

Serve and be Accountable

The simultaneous promotion of 654 government officers in the top strata of the country's civil administration, announced last Sunday, was, by any standard, an extraordinary event. But, as is often the case in a country like ours where scepticism has almost become a second nature, an extraordinary event is liable to raise a lot of eyebrows. This is a healthy sort of scepticism, since it denotes an unwillingness to take every official version of events, especially extraordinary ones, at face value.

However, in the case of these promotions in the Secretariat, the causes for doubt are surely outweighed by reasons to be relieved. It is no secret that discontent among the ranks of the Civil Service has been building up for sometime. But, being officers of the state, these aggrieved people have had to keep their grievances bottled-up, leading to increasing levels of frustration and a corresponding decline in the efficiency of their work. Reportedly, so many genuine cases for promotion had been held up that many had begun to regard the Civil Service as a dead-end job with little scope for career progress.

The government now hopes—and we join it in its belief that the hope is not misplaced—that these promotions and others that are sure to follow, will convince the officers of its sincerity in bringing back a sense of fairplay and justice to the Service.

That, however, can only partly contribute to the general overhauling and improvement of our civil administration. The Civil Service has perhaps been the most privileged section of the community since the time of British rule. Over the decades, the service has been able to exercise enormous power without much in the way of accountability, and grown into a virtual class on its own with a built-in ability to perpetuate its position regardless of the colours of its political masters. The newly-restored democratic order needs to look into ways to tackle this, less acceptable aspect of the bureaucracy.

What the government now ought to do, having made its own sincerity clear to the service, is bring about a fundamental change of attitude. After 20 years of independence, a shedding of all vestiges of colonialism is now imperative, and Civil Service officers have to be re-oriented to regard themselves more as public servants, rather than as government officials or a special caste. In order to make the word "service" meaningful and relevant to the public at large, the administration ought to be made more dynamic, efficient and productive. The government should now follow up its promotion move by setting up a committee to study and recommend ways on how office work could be speeded up, thus reducing red tape and scope for corruption.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the government is how to make all services of the state accountable to the public through parliament and elected local bodies. At present, no mechanism exists through which officials could be taken to task or investigated by the representatives of the people.

The government should give serious thought to the issue and take it up on the floor of the Jatiya Sangsad at an opportune moment. We could take lessons from practices in other democratic countries and set up a Parliamentary Standing Committee, with the power to summon and question officials, including those of the ministries of defence and foreign affairs. In addition, appointments of Secretaries and Additional Secretaries, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, and chiefs of the armed forces could be made subject to approval by the same committee. Naturally, the committee ought to be an all-party one, with a demonstrated ability to conduct a non-partisan line of enquiry. For the sake of transparency, all its hearings should be held in public except where questions of national security are involved.

Sea Pollution and Our Environment

The Bay of Bengal seems to have turned into a happy dumping ground of harmful industrial wastes and other pollutants for the foreign ships. The latest such incident involves the 40-mile oil slick caused by spill from a crude oil tanker. Another report carried in a Bangla daily has it that about 100 tons of waste matters were jettisoned from foreign ships at Mongla Port in the last three months alone. Needless to say that foreign ships have been doing this in contravention of national and international laws. More, their contribution to environmental degradation is a moral crime.

Not surprisingly, reaction to the dumping issue had been sharp and vociferous from the more conscious quarters. Both immediate and long-term impacts of this illegal practice are going to prove devastating for the environment of this country in particular and that of the region in general. However, the sea pollution is global so far as its deleterious impacts are concerned. In this respect, the damage being wrought to the unique Sunderbans mangroves is already heavy and fish resources in the Bay of Bengal are also sending SOS for sometime now. And the Sunderbans is more of a world heritage than just a forest.

Environmentalists have rightly demanded that the Sunderbans be declared as a world heritage. According to them, the flora and fauna of the forest had been severely affected by the large oil spill of 1989. This time, they fear, the spill may deal a death blow to the already gravely wounded Sunderbans. And who does not know that life in the coastal belt of the country is simply unimaginable without the Sunderbans that takes in the first onslaught of any major cyclonic storm or tidal bore.

Admittedly, the release of harmful substances from ships is not the only factor that contributes to the degradation of the mangroves and diseases of fish; but it certainly is a major cause of the havoc. So, drastic measures have to be taken to plug the source of pollution. First, the ramshackle ships and tankers that have proved to be a villain by profusely contributing to the oilspill in our territorial waters should be banned, once for all, from entering our ports or water area. Second, strict regulations should be enforced in controlling the dumping of harmful matters in our waters. As for the oil slick that now poses a great danger to our environment, the offending party should be made to pay for the damage—even if it is partially. Since Bangladesh will have to import expertise and equipment from abroad to deal with the problem, international help and co-operation will be most welcome.

For India There's No Go from Self-reliance

MAYBE this is what the government means by foreign investment. World famous brands of chocolate, soft-drink, breakfast cereal and fast food are about to hit the Indian market. If the applications received from abroad are any guide, there will be not only a surfeit of such goods but also of consumer durables like washing machine, refrigerator, automobile and colour TV.

This was precisely the apprehension which the critics had expressed when the policy of liberalisation was initiated. They had warned that the multinationals were interested mainly in the 150 million Indians, who had the purchasing power, and would not invest in power, transport or machinery. The fear may well prove wrong but until foreign capital flows to hi-tech fields, the central government may find it hard to explain why. Already the general impression is that the new economic policy is at the behest of outsiders.

New Delhi should have debarred foreign investors from producing consumer as well as durable goods. Over the years, India has developed the expertise in these fields. The brand names may not be catchy but the products are in no way inferior. Now the scarce foreign exchange may be frittered away in the shape of profits transferred from the goods which the country is competent to produce.

Probably the government had no choice. With practically total dependence on industrialised countries for loans to

stay solvent in the world's eyes, New Delhi has to agree to what they ask it to do. In fact, the proposals by Arthur Dunkel, director general of GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariff) give a loud and clear message. What they boil down to is a flat by foreign investors that they will be free to invest in any field and on any product of their liking.

Dunkel Proposals

The Dunkel proposals, indeed, are directed against the Third World countries, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. So far the GATT has governed such aspects of trade, law and procedure as have impinged on the transactions at the international borders. What happens within the borders of a country has been its own business. Now the GATT's scope is sought to be widened so as to cover the policies and transactions falling within the domain of a sovereign nation. In other words, developed countries will come to have a say in trade, industrial or fiscal policies of the Third World. If it does not comply with their wishes, it may be chastised.

Take for instance, textiles where the developing countries have better competitiveness. The GATT has listed it among the goods which are guaranteed entry into the markets of industrialised nations. Now the proposal is to get away from the commitment and to link with exports of poor nations with the concessions they grant at the bidding of developed countries in the fields of investment, services, banking, insurance, etc.

The logic is understandable but impossible to accept. Industrialised countries, particularly the US, have been losing their competitive edge in manufacturing. They are particular in retaining their old monopolistic position on technology and knowledge. They have, therefore, decided to change the rule of the game unilaterally. They want a new instrument of international law to strengthen their hold on the international economic order.

Everything in One Basket

The Dunkel proposals put everything in one basket—trade in goods, regulations re-

lated costs for hi-tech products. Until the sixties, many European states had the same provisions which India has today. Yet our patent law is now considered outlandish, a sort of piracy. No field will be outside the purview of patentability, except giving birth to babies.

If we accept the Dunkel proposals we will bind ourselves to a discipline of reducing or eliminating export subsidies such as reimbursement of losses on sugar exports. Even the procurement price for foodgrains will not be exempt. Atomic energy and space technology will also have to abide by the discipline.

Between the Lines

Kuldip Nayar

The government did well in appointing a cabinet subcommittee to discuss the matter with all political parties. On the response depends India's economic independence and the determination not to dilute self-reliance. But New Delhi's resolve is waning. There are moves for a compromise on the fundamentals.

Ethos of Swadeshi

India can still retrieve some ground by signing three protocols—one each for trade in goods, trade in services and the intellectual property protection, without the provision for retaliation. But it requires grit and spirit to fight back. It also demands the leadership to marshal the nation behind the

ethos of swadeshi. None can find fault with the efforts to demolish the raj of permit, licence and quota. But it does not mean that foreign investment is welcome for the production of consumer and durable goods. Once a nation gives in on its basic policy, there is no stopping.

The way New Delhi has so far overlooked the violations by multinationals holds little promise for strictness in the future. For example, not even one multinational has been punished for not fulfilling its export obligation, which it promised at the time of getting permission to operate in India. Now the multinationals do not even export the items they produce; they export goods manufactured by others. Some multinationals do not even sell products in the next-door Gulf and allow their distant parent companies in the UK and elsewhere to operate. No wonder, India's imports exceed its exports by three to four billion dollars.

The government has adopted the line of least resistance. Foreign investors have been able to get far more concessions than the country's own entrepreneurs. It is an open secret that some donor countries have used pressure behind-the-scenes to make the government bend in favour of certain multinationals. Had this happened in the essential sector, it would not have mattered much? The concessions given are for the products, which will affect our small and medium industries.

True, for long time, the Indian industry has enjoyed a sheltered market. Some competition will do it good. The tax deduction, which it has been getting, in the name of research and development may now be used for the purpose it has been given. More indignously developed products may come in the market. But it is a matter of national let-down that out of the 13,000 industrial units of different types, India has not even 3,000 that can claim to have come up without one or the other type of foreign collaboration. If the Indians abroad are among the best of scientists and inventors, why the same talent does not perk in the country?

There is no go from self-reliance. This does not mean shutting out the new or modern technology. But this does mean the stopping of foreign borrowing, which has already crossed the figure of \$71 billion. India spends Rs. 17,000 crore on defence and Rs. 42,000 crore on subsidies, most of which go towards transport, electricity and higher education. No viable case for self-reliance can be built if the defence and the subsidies are to continue on this high scale. Apparently, the government has some other ideas; it is increasing foreign exchange burden by importing one million tonne of wheat, which will cost roughly Rs. 8 a kilo. Why not give more price to Indian farmers, who will be willing to bring out all the produce that they have stocked? From India's point of view it will still be cheaper.

Earth Summit

Recovery Not Discovery is Campaigner's Advice

Kelly Haggart and Deniel Nelson write from London

AMONG the growing number of people who fear that the forthcoming Earth Summit might do more harm than good is Darrell Posey, a campaigner for the rights of the world's 250 million indigenous peoples.

The June 1-12 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, says Posey, president of the International Society of Ethnobiology, is unnecessarily trying to 'discover' how to save the world from environmental disaster.

It is unnecessary, he argues, because ways of maintaining biodiversity and living sustainably are already known and practised by indigenous peoples. Instead, the Summitters should 'recognise and empower indigenous and traditional peoples, whose very existence is being destroyed by existing models of development.'

Yet such peoples have only a small place in the official meetings, because most governments regard them as administratively inconvenient, embarrassingly backward and politically irrelevant. Says Posey: 'It is ironic that those who have the most of offer will have the least opportunity to speak.'

Until recently, it looked as though they would have no opportunity at all, because they wanted to be accredited to the Summit as nations. Faced with unbending refusal by government delegates, however, most have now bowed to the previously unacceptable classification as non-government organisations (NGOs) in jargon for campaign groups.

They will be only a handful among the more than 1,000 NGOs which have been registered for the conference, a development which UN insiders herald as a breakthrough for

the world body. Yet the meeting remains overwhelmingly 'official' in orientation, so indigenous groups are staging an Earth Parliament to coincide with the Summit to make sure their voices are heard.

It will have to compete for attention not only with the Summit itself, but with an even bigger parallel gathering of NGOs, which is expected to attract at least 10,000 activities and lobbyists. The hosts of the Earth Parliament, the Indigenous Intribal Council of Brazil, are confident that the uniqueness of the Parliament will attract the cameras and steal the limelight.

One of its aims 'will be to forge new alliances between environmentalists, scientists, indigenous and traditional peoples in an effort to defend

the biological and cultural diversity of the planet.'

Until now, international attention on biodiversity—the enormous array of plants and animals, a natural resource of priceless value to humankind—has focused on trying to protect threatened species from dying out.

A global convention on the preservation of biodiversity is under negotiation, with the aim of having it signed at the Rio Summit.

There is growing awareness, however, that the conservation of biodiversity cannot be separated from the maintenance of the indigenous cultures that know so much about it.

Yet in many areas, says the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, 'the often intimate

knowledge of nature possessed by indigenous people is fading even faster than nature itself.' More than 90 indigenous groups have disappeared in Brazil alone since the turn of the century.

'With the decimation of each indigenous group,' warns Posey, 'the world loses thousands of years of accumulated knowledge of adaptation to tropical ecosystems.'

He is worried that decisions taken at Rio might make the situation even worse. His fears include:

- a biodiversity convention based on parks and reserves that restrict the traditional peoples who helped create and protect the regions in which the parks are sited;
- creation of huge tree

plantations to offset global warming which fail to respect local peoples' rights to choose species, participate in planting and control of plantations, and to derive benefit from them;

• establishment of 'green funds' which will provide more money to the agencies, institutions, corporations and people who created the global crisis in the first place.

Indigenous groups will be lobbying hard at the Summit's final preparatory meeting in New York in March, both in

the corridors and outside the UN building; a demonstration is planned by thousands of Native Americans.

Perhaps their most important message is summed up by Jeffrey McNeely of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), co-author of a new 'Global Biodiversity Strategy': 'The numerous local cultures which are adapted to sustainable use of locally available resources may well provide the resilience which will enable our species to adapt to what ever changes the future may bring.' /PANOS



To 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.

Speed breakers in Uttara

Sir, Uttara Model Town is situated on either side of Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway, between Dhaka Airport and Tongi. Dhaka-Tangail, Dhaka-Mymensingh, Dhaka-Gazipur, Saidabad-Gazipur, Dhaka-Kapasia, Dhaka-Uttara-Tongi Bridge buses ply on this highway regularly. The Dhaka Women's College, and Uttara Girls' School are situated at sector No 7 in Uttara residential area. Students of these School and College have to cross the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway to reach their destination from sector Nos 2, 4, 6 and 8. But the buses on the highway move with such a high speed that students have to cross the highway with great risk. Again the zebra crossing marks are not prominent. As a result accidents have become a regular feature in this area. In order to prevent accidents and allow the people to cross the highway without

much risk and difficulty, we would request the concerned authority to immediately construct at least two speed breakers—one near Shamsuddin Road and the other near the entrance of sector No 7 on the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway.

Rahmi Wahed
Uttara Model Town, Dhaka

Diplomatic passports

Sir, At present Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh issue three types of passports to citizens of Bangladesh: (1) Maroon coloured special passport is issued to a commoner for travel to India only. (2) Green coloured International Passport is issued for travel to all countries to the world except Israel, Taiwan and Union of South Africa. (3) Red coloured Diplomatic Passport is issued to the country's diplomats assigned

to foreign countries, Head of State, Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers and other high ranking officials that the Government may consider fit.

Can we not discontinue issuing red coloured Diplomatic Passport? Does it really serve any meaningful purpose or signify anything? The British government issues one kind of passport to all its citizens, diplomats or otherwise. We can save a lot of botherations, expenses and hassels if our Government issues one type of passport to all its citizens, diplomats or otherwise for travel to all countries of the world. With the change of global political atmosphere and switching over to democracy at home, our diplomats certainly do not need the touch of an extra red colour to hold them out prominently. With their talents within, they can outshine their counterparts when need be.

With the introduction of democratic regime at home, we should prove that we believe in equality—all our citizens are equal getting equal opportunities and we do not differentiate or create a class consciousness in them, which is also Islamic.

A senior citizen,
Dhaka-1205.

True history

Sir, The new government came into power through democratic procedure and by gaining popular support. Hence, this democratic government is based upon a true foundation and it has great opportunities to retain and strengthen popularity through discharging responsibilities as per the code of ethics and has no reason to struggle for gaining cheap popularity through debatable means.

Unfortunately some sycophants have become active to tarnish the image and goodwill of this government. Why the people in the helm of power should face the criticism of being involved in the distortion of the history of the country? In this respect, I would suggest that the government should constitute a parliamentary committee taking MPs from both treasury and opposition benches plus reputed historians for composing the true, unbiased history of Bangladesh.

For the sake of retaining people's trust, confidence and popular support, I think, the government should avoid matters which might create confusion in the public mind.

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OPINION

Where Does 'The Daily Star' Stand on the Indemnity Repeal Bill?

R.H. Khandker

The Executive Editor of The Daily Star, Mr. Mahfuz Anam has written a front-page commentary on 5 February urging the Awami League to 'think carefully before mass agitation' for the repeal of the Indemnity Act. I know Mr. Aman, respect him and usually admire his writings. This commentary however has troubled me.

The counsel of caution in developing a strategy to enact the Repeal Bill is in order. What should cause concern, however, are some of the arguments for it and the implication that the BNP could oppose the repeal without any sense of accountability to the nation. The commentary has of course made the valid point that the indemnity issue is a moral issue for the nation not for the Awami League alone. But then it moved away from this central thought and discussed how BNP could gain advantage by opposing the Repeal Bill. This implies that something which is a moral issue for the nation is not so for BNP.

Crimes like murders are condemned and punishable in any society under any legal system. So is obstruction of justice. President Nixon was impeached for a mere appearance of obstruction of justice. It is inconceivable that a constitution of a nation can validate both murder and obstruction of justice. Yet, our constitution has done exactly that, though selectively. I can't believe that BNP leaders like Badrudduza Choudhury, Mirza Golem Hafiz, Abdus Salam Tahukdar etc. would prefer to defend this morally indefensible constitutional provision. I have not named Begum Khaleida Zia because I understand her less clearly and also because she, as the widow of the leader who had enacted the Indemnity Ordinance through a constitutional amendment, may have some psychological reservations about the Repeal Bill. She need not. It was perhaps necessary for General Ziaur Rahman to accord constitutional validity to the Indemnity Ordinance of 1975 to protect himself since he came to power through a process of violence. However, eventually he was not protected, he paid by his life. The Indemnity Act is no longer necessary for BNP. It hangs as

a national guilt, and should be more so far BNP which had enacted it.

I see it perfectly in order for the new BNP to even take the initiative to correct the mistake committed by the old BNP. The new BNP has been elected to power by the people; it is not burdened by the legacy of the past. Its image to the people should improve if it supports the Repeal of the Indemnity Act. The new Awami League has corrected the damage done by Bangabandhu who had destroyed democracy by successfully campaigning for the restoration of democracy. BNP could do likewise with honour and grace.

Now, to take up some of the arguments of The Star commentary. It says that the Indemnity (Repeal) Bill agitation will divert attention from immediate issues of economic growth, price hike, law and order, campus violence etc. I hold the contrary view. The latter issues must not be allowed to divert attention from such a national, moral issue like legalized murder. The counsel to wait until these issues are resolved or markedly improved is a sure recipe for the perpetuation of the moral guilt of the nation. Take for example the price issue. Can we honestly believe that prices will come down in the future? Has any government succeeded to bring down prices in the past? The only period when the prices of essential commodities did decline markedly was the latter half of 1975 when there was no effective government in the country. We tend to assume too much power in the hands of the government to control prices. The law and order situation is not too different; here too the trend is not toward an improvement.

If the counsel of The Star's commentary is taken seriously we may have to leave the Indemnity issue for the distant posterity. Must we continue to live indefinitely with the moral guilt? I would respectfully urge The Daily Star to lend its strongest voice for an early Repeal of the Indemnity provision, not throw a damper.

(The writer is a former University teacher and UN official)