

## IMF Support

Our negotiations with the IMF for a loan worth 600 million US dollars under its Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) to tide over a balance of payment (BOP) problem have reportedly run into a knotty phase. The very name of the facility suggests that the Bretton Woods institution would insist on certain structural fine-tuning to precede their actual release of tranches, but the conditions needn't be overwhelmingly difficult for a country seeking these under pressing circumstances.

The government's borrowing from the banking system has drawn a flak from our columns on the ground that it meant a credit squeeze for the private sector, yet it is difficult to imagine how the fall-out on the forex reserve linked to emergency food imports against the backdrop of weather-induced cereal deficits could be averted.

On the issue of privatisation the AL government is trying to associate the workers with the management of the disinvested SOEs. This is how the government plans to circumvent labour resistance to divestiture. Evidently, a take-over by seasoned entrepreneurs is not being visualised. This calls for not merely objective-driven retraining and reorganisation but also steady credit support to new managements for sometime to come. That's why the Privatisation Board has entered into a series of meetings with the donor community representatives in Dhaka seeking their help in persuading their people at the headquarters to extend material support to us for implementing the privatisation agenda in full.

Either the workers of the SOEs accept the management responsibility of the losing concerns or they agree to these being transferred outright to buyers in the private sector. In the second case, there may well be need for retrenchment, golden handshake, retraining for rehabilitation and social netting.

It is time Bangladesh government worked out the requirements in both scenarios and devised ways and means to meet these from its own resources as much as possible leaving the rest to the good judgement of the multilateral agencies.

## Refrain from It

We had condemned this new pattern of vandalism during the last hartal and exhorted the political parties to stop their cadres and activists from indulging in criminal activities like attacking press vehicles. Apparently, our pleadings have fallen on deaf ears. Picketers damaged more than a dozen autorickshaws carrying press staff at various points of the city during the hartal hours on last Monday. It was not only the inanimate vehicles that took the heat during the dawn to dusk strike called by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its right wing allies but also the professionals in them who were harassed and beaten up by activists. At some places they allegedly even robbed the journalists and photographers on the move with a view to discharging their professional duties. Worse, like last time, on this occasion too, a particular section of the press was targeted by the 'strike enforcers'. The motive at work seemed to be more sinister than the mere purpose of creating obstruction to a professional group.

We want to get this message across loud and clear that the attitude shown by BNP activists during the last two hartals is thoroughly condemnable. BNP high command cannot allow any section of its followers to swoop on the press from a retaliatory impulse. More so, when there is a standing declaration that press and other emergency services will remain outside strike calls. If people can be respectful to the Geneva Convention even in war times what stops the mere political activists to be deferential to some norms that have been approved by their leaders?

This cannot go on. BNP or any party for that matter must make sure that their activists do not attack the press people during strike hours. If they cannot ensure that, they better not go for strikes. In fact, given the portents for anarchy underlying every hartal call, we urge the opposition to generally refrain from it.

## Sensible Thing to Do

Health Minister Salahuddin Yusuf has hit the headlines for doing something laudable. On Monday morning on his way back to Dhaka from a visit to Satkhira he broke journey at Kalaroa and entering into a high school named after him, pulled down the signboard reading "Salahuddin Yusuf High School" and resumed his journey. Before setting off he directed the school authorities to use its earlier name, the Beshboti Junior Secondary School. Months back on April 23 the minister had himself inaugurated the Salahuddin Yusuf School.

What happened in the mean time was that the minister came to know that his name was being used in a conspiracy by a group to capture the school. It was involved in the school politics of that village. He reacted appropriately and promptly to extricate himself from the foul game.

The rogues that resort to such ploys as naming a property after some big name in order to steal that, do that after knowing through experience that this pays. But the naming ruse generally does not misfire either. There have long been a lot among ministers and other top people who are not quite honourable and would stoop to any low for a chance to perpetuate their names. We are glad that Mr Yusuf belongs to a truly honourable set.

Encouraged, we would like to go a step farther. It has always been in bad taste to name any institution or road etc. after any living person. Specially when that living person has very little to do by way of big donations or endowments and activity called yeoman service, with the thing named after him. We shall be gratified to see that nothing is named after a sitting minister — ever.

Whenever a group of faceless people want to name any project of theirs after the high and mighty of the land, there must be something foul and fishy. Please beware of such.

# Everybody Collects Tolls Everywhere

Why the T&T must discriminate customers on the basis of membership of the parliament? Why there must be two standards — one for the ordinary people and the other for those who make laws for the ordinary people?

Why all customers will not be treated alike?

A news report published in the *Daily Ittefaq* last week suggests that some former and present parliamentarians of the country owe Taka 50.4 million as arrear telephone bills to the T&T authorities. According to the report, there are at least 125 parliamentarians in the country whose unpaid telephone bills range between Taka 100 thousand to Taka 1.63 million. The list includes two former prime ministers of the country as the second and the fourth biggest telephone defaulters.

Obviously, the T&T authorities disregarded normal rules — that are applicable to its ordinary customers — in dealing with the defaulting parliamentarians. Otherwise, those defaulting telephone lines would have been disconnected long before the unpaid bills could reach such a staggering amount.

The minister concerned reportedly has stated that attempts were being made to collect those unpaid bills and some of those bills were already collected.

Of course, such initiatives are welcome. But the question lies elsewhere — why the T&T must discriminate customers on the basis of membership of the parliament? Why there must be two standards — one for the ordinary people and the other for those who make laws for the ordinary people? Why all customers will not be treated alike? Can an ordinary citizen think of having a telephone line operating year after year without paying the bills?

More importantly, why the initiatives to collect the unpaid telephone bills are so irresponsible, so indecisive? The government is never so lenient when it comes to recovery of money from the ordinary people. For example, a report, carried in the same newspaper on September 22, suggests that the government has filed as many as 18 thousand cases to recover Taka 440 million from defaulting farmers and weavers in three districts, and officials concerned are going door to door to recover the money. Why the government doesn't do the same thing against big-time bank defaulters? How many cases has the government filed against telephone defaulters

whose unpaid bills run into millions of taka?

Of course, the parliamentarians deserve the highest possible perks and privileges in a democratic society. But defaulting telephone bills cannot be one. They do receive telephone allowances from the government. Reportedly, some of the parliamentarians preferred to put the allowances in their own pockets rather than clearing their bills with T&T authorities. The government could easily solve the problem by issuing redeemable coupons or directly paying the telephone bill to the T&T. Perhaps some parliamentarians could inform the nation why the government chose not to do so.

But the problems with the country's parliamentarians are not limited to defaulting telephone bills alone. If the publicly made statement of the country's President is right, many of them are among the big deceivers and liars.

Deceiving and lying, the politicians — almost anywhere in the world — can easily outshine any other segment of the society. They are lucky that no society takes their lies or deceptions seriously, otherwise, the politicians could have been on the top of the list for the most endangered species in the world. Still, they should understand that a democratic state is a pledge bound to maintain law and order in a neutral manner and provide same treatment to similar persons, irrespective of so-

modating murderers. But so far, the nation did not watch any furor or turmoil over the statement. Does it mean that the Leader of the Opposition made a correct statement? If the Parliament is composed of so many bank defaulters, telephone defaulters and murderers — what could be expected out of it? And how can the nation trust it to make laws for it?

Of course, when it comes to deceiving and lying, the politicians — almost anywhere in the world — can easily outshine any other segment of the society. They are lucky that no society takes their lies or deceptions seriously, otherwise, the politicians could have been on the top of the list for the most endangered species in the world. Still, they should understand that a democratic state is a pledge bound to maintain law and order in a neutral manner and provide same treatment to similar persons, irrespective of so-

scarce resources are put to its best use. If they don't care about their professed responsibilities and join other opportunity-seekers in the society to collect tolls at every point, how can the nation move forward?

The parliamentarians should answer to the nation how the T&T can make profit if they themselves don't pay their personal telephone bills amounting millions of taka. How the T&T can operate profitably, if the ministries and other government agencies don't pay telephone bills worth billions of taka each year? They should answer how the nationalised commercial banks can run profitably, if one in every three taka in their vault ends up in the accounts of the defaulters? They should answer to the nation how the NCBs can be profitable if their branches are opened on the basis of political and other non-economic considerations?

Rumours have it that the government is contemplating to allot a plot of land in the capital city to each member of the parliament. Of course, the government can do whatever it likes — especially when it comes to distributing favours to the politicians or bureaucrats. But the question is: How and why all members of parliament deserve a government plot in the city? How would they represent their constituencies being permanently settled in Dhaka?

Moreover, what kind of representation that would be? Are the government trying to revive the concept of absentee landlords in the country's politics? It is simply mindboggling to pinpoint all the vices, crimes, corruptions, unfair means, plundering and robbery going on in the country — with active involvement and cooperation of the privileged people of the society. The prime beneficiaries of public property — including those that thrive on default culture and toll-collections — know in their hearts that this nation may be poor, but it has made many people rich, fabulously rich. It will not be awfully unrealistic to hope that some day somehow these ill-gotten wealth, perks, privileges and notoriety will be subject to public scrutiny.

It is simply mindboggling to pinpoint all the vices, crimes, corruptions, unfair means, plundering and robbery going on in the country — with active involvement and cooperation of the privileged people of the society. The prime beneficiaries of public property — including those that thrive on default culture and toll-collections — know in their hearts that this nation may be poor, but it has made many people rich, fabulously rich. It will not be awfully unrealistic to hope that some day somehow these ill-gotten wealth, perks, privileges and notoriety will be subject to public scrutiny.

## OPINION

### "This Act will Cost AL a Lot"

Ahsan Ahmed

The editorial of September 20 — "This act will cost the AL a lot", made me wonder as to just how does one try and create some modicum of political stability in a parliamentary democracy where the opposition can't bear to sit out of office for the required term. You are right in observing that the police should not have been allowed to take action against activists within the premises of the BNP's office. This was avoidable. Against this, the removal of the bridge on Crescent Lake, if it really was needed in another part of the country, which I understand to be the case, was a more difficult exercise for the government, as the opposition would have objected, no matter what. If, however, the bridge was not critically needed elsewhere, there was no need to have removed it, thereby injecting further suspicion into an already volatile mixture.

I am not sure about your point that the decision of the DCC for all political parties not to hold public meetings on city streets, has to be implemented voluntarily. In that case, a precedent has been set, and in future every major decision of the DCC will depend on a consensus. That clearly cannot be so. If anything, Dhaka city is desperately in need of firm and positive measures by the city authorities to solve the many serious problems that are well known. I would have imagined that a directive not to hold political meetings on main roads and thoroughfares would be welcomed by everyone, as it encompasses all parties and will unquestionably improve the unbearable traffic congestion. A discussion and the needed consensus on this will just drag on day after day, month after month with no result, as we have seen so often on almost every other issue.

It brings me back to the point of political stability. The ghost of *hartals* was expected to catch up with the Awami League sooner or later, given their track record in that field, and given the mindset of the opposition. Yes, it is fair to say that the demand for a caretaker government was logical, particularly as the BNP had themselves had come to power through a caretaker mechanism in 1990-91, perhaps the answer may lie in some form of a consensus or national government where all major parties can enjoy the fruits of power and allow the ordinary citizen, who is now quite fed up of this charade, to live a decent and respectable life. I always look at the Malaysian example, where the UMNO coalition has run the country so very successfully for several years through their institutional avenues available in a democratic framework rather than disrupting everyday life through the medium of street agitation?

On the question of medium to long-term political stability, so critical and essential for the economic growth of this country, I wonder how long we can afford to sustain this form of destructive and dishonest politics. If our political luminaries are unable to accept the ground rules of a parliamentary democracy, which they so eagerly embraced in 1990-91, perhaps the answer may lie in some form of a consensus or national government where all major parties can enjoy the fruits of power and allow the ordinary citizen, who is now quite fed up of this charade, to live a decent and respectable life. I always look at the Malaysian example, where the UMNO coalition has run the country so very successfully for several years through their particular brand of democracy. Our political parties here should decide how they want to govern this country, be it a parliamentary or presidential form or a form of national government, and then live by the rules, whether they like it or not.

### Sheema's Death: Barrister clarifies

M Amir-Ul Islam

Sir, The Daily Star Roundtable with an expert group on the JS probe report on "Sheema's Death" is praiseworthy. In the deliberation printed, as I noticed, in September 22 issue of the DS, I was quoted at various parts of the report.

Question was raised that in case of eloping with a boy and getting married without parents' consent should land the girl in prison, only because she refuses to go with the parents. Whether the law or the court or the police can force a custody of a minor against her will to the parents to be considered in depth by looking at the matter not merely as a custody issue.

The legal custody of a human person with a mind of her own cannot be forced to live with the parents against the will of the minor. A minor who has not committed any crime cannot be sent to the prison in any case. It is violative of our Constitution and negation of fundamental rights.

It is not to undermine the dignity of any institution but to point out as to how the human dignity of a rape victim is undermined in police custody, in jail custody, in safe custody and manner in which she is examined in hospital and also in the court through cross examination and lastly in the media. Thus, while the rape is reconstructed again and again as perpetrated in our legal system the poor victim is to go through this ordeal, being stigmatised and humiliated in society as being treated on the same footing as that of a criminal while her violators continue to live in dignity and with authority in the society. I simply cannot reconcile this with the solemn pledge and the promise in our Constitution that "No person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty save in accordance with law"; and "The Republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of human person shall be guaranteed."

I hope the publication of the above will adequately clarify as to what I said in the roundtable and remove the scope for any controversy.

## CROSSCURRENTS

by CAF Dowlah



defaulters of bank loans as well. Just few weeks ago the President criticised them for breaking the law of the land while being responsible for making the laws. The list of parliamentarians will be quite remarkable if one adds both the lists of bank defaulters and telephone defaulters. Both are aimed at sucking the nation to the core. What kind of examples the parliamentarians set for the nation by being conspicuously responsible for such a large-scale plundering of a nation's scarce resources?

Worse still, another serious criticism has been labelled against them recently. The Leader of the Opposition told a group of journalists that some parliamentarians — sitting in the current Parliament — are also murderers. It could be a dangerous statement having far-reaching repercussions. After all, the parliament is not the most appropriate place for ac-

cial, economic or political stratifications.

A country like Bangladesh — where democracy itself is at a rudimentary stage and the society lags behind in every conceivable way — can hardly afford a high-profile, all-pervasive, and flourishing default culture participated by privileged people from all spheres of life. While the defaulters — be a parliamentarian or not — may go scot-free, the nation cannot escape the burden. Ultimately, the ordinary people — who have no status, no position, no representation — pays the buck stops right there.

The irony with the whole matter is that the things that have been discussed above should have been pointed out by the parliamentarians themselves. After all, they are the elected representatives of the people and they have the obligation to make sure that each and every dime of the nation's

built much prior to the meetings itself. Is it a good show to harass people like Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury or Maulana Nizam on the streets? I think I am missing a point here. Can someone explain?

Another vital question to the Mayor is: Is the selection of the seven sites only for the opposition parties? If the law is equally good for AL and as well as others, then how come police did not stop an AL meeting near Ibrahimpur in (under Dhaka Cantonment PS) the city, creating jams on September 20?

Himu Ibrahim

By e-mail

Dhaka

### Dishonouring four sisters

Sir, Once again, it is the case of devilish cruelty committed on women. Why is there no security of life, property and honour of women in our country? Why is the law and order situation getting deteriorated day by day? Is it not yet another slap on our face, on our society and on the administration of our country?

Four sisters have been gang-raped at Sanapar in Siddhirganj which is not far from Dhaka. At one stage, one of the sisters freed herself from the clutches of the devils and ran to the police station. The police rushed to the spot and arrested four culprits.

We demand severe punishment to the criminals, and thus help stop cruelty on women and dishonouring them in future.

O H Kabir

6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

### Movie tax and black tickets

Sir, Hollywood movies in Dhaka and our mafias towns is all very well. As you must be aware, foreign movies are already being screened in movie halls. Like the low quality pirated video versions, they are nowhere near their original length. Video rental shops still remain our only source for viewing films unscissored. Will big screens today offer a similar wear? If they don't, movies won't fetch as much as they could have. Even Sean Connery and Gina Lollobrigida's *Woman of Straw* at Madhumita was slashed by the pre-Liberation government, or the distributor brought the copy after it had seen the inside of all other Asian countries! Naturally, such scissoring spoilt our viewing pleasure.

Nowadays low class people as distinct from the low income group, have money to throw around. The educated middle class family cannot sit with these uncultured, rowdy elements at Madhumita's balcony upstairs or rear stall downstairs. Perhaps we will have to sit in the middle stall or third stall.

No, I am not joking. These seats are too cheap in the eyes of these vocal, unruly elements. But we have sat there in our youth. We enjoyed Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* in pin drop silence!

### Scanning the dailies

Sir, Within few days of assuming power, our Prime Minister (PM) with a bundle of famous /infamous /and unknown (having less circulation) dailies settled down in the appointed chair of the Leader of the House. Then, at one stage, she started reading out one after another the news items, related to rape/murder/footing/extortion /chandabazi and alike lawlessness, that occurred in Bangladesh, in a month (or so) during the past regime.

As she did so, law-makers, around her in the JS, applauded her for her performance. We too, in our TV parlour, applauded her to appreciate her patience, efforts and tenacity of scanning all the details of those dailies, for meticulously assessing the crime situation which concerned her. That time, we also believed the bad governance of past regime caused so much deterioration of law and order. So, people hoped that the present government would certainly do the needful. Then, we also watched a show on BTV, where our PM was shown to adorn the top executive's chair in the PM Secretariat. There, the PM began her day's work after having a good browsing of national dailies (in contrast with General Ershad's show of austerity, biking to his office).

We hope our PM still follows the similar routine shown to us. We would also expect from our PM to table a similar resume of national dailies, in the House on the law and order situation, at the end of 15-month of her reign.

A R Choudhury  
Uttara, Dhaka