

Unprecedented ferry ghat ordeal

Contingency planning sorely missing

THE home-bound people, who were on their way to southern and south-western districts, remained stranded for nearly two days at the Mawa and Paturia ferry ghats, as poor visibility caused by heavy fog led to disruption of ferry services. Their hope of celebrating Eid-ul-Azha with their near and dear ones was reduced to a nightmare, as they were caught in more than 8km long queues of vehicles near the river terminals. The wild risk that river vessels took resulted in the death of a steamer passenger near Chandpur when there was a collision between two vessels.

The heavy rush and long queues at the river terminals are nothing new during the Eid holidays. But the fog that persisted for nearly three days did not come all of a sudden and transport operators should have been aware of the grave danger associated with such weather conditions. The Met office was expected to send the message to all concerned, but it seems the issue was either not handled with due seriousness or the transport operators completely ignored whatever information they had. Their only concern was to make extra profits. There was nobody to consider whether the buses would reach their destinations.

People, including children and women, were left without food, water and toilet facilities in biting cold. Well, they were ready to undertake an arduous journey, but how could the transport operators leave Dhaka knowing well that the queues at the river terminals were getting longer and longer? There was apparently no exchange of information and the sufferings of the passengers are only proof of the total insensitivity of all concerned, including the transport authorities, to the passengers' well-being. Clearly, we don't have any contingency handling mechanism. The situation was going out of control when the ferries stopped plying, but there was nobody to prevent its further worsening.

The ordeal that a huge number of bus passengers faced could have been avoided, or at least mitigated to a great extent, with better planning and timely response to the crisis. One would expect that such wholesale pushing of people towards a totally uncertain journey won't be repeated in future.

WASA loses crores in cooked bills

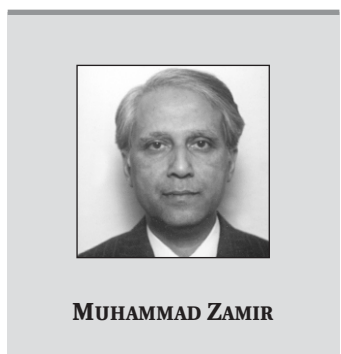
Corrupt staff collect money against fuel costs and overtime

THE recent unearthing of cooked bills by a section of the WASA staff on account of fuel costs for power generators for supply of water during power outage is shocking and outrageous. During the period from July through September of last year alone the cooked bills on account of operating generators amounted to Tk 1 crore. This blatant act of corrupt practices is twice more shocking when over the years there has been no end to the sufferings of city dwellers for lack of water supply. Coupled with costs for diesel fuel, these dishonest staff also pocketed lakhs of taka on account of overtime payment for operating the generators. Apparently the WASA's Board of Directors has discussed the issue at its meetings a number of times with no visible impact on the corrupt practices whatsoever. We find the nature of the corruption to be criminal that crosses all boundaries of moral and ethical considerations.

One wonders as to how despite the knowledge of the highest body of the Administration of WASA such a practice is allowed to continue? Clearly this was possible due to a gross negligence on the part of the officials responsible for supervising the staff at various levels. This is indeed unpardonable since it directly affects one of the most essential day-to-day civic services for the public at large.

Corruption of all dimensions is already eating into the vitals of our nation and has earned for us the number one position as the most corrupt country of the world. This is one corruption we should be able to tackle here and now. Let us punish the culprits, make it visible to the public and set an example for others engaged in providing various civic services to our city dwellers that are already living under distress due to such corrupt practices. We shall anxiously await the response of the Administration on this vital issue of public interest.

Fair election, Election Commission and its secretariat



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

JOSEPH Schumpeter was very correct when he observed that 'the ballot is stronger than bullets.' Sir Winston Churchill put it together even better. He famously commented that "at the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into the little booth, with a little pencil, marking a little red cross on a little bit of paper." How true!

All of us have therefore followed with great interest the clamour and confusion that have accompanied recent efforts by the Chief Election Commissioner to carry out the voter listing process. One must, in this context, also express one's admiration for the manner in which the Judiciary stepped into clarify certain basic functional principles associated with the coming election.

The current Chief Election Commissioner Justice MA Aziz could have done without the steps that he did undertake. He only surrounded himself with unnecessary debate. Till now, his application of Article 116(1) and his subsequent decisions have landed him only in disagreements. Like Justice Rouf and Justice Sadeq he has become controversial.

Several important points have emerged through the High Court decision. One could summarise them as follows:

- (a) the Election Commission is to prepare a voter list based on the existing one instead of preparing a fresh electoral roll. In this context they will exclude the names of those who have since died or have been certified to be insane. The electoral rolls for the next general elections will have to be prepared by way of addition, exclusion and
- (c) a fair voter list is the prerequisite of a free and fair election and if any confusion is created in the public mind in this regard, the Election Commission will be deemed to have failed in discharging its responsibilities;
- (d) the Election Commission will prepare a voter list without entertaining the demands of any particular political party or parties and
- (e) the right of a voter to be retained or included in the voter

required given the reports of serious anomalies that were surfacing in the media.

It all started with claims that on the very first day, the 1st of January, sixty per cent of the enumeration of the voter list had been completed. Given the fact that 3,00,000 enumerators had been appointed unilaterally, and on the basis of a certain political slant, the whole purpose of the exercise immediately became questionable. Then came disquieting press reports in

ately undermining the democratic process by enlisting names of ruling coalition supporters and ignoring those inclined to support the opposition. This only made things that much less transparent.

Such an emerging scenario, quite understandably, led Sheikh Hasina, the Leader of the Opposition to observe that "from the attitude of the CEC and the government, it appears that none but their party people have the right to become a voter or be enlisted in the

We do not have too much of time in our hands. The revision will therefore have to be undertaken and completed in a disciplined manner. If necessary, the Election Commission and its Secretariat should form committees composed of representatives of the important political parties at the village level in the rural areas and at the Ward level in the urban areas. This will expedite such revision and will facilitate the preparation of a comprehensive, all-inclusive and accurate electoral roll.

The Election Commission should also work as a Commission and not on unilateral basis. We have a historic opportunity. Our Election Commission must prove that they are as good as the Election Commission that is in India. The recent election in Bihar in that country, has demonstrated what a strong and independent Election Commission can achieve.

We need to remember that proper revision of the voter list will not only help us during the next general election but also during other elections planned in the future. This will include the city corporation elections, the municipal elections and the union council elections. The Election Commission and all those involved in the process can either abide by the decision of the Court or face charges of contempt and also the wrath of the people.

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Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzmir@dgha.com.

POST BREAKFAST

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revision to the existing rolls in accordance with Sections 6, 7 and 11 of the Electoral Rolls Ordinance, 1982. This connotes that the voter list shall include all persons who have since reached the age of eighteen;

(b) henceforth, the Election Commission members, including the CEC are expected to take decisions on the basis of meetings and discussions and not through the exchange of notes or airing of views through interviews with the media. It was also observed in this regard that the Election Commission, constituted under Article 118 of the Constitution, is a composite and collective body having the power to discharge its functions independently, where decisions need to be taken collectively on the basis of minimum majority;

list does not depend on his having to present when the enumerator goes to his residence. The enrollment of the absentees can be done subsequently even though they were absent when the enumerator visited the residence.

One can only hope that the guidelines provided by the High Court will be followed.

One must understand the seriousness of the situation. We already have a very volatile state of affairs in our political horizon. We do not need to exacerbate the problem. We need to remember that disenfranchisement of any sort can only be construed as a deliberate theft and robbery of the victim's rights as a citizen. It is the withholding from him of his protection against mis-governance.

This judicial intervention was

the media that the fresh electoral rolls being prepared in Chittagong was deliberately neglecting the Hindu religious community. Various civil societies also remarked that this particular community was being studiously ignored. The Election Commission tried to explain away their lapses but it was clear that their arguments were less than credible. Commenting on this scenario, many analysts opined that such an approach with regard to the Hindu community was deliberate given the belief among certain quarters of this section being essentially a vote bank for secular parties such as the Awami League.

It was also apparent from reports originating from Barisal that enumerators and the powerful people behind them were deliber-

voter roll". Accordingly, it was urged, "the government should stop the work for preparing deceptive voter lists." It was also made clear that if this were not done, the people would oppose it.

The moral victory now needs to be properly implemented. The Election Commission and its Secretariat have to carry out the task assigned to them with sincerity. This will include the training of the relevant personnel, the enumerators in completing such updating with precision.

The first step will require the providing to these enumerators of the existing voter list so that they can make this the starting point for any alteration. It also needs to be remembered that according to the electoral rules, the forms to be used to revise a voter list should be

Curbing corruption

NURUL HUDA

INDIAN political leadership deserves kudos for action against 11 parliament members on charge of graft, which was recorded in video cameras of some media men.

Those who have done the secret video recording of 10 members of Lok Sabha accepting money to ask questions, also deserve credit. They have done the big job of exposing the corrupt practices by a section of law makers with documentary evidences. They lost their membership following a report by a Lok Sabha probe committee indicting them.

A member of Rajya Sabha (Upper House) was also removed as per a report by the parliamentary Ethics Committee.

The Indian website which has conducted the "sting operation" and also the news channel which telecast the incident on December 12, have, in fact, glorified the image of journalism as a profession. People's representatives are expected to dedicate themselves to the cause of people's welfare.

But instead the parliament members in question got involved in taking money simply for raising questions in the Home. They were hired for raising questions as desired by those who wanted to influence certain government decisions.

Those expelled represent the ruling Congress, main opposition BJP, the BSP and the RJD. Though there was a feeble move of opposing the action on ground of lapse in procedural formalities, there was no big noise from BJP, which had to swallow the loss of five of its parliament seats. The beauty of Indian democracy is that there was no strike call or street agitation protesting the expulsion.

The practice of accepting money for raising questions in parliament

is not unknown to us but that, in this case, it was done inside the House is something new. The action against the parliament members is sure to be cited as a glaring example in similar circumstances also in other countries including ours. It is for the second time that such action was taken against some erring law makers of India.

Bangladesh has been repeatedly branded as the world's number one corrupt country by Transparency International (TI). When it was first so described Awami League was in power. The BNP led alliance used it as a favourite slogan against the Awami League. Today with the change of government Awami League is using the same slogan against the BNP.

As per election pledge, the BNP led alliance government has set up the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which, however, is yet to deliver the goods. It is high time that the country's major political parties sat together and devised ways and means at least to minimise, if not eradicate corruption, which has become all pervasive.

There is increasing trend of corruption even in the education and postal departments, which were traditionally known as corruption free areas. Recently I met some people who were duped by the postal department with regard to taxes for vehicle registration. Even some top bureaucrats (both civil and military) and newsmen have been cheated by a section of postal department employees and in the process they have amassed huge wealth.

The question arises whether it is possible for some low-paid employees to get involved in acts of corruption in the postal or education department without connivance of high-ups. It is often asked if politicians in high positions are

involved in corruption, there is no sense in blaming a section of poor employees.

The politicians of India alone are not to blame for corruption. It will be quite difficult to find politicians of clean image in other South Asian countries including ours. The politicians have a ready reply to defend their corruption.

Their arguments include huge regular expenditure in the name of keeping their supporters in their respective constituencies loyal to them. The cost of electioneering, they would argue, has also multiplied as they won't get people to work for them on voluntary basis as was the practice in bygone days.

In today's Bangladesh society political leaders traditional family having political background, are frequently seen lamenting in private conversations that they were being driven out of politics by those coming in for promoting their business interests. Money has become a major factor in politics as those having money spend it for buying both musclemen as well as votes.

To such elements it has become convenient to spend money to become politicians themselves instead of hiring others to serve their cause. Those with business interest suddenly getting important political responsibilities usually take politics as another type of business having little obligation to society.

It is being increasingly asked in different circles how the society can be freed from the influence of black money unless political leaders have a clean image. I would like to quote Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh Chai Xi, "Unless there is check to corruption, Dhaka won't get its cherished Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)."

Nurul Huda is a Special Correspondent of BSS.

Zia Int'l Airport: Adventure of a lifetime

Misplaced signs, faulty belts, ill placed parking, dysfunctional A/C, shortage of trolleys, puzzling rules for immigration forms-- these are issues that definitely deserve immediate attention of the authorities.

AZIZ MALLICK writes from London

ZIA International Airport has made some impressive progress in upgrading its facilities in recent times. But some of the procedures continue to be baffling.

My flight from London arrived at the same time as some others from Middle East. Already airborne for more than 10 hours, I was looking to complete the formalities quickly. In the end my checkout time was close to 3 hours and in that time my flight had refuelled, boarded passengers and taken off again.

I understand the mass of incoming passengers didn't help. But I couldn't understand some of the procedures that contributed to the delay. Firstly, inexplicably, the officials asked everyone to re-fill the immigration cards in Bangla instead of English. There was a mad scramble for new cards as everyone had filled theirs in English. Then of course every single person started filling in the forms ONLY once they reached the desk. Why they could not be sent to the back of the line while they had already filled in theirs, is a mystery.

Seeing the delay I made my way over to a counter that said foreign visa. When I presented my passport, the official told me that the sign "wasn't correct" and that this was a "dead" booth. In the 40 seconds it took for this conversation, there were another 50 people

who piled up, so I had to go back to the end of the line. So an incorrect sign delayed my check out time by an hour.

And in all that commotion, one of the passengers collapsed in the heat. Didn't I mention the air-conditioner wasn't on? Instead of bringing in a doctor as his friends were demanding, I walked an armed guard to prod the fellow back to consciousness. After an interminable 15 minutes of this futile exercise, a peon rushed in with a half-decimated leaking "badna" and started splashing water on his face. If that didn't help, what didn't help either were the rest of the passengers clamoring over him to get ahead in the line. All this, under the watchful eye of the official continuing to zealously track down people who still had their forms in English. Astonishing commitment!

Once my papers were duly sealed, I found out that only one of the conveyor belts was working. So three flights and I belt the equation just didn't look right. If I was apprehensive about when my luggage would arrive, I really shouldn't have been. That's because there were no trolleys so even if my luggage arrived I wouldn't be able to trot off with my 30kg bags. Which is what another 50 people were just then figuring out. So the luggage started piling up next to the conveyor belt and pretty soon the inevitable tussle started. In the end I had to queue up at the gate

and depend on luck to grab a trolley from passengers leaving the terminal.

Finally luggage safely tucked in, I laboured my way, following the exit signs. But of course I couldn't locate my patient parents waiting to receive me. Thankfully there was no glitch with my GSM and after a frantic conversation found out that this exit, like in the Immigration counter also had misplaced signboards so that I had ended up at the wrong end of the airport.

Needless to say that once I got out even the exorbitant 200 taka taxi fare to take me from the gate to the parking place seemed a fair price to pay rather than lugging my suitcases up the ramp and navigating between speeding cars. Made all the more confusing by the constant blaring of the guard's whistle. I realise that their job is to keep the crowd moving, but it's not too much to ask for a minute to get one's bearing, is it? Might even ease the flow of traffic as there would be less number of confused passengers running hither and thither to find their ride.

Misplaced signs, faulty belts, ill placed parking, dysfunctional A/C, shortage of trolleys, puzzling rules for immigration forms. Not rocket science to address these issues, but definitely would make a world of difference.

Aziz Mallick is a senior analyst, corporate finance.

TO THE EDITOR 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.

Good news, why not more of it!

In one single month, December 2005, remittance from our workers abroad shot to US\$400.32 million and total remittance ran over the PRSP's benchmark 14 percent and accumulated to an all time high 22.6 percent over last year's. (A news item in a section of print media). What this signifies?

Immediately after the last devastated deluge farmers did not wait till the institutions come to their rescue who ever had any means started moving on, and even become more innovative than high salaried researchers, sow their seeds on the floating bed.

While the educated or so called enlightened mass is very much indulged deep into the matter that does not move the economic index or helps ease daily living, and those poor farmers or out of the sight

remitters remain outside any scope of focus and the state incentives.

What is the total investment behind this earning that is helping tremendously to ease the current account of the state economy? Cattle, home or life savings - that is initially invested by the millions, a majority of which gone into the pockets of those unscrupulous business houses (recruiting agents) many of whom happened to be politicians or supported by the politicians.

Even the state machinery seems put in place only to the advantage of the officials or the gatekeepers.

The suffering of these saviours of our economy, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan even in Europe and North America goes beyond any human sufferings at a time and our state operators remain indulgent in affairs more in their own interest.

Much talked about and all prom-

inent garment owners, being or not being a CIP, can threaten the traffic or custom officials in the airport for an illegitimate favour. It is not a sweeping comment, you can see has a worker, who remits every month without fail as he needs to support his family, is treated for an extra kilo before he boards, or as he offboards by the customs officials.

A nation setting firmly its focus on issues that have little relevance to economics or well being of our people can expect nothing but rhetoric.

If the expatriate Bangladeshis can send US\$ 400 million as savings in a month, then what is the potential of their total release of fund in any time? Can you think that they can fund a vital infrastructure worth half a billion or more, which can be a quality control and testing laboratory for civil or mechanical equipment in BUET or Dhaka University, an API park

for promising pharmaceutical industry, an important highway, a power plant, financing BAPEX or even buying petroleum or establishing another refinery? All or many of the above can be done without begging for fund from the big DFI's whose politics is greater than the interest rate they charge.

Country can benefit immensely provided the state authorities demonstrate a spirit of love for the well-being of its people. With a minimum rate, plus some incentives (the rate we pay to the big DFIs) in a script/security will attract millions, provided the asset base and proper operations with the fund are assured.

MM Haque
Jeddah, K.S.A

Curse of dowry

Though Bangladesh is a poor country, it has a harmful system in

the society -- dowry. It is considered as a social curse in our poor country. But it has become a common phenomenon in our matrimonial life.

Every day at the time of reading newspaper we see that, many families are suffering only for dowry. There are many married women getting divorced or committing suicide or are killed by their husbands. Thus many innocent lives are falling victim to this curse. For this removing the dowry system from our society is very essential now.

So as a conscious citizen, I request our government to remove this all devouring system from our country through legal action.

Mohammad Zafar
Chittagong College, Chittagong

Congratulations

Rajarbag, Dhaka

A cursed season

Undoubtedly it is the middle of the winter. But still the effect of winter has not really touched us because of our housings protection. But I really feel sad at the sufferings of the poor, to whom this winter is a cursed season. Even they are ready to starve rather than tolerate its trembling effect. So I can see it "as blissful to the rich but a cursed one to the poor."

Umme Kulsum Sonia
Agrabad, Chittagong

Samajtantrik Archive

It is indeed heartening to learn that a Samajtantrik Archive is launched in the city. I wish the institute turn world class by collecting materials from all over the globe. The Archive should highlight the need for socialism

even partly to serve the down-trodden. Growth of wealth alone cannot help the poor as we have seen in many countries including ours. Great disparity of income among the people can perhaps be reduced by practicing socialism in a modified form to be evolved by economic experts. Let the newly established Samajtantrik Archive show the height to the people. The Archive may play more active role by organising and seminars discussions at local and regional level. Also they should think of holding a grand international meet of the socialists at Dhaka in near future. Engaging in such activities would make the Archive an international centre for the socialists whose only concern is the welfare of all people, particularly the poor.

A reader
Dhaka