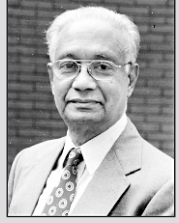


The corruption epidemic



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

This country has many who engage in corrupt practices and they unfortunately prevail in every sector of business, the professions, and politics. The time has come for the people to stand up and fight this evil which has been destroying the economy and gravely tarnishing the image of the country. All citizens regardless of their past, it's never too late to turn good, must now take a vow to do whatever it takes to remove this evil from the society. Let's seriously practice no more corruption, come what may.

CORRUPTION is a disease. The more you have, still more you go for -- a crazy and evil phenomenon indeed! Corruption appears to be more rampant at the higher level of income and political power. As life is very short and while going to the grave one carries nothing of the wealth amassed, not even a thread, then why go for it and earn the bad name here and probably Hell in the hereafter?

Luxury cars duty-free
Duty-free import of cars was introduced by the autocratic military regime, but later the members of the democratic regimes also found it convenient and lucrative to adopt it. The question is: why this extra privilege where people are required to pay duty and taxes as per law of the country? Can the members of parliament pass anything -- even a hugely controversial thing -- that goes against the public interest by bringing huge loss to the public exchequer?

The adverse fall-out effect of the provision continued: many of the members of the parliament who imported the luxury cars and got them released without payment of duties, reportedly sold them, in advance, to businessmen and pocketed the wind-fall profit amounting to several lakhs in each case.

They seem to be clever enough as they did not formally transfer the cars to those businessmen. This is why NBR reportedly could not go after them to realize the duty and taxes. But there should be a mechanism to find out the truth for the purpose of realization of the duties and taxes.

It is already a talk of the town: was this not a dishonorable thing for those

honorable members? However, NBR reportedly made some amendments: engine size limit of 3,000 cc (3,000 is also high) and time limit of at least two years as a member of the parliament were introduced. The newly introduced women members in the parliament were, therefore, deprived of this benefit.

Whitening of black money
While approving the budget, the parliament approved the provision giving opportunity to all tax dodgers to whiten their ill-gotten money by paying just nominal 7.5% duty. A bizarre decision! This was done before, and again done, despite open objections from the civil society and some trade bodies.

Indeed, the Finance Minister himself reportedly gave the impression before the budget that such a provision was not on the cards, but this was done. Nobody understands why. This certainly encouraged such businessmen who indulge in amassing black money to continue to do so at the cost of other good tax paying businessmen who earn their income through hard work.

The worst thing is that these tax dodgers pay only 7.5% while the honest businessmen pay 10% to 25% depending on the quantum of income. Let NBR publish the names of these tax dodgers. Civil society has the right to know who these people are.

Bureaucracy
Being a former bureaucrat, I feel terribly distressed to note the ever-growing criticism of the most of the members of the bureaucracy for two major ills -- corruption and lending support to the political bosses for

undue promotions.

The allegations are that businessmen cannot get anything, even a good thing, done, without paying bribes to the concerned bureaucrats. An appalling situation! It is also alleged that the businessmen, more often than not, get unlawful or even illegal things done by paying bribes. This leads to huge loss to the country's exchequer. In big deals, some of the political bosses are reportedly involved and they share the bribe money. Niko gas deal, Kafco are the instant cases. The names of the involved people also appeared in the media but hardly any action by the ACC or other relevant agencies.

Unfortunately, some foreign business companies and agencies also resort to corrupt practices like presenting cars and other monetary offers including fully paid luxury foreign travels. Corruption is rampant in most of the government sectors: energy sector, communication, roads & highways, public works, Rajuk, health (including hospitals, testing labs and health complexes), post & telegraph, police, income tax, customs, and name any department, even education.

The noble profession like education has also been polluted by the unscrupulous people in the department. Unfortunate indeed! The news of establishment of unnecessary schools and their registration under MPO for political reasons, the corruption in appointments, postings and transfers of teachers in the government schools and colleges against bribes are quite common. The worst thing is the demand of bribes for processing even pension cases and the harassment that the retirees face for

months and even years.

If our young generation goes through such a polluted educational system, then what is our future? It's time for those honest people to raise strong voice against them and try to stop these deadly corrupt practices.

There has been a widespread politicization of the bureaucracy over the last decade or so and that was mainly responsible for poor governance. Many of the bureaucrats reportedly do not perform normal duties; they serve the political bosses and do undue or even unlawful things for undue promotions. The news of undue or even political promotions of hundreds of officials who support a political party(s) have been fairly regular during the successive governments in the last decade. The process is continuing with dreadful consequences on the governance of the country.

This country has many who engage in corrupt practices and they unfortunately prevail in every sector of business, the professions, and politics. The time has come for the people to stand up and fight this evil which has been destroying the economy and gravely tarnishing the image of the country. All citizens regardless of their past, it's never too late to turn good, must now take a vow to do whatever it takes to remove this evil from the society. Let's seriously practice no more corruption, come what may.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary & Ambassador and founder VC of North South University. He is also Chairman of Citizens Forum Against Corruption (CFAC) & Civic Watch, Bangladesh.

IN MEMORIAM

Little Sister Some words for Nasreen

NAILA KABEER

Words are the currency of the academic life,
Words carefully crafted,
And endlessly redrafted.
Yet when I want to talk about you,
About your life, your death, our loss,
I am lost for words.
I find I deal in a sterile currency
That has little meaning for the things that matter most.

If I were a poet instead, I would find the right words,
The words that could bring you back to life as you were:
The small explosion of energy that was you
Coming into a room,
The hair you tried to tame, but only half-heartedly.
(We shared that, you and I).
The smile that stayed behind long after you had gone,
(It must stay in our hearts now that you won't be coming back).

If I were a poet, I would find the right words
To describe you when you were serious,
The hesitant way you spoke as you thought aloud, ,
The care with which you chose your words,
Because you thought in terms of possibilities and probabilities,
Not in terms of certainties.
But when you were certain, you could move mountains.

I don't know quite when you grew up,
When you stopped being Shireen's little sister,
The little sister I never had,
And became this fearless young woman
Who fought for those that the rest of us forgot
Or preferred to forget
Or simply did not have time to remember,
Those strangers who became your friends.

When did you stop being the little sister,
And become the grown up sister I never had?,
Where did you find the wisdom that the rest of us yearn to find?
How did you find time to move all those mountains,
And yet never lose the gift for the small, precious moments,
The gift of keeping your feet on the ground?

In all that flurry of activity that was your daily life,
Did we remember to tell you how much we loved you,
And what a precious gift you were to us, little sister,
Who grew up to become a beacon of hope
That lit up and warmed the rest of the world?

Naila Kabeer teaches at the University of Sussex.

The black episodes of black money



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

The estimates of how much black money is there vary widely. According to some economists, the country's black money rose to Tk 70,000 crore in the year 2004 from Tk 60,000 crore of the previous year, while other economists dealing with the issue guesstimated it to be equivalent to 40 to 50 percent of the formal economy. But most estimates suggest that it is as large as the formal economy or very close to it

THE proverbial saying: money is the root of all evil perhaps has not been more poignantly exposed anywhere in the world than Bangladesh, so far as black money is concerned. From buying political power to criminalization of the society, the black money also wanders across the border in the form of capital flight. Bribes, smuggling, terrorism, extortion, black-marketing, market manipulation, money laundering, over and under-invoicing are the major components to accumulate black money in our country.

Finance and Planning Minister M. Saifur Rahman in a pre-budget consultation meeting held on May 18 categorically said that the government would no longer allow whitening black money since it is contradictory to the existing Anti-Money Laundering Act. "The government will lack in moral courage if it extends such unethical provisions like keeping of the provision in force to turn black money into white," he added. But the finance minister had to capitulate to the forces of black money.

The provision of whitening black money was first introduced in the national budget for the fiscal year 1975-76 to bring some Tk 70,000 crore of black money into the formal economy, though Tk 7 crore was actually whitened.

The facility was again offered for three consecutive fiscal years from 1987-88 to 1989-90, and Tk 200 crore, Tk. 250 crore, and Tk. 400 crore, respectively, were whitened during the period. The government again revived the facility in 2000-01 and Tk 1,000 crore was whitened.

The BNP-led coalition government introduced the provision for whitening black money in the budgetary policy initially for two years, beginning from 2003-04, with a view to bring the bulk of black money into the formal economy. Black money amounting to a total of Tk 1,775 crore, came into the economy through the

process. Some 1,000 people legalized the untaxed money they had in their possession during the period. Tk 800 crore has been whitened during the nine months of the on-going fiscal year.

The estimates of how much black money is there vary widely. According to some economists, the country's black money rose to Tk 70,000 crore in the year 2004 from Tk 60,000 crore of the previous year, while other economists dealing with the issue guesstimated it to be equivalent to 40 to 50 percent of the formal economy.

But most estimates suggest that it is as large as the formal economy or very close to it. Due to deliberate apathy by the government to the growing problems of corruption and all sorts of financial malpractices, the scale of black money has become enormous over the years.

A Daily Star report on April 18 said that an increasing number of people including doctors, lawyers, bankers, and government officials, are now whitening their future black money by paying only 7.5 percent taxes and taking advantage of legal loopholes. Many of the newly formed company directors and new members of Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) have also used the opportunity to whiten their black money.

According to the report, 35 people were given membership of the DSE, most of them relatives or friends of ministers or ruling alliance leaders. Each membership was sold for Tk 80 lakh, and it was made compulsory that a member must form a company and get it registered as a joint stock company. Besides, the companies must have a paid up capital of at least Tk 1 crore each.

Corruption breeds black money, which has already assumed an alarming proportion in the economic field of the country. A survey report of the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) revealed that the people of this country pay an estimated amount of Tk 6,796 crore a year in bribes to the officials and employ-

ees of 25 service sector institutions. The amount accounts for roughly 2 percent of our gross domestic product (GDP). Every person in the country pay Tk 485 in bribes on an average to these sectors. Black money is an inherent component of all economics around the globe. The government of India also announced tax concessions through a voluntary disclosure scheme for people having black money to make declaration of their unaccounted money some years back. But the strict policy now being pursued by the government of India has checked the evil of black money spreading in the country to a great extent. Raids were conducted by the income tax people on big business houses and private individuals. Several crores of black money was brought to light in this way. Bangladesh may also consider similar action for bringing black money to light without providing more scope for whitening black money.

Black money has manifested itself in many bizarre forms and dimension in our country. Obviously, the economic affairs of the black money holders, including criminalization of politics, are now proceeding with a well-orchestrated plan, which is adequately supported by the persons in the corridor of power. One may see that a parallel economy run by the black money holders will be strong enough to challenge the formal economy in near future as it now estimated to be very close to the national economy. Black money responsible for running a parallel economy has been causing havoc not only in the economic field but also in every sphere of our lives.

The black money whitening facility is not the solution to the problem that has created a culture of plunder in the country. The sources of black money are well known to the people in power. So, it is imperative for the government to strike at the sources of black money to check its unabated growth. For a country that has ranked as the most corrupt country in the

world for the fifth successive year has no other option but to make the Anti-Corruption Commission really a functional one to check the unabated growth of black money. Accumulation of black money must be brought under control, knowing well that it cannot be eliminated totally.

Certainly there is no denying the fact that black money has become a part of politics and has been plaguing the process of democracy in the country. The scope for whitening black money indeed raises ethical questions and encourages the operation of black money, not only in the economic field, but also in other fields of life, including politics. The Anti-Corruption Commission, eminent economists, and business leaders severely criticized the finance minister for continuing the provision of whitening the black money in the on-going budget. According to them, it was a "moral defeat" on the part of the finance minister in establishing credibility of his own policy and an indulgence to legitimize corruption.

The initiative of the Nagorik Committee 2006 to put pressure on the political parties to nominate competent candidates in the next general election is no doubt a welcome move. Creating public awareness about competent candidates is imperative to resist the black money holders, who are otherwise political criminals, to enter parliament in order to bring a meaningful change to the country's politics.

It is now for the government as well as for the opposition leaders to comprehend the reality, which is that the nexus between the politics and black money is the prime factor in criminalization of the society. The situation calls for a determined drive to provide substantial relief to the common people from the tyranny of black money.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

A patriot passes away

SHAMIM HUUQ

WHEN she spent a summer with me in 1982, Houston was in a deep recession. She had come to help me through my separation from first wife and my loss of job during the downturn of early '80's. She worked at the Baylor College of Medicine as an intern, awaiting her GRE results after she had finished her undergraduate work at State University of New York at Purchase. While here she developed close bond to my children and helped me through.

Later, when her GRE results came out, while she was in Dhaka -- I got an eager phone call from UC Berkeley's famed Nutrition Science Department. They wanted her in their school.

Nasreen or Happy as well as called her wanted to study nutrition. We argued the benefits of her going to Engineering School in the path of my father and me. She politely and firmly said no. Her cause was that of pregnant malnourished women of Bangladesh. Still, I was a skeptic but did not push her. She was firm and determined.

So when some years later, she finished school at UC Berkeley I suggested to her again that through her intern work at Baylor -- who were quite fond of her that she could easily, as indicated to me, put her in their nutrition programme. This of course would mean a nice cushy life in suburbia, USA. She was quite adamant and would not only exercise her immigrant status, but would let it expire.

She went to Bangladesh and worked in the villages studying and schooling better nutrition to pregnant mothers. This was her passion and

AKKU CHOWDHURY

WHEN a friend called me the other night to inform me the fatal accident of Nasreen Haque I was dismayed. All I could recall was the smiling face of this wonderful person whom I met many years ago when a friend of mine from Paris took me to meet her.

We went to the BRAC office in Mohakhali and I still remember this bubbly young person hardly in her twenties, but who impressed me so much with her wonderful personality that I still



remember that morning. After that meeting I met her several time and always found her to be smiling and with an attitude that is not just friendly but very genuine. Her simplicity in both attire and make up was most appealing. Be it at a formal dinner or in the streets protesting some wrong-doing she looked and dressed most elegantly -- simple cotton saree and a beautiful bigteep.

I never had the good fortune of working with her or knowing her socially to belong to her circle of friends. But her death somehow makes me feel I have lost someone very close to me.

Some years ago, I had a friend call me on a weekend that Nasreen appeared with Connie Chung in 20/20, the news show. The attention

was brought on by her work to bring justice and treatment to the victims of acid burn. When I asked her what Ms. Chung thought of her work. She remarked Ms. Chung thought of her own work was insignificant in comparison to Nasreen's contributions. I recall her tour through the US universities on behalf of acid burn victims and Amnesty International. She was consistently articulate and intelligent in her responses. She never sought glory for herself; instead she always shone a bright light with the problems that afflicted our society.

It is with deep sorrow and a very heavy heart that I part with her. I headed for Dhaka to lay her remains next to where my brother was laid. My mother had to endure the passing of my father when all of her children were studying abroad and then her son, my elder brother at age 46 the same age as of Nasreen in about the same dates back in 1991.

Ours has been a family that followed and lived their ideals. My sister, Nasreen out did us all. My father a man of great integrity and passion showed us the path and our mother a quiet intellectual allowed us to find our own way. To all young folks who seek glory -- take a page from Happy's life. And if you find your calling in serving people you will have found the highest -- remember this little girl from Bangladesh, who endured so much to show a path that is far brighter than any we lesser humans have traversed.

Dear sister, when my time comes please be there for me when I cross the bar. I will miss you till then.

A lost leader

remember that morning.

Last night when I rushed to the hospital after hearing the news and saw a big crowd I knew that I wasn't the only one who was pulled there by the inner beauty of this wonderful person who had touched so many souls. For those who are most close to her, the family and friends, her demise is a great loss that is unimaginable to me. In Nasreen, the nation has lost a young leader whose vacuum will be felt very soon. The time has come for the young to take over the helm of leadership from the older generation that we belong to. I saw Nasreen as one of them and I grieve for our loss, selfishly.