The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Thursday, August 29, 1996

Trimmer Administration

The need for streamlining the government administration through restructuring, and even reduction in the number of its organisations, including ministries, has been underscored by a committee set up to bring about qualitative changes in administration. Important suggestions have been made to avoid overlapping of and undue interference with functions by various organisations of the government. The centrepiece of the proposed administrative reform is a trimmer and more efficient bureaucracy geared to keep up with the newer challenges of the time.

To that end the committee has made specific recommendations such as bringing down the number of ministries from the existing 35 to 22, reducing the government manpower by 48,000 and repealing the Official Secrecy Act. All of these recommendations are sure to have far-reaching impacts. It is common knowledge that proliferation of government organs and extension of bureaucracy are not always a reflection of increased administrative activities. Far from that, jobs are at times created only to keep the pressure of unemployment off. However, we are now following a type of economy where such a scope is gradually shrinking. The emphasis now has to shift from complicated and extensive paper-work to productivity, based on entrepreneurship. There is no

place of the gratis in such an economy.

As for the reduced number of ministries even a few of them could be renamed according to the recommendations. That is in line with the reorganisation agenda. However, we find the proposed separation of the communication ministry from the transport ministry with water-tight*compartmentalisation of responsibilities rather incongruous. For the transport ministry to have the charge of posts and telecommunications seems to be quite misplaced at a time when telecommunications have been revolutionised beyond recognition. Apart from this the argument for a smaller size of ministries is hardly likely to be contradicted, During all the martial law governments the number of ministries was initially very small. But we can leave aside such set-ups because they were not the ideal ones. If the intention is to reduce expenditure on a top-heavy administration, we should better look at the caretaker government that succeeded in bringing down the administrative cost and yet proved to be an efficient dispensation.

Finally, we commend the committee for recommending the repeal of the Secrecy Act, which when done will pave the way for ensuring transparency of the administration.

Let Them Do Their Job

It takes at least two to run a government. The Opposition's role in it is not wholly as a junior partner. It is a junior partner all right but with the great difference that no worthwhile governance can take shape and effect without its co-operation. The nation could be rid of one of its greatest obstacles to progress and development if the opposition decided to play its role as that proverbial Her Majesty's loyal opposition and not as a pain in the neck.

People, perhaps without an exception, are weighing each step of the new government. There is no escape for any word uttered and any action taken. The opposition appears to be oblivious of the fact that they are also being evaluated for each one of their pronouncements and steps. To a large extent, their performance so far has been finding fault with whatever the government does or doesn't and making governance difficult for the administration. People expect them to discharge their responsibilities to the nation as a constructive opposition. This is not to say, however, that their rightful concerns, if any, should go unheeded under any circumstances.

Begum Khaleda Zia addressed on Tuesday a press conference in Dhaka. The expectation on the part of those having the good of the nation at heart was she would say something befitting the wisdom of statesmen - something touching upon the national issues and marking a departure from the opposition's conduct so far, a departure aimed at giving a better account of themselves than the government as people responsible for fashioning the destiny of the nation. It was clear from her outpourings that she remains pathologically fixated on AL and its government.

A big ponderous party like BNP with crores supporting it could do wonders in acting as an effective check to the government's possible degeneration into the waywardness of the earlier governments. When will the BNP decide to play its part as an opposition - responsibly and participating in the

governance to which ample doors have been opened in so many ways?

All for This?

Kalpana Rani Chakma, the tribal girl from the Hill Tracts whose kidnapping recently triggered off a country-wide consciousness against the abduction malady was not the first victim of the vanishing act. Several men and women had disappeared in mysterious manner before her, never to be traced. Perhaps the change in the government marked by a resonant vow to start a crusade against all sorts of criminal practices raised our expectations and went a long way in colouring Kalpana's case as something uniquely special, at least the public response led one to be under that impression. More than the effectiveness of the effort itself in recovering a missing Kalpana, the encouraging aspect was the expansiveness and intensity of the general awareness.

But that spirit looks destined to dilute in ludicrousness by the recent turn of events about law enforcers' sweaty search to trace the girl. Reportedly, they produced before the court one Tripti Begum whom they picked up from a village in Jhenidah' on the suspicion of her being a camouflaged

Kalpana. We are peeved by and feel strongly about the mode of operation of the police which is giving birth to news like the one we are dealing with now. Because if this search fizzle's into an abortive one and a few more attempts follow suit, the sting, urgency or seriousness surrounding this strange and sad case will disappear like the very act on the carpet. We do not know whether a conclusive or an inconclusive future is there in store for the Kalpana case but all those early trepidation's seem so grandly farcical in the present context. So much for so little.

MP's Salary: A Classic Case in British Parliament

N interesting development took place in the Parliament recently. The issue has a set pattern mooted in parliaments perhaps in all other countries, but the manner of voting, given the subject matter in question. was highly interesting. This was a free vote, members of parliament having the freedom of casting their votes freely. according to their own sweet will and in contrast to being whipped along party line.

The issue was one of paramount interest, but not on the domain of national and international politics. It related to the members themselves. The motion was a proposal to increase the existing salary of British parliamentarians. Evidently, the discussion was both lively and interesting, but remarkably brief.

It'was an independent body. Senior Salary Review Body. bereft of any member of parliament, that had been entrusted with the task of assessing the need for a raise or otherwise of members of the parliament. The terms of reference were to take into consideration the cost of living index, existing volume of work required of members for performing their duties, salary reviews made or being made in other sectors of the society, various perks en-

HEN Deve Gowda was

months ago, it was ac-

knowledged that he would be

heading a coalition government

in which the regional parties

would be significant con-

stituents, apart from the

Congress whose support from

outside constitutes the life-line

for the United Front from Min-

istry, because without the oxy-

gen provided by it there was no

The experience of the last

two months of functioning of

the United Front government

has brought out some signifi-

cant features which are unique

to the present coalition set-up.

For one thing, the composition

of the new government has

largely been dictated by re-

gional pressures instead of be-

ing on the merit of the new Min-

isters and their suitability for

the portfolios they hold. To a

certain extent, this regional

stamp could be seen in most of.

the Ministries since Indira

Gandhi ruled as a monolith.

The Ministries that have come

and gone in the twelve years

since her demise have been

more and more heterogeneous

in character, though in one of

the previous ministries the re-

gional stamp was so pro-

nounced as it is on the present

State level are having their im-

pact much more pronouncedly

on the fortunes of this govern-

ment than at any time in the

past. Whether it is the water

dispute between Karnataka and

Tamilfiadu, or the Romesh

Chandra report on the goonda-

giri by Mulayam Singh's men

against the BSP in Lucknow

last year - such issues of local

concern have started taking

precedences in the business of

Parliament. It is true that ma-

jor developments in the States

found their echo in Parliament

in the past, but these were not

treated as of life-and-death im-*

portance for the government of

the day. Today the dispute over

the water issue can decide

whether the DMK and Moopa-

nar's Munnani Congress would

stick on or withdraw from the

Secondly, happenings at the

government

question of Deve Gowda surviv-

ing in Parliament

sworn in as the Prime

Minister of India two

The capacity has not been expanded stnce 1950, when reloved by members, etc. construction of the parliament The independent body, after building became complete fola thorough study, forwarded a

The independent body, after a thorough study, forwarded a recommendation to the government for an increase in the salary of members of the House of Commons substantially, from 34,000 to 43,000 pound sterling, per annum. The same body recommended a raise for cabinet ministers from 70,000 to 103,000 and for Prime Minister from 84,000 to 143,000 pound sterling. Members of the House of Lords do not come under the purview of salary structure.

recommendation to the government for an increase in the salary of members of the House of Commons substantially. from 34,000 to 43,000 pound sterling, per annum. The same body recommended a raise for cabinet ministers from 70,000 to 103,000 and for Prime Minister from 84,000 to 143,000 pound sterling.

among them was aptly reflected

by the heavy turnout of voters,

as if on a major issue deliber-

ated in the House. It may be

noted in passing that despite

total membership of 651 in the

House of Commons, the maxi-

mum seating capacity in the

Gowda government. If Mulayam

Singh is discredited through the

exposure of the official report

political party, then it may en-

danger his political longevity at

the Centre and with that is

linked up his relation with the

level, the United Front govern-

ment has been facing difficul

ties which have no precedents

in our parliamentary politics.

As is well-known, the United

Front after the election drew up

to Common Minimum Pro-

gramme (CMP) to serve as a

guideline for the new govern-

ment, and all the constituents

from the market-friendly Chi-

dambaram to the Left parties

all began to swear by it. How-

ever, many of the decisions on

the economic front came as ad

fior pronouncements from the

Finance Minister, though he

claims that he has never meant

to deviate from the CMP. Al-

though Chidambaram claims

that his Budget has been in con-

formity with the CMP line.

there are nuances which makes

it obvious that he and his min-

istry have been straining every

nerve not only to retain Man-

mohan Singh's open-door line

The issue which evoked the

widest public protest has been

the unprecedented price hike of

petroleum products which has

opened up the danger of serious

inflation and price rise affect-

ing vast sections of the under-

privileged in society. Most of

the other constituents of the

United Front were annoved at

this unilateral announcement

of petroleum price hike, but

they had to accept the fait ac-

compli because the only alter-

native left before them would

have been to vote the govern-

ment out of power - which ob-

'viously the United Front mem-

bers would be reluctant to do, as

in their calculation, this would

pave the way for the BJP to

come to power. which they are

ing to note the Congress inter-

action with the United Front.

When the CMP was announced,

the Congress announced that it

would support the proposals

In this context, it is interest-

but to carry it forward.

At the policy programmatic

United Front itself.

House is only 437.

lowing devastation caused by Members of the House of Lords German bombing in 1941. On do not come under the purview ceremonial and other imporof salary structure. tant occasions, an overflowing . The recommendations found House often finds some of its favour not only with the back members kept standing, watchbenchers of the principal politing proceedings from behind ical parties but also among the demarcated lines. ministers and shadow minis-What is most interesting is ters in the parliament. The mothat both the Leader of the tion was carried by an overwhelming majority of members. The interest generated

Functioning of United Front Government

Nikhail Chakravartty writes from New Delhi

There is always the talk that a section of the Congress would like to join the Deve Gowda government, and

Sharad Pawar's name is often mentioned in this connection. This is not likely to happen unless and

until the United Front itself is broken up through revolts and squabbles. Meanwhile, Prime Minister

Deve Gowda has been regularly consulting his predecessor in office, PV Narasimha Rao for

advice and guidance. . .

House (Prime Minister) and the Leader of Opposition (Shadow Prime Minister) were vehemently against such a high raise, had expressed their views in public before the vote and. finally, voted against the proposal. The Labour leader. Tony Blair, subsequently declared that he would not accept any pay rise, except to the tune of 3 per cent as provided for some other sectors. Prime Minister John Major has not yet decided whether he would accept the

embodied in it. Although the

larly Narasimha Rao has been

involved in a number of cases

pertaining to Chandraswamy's

activities as also those of his

own son and nephew, he has

uptil now, been able to retain

majority support both within

the parliamentary party of the

Congress as also in the Pradesh

organisations as a whole. With

all the hi-fi publicity that the

Congress dissidents have so far

been able to manage for them-

selves, it appears that their

hold on the party is still very

weak and that is only with all

their public attack on

Narasimha Rao, they have not

been able to dislodge him from

the presidentship of the party.

As trends show upto now, there

is little chance of the dissidents

taking over the party organisa-

tion through the inner-party

elections that are planned for

a section of the Congress would

like to join the Deve Gowda gov-

ernment, and Sharad Pawar's

name is often mentioned in

this connection. This is not

likely to happen unless and un-

til the United Front itself is

brøken up through revolts and

squabbles. Meanwhile, it is

worth noting that Prime Minis-

larly consulting his predecessor

in office, PV Narasimha Rao

for advice and guidance particu-

larly in the matter of key ap-

pointments in the administra-

tion. This is common knowl-

edge in New Delhi, and one

finds a number of cases in

which the Prime Minister an-

nounced appointments as per

the Congress President's advice

much to the embarrassment of

It is not surprising that the

handling of major issues such

as Kashmir and the problems of

the North-East, will pose the

real test for the United Front

government. Although' Deve

Gowda has so far proceeded

along lines in Kashmir which

are acceptable to all the parties

in Parliament, it is yet to be

seen how the alienated people

in the Kashmir Valley would re-

spond to the present govern-

his Front colleagues.

ter Deve Gowda has been regu

There is always the talk that

the next six months.

Congress leadership particu-

ment, or a modified one unilaterally

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

The parliamentarians giving themselves a high raise to their own emoluments, caused a good deal of commotion and criticism. Opinion polls earlier taken by a section of the press suggested a vast majority of people, 75 per cent, were opposed to the parliamentarian indulgence and another section called the supporters of the move "greedy". A small section of the society, however, endorsed it, since it represented less than what is in vogue in some of the western European countries. Besides, some of the perks allowed to them, such as mileage allowance on travels had been cut on the basis of recommendations of another committee, on standards in raise, as passed by the parlia public service. Yet, employees

in the health and education sectors came out bitterly criticising the parliamentary action of a 26% increase for MPs, while they themselves were allowed only a maximum raise of only

In spite of all these criti-

of British Parliament ranges somewhere above that of a school head teacher and below that of a hospital consultant. It approximately equals the income of a general medical practitioner. Over and above, they have to pay income tax to the maximum tune of 40 per cent of their earnings. Such is the financial standing of an average law-giver, without any additional source of income, in what is known as an egalitarian

Buchwald's COLUMN

Convention Chaos

HE opening ceremonies of the Republican convention came off smoothly. This was a big relief to the organisers because, with all the various political factions, there could have been chaos. This is what could have happened. Good evening, this is Tom Brokaw, bringing you your primetime Republican convention.

There was a flap on-the platform at the opening ceremonies. Let's go to Tim Russert and find out what happened." "Tom originally the festivities were supposed to start with The Star Spangled Banner, but suddenly Pat Robertson

grabbed the mike from Luciano Pavarotti and started to sing Onward, Christian Soldiers. "He got halfway through when Phyllis Schlafly stole the mike from him and started to sing Yes Sir. That's My Baby in

support of the abortion plank. Finally Arnold Schwarzenegger climbed into the ring to sing the national anthem, which brought the house down. "Thanks. Tim. We have Bob Costas, who has just returned

from the Olympics, to give us a sport briefing. "To deal with the Dole age issue, they have made a 20-minute film showing Dole racing Carl Lewis in a 400-metre high hur-

"Wow! Who wins?" "Dole. The film is called The Thrill of a GOP Victory and the Agony of a Clinton Defeat." "Thanks. Bob. Now let's go to Katie Couric, who is trying to get

to Pat Buchanan "Tom, as you can see, Pat Buchanan is surrounded by re-

"Since the Republicans won't let him speak, he has decided to

send his message on the Internet. "He is very upset at the way they have been treating him. They took away his funny GOP cap with the propeller, and the vendors have orders not to sell him a hot dog.

"I can't see it on my screen, Katie. Is he scowling?" "His whole face is scrunched up, and he looks as if he has a toothache. I hope to get near him in the next hour for a few

"O K. Ratie. Now let's go over to Bryant Gumbel. Who have you got, Bryant? "Newt Gingrich, Tom. Mr Gingrich, what role are you play-

"I am here to see that everyone who attends this convention

"Do you think Bob Dole is going to win the presidency?"
"My prediction is that he will sweep Kansas." "So the polls don't mean a thing?" "Nothing. We still haven't heard from the anti-Hillary vot-

"Back to you, Tom."

"Thank you, Bryant. Stay tuned for the weightlifting event between Senator Al D'Amato of New York and the liberal Goverror William Weld of Massachusetts. *** ***

By arrangement with the Los Angeles Times Syndicate and

ment's overtures, and how the responses from the Valley could be reconciled with the demands of Jammu and Ladakh. The entire question about the quantum of promised autonomy to that state hinges on that. As for the North-East, economic development, scope for jobs and assertion of democratic rights of the people, are the three issues round which solutions have to be worked out if the government in New Delhi has to earn back the confidence of the

Against this background of such formidable difficulties, one cannot but note the firm stand of the new government in the field of foreign affairs, particularly with regard to the central issue of CTBT. The firmness with which the present government has been refusing to agree to sign the prea whole host of powerful countries at the Geneva UN Conference, is actually the measure of overwhelming support the Government has been able to enlist nuclear powers. The excellent presentation of India's case ! of countries including three out the Security Council (USA, Rus-

rogative. However, the real test for the durability of any government lies in the hands of the people of the country. It is too early to say that the United Front government led by Prime Minister Deve Gowda has passed that

The, writer is an Editor of The Mainstream.

demands wore not achieved. We

wonder what is the intrinsic

value of the Parliament when a

political leader thinks streets

are their alma mater. Why,

then, tax payers' money will be

spent on elections and sessions

of Parliament? Many would be

aghast to read a news item

when a very responsible

opposition leader in a party

meeting in Comilla on 17-8-96

threatened to go to the streets if

repression on their party

workers are not stopped. The

nation had enough of Andolan.

We do not want any more

turmoil in the society. We want

When a terrorists caught

with arms or when a person is

caught while violating law and

order, will any peace-loving

people support him to go scot-

and tranquillity in a society is

an outcast to whatever party he

may belongs. These are the per-

sons who always try to seek

refuge under the umbrella of

political parties. Therefore, to

shed tears for such outcasts and

threatened to embark on

movement is denying people's

urge for peace and tranquillity.

A person disturbing peace

peace and harmony.

embittered sections of the people in the region which is still isolated from the mainstream of Indian development, both political and economic.

sent CTBT draft as presented by in the country as a whole. There is no party worth the name in India today which is prepared to toe the line laid down by the Foreign Minister Gujral at Jakarta before a large numbers of five veto-holding members of sia and China) as also to a large number of developing countries has been a welcome step in the right direction. India has never been scared at having to go it alone so long as the cause is just and in the interest of the country and its sovereign pre-

OPINION

AIDS: The Role of Media by Maurice Bloem warmest

IV/AIDS is a reality for the whole world especially for the socalled "developing countries" as concluded once again at the 11th International AIDS conference in Vancouver last July. Living in Bangladesh, we assume this is still a low prevalence country and this situation will enable us to find the right response in order to avoid a wide-scale spread of the virus (HIV) causing AIDS. During the last few years, several events happened and actions took place and although not enough. some positive changes and trends can be identified. However, recent articles in the newspapers (indeed, not only The Daily Star) Indicate that we have not learned from our own experiences and that of surrounding countries.

For example, in 1992 two Bangladeshi nationals became social outcasts when they were wrongly identified as HIV posi tive by a newspaper. Their names, address and photographs were printed, and although the final results showed that they were HIV negative. the earlier reports had already done the damage. The same could happen with the persons you named as HIV positive in The Daily Star issues of August 10,12 and 14 this year

There are several important issues related to these reports. First, the percentage of false positives (i.e., a test that will give a positive result while the person is in fact HIV negative), will be very high in a low prevalence country. (It will go to far to explain here why). Secondly, it is unethical to disclose the HIV positive status of an individual without her/his per mission. The Daily Star should have questioned the facts: the medical information of these persons had been disclosed. By whom? With what purpose? Thirdly, given the stigma still attached to HIV/AIDS in this country, it will be impossible for these persons leven if they turn out to be HIV negative) to live a normal life, though a HIV positive person can lead a perfectly normal productive and meaningful life for another ten years or so. Fourthly, especially, porters? in a country like Bangladesh. the media have an important role to play in relation to the prevention of the spread of the virus. To play this role constructively, information should be presented accurately and without sensation.

The Network in Bangladesh prepared a "Statement of Belief" which endorses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and emphasises the need to respect rights of persons with AIDS, persons who are HIV positive, and persons who are perceived as being at risk for HIV infection. It seems obvious looking at the recent developments in relation to HIV/AIDS in Bangladesh, that these rights are at stake here

Lastly, there is the issue of testing. The above mentioned 'Statement' also recognises the rights of individuals not to be subjected to compulsory and mandatory HIV testing. Testing without informed consent has no public health benefit. It damages the credibility of health services and efforts to prevent HIV transmission. I will not further elaborate on the arguments for these. Testing certain segments of society will not keep the virus from spreading, but behavioral changes of us all will. In the case of Bangladeshi

citizens and also the fishermen from Myanmar, I am concerned about the recognition of their rights in this regard. Why are these fishermen tested? Did they give their permission? What is the government of Bangladesh going to do with the results? Blood samples from particular groups of people are sometimes tested for epidemiological and public health resources i.e., screening. HIV screening is done for two main purposes: preventing transmission - through blood transfusions from organs and tissues intended for transplant; and surveillance — to learn the rate of new cases of infection within a specific population group (incidence studies) and to estimate the percentage of a population infected within a particular length of time (prevalence studies). International policy makers recommend surveil lance should always be unlinked (the test sample is not linked to people's names) and therefore anonymous (when screening is unlinked and anonymous, informed consent is not usually necessary because there is no way of tracing the results to any individuals). Was this or will this be the case with the above mentioned persons? Why is this not questioned by an editorial note or by an investigation of one of your re-

I consider The daily Star one of the better English newspapers in Bangladesh whose reporting can be characterized as sincere and full of integrity. In general, you play your role as a watch-dog for justice and equal rights quite satisfactorily. Will you kindly make sure that we can say the same about your actions in the field of HIV/AIDS

The writer is a member of STD/AIDS Network. Bangla

dead set to avert.

Neutral media

Sir, A recent letter in your letter column written by Natasha Kamal on 8/8/96 under the heading "Neutral Media" drew my attention and I would like to say a few words regarding this. While explaining her stands she has given various statements which can easily be countered but I do not want to do that. What really surprised me was one of her claims that this paper is not maintaining neutrality while covering the news. The only problem with her topic was she could not stay neutral herself and openly supported one particular party in which she believes. That is very well but there is always another side of the coin. What is a neutral media to her? When a paper or news media supports his/her party or does not go for any criticism, is that neutral? If we analyse the role of the media before and after the June 12th election it is easy to see that practically most of the newspapers including the state-run television started siding with one party which then gave a good momentum to the then opposition in the general elections. Just like she felt that there was no Neutral Media supporting her party at that time, many people felt that the Media was biased. The way the editor of The Daily Star asked questions in the Shobinoy Jantey Chai to BNP made people wonder did the editor belong to certain party?

I guess it made certain quarter happy and others unhappy, but that is how the role of an editor should be. After the elec-

tion the way some newspapers started giving importance to one party was too naked but the editors could not change anything by doing that as the ultimate judgment is always with

the people. The prime minister herself wanted criticism so that any wrongdoing can be rectified so why stop that? This can be a real benefit to the government party, they can make their choice which issue to consitter and which not. I agree with her on one point. Yes, there are some newspapers which are not neutral. The editors or owners of the papers belong to certain political parties. Though, this kind of editors might be able to fool the rural or uneducated people but I have my doubts if this kind of newspapers can really make any impact on the urban and educated people. Consider Shobinoy Jantey Chai and the editorial writings of this newspaper (such as BIR-DEM issue). I personally do not think that the editor or the newspaper itself is biased and that they are not maintaining neutrality in their comments.

Md Anwarul Kabir 1/3 Shajahan Road, Block-C Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207.

Air pollution

Sir. Recently in the annual general meeting of Bangladesh Society for Conservation of Environment, the activities of the Society as well as the environmental situation of Bangladesh was reviewed. The members of BSCE stressed the

need for accelerating action programme towards ensuring a pollution-free environment. The speakers in the meeting observed that the present status of air-pollution is rather very serious and urged upon the authority concerned to take measures for checking air-pollution by vehicles' fumes, factory's wastes and other sources.

Some of the discussants suggested publication of leaflets with relevant quotations from the holy Quran and other Books of religion to create public awareness on the importance of keeping a clean and pollution-free environment. One such quotation is: "Cleanliness is next to Godli-

The President of BSCE, Prof. Dr. Abdullah Al Haroon, Professor, ENT, Dhaka Medical College and Hospital said that the Society was very soon going to launch an action programme for containing air-pollution through public participation. He sought everyone's cooperation.

M. Zahidul Haque Publicity and Press Secretary BSCE, Dhaka

The opposition and the public

Sir, Like me, the peace-loying people of this country were perturbed to read the statement of political leaders who threatened to go to the streets if their

The political parties should abhor them for greater good of the nation. When this is done. only then the political parties can reap the fruits of their pop-

> GMF Abdur Rob Park Rd, New DOHS Dhaka.