

Dhaka, Monday, September 16, 1991

Make DCC Accountable

By any standard, the Dhaka City Corporation is in trouble. With every passing day, the problems — majority of which are a residue from past inefficiency and corruption, but some undoubtedly a result of inertia of recent months — continue to multiply.

Condition of roads and lanes, which reportedly have not had any maintenance for the past one year, has deteriorated alarmingly; water-logging in many parts of the city has polluted the environment to an unbearable degree and the Corporation's waste disposal system remains far from adequate. Another essential service, public lavatories, is in a disgraceful state, on top of being too few in number. Wide open spaces and parks have become a rarity in a city bursting at the seams from pressure of a rapidly-increasing population.

While it is easy for an observer to catalogue the problems, it is not that simple when it comes to devising solutions. But it would be deceptive, even dishonest, for any DCC official to claim that all problems could be solved if only more money was made available. The DCC's budget for next one year has been pegged at 48 crore higher than the previous year, but the probability of the problems being solved remains marginal.

Widespread corruption, and indifferent and inefficient management remain the worst enemies of the city, not lack of funds. What is needed to solve these problems is not "goodwill", but political will—something that we can expect from a democratically elected government. We need a DCC that is politically committed to tackling the problems of institutional corruption and inefficiency head-on, before this city of seven million becomes little more than a gigantic garbage dump, with diseases and criminals crawling side by side.

In recent years, the city's mayorship has unfortunately become a presidential appointment, virtually exempting the city's chief executive from any accountability to the tax-payers. It is logical that the top executive post of the city should be an elected one, in line with the democratisation process going on at the highest political level. Public accountability and representative character are the hallmarks of regional, local and metropolitan administrations of all democratic societies, in Europe, North America, even South-east Asia.

But one elected leader for a city of seven million (and rising) may not be enough even in the short-run. We should undertake a serious study of how other major cities operate, in order to find a suitable system. For instance, how about having a directly-elected city council or legislative body, which would operate in the same way as the national parliament by holding the city's chief executive accountable to itself, and by debating, formulating and overseeing implementation of policies for the city's development and upkeep?

Another vital step would be decentralisation. At present, city-dwellers have to travel to, and battle with the bureaucracy at, DCC headquarters for all sorts of things, even for collecting a complaints form. There is obviously a need to transfer staff and function — meaning authority as well as responsibility — from headquarters to the 12 Zonal Offices to make life easier for city inhabitants. Directly-elected Ward Commissioners could be empowered to hold the Zonal Offices within their Wards accountable, reducing bureaucratic indifference and inertia. But whatever the system, it should be devised for the convenience of the citizens, and policy makers must be made representative of, and accountable to, the city's population.

Little Letter Writers

Letter-writing for most is a matter of necessity. And for some it is something starting from a pleasant pastime to an activity involving deep passion. There are times when letters become pieces of literature and high art and something prized and preserved for all mankind. It is said that the painter Vincent Van Gogh would anyway have found a place in the hall of immortals of all history even if he did not paint any one of his prolific ten-year outpouring. His letters to his brother Theo would have taken care of that. Earl of Chesterfield is remembered, and read, only for his letters. If in an adverse time Karl Marx becomes short of ideal reading his letters to his wife to be Jennie would remain masterpieces of German prose which also applies for the letter Sigmund Freud wrote his fiancée. Letters from the jails to his daughter Indira by Jawaharlal Nehru was high school text even in British India when he was supposed to be a firebrand socialist out to undo the British empire.

For a Bengalee, nothing can beat Tagore's Chhinnapatrabali. And nothing ever will. His other letters issued so far in twelve volumes are also high literature and would remain a treasure for all mankind. This is not quite a matter of parochial bias.

Bangladesh Postal administration has the other day announced the results of two letter-writing contests — the Ninth SAARC Letter-writing Competition '91 and the International Letter-writing Competition '91. The contests were held for school children. The list of the winners of the national level competition in both revealed something very interesting indeed. In the SAARC contest the first two places went to girls and two of the first three spots went to students from the backyards of Gopalganj and Jhalakati. Congratulations to Shanta of Binapani High School of Gopalganj for coming first in this category.

Congratulation also to Shermin Akbar of Wills Little Flower School of Kakrail, Dhaka for topping the International competition. Meherunnessa deserves a special pat for securing the second prize in both the competitions, competing from a Banani school, Bidya Niketan. Of the seven places of honour in the two competitions, believe it, five went to girls. Three of these were bagged by students from the neglected mufassil.

Quite a surprise. There is then a Bangladesh outside Dhaka! And there are schools too there! And it's time boys woke up — girls are already ahead in many areas.

COUP IN SOVIET UNION

Communists Defeated but Not Communism

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

DURING my visit to the Soviet Union in July-August 1985, just about four months after Gorbachev rose to power, I asked the tourist guide who was explaining God and faith during pre-Bolshevik period at a Kremlin church. "Do you believe in God?" She replied, "No". When we came out of the church a fellow American tourist, after having looked at the sky, asked the same tourist guide, "Is it going to rain?" She replied, "Only God knows." Exactly same seems to be the fate of communist faith in the Soviet Union. May be, you ask a Soviet citizen — do you believe in communism? He may pause a while, look around and then would say — no. But if you continue and ask who is going to take important decision on state matters, he would say — the Party, thereby meaning the Communist Party. May be, now that party would have a different name.

Boris Yeltsin who left Communist Party more than a year ago and became an anti-communist addressed the army during the last coup as "comrades-in-arms" — the traditional way a communist addresses another communist. With the victory of Socialism comradesly relations spread through society as a whole for the first time. Precisely this is the significance of the use of the salutation "comrade" in the socialist society. During the last Congress of Deputies the other day President Gorbachev kept on using the term — *Tovarishch* i.e. "comrades" while addressing the fellow Deputies. There was no objection; after all 87.6 per cent of the Deputies belonged to the now defunct Communist Party.

Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin are born and brought up in a communist society and within its totalitarian form. Indeed, the entire Soviet Union is the product of more than 70 years of communist system — a system that systematically brainwashed men, women and children. Whatever may be their reactions to the recent events, they cannot get out of the mess of this Godless society so quickly. A system that developed over such a long period of time and deliberately made so integrated cannot be changed overnight. Sudden

shock treatment would only lead to serious disintegration resulting in immense sufferings. Therefore, Gorbachev's moves, though at times appeared hesitant and indecisive, were probably the right way to change the system and the society without upheaval. However, Gorbachev shares the responsibility which he gracefully admitted as he did not take timely action despite strong warnings. Of course, the coup plotters have greatly helped Yeltsin and his associates in bringing changes which could not have been brought about even in years. But it has cost the Soviet Union a great deal not only in terms of internal economic and political chaos but also in terms of international politics and global power balance.

After the coup, the euphoria for change forced Gorbachev to become more accommodative for which he is well known; he joined the radicals. One would

interpret such an about-turn as Gorbachev's political defeat and he, being a man of principle, ought to have resigned. But he explained it by saying — resignation at such a critical juncture would be immoral. Probably he was right. His resignation at that point of time would have led to the total collapse of the Union. Indeed, he was the only unifying force which at that time worked as the pivot around which the Republican leaders, whether they liked it or not, clustered for their own survival. The disintegration of the Union would have brought total disaster for the Republics which are not at all equipped to run their own affairs. As the system had worked for over 70 years, everything was inextricably hooked up with Moscow and all decisions were taken there and the rest went for implementation almost in a mechanical way.



Tanks on a Moscow thoroughfare after the coup failed. — IAN PHOT

return from Crimean captivity, Gorbachev shrugged off the after-effects of the coup and with the support of Yeltsin and leaders of ten Republics went for adoption of the interim mechanism worked out by them. Indeed, Gorbachev used undemocratic methods to silence the Congress of Deputies, the highest legislative body and steamrolled them into voting that led to creation of the looser "Union of Sovereign States" and adoption of 3-tier interim mechanism to run the Union and also the final decision that put the Congress itself out of existence. In fact, when the Congress showed utmost reluctance to agree on the dictated terms, Yeltsin sent an ultimatum to the Congress saying he would call the Russian Parliament into session and declare independence from Moscow. Though Yeltsin's ultimatum was a firm support to Gorbachev, one could detect the seed of Russian domination in many aspects of the new Union's affairs.

The craze and the rush for independence by various Republic leaders reflected much of their personal ambitions and also the effective way to hide their past misdeeds including some leaders' direct or indirect support for the coup. The independence moves did spread like infectious disease as some said — when others are doing why should we lag behind? It seems that the general move for independence was not in conformity with the people's — verdict given only last year on the "New Union Treaty" which did not materialise due to the coup.

The West also seems wary about the wholesale independence of various Republics though they identified the Baltic states as something different from others. The British Foreign Secretary in his speech in the on-going Human Rights Conference in Moscow rightly said that the desire for independence does not necessarily mean desire for democracy and human rights. Indeed, the way the things are developing in various Republics the tensions between old communists and the radicals are growing and they may flare up any moment. Various autonomous regions within some Republics and particularly in Russian Federation are also making moves for independence indicating further disintegration of the Union. The situation would be further aggravated by ethnic rivalries. In the absence of proper central authority there would be none to control them. Unless the situation is handled very carefully, the greater parts of Europe and Asia may also face serious destabilisation. One could already detect political moves by ethnic groups towards finding religious affinities — the Christians towards Europe and Muslims towards Asia. The instability in Yugoslavia and in the Middle-East after the Gulf war could only aggravate the situation. This warrants joint moves by Europe and Asia with the support of the US. Any further attempt to divide the areas into zones of influence would further worsen the existing instability.

The author, a former Secretary and Ambassador, writes on national and international issues.

Nepal plays down 'special links' with New Delhi

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

WITH a general improvement in bilateral ties, Nepal and India hope to stabilise normal relations after signing new trade and transit treaties by the end of this year.

The signing of the agreements is one of the top priorities of the Nepali Congress government headed by Prime Minister Girma Prasad Koirala.

Mr Koirala, who has been accused by the Communists of being "pro-Indian," says his administration's first priority will be to maintain the best possible relations with both India and China. The Communists emerged as the largest opposition in parliament following the May 12 elections.

Analysts noted that Mr Koirala is slowly, but deftly, edging away from the "traditional" Nepali Congress's emphasis on a "special relationship" with India. He has not referred to the "special relations" concept since he took office in May. He has not

chanted the oft-heard "China is a friend; India is a brother" mantra.

The accords with India on trade and transit have "almost been finalised," officials said after the meetings in early August of high-level, multi-disciplinary negotiating teams under the overall guidance of the Nepal-India Joint Commission.

The Joint Commission was formally launched in 1986 when the present Indian Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, was foreign minister.

Both Nepal and India agreed to "work together" to draw up a long-term programme of economic cooperation "on a priority basis." The areas the two negotiating teams covered included trade, transit, the development of hydropower and industrialisation.

What was described as a "fruitful and useful" but unusually brief bilateral parley was skipped by the chief secre-

taries of the two governments: Nepal's Damodar Prasad Gautam and India's Naresh Chandra. This was said to be the first time that the top bureaucrats on both sides — in the fields of foreign affairs, commerce and finance — had got together in this way.

Nepali officials are optimistic about the future as both sides have agreed to "make better use of the existing machinery" so as to avoid aggravating problems on the one hand and to consolidate areas of agreement on the other. "India is in a generous mood," one Nepali official who took part in the meeting said. The decision to activate the Joint Commission has been

welcomed by India. "It is a welcome step," said Mr Chandra. There were "far more hopeful signs of accelerated progress on many projects of common interests."

After the second round of talks, this the two governments are expected to formally sign new trade and transit treaties and an agreement to control unauthorised trade (smuggling) along the 1,750 kilometre open border.

An accord on the multiple use of water resources for mutual benefit is also being negotiated.

Various subcommittees under the Joint Commission, at the secretary and expert levels, had already begun

working to give a fresh impetus to bilateral cooperation which hit its lowest ebb after India refused to extend trade and transit treaties when they terminated in March 1989.

The interim prime minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, visited New Delhi in June 1990 and restored normal ties between the two neighbours by persuading the Indian government to restore the status quo ante.

There is a discernible trend towards a more even-handed foreign policy projection vis-a-vis the strategic Himalayan kingdom's two most important neighbours: India and China.

Most significant has been Prime Minister Koirala's stress on the factors of "continuity" in Nepal's foreign relations, with the emphasis on the "immutability" of geographical links not only with India but also with China.

"I have no misgivings or confusion about the relation-

ship between Nepal and China," Mr Koirala told a gathering of the Nepal-China Friendship Association. Recently, he also assured Chinese Ambassador Le Debiao that Nepal would never go against the national interest of China.

Such a conscious distancing from "special relations" towards "equidistance" is the result of a new awareness on part of the ruling party that China cannot be wished away.

"It makes sound political sense to cultivate warm ties with a China that is the chief ideological ally of the Communists, its main political foe," says Manu Ranjan Josse, Nepal's former deputy resident representative at the United Nations in New York.

How India reacts to this shift will become clearer as the negotiations proceed. But so far there has been no sign of an adverse response. — *Depthnews Asia*

Cambodia's Hidden Trauma

Living in a society that has few ways of dealing with psychological problems, Cambodian women traumatised by the brutal Khmer Rouge regime have quite simply gone mad. Philip Smucker of IPS reports, from Lovea Em, Cambodia.

On the lawn in front of the Communist Party headquarters in this quaint district capital by the Mekong River stand two statues of Cambodian model workers.

The man and woman, depicted as marching diligently along the path to development, have been violently attacked — both are missing an arm.

The statues' deaement is a manifestation of a facet of Cambodia's trauma and suffering that the world hardly knows about. The statues had been assaulted by Lovea Em's "Crazy Lady," Tin Sorn, a character of which almost every Cambodian town has one. They are victims of the past who have nowhere to turn to in a society that has few ways of dealing with trauma and psychological problems.

By day, Tin Sorn can be found walking half-naked along the muddy banks of the Mekong stealing chickens and shirts of clotheslines.

Like thousands of others who lost family members to famine and genocide during the brutal rule of the Khmer

Rouge, Tin Sorn, now over 60, will never recover from her loss.

"We have 10 families in this district that have women who have gone mad," said Sor Salim, head of the women's association here.

This number does not include those suffering from less visible forms of mental illness.

"During the reign of terror, many women were beaten severely in the head, but they did not die," said Salim. Tin Sorn's husband and son were killed when she was pregnant. She still imagines they will return one day. In one of her anguished fits, she attacked the statues and threw herself at their feet, crying, "my father, my son, where have you gone?"

Villagers in Lovea Em treat Tin Sorn with a great deal of tolerance, but no one has time to listen to her tales of woe. Almost everyone over the age of 25 in Cambodia has a horror story to tell about their own

predicament between 1975 and 1978 when nearly one million countrymen died from execution, torture and starvation.

In many district, women head over 40 per cent of Cambodian families due to the death of husbands.

Buddhist tradition, ravaged by the extreme Maoism of Cambodia's recent past, has few built-in mechanisms for comforting and reassuring those who have lost so much.

Cambodians believe that a person's fate is the result of his or her behaviour in past lives. One can do little but grin

and bear the pain of one's suffering and hope for a better life in the future.

Medical doctors and social workers say that this notion is the root cause of the rabid and often unexplained outbursts of violence that have become common occurrences since the late 1970's.

"There has been a fundamental change, it is much more violent, murders are not carried out in a standard manner," said Patty Sewlow who works with the American Refugee Committee.

"One woman I know erupts in fits of anger every few

months," said another social worker. "She just starts attacking and screaming at anyone near her. She has been known to tear at their flesh with her teeth and begin sucking blood."

Sewlow added that beyond the city limits, there is "frighteningly low level of compassion". They cannot tell their own people of what they have been through, the social worker said.

With assistance to Cambodia still held up because of glitches in the peace negotiations, international aid agencies can do little to relieve the situation which they say grows worse by the day.

In Lovea Em, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) tries to assist widows like Tin Sorn by donating weaving materials so they can earn some cash to feed their families. Basic health care is also a priority of UNICEF funding.

But beyond these simple assistance, the women must fend for themselves, giving rise to the usual manifestations of grief and frustration.

"The trauma that Cambodia must recover from as a nation is unique, said Ros Serey, a Cambodian social worker. "Cambodians have suffered some of the most severe social controls ever devised by man."

The most common means of dealing with the past is simply to seek escape through alcohol and pleasure outside the family unit.

Prostitution is on the rise in major towns, according to government officials, who estimate that even small villages now have a few prostitutes.

"When I first saw this, I was disgusted, but the more I think about it, I understand that the Cambodians have to dance and drink to keep from going crazy or face the hard truth," said a Western social worker who did not want to be named. "There is national shame that exists about the killing of so many countrymen by fellow Cambodians."

IN THE EDITOR

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

The weekly holiday
Sir, since the issue has been re-opened in your Letters column even after the authorities recently changed the office timings to early morning hours. Leaving the mid-afternoon free for the employees, attention may be drawn to certain implications of the existing choice of Friday as the weekly holiday.
The policy makers who made the choice several years ago cannot easily get the benefit of the doubt. The male excuse of imitating some other

while we say our prayers, and it does not need a full Friday to offer the Jumma prayer; and waiting for three days (Fri., Sat. and Sunday) to resume business transactions, especially at international level. With the current office timings, Saturday will also be a "half day", in contrast to the 5-day week observed in many countries. The developing countries cannot afford a 5-day week.

The world's largest Islamic country (which is not Bangladesh) work on Friday; as well as Malaysia, officially an Islamic republic, and one of the most advanced in the Muslim world.

We have to examine and watch carefully the subjective trends in national policy-making process, mostly imposed by autocratic leaderships. The new government might like to review the position. Snap decisions spell disaster in our society, hence the ground may be prepared for quite some time before making any formal announcement, if any change be contemplated.

On the whole, the advantage of Sunday outweighs Friday — maximum good to the members of maximum people; specially to those who like to be active, and work and deliver. We have to work doubly hard, to catch up with the fast pace of modern life.
Vox Populi

Enjoying a stage play
Sir, on account of the closure of Dhaka University and other educational institutions, when, we, the students are doing nothing but wasting our valuable time and saturating it with boredom and frustrations, my friends and I decided to watch a play at the Mahla

Samity Mancho. It must, however, be mentioned, that I, personally, am not interested in watching stage plays and therefore, never got along to watch any one of them before.

Anyway, the drama, we went to, was called "Bichehu" — a translated version of French dramatist, Moliere's "That Scoundrel, Acapain", performed by the theatre-group "Natyog Kendro". I must admit that I was very much surprised and overwhelmed by their presentation which not only gave us an hour-and-a-half of sheer delight, but also entertained us to an extent that was beyond our expectations. Performances of all the actors and actresses were excellent, especially of the one who played the role of "Yusuf" or "Bichehu". Also, as it was a comedy, their comical histrionics were highly commend-

able — in contrast to the instances of vain attempts to make people laugh, we sometimes endure in movies, and TV dramas.

Hats off to you, actors and organizers of "Bichehu", and hoping that there will be frequent repetitions of these brilliant performances.

In this connection, I would also like to call the attention of the authorities of Mahila Samity and Guide House to modernise their auditoriums, particularly equip them with greater number of fans and ventilation systems. This would obviously make the auditorium less claustrophobic, and the people who go there to relax and ease off the day's labour and enjoy the laudable performances in a more comfortable manner.

Tasneem Zaman
Dharmordit, Dhaka.