

Healthcare in the doldrums

Public and private partnership needed

THE findings of a recently held The Daily Star roundtable on healthcare in Bangladesh indicate that the less fortunate of the Bangladeshis find themselves between the devil and the deep sea when it comes to healthcare service. While the state of the public healthcare service that is available to the people of lesser and modest means remains in a dismal state, and there is a plethora of reasons why that is so, the filling up of the gap in public health service by private sector intervention has not been very satisfactory either. Miseries of those that turn to the private hospitals are no less acute, and there is again a plethora of reasons why that is so. Thus, those who can afford seek treatment outside the country where, in some cases, the expenses are even less than what is charged by the private hospitals in Bangladesh, and those who can't, can do very little to ameliorate their physical distress.

Take the state of affairs of both the public and private hospitals. Mismanagement, lack of adequate doctors and even fewer specialists, shortage of nurses, inadequate number of beds, are some of the glaring lacunae that all the public hospitals in the country. As for the private hospitals, they are beyond the reach of the common man, and even for those that can afford it are taken for a ride when it comes to the cost of treatment here -- most of them made to undergo numerous tests which are felt avoidable. The blatant commercial considerations with which the private hospitals are being run make many seek treatment abroad.

It's time the government addressed the issues in real earnest. Taking the structural flaws like the adverse doctor to patient ratio, shortage of trained nurses, inadequate number of public hospitals, propensity of doctors to go abroad, the very high charges at the private hospitals, and also the attitude of the doctors and nurses in the public hospitals in particular, are matters that merit immediate attention of the government. If there is a surfeit of patients then the doctor's attention is diluted and so is the attention of nurses on which the medical care in the hospitals is pegged.

These are all measures that can be resolved over time if addressed in earnest. But for now one would like to see the private medical services come within reach of the common man. We support the idea of government support to the private hospitals only if that is reflected not only in the standard of the service provided but also in the cost of it. As for the public hospitals improvement in the management is the dire need.

But above all we can expect very little success in the field of healthcare unless the private and public sector join hands.

A disaster in the making

How such a glaring instance could be ignored?

IN our context it appears that nothing seriously hurting would nudge us, not even those in the vicinity of wrong doing, unless newspapers cast their eyes on it bringing it up as an issue of public concern. Take for instance, illegal extraction of stones from at least 30 sites in Panchagarh. This has been going on since 1994 when extraction under permit system was officially stopped in view of its damaging effect on the environment.

Environmental authorities must have heard by word of mouth that a serious ecological imbalance was being fostered in the area, but obviously they did nothing to take cognisance of it, let alone resist the large scale commercial extraction of pebbles. Resultantly, landslides have been occurring due to the burrowing into the crusty earth; rivers have changed course; and equally adversely the subterranean water flows have been affected.

Our correspondent saw at first hand how the lucre of stone trade has got some vested quarters beholden to it like butterflies to a flower. Some powerful syndicates have been formed with blessings from certain people in the administration and divisional forest officer's setup. It is alleged that the district administration and the DFO are indifferent to the wanton extraction of stone by scouring the land. Obviously, the syndicates and the local officials are in collusion, otherwise such blatant violation of law couldn't have taken place.

We have four suggestions to make: first, stop the extraction business at once by an administrative decree; second, do a scientific study of the ecological implications of the extraction done since 1994 accompanied by a quantification of the damages wrought so far; third, take disciplinary action against the colluding officials; and finally, book the recalcitrant extractors.

An albatross around the nation's neck



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE road to election 2007 is becoming increasingly bumpy, with the CEC continuing to defy the public trust with his arcane and arbitrary stances with regard to the commission's functioning. He has already violated the court ruling by preparing a fake voter list (squandering over sixty crore taka in the process), a legally punishable offence and enough of a casus belli for his removal.

As regarding the neutrality expected of a CEC, his credibility has been suspect right from the beginning due to his nexus with the establishment who, among other things, rescued him from his non-compliant EC (Election Commission) members and replaced them with loyal ones.

As a matter of quid pro quo, the CEC has, of course, been propitious in staffing the commission at all of its echelons with the compliant cadres of the ruling alliance in a rather blatant manner. So much so that even important ministers of the government

expressed on occasion their embarrassment, reservation, and concern, not only for what he already did, but also for his schizophrenic reaction to foreign dignitaries and journalists, as well as his mercurial views from time to time.

The man's peculiar personal chemistry seems to be a constant source of worry also for the government, which gives an impression of already considering the CEC a liability. The mid-ranking BNP leaders are openly vocal against his antics -- particularly with regard to his refusal to go door-to-door for preparing a fresh voter list. Then there is the continuing question about election expenditure.

It is, however, not for nothing that the present CEC became a choice for the government out of all people. Yet the government did not perhaps want him to be so naked in obliging it in the turbulent situation now obtaining in the country. But unfortunately for the government, neither the

PERSPECTIVES

Only a fair and neutral election conducted in a timely manner by an honest and acceptable EC can douse the flame of discontent fast sweeping the country. Even if an election is forced upon the people under the present EC, not only its legitimacy will be put to question, the country will continue to be in turmoil. It is not a risk worth taking for the sake of an ignominious EC, which already did a good deal of damage by vitiating the country's political ambience.

CEC nor his two other lieutenants in the EC understand these subtleties.

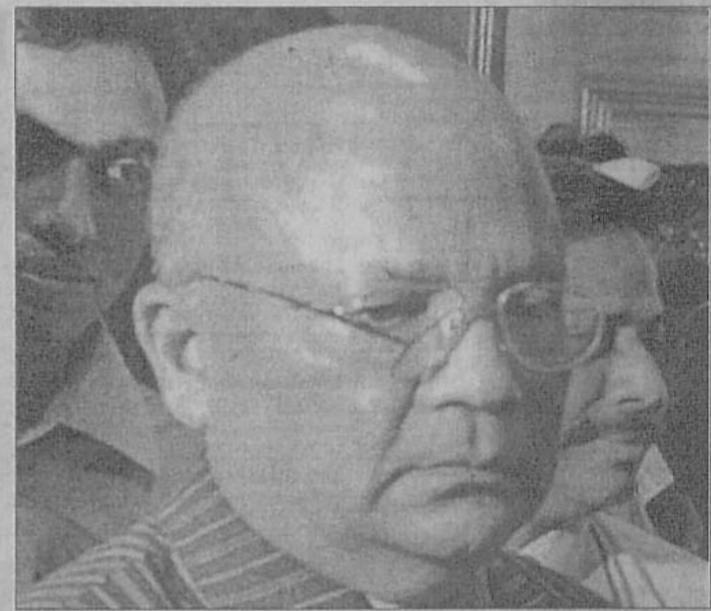
In the meantime, the public complaint against the EC has reached its crescendo, with an ever-swelling number of protesters taking to the streets and demanding his removal. But the CEC seems to be enjoying his clout by cozying up with his loyal members of the commission behind a reinforced protection barrier of his citadel in Argargaon as the people battle police in the street. What a beginning of an electoral process considered both at home and abroad the most crucial since independence!

In a queer dichotomy, as the government attitude hardens in favour of the present EC and the public fury intensifies to remove it, there is growing skepticism as to whether an election will be held as due in early 2007 -- let alone the question of a credible one. Yet, only a fair and neutral election conducted in a timely manner by an honest and accept-

able EC can douse the flame of discontent fast sweeping the country. Even if an election is forced upon the people under the present EC, not only its legitimacy will be put to question, the country will continue to be in turmoil. It is not a risk worth taking for the sake of an ignominious EC, which already did a good deal of damage by vitiating the country's political ambience.

But the post of the CEC being a constitutional one, once appointed his removal cannot effected through the stroke of a pen; neither will the present CEC voluntarily quit nor can he be hounded out. The only way he can be gotten rid of is through a supreme judicial council, which alone can remove him for his moral turpitude. But the initiative has to come from the government. Would it be to the taste of the government to accept such a climb down?

The judicial experts of the country have already advocated the CEC's removal through the



supreme judicial council for which they identified the present CEC to be the most appropriate case. Even the noted political observers find such action to be an opportunity for the alliance government to demonstrate its generous intentions in regaining some of its lost support. Or else the present CEC, however servile he may be, is bound to back-fire against the government's hidden agenda.

The authorities should be left in no doubt that the present CEC has since lost his moral standing to be at the helm of a body which plays a significant role in shaping the nation's fate. If it is bent upon deriving a short-term gain through the mischievous EC, it

has been prepared for a long-term disaster which the nation can ill afford to sustain. In addition, the EC should be brought to book for alleged financial embezzlement and other irregularities still being committed.

A credible election under a credible EC is the need of the hour. Hinging on it is the future shape of things in Bangladesh, which has already suffered from terrible misrule, corruption, and rise of militancy. Unfortunately an albatross -- a highly biased and immoral EC -- hangs around our neck. The albatross must be discarded before we can proceed towards an enlightened future.

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Indian elite's lovefest with the US



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

A global majority sees the Iraq occupation as a "greater danger to world peace" than Iran, "despite growing concern over Iran's nuclear ambitions." However, Indians who regard the Iraq occupation as a threat to world peace are just 15 percent -- the world's lowest, and less than half the rating in the US. A huge 59 percent believe US can establish democracy in Iraq -- a desperate hope not shared by Americans!

(50 to 23). Even in Britain, approval has slumped from 83 percent to 56.

Over the year, approval of the US has plummeted in every single European country barring Britain: in Germany (from 41 to 37 percent), France (43 to 39), Russia (52 to 43) and Spain (an even sharper 41 to 23 percent). Even more dismal is the fall in Turkey, a Nato member (23 to 12 percent). In Pakistan, the rating has risen marginally from an abysmal 23 percent to a poor 27 percent (less than half that of India's).

Even worse, India's support for the US-led "global war on terrorism" (GWOT) stands at a record 65 percent -- the world's highest, and 13 percentage points greater than last year.

But, says the Pew Centre: elsewhere, support for the GWOT "is either flat or has declined. The Iraq war continues to exact a toll on America's overall image. Majorities in 10 of 14 foreign countries surveyed say that the war in Iraq has

made the world a more dangerous place."

The "global" majority sees the Iraq occupation as a "greater danger to world peace" than Iran, "despite growing concern over Iran's nuclear ambitions." Forty-one percent of Britons say that the Iraq occupation represents a greater danger than the Tehran regime. In Russia, Spain, France, and China the relative proportions are 45:20, 56:38, 36:31, and 31:22. It is only in the US and Germany that the proportions are inverse -- 31:46 and 40:51. The rest of the world takes an even dimmer view. The threats attributed to the occupation exceed those from Iran by 3 times in Indonesia and 7 times in Pakistan.

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The Indian support for the brutal occupation of Iraq is unique -- despite over 100,000 civilian deaths, an intractable insurgency, and discontent in the Arab world. Even Mr Bush admits that he made "mistakes" in Iraq.

Yet, the poll results don't necessarily show that all Indians are unable to make a judgment about war and peace. This is because the poll represents a narrow urban sample. The interviews were conducted amongst the 10 percent who have landline telephones. It is an elite opinion poll.

Even so, the pro-US sentiment is shocking. Not long ago, the same elite ardently opposed American hegemony. The same policy-makers and shapers have now become abjectly pro-America. Their admiration for "the American people" (67 percent) exceeds even their support for the US.

It would be simplistic to attribute this Americophilia to the Indo-US nuclear deal. That

deal was only signed last July. Three other factors seem weightier: the burgeoning of a middle class under neo-liberal policies, deepened since 2000; the elite's moral-political disorientation; and the hangover of Hindutva's Islamophobia.

These produce callousness towards the cruelty of war and occupation, amnesia about the false excuses about weapons of mass destruction and about the US's generally baneful global influence.

The US occupation has created a far worse situation than that under Saddam. Despite a semblance of democracy -- under a constitution dictated by the occupation powers -- daily life is harsher and more insecure. There is systematic looting of the country's huge resources. Saddam had his death and torture squads. But it's hard to say that the Abu Ghraib tortures, Fallujah's ravaging, or the Haditha massacre are any better. Haditha is the worst US massacre since My Lai.

The atrocious ways of US troops forced Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to say that their grave misconduct on a daily basis "has become common. No respect for citizens, smashing civilian cars and killing on a suspicion or a hunch. It's unacceptable."

In first-hand accounts pub-

lished in Time and Newsweek, the occupation troops emerge as mentally unstable, high on drugs, and prone to perverse behaviour. Says ex-soldier Cliff Hicks: US troops "were taking steroids, Valium, hooked on painkillers, drinking. They'd go on raids and patrols totally stoned."

He says, "There's a lot of guys who steal from the Iraqis. Money, family heirlooms, and then they brag about it. Guys would crap into MRE bags and throw them to old men begging for food."

Those who believe these are aberrations don't understand the insanity that sometimes sets in among soldiers who don't know why they are fighting. How else can one explain the sickening sadism of the four-minute video, called "Hadji Girl," apparently sung by a Marine? The lyrics read: "I grabbed her little sister and put her in front of me. As the bullets began to fly, the blood sprayed from between her eyes, and then I laughed maniacally..."

The US is not a benign power in Iraq. Nor elsewhere. It's out to establish an Empire. Its leaders barely hide their intentions. Colluding with them is the worst thing that a country's elite can do.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Parliament in danger of losing its sanctity



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

The 8th parliament is now limping towards the fag-end of its five-year journey, mostly as a dysfunctional body with continuous boycott by the opposition. When there has been an occasion when the opposition was present in parliament, most of the time was wasted in polemics, vilification, and angry exchanges of words that have had absolutely no bearing on national affairs. Given its lack-lustre and deplorable performance, the 8th parliament has never emerged as a legislative body worth its name.

ings of the House immediately. Ultimately he was made to do so in the face of repeated demands, both from the opposition and the treasury benches.

It is most unfortunate that our national parliament has now turned into a venue for character assassination and its sanctity has been violated. Sometimes it also turns into an exclusive club of the downfallen. Such a state is a clear reflection of the quality of the politics and the leadership we are ruled by. Indeed, the nation is greatly frustrated with this sort of people occupying an august body meant for deliberation.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) released a sensational report on our parliament a few months back. The report said that the present parliament has failed to ensure the accountability of the govern-

ment and the parliamentary standing committees on different ministries have also failed to investigate corruption and irregularities in different organisations under the ministries concerned. The report also criticized excessive boycotts and walkouts from the House by the opposition MPs. The opposition MPs were absent in the House for 48 days out of 83 working days in 2004.

The reality, as reported in the survey report of TIB that keeps tab on the working of parliaments in emerging democracies, is however sadly different. The report on the functioning of our parliament revealed that a total amount of Taka 2.35 crore was wasted in three (4th, 5th and 6th) sessions of the current 8th parliament due to quorum failure. The time lost in quorum crisis

amounted to 26.15 hours of the total session time of 127.50 hours. Only 22 hours were spent on legislative business. Interestingly, the MPs uttered the names of their party leaders at least 493 times during their deliberations. Such a report on our parliament has created a deep sense of concern among the patriotic citizens of the country.

The MPs elected to speak for 140 million people do not take their task seriously and yet they enjoy enormous power and privileges without the corresponding responsibility. There are also other charges against the legislators which are no less serious. Many of them do not pay telephone bills though they draw the money allocated for that purpose. The MPs imported tax-free cars of the latest model

affecting the public exchequer. But these costly cars were ultimately sold for gaining profit. Such activities on the part of the elected public representatives of the highest category are a national disgrace.

A paramount truth we cannot afford to ignore is that there is a need to change the political culture foisted on us. This is mainly because politics is fast becoming a profitable business and the nexus between politics and criminality is corroding the democratic character of the polity. These people or others of their ilk would be voted again to parliament if the civil society movement for clean candidates does not bear fruit.

The 8th parliament is now limping towards the fag-end of its five-year journey, mostly as a dysfunctional body with continuous boycott by the opposition. When there has been an occasion when the opposition was present in parliament, most of the time was wasted in polemics, vilification, and angry exchanges of words that have had absolutely no bearing on national affairs. Given its lack-lustre and deplorable performance, the 8th parliament has never emerged as a legislative body worth its name.

In fact, the history of our



national parliament has essentially been a story of dashed hopes and aspiration during the years since democracy was restored in 1991 following the collapse of the autocratic regime of Ershad. So far, we have not been satisfied that parliament has been able to answer public concerns. The prime examples would be the terrorist attack on the AL rally on August 21, 2004 and the country-wide violence perpetrated on August 17, 2005, which have never been deliberated on by the parliament.

One thing we can be sure of is that there is a shocking lack of

maturity, morality, and even patriotism in many of our lawmakers. These are the qualities needed for deliberation in a body of utmost honour and dignity. The budget session is surely of crucial importance for the nation. When an MP is given the floor for budget discussion, he must not be allowed to embark upon character assassination of his rival. Discussion on budget in no way can be linked to vilification of the opposition leader and journalists. The rules of procedure (ROP) of parliament also provide that a motion shall be restricted to a specific

matter of present occurrence. The Speaker, as the guardian of the House, must ensure that the sanctity of the parliament is not undermined. Parliament is not a place for vulgarity and must not be characterised more by muscle power than debates on significant public issues. A national stand is also imperative for bringing about a qualitative change in the make-up of our parliament. Unless we reform the so-called democratic dispensation that makes a mockery of our national spirit, the parliament will be in danger of losing its sanctity.

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