The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Why Always Uphill?

Dhaka, Tuesday, December 23, 1997

The resignation of Kazi Fazlur Rahman as Chairman, Public Administration Reforms Commission on health grounds does not quite come as a bolt from the blue. Given the lack of support trailing him since he assumed headship of the commission in June there is sorrow at his having said quits but very little surprise.

Here was a man with three decades of administrative experience and a good deal of integrity and probity appointed with the rank of a full minister to deliver on a stymied but key reform process. He was, as expected of him, not up to suggesting any radical change that would ruffle many feathers nor for subjecting the government to any fresh financial involvement as were evidenced by the first series of recommendations he had released earlier on. He was being improvising and creative with the benefit of his experience and a sharp eye for details to make the most out of the existing set of rules. Appointed in June, his luck on office accommodation smiled as late as in November. But then, within a month and a half, the allotment was cancelled, going by a prominent Bangla daily report and apparently he met with little success in obtaining an alternative accommodation since December 15.

In point of modus operandi he seemed to have fought a lost battle, too. His original move to work autonomously with adequate financial authority delegated to him was frustrated.

The inspiration generated among the public by his appointment following submission of resignation (also on health grounds) by former cabinet secretary Ayubur Rahman got switched off as indecision continued for what could be trend-setting four months for the commission's work. First it was placed under the Establishment Ministry and then under the Cabinet Division with imaginable difficulties faced by way of getting the required financial or logistical support.

All of this goes to show how resistant the government machinery has become to any reform undertaking. This has happened with the recommendatory phase, and Heaven knows how difficult the implementational process might have been! The biggest message to draw from this is: let political will of the government assert over administrative non-coordination which is tantamount to stonewalling of any reform process. The unfinished agenda must be completed.

We are Worried

The Chittagong port crisis seems to have taken a turn for the worse. Although the port authority, in its placatory overture to the Chittagong Feeder Trade Committee, has claimed 'improvement' in the situation, country's premier sea port is far from being over the hump as far its chronic worker-user feud is concerned. All this talk of improvement is nothing but a desperate attempt to stop the Singapore-based organisation from getting ahead with its decision to impose congestion surcharge on the Chittagong-bound vessels.

What bugs us most is the role of the concerned ministry. What is it doing? It has been years since Chittagong port has been devitalising country's economy instead of invigorating it and here the ministry is passing days apparently with not a care in the world. We hear a high level committee has been formed to probe into the heart of darkness. What are its findings? Actually there is very little now to be formally investigative about. Upholding sufferers' point of view, the Bangladesh Garments' Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA) has categorically explained the knots and loops in the crisis. The workers who have long found the port as a dripping roast want to dictate terms as it suits their convenience. By pandering to their demands for short term benefits knowingly or unknowingly the political parties have put a seal of legitimacy on this criminal cul-

We have been airing our anxiety over the reign of utter misrule in Chittagong port for a long time and here we urge the ministry again to be loud and clear on the crisis. It should remember that port authority pleading for mercy with an organisation abroad makes for a very sad commentary on its efficiency. If courage is what it is lacking then let us sound it for them that the whole country would back any decision--no matter how hard it looks-against the people that have come to play with the economy so long.

Heads Should Roll

Even a hair-line crack overhead in a newly built house gives one an apparition of an impending danger. The feeling is weird, like he or she has seen a ghost of destruction in the fault-line. Many stories of fleecing lie buried in the brick and mortar of metropolitan masonry, but who cares? Haphazard constructions in the greater part of the city with no breathing space kept between buildings is another serious offence that has multiplied over the years drawing sinews from bad precedents reprehensibly overlooked.

To top it all, we now hear of new buildings collapsing or tilting with far greater trepidations caused about lethally flawed engineering malpractices. How horrified we are in the latest instance of an upcoming four-storey residential building at Bashabo tilting three feet pressed down by the under-construction second and third floors. The plinth and the soil were good for supporting only the ground and first floors, so it seems.

Several heads should roll from the dangerous swaying of a residential building. Mind you, the Tower of Pisa tilted so little over so many centuries and yet so many felt jilted. Should not we ask ourselves such questions as: (a) who passed the plan for the second and third floors (b) who was its contractor (c) was the owner singly responsible for what he did and (d) what is the standard supervisory practice in such cases?

We want the law to take its own course.

Can a Country be Sold?

The absurd alarm that the country is being sold because of the peace agreement or South Asian Growth Quadrangle or opening of trade routes to north-east India is a highly regressive attempt to constrain development of Bangladesh so that we remain poor and destitute.

comes to my mind on first thought is the sale of Alaska by Russia in the 19th century to the United States of failed to conclude any peace America. Thereafter, no such agreement with the original inlarge scale buying and selling of habitants of a part of its territerritory has taken place in the tory so that those inhabitants history of the world. After continued with their anti-state. much more than a century, it is terrorist activities, then also quite obvious that the United government should be consid-States considerably gained out ered to have failed to protect the of that purchase. Alaska is full vital interests of the country. of oil and gas. Perhaps, the The question is, who sold the main opposition party of country and at what price? Bangladesh is fully conversant Thank God! The country was with the history of Alaska. about to be sold since there was Chittagong Hill Tracts is supno water under the bridge and posed to contain enormous innocent people were getting quantities of natural gas. Any killed in the Hills, but two country buying that part of our milestone agreements have reterritory will make a fortune versed the trend. The agreeout of it. So, why not raise a hue ments have been able to save and cry? After all, the role of the country from a devastating the opposition is to oppose. sale out. Please note that I am

AN a country be sold?

The only example that

proceed right up to Dhaka City where land prices are very high. Can a country be sold? Yes, it can be sold if deliberate actions and in-actions by the government fail to protect its vital interests. For example, if due to failure of the government to conclude any effective agreement. Bangladesh is denied the waters of any river during the dry season. In that case the government has also failed to protect the vital interests of the country. Following the same logic, if the government had

HE United States

A Madeleine Albright and

Israeli Prime Minister Ben-

jamin Netanyahu have been

lately engaged in diplomatic

sparring. As any fan of boxing

knows, a sparring partner

never beats the champion. He

only goes through the motion to

help the champion sharpen his

skills. In the jungle of Middle

Eastern pugilism, the Secretary

is no more than Netanyahu's

sparring partner. Netanyahu

practices his deceptive skills on

Albright, and with a better

grasp of American thinking on

the issues, he is better prepared

to hoodwink President Clinton,

entertain basketball and non-

basketball fans throughout the

world. At the end of their rou-

tine, they always play a game of

basketball against their "oppo-

nents." The outcome of that

"contest" is never in doubt. The

Globe Trotters have to win to

perpetuate their act. The Secre-

tary may be genuinely "an-

noyed" at Netanyahu's breach of

promise. But she, Netanyahu

and the rest of the world knows

very well what will happen at

the end — Netanyahu and Israel

will have their way. The West

Washington is now begin-

always lets them.

The Harlem Globe Trotters

when the two meets.

Secretary of State

They think they are very clever.

highly imaginative and pro-

foundly original. And it is not

only CHT, the salable amount

of the country's territory has

expanded northward - right up

to Feni. But I do not understand

why the opposition should stop

at Feni. They should widen

their imagination further and

pretation, such giving away of territory regardless of the purpose may constitute the sale of a country

In the Maldives, many small uninhabited islands have been given away on long term leases to foreign companies to develop tourist resorts. Is it a good or bad practice? The government has given up certain rights over those islands and bestowed new rights and privileges to foreign companies so that tourism can develop, there is more employment and the country earns a

restricted to those who are working there. Those resort islands have been transformed into parts of southern Europe. In spite of all these, the Maldives did not suffer from the loss of any sovereign rights over those tourist islands. The government had bestowed certain rights and privileges to corporate entities of foreign origin for solid income and

considerable employment. If an ultra zealous nationalist would be content with the barren empty islands, then he



Window on Asia

great deal of foreign exchange. In fact, the main business in the Maldives today is tourism and the country has enormously gained out of it. It would be

sheer madness to suggest that the Maldives government had lost its sovereignty over those islands. If you travel to those tourist islands, they do not resemble any other inhabited island of the Maldives. Usually there is a resort where foreign tourists come for rest and recreation of all sorts. Those are outposts of western culture - nudity and other forms of so called western liberalism, all included. Entry of locals is

is simply out of his mind. He may be termed a lunatic. Fortunately, such lunacy did not prevail in the Maldives. The country is much more prosperous today. Its GNP per capita was US\$ 995 in 1995 compared to US\$ 240 of Bangladesh. The island-based tourism development made a significant contribution towards 5.9 per cent rate of economic growth. maintained by the Maldives during 1985-95 period.

Bangladesh is a free, independent and sovereign country. No part of our territory has yet been leased out to any foreign country or company. However,

there are prospects at remote coastal islands which could be leased out to foreign companies for tourism development. Is the government of Bangladesh prepared to do so? No, it is not. Immediately, there would be an outcry from ultra zealous nationalists. Although, given the remoteness of these islands. cultural pollution can be avoided (although the same pollution is taking place through satellite television). From Cox's Bazar airport, tourists will be able to travel by boat straight to those islands and enjoy their own style of holiday without any interaction with the local population. The gains to the economy are likely to be enormous. Tourism is a highly labour intensive industry and the earnings would be all in foreign currencies.

Yet, no government would dare to develop island tourism in view of the grim political realities which are essentially of a highly reactionary nature. Peace in the Hill Tracts is essential, otherwise, huge potential of developing the area will remain entirely underutilized. Apart from energy resources. potentials of horticulture and forestry are tremendous. The Hill Tracts, constituting three districts, involve 9 per cent of the land area but less than one per cent of the population. These are mostly highlands suitable for forestry and high value horticulture and tree crops. Thirty four per cent of the total forest cover of the country exist in the Hill Tracts.

However, these are mostly denuded lands. Millions of hectares in the Hill Tracts are tree less, covered with uselesis shrubs and bushes. The entire area suffered long due to uns ettled conditions. We need pe ace and stability to restore the productivity of the highlands. We need considerable investment to let the flowers bloom again in the hills. In addition, exploration, drilling, transmission, processing and finally, marketing of oil and gas from the Hill Tracts ought to make a vast difference between what is Bangladesh today (low income and least developed) and what it could be tomorrow (middle income and industrializing) The absurd alarm that the

country is being sold 'necause of the peace agreement or South Asian Growth Quacirangle or opening of trade routes to north-east India is a highly regressive attempt to constrain development of Bangladesh so that we remain poor and destitute. Bangladesh cannot be sold. In fact no country can be sold. The sovereign rights are well established under the UN charter. Tiny Costa Rica with a population of 3.4 million is located not very far away from USA the most powerful country of the world today. Costa Rica has not only survived but prospered (per capita income US\$ 2,610) even without a standing Army of its own.

Bangladesh is a nation of 120 million. We proved once before that the entire 120 million are capable of standing up as an Army to defend the Nation. Who the hell is going to sell this Nation? Perhaps those who are shouting out that the country is being sold away!

LETTER FROM AMERICA

And the Winner is ... Benjamin Netanyahu!

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Like Warren Christopher before her, Madeleine Albright has encountered an unavoidable reality. Between the stubbornness of Benjamin Netanyahu and the indecisiveness of Bill Clinton it is difficult to set a course for American policy.

ning to wonder whether Netanyahu's desire for peace with the Palestinians is merely talk. His evasive tactics have not escaped Washington's attention. With Washington's diminished influence in the Arab world, as demonstrated in the latest Iraqi crisis. Washington has been urging Netanyahu to move the peace process forward. But the Israeli Prime Minister is less interested in peace with the Palestinians than in delaying having to make hard choices.

deliberately calling them dev-

astating since without the water

sharing treaty, south-west

Bangladesh would have turned

into a barren, salt-ridden desert

and hill tracts turned into the

thereof) be sold? In physical

terms, a country consists of a

territory or land and water

mass bounded by international

borders beyond which are ei-

ther the beginning of the terri-

tory of another country or open

international waters belonging

to no particular country. If a

part of a country's territory is

given away, under certain terms

and conditions, for the purpose

of business development, to a

foreign private or public corpo-

rate entity, then the question is

whether such business should

be allowed. Under strict inter-

Can a country (or a part

second Jaffna of South Asia.

Defying US pressure to produce "significant and credible" Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Netanyahu showed up for two recent meetings with Albright with no maps or percentages. Instead, he demanded a probation of five months before any withdrawal takes place to "judge the Palestinians' fulfillment of their obligations." Instead of being equal partners

in peace. Netanyahu wants to be the judge! Netanyahu's "reciprocity" is a pretext for not carrying out Israel's obligations under Oslo.

Israel cannot be the sole arbiter of when Israeli-Palestinian cooperation has improved sufficiently, up to Israel's satisfaction, to justify significant Israeli withdrawal Netanyahu counts on Yasir Arafat's noncompliance with certain minor provisions of Oslo accord to avoid having to make difficult decisions about the peace process. The United States is now trying to call Netanyahu's bluff and make him reveal his cards. It will not be that easy for America.

According to the Americans. despite all of Netanyahu's assertion that he seeks real peace and cannot be rushed into making fateful decisions on Israel's boundaries, there was no evi-

dence that he was engaged in studying or planning a further withdrawal until the Americans started turning on the heat, and denied him a meeting with President Clinton in November. Americans acted because they had secret information that the Israelis had no intention of making any further withdrawal.

Like Warren Christopher before her, Madeleine Albright has encountered an unavoidable reality. Between the stubbornness of Benjamin Netanyahn and the indecisiveness of Bill Clinton it is difficult to set a course for American policy. President Bush's Secretary of State James Baker had warned Albright that rightwing Israeli governments move only under intense American pressure. Even the Republicans did not fare well when President Bush and James Baker took on

the Shamir government of Israel. By stating that Jerusalem was a "disputed" city, President Bush caused the fall of the Shamir government in early 1992. The American Jewish lobby went into overdrive They succeeded in defeating a President whose approval rat-

Republicans. A Democrat's liberalism is measured by how strongly he or she supports Is-

If Net anyahu does not budge, and he will not, the Americans promised to make public their own proposals and apportion blame. That will not happen for two reasons. Vice President Al Gore is a supporter of Israel. He cannot hope to get elected President, if there is any hint whatsoever that he is anything but an unqualified supporter of Israel. These days President Clinton defers important matters more and more to the Vice President.

President Clinton does not have to worry about re-election. He: is forbidden by law to seek a third term. At this stage of the game, the second-term Presidents are more concerned about t'neir place in history. Everyone knows that history does not treat a President kindly who annoys Israel and its Jewish supporters.

No wonder Benjamin Netanyahu is eager to raise the stakes even higher so that he can call America's bluff!

"One who was present"

Sir, I read a letter printed in this Section of your newspaper on December 13 that commented on my December 10 article titled "The Prime Ministers Meeting with the Secretaries." The writer, "one who was present," deserves thanks for taking the time to come up with some biting comments. While such comments are always welcome, I must point out that never before I came across such slanderous comments on my writings, at least in news-

paper pages. No, it is not that I don't have the stomach to digest bitter criticisms. Like any other columnist/commentator, who expresses his mind in public, I know that I am also exposed to open public examination. I find nothing wrong if one disagrees with me or criticises my comments/observations. The problem with this letter is that the writer appears to have bordered his comments around a whole-

sale personal attack on me. First of all, as the writer of the letter himself agrees, my article was based on reports carried by some leading newspapers of the country including The Daily Ittefaq, and those were printed four days before the publication of my article in The Daily Star. If the story was based on distorted facts, then perhaps the "One who was present" or the other parties involved should have hold those newspapers responsible for printing such a story, not me.

Second, the writer accused me of concentrating on the problem of dearth of skilled officials alone and for not covering other matters that transpired in that closed-door meeting. The writer appears to have failed to understand the difference between a report and a commentary. It is not my job to cover what happened in that meeting. I just picked up a theme from the reported deliberation of the meeting. Moreover, all the arguments made in the article are mine — none of those was ascribed to ex-CSP officers or anybody else.

Third, the bitter-most bite of "One who was present" was that , according to him, I belonged to an "ilk" of journalists, who write "irresponsible and unethical pieces." Although nothing could be outrageous than that, I believe, over the years my readers have showered me with enough admiration to enable me to digest it with good grace. Still, the concern remains. One

has to see who decides what is ethical or responsible. The nation knows how "ethical and responsible" is the behaviour pattern of those who are omnipresent in the cloistered world of state power. Perhaps, this brand of people are least qualified to give sermons on ethics, sense of responsibility or any other virtue. Moreover, I am not a journalist, so the question of belonging to an "ilk" simply does not arise. Writing a column is my voluntary work - absolutely dedicated to national interest — at least to a version of it that I think is the right one.

Having said all these. thank this writer and many others who commented on my writings throughout the year Such an involved readership is undoubtedly an asset for the country. Happy New Year to all

CAF Dowlah

PDB vs REB

Sir, Bangladesh Power Development Board is one of the oldest semi-government autonomous bodies dealing with the most vital power sector which was inherited from the then EPWAPDA. Being blessed with country's most senior, experienced and qualified manpower, this sector should have been run efficiently. Unfortunately, this is one of the public sectors which is beset with numerous problems in power generation, distribution and sales, resulting acute power shortage and abnormal systems loss (approx 44 per cent, highest in the world).

Rural Electrification Board, another sub-sector of PDB. came into existence at the beginning of '80s with the objective of supplying power to rural areas and small towns of the country. Senior staff members of REB were mostly recruited from PDB either on deputation or option. The area of activities of REB has been gradually expanding due to their excellent performance. They used to purchase power from PDB and distributed amongst the consumers. Due to efficient administration and management REB deserves credit and ovation for their outstanding performance in curbing systems loss which is around one-third than that of PDB (16-20 per cent). How is it possible in the same country

where officials and workers are

from same sector? Needless to

mention that hundreds crores

of taka are eroded every year from national exchequer on account of power systems loss. M A Jalil

372/B. Khilgaon Dhaka

Drug abuse and smuggling

Sir, The number of drug addicts is increasing at an alarming rate in our country. Many of our young people mostly bus and truck drivers, rickshawpullers, small shopkeepers, daily wages workers, unemployed youth and frustrated students — are getting habituated to taking various types of drugs like heroine, pathedene, Indian phensidyl morphin, choros, bhang, ganza, opium etc. The use of drug is spawning large-scale corruption, terrorism, rape and murder, law and order situation in

our country. Almost daily we read in the newspapers about seizure of huge quantities of harmful drugs by our law enforcing agencies. But it appears that there is no end of supply of foreign drugs. The more the contraband drugs are confiscated, the more the consignments of drugs arrive in our various markets and bazars and sold in

a hide and seek manner. About 80 per cent detrimental drugs including phensidyl come from India-Bangladesh border, 10 per cent from Burma-Bangladesh border, 9 per cent from different countries through our sea and air routes and the rest one per cent is pro-

duced in our country. For the sake of accountability and transparency of our government, we would like to know from our Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs what steps they have taken so far to do away with drug abuse and drug smuggling in our country?

O H Kabir Wari, Dhaka-1203

Why use wrong term?

Sir, Most Sylhetis say that they are Sylhetis, and not Bengalis! Do they mean they are superior or different? I don't know. But they often say so. Doesn't matter really, whether they want to be Bengali or not, as long as they think themselves to be 'Bangladeshis' For, that is our real identity. Our country's name is Bangladesh, so we are all Bang-

ladeshis. No matter whether we are Sylhetis, Noakhalis, Dinajpuris, Dhakaites, Chakmas,

Garos or Monipuris.

That is where the mistake was made by choosing the wrong term 'Bengalis' for the Chakmas. It infuriated them so much so that, they took up arms and started to fight! For, they certainly are not Bengalis but what they certainly are is Bangladeshis. They definitely wouldn't have mind being called that. So much, for just a

wrong choice of term! As in India everybody is an Indian, be he Bengali, Punjabi, Assami, Gujrati, Marhati or a Rajput. In Pakistan everybody is Pakistani, no matter if he is Sindhi, Baluchi, Punjabi or Pathan, In America, everybody is an American and in France everybody is French. So why this confusion in our country, which is so small that we dare not call ourselves anything but Bangladeshis.

Dr Sabrina Rashid Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka.

Bangladesh weather

Sir, The Internet version of The Daily Star provides me with the latest news regarding political, economic and cultural activities in Bangladesh Since the US news media seldom covers events in Bangladesh (unless there is a terrible catastrophe), your Internet edition has filled a void and has made a great impact in making Bangladesh a partner in global communication.

I suggest that you also cover the Bangladesh weather (temperature, rainfall, humidity, air borne pollen/pollutant levels in major cities) in your Internet edition. This will be of help to business travelers as well as tourists.

Bakhtier Farouk (By e-mail)

Gulf War returnees

Sir, Would you please publish the names of the 72 thousand victims. If any business man has had returned from Kuwait, how much money he can get as compensation? I will appreciate if you do that for the readers.

Mohamed B Rahman (By e-mail) Dhaka

ing was in the nineties only a few months earlier. Netanyahu knows the dynamics of American politics very well: that the Democrats have a much more difficult time taking on the Israelis than the

OPINION Building Maintenance and

Beneficiary Participation

Recently, my visit to a district hospital to ascertain the repair and rehabilitation needs under a foreign-aided project, it was observed in a bathroom that the flooded with water due to missing of a bibcock! On enquiry, it was revealed that despite hospital authoritiy's several requests, PWD had not replaced the bibcock which hardly costs Tk 50 only! The hospital authority did not have any fund for maintenance.

It is a pity that different foreign donors as well as the government have constructed many essential buildings like hospitals, schools, cyclone shelters etc., but over the years condition of the structures have deteriorated and many of those have to immaturely abandoned due to lack of repair and maintenance since their construction. If a building however, is not looked after, it will gradually disintegrate and be destroyed by wear and tear. This disintegration will accelerate for each year provided that maintenance is deferred and quickly become out of control. The longer maintenance is deferred, the greater the cost of the deferred

maintenance. There are three categories of maintenance works viz. routine maintenance, periodic maintenance and emergency

maintenance. Regular cleaning is a routine maintenance job. Dirt, rubbish cobwebs and old leaves should never be allowed to accumulate anywhere, either inside or outside of the building. Apart from breeding grounds for insects and rats such accumulations absorb moisture-producing acids and alkalis which soak into and corrode surfaces and so accelerate deterioration. During rainy seasons, roofs and sunshades should be checked and cleaned daily so that rain water does not accumulate in those places. If water accumulates, the roof will absorb water damaging limeterracing and ultimately the roof slab. If steel gets wet, it will rust. When steel rusts, it expands and bursts the concrete and that part of the structure quickly becomes weak and useless. The concrete will first crack and later it will start to come down in big flakes.

Buildings should not be allowed to reach this stage. Hence routine maintenance plays an important part for the life of a building. Such small

exposing the rusting.

Moyenul Islam things and some others like cleaning of pipes and septic tanks can be easily taken up by beneficiaries and users. The historical top-down approach of the maintenance programme needs to be changed and awareness should be developed so that users and beneficiaries take care of the buildings and save the buildings from premature disintegration and destruction. Beneficiary involvement in maintenance of the structures is a key part of a strategy to

> that by participating in maintenance, the beneficiaries become integrally involved with the structure and feel the building as their own. In schools, students can clean their classrooms and school premises at least once in a week. For hospitals, godowns etc., the initiative and interest of the authorities will suffice. They have their paid sweepers

and other MLSS. A clean

institution reflects the good

aptitude and taste of the

raise awareness and assumed

management. Periodic maintenances are like replacement of hinges. tower bolts of doors and windows, defective bib-cocks, gate valves and pipes in toilet, cleaning of pipes, septic tank, drains and minor repairing of plaster, concrete and painting etc. Repairing of damage of lime-terracing may also be required. This may also be taken up by beneficiaries and users periodically, say, once in a year to save further deterioration. This will certainly involve some found that can be raised by the institution concerned or the government. We should

"A stitch in time saves nine!" Emergency maintenances are required to be done after natural calamities like flood cyclone, war etc. The repairing works depend on the intensity of the damage. Post-flood and cyclone damages are mainly doors, windows and cleaning of floor, walls tubewells etc Beneficiaries and users may also get involved in these

remember the age-old proverb:

repairing works voluntarily. We should, instead of looking toward the government agencies to maintain and repair the buildings, develope awareness so that beneficiaries and users think the buildings as their own and take care of the building and save the from premature disintegration and

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destruction.