

Opposition Needs to Reconsider

Never before did an investment conference of such an order — both in terms of size and level of representation — take place in this country. Indeed the international conference, jointly organised by the prestigious London-based Euromoney and our local Board of Investment (BOI) has all the makings of a great event but for the opposition-called hartals coinciding with the conference.

We are informed that the leaders of the opposition political parties are also going to attend the conference. There is no reason to believe that the opposition is unaware of the importance of this well-represented conference. The opposition parties' interest to participate in the meet is enough indication of how they value it. But their hartal call at the same time is what sounds extremely confusing. They make it a point to say that the hartal programme was decided much earlier. But to give their own arguments, we can say that the investment conference date too had been planned well before their programme. Most of these globe-girdling delegates coming to the conference have had their itineraries fixed months in advance.

Starting from the Jamuna Bridge's foundation laying ceremony through the Japanese trade delegation's visit to the British trade team's arrival and the British foreign secretary's visit — all have coincided with one hartal programme or the other called by the opposition. On the one hand, they miss no opportunity to declare how keen they are in welcoming foreign investment while on the other hand, the reception they accord to the foreign delegates is completely inconsistent with their professed keenness. Even without entering into a debate as to whether hartal as a means of realising political demands is right or wrong, it can be said that this kind of reception sends a most negative signal to prospective foreign investors. On the home front too the inconsistency between practice and preaching will have its repercussions.

The opposition parties in their attempt to discredit the government seem to be forgetting the country's interests. At the conference they too will have the chance to build their credibility with foreign investors. If and when they come to power, they will have to deal with these business leaders. We see no harm, and a lot of good, if the hartal programme is deferred by a couple of days. By showing respect for the conference, the opposition will show how much they are interested in foreign investment. So, if you cannot cancel, then at least postpone the hartal, till after the 26th.

Avoidable Error

The concern over the riotous scene on Friday morning at the Kamalapur rail station is not for the backlash it can have but for the inherent potential for recurrences of the same.

The Express train which was to leave Dhaka at 9 am stood still until 11 am when some passengers thought it was time to ask the station master why. Exchange of words in no time boiled over as a full-scale verbal duel. Passengers then mobbed the station master and ransacked his room. Moments later, rail employees reportedly led by the station master, caught hold of some passengers, pushed them into a room and beat them up. It was passengers in a body provoking organised clanish vengeance.

The station authority knew all the time that an engine fault was under repair but withheld that important information from the public who seethed and grumbled before bursting forth in anger. The train's status could be announced through the audio system at the very beginning allowing the passengers to take another mode of transport if they wanted. The loss of time was costly for them. Why not use in-house TVs to report positions from time to time? These are routine things all over the world.

Our normal reactions to any blundering by any authority and the resultant public vandalism have been to dismiss these as unfortunate incidents, worthy of contempt at best. What is even worse, their repetitive nature dulls our sensibilities and we grow accustomed to accepting them as a fixture in life. The result is that even where the omissions and commissions were as clear as daylight, we let the opportunity to promptly fix responsibility slip through our fingers. The actions are either too little or too late or both. Mostly these are in the nature of sweeping under the carpet both the systemic error and the dirty linen of the delinquents.

Intemperate public behaviour cannot be wished away; its possibilities should be eliminated by getting the system right in its essentials. If this is not done, even the media will find it difficult to moralise the crowds to behave.

Now a Guerilla War

At long last the Presidential Palace in Grozny has fallen into Russian hands. The whole city being in complete ruins, the costs of the battle are writ large on the now-ghostly capital of Chechnya. The warriors of independence have dispersed away from Grozny into the countryside of the Caucasian land which is ideal for long-drawn guerilla warfare.

As Russia's involvement grows, so does the Chechen determination to fight a hit-and-run battle for survival and independence. In Chechen leader Dudayev's words, his people "are preparing to send the grief back to where it came from."

More expressions of horror on the part of the world community over the impending blood-letting in the Caucasian region would be empty rhetoric unless the UN or the US gets the Russian leadership to take the path of statesmanship. The UN has to adopt a stance on the human rights question. As for the US, the Congress has recommended to president Clinton that economic aid to Russia be stopped if it carries on the war in Chechnya. The Clinton administration while emphasising the need for adoption of peaceful means by the parties concerned to resolve their differences over Chechnya has minced no words to say that this land is a part of the Russian territory.

Whatever the semantics, the reality on the ground is that the Chechen mind is set on freedom and that its craving for independence has only intensified through the baptism and ordeal in fire.

Even from their such difficult positions and posturings, the Russian Federation and the breakaway Chechnya may still negotiate a settlement sparing the world the nightmare of their blood spilling.

Foreign Office: A Permanent Target of Reforms

I was not surprised when I heard that the BNP government had decided to appoint a committee to reform the Foreign Office. The last BNP government under Gen Zia also tried to reform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which seems to be one of the favourite targets of a BNP government. The Prime Minister's trusted envoy, Mr Morshed Khan is the chairman of the committee set up for this task. Given the disturbing historical record of political interventions in the organization and operations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs one finds it difficult to be sanguine about the prospects of meaningful reform as a result of the present committee's work. A committee is often just a clever device to cover-up failures, and in the worst cases to validate arbitrary actions. Ershad did not need any fig leaf under the label of reform committees; he just played football with this Ministry as a child plays with his toys although he also had committees to do his bidding.

For nearly three decades I belonged to this Ministry. It was almost like my home. While travelling abroad in those days I gave the Ministry's address as my home address. When I see it perform well, I am filled with joy and pride. Its current profile, which is almost invisible gives me no pleasure. I feel a sense of disappointment. The news about the Morshed Khan Committee has not aroused a sense of optimism in me. Instead I feel a

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sense of disquiet. A committee cannot erase the dismal record of the last four years. The attempt to find a scapegoat for the poor performance of the political leadership will be most unfortunate. Officials are not able to defend themselves publicly and often they are victims of allegations and insinuations which they cannot counter or refute. I keep a safe distance from the Foreign Office because I am told that any contact with the opposition is sure to jeopardise the careers of my former colleagues.

The late Gen Zia used the Foreign Office, rather blatantly, for promoting the fortunes of the BNP. He could not care less about the damage to the professional cadre of the Ministry. Many readers will probably recall, in this connection, the creation of the so called 'Doot Pool' or the pool of potential envoys who would serve abroad. These people were lured into his party on the promise of position and money. They were restless when both of these goals eluded them. After all, how many of these people could be made ministers or deputy ministers? He tried to find jobs for them by creating the posts of District Development Coordinators (DDDC) but the number of DDD was limited by the number of districts. So he hit upon the idea of a Dootpool — a bizarre word formed by

combining the Bengali word 'doot' with the English word 'pool'. The number of the so-called Doots, if I recall correctly, was over fifty. Many of them seriously believed that an ambassadorial appointment was just around the corner. To create credibility about the 'Dootpool', five of the Doots were appointed as ambassadors abroad. No thought was given to the impact of this decision on the quality of our

genuine interests of the cadre officers were trampled underfoot without a second thought. As a result of the patently unjust decision on seniority, which was taken against the established rules and precedents, some of these assassins got the rank of ambassador when professional officers with much longer experience could not become even counsellors.

Gen Ershad made the Foreign Office the dumping

presidential relative used to run the Foreign Office from his office in New York!

Gen Ershad also appointed Committees to reform the Foreign Office. I heard about the Enam Committee which carried out the initial reforms.

Why an army officer was considered to be an expert on administrative reform was always a puzzle to me. Then another committee was appointed, perhaps in 1984, under the chairmanship of an erstwhile CSP. This time the officers of the other ministries and services wanted a share of the coveted posts abroad.

Their argument was: Why should only the rejected army officers be rewarded for their unsuitability to remain in their posts at home? Civil Service officers who have exhausted their possibilities at home must also have a go at diplomacy and therefore a quota must be reserved for them.

Thus the officers who joined the foreign service on the basis of national competitive examination and who received appropriate training were relegated to the background. Their morale, as a result of these assaults, plummeted to the bottom.

Today the thrust of the Morshed Khan Committee is reportedly economic diplomacy. I fully support the idea

of giving our envoys full responsibility for promoting our economic interests. Why must we, however, send an officer from the Commerce ministry or some other ministry for this purpose? Are they really specialists? For example an officer may serve as a DC in a district and then serve as a deputy secretary in the works ministry or youth and sports ministry and is then transferred to the Commerce ministry or the ERD. How does he become an expert in commercial or economic matters? Yet it is the pressure of these officers which was behind the policy of apportioning posts abroad to different ministries.

Reforms may be needed, but an attempt to cover up political failures by making hapless scapegoats of the officers of the foreign service in the name of reform is not desirable. The Foreign Ministry under the Khaleda Zia government has performed, by all accounts, rather poorly. The Hon'ble Foreign Minister himself admitted some time ago that he was conducting a so-called 'invisible' foreign policy.

Now comes Mr Morshed Khan with boundless enthusiasm and presumably his own personal agenda. I do not want to speculate about his personal agenda but one can certainly question his credentials for the job that he has undertaken. Games have been played with this ministry for too long and by too many self-serving people. I sincerely hope that this process will not be repeated once again.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

representation abroad.

Much greater damage was done by Gen Zia when he ordered the absorption of the assassins of August 15, 1975 in the Foreign Ministry. This was the unkindest blow which caused demoralization in all the ranks of the Ministry. No one knew why these killers had to be rewarded for their heinous act and why the President himself had to issue the orders of their appointment in the Foreign Ministry in his own hand. These assassins are to be found even today as envoys of Bangladesh abroad. Gen Zia was not content to appoint them permanently in the Foreign Office, he wanted their seniority to be determined according to their wish. The le-

ground of officers of the armed forces. This autocratic ruler had a sharp eye for those in the armed forces who might pose a threat to his throne. So he picked them up, one by one, and dumped them on the Foreign Office. He did not bother about the suitability of these officers for the assignment or about the damage to the morale of the cadre officers. He damaged the cadre at the very outset by appointing his brother-in-law as a member. This officer was first posted to the Washington Embassy and then to the New York mission. Obviously this new diplomat needed the international arena to make full use of his vast diplomatic skill. Some people believe that the

The Admission Nightmare

by Waheedul Haque

The already impossible situation is further exacerbated by the hapless parents firmly believing that some schools were better than others. Or precisely, as some schools very evidently produced better results than others, these could be instrumental in getting their children score a creditable performance in the matriculation exams, whatever the merit of their wards.

Coming closer to reality let us further reduce the school accommodation requirement for Dhaka's children by 50 per cent and settle for 500 thousand. And at present there are seats at the most for 50 thousand — you cannot possibly stretch 35,000 any further.

That is reality number one of Dhaka's educational situation that contributes mightily to throw all parents in the city into an unrelenting 15-year spell of worry and depression, seasonally visited by horrible nightmares.

The already impossible situation is further exacerbated by the hapless parents firmly believing that some schools were better than others. Or precisely, as some schools very evidently produced better results than others, these could be instrumental in getting their children score a creditable performance in the matriculation exams, whatever the merit of their wards. This apparently very simple and very true idea on the part of the parents needs to be examined at depth. Parents are no fools. They want exam performance only which can see their wards through the ordeals of the other hurdles that lie before the youngsters: getting a masters and even higher decorations which count in the matter of landing a job, building a career, shaping a life's calling for one's own. It is not their headache if there is a real gap between exam performance at the school level and true education or the amount of it re-

sonably expected to be imbibed by pupils in ten years of schooling. It is universally agreed that 'most holders of the masters degree in even the humanities subjects, not to speak of the sciences, do not have the linguistic skill to write flawlessly a paragraph either in Bengali or English. Incredible as it is, this holds good for masters holders in Bengali and English literature too. The first test of one's education — of whatever kind — and indeed of one's growing into mental adulthood lies in the way one can formulate one's thoughts and commit them to writing or speech. It is the height of failure for our education as a whole system that nearly all university successful fail to express themselves fairly in, please believe it, tolerably passable speech.

The parents have no reason to worry themselves to distraction over education proper. They simply have no way really. Quite understandably — reasonably too — they want a good result from their wards. As they believe that some doctors heal better, they are certain some schools produce better results. So ensues the mobbing of Motijheel school or Vigarunnessa. The cadet colleges, the Dhaka College and the Government Laboratory School and their likes have over the decades instilled into the brains of the parents that it is neither quality of teaching nor student merit but sheer virtue of a particular school that counts in producing results. Computerised results

have given a serious jolt to what so far enjoyed by certain institutions on the exam result sheet, but it will take a long time to dent the entrenched beliefs of the parents. And who knows — if the monopolists wouldn't find their way back into preminent producers of star performers, beating the difficulties posed by the computers. After all computers take orders from man who is more corruptible here than anywhere else. It is the considered opinion of many knowledgeable people that monopoly of good results for any length of time, no matter who hold it, is materialised through means not exclusively academic.

Once the infamous monopolistic hold is broken — how we don't know — it will be found a very large number of schools offer about the same quality of education. Of these those that hold their classes with rigorous regularity and supervise the students with punctilious care — would do better. This last simple key to good result has recently been used by schools like Vigarunnessa and Motijheel with unsparring enthusiasm. What do these good schools do to their students? Don't these use the pupil as a kind of tool to rake in reputation via impressive results?

The question would be made the easier to understand if we look at the interviews given by the merit-list luminaries to newspapers. Most of these heroes have two meeting grounds: daily reading hours of eight hours and more for years, and coaching by a

bevy of private tutors on top of school supervision. Now it is for the average intelligent person, and not the expert, to divine how students can improve intellectually by poring over for hundreds of hours the same material (not an awfully big volume either) prepared by school teachers and private tutors (who use the same 'notes' over a whole lifetime of pedagogy).

The myth of 'good' school education explodes finally when one notices that most of the luminaries on the various merit lists tend to drop out of such lists at every higher step and at the final masters level their showing is shamefully miserable. There is one good explanation for this. The 'good' education of learning by rote other people's pieces and guzzling useless single-bit information by the hundred hasn't quite prepared the pupil to engage the academic challenges not honouring such easy

techniques. We want more schools in Dhaka, hundreds more. We want most of them to be efficient and professional and a goodly sum of them to be inspired and dynamic. But as long as the content of school education and the ways this is disseminated and imbibed are not improved radically — even better schools will only be producing 'educated' scum of the kind we can hardly afford.

What's the answer to the parents' nightmare then? This is the problem patently of the economically well-off and socially upper-crust people. Every other stratum of society has its own set of problems and this one is no worse than any of those. Why not let these middle class elite grow to get out of this problem helped by the growth of more and better schools which is a certainty and a matter of time only? In the mean time will not a big section of the school teachers themselves become honoured members of the middle class? Can they not contribute to the improvement of the schools?

One reason for sloppy school education is lack of supervision of the teacher's work. If it is pretty difficult to make the 'inspection' system paying all over the country, it should be rather easy to have the Dhaka schools 'inspected' with care and strictness.

OPINION

Govt Controlled Media

M M Ahmad

What's wrong with the news service of the Bangladesh Government's state-controlled public broadcasting networks? Everything.

The elected people's representatives who have formed the cabinet and are running the country are violating the very basics of an impartial and standard news service expected from a broadcasting service in any free country. The propaganda is crude, repetitive, and boring; and the news is a bundle of half-truths, and the other half (or more than that) is repressed and suppressed. How this perverted policy is supposed to enhance the image of this very ordinary and second class government is not clear to the majority of the thinking citizens.

The situation is all the more ludicrous when the citizens are not barred from getting the news from other independent local and foreign sources. This ostrich-like head-in-the-sand attitude is not going to impress anybody, or improve the image of, or respect for this government. The administration is living in another world, the way it is responding to the urgent and important issues. The newspaper columns are full of complaints on the way the sane citizens of Bangladesh are being treated in the offerings of a government-regimented news service.

Even where it can get some credit in the development sector, the goodies dished out have too much salt — we all know the taste of over-salted dishes. This brilliantly conceived propaganda is producing the opposite effect. Once I read a book on the Nazi propaganda techniques used during Hitler's period. Tell a lie a hundred times, and you start believing it yourself.

Bangladesh is not a totalitarian state, but it is being treated like one when disseminating the national news bulletins. In this information age, the tech-

niques have to be completely changed. Who are the qualified experts advising the government on the propaganda techniques to be applied on the chasi bhaais and the intellectuals?

A news is a news is a news. Facts cannot be edited (like two plus two is four cannot be edited to provide any other result); and half news is no news; and the editor is suspect. An event which has occurred cannot be covered up or undone. People will know about it from other sources. What should go in a national bulletin is not a very difficult task for experienced editors. How is it that in this sector the official moral courage is virtually absent? Experts are not required, nor stringent policy decisions have to be memorised.

Views and comments are quite a different issue. The public complaint is that why important news events are blacked out (like the handing over of the resignation letters by the opposition MPs on 28 Dec). When a couple of lakh people attend an opposition meeting, it is news; otherwise these lakh audience are fools, indirectly, according to the state media. Well, even the important foolish news have to be reported, for getting wiser (in some circles!).

The state broadcasting media may sell some air time to private bodies for independent programmes. Otherwise, all the opposition print media may be closed down. What the government is placing stress on is that the print media is free — but not the electronic media. What is wrong with additional channels, public and private? In case of the latter, BTB would lose a large chunk of the advertisements in the ensuing competition. The listeners and the viewers are not the slaves of the ruling party. There are many other ways to remain popular, but not by suppression of news. Correct news (as it happens) is a big symbol of freedom.

To the Editor...

An appeal to British Council

Sir, A notice from the British Council appeared in your newspaper to inform the GCE examinees that they would not be able to hold exams falling on the days of 'full-day hartal'.

Although we do not blame the British Council, we, the parents, are very much anguished by this decision.

It will mean that on those affected days all the examinees will miss subjects which they can only reappear after full one year. It will also mean that an examinee who appeared in one paper but missed the other paper in any subject, will end up getting a grade of E or F which will be a disaster. Being deficient in some subjects, they will not be able to get admitted to A-level or HSC classes.

Like most parents, we anticipated 'full-day hartal' and made our contingency plans. If necessary, our wards will arrive at the British Council premises on foot or by any other means and there will be no failure in that. If required, they will attend after 6 pm.

We appeal to the good people of the British Council to reconsider their decision and not to close their doors in the face of our children who have worked so hard for so long. A frustrated parent

Antibiotics

Sir, Antibiotics are essential drugs in our everyday life. We

are using antibiotics frequently without investigating through susceptibility test and change-doses on trial and error basis. But antibiotic drug should be prescribed only after an antibiogram test. Because a particular organism is sensitive to a definite antibiotic and resistant to the others. Some organisms are sensitive to an antibiotic but frequently become resistant to that drug, and a high dose of antibiotic may also lead to other side effects. So it is necessary to select a definite antibiotic with a definite dose after passing through antibiogram test. Not only antibiotic but all types of drugs should be prescribed after accurate diagnosis.

Because of high clinical expenses, government should establish a diagnosis centre for poor people to give them service at a subsidised rate and it should be headed by biochemists.

The clinical report, maintenance of quality of the drugs and also determination of the reaction of the drugs should be conducted by the biochemists and be recognised by government.

Patients should also be aware about side effects of drugs to ensure better treatment and avoid complications arising from indiscriminate use of wrong medicines.

Navaz Khan
Maitabaz Chowdhury Para,
Dhaka

Blocking of normal road traffic

Sir, Folder Street, Jai Kali Mandir Road, Toybee Circular Road and Old Railway Crossing at Nawabpur-Gulistan point on Dhaka.

Narayanganj/Demra/Narsingdi/Chittagong route are the most busy and overcrowded public thoroughfares located in the heart of the city. These are also the meeting points of old and new Dhaka.

We fail to understand as to why DCC and the Dhaka Traffic Police are allowing some motor workshops to carry out all sorts of repair works, welding, vulcanizing, engine over-hauling, body manufacturing and painting etc. of buses parked on these public roads illegally and unlawfully blocking the traffic at the cost of untold suffering of the people?

Through these columns of your esteemed daily we have drawn the kind attention of DCC and Traffic Police to this effect repeatedly but in vain. We wonder if the authorities concerned have fallen fast asleep or they have become blind and deaf.

We strongly demand that disciplinary action may kindly be taken under the rules against the officials responsible for negligence of duties in the above mentioned areas.

O H Kabir, Dhaka-1203.

Star man of the year

Sir, The award went to a person who made an idea travel. Nothing can travel un-