

Hearty Dig

The redoubtable Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has crossed another plateau in expressing his disgust over the appalling state of financial accountability in the government. Speaking at a seminar on public accountability on Sunday he went to the length of almost making a confessional statement of having been 'unhappy' during his ten years in government and eight years as the finance minister.

Anyone knowing Rahman's penchant for hearty as well as brainy outspokenness will hardly construe his observations as being politically loaded to a point of presaging his quittal from government. He simply wants to get things done. That's all.

Hence, his salvos are directed towards the politicians and the bureaucrats who have made a further mess of what remained a public non-accountability system — both by structure and legacy. Restoration of democracy kindled hopes in us for overcoming the past hang-ups but what used to be a waste of money through a nervous legitimisation process beforehand has since been replaced by populism-induced expenditure. The monetary and fiscal policies are 'guided more by political' dictates than by economic considerations, according to Rahman.

The politico-economic elites who are to set standards for others do neither pay taxes nor the arrears bank loans and telephone bills. Many a ministry defies censures by the parliamentary committee on public accounts with impunity. Bank directors elude the grip of accountability, too.

The public exchequer, or by implication public money, is treated as something like *sarkar-ka-mal-dariya-me-dal* which roughly translates into: everybody's money is nobody's money and so go dump it into the river! The attitudinal change will not come by moralising. The system has to be beaten into shape by requiring, on pain of exposure and punishment, that the top people set examples in political answerability and economic accountability which are of the essence in a democratic system.

As an insider's story, the finance minister's version of the goings-on merits unqualified support. But while we have no doubt that he does his own home-work and, is, therefore, entitled to criticise others, we would nonetheless like him to be more specific with his complaints so that accountability can be enforced in particular cases.

Dealing with Kidnappers

If illegal toll collection has been a serious impediment to business transactions, abduction of big businessmen in Chittagong seems to have acted as a further disincentive to the flourishing of trade and commerce. The fact is that our trade environment is far short of the ideal due to undesirable and unhealthy interferences at several points. The fear of being robbed of cash at any time is sure to keep genuine traders and prospective entrepreneurs from being enterprising.

What is happening in Chittagong is dreadful. Fifty businessmen or their wards were taken hostage for ransom during the past six months alone. How big was the ransom money demanded and even paid in some cases? No less than Tk 2,00,000. Surprisingly, the incidents mostly had either gone unreported to or unrecorded with the police stations. The reason for the law enforcing bodies proving completely helpless is not far to seek. The well-armed gangs who resort to hostage-taking are also well-connected with the political parties. This explains why the police, instead of recording complaints have, in some instances, advised relatives of the victims to pay the ransom for getting the hostages released unharmed.

The problem seems still confined within Chittagong. Unless immediate steps are taken to root out the crime, it may spread fast into Dhaka and other cities. In Colombia the drug cartels have grown to challenge the government because the government did not destroy them early enough. The political connections in our case have not gone to that extreme. But signs are clear that unless the problem is tackled immediately, and with utmost seriousness, its tentacles can spread into areas hitherto immune from such a malady, and pose a threat to the whole edifice of administration and business.

Iraq in Turmoil

The defection of Saddam Hussein's two sons-in-law and two daughters has exposed further cracks in the Iraqi president's administration. He has been presiding over a weakened and highly troubled regime ever since the invasion of Kuwait had turned into a military reversal for him in the hands of the western powers. Iraq is fighting a serious economic crunch compounded by the embargo on its oil export. And now comes the open incitement by his sons-in-law, one a general who was industry minister in charge of the powerful military industrialisation organisation and advanced weapons programme, and the other, the head of Saddam's guards, for toppling the Iraqi ruler.

Whether Saddam will survive the blow dealt by the defection depends on a number of factors. The spin-offs of this defection can be decisive. Because of their closeness with the Iraqi president, they are likely to know secrets that few in Iraq or outside have ever known. The West is particularly interested in Iraq's biological weapons programme. But till-date Hussein Kamel has refused to divulge anything of serious import. He has only tried to brush aside a suggestion of his involvement in Iraq's weapons programme.

That the elite army units have been deployed in Baghdad shows the president is really having some anxious moments. To survive the threat of a military *coup d'etat*, Saddam will have to make shrewd moves. But one thing is clear that his power bastion is showing signs of crumbling. On the home front he has been fighting against great odds and many in the West want to see him go. They have got a potent weapon in the defectors to deliver a stroke.

For a Real Watchdog of Public Funds in Bangladesh

It is encouraging to note that lately our policy makers are talking about rational allocation and accountability of public funds under a democracy-driven market-oriented economic system. It seems that at least some of the people at the helm of the state affairs have begun to realize that demands of a market economy and democratic system can no more be addressed — at least sensibly — without a drastic overhaul of the archaic accounting and auditing system in the country. After all, no system — be that democratic or not — can survive for long without proper accountability of public funds.

Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, for example, went overboard on Sunday last to point out how years of democratic practices in the country failed to stop 'misuse of public exchequer' and make any headway in reforming the financial accountability system. Reports suggest that the outspoken finance minister, while addressing a function of the BCS Audit and Accounting Association, blasted both the politicians and the bureaucrats for creating indiscipline in the country's public accounting system. He even threw a challenge to hundreds of MPs — who received telephone allowance from the government but did not pay their telephone bills — "they have to be accountable prior to expecting it from others."

It, however, does not take the finance minister or the finance secretary to point out that the existing accounting and auditing system in the

In fact, one of the major reasons for the nation's backwardness is that the law of the land is not applicable to everybody equally — some are above the law, in some cases application of laws are kept in abeyance, and in case of others the spirit of the law is not respected deliberately and systematically. The case of the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) can be taken as an example.

country is simply outdated — the nation knows it for long, because it has long been paying dearly for the inefficiency, wastage and corruption involved in the system. Of course, it is heartening to watch that they — who are a kind of custodians of the system — are also pointing their fingers to it for the nation's failure in establishing a sense of accountability in the public domain. None can deny that the existence of a sound auditing and accounting system — geared to ensure accountability of public funds — could promote not only discipline in fiscal and monetary policies, but also expedite more efficient utilization of the nation's scarce resources.

The accounting and auditing system in Bangladesh has been antiquated for a long long time — may be since the installation of the system by the colonial rulers more than one hundred years ago. In the meantime, the nation achieved freedom or independence twice — but nothing changed appreciably with the archaic system. Thanks to the good-old auditing books of the government, our auditors' primary concern is compliance to financial rules and regulations — not actual results or performance stemming from the use of public funds. For example, they don't have to

care whether a school is actually built with public funds — their serious concern lies with matching receipts with allocated funds. As long as the receipts are fine and as far as they are concerned — the public funds are properly utilized. May be the finance minister is somewhat right — may be some "dishonest bureaucrats and politicians" have made best use of the archaic system for achieving pecuniary or other benefits.

refuse to pay the bill to telephone company. Why not change the system — issue coupons to the MPs for the telephone use, make the coupons reimbursable only with the telephone company. Or pay the telephone allowance directly to the telephone company — not to the MPs. Also, let the telephone company disconnect telephone lines of the MPs in accordance with the rules applicable to ordinary telephone subscribers. The prob-

example. It is a constitutionally mandated independent office — like the Election Commission or the Public Service Commission. But everybody knows — including the finance minister — it has to work under the administrative guidance — if not control — of the Finance Ministry.

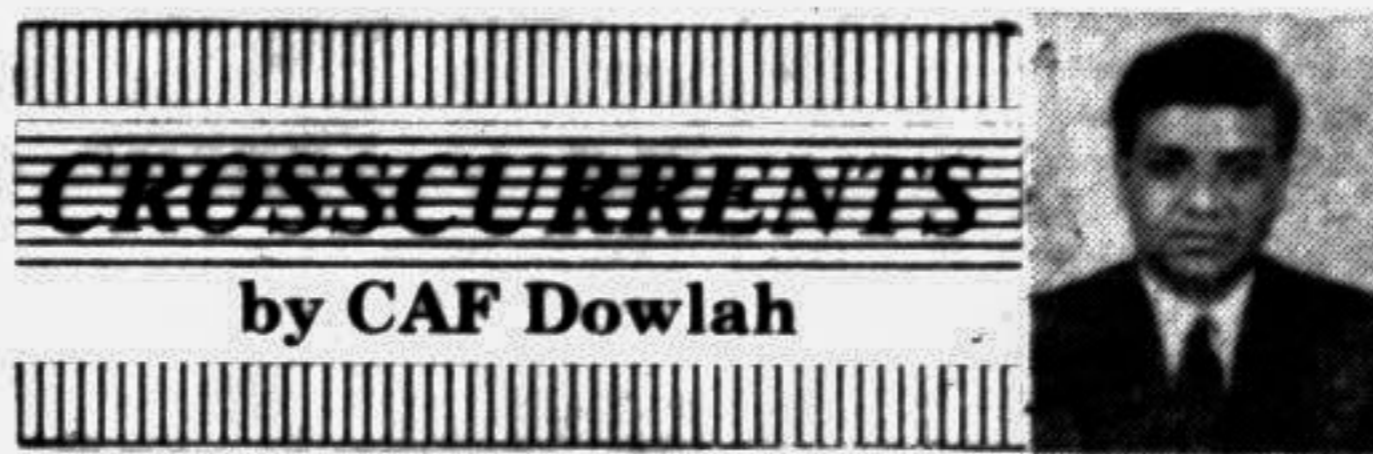
Does the government think that appointing the CAG for a tenured period will alone ensure its independence from executive branch? How does the CAG exercise its independent auditing power over government expenditures while remaining under the control of a government department — namely, the Ministry of Finance? In the developed world, especially in the United States, the Government Accounting Office works under the direct supervision of the US Congress. Its reports — not only annual ones — routinely catch newspaper headlines, create public furor over appropriate utilization of government funds, and also allocation of public funds substantially depends on its evaluation of the performance of the respective departments.

On the other hand none seems to pay heed to the reports of the CAG in Bangladesh. Hardly they catch newspaper headlines, ensue government actions or

parliamentary debates. Most of their audit objections, in the words of Finance Secretary Nasimuddin Ahmed, are inconsequential in nature and thus the auditors actions become irritants and sources of needless friction and conflict, instead of being an effective aid to good governance and responsible and efficient administration.

Audit reports hardly matter in allocation of budgetary resources as well.

Therefore, the question is, has the government ever denied allocation to a department, to a public corporation for not resolving audit objections in a timely manner? Instead, there are hundreds of examples where audit objections are routinely set aside by executive orders or indifference. How can an effective and efficient audit system can evolve and function in Bangladesh having the CAG controlled by the administration? How can the state-owned enterprises be put on self-accounting or sound economic principles without subjecting their overall performance — pricing, sales, production, marketing everything — to independent auditing? How a government can claim transparency in spending without a sound system of public accountability? Therefore, if the policy makers mean business — the first thing they should do would be to transform the CAG — a constitutional body on paper — into a real constitutional body having real autonomy to function as the real watchdog of public funds in Bangladesh.



CROSSCURRENTS by CAF Dowlah

However, blaming this set of people will do no good to the country or society — as long as such loopholes remain, some sections of the people will make their way into it. As long as opportunity for dishonesty remains — there will be no dearth of people to make best use of it. Therefore, the attention should be shifted to system itself — not to those people who are sustaining it. As long as the system, for example, allows the MPs to receive telephone allowance, there will remain some MPs who will cash it and will

lem has been created because the system contains loopholes and the MPs are considered to be above the law of the land.

In fact, one of the major reasons for the nation's backwardness is that the law of the land is not applicable to everybody equally — some are above the law, in some cases application of laws are kept in abeyance, and in case of others the spirit of the law is not respected deliberately and systematically. The case of the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) can be taken as an

The Holocaust that Still Haunts

by Md Asadullah Khan

The belief is so strong that some Japanese hire private detectives to investigate whether a son's or daughter's prospective spouse is a child or even the grand-child of a bomb victim. The stigma of being a bomb victim haunts them so much that thousands of them do not register for the special government health benefits to which they are entitled.



The legacy of exposure: Radiation burns



A time of tragedy and horror. The aftermath of the first use of nuclear weapons

illments of the parents will be transferred to the children. Tests on about 74,000 children who were not conceived at the time but whose parents were exposed to the bomb's radiation have not found any birth defects in chromosomal abnormalities in white blood cells. Studies in the US National Cancer Institute which were published in the early 1990 conclude, "Humans now appear less sensitive to the genetic effects of radiation than previously thought."

But the ominous side was also there. There was one class of unborn children badly scarred by the bomb: those already in their mothers' wombs. Many were born with abnormally small heads. Others particularly those irradiated during the eighth to 15th week of gestation, suffer mental retardation. It is during these critical eight weeks that neurons proliferate and migrate to the proper place

in the brain's complex circuitry. Based on that aspect, any disruption apparently can leave neurological scars that never fade. Besides, just as people blasted by the bomb's radiation have an added risk of leukemia, those who were exposed to the rays through the shelter of their mothers' womb also seem to run some extra cancer risk. But as a group they have so few tumors of any one type, the increased cancer risk cannot be definitively attributed to atomic bomb radiation, as yet, says a report from Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF) in Hiroshima. But that "yet" is still causing a dilemma. Survivors who were exposed as fetuses have not reached the most cancer prone age. As they enter their 50s they may suffer the long-delayed consequences of the bomb.

But children born to survivors more than nine months after the holocaust

may have escaped the biological effects entirely. Relentless research over the decades by RERF, including biochemical probes of the offspring's blood proteins has failed to find "any significant genetic effects", says Yoshimoto, a senior researcher belonging to RERF. Hopefully, that findings contradict the widespread fear that the victims would be time bombs themselves, carrying mutations of their reproductive cells that would doom their children and their children's children to genetic disorders. The belief is so strong that some Japanese hire private detectives to investigate whether a son's or daughter's prospective spouse is a child or even the grand-child of a bomb victim. The stigma of being a bomb victim haunts them so much that thousands of them do not register for the special government health benefits to which they are entitled. The new assessment

of radiation's effect may annul the traumatic feeling they were so long nurturing. John Boice of the US National Cancer Institute says "We know from animal studies that radiation does cause heritable effects. But studies have now revealed that humans may simply have more effective repair mechanisms that are able to undo the damage."

No wonder, the post-bomb generation may have escaped the major genetic injury but none can be sure till now that it has outrun the shadow of August, 1945. They may indeed face an increased cancer risk, but not until they are older.

The finding that radiation might not leave its mark on the genes has significance far beyond the bomb survivors and their children. Over the

last 50 years, studies of bomb survivors have revealed that consequences of exposure to radiation have little to do with any major genetic disorder. If the latest evaluation is correct, the children born to Ukrainians after Chernobyl might not face a long time medical problems. But everything is not reassuring. British researchers have recently reported that children of fathers working at the Sellafield nuclear power plant in England suffer high rates of leukemia and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The scientists suggest that radiation of the sperm-producing cells six months before conception can plant the seeds of cancer in a child-to-be.

This theory is being tested at other nuclear sites. But in the light of the findings that are emanating from Hiroshima and Nagasaki it is almost certain that in the realm of human health, at least, the legacy of the bomb does not last forever, but at the same time we must be cherishing this hope that over-enthusiastic leaders of the world and superpowers must not plunge any part of the world into further gloom.

To the Editor...

Dhanmandi Lake

Sir, Thank you very much for alerting the residents of Dhanmandi to the indecent plans of the Ministry of Works. They have planned and in systematic manner destroyed the lake. Now they are shamelessly filling up the lake and finishing it off completely. Needless to say the residential area itself has suffered of mindless encroachment to which the authorities have turned a blind eye. I believe in a few years time we will have to rename the area as a commercial one.

I urge the residents of Dhanmandi to join The Daily Star in protesting this unwarranted and uncivilised act of the ministry and demand the re-excavation and maintenance of the lake.

Give us back our lake!

Sarab House 56, Road 27 DRA, Dhaka

Bangladeshis shorten by an inch

Sir, The report about the height of Bangladeshis which was published in a number of dailies is very disappointing. It said that in the last 30

years the average height of our people had reduced by one inch while it increased elsewhere in the world. We know that Japanese were on the short side but they have overcome it and we are losing what we had.

But not only in height, we see downward trend in many fields. Our morality has gone downhill, law and order situations has deteriorated and even environment in educational institutions is appalling.

I am afraid to think what would happen if it goes on like this.

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong

"Plight of deception victims ..."

Sir, Your columnist, Mr A S M Nurunnabi, deserve kudos for the article "Plight of deception victims in city" which appeared on 29 July '95. While he concludes that "it behoves the government to probe into bonafides of the organisations," he, however, fails to point out who should protect the prey from fraud in such a patently false pretext. For instance, the T & T

Board, Export Promotion Bureau, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Computer Council are fully aware that Off-shore Data Entry is not possible in Bangladesh because the telecommunication facilities for data transfer is not available and the regular telephony rates are 2200% (two thousand two hundred per cent) higher than the data entry industry norm. Fraud could be smelt from first advertisement. All these government offices could be responsible for negligence. Since none of them will own up, it may be in public interest for a victim to sue the government and generate accountability.

KB Habib Motijheel CA, Dhaka.

Rickshaws

Sir, In the recent days, the number of tempo, auto-rickshaw, bus, truck etc. on the streets of Dhaka as well as on the country's highways has increased tremendously. These vehicles are contributing to the increase of two major problems — environmental pollution and traffic-jam. On the other side, the au-

thorities have intensified drive towards eliminating unlicensed rickshaws from the streets with a view to restoring traffic discipline. Well, this is an encouraging move indeed. But we cannot ignore the fact that rickshaws are not only important means of transportation but they also help in keeping the environment pollution low because rickshaws do not emit black smokes or produce noise. Moreover rickshaws are providing employment to a good number of people.

Under the above circumstances, it is felt that (i) sufficient number of rickshaws with valid licenses be allowed to ply on roads, (ii) separate lane for the rickshaws should be constructed by the side of all the major streets, (iii) training should be imparted to the rickshaw-pullers on traffic rules and discipline, (iv) process for procuring licenses should be simplified.

If rickshaws can be made to ply on the road with discipline, not only the city will be protected against environment pollution but also the traffic-jam will be reduced.

M. Zahidul Haque Press and Publicity Secretary, BSCE, Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Press Help and Cry

THIS summer I made the mistake of taking along my computer because I had been assured that it was "user friendly." It might have been "user friendly" to other people, but it certainly wasn't to me.

I sat down and booted it up. The screen promised that the computer and I were going to have a great vacation together and it was going to cut down my workload by half. It didn't take long, however, before the computer started doing things behind my back. I was beginning to think that it had only been nice to me to get a free trip to Cape Cod.

The only use I had for the computer was word processing. I didn't want to solve DNA problems or Internet with Donald Trump, or boot up "Dobbie Doos Dallas" on my screen.

I attempted to type the first sentence of my new book, which I had been thinking about for years. "It was the best of times and the worst of times."

The computer followed all my instructions and the opening line appeared on the screen as I expected. For several days I fed it inspired words and phrases. At the end of Chapter One, I had my hero say to the piano player in a bar in Algeria, "Play it again, Sam."

I had written about 30 pages which I thought I should save. I chose "Save As" and pressed "Enter."

The computer wiped out everything and I was staring at a blank screen. In panic I started hitting buttons, but could not retrieve my copy.

I went into "File Manager," "Program Manager," "Set Up" and even the Solitaire card game. But to no avail. All I got back was, "Press Help for more information."

I pressed "Help." The first message said, "Why are you so angry with this user-friendly computer?"

I typed back, "Where is my copy?"

"Help" replied, "Why does a fireman wear red suspenders?"

"Stop being funny. I need that stuff before the Pulitzer Prize judges meet."

The next message said, "Have you looked in the ozone layer? All lost words are sent to the ozone by computer if not retrieved in 30 days."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "the copy is hidden in the hard disk?"

The machine replied, "It's impossible to find anything in the hard disk unless you have the code word and the name and home address of the man who sold you the computer."

"You're no help," I said.

"I may not be able to solve your problem, but I can tell you how to plug in with a 12-year-old hacker in St. Paul, Minnesota."

I typed angrily, "I don't want to do e-mail. I want my own copy and you are not user friendly at all!"

The last message to me was, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

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