

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Budget has no reflection of people's sufferings

An underwhelming budget at a time of overwhelming crisis

The finance minister on Thursday presented the country's 52nd budget of Tk 761,785 crore, which is 12.34 percent more than the previous budget of Tk 678,064 crore. It has been portrayed as expansionary and future-oriented. But unfortunately, there is barely any reflection in the proposed FY2023-24 budget of the current reality being experienced by a majority of the people. Two positives that can be taken away from the budget is the environmental tax – influenced by the World Bank's loan conditionalities – imposed on owners of more than one car, and the allocation for startups that the government hopes can transform the country from "Digital Bangladesh" into "Smart Bangladesh." But at a time when prices of food and non-food items have shot through the roof, these catchphrases are of no use to the public, who are being overwhelmed by their daily struggles.

In the budget, the government has proposed increasing the tax-free income threshold, but only slightly, from Tk 3 lakh to Tk 3.5 lakh. Yet simultaneously, it increased the surcharge-free limit of wealth from Tk 3 crore to Tk 4 crore – a gift to the rich. It also proposed increasing the monthly allowance for the elderly by Tk 100 to Tk 600, and for widowed, deserted and destitute women by Tk 50 to Tk 550 – which are still extremely trivial amounts given the present conditions. Even more ludicrously, it proposed the imposition of a minimum tax of Tk 2,000 for individuals who are required to submit income tax returns to avail themselves of various government services, even if they do not have taxable incomes. Meanwhile, in its desperate bid to increase revenue, the government has decided to rely more on indirect taxes, which will increase the financial burden on the middle class in particular.

In its typical fashion, the government has also come up with a wishful inflation control target of 6 percent; however, most of the budgetary measures give very little hope of achieving it. The budget has also set a highly ambitious revenue collection target of Tk 500,000 crore, with the vast majority of it to be collected by the National Board of Revenue (NBR). However, given that the NBR has failed to meet its tax collection target in the past 11 consecutive years, and that the newly proposed target will be its greatest challenge till date, we see no reason to believe that this time will be different. And despite the mention of bringing some reforms to the tax system, the government has failed to provide any specifics of said reforms – which is concerning because we have previously seen how such promises turned out to be completely hollow.

Besides that, government expenditure will be financed by significant borrowing from the banking sector which may lead to a "crowding-out effect" – thereby increasing the struggles of small and medium enterprises in accessing loans – not to mention increase the government's debt burden. Or it will be financed by borrowing from Bangladesh Bank, meaning more money-printing, which will increase inflation. The government also plans to finance the deficit via foreign borrowing. But it is difficult to see how it can mobilise the targeted funds, given its past collection history.

It is evident that the IMF has had quite a bit of influence in the budgetary preparations and allocations. But that has not been echoed in the allocation for the healthcare and education sectors, with both sectors receiving lower percentages of the total budget compared to last year. Because the IMF was also opposed to government subsidies, the subsidies for the energy sector have to be more effectively utilised as people cannot afford further hikes in energy prices right now. Yet it is unclear what the government plans to do about its energy subsidies – whether most of it will again go down the drain in the form of paying capacity charges to private and politically connected individuals and businesses, or if it will actually be used to give relief to the public. For once, the issue of paying enormous capacity charges was mentioned during the budget session. But, disappointingly, no bold decisions were taken.

Overall, this lack of initiative and courage pretty much sums up the proposed budget, which was neither pro-poor (even though it needed to be) nor cognisant of rapidly growing inequality, which has already reached a worrying level. While setting unrealistic targets, the government has failed to consider the very real sufferings of the people by presenting a budget that barely looks to address any of their most burning concerns.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net



Beautifying the pillars

Some of the pillars of the Moghbazar flyover in Dhaka have been painted with beautiful artwork. Though it is a laudable measure that gives the city a cleaner and brighter look, a few things need to be addressed, in my opinion. The colour palette of any similar subsequent artwork could be made a bit more subtle and less distracting. The existing artworks should also be touched up on a regular basis in order to preserve their pristine look. Since Dhaka gets its fair share of rains and puddles, the elements of nature are soon going to leave their mark on these. Also, the paintings need not have continued all the way down to the very base of the pillars, as these areas are likely to get dirtier than the upper portions of the pillars. In any case, the authorities should be strict in not allowing any posters to be pasted over these paintings.

Dr Chowdhury Ishraq Uz Zaman
Ottawa, Canada

Misinterpreting visa threats won't do us any good



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedkam

KAMAL AHMED

The welcoming reactions from the mainstream opposition parties to the recently announced visa policy by the United States for Bangladesh was predictable, as they have been relentlessly complaining about the systematic destruction of a credible electoral institution. But the often confused reactions from the government and the ruling party seem surreal, as if this foreign intervention in favour of a free and fair election in the country is a blessing for them, too. The official reaction given by the foreign ministry was so welcoming that Matthew Miller, spokesperson of the US Department of State, said, "We were heartened by the announcement from the government yesterday (May 24) that welcomed the steps that we took."

The foreign ministry statement, perhaps, was symptomatic of the consistently inconsistent statements made by the minister in charge. We have heard countless times from Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen that his government does not want any country to get involved in Bangladesh's internal affairs and that elections are in our DNA. But he did tell his US counterpart, Antony Blinken, that they could see if they could get the BNP to take part in elections, and sought help from India to keep his government in power.

While the foreign ministry welcomes the US' threat of visa bans against people "responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh," Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder termed the new visa policy a shame on the 170 million people of the country. His hurt feelings, however, are not shared by his party's General Secretary Obaidul Quader, who has been glossing over the threat by portraying it as a serious blow to the opposition BNP's demand for a poll-time caretaker government and a deterrent to the election boycott movement. A functionary of the



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

ruling party, reportedly, has already written to Secretary Blinken with a hoard of proof, including video clips, of alleged campaigns against peaceful elections spearheaded by the BNP.

These contradictory statements from within the government, perhaps, reflect how rattling the US threat has become. Since the decision was communicated to the government almost three weeks before it was made public by Secretary Blinken, a coordinated and well-thought-out response was expected. Instead, the ruling party and the government do not yet appear to have fully realised its implications and scope.

If we recall the days after the US imposed sanctions against the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and a handful of its commanding officers, including two successive chiefs, we saw a sense of unreal hope that the unit was a victim of a mistaken act and soon they would be able to convince Washington to realise its mistake. Some of the leading intellectuals aligned with

the ruling party made misleading arguments, too. Brushing aside US concerns about the worsening human rights situation in Bangladesh, they argued that the sanctions must have been the result of opposition lobbying as the US had apparently applauded Rab's role in curbing terrorism earlier. Their suggestions put emphasis

are more likely to be the traits of the governing party.

Though the US does not reveal the identities of those who have been refused visas for privacy reasons, there are plenty of symptoms that make drawing conclusions easier. Nicaragua and Uganda can be cited as examples. In the case of Nicaragua, the post-

on increased counter-lobbying, instead of focusing on improving the country's human rights situation.

If those spinmeisters were correct, then Bangladesh would have gotten back the GSP for its garment product exports to the US years ago, and the sanctions against Rab would have ended months ago. There's little doubt that much of a peaceful, free, and fair election depends on the state machineries' neutral and honest service according to the law. Doesn't the issuance of a pre-emptive warning itself bear proof that the threat-issuing foreign power does not have confidence in our state institutions' ability to ensure a democratic election process?

There's no denying that the opposition, too, can disrupt an electoral process. But that is not at the level of a party in power, as the administration very often sides with the latter. Denying political rights, and intimidating and harassing opponents in countries like ours

election announcement of hundreds of visa bans had references of judges and officials. As for Uganda, the US termed the election neither fair nor free, and noted that the "opposition candidates were routinely harassed, arrested, and held illegally without charge. Ugandan security forces were responsible for the deaths and injuries of dozens of innocent bystanders and opposition supporters." I couldn't find any example that allows a contrasting conclusion.

Misleading analyses can help propagate a narrative for immediate damage control, but are not helpful to overcome the real crisis. In our case, it is the loss of credibility and trust in the existing system and institutions for restoring a functioning democracy and rule of law. Suffering from denial syndrome will not help restore a credible election process. It's time to initiate dialogue with urgency and sincerity for a truly inclusive, free, and fair election, and make the nation dust off the shame of being threatened.

Is Dhaka Wasa personal property after all?

Muhammad Zayed Hossen Jubayer is majoring in Finance and Banking at Govt BM College, Barishal.

MUHAMMAD ZAYED HOSSEN JUBAYER

Prof Sujit Kumar Bala has been appointed the new chairman of the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) board. According to a circular issued on May 22, he succeeded former Dhaka Wasa chairman Dr Golam Mostafa, who, two days prior to being substituted, had alleged that Wasa had become the "personal property" of its managing director, Taqsem A Khan.

One would've hoped that the chairman's allegations would have been investigated with due diligence. Instead, he was sacked for speaking up. Needless to say, the move further explicates the disastrous depth of corruption in the organisation and the untouchable position of the Wasa MD. Reports after reports have provided evidence of the MD's wrongdoings, yet nothing has been done to hold him accountable. Even allegations from the chairman couldn't deliver a much-needed shake-up. So, the question is: what reasons do we have to believe that Wasa is anything but the MD's personal property?

Taqsem has been accused of various misdeeds over the years, including being selected and reappointed as the MD for six consecutive terms, in violation of Wasa's bylaws. His reappointments were deemed "questionable" by Transparency

International Bangladesh (TIB), which also demanded a neutral audit of his performance. The audit is yet to be held.

During Taqsem's leadership, Dhaka Wasa hasn't been able to fix the city's waterlogging issue, in addition to failing to provide safe water to its customers. Given Wasa's repeated failure to resolve the issue of waterlogging, Dhaka's two city corporations took over drainage management in 2020. Additionally, it was discovered that the Buriganga River was polluted by Wasa's sewage systems.

The organisation has consistently refused to answer for its shortcomings, despite the fact that it has completely failed to enhance the quality of water it distributes to inhabitants (for instance, last year, the city had a significant cholera epidemic as a result of leaks in Wasa pipes). According to a TIB investigation, 62 percent of those who applied for water and sewer connections from Wasa said they encountered harassment and anomalies.

If dodging accountability, transparency, and governance were an art, either Wasa or its MD would've been maestros. Around 910 million litres of sewage are reportedly generated every day in the areas covered by Wasa. Of this, almost 900 million litres of raw sewage enter our freshwater sources, such as rivers and canals – meaning less than two percent of the sewage is being treated. In May, the National River Conservation Commission's chairman accused Dhaka Wasa of contaminating the rivers that surround the capital. No data can

quantify the immense damage done to our water bodies as a result of Wasa's negligent and immoral activities.

Residents paid Tk 1,066 crore between FY 2018-19 and FY 2020-21 for sewage treatment, a service that was barely provided. In FY 2021-2022, it was almost Tk 400 crore. Why, therefore, should citizens pay for a service that doesn't exist?

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Despite all this, Wasa hiked water rates often and unfairly between 2009 and 2022, for up to 15 times. While the general public suffered, MD Taqsem's pay and Wasa's earnings skyrocketed. The Wasa MD has received Tk 5.8 crore in salary and other benefits for the past 13 years. Wasa said in a report that Tk 1.29

crore had been taken out for housing rent and renovations, income tax, and other expenses, leaving the MD with Tk 4.51 crore. His pay increased by Tk 1.75 lakh during the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the water tariff was hiked twice. Taqsem currently earns Tk 6.15 lakh per month, an astounding 421 percent increase in 12 years. The Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) was correct when it claimed that Dhaka Wasa's MD and its officials are the ones who genuinely profit from the regular increases in water tariffs.

In blatant violation of the Dhaka Wasa Act of 1996 and the Dhaka Wasa Service Rule of 2010, Wasa MD Taqsem A Khan allegedly appointed two people close to him by establishing two top posts, even though they had already retired in 2016. Since then, former Wasa engineers Abul Kashem and AKM Shahid Uddin have regularly been reappointed as consultants, advisers, directors, or deputy managing directors. Reportedly, either one of them takes over as acting MD whenever the Taqsem travels overseas. Nothing has been achieved in terms of combatting this, despite the Local Government Division's (LGD) request to terminate their positions and cease paying the individuals' salaries and benefits.

The list goes on and on. The letter from the former chairman said the agency has become "a den of corruption." There is no mystery around this. But the question is: will MD Taqsem and others involved in running this den ever be held accountable?