

What Price Complacency?

The situation in Khagrachhari is a bit tense now. Unless effective measures are taken to defuse it, Khagrachhari can indeed explode. An weird mixture of terror and protest has so pervaded Khagrachhari that many pro-treaty plains people and even a number of hills people have hoisted anti-peace treaty black flags atop their houses — out of sheer panic.

There hasn't been a word explaining the peace treaty's true provisions and their benign import from any one who could have the ear of the non-partisan majority among the settlers. And there is constant propaganda by interested quarters against it at all levels — reaching a surfeit weighing down on the perceptions of all. The situation has been allowed to slip out of hand as if by some plan. A flickering light of sanity has been snuffed out of Khagrachhari by the utter failure to motivate the people in the truths of the treaty.

The AL government has been congratulated at home and abroad on coming to such a forward-looking treaty ending a bloody ethnic strife that looked uncontrollable for decades. The same government is now paving a sure way to the undoing of this achievement. Unbelievably. But why? Complacency and not BNP is responsible for the looming debacle. BNP is doing very predictably what it said it would do. There is nothing new in their stand on the treaty. The AL performance, before the treaty and after, beat all expectations and even ordinary political norms. Before they didn't exert to motivate the people in CHT and after they cared even less, perhaps basking in the glow of a great job done.

The hill treaty could indeed be the noblest of jewels among those bedecking AL's coronet of achievements. But it quite forgot that for the success of a treaty it was not enough to just sign it. Most fatal cases of surgery kill the patient through secondary infection at the post operative stage.

If the government above goes about stopping the dangerous slide to renewed plains and hills conflict, as government ordinarily do, the situation down there may worsen further. A very positive campaign of political motivation must be mounted and sustained there by not only AL but also others who believe in the prospect of peace. AL let this be a lesson for shunning complacency.

Custodial Deaths

The police seem reluctant to give themselves a break. One would have thought they have lived down the last year's slur of an Amnesty International mention about deaths in police custody and started on a clean slate. But no, here we are jolted a little more severely this time around by two deaths of under-trial prisoners in jail custody at Narayanganj occurring within 48 hours of each other.

Horrendous! Not only because it is earning us notoriety abroad for police excesses and in a tin-pot dictatorship or so-called police state which, by definition and in reality, we are the farthest from, being very much an elected democracy. But it is also horrific because going into police custody has become a routine matter in our chaotic environment of today; and if deaths occur in lawman's supposedly protective arms nothing could be more dreadful for a society. Actually the outmoded practice of extracting information through torturous interrogation etc causes such a tragedy. The police have to be wary of such threshold-crossing instances which were basically prompted by an unrealistic notion of power or authority which is completely out of joint with democratic system of governance.

When public outcries follow reports alleging deaths in police or jail custody there has been an obvious proclivity on the part of the exposed quarters to feverishly sweep things under the carpet to appear in the clear. A process of clannish shielding as in the Maha case or of shaking off blameworthiness as in other cases are matters of record.

Hopefully, this will be obviated after the Narayanganj outrage. In fact, we would urge the home ministry to clear the air by immediately releasing a detailed and authentic version of what happened in Narayanganj, regardless of who is at fault. This public statement by a home ministry spokesman ought to be a complete departure or relief from the travesty of truth a departmental version tends to be. We keep faith with the sense of commitment of Home Minister Rafiqul Islam in getting us a faithful account of circumstances leading to the two deaths in jail custody. Some fresh air will circulate through police administration when he does so.

Well Done, Boys

Just when things were looking little bleak partly because of the presence of too many non-performing old heads on the national cricket team and partly because of the overheated public expectations following ICC Trophy success the national youth team has lived up to the expectations by finishing on top in the just-concluded Youth Asia Cup in Hong Kong.

Bangladesh's place in the World Youth Cup—the high profile event to be held in South Africa comprising nine Test playing nations and seven associate ICC members early next year — was never in doubt, the privilege having been ensured even before the team actually took to the field. Nonetheless, it was no mean achievement for the youngsters to do justice to their high seeding in this competition for the national youth teams of the ICC associate members from Asia.

Three cheers for coach Jalal Ahmed Chowdhury and his boys. We are particularly happy that unlike the aftermath of senior national team's success, this time there were no unseemly or ugly incidents caused by overflowing emotions. Though that was obvious yet we would like to interpret them as signs of maturity, that we are learning to differentiate between *huzoog* (adulatory flurry) and genuine appreciation.

There is a word both current and evident that players from youth teams rarely live up to their promise. We want this hypothesis to be reversed. Our national team is suffering from a serious crisis of young talented players. We want the majority, if not all the members of this team, to carve niches in the national team proper.

The PM's Meeting with the Secretaries

The Diagnosis is Sincere, but the Counsel Falls Short of It

What makes them nervous is that the gap between the two brands of civil servants are so wide, so profound and so spectacular that the new generations of civil servants are simply no match for their old counterparts. It simply does not need a research to figure out that the old is gold, the new is nothing but counterfeits

WHAT will happen after they are gone? Something like that had been in the air for several years now, although that concern — for obvious reasons — was not vocalised quite vividly, especially in public discourse. But some secretaries — the highest-ranking civil servants belonging to the ex-CSP cadres — appears to have been trying to break that taboo. Reports suggest that they did raise this issue with none less than the premier of the country last week while having a two-hour agendaless meeting with her.

Obviously time hasn't come yet to write an obituary on the CSP saga that has been dominating the country's administrative avenues for decades. Given a thirty-year-long guaranteed career, the last batch of ex-CSP officers — hired immediately before the country's independence war — would be retiring by the year 2000. Of course, some ex-CSPs would be around even after that — on contractual services or otherwise — but by all means, they would be making the endgame list very soon.

Although nobody is indispensable for any job anywhere in the world, most concerned people in the country appears to be quite worried — if not horrified — that soon the civil servants hired during Bangladesh period would be steering the wheels of administration. What makes them nervous is that the gap between the two brands of civil servants are so wide, so profound and so spectacular that the new generations of civil servants are simply no match for their old counterparts. It simply does not need a research to figure out that the old is gold, the new is nothing but counterfeits.

The concern of the concerned secretaries are therefore real — they voiced what the people in the country have been silently observing for decades and the donors had long been talking

First, over the years the country has significantly moved away from command and administrative economy to market economy-oriented policies, and the process continues. More and more, the private sector is becoming vocal and dominant, a large number of civic organisations have sprung up in almost all spheres and parts of the country, and increasingly the ordinary people are asking questions — often serious ones — about the management of state-run enterprises, banking and financial sectors. The ex-CSP officers — the predecessors of the new generation civil servants — spent most of their careers without facing any of these challenges.

Second, as the government intensifies efforts to generate greater revenues from domestic sources through VAT, income taxes, customs duties, and others of this kind, the people will take increasing interest in ensuring accountability of public money. One reason for not so much concern to this issue over the years was that most people — rightly or wrongly — believed the country was run by foreign aid. Now that they know that they are also paying for running the government, they will most certainly raise eyebrows whenever something goes wrong. Gone are those days when the civil servants could sleep for decades on the queries of audit reports. Moreover, the newspapers — along with potentially privatised electronic media — would play a dominating role in keeping the issues of responsibility, accountability and transparency alive on the national agenda.

Third, although the foundations of democracy remain still fragile, the country is increasingly moving away from autocracy, martial law or other kinds of anti-democratic systems. Parliamentary elections are taking place at regular intervals and chances for elected representative leaderships at local government levels are also

on the rise. That means, through trial and errors, a kind of responsible and accountable political leadership might arise in a matter of decade or two. The new generation civil servants, in sharp contrast

cope with these challenges, they must behave according to the dictates of market-oriented and democracy-driven society. They must be more responsible, more accountable and more transparent than their predecessors.

The million-dollar question is, how to equip the new generation civil servants for such a formidable job at the tail end of the century so that they can step into the 21st century with confidence, courage and appropriate skills and aptitudes? Apparently, the CSP officers, who raised the issue of the incompetence of their successors, also gave an answer to this question to the prime minister. Their answer is: appoint us on contractual basis after the expiry of regular term of employment. Obviously, its myopic answer — it can at best solve the problem temporarily, the issue of training their successors suiting the needs of modern day would remain as it is. After all, their successors worked under them for decades, and according to them, they learned nothing.

Of course, solution to such a gigantic problem cannot be given in the orbit of this article — it will require thoughtful, well-calculated and far-reaching reforms of the country's bureaucratic leviathan. Currently, a high-powered reform commission is working to that end. Perhaps, unlike many other reform commissions and committees of the past, it would be able to put together some talented people capable of addressing these issues with intelligence and far sightedness. Of course, failure to do so would give us more of the same that the nation has been experiencing for decades.

In the meantime, however, the nation's administrative affairs must be looked into. Perhaps, in addition to hiring the ex-CSPs on contract basis, the government can consider the following proposals as stop-gap measures to fill the vacuum bring created by the departure of the ex-CSP cadres from administrative ranks. Perhaps the government could open up the top brass of the administration — the positions of deputy secretary and above — to open competition so that people from inside as well as outside the civil service can compete for these positions.

Another approach could be establishing an elite cadre — say a senior service pool — comprised of high fliers who will be recruited through open competition. Members of such a pool will not be backed by civil service protections, they will be rewarded if they can accomplish assigned goals and missions, and can be summarily dismissed in case their performance falls short of assigned goals and objectives. Many countries revitalised their administrative services by doing so, will the policy makers in Bangladesh be courageous enough to do the same?

They are products of post-independence Bangladesh, where evidently the educational boards had been involved in leaking question papers, manipulating results, and falsifying important documents — almost on a regular basis. Then, at the university level, they had been victims of senseless politicisation among the teachers, that often drove the best and brightest teachers out of the universities, and resulted in the manipulation of exam results. The last part of their educational trajectory involved the Public Service Commission. Everybody knows how badly government after government have transformed it into a place of political favour distribution.

Then just like adding insult to the injury, the government banned English — a language to

which this nation had more than years of exposure — as a medium of instruction. As a result,

most civil servants of post-independence Bangladesh got education in Bengal medium.

That systematically denied them access to

knowledge written in English — because a young

nation could not provide them with enough

translated materials that could be essential for

blossoming their mental horizon.

It is therefore not surprising at all that today

most civil servants simply don't understand En-

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words or lines, which is essential for negotiating

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