

## Securing Govt Property

Illegal occupation of land and grabbing of government property have long been a problem in the city. Some do these through forgery and others with the help of muscle power. An investigative TV programme called "Drishtikone" (outlook) had for once concentrated on this endemic problem and came up with chilling reports on illegal land occupation through the employment of both means. A gang of professional musclemen was found to be offering their service for fabulous sum of money to make and unmake the fate of land owners. Now comes a Bangla daily with the revealing news that government land valued at about two crore Taka has been illegally occupied in the south-eastern part of the city. Forged documents were produced all through to establish possession rights, to have the housing plan approved and to get all the utility services.

What is highly interesting is that the Public Works Department (PWD) at the instruction of the housing and Public Works Minister has investigated into the matter and found that forgery had been resorted to take possession of the land. Yet the property cannot be recovered, thanks to a section of employees in the ministry concerned. In its report the PWD also recommended the eviction of 15 illegal occupiers from the govt land on June 16. The file, according to the daily's report, has not moved further than the table of a deputy secretary. Apprehension has also been expressed in the news item that the report submitted by the Public Works Department might not have been brought to the knowledge of the concerned secretary and the minister.

This is a dangerous symptom we are heir to from the colonial period. It has been eating into the very vitals of our national spirit. Corruption and musclemanship are ignored or even nurtured within the system. How come that the minister's order has been stalled midway by way of shelving the file. Such bureaucratic tangles have been responsible for much of the nation's miseries. If prompt actions could be initiated against the land grabbers and their backers both in the administration and outside of it, any prospective criminal of the brand would have given a second thought before embarking on that illegal mission. What is more is that the reporters who take so much pains to get into the depth of such racketeering are made a target of the goons desperately trying to get rid of those uncovering their activities.

Sure enough, city lands are precious like gold now. The Rajdhani Unnayan Katiripakkha (RAJUK) already has a tough job in its hand. Several times has it gone with its dismantling mission in parts of the city. But in most cases it is the slum dwellers who have become the worst sufferers with RAJUK's bulldozers going about their assigned task. Generally the big shots have remained untouched, one wonders, by what magic. Here again we know the bureaucratic process somehow favours the men with money and of power. In the case of the expanding slum on the Dhaka Medical College Hospital compound, the assurance of land for the employees of that hospital has been enough to reach an amicable solution. The inhabitants of that unauthorised slum, working in the hospital, have readily agreed to vacate the place as soon as they are allotted a place in the city for their residence.

Had the illegal possessors of government land in other areas also behaved, things would have been easier for the concerned ministry to conduct its business. But those are the tough nuts who need equally strong and even stronger administrative measures for surrendering their illegal claims. But it is not enough to evict them from the lands they have falsely claimed their own. They should be made to pay for keeping land in possession for so long. They have cheated the government, the people and the state and a case should be instituted against them accordingly. Unless they are penalised, other intending violators would not learn a lesson. We hope this fraudulent property gains will be promptly dealt with to set a precedent in a way that no one in future dare take away government property.

## For Support where Due

The rapidity with which we have been liberalising our imports broadly as part of the free market stratagem can be specifically ascribed to two reasons other than just providing a greater access to foreign goods. In the first place, initially we had a persistent recession not solely in consequence of a global recession but to some extent as a result of moves designed to discipline the credit giving institutions and to recover huge outstanding loans from genuine as well as self-styled entrepreneurs. The crackdown on wilful defaulters in the earlier phase of our economic management, executed for very valid reasons, yielded some dividends by way of loan recoveries for sure. But admittedly, economic activities shrank as a price paid for greater all-round caution. So, an increase in import became necessary as a preliminary step to breaking out of the stagnation trap we had willily-nilly fallen into.

Secondly, as we moved towards privatisation and free market operations we were bound by commitment to make our industries stand on their own feet and prove their liability through competition. Our commitment has not only been to ourselves but also to the World Bank in a palatable way. The WB linked its release of industrial development credit to our liberalising the imports as far back as in 1992. As part of the requirement for a steady inflow of WB credit, we were asked to slash the controlled list of import items numbering 193 until February last year — and as of now down to 100 — to a maximum of 39 items.

By all accounts, several items will be released for free import in the near future. Add to this our fulfilling another conditionality in remarkable haste, this having to do with the lowering of the tariff structure to welcome imports. We have done it faster than our South Asian partners, a fact that some chamber leaders do not tire of pointing out to underline our unequal access to their markets, which are hemmed in by a high tariff wall.

Thus, the freeing of more items for import from the controlled list together with the reduction already effected by us in tariffs is sure to have a negative bearing on the fate of some local industries. There is no escaping this ordeal, for sometime at least. As a damage control measure, we can think of ensuring smooth supply of power and other inputs to them. We are not for artificially propping up any industry, and that too, *ad infinitum*, but for protection where it is genuinely needed and deserved like in the small and cottage industries sector. Let what is sought to be done to promote industrialisation in the country be not self-defeating and counter-productive.

WITH the emergence of Bangladesh Dhaka city was catapulted to the status of a capital for which she was not groomed, in a manner befitting the requirements of the capital of an independent state. Being preoccupied with other overwhelming exigencies like food and shelter, the new government had no respite and resources at its disposal to remove the deterrents standing in the way of Dhaka transforming into an ideal capital city.

In those days everything was in short supply. Crisis was synonymous with every day life. There was no foreign exchange to buy food, no money to provide shelters to the destitutes or to restore communication crippled by the occupation army. Sighs of shahid families, who lost their dearest ones, were reverberating the country's sky. Under such circumstances programme for the development of capital city obviously took the back seat. Before all those crises could be efficiently managed, the nation suffered another shock of a devastating flood in the wake of which came the famine. The cumulative effect of the two had set the country's economy in doldrums. There was no job and no means to survive in the rural areas. Consequently people desperately started rushing towards the cities and towns in search of a living and obviously the capital became the prime target of influx.

The city, itself handicapped with perennial crisis of all modern amenities of life, was hardhit by the stream of immigrating population. Consequently, degeneration of ethical values started. The anti-socials got the better of the administration. No effective measures were taken to curb their activities. On the contrary, some of the governments rather established a nexus with the musclemen allowing them, in the process, impunity from the law enforcing agencies.

My endeavour is to highlight the messy situation of the metropolitan city's transport system in the backdrop of our shattered social fabric, and to keep the esteemed readers fully abreast of an impending dangerous situation that may take everybody by surprise.

# Dhaka Traffic: A Difficult Deluge

Lack of Essential Standards

Dhaka lacks some of the most essential standards of a metropolitan capital. Public transport system here has no basics. Unlike other metropolitan cities in the world, Dhaka has got no circular railway, no tube line, no trolley bus. Its main thoroughfares, barring a few are all covered with whopping number of cycle rickshaws that run in conjunction with the fast moving vehicles. Neither the government nor the private sector have come up in a big way to render positive service to revamp the metropolitan transport sector qualitatively. The private sector's bulk investment has gone to deploy as many reconditioned minibuses as possible — proportionately low investment but high return. They were not interested in standard size buses which otherwise could have saved this sector from the present situation — too many vehicles but too little space. No wonder, today these mini-buses, by virtue of their overwhelming number, carry a vast multitude of passengers to their destinations. But an equal number of standard size buses would, indeed, have carried at least double the numbers, if not more, without occupying much extra road space. Meant to carry sitting passengers the mini-buses, despite their inherent weakness in size and quality, are seldom found to run without standing passengers, quite often overloaded. I will not admit that the people have become euphoric for minibuses. Rather situation compels them to board a crowded minibus, in absence of any alternative within the same economic range.

The fitness of these category of vehicles is a highly debatable issue. To skip fitness test for their vehicles and at the same time maintain papers in order is a characteristic style of the owners who are perhaps apt in the art of keeping the police in good humour. Their operating crews, unconcerned about their obligation towards passengers, keep wooing others to satiate their desire for more money. During rush hours people are sometimes found to hang at the door with their bodies outside the vehicle. Technical snags are quite common with most of these vehicles some of which have outlived their ages.

## Auxiliary Means

A close look at the status of and services rendered by these vehicles would reveal that they can never be rated as vital mode of community transports in a metropolitan city. They may at best be accepted as auxiliary means taking only sitting passengers who are able to pay more and require faster movement and womenfolk who cannot board a crowded vehicle.

The management of the public buses in the metropolitan city like their counterpart elsewhere in the country are not in the habit of issuing tickets to their passengers even on demand. The fare collector will give you a disparaging gaze if you insist. I do not know who has given them the authority to collect fares without issuing tickets. Is the government aware of such a situation? If so, why no action is being taken against the persons infringing the universal law.

## Inevitable Traffic Jam

Quite often a driver in his bid to compete with another stop his vehicle at the stoppage in an oblique fashion so that his counterpart in the vehicle following him cannot overtake him. The second man does the same thing to the third. Moreover, most of the bus stoppages because of their ridiculous location at or close to a road intersection point, are anything but the purpose of stopping at these locations, often far away from the edge of the foot path, make a mockery of a bus stop and take no cognisance of what is happening at their back. The drivers make their own decision where to stop and when to leave. Concious of their right, also the three-wheeler drivers and the rickshawpullers, taking advantage of administrative lapses, exercise their free will

to park at times covering almost half the road width. Cumulative effect of the negligent and care-free attitude by the individuals manifest itself in inevitable traffic jam.

I have said earlier that standard size buses, with wide doors, covering negligible extra road space can carry twice as much passengers as a minibus can. A comparative cost analysis would reveal that proportionately the former turns out cheaper than the latter apart from being far more safe and comfortable. Whatever the advantages a minibus has are largely obscured by greater incidence of road accidents and higher operating costs. As such, a major share of these minibuses should be gradually replaced by proportionate number of standard size buses and double deckers if public transports system in the metropolis is to be made fairly credible to the city dwellers. Government should come up with credit facilities on easy terms to entrepreneurs for investment in this sector and on their own try to augment BRTC stock of standard size buses and double deckers.

The cycle rickshaws, an orthodox class of transport have been traditionally serving the city dwellers for over fifty years. Their ubiquitous presence at every street corner is something of a *fait accompli* and relieves the people of growing a habit of walking in exchange of their pocket and health. An estimated 2.5 to 3 lakh rickshaw (City Corporation's figure is 5 lakh) are at present plying in the city streets of Dhaka. Needless to say, the figure is increasing unabated. According to the Mayor of Dhaka, only 77,000 are holding valid licences. Hence, the rest are running either with forged licences or none of it. Perhaps, the City Corporation hasn't had the appropriate weapons to unearth the unholy truce between the rickshaw owners and the vested interests.

## Stumbling Block

The rickshaws are, indeed, a stumbling block for smooth

traffic movement. When the fast moving vehicles run side by side with the rickshaws there appears no room for efficiently controlling the traffic, particularly at road intersections, with inevitable slow clearance of traffic. The scenario that gives rise to traffic jam in the metropolitan capital does not need an elaboration as we are experiencing it day in and day out. Situation turns volatile on the eve of festival days. Hence, it is high time to look for a remedy. When all doors before us are closed, we have got to go for more tough and costly measures. Most immediate action would be to slowly ban the rickshaws from entering the main thoroughfares of the city. The other option to construct two-tier flyovers at the intersection points of the busroads is dismissed at this stage for being cost prohibitive, for creating serious traffic jam during construction phase and requiring an overhaul in the distribution system of the city's infrastructure facilities such as electricity, water, gas, sewerage system etc.

## Reemployment of Rickshawpullers

Imposing ban on rickshaws from the main thoroughfares might throw a sizeable percentage of rickshawpullers out of job and to eventual starvation. So, any action taken must be premeditated so as not to create any social problem. The onus of reemploying these jobless rickshawpullers shall lie squarely on the government and the private businessmen. No other measure, howsoever efficient, can salvage the Dhaka city from an acute traffic jam that can paralyse the life any time in the foreseeable future. So now or never. Before implementation of this programme certain pertinent steps, as follow, have to be taken by the concerned organisations:

- (a) No new licence for rickshaws should be issued.
- (b) Rickshaws with fake licences shall be detected and put out of commission forthwith so that it cannot reappear

on the streets.  
(c) Rickshawpullers rendered jobless due to phasing out programme shall be provided with small soft loans for self-employment.

(d) Sufficient number of buses, three-wheeler autos and tempos shall be pressed into service and channelled through those thoroughfares where rickshaws have been banned from entering.

The third principal category is autorickshaws which are meant for covering long distances and usually go on hire. Fare rate for autorickshaw is very high but they are used mostly by middle and low income group when the distance to be covered is little too long. Three-wheelers are usually run by 2-stroke engines where fuel is a mixture of petrol and luboil. Such fuel emits relatively high dose of carbon monoxide believed to be an airpolluting agent. This type of transports cannot be truly regarded as any vital mode of community transports. But in some Asian cities it takes the load off from the taxis operating on hire. In Dhaka where taxi cabs are not available, very easily autorickshaws shoulder the entire responsibility what the cabs, otherwise, would have shared. However, the auto rickshaws should remain in the streets in long as they don't pose a formidable environmental threat and can be partially phased out when the per capita income of our people attains a higher figure like Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India. The tempos which ply in the metropolitan city streets offer shuttle service between any two fixed stations with intermediate stoppages. They carry 10 to 12 passengers each trip and can be regarded as community transports like buses. Their fare is much cheaper and is affordable by even low income group passengers. These types of transports are not liked by many for their inherent inconvenience in boarding and alighting. Nevertheless, given the present state of affairs they would go a long way in providing supplementary transport service to the people of this crisis-ridden city.

(To be concluded tomorrow)

# Sri Lanka Holds Snap Parliamentary Polls this Month

Mallika Wanigasundara and Harold Pieris write from Colombo

After 17 years in power, the ruling United National Party faces a tough fight against the People's Alliance

In a surprise move that defied convention, Sri Lankan President Dingiri Banda Wijetunge dissolved Parliament on June 24 and announced the holding of snap election on Aug 16.

The President's decision to hold parliamentary elections ahead of the scheduled November presidential polls was apparently made without first consulting many of his Cabinet members.

The usual practice in Sri Lanka is that presidential elections precede parliamentary polls.

After 17 years in office, the ruling United National Party (UNP) is facing a tough fight against the People's Alliance (PA) formed by the leading opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its leftist partners — the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party.

The UNP appears to be in disarray and crumbling. Its might was completely shattered when it lost 20 of 21 contested positions in the Southern Provincial Council (SPC) elections last March to the PA, led by its president Srimavo Bandaranaike and her daughter and deputy president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

The Southern Provincial Council poll was also won by the PA by a slender vote last year. The March elections were called after the UNP persuaded one PA member of the SPC to cross over, which brought down the Council's administration.

Chandrika, who spearheaded the opposition's victory in the SPC polls, has emerged as the new SLFP leader after the brother Anura left the party to join the UNP.

The young, charismatic Sorbonne-educated Chandrika is making a straight line for the presidency, even though her mother insists that she herself would be the Party's presidential candidate.

Chandrika is the popular choice of the young people and

many other voters who are fed up with a party which has been in power too long. The swing in public opinion seems to demand new faces, new approaches and fresh initiative in the next government.

The loss of the UNP in the Southern Provincial Council has been taken to be a trendsetter. For the ruling UNP, the coming presidential polls will be a tough fight, not only to retain power, but also to prevent a landslide for the SLFP.

Commentators believe this is the reason why the President took the unprecedented step of calling a parliamentary elections first. The UNP hopes to win in the earlier elections. If it does not, then chances are strong that it will receive a drubbing at the presidential elections in November.

This early, 225 Member of Parliament have gone back to their electorates to start the campaign. It is estimated to have a block vote of 40 per cent while the SLFP commands around 30 to 35 per cent. There are now more than 11 million registered voters, of whom 2.4 million are new and young voters of crucial importance to the contenders.

The UNP's beleaguered political leaders have sighed with relief when the 400,000 — strong Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) composed of Tamil plantation workers, threw its support behind the ruling party. The CWC is headed by one of Sri Lanka's most shrewd, adroit political strategists, Savundramoorthy Thondaman.

The UNP also has the support of the Democratic United National Front (DUNF) rebels, who earlier broke away from it, and that of a smaller party — the Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya (SMP).

On the other hand, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress said it will support the opposition PA.

Several Tamil parties, such as the Eelaam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front, Tamil United Liberation Front, the People's Liberation Organi-

sation of Tamil Eelaam, Tamil Eelaam Liberation Organization and the Eelaam Revolutionary Organization of Students, said they will most likely field their own candidates.

Candidates of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelaam, fighting an ethnic war in the north and south, would likely join some group for election purposes.

The results of the recent SPC election weakened the ruling party even more. The President has been shown as a weak leader and, right now, the party is split between those loyal to the late president Ranasinghe Premadasa and those supporting President Wijetunge.

The UNP's tactic of pulling into its party the son of Mrs Bandaranaike — Anura — has flopped. Anura was not able to win over to the government's side opposition votes at the recent polls.

This weakness of the President was evident when he requested Parliament members nominated by the government to resign to make way for former Minister Gamini Dissanayake and several others. Mr Dissanayake of the UNP was expelled by the late Mr Premadasa for trying to impeach him.

Government Parliament members refused to heed the President's request to resign except for three, which enabled Mr Dissanayake to enter Parliament.

Mr Dissanayake's re-entry into the Government ranks has not been well received by the entire ruling Party. But President Wijetunge seems to have great faith in Mr Dissanayake and appears to have shelved the old guards who were around the late President Premadasa.

During the SPC elections in March, President Wijetunge

took a pro-Sinhalese line which failed to win him votes in a predominantly Sinhalese electorate. It only annoyed the minorities in the area like the Tamils, Muslims and Christians.

The UNP's decision not to have a May Day rally this year was also seen as a weakness of the Party. The opposition held a mammoth rally to celebrate their Southern Province victory and to boost the morale of all their party cadres.

However, President Wijetunge announced on May 1 a package of benefits in an obvious bid to shore up his election prospects.

The highlights were tax exemptions, housing loans, food stamps to more people, more scholarships for students, subsidy schemes, jobs for unemployed graduates, insurance and pension schemes for the 1.5 million informal workforce, farmers banks, more subsidies on small fishing boats, reduced electricity tariff charges, etc.

However, opposition analysts saw some devious designs in this May Day extravaganza. They said the president was scorning the economy, fuelling inflation and leaving a legacy which would make it difficult for the next government to function.

The UNP has seen some of the most turbulent and violent years in Sri Lanka history. Most notable were two insurrections: one by the Sinhala youth of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna which was crushed and the ongoing ethnic conflict in the northeast that is costing the government 23 billion rupees (US\$46 million) annually.

These have sapped its resources and eroded its reputation. Killings, human rights violations and disappearances have damaged its image

Political analysts feel people would vote for a change after 17 years, particularly noting the deterioration in the ruling party leadership.

The ruling UNP which was swept into power in 1977 with a substantial majority introduced the open market economy and liberalized it. But it forgot some of the wisdom it had gathered when it was in the opposition.

It attracted foreign investment and helped the private sector to flourish. But while making changes at a macro-level, it forgot the impact and changes necessary at the micro-level. The subsidies which farmers and fishermen were receiving were stopped. The party was insensitive to the rising cost-of-living, blithely saying people have more money now.

Just as an army marches on its stomach, so do the people when they march to the polls. Though late, President Wijetunge has learned this.

—Depthnews Asia

## OPINION

### ABC News, Australia

The write-up of Taslima Nasreen was much talked about nationally and internationally. Particularly the western media have taken the topic as a very hot issue for discussion. The reasons behind are unknown to many of us.

Recently, I learnt from the newspaper that ABC Television of Australia had telecast an interview with Taslima, where the controversial writer told that in Islam women are treated as slaves of the menfolk. But I am sorry to say that it is travesty of the truth. Here, I would like to mention from the 4th verse (NISSA) of the Holy Quran, where it is clearly mentioned that "If a wife fears cruelty or desertion on her husband's part, there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves. And such a settlement is the best."

In fact, Islam permits divorce but it is our cursed society which still hangs on its prejudices and prides. Although Bangladeshi society is progressing fast, yet it is very much conservative to accept a divorced or divorcee woman. The watchdog-like society till now points a finger to a divorced woman and makes sarcasm. So it is not Islam, but the society to be condemned or blamed. It is not Islam, but the social attitude towards which women are to be altered.

I feel, the interview telecast in ABC News is biased and one-sided. As a journalistic point of view, I guess, together with the interview with Taslima, ABC should have taken interview of some other women from Bangladesh. There are no

dearth of high-positioned educated women in Bangladesh.

The western media have talked much about Taslima and Islam. But I wonder, why they don't try to reform other religions also? There are instances of fanaticism in other religions too. Even in this present age we find reports of widow burning on her husband's pyre. And where even a tender-aged widow has to discard meat or delicious food or any other luxury from her life after the husband's death. Whereas, Islam allows women to get a divorce, to remarry and to lead a very normal life. Even a Muslim woman can marry a person younger than her by age. The best example of it is that our Prophet (SM) got married at the age of 25 to a widow when she was forty. Doesn't it prove that Islam is a more liberal religion than any other, and it gives us a complete code of life?

To be candid, I am not an orthodox Muslim, but like other rational human beings I would be on the side of the truth. I would also request the western media as well as ABC TV, Australia, to be truthful, righteous and professional.

However, we do support Taslima's fight for women's right, honour and dignity as human beings which is yet to be provided by the society.

We hope, true journalists all over the world will not drift away in the stream of the flash-ups of western media, rather they would have the courage to express the truth.

Nima Haq Shantinagar, Dhaka

## To the Editor...

### "Getting the act together for Rwanda"

Sir, Your editorial titled "Getting the act together for Rwanda" on August 1, 1994 is indeed a good piece of journalistic excellence in interpreting the current issues related to Rwanda in line with international politics and diplomacy.

Since tribal cultures in different African countries differ from each other, it is very significant to note that multiracial warfare among the tribal people in the "dark continent" in our times is looming large due to diplomatic break after the fall of communism and the unification of Germany in Europe.

There has been a marked and sharp change in the African politics after Nelson Mandela's victory in the presidential elections in South Africa. We, as peace lovers, want that without any foreign intervention or any UN action the current crisis facing Rwanda can be resolved by African tribal people themselves. Any deviation in global politics can put the big powers in a very embarrassing situation. One should be cautious in dealing with this Rwanda issue as it demands enough foresight and vision.

The death of the common people in Rwanda and other African countries is the outcome of the failure of the UN

and its agencies in dealing with this delicate situation in time. Let this phase of UN operation in African countries be over with pragmatic solutions to the problems through the action of the UN member countries without any more delay.

Prof Abul Ashraf Noor Pabna

### Election Commission

Sir, It would, as I consider, be more relevant and appropriate on the part of the Opposition to go back to the Parliament and work out a policy guideline towards constituting a fully autonomous

Election Commission. Such an Election Commission should perform the role of a caretaker government only in case of conducting elections with full power and authority to be provided by the government. This Election Commission may be constituted with persons acceptable to all the parties. I am confident that such an Election Commission would definitely succeed in conducting a free and fair election.

Let us all think constructively for building up a better future for us all and our country as well.

M Zahidul Haque Asstt Prof. BAI, Dhaka.