

Expatriates ministry neglect

Effective functioning is essential

THE government's neglect of the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment, detailed in a report that the ministry submitted this week to a parliamentary standing committee, is as startling as it is short-sighted. The ministry was formed by the government in December 2001 as per the BNP election manifesto, but has sat more or less idle in the two years since its inception.

Among other problems mentioned in the report, as many as 18 of 47 posts in the ministry remain vacant, the office space allocated to the ministry is inadequate for even this number of employees, even the secretary of the ministry has no fax connection or ISD facility, and there are no resources to keep in regular communication with the labour wings of Bangladeshi missions overseas.

Given the number of Bangladeshi citizens working abroad and the effect that their foreign exchange remittances have on our national economy, it makes a great deal of sense that the government would create a ministry to ensure their welfare.

Bangladeshis in foreign countries are no less deserving of government assistance than those of us within the country. Indeed, in light of the fact that Bangladeshi expatriates are a principal source of foreign exchange earnings for the country, there is even greater reason for the government to take steps to address their concerns.

For the government to sit idly by for two years and allow the ministry to languish due to insufficient human resources and funding is poor public policy. Even basic coordination and oversight could significantly benefit expatriates and produce tangible economic benefits to the country as a whole.

The government must move swiftly to provide the ministry with the funds and the human resources it needs to operate effectively. A good first step would be to immediately fill the vacancies in the ministry so that it is fully staffed and to allocate the funds necessary to address the shortfalls mentioned in the report.

The underlying problem is that the government simply hasn't made the ministry a high priority, and this is what must change if the ministry is to operate effectively. After two years of neglect, such a focus is already long overdue.

Acid throwing

Legal loopholes must be plugged

NGO leaders have accused police of allowing acid throwers to slink through the loopholes in the law. The charge brought against the police is that they record cases of acid throwing under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, instead of the Acid Control Act which would have made it difficult for the accused to get bail.

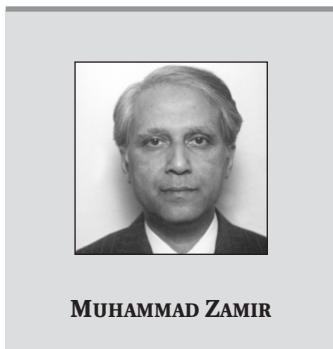
The issue deserves a serious look, if only because acid throwing is not an ordinary crime. Society cannot acquiesce in the harsh truth that acid throwers, who have ruined the lives of many innocent girls, manage to evade the punishment that they deserve. It is a matter of disgrace that despite what has been said and done to contain acid attacks, the situation has not really improved. Poor girls, who form the most vulnerable group, are still very much exposed to the menace. It seems the concern shown for the girls in seminars and meetings is not reflected in the steps taken to protect them from this diabolical crime.

The widely held view on the issue is that the law enforcers have failed to make any impact on the situation. Tough measures are being taken in the neighbouring countries to eliminate acid throwing, but in our case the theoretical emphasis on curbing the crime has not produced anything in practice.

There are basically two points that must be taken into consideration. First, brutalisation of society which has led to proliferation of such a beastly crime like acid throwing. The second point is that the measures adopted to counter the ill have not been very effective. The first problem has to be viewed in the socio-economic context. And we will have to rely on a long-term scheme to change things for the better. However, when it comes to enforcing the law, matters will improve appreciably if the law enforcers give a better account of themselves.

The home ministry is planning to set things right at several points. The planners are on the right track, but we believe what they must guarantee, before anything else, is elimination of legal loopholes.

Thirty-three years later



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

I had written in October about lack of law and order and poor governance. I had hoped that before the year ended, there would be some progress in this regard. Regrettably, the news from the ground appears to be less than encouraging.

This poor situation has been reflected once again through expressions of concern about Bangladesh in the European Parliament. This time the Government cannot blame the former Prime Minister for fomenting the comments. She was nowhere near Brussels.

This European institution, not only expressed concern over law and order in Bangladesh but also observed that police are unable to respond to criminal situations appropriately. It is understood that EU Commissioner Chris Patten also indicated that the human rights situation had weakened in our country. In this context, he also suggested an existing nexus between the police, criminals and certain politicians. References were also made to the growing disquiet in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the lack of progress on separation of the judiciary from the executive and the failure to establish independent monitoring institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Human Rights Commission and the Ombudsman.

These are unfortunate charges. We have already been identified as the most corrupt country (according to the debatable corruption perception index) by Transparency International. Fresh aspersions from the European Parliament will not do our nation any credit. This will only reiterate that we are probably not trying enough.

I am writing this column with anguish in my heart. On any given day, one can open any Bangladeshi

should not also overlook the fact that all are innocent till proven guilty. The District Administration has tried to explain away these killings by saying that the local people knew about their criminal activities. If that is so, the obligation for the Administration was even more. They should have pre-emptively and jointly taken such offenders into custody with the help of the police. Subsequently, the correct judicial process should have been

agencies.

Why should this happen? Is it because we have failed to create a proper process of governance or are we just losing our basic moral values? How is it that we can continue to have several rounds of government headed by women and yet be unable to ensure safety for women both within their households and in the streets? Many might take issue with me and say that different measures have been adopted to control such

charitable feeding schemes in our small towns and villages.

Time has come for us to do some serious thinking. How can any sane person spend Taka ten million on a car (whose latent abilities of performance and speed can never be properly enjoyed in the crowded streets of Dhaka) and not save half of that amount and donate it for purchasing four good kidney dialysis machines for a hospital? Are we really forgetting that a car is after all just a functional machine?

is a patriot and a nationalist. Thank God, we have freedom of the press. We need to build on this.

What is needed is restoration of credibility of governance. It has to be understood that this is a poor country which deserves better from the people's representatives and its officials. It is they who have to show the way for others to follow. I do not like giving examples. However, one cannot but point to the way some of the politicians and officials live in developed countries and suggest that our representatives in the government adopt similar simple lifestyles. This will then encourage others. This will also reduce violation of law and order and substantially decrease nepotism and corruption.

Another welcome step to ensure better governance would be to restore confidence among the bureaucracy by removing political bias. Within the country, politicisation has generated its own dynamics with regard to appointments, promotion and also extension of service through contract. This factor has not spared even the judiciary. This is indeed unfortunate. Such an approach is only creating servility and destroying all chances of merit being recognised unless it is juxtaposed with the right political flavour of the year. This has already led to a sorry state in the maintenance of law and order. This slide can be stopped by reaffirming the rule of law and regulations and reducing the potential of *suparish* by political godfathers.

An ocean of blood was shed to achieve our independence. Many lives have been lost since then to ensure a democratic process within our governance. We should not permit our collective sacrifice to go in vain.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

There is no reason why we cannot overcome our flaws and succeed. We need to understand that each one of us in our own way is a patriot and a nationalist. It has to be understood that this is a poor country which deserves better from the people's representatives and its officials. One cannot but point to the way some of the politicians and officials live in developed countries and suggest that our representatives in the government adopt similar simple lifestyles. This will then encourage others. This will also reduce violation of law and order and substantially decrease nepotism and corruption.

daily newspaper and discover several reports which reflect negative aspects of our character. As we traverse the thirty-third year of our liberation, one wonders whether we have moved forward or regressed as a civilized society.

Recently, we read about 27 alleged robbers having been lynched (beaten to death) in Noakhali chars. How can this happen in this day and age? There are indications that some of those killed were snatched away from police custody and then beaten to death. There is no excuse for this. The police are there for maintaining law and order and to assist the judicial process. We must all remember that implementation of legal measures and meting out of punishment can only be taken up by law and order agencies. We

undertaken. They have failed in their responsibilities. The image of Bangladesh has been tarnished.

Every morning, newspapers are replete with despatches of wives being burnt or disabled because the wife's family has been unable to meet dowry demands by the husband or his family. There are also reports of acid attacks on teenage girls and rapes of young women followed by murder.

This unsavoury brew also includes reports of deaths of political functionaries (due to inter-party rivalry), stories about businessmen being kidnapped, extortion followed by grisly killings, cheating in examinations, death in custody and land grabbing by powerful groups who have the support, direct or indirect, of politicians and law and order

violence against women. True. However, the proof of the pudding lies in its eating.

In most areas of our lives, we seem to be guided today by false values and misplaced priorities. It is probably the malicious after-effects of cultural globalisation and erosion of morality that has affected our sensitivities. A case in point was the great ostentation with which Iftar parties were held again this year. It is indeed a national shame that thirty-three years after independence, we still find women clutching babies on street corners, begging for food and young children selling flowers and sweets instead of being in school. Who are we trying to fool? I am sure Allah would consider it more to His liking if we had less of these ostentatious Iftar parties and more

It is good for our elite to put on first world pretensions, but they should not forget examples of first world habits like charity and equality of opportunity. It is a question of values.

However, I have great faith in our people. They have always, at every critical juncture made the right decision. We are a country which has a moderate blend in the psyche of its citizens. We have managed to survive against many odds. We are generally honest and hard-working. We are also God-fearing. We have a lot of resilience in our character. We enjoy music and art. We have many good things going our way.

There is no reason why we cannot overcome our flaws and succeed. We need to understand that each one of us in our own way

Nothing succeeds like success

MEGASTHENES

IN our school-going years, due largely to the requirements of our curriculum and also at times to extra-curricular assignments, we achieved a degree of familiarity and even taste for certain fables of old. The fables were, of course, didactic in purpose -- tales that sought to teach timeless truths and universal values -- so designed that the moral or lesson was imparted and imbibed in a manner that was both pleasurable and also created an impact on impressionable minds. These included, in simplified form, works of Aesop and La Fontaine, parables of the New Testament and also folktales indigenous to our region -- tales of Ramayana, Jataka, Panchatantra and Hitopodesha. A particular tale of Aesop came to mind recently, when a good friend, who is an even better raconteur, recounted an anecdote. I have no reason to doubt my friend's version of events but like any good teller of tales, I suspect he is not averse to embellishing a minor point in a story to reinforce his main theme.

Aesop's tale of which I was reminded is well known. An eccentric magician enjoyed travelling incognito from place to place. Once in a remote sparsely populated area, after a long day's travel, he came upon an inn and sought shelter for the night and hot food. He was shabbily dressed and, the innkeeper concluded, would not be an adornment for the inn. He was thus advised that there were no vacancies, all tables and rooms were taken. Unperturbed the magician retired to a secluded nearby spot; a whisk of his wand, a muttered incantation, and his shabby travel-worn clothes were swiftly transformed into resplendent robes and finery. Once again he appeared at the door of the inn. His dress and demeanour exuded

affluence and authority. The innkeeper was proud to invite him to a place at the high table. Food was served but the magician did not partake of it. Instead he dipped, by turn, his gloves, socks, coat and shirtsleeves and other articles of dress into each dish, solicitously urging them to eat. The innkeeper was perplexed. Not without trepidation he asked at length if the food was not up to standard. No, replied the magician in feigned surprise, he could tell from the aroma that the food was excellent but he assumed that it was meant for his clothes and not for himself as only a short while earlier, in different attire, he had been denied

Minister, leading his country's delegation, addressed the conference, as did Ministers and Heads of Delegation of other countries. He was articulate, his speech focused and telling. It contained an apposite quote from "Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen" that reinforced his thesis; few scholars have written on food and famine-related issues with such a feel and insight as Prof. Sen. As is usual in such gatherings, a number of other Ministers and also delegates went up to him, after he had concluded, to extend congratulations.

One delegate, after felicitating the Minister, sought permission --

won the Nobel in 1998 and received the Bharat Ratna in 1999. Was the Bharat Ratna, in both cases, awarded to these distinguished individuals for any outstanding work or achievements after winning the Nobel or were they honoured for achievements of a lifetime, in which case, should not the Bharat Ratna have preceded the Nobel? The Minister's smile broadened and the twinkle in his eyes became pronounced as he replied in Hindi: "Bhai kew ye sawal puchte ho. Is ke jawab tho tumhe ache tara se malum hai. Ham sab tho eki jagay se hai na". (Old chap, why do you persist in questions the answers to which

into an institution, even if it takes place in the most honourable form". The line of demarcation that distinguishes between appearance and achievement, shadow and substance, innate value and functional use can be confusing; thick or thin, blurred or imaginary -- perhaps more patently so in the realm of the arts.

Paul Gauguin was a pioneer among Post-Impressionist painters. He painted and sold his pictures for a living, and lived and died in poverty. At a conservative estimate, the price of an authentic Gauguin today would far exceed, after allowing for inflation,

-- it is fair to assume that it would be taken for a copy and not the Da Vinci original by most people. In such circumstances how much would even an art lover be prepared to pay for it? Would its possession afford, whether in terms of functional use or aesthetic pleasure or even pride of possession, the same measure of satisfaction as would, for instance, the ownership of a sleek BMW?

In November of 1954, as part of his eightieth birthday celebrations, a portrait of Sir Winston Churchill, by a respected artist Graham Sutherland, was unveiled at a special session of Parliament. Churchill, himself an amateur painter of talent, was appalled when he saw the work; he felt it made him look half-witted. Lady Churchill, no philistine she, disliked it even more. Aneurin Bevan, an icon of the left and Churchill's bete noire of many years, thought it was "a beautiful work". The painting was removed from public gaze, placed in hiding behind a boiler in a cellar, until in 1955 Lady Churchill "smashed it to the floor and tossed it in the incinerator". A decidedly bizarre and grotesque end for a painting valued at \$200,000.

Speaking through a character in one of his short stories, Somerset Maugham once asserted with absolute conviction: "Art is the only thing that matters. In comparison with art, wealth and rank and power are not worth a straw.... We (i.e. artists in general and as a class) give the world significance. You (i.e. others) only are our raw material". There may not be too many arguments on this from connoisseurs of the arts or aesthetes. In the minds of many others though it could be the question: "What exactly is it that constitutes art?"

LIGHTEN UP
Honours and awards may not add substantively to an individual's achievements or contribution to human welfare but these are seldom unwelcome. It is the rare individual of Sartre's individuality, eminence or even eccentricity who can decline the Nobel with the dismissive words: "It is not the same thing if I sign Jean-Paul Sartre or if I sign Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prize winner. A writer must refuse to allow himself to be transformed into an institution, even if it takes place in the most honourable form".

food and even entry into the inn.

There may be more than one moral to this fable, which also underscores a particular aspect of human nature, the tendency among many to genuflect before any semblance of authority and fame. As Dr. Kissinger once observed: "The nice thing about being a celebrity is that when you bore people, they think it's their fault". Indeed the proximity of power and greatness can be heady and may even provide a vicarious sense of achievement.

But coming back to my friend's anecdote. Some years back he was a delegate at a Regional FAO Ministerial Meeting. The Indian

which was promptly forthcoming -- to pose two questions. The first question: referring to the quote from "Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen", the delegate wondered if the quote in the speech had been from Bertrand Russell or Lester Pearson, would the Minister have prefixed the words Nobel Laureate before their names. The Minister's eyes twinkled. He responded with the hint of a smile: "I had asked myself the same question". The second question: Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel in 1979 and the Bharat Ratna -- India's highest civilian award, given to the likes of Pandit Nehru and Ghaffar Khan -- the following year. Amartya Sen

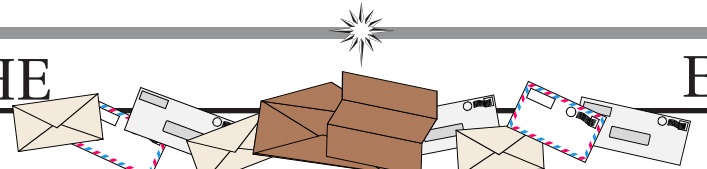
you know very well. We are from the same region after all.

Nothing succeeds like success. Honours and awards may not add substantively to an individual's achievements or contribution to human welfare but these are seldom unwelcome. Most assuredly also, recognition can enhance a person's capacity for future contributions. It is the rare individual of Sartre's individuality, eminence or even eccentricity who can decline the Nobel with the dismissive words: "It is not the same thing if I sign Jean-Paul Sartre or if I sign Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prize winner. A writer must refuse to allow himself to be transformed

whatever the artist earned in his entire lifetime through the sale of his paintings. What is there in a Gauguin that is so apparent to art lovers and critics today but which was not discernible to connoisseurs of the artist's own time?

The Mona Lisa is without question the most famous and recognisable painting in the world. In 1962, for insurance purposes it was valued at \$100,000,000. If by some feat of legerdemain -- courtesy of today's version of Aesop's magician -- it was transported to some art and antiquarian shop in a remote city -- and a passable facsimile surreptitiously put in its place at the Louvre

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

ICT

Kudos to Abu Saeed Khan for bravely exposing the woeful lack of preparation our ICT Ministry has. I'll add a few more examples.

Two years back, a software company in San Francisco came to Bangladesh to find engineers who could do their programming. The programmers they met were decent, but the technology infrastructure was pathetic. Reluctantly, they gave the project to Pakistani programmers, even though the Bangladeshi-origin CEO desperately wanted to bring some business to his native country.

This year, a colleague of mine set up an outsourcing company in Dhaka, hoping to get a slice of the billions of dollars of outsourced work that is going to India. But who is going to bring business to Bangladesh, with a crumbling technology and communications

infrastructure, when they can get world-class infrastructure in India, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia? So far, he has bagged nil clients.

A Bangladeshi student was the first to invent an anti-virus for the global Chernobyl virus. If it had been an Indian boy, the Indian government would have tirelessly promoted this invention, and this inventor would have ended up on cover of "Businessweek" (as another Indian did, two weeks ago in "The Rise Of India" story). Bangladeshi authorities frittered away the golden opportunity to tell a different story about a young, tech-savvy generation.

India, Pakistan and others all have country-specific domain names (.in, .pk, etc.). I once heard from a Dhaka technologist that the reason Bangladesh didn't have .bd is because the technology powers-that-be could not get their act together to apply properly. I don't

know whether the claim is true, but certainly Bangladesh is the only country I know without a country domain address in 2003!

Dear ICT Ministry, technology is a young person's game. Some of the BUET graduates I meet can run rings around top-level programmers in New York. Jettison the old generation (anyone over 50!) at your ministry and hire young programmers and technologists, especially those only a few years out of college. There is still time to join the twenty-first century!
Naem Mohaleem
shobak.org

The capture of Saddam

When I saw the news on CNN about the capture of Saddam, I was delighted because at last the coalition forces have done something. I was happy in a sense that we will no more see this

dictator in power again. But on the other hand, I was also depressed because this is also good news from Israel's point of view. Saddam could have been a problem for Israel, and now that he is captured, Israel will face no threat. It can now dominate the entire Middle East.
Minhaj Ahmed
Uttara, Dhaka

Saddam must get fair trial

The Americans must avoid 'revenge' when prosecuting Saddam Hussein. International involvement is important in deciding the fate of Saddam. Otherwise it might be perceived as victor's justice or victor's revenge. There's the old adage that not only must justice be done, but it must appear to be done, and this would hold true with regard to the prosecution of Saddam.

World leaders should push for a special process that would include both Iraqi and international judges and jurists -- modelled on the internationally sanctioned tribunals to try crimes against humanity in Sierra Leone and Cambodia. That would give an international component to the prosecution and the international community should sanction the process for bringing Saddam to justice.

The case against Saddam includes war crimes, massive genocide and other crimes against humanity, such as using poison gas on cities in his campaign against the Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s, the mass expulsion of Marsh Arabs and Shiite Muslims in the south, and the murder of political opponents throughout the country. But the magnitude of the allegations does not mean Saddam deserves a kangaroo court and quick conviction.

Gopal Sengupta and Shyamali Sengupta
Barclay Avenue, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Louis Kahn or Ayub Khan?

The Daily Star has published a full page interview held with Nathaniel Kahn, son of famous architect Louis I Kahn, by Kazi A. Ashraf in its issue of December 2, 2003. The reason behind giving such great importance to this interview in that Louis Kahn was the architect of our magnificent Parliament Building Complex. I remember having read some time back another write-up published in The Daily Star (weekly magazine?) on Louis Kahn and his great work at a place now called Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. Neither in the earlier nor in the latest publication related to the 'Shangsad Babon' complex, is there any mention as to who

commissioned Louis Kahn to build the great edifice we are proud of having in Bangladesh.

Why are the writers shy of mentioning the name of Ayub Khan, the then President of Pakistan, who wished to give a share of the national capital concept to East Pakistan by building the National Parliament of Pakistan at Dhaka and initiated the appointment of Louis I Kahn, the most reputed architect of the time? Ayub Khan may have been a dictator but not the worst of the dictators we unfortunately had in Pakistan and in Bangladesh. What is the harm in giving him the credit for anything good that he did?

The man who made the architectural plan of the wonderful Taj Mahal was perhaps a far greater architect than Louis Kahn but people call Shahjahan the builder.

RD Qureshi
Uttara, Dhaka

Denouement in Iraq

Finally, Saddam Hussein has been nabbed in Tikrit. This episode heralds a new era in the history of Iraq. Saddam is a despot who has emulated Pol Pot of Cambodia. Saddam's capture will commence a metamorphosis to democratise Iraq soon. Saddam's felony is really culpable and he should be tried in special tribunal to teach the next posterity so that human rights violation comes to an end. Bush administration should show due deference to this statesman, plus bring him to book as per International Law. Trace of Saddam is a victory for US. Power transition procedure should be quickened for the welfare of Iraqi people. I hope freedom in true sense will come back in Iraq.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, Dhaka University