

Unwise Bill

The passage of the Local Government Union Parishads (amendment) Bill in parliament on Sunday has created a lot of furore inside the house and given rise to avoidable controversies. The rationale behind the postponement of union parishad polls can be well understood. That the April-May time is monsoon season here, that the SSC and HSC examinations are scheduled for this time are all good causes for the postponement of the UP polls. And nobody even questioned the wisdom of the deferral move. What has been the bone of contention is the empowering of the government through the passage of the bill to the extent where it reserves the right to defer the UP polls for an indefinite period. The opposition has rightly pointed out the discordant note it strikes when pitted against our constitution.

Clearly, the treasury bench did not bother to put forward any argument in favour of such an open-ended legislature giving the government enough power to put back the local government's election for an unlimited period. This exactly is the point where we question the wisdom of the move. The government could indeed avoid the controversy and confusion by accepting some amendment to the bill. Particularly the rejection of amendments proposed by the opposition looks suspect, because many of those simply wanted to include a time bar consistent with the original law relating to holding of the UP polls.

Now can we remind the government that the position it has taken this time also does not correspond to its commitment to the devolution of power through the local government at the earliest possible opportunity. We are keen to see that the government come up with a bill on the local government—one of the important election promises it made. It is unwise for a government to go the extra steps when there is hardly any compulsion or the move proves in no way politically advantageous.

We cannot see the logic of the treasury bench rejecting all the amendments proposed by the opposition. In fact, such an attitude only helps to, regrettably, strengthen the opposition view that the treasury bench is not willing to accept any suggestion, however reasonable, contrary to its own thinking.

Covert Clinical Trial

It is quite disturbing to know that some poor women in Chittagong have been turned into virtual guinea-pigs with them having not the slightest idea about it. Some 530 low-income group women, according to a report published in yesterday's issue of The Daily Star, had a drug applied to them as a trial for chemical method of sterilisation. Based on an allegation made by various women's organisations and a visiting Canadian academic of some relevance, the report says that a programme carried out by the principal of Chittagong Medical College used Quinacrine, an anti-malarial drug, on these slum-dwelling women. In a poor country like that of ours where ethics, hygiene and human rights record incidents of daily setbacks in the confrontation with poverty, this allegation sounds more like a fact than figment.

In that case we do not only have a human rights violation case on our hand but also the violation of the government-approved procedures for trials of new drugs and contraceptives. By not informing of the objective and the possible hazard of the trial, the principal of the CMC has made gross violation of human rights. As a professional with loads of expert knowledge of the effect of the drug on human body, he cannot now claim ignorance. No sane man can attribute it anything other than ethical depravity.

We are worried about the health hazards these 'drugged' women may have already run into. For, Quinacrine causes inflammation and burn the uterine tissues of women. The allegation is worth probing into and if found true it should be pursued with an aim to punish the man behind this monstrous medical research so that these covert clinical trials do not recur. For there are safer and saner chemical methods of sterilisation.

Hats off to Hawa

Myassar Abul Hawa is a remarkable woman. Among Jordan's 100,000 taxi-drivers, she is the lone female. Although female cabbies are commonplace in many countries, in a conservative Arab country like Jordan, it is not only a rarity but novelty too. Originally from Lebanon, she fled that civil war torn country way back in 1975 and came to Jordan. On landing there, she found that life was no less insecure even in the absence of bullets and bombs, for there are other threats to life as well. In her case the problems were even greater. Because with a degree in English literature and working experience as tutor, she found herself rather unfavourably equipped in the battle for existence in an alien atmosphere. The refractory reality of having to bother about the sustenance of herself and her eight children simply ironed out any prudish sentimentalism she could have entertained about the mode of livelihood. Unable to find a job befitting her education and experience, Hawa took the job of a taxi-driver. Since then it has been a relentless struggle against convention, custom and all other accompanying odds. For safety, the 52-year-old woman carries a gun in daytime and often hides a male friend in the trunk of her cab.

Hawa is not only an educated and caring mother who has taken up taxi-driving for existence, she is also an epitome of zeitgeist or the spirit of age. At a time when women all around the world are fighting for equal right, Hawa has quietly and effectively stolen a march over the feminists who grow hoarse over gender equality under male protection. With a degree in literature under her belt the taxi-driving female in the roads of Amman is a symbolic rejection of vanity and Victorian balmorality that still are the components of the social reality in Bangladesh and many other countries. Hats off to Hawa. We wish you were born here.

The Incredible Airline — You Fly Ahead!

How can an airline fly ahead of the scheduled time of departure without the checked in passengers? It is a security risk of abominable proportions. In any other airport and in case of any other airline, flights will be delayed if a checked in passenger is found missing.

WE are all well aware of delayed or canceled flights. It can happen with any airline. But have you ever heard of flights ahead of schedule or of flights leaving a passenger behind a passenger waiting to board the aircraft with a valid boarding pass in hand? No, you haven't.

Or perhaps you have if you are a frequent flyer on the one and only Incredible Airline. The hallmark of an efficient airline is punctual flight timing. The incredible airline has gone much ahead into the realm of unknown standards without caring for the passengers left behind and flying an hour or two ahead of schedule on occasion!

Recently, a UN official working in Nepal was waiting to board the aircraft with the his boarding pass in hand, after he had been duly checked in, cleared immigration formalities and had his luggage taken away. Unfortunately, he just kept on waiting. Only a few minutes left for the scheduled take off, the passenger made anxious inquiries and found to his utter surprise that the flight had left without him. Why and how? The incredible airline had no answer.

The real-life story when the truth is stranger than fiction, did not end here. The unfortunate UN official managed to take a later flight to Calcutta and from there, reached Kathmandu — 14 hours late. He had to visit a project site up in the mountains. In spite of exhaustion, he made an all night journey by a jeep to that place. He was stressed beyond endurance and suffered a heart attack. He had to be evacuated by an airplane (not belonging to the incredible airline, thank Allah!) to reach the intensive care unit of a Kathmandu hospital.

His wife was naturally worried. She tried to reach her husband the next day — again by the only available flight by the same incredible airline. She was told that the expected time of departure (ETD) was at 13:30 hours. At around 11:30 A.M., she inquired if the flight was on time.

Not only was it 'not on time',

the plane had left ahead of schedule! Two hours before scheduled time! The incredible airline had kept up to its 'reputation' but attached to it was an unique explanation: there were too many passengers on the waiting list. Also, there were transit passengers who should be given first-class hotel and top-class food, if not a seat on the plane at the cost of the airline. In order to avoid all these problems, the incredible decision to fly ahead of time was made. Brilliant — isn't it?

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Window on Asia

Shahid Latif



ger is found missing. It should not fly unless and until the missing passenger's luggage has been off-loaded. The unfortunate passenger who fortunately survived the heart attack was not even missing. He was waiting for the flight — yet he missed it. On the other hand, overbooking and therefore, deliberately flying ahead of time is a particular characteristic of the incredible airline. I was told that all airlines are involved in overbooking but to a limited extent, but I am sure no airline, except the one being discussed, will try to run away from the problem by leaving passengers behind. Uncertainty it is said, makes love interesting. No doubt. But uncertainty and flying? They surely do not go hand in hand.

I can find only one explanation for this. Previously, the incredible airline used to suffer from the notoriety of being a habitual late flyer. Therefore, the super-efficient officials of the airline must have decided that they must re-establish

arrive. Many fellow passengers heard this and said, "Please do not serve us any food for the two-hour flight, only water will do, please start up the engine and let us go without any more delay."

Perhaps based on this particular experience, the airline adopted the corporate slogan — Incredible Airline: "Fly Ahead — — — (the last two words will be filled in later).

It seems that the airline does not care about its passengers. Nothing affects the airline personnel who are quite mature people immune to any sympathy for human predicaments. A common occurrence among staff of the incredible airline remains, in fact, the act of disappearing. Whenever something goes wrong and questions desperately need to be answered in any airport gate in any country where the incredible airline flies, the staff will all of a sudden, vanish. Why answer questions when one can so easily run away from them?

On the topic of running away, another common occurrence is the scramble for seats and reservations. If one wants to fly on the incredible airline, making a booking will cost them dearly, in kind. You see, so popular is the airline that it is always full, overbooked etc., for weeks on end. The incredible Airlines, it would seem is incredibly popular! Then why, once you get on the plane are so many of the seats empty?

Perhaps the corporate slogan should read "Fly Ahead — Fly Light!"

We are the citizens of a poor backward country where the fact that there are airlines which fly should be good enough. Aircrafts and bullock carts coexist in golden Bengal. Therefore, to expect planes to fly on time is perhaps too much. Nobody has ever heard of a fixed time for the bulls to move, or a reservation on the bullock cart for that matter — why should it be any different for another mode of transport, with or without animal power?

Given the above background, the best procedure for the incredible airline to adopt would be to follow the schedule of the river ferry near my village. The boatman there, under no circumstances, leaves the Ghat unless the boat is fully loaded with passengers huddled within the small space allotted for each. I am convinced, that boatman should be upgraded as the corporate ideal of the incredible Airline. There should not be any ETD (expected time for departure). It may take an hour or it may take a full day for all the passengers to check in — it does not matter.

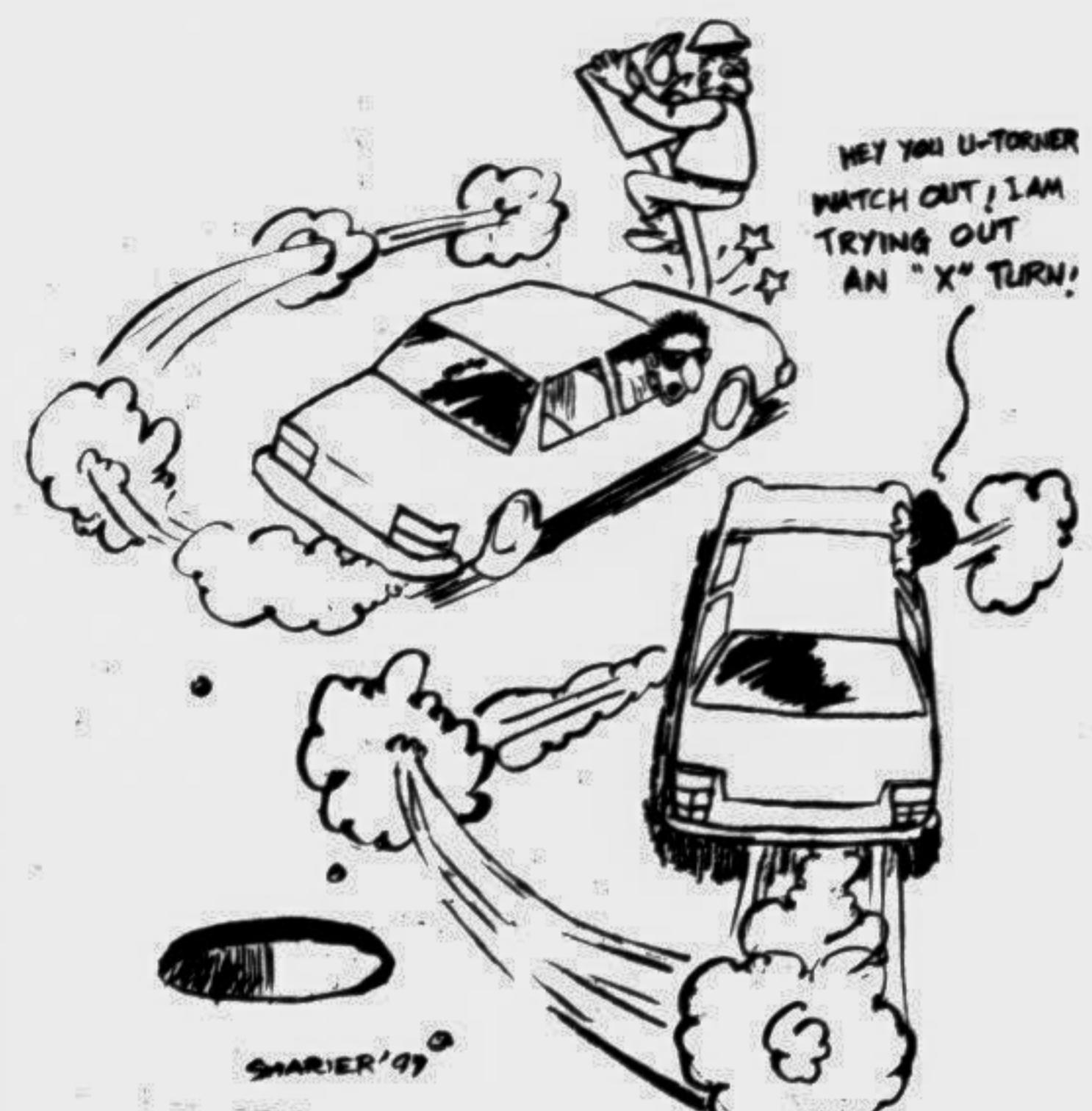
The airline must live up to its "reputation". The airline management should seriously consider the possibility of hiring the boatman as a consultant. He should be capable of working out the details, in particular, the practices and procedures to minimise the insults from the passengers or control their anger and frustrations.

All jokes aside, the incredible Airline, simply cannot go on like this. It must become the flying on time.

Dhaka Day by Day

When Rickshawallah Rules the Roost

by S A Mansoor



Macro confusion is probably an apt description of Dhaka traffic. The mind boggling confusion defies definition, makes logic look ludicrous, and law but an apology. It is a potpourri of castrophologic combination of all things normal. It is a hotch potch of all that is wrong, confusing and absurd.

Traffic lights are for the faint-hearted, and traffic lanes are just yellow lines for those who are fools or yellow or worst. The only right of way is the right to grab the way. None but the brave deserve the fair; and the fairways of Dhaka are only for the brave! Dhaka traffic fundamentals can be summed up as: left is always right, the right is your right, and the U turn; yours for the asking. Confusion to Dhaka traffic is what confusions is to Chinese Philosophy. Both are deep-rooted and profound.

Yet the fact remains that among all the confusions, jams and jellies of nerve racking travel it is the rickshawallah who rules the roost! He moves according to his will, stops to suit his needs, and turns when he wants. Every body else, just watch out in a confusion of wheels, two, three, four or more — all rushing headlong towards a single road crossing, it is the rickshawallah who is the king. His is the right of way for none to dispute. Everyone else has to defer to his wishes and whims on the road, for he is the rickshawallah of Dhaka, the present day successor to the fabled Nawabs of yesteryear whose rights there were none to dispute.

Pakistan: A Polity at the Crossroads

by Brig (Retd) M Abdul Hafiz

Many Pakistanis are indeed at a loss to grasp how the ouster of a corrupt government and its replacement with another suffering from the same stigma would solve the problem of corruption in the administration?

IT was full of theatrics with an interesting array of contenders confronting each other in the recently-held general election in Pakistan. The centre stage of the electoral context was obviously occupied by two former prime ministers who spat fire and brimstone before the huge crowds they drew. Even the lesser contenders were no less exciting with Imran Khan, a former cricket star vowing to establish a just order for his country and Ghinai Bhutto, an ex-ballerina of Lebanese descent trying to snatch the mantle of Bhutto legacy for the PPP faction of her slain husband. Although Pakistan's politics is still dominated by the feudal lords and industrial barons as well as sub-ethnic chieftains there were interesting side shows with, for example, a film actress pitted against the country's leading religious clergy in a conservative constituency of Dera Ismail Khan in the north-west.

The election scene, a medley of such diverse features could not but grab the attention of the masses during its brisk campaign. Yet when the D-Day drew closer, the enthusiasm waned and on the day of the polling paltry thirty-five per cent of the voters turned out to cast their votes thus denting the credentials of an important democratic exercise of the country.

The reasons for the apathy is not hard to find. After four governments were dismissed within eight years more or less on the similar charges of corruption and misrule, the public remained sceptic about the usefulness of this exercise. They obviously appeared askance as to the durability even of the next government when the infamous Eighth Amendment of the Constitution was firmly in place. The doubts were intensified with the introduction by President Leghari of a controversial Council for Defense and National Security (CDNS) barely a month before the scheduled election. The notion of National Security Council, if not CDNS, is in vogue in post-World War II era. But the timing and the manner in which the council was brought into being, the council was not able to raise a great deal of apprehension as regards the motives behind the step. The motives were opaque even when Benazir Bhutto government was summarily dismissed in early November 1996.

The corruption theory, though not baseless, was not convincing enough for frequent dismissals of the elected governments. The practice has no parallel at least in the region where in the notoriously corrupt polities, legal proceedings

have, however, been drawn routinely against the defaulters even if they are highly placed officials, politicians or ministers. But that had seldom been an excuse for prematurely terminating the tenure of an elected government. Many Pakistanis are indeed at a loss to grasp how the ouster of a corrupt government and its replacement with another suffering from the same stigma would solve the problem of corruption in the administration?

Many aptly ask when president Leghari deposed Ms Bhutto, his long-time boss in the PPP, was he trying to save the country or was plotting to grab power for himself or was acting at the dictates of some invisible quarters? It was not surprising that amidst such confusions Pakistanis are by large turned their back to an electoral process considered only to be ritualistic by them. Pakistanis already have unsavory experience of democracy in the past. By all reckoning they are yet to be reassured of a democratic future of their country. To them, CDNS has been fashioned at this juncture more as a forum for a new power-sharing equation between the military and the politicians loyal and subservient to it.

With the new mechanism, the president Mr Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari, in sufficiently transparent connivance with the military's top brass, seems to have reinvented Pakistan as civil military polity with an explicit constitutional sanction. Apart from the military's direct rule of the country for a long time the notion of a political role for them has never been an inconceivable proposition even in a democratic Pakistan of post-Zia period. An unbridled democracy remained as elusive as ever, even during this period when the country was, in fact, ruled by a 'troika' comprised of the President, the Prime Minister and the COAS who all watched each other with suspicion. There are tell-tale evidences that during the period all political steps including those of the dismissals of the governments could not have been taken without military's acquiescence, if not connivance. Viewed against this backdrop, the CDNS has now simply formalised such role of the military in the country as de-facto centre of power.

Even post-1971 Pakistan is characterised by sharp unevenness at the level of social-economic and politico-cultural developments of ethnolinguistic groups and geographical regions. And to make things worse, there is hardly any viable policy with regards to these ever-sharpening ethnic differences. The policy in this regard by late Bhutto was more of carrot and sticks while Zia opted for fundamentalist romanticism accompanied by shrewd

manipulation and suppression. Now with the increasing regionalisation in national politics producing only the regional satraps with narrow regional motives, the military remains to be the only institution having a nation-wide reach. The enforced solidarity of mutually opposed interest and heterogeneous cultures can now be kept together even if on ad hoc basis only with the intervention of national institution like the armed forces. This is an unfortunate reality for Pakistan.

So, Sharif's victory in the election was a foregone conclusion even without any foul play. His only credible rival, the PPP and its demoralised and humiliated leader was sufficiently neutralised not to be able to give an effective fight. As expected, Sharif's PML was returned to power with thumping majority. Despite Sharif's earlier record of a row with the President and occasional clash with military's interest, these are nevertheless considered to be all in the family in a Punjabi-dominated Armed Forces for which it would be much easier to establish a quid pro quo with their own man.

The military's repeated intervention in Pakistan's politics and its desperate search for willing and loyal partners in its scheme of things are not without reasons. However to understand the internal power balance in Pakistan — a country of many contradictions and gross asymmetries in its ethnic composition — the nature and objectives of various interest groups of the country need to be kept in view. Even if there are visible dynamics of immediate nature for Pakistan's chronic crisis for democracy, the sore festering the nation's body politic runs rather deep. Their fear of Hindu once served as the *raison d'être* of the movement for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. Later, with the shifting of the federal capital from Karachi to Rawalpindi during the early sixties, the country's political gravity obviously shifted to the Punjab. The introduction of one unit in erstwhile West Pakistan further strengthened their position in national politics.

Now, to dislodge them from this privileged positions was far from easy. Perhaps, only a political arrangement and dispensation that conform to the interests of the majority ethnic group of the country can work even if at the expense of the suppressed minority group. But whenever the status quo is disturbed, the military force moves in to reinforce the nation's political balance in favour of the rich, advanced and more educated people in the Punjab. With Pakistan's divisive forces getting pronounced along ethnic, cultural, communal and sectarian lines the nation would find few alternative to military's routine intervention unless the problems of ethnic differences are earnestly addressed and new devolution of state power is worked out to meet the interest of each ethnic group. Or else, on the eve of the golden jubilee of the country's creation, Pakistani is bound to stand baffled and bewildered at another cross-roads of its history.

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Efficient management

Sir, The World Bank very often points to our inefficiency in running any business administration. But it has never suggested about raising the retirement age. Most of the efficient people working in the World Bank and in other UN agencies are above 50-60 years old. It is not understood as to why the World Bank has not recommended to raise retirement age in our country. It also has not said anything about contractual appointment.

A good carpenter's service may be very essential but he cannot seek extension of his service because he has none to lobby for such facilities. So the experienced workers like these are not getting the facilities of contractual appointment.

Cylinder gas crisis

Sir, The cylinder gas users, willing to avoid pressure of work while cooking with fuel materials, depend on cylinder gas in Sirajganj like any other no-gas-line area of the country. But they, now and then, face many problems due to shortage of gas and its price rise.

Sometimes, the bill goes up over 500 taka which normally is 210 taka. It is learnt that in the period of gas crisis, some higher officials of the district get it at lower price, making the other users onlookers only. Both the crisis and partisanship should be removed.

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