

A Timely Building Code

A national building code is soon to be here. Last week a workshop participated by engineers and architects was told by Works Minister Rafiqul Islam Mia of the good news.

After the book policy, the building code. Even a promise of such thing is good. And it is good that government has apparently found a way to eschew the present rule of ad-hocism.

Nevertheless, we can justifiably take the pledge of the building code as an important step towards transparent government if indeed the government is going to be limiting itself by committing to an open document with all the world able to monitor its performance.

Our building sector has seen much activity and it will be some time before it shows signs of the rate of expansion to fall. Considering the performance of the other sectors of our national economy, this cannot be deemed as a very healthy symptom.

There is, however, a contrary side to the high-rises for which the code would be more of a necessity. Bangladesh must go for massive housing projects building tens of thousands of flats a year to withstand the pressure of population influx into the cities.

The workshop and the minister's attitude towards it speaks of a government endeavouring to involve specialists outside its house. Very good indeed. With the gates now open, physical planning pinioned on best of sociological considerations, and landscaping and a thousand other urban planning things that determine shaping of individual buildings would come flooding the pages of the code.

In this super-scenario the most important duo would be the investor and the architect. The sooner it is pressed home in the mind of the investor the better. Scandalous behaviour on the part of the investors has already caused the growing community of architects to compromise on the point of professionalism.

Welcome to Dr Salam

This journal joins the nation in welcoming the Nobel Laureate Dr Abdus Salam to Bangladesh. We are indeed privileged to have him among us, and we commend Dhaka University for organising the special convocation to confer on him Doctorate of Science (DSc) degree.

Our attention has been drawn to the publicly announced intention of some student groups to disrupt the special convocation, or try to organise demonstrations on the occasion, not because they are opposed to Dr Salam being honoured, but because of political and party differences.

We would like to appeal to the student community of our most prestigious institution of higher education, Dhaka University, not to do anything which will mar the sanctity of the occasion of the special convocation. We are aware that the students have many unfulfilled demands from the government. It may also be the case that the students may feel let down by the unmet commitments that the authorities may have made from time to time.

Those students who have stated their opposition to the coming of the Prime Minister to the campus unless she accepted their demands, are mixing up complex local issues with that of honouring a man who has devoted his whole life to the advancement of higher education in countries like ours, especially in promoting the study and advancement of basic sciences.

It would indeed be a matter of national shame if the special convocation to honour this great man should in any way be disrupted because of our failure to rise above sectarian interest and narrow party and political vision.

THE MPs came, they traded invectives and they left. This is how the recently concluded five-day, ninth session of the Parliament can perhaps be best described, that ended on 14 May last.

As can be expected, throughout it all, whatever passed off as parliamentary debates consisted mainly of accusations, counter-accusations, lambasting one another, taking the floor on 'point of order' to essentially create 'disorder' and the like.

From the very outset the session was marked by confusion. Widely expected to be the budget session, it was decided to make it a short pre-budget meet at the very last moment so much so that the leader of the opposition ended up expressing her surprise during her concluding remark of the session.

Parliament Roundup Debates Getting Increasingly Irrelevant

by Mahfuz Anam

been surprised, remains a question, because the decision not to make it a budget session was taken at the programme committee level in which the Awami League is well represented.

The walkout on the first day, in essence, set the tone for what was to follow. An impetuous move by the opposition chief whip Md Nasim was triggered by what turned out to be less than authentic reporting by Abdur Razzak of what happened at the Nirmul rally at Bangla Motor intersection.

It is not clear whether the move had the total blessing of the party chief, Sheikh Hasina. It is my view that she acquiesced to the move, but did not feel too comfortable with it.

The drama of the walkout move shifted the attention of the House from a very pertinent point that was raised by

the leader of the opposition. While Nasim, Razzak and Samad Azad concentrated on the dubious claim of police firing, Sheikh Hasina was emphasizing a far more vital point of the right of citizens' group to hold public rallies and demonstrate on issues of concern to them.

It may be recalled that the government cordoned off the whole Ramna area to prevent the Nirmul Committee from holding its rally on 26th and 28th March. The next day police physically assaulted some Nirmul Committee leaders including the venerable Jahannara Imam.

The Nirmul Committee's programme was announced far in advance. The government could have easily gone to court and got itself an injunction or a

plain court order disallowing the rally to maintain public peace or whatever. The government was so disregardful of the norms of the law that it did not even bother to produce an administrative order of the Home Ministry.

The incident of preventing the opposition led 'Commemorating Committee of the Bangla 1400' from holding its grand rally in the Suhrawardy Uddyan on the Bangla New Year's Day, further brought into question the credibility of the government's claim about its unscrupulous respect for the letter of the law.

It is on these issues that the opposition should have tried to pin the government down inside the parliament, and not go for a showdown on claims of 'shooting' on the Nirmul Committee's demonstration, that the government was easily able to refute. The treasury

bench could not believe its luck when the AL just walked into what was a self-made trap and messed up the advantage that was obviously theirs. So the walkout, in my opinion, was a move that deflected the attention of the House from the very serious issues that Hasina raised, and thereby helped the treasury bench in 'getting off the hook', so to speak.

What it means is that the opposition needs to plan better its strategy within the House and should not go for impromptu actions based on incomplete and, sometimes, misleading reports. There is also the need for better coordination between the main speakers of the opposition bench so that they do not waste their time in being repetitive, and in going in all different directions when they speak.

On the plus side was, of course, the daily question-answer session which brought out many important facts for public scrutiny. The statistics that were of obvious interest to us dealt with the amount of government advertisement that was given out during the June '92 to March '93 period. The minister explained that the advertisement distribution policy of the government was based on circulation, authenticity and objectivity of contents, commitment to development, and implementation

of wage board for journalists. It made very interesting reading, the assessment of the Information Ministry, as to which dailies fulfilled the above criteria. We will write separately on the issue later.

A rare and welcome example of bi-partisanship inside the House occurred on the issue of including MPs in the thana level education committees. Both the treasury and the opposition benches wanted the inclusion of the local MPs, which was strongly opposed by the minister concerned.

It is perhaps appropriate to conclude by reiterating the appeal of Prof Badruddoza to make 'future sessions more meaningful.' He suggested that members should do more research before they speak and back their claims with adequate data and statistics. He also suggested that there should be more suggestions coming from the members. We cannot over-emphasize the importance of his comments, which were addressed to all MPs.

Beijing Rules out Military Settlement of Spratlys Dispute

Hermione Mary Anne A Cabie writes from Manila

Officials insist the 'Chinese threat' has been concocted by arms merchants.

THE timing was perfect: the Cold War era has ended and China's National People's Congress has just concluded its session in Beijing.

China's foreign minister Qian Qichen has repeatedly declared that his country — the most populous in the world with nearly 1.2 billion people and an armed force totalling 3,030,000 troops — is not exhaling war flames on its Asian neighbours.

While Beijing's budget has called for a 12.5 per cent boost in military spending, Chinese officials insist the "Chinese threat" has been concocted by arms merchants. In Manila, Chinese ambassador to the Philippines Huan Oufang dismissed accusations that his country had military designs on its neighbours.

After the end of the Cold War, some merchants in arms sales want to find a place to sell their arms so they

(have) to find imagined enemy in the world and they selected China," Ambassador Huang told Manila-based journalists.

And he reiterated China's commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes, including its tiff with five other countries over the Spratly islands chain in the South China Sea, reputedly rich in oil and gas as seen as a potential flashpoint of confrontation in Southeast Asia.

The Spratlys' big strategic and economic potential has led to a six-sided standoff as China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Brunei contend sovereignty over the scattered coral islands, atolls and reefs.

Midway between Borneo and the Vietnamese coast, the Spratlys straddle a major searoute from the Pacific to the

Indian Ocean, and oil companies have been vying for the right to explore for fossil fuel.

The island chain was under French colonial rule until the mid-1950s. Then the United States, with its bases in the Philippines, and the Soviet Union, operating out of Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, assumed the role of regional military powers.

But that standoff ended with the US pullout from the Philippines and the collapse of the Soviet Union and its eventual replacement by the Commonwealth of Independent States.

One Western diplomat said recently that because of the vacuum, countries around the South China Sea may feel freer in their strategic and tactical thinking.

But Ambassador Huang dismissed allegations that Beijing was becoming a threat to the Asia-Pacific theatre following the end of the Cold War and the down-grading of the US military deployment in the region.

In Beijing, Foreign Minister Qian himself said "strong China will not pose a threat to any country (and) China will never become a superpower."

Some military observers say, however, that since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and American military presence in Asia is on a low tide, China is surfacing as the power to reckon with in the region.

And the fact that the summit between President Bill Clinton and Russian leader Boris Yeltsin was in Van-

cover, the stage has been set for China to steal the show from Russia in Asia's strategic arena, according to analysts.

While there has been a numerical decline in the number of the People's Liberation Army, observers say Beijing has begun a definite reorientation of its military doctrine in keeping with what they call a "more free-for-all rivalry" among nations.

But they add that China is apparently concerned that India wants to penetrate the South Asia sea-lanes in what Beijing perceives apparently as New Delhi's attempt to demonstrate itself as a major naval power.

China's officials have suggested making increased visits to the countries in South Asia, declaring they cannot recognise the vast Indian Ocean as India's ocean — but this was dismissed by Foreign Ministry spokesman Wu Jianmin as "sheer fabrication (and) a fantastic theory."

Mr Huang, China's ambassador to Manila, admitted that a stable China "is a very important factor to world peace and stability," adding the Asia-Pacific is the most politically stable region in the world and China wanted to keep it so to sustain its "robust economic growth."

This appears to stress China's commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes, including the standoff on the Spratly Islands. —Daphnecup Asia

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.

Epidemic of scabies

Sir, A letter on the above topic written by Drs Herbert Codington and Sarah Coghlan (April 12, 1993) from the Friends of Bangladesh, attracted my attention. It is really encouraging that these two professionals from a foreign country are trying to introduce a less expensive treatment for scabies in Bangladesh. Back in 1971, during the Liberation War, a serious scabies epidemic afflicted a large number of people.

Scabies in humans is caused by the acarine species Sarcoptes scabiei. It is also known as itch mite. Itch mites form meandering burrows in the horny layer of skin. They use their jaws and the front pairs of legs for digging in the skin. Itch mite infestation on human skin, that is scabies, causes severe irritation and constant scratching. Drs Codington and Coghlan correctly pointed that the scratching causes skin breaks and allow the entry of microorganisms resulting secondary infections.

Several chemicals such as HCH, benzyl benzoate, sulphur, tetraethyl thuram monosulphide, crothamiton, etc. are effective against scabies. Among these chemicals, HCH which is also known as Lindane is probably the most widely used product for the treatment of scabies. For the treatment of scabies generally creams or ointment containing 1% Lindane is used. One such formulation is Kwell available in the USA which contains 1% Lindane and comes as cream or ointment. Lindane formulations used for treating scabies are considered as medicine and are used according to the physician's prescription. It is probably dangerous to suggest or recommend the use of agricultural grade of a pesticide for medical purposes. In some cases agricultural grade of a pesticide is considerably more toxic to humans compared to its public health grade. The writers suggested to dilute the Lindane at the rate of 20:1 ra-

tio. It will probably create confusion regarding the concentration of Lindane in the solution because the concentration of active ingredients (e.g. Lindane) in pesticide formulations vary according to the brands. Lindane is basically the gamma isomer of hexachlorocyclohexane. Gamma isomer of Lindane is relatively safe for humans, but its alpha isomer is not so safe. Therefore, one needs to know the concentration of gamma isomers in the formulation before it could be used for medical purposes. When used properly, Lindane ointment or cream poses negligible hazard. But in case of slow excretion and prolonged absorption, repeated treatments might cause a build up internally. Presently Lindane is not registered in Bangladesh. Therefore, its use in scabies treatment will probably be a violation of the pesticide act. Any recommendation to use agriculture grade Lindane may result in the smuggling of it into Bangladesh from other countries. Besides these, there is a potential danger that people in the rural areas may erroneously conclude that other pesticides may also have remedial action against scabies and attempt to use them.

Benzyl benzoate is another widely used chemical for the treatment of scabies. It is relatively expensive but safe. It is advisable to go with benzyl benzoate for scabies treatment in Bangladesh.

Manjur A Chowdhury, PhD Safeway Pest Control Barani, Dhaka

First class letter service

Sir, A first class fast delivery postal service can be introduced in our country by the Postal Department. Any letter marked 'First Class' on the envelope, on payment of double the normal existing charge (affixing stamp thereof), should be given top priority in despatching it to its destination, as early as possible. All first class letters should be de-

livered seven days a week. This will help people to send their important messages and documents in a faster way and also enable the Government to earn an extra revenue. Initially this may be introduced in the capital and big cities and if found successful other districts may well be brought under this system.

Needless to mention here that our telegraph system has not improved much. At times a telegram takes longer time than a letter. If this first class fast delivery postal service is introduced, everybody will be benefited to a great extent.

Motius Samad Chowdhury Assistant Manager, Phulida Tea Estate, Sylhet

For higher excellence

Sir, We are out of joints. This observation is equally true about our educational institutions. Aberrations of the age have deeply set in our educational system. Gone are the sanctity and quiescence of our campus; gone are the days of consecration. Commotion and confusion reign everywhere. Compared to Plato's Academy — which, in all practical sense, was a veritable garden — our institutions have become arenas of chaos and confusion. Formerly, pursuit of knowledge was an exhilarating and illuminating experience both for the teachers and their mentees. Education now has lost that sacramental aura.

Pedagogic failures apart, the existing system has largely contributed to the present mess. Present system has put the rectitude of our teachers, specially of the higher institutions, to a severe test. The system has embroiled many of the respected teachers in nasty politicking. Clique and rift are the natural offshoots of this distraction. Teachers who are really consecrated, are finding themselves increasingly vulnerable. They are becoming increasingly cynical about the whole system. The students are the ultimate victims of this polarisation. Our institutions, as a consequence, have ceased to be the hubs of intellectual activity. Our teachers are losing their patriarchal image. Obviously they have many things to worry about but those cannot be the grounds for becoming lax in professional ethics. There are quite a good

shining examples of personal integrity and dedication. People hold them in high regard. Really they belong to their fraternity. Intellectual culture is a felicitous experience for them.

A case in point concerns the matter of evaluation. It is a common experience that time taken for assessment is unduly long. Without questioning the merit and fairness of appraisal, it can be said that such a prolix process puts under strain on the guardians as well as the students. If the shift and emphasis are greater on academic matters both teaching and administrative, it is felt that higher excellence could be attained. Already the session jam has become a baffling experience for the students. If, in addition to this, they have to wait for a protracted period for the result, they will find it is feared, no meaning in academic pursuit.

Golam Nabl, Chittagong.

"How Does the Home Ministry Justify its Behaviour?"

Sir, Congratulations to Mr. Nurul Kabir for his investigative reporting under the heading "How Does the Home Ministry Justify its Behaviour?" published in The Daily Star on May 7. It is utterly shocking to know how the career of an apparently brilliant young man is jeopardised by a callous and malicious bureaucracy. The present Home Secretary cites from rules and regulations in order to defend the action of his department, while one of his predecessors is alleged to have made an utterly false allegation for obtaining the dismissal of the young official concerned. It shows how our top bureaucrats can, on the one hand, act like 'robots' in interpreting rules and regulations when it comes to taking an initiative for a good cause, but, on the other hand, can go to any extent of falsehood and maliciousness when it comes to doing harm to anybody! Why is it that the investigations against corruption and malpractices are initiated only after these are reported in the press as a result of some investigative journalism? What are our top bureaucrats paid for? To act like robots? A citizen, Dhaka

OPINION

Women and Human Rights

On behalf of a citizens' group representing 38 organisations and individuals, which have formed a Preparatory Committee for UN Human Rights Conference, Vienna 1993, we write in response to your editorial of 15 May.

We find it difficult to understand your criticism of a suggestion put forward at the Geneva Human Rights Preparatory Committee meeting last month that the UN Human Rights Commissioner be authorised to investigate violations against women. This criticism is easily dismissed because of a misunderstanding that the demand entails an additional appointment. What was suggested is that monitoring of violations against women be included in the terms of reference for the HR Commissioner. The question of costs applies to the entire UN system and cannot be solved through a piecemeal sacrifice of instruments relating to women's rights alone. If the appointment of a UN Human Rights Commissioner is not under question, why should the matter of costs be raised only for part of the work involved?

Your second criticism is raised by the likely hostility from some states. This bears little relevance to the urgent need to address the issue of violence against women. At a time of growing international concern with women's rights and gender violence, the matter cannot be left to bilateral or unilateral negotiations. There is a need to devise both international and national instruments for protection and promotion of such rights. The UN Convention for Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, has been ratified by over 116 states. In many states its implementation remains inoperative through substantial reservations. But the answer to this is to bring pressure upon the signatory states to withdraw their reservations, not to encourage them to transgress common standards. The rape of Bosnian women is a crime against humanity notwithstanding the reluctance of states to intervene. Should the UN system legitimise violations merely because some states are guilty of violating international norms? If the UN were to dismiss all issues because of a lack of unanimity, no disputes could ever be raised. Even if some states remain re-

calcitrant, or express reservations, this does not imply that the international community should brush human rights violations under the carpet just because it is women who are affected?

Your suggestion that women's rights are not a public concern falls in line with historical patriarchal position to keep women invisible. If the issue of women's rights is monitored secretly through unilateral aid controls, this may not necessarily lead to a public acknowledgement of transgression, and the causes of gender violence may not be addressed. Should one state be allowed to arrogate the power of a policeman at a time when the international community is beginning to respond to the pressures for recognising women's rights as human rights, and for their systemic violations?

The international community has endorsed several plans of action and conventions for the full, equal and beneficial integration of women in all development activities, in particular the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. Several ILO conventions have also been adopted to end gender based discrimination and ensure women access to land and other resources, education, safe and equal employment. Effective implementation of these programmes will depend on the active involvement of women in economic and political decision making. Developing countries are now increasingly dependent upon women's labour; at the same time there is a growing need to ensure equal opportunities. The inevitable corollary is to accept women's right to development as a basic human right. Lapses at a national level need to be corrected rather than overlooked.

It is certainly time to give the proposal more thought. But this should be directed to operationalising the principles of human rights, both through international and national instruments. Women's rights have as much relevance as civil and political rights, because it is the inalienability of human rights that we are concerned with in each case. This does not permit a gender differentiation in the means to protect and promote these rights.

Sultana Kamal Preparatory Committee for UN Conference on Human Rights, Vienna 1993.