

Of Accountability, Transparency and the Fight Against Corruption

by Shah A M S Kibria

The parliament has a crucial and central role in ensuring accountability. In fact this is how it should be in a parliamentary system. Our proposal to set up the committees under the chairmanship of members of parliament rather than ministers speaks volumes about our commitment to the goal of accountability.

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina's government has been in office for just four months. Obviously it is too early for anyone to make a meaningful assessment of the government's performance. However, having been in the government as the Finance Minister I can share some of the insights gained by me in the course of these four months about the way we have been trying to achieve the goals set out in the election manifesto. It is a succinct and comprehensive document containing the essence of the nation's aspirations in virtually every field of national endeavour and contains a programme to be implemented over a period of time. Indeed the whole nation has to be mobilised for joining in the process of its implementation.

One of our most important commitments in the manifesto is to ensure transparency and accountability in the government. The members of the public are in the best position to make a judgement in this matter. The government has attempted, during the last four months, to conduct official business by taking the public into confidence. In preparing the budget, for instance, I undertook detailed consultations with a cross section of the society. Despite time constraint these consultations were held in a free and informal environment. My colleagues in the cabinet have not only been willing to talk but actually talking freely on different policy issues. The prime minister is well-known for her openness and frankness in sharing her thoughts with the people. Unlike her predecessor, she is always ready to face the press both formally and informally. I believe the initial attempt at holding discussions with panelists on the television will be followed up by the ministers as well. Shortcomings noticed in the programme should be remedied in order to make the programme even more attractive and a genuine exercise in accountability.

The parliament has a crucial and central role in ensuring accountability. In fact this is how it should be in a parliamentary system. Our proposal to set up the committees under the chairmanship of members of parliament rather than ministers speaks volumes about our commitment to the goal of accountability. I hope that the Opposition will cooperate with the government in organising the committees without delay. It was somewhat surprising to see during the last session that the Opposition resisted attempts by ministers to speak about the activities of their respective ministries. Ministers should not only speak but should be encouraged to speak about matters of public interest so that the members of the Opposition can question them, criticise them and expose the weaknesses and shortcomings of their policies or programmes. The national consensus that we all talk about may emerge only from such a dialogue. We should have debates in the parliament on important national issues of public interest. Conducted with dignity and seriousness and broadcast by TV and Radio, these debates can enlighten the public, remove confusion and crystallise the choices before the government. People in every walk of life have been following these proceedings with keen interest. Obviously they want the two sides of the House to work in harmony. Here I would like to pay a tribute to the people of this country for their great interest in public affairs. In more ways than one this augers well for democracy in Bangladesh. These days the issue of cor-

ruption seems to have receded somewhat from public view though the fight against corruption is also one of our important campaign pledges. Perhaps this reflects the public's greater pre-occupation with economic growth. The government, by focusing its attention on the imperatives of poverty alleviation and investment, has highlighted the urgency of speeding up economic growth. Surprisingly, however, international attention seems to be turning towards the pervasive influence of corruption in undermining economic systems, especially in the developing countries. As Frank Vogl, vice chairman of Transparency International, an anti-corruption pressure group, noted recently, 'four years ago, corruption was nowhere on the international agenda. Now it is almost as much in vogue as the environment was 10 years ago.'

Even the major aid agencies have joined the fray, recognising that corruption not only results in distortions that interfere with market forces but that funding for development is being adversely affected by perceptions in the developed countries that taxpayers' money is not being spent well. The new president of the World Bank Mr James D Wolfensohn made some refreshingly candid remarks on the subject of corruption at the recent World Bank-IMF Board of Governors' meeting in Washington. He did not mince his words when he said, 'We need to deal with the cancer of corruption. In country after country, it is the people who are demanding action on this issue.'

They know that corruption diverts resources from the poor to the rich, increases the cost of running business, distorts public expenditures and deters foreign investors. They also know that it erodes the constituency for aid programmes and humanitarian relief. And we all know that it is a barrier to sound and equitable development. Expressing his determination to fight corruption everywhere, he added, 'Working with our partners, the Bank Group will help any of our member countries to implement national programmes that discourage corrupt practices. And we will support international efforts to fight corruption and to establish voluntary standards of behaviour for corporations and investors in the industrialised world.' He recognised that he could not intervene in the internal political affairs of member countries but he felt that as development partners he could certainly give advice, encouragement and support to governments that wish to fight corruption and it is these governments that will, over time, attract the larger volume of investment. These are highly significant remarks. The message to the Banks clients was loud and clear. Henceforth the Bank is going to look closely at the record of the member countries in the fight against corruption.

The problems are well-known but many people despair of the solutions. Certainly there are no quick and easy solutions, and dealing effectively with the problem will require action on a number of fronts. These moves must be undertaken on the basis of a comprehensive strategy to not only root out corruption, but to ensure the development of an environment which is inimical to its future growth. Transparency International's recently published *National Integrity Systems* draws on the experience of countries around the world in combating corruption to identify a number of key elements in a serious effort to deal with this problem. These include: 1) a clear commitment by the political leadership to fight corruption and to submit themselves to scrutiny; 2) the adoption of comprehensive anti-corruption legislation; 3) introducing changes in the regulatory system and administrative procedures that would reduce the discretionary power of officials and the scope for corruption; 4) aligning salaries of public officials with the marketplace and ensuring that these salaries are commensurate with their responsibilities. All these policies which will need to be supported by civil society (including professional associations, business groups, and NGOs) work towards ensuring that corruption becomes a 'high risk' and 'low profit' undertaking.

The light against corruption, in the final analysis, will succeed only if the society as a whole joins it. One noticed a disturbing signal recently that is surely a cause for concern. A number of newspapers published reports which questioned the wisdom of enquiries against individuals who happen to have held public offices in the recent past. Clearly some of these write-ups are motivated but one wonders if we are getting desensitised against corruption. Why this attitude of tolerance towards those who plundered public money by betraying public trust? Why should anyone think that prosecuting individuals for corruption would discourage investment and discourage political and witch-hunting. In fact, the government will be politically damaged if the public get the impression that unsubstantiated allegations have been made merely to harass political opponents. But the law of the land must take its course. One wonders why some newspapers allege that such enquiries or legal actions will discourage investment and economic activity. Perhaps there is more here than meet the eye. However, let it be understood clearly that the present government will never be a party to pushing corruption under the rug or giving shelter to corrupt individuals, regardless of party affiliations. Despite pressure from powerful quarters and motivated press reports, the fight against corruption will continue.

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Point Well-taken, But ...

What has been apparently simmering in the Japanese official mind has burst forth in the open, not in Tokyo but in Dhaka playing host to a delegation from that country for annual consultation on Japanese assistance.

While acknowledging the Japanese official delegation's exasperation over the inordinately long response-time taken by the Bangladesh side to jointly help materialise projects under Japanese grants and technical assistance we cannot help express our surprise at their outburst in public. The purpose could have been served as well, if not better, were it sought to be fulfilled through soberer options than throwing something right in the face of a friendly country with a new government. We would not even attempt to guess why what the Japanese have so far kept to themselves with their characteristic diplomatic and cultural finesse — if at all they felt so strongly about it — came slithering out of their mental wheel to be such a stunner. But others might, induced by the abrasiveness and condescension overlying the public pronouncement: Bangladesh government has two to three months to make amends on the road-blocks to project implementation failing which the Japanese government is to give second thought on future grants and technical assistance.

In an earlier editorial we had been supportive of this very delegation's pointer to Bangladeshi trainees' vanishing act in Japan but their latest outburst has been unfair on the present government which is only a few months old. The specific instances of delay they have cited date back to the time of the erstwhile government. The point here is, why not give the new government time and chance to prove itself. They remarked that the difficulties they faced in Bangladesh were unique. To this we say their public 'dressing down' of Bangladesh has also been unique, unheard-of.

All this, however, does send a strong signal of Japanese new review mentality toward us. More than 50 per cent of the Japanese assistance as the world's largest donor to Bangladesh and that also in vital areas of national development efforts is coming under clouds. Here is a country ready with professed goodwill in the mainstream to give us money and technical expertise and we are being slow in the uptake. The government must do everything in its power to get Japan-Bangla relations on a steady course, any unintended misgiving notwithstanding.

Poisoned Food

Some food items are posing danger to people's health in Bangladesh. All because the unscrupulous growers or manufacturers or traders are adopting malpractices of the most devious kind. Reckless use of pesticides with telling residual effects on human body, such as the application of DDT as a preservative agent for dried fish, use of urea for enhancing the shine and size of puffed rice are some of the mind-boggling methods used to maximise profit. The latest addition to this list is the mixing of urea and splintered glass with sugar. If this is not enough to put at risk people's health, there is yet another novelty up their sleeves to deal the death blow. This concerns the use of highly poisonous agents either to get rid of the unwanted fish or catch the cultured fish from the pond.

Those who are in the know estimate that the use of poisons is common for fishing in half the number of the 13 lakh ponds and water bodies. Experts are also unanimous in their opinion that the poisoned fish are very dangerous for human consumption. Fish farmers are using poison in defiance of the country's law that stipulates for them to use some specific medicines for the purpose, because this way they can catch the fish at a cheaper cost. The lure has got the better of it, seems, the health, ethical and legal considerations. No nation can think of compromising the integrity on the question of purity of food items. Somewhere the line has to be drawn. After all, harmful eatables can seriously imperil the national health. Along with increasing awareness about the risks owing to such practices, there should be provisions for monitoring and supervision at the growers' and manufacturers' level. If the laws are violated even after that, exemplary punishment for the violation is the right answer.

Cricketer's Dream

Wasim Akram has achieved a bowler's dream. Arguably the best bowler around in the cricketing world today, Wasim has captured 300 wickets in his 208th one-day appearance. What is remarkable about this Pakistani bowler is that no one is near him to challenge his feat soon. His 300 wickets have cost him 6791 runs at an average of 22.64. This speaks eloquently of the man's consistent glutony for wicket.

Now the sub-continent boasts the highest number of wicket-takers in both Test and limited overs cricket. This is quite encouraging for the budding cricketing talents here. Kapil, the highest number of wicket-taker in Test has long gone into retirement. But Wasim still has some more years before him. That way he presents a formidable challenge to his contemporaries.

Records are, however, made only to be broken. If Wasim can reach the 400 mark, the aim for others will be that much higher. Games are played just in that spirit. It is the extension of mental and physical prowess to an unbelievable height where the entire humanity gets something in the superlative terms to celebrate and enjoy.

The World Food Summit in Rome

Poised to be the Biggest but Most Economical International Event

THE city of Rome abounds in Panificios or speciality shops selling a variety of breads or *paine*, as if in tacit acknowledgement of the exhortation, *Plati Paine*, or Let there be Bread — the logo of the largest institution dealing with man's concern for his daily bread: FAO, whose headquarters are appropriately in a city where bread is a fact of life. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the rest of the world which survives on crumbs.

In fact, out of the 5.7 billion global population, more than 800 million people in the developing world alone, live with hunger and malnutrition as the prime reality. At first glance, though, if one were to compare the 920 million chronically undernourished people in the 1970's with the much reduced figure of 840 million in the 1990's, it would seem that, given continuing population growth, this has been a remarkable achievement. But the sad truth is that, unless a concerted global commitment is made, by the year 2010, the number of people facing chronic undernutrition will still be about 680 million, with over 300 in sub-Saharan Africa.

Faced with this dismal prospect of the future, the Director-General of FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, consulted a large number of Heads of State and Government from every region of the world. There was immediate consensus that the question of food security required the action and commitment at national and international levels with a clearcut Plan of Action to implement effective policies and strategies for the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. Of the approximately 180 countries invited, nearly 100 Heads, including Kings, Queens, Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Prime Ministers and Princes, not to mention heads of organisations, delegations and NGOs and private enterprises are scheduled to attend, making the

This is a curtain-raiser reportage on World Food Summit to be held from November 13 in Rome. Our correspondent in Italy and at FAO Neeman A Sobhan writes on the all round hectic preparation going on at the FAO Headquarters for the summit supposed to be the biggest on earth with more or less 6000 participants.

World Food Summit of Rome, the biggest, most glitzy summit in history. One striking difference between the previous summits and the present one will be that in spite of its scale, this will be the most economical and low cost international event. In fact it is said that compared to the Copenhagen summit, the Rome Summit will cost only 1/4 of that incurred during the former. This was done in the following ways: A) There were no extra costs for the preparatory meetings because the regularly scheduled sessions of FAO Governing bodies were utilized for Summit preparations. B) Using the Headquarters of FAO as the venue rather than some other locale, existing conference facilities and services have been used at no extra expense. In fact this has provided a good opportunity for some much needed renovations. And in most cases, the work has been funded by specific donations from member countries. In fact, apart from construction and structural renovation works, voluntary contributions, cash and kind are being used to cover other costs as well. Donations have come from governments, organizations, foundations and the private sector. C) The holding of receptions and dinners by participants during the Summit is being discouraged and instead, it is being urged that the funds that would have been used for entertainment be donated to financing the Special Programme for Food Production in Support of Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries.

The format of the Summit itself is quite streamlined. On the morning of Wednesday, 13 November, after opening ceremonies, which may involve the Pope, though at this point this is not certain, countries represented at ministerial level and some observers will begin to address the Summit. After midday on Friday, 15 November, speaking time will be reserved for Heads of State or Government. On Sunday, 17 November, after world leaders have addressed the Summit, there will be a major press conference. The day before yesterday, as this correspondent walked through the FAO building, which is still keeping up its normal routine while simmering with activity in preparation for the eventful week to come, I could not help wondering if the place would ever be ready on time. As of now the headquarters looks, if anything, in a shambles. The drone of hydraulic hammers has not ceased, there is saw dust everywhere, work is still being done around the temporary marquees that have been set up and one has to negotiate one's way through wires, pipes, ladders and workers who are all over, still loading and unloading crates and cartons.

While the entire focus of the FAO headquarters is on the 6000 or so Summit participants who are expected, the regular staff are bracing themselves for some changes to their routine from the week of Monday, 11 November, when Parallel Summit events like NGO Forum and International Youth Forum will take place, through to Sunday, 17 November, the final day of the Food Summit. These changes involve staying or working at home on the Summit days, not being allowed into the building at all and having many of the streets around FAO closed off for parking and security reasons. There will be two

groups of FAO staff working during the Summit. A thousand servicing staff including volunteers, porters and guards, also those divisions directly involved with the running of the Summit i.e. Information Division, Conference Services, a skeleton staff in each division not directly involved.

With countdown about to begin for the most important event in the 51-year history of FAO, staff and their families are finishing last minute chores that involve going into or near FAO. The Commissary where one buys food and other goods from all over the world at the lowest prices, will naturally be closed for the duration of the Summit and therefore it is seeing quite a rush. So people are frenetically doing their last minute errands, all adding to the suppressed excitement of the place.

The rooftop of the otherwise drab and unimpressive FAO building happens to boast one of the most panoramic views of Rome. I thought I would take one of my Rome visitors up there to see the sight of the ruins of the sprawling Baths of Caracalla on one side, and on another the Palatine hills and the Circo Massimo which was the ancient chariot course where the likes of Ben Hur may have raced, all blending into a sublime view of the rest of Rome. But today, even the past seemed to take a backseat because we were distracted constantly by the activity going on around the premises of FAO itself. Today the blue flag with the insignia of FAO championing food for all, seemed to be saying that beauty, aesthetics, culture, history, all are important to man, but the one thing that is paramount and will not

be denied is that basic staff of life: Food. And on the eve of the unique occasion when all the world's leaders will gather to consider the question of how to ensure that all their citizens have access to food, it is important to keep in mind the pragmatic words of the Director-General: 'Present levels of hunger are intolerable in a world that has the capacity to produce enough food for all both now and in the future. The success of the World Food Summit will therefore be measured initially by the level of commitment it generates, but the final judgement will depend on how many seriously undernourished people remain in the decades ahead.' We too hope that in this city of 'bread and circuses', the hungry will not be fobbed off by the mere pageantry of words and speeches delivered by the glamorous and the powerful, but that a concrete Plan of Action will be agreed upon and implemented.

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To the Editor

What is happening at the police department?

Sir, It is the duty of the police department to investigate any unnatural death, whether it is murder, suicide or accident so that right action could be taken. In the recent past we heard about quite a number of unexplained deaths in police custody, which could not be accepted as normal. The Institute of Democratic Rights, after proper investigation reported that Tuhin's death was caused by torture by policemen at Motijheel thana. So, it is a criminal offence on the police department's part to try to cover it up, saying Tuhin committed suicide.

The role of police is very important, they are here to combat crimes and bring to light anything mysterious. But it seems that the opposite is happening, they are creating mystery.

If it has become the common stance of our police force then a very bleak future is in store for us.

Nur Jahan Chittagong.

Treating defaulters Sir, Enough sensation was

created by the former Finance Minister of BNP government through publication of names and addresses of defaulters of bank and other institution loans. The net results in respect of recovery of those loans were not published till the end of BNP rule. Since the present government is determined to wipe out corruption, practice transparency and so on, I am tempted to request the Finance Minister to publish the photos of those loan defaulters in the newspapers and Bangladesh Television so that the public can identify those talents of the country.

Recently in a BTV debate of college girls on industrialisation of Bangladesh, some participants observed that in a country where borrowers are not traceable, what can happen to Bangladesh? It is time to identify those fake borrowers while documents on loan preparation must speak about the facts of loan disbursement procedures. Let the government do something in treating defaulters, even Islamic way of publishing thieves may be thought when our PM and opposition leader are not against corruption eradication!

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National Boat Museum

Sir, It appears from a news item appearing in *The Daily Star* on 30th September, 1996 that the Ministry of Youth Sport and Cultural Affairs has taken a decision to set up a National Boat Museum to preserve several models of boats being used in our country. I wonder whether it will be proper to spend borrowed money for setting up a museum of boats. I suppose this is going to be a development project. Our present economic condition is such that we cannot fully finance the development projects which are directly or indirectly related to the economic, social, administrative and political development of the country.

It would therefore, urge upon the government not to take up any project which does not satisfy criterion of economic, social, administrative and political development of the country. We should postpone the project like the proposed one until we are in a position to meet cent per cent expenditure on development project by our revenue surplus.

A A G Kabir Joarshahara Dhaka

National Youth Day Let them be Alert against Evils

by Prof Roushan Ara Hoque

1ST November is being observed as the National Youth Day. Various programmes have been chalked out to observe the day with due importance. The period between 15 to 30 years of age has been designated as the period of youth during which a person remains most active in body and mind. Almost 30 per cent of the population of Bangladesh falls within this age group. It is the duty of the family, society and the state to divert this huge energy of our youths to right direction and utilise them in the developmental process of the country.

Youths are the best human resources of the country. But a large number of youths remain uneducated and a larger number of them remain unemployed for a long time even after obtaining highest degree from colleges and universities. Our education system does not have much opportunity for technical and vocational training without which a youth cannot begin a project of his own. Therefore, one Youth Development Directorate has been created under the Ministry of Youth and Sports in order to give vocational and technical training to the unemployed youths so that they can create self-employment projects for themselves and also can give jobs to others. The Directorate has been working since 1981 and during the last three Five-Year Plans 92308 youths have been trained and 60825 have been given loans against their self-employment schemes, up to 1995.

With financial aid from Japan and Korea and international organisations like UNDP, UNFPA and ESCAP the Youth Development Department has started 154 centres to give vocational training in fish, cattle and poultry farming, typing, computer training, secretarial course, cloth printing, wool-knitting, garment-making, repair of electrical equip-

ment etc. The training period varies according to the demand of the course. After successful completion of training these youths are provided with loans varying from Taka 10 to 25 thousand and above to start their self-employment projects. With the aid of the Commonwealth Youth Programme, seminars, and workshops are being organised and many youths have been trained and awarded diplomas. With the Asian Development Bank aids, up to last year 32 projects have been set up in 32 thanas to give vocational training for jobs and thereby to alleviate poverty of the rural people. One National Youth Centre has been set up to organise seminars and workshops at national and international levels and to give training to the youths. More than 2000 youth organisations have been enlisted and up to last year, 67 organisations have been registered and given aid. The Directorate has plans to utilise all members of all the organisations in the developmental process of the country and also to give them training on leadership. On the National Youth Day, 7 awards are being given to the seven most successful organisers of self-employment schemes. Every year seven most successful young men and women are selected for this National Youth Award.

But at present the number of centres and the number of youths can be trained are quite insufficient to solve the vast unemployment problem of all the youths in the country. Beyond these school-level or uneducated youths, a vast number of educated youths remain unemployed for long due to very few job opportunities in government and private sectors. Being thus frustrated about their future they often develop disregard towards the social and legal norms and values. These youths often even get addicted to drugs to forget their

mental agony and most often they are easily allured to money offered by unscrupulous elements posing as social, political and religious leaders in exchange of carrying out violence, terrorism, extortion, smuggling, robbery etc. These frustrated youths sometimes work for the parties of their leaders as musclemen and armed cadres and even commit murders and armed robbery for their godfathers who in return even buy them legal protection. Thus our younger generation falls into the traps of the selfish and shrewd people who misuse and spoil the lives of millions of youths to fulfil their own motives.

Our youths should not be easy victims of these evil ways because it is only they and their family who are to pay heavily for these misdeeds. It is not the youths but the society is to blame for leading them towards such misdeeds. They youths should themselves remain alert against it.

Our youths are our proud possession. In the past, they have acted as the conscience of the nation. During the Language Movement they established their mother tongue as a state language at the cost of their blood. During the mass political movement of 1969 they compelled the military rulers to give election and step down. During the Liberation War of 1971 they played a valiant role and achieved independence. During the peace time also they should act not as allied member-tools of larger parties fighting for power but as responsible and vigilant citizens of the country. They must remember that, 'freedom is the price of eternal vigilance' and that political freedom will be meaningful if it brings economic freedom.

Our youths are our future leaders and architects and they should prepare themselves to discharge their duty to the nation.