

Good News for Pension Applicants

Government employees going on retirement have a natural right to pension and gratuity as security cover against lean days. But this well-earned entitlement after years of government service was being largely denied to them through inordinate delays in the settlement of their pension cases — the procrastination often going beyond the life-span of the claimants.

All this was tragic for the most part, but comical as well, when viewed in the context of what other civilised governments routinely offer their citizens in the shape of social security benefit or the national health insurance. Messing up pension cases of listed government officials was the height of ludicrous failure on the part of successive governments here. This debacle in something that always looked so manageable has been quite unforgivable.

It is therefore a highly welcome piece of news that a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has approved a time-bound formula that replaces wholesale the cumbersome procedures of the past, to hand in Pension Payment Orders (PPOs) to retiring ones six months before they go on LPR. The deadlines fixed for updating service books, assessment of dues owed to the government, and finally, issuance of No-Demand Certificate to the applicant acquire a compelling force in that their expiry would make the official concerned liable to punishment under disciplinary rules. The doing away with the requirement of submitting ACRS — we are amused as to why this being foisted upon a person retiring — is a step in the right direction. That by a single stroke, the whole bunch of incongruous circulars issued earlier is being swept away pleases us enormously.

The fear of punishment has not always done wonders with fussy bureaucrats. The government has expressed the will to get the pension cases settled in due time. How far the specific authorities are going to be infused with the government's will and will be imbued with the necessary sense of commitment, are obviously to be seen. We are inclined to put the emphasis on a self-triggering mechanism to take up the pension and gratuity cases at the earliest and clear them at the exit point, namely the audit office, without much ado.

The latest orders, as far as we understand, will not only apply to the new pension cases, these would also hold good for the long-pending tangles. Eighty per cent of the net pension and gratuity will be instantly paid in the case of an unsettled claim pending full receipt of the necessary papers.

It is the enrichment of the family pension provision with some welfare elements that marks a good beginning towards extending a social security cover, on howsoever a limited scale it may be. If the government, as the biggest employer, does not make a start there, who else will? The sick and retarded children of dead pensioners are to receive life-long support. The widows too will be getting the same if they do not re-marry. They do not have to procure succession certificates from the court, the certification of the last authority under which the dead employee had worked or of the local body chairman or commissioner would suffice from now on.

Directives, however well-intentioned and forceful they are, could fizzle out for lack of suitable reorganisation at the offices responsible to process papers and sanction pensions. Then, of course, a watch-dog body or a cell must keep tab on the implementation status, otherwise a tissue of excuses may be invented at the operational level to circumvent the orders.

Avoidable Fracas at Mirpur

For the third time in a week the police and local people, including students, clashed over the possession of a disputed piece of land at government school premises in Mirpur. The latest pitched battle between the police and the public has left more than a hundred injured on Monday. Earlier on Thursday the number of casualties crossed the 100-mark. Twice a wall and some constructions were raised and brought down by rival groups respectively. There is no knowing what undesirable and tragic incidents all this will lead to. Signs are already very alarming.

What has happened is that the local people have become a party to the fray only because a school of their locality is involved in it. The students have reacted the way they did because they considered the allotment of the land an encroachment on the school's property and the idea of sharing the premises with private organisations or individuals unacceptable. That was expected. But what about the teachers' role? Or for that matter the part played by the local authority in the area?

It is an intriguing situation, no doubt. The very issue of handing over land from a school premise to any private body for purposes other than education is a delicate one. Why the government decided to take away a piece of land from the school compound is beyond comprehension. At a time when most schools have hardly any breathing space, let alone a large field, any school fortunate enough to enjoy the facility should be left alone. This is also hardly in line with the importance professedly given to school education. If the Mirpur Primary Government School appears to have a large field now, it may not look so when the population grows and the institution is forced to take in more students.

Clearly, it was an injudicious decision on the part of the Works Ministry. What is more is that it seems to be blamable for making a short shrift of a need for prior consultation at the local level. Now that the private bodies have been facing problems in possessing the land, the government cannot play the role of a by-stander. Should it not have weighed carefully the pros and cons before allotting the property to private parties? Reportedly, at the time of finalising the deal, it was opposed by the school authority and the local people. The government might have a compulsion greater than what we understand. But that also makes it incumbent upon the government to clarify its stand on the issue. That the rival parties are pitted against each other is neither doing good to the government nor the local people. The police, reportedly have also given a deplorable account of themselves in that they withdrew from the disputed area and asked the local people to take possession of the land. They are there to maintain peace and order, not to provoke or encourage either of the parties in taking law into their own hands.

Despite Israeli Army and Settlers, Peace Moves Continue

THE settlements are "obstacles to peace" — was the view of the US Administration and so was of the rest of the world except Israel. Now it seems that Israeli army is also an obstacle to peace. In this column I cited several examples earlier showing negative role of Israeli army in the present peace effort. On major occasions Israeli army thwarted the peace process by raising unnecessary security questions and particularly those relating to Israeli settlers. Many a time political decisions were either changed or delayed by army interference. At times Arafat felt terribly frustrated over the peace negotiations and said "Peres agrees with us on one thing and the next thing we know Rabin vetoes it". Rabin vetoed them mostly because of Israeli army interference. On most of the issues Rabin seeks Israeli army's advice and hence the problem and undue delay in the implementation of the peace accord. The world has, however, now seen what those security excuses are; indeed, it is not the settlers but Palestinians' security which has always been at risk.

Baruch Goldstein dressed as an army reservist travelled in an army jeep, reached the Tomb of the Patriarch with automatic weapons, entered the mosque and killed over 30

Palestinians who were praying at the mosque. Israeli Investigating Commission has also the evidence that Goldstein was not acting alone. Israeli soldiers also confirmed during investigation that "second armed man entered the mosque". After Hebron massacre of Palestinians, Prime Minister Rabin said Israel had a "moral commitment" to ensure safety of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. But he failed once again to keep his "moral commitment". Hardly a month passed by after Hebron mosque massacre, Israeli army carried out two more massacres, one in Hebron itself and another in Gaza Strip. In Hebron, Israeli army laid siege to an apartment which was allegedly occupied by Hamas activists, fired rockets and hundreds of rounds of ammunitions and killed five Palestinians including a pregnant woman. Israeli army indeed used a children's hospital as a base for launching the attack which any civilized society will condemn. Indeed, Israeli army's action was severely criticized by even an Israeli cabinet Minister and many Israelis including the peace activists. Just five days after Hebron apartment massacre, Israeli soldiers killed six Palestinians in Gaza strip. Thus massacre of Palestinians by Israeli army continued un-

abated. There are reports that Israeli army had no political directives for such excesses against Palestinians particularly after Hebron mosque massacre which shocked the conscious people around the world, and also embarrassed Israeli government. But it is also a fact that no Israeli army man has yet been charged for such excesses.

Israeli army and police hardly go against the settlers even if they commit crimes including murders. These set-

and the Arabs by Israeli military law or military orders based on occupation. Therefore, though Israeli government has announced "crack-down" on two extremist groups — Kach and Kahane Lives — by branding them as "terrorists", it is doubtful whether Israeli army and law enforcement agencies would ever implement the government decisions. A commentator of Israeli law, Moshe Negbi, said "If there is no determination to enforce it, the declara-

standable but not really justified when UN Security Council decided to act against massacre of innocent people at prayer. However, the gradual transformation of US policy on Middle-East, after the collapse of Soviet empire, is noteworthy and if the trend continues the US may eventually emerge as the honest broker in the M-E affairs. It can do this even without abandoning Israel. This is indeed necessary to stop polarization of political forces in the area as such extreme polarization may ultimately harm the interest of US and its friends in Middle-East.

The UN security council rightly agreed to the stationing of international observers in Hebron in line with the provisions of the September, '93 peace declaration. Stationing of international observers with light weapons is necessary also in other critical areas of the occupied territories with a view to overseeing the activities of Israeli army and law enforcing agencies in the occupied territories. Though a contingent of only 160 will not be effective from the point of view of security but this is likely to curb, to a certain extent, the excesses of Israeli army.

The dismantling of settlements is a major issue which needs to be addressed as quickly as possible. Prime Minister

Rabin's political inability to dismantle, at this stage, the settlements in critical areas is understandable. This may strengthen the hands of rightist elements in Israel and may harm the peace process, but he will have to remove 400 or so settlers from Hebron area as soon as the present emotion dies down. For the rest of the settlements encouragement with financial support should be given by Israeli government to settlers to return to Israel proper. This may set the trend for settlers' return to Israel.

However, despite emotionally charged situation due to massacres of Palestinians, the secret talks between PLO and Israel continued due to positive role played by the US resulting in an agreement on security relating to Hebron. This cleared the way for resumption of talks on Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and Jericho. Latest reports are encouraging. Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho will start soon. Indeed, dismantling of some of the army establishments have already begun. The immediate goal for the PLO is to reach Gaza and Jericho, establish their administrative unit for self-rule and finally gain full control of Gaza and Jericho. This will be their first step towards establishing the Palestinian state which is now a matter of time only.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST Muslehuddin Ahmad

Settlers indeed receive sons-in-law type of treatment from the Israeli army and police. Israeli Human Rights group said 'Israel's army and law enforcement system have systematically failed to enforce the law against the armed Jewish settlers... who have attacked and killed Palestinians'. The group also said 'Settlers are above the law... Of the 62 Palestinians killed by Israelis from 1988 to the end of 1992, only one Israeli was convicted of murder'. There seems to be a "dual-justice system" in the occupied territories; the settlers are governed by Israeli law and with much leniency

tion is useless. So far we did not see, I must say, determination of law enforcement agencies to enforce the law'. Professor Ehud Springzak of Hebrew University said "If you just outlaw the organizations and you do nothing, it is almost not a blow".

However, despite repeated massacres of Palestinians, talks between PLO and Israel on security issues continued and here the US Administration played a constructive role though it fumbled for weeks over suitable words that should condemn Hebron massacre but not hurt Israeli position — a balancing act which is under-

Democracy must Negate Laissez-faire, Breed Stability

by Md Asadullah Khan

ECONOMIC reforms launched by the government are taking place at a snail's pace. Half-hearted restructuring and vacillation have plagued their last three years of democratic urge, people are still hopeful of an economic rejuvenation.

As it appears, the expectation of a social fabric free from the ramshackles of poverty and exploitation seems to be a far cry. The country is experiencing a break down of law and order. The falling economy and growing poverty are pushing marginal citizens into crime. While the fight in the political arena goes on unabated, a sizeable portion of the population is undergoing the most severe economic hardship resulting from homelessness and lack of job opportunities. During the last few years occurrence of crime has risen manifold with burglaries and street-robery topping the list. Shoot-outs and killings are becoming commonplace. Govt effort in curbing crime is rather inadequate and at the same time Govt is reluctant to admit the deterioration in the law and order situation. It is ironic that fledgling democracy has released creativity of all kinds and include criminality — and added new desires and also frustrations. People now have more ambitions and bigger dreams which sometimes lead to bigger acts of criminality.

On the other hand most of the factories in the country are facing closure partly because of

revolt into running a country and restoring the economy to order. But despite the fact that hardship and turmoil have plagued their last three years of democratic urge, people are still hopeful of an economic rejuvenation.

the shrinking demand for the shoddy goods these are producing and partly because of their gradually deplorable condition entailed by lack of BMR facilities. The number of jobless workers has surged to an all time high mark. An estimated 60% of the population now lives below the poverty line. But even as hard times sweep the country, the advent of capital market has created a new moneyed class. In the absence of laws governing the emerging system, 'business' in Bangladesh has become a free-for-all pursuit. By taking advantage of a not-so-transparent system, savvy entrepreneurs, mafia style business people and of course, some corrupt Govt. bureaucrats have profited handsomely. All these laissez-faire attitude have led to a situation that is totally cataclysmic and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening rapidly.

There is no dearth of money in the country. But it is not in the proper hand. Much of the legitimate new money comes from margins on import of foreign goods and/or wheeling with local authorities on behalf of the foreign firms. Other entrepreneurs provide services like shipping which once were the sole precinct of the state. Things have come to such a pass that it is at once noticeable that money here is mostly made by middlemen

not in the realm of actual production. To convert old sick Govt-owned industries to efficient high quality production, units, the country must first create a legal foundation for property rights and then proceed ahead with its privatisation plans. Such moves would encourage home grown and foreign capitalists to come forward with their investments and ideas.

All told, hardship experienced by the consumers is all too pervasive. New adventurism has eroded the old values of morality and respect for law and order. There is widespread complaint that inaction by the law enforcing agencies and harassment of the people not actually in the crime-ring are more rampant than ever.

And taking advantage of a free market economy, smuggled goods, mostly evading taxes and customs duty to the exchequer, have poured into the market dipping the economy to a level of sluggishness.

With democratic norms and spirit gradually taking roots, people had pinned great hopes in the present leadership. No wonder, the ruling party had taken major strides towards transforming the country into a free and open society. But the disastrous state of economy the country inherited has made that exceptionally difficult. But it should also be ad-

mitted that the task the reform team is doing, falls far short of the expectation. If the Govt. falters nay fails, the consequences will reverberate throughout the length and breadth of the country. The country has seen experimentation in running the state craft by the leaders with prudence and pragmatism as well as those discredited. And the experimentation has reached the final stage. Now the question that agitates the public mind is: should this Govt fail and other parties come to power after two years, whether the continuity of reforms starting with market economy and privatisation would be there or they will start from scratch with some new ideas and planning.

Attempts to establish a system of check and balance are not faring well. The legislature is paralysed by unending battles with the executive branch. The Govt has to listen to a deafening chorus of calls for its resignation for its alleged failure to implement the structural reforms and rejuvenate the economy.

Considered on a global scale, we at once see that the world has gone on the exultant binge of democracy in recent years. Repressive governments have fallen. Authoritarian regimes have opened up to political opposition. After enforced silence, people feel free to speak their minds. But now, after all the amply justified celebration, has come the

moment for sober stock-taking and searching questions about the so-called triumph of democracy. We have to remember that even when totalitarian or authoritarian systems crumble down, democratic ones do not automatically rise up in their place. Only free and fair elections, as we have witnessed in our country, do not necessarily produce open governments, human rights and economic prosperity.

The essential virtue of democracy is very well-known. It is a system that has proved its worth in reflecting the dignity and equality of all human beings, in obliging governments to act on all citizens' behalf in establishing a peaceful method of removing bad rulers and altering the course. One of the pleasing things about the way the world has changed in recent years is that the time for cheer-leaders in democracy is gone. What is needed after all the euphoria is clear-headed sense of democracy's fragility and its limitations.

In all fairness what people fervently demand to-day in order that democracy does not turn to be authoritarian rule, is that the parliament's life should be limited to three years and not more than that. Taking the development of scenarios into consideration there is possibly no second thought that democracy is still very much under threat. (To be concluded tomorrow)

ARAB leaders grappling with the growing militancy of Muslim fundamentalists frequently blame their troubles on external powers, particularly Iran and Sudan.

But more and more analysts see the roots of these troubles at home illustrated by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and other social ills not least of which is the lack of democracy.

Despite the few 'cosmetic' moves toward democracy in certain parts of the Arab world since the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991, the Arab world, by and large, is ruled by absolute or near-absolute dictatorships. Changes in the world after the Gulf crisis have had little or no effect on the systems of government in the Arab world.

The United States, which has emerged as the unrivalled superpower in the world is grappling with the dilemma of how to apply its passion for democracy and human rights to the troubled Middle East. President Bill Clinton came to power accusing his predecessor, George Bush, of coddling dictators around the world and promising he would not do the same.

Crisis Stems from Absence of Dialogue between the Rulers and the Ruled

Mounir B. Abboud writes from Beirut

Yet when it comes to the Middle East, this policy turns into a dilemma. Most, if not all, of Washington's key Arab allies including Egypt and Saudi Arabia are non-democratic and are threatened by Islamic fundamentalists hostile both to US interests and Western values.

Form the far western end of this Arab world all the way to the east, Arab governments refuse to talk to their peoples. They ban dialogue with their own people and yet race to negotiate with their prime enemy Israel at Washington's request. Putting it in a nutshell, the crisis of the Arab world stems from the absence of domestic dialogue and negotiations between the rulers and the ruled.

There are may examples — in Iraq where people are not allowed to speak, Algeria where the rulers believe the people are not qualified to

rule, and Saudi Arabia where the silence is deep. The crisis is with the Arabs. It's among Arabs before it became a crisis between the Arabs and Israel.

Democracy is an indivisible whole, either there is democracy or no democracy. You can't have partial democracy. The main features of a democratic system are people's participation in the decision-making process and the democratic transition of power.

Is there any Arab country where the people know when or how the mandate of their present rulers ends and who takes over after that? No — most of the decisions in the Arab world are made at the top and often by one person. The people only take the consequences and political parties are dictators in disguise.

After the Gulf War, most Arab states ruled by virtual monarchies, created what they call 'consultative councils'. It

was a modest step toward government by the people, but far different from the elected parliamentary systems of the Western world. Kuwait has this 'advanced' form of democracy in the Arab world.

The policy emerging from the US State Department under the Clinton administration seems to try to nudge Arab leaders to take slow, cautious steps in the direction of political and economic reform in the hope of heading off a perceived Islamic threat. Officials have indicated that the US administration gives a high priority to human rights and democratization, telling its friends that world stability is not a static phrase that just means security in the military and police sense.

Since the Gulf War, almost every Gulf Arab state has concluded bilateral defence agreements with the United States, Britain and France pro-

viding for help in case of an emergency similar to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This has caused consternation in Arab nationalist quarters, including Syria, which sided with the Western alliance during the Gulf War. Even in Kuwait there have been some calls for an end to foreign military presence in the Gulf now that their mission has been accomplished.

But stability means confronting domestic challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, ignorance and social injustice. These constitute the environment in which terrorism thrives. Terrorism is like a fish, if it goes out of the water, it dies.

To the extent that these social problems are resolved by more political participation and economic liberation, the long-term issues of social justice can be much more effectively dealt with and that sta-

bility comes into being. For the United States, this is easier said than done. Washington has two scary models before its eyes when surveying the region. First is Iran where a pro-American authoritarian leader was swept away by an Islamic government which now threatens US interests throughout the region.

Second is Algeria, where the army stepped in at the last minute to prevent Islamic radicals from winning power in an election. Now, the military-backed government is engaged in a tough day-to-day struggle against unrest and mounting economic difficulties with the Islamic threat far from extinguished.

The problem with allowing fundamentalists to win office through elections is that once in power there is no certainty they would ever give it up. But the Jordan experience may be a model that can be emulated by other countries threatened by fundamentalism. King Hussein has allowed Islamic parties to win a substantial share of seats in a national assembly and is moving toward free party election.

— Depthnews 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.

Consuming and saving

Sir, One cannot eat a cake and save it for future consumption at the same time. Various people live in a society having complicated minds and thinking processes. Most of them are not expected to see things in the perspective of realities. Consumption and saving or utilisation and preservation of the same thing cannot go side by side. A proverb says, "A pie saved is a pie earned." Earning and

spending is very much associated with every individual. One is likely to spend money for some specific purpose. For any work if I require spending say 10 Taka, and I succeed to finish the purchase within 8 Taka then I can say that I have saved 2 Taka in the deal. Thus my pocket gets an additional strength of having 2 Taka more which adds to my purchasing capacity to that extent. If I have a fund at my disposal, I am free to spend out of it. And whatever I spend, my accumulation decreases. That

is why when I spend an amount lesser than budget, I have reason to claim that I have earned the balanced sum for the simple fact that my saving causes an increase in my fund, from which I am free to spend anytime in future.

Complicated selfish people want to enjoy the utilities of things and at the same time desire that those things should remain or should be kept in tact for future. This kind of mental attitude underscores a sort of psychological absurdity. The bare fact is that if a thing is consumed it cannot at the same time be preserved for future use. If it can be meant for saving it cannot be spent now and is only saved for future use of deferred utilisation.

In the present day society where job constraints are acute and the range of earning is limited, one should look at spending less, so that the dif-

ference is added to the fund, which tends, every moment, to deplete.

N Naser
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"Magura by-election"

Sir, My attention has been drawn to the write up on the captioned subject published in the opinion column of your esteemed daily on 30.3.94.

I can't help thanking the contributor for his valuable write-up on a very vital issue. He has very thoughtfully and logically put forward his views with which I fully agree that there are sufficient reasons to believe that the Magura poll was rigged. And as such the Magura by-election result is required to be cancelled for in the public interest. The views expressed by the writer, in my

humble opinion are very likely of the majority of the people.

Following the election, there was a hartal call on 20.3.94 in protest by the opposition. This time I think, the participation by the people in the hartal was spontaneous which adequately reflected their sentiment in favour of cancelling the Magura by-election result. Perhaps this may go in favour of the ruling party if the election result is cancelled and arrangement for re-election to the seat as suggested (i.e. under complete supervision and control of the CEC) is made. They might win because they claimed winning by widest margin. Therefore, they should have no fear. Even if they lose (not likely, of course), it will atleast generate confidence about neutrality and fairness of the Govt. among the people which may pay in

the long run, i.e. in the next general election. It will be sort of "tail they lose, and head they win".

Therefore, there are many merits in arranging a re-polling than in opting for not doing so. Of course, I don't say that the issue is at all not debatable. I, therefore, through your column, invite those who could contradict the views of Abu Imran, to come up with reasons and justifications. Like many others, I am open to reasons. And if their view points are convincing, I would have no reasons not to accept theirs and modify mine's. This may also help the rulers to read the mind of the people, if they would like to give any consideration for the people's opinion.

Abdullah
Dhaka