

Ban on TUs

Our highest commendation to the work done by the Task Force on Trade Unions in the Banking Sector. And we lend full support to the useful set of recommendations it has submitted to the Finance Minister within a pleasantly short span of time — a little over six months.

Never before the vicious role of degenerated trade unions was so thoroughly exposed as has been done by the Task Force with incontrovertible factual details. Their octopus-like grip around the respiratory tract of the banking system has grown over the long haul with a common thread of pampering them into spoilt children running through governments since the inception of Bangladesh. Professional trade unionism thriving on conventional political patronage turned out to be chameleon — even worse than the earlier version — during the military or semi-military regimes. Even the vestigial moorings to principled trade unionism as part of political philosophies thus got cut off. The trend is continuing to this day.

The purpose of the TUs should have been the welfare of the employees and not the personal well-being of their office bearers. So, we are for a workers' representative structure, that is compatible with the designated role of the TUs, not an inch beyond that.

It would be ideal under the present circumstances to weed out the TU culture by completely banning it from the scene. Short of that, for pragmatic political reasons, the TU Task Force has recommended an alternative route to reaching that goal of disciplining the banking sector by adopting a gradualistic approach. Initially, there ought to be a three-year moratorium on TU activities, by declaring the NCBs as an emergency service sector. This is to get the necessary respite and ambience for refashioning the TUs in a way that they are not only defanged but also revitalised in a new form with a positive content.

Since this government made bold to form the Task Force in the first place, it should not be found wanting in political courage to implement its recommendations. Not a day be lost in initiating the process of ridding the nationalised banking sector of pernicious trade unionism.

This Himalayan Backlog

The courts of law in the country are pressed down by a backlog of 700 thousand undisposed of cases. At the Supreme Court level alone there are about 87 thousand unresolved cases. This is a maddening situation. The Herculean augean stable was a far easier job to clean up. How many years the forty-odd high court judges would take to clear up this load of 87 thousand? If the per capita output is a fantastic 40 cases a year it would take them 54 years. It is highly likely that by the time these would be finished, cases about double this tremendous load would pile up. There must be a way out of this situation of reducing the state's insurance of justice to all to such a mindless farce.

The less said about the district and lower courts the better. As they are, these courts resemble asylums if not shambles. The inner reality of a 6.67 lakh pile of cases pending with these courts would push all sane people into the realm of the unreal and irrational. When wise people said justice delayed is justice denied, they did not know what that delay would amount to in Bangladesh. The mountainous backlog has robbed Bangladesh's system of justice of all meaning.

What remains of a state if justice is thus marginalised? From the emergence of the first states, the arrogation of coercive powers to itself was justified by a guarantee of justice. The highest form of state and governance — democracy — is wholly negated in the virtual absence of justice our judicial backlogs amount to. This huge and unjust piling up of cases is naturally a case of exponential accumulation over the years. Each successive government since the exit of British colonialism brushed aside the growing needs of judicial expansion. For about three decades the strength of the judicial manpower stool still. Incredibly!

Law Minister Abdul Matin Khasru is an eminently sensible man. He knows the problem and believes that his government is all for doing something positive about it. But he seems not to have done his arithmetic right. Forced with that big a challenge he must start thinking big and convincing his leader and the colleagues that radical measures are needed here. Like doubling the capacity of the Supreme Court and tripling the whole judicial manpower before the end of the present term of the government. And setting up cells to sift backlog material and dispense with them in some summary manner acceptable to all.

Make it Public

Nearly seven months after the Magurjhara blow-out, information filters out in trickle that design flaws in drilling led to the disaster at the gas exploration site in the north eastern part of the country. A report in Thursday's issue of The Daily Star while referring to the probe committee's report on the June 15 explosion informed us of this. An independent fact finding mission's report, based on the data recorded 24 hours before the blow-out, also pointed out that the catastrophe took place not by chance but by avoidable human error.

Our question is why so late and why so fragmentary? Before we can go the whole hog in backing the government for full compensation from Occidental, the operating company, we need to know all the contents of the report. It is for its own interest and a commitment to democratic norm that the government should make the report public. Its claim for compensation would be richer for conviction if it carries the weight of public understanding and demand.

The inquiry committee had completed the report within two and a half months of the incident. It was then submitted to the government September last. Since then it has been lying idly with the authorities, with little or no sign of governmental activism. It should be remembered here that Magurjhara is not a mono-dimensional disaster. It has, as the report says, caused great environmental disaster too. All these aspects have to come under the purview of any appraisal for compensation. And for that the report has to come out in full. We urge the government to divulge the report in its totality.

Spectre that Haunts the Banking Sector

The present imperatives are, first, to contain the high-handedness of the unions and CBAs in the banking sector and, second, to arrest any future loan defaults. And both of these to happen require straight clear-cut steps...

THE recent report of the Task Force (TF) constituted to delve deeper into the trade union/CBA activities in the banking sector unveiled the spectre inhibiting the healthy growth of the sector. It may be noted here that the TF was formed against the backdrop of Reports hovering around anarchy in the sector, especially in the light of the recent rumpus in Bangladesh Bank.

The most shivery news that the report annexed (vide the Dainik Sangbad, 24-10-97) is about a CBA leader. His salary is only Tk 4000 a month (almost a poverty level income). "Poor" though, he rides a luxury AC car, moves with mobile phone. From 6-8-1995 to 21-4-1997 (21 months) he managed about Tk 22 lakh and deposited in a branch of his bank. And most of it has been deposited in cash! Reportedly, he drew take one lakh on average per month. The report further contends that some of the trade union leaders refuse to go up the ladder by accepting promotions. They tend to refuse the offer in writing. The economics is simple: trade unionism is more profitable and also powerful than getting promotion.

Information collected from eight banks appear to show that of the total staff in banks, 30 per cent do not do any work whatsoever. Some way or the other, those taking 'french leave' are connected with trade union activities. Bank wise, the proportions of not doing duties are as follow: Bangladesh Bank (22 per cent), Sonali Bank (89 per cent), Janata Bank (24 per cent), Krishi Bank (30 per cent). While existing laws tend to respect union or CBA activities

disconcertingly, they do not respect laws. Even with regard to promotion and transfer at official levels, which is not under their (CBA) purview, they (CBA leaders) intervene and coerce the management. In such cases, they take bribe ranging from Tk 5,000 to Tk 20,000 from the official concerned." (The Daily Star, 18 May 1997). An enquiry into the activities of NCBs show that CBAs administer parallel administration. For example, only presidents and secretaries of CBAs cannot be transferred. But they managed to distribute



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

the privilege to all the members of CBA.

By and large, the findings of the TF report sharply point to the spectres that haunt the vital sector to disturb smooth flow of financial blood in the body of the economy. Corruption, irregularities and display of muscle power tend to be the order of the day. Whereas, no action could be taken against them. Further, anarchy, bribe, shouting in premises have become a 'culture' in the arena of our banking sector. The management is so helpless that they dare not touch the hair of those involved lest they are treated as tactless and transferred elsewhere by top brass. To substantiate this premise, the TF report cites one example. A trade union leader once physically

assaulted executive director and general manager to face a dismissal. But the next government reinstated him and the president of the country himself introduced the "hero" as his "younger brother" in a public meeting.

While the formation of the TF and preparation of the report in due time deserve special thanks, one could only expect the recommendations of the TF are sincerely considered by the government. A total of 18 valuable suggestions are provided in the report which, if duly considered and implemented, could

ing sector is loan defaults. The latest information on this count tend to show that about 83 per cent of the total industrial loan disbursed by the Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Sangstha (BSRS) is defaulted (Bhorer Kago, 26 February 1998). So much have been said over the years about defaults and defaulters that any comment on this would sound mere repetition. However, we are glad to note that there has been some progress in getting back some of them. One can only relate the above mentioned union/CBA activities with loan defaults also. The union/CBA leaders, in collusion with high ups, managed to get through some of the loans. They also manage to post their 'people' at the helm of affairs of the banks to get the job done.

The present imperatives are, therefore, to contain the high-handedness of the unions and CBAs in the banking sector and, second, to arrest any future loan defaults. Both of these to happen require three clear-cut steps: (a) a political commitment on the part of both government and opposition to shun unionism in banks and to that effect, initiate laws and regulations; (b) stop giving political shelter to those involved with such activities and (c) delink union and CBA from political colours i.e. no union or CBA (if at all they are allowed to operate) should use the name of any political party or political leader. To face the spectre haunting the banking sector, it is not only the government which should be asked to do the job, but it is we who should ask the government to do the job and extend our support.

Another spectre in our bank-

save a lot of the rot.

The basic problem in taking the evils to task is political patronisation. Whether in power or not, the political parties use these unions and CBAs for their political gains. The union leaders or CBAs also tend to change political colours with the change of government. This is, we think, a sheer trading of national interests in pursuit of narrow political ends. We can only hope that both government and opposition leaders should discuss this report in and outside the Parliament to arrive at a consensus. In the name of democratic rights and voice of the poor, the activities of the union and CBAs appear to have taken hostage the whole banking sector.

Another spectre in our bank-

Instruments of Ill, and Other Frivolities

All I know is that gossip is an act of will. I know that though gossip often comes from harmless chatter, it can — and it usually always ends up — harming its victims more than it helps its perpetrators. I also know that gossip has become an insidious, almost everyday occurrence in our lives — so common, in fact, that some people might even fault me for discussing the subject on the "august" editorial pages of this serious newspaper.

But when to mischief mortals bend their will, How soon they find fit instruments of ill!

The Rape of the Lock, Alexander Pope 1688-1744.

It is exceedingly tempting, that is part of the problem. "Have you heard the latest..." asks the voice on the telephone. It is, typically, a saccharine-sweet voice and a tone casual enough to be titillating. (I always fall for the tone.)

I'm busy, you want to say at first. I actually don't have time to gossip. It's wrong to gossip.

"You'll never believe this," the saccharine-sweet voice says, softly.

Really. Why not, it can't be that scandalous. What have they done now?

"I don't know if I ought to tell you. Maybe you're right. It's wrong to gossip," Ms Saccharine suggests casually.

And you're hooked. You put your calls on hold, tell your secretary to buzz off, shut the door and bury yourself in yet another exciting episode of the latest muck which the rumour mills of Dhaka's elite circles are churning out for genteel consumption.

No, I don't believe you. Really. Is that what happened. I mean, who told you no, not her, how did she hear about it? Oh, I see, he told her and she told him and he told her and she told her and she told you. Yes, quite right. That's right from the horse's mouth. Really, I am shocked.

"What's gossip," my son once asked me. He was about 13 years old at the time.

Gossip is repeating silly, trivial things, things which don't matter. Frivolous fantasies.

"So gossip is harmless?"

Not really. It can be dangerous. If you're repeating something about a person's private life, for instance, something which isn't true, it could lead to other people getting hurt, to a scandal, and that can harm a lot of innocent people.

Your lips sealed. (Which means you'll spill the beans at the first opportunity.)

Tell me, tell me! What did you hear...?" demands this other woman at a social event the next day. You might call her a friend though she could also, on occasion, pass as your enemy, if you get my meaning.

"Is gossip always about in-

nocent people's private lives?"

No. It is always based on unconfirmed allegations about someone, and it is always stated behind their back. It's like saying that someone is a thief, or a bad person, or is doing something terrible without actually having proof. People often believe gossip — they say, where there is smoke, there is fire. So you have to be careful what you repeat and what you believe about other people.

"Why do people gossip?"

I guess, because they don't like the person they are gossiping about. Or because they don't have ethics. Maybe, people don't know they are gossiping, when they are.

"Do you gossip?" he asked after a few moments.

it. I gossip — but only sometimes. My son's face went funny for a few moments, then he lightened up. (Given the choice, I believe children prefer parents who are honest but flawed, to parents who are dishonest and flawed.) He asked me a few more questions about gossip (and what does "carrying on" with your secretary mean!) eventually losing interest in the subject as children usually do when you tell them the truth.

But his questions haunt me, still.

They haunt me because last week I noticed a face at a party. It was a pinched face, with terribly hard eyes and lips drawn back in an ugly sneer.

She's the one. Bad mouths everyone, even you. Doesn't stop gossiping," whispered a (different) Ms Saccharine in my ear. A few moments later, when Pinched Face came up to us, Ms Saccharine hugged and kissed her and said the most flattering things to her, and about her. I smiled sweetly too.

It is scary to admit that you are part of the hypocrisy which feeds the rumour mill, too. You might think you don't have a choice. Or that your particular variety of gossip is harmless, but who is to know for sure. I, certainly, don't have the answer.

All I know is that gossip is an act of will. I know that though gossip often comes from harmless chatter, it can — and it usually always ends up — harming its victims more than it helps its perpetrators. I also know that gossip has become an insidious, almost everyday occurrence in our lives — so common, in fact, that some people might even fault me for discussing the subject on the "august" editorial pages of this serious newspaper. But that is part of the problem, isn't it.

You know something, I think that is the problem — the most difficult part of dealing with gossip is to acknowledge that it exists. Especially by those who deny it the most.

Never. I never gossip.

"But when about Auntie Aggie's problems with her husband because he is carrying on with his secretary you said it was a scandal and I heard you repeat it all later when Auntie Glenda came over and she said she had heard it already from Uncle Larkin, and father said later he had heard the scandal too, so wasn't that gossip..."

My son looked me straight in the eyes, a hint of an accusation lurking in his. Children can be quite tiresome, can't they. So I pulled rank on him, what else. When your children have you cornered, that is the only way out.

You are not supposed to listen to grown-ups talking. I admonished him. He stared right back at me, the cheeky fellow. Eyes clear and honest, chiding me silently for being a gossip — and a liar.

Okay. I crumbled, as I always do with my children. I admitted

Never. I never gossip.

I end recalling a mystic Urdu couplet which reads: "planning for the next 100 years, without knowing the morrow's fate".

AZ

Dhaka

Coming Home . . .

Almas Zakiuddin

talked about, and that is not being talked about," wrote Oscar Wilde.

People usually laugh when I quote Wilde to them, just as they also laugh about, and laugh off gossip, as though the practice of ill-will through anonymous, seemingly idle chatter, supposedly the particular pastime of women with nothing better to do in life, is all a big joke. But it is.

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nocent to punish the person.

But, what if it is the other way round...?

Md. Shammi Shafi

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Tilapara, Dhaka

Hoping for a clean city?

Sir, Spruce and vegetate ter-

ritory is our long cherished

dream. "It's a great aspiration"

one can argue and say, how

could it be possible? But my

opinion is different from them.

Although having been a sick

country's inhabitants, if we try,

cooperate and co-operate with