# The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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# Why be Destructive?

BNP may have several reasons, some of them cogent also, to be boiling inside out over the way the party has been 'treated' and the country run during one and a quarter years of a reincarnate Awami League rule. But the pity is, and it gives a bad heartache to most people, that Begum Khaleda Zia is now eating her own words about her aversion to and righteous indignation over agitational overkills in opposition politics. She is herself bracing up to give the people and national economy the same roller-coaster ride that Sheikh Hasina had given when she was in the opposition.

There is a consolation though that in her freshly-announced agitational programme Begum Zia has confined herself to a rail, road barricade rather than calling for a hartal as such. By not going outright for a hartal, she has earned our appreciation which we would like to give her roundly if she keeps up her caution in using that political weapon reviving it to its former glory of being a political tool of the last resort.

But in an unmistakable way her programme for bringing rail and road communication to a halt bears disturbing signals for the national economy and civic life for it is set on Sunday, with Friday and Saturday being public holidays. There is a very mischievously designed cocktail of days offered to office-goers, both in the public and private sector, to get into an extended holiday mood-play. Especially for those multitudes who leave the city at the weekend for their homes in the countryside there would be no option left to return to Dhaka on a snappy Sunday. In the run-up to the barricade, rallies and street agitations all over the country are likely to put things to a boil.

A major political party should be credited with more wisdom than those impulsive public transport-related trade unions which often threaten vehicular strikes to be realising how badly rail and road blockade can tell upon the national economy. It is a destructive path the BNP is about to take courting a complete demolition of its own theories about economy-friendly politics, etc. Why should the BNP of all the parties be contributing to a destructive bonfire of the national economy?

# **Suffering Consumers**

Consumer unfriendliness seems to be the only theme with the country's power sector. As if sufferings due to shortage of power and rampant corruption in the sector were not enough for the beleaguered tax-payers, the government has decided to raise the price of power for the second time this year.

If upping the price in the utilities sector is a necessity that the government cannot help in order to keep pace with the global economic trends, then providing service worth the price it charges from the citizens is an equally inviolable obligation from which it can never dissociate itself particularly in a democratic system.

The raising of power tariffs is not regrettably accompanied by a presentation of the overall picture in the energy sector. During the first hike of power price by 17% way back in April, the government did not even make a public announcement. Same unilateral imposition we all witnessed in the rise of petroleum products prices.

Imposition of economic burden upon people in the form of periodic and abrupt raise in the price when so much is left to be desired in terms of housecleaning in the utilities sector is a sure sign of alienation between the people and the government. Besides, hike in power price is likely to work as a disincentive to the process of industrialisation.

It is clear from the report that the increase in power price has had little to do with practical economics. Even if we play down the geographical and other considerations behind the price of power being cheaper in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and some parts of India, there remains other logic to contest this latest decision for a hike. Some of the private companies have reportedly offered 20 year flat rates. How come the government finds it so difficult to ensure tariff stability then?

Truth is, much of the government compulsion in raising price stems from the huge and unabated losses incurred in the energy sector due to the flaws and loopholes in the system.

The government would be better advised to get rid these problems instead of weighing a poor people further down with price hikes every now and then. It is not fair to make the public pay for the systemic inefficiency of any particular sector.

# Wake up

Casualties caused by criminal incidences is one of the surest items in the morning press these days. In the glut of sad stories of abject surrender by the victims to the agents of terrorism, the businessmen in parts of old Dhaka have taken a very welcome if not novel stance. According to a leading Bengali daily, businessmen who have long been held hostages by organised terrorist groups at areas like Badamtali and Islampur, have decided not to take it lying down any more. While it speaks volume of the resolve of a people who have learned it the hard way, it also gives a very poor account of law enforcing agency's performance.

Terrorism and extortion have reportedly been a way of life with these people for a long time. Not only the sufferers, but the law enforcing agency also knows the groups and people who extort money from the businessmen by applying various tactics ranging from holding people to ransom to the rather novel system of blackmailing by portraying the victim as a terrorist. Our question is why police is not going on an all out offensive against these identified criminals? That it is difficult to catch them because they cross the river after

completing 'operation' is certainly no answer. As it is evident odd nabbing of crime kingpins here and there is not helping the situation in a society that is quailing under the threat of pervasive terrorism. There is no denying that it is not entirely within police's reach to curb terrorism; a social movement is the order of the day to combat it effectively. But the kind of inaction on the pretext of childish excuses reportedly given by police personnel is not acceptable either.

We want to remind the party in power that whatever it said about removing terrorism before the elections has not been translated into reality. People particularly the business community seems to be as vulnerable to terrorism as any time in the past. That is bad news. Bad news not only for law order but also for the economic future of the country. It is about time the government took some effective measures to give country's law and order profile a civil look.

# Just How Poorly are the Civil Servants Paid in Bangladesh?

THE Pay Commission has figured out that each government car - used for officers at the deputy secretary and above levels - cost the government Tk. 27,000 each month. Baffled by this piece of information, according to a report published in a vernacular daily last week, the pay Commission has asked the government to Pay each of these officers Tk. 8,000 in cash, instead of providing them with a government car.

This proposal, the Commission maintains, will enable the government to save Tk. 19,000 per officer per month - Tk. 2 lakh 28 thousand per officer per year. Obviously, the total annual savings will run into billions of taka, as there are more than 1.000 such officers employed with the government. Implemented or not, the Commission deserves appreciation for informing the people of the extent of wastage involved in providing transport facilities to government officials.

It is a part of common knowledge that when it comes to unbridled corruption, notorious service standard, senseless abuse of power and privileges, and unchallenged wastage of scarce national resources, few bureaucracies on earth can beat the monumental records of the public service in Bangladesh. It simply doesn't matter what party is in power or what donor says what - the bureaucracy's commitment to survive and prosper at the expense of the nation seems unequivocal.

Not a single day passes when scores of reports do not appear

intentions have now

become a staple of election

manifestoes of the major

political parties. After its

election victory in 1991, BNP

had dutifully formed a

Commission to look into local

government reform and the

Commission as dutifully pro-

duced a report but that was

about the end of it. This, of

course, did not imply any vac-

uum in the local government

scene insofar as the regularity

of Union Parishad elections

has been one of the remarkable

features of our political life

through all the upheavals of

regime changes. However, the

goal of both a 'strong' and a

'system' of local government

remained fulfilled. Awami

League too placed great empha-

sis on the subject in its election

manifesto and as expected a

Commission was duly formed

early on. After over a year, this

Commission too has produced a

report. The Report was only re-

leased on a restricted basis and

no debate on it was organised.

Meanwhile, under the impera-

tive of avoiding any further de-

lay in Union Parishad elections

now rescheduled for December,

the preceding session of the par-

liament passed bills to accom-

modate some proposed changes

in the composition of Union

Parishads as well as the forma-

tion of semi-formal Gram

Parishads at the ward level

Neither of the bills benefitted

from any parliamentary de-

bate. Predictably, while Gram

Parishads as proposed are in no

way central from the stand-

point of the 'system' of local

government, proposed Gram

It has been widely documented that they have no service standard, no stake for improving performance, and no sense of responsibility or accountability. How do they deserve a pay-hike in a society that claims allegiance to accountability and transparency?

in newspaper pages suggesting large-scale bunglings in some government agencies or offices. when helpless people do not cry out in wilderness seeking fair treatment from the bureaucracy or stark examples of senseless bureaucratic wastage do not defy wildest imaginations. Much has been written in this page, several articles by this writer alone, about rampant corruption or abuse of bureaucratic power. Today's article addresses the issue of govern-

mental wastage. Just how colossal is the wastage in the public sector in the country? Take the example of the transportation cost for the senior civil servants. The nation - globally known for its abysmal economic condition and poor prospects for moving ahead - has to pay Tk. 27,000 per month per officer just for their transportation only. It could be easily one of the highest records in the world. Transporting real elephants should cost far less than that.

Currently the take-home pay - according to a recent donor agency report — is Tk. 8,952 for the deputy secretaries. Tk. 11,000 for the joint secretaries and Tk. 13,080 for the secretaries. Based on these figures. many, including some experts and donors, argue that the salaries paid to the senior civil servants in this country are utterly inadequate for maintaining a decent standard of living. The Pay Commission in guestion also came up with substantially higher payments for the civil servants, of course, basing their assessments on incomplete and flawed information.

The fact of the matter is the take-home pay is nothing but a gimmick for the civil servants. It has absolutely no connection with the living standards of these officers. First of all, no segment of the society can be compared with the magnitude of power and privileges that these officials usually enjoy or usurp. There must be some

trade-offs between administra-

tive power and financial gains

— there is no reason to let them

enjoy the best of both the

worlds. Moreover, it has been

widely documented that they

have no service standard, no

stake for improving perfor-

mance, and no sense of respon-

do they deserve a pay-hike in a

sibility or accountability. How

society that claims allegiance

to accountability and trans-

ridiculous to believe that even

in financial terms, the civil

servants of the country are be-

Moreover, it is simply

parency?

EKOSSEEKKENTS

by CAF Dowlah

ing paid poorly. Fact of the mat ter is, even in financial terms the civil servants are paid most handsomely in this society. Take, for example, the case of the officers at the deputy secretary and above levels. They are provided with the nicest possible government housings. strewn in different parts of the city, including posh areas, such

The Pay Commission, however, did not come up with the maintenance cost of the gov-

ernment's real estate empire.

there is no reason to believe

that it would be less striking

than that of the cost for the

maintenance of government

cars. According to some unoffi-

cial estimates, the private sec-

tor monthly rent of the hous-

ings — allotted to senior gov-

ily range between Tk. 10,000 to

Tk. 50,000. Even the most con-

servative estimate would put

the average monthly rent of

such government housings at

Tk. 15,000. If one adds all that

- transportation cost (Tk.

ernment officials - would eas-

15,000), and monthly takehome pay (Tk. 8,952), the government has to pay Tk. 55,952 a month for each deputy secre-And then, how about the telephone bills. Anybody whoever visited a government office even for an hour — would know beyond any shred of

doubt how frantically the govas Dhanmondi, Banani and ernment officers abuse official telephones for unofficial purposes. Nobody ever keeps the record of their nation-wide and international calls, forget about making them account-

> for personal gains or purposes. If one adds Tk. 5,000 only for telephone bills, on top of Tk. 55.952, it appears that the government has to pay at least Tk. 60,952 every month for just one deputy secretary. The amount will easily add up to Taka 100 thousand a month if one takes into account the cost of retirement funds, office maintenance, messengerial and other services, medical and other allowances that these officers are officially entitled to. Who says

able for such expensive calls

and the consequent misuse of

public money and public time

Bangladesh is a poor country? Worse still, the cost escalates in geometric proportions when one calculates government expenses for officers at higher ranks. The secretaries, for example, live in government housings that could be easily rented for Tk. 25 to Tk. 50 thousand a month. When one takes

into consideration of all the powers, privileges and perks that an ordinary secretary routinely enjoys, it could be nearly be a two-lakh-taka-a-month job. No wonder, many retired secretaries and would be retired secretaries frantically lobby for extensions, often even avoiding lucrative offers from donor agencies, who are, of course, notoriously prone to favour these

officers and their offsprings. Most unfortunate part of the whole discussion on the subject is that nobody seems to bother about the mindless wastage of national resources by the country's over-sized, out-dated and poorly-staffed bureaucracy. A government — having commitment to democracy and market economy - should get out of the business of providing the government servants with transports or housing. It should, instead, pay a comprehensive financial package to each civil servant, so that they could have housing or transport of their own choices like an ordinary consumer.

This way, the government could save billions of dollars by selling off its real estate empire and fleets of automobiles to the private sector. It could help the government to establish budgetary discipline and put its fiscal house in order. This kind of decision — alone — could be a single most effective vehicle to reduce government wastage, boost up the private sector and re-energise the economy. The billion dollar question is — who is going to privatise the government's real estate empire and automobile fleets just for the sake of the nation?

# 27,000), housing cost (Tk. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

# Too Much 'Democracy', Too Few 'Powers'

by Hossain Zillur Rahman

A common weakness of LG reform agenda has been the imbalance in the attention given to issues of representation at the expense of issues of powers and jurisdictions. The current Commission Report as well as the new bills suffer from exactly the same crucial weakness.

Parishads have attracted the bulk of public commentary for political fears that these bodies without the benefit of any proper system of election may be manipulated by the ruling party to become captive clients. While such fears may well merit serious attention, the larger question is why the grand rhetoric of local government reform once again appears to end up in such feeble and inconclusive progress? The question is of the utmost importance for an electorate eager for results and it is very much in the public interest that the proposed reforms and the Commission report as a whole be subjected to a thoroughgoing critique. The Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and a Dhaka University-based team are currently finalising such a critique for presentation at a roundtable discussion in the near future. However, it is also both interesting and instructive to look at the sociology of the commission process to get in sights as to why the grand intentions of reform fail to translate into meaningful results.

# Sociology of the

**Commission Process** 

The following features of the sociology of the commission process are key to understanding the results which have fol-

**Initial Goal of Total Change:** Local government reform commissions invariably tend to be invested with an apparent initial mandate of total change. The 1996 Commission was no exception. Successive governments have tended not to emphasise a process of approach building on past achievements The search for "radical" solutions and experiments has unfortunately obscured the need for better understanding of where the constraints to the emergence of stronger local government system lie. From the outset, therefore, the Commission's work becomes biased towards experimentation rather than incremental but concrete progress. Witness this Commission too has intro-

Consultation As a Sideshow: From the outset of this Commission, explicit emphasis was put upon consultation as a major activity. Indeed, a questionnaire survey was launched and several rounds of high-profile discussions with intellectuals and activists held. A leading NGO close to the ruling party was engaged to process survey results. However, both a reading of the report as well as discus-

duced two new tiers at the ward

and district levels.

sions with several participants in the consultative process leave the strong impression that the consultative process was an activity on its own but not particularly a central input into the report content. The crucial concerns voiced by many about adequate financial powers and subject jurisdictions are the weakest part of the report as also the emphasis on a simplified but effective system. The report does not also include

sults of the much touted an inion Bureaucrats in the Driving Seat: The most striking aspect of commission sociology is the emergency of the bureaucrat members in the driving seat in the course of the commission work. This is not peculiar to this Commission but has been a general feature with previous commissions too. The agendasetting leadership of the bureaucrat members finds expression in two major outcomes: Firstly, the crucial issues of financial powers and subject jurisdictions are given secondary attention; secondly, public debates on the Commission report remains severely circumscribed. It is interesting to note

Commission itself but only as a follow-up activity entrusted to a Secretary's Committee.

The face, however, that bureaucrat members come to dominate commission proceedings is as much a reflection of their mastery of procedures as it is of the feeble assertion by the political and other members of the commission.

Too Much Democracy, Too

Few Powers: A common weak-

ness of LG reform agenda has any appendix showing the retention given to issues of representation at the expense of issues of powers and furisdictions. The current Commission Report as well as the new bills suffer from exactly the same crucial weakness. Nearly the whole report and the bills is about how many to elect, whom to elect, how many tiers to elect etc. Corresponding recommendations about what powers those elected are to exercise and how meaningfully, are minimal. It is as if democracy is only about elections but not

> about meaningful governance. General Versus Specific Powers: It is not the case that jurisdictions are not at all defined for local governments. A major aspect of the enfeeblement of local governments visa-vis administration is that the powers of the former are in-

variably defined in general but vague terms while the powers of the latter are enshrined in specific and precise terms. For example, the general powers of the Union Parishads is to maintain law and order but the specific powers in this context lie with the magistracy and the police in terms of powers of arrest and bail etc. At the ground level, it is always the specific power which carries the teeth while the general power is not much more than a declaration of intent. The Commission report has been very generous in giving general powers to all tiers but extremely shy in giving specific

## **Big Intentions, Small**

Results:

Local government reform remains a orugial national agenda. However, intentions may not be enough here. The specific sociology of the policy process which acts against the emergence of a meaningful action plan seems to be firmly in place. To this has been added the distraction of fears of political manipulation of the new tier of Gram Parishad. The challenge here is to go beyond intentions and create those concrete capacities which can confront and override the dysfunctional sociology whose latest expression is the LG Commission Report. Political initiatives in this regard both from the government and outside will not materialise on their own. They have to be facilitated, indeed forced, by

active public debates.

## Govt should take up the matter

Sir, I was watching live transmission of mother Teresa's funeral from Calcutta on NBC, the leading American network. It was also simultaneously shown on many other European televisions.

As formal placing of floral wreaths began, President of Albenia came first, as the mother being an Albenian (Mecedonian) in origin, followed by Ghanian President and then the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The commentator at the stadium rightly declared "Her Excellency the Prime Minister of Bangladesh" before Sheikh Hasina proceeded to place her wreath.

After every such pronouncement, the networks, both CNN and NBC were putting out names of the person placing floral wreath. But when Sheikh Hasina placed the wreath, NBC flashed the name, "Khaleda Zia (first line) Prime Minister of Bangladesh (second line)"

Since then I was wondering, how could a premier network like NBC, watched by millions in America and all over the world, make such an grave error, or, is it because the country being Bangladesh, nobody cares who is on the saddle? Now, the government should sake up the matter, formally protest to NBC and demand apology.

Ahmed Ziauddin Brussels, Belgium

### **Alarming Rail** robberies

Sir, It is not funny to read in the newspapers the armed contingents travelling in the running trains to guard and protect the passengers cannot defend, guard and protect even themselves; and meekly surrender their arms to attacking hoodlums. Is this the meaning of the government propaganda that the law and order situation in the country is under control? Deterrence has simply disappeared. Where is the credibil-

ity? The citizens are not safe at

home or at the office, and also on the city streets. Now travelling by rail, bus and river routes has also become hazardous. Night journeys are being avoided. There is something wrong with the administration of Bangladesh. From whom do we seek protection? What about 'shoot-to-kill' ordinance? How many terrorists and armed robbers are caught every month and prosecuted? The data may be published; and the court cases disposed off quickly.

Perhaps we can try some special commando squads to patrol the highways and waterways. Certain areas are found to be prone to regular attacks and holdups (for example, some area in the Jessore district). Why the police and CID cannot round up the local criminals? Everywhere the sense of duty

has eroded. Who are sheltering whom? The JS session is likely to be short. Innocent lives are in potential danger - the lawmakers should wake up and announce stringent contingency plans Low morale, uncertainty and insecurity cannot win votes. How to be popular and lose vot-

A Husnain

### Dhaka. Death of four BUET students

Sir, The death of four student of Mechanical Engineering Department of BUET on Cox's Bazar beach highly shocked the people. These four students were a part of 50 students accompanied by four teachers to the Cox's Bazar beach as a part of their study tour.

The accident took place on 18 August. There was signal No 3 in Cox's Bazar port area on that day. Why did the teachers allow the student to go to the beach in spite of the signal? Besides, I also blame the authority of Cox's Bazar beach. The authority will perhaps catagorised the death of 4 student as accidental. But this is not for the first time that on holidays. people on this beach resort got stuck in quicksand and perished.

Almost all the sea beaches

all over the world have a dangerous point and there is also a mechanism to monitor them. So the practice is mark — the area with a prominently displayed note of caution. In Cox's Bazar, there is no such precaution. Besides this, there is no adequate lighting facilities after evening. There is no compulsory rule approved by the authority about having the swim of visitors and not to visit the beach in the time of low tide.

So for the sake of tourism, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation should take measures to end recurrence of such incident. Otherwise more accidents like this would take place for the careless attitude of the authority.

Md Saifuddin (Swapan) 43/7 A Abdul High Road Zigatola, Dhaka 1205.

# FM tunes the tone

Sir, Abdus Samad Azad, the foreign minister of the present government, as appeared in the DS on 23-8-97 has rightly said that Begum Zia could not be the prime minister if Zia were not

OK, fine. Then, has our foreign minister ever looked back to see that the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib have practically paved the way for present PM to be the PM under whose shade the FM is serving?

Nur Hossain 151, Bangshal Road Dhaka-1100

### Clearing House Sir, A few years back,

Clearing House sat twice a day to dispose off the cheques received from different banks all over Dhaka. Cheques received up to 11 am by different banks were sent to the Clearing House, which sat first time for the day and dispose off the cheques received. Cheques presented up to lpm in banks were sent to the House on or before 2pm and the House sat for the second time for the day and cleared those cheques. Disposal reports of the first sitting were sent to the respective banks by the end of the

day to enable the depositors to draw, if necessary, their money by the next day. Second disposal reports were sent to the concerned banks by the next day so that money might be available for drowal by the third day of the deposit of

here that the task of defining

powers and jurisdictions was

not dealt with by the

cheques in a bank. Nowadays, the procedure has been changed. The Clearing House sits only once for a day. The procedure followed is as be-

The cheques received by all banks in Dhaka up to 12 noon, say, on Sunday, are sent to the Clearing House on Monday morning. The House sits and its report of disposal is sent to the respective banks on Tuesday. The bank concerned takes one day for doing the needful and the money is available on Wednesday. Cheques received after 12 noon on Sunday are sent to the Clearing House on Tuesday along with those received up to 12 noon on Monday. In the process, the disposal report of the Clearing House is sent on Wednesday to the receiving bank of the cheque. The bank takes one day viz. Thursday for necessary action. Thus the money in respect of cheques deposited late on Sunday is available for drawal on next Sunday after two-day holiday on Friday and Saturday.

Importance of money in all walks of life hardly needs any emphasis. Economic life of people at large has been made miserable by placing hurdle after hurdle on the simple path of established practice. Finding no way to escape, people are groaning under such circumstance with no remedy in sight. If old system of two sittings of the Clearing House in a day with its manner of disposal could be reintroduced, inordinate delay in clearing cheques would disappear enabling the deposits to sigh a relief.

Will the Ministry of Finance look into the matter to find out an easy solution? The Finance Minister's attention is drawn for a quick action in the matter.

M A Lashkar Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207.

# **OPINION**

I feel pleasure to offer you

## "DCC's Radical Venture" Kallyan Kishore Debnath

thanks for the editorial published on Aug. 23 under the caption of "DCC's Radical Venture." In my opinion, the most important reason of our present crippled economic status is the failure to utilise our resources in a well-planned and appropriate way. And the responsible people for the same are none but our leaders and, more truely, our 'wisdom-bottles' — bureaucrats. l feel keen to criticise our national politics where our patriotic players are engaged in slinging mud to one another keeping aside the greater interest of the nation and where one doesn't hesitate to change one's date of birth frequently despite being a candidate for the highest administrative post of the country.

The scenario of the bureaucracy is probably more disappointing. The bureaucrats are taking the chance of political weakness and most of them are lacking adequate level of talent. Over the last two decades, what we have seen, the inefficient and corrupt-minded individuals have managed to get all important posts and rapid promotions and other facilities. The real talents, failing to exhibit their intellect, have been converted into worthless fools. Such a trend of 'brain abuse' has carried us into a dark ditch where fools are masters and talents are learning how to abuse their brain to beef up (?) the economy of the country.

This is the basic pathology of backwardness in general affecting every sector in this country. As a result, we are facing the adverse effects of faulty planning, mismanagement, nipin-the-bud projects and hence, abuse of time and money.

DCC's new health plan of extending its service to other cities is an honest attitude toward humanity, no doubt, but we should keep it in mind as well that our resources are limited The more important task should be done first. A proper

psychological assessment is also essential before doing anything. The authority must know what we, the city-dwellers, expect from the DCC a pollutionfree healthy environment, jamfree roads etc., which are prerequisites for quality service of all other sectors. Efforts can be extended, if desired, toward provision of adequate healthy housing and better transport system. We are observing with great sorrow that most of the recently-constructed footbridges as well as the underpasses have failed to improve the existing situation of the city other than to beautify the external appearance.

One must admit that health - a state of physical and mental well-being — is the first need in life before anything else, but it doesn't refer to a doctor's prescription only. To create and to maintain a healthy environment is more important than to treat a patient but it's regrettably true that DCC is failing to accomplish this important task up to a minimum acceptable level which is the duty of its very own. So it looks very odd to feed others keeping its own children unfed.

When a doctor needs two hours' time to reach a hospital from his residence somewhere within this city and again two hours to back home, when an already sick patient hurries his or her death by an accident on the way to hospital, what level of service we can expect from this doctor and for whom? But this is the existing reality in

So, I would urge all authorities concerned including DCC to take constructive plans to ensure best use of our limited resources through accomplishing the most important home tasks of fundamental needs. It is not always good, even may be detrimental, to cross the limits of one's abilities particularly for those who are too weak to shoulder the burden of their own weight

this city.