

# Making the military budget: a plea for change

**Farhatullah Babar**

**T**he budget season has begun and the Central Board of Revenue (CBR) and the Finance Ministry are working overtime to apportion resources among various sectors. Once again the major slice of national wealth will go to debt servicing and military spending. Once again, the actual military spending will be masked as civil expenditure and the Parliament will not know which Service is spending how much and on what.

Some 4,300 pages of documents were laid before the Parliament at the time of the budget last year/?. In the thousands of pages of voluminous budget documents the justification given for 193 billion rupees was half a line that read, 'to defray salary and other expenses.'

Four years ago the total pension bill of the federal government was over 33 billion rupees which included over 27 billion rupees of military pensions. One of the first actions of the present military government was to separate the military pensions from the defence budget and show it as civil expenditure.

One would have thought that after charging military pensions to the civil expenditure the military spending correspondingly would come down. Instead it has continued to rise every year.

The defence allocation for the current year is 193 billion rupees. It does not include the military pension which is believed to be now well over 30 billion rupees. Nor does it include 3.2 billion rupees for the rangers, 5.3 billion rupees for the civil armed forces and some 860 million rupees for the educational

institutions in the cantonments and garrison areas, all shown as civil expenses.

The Atomic Energy Commission has been officially made part of the Strategic Plans Division but the 4.8 billion rupees capital outlay for atomic energy is also not part of the defence budget.

Last week the Asian Development Bank projected that the actual military spending would be significantly higher than the budgetary provision. It will thus overtake the 200 rupees allocated for development.

Doesn't this call for serious introspection, discussion and debate?

Unfortunately, Parliament will not be allowed to discuss the military budget. The MPs will not be trusted to suggest a rationalisation. Once again the people and their representatives will be asked to make sacrifices, but ask no questions.

During the budget debate last year a number of MPs raised questions and demanded explanation, howsoever sketchy, of 'other expenses', but in vain. Examples of country after country were quoted where Parliaments debate, question and rationalise 'other expenses'. The Parliament was prepared to approve any amount asked for, provided it was convinced that it was meant for enhancing national security and not for luxury, said the members.

The MPs reminded the House that a chief claim of the government was to ensure transparency and accountability, and pleaded that a debate on the defence budget would serve to make the claim appear credible. But the Finance Minister remained unmoved. In desperation the opposition MPs then moved cut motions/? and helplessly watched them rejected.

When the Finance Minister rose to wind up his speech some of us secretly hoped that he would at least sympathise with the MPs' demand for some openness. After all a day before we had heard him claiming that not only 'breaking the begging bowl' but also 'breaking with the past' is important.

But he startled us when he declared that the defence budget could not be discussed even in the Parliament due to 'national secu-

raling military spending in reaction to India's is not fundamentally flawed. Isn't it wrong to measure defence capability in terms of bullet for bullet, gun for gun, and jet for jet? They know that excessive spending on military by the nuclear-armed former Soviet Union failed to save the knight from collapsing in shining armour. God forbid Pakistan is awaiting a similar fate, they fear.

The defence wizards claim that the cost of

---

**India's high economic growth may permit it to spend 2.8 percent of its GDP on the military. But when a country six times smaller spends twice as much of its GDP on the military the danger of the knight dying in the shining armour appears real**

---

urity'. His claim of breaking with the past struck like a cruel joke when he declared that the defence budget will not be discussed 'because it has never been discussed in the Parliament before'. Seldom before has the handsomely tall Finance Minister appeared so diminished.

The Parliament needs to discuss military spending and MPs must know whether the claim made in the report of the official 'Debt Management and Reduction Committee' or in the budget documents is correct.

The official Debt Management Report states: "While defence spending in constant prices more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, the development expenditure actually declined over that period", but the budget's documents claimed that the allocation for military was less than that made for development. The Parliament must ask whether spi-

Pakistan's military machine is one of the lowest. On an average Pakistan spent \$5000 per soldier a year, on its half million troops, as against \$16,000 spent by India on its one million army — they want us to believe.

A thorough debate in the Parliament would reveal whether this comparison in terms of spending per soldier, even if true, is odd. It would bring out whether spending per soldier by an Army is a measure of the quality and quantity of hardware in its inventory, or of its efficiency and frugality.

India's population is over a billion, and it maintains a million strong army, whereas Pakistan with a population of 150 million maintains over half a million troops. This raises questions which can be asked only in Parliament. The only reliable yardstick for determining the level of spending is a country's GDP. Pakistan's military spending is 5.6 per-

cent of its GDP as against India's 2.8 percent. If we have to draw comparisons with India our military spending must be brought to less than 3 percent of the GDP.

The prestigious Jane's Journal of Defence has concluded that spending more than 3 percent of GDP on military undermines the social and human development of the citizens. India's high economic growth may permit it to spend 2.8 percent of its GDP on the military. But when a country six times smaller spends twice as much of its GDP on the military, the danger of the knight dying in the shining armour appears real.

The MPs are puzzled that while the security wizards give them exhaustive comparisons with the Indian war machine, but have no answer on why Parliament should decide on issues related to formulating and overseeing the defence budget, as in India.

True, the defence budget has never been discussed in Pakistan's Parliament in the past. But does that mean that things should not change and move forward?

Mr. Shaukat Aziz's graduation from Finance to Prime Minister is claimed as one such forward move. Let there be another change and forward movement and 'breaking with the past.'

A true break with the past will come only when long held theories of national security are debated in the Parliament. It will come when questions are raised on whether the monies allocated are really spent to advance the cause of national security. It will come when military spending alone is not made to pass for the defence budget.

**The writer, a PPP Senator is a member of the Defence Committee of the Senate**