

Unwelcome in Malaysia

The most stringent visa regulations just introduced by Malaysia against visitors from Bangladesh and three other South Asian countries look like a case of the medicine being stronger than the disease it is supposed to cure. The move has been prompted by the concern in Kuala Lumpur over the influx of prospective job-seekers from four South Asian countries, namely, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, who overstay in Malaysia beyond the time limit set by the country's immigration department on their tourist visa, while some manage to take employment in its labour-hungry sectors, such as construction industry and rubber plantations. Up to a point, the Malaysian concern is understandable, since it may be difficult to throw out these illegal foreign workers after they have stayed on in the country for years and set up their homes. Again, since they constitute a new class of cheap labour, they tend to undercut the wages paid to Malaysian workers. Seen in this perspective, Kuala Lumpur must indeed deal with the situation but, in a fair and reasonable manner.

Here, we must face the question: are the new regulations fair and reasonable? Judging by the explanation given to this paper by the Malaysian High Commission here and published yesterday, we are obliged to say that Kuala Lumpur has gone too far in trying to prevent all categories of visitors from these South Asian countries from entering Malaysia. The most objectionable provision in the new set of regulations is that citizens of these countries will need sponsors in Malaysia, who must pay a deposit of the equivalent of 300 US dollars in the local currency for each applicant for visa. The deposit will be refunded if the visitor leaves the country within the stipulated time. Another unreasonable condition contained in the new regulations is that even after the visitor has completed all these time-consuming and humiliating formalities, the clearance for the visa must still come from Kuala Lumpur, with its diplomatic missions in the four South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, serving as nothing other than post offices for the authorities in the Malaysian capital. In other words, these diplomatic missions will not be in a position to make any exception and issue a tourist visa on its own to genuine visitors, such as noted businessmen, high officials, journalists or perhaps even members of the Parliament. All, literally all, must adhere to the new regulations. This also means that no one from any of these four countries can make a trip to Malaysia to attend to an emergency, within the shortest possible time.

These new regulations come into effect within a matter of months of their introduction of other measures which were designed to stop the flow of illegal workers. A system of registration has been in force, while assurances have been made to Dhaka by Malaysian authorities, including by Foreign Minister Dato Abdullah Badawi who was on a visit to Bangladesh recently, that workers from this country, including a few thousand who had overstayed or taken jobs, would be absorbed in the country's industries. These assurances were made against the backdrop of growing interest in Kuala Lumpur and Dhaka in the improvement of their economic relations. If Bangladesh has made a case for sending its surplus workers to Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur has mounted a strong campaign to sell its palm oil to this country. We doubt if the introduction of the new visa regulations will promote better economic ties, including trade, between the two countries. Kuala Lumpur will be well advised to modify these regulations and make them fair and reasonable. South Asians should not feel unwelcome in Malaysia.

Israel's Evil Move

The expulsion of more than 400 Palestinians from Israel for their alleged links to the radical group Hamas has forced them to brave the elements of nature in a no-man's land in between Israeli and Lebanese borders. Apparently in retaliation for killing of six Israeli soldiers by Hamas, the move by Yitzhak Rabin has been condemned — and not for nothing — worldwide. We join the world leaders and organisations in condemning the inhuman Israeli action. The Israeli move has been well matched by the Lebanese refusal to allow them entrance into the territory of Lebanon.

The deportation move by Rabin's government has not only caused sufferings to a large number of Palestinians but also confirmed its position as an evil state. It has now become clear that there is not much to choose between the Likud and the Labour governments, so far as the Palestinians are concerned. But Rabin gave enough indication that his government would be fundamentally different from his previous Likud government. The fact that he stopped Jewish settlement in the occupied Gaza Strip and expressed his readiness to give further concessions in its negotiations on the Palestinian right to self rule was considered a positive move. The on-going peace talks between the Arabs and Israel mediated by the US — the last session of the eighth round of which was boycotted by the Arab team representing Lebanon, the Palestinians, Jordan and Syria on Thursday last — owe to a large extent to Rabin's policy shift.

On this and other scores, Rabin sprung quite a few surprises but all those now look set to be mere surprises, not any significantly positive policy shift to bring about a lasting solution to the prolonged Middle East crisis. It is the end result that matters. What Rabin embarked upon immediately after taking office was a daunting task; for he ran the risk of becoming unpopular with a good number of Israelis if not the majority. But Rabin's election promises are proving increasingly unattainable. His nervousness and indecision or even his attempt to placating the hawkish Israeli quarters are becoming evident. Keeping the Palestinian Organisation (PLO) out of the Arab-Israeli talks was, in the first place, his indirect invitation for trouble. If he really meant business, he could talk with representatives of the PLO, which has by now proved its credibility as a moderate political organisation, across the table. A Palestinian state may be in the limbo, but the cause is very much there. Or else, it will be difficult to explain away the sacrifices of the Palestinians. Even the 400 or so Palestinians deported have exhibited the ultimate fortitude in the face of human and natural adversities. Rabin must recognise the spirit and have the vision and courage to take the right decision if he is serious about bringing an end to the political hostility and hemorrhage in the region.

Is there a Case for an Independent Television Channel?

CNN seems to have gained much popularity these days. I am surprised because most of the news covered relate to either the United States or Europe or some other global trouble spot. Bangladesh events almost never get any coverage. People in Dhaka can possibly have no interest in the American weather report. For many people, there is the barrier of language. Yet a lot of people seem to love it. The main reason, according to my friends and acquaintances, is their disappointment and frustration with the Bangladesh Television. It is not only under the total control of the government, its main task appears to be to act as a vehicle of publicity and propaganda for the government and the ruling party. News is often blacked out if it does not suit the authorities. It is also dull. Its reports are often predictable.

Some viewers enjoy playing guessing games about the number of times the different minister's are on the screen. Perhaps it is only in Bangladesh that a Minister has a right to television coverage even if the event is neither newsworthy nor significant.

There can be no doubt that the television is the most powerful medium for mass communication. Newspapers used to wield great power in democratic countries but television has eclipsed them in terms of coverage and impact. In a country like Bangladesh where vast majority of the people are illiterate, the influence of newspapers is bound to be limited. Television (also radio) can transcend the barrier of illiteracy. Indeed the audio-visual media are accorded the highest importance all over the world. The TV debate in American presidential elec-

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tion, which many people in Bangladesh could see, was clearly a most vivid example of the tremendous impact of this medium in moulding public opinion. Television can be a most powerful instrument in Bangladesh for building up the nation. Apart from being a source of news, often visually presented, it has no parallel in mobilizing public opinion for defending democracy and human rights, in reaching people in their homes with educational programmes and in providing family entertainment. Even farmers living in remote parts of the country can be reached with programmes of interest to them. But are we fully utilizing the potentials of this medium? In utter disregard of the agreement reached during the anti-Ershad movement, the BNP government has turned it into a tool for government and party propaganda.

One notes with disappointment that the BNP government is not learning from history. Ershad turned the Bangladesh Television into an instrument of personal publicity. He was seen on the television screen every day of the year. People had no respite from the sight of his face peering at them from the television screen. But did it increase his popularity or improve his image. In fact, most people were disgusted at this blatant misuse of a public facility. Some viewers turned off the TV when the so-called news was read. They knew that the news was nothing more than a parade of Ershad and his wife. His ministers also

viewed with one another for television coverage. These underlings did not realize that it was a futile effort. They seem to have been under the illusion that, somehow, this magic box will earn for them a place in the hearts and minds of the people. In practice, the opposite happened. People turned against Ershad and his wife. The corrupt courtiers did not escape public wrath despite the publicity that the government-owned television and radio gave them. What I am saying is common knowledge. It was because of the gross abuse

of normal journalistic standards, can qualify as 'news'. They do not want a parade of the ministers every day. Ministers do not seem to have the foresight and wisdom to realize that unless they are actually involved in a genuinely news-worthy event such exposure is counter-productive. Since however the government is bent on doing what they think will increase their popularity (Ershad suffered from the same delusion), I have been wondering if we could find a new and somewhat different solution. We could have

an independent TV station in the private sector. Why should there be any restriction on a TV channel in the private sector? Freedom of expression is a fundamental right and the television is the most effective medium for expressing and disseminating our thoughts and ideas. We have, as far as I know, no restrictions for newspapers. Indeed, given our small market we seem to have far too many newspapers in the country but their financial viability should be a concern for the publishers and the financiers. The newspaper readers are getting a wide choice. A new TV channel will have the effect of balancing the government monopoly. We have different models to help us in making a choice. The British model in which an in-

dependent TV alongside BBC was permitted is perhaps the easiest for us to follow. After all, many of our institutions are based on British models. The Americans, on the other hand, believe in free operation of the private sector and therefore they permit competition to determine the number of TV stations which will serve a particular market. I saw the Philippines following the American model. In the private sector, there will be no scope to manipulate news because the network will lose money if it loses credibility.

Perhaps the government has not appreciated how this issue is coming to the forefront on the political agenda. The government can defuse the issue by permitting the setting up of a new TV station. The opposition parties may also consider this as one of the options open to them. One should certainly make every effort to make the BTV neutral and impartial. An autonomous corporation may go a long way in redressing the worst abuses. However, in my view, competition may be more effective in bringing objectivity and balance in the presentation of news and views by BTV. The Parliament in its forthcoming session can discuss this matter. Given the growing discontent in the political circles about the management of the Bangladesh Television, it will surprise no one if this is taken up quite early in the session. Instead of engaging in a bitter but futile debate it may be worthwhile to look at the issue in a constructive way so that the underlying reason for the problem can be removed. Once BTV's monopoly is broken, we will not only balance its one-sided and biased coverage of political events but take a giant step in making full use of this most powerful invention of our times. In the process, we will also strengthen the foundations of democracy.

Once BTV's (and also the radio's) monopoly is broken the power of a particular minister or the government party to use this medium as a weapon to fight political opponents will be reduced. If the government-run channel presents biased or distorted news or if real news is cut in order to find time for parading the ministers, the viewers will turn on the other channel. This, I hope, will act as a brake on the over-enthusiastic minister or bureaucrat. Under the current conditions I see no way out of the dilemma we are in.

I hope, an enterprising businessman with an innovative mind will take up the challenge. I do not know if it will be profitable as a business but how are we going to find out if we do not try? To reassure those who may feel that a private TV channel might abuse the enormous power at its disposal, I would like to point out that the government's regulatory power will always be there to ensure

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

of the television and radio that the anti-Ershad alliance (which included the BNP) committed itself to making the TV and Radio autonomous and non-partisan. What happened to the agreement? Is this the proper conduct for a government which is supposed to be accountable? The BNP government is not tired of proclaiming from the housetop its privileged status as a democratically elected government. But does it not also mean some responsibility to the people? The least that a democratic government can do is to honour public commitments.

What is the solution of this problem? The public has a right to see programmes on the TV which are objective. They want national and international news which, accord-

US Right is Against the Plunge into Somalia

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

Although the decision to send 28,000 troops to Somalia enjoys broad support in the United States, a few influential politicians and commentators oppose it. Critics say the move will heighten pressure for similar US-led forays into the world's other hot-spots. Conservative politicians and think-tanks, are expressing outright opposition to the intervention. The left, on the other hand, finds itself backing the move, if somewhat reluctantly.

PRESIDENT George Bush's decision to send 28,000 troops to Somalia enjoys broad support in the United States. A few influential politicians and commentators criticise aspects of the mission or even oppose it. Many organisations that would normally object to US military intervention in the Third World back the operation, though with certain misgivings.

"It is a position we take reluctantly," says Randall Robinson, head of the Washington-based TransAfrica lobby, "but considering the fact that the lives of millions of Somalis are at stake, we must advocate this drastic action."

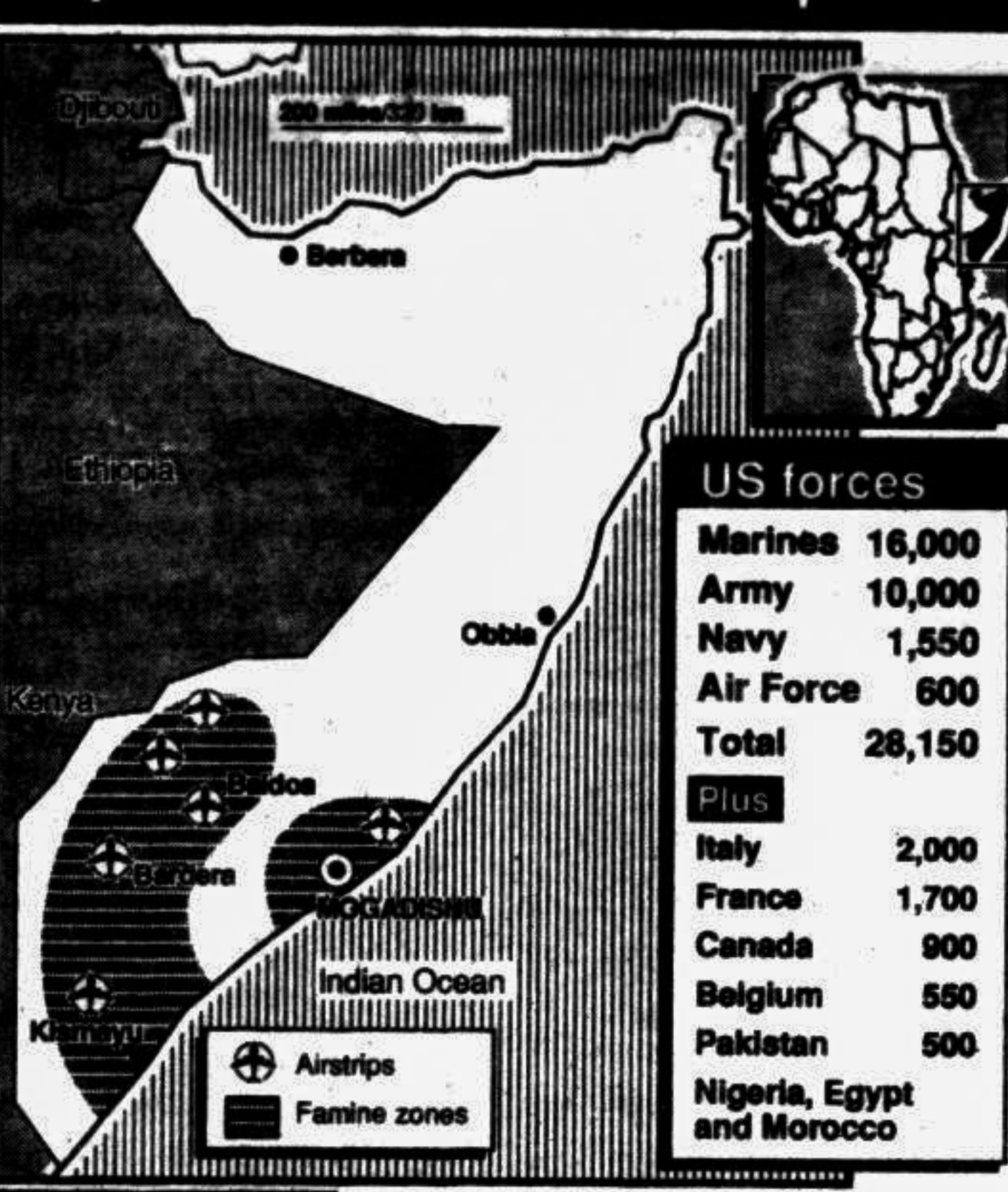
Robinson was not willing to endorse a United Nations trusteeship arrangement. He urged the US and the UN Security Council to convene a national peace conference in Somalia which should include clan elders and militia leaders.

TransAfrica, the country's most prominent black-led group with a focus on foreign policy, has in the past denounced the dispatch of US forces to developing nations. Along with most other human rights advocates here, it has also called for stronger US efforts to alleviate hunger and political repression in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World. Having specifically urged action to facilitate food distribution in Somalia, these groups now had little choice but to approve the Bush initiative.

The same political dynamics apply in the case of the Congressional Black Caucus, which includes all 40 African-American lawmakers elected to the US House and Senate. One Caucus member, House Africa affairs subcommittee chairman Mervyn Dymally, says he "strongly support" the troop deployment.

Walter Carrington, a Dymally aide and a former ambassador to Senegal, joins Robinson in urging that the

Operation Restore Hope



- The Washington plan
- 1) Marines land at Mogadishu and move to Kismayu covered by helicopters and four warships
 - 2) Marines secure Baidoa, where fighting is worst
 - 3) 26,000 troops fly in by skytrain, guard roads
 - 4) Handover to UN and withdraw by Jan 20

UN contingents take care not to undermine the authority of Somali clan elders. Other leading Caucus members, while endorsing the intervention,

warned that the US must not proceed in a unilateral fashion, and should instead operate strictly under UN auspices. In deciding on November

25 to send troops to Somalia Bush may have been responding, in part, to a plea made a few days earlier by a coalition of private relief agencies. These groups had asked the White House on November 19 to work through the Security Council in order to implement enhanced security measures in Somalia. Implicitly calling for military action was an "agonising" step on the part of the humanitarian organisations, said Karen Donovan, an official with the aid agencies' coalition, known as Interaction.

Donovan said these groups had never before taken such a position. "This is a last-resort situation," she said, explaining that other approaches to avert mass starvation in Somalia had been tried and failed. Donor organisations "tried traditional peacemaking. They've tried flooding the country with food. It hasn't worked," Donovan said.

A minority of the lobbying groups belonging to the Coalition for Peace in the Horn of Africa have "serious reservations" about the way the Somali intervention is organised, noted John Prendergast, a leader of this Washington-based advocacy coalition. "Some of us are really worried about what may happen in the long term — not only in Somalia but in regard to US relations with the entire Third World."

"The Pentagon is extremely enthusiastic about this kind of operation. Colin Powell and Dick Cheney have been listening to Bill Clinton talk about

military budget cuts of up to 25 per cent. And now they are saying, 'We can stake out a whole new mission for ourselves with this kind of intervention.' And Somalia is the perfect opportunity to start it."

The New York Times, the country's most influential newspaper, has likewise suggested that the Somalia operation will be treated by some officials as a precedent to justify armed US intervention in other troubled parts of the world.

One Times correspondent cited a diplomatic cable from the US embassy in Benin which said in effect that some West African leaders not only approved of the Somalia action but were proposing that the Marines be sent to Togo and Liberia to stabilise those countries as well. Political analysts observe that the move into Somalia will surely heighten pressure for similar US-led forays into Bosnia and Haiti.

Bush is thus presenting President-elect Clinton with a set of thorny foreign-policy decisions that will have to be made in the early days of the new administration. And Clinton, an untested world leader, had clearly been intending to avoid new international entanglements.

If he does refrain, at least initially, from sending troops to additional hot-spots, he will find support in a somewhat unlikely quarter: the right wing of the Republican Party. Staunchly conservative politicians and think-tanks are among the few voices in the US expressing outright opposition to the Somalia intervention.

Senator Hank Brown, a Colorado Republican, is arguing that US troops should be deployed abroad only when the nation's vital interests are threatened. That clearly is not the case in Somalia, Brown said. After a meeting with Bush, he added: "I think Muslim troops should be taking the lead in this. I think it's a mistake for US troops to be involved."

The same position is taken by Tom Sheehy, an Africa policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation in Washington. He suggests that the chaos in Somalia could necessitate a costly and protracted US military presence there.

Other right-wing commentators point to the recently leaked contents of a diplomatic cable sent to the State Department by Smith Hempstone, the US ambassador in Kenya. Hempstone, himself an outspoken conservative activist, counselled against intervention in Somalia, predicting that Somalis, who are "natural born guerrillas, will 'inflict — and take — casualties' when foreign troops begin operating in the country.

Though it may seem out of keeping with their often-bellacose rhetoric, many headline conservatives now oppose US military intervention in the Third World. They thus join the far left in favouring an isolationist foreign policy.

The conservatives do not reach that position out of solidarity with Third World demands for self-determination. Instead, they argue that with the Cold War now over, the US has no compelling reason to expend lives and resources in far-away lands. Many of the same right wingers opposing the Somalia action had refused to support Operation Desert Storm two years ago.

— GEMINI NEWS
KEVIN J KELLEY was born in New York. He is Editor of *Toward Freedom*.

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.

Doctor's fee

Sir, At the moment there is no standard rate of fees charged by the doctors for the patients. For a practitioner of medicine this varies from Tk fifty charged by an ordinary MBBS to Tk two hundred charged by professors. And for the surgeons the less said about it, the better. There is a general feeling that this rate is rather too high compared to the rate of fees of doctors in Calcutta. Fee of an MRCP or equivalent doctor is Tk 50 to 75 there although per capita income of India is double of Bangladesh. While the fees charged by Bangladesh doctors are high, their behaviour and quality is much inferior. Even

impartial doctors visiting India may testify this. That is one of the reasons why these days patients in large number are going to Calcutta and other places for treatment.

Hence it is felt that there should be rationalization of fee structure at the initiative of the Government. Doctors have a moral responsibility to the patients also, because their education was highly subsidized by the poor tax payers.

Subsidy for an MBBS doctor is roughly Tk. ten lakh and that for a specialist it is much more. Moreover, paying capacity of patients is very low in our country. They are paying the doctors' fees through their noses because doctors in

medical colleges and other hospitals do not pay proper attention not to speak of showing courtesy and consideration to the patients. It is also suggested that for the intense and inservice doctors, there should be a short course on behaviour to patients. The writer had been to England last year and came across a newspaper report which stated that a Bangladeshi doctor serving there was sentenced to a jail term of few years by a magistrate for his misbehaviour to patients. This is being stated without any malice to anybody.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
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Senile ramblings

Sir, A Khulna reader, in a Dhaka weekly, recently suggested some measures to improve the administration and remove the present chaotic condition. He advised,

1) "Adoption of Saudia style of Sharia for evildoers": This means a good proportion of our population (especially the

youth) will end up without a hand and some without heads.

2) "Removal of corrupt, dishonest and inefficient people": This means that almost all government, private and autonomous offices, shops, industries, bazars etc will have to close down as there will be very few people to man them.

3) "Promotion and financial rewards on retirement": I would wonder if they would rather not manage and collect these, one way or the other, while still in office.

4) "Import of, foreign technocrats to reform the Administration": This has merit, because, we remember in the 'Bad Old Days', THEIR administrators were usually posted over here, while OURS were posted over there. Since there were no 'Nanas, dadas, chachas or tallo bhai's' in both wings to influence or satisfy, more work used to get done for a lot less, both in money and headache. But, alas, in the present situation, is it not more likely that even 'Phoren

Experts' will start washing their hands in our swiftly flowing *Gangas* of corruption?

Besides don't we already have a veritable army of such experts doing just about everything?

Quazi Akhlaque-uz Azeem
Anderkilla, Chittagong

Service rule for private sector

Sir, Many national and international critics had on a number of occasions commented that if organizations like the Bangladesh Railway or BRTC were given in the private sector it would have made a miracle — in respect of profit, expansion and maintenance!

It is encouraging that the present democratic government has given importance on privatization. But often a thought strikes my mind, whether such privatization on the other end helping certain

quarters/influential persons to capture the capital thereby creating opportunity to exploiting the 'Mehnat Manush' (the working people)?

One would find many institutions in the private sector which do not have any fixed service rule or pay-structure for their employees. Our employees and workers are so poor that they seldom show any courage to uphold justice.

There is always the chance of losing the job on the management's/owners' single word — 'Dismissed'.

Would the government please look into the matter and formulate a pragmatic service policy for the private sector enterprises and code of conduct for the owners. This should be applicable to every private institution — a small tea stall, health clinic to large industries.

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