

Moral and the Real Responsibility

Moral responsibility is fine, but what about real responsibility? Where does that lie? The industry minister, Zahiruddin Khan, quit his ministry on Tuesday. He said he resigned. Some papers claimed that he was asked to, by the Prime Minister. We do not want to enter into this debate. What however we would like to highlight is the fact that he took upon himself the moral responsibility for the fertilizer crisis, and left with dignity. In our country, it is seldom that anybody, especially a political leader, admits responsibility, and almost never has he resigned a ministerial post for any bungling. We congratulate Zahiruddin Khan for this precedent-setting gesture, and hope that others, especially ministers, follow suit, if and when such occasions should arise.

However, the question that lingers in our mind is, what did Zahiruddin Khan take responsibility for? As the industries minister, and the man in charge of running all the fertilizer factories in the country, he appears to have done a good job, for we produced more than before, and more than we needed. That leaves distribution. Is he responsible for that? Given the privatisation policy of the government, fertilizer was delivered on a first-come, first-served basis from the factory gates. Was he responsible for selecting who got a quota and who did not? What about monitoring the distribution of fertilizer, as to whether or not the dealers were actually selling in the areas for which they have been allocated, or they were all selling it in Dhaka, or in the border areas?

While Zahiruddin Khan takes moral responsibility, we feel there is more than moral aspect of it he should shoulder. But here he is far from being alone. In fact a lion's share of the real responsibility appears to lie elsewhere. What is the Prime Minister going to do about them who actually disgraced her tenure, her party, and her image so severely by creating this disaster. Our attention now stands focused on the judicial inquiry committee that the government has decided to set up. We insist that it should be allowed to work freely and speedily. This newspaper has written two editorials asking the government to tell the public clearly and truthfully as to the present status of the crisis. Unfortunately what we got were a cacophony of rhetorical responses blaming everybody but themselves for the crisis. In the midst of such an 'it is always somebody else's fault' attitude, Zahiruddin Khan's taking moral responsibility is such a refreshing change.

As Grows a Malignant Tumour

When there is news of fire incidents from the four corners of Bangladesh you know it must be now the month of Chaitra. But it was always a rural phenomenon. Village homes are built of inflammable material and the Chaitra heat makes them into ideal fuel for conflagrations involving more than one village. Now how is one to react to frequent fire incidents lapping up blocks of houses in the Dhaka metropolis possibly every day of this high Chaitra. The answer is not far to seek. There are pockets in this city, specially on its periphery, that are more congested and populous than the city proper but are essentially villages. In fact, very bad villages. So bad you do not call them villages any more, you call them slums.

As long as you allow slums in the city, the damning visitation will be there. And in one fire invaluable lives and the inseparable minimum of the poor people's material belongings would be lost in spite of big chunks of TV counselling ways of prevention.

When accidents strike up a way of repeating in a particular fashion, one knows how to fight them. First, all of a city's housing must conform to given standards of building material. Secondly, fire prone industrial shops may not be allowed in any residential area. Thirdly, all housing — however kutcha or temporary they be — must conform to approved area designs providing for enough road and park spaces. Wide roads are necessary to allow fire engines to engage the leaping flames. Open space puts a stop to the spreading fire. All this is elementary for whoever are in charge of the city's affairs.

So many people are in charge of so much of cares in this city and hardly anyone seems to be in control. The city grows like some uncontrollable malignant tumour. The question is, has anybody ever wanted this to stop and conform to healthy ways of development?

The Why of Addiction

Drug addicts in Bangladesh are believed by our narcotics control people to number between one lakh and 13. Some statistics! This, however, underscores the importance and urgency of the 1.9 million dollar UN survey and control programme beginning June as much as it illustrates the poor state of our grip on the matter.

The survey will work as the all-important database for the programme of controlling drug addiction. The control project will reportedly focus on law enforcement and legal assistance, treatment and rehabilitation and preventive education and information.

Without a proper and thorough understanding of our young people's going so massively for drugs, not one of the three sectors of control effort can possibly contribute substantially to the reduction of drug abuse. We have been living for centuries with the narcotic drugs but have never been faced with the problem of addiction, certainly not of this menacing magnitude. Hemp used to be taken almost universally by singers and assorted seekers after the mystic experience in the akhras. Patients of advanced cases of painful ulcers to killing cancers had recourse to opium. This never posed a problem for Bangladesh even when, for the most part of the historical times, this country held a world monopoly for production of the cannabis plant. Why and how has it turned into the vicious social malady that it now is? All the answers to this question may not respond to the action plan of the programme.

Unemployment and frustrations born of a drifting directionless society, unhealthy urbanisation rush, social switch-over to consumerism and valuing individual pleasure above the good of the collective, spreading western influence as propagated by the media — blue films, yellow magazines and the incomparable pull of satellite TV may be source of the factors contributing to drug addiction. How do we propose to fight these — on what planes?

HARIS Sladic, the Prime Minister of Bosnia in a recent statement said that the Bosnian Government and people were left with no option but to fight. This brings this four year old drama back to square one.

There is a clear consensus regarding the problem of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It started with the splintering of Yugoslavia — a vibrant state until the early eighties and now a distant memory. Of the ethnic mix that was Yugoslavia, Serbs had an overwhelming weight in size and power. Croats were the first to break away and after initial skirmishes with the Serbs, have had a relative easy time as a separate sovereign state. Josif Broz Tito, a Croat, who led the partisans against Hitler in the Second World War, was the architect of the unity of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was composed of six states and two autonomous regions. Yugoslavia was a model secular state, where religious and ethnic varieties were blended into a harmonious state.

The four-year old Bosnian

Bosnia—Back to Square One

by Arshad-uz Zaman

The saving grace has been the courage shown by the Muslims of Bosnia against Herculean odds. They have not cringed before the aggressors, they have not begged nor surrendered an inch of ground without a fight.

crisis has held centre stage of the world. It arose out of insatiable greed of Serbia. The weakening and finally vanishing of central authority in capital Belgrade provided the perfect excuse to the Serbs to put into action her age-old dream of Greater Serbia. Since she outgunned and outnumbered the Bosnian Muslims many times over, for the last four years, she has wrecked havoc among the hapless Muslim masses. Sarajevo, the beautiful capital of Bosnia, has remained under siege of Serbian guns for the last four years. The world has become numb by the pictures of Serbian horror perpetrated on Bosnian Muslim men, women and children. Thousands have been slaughtered, many more thousands

maimed and hundreds of thousands have fled to countries near and far.

Today Serbia controls 70% of Bosnian territory. The Bosnian question continues to be on the world agenda as a priority item. During the last four years we have witnessed diplomatic drama over this question of the most grotesque kind. This conflict has drawn the big powers and the United Nations like few other questions since the Second World War. There have been peace proposals galore. They have had the sanction of the Security Council of the UN and the sole superpower US and the European Union. Broadly speaking those proposals gave Bosnian Muslims 50% of territory. In order to hold on to her

ill gotten gains through guile and bluster the Serbs played a cat and mouse game with the international community. The position on the ground today remains unchanged with Serbia holding on to all that she gained by force.

The US, the principal player had taken some courageous initiatives throughout this crisis. It was under US prodding that NATO planes bombed Serbian positions to bring them to their senses. Yet the unfortunate fact is that the US shows clear signs of battle weariness — not in the battle field but the cat and mouse game played by Serbian leader Milosevic. The US has felt let down by her European allies. Yugoslavia is the old battle

ground of European diplomats, who are unable to forget the old Balkan question, however, archaic it may look in the context of today. We thus witness various degrees of lukewarm support to US initiatives. Russia has her old Orthodox Christian policy, which is propagated in a highly colourful way by Vladimir Zhirnovsky.

The upshot of all this is that the UN peace plan appears to have been consigned to the cold storage for good. The UN seems to take comfort from the fact that Croatia has not thrown out all the UN troops. Similarly the West congratulates itself everytime a ceasefire goes into effect. She appears resigned to the reality of Serbian unlawful gains at the expenses of Muslims of Bosnia.

The world of Islam has been traumatised by the Bosnian episode like no other event, in the recent past. The pictures of Serbian horror, the TV screens have been regularly bringing into their living rooms — the live tales of the suffering of Bosnians, old and young, women and children — remain like wounds in their souls. Indeed such is the revulsion of an average intelligent

housewife that she prefers to switch off the programme rather than watch her coreligionist suffer an ignominious fate. Feeling frustrated and helpless the Muslim world pinned its faith in the West and particularly the US who call all the shots. The passivity of the West has been blamed on the fact that Bosnia has no oil. Through the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Muslim world has attempted to channel action besides individual effort by member states.

In this grim picture, the saving grace has been the courage shown by the Muslims of Bosnia against Herculean odds. They have not cringed before the aggressors, they have not begged nor surrendered an inch of ground without a fight. All they have asked for is lifting of the unjust arms embargo, which put them at such a great disadvantage.

The warning of the Prime Minister of Bosnia must be taken seriously. The heroic Muslims of Bosnia have proved for the last four years that the Serbs will not be able to achieve their objective of Greater Serbia. The West, who are continuously haranguing the world on Human Rights, must face up to the situation of naked aggression by the Serbs against numerically inferior Muslims. There should be no illusion that ill gotten gains in Bosnia will whet the appetite of Serbia. The world must get ready for what is next on the agenda — Kosovo inhabited largely by Muslims of Turkish origin.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

How Far to Reveal and How Far Not to Reveal? — That is the Question...

by M M Abdul Matin

IN Bangladesh, everything is secret, apparently; that is, unless you are good mates with an official, whatever his rank or status may be. Access to information on the part of a newsman poses a problem.

Just to give an example, a journalist went into Benapole Border Immigration Office in the district of Jessore asking for statistics on visitor's arrival and exit.

"Sorry we can't tell you" the office chief bluntly replied. "It is confidential. If you want to know, please ask for approval from my boss in Jessore town".

The reporter then went to a nearby border outpost at Darsana, Chuadanga district. This time, the officer-in-charge was no stranger. The newsman got everything he needed.

Merely through good personal relations, not because of any legal right, the reporter got all the information he needed. The information, as it turned out to be, was not an atomic secret or an access to a wealthy man's house at night. This case tends to unveil many things, not only that personal contacts can at times be more important than the law, but that any information in the hands of a govt official can be deemed confidential.

A friend once told me how he obtained data from a government office to finish a project. "Despite the Director General's approval — not verbal but written — I could do nothing because the 'mighty clerks' were not that cooperative," he asserted. "I then made friends with the clerks... It gained the desired result. I got the data I actually wanted and my research was done fairly well and on time".

Similarly whether a Secretary to the Govt grants you an interview or not is entirely upon him, without the least consideration of the purpose for which you seek the interview. There may be many such cases. I have come across at least one such case with a Secretary who was inducted in the civil service of the then Pakistan. He kept me waiting with his private secretary for about half an hour before choosing to advise me to call on the Joint Secretary. I felt disappointed not for his ignoring me, to be sure, but for the simple reason that I failed to obtain an interview despite my seniority while another junior to me in age and service succeeded in having his interview despite no previous appointment.

It would not be unfair on my part if I say that the Secretary was a little adamant not to see me because only a moment

earlier he had been quite kind and indulgent to grant an interview with an officer far junior to me by age and length of service although I had gone there first and I had been told by his personal secretary that the interview was on! Such instances do exist in all services. A handful of the members of the erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan inducted on merit basis — serving in present day Bangladesh — are mostly capable enough of visualising issues beforehand prior to embarking upon completing planning disciplines to pave way for implementation.

There are exceptions of expectations also. The nasty ideas "Once a good student — always a good civil servant", "Initially a good student, initially a good civil servant" — do not always hold water. Rather initially very intelligent youths — but not that keen for first class first position in academic life, — endeavouring to update themselves, — turn out usually very good wherever they are. Education is not comparable to acquisition of a few acres of land, which belong to the purchaser or the successors-in-interest unless the land is sold out to others or abandoned. Education has got to be updated in as much as statistics printed or reported annually on a set period.

If a journalist or published wants to know about anything from the government office, they are to get it through personal relationship to avoid the same disappointment as I had with the Secretary. In such a case I cannot help but remember Dr Serio Wongmoontha, a news media academic and former lecturer at the Faculty of Journalism, Thammasat University in Thailand, to have said in an interview that people always faced the cloak of secrecy when they asked for state information. Politicians, academics and journalists doing a bit of research work meet the same problem. If a former minister wants to know how many votes he got in the previous national election in the different centres of his constituency, he may find it quite difficult to collect the information despite the fact that such information is by no means classified or secret. How can this information be secret in 1995 or 1996 while these figures were prominently published in news media in 1991?

If journalists do not have the right of access to official data and publishing them, with those foreign countries with whom we make import and export and entangled with foreign loans who would be benefited?

newspapers become meaningless. In Bangladesh, everything that once was, or has been, is now secret. Government officials keep details of talks at their meetings and the decision-making process itself shrouded in secrecy, although these took place only, may be, five years back. This senseless lack of freedom of information hurts, rather than benefits, the country and at times can ignite the powder of revolution paving way for unceremonious ouster of regimes. The chief of the previous regimes at least endeavoured apparently to do some good to the villagers, but lamentably failed to come to any useful purpose from Cost Advantage Analysis point of view. It so happens while the mass media is intentionally divorced from actuality.

The situation has shown some improvement since 1991 though slowly. The previous regimes exempted tuition fee of the secondary girl students on a sudden impulse, without prior information and a proper budget allocation, — hardly only a year before its disgraced exit. This resulted in non-disbursement of 'proportionate pay' to the teachers from the government for a considerable time. This required considerable time for release of fund followed by allocation despite utmost sincerity and speed for the government its bid to remove their sufferings, accumulated not for the fault of this government its predecessors, the problem is that the public was not told of the move until it came into effect. If people had known about it earlier, they would have either accepted it, or rejected it. In any case, the government could have been told, and a debate mounted.

The secrecy seriously contrasts with 'right to know'. People should have access to state information. To enable them to check the performance of government officials while it may affect directly and/or indirectly their livelihood, I would like to make it clear what the law should cover. The terms 'data' and 'information' are not identical. Any information which has not been finalised is called data; for example, details given during a cabinet meeting are surely data, not information, because no conclusion has been reached.

An argument often heard as to which data should be kept secret for national security reason. National security is very important. Information which could affect national se-

curity or damage the economy and the image of the country should never be disclosed. The government can keep the preliminary drafts and/or any official data and information whose disclosure could harm the government, the country's economy, its foreign relations and its national security. A classification system for levels and periods of secrecy may be taken in right earnest. For example: confidential data, given the lowest level of secrecy, could be kept confidential for a maximum of one or a couple of years. That of the highest level of secrecy could be kept under wraps for 25 or 50 years. Some data might need to be classified forever because revealing it even after fifty years might still damage the country or international relations.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Ministry of Home Affairs always look after the international and national interests and combination of these two, and on a few occasions invite the co-participation of the Ministry of Finance in such deliberation. The government should be empowered, if not already empowered, to impose regulation to determine the secrecy of data in clear terms. The government will decide if specific data is secret only when there is a genuine and specific complaint. Every effort should be made to protect the incident's right. Officials disclosing personal data could face legal action, but it is up to the government to decide Govt access and or the extent/degree of access of the government to personal data.

Use of vague words into the law, which is scarce in our country following the British system, (omission of coma or hyphen or the like) should be consciously avoided. Not drafting legislation in too much hurry from the Administrative Ministry to the Ministry of Law and Justice may have a positive impact here. The constitution should be understood by the vast majority of people and if needed the constitution should be made understandable to the people either by the Ministry of Education or by the Ministry of Law and Justice through a crash programme. I do not see any reason why people who created the constitution do not understand it.

When the necessary laws are in place, the type of problems faced by a former government may be a thing of the past!

The writer is Joint Secretary, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock

To the Editor...

'Statement of income and expenditure'

Sir, The letter of Mr O H Kabir that appeared in your daily of 12th March 1995 under the above caption deserves appreciation. The letter is concise, precise and simple but it reveals a pertinent truth regarding our life. A poor country like ours can't afford to be extravagant as is seen today in expenditures of public money. Accountability and transparency must be ensured to save the disadvantaged group of people from exploitation. Exploitation-free society was the objective of creation of Bangladesh. But it is now a far cry. Why?

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Strong Taka

Sir, With reference to Mr Naz Shafiq letter published under the above caption of March 18, 1995 and further to my letter published on March 9, 1995 I would humbly re-

quest both Mr Naz Shafiq of Dhaka and Ekram Belal who also wrote on the subject from New York to kindly make a study of our export and import income and expenditure and also the foreign debt we have accumulated since 1972.

Would they kindly explain and justify as to why our per capita income is only US 220 dollars whereas it is 25,000 in USA?

Don't we export small quantity of goods and commodities at cheaper rates and import huge quantity of goods and commodities including food, arms and ammunition, machineries and equipment from foreign countries at exorbitant high rates?

If we further devalue our currency whether we would be purchasing those goods and commodities at higher or cheaper rates and whether our people would be required to pay more or less money for the purchase of foreign goods and commodities?

Further analysing our balance of foreign trade, foreign debt liabilities and also comparing our per capita income

with those foreign countries with whom we make import and export and entangled with foreign loans who would be benefited?

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Our plight

Sir, After 24 years the wretched nation is witnessing a drama—tragedy or comedy or a cruel farce which, though apparently seems ironical, is of least concern for the teeming millions who are suffering under the pangs of poverty, diseases and from innumerable miseries all these long years since independence with a bleak future.

The mute motherland has so far witnessed a lot of political murders and bloodshed followed by coup d'etat and counter coup, sometimes abortive and sometimes successful, by the greedy and the ambitious. After all, how much interest this drama will evoke from common men, who themselves are beset with drudgeries of life, is a question

to be posed to our patriotic leaders.

Enough harm has been done on the plea of people's welfare and interest. And no farther. We only expect that emotion and commotion do not prevail over justice, equity and fairplay. Culprits must be ruthlessly dealt with on the other hand.

An unfortunate citizen

Farakka

Sir, The adverse effect of the Farakka Barrage is causing serious problem to agricultural irrigation and riverine transportation in Bangladesh.

When the world is considering increased sharing of natural resources among countries for improving the lot of the people on global basis, ignoring political boundaries, India, being the closet neighbour of Bangladesh, is dragging her feet in reaching a just agreement to share the Ganges water.

India will be a little more considerate, — can her hope? Mithr Kumer Ray (Jhantu) Nandail, Mysenisingh

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Shouting at the TV

I don't know if anyone else has noticed it, but more and more people are yelling at their television sets nowadays. All you have to do is walk down any street while the OJ Simpson trial is on, and you can hear America shouting.

What makes this interesting is that it's the women, not the men, who are doing most of the screaming. I first noticed the interchange when I went to visit my sister, Alice Gordon, in Forest Hills, N.Y. Rosa Lopez, the Salvadoran maid, took the stand and testified that OJ's white Bronco was parked in front of his house from 10:15 to 10:30 p.m. at the time of the murders.

Rosa's memory on this was infallible. However, she had tremendous difficulty remembering much of anything else and said more than 80 times, "I don't remember".

It was these lapses that set Alice off: "Think hard, Rosa." "Come on, Rosa, you can remember something." "How about your birthday, the Salvadoran anthem or the lyrics to 'Don't Cry for Me, Argentina'?"

But no matter how loud Alice shouted, Rosa just looked at her and said, "don't remember".

When Johnnie Cochran, the defense attorney, questioned one of the detectives about his role in the investigation, there wasn't too much shouting from Alice except for a few things like, "Where's the first Mrs. Cochran, Johnnie?"

But when F Lee Bailey started in on Detective Mark Fuhrman, Alice jumped out of her chair and pressed her nose against the TV screen. "Why don't you lose weight, Lee, before you pick on a woman prosecutor and stop lying. You're nothing but a hired gun!"

"Alice, you must show consideration for the decorum of the court. That's not a nice thing to yell at a defense lawyer when he's questioning prosecution witness. All Bailey is trying to do is break your husband's knees and run over him with a white Bronco. That's what high-paid lawyers are supposed to do."

Alice didn't see it that way. "I'd like to shove a knitted hat down his throat." Then she turned to the screen, "How much are they going to pay you for your book, fatso?"

If my sister was the only one yelling at the TV, it would not be a big deal, but it seems that all of Forest Hills was doing it.

Even when the lawyers were called to the bench, there was shouting from all the windows in the neighborhood. I heard a voice screaming from the seventh floor of an apartment house, "Come on, Judge, let's get the show on the road. I have an appointment at the hairdressers."

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OPINION

Common Knowledge!

M Rahman

Bangladesh's suggestion for uniform education policy in Commonwealth states can help achieve common standard in academic discipline. The home scenario shows off a trend of learning anything foreign, especially Western, more than what are claimed to be native.

Nowadays, academic climate has been changing fast into consistently hazardous for national prosperity as much as for prospective pioneers and inventors and for safeguard of the common wealth of this universe.

Wellknown as it is, politicization of student affairs has been identified as a prime root of the most violences on campus resulting in interrupted study program which gradually downgrades institutional standard.

Many degree aspirants have already preferred foreign institutes to catch up with unwarranted waste of time, money, and energy while coaching has flourished as the supplementary business to bypass the terror course on campus that frantically teaches how political might merits more advantageous than hard-earned grades.

From the developing temperament on and off campus marks up the doubt about "sustainable development" of this SAARC state to be materialized if professional skills do not work up to the required

level. Compared to the fast improving standard elsewhere on earth, lagging-not-too-far-behind a nation like Bangladesh may have to have alternatives to total dependence on imported values and resources of questionable quality, else risking direct competition against overseas expertise will have no substitute; but either way can be gainful only when affordable, however.

For present, what to do with the costly certificates bought at the battlefield of excellence that remain unmarketed ought to be paid off by the state educators the best way possible for the nation's wellbeing.

Also, for better generations in future, a more productive education infrastructure must be necessary without fall which can be attained through a uniform primary and secondary syllabi under one national Board equipped with a uniform results method as well as a set national standard for tertiary curricula with emphasis on research oriented programs plus open-book and take-home examinations where applicable in the individual courses.

Simultaneous schemes for mandatory statewide education facilities will have to be available to all with a view to promoting literacy from the present rate to 100 per cent.