

Challenges Before the Nation

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Inform the Public

Chittagong has been witnessing the worst kind of extortion of money by organised criminal gangs for the past couple of years. The gangs resort to the mafia-style abduction of businessmen and their wards for huge sums of ransom money. About 100 people were taken hostage last year alone, which means no less than eight hostage-taking a month on an average. In the year-ending week six young men were kidnapped at gun point. This gives an idea of the abductors' reach and power in conducting their illegal sloop. Unchallenged the goons have been carrying on their criminal acts as if there is no law enforcing agency nor a government.

The rule of law has become a casualty all across the country. When as many as 5,000 families are forced to leave their houses and move to relative security in the port city, no administration can turn a blind eye to this disturbing development. The government of Khaleda Zia is at fault for not taking into reckoning such a gross lawlessness. Because the business families are the prime target, one cannot be naive enough to realise the implications of the routine terrorism and extortion. When the prime minister and her cabinet colleagues claim that Bangladesh offers the best of opportunities for foreign investment among the South Asian nations, they simply forget one basic truth. The truth is that if a government cannot create the proper environment for carrying out business operations by the local businessmen smoothly, the foreigners have more reasons to fear the lack of security of life and property.

If the extortion, terrorism and abduction continue unabated, chances of capital flights from the country cannot be ruled out. So far there is hardly any instance of the police ever successfully nabbing any member of the illegal groups operating in the port city. That is mysterious. The authority does not really want us to believe that the police are so inept and powerless in the face of the alarming rise of terrorist goons. What is needed is a determined and well-concerted drive against the outlawed gangs. But to organise such a campaign a political will is a prerequisite. Let the government tell whether it has that will or not.

Let it be Good Business

The Second Dhaka International Trade Fair was launched on Tuesday by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia extolling the "unique" investment opportunities in Bangladesh. This shows that an international trade fair is not just what its name may suggest — a shopper's paradise. With 206 stalls and pavilions, 87 of them taken up by companies from 19 foreign nations — this is not much of a show as things go at traditional trade fairs overseas. But ours is only a beginning and with a steady industrial progress taking place here, this will in time become a true international business event.

This show is a shop that must sell to foreign buyers and by its quality of merchandise must induce the foreign shoppers to come next time and entice others to come. Foreign sellers are here to explore markets for their products, too. At the end of the day, January 21 that is, the success of the show would be measured and we would know whether the effort and cost has been worthwhile in terms of business done and openings made abroad. All this is to say that considerations other than these must not determine the future and development of the fair. Poorer nations have very bizarre ideas of ostentation. Let this be not an illustration in point.

The range of products we offer, mostly, to foreign buyers and nations are historically determined. About the best of these — everything related to jute — we have not handled with any imagination and success. Textiles with garments and handloom fabrics — are traditional things revived in good time but waits to become a worldshaking business event — having all the potential for it. It is more cheap labour than anything else that sells our products of this range — till now. This must change.

Bangladesh could make good ground in toiletries and cosmetics. They have come a long way and there is no reason why these shouldn't compete with the developed nations' products as our ceramics and crockery are already doing.

Handicraft has long been showered with patronage in the hope of its making a mark on the international market. The quality remains very poor to this day compared with ancient skills and the art is lost. Why shouldn't our big tea industry make a big go at this fair for newer buying companies and nations?

Rising Car Theft

In the metropolis 286 motor vehicles were stolen in 1995 — an increase of 22 over the previous year's figure. In 1947-48 there were only two town service buses in the city. In the early forties, perhaps no more than a dozen private cars plied the streets. The number of stolen cars does indeed speak of Dhaka coming a long long way since.

It must be said the increase in car theft has not been as steeply rising as the rise in vehicle number. Perhaps that accounts for police not caring to come to grip with this. In 1995 total vehicles stolen all over the country were some 950 and of these only 234 could be recovered. That these 234 could be traced and got back owed more perhaps to the fact that motor vehicle owners are the richest and most powerful people of our entire nation — than to police initiative.

What is more disquieting than the stealing of cars of a few affluent people is the so-called hijacking of the inter-district trucks — often-times fully loaded with materials. It is reported rings of mafiosi have ganged up to profit from this lucrative business and that police are proving no match for them.

Is this the curse of civilisation and development? Then why do not the blessings of the same benefit this poor land — food, job, house, education and health for all?

THE past year has been exceedingly tough for Pakistan. Some notable indicators did surface about the end of 1995 that point to a better 1996 if the trend continues. Perhaps the best news for the country is that the President has become the Head of State of all Pakistanis, not the rubberstamp of a single political party.

The knowledge that their actions may be subject to check and verification will certainly make the elected government perform better. There remain certain questions of vital national importance in suppression to many others in which the President must intercede on behalf of the nation, among them viz (1) the basic anomaly of corruption that is wrecking the economy (2) the Sindh Urban problem and (3) the regional geo-political situation.

To the common man, whether the economy is good or bad is measured by the continued rise in prices i.e. rate of inflation, whereas for economic managers inflation is the end result of policies and initiatives taken by the government as adjusted to the world economic environment.

At the moment, prices across the board for all products and produce have risen with such ferocity that many in the middle class cannot afford more than 1.50 meals a day, that too on a scale considerably below their average ration of meat, vegetables and fruit. One should not go by the availability of imported goods in the market and the small privileged elite who retain the buying power to clean out such shelves.

There is an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, the middle class has been virtually wiped out in-between. Murphy's Law has ensured that except for Dr Mohammad Yacoub, Governor, State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), the PM has the worst economic team that this country has ever seen. Mr VA Jafarey is an honourable, venerable old gentleman but

given the individuals and national security. To those who choose to remain deaf, dumb and blind to this brazen thievery, one can only feel contempt at their naivety, their silence makes them as culpable as those looting this country. The price of inaction today will be paid in blood by the youth of this country. Look at the shenanigans of "political" appointees in the country's financial institutions, their only claim to fame is to serve the individual good of the "master" at the cost of the nation. Does one expect anything from such people than the assuaging of their greed? When the only real threat to them choose to be inactive due to "social and constitutional motives," the greed of the Un-Godly force-multiplier without the fear of retribution. This open season on Pakistan's national interests can only be checked if the President establishes a Special Task Force for checking and eradication corruption, constituted of persons of integrity and repute. With Presidential authority to go after high and low alike without fear or favour, the flight of ill-gotten wealth will come to a stop.

The second major focus of national crisis are the major urban areas of Sindh, particularly Karachi. Over the past six months Gen Babar and the Rangers (helped by the Police) have done a magnificent job of eradicating terrorists of one particular political leaning but there is a time and place for everything, the dual-track political initiatives are missing. Now we must follow an even-handed approach, to paraphrase (with apologies) Deng Tsao Peng "it does not matter whether the cat is white or black, it is dangerous as long as it can eat mice."

We must even the balance to ensure that one set of criminals is not replaced by

another. One of the fallouts of positive action by the LEAs is that Karachi Police have come out of their subdued shell and started to wantonly harass the common citizens, this despite credible professionalism in their senior hierarchy. While the Rangers carry the burden of public approbation as the leading edge of the LEAs, the behaviour of the Police is getting to be atrocious, mainly in extorting money. One form of terrorism should not be replaced by another more dangerous form, unauthorised State terrorism for individual gain thereby washing out whatever good has been done in wiping out terrorism. The President must take immediate remedial measures for the urban citizens of Sindh.

crime, provided those asking for amnesty specify his (or her) criminal action.

A period of one month must be given for people to avail this offer. Simultaneously delimitation of constituencies based roughly on last population estimates must take place with 9 districts (one for every million of population) in Karachi and 3 in Hyderabad. Within 3 months of Governor's rule elections must take place for all Local Bodies slots at the basic unit level, with elections to the next 2 stages at three month intervals. Within 9 months the District Mayors must take office after being directly elected and assume responsibility followed by direct election to the post of Mayor who then replaces the

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

In particular Karachi. He cannot let the situation slide into anarchy. Gen Babar's task was restricted to restoring the peace, to sustain the peace requires political initiatives that are either not in Gen Babar's mandate or can be settled without going outside the parameters of the LEAs.

The president must first appoint a Governor equal to the task of peace sustenance, regrettably Governor Kamal Azfar's credibility or personality is not equal to this challenge. Once the Governor is appointed, the president should put both the major cities of Karachi and Hyderabad under Governor's rule appointing full-time Administrators for each city with all the civic agencies and LEAs under his (or her) authority. The government must then announce a general amnesty for all politically related

Administrator.

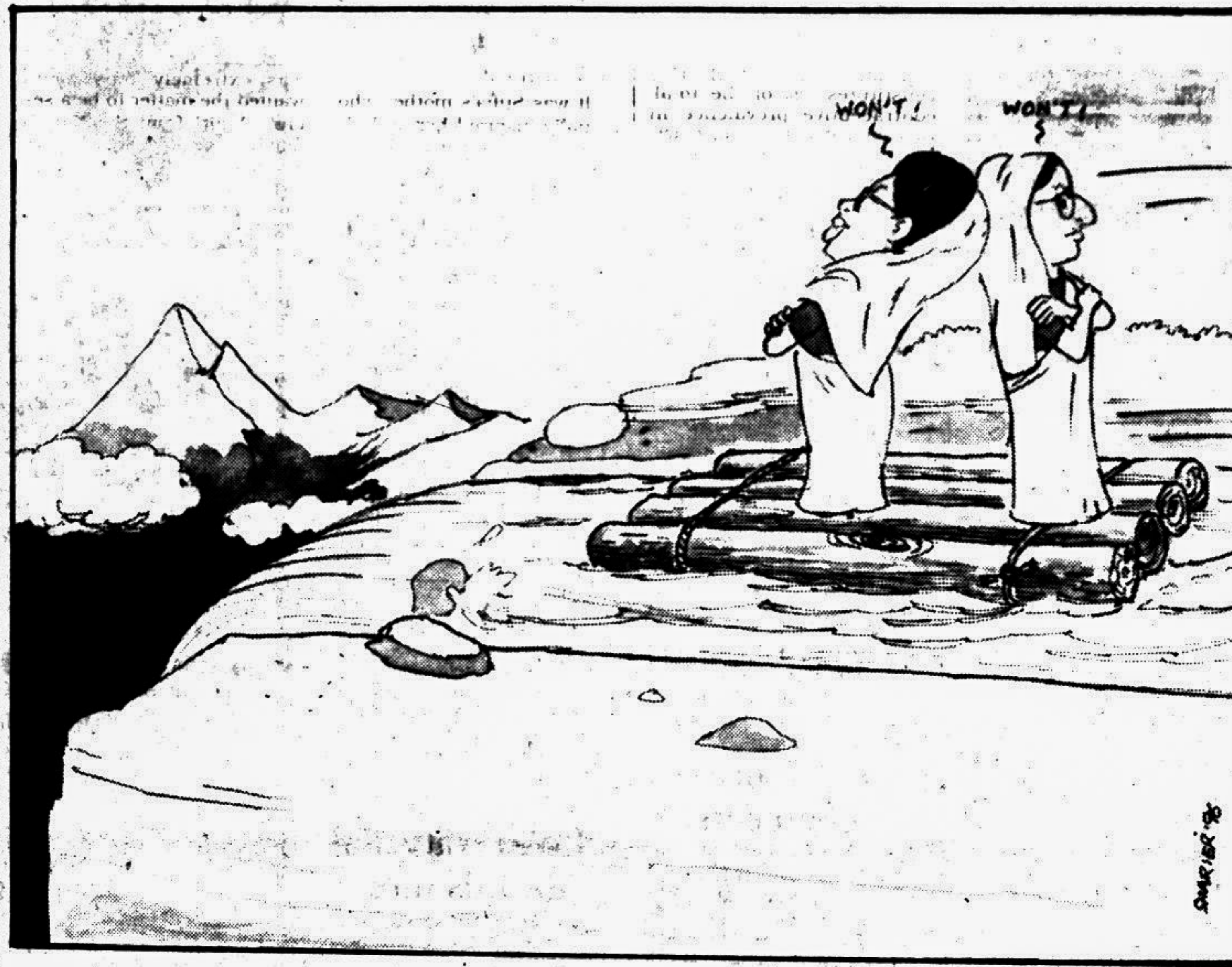
It is most important to remove the vacuum of leadership at the grassroots level followed by a gradual return to power to the directly elected representatives of the people. There is no need for elongated dialogues on the issue, unless the people of this city are re-enchanted soon so that they ultimately form a voice at the provincial and National level, the Mohajirs will be permanently alienated from the national mainstream. The MQM represents that voice and must have a place under the Pakistani sun. It is the responsibility of the President to take direct charge of the situation before permanent physical division of geographical parameters takes place as has happened in country's history before, the fear is that mentally the division has already taken place.

have handled President Rabbani with greater tact and diplomacy in the same manner that we have handled Dostum.

Circumstances have now been created which obligate the shunning of communists and their adherents who keep the minority Tajik leaders Rabbani and Masood in the seat of power in Kabul, the same measure should have been applied to the mercenary Rashid Dostum. However, in sending most of Pakistan Army's Afghan veterans home, the new ISI Chief (in 1993) decimated our field contacts and set us on a disastrous course in Afghanistan. The tragedy is that the Indians (courtesy of Masood's intelligence Chief Indian-trained Gen Fahim) are established in the Kabul seat of power and our policy is in total disarray, existence only by the timely emergence of the Taliban.

In the process we have annoyed Iran which has sent out feelers of friendship with India to a level more than can ever be imagined. For different reasons, China is also estranged from us, a continuing catastrophe in diplomatic polity for us. Since this government seems to have no time for Bangladesh and has lost the affinity we had with Sri Lanka, our diplomatic cup in the region is bitter indeed.

Having had a taste of the President's penchant for fairplay as exercised in his choice of Gen Jahangir Karamat as COAS based on pure merit and merit alone, we look to him for more, this is our right. While he cannot take on all the responsibilities of the elected government, the public expects him to establish Presidential writ to stop the rot in our elected government and take steps commensurate under the circumstances in the supreme national interest. Short of setting aside an elected government one can only hope for redemption on the basis of the indications one saw in the President as a welcome silver lining in the dark clouds dimming almost the whole of last year.



OPINION

Dhaka's Traffic Mess

Wasif Islam

I know much has been said and is being said about Dhaka's perennial traffic jams. But we see no perceptible movement towards alleviating this horrendous problem which involves all of us high and low. The proposed flyovers, I know will ease a lot of this problem but when will it happen? Who knows?

May I humbly offer a few immediate steps towards a partial solution till our city fathers and traffic pundits come up with the all cure.

1. **Traffic Signals:** Our traffic signal allows two way traffic for red and green. This should be immediately changed to allowing only one way traffic at green for one lane at a time as we have seen practiced in cities of developed nations.

2. **One way streets:** It is high time that we introduce one way streets on some major problem streets to begin with.

3. **Rickshaws:** Of course any one who can solve this problem deserves a Nobel Prize.

A gradual easing out of rickshaws from main arterial streets should be started immediately. However this will produce a backlash from the rickshaw pullers. To resolve this we may allow incentives to those pullers who volunteers to ply on side streets and minor lanes. This can be achieved by painting those rickshaws with a particular colour and allowing them such benefits as free schooling for their children, wheat for work, printed shirts/vests (with writings related to this programme), starting a hire/purchase programme for all such pullers willing to participate. Public debates/conferences, public awards for rickshaw pullers, Save Dhaka programme involvement, etc.

Some enterprising NGOs may be involved along with active governmental support.

If the above proposals make any sense to others may I request that these views be endorsed over and over again till we get some response from the right people.

To the Editor

President speaks

Sir, Your editorial under the caption 'President Speaks' appearing on Dec 30 was excellent.

It reads: "President's biggest mistake so far has been that he has grossly underestimated the Moral Authority of his office. It is time that he corrects it." Do you really believe that it is he who should be blamed for this. Shouldn't we — the citizens, the government and the opposition also share blame for this.

The President was duly elected to the highest office through constitutional means. But has not his esteemed office been belittled in subtle ways? Hasn't some of his legitimate authority and responsibility been usurped by others, which I am sure, have not escaped your attention?

Constitutionally, his political authority is very limited and his moral authority is best maintained by keeping silent and not saying anything which might be termed as partisan. If he had dabbled in political matters you would not have said today that he grossly "underestimated" his moral authority. Even before he has said anything unsolicited, his impartiality has been indirectly questioned by a politician.

I feel that the President's office is not an enviable of-

fice. It is a very lonely forlorn office like that of any other President, even the Indian President is no exception. Think of President Zail Singh. How lonely he had felt. However, yet the presidents are the symbols of the integrity of a nation and every one should leave him alone. This office can be helped to act by showing every respect and courtesy due to it. He can only act if there is a consensus among the parties in letting him act. His office is a very sensitive one.

If we want to be a proud nation, we should pay due respect to our institutions.

P G Muhammad
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Feroz Shai

Sir, The sudden death of the celebrated folk singer, Feroz Shai, leaves a state of gloom and sadness all over and especially those who have known this great singer will find it difficult to be without him. Feroz Shai was a wonderful person pure at heart, simple, humble and ever-smiling. He was the idol of the youngsters of the early seventies and his songs took

everyone by charm even today.

Feroz Shai's last message to the audience "ek seconder nai bhorosha" so truly and instantly coincided with the final fact of life.

May Allah rest his soul in eternal peace.
Khawja Viqar Moiruddin
Dhaka

Home in the air

Sir, Sometimes in early summer last year, I was at John F Kennedy International Airport in New York City to see-off my aunt on her way in a Biman flight to Bangladesh. The borrowed terminal from Alitalia (Italian Airlines) was quite full. Later, as I checked with one of the Alitalia personnel, I found out that the flight was full. Every single seat was taken. It made me quite happy. I am sure the feeling was not unique to me; every Bangladeshi would have felt proud to learn that Biman was doing competitive business in the US, "the greatest business ground" in the world as I believe. So, I decided to fly Biman, next time I was going home. I was ex-

pecting "great" service from Biman.

I believe in consumer protection. Naturally, the trend came from my stay for a few years in the US, where everybody instinctively knows to compare the market before buying any product, or availing a service. Early October, I was comparing prices of airline tickets to Bangladesh from different travel agencies. I found out that the price was largely varying. Different travel agents were asking different prices at different times of the day. And, this is true literally. The range varied from a hundred dollars to a few more.

Being curious, I wanted to check with Biman about the price caps and discount prices on air tickets. To my biggest surprise, I found out that nobody ever picks up the telephone at the Biman office in Manhattan, New York City. Forget the air ticket price. The airline should at least provide information regarding flight arrival, departure and reconfirmation on reservation. Sadly enough, the customer service I found was nil. After holding on the line

for about 10 minutes, 15 minutes, and 30 minutes finally, in three different occasions, I gave up all the hope. It was simply useless; my long-distance telephone company was charging me about 30 cents a minute, plus sales tax, etc., in busy hours of the day.

I can understand that the customer representatives are busy. Perhaps, a toll-free number (something that does not charge the caller) could be a fair solution. All the other competitor airlines, such as Gulf Air, Emirates, or British Airways have prompt customer service, plus a toll-free number to go along. Naturally, I did not choose Biman to fly home. I am positive, many alike me have turned their business down because of poor customer service. I wonder, if Biman still flies full air planes, I won't be surprised if the business goes down (if it is not down already) within a few months. Surely, poor customer service eventually will make Biman loser in the competition.

To my understanding, the only ones who are flying Biman are either "desperate

patriots," or quaintly unaware of their consumer rights. I am neither, and I am positive that there are plenty who are in my group. If Biman was a little concerned, perhaps all who are in the "neither group" can also fly on Biman. Zunaid Iqbal
55 North Dhanmandi,
Dhaka

The year that was

Sir, Three hundred sixty-five sun-sets ago, at this time all of us were eagerly looking forward for the year 1995. The year 1995 is now over and will soon disappear with all its events to the vast ocean of time. The question is: did we really get what was expected during that year? Except for individual ups and downs, the year 1995, unfortunately, went through political unrest, scores of crimes and tragic untimely deaths of all kinds. Can we expect any miracle in 1996? Will 1996 bring us happiness or will it bring us sorrows of repeated nature. I mean endless political differences and deadly crimes? Khawja Viqar Moiruddin
Dhaka