

Int'l Women's Day

If there is one issue that The Daily Star has remained unfailingly focused to since its emergence it is certainly the sordid reality of women in our society. We have never failed to air our conviction that progress would be an abstraction without women asserting their rightful place alongside men. This critical failure in accepting and ensuring woman's role alone explains our failure to be hitched the global wagon of development.

So far our developmental thrust has been essentially unifocused. Man has been in the control of the whole development dynamics in our society. Only recently woman in this part of the world have started venturing out to claim their rightful place as the partners in progress. Albeit at varying ratio women are now being found practically in every profession ranging from those dealing utterly in physical prowess and the ones purely cerebral. Very naturally and not at all surprisingly, this increasing presence of women in professions is leaving a very healthy impact on our socio-economic reality. We are happy things are looking up. The participation of women for the first time in the recently concluded Union Parishad election showed we are on the right track. We hope that this trend will be replicated in every other area of our consciousness.

But there is no room for complacency. If Bangladesh has been a source of global admiration as an innovator in the field of women's economic empowerment through such financing schemes as micro credit, it has also known an almost insane hype of repression on women of late. Women practically of every age group are falling victims to man's bestiality in every part of the country. Even woman with children as old as 25 is not immune to the danger. The gangraping of two forty plus housewives in Khulna recently amply substantiate the fear. It is against this sad social backdrop that the theme of this year's slogan, woman's right to movement, rings in our ears with such powerful resonance.

There is no doubt society in general has become more responsive to the problems on a woman's way to become an equal partner of man in the process of nation building. But we still have to go miles. We have to review and redefine laws in this respect. Our legal system which suffers heavily from male bias has to be sensitised to a molested woman's trauma and predicament. We can only delay at our peril in realising that by keeping half of our population in danger there is no way we can even dream of progressing as a nation or a country.

Visages of the Grotesque

The northern districts of our country is home to about 15 million goitre victims. This knowledge should shock anyone anywhere in this wide world. But are we, our government included, scandalised by the fact that we are a nation of monsters with bloated necks — every one in seven of us being a goitre victim?

But this is a wholly unnecessary tragedy. Even a child knows by now what causes goitre. And what's the remedy. Lack of the requisite intake of iodine causes it and as soon as the iodine amount is restored to the required level, the patient responds and recovers. The best way to ensure that one's body got the right daily dose of iodine was found to be taking iodized salt with food as well as using it in cooking. Factories grew up like mushrooms as soon as the knowledge spread. It was iodized all around — in the radio and TV, on the newspapers.

But disturbing news continued to trickle into newspaper offices of many in the poorer sections of our people still consuming the baleful non-iodized traditional salt — because the stuff is cheap cheaper than the forbidding price of the healthful variety. But that always seemed a sporadic thing worth not to get panicky about. A national daily on Saturday reported quoting a survey that 55 per cent of the population of the 16 northern districts are suffering from diseases caused by food low on iodine — swollen necks and dwarfism. Patently because of taking non-iodized salt.

But how do they get it? We have time and again demanded of the government that manufacture of non-iodized salt be banned and factories grinding the same be closed down. Let ours be an iodized-salt country. It is so easy to do that. How much is spent on motivational promotional campaigns about smoking, AIDS or population control? The government, realising the gravity of the iodine situation, could offer such incentives to the iodized salt manufacturers as could enable such salt to be sold at a much reduced rate — one that could compete with the common salt in price.

If the government and other activist groups were serious enough in this matter, the problem could be solved in a very short time and very effectively too. To follow Euclid, if this result is not here, it can be validly construed that the premise of government having any concern in the matter, is wrong.

It is wrong for any man not to feel revulsion at the advance of this eminently manageable and supremely inhuman disease. It is down right wrong and absolutely criminal on the part of the government not to be doing anything worthwhile in the matter, just because it doesn't feel concerned or disturbed by the visages of the grotesque down there in the northern villages.

DCC's Slow Wisdom

We welcome Dhaka City Corporation's decision to set up a Traffic Engineering Department

It is amazing a department that is being envisioned to monitor so many things — and all of them are of great significance in view of Dhaka's chronic urban problems — took such an awful lot of time to arrive in the first place. The department, we are told, would oversee among others construction of fly-overs, link and bypass roads, bus terminals, road safety measures, new city bus services, integration of non motorised vehicles.

But one can't help questioning, will it deliver or just end up as a papery gimmick to justify World Bank's 200 million US dollar offer under the Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP)? We are not a bunch of incorrigible negaholics. But pessimism creeps automatically in everything to do with DCC.

Almost every target it has trumpeted to attain so far has ended in abject failure. The latest on the list of DCC's failures is the mosquito eradication drive. We sincerely hope this Traffic Engineering Department too does not end up being a part of its hateful legacy.

Agro-processing Sector and its Potentials

A newly-emerging group of entrepreneurs in the agro-processing area has just launched an association named, Bangladesh Agro-Processors' Association (BAPA), in the presence of some distinguished guests like the Finance Minister, Shah A.M.S. Kibria. His Excellency the US Ambassador Mr. John C. Holzman, Dr. Richard Brown, Director, USAID in Dhaka, Mr. Ronald Black, Team Leader of the USAID-funded Agro-Based Technology Development Project (ATDP), Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, and a host of other government officials, top business leaders, foreign observers and executives of various national and foreign business and donor organisations. Although the Prime Minister, and the Ministers for Commerce and Industries and Agriculture couldn't attend this inaugural function personally, they sent their messages of support and encouragement.

However, in course of their speeches, both the distinguished guests and the leading office bearers of BAPA have rightly underscored the importance of this sector in the future development of Bangladesh economy in terms of industrialisation with local inputs and cheap labour, employment generation, poverty alleviation and export earnings. While explaining the potentials of vast development prospects of this sector, both the new President and the General Secretary of BAPA pleaded for government assistance in terms of eliminating tariff anomalies on imported inputs, and providing tax incentives and other facilities as it did to the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in its initial stage of development. It is commendable that the fruits and vegetable processing industries are making some progress.

However, there are three issues in this area that deserve special attention. These are: (a) the basic definition of agro-processing industry, (b) Finance Minister's advice against possible emergence of "sickness culture" as well as assurance of possible assistance in future and (c) the reasons why

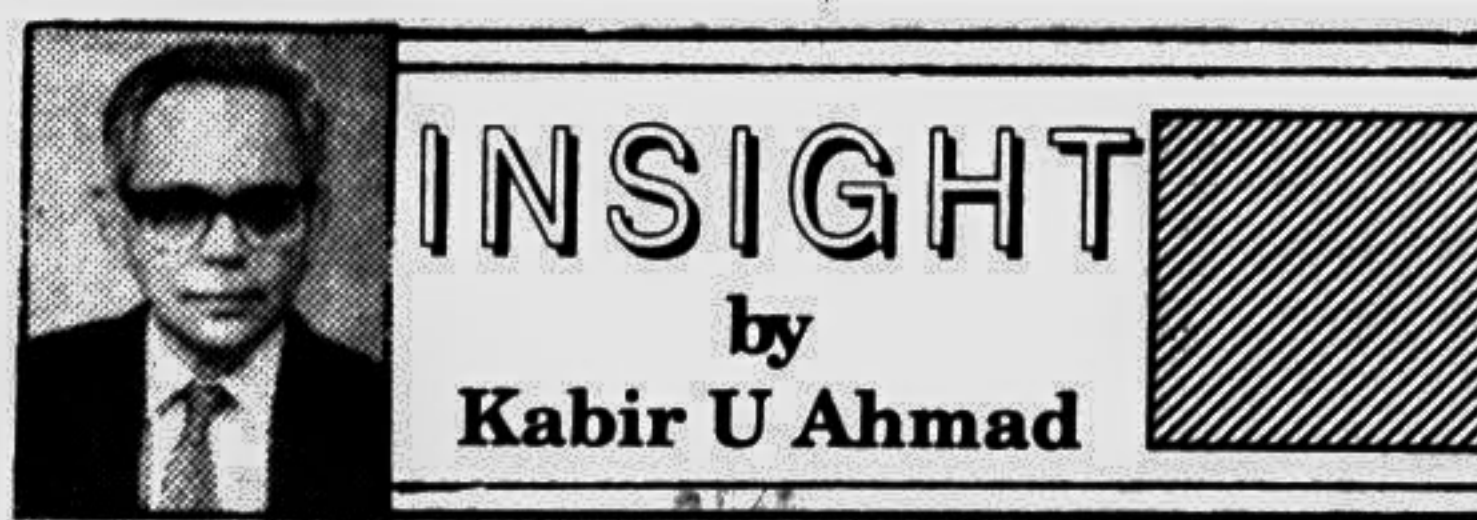
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Defining Agro-processing Industry

It is important to define this industry properly since an activity which is defined as an industry is entitled to some reduced rates for the use of electricity and gas supplies etc., as well as loans at subsidised interest rates while an activity that is not treated as an industry is deprived of such cost-reducing rates. For example, poultry, livestock and even tea industries do not get such reduced rates because these are not treated as industries. The question of proper definition, therefore, is important. What is an agro-processing industry?

A reasonable definition would be that any manufacturing process that uses local agricultural produces as inputs should be treated as an industry. To be more specific, these produces should be the result of land use with accompanying use of water, seeds, labour and technology. In this sense, not only the fruits and vegetable processing activities but also the whole range of processing activities with jute, rice, tea, sugarcane, silk, flower, dairy, poultry and livestock, fish, timber and the like have to be treated as agro-based industries. Fruits and vegetables processing is only a sub-sector of the entire range of such agro-based industries. All these should be given similar treatment for their development, quality improvement and marketing abroad. This is the line I have been advocating over the last six years or so in this column and elsewhere since there are enormous prospects of developing all these industries for both domestic and foreign markets.

The latter includes items like jute, tea, silk, fruits and vegetables, flower, fish and even timber products. The processing industries of some of these items exist, some at primitive levels while others at advanced levels. It is an irony of



INSIGHT by Kabir U Ahmad

that the jute industry which was once the most modern and efficient industry in 1950s as well as the backbone of the entire Pakistani economy has now turned into a sick sector because of wrong set of policies. The tea sector still has considerable scope for further expansion by bringing into production the available unused land inside and outside tea estates, replacing the 40-60 year old tea plants by younger ones and by introducing good management. So has the fishery, silk and fresh flower sectors. People don't seem to have grasped yet the growth prospects of these items just as people didn't grasp the prospects of fruits and vegetables sector until very recently.

This latter sector with large-scale investments, advanced technology and modern management seems to be beginning to take off now due to committed efforts and dynamic entrepreneurship of people who are now leading the BAPA. One must also due credit to the contribution of foreign technical assistance specifically to this field.

Finance Minister's Advice and Assurance

The Finance Minister has rightly told the BAPA inauguration meeting that BAPA must see to it that the culture, or should one say virus, of "Industrial Sickness", so deeply ingrained in the other traditional sectors of the economy now, doesn't corrupt their sector as well. He is perfectly right. One of the factors that has kept the economy from growing faster is the "industrial sickness" or "default culture" of a substantial number of so-called

entrepreneurs. In the name of industrialisation, the philosophy that a large number of the so-called industrialists followed mostly in the decade of 1980s was "Borrow now and don't pay" which has crippled the entire banking system. Some recent reports had it that more than 1100 persons borrowed over 1 crore Taka each (some of them borrowed hundreds of crores) who have defaulted. The government has been desperately trying to recover these outstanding loans.

Hopefully, it succeeds. However, this "sickness culture" is not only an exclusive characteristics of private sector industries but of the state sector as well. More than 30 per cent of banks' outstanding loans are to the public sector corporations. The annual losses of these State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) come to about Tk 3 billion which has to be financed by the poor tax payers of the country. I have hammered on this point a number of times before but brought up here only to put the entire "industrial sickness" culture in proper perspective. The country can least afford another newly-emerging sector to be come sick in the near future. It should strictly adhere to the rigours of economic efficiency.

The Finance Minister has also assured the BAPA leaders that he would soon sit down jointly with them and the officials of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to see what tariff and tax relief could be offered to this sector. This is a healthy attitude to this newly-emerging export sector. There is a number of well-known tariff anomalies that the leaders of

creeding in tackling these problems. One expects that once they have broken the grounds, they and their members will be able to successfully exploit the vast opportunities that exist in this field.

In the second place, the reasons for delay in developing this sector, or for that matter all other potentially profitable sectors, seem to be the following: (a) too few innovators and too many followers, (b) tendency to make easy (and also illegal) money, (c) businessmen's awareness limited to trading and traditional industries, (d) lack of the concept of efficiency, (e) poor management capability, (f) poor fiscal, monetary, and trade policy package, (g) inherited ideology of political and bureaucratic controls on economic activities, (h) terrorism, illegal toll collections and workers' indiscipline and (i) too much dependence on foreign aid. Another article explaining some or all of these will be written for the next week's column.

Some concluding Observations

I have never believed that Bangladesh is a resource-poor country nor that its people are unresponsive to economic opportunities. Bangladesh is rich in terms of its natural gifts of soil, product varieties, rivers, sea and forest resources and, above all, of ordinary people's adaptiveness and creativity. The problem is with people at the top, politicians and bureaucrats, who have tried to run the country according to their ideologies. It is there that a fundamental change in thinking and mindset is called for if the country has to progress.

New Bloodshed in the Balkans

by Dr F H Chowdhury

KOSOVO, a semi-autonomous state within the then Republic of Yugoslavia, has been a flash-point of ethnic conflict for centuries. The Turks occupied the land with much of the Balkans when the Serbs were vanquished in the battle of Illyria in the 14th century. The Serbs gradually left the area and after an unsuccessful anti-Turkish revolt in 1690, many more Serbs left Kosovo and at present 90 per cent of the population are the Albanians who are, by religion, Muslims.

Kosovo has potentially rich arable lands with huge reservoir of lead and silver and although land-locked, it has spectacular mountainous ranges of peaceful serenity. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the wake of the collapse of Soviet empire and the rise of Slobodan Milosevic 10 years ago had begun with his promise to his kinsmen for a greater Serbia including the Kosovo which according to them is a parts of their ancient homeland. It is too dreadful to think how the intractable conflict will end there where it began.

The breakup republics of Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia have all got their homelands out of the former Yugoslavia in the midst of bitter war and terrible ethnic cleansing. They all fought their hardest to maximise their territorial gains and are content now with the UN mediated, internationally recognised boundaries. Even Bosnia has remained geographically intact under the hard fought Dayton accord and has recently elected a moderate Government drawn from the three communities of Muslims, Serbs and Croats.

The breakup of the Federal

tion has, however, left Milosevic with a smaller Slav dominated land that he had originally planned. In the circumstances it is not surprising that he will cast his eyes around and try to ethnic-cleanse Kosovo with a view to integrating it into his greater Serbia. To the south, Montenegro and Macedonia are already independent republics. So Kosovo's struggle to regain its autonomous status under the leadership of its moderate leader Ibrahim Rugova must be conceded to by the Serbian leadership and its encroachment into Kosovo with brutal police force must be halted. The independence movement led by the Kosovo Liberation Army is already beginning to gain strength. The fuse lit of further ethnic conflict if not extinguished, will reignite the flames of ethnic rivalries over the wider areas of the Balkans involving Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Macedonia.

Twentyfive people have been killed this weekend in Kosovo by Milosevic's henchmen, fascist SAJ, which he has used in ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The fall of Soviet empire set off a chain reaction that broke up Yugoslavia which were artificially held together under Joseph Tito's strong leadership.

In the intriguing whirlpool of the Balkan quagmire, Kosovo was only waiting to be sucked up. There must, however, be a political settlement in Kosovo and no more bloodshed and ethnic cleansing should be tolerated. Milosevic's regime should not have its sanctions lifted until Kosovo's rightful political status is restored which was brutally usurped by Milosevic in 1989.

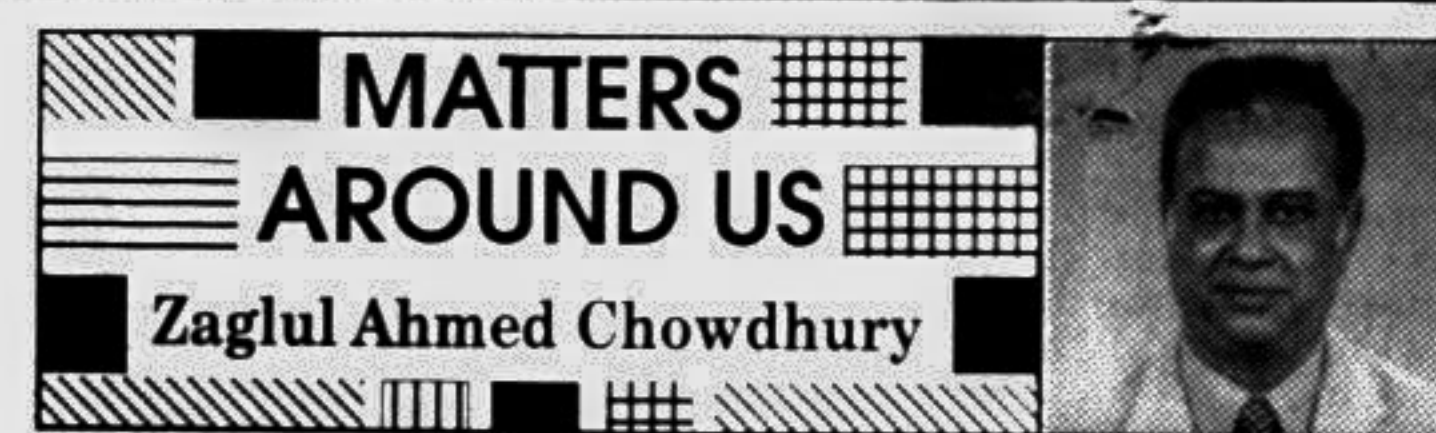
Indian Election Results Marked by Incumbency Disadvantages

The results of the elections varied from region to region and the factors of policies and ethics appear to have played insignificant role in the entire affair.

THE results of the much talked-about national elections of India are on the fore now and major players of the political spectrum are jockeying for setting up a government. Whatever be the shape of the government — whether the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies with the support of some others form the government or it is once again a coalition between the Congress and the United Front (UF) — the outcome of the voting gave a clear indication. It is the incumbency disadvantage. The electorate have categorically disapproved the party in power, no matter whether it is at the centre or in the state. As such, it is no wonder that while the BJP and the Congress have increased their strength this time, the UF that ruled the country in two phases is the worst sufferer. Its tally in the lower house of the Parliament (Lok Sabha) came down by nearly half as it succeeded in securing less than 100 seats compared to 190 in the last house.

The same is reflected in different states regardless of the fact which party is in power. The BJP, despite its impressive gains in the polls, suffered severe beating in mainly two states — Maharashtra and Rajasthan, both ruled by the BJP. While in the commercially important Maharashtra it is tied up with another widely known communal party, Shiv Sena, to rule the state, it is alone governing the Hindi heartland state of Rajasthan. In both the places the Congress is the main beneficiary as it was the number one opposition in both the states and would remain so at the state level, whatever is the outcome in the national polls.

By the same token, the BJP made significant inroads in the south where its presence was nominal to the extent that the organisation used to be seen as mainly a north Indian party. The scenario is entirely different now as it fared remarkably well in the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu — albeit in alliance with two regional organisations. Here too, the main casualty is the party in power in the states. In Karnataka, the



Janata Dal has virtually been wiped out even though the state is ruled by it and so far considered as a bastion for the organisation. Former prime minister of India HD Deve Gowda secured a seat here because of his national stature but the reverses suffered by the Dal here was something almost unthinkable. Mr R K Hegde, the former Janata Dal leader who parted ways with the present set-up of leadership of the party, of late appeared as a virulent critic of the Dal and challenged it through his newly-formed "Lokshakti" that forged an alliance with the virtually non-existent BJP and the combine swept the state. In the neighbouring Tamil Nadu, the ruling DMK of Mr Karunanidhi suffered humiliation when its performance in the hustings shattered all calculations as the party fared too badly. Its main rival in the state — the ADMK combine together with the BJP and came out with stunning success.

The Congress also had its share of the cake in the incumbency problem as it lost heavily in two states — Madhya Pradesh and Orissa — where it is at the helm. It was the BJP that swept the Madhya Pradesh and even senior Congress leader Arjun Singh had to face the debacle. In Orissa, the party fared badly as a combine of the BJP and "Biju Janata Dal" — a newly-formed regional party by late Biju Patnaik's son Navin Patnaik — ruled the roost. But the Congress which was instrumental for the snap polls in India in the sense that it pulled down the UF government by calling off its crucial support even in less than halfway through the five-year term, has not been punished by the electorate.

On the contrary, it is the UF which enjoyed reasonably good degree of image had to pay the price mainly because it was in

power. The UF has no dearth of respected and able leaders but while running the country it gave the impression that the administration lacked dynamism. The problems within the Janata Dal, the main constituent of the coalition resulting in its split, came as a big setback for the government and occasional differences of opinion among the partners who range from communists to free-economy advocates finance minister P Chidambaram of the Tamil Nadu Congress restricted the focus broadly on the cohesion of the ruling combine rather than its performance which otherwise was quite impressive. But it is the expectation of the people that the persons at the helm devote more time in effective governance and not in squabbling and the UF paid dearly on this account.

The ruling Left Front in the West Bengal can be categorised in a little different manner in this context as it maintained its ascendancy in the state and also in some other areas like the southern Kerala but it had also to face the problem to an extent. The firebrand leader in the state, Mamta Banerjee, who had parted ways with the Congress and set up a separate identity in the form of "Trinamul Congress", took away as many as seven seats on anti-left rhetoric. She blames the leftists of the state for "ruining the economy" of West Bengal during the long 20 years of rule — a contention seriously disputed by the CPM-led Left front. Here, surprisingly, the BJP which had hardly any presence in West Bengal, found a foothold this time by winning seats. The Left front also conceded some seats in the state of Kerala which is a setback for the combine. And another glaring example of ruling parties suffering badly in the voting is the Rastriya

Janata Dal of former Bihar chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, whose wife Rabri Devi is now the chief minister in the state following Laloo's exit from the helm centering a scandal of alleged corruption.

The BJP and the Samata Party of George Fernandes shattered Laloo's stronghold and he had to remain content with his own victory and a few seats in the 54-seat parliament from the state. However, the populist Laloo has not been wiped out but his main rival and Janata Dal president Sharad Yadav cut a sorry figure both for himself and for the Janata Dal. Evidently, the former prime minister and one of the founders of the Janata Dal, VP Singh has been a shocked man as the reverses suffered by the organisation is also a loss for the secular and progressive forces.

The results of the elections varied from region to region and the factors of policies and ethics appear to have played insignificant role in the entire affair. Political exigencies in terms of electoral gains seem to be the main criterion in this game even though such understandings cause more problems for the alliance partners in the long run. The Congress improved its tally mainly because it was not in power in the immediate past. However, the widow of the former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi played a meaningful role for the organisation by involving herself actively with the electioneering that helped restrict the BJP march which at one stage had appeared to be somewhat invincible for an absolute majority. Now it is a fractured verdict with no outright victor although the BJP emerged as the single largest party.

Many factors weighed high in the balloting involving 61 crore voters but the incumbency disadvantage must have played a key role in determining the outcome of the Indian elections. This sends a positive signal — whenever one gets the opportunity to serve the people by forming the government, people's hopes and sensitivities are to be taken more seriously for being in the seat of power.

strike but give in writing to the BUET authority that they are actually doing all their official work, behaving more like a "fish's mother"? Because the students of Architecture have taken to the street based on the false belief that some of their teachers are on "strike". Why are the teachers saving their skin and sacrificing that of their own students?

In these days of IT, it is not important how "sitting in Badda" Mr Rahman got his information. We would have benefited if Mr Zafar could point out any lie in Mr Rahman's letter.

M M Haque
Indira Road, Dhaka

To the Editor...

Learning to be tactful

Sir, The Feni gun firing incident targeted on the travelling entourage of the visiting highest executive, the Group Chairman of the mighty Shell group of companies, who flew in a special aircraft to study the investment situation in Bangladesh, might have repercussions on the future British investment in Bangladesh in the gas, fuel and power sectors.

This type of intimidation was a most unfortunate incident when the country is desperately seeking foreign investment in all the sectors. The Shell group is too big to be ignored, and their protest and pressure also cannot also be

brushed aside easily. The situation calls for immediate disciplinary action against the godfather/s involved, and police action against the gun-toting miscreants, together with satisfactory explanation of the incident by the authority.

There are also the Irish and the American lobbies. The West can combine, if necessary, against a bottomless-basked country, and make the situation miserable for us. As a citizen, I am deeply disturbed at the possible negative implications of the incident. When shall we learn to be tactful?

A Husnain
Dhaka

Do us a favour

Sir, Although Mr S M Abu Zafar proves in the first few paras (DS 4.3.97) his inability to understand the plain English of Mr Mizanur Rahman's letter (DS 28.2.97) and thereby takes the liberty to distort it, he somehow saves his day in the last para. Yes, the "striking" teachers of the Architecture Department should have opted for dialogue instead of bravado press releases, press conference and involving students.

Perhaps to Mr Zafar abiding by the rules of university is akin to carrying the "boss's umbrella". But, are not the teachers who publicly say they are on

Art
Buchwald's
COLUMN

Your Own Prosecutor

"HOW" I am constantly asked, "can we prevent something unreal like what is going on in Washington from happening again?"

A simple solution. Every time a person is selected for a high government position, he must be sworn in with his own special prosecutor.

The special prosecutor will remain at his side the entire time the person serves, becoming part of the family.

The special prosecutor will have the right to subpoena witnesses, tap phones and investigate the sex life of anyone acquainted with the appointee or his family.

Let's say Willington is sworn in as the president's adviser on baldness. His special prosecutor will immediately call a grand jury to hear witnesses testify against him.

The way he will do this is to offer immunity to anyone who has anything bad to say about the president's adviser. The feather in the prosecutor's hat will be if his investigation leads to misconduct in the Oval office.

Let's say the special prosecutor digs up information taped by a disgruntled administration employee concerning Willington's offer to invite a White House intern to accept a plane ride and lodging from a Japanese car company for the Winter Olympics. This leads the prosecutor to discover Willington once had a one-night stand in Sun Valley with a figure skater from the women's Olympic team.

The prosecutor subpoenas the skater to testify about the affair and produce gifts exchanged with the official.

The prosecutor offers the skater a pardon if she declines to take the Fifth. Her lawyer says no unless she gets a job in Paris.

That is just a hypothetical situation. Many special prosecutors who hang out with appointees will still be unable to dig up anything that would send someone to jail. It isn't necessary for an SP to produce a conviction when assigned to prosecute someone — but if he comes up with nothing, his chances of an interview with Barbara Walters are nil.

One special prosecutor who got nothing recently could be seen standing in front of the White House handing subpoenas to anyone who walked out of the gate.

He knew he was playing a long shot, but that is what special prosecuting is all about.

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