

Right to information

Procrastination in granting it as good as denial

RIGHT to information is the most fundamental of rights that the state must feel obligated to accord to its citizens. And we are disconcerted to learn that the draft law to enact necessary legislation to that end has been in the cold storage for a long time.

In spite of its repeated commitments to a right of information act since its coming to power in 2001, all that the government has been able to do is to provide lip service to the agenda. It is difficult to characterise it as anything other than that, because more than four and a half years down the line, we are now caught in an absurd situation where the ministry of information seems unaware of the draft law that the law ministry is supposed to have forwarded to the former.

There are two impressions that one can form from the remarks of the ministers in this regard. One, that there might have been an attempt to hedge the issue; and two, that the issue has been trivialised by the attitude of those that are responsible to formulate the act.

It hardly needs to be stated that such an act will go a long way in strengthening participatory democracy and curbing corruption through establishing transparency in the administration.

More than providing a powerful impetus to press freedom, the freedom of information act will go to enhance the freedom of the people as a whole. As we need air to survive so do we need free access to information to function freely and for democracy to thrive.

What such an act will also ensure, is the empowerment of the people by allowing them access to other civic rights, thus making them more effective citizens while, likewise, the association of the people with the development programmes in the rural as well as urban areas will be guaranteed. In other words, such an act will help establish the truth that to the people belong the state resources and it is they who can at any time call the government and its functionaries to account in all matters that involve the interest and security of the state. Most fundamentally, it will prevent government functionaries from hiding behind the excuse of the official secrets act and compel them to be more accountable and transparent in their working.

We would urge the government to prepare a draft right to information bill and circulate it for public debate and discourse before placing it on the table of the House.

Environment-unfriendly activity

A question of survival

A report from Savar has it that industrial wastes are causing great damage to the environment. Around 300 industrial units in the area are operating without proper drainage and effluent dumping systems.

The result is that cropland around the industrial units is being polluted, adversely affecting both soil fertility and production.

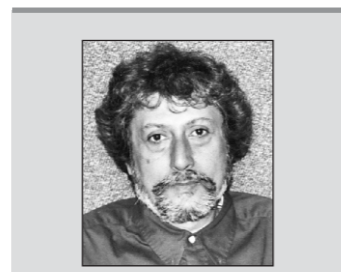
That most industrial units and factories do not have a scientific waste disposal system is an open secret. Environmentalists have long been crying hoarse on the highly negative impact of unplanned and haphazard waste disposal. A number of suggestions have also been put forward to keep things under check. But it is evident that the laws and rules are being violated with impunity -- a point made clear once more by the report from Savar.

We regard this as defilement of the environment that cannot be tackled by some seldom-enforced laws. It is a hazard that has to be contained at any cost if we don't want to expose ourselves to an environmental catastrophe. As things stand now, very few people are actually aware of the impending danger. Consequently, corrective measures are not being taken to ward off the menace.

Environment certainly doesn't feature prominently in our planning. Many examples can be cited to prove the point. The Demra canal area which was cleared of squatters last year, has again been occupied by them. So the enforcement of law has turned out to be a temporary affair. Again, the DCC authorities have decided to turn a wetland in the city's Khilgaon area into a graveyard. The point to be noted here is that we are mortgaging our future to an insatiable money-making appetite of some shortsighted people.

The decision-makers will have to deal with the menace immediately or else our progeny is condemned to a bleak future.

Department of election engineering, blessed heroin money...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

ACCORDING to my source, a "high level committee" has taken the decision to allow all the colleges and universities of the country to open a new department named the Department of Election Engineering. And the response has been tremendous. Students are queuing up outside to get admitted to this particular department. Already many such institutes have started to impart academic as well as practical education to students to get skilled in engineering the electoral process.

Retired and rejected politicians having decades of experience in election engineering are joining these institutes as teachers. As they are self-declared patriots, having served the nation in many unknown and unseen ways, they want the new genera-

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

What did the smugglers pray for? What did they want from God? More deals to send deadly poison to some foreign country? More money so that their own sons and daughters may live in comfort while young men and women of their age died elsewhere? Isn't it therefore worth diving in to the fathomless depth of the minds of these people, these smugglers of heroin, who lived amongst us?

tion to know all about this useful subject. The committee also declared that scholarships will be offered to foreign students so that they may also learn the tricks. They will work as true patriots after returning to their respective countries with the degree.

Blessed heroin money

This is worth a thought or two. All these years these smugglers of heroin were your next door neighbours! Your sons and daughters had befriended their sons and daughters, and went to the same school or college. They are a hospitable lot. On special occasions they sent sweets to your house. There is no way one can cast a shadow of doubt on them. They went to the same mosque with you every Friday to pray to the Almighty. You have always prayed for the well-being of your near and dear ones and for His blessings so that you may live a

decent life free of any blemish. What did the smugglers pray for? What did they want from God? More deals to send deadly poison to some foreign country? More money so that their own sons and daughters may live in comfort while young men and women of their age died elsewhere? Isn't it therefore worth diving in to the fathomless depth of the minds of these people, these smugglers of heroin, who lived amongst us?

Our speculation regarding a nexus between these people and some political party of questionable antecedents is slowly turning in to reality. It won't be long when the entire story will come out. If there is a grain of truth in it then we wonder how the preachers of piety could accept the money that smelled of death? Or is it that whatever they touch, like heroin money, becomes sanctified by some divine order?

Your castle in the air

Biman Bangladesh Airline's slogan says "Your home in the sky." Doesn't it sound a bit similar to "building a castle in the air"? Castle is from 'casa' in Italian, which means home. How amazingly close in meaning the two are! Many fools after a great deal of trial and error discovered that a place was not too dependable a place to build one's castle. It does not provide a solid base for the structure to stand long enough. They disintegrate as soon as you build them. In case of Biman, the home in the sky is also standing on shaky foundation, full of air, and that's why those homes are disappearing one after another from the face of the earth. Sadly, the last bastion of our pride in New York is strongly rumoured to be on the verge of disappearance.

No, David Copperfield or David Blaine or PC Sarker Junior or

even our very own Jewel Aich did not do the vanishing act. Biman's own people did it, over the years, slowly but steadily, bit by bit, bite by bite. And now they are waiting to devour the carcass. They are happy. Very happy, indeed. They have had a good meal. They are bloated beyond recognition. Many of them have made it from rustic Baliapara to restful Baridhara in lightning speed. Every time they say their prayer they thank the Almighty profusely for having had blessed them with a Biman job. It was little short of giving them a ticket to heaven. Heaven can wait, for the moment they are busy having a meal on earth.

Compare the irony, dear readers. When other airlines are expanding and offering us incredible discounts and still making profit, Biman, after having eaten up the profit much before going in to operation, opts to close down to avoid incurring loss.

Singer Bangla Bhai

Wait for the grand entry of this new sensational singer named Siddiqur Rahman alias Bangla Bhai in the music arena of the country. Never heard of him, you say? Wait till his CD comes out. The judges, prosecutors and some 'almost infidels' in a Jhalkathi court have had the rare privilege of listening to this singer

crooning in sheer delight of being put on trial in the court of the hated mortals. Whether there was melody in his song or was it only malady, I cannot say for sure at the moment. Anyway, he exposed his holy yellow teeth and sang the Bengali version turned JMB version of the English song "We shall overcome..." His Bengali version translated in to English will sound like "JMB will overcome..."

What a meaningful song! What a powerful voice to inspire all of us in this country and even beyond! I am sure all the presidents and prime ministers from the first world to the eleventh world have been inspired by his song. His voice has not been missed either in our capital by those drafting the laws on how to try the terrorists. It was on one of the channels the other day. After hearing the inspirational song they too are feeling helpless. Since JMB is so confident that it will overcome one day then what's the use of toiling for months to create laws that will be of no use in the end? Better, let us all go and sing in chorus with Bangla Bhai.... "We shall overcome...!"

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Should Iran go nuclear?

Iranian nuclear issue is complex and seemingly intractable. Iranian hardliners believe in the inevitability of a conflict with the US and therefore the survival of the regime and its ideals demand acquisition of nuclear weapons which, they argue, if Saddam Hussein had then the Americans would not have dared to invade Iraq, and has so far successfully prevented US military strike on North Korea.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE photograph front page by The New York Times of Ahmedinejad walking over the image of the US flag printed over the street on his way to the polls which elected him President of Iran must have caused deep anger even to the most liberal quarter among the American population. Added to this grotesque display of bad taste the recent imprudent remarks by Ahmedinejad about wiping Israel off the map of the world, throwing into the sea, and branding the US as the Great Satan could have only helped the Bush administration in the pursuit of its strategy of "delegitimation" of the Iranian regime.

Iranian President's love for the Islamic Ummah and his anguish over Israel's continued occupation of the Arab lands along with attendant unjust war inflicted upon the Palestinian people are beyond doubt. But the question remains whether threats leveled by the Iranian regime against the Bush administration which is marked by its contempt of international law and aversion to reach consensus unless it accords with its point of view coupled with its natural tendency to flex muscles is going to deter the Bush administration from its firm resolve to deny Iran the

capability to acquire nuclear weapons.

Iranian theocracy, opines Kenneth Pollack (of the Brookings Institution) "have continued to define their foreign policy in opposition to the United States and have often resorted to belligerent methods to achieve their aims". In pursuit of this policy Iran is believed to have tried to undermine Saudi Arabia and other US allies in the Middle East and have demanded a predominant role in the Persian Gulf region which is beset with a restive population frustrated by the inability of the regional governments to provide either the fragrance of liberal democracy or the fruits of economic development which many in the oil rich countries believe their petrodollars should have been able to provide.

Unfortunately many Middle Eastern countries are suffering from tension between mainly two strands of domestic political forces -- one aspiring for Western model of governance based on democratic values and the other forsaking modernity in order to return to its sacred past based on purist interpretation of Islamic values. The space provided by this unresolved conflict between the opposing forces has been appropriated by non-state actors who preach terrorism as the way to deliverance from national

humiliation, injustice and despair caused by the failures of their national governments who in turn are dependant on largely unpopular external power for their security.

Iran is often cited by these Middle Eastern countries as the cause of their demand for external security because Iran is alleged to continue its support of the Hezbollah, has sponsored at least one direct attack on the US troops in Saudi Arabia in 1996, and currently is meddling in Iraqi domestic affairs. Iranian ideologues, according to the Western sources, believe in exporting Islamic revolution across her borders as Castro-Che Guevara tried to export communism in Latin America. But the pragmatists in the post-Ayatollah Khomeini period advocate a more judicious international course for the regime's survival being acutely aware of the fact that majority of Iranians born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution have little attachment to the Iranian theocracy and lack reverence to the "martyrs" killed in the long Iraq-Iran war. One should not, however, lose sight of the fact that despite Bush administration's dismissal of the Iranian Presidential elections Ahmedinejad polled 21 percent of the vote cast in the first round and 61 percent in the second round in the elections. There may

be some merit in the President Bush's observation that "Iran is ruled by men who suppressed liberty at home and spread terror abroad... Power is in the hands of an uneducated few who have retained power through an electoral process that ignores the basic requirements of democracy". But then President Bush's 2000 election, the middle of Florida vote count, and ultimate resolution by the Reagan and Bush Sr appointed Supreme Court takes away much of the sting from the Bush observation on Iranian democracy.

Iranian democracy is not perfect. Indeed even by the measure of intermittent democracy in the Islamic countries Iranian system comes nowhere near the acceptable standard of democratic practices. But the Western worry at the moment is less focused on Iranian democracy which is antithetical to theocracy anyway and more on Iranian intention to acquire nuclear weapons. Despite Russian and Chinese reservation about a Western sponsored resolution (under Chapter VII) in the UNSC on Iran there appears to be an emerging consensus in Washington that war with Iran is inevitable. Learning from the lessons of the US experience in the UNSC in the prelude to Iraq invasion US would like nothing better than to have tough sanctions imposed on Iran with implicit authority to take military action, if necessary. But the sacking of Jack Straw as British Foreign Secretary who had ruled out any military action against Iran indicates that even "Bush's poodle" may not have unqualified support from the British people

for another military adventure.

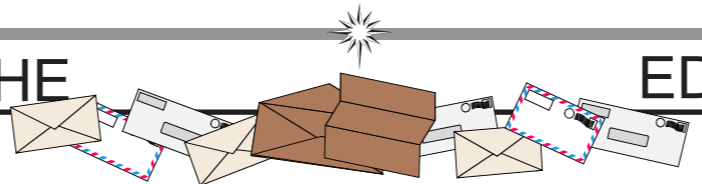
Even if one were to accept the argument that Iranian nuclear threat is more real than Saddam Hussein's presumed nuclear threat, President Bush's bristling character of aggrandisement (he may not get Congressional mandate to attack Iran) makes it theoretically possible for the repeat of another Osirak incident (Israeli bombardment of suspected Iraqi nuclear establishments at Osirak in 1981). But as some analysts point out that the Bush administration must surely know that the US does not have the kind of intelligence about target locations for successfully preempting Iran's nuclear programme. Iran is believed to have dispersed, diversified and concealed its nuclear centres to a dozen or more potential sites. Besides, Iran until now restrained from using its influence among Iraqi Shiites could inflict serious damage to American forces in Iraq, can destabilise US efforts to encourage Iraqis to bury the hatchet and form a cohesive government, and could use its influence in the global oil market to shock Western economies in today's energy starved world. And no less importantly a military strike on Iran could destroy chances of Iranian reformists to change the theocratic character of the regime from within and irreversibly tarnish the US image and reduce US influence in the Islamic world.

Iranian nuclear issue is complex and seemingly intractable. Iranian hardliners believe in the inevitability of a conflict with the US and therefore the survival of the regime and its ideals demand

acquisition of nuclear weapons which, they argue, if Saddam Hussein had then the Americans would not have dared to invade Iraq, and has so far successfully prevented US military strike on North Korea. Brussels based International Crisis Group suggests that if "zero enrichment option" i.e. Iran's indefinite relinquishment of its right to enrich uranium in return for guaranteed supply from an off shore source as suggested by the Russians does not materialise, then Iran may be induced to accept "delayed limited enrichment" plan by which the West would explicitly accept not only Iran's right to produce peaceful nuclear energy but also its "right to enrich domestically". In return Iran would agree to a several years delay in the commencement of its enrichment programme, limit its size and scope, and accept a highly intrusive inspection regime. Should Iran refuse to accept both the options, then Russia and China would have to join the West and support actions by the UNSC and establishment of an escalating sanction regime. One hopes both the parties would be flexible enough to prove Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis inadequate to explain the current global turmoil. What we are witnessing today is not so much a reenactment of the crusades but a complex mix of disproportionate distribution of global wealth and uncertainty about appropriateness of values to be adopted by different and widely divergent segments of the global society.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador

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.

Eye hospital

I am writing about a hospital not widely known in the country but silently contributing to managing an ever increasing number of eye diseases, mainly of the lower income and lower to middle income people of Dhaka city and far-flung places. They have been working for over a decade. "AL NOOR EYE HOSPITAL" is offering treatment at a nominal cost only. They are registered with NGO affairs bureau and working time is stretched to 9-00pm everyday except Friday. They have hospitalisation facilities, operation theatre, qualified doctors, trained, neatly dressed and well mannered paramedical staff, friendly environment and even a chemist shop. The management rests with an expatriate who is academically qualified for hospital management and had adequate exposure working in other hospitals prior to coming to Bangladesh. The hospital has been providing all sorts of eye treatment and has set up an eye camp in the slums of Dhaka city and other adjoining areas once in a week to give relief to poor

patients at not cost. On an average, they provide treatment to 400 patients every day. The hospital with all facilities are placed in a rented residential building situated in the main Sat Masjid Road, Lalmatia, Dhaka. The limited available space often remains overcrowded and even patients keep on waiting in a small space for their turn to see the doctors. With a view to setting up a modern hospital with all facilities and offering treatment at a nominal cost the management approached the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Dhaka City Corporation and RAJUK for a suitable plot of land in the city but without any result as they do not have adequate resources to finance purchase of a piece of land from any private owner at a high cost. It is a non-government organisation mainly funded by individual donors and institutions and, therefore, their limited resources are meant for mitigating sufferings of poor patients and making improvement of service standard. In view of the above, I would make

an appeal to both the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Housing and Public Works to make an allotment of a plot of land in the name of the hospital at government price solely for the purpose of construction of a modern eye hospital building. If necessary a survey of the hospital's existing activities may be conducted by any agency of government's choice. It is firmly believed that such an organisation needs support and patronage of the government in view of their rendering valuable services to general public ceaselessly and a little lean forward shall boost their expansion programme for a humanitarian cause.

Acitizen Dhaka

An interesting idea
I have gone through the article "Atmospheric electricity..." published in The Daily Star on 29.04.06 & found it very interesting, particularly for highlighting the intrinsic behaviour of electricity & its impact. We would be benefited if

Professor Rahim describes the method & technique for harnessing such electricity in meeting powershortage.
Rezaul Huq
Lalmatia, Dhaka

"Scarcity of English newspapers"

With reference to the letter by Mr. Peerzada Syed Rafiqul Hussain (DS 1/5/06), I recall the suggestion given by one of our English professors (Dhaka College) to read English newspaper to improve English. I also recall a quote in the "Reader's Digest" that I read more than three decades ago which is "Newspaper is a moving library with high blood pressure." I simplify the meaning that in case of high blood pressure the blood circulation is very rapid.

In 1969, when I was in the first year of I. Com., I had to travel to my village by launch from Sadarghat terminal. At that time "The Pakistan Observer" was my favourite newspaper. The said newspaper came very late when our launch was about to sail. On

Friday (28/4/06) when I went for "The Daily Star" to see my write-up before going for a picnic, I was told by the hawk that it would take sometime for "The Daily Star" to arrive.

The question arises if a reader residing at Rampura Bonasree cannot get his favourite newspaper regularly, then what about the readers in the villages?
Thomas Gomes Bhura
Monipuripara, Dhaka

History forgotten

Thirty-six years have elapsed since we gained our independence, but it seems in this long period we haven't learned any lesson from history, nor do we bother to hear the growing murmur from different places in this country turning into a roar. We achieved independence at the cost of blood, sweat and tears of millions of sons of the soil. The architect of this freedom sacrificed his life along with his entire family members and political associates.

Has the dream been materialised in this long span of time? Or

do we find any ray of hope at the end of the tunnel for which so much of sacrifice was made?

Certainly, these sacrifices were not made for a bunch of corrupt people to practice "kleptocracy" in the name of democracy by looting the wealth of the masses who have only bones and skins but no flesh in their bodies. (Labours, farmers, garment workers etc).

These champions of kleptocracy must not forget that people who know to die for their freedom also know to die for the fulfillment of their dream.
C.F. Azim
Gulshan, Dhaka

Don't send wrong signals!

Everybody should admit that Bangladesh is now in a very important transition phase in the development cycle and any wrong perception regarding the economic trends would jeopardise the interests of the nation to an extent which we would not be able to overcome. I have noted some reputed economists in Bangladesh and also some

people giving a wrong signal about FDIs by writing articles in reputed newspapers.

This is true that some foreign investment might be detrimental to Bangladesh's interests, but it would do harm only when if we don't formulate the right policies to handle such foreign investments. But if we continue to blame the general foreign investors, instead of fixing our own problems and developing the knowledge base, it will give all the foreign investors a wrong signal.

I hope The Daily Star would continue to strive to create a favourable economic and social environment for attracting FDIs.
Mabroor Mahmood
On e-mail

A break for Ashrafal

It is good news that Mohammed Ashrafal, the unpredictable yet highly talented batsman, is now playing in England. This may give him an opportunity to perform well in English conditions and eventually find a place in some big county team. I believe other Bangladeshi

players should also look for similar opportunities. Playing in England is perhaps the best way to learn the game. Many of the world's top players have a record of having a stint with one of those clubs. I wish Ashrafal all the best.
Mansoor Raja
Dhaka

Our cricket

The recent poor performance of Bangladesh cricket team against Australia once again clearly indicated that we are highly unsuitable to compete in an international Test match, while our performance in ODI is slightly better than that of Kenya, Netherlands, UAE or Ireland. Allowing them to play internationally could just bring more and more disgrace. During the last or third ODI, highlighting the Bangladeshis' inefficiency one commentator said that Bangladesh played as poorly as Sri Lanka did some twenty years ago.

This clearly indicates that our cricket team is running twenty years late.

Abu Sayed
Malibag, Dhaka