

## BTTB's sliding revenue

Address the illegal telephony business

At a time when the entire telecommunication system is being modernised and the overall business in this sector on the whole is on the increase, it is rather shocking that BTTB's revenue income has gone down by over Taka 100 crores compared to what it was in 2001, a record five-year low. As pointed out by sources in the BTTB itself, the prime source of its income is connected to overseas calls that have since increased by about 15 percent. In this connection it may also be pointed out that BTTB is the sole provider of both inward and outward telephone traffic. Besides, an independent telecom research organisation has ranked Bangladesh as the third fastest growing destination of international VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) in 2004. One thus cannot but be surprised to learn that there has been a decrease in the BTTB revenue earnings.

The reason for such a downward trend and the loss in revenue income is due very largely to Internet telephony or VoIP, being provided through illegal private operators, whose number has now reached several thousand. We find this state of affairs appalling.

A proper and effective telecom network is not only a question of revenue earnings for BTTB, it also has a direct impact on the country's overall business and trade, particularly exports. Besides, we have a large number of non-resident Bangladeshi workers who need to keep contact with their families back home without a hitch or hassle.

We fail to understand as to why no action is being taken to legalise the VoIP operations in the country despite the fact that as early as November 2003 a decision was taken to the effect at a cabinet meeting with no less a person than the Prime Minister herself in the chair. We are highly apprehensive and feel that some influential quarters close to the seat of power may be blocking the implementation of the decision taken nearly three years ago.

The government should take urgent action against the illegal VoIP operators and all others responsible for this deteriorating state of affairs.

## Hospital wastes

Safe disposal system urgently needed

It is a matter of great concern that the 860 hospitals in the city do not have any waste disposal system worth the name. And the question that arises is, where and how this huge amount of wastes is being dumped. Incredible though it may sound, these filthy substances, that spread all sorts of diseases, are finding their way to roadside bins or open places. The hospital authorities, including the management of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, fail to show the slightest regard for the general hygiene needs of the city dwellers.

What is particularly shocking is that, waste disposal is not treated as an integral part of hospital management. The health hazards that people are exposed to, when roads are littered with hospital wastes, are completely overlooked. Even the hospitals, having modern equipment and facilities, seem to be blissfully oblivious of the need to have a waste disposal mechanism.

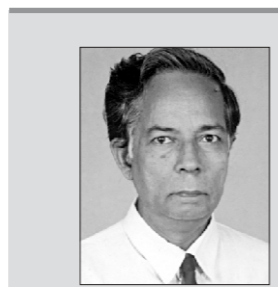
The problem is multiplied by the fact that street children and rag pickers collect the used syringes and other recyclable materials from the wastes. They of course are not aware of the possibility of being infected with fatal diseases. So, indiscriminate disposal of hospital wastes not only pollutes the environment but also poses a grave threat to the people who come in touch with these harmful substances.

The picture that we get speaks volumes for the total indifference shown by the hospital authorities to our environmental and hygiene needs. Many of the hospitals have introduced treatment facilities comparable to any modern hospital in a developed country. But they show a poor understanding of the problems associated with primitive waste disposal. They are not even utilising waste disposal services introduced by an NGO--apparently to avoid a small expenditure.

Obviously, private initiatives can help mitigate the problem, but these cannot be the answer to the huge task on our hands. The health authorities should address the issue in right earnest and ask the hospitals to introduce safe waste disposal methods in the interest of public health. There should be greater coordination among the DCC and hospitals and clinics, so that a safe waste disposal system can be evolved.

Outbreak of various diseases in the city is a regular phenomenon these days. However, we cannot deal with the problem if hospitals violate health and hygiene rules so blatantly.

## Absolute power



Md. Asadullah Khan

FIVE years is a long time in the life of a politician or a political party. It is a good enough time frame to make sense of the quality of the party's governance when they are in power. As the ruling alliance completes its five years in power in another three months, the occasion should, ideally be a cause of celebration.

A fractured mandate brought the BNP led alliance to power and once they were in power the peoples' perception was that the alliance government would engage all its efforts to improve the lot of the suffering masses. The mandate for this government, if there was any, was a negation of dynastic impulses and an endorsement of the idea of a nation.

At the fag end of their rule, the party would like to term it a commemorative moment, though there is hardly anything to celebrate because what actually happened was contrary to the people's expectations.

As the BNP-led alliance leaves office in October, there can only be a deep sigh of relief, or a shudder of disillusionment, or a sense of indifference among those who wanted to see the chief executive as the chosen person of great change. Power has not only corrupted the party and its stalwarts, it

## BITTER TRUTH

The alliance government, it seems, will walk out not like heroes in the cause of the people, but like one betrayed, not by the people, but by its partners and sycophants. If the people brought them to power, as they often say, there was a groundswell of faith and it was up to the alliance government to turn that popular faith into performance. It didn't happen. The last five years of BNP-led alliance in power saw only instances of hope abandoned and trust betrayed.

has immobilised them. This is abundantly clear.

Take a look at the way this government ruled the country for two terms interspersed by AL rule in the intervening period. The first term was too brief to be of any consequence except perhaps the symbolism of the coronation of the country's right wing government. The second term was eventful: launching of Saarc Summit and rise of the extremist ideology and JMB operatives in the country.

Remarkably, the second term was a grand gesture, with feet in Dhaka and eyes on some wealthy Muslim countries in the Middle East. But the gesture was soon wiped out by the explosions and series of blasts that rocked the country from Teknaf to Tetulia, taking a heavy toll of precious human lives including judges, academics, journalists, lawyers, businessmen and parliamentarians.

This was a moment of national catharsis. The term has now come to an inglorious end when the government is facing enormous challenges on all fronts: unbridled corruption, moral decay, political stagnation, accumulation of wealth in some unscrupulous hands, proliferation of extremist ideologies, price hike of essentials and politicisation of the administration.

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Starting from the unilateral appointment of Justice MA Aziz as CEC, that rendered the whole election process fraught with dire uncertainties, inability to contain the price hike of essentials, turning a deaf ear to non-government school teachers' demands of nationalisation of their services, dismal situation in the power sector with no increase of even by a watt in the generation capacity during the last five years, the performance of the government has been anything but good.

Things could get better if the stalwarts in the alliance government understood the importance of good governance, if in their speeches in meetings, and before media, they had articulated exactly what they planned to do about the things that went wrong. Instead what we got were polemics and

platitudes and political alliances with parties of diverse ideologies so shamefully crafted into a marriage of convenience, regardless of their inglorious records during the liberation war.

But undeniably true, there was and there is stability in the chair and no political threat to anybody's position, even no proactive opposition to make the best use of a bad situation, but there are no stirrings of change in the country. Politically the balance sheet is pathetic. Despite the PM being in permanent national focus, there seems to be no agenda, no vision. The only promise or the agenda that is being realised is a chance for the exploiters, extortionists corrupt officials and political mastans to have a field day. The PMO must have known about what is going on but it appears incapable of taking action against officials and the closest associates of the ruling alliance who are so openly insubordinate and brazenly corrupt.

The answers are hard to come by. Could it be that the chief executive is just tired of the whole situation and cannot bestir himself into showing even a flicker of leadership?

One of the most infuriating features of the country as well as the government is that time, and timeliness, have no value. The last

few months were dominated by events that demonstrated the grave consequences of allowing things to slide. It started with the unilateral appointment of Justice MA Aziz as CEC and then the events took a full circle.

Even after the government has been convinced that the present CEC is wasting precious time and is guilty of the abuse of peoples' money and power, as is evident from the statements of several influential ministers, it has shown callous indifference and did not resort to the last weapon of removing him through formation of a judicial council as required by the constitution.

These are the most critical times for Bangladesh. As the alliance government struggles to address a range of social and economic ills with little success, the last thing people need is further tension, chaos and uncertainties. Unfortunately trouble is at hand and the government cannot put the blame at anyone else's door, because the government, even if it can foresee the catastrophic situation the country is heading to, has done precious little to retrieve the country out of the quagmire of petty politics.

The danger is inherent in the statement of the law minister that even if the opposition parties do not participate in the election, it will not create any constitutional crisis, which is a fair indication of the grand plan, or the road map, some parties or vested groups have designed.

True, the CEC's post is constitutional and he cannot be removed unless he opts to go out willingly, or at his pleasure, but his pleasure should not end up being the people's pain. The legal connotation "constitutional immunity" oft repeated concerning the CEC's post is a

double-edged sword. As people have found, it is being used as much to hide the real story as tell it.

The alliance government has to realise that an EC, completely independent of the PMO, and which can work independently, transparently, reliably and with neutrality and fairness will be able to deliver the goods that people look forward to at this critical juncture of the nation.

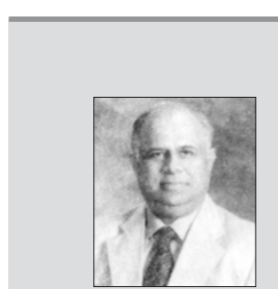
In the latest bout of the war of words with the CEC, the finance minister, by refusing to allocate fresh fund for the EC to update the flawed voter list that was prepared in violation of the High Court verdict, has earned total support of the people.

The finance minister rightly echoed the sentiment of the people when in a meeting with EC officials, he said that as the guardian of the exchequer he has a constitutional responsibility to ensure that funds allocated to a particular institution was being properly spent although people from their past experiences knew it for certain that accountability is the last thing that some holders of public office go by, least of all Justice Aziz, who has given a dismal account of himself from the time he assumed his office.

Why can't the present CEC realise that at this critical juncture of the nation, EC is an institution that can only survive and work on credibility. Unbefitting conduct of the CEC, who is himself a judge, affects the institution as a whole. It can't be that judges will be judging others' lapses but when it comes to themselves, they won't let minor things like ethics stand in their way.

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## Spinning out of control



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

THE situation in the Middle East is rapidly degenerating from terrible to atrocious.

Already bordering on living hell for those at ground zero in the battle zone in Lebanon, the conflagration could spread out of control. While the mainly Sunni Hamas are offering token resistance to the Israeli ground incursion in Gaza, Shia Hezbollah are putting up robust resistance in South Lebanon.

Israel has every right, like any other nation on Earth, to defend itself. However, the disproportionate response has been shocking to its friends and foes alike, undermining Israel's moral domination in western perceptions. This callousness reinforces the opposition to Israel's existence, even among those who have been persuaded over the years, through intellectual interaction, that Israel can live in peaceful co-existence with its neighbours.

Even if one were given the rules of engagement peculiar to the conflict raging in the Middle East since 1948, the Israeli reaction to the capture of its soldiers in Gaza, and later in South Lebanon, was shocking. Hamas(?) and Hezbollah certainly had no business abducting the soldiers. They

## AS I SEE IT

The US army has already got its hands full coping with the Sunni insurgency. The far better and larger Shia militias would be more than a handful. To add to that, the new Iraqi army has yet to see its loyalties tested. In fact, Hosni Mobarak could well find the Egyptian armed forces simmering with discontent if Iran and Syria enter the equation. This discontent is already rampant in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria. Lebanon is a powder keg with grenades going off all over, and it needs only one wrongly directed attack to blow the whole region to smithereens.

broke a certain fail-safe line that goes for a tenuous peace in the area.

When the Israeli demand to release its soldiers was refused, an Israeli ground incursion and preventive air strikes were to be expected. Not abandoning its own is an article of faith of Israel. Take into consideration the raid at Entebbe to rescue Israeli hostages many thousands of miles away.

As the government-in-power in Palestine, it was Hamas's responsibility to search out and return the Israeli soldiers. However, the Israeli response was disproportionate in targeting power stations, bridges, utility services, etc. They then went on to detain Hamas parliamentarians and even government ministers.

Without electricity and water, and facing daily pounding from the air, the Gazans, as indeed the rest of the Muslim world, may be forgiven for condemning this collective punishment. The Hezbollah ambush that killed Israeli soldiers and took two prisoners is another matter. It broke the fragile ceasefire in place, and the Israeli response was swift, deadly, and again, disproportionate.

The war was extended into Lebanon itself, with the city of Beirut firmly in Israel's gunights. Israeli aircraft roamed far and wide, attacking Hezbollah targets, focusing also on Hezbollah TV stations and known Hezbollah bunkers within Beirut, etc. What was shocking was that the Israeli air force also indiscriminately attacked bridges, communication centres, etc. By any account this degradation of civic facilities was deliberate overkill, and in areas considered out-of-bounds by military planners.

The result has been mayhem. More than 500 persons killed, thousands injured, plus half a million internally displaced. Over 150,000 Lebanese refugees have crossed over into Syria. What took over two decades of tireless effort (and plenty of money) to re-create and develop has been reduced to rubble in less than a fortnight. The biggest casualty is the psychological security of Lebanon as a tourist haven. With an exodus of all nationalities, desperate to get out of harm's way, only some have been lucky to be evacuated to Cyprus.

While Lebanon is a resilient nation one wonders whether anyone can repair the damage to

perception about security, the prime interest of any potential tourist. Instead of focusing on the battle zone in South Lebanon, which by itself would have been bad enough, Israel has succeeded in making all of Lebanon a war zone. While force is understandable against Hezbollah combatants, and one can stretch it to include the logistics chain, this overwhelming use of force against the defenceless has shaken the faith of quite a segment in the intelligentsia who firmly believed that, given the hand of sincerity by Muslims, Israel would respond in good faith.

Why has Israel gone into overdrive with overkill in this awesome manner? Since Israel does have a definite military motive in degrading Hezbollah's military facilities one can only surmise that the objective of "shock and awe" was to force the Lebanese population out of South Lebanon so as to have a buffer zone 20 kms broad.

One objective certainly was for the population to blame Hezbollah for bringing Israel's wrath on them. Israel's military policy of a swift and surprise offensive has also not materialised. For the first time in its history of successful military cam-

paigned, fought over almost six decades, Israel does not have a conventional army with fixed defences to contend with. A conventional army has bunkers, command posts, transport, artillery, ammunition and supply trucks, with accompanying personnel etc. The complete paraphernalia provides good targets to destroy and/or decimate by air, artillery and ground maneuver.

Hezbollah is operating in very small mobile groups, and with Viet Cong-style tunnels crisscrossing the area they seem to have taken a toll of Israeli armour in their limited incursions, thereby the reluctance to engage in hand-to-hand fighting. With the whole area covered with shoulder-fired and/or wire guided missiles, and interspersed with anti-tank and anti-personnel landmines, the forecast of possible Israeli casualty figures has been dramatically increased. And the going has been painfully slow. With a small population, Israel is psychologically ill-equipped to handle large casualty figures. It is extremely sensitive to inordinate increase in numbers of dead and injured, this will happen with the Hezbollah.

So the Israeli strategy seems to be a combination of socio-economic gain and military access to South Lebanon short of an actual war. It is a strategic bluff to get the international community, led by the UN, to call for a buffer zone, patrolled by an effective international force, that would create a stand-off distance against missiles, thus giving Israel their concept of "secure borders." This would be carried out from South Lebanon.

A by-product of this strategy is to further vilify Syria and Iran as terrorist sponsoring nations, tilting the

balance against Iran in the nuclear issue which is shortly to go before the UN Security Council. While the Israelis may still go in for incursions, limited by time and space, Hezbollah has challenged the reputation of Israel's invincibility in battle. Something that made Israel be perceived in nothing short of awe. If Israel does invade Lebanon it will be a calculated risk meant to restore Israel's image of overwhelming and unchallenged might in the region.

If Syria, and then Iran, is drawn into the conflict directly, things may go out of control in the region. There will be no way of keeping the US out, and that may be catastrophic given that the Shias in Iraq will feel obliged to strike at the dispersed US and coalition forces in Iraq. There is a growing conviction amongst geo-political analysts that this could be the Israeli strategy to force US and coalition forces into a greater conflict.

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In fact, Hosni Mobarak could well find the Egyptian armed forces simmering with discontent if Iran and Syria enter the equation. This discontent is already rampant in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria. Lebanon is a powder keg with grenades going off all over, and it needs only one wrongly directed attack to blow the whole region to smithereens.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Pakistan army officer, is a political analyst and columnist.

## Our culture, our moral values

Gone are the days when there was this element of unspoken respect of the young for the old. Gone are the days when compassion and brotherhood were passwords at all levels of the society. Gone are the days when students regarded their teachers as equals to their parents. Gone are the days when a cup of tea and a good book heightened our finer senses of peace and tranquility.

### SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

OF late, this feeling that "I am an idiot and an undesirable element in this society of ours" frequently haunts me. I look for a friend to join me over a cup of tea and talk about issues of humanity, the intricacies of our culture, the erosion of our moral and ethical values, and I end up finding none.

You want to watch a good film, you have to go to the Information Center of the Indian High Commission, or some ongoing international film festival, or an expatriate friend. All that is left of our cultural heritage is the celebration of some festivals and that, too, is confined to ceremonial celebration of some selected days with Pahela Baishakh (Bengali New

Year's Day) topping the list.

If you want to share the pleasures of reading a good book, or talking about one, you will have a hard time finding an enthusiast. Songs and music have also taken a beating. At the peak of it all happens to be pop music and occasional songs of Tagore and Nazrul. The frequent presentations of modern songs, to say the least, are most ordinary and poor, particularly in lyrics. The state of our classical music, both vocal and instrumental, is, to say the least, deplorable.

Most of the dramas and the cultural programs presented in the electronic media are of the poorest quality and are often dominated by cheap slogans and propaganda. The high point of our dresses appear to be dominated by those loud and obnoxiously expensive

lehngas, or shewar kameez of queer shapes and designs, imported from our big brother India and sold at the so-called shopping malls popping up like mushrooms all over the major cities of the country, including the capital. I wish some one could put a halt to this growing culture of shopping malls. There are yet other aspects of our culture, which we should seriously look into, like consumption of food and material acquisitions of all kinds and nature.

On the moral and ethical fronts, too, there has been unprecedented erosion. We have become extremely arrogant, inconsiderate and intolerant of one another.

Our view of religion has become too narrow. Our faith has become hostage at the hands of the so-called maulanans and moulvians and

confined within the four walls of our mosques. The amount of state funds used in building mausoleums today could very well be used in the socio-economic development of the poor through implementation of many benevolent projects. I have always felt that it is better to build a hospital for the sick than a mausoleum for the dead.

We have no respect for others' rights. You see reflections of it on the streets, in the bazaars, in cinema halls, in hospitals, in playgrounds and within the confines of your homes. It is no longer mind over matter. It is all about consumption and acquisition.

Slowly and surely the excesses and crudities of the materialistic world are overtaking the finer elements of our culture. At the forefront of this onslaught on our culture, and cultural values, are the countries of the west with India and Pakistan not far behind. Bangladeshis appear to be most vulnerable to all that is decadent and vulgar.

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Gone are the days when compassion and brotherhood were passwords at all levels of the society. Gone are the days when students regarded their teachers as equals to their parents. Gone are the days when a cup of tea and a good book heightened our finer senses of peace and tranquility. Gone are the days when our acquisitions were strictly by their selective needs. Gone are the days when greed was considered a vice. Gone are the days when heroism was considered a part and parcel of patriotism.

We consume and acquire more than we need. Too much eating and wasting seem to be a part and parcel of the lifestyle, particularly amongst the affluent section of our society. Today, parents and children of the second and the third generations alike seem to be more excited about the Pizza Huts and Wimpy rather than visits to libraries or museums, or even participating in an outdoor game or watching one. I am often baffled by the chain of restaurants on both sides of the main street running between Gulshan-I and Gulshan-II. This

business of growing obsession with food finds its true expression in these restaurants.

When you are ushered into a living room of a middle class or a well to do family home you are likely to be struck by the ugly sight of pieces of furniture which are highly decorative and often unnecessary. The so-called pieces of home decoration lie around like in a shop selling cosmetic jewelry. No books on shelves in sight. The floors look like those befitting a palace. The feeling is one of awe and decadence.

Talk to a middle class or a well to do educated member of the society belonging to the age group 50 and below about the songs of Pankaj Kumar Mallick, KL Sehgal or sitar and sarod recitals of Ravi Shankar or Amjad Ali Khan, you will be promptly dismissed as old fashioned.

There is also a marked change in the cultural practices of our marriage ceremonies. Today the marriages of our sons and daughters are marred by too many senseless and wasteful ceremonies. Ceremonies are often marked by

ugly displays of material affluence by both parties.

The other day I met a childhood friend of mine quite accidentally after years. As we were talking of old times he told me that he had been quite busy for the past two weeks. He was commuting between Dhaka, Dubai and Calcutta making purchases in connection with the forthcoming marriage of his niece. Such is the pitiable state of our culture caused by an all round erosion of our moral and ethical values.

Yet not all is lost. We certainly do have two specific windows of excellence in our cultural arena of which we can rightfully be proud of. These are all time steady growth and development of stage theatre and art and painting. People involved in the theatre movement do deserve our gratitude. The stage theatre movement in Bangladesh is not only a medium of popular entertainment but also has established itself as the voice of the people in our struggle for establishing democracy and rights in the society. On the other hand, the world of art and painting has under-

gone revolutionary transformation, making a name both at home and abroad.

Many have often argued with me that this matter of degradation of value systems is a global phenomenon. Many would like to appease me by saying that this is simply a resultant factor in the ongoing generation gap. Having accepted all that, and even more, I say this is something our nation can hardly afford, and there is no room for complacency.

Our health services are non-existent and beset with corruption at all levels, the gap between the rich and the poor is continually increasing, and the backbone of our education has been destroyed, while politics and political management are in complete shambles. It is thus all the more imperative that we put a halt to this erosion of our moral and ethical values before it eats through the vitals of our culture and heritage.

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