

An Abortive Good Move

With the city corporation elections only about a month to go, things are developing on an welcome even keel. The electioneering activity has gone into full swing and, happily, development of controls such as would not let the former go out of hand, is evolving on a sure and no-nonsense footing. Credit for this is wholly due to the Election Commission and its chief. The political parties have so far done well in responding to the CEC's calls and moves. They have all pledged to abide by the Election Commission's 31-point code of conduct. This would be a truly great achievement if only all of them, especially the one in power, bring themselves to redeem the pledges in actual practice. Some gains are already home in that the government has committed that ministers would not go about canvassing using government facilities and no new grants and donations would be announced for anything in areas going to polls. This is in line with the welcome resignation of the incumbent mayors. One only hopes government would keep to this healthy line.

The CEC in his keenness on making the ensuing elections truly free and fair, and perhaps also because of the encouraging response of the parties to his initiatives, on Sunday proposed an all-party steering committee to help conduct the elections.

The government, or better BNP, representative feared the proposed set-up would be infructuous as it wouldn't be empowered to do anything by constitutional provision. This is debatable for the body could very well draw upon Election Commission for its necessary effectiveness, being an accessory and extension of the Commission itself. The other reservation is based on the realistic view that everything depended on the will of the government, including the performance of such a committee. The government, more than any such vigilante body, can ensure fairness. If it is not quite keen on the point, such a body cannot ever deliver the goods.

The third view involves more fundamental questions. The idea behind the exertions of the CEC and parties is geared to help institutionalise democracy through the holding of truly meaningful and democratic elections. How can this be promoted by a body comprising of some avowed anti-democratic and fascist forces? For very understandable reasons both of these groups supported the CEC proposal with enthusiasm making it more difficult for the democratic parties to oblige the CEC.

Without dismissing the reservations we, however, want to underline the fact that the gains that could accrue from an effective take-off by the proposed committee would have far outweighed the possible losses that could issue from the same — if advancement of the cause of democracy were the only and true consideration. In fact, the formation of such a committee by no less a stupendously situated state organ as the Election Commission could be a definitive step towards democratisation of the crucial election process.

These elections cannot have very big bearings on the national political outlook. Even so, these are important particularly because the conduct of these would decisively determine whether the nation's good would lie in a caretaker government holding the general elections or otherwise. The nation would feel relieved if government showed due deference to this point of democratic obligation.

Policy on Book Promotion

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's disclosure that her government will soon come up with a national book policy makes good news. Long neglected, the area could not be brought in order without a well-formulated book policy. So the concern shown by the government and the subsequent prompt undertaking of the task deserve unreserved praise, no doubt. As the Prime Minister has been on record, the policy will address the dual problem of education and library service in a package. Such an attempt to cover the whole gamut of dissemination of information and knowledge will be all the more beneficial for the nation that is no more particularly known for its reading habit.

Any policy on an issue so vitally important for keeping in good shape the mental health of the nation however needs to be as much flawless as humanly possible. Particularly, the challenges from the electronic media appear to be insurmountable when it comes to the question of promoting books and reading habit among the people. The government policy of making all printing materials costly has not so far helped the cause. The threat posed by the electronic media to overwhelm the printing medium has as a result become even greater. So it is a daunting task for the policy-makers to bring people back to the reading table.

No one in his right senses can expect reading materials to be altogether free of cost; in fact knowledge was never quite free - not even in the most ideal times of the *rishis*. Free knowledge has ever remained an oxymoron. But then knowledge as a commodity must not be subjected to over commercialisation. When the writing and printing papers along with other educational implements are made dearer, a country's overall education suffers. The proposed national policy should be mindful to this aspect of our education sector. This is perhaps one area where the provision for subsidies can be made in view of the greatest returns it will bring in.

Other salient points that deserve close attention are the code of conduct for the publishers of books and the rationale of duties at any high notch on imported books. As for the publishers of books regulations are lax, to say the least. Most of the publishers act more as contractors — in that they publish their quota of text-books under a contract reached between them and the relevant ministry. Barring a handful of them, others just do not do much besides being engaged in book piracy by violating the copyright law. In doing so they not only compromise on quality of the product but also misprint or even distort the original. There should be provision for publication of foreign classics or quality books in a lawful manner. In India some publishing houses do the job well with permission from the authors and after paying due royalties.

Similarly, import of books — not just the non-fiction such as technical and text-books — should be exempted from the high rate of duty on them. Fiction and poetry are as good a product of the best minds as the research and scientific ones are. Let the proposed policy efficiently deal with all these intriguing aspects and positively contribute to the promotion of books and knowledge.

Israel Fails a Test of Good Intentions

Michael Jansen writes from Nicosia

The Arabs may insist on ironclad guarantees when they make further agreements with Israel. Their first experience has been a letdown. The Israelis did not withdraw from Gaza and Jericho on the appointed date. The consequences will be serious. Syria and Jordan are not likely to be as helpful as they had promised to be.

Jitters in Jericho



implementation of the Oslo accords.

The next day Rabin showed himself to be stiff-necked and lacking in an understanding of the dynamics of peacemaking when he refused to make a uni-

versity restored the climate of goodwill between Palestinians and Israelis created by the Oslo accords. He did not.

That climate of goodwill has largely evaporated since September because the accords had no impact on Israel's behaviour in the occupied territories. Israel maintained its iron grip, reinforcing rather than reducing its troops in the territories.

Israel did not ease its ban on residents of the territories entering Jerusalem, cutting them off from schools, hospitals and markets and their administrative and cultural capital.

The Rabin government continued to build Jewish settlements and subsidise settlers already illegally colonising the territories. Undercover Israeli army units pursued, captured and killed Palestinian activists in spite of a ceasefire agreed with the PLO in September.

And Israel released only 600 of the 12-13,000 Palestinian prisoners it holds. Many are children under 15 detained for writing slogans on walls and throwing stones and youths held for membership of resistance groups no longer banned.

Israel's refusal to absorb the spirit of peacemaking and treat the Palestinians generously cannot but have a negative impact on negotiations between the Jewish state and its other Arab antagonists for whom the Palestinian problem is the core of their disputes with Israel. Lack of progress on the Palestinian track will mean stalemate on the other three tracks in the talks.

Syria, the leading Arab party involved in the peace process,

will be all the more wary of any "creative ambiguities" in arrangements or "informal understandings" and "gentlemen's agreements" with Israel now that Rabin has demonstrated that he is neither flexible enough to finesse a difficult situation nor a gentleman.

Damascus will certainly maintain its insistence on obtaining from Israel a firm, written commitment to withdraw its forces from the whole of the occupied Golan Heights as a precondition for defining what sort of peace it will give Israel. Syria may also now demand a guarantee from the United States and Russia that Israel will honour any commitment.

Syria-Israel talks have been stalled since June because Israel refuses to give such a commitment until Syria spells out its definition of "full peace." If Damascus hardens its position because of Israeli failure to deliver on December 13, the talks may become deadlocked.

If there is progress between Israel and Syria, Lebanon will also stay away from the talks, due to resume in Washington at the end of January. Lebanon, like Syria, is seeking an Israeli commitment to withdraw its army of occupation from a small slice of territory in the south and insists that it will not make security arrangements for the frontier with Israel or discuss a peace treaty until Israel makes this commitment.

Jordan will be unlikely to implement elements of their draft understanding with Israel before there is substantial progress on the Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese tracks. Plans to co-operate on shipping

in the Gulf of Aqaba and develop water resources in the Jordan valley may be put on hold.

Participation in the peace process has given Israel international respectability and recognition before it has even agreed to withdraw from "all" Arab territories captured in 1967. The Arab suspect Israel is simply trying to reap the rewards of appearing to make peace without paying the price of peace. The passing of December 13 without progress has confirmed this suspicion.

The meanness of spirit with which Israel approached implementation of the accord with the PLO has two main causes. Israel is extremely reluctant to return to the Arab lands which Israelis regard as "Jewish land" and "inalienable." Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, both Zionists and founders of the state, share this feeling and are torn between handing over land to the Palestinians and holding onto it.

And since the Zionists presented maps of the state they wished to establish to the Versailles peace conference at the end of World War One, they have refused to define the boundaries of that state. By doing so they could claim any land they conquered.

Any withdrawal of Israeli forces from any part of Palestine amounts to not only a renunciation of "Jewish land" but is also the first step in fixing frontiers.

The Palestinians, reluctantly and painfully, long ago relinquished their dream of a Palestinian state in the whole of Palestine. It took many years, and it is now the turn of Israel to change its mindset, to recognise that it must share the land of Palestine, evacuate occupied Arab land and learn to live with its neighbours.

GEMINI NEWS

Book Trade in Bangladesh: Problems and Prospects

by M Nazmul Karim

THE publishing industry of our country is yet to be recognized as an industry. The flourishing of such an expanding industry will depend on a well-organized book trade network, which should not only be active in the capital city, but also throughout the country.

The publishing and book trade does require additional care and support from the Government for its smooth growth.

As a country having 120 million people we should not be satisfied with the number of publishers and book trade people we have. We must have at least 10 times higher the number we have involved in quality publishing as well as in quality trading activities. How can we do it? Will a simple call by our national leaders be helpful in drawing the attention of the people to invest in publishing and book trading activities? If it could, then I would like to request all our national leaders to give such a call as I do firmly believe that the people involved in quality publishing and quality trading activities have been playing a very important role in developing our education and human resources development, like any other professionals, but they have not been properly recognized.

As it happened during the last budget announcement that a most funny, illogical and illegal import duty at the rate of 7.5% was imposed on the import of books. When the matter was protested in the media, the Government withdrew the duty on academic and scientific publications, but the same is still remaining on the import of fictions.

ing and book trade sector, if it is not 10 times more as mentioned elsewhere.

This can make a big contribution in education and human resources development activities. Every one should realize that investment in this sector in the form of a total tax holiday package will result in a very fruitful return for the nation in the long run. The Government may consider this to be incorporated in the national book policy about which the Honourable Prime Minister herself is committed to be announced. The existing committee, which is responsible for preparing the national book policy, can do a little extra exercise in finding out the possibility for the proposed tax holiday package for the publishing and book trade industry of the country, involving the Finance Ministry and the National Board of Revenue on the committee. We do take positive actions and we do realize the actual actions to be taken, but we do it sometimes after a very very long time — but we loose a lot by the delayed action.

After 22 years of liberation of the country, we have now realized the importance of learning

English after having all education up to college level in Bengali medium. Whenever our children are going to have their higher education on arly subjects, whether it is medical, engineering, or computer science, they face problems, and now-a-days special courses are being taken by the first year medical students to improve their English. Even the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently announced a course for the business people to improve their English, so that business communications with the outside world become easier. Now English is gradually getting back its importance once again. We are now having several English medium schools which are officially being recognized by the Government and the people, because we have realised its importance.

After the independence of the country, our book trade has considerably developed. If proper opportunities were given, then the persons in the book trade will be able to render a much better and more economical service than that of the third country jobbers/distributors. In this context, even education projects having international funding should also be encouraged to use local book trade sources for procuring all their required books, journals, and audio-visual materials. It was found in some projects that where provision for direct supply was made by the international funding organization,

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There are many aspects and facets of the existing problems in the publishing and book trade sector of Bangladesh. One such problem is the direct importation of books and journals by different universities and institutions of the country, using third country jobbers/dealers.

These jobbers/dealers do normally sell their publications at a very low discount to the institutions, but sometimes they do have a very high marked up price. This (direct importation) was actually introduced immediately after the liberation of the country when our local book trade was not sufficiently equipped to render the required services to universities and institutions. This scheme is known as Actual Users Scheme under which any universities and institutions are getting foreign exchange funding, import license, etc. to import their required books and journals directly from abroad. Such transactions do not give any benefit to the local trade, and I would propose that our Government

considers to stop giving any foreign exchange allocation or any import license to any universities and institutions as the normal system requires that books were supplied at a full marked up price without any discount, but charging the full freight charges. Even for a book worth US\$ 4.00, a handling charge of US\$ 9.00 was charged for each book supplied to that particular project. Many of our senior librarians are having such experiences of purchase where international funding was involved, which were internationally handled and supervised, but local book trade could not do anything.

To support the country's publishing industry, which is the life-line of the national book trade what is urgently needed is that the availability of paper and ink should be made available at a highly subsidized prices, like that of our neighbouring country. With the strongest support from the Government of India, the Indian publishing industry is now playing a very important role not only in India, but also in the whole publishing world. Healthy growth of the publishing industry and book trade will open up the vista of learning in the country. The non-availability of paper, ink and other related materials at a lower or subsidized price is a big problem for

us. Some of our local publishers in a recent TV discussion pointed out that, instead of publishing locally because of high cost, many people are much more interested to import publications from India as the cost of importation is much lower. Import of unnecessary and cheap publications is another problem for us, and we should find out suitable methods of barring unnecessary imports, which can be done by having a dialogue with the book trade people, instead of taking a negative approach, like imposition of import duty, restriction of import, etc.

Another major impediment is the peculiar tendering system in libraries for the purchase of books, as a result of which many libraries have been suffering a lot in not getting the required books in time. In fact, there were a lot of discussions and newspaper reports about

the purchase of books by different public libraries through the tendering system. Because of the existence of such tendering system, the public libraries are unable to buy latest and important books, which cannot be purchased at an abnormally high discount quoted by some tenderers who want to clear their old stock as well as the old edition of books.

Bangla Academy has been organizing a very successful one-month long book exhibition in Dhaka in February on the occasion of Ekushey. Ekushey Grantha-mela has undoubtedly contributed a lot in the development of our publishing industry as well as in increasing the reading habit and making our people book minded. However, we need more such book exhibitions to take place at all the divisional and district headquarters.

Ekushey Grantha-mela or the annual national book exhibition, organized by the National Book Centre, does only permit the exhibition of locally produced publications, whereas foreign publications are not permitted to be exhibited and sold. Hence to know what is happening in other countries,

many reasons, the prime one might be his neighbour.

In fact it is a thing of vital importance that when an individual is capable of checking his first desire of having something, he invariably saves himself from the burden of shouldering the additional burdens which were to follow in the long run; if and when he was subjected to the first desire. Every desire when checked in the beginning, is so much better. And when it is not checked and implemented it would involve some responsibility to matters that would surely follow taking time and money. That an increase in the sense of want, is likely to expand the range of corruption. Because when a want is felt, an urge is invariably created to fulfil it by what

ever means fair or foul, which is sure to breed corruption.

Today, when we look around, we find to our utter surprise and dismay, a sense of competition in those who are unfortunately the men of lower income group, to have costly amenities of life, obviously not within their reach by honest means.

It is, therefore, very much desirable that an individual should think in terms of remaining content and satisfied with whatever he has or he can expect to have within his financial capability, so that the range of corruption may be contained and suitably kept under control.

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To the Editor...

'Big fishes' first

Sir, The office of the Dy Commissioner of Taxes of different circles have suddenly woken up; perhaps they were pretending to sleep all those years. Recently they have been busy collecting lists from post offices of those who have colour TV licences, those who own motor vehicles from motor vehicle deptt. and names of members of Dhaka Club who have been extravagantly spending money etc. — have written to them to justify their sources of income by a certain date. Obviously the recipients of these notices will give their statements and it will be the office of the Dy Commissioner of Taxes who have the discretion to accept or reject the statements of the recipients of

these notices. It should not be difficult to influence these officers to ones advantage. However, if there are any offenders in these lists — they will be small time offenders.

There are other obvious signs of opulence of people. One has to open one's eyes to identify them. Why not go after the 'big fishes' first?

A Citizen

Poster and wall writings

Sir, We all know that prior to any election of national or local level every party or individual candidate makes heavy poster and wall writings in different deep colours, making the walls and buildings very odd

looking. They treat these walls as if these are their own property.

To keep the city nice and clean, the government should introduce laws to avoid poster and wall writings, except where it is allowed by the owner on payment. Writings are made at night and it is very difficult to catch the offenders. My personal opinion is that the offenders should be held for punishment. Then the party concerned for whom they work must pay the charge to remove the wall writings to restore its original condition. It should be @Tk. 100 per 100 sq ft with a minimum of Tk. 250 per case. Every candidate is to keep 'Caution Money' for this to the Election Commission to met the claims if any candidate fails to follow the

Containing corruption

Sir, A saying goes, "It is easier to check the first desire, than to satisfy those follow it." It is true that a man who may now find himself satisfied with whatever he has, may soon fall prey to the greed of having more. This may be owing to what