

# "Misery is My Name, the Telephone is My Game" Confessions of a Telephone Repairman

THE following are some excerpts from the soon to be released autobiography of Mr X entitled "Misery is My Name, the Telephone is My Game" — confessions of a telephone repairman.

"Hello, this is Dr Despair calling. I would like to register a strong complaint. My phone has been having problems for the last week. I keep getting cross connections, sometimes others can't call in, at other times I can't call out and for the last two days it has been completely dead. My office has come to a standstill. Please send someone right away."

"Right away sir."  
[Nothing happens for a week, despite the assurance. The important point here is to establish who is in control. Some customers continue to have this naive belief that as long as you pay your bills, telephone service is a right. The reality of course is that it is a privilege, granted to the lucky few, by the many in the Telephone Department.]

"Hello, this is Dr Despair again. I registered a complaint a week ago, and no one has come. My phone has now been dead for over a week. This is ridiculous."

"We've received no such complaint. All the lines in your neighbourhood are hav-

ing problems. It's the monsoon. Our people are working on it. We will get to you as soon as possible."

[The first rule of thumb of telephone complaints is to deny the receipt of such a complaint. The weather is always a good excuse. In any case, this customer has not suffered enough, it's only been two weeks. Where does he think he is, this is after all Bangladesh.]

"Hello, this is me, Dr Despair again. It's been three weeks now that my phone has been dead. This is totally ridiculous. I am going to complain to your superior. I am going to....."

[I hang up the phone. This man has an attitude problem. Who does he think he is, talking to me, the telephone complaint officer like this. What nerve? Complaining to my superior — as if he will ever be able to figure out that person is. That's the problem with these people, no respect, no civility. Let him stew for a while longer. I'll just put the phone off the hook.]

"Hello, this is Dr Despair speaking. It's now been three weeks since my phone went dead. Could you please send

someone to take a look at it. I would be much obliged."

"I'll see what I can do. We are really understaffed here and there is so much to do."  
[Well, the man has finally learnt some manners. It has been a slow day so far (only a hundred complaints in the first hour, before I put the phone off the hook). That's the problem with



## REFLECTIONS by Dr Omar Rahman

Bangladeshis, no patience, everything has to be taken care of right away. Rush! Rush! Rush! I guess I should have someone take a look at this chap Despair's phone. There really doesn't seem to be very much else to do. I have already finished reading the newspaper from cover to cover, and had my third cup of tea. Let me call Y, the lineman."

"Y, try to swing by the good doctor sometime this week — no reason to rush."

say. — "Do you want me to fix it in one go?" says Y, a man not known for his mental acumen.

"Of course not, you dumbbell, I sigh impatiently. It's only been three weeks. Just arrange it so it's working while you are there and make it go dead between 9 am to 6 pm. Don't screw up. Last time I sent you to a customer, you

fixed his phone right away. How many times have I told you, things have to be done in stages, and make sure you give me my share of the appreciation gift."

[It's already 11 am, it's been a long day. I feel so tired. Two hours of work every day really takes a toll of you. I think I will go home. I need to go do some shopping for the wife. She has been bugging me to get her this set of gold earrings. Now where did I put Mr busi-

nessman's monthly appreciation envelope. Ah! there it is. A measly two thousand. These businessmen are really cheap, I tell you. Here I arrange to lower his monthly telephone bill from twenty thousand a month to two thousand a month, and he only pays me two thousand, which I then have to share with Y, who is increasingly getting restive. I think we need to teach Mr Businessman a lesson.]

"Y, get up, we have work to do. All you do is eat and sleep. We need to discuss Mr Businessman's phone. I think he is getting off too lightly."

"But, but, he is paying us every month and I promised that his phone bill would remain constant."

"Forget your promises, remember my boy, promises are meant to be broken. And I have been getting some heavy duty pressure about excessive billing. You know, we have been spreading out Mr Businessman's bills over three other customers and they have become crafty now. They have discontinued their NWD and overseas calls, so there is no way we can over-bill them. I have to find some

other "stupidos" to overcharge. But it will cost Mr Businessman. Make his phone go dead for a week and then after you fix it, overcharge him for two of our other regulars. When he calls, I'll tell him you are sick and somebody else is temporarily on duty. That should fix him. I think we can get him to raise his contribution to the telephone welfare association to at least five thousand a month."

"Hello, its very Dr Despair again. I am so sorry to bother you sir at this time of the day (10 am). I hope it's not too inconvenient. But I was wondering, if you could, if it's not too much trouble, send one of your esteemed colleagues to take a look at my phone. It's been a month now that it has been out of order. Not that it's anybody's fault. It's my fate I guess. But you would make me very happy if you could send someone to help me correct my problem. I will be happy to take care of your needs."

"I'll send someone over today to take care of it. Don't worry."

[I guess Despair has learnt his lesson. I'll get Y to fix his phone properly today and we can negotiate an understanding. I have a feeling this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.]

## OIL

### Spotlight on the Subsea Challenge

David Welsh writes from London

IN a global market faced with the prospect of continuing low oil prices, the challenges of the subsea are many. Offshore oil companies need to find new technical solutions to enable small oilfields to be economically developed. In addition, streamlined cost-effective operating procedures must be sought, along with improved designs and new materials which will reduce the burden of routine inspection and maintenance costs.

These and many other subsea challenges will come under the microscope at the Subtech '95 conference to be held in Aberdeen, Scotland, from 7 to 9 November.

The conference aims to address how the industry is rising to meet these challenges and will provide a forum for the discussion and exchange of experiences, success stories and ideas.

Organised by the Society for Underwater Technology (SUT) and co-sponsored by the International Marine Contractors Association (IMCA), it will feature sessions on subsea robotics, deepwater developments, technical developments, diving and physiology and operational experience.

With an introduction by SUT president, Admiral Michael Vallis, the conference will open with three keynote addresses. Richard Shepherd of Petrodata will take 'The Subsea Business Revolution — Sink or Swim for Offshore Contracting' as his topic, Kourosh Bassiti of Scottish Enterprise will look at 'R+D in the Market of the Millennium', and Ken Knox of the SeaFish Industry Authority will highlight 'Dangerous Encounters: Safety to Installations and Fishing Gear'.

According to Richard Shepherd, there is a scramble by companies from many different backgrounds for shares in an oilfield development business dominated in deeper waters by subsea and floating systems.

"I will be looking at the race for position between

several sets of players with varied core skills and assets, but with a common target: the management of new field development projects," he said.

"Drilling contractors, subsea construction contractors, heavyweight fabricators engineering giants and well equipment companies are all being drawn into new roles as integrated service suppliers or even as production contractors."

Kourosh Bassiti, head of energy group, Scottish Enterprise, explained: "I am hoping to give delegates a message that is sufficiently blunt in terms of the technical and economic challenges facing our industry and our economy."

"Yet I hope to convey a message of hope in an industry that is far more efficient and far more competitive than a decade ago."

"Subsea engineering is a cornerstone of our competitive oil and gas industry and the United Kingdom is being used increasingly by international companies as their base for international operations in the former Soviet Union as well as the more technical markets in the Middle East, Africa and the Far East."

"Dangerous Encounters" may sound like the name of a horror film. To Ken Knox it concerns safety to installations and fishing gear.

"After some 30 years of oil and gas exploration and exploitation in the North Sea and the Norwegian sea, there is now a move into new pastures to the west of the Shetland Isles. This coincides with a move by the fishing industry into deeper water in the same area," he explained.

"For both industries the risks are considerably higher as a consequence of weather and the depth of water. But there is also a greater risk of conflict between the two industries." — LPS

DAVID WELSH is LPS Industry and Science Editor.

# The Pie in the Sky

by Ekram Kabir

THE definition may be wobbling, but no communications medium or consumer technology till today has ever grown so quickly — not the fax machine and not even the personal computer. Yes, it is the Internet — the Information Superhighway. The stretching of the Net, according to the critics, is not a fad, but the consequence of unleashing the power of individual creativity to an unlimited ocean of information and knowledge. As a recent issue of *The Economist* of London put it: "If it were an economy, it would be the triumph of the free market over central planning. In music, jazz over Bach — democracy over dictatorship."

Now, what precisely this Internet is and what can you do on it residing right here in Bangladesh? The Internet is a large global network of computers that enables you to share services and communicate with the rest of the world, no matter on which corner you're settled," told Andrew Robinson to a persevering interviewer very recently. Robinson is a program associate at the Ford Foundation who is currently helping to demonstrate all about — specially the technology involved — the Internet publicly for the first time in Bangladesh.

Underlying the Net are three basic means of communication — e-mail sends electronic messages from one person to another, like letters, capable of crossing an ocean — the Atlantic, for example — in 15 minutes or so. File-transfers help move bulk data from one computer to another. And finally, the Telnet services empower someone to connect to a computer miles away with a very high speed. "And so, what's the big deal?" you may ask.

Well, despite instant communication with e-mail in seconds or minutes with global partners, you'll need no secretaries, no letterheads and no messy mailing, and all these from your own desk. While getting information, there's something for everyone once you know where to look. You can access thousands of PCs and databases world-over and download what you need for your computer.

Stuck? There's help: an immense network of support groups lives in "cyberspace". You can send your query to one of the common-interest newsgroups or electronic bulletin boards, and a reply is almost guaranteed. For subscribers to press release, news letters and mailing lists — all electronically — on any subject that interests you can be free of cost. Specially the advice. Want to have fun? You can make friends; burrow into a computer in Europe or Latin America; join a discussion on anything — from nuclear physics to religion. You can even send out matrimonial advertisements anywhere. With all these capabilities, the Internet has become post office, printing press and meeting place — all in one.

The origin of the Net dates back in the '50s. Though it sprang from an anachronistic Cold-War paranoid experiment, its aim was very modest and simple: to allow computer scientists and engineers working on military contracts over the

USA to share expensive computers and other resources. According to Andrew Robinson: the military had their computer system set up around America, and then they wanted to be able to work on one system simultaneously so that 10 people — for example — could design a software or work on a computer at the same time.

Those people would — and I would guess that's how it happened in the beginning — sit together, each with their own keyboard and monitor, and be working off a one big main-frame computer



and designing software," said Robinson. But in order to make it work so that all 10 of them "can" work at the same time, they needed a very sophisticated software that could handle 10 people without it getting confused, without the computer getting confused.

Then they realised they could connect all their sites around the country to the military bases and were able to send information secretly without anybody being able to read it. It was just amongst their own computers," explained Robinson, adding: "Whatever the reason behind, the impetus was to get the network started so that the people could communicate at the same time."

As the network grew through the '60s, the military needed some programming languages with a high speed. Said Robinson: "They turned very much to academics and computer specialist to design it. And in the late-'60s, professors and students at Berkeley, California, created the UNIX system which was an operating language. They were also sort of experimenting this at the university."

"Pretty soon their language and the system that the military had set up began to meagre. And the UNIX system started spreading over the academic circles so that students can communicate with each other over the universities. And as such, so many servers were already made up by the military, it was very easy to use their hardware," said the Ford Foundation consultant.

At the formation period, the technology wasn't valued as a great thing by the people at large. They didn't regard it anything other than it's a few computer geniuses who were able to work simultaneously. People really didn't know what was it all about. But over time — through the '70s and

'80s — it became more familiar among the students, as Robinson remembered, when he was in college in the mid-'80s, the UNIX system was used quite frequently by students. "But there was no such concept of Internet or e-mail or anything like that," he said.

It expanded outside confines of universities and that of public funding and the private organisations began to use it. Because of its user-friendliness, more and more people were inclined to it in the late-'80s. Now there are so many private servers that

phony and all other communications forms over one single channel. That system is in people's mind, it doesn't exist. Those who say that the Internet is the Info-Highway are correct because it's real and it exists where you're able to transfer all kinds of communicative information."

"But, those who say that it is not the Info-Highway are also correct, because it doesn't match what people have in their minds," he added.

Still, sceptics abound. The Internet, they say, is chaotic, frustrating and intimidating.

With this, Robinson agreed, because the network is so big that a lot of times things don't work out on it. "On the Internet, there's so many different protocols and network applications that many of them are incompatible," he said. But next came the World Wide Web which is designed to a sort of make-it-all-compatible into "one" so that one person can use one software and travel the entire Net.

Getting onto the Net is simple. Suppose you are in New York or in Delhi and you want to get onto the Net: you would call a local company or dial up that company with your modem. Well, if you use your modem, you'll be looking at your screen, saying: "Welcome to such-and-such communications". "Are you interested in joining?" etc. If you click Yes, it will say: "Do you want a software, or do you have your own software?" That's how you get on the Net. It may cost about 25 to 30 US dollars a month, but it's getting cheaper day-by-day. Some companies charge \$25 for unlimited time.

Answering a question on Bangladesh going onto the Net, Robinson said that there's no system in Bangladesh — whether it's government-run or private-run. It hasn't been decided as yet. The question here is still whether to enter-or-not-to-enter into this sort of 40 million users and share their part of it. But the technology is here, and in order to implement that, the country will need to create a sort of internal network and connect the computers that already exist in Bangladesh with the help of some servers. And, that's quite feasible in their country, said Robinson. For this, Bangladesh doesn't need any Internet, it can be done right now, and as a matter of fact, there are companies who are

doing it.

There are about four such companies — Trade Mart Limited, Drik Picture Library, Pradeshta, DeltaNet and the like — giving services of Telnet system in the country.

Added Robinson: "Getting a server doesn't mean that the country is connected to the Internet. That's what I'm having trouble explaining to the people: you can get it, but if it is just within the high-level NGOs and UN organisations — who are already using it, what difference does it make if you're located in Dhaka, Delhi or Bangkok?" He seemed quite right. What the Internet is doing that it's changing people's ideas about geography and space. Information, in this way, is becoming a world of "cyberspace".

For example, if one server brings the UNICEF offices of Dhaka and Lagos together, then they become practically one unity while sharing information. But what difference does it make with that of Dhaka than with Lagos, even they change the concept of geography. So, "that" server in Dhaka becomes much closer to the people of the UNICEF office in Nigeria than they are to the UNICEF office in Chittagong.

A question arises: If Bangladesh gets connected to the Internet, will the development process — economic,

to be specific — be increased or expedited? Well, Robinson thought it would be otherwise: it would probably be decreased. He said: "Because for one thing — the country will be paying a lot of money; and the information Bangladesh will be getting on the Internet is much more removed from the information it needs."

In other words, if you're more closely connected to Washington DC than you're with the districts of Khulna, Rajshahi, Chittagong, etc you're completely dislodged from your own people. For example: a woman in Dhaka will be able to know more about the Beijing Conference and women's activities in the US — America has most of the Internet, — but they wouldn't know what problems the women are facing in the villages away from Dhaka.

According to Andrew Robinson: most people here in Dhaka just want to get it without knowing what it's all about. This, he has observed during his recent demonstrations at the Goethe Institute.

Well, may be it's expensive for now for the government, to get on the Internet. But since the technology is already here, sooner or later Bangladesh may need to formulate some policy-decisions regarding this. It may be a subsequent need — like India did in August — at a time when the country is trying to expedite an export-led economic growth.

Nepal's fledgling democracy has been rocked by political upheaval over the past few months as its minority Communist government battled to stay in power before being toppled and replaced by a Centre-Right coalition. But when a Gemini News Service correspondent talked to villagers, he found that most were unimpressed with the changes.

# Sheep rather than Politics Mark the Passage of Time

Mohan Mainali writes from Gorkha, Nepal

THE recent roller-coaster ride of Nepali politics has done little to lift the hopes of villagers in the high hills around Gorkha.

"Why should I bother about the politicians' battle over power if no-one is serious about villagers' problems?" asks Tula Ram Ghale of Uhiya village, switching off a radio broadcast about the latest developments in Kathmandu.

After a long battle, the nine-month minority Communist Party government of Man Mohan Adhikari was toppled by a vote of no-confidence and replaced in September by a Nepali Congress-led coalition, with Sher Bahadur Deuba as the new Prime Minister.



the authorities launched a "village-oriented development programme", which, he says, has been ineffective.

His indifference is shared by many villagers. In nearby Gunda village, Uar Singh Gurung remembers the overthrow of the feudal Rana regime in 1951, and has lived through periods of democracy and direct rule by the monarch.

"If you want to know what change I have seen in my life," he retorts, "it is the number of sheep in my farm. I had nine sheep when I began helping my father at the

age of nine, and I have 69 now that I am 69."

He has difficulty feeding and caring for his flock as his pastureland is in poor condition and he has no access to veterinary services. He says the local education facilities are inadequate and expensive, and he cannot send his grandchildren to school.

It is the same tune in Samdo village, on the border with Tibet. Villagers feel badly neglected by the politicians. Having lost some of their summer grazing lands to China in a border agreement signed by the government in Kathmandu, they were for many years not recognised as Nepalese citizens.

"It took the Supreme Court almost a decade to decide whether we were Nepalese or Chinese," says the village headman. They finally won recognition as citizens of Nepal 20 years ago, but the villagers complain they are still deprived of basic services.

Residents of Filim village say they were angry when their local member of parliament wrote to them just before last year's elections to say that he had spoken to the Prime Minister about the establishment of a local secondary school.

Though we are illiterate, we are not so foolish to believe that the Prime Minister looks after such minor issues," comments one villager, Ram Bahadur Gurung.