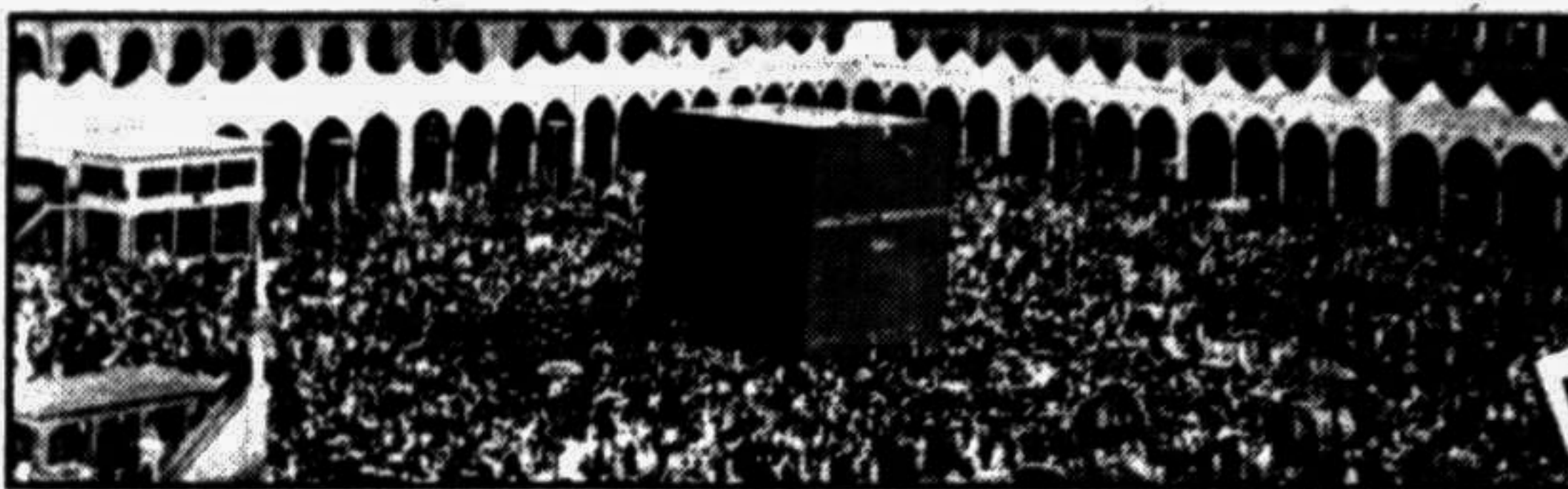


Uneasy Peace as Pilgrims Flock to Makkah

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

Muslim faithful are already beginning to arrive in Saudi Arabia for this year's Haj — the annual pilgrimage to Makkah. By the third week of June some two million will have gathered for the five days of spiritual ceremonies. The Saudi — Iranian accord, drawn up after 1987 when 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed, and a subsequent Iranian boycott of the Haj, has yet to pass its sternest test.



The Pledge from Paris

Although the size of the amount pledged at the Bangladesh Aid Club meeting — \$ 2.3 billion against a request for \$ 2.4b — provides hardly any surprise as such, the decision serves as a boost for the government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. At the same time, by pledging an amount which is said to be the highest ever offered to this country by the Aid Club, the consortium has given another signal. It underlines its satisfaction over the return of democracy to Bangladesh as well as its willingness to support the efforts of the new administration to put the country on the road to economic recovery, after years of mismanagement and the devastating cyclone.

All this is most gratifying to the Government and, indeed, to the Finance and Planning Minister Saifur Rahman who led the Bangladesh delegation to the Paris meeting. However, instead of basking in the success of the meeting in French capital or seeking political gains out of it, the administration should immediately face up to the challenge of translating the Paris pledge into reality. In the process, it should be able to demonstrate to the donor nations and agencies that its approach to aid management, even at the stage of negotiation, is qualitatively different from that of the previous administration.

In the first place, a pledge must be seen as a declaration of intent rather than as a firm commitment. This means that an amount pledged becomes available in the pipeline after a series of negotiations have led to the formulation of projects and programmes. It is during these negotiations that such questions as the provision for counterpart fund and the status of unfinished projects will be raised and, hopefully, resolved.

Much of the aid pledged in Paris has been earmarked for on-going projects. This involves little further negotiation. But talks on new projects, which have so far undergone only preliminary discussion, can be difficult, like the agreement on the size of food and commodity loans. On all these issues, the negotiation can be tough, because, at various stages, donor nations and aid agencies, especially the World Bank, would be raising the much-discussed and controversial subject of conditionalities for disbursement of aid and grants. In Paris, the Aid Club members endorsed the policy statements of the Bangladesh Government committing itself to various measures, ranging from a fight against corruption to a drive for raising the level of domestic savings. In months to come, they will be breathing down the neck of the administration, as the saying goes, to ensure their implementation. There is no doubt that many of these conditions are designed to help this country and the World Bank is justified in insisting on their enforcement. Unfortunately, this can not be said about several others — we do not know how many — which include some which are verbal, since, as sources say, they are too sensitive or demanding to be put down in writing.

While all parties involved should ensure that aid negotiations on projects and programmes are completed speedily to facilitate quick disbursement of funds and full utilisation of committed grants and loans before the end of 1991-1992 fiscal year, the Bangladesh Government should go through this exercise with its head high, but in a spirit of accommodation, openness and pragmatism.

ME Arms Control Initiative

We welcome President Bush's latest arms control initiative for the Middle East which includes a freeze on the acquisition, production and testing of surface-to-surface missiles and new guidelines on the sales of conventional weapons. His move also includes seeking a ban on the production of nuclear weapons material. The initiative seeks to bring about an agreement among the big five arms suppliers to the region — US, UK, Soviet Union, China and France — to adopt guidelines that will include stricter export controls and keep each other informed about weapons and technologies being sold to any country that may have destabilising effect on the region. France is reported to have offered to host the first meeting of senior officials of the five major arms suppliers to launch the process of developing the guidelines.

It is no coincidence that the big five arms suppliers to the region are the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. While they sit in the Security Council and pontificate on the need for arms control, their arms merchants with the knowledge and assistance from their defense ministries, sell the latest implements of mass destruction to countries of the region. It is this double standard in the policy that eroded the credibility of their arms control initiatives in the past. The US policy in the region was not perceived by many countries as being evenhanded, which greatly reduced its chances of success in the past.

We would like to believe that the new initiative by President Bush is a radical departure from all past efforts in terms of sincerity of purpose. The past experiences of arms sales to the region should have convinced the big five arms exporting countries that real peace in the Middle East can be brought about by reducing the concentration of lethal weapons in this volatile region and not by arming these countries more and more.

We have not heard about the reactions of the Arab countries to President Bush's proposal, except for Israel, which has expressed concern about the suggestion for banning "nuclear material". It is our view that the initiative deserves serious consideration by the countries of the region. There are several new elements in the initiative. The idea of the major arms sellers to the region abiding by some guidelines is a sound suggestion. However, its effectiveness and credibility can be greatly increased if the United Nations can be given some sort of monitoring role to supervise how effectively the guidelines are being observed. A purely voluntary formula is not likely to work very well.

The victory in the Gulf war has greatly increased the capacity of the United States to give a fresh impetus to peace initiatives in the region. The ideological power blocs have been dismantled and new alliances and co-operative relationships have emerged.

President Bush has already lost a lot of valuable time. Peace initiatives should have been pursued with greater vigor and imagination than it has been the case. We hope that the idea contained in the latest initiative is examined very carefully and sincere effort is made to move forward in the direction of peace.

THE Haj pilgrimage to Makkah, which will draw nearly two million Muslims from around the world in the third week of June, will be free of boycott this year for the first time since 1988.

This is the result of an accord reached between Saudi Arabia and Iran as part of restoration of their diplomatic relations on March 26. Under the accord, details of which have been sketchy, some 110,000 Iranians will perform the Haj, ending a boycott over the pilgrim quota introduced by Saudi authorities three years ago.

It is obligatory on every adult Muslim man and woman once in their life, provided they can afford it, to journey to Makkah, the ancient Saudi city where the Prophet Muhammad (Sm) was born in 570.

Thousands have already arrived and the influx is picking up daily, with pilgrims arriving by air, road and sea.

This year's Haj will be performed a little more enthusiastically by the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs who feel relieved and will especially be thanking God for the liberation of Kuwait and defeat of the aggression launched by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in August last year. The five-day spiritual ceremonies will not be under the shadow of war either, as was feared by many earlier this year when Saddam Hussein refused to get out of Kuwait, leading to the prospect of a long and bloody conflict.

Even the propaganda,

fiercely conducted by Iraq and its Arab and Islamic supporters in several countries, that Western troops — the infidels — had virtually taken over the holy land of Saudi Arabia, has lost punch and relevance.

The bulk of the multinational force, especially the American and other Western soldiers, will have left Saudi Arabia by the time the Haj takes place. Moreover, the crushing defeat of the Iraqi military and Saddam Hussein's subsequent harsh treatment of Shiite and Kurdish rebels, have turned the tide against Baghdad in favour of Riyadh and its allies.

As a result, Iraq's call for a boycott of the Haj that was

made at the height of the occupation of Kuwait, no longer carries any weight. Muslims from across the globe — Iraq's case is unclear, though — will have no inhibitions about travelling to Saudi Arabia for the Haj and a visit to Madinah, the city where prophet Muhammad (Sm) is buried. Iranian participation has added to the climate of normalcy.

However, the Saudi-Iranian accord has apparently hit an snag on the question of political rallies during the Haj season.

It has been a major issue for the Saudi authorities, who are haunted by the 1987 tragedy. More than 400 people, mostly Iranian pilgrims, were killed in

clashes with Saudi security forces near the Grand Mosque in Makkah.

The Saudis subsequently imposed restrictions on the number of pilgrims on the basis of a quota. Under it, one pilgrim for every 1,000 Muslims of a country's total population was to be allowed to enter Saudi Arabia.

This would allow nearly 50,000 Iranian pilgrims, as against some 150,000 Iranians who usually performed the Haj each year. Teheran rejected the quota and other restrictions during the pilgrimage, and stayed away in 1988, 1989 and 1990. Riyadh broke off diplomatic ties in April 1988 when bitterness increased.

Under the March agreement, 110,000 Iranians, more than double their permissible quota, would be allowed to perform the Haj. And, according to published details, they would be permitted to hold regulated rallies to be addressed and conducted by a representative of the Iranian government and religious authorities.

But on May 6, those in charge of Iranian Haj arrangements turned down a purported Saudi proposal curbing the right to demonstrate. "The Saudis suggested the rally be held in a place in the mountains, but this is not possible," Mehdi Imam Jamarani, head of

Iran's Haj and Endowments Organisation, was quoted as telling a group of doctors to accompany the Iranian contingent.

"We cannot shout our cries of hatred against America and infidels (such as Israel) in the confines of the site proposed by the Saudis. We must shout in a place where the believers can be informed and the infidels hear us, too. The disavowal must be public," Jamarani was quoted as saying in Teheran.

While the predominantly Shiite Iranians insist that it is their religious duty to raise and debate political issues of general concern to Muslims during the Haj season, the mainly Sunni Saudis say the Haj is a purely spiritual affair.

Riyadh argues, and the Islamic Conference Organisation agrees, that the sanctity of the occasion and of the holy shrines must be maintained. The authorities have again warned against any wickedness or wrangling. Trouble-makers will be deported.

How the wrangle will be resolved remains to be seen. But the Saudis' predominant interest will be in maintaining public peace during the Haj. So they will agree to a compromise as long as it fulfills that objective. Teheran is likely to cooperate too. — GEMINI NEWS.

MOHAMMED ASLAM is on the staff of Khaleej Times, Dubai.

NZ Still Out in Cold over No Nukes Rule

Derek Round writes from Wellington

According to Washington, there is one major difference with New Zealand — they know what it is, we know what it is'

WHEN New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger telephoned United States President George Bush to congratulate him on his leadership in the Gulf war, it was the first time leaders of the two countries had talked to each other for seven years.

New Zealand has been out in the cold since the former Labour Government banned visits of US nuclear warships in 1985. The "no nukes" policy has been continued by the present National Party Government.

The US officially regards New Zealand as a "former ally" and has made it clear the relationship will not change until New Zealand accepts the US policy of neither confirming nor denying whether or not individual ships have nuclear weapons on board.

But the National Government, elected last October, says it wants improved relations with the United States. It has sent Denis McLean, an experienced former career diplomat and head of the defence ministry known for his pro-American views, as ambassador to Washington in a move to improve relations.

Two New Zealand military medical teams and transport aircraft were sent to join US and coalition forces in the Gulf war.

There were reports that the Americans were sharing some intelligence with New Zealand during the war — something New Zealand has been denied since the ban on nuclear ships was imposed.

Prime Minister Bolger's decision to phone President Bush, while no great diplomatic coup, was seen here as at least a small indication of a better climate developing between Wellington and Washington.

"It is significant, but don't overrate it," Mr. Bolger said after the 10-minute call. He said he had not invited Mr. Bush to visit New Zealand and he had not been invited to the White House.

In Washington, the President told reporters he and other Americans regarded New Zealand warmly. But there was one major difference with New Zealand — "they know what it is, we know what it is."

Mr. Bush said he would like to try to resolve the dispute between the two countries. US

officials, however, have indicated there will be little movement while New Zealand continues to reject the "neither confirm nor deny" policy.

The ANZUS defence pact linking the United States, Australia and New Zealand remains "inoperative" as far as New Zealand is concerned. The United States and Australia continue to have annual defence talks, but New Zealand is left out.

"Either you are an ally or you are not," a US official is quoted as saying.

While New Zealand and the United States continue to cooperate in trade, economic and environmental matters, resumed cooperation in defence and security matters appears a long way off.

New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation separates the two countries in American eyes as

steadfastly as the Berlin Wall once divided Germany," a Washington commentator says.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Don McKinnon has made it clear the change of government here last year meant no softening in the attitude to nuclear weapons. "We intend to keep New Zealand free of nuclear weapons," he declared.

"The New Zealand public and the New Zealand Government are clear about that. And we want the South Pacific to be free of them, too."

Prime Minister Bolger, while saying he will continue to work on improving relations with the United States, says he will not consider a deal which would compromise New Zealand's nuclear-free status.

He was responding to US Congressman Jim Leach who suggested that a compromise with New Zealand in accepting the "neither confirm nor deny"

policy on warship visits could promote US acceptance of a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.

Asked if he was willing to make a deal, Mr. Bolger replied: "I'm not looking for a deal.... both countries acknowledge they have the right to determine their own approach, and (the 'neither confirm nor deny' policy) is the approach the US government adopts around the world."

"Equally, New Zealand has the right to retain a non-nuclear status. That's it."

The US has refused to associate itself with the 1986 Treaty of Rarotonga establishing the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone because of its "global security interests and commitments."

New Zealand and the other ten countries that have ratified the treaty argue that nuclear weaponry is inappropriate to the security requirements of

the South Pacific. They agreed not to acquire, test, make or station nuclear weapons on their territory.

But the treaty does not apply to international waters and each country decides for itself whether to allow visits by ships or planes which may be carrying nuclear weapons.

No ships of the United States or the British Royal Navy — which also has a "neither confirm nor deny" policy — have visited New Zealand since the anti-nuclear policy was introduced in 1985.

Both countries have been invited to send warships to the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Royal New Zealand Navy this October.

But unless New Zealand softens its anti-nuclear stance — which appears unlikely — the reply to the invitation is likely to be a polite "no thanks."

— Depthnews Asia

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Shaheed Zia

Sir, Every year 30th May reminds us of an unfortunate and painful incident in which a great son of this soil, Ziaur Rahman, was assassinated by some traitors. Shaheed Zia was one of those front column freedom fighters who fought valiantly for the liberation of Bangladesh. The historic declaration of independence in 1971 by Major Zia will gratefully be remembered by every Bangladeshi. As the head of the state as well as of the government, Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman was an example of honesty, dedication and patriotism.

This year's 30th May had a special significance. Begum Khaleda Zia has become the head of an elected democratic government while BNP again has gained the sacred responsibility of running the State. The time itself preserved Zia's name and fame. We pray to Almighty Allah to grant heaven to our beloved leader. May Allah, bless us with more dedicated, honest and patriotic leaders like Shaheed Zia.

M. Zahidul Haque
Bangladesh
Agricultural College,
Dhaka-1207.

Stipend amount

Sir, The undergraduate level monthly stipend of Tk 100/- at Bangladesh Agricultural University has been doubled (to Tk 200/-) by the special order issued by the Ministry of Education recently and the incumbents are drawing it. But unfortunately the post-graduate level students are still getting stipend at their earlier rate of Tk. 225/-

only. We would like to appeal to the concerned authorities to look into the matter and thus double the stipend amount also in case of post-graduate level incumbents of the Agri Varsity.

Md. Rafique and others
Agri-Varsity, Mymensingh.

'Insuring the poor'

Sir, In your second editorial of May 19 "Insuring the Poor" you highlight the tremendous business prospects for insurance companies should they succeed in harnessing the small premium policy holder at the lower end of the social scale. Delta insurance which you have mentioned in the body of the editorial has also had the innovative idea of linking insurance to family planning programmes by giving increased benefits to those policy holders who, at the time of maturity, have succeeded in keeping their families within certain limited size, with downward sliding scale of benefits according to the number of children, possibly to a limit of two or three children. This I find to be an intriguing notion and could easily be expanded to the fixed income group as well.

In the final paragraph you point out the impossibility of enticing the very poor to part with even the small amount needed for the premium on the premise that survival today is more important than an uncertain future. This is, I think a misconception, for the poor do think about the future and worry about what it can hold for them just as much, if not more than, any other class of society. If they did not they would not fall prey to the many

human predators who await the opportunity to 'suck their blood.' Many poor people are persuaded to part with their small amounts of savings on the promise of monthly payments as interest which they add to their meagre incomes in order to defray costs. This is fine in as far as it goes until they have the temerity to ask for the return of the 'principal' when they find, to their shock, it is not forthcoming as their benefactor has utilised it for his own benefit. Once they ask for it the monthly interest payments also cease and there is nothing the poor person can do about it for the poor have little recourse to the law.

If the very poor can be persuaded to channel a part of their small income into an insurance policy their money can be used by the established institutions which ultimately will benefit not only them but the nation as well and may augur well for the future. If the insurance companies can succeed in their self-appointed task whether or not it is purely holistic I for one would say what they are doing is most commendable.

Sylvia Mortzoza
Dhaka.

Importance of English

Sir, The deposed autocratic regime did the greatest harm to this nation by abolishing English from many of the academic and most of the administrative tiers. This was done mainly in order to get cheap popularity from such groups who demand abolition of English time to time on political ground only. With the abolition of English we are going to be isolated from the nations of the world very rapidly. In spite of many a deficiency of this poor nation of ours, knowledge of English had been a real strength of the educated class of people of this country. This was the lone good legacy of the British Raj in the sub-continent.

After only five years of such abolition of English, we now see a weaker educated class lacking of knowledge and skill. Power of communication and acquiring knowledge is being reduced at a fast rate. Within the next five years the darkness of this policy may mostly eclipse our remaining bright sides.

I would request the new democratic government and the intellectual section of the society to come up unitedly to restore the due role of English in the academic and administrative fields without further delay.

M. N. Uddin
East Nasrabad, Chittagong.

BMDC

Sir, Entering the Bangladesh Management Development Centre (BMDC) at 4, Sobhanbag the first thing one will notice is a 'slogan' on the wall of the office building in front that reads "Mamun Tui Kobay Jabi" in bold but badly written Bangla. The most surprising thing is that although a new Director General has joined the Centre and the man named Mamun is no more employed at the Centre, the writing on the wall still remains to remind us that the "task force" belonging to the Centre is still active doing other jobs with total ignorance to their respective duties. Otherwise, why would the whole organisation remain immune to queries about the different courses?

It is notable that there were no publications in the year 1990 and no course programme for the year 1991-92 was available. Last, I sincerely request the concerned authorities of the Centre to at least remove the writings which would cost no more than a little physical labour, and start genuine courses for the greater interest of the country.

Neloofar Zaman,
Dhaka.

OPINION

Bureaucracy in the Fax Age

Now that the jet age has been overtaken by the fax age (it takes too long to write or say "facsimile"), the bureaucrats have a problem in hand: how to keep in pace with the modern and super fast mass communication systems.

The mobile SNG (satellite news gathering) TV cameras covering the war in Iraq were sending the news faster than through official sources; even Pentagon could not ignore it.

In India, it is reported that reminders from New Delhi to regional offices in the country are being sent through the domestic satellite. In Singapore and Hong Kong (not to speak of Japan) local mail is almost entirely through fax. Last week I received an invitation card from Singapore to attend an international exhibition-cum-seminar. The Registration blank (card, to be filled in) did not contain the postal mailing address, but only the fax number. International and regional organizations use fax most of the time for communicating with other countries — only heavy reading documents are air-mailed. Even the telex is going out of date.

So we face a contrast in bureaucracy: it might take days or a couple of weeks to take a decision; but it can be sent to any part of the world within seconds in written form using fax. Bureaucratic delays occur in Washington as well as in Dhaka — the difference is one of degree or of kind.

The opinion "Executive — clarity" (Star, May 13) touched on one aspect of bureaucratic load-bearing (not load-shedding). There are other aspects which the poor and developing countries have to review.

How much paper work such administrations can, or should, bear? Faster decision-making processes and fast work could save millions of man-hours. It is not readily realised that wastage of man-hours is one of the most expensive, and invisible, components of the budget in a bureaucratic system.

One visible example is the "noting" system we have inherited from our past masters. The civil servants of this sub-continent have earned some dubious reputation in this respect. I recall my predicament, when, on my first assignment with an international agency abroad, my boss (a Japanese) threw away my elaborate and 'perfect' notes, and warned me that in future I should walk into his room or telephone him. The next boss, an ex-Britisher, was more tolerant, but he preferred to dispose off cases at the daily morning meeting.

We talk a lot; and when it comes to writing, we write a lot — without any visible improvement for the (wasted) efforts. The culprit is the system, not the individuals. It is centralization, and non-delegation of authority. In the States, the managers and executives (in the private sector) are hired and fired (almost verbally); apparently giving the impression that security of job may not be very conducive towards efficiency. In developing countries the State has to bear the consequences of labour-incentive and job-creating policies. Providing a job opening gets priority over efficiency.

Coming back to the marvels of modern communication devices, now that our country is stepping into digital telecom system, it would be much cheaper in the long run to connect Dhaka and the districts with fax machines (locally assembled with progressive manufacture of components, as we have been doing in the telephone sector). The microwave links, being wireless system, are suitable for cyclone-prone areas (let us hope 200kph cyclones would not recur within decades); as well as the tropo-scatter system which is supposed to be working since the pre-liberation days (the current status is not known to the writer).

All modern technology are not unsuitable for the LDCs — some might destabilise our formidable bureaucrats!

A. Mawaz
Dhaka.