

Govt's Own 'Default' Habit

The financial management of the government's own autonomous bodies and corporations gives a most dismal picture. Fifty-six sector corporations and autonomous organisations owe Tk 3,279 crore just for the current fiscal year against their accumulated debt to the exchequer, which will be many times that amount.

Today, our focus is not so much on the defaulting habit of sector corporations, but on why the government, after being nearly five years in power, failed to change things. Recently, we have heard a lot about government's effort to streamline private sector loan defaulters, and we have extended our support for such a move.

Our conclusion is that there has been a regrettable lack of "will" on the part of the government to streamline its financial management. It was thought to be finance ministry's headache, and not that of the whole government's.

Refund Fiasco

Trains didn't much move on Tuesday, the blockade day of the opposition parties. Things were at a complete standstill specially at Kamalapur following an early morning derailment at Tongi. What then happened to the passengers who had collected advance tickets for the dozens of trains that were to depart that day?

They stood in long queues before the booking counters for refunds. No luck. Clerks said they hadn't been instructed to oblige them. Railway officials, however, maintained that refunding was done. Moreover, ministry officials later said refunding was a normal procedure when service bought was not provided.

There lately has been an impression that the railways are trying hard to get out of the disastrous rut they were in. But this refunding fiasco raises doubts. The railways must be a highly competitive commercial organisation so as to get back on its feet. It would deserve helpings from government, specially infusion of new capital by way of modernisation.

In the interest of generating confidence in them, the railways would be well-advised to enquire into Tuesday's refund fiasco and share the findings and actions taken by them, if any, with the public with the help of the media.

Of Hospital Management

Eighteen thousand patients die and another 25 thousand suffer incurable disabilities every year in Australia — due to the kind of care hospitals and the health system offer there. The figures are staggering. Even if these were Bangladesh figures, Australia is a very big country, about twice the size of the subcontinent. And it has about one-hundredth of the population of the subcontinent.

Are those hospitals and the Australian healthcare system still in the pre-Florence Nightingale era? No, not indeed. There should be no dearth of competent and truly caring doctors there. And the hospitals should be among the better to best ones in the world. Then?

This revelation of a study, done by a government task force, does indeed speak of the measure of high-degree of control and supervision that is maintained there.

How then will be the picture of our hospitals — if subjected to such unrelenting all-seeing examination? Well, these our medical outfits are not quite hospitals, however glorified degrees their physicians may flaunt. Why? There is a clue to that in the remedial measures contemplated by the Australian study. They have asked for radical improvement in hospital management. Do our hospitals have any management of any kind, at all?

Prime Minister's Speech at the UN: The Farakka Issue

by M M Rezaul Karim

Would not the UN be the most appropriate international forum on which the Prime Minister should have brought to the notice of the world leaders the single most serious problem of her people with an otherwise friendly neighbour?

QUESTION has been raised in certain quarters as to the effectiveness and even desirability of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's reference to the issue of the sharing of the Ganges waters in her speech delivered at the special session of the UN General Assembly. It was alleged that the raising of the Farakka issue was "inter alia" ill-conceived, ill-prepared and counter-productive.

Let us analyse the rationale and propriety of the Prime Minister's decision to do what she did. She briefly but aptly apprised the world community of the serious plight of 40 million people of Bangladesh affected seriously by the unilateral withdrawal of waters of the Ganges by India at Farakka. She brought to the attention of one of the largest gatherings of world leaders — monarchs, heads of state and government — the process of desertification that has already set in throughout a vast tract of our land, upsetting ecological balance and causing environmental degradation.

Farakka. Would not the UN be the most appropriate international forum on which the Prime Minister should have brought to the notice of the world leaders the single most serious problem of her people with an otherwise friendly neighbour? Would it also be absolutely wrong for the Prime Minister to invoke the sympathy of the largest multilateral group at the highest level to bring to bear some influence, to whatever extent may it have been, on India urging the latter to resolve this issue with a smaller neighbour in a spirit of understanding, cooperation and fairness, keeping in view the traditional uses of these waters and in accordance with international law and practice? Nay, it is not, a neutral observer would say so.

On the contrary, the government would be failing in its duty if during her presence on the very special occasion to celebrate the golden jubilee of the world body, there was no mention of this issue of paramount importance to the nation. Again, if it is considered wrong to seek to vindicate human rights, the most fundamental of which being the right to life or survival, for

almost a third of her entire populace, then the Prime Minister had indeed committed a grievous wrong.

The contention that the Farakka issue has been raised at the UN but not pursued deserves a careful examination of the intent and purpose of the action itself. A member nation can, and many do, make a reference to an issue or dispute of bilateral or international import in the speech of the head of its delegation to the UN. That does not necessarily imply that the issue would be debated in the world forum by delegates of other countries and a resolution, consensus statement or similar such instrument emanate out of the debate or discussions. For this, the member nation has to inscribe the subject matter on the agenda for discussion for which a set procedure has to follow. Without conforming to this requirement, no formal debate takes place. The UNGA remains under no obligation to take any specific measure or action. Also, other participating delegates easily and generally skirt the disputed issue to avoid taking sides publicly. A large number of delegates nevertheless voice their dissatisfaction in

matters of their deep concern and even refer to their disputes with other countries, without undergoing the formalities called for a full-scale debate. Similar was the case of Bangladesh.

Next, the assumption that the Prime Minister's intervention at the UN was ill-prepared appears fallacious. It was argued that extensive lobbying among nations urging them to speak on the issue in support of the aggrieved party is an imperative necessity and must precede such an action. Yes, the point is indeed a valid one. But, the government is not only aware of it but has resorted to it successfully in the past. The well-orchestrated lobbying on the international arena had secured Bangladesh a seat in the Security Council in 1979, the one and only occasion the country was elected to this most prestigious world body, by manoeuvring against a formidable contestant, Japan. This happened during the epoch of President Zia. Earlier, also during his time intervention at the UN on Farakka had resulted in a consensus statement that brought back the two sides to a negotiating table fruitfully. In contrast to these, the present goal of the government

was much limited in scope the rationale of which, as may be seen, has been set forth above. As usual, bilateral briefings on this important issue forms a constant exercise undertaken by the Foreign Office both at Dhaka and in the capitals of foreign countries. The government has no intention, at present, to raise the issue formally at the UN, specially now when the negotiations with India are proceeding amicably.

Again, the argument that the relevant section of the speech at the UN was prepared merely for domestic consumption is also untenable. On the contrary, had the Prime Minister expunged this section of her speech, she would have been subjected to criticism for this gross omission, and correctly so, by the people at large and could have even been condemned by the opposition parties themselves. No Head of Government of a democratic nation would find it prudent and could afford to do so.

Finally, the assertion that the Prime Minister's intervention has strengthened the hawks of India and influenced their government to adopt a hardline in future negotiations is indeed a serious

claim worthy of impassionate scrutiny. The Bangladesh government does not subscribe to this view. The Indian government had earlier responded to the overtures of the Bangladesh government positively as a result of which the current series of talks at the Foreign Secretary level ensued. The two rounds of talks will, hopefully, be followed by others. The issue is complex, to say the least, and both sides claim it affects their vital national interests.

For Bangladesh, this is a matter of life and death for a vast number of its people. To raise a voice in the world forum pointing out the danger of abject poverty and utter ruinousness as a stark reality facing the nation is the least Bangladesh can do at present. For this, its leader should be commended and certainly not chided. It is, however, assumed that with the understanding and sincerity India claims to profess for Bangladesh on this and other issues, no adverse impact will be allowed to be cast on the future negotiations. People, other than the sceptics and pessimists, do generally share this belief. After all, the relations between the two countries were built on solid foundations at the very inception of the nationhood of Bangladesh and would hopefully remain so, given the goodwill and the spirit of understanding on both sides.

Leadership and Health

Our leaders can regulate their health by constant physical exercise and empowering their supporting medical staff to take remedial action whenever necessary.

FOR the second time in four months, Russian President Boris Yeltsin has been hospitalized because of heart problems, the fact that the executive head of the second leading power in the world is hors de combat (and virtually incommunicado) is a matter of great concern within Russia and in the outside world, though one daresay for widely differing reasons. Indifferent health of executive heads of major powers always excites apprehension as in the periodic medical bulletins of US Presidents Eisenhower (1952-1960) and Reagan (1982-1988). Even President Bush, very much an outdoor man in the mould of Carter and Clinton, saw attention focused on his ability to govern after he collapsed during a dinner speech in Tokyo. Successive Soviet leaders Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko went through protracted illnesses while the world waited on a lingering death-watch. Such is the effect of interaction of the health of world leaders with world events that US President Clinton does not spare a single photo-opportunity (photo-ops) for a jog, thereby symbolizing the dynamism of the only remaining Superpower in the world.

Symbolism aside, it is vitally necessary to have leaders in the best of physical and mental health in all critical places. The essence of good leadership is that decision-making be a sound mental process that is definitive and far-reaching, one can hardly expect someone who is in poor health to make constant good decisions in any positive manner. A person in poor health, whatever may be the person's qualities of mind and character, will frequently make bad decisions. History's most famous case is that of Adolf Hitler, believed to be under heavy medication in the later part of the Second World War. Always high strung, Hitler maintained tight control over himself while giving far-reaching decisions in the early part of the war. As his health deteriorated and the medicine dosage increased, his temper tantrums and irrational decisions cost the Germans, a nation of very

precise people, very dearly. Would Hitler, in full possession of his senses, not have withdrawn his Army to secure defenses and much less extended (and vulnerable) Lines of Communication (L of Cs) when it became apparent that the Russian winter was about to engulf the Germans in 1942 or for that matter allowed Von Paulus 6th Army to be encircled at Stalingrad, among a host of other mindless instructions?

The Hindustan Times has reported concern in the Indian Defence Ministry about the ailing health of the top hierarchy of the Indian Army. After the death of the Indian COAS due to heart attack, a random medical check-up carried out by Indian Medical Corps doctors showed up over a dozen officers of the rank of Major General and above having low medical category, the more common serious ailments being heart problem, cancer or diabetes. It seems that a number of senior officers got themselves cleared under coercion or even subterfuge. Among those who managed "a clean bill of health" were at least two GOC-in-Cs, one Deputy COAS and two Corps Commanders, all serving in sensitive military posts. The late COAS Indian Army, Gen P C Joshi, had had a mild heart attack six months before his death but the medical staff had shown this as "bronchitis" at the "request" of the Army Chief. Thereafter Gen Joshi had remained on heavy medication till his death. Our late COAS, Gen Asif Nawaz Janjua, also died of heart ailment but though he had a family history of heart disease, there was little or no suggestion of heart ailment till his demise. Another fine officer, Lt Gen Amin Burki, a Principal Staff Officer at GHQ, had also died of heart attack, again without any previous hint of heart disease.

Given that good physical and mental health is the prerequisite for sound leadership, whether it be political, civil or military, it must be incumbent upon leaders to take constant physical exer-

cise and routine medical checks so as to ensure regular monitoring of their health. While golf was really started as a "leadership sport and recreation" by Field Marshal Ayub Khan and Gen Musa, in reality it was during the late Gen Ziaul Haq's tenure as COAS (and later simultaneously as President) that it commenced in earnest. Civil and military officers, followed

AS I SEE IT Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

close by a flock of businessmen with business more than "rest and recreation" on their minds, congregated on the few golf courses in the country. As a social event golf also became a must professionally for the "upwardly-mobile" and was thus hardly a mental relaxation, except to the committed golfers, and even then only forcibly so in the presence of so many senior officers. Whatever the excuse, the establishment of golf as a professional man's sport was good for our leaders through the spectrum, it gave them vitally needed exercise in an environment where squash, tennis and riding were becoming too strenuous on a regular basis. As such, partly by default, the civil and military hierarchy kept their health because it was the "done thing" for their ambitions. Since there are few votes to be had on the golf course, except off course a "line" to the powers-that-be, golf remains mostly without interest to our politicians.

Active exercise only reduces medical problems, divine nature remains a great equalizer. Heart ailment, cancer, diabetes, etc may all hit any human beings despite the best physical exercise. Heart ailment and cancer are almost self-explanatory, so much is aired about these that it would be futile to repeat the symptoms, cause and effect. Needless to say a person having heart problems cannot stand stress, in

today's public life it would be 100% fatal to subject a person to that rigour. Similarly cancer being painful, as is its treatment, its effects are debilitating physically and mentally on the victim, playing psychological havoc on the mind of the individual and thus affecting decision-making. Easily concealed diabetes affects all organs of the body directly or indirectly, par-

room for misdemeanour. While a bureaucrat having diabetes may become Federal Secretary without grave effect on the health of the nation as the nature of his job as related to stress would be within acceptable parameters, can one imagine a Corps Commander with diabetes and co-relate that with taking rational decisions under stress affecting the lives of thousands? In a nightmare scenario, we will be lucky if he suffers a diabetic coma under the stress of war, that is why some may have been discreet and avoided action throughout their career. The Quaid-e-Azam knew he was dying but had sworn his physicians to secrecy about his fatal tuberculosis (the X-Ray showed two shadows the size of golf balls in the lungs) but the reason was to keep Mountbatten and Nehru from using that knowledge to deliberately delay the Partition decision till he had passed away and thus circumvent his indomitable will for an independent nation for the Muslims. There is a differ-

ence between ambition for self and that for an entire nation.

Our leaders can regulate their health by constant physical exercise and empowering their supporting medical staff to take remedial action whenever necessary. Above all, since it concerns the well-being of the nation, those who resort to hiding such ailments at the altar of their ambitions to the detriment of the nation should be given exemplary punishment in proportion to their stature and appointment, including the cancellation of pension and all post-retirement benefits. If we can punish lowly soldiers for small misdemeanours, why not crucify a middle-level civil servant, even a colonel as for that matter a Lieutenant General for manipulating the truth by blackmailing/coercing medical staff? For the good of this country we must take stiff penal measures to root out leaders of all ilk having bad physical and mental health! This will act as an incentive to all our leaders to maintain good health or give way to others more physically fit to absorb stress and strain. Leadership and health must go together.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN Vive La France

I have just returned from Paris, and the big news from Europe is that France has become the leading arms merchant in the world — surpassing even the United States. The question on everyone's lips is, how did the French pull it off?

I asked my friend Alain Bernheim, who, when it comes to anything French, is as defensive as Brigitte Bardot. "We did it," he explained, "by combining all the luxury items France exports with the arms and ammunition. We have become the guns and butter capital of the world. For example, we sprinkled Chanel No. 5 on all the missiles that we sold to China. It was the fragrance on the tip of the weapons that made them the sweetest-smelling explosives in the world. The Chinese army fell in love when they inhaled the missiles."

"That's good marketing," I told Alain. "What else sold the French armaments?"

"As you know, truffles are now more expensive than submarines — we offered to throw in a pound of truffles with each Agosta Class Submarine. The Saudi Arabians were desperate for truffles, and they ordered 10 submarines plus six tonnes of foie gras to serve underwater to the crews. The Americans were furious when they heard about it. They plan to complain to the World Trade Commission. They are claiming that truffles were forbidden from inclusion in arms sales."

I asked, "Did you throw in any Christian Dior clothes as an inducement to sell the French Mirage jets?"

"As a matter of fact, we did. We informed the Iranian government that if they bought our planes we would dress every army officer's wife for free. When the wives heard this, the military had no choice but to buy from us."

"To further sweeten the deal we threw in a one-year warranty on the evening gowns with a six-month guarantee on the planes."

"No wonder France beat out the United States. Besides guns, France has so much more to offer than we do."

"The countries we sell to have developed a strong appetite for our equipment. The other day Ghana wanted two frigates. The United States and Britain sent in bids, but we offered a case of Mouton Rothschild 1949 and we got the contract."

"It's hard to imagine that France, which is considered so civilized, is now the leading exporter of arms," I said sadly.

Alain said, "We were once a country of wine, women and song. Now we are a country of wine, women, song and bazookas. Vive la difference!"

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We want a peaceful solution

Sir, We are very anxious for the persisting political impasse in our country. The both sides, the government and the opposition, are immobile of their own stages. So, how is it possible to mitigate the stalemate?

As a patriot, I want to give a suggestion to both the sides to meet a table. The mainstream opposition political parties, in the middle September, called a prolonged shutdown which seriously affected the country's economy. Again, the opposition parties announced a tough agitation programme, including a week-long hartal.

The prime minister expressed in her statement that she wouldn't accept the demand even though they

call hartals again and again. Meanwhile, the local businessmen, foreign investors are frustrated because their normal business is being hampered. The foreign entrepreneurs invest only when they get our country's climate in favour of them. Otherwise, they will go back.

At present, the political arena of our country is very unstable. Both the oppositions and the government, are still firm on their own views. The educational institutions are being closed down for many months. It is affecting seriously especially at the universities because the normal classes and examinations are not being held.

As a developing country, Bangladesh, needs to achieve its economic emancipation,

but our leaders of all the political parties are busy to hold power at any cost.

In the circumstances, I would like to request everybody to avoid destructive steps. I want to request our government to take suitable action discussing with the opposition and to give peace to the common people.

Rafiqul Islam Rana, Dept of Int Relations, Dhaka University

Posting and transfer of officers

Sir, A lot of bungling and corruption is going on regarding posting and transfer of officers by the ministry of establishment. There is no fair and impartial policy on

the matter. The concerned officials say that postings are made on the basis of requisition of ministers.

May be a few cases are done by this process. But definitely not all cases. Vested interest group of the ministry of establishment is indulging in nepotism, favouritism and corruption. Hence the minister of establishment, who is the PM herself, is requested to verify the matter using her power regarding the irregularities and injustice committed by the officials of the ministry.

In fact, postings are being sold and purchased by the concerned officials. Unless they are brought to book, they will simply play havoc.

Hussain Imam, Mirpur, Dhaka