

State minister's admission

Why intelligence hints not acted upon?

WE are unable to comprehend why the government could not preempt the recent acts of vandalism and anarchy at the various garment factories despite having prior intelligence on such possibilities. To an allegation leveled by the business community as to why intelligence agencies failed to warn of the impending attack the state minister for home affairs stated that they had an inkling of what was coming. Then what stopped him from going all out to act on it? His statement to the effect that he could not take action because of dearth of law enforcers and lack of coordination among them does not hold water. Rather it speaks abundantly of inept and amateurish handling of a sensitive area of governance, with which the lives and property of the citizens are inextricably linked. Those in charge ought to explain to the nation their inaction.

All the prima facie evidence points to the fact that timely and discreet action would have saved the factories from the paws of the looters and arsonists. While the factories burned, panicky owners appealed to the authorities for help, but the contingent of police and RAB personnel sent to the scene was too small in size to neutralise the frenzied crowd. And by the time the authorities sent paramilitary forces like the BDR, a great deal of damage has already been done.

A host of ministers including those of home, finance and commerce are crying hoarse to suggest that the anarchy was linked to an act of sabotage and conspiracy. If you are so convinced of the existence of a conspiracy, of agents provocateurs, local or foreign, then by all means catch them and expose them. Such premature and skin-deep comments only help fan the fire of speculation. In the past also we have seen similar lackadaisical attitude on the part of the relevant authorities despite having intelligence reports on the terrorists who later carried out bomb attacks throughout the country.

Handling conspiracy is part of governance and the people concerned must remain on their toes all the time to identify and foil any such attempt directed at destabilising country's security, economy or social order. No intelligence report is definitive and yet preemptive action has to be taken on the basis of whatever is in hand.

If the argument is that despite having intelligence report relevant ministries cannot act with a quick reflex due to paucity of forces, then are we to believe that this will go on happening as a fait accompli? We feel the heads of various security agencies should put their heads together to devise a mechanism whereby they can act swiftly on an intelligence report.

Avoidable deaths at CMCH

Culpable negligence

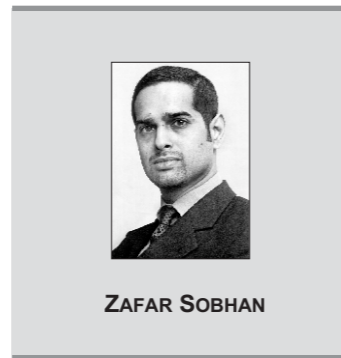
NEGLECT and carelessness have become a routine affair with most of our medical services, particularly those provided at public hospitals and clinics. We are appalled at the way two undertreatment patients died at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) the other day. We are all aware of the critical state of power outages all over the country. But what caused the deaths of the two patients goes beyond electrical power failure and loadshedding. Clearly, this was more a case of gross negligence on the part of the hospital administration than anything else.

Apparently the two patients who died were receiving treatment at the ICU and their deaths were caused by a stoppage of the generator. The explanations offered by the PDB for the generator coming to a halt is unacceptable. By their own admission, they stopped the generator without prior information to appropriate hospital authorities, a highly irresponsible act, to be sure. On the other hand, the explanation offered by no less a person than the director of the hospital appears to be too casual.

We are not here to act as an investigator, but we shall stress the need for finding ways and means to prevent all such tragic deaths in future. Already the power and energy ministry has said that loadshedding might be more acute in the coming months or even years. Surely, there must be a way to put public hospitals out of the purview of any extended period of loadshedding. With medical services at the innumerable private clinics all over the country being out of reach of the common people, it is all the more imperative that the administration seriously considered putting additional resources in and streamlining the management services of the public hospitals.

In the meantime, we urge that an investigation be instituted into the incident and steps be taken to prevent recurrence of such untimely deaths.

To make democracy work



ZAFAR SOBHAN

SO far my trip to Australia has been quite an eye-opener. In Bangladesh, we tend to think that if there is anything for us to learn from Australians it is how to bowl flippers and the like, and indeed, the one organization I know that has availed itself of Australian know-how and expertise is the BCCB.

But what has struck me most since I got here, and that I think Bangladesh could do well to learn from, is the Australians' commitment to democracy.

Let me say that Australia isn't paradise. It has its problems. Not the least of which is the shocking state of some of its indigenous communities. The last few days, the newspapers have been filled with horrific tales of the third world living conditions in Wadeye, an indigenous community on the north-west coast.

It is clear that this is one problem that Australians have not got a

STRAIGHT TALK

The time has come for us to take a long look at our entire system of governance and put in place the institutional checks and balances that, taking into account the frailties of our elected representatives, are designed to make the system work. Of course, all the institutional changes in the world won't help unless we have the commitment to change. Ultimately, we need to develop a true respect for democracy. Until and unless we do, democracy will never truly flourish in Bangladesh.

handle on.

But, be that as it may, when it comes to democracy and democratic institutions, we could do a lot worse than to take a page out of their book.

Most people may not know that Australia has always been at the forefront of democratic reform, and that it was Australia that first introduced secret ballots and universal suffrage.

Today there is compulsory voting, and the Aussies take their democratic responsibilities very seriously.

So do the Bangladeshi people, for that matter. The difference is that the system they have in place facilitates this, whereas in Bangladesh the entire system seems designed to frustrate the democratic process.

Voters in Bangladesh have respect for democracy, but it seems to me that the politicians don't share this commitment.

When we compare the democratic structures, institutions, and prac-

tices in the two countries, there are striking differences.

The key difference is an appreciation for the need for neutrality and non-partisanship to make the process function. Professionalism, continuity, and neutrality were the watchwords of the Australian civil servants I have met on my trip, and it seems clear to me that if we want democracy to function in Bangladesh then we need to re-establish this principle.

The entire Bangladeshi civil and judicial services need to be cleaned up from top to bottom. In my mind this is perhaps the most important and far-reaching reform that we could institute.

Clean candidates are all very well, but if we assume that we are going to continue, for one reason or another, to elect questionable representatives (a pretty safe assumption), then perhaps what is needed is for the system to be tweaked so that the damage wrought by lousy parliamentarians and ministers can be kept to a

minimum.

This can be accomplished if the civil service is depoliticised. If we had a truly professional and non-partisan administration, it wouldn't matter so much how poor their ministerial bosses were. A non-partisan bureaucracy would be able to curb the worst excesses.

Perhaps we need a movement for clean civil servants. It might be a lot more workable and effective than a movement to clean up politics.

Of course, to accomplish this, we need to put in place reforms that will permit our civil servants to function professionally without fear of reprisal. To this end, we need a freedom of information act that permits us to find out the processes by which decisions are made and policies are implemented.

We need full and timely accounting of all expenditures and the ability to question civil servants as to the basis for actions taken. Most of all, we need to be able to

shield honest civil servants when they are following the established procedures. Many civil servants are corrupted only because they have no protection, and playing ball with the corrupt politicians is the only option unless they want to end their careers issuing licence plates in Patuakhali.

I like the idea of these kinds of fixes, since it seems to me that the only way forward is to take into account the dysfunctions within the Bangladeshi body politic, and attempt to fashion a system that minimises the negative consequences.

Such an approach would start with civil service reform.

More important even than the civil service as a whole is the election commission and the caretaker government. In this sense, the opposition has the right idea. Reforming these institutions and ensuring their neutrality is absolutely the sine qua non for the continued functioning of democracy in Bangladesh.

But more important even than this is a non-partisan corps of civil servants devoted to the functioning of parliament to help ensure continuity and a reservoir of institutional knowledge.

In Australia there is a whole corps of civil servants, the parliamentary service, that is dedicated to the functioning of parliament, and the equivalent of the PMO is determinedly neutral and non-partisan.

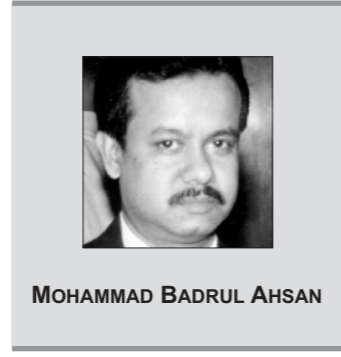
The time has come for us to take a long look at our entire system of governance and put in place the institutional checks and balances that, taking into account the frailties of our elected representatives, are designed to make the system work.

Of course, all the institutional changes in the world won't help unless we have the commitment to change. Ultimately, we need to develop a true respect for democracy. Until and unless we do, democracy will never truly flourish in Bangladesh.

Unless the reform is within ourselves, all the reforms in the world will not fundamentally change things for the better. But failing that, putting in place reforms that minimise the damage the politicians can do might not be a bad start.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Flowers to the grave



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN she died he must have been in the elevator between fifth and sixth floors of the hospital, when on the tenth floor she, who wanted to see him for one last time, left the world before he arrived. The doctors frantically tried to bring her back to life. They poked her body, opened her eyes, checked her pulse and talked amongst themselves while sliding the stethoscope on her chest like a mine sweeper. The room which was already heavy with grief got heavier when they confirmed that she had died.

In his mind he said to himself that fate had again triumphed over hope, that two people separated by the distance of many years could not meet by the distance of a few moments. As the sound of wailing voices and shuffling bodies drowned his thoughts, he was not sure if he wanted to leave or stay in the room.

He calculated that he could have found her alive if he had saved time, skipped the haircut, shave, and search for clothes, not fussed over the breakfast, sugar in

the tea, car wash, and then not rehearsed over what he would say and what she would ask. He would have found her alive if he had answered her call one day earlier, had he made up his mind sooner to come and meet her in the hospital.

It must have been a matter of ten minutes at most, the elevator stopping at each floor, picking up and dropping off people, until it arrived on the tenth floor and then a minute or so to find her room. If somehow he could have squeezed all that time, he could have arrived few minutes earlier, while she was still breathing and alive. She must have waited for him, because she knew he was coming, until the fits of death clouded her mind.

She said she wanted to tell him something, that she was in her last days and wanted to die with a lighter chest. But would she have been able to talk to him even if he had arrived sooner? Was her mind still working, only moments before the onslaught of death? Would she have recognized him even if he had arrived before she died?

He never wanted to see her again, neither alive nor dead, never again to step on her shadow, come within the earshot of her voice, or smell the air stirred by her presence. All these years he carried so much rage inside him, rage that brewed within the walls of his chest with the wrath of a thousand storms, diminishing him every day through sleepless nights, shame, loneliness, ratcheting up pain that could not be cured by doctors of the world.

He would have said all of these to her if she were alive, if their conversation had progressed as he anticipated. She would have told her why it happened, why she married another man, may be she would have also said sorry for hurting him so much for all these years. May be she was thinking that she could clean up the entire slate with the stroke of a single apology or confession. People, who have a sense of approaching death, often feel the urgency to fix lifelong mistakes overnight.

CROSS TALK

Many years ago when he had fallen in love, when the angst of youth roared in his head like the howling wind blowing in the prairies, when lust rocked his body like the eruption of volcanoes, when the desolation of a plundered city gripped his heart, when the ecstasy of countless festivals inundated his soul, he wanted to die in the intensity of life. He needed someone to hold his hand, to give him courage and comfort in the undulation of desires, surging through his body day and night. What should happen to his love now that she was dead? Until he finds the answer, he will bring flowers to her grave.

that had spent its force as he stood before his dead adversary, reminded of life's futility, that birth and death, pleasures and pains within these extremes, were nothing but the illusions of a magic lantern show. All these years he lived in the fury of vengeance to get even with a woman, who had cheated him in love, vowing to treat her with utmost cruelty once he got his hands on her.

As he stood at arm's length from the dead woman lying in the bed, he felt despaired like a detective who found, after a hot pursuit, that the criminal had slipped his net. A haunting sense of grief crept on him as he realized that he had been cheated twice by the same woman, who left him once when he was ready to love, and again when he was ready to hate. He choked on tears while his heart was ready to explode, fighting back the loneliness that devours a pugilist after his sparring partner has left the ring.

Someone asked him to leave the room because the dead would be prepared before taken to her

house. He made for the door, looking back at the bed where several women were turning the limp and inert body, which he coveted throughout his life. Now this body was going to be buried in the earth, then it will decompose slowly, the flesh melting like a block of ice kept in the sun, the head-turning body of an attractive woman reduced to bones.

The blast of a noisy city hit him in the face as soon as he stepped out of the room, screeching cars, honking buses, tinkling rickshaws and the uproar of multitude streaming through the streets, everything in stark contrast to the ecology of the room where he witnessed how a life had come to its end. This is how the world has moved, unrepentant for the fallen, selfishly turning to fulfil its cosmic journey through wars, devastations, holocausts, plunders, storms, cyclones and tidal bores, above all death. The human beings have ingested that selfishness, their earthly life honed by an instinct to survive at any cost.

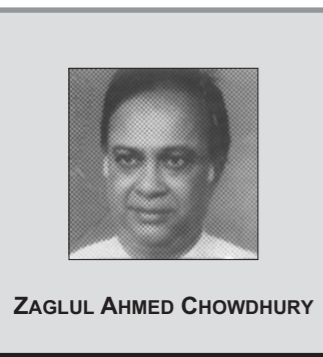
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Love is an expression of life, but he never thought that his entire life would become an expression of love. He could not fall in love with another woman, although flurries of women came into his life, women who meant nothing more than a stack of bodies that added fuel to the seething fire of love. He consorted with other women for the same reason someone, who wanted to remember his loved one, brought flowers to the grave.

All things come to an end, fire in ashes, journey in destination, flowers in fragrance, conflict in resolution, work in outcomes, and motion in stillness. What should happen to his love now that she was dead? Until he finds the answer, he will bring flowers to her grave.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Tougher time for UPA in the third year



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in India has just stepped into the third year of its tenure amidst indications that it will have a tougher time ahead in domestic and foreign policy matters. The ruling alliance enjoyed a relatively easy sailing during the first two years of their rule even though it was not based on strong ground politically. This is because the government remains in power with the help of the leftists, who are not in the government, but extend crucial support from outside. Indeed, it goes to the credit of prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and more importantly, UPA chairperson and Congress president Sonia Gandhi for being able to ensure the support of the leftists despite

MATTERS AROUND US

The Indian opposition is trying to shed inertia and swing into its role more vociferously. It is seeking to whip up again on the "foreigner" issue against Sonia and alleges that it is she and not the prime minister, who is really running the government. The contention has been totally rejected by the UPA. But despite Sonia's big win in the by-election, the Congress remains weak in the key Hindi belt states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh etc. The Opposition is targetting these states in the coming days for anti-central government agitation.

serious differences with them on several policy matters.

The withdrawal of this critical support means a straight development -- the fall of the UPA government, which the leftists will not want because the secular UPA is much more acceptable to it than the previous ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is widely seen as being communal. In the event of the exit of the present government, in all probability a midterm election will take place and return of the NDA to power is not ruled out. The leftists will not relish such a development. Nonetheless, their support to the UPA is not absolute and cannot be taken for granted. This may be more pronounced in the third year of the UPA rule when the communists will definitely enjoy a bigger say in

the running of the UPA government since they have acquired greater strength in the recently held polls to five state assemblies -- four of which are important in Indian context in varying degrees.

The UPA headed by the Congress won the national elections over two years ago rather unexpectedly when the NDA government headed by charismatic BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee advanced the polls by several months in the belief that the decision would help the ruling rainbow coalition. But what happened was a shocking defeat despite good performance of the government in several sectors like the IT and industrial development. The "shining India" slogan, however, proved counter-productive as rural India felt neglected and this was reflected

in the results of the polls. Wisely, the present government has taken lesson from this and has concentrated in rural areas as well, which is helping it in garnering public support. The recent state assembly polls have shown that the Congress and its partners in the UPA have done fairly well -- the Congress in particular retained power in Assam and Pondicherry, won in Tamil Nadu in alliance with dominant regional ally DMK while it lost in Kerala and, of course, it never had a chance in leftist bastion West Bengal. Despite setbacks in Kerala, Congress feels it has done well when it is in power at the centre. This is a measure of its performance as the head of the UPA alliance.

The UPA launched several initiatives in the foreign and

domestic affairs, where the economy has shown progress. Certainly, the government derives benefit from the leadership of a person like Dr. Singh, who is seen as the architect of India's economic reforms in the early nineties when he was the finance minister in Narasimha Rao's government. In the foreign policy area, the government feels it has taken the country to a new height by emerging as a regional power. The is evident from the readiness of the US to work more closely with New Delhi. The two nations have signed a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement during president Bush's visit, which is widely considered as Washington's going out of the way for India. At domestic level, the main opposition BJP is somewhat in a disarray following the last polls

debacle and also because of internal problems as well as differences with its allies Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Shiv Sena and the RSS. The opposition failed to mount a serious challenge against the government either in parliament or on the streets and this made the government's stay for the last two years rather easy. However, the government had its setbacks as well when foreign minister Natwar Singh had to quit in the wake of a controversy involving Volkar commission. UPA allies lost power in important states like Bihar and the raging debate on parliamentarians having more than one office of profits. This had adverse impact, but not to the extent of troubling the government much.

In the third year, the government will face a more determined leftists, who earlier felt somewhat unheeded on such issues like India's pro-western position on the Iran imbroglio, present government's too close ties with the United States, prices of the energy products and some other economic matters. The leftists, buoyed by the success in Kerala and West Bengal, will now seek to exert greater pressure on the government. CPM general secretary Prakash Karat said the

government cannot go scot-free when dealing with the leftists on key policy matters. True, they are in no mood to contribute to the fall of this present government, but they will certainly not accept anything that will go seriously against their policy. Already energy minister Murli Deora accepted leftist demands to an extent when he said prices of kerosene and some other products will not increase considering common people's interest despite increase of the oil price. The foreign policy issues, especially New Delhi's too close relations with Washington will have to be pursued taking into account the leftists; at least to some extent. On economic matters too, UPA government will need to adjust its policies on several issues -- failing which the leftists may seek to show value of their critical support. In the event of the non-ratification of the Indo-US nuclear deal by the American Congress, the much-hyped development will boomerang on the government. However, chances of approval by the Congress are there.

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against Sonia and alleges that it is she and not the prime minister, who is really running the government. The contention has been totally rejected by the UPA. But despite Sonia's big win in the by-election, the Congress remains weak in the key Hindi belt states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh etc. The Opposition is targetting these states in the coming days for anti-central government agitation in a bid to put pressure on ruling alliance. The UPA may also find some problems in maintaining the unity and cohesion of its partners on a variety of issues. Besides, it has complex matters like talks with the separatists in Kashmir or insurgents in North-East on its hands. The government is not on slippery ground, but is likely to walk a tight rope in the third year even though its survival is not at stake.

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