A well-educated and skilled labour force, along

leading regional and global players, while Australia, Indonesia, and South Korea, all G20 members, play important political and economic roles as well. Little wonder, then, that an effective formal regional institution like the European Union is entirely absent.

Despite establishing regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the East Asia Summit to resolve economic and political differences, Asian leaders have yet to share

which is the single biggest obstacle to the development of collective Asian leadership.

After all, Asia still relies heavily on the US for peace and security. Many countries, including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, are US allies and do not want to choose sides. Within the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, the US, Japan, India, and Australia are strengthening ties to confront China’s



People doing morning exercises in front of the skyline of the Lujiazui Financial District in Pudong in Shanghai.

PHOTO: AFP

a common vision for regional integration and cooperation. And with geopolitical tensions rising in the East and South China Seas, the Korean Peninsula, and along the China-India border, military conflicts remain a possible threat to regional peace and prosperity.

External actors will continue to play a key role in the region, partly because Asia is heavily dependent on its exports to the United States and the EU. True, with Covid-19 disrupting global supply chains, companies now prefer to localise or regionalise their production networks. This shift could deepen trade ties among Asian countries, where a growing middle class is expected to generate its own demand for production.

But America and the EU, as well as emerging markets in Africa and Latin America, will remain important trade partners for Asia. The region’s future trajectory will thus depend on how effectively it can prevent global trade protectionism and minimise the impact of US-China strategic competition,

increasing regional influence. The group also recently announced a plan to deliver Covid-19 vaccines to Southeast Asian countries, while China has been supplying its own vaccines to much of the developing world. Unified Asian leadership can emerge only once China and the US compromise and cooperate.

An increasingly prominent Asia will have to assume greater responsibilities and obligations. The region’s governments must actively engage in solving regional and global challenges, and cooperate constructively with other regions. And they must contribute to improving global governance. There will be no Asian century until Asia’s leaders recognise that it must also be a century of shared global prosperity.

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*Asian countries have nurtured competent private sectors, too. A well-educated and skilled labour force, along with well-directed economic policies, was key to building up diversified and technologically sophisticated export industries.*

more than just China.

Moreover, India and Japan—the world’s third and fourth largest economies, respectively, in PPP terms—also are economic superpowers. Over the last 50 years, the per capita incomes of Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan have risen fast and caught up with western levels. China, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam are now following the same path. And Asia is expected to continue growing strongly in the coming decades:

with well-directed economic policies, was key to building up diversified and technologically sophisticated export industries. And Asian firms have shown great dynamism and agility in responding to both the 2008 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

But the Asian century currently seems a distant prospect, mainly owing to its lack of unity. China is clearly an economic and military superpower, but its authoritarian model does not appeal to the region’s democracies. Japan and India are also