

## DOWN TO EARTH

### Woes of telephone subscribers

By Khalilur Rahman

An overseas private telephone call made from one part of the metropolis to London was recorded in favour of Bangabhaban, the official residence of the President of Bangladesh. The Chief Executive of the state was thus made liable by the telephone department to pay the bill for an unknown private call.

In another case, wife of a telephone department clerk, Mrs. Zerina Mondal got a domestic telephone connection even without applying for it in writing.

These are two cases among too many events of gross irregularities contained in a report submitted to the government long ago by the then cabinet secretary and now Commerce Minister, Mr. M. Keramat Ali on the overall performance of the telephone department. Mr. Ali was appointed head of an enquiry committee to probe into various allegations by the telephone subscribers and other quarters.

Many years have passed since the enquiry committee report was received by the government, but the country's nearly two lakh telephone subscribers including one lakh in Dhaka city are yet to get a smooth and satisfactory service from the concerned authority. Of the total number of clientele only about 15,000 subscribers with digital telephone connections have less complaints. Introduced in January last year, the digital telephone facilities are confined to Dhaka city only. The city limits extend from Narayanganj district town to Uttara.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mr. M.M. Hossain, an executive of a corporation who intends to float a welfare association for the telephone subscribers in the city said the overbilling still remains a nightmare for the majority of the subscribers. He alleged that a section of the unscrupulous employees of the telephone department is responsible for the present sufferings of the general subscribers. These staff maintain a group of dishonest subscribers in various localities of the city and get regular commission from them in exchange of 'special treatment'.

Elaborating special privileges extended to the particular group of subscribers, Mr. Hossain said that a 'favoured client' is allowed to make

'unlimited' number of calls, both local or long distance under nation wide dialling (NWD) system, at a more or less fixed monthly rate. Under NWD, 12 to 18 local calls are recorded each minute depending on the measure of distance. But this type of client gets monthly bill which does not exceed the 'negotiated rate'. But all his excess calls are evenly distributed in the telephone connection of other subscribers, Mr. Hossain stated. He even offered me to accompany him to one such 'favoured client' at Nawabpur from where telephone calls can be made to any district under direct dialling. There will be no charge as the subscriber has to pay telephone bill at a fixed rate. Whether he makes any call or not the subscriber must pay the amount. So he remains always ready to entertain any friend wishing to make calls within the city or to other districts directly, Mr. Hossain added.

Mr. Hossain who has been keenly following the performance of overall telephone system in the city and watching the movement of as many telephone staff and subscribers as possible for the last 25 years, told The Daily Star that it is a common phenomenon when one hears a mild stroke in one's set and immediately on picking up the receiver, finds the connection dead. Most often this happens early morning and by evening the dead set returns to life with a similar stroke although no complaint is lodged with the telephone office. The whole day, this line is diverted for use by others, of course, at the cost of the subscribers' hard earned money. The subscriber will invariably get an inflated bill after the month is over. The telephone department will not listen to the subscribers' complaint that the calls were wrongly recorded. Mr. Hossain pointed out. He also said that there are innumerable cases in which subscribers get regular monthly bills showing large number of calls although their sets remained totally dead for long, long time.

In case of written complaints to the concerned authority often a subscriber gets a printed questionnaire by post. The complainant is asked to submit the proforma after

filling in. Some of the questions relate to the location of the set whether in the bedroom or in the drawing room. Whether there was any function during the period of complaint or whether the subscriber maintains a log book for registering the calls, Mr. Hossain told me.

Mr. Hossain further informed that most often a complainant is served with a set reply that the bill has been found to be correct on examination. The subscriber is asked to pay the bill to avoid disconnection. On rare occasion a complainant gets a revised bill made on the basis of review of calls during the last six months from the period of complaint. This revision is not done more than twice in a year, Mr. Hossain said.

A disgruntled subscriber said that the revision is nothing but an eyewash. In case of a revision, the bill for the next month is invariably inflated than the revised one, the subscriber complained.

Another aggrieved subscriber told The Daily Star that during the last 12 years he has paid not less than taka 70,000 for his domestic set as additional amount by way of over-billing. Now he wants no set at his house.

This subscriber is a chief accountant of a private company. He told The Daily Star that telephone men approached him immediately after installation of the set at his residence for a monthly 'honourarium' and in return assured him of a fixed bill per month irrespective of the volume of the calls. They returned disappointed following a curt reply from him. 'Since then I never got peace with my set. I have meticulously kept the record of calls but could never convince the department that there is overbilling, he commented painfully.

When contacted, a senior official of the telephone department said that the question of overbilling did not arise as there was no enmity between the subscribers and the staff. 'No official of the department can gain individually by charging extra money from a subscriber because the revenue earning is deposited with the government treasury', he asserted.



Violent Jatiya Party processionists damaging a bus at the Purana Paltan crossing on Thursday.

JP

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None claimed responsibility of throwing the rickshaw.

The protesters kicked the vehicles, hit them with sticks and pelted stones at them. Panic gripped the area as the scared passers-by ran for cover.

A minor scuffle also occurred between the processionists and the police when the protesters attempted to damage a BRIC bus.

The procession came under police attack when it returned to Paltan crossing from the National Sports Control Board. Then the procession was scattered by police but the demonstrators gathered again in front of the Press Club where it dispersed after a rally.

JP Vice-President Mahabubul Huq Dolon while addressing the rally alleged that the judgement on Ershad's case was "unfair and politically motivated." Several party MPs and leaders were present in the rally.

A large number of women led by ex-MP Amina Bari also took part in the procession.

Later police filed separate cases against the persons arrested. The arrested are Faruq Ahmed, Moynul Hoq and Delwar Hossain. The Jatiya Party has called for a country wide demonstration on June 19 to demand release of Ershad.

The decision came at a Central Executive Committee meeting of the party Thursday which also strongly condemned the police action on a party procession. The meeting also decided for a boycott of the Jatiya Sangsad session on June 15 by JP MPs.

## Chambers reaction

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The meeting was presided over by Akram Hossain, the president of the federation.

The meeting observed, industrialisation was essential for strengthening the national economy and said there was no measure in the budget for additional rebate for import of capital machineries. FBCCI mentioned that no special facilities were provided in the budget for the import of essential raw materials. Moreover duties were imposed on all the raw materials.

FBCCI also noted that industrialisation would be hampered due to reduction of tax holiday period from 2000 to 1995, reduction of investment allowance from Tk two lakh to one lakh, proposal for imposition of new taxes on the dividends of public limited companies and withdrawal of tax rebate on the dividends of private limited companies.

FBCCI said it favoured withdrawal of subsidy from revenue head in principle, but it would

Crash programme to remove waterlogging

A meeting of the inter-departmental coordination committee on 'removal of waterlogging in the city caused by rains' held here Thursday decided to excavate the Segunbagicha, Paribagh and Shahjahanpur canals under a crash programme to remove waterlogging, reports BSS.

The meeting also decided to excavate seven other canals under this programme and properly clean the city drains.

support subsidies for agricultural inputs for making the country self-sufficient in food.

About increased duties on gas at the rate of five per cent, FBCCI feared that it would further increase the power tariff which would hamper industrialisation.

FBCCI however appreciated the reduction of duties on the engines of auto-rickshaws and CI sheets and said this measure would benefit common people.

MCCI

Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) termed the new budget as 'people-oriented' and welcomed various proposals to reduce duties and taxes. However, the Chamber felt that there should have been adequate measures for encouraging investments.

Dhaka Chamber The Board of Directors of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) reviewed the budget at a meeting with Mahabubur Rahman, president of the Chamber, in the chair.

In his initial reaction to the budget, Mahabubur Rahman said the Finance Minister tried to present a real picture of the country's overall situation.

Narayanganj Chamber

Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NCCI) hailed the proposed budget terming it as 'balanced' and 'pragmatic.' An executive committee meeting of NCCI said the proposed budget was no doubt praiseworthy since it was balanced and realistic. NCCI president Alhaj Mohammad Fazlur Rahman chaired the meeting.

## The Midnight File

### N Korea agrees to N-safeguards

VIENNA, June 13: North Korea said Thursday it was ready to sign an agreement under which it would be obligated to submit its nuclear facilities to international inspection. In a statement to the 35-nation Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, special representative Jin-Chung Guk said the agreement would be ready by September, reports AP.

### Lankan troops go on rampage: 166 killed

COLOMBO, June 13: At least 166 Tamil civilians including women and children were massacred by rampaging Sri Lankan security forces in eastern Sri Lanka after two soldiers were blown in a landmine explosion set off by the LTTE militants in the area of Kokkadicholai, Tamil leaders charged today. People were 'mercilessly shot and hacked to death', said Parasingham Joseph, MP, of the moderate TULF from Batticaloa, reports PTI.

### Yeltsin wins absolute majority

MOSCOW, June 13: Radical leader Boris Yeltsin won an absolute majority in the Russian presidential election. Yeltsin won about 55 per cent of the vote, according to initial official results, the Chairman of the Electoral Commission Vasily Kazakhov announced. Voter turnout was about 70 per cent, the Commission said, reports AFP.

### Picasso's paintings stolen

ZURICH(Switzerland), June 13: Two pictures by Pablo Picasso, estimated to be worth a combined 61 million Swiss francs (42 million dollars), were stolen from a Zurich art gallery, police said Thursday. They were looking for three middle-aged suspects, including two men speaking, accented English and a Swiss. The three visited the gallery Tuesday, posing as potential buyers of other objects at display in the gallery, reports AP.

## Opposition

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The opposition came to know about the ruling BNP's decision on form of government through newspaper reports, he added.

The meeting was attended, among others, by Jamaat leader Moulana Abdus Sobhan, Jatiya Party leader Monirul Haque, Baksal leader Mohiuddin Ahmed, Workers Party leader Rashed Khan Menon, JSD leader Shahjahan Straj, CPB leader Shamsuddoha, Islami Otkya Jote leader Moulana Obaiddul Haque, Gonotantri Parti leader Suranjit Sengupta, NAP leader Abdul Hafiz, and independent MP Nurul Islam Moni. NDP leader Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury could not attend the meeting due to his pre-occupation.

Mohammad Nasim said that the opposition MPs were united in favour of a 'pure' parliamentary form of government. He said that the Jatiya Party representative in the meeting also said that the Jatiya Party would not oppose the bill to be moved for transition to the parliamentary system although their party stood for retaining the presidential system.

Replying to a question he said that the Awami League had been demanding parliamentary form of government for a long time and the party had already notified a bill in this connection which was duly passed by the private members scrutiny committee. He said that the bill would be

introduced to Parliament in due time.

He, however, said that the AL wanted a bill in this regard from the ruling party. Asked whether they would support the bill to be introduced by the BNP, he said they had not yet seen the bill.

Earlier, the Awami League parliamentary party in a separate meeting with party chief Sheikh Hasina in the chair also reviewed the national budget. After the meeting Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdus Samad Azad, who notified the AL's bill to parliament said that the Awami League would bring the bill next Thursday. The Awami League would move the bill at least to put it on record, he added.

UNB adds: the meeting also held detailed discussion on the just-announced national budget. 'It's full of jugglery of figures,' the opposition observed. The direct and indirect tax burdens will badly affect low-income and middle class groups. The government resorted to obscurity in case of fresh taxation 'to bluff the people' while the rich and business community were exempted from new fiscal measures.

The speakers also alleged some important documents on sectorwise taxation were not supplied with budget papers to parliament members.

Earlier, Awami League Parliamentary Party reviewed the new national budget at its meeting with Sheikh Hasina in the chair.

## Opposition parties

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factories, he added. The city unit of Jamaat-e-Islami held a rally at the northern gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque on Thursday protesting the withdrawal of subsidy from the agriculture and food sectors in the proposed national budget for the fiscal 1991-92.

## Finland

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The Ambassador on behalf of the people and government of Finland thanked the democratic government of Bangladesh and its people for creation of a democratic atmosphere.

He hoped democracy would be consolidated under the able leadership of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia.

The Ambassador expressed satisfaction over the post-cyclone relief and rehabilitation activities undertaken by the government.

He also offered an invitation to the Prime Minister to visit Finland.

Begum Zia thanked the envoy for his country's desire for extending cooperation to the democratically elected government.

## Reopening of Calico Cotton Mills urged

By Staff Correspondent

Fortyfive opposition members of parliament Thursday demanded reopening of 'Calico Cotton Mills' at Pabna before the coming Eid-ul-Azha.

The MPs in a joint statement said the mills authorities, following demand from different quarters, withdrew the lay-off, ordered earlier, and asked the workers to resume duties from June 1. But the district administration, acting upon an instruction from the textile ministry, asked the mills authorities to continue the lay-off.

## JCD blames BCL for Runu's death

Jatyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) at a rally on the Dhaka University campus on Thursday protested the 'brutal' killing of its leader Jafar Islam Runu, reports UNB.

The speakers blamed pro-Awami League Chhatra League for the daylight killing at Mohammadpur in the city Wednesday morning.

Runu, Vice-President of the Mohammadpur thana unit of JCD, was called out from his residence and killed by some unknown miscreants at the Nurjahan Road colony.

The rally, addressed by JCD's Dhaka University unit President Habibul Nabi Sohel, demanded immediate arrest and trial of those responsible for the murder of the leader of ruling BNP's student wing.

Our Staff Correspondent adds: No further arrest was made on Thursday in connection with the murder of Runu.

Police took one shopkeeper Ajjullah, 35, and Reazul Karim alias Amir into remand for 4 days for interrogation on Wednesday.

See also an editorial

CU

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Shibir and discussed means of restoring law and order and bringing back academic atmosphere on the troubled campus.

Meeting sources said conflicting opinions were given by the feuding teacher and student groups at the meetings regarding Vice-Chancellor Prof Alamgir Mohammad Strajuddin.

Meanwhile, campus sources said, APSU supporters continued its stage of the university on the fifth day today, cutting telephone, water and gas lines to the university halls.

They also called for a half-day hartal in greater Chittagong on Sunday in protest against what they said armed terrorism on the campus by the Islami Chhatra Shibir.

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## 'Budget aims at self-reliance'

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level, would be possible if more development programmes and projects would be prepared.

Such programmes could be supported by the block allocation of Taka 600 crore, as unexpected expenditure, under the proposed revenue budget for 1991-92, he added.

The Minister stressed the need for a competitive and market-oriented economy with a vibrant private sector to ensure greater dynamism and competition in the economy for its sustained growth. The 'command' economic structure has broken down in almost all corners of the globe, he said.

Terming rampant corruption and economic mismanagement as the causes of economic stagnation in the eighties, he felt that a competitive private sector with the least controls and interventionist role by the government could provide the best guarantees against corruption.

About the new fiscal measures for tax holidays, he said that the period for tax holidays has been proposed to be shortened by five years from 2000 to 1995.

Last year, the period was arbitrarily enhanced for ten years up to 2000 in violation of the practices, since the early sixties, to allow such tax holidays for five years and extend the period after necessary reviews, he added.

'No democratic government can make longer term commitments because, under democracy, no party can think of remaining in power perpetually,' he noted.

About the enhancement of customs duty on soyabean oil, he said that the rates were proposed to be raised for rationalisation and uniformity under the on-going trade reforms programme. The revenue gains will be marginal as a result, he contended.

About the hikes in duty rates for ball point ink, he said that the increase was proposed to remove distortions in duty rates on imports of ball point ink and ordinary printing ink. There have been some abuses of the concessionary rates of duty on import of ball point ink, he added while noting that the rates on both items were proposed under the budget for 1991-92 to be a uni-

form one.

He said that the new fiscal proposals in areas of dairy farming were aimed at plugging the holes in tax administration under the existing measures in the sector.

Replying to a question about the quantum of additional financing needs under the new fiscal measures to meet the deficit in the overall budgetary operations, the Finance Minister said that financing by new fiscal measures would involve Taka 554.17 crore.

The amount of additional revenues under the proposed budget has however been shown at Taka 700 crore, he added.

Explaining the reason for this, he said that the amount of additional revenues was estimated to be higher than the expected budgetary deficit, as a caution against any shortfall in revenue collections. If there is no shortfall, development expenditure will rise to higher levels in 1991-92, he added.

He said that the next tax proposals under the budget were for mobilisation of only Taka 250 crore. The rest of the 450 crore Taka would come through tax reforms, he added.

The excerpts of the Minister's replies to different questions at the press conference are as follows:

Q: Mr Minister, in your budget speech, you proposed cutting the size of the government. In what ways, are you planning to do so?

A: Yes, we are planning to reduce the size of the government. We must cut the size of many public sector enterprises where redundant workforce is eating into the vitals of the national exchequer. We can't afford to maintain additional manpower because our resources are very limited. We have already directed cutting the size of upazila structures. Upazila courts are being withdrawn. Only essential structures involved in rural development, education and health will be retained at the upazila level. Many other public sector enterprises like the Board of Investment and the Comptroller of Capital Issues will be trimmed.

Q: Are you going to implement the Pay Commission report?

A: The Pay Commission, set up by the Ershad government,

has submitted its report to us. We are studying the report. We have to be very cautious and conservative in compensation policy and its impact. We are in favour of restraining the current expenditure and keeping prices of essential commodities under control. This does not mean that we will not go for an upward revision of the salary structures. It must be noted that one-third of our revenue budget is accounted for by payment of salaries. But we can't at the same time be oblivious to the recommendations of the Pay Commission. Already 10 per cent Dearness Allowance (DA) has been given. In the context of prevailing constraints, we have to think more seriously about price stability.

Q: Do you have any figure on black money in the economy? Is your government taking steps to contain the influence of black money and curb smuggling?

A: I must appreciate the role of journalists and the media in directing the government in its policy lapses. We have already taken a number of steps to check smuggling. You know, it's impossible to eliminate smuggling in its totality. It's a worldwide vice. During Dr Wahidul Haque's tenure as Finance Minister, there was severe leakage of foreign exchange and Letters of Credit (LCs) were opened for pulses which were smuggled to neighbouring countries. What is needed is the removal of tariff economic distortions.

We must take into account the duty structure in neighbouring countries while setting out our fiscal policies. We must make efforts to conserve our precious foreign exchange.

On black money, there is no definite figure. This is termed as untaxed money. Black money is there in all countries in the world. Through tax reforms, an additional revenue of Taka 200 crore will be earned by plugging the notes in tax administration.

Q: Are you going for privatisation of big public sector enterprises like railway, jute etc?

A: Privatisation is possible only in commercially viable sectors. Are any one of you ready to buy railways, BADC or Jute Corporation? Private parties will take those units from which they will be able to

earn profits. We have already taken a deregulated stance on the economy but it's not possible to sustain the burden of huge losses in those sectors. There will be discussions at the national level on these losing concerns. You have to make short-term sacrifices for long-term benefits.

Q: What steps are you taking to eliminate corruption? We have heard that many big defaulters have taken refuge in neighbouring countries and threatening retaliatory action. How are you going to tackle them?

A: It's not an easy job to eliminate corruption. I have also been warned quite a number of times. I have repeatedly said that corruption must be eliminated through a set of principles. I think we have already made our society deregulation-oriented. We have liberalised our economy. We will never allow it to be run by a coterie. This will be supported by administrative and legal measures unless this is compelling. Everyone has to pay the defaulting loans, none will be able to escape. But genuine problems of the defaulters will also be scrutinised.

Q: Expenditure on the presidential secretariat has been reduced while that of the defence budget has been raised. Would you comment?

A: Yes, we have trimmed the expenditure of the president's secretariat to avoid duplication. Many employees of the president's secretariat have already been transferred to the Bangladesh secretariat. We cannot afford to run an 'Islamabad-type' super secretariat. There will be no need for this in the future. Defence expenditure has been raised by Tk 50 crore, but this is in conformity with the inflationary trend. This is not a phenomenal rise.

Q: Is your government publishing a White Paper on the corruption of the past government as committed by the BNP before the election?

A: Immediately after taking power, the BNP government was faced with many problems like tackling the aftermath of the severe cyclone, floods in Sylhet etc. My ministry is not however involved in preparing the White Paper.

See also an editorial