

Whose Patient is it?

To us it seemed like a classic case of 'offence is the best defence'. Having taken bank loans which they are unable to pay, the 'sick' industry owners have decided to blame the government for it, with an ultimatum to bail them out under threat of agitation.

The unfunny aspect of the whole thing is the private sector's pressuring the government to cure all its ills — including those units that have, in many cases, only themselves to blame for their undoing. One chamber leader was apt in identifying two plausible reasons for debacle in many units. One, liberalising trade without giving local industry enough time and support to be able to withstand competition from outside. Two — smuggling. These two may have been responsible for throwing many local units into a very challenging situation. But is it wholly true that all of these units fell sick simply because of those factors? And none of them indulged in what can safely be called as bad business?

There is an answer to that in another stalwart's demand for publication of the names of bureaucrats who took fat kickbacks for favours done. Yes, that was one standard way to get an industry sick. The other answer is the inept handling by the entrepreneur. This factor has been glossed over whereas the whole beauty of emphasising the private sector lay in the unquestioned efficiency and drive of it as against the impersonal management in the public sector.

The chamber leaders should think twice before canvassing for a wonder formula of privatised industry financed by government to the hilt and ensured a surefire prosperity by a wholly protected market. This dream situation has its dangers. Dangers for the entrepreneur. A strong domestic market is the best thing enterprises can ask for. That would call for increased buyer capacity. Under the dream formula that is the last thing to happen.

Euclid told his student who incidentally was the Pharaoh himself, there is no royal road to geometry. Need the owners of the sick industries be told that there is no secured road to prosperity except through sweating and imagination and knowledge, and good management.

The units that hit quagmire in spite of putting in good honest work, deserve all support from government. What about those getting sick for bad management? The chamber leaders should think seriously before humping all into one big deal.

Arrest of Newspapermen

Police arrested three newspapermen in Chittagong and Comilla for publishing the leaked question paper of the ongoing SSC examination. The charge on which the trio was arrested has been described as leaking official secrecy. We are not sure what the authorities meant by that. How could the press be accused of violating official secrecy when the leaked question papers were already in public possession? Disseminating information is the existential principle of newspapers. It is the duty of the newspapermen round the world to keep the readers informed of everything happening around them. Leakage of question paper is a major legal aberration and the newspapers are well within their rights to report on such a monstrosity.

The real issue here is the failure of the education board to maintain secrecy — which is their duty — of the question papers. The fact that question papers were in circulation is the real. What the newspapers did was increase that 'circulation'. We admit that publishing the question papers was not in the best judgement, nor perhaps was it wise. But that is not where the 'leak' took place. And therefore newspapermen are far from guilty. What the publications did was to expose the failure of the board to do their duty. We think the newsmen are being made scapegoats for a government failure.

We don't think it is right on the part of the authorities to judge the incident from the view point of criminal law. Pursuing the criminal law in cases like these is tantamount to defeating the very objective of journalism which is finding the truth. We are of the opinion that before opting for criminal proceedings it is a much better option to consult a body like the Newspaper Owners' Association in a situation like this. Industry's collective discretion should be enough to deal with a case of ethical violation by its members. The government must keep in mind that newspapers will pounce on anything that is worth drawing public attention. If it is so sensitive about official secrecy it had better take steps so that these secrets never become public property in the first place. We demand the withdrawal of prosecution against the newsmen.

Passage of Paz

Octavio Paz, the great Mexican poet is no more. Poet, diplomat, writer — all in one — this Nobel Laureate passed away at a ripe age after a prolonged battle with cancer. An early starter Paz carved a niche in the pantheon of great Latin American litterateurs with his extraordinary creative excellence which brought him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990. Paz's readers are of the opinion that his oeuvre marked a relentless quest for overcoming man's existential solitude through erotic love and artistic creativity. As a highly sensitive creative figure he probably could not have dealt in anything else. The rise of materialism and the deepening crisis of man as an individual fuelled the poetic fire in Paz as did many others of this century.

Paz had special communion with the subcontinent; its culture, religion and philosophy. Hinduism and Buddhism influenced him as strongly as did Marxism, Existentialism and Surrealism in the early days of his career. The relationship grew intenser during the six years of his tenure — from 1962 to 1968 — in India as the Mexican ambassador. In a not too distant resemblance with our own Tagore, Paz resigned in the latter year in protest over Mexico's brutal treatment of student radicals.

He was a man of action. Poetic concern over man's loneliness did not throw him in the world of passive reflection. Nor did it make him a creative artist who only rhapsodised 'hombre' and his 'soledad'. He took great interest in anthropology. His pride in being a Mexican and his deep interest in the evolution of the Mexican nation found a powerful expression in his influential essay The Labyrinth of Solitude. His death is a great loss to the world of poetic imagination.

THE government appears to be considering a proposal to impose a ban on trade union activities in the banking sector of the country. A Task Force, appointed by the government in July last, has recently come up with a devastating report on the wrong-doings of the CBAs and trade unions in the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs). The accusations are all-pervasive — the trade unions and CBAs exercise almost unbridled powers in transfer and promotion of bank employees and officers, openly give a damn to banking rules and regulations, flagrantly amass wealth beyond proportions, routinely defy and break laws of the land, perpetuate substantial over employment, and thrive on muscle powers with active patronage from political circles.

Apparently horrified by the grievous state of affairs, the Task Force has called upon the government to ban the trade unions and CBAs in the nationalised banks. In the meantime, several front ranking newspapers, including The Daily Star, have registered their editorial support for such a move. Public sentiment, as can be gauged from newspaper pages appears to be in favour of stern actions as well, especially ever since the outrageous incident at the central bank of the country, whereby several senior officials were literally assaulted by unruly trade union activists.

This writer, however, believes that the government will be ill-advised to ban trade union activities in the banking

Trade Unions/CBAs in Banks  
The Solution Lies with Cleansing the Trade Unions, Not with Banning Them

One has to consider the fact that banning trade unions in a democratic society may be politically incorrect because trade union rights are inextricably associated with fundamental human rights — national and international labour charters, UN charters as well as the Constitution of the country are pledge-bound to guarantee such rights.

sector. Such a move will be politically incorrect and socially deceptive and hypocritical. Given the notorious character of trade unions in the country, the solution, if any, lies with cleansing the trade unions and the CBAs with an iron hand, not in banning them. Banning will do no good to the society, except causing the problems to disappear temporarily and only to surface again — at a more opportune time — with intensified enormity and more dangerous consequences.

There is, however, no denying that the country's banking sector is in doldrums today. First, the NCBs are burdened with monumental proportions of defaulted loans — almost one out of every two taka in the vault of the NCBs disappears in broad daylight. Out of a total domestic credit of Taka 35,000 crore with the NCBs, Tk 15,000 crore is classified. Currently, there are over 2,177 businesses in the country, each of whom owe to the NCBs at least Taka 1 crore in defaulted loans. Second, NCBs lack any sense of professionalism — it is believed that the defaulted borrowers have channelled a significant part of the loaned money in the pockets of the involved bank officials and politically appointed directors. Third, an astronomical percentage of bank employees, ranging between 25 to 35 per cent, appears to be ab-

solutely redundant. Fourth, the NCBs, in fact, are run non-commercially — under the administrative control of the Ministry of Finance. And fifth, a large chunk of the bank deposits are routinely directed to bail out loss-making state-owned enterprises (SOEs) every year.

Of course, the nation must find out ways to address these problems that are eating into the vitals of the country's banking sector. The million dollar question is whether a ban on trade unions would help in resolving any of the problems mentioned above. Can the banks be run commercially if the trade unions are banned? Can the default culture be curbed by banning trade unions? Can overemployment in the banks be dealt with if the trade unions are banned? Can the level of corruption be restrained if the trade unions are banned? Can the practice of bailing out loss-making SOEs be stopped by banning trade unions? Perhaps, before ban-

ning the trade unions in the NCBs, the policy makers should come up with satisfactory answers to all these questions. They should tell the nation, in clearest possible terms, the objectives that they want to accomplish by banning the trade unions in the banking sector.

Besides, one has to consider the fact that banning trade unions in a democratic society may be politically incorrect be-

Moreover, ban on the trade union activities of only one segment of workers, while allowing others to enjoy the rights, would be an act of extreme discrimination by the government. Yes, the activities of the trade unions in the banking sector had been unfortunate. But can anybody identify a trade union in another sector of the country which is less rowdy, less chaotic, less problematic than the banking sector, provided that the sector in question possesses equivalent financial or political clout?

Moreover, how can a society ban trade union in one sector while promoting it in another sector? Take, for example, the case of Dhaka University — the highest seat of learning as well as trade union practices in the country. Just recently, the chief of the officers union in the university was appointed the Registrar of the university. The leaders of the teachers association of the university are routinely occupying the most coveted positions in the university, such as the vice-chancellorship, pro-vice-chancellorship, etc. Some of them are even appointed in adored positions outside the campus. None of these appointments have any connections with academic qualifications, merit or talent.

Thus, one can see soil science professor becomes chairman of Public Service Com-

mission, history professor becomes director general of Bangla Academy, and accounting professor becomes chief of National Archive. Thanks God, trade unions in the NCBs are not following the foot steps of Dhaka University, otherwise they would have demanded that the positions of the Governor and the Deputy Governor of Bangladesh Bank, or Managing Directors of NCBs, be filled up from their membership rolls.

In sum, banning trade unions for some alleged unruly activities of the trade union activists would be equivalent to banning politics by blaming the politicians for their unruly and chaotic activities. The nation has seen many such nuisances when unscrupulous military rulers had done so jeopardising the nation's future. Therefore, the policy makers should understand that the solution to the trade union problems lies with overhauling the trade unions, not with banning them. Chopping head off is not an acceptable solution to a headache. Take drastic action against the wrong-doers. If trade union activists broke the law of the land, if they have defied the banking rules, amassed wealth beyond known legal sources of income, catch them and punish them.

Existing laws are more than adequate to simplify them. What needed is simple: the Government and the Opposition must be willing to let the law of the land take its own course. Whether they will be gracious enough to do such a big favour to the nation, however, remains an open question.

OPINION

Apology? No; No-Confidence? Yes

by Chowdhury Tanweer Ahmed Siddiky

THE ruling party is gung-ho with a torrent of attacks on its main political foe. Backed by the section of sycophantic pro-government media, it has let the hell loose on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) over the incident of 15th April inside the Jatiya Sangsad. The BNP deputies were denied floor in the House on the following day by the man who feigns neutrality. It was a measure of so-called punishment for what some of their parliamentarians have allegedly done inside the House last Wednesday.

But this is democracy a la Awami League. This is, doubtless, a grim reminder of the history 23 years ago when the selfsame Awami League changed the Constitution of the country less than five minutes and without a whiff of discussion in the Parliament. They brought in a one-party monolith replacing parliamentary democracy. At that time, they tried to suppress the voice of dissent to create a situation where only the Awami League and its coteries would rule, and rule forever. Has the wheel come full circle after 23 years? Yes and No.

Yes, because the rulers have set the inexorable process of reaching that monolith in motion. No, because the time has changed. The party today is not as overwhelmingly in command as it used to be way back in 1975. In those days, it managed to capture all but a handful of parliamentary seats. It had two-thirds majority that en-

abled it to change the statute book at will.

Today, if the last election results are a guide, it has the support of only 37 per cent of the country's electorate as against 34 per cent of the BNP. This it has won despite its best efforts to obliterate the opposition and the means that it had resorted to at the polls. There is, therefore, no way it can wrangle the constitution at will. At least not yet.

The current rulers have not given up hope. They have not unveiled all the tricks under their sleeves. At least not yet.

Hence the madness to win the two-thirds in the House. It was blatantly exposed when two BNP parliamentary backbenchers were spirited away couple of months ago to be immediately enticed with the posts of state ministers. That was the first shot the Awami League had fired to set itself on the course to achieving the two-thirds. But it knows as much as everyone else does that it is still far away from that coveted but impossible figure. Even assuming that the entire Jatiya Party legislators would join hands, the figure is still short. The ruling party is, therefore, up to its second trick.

It appears that the task of setting the ball rolling has been given to Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury, who has repeatedly shown that impartiality is not his forte.

The incident on the 15th April should be seen strictly against this background. It may be a conspiracy to throw some BNP members out of the Par-

liament in one pretext or another and then fill those seats up with the Awami Leaguers through a kind of by-elections with the help of a pliable Election Commission. Not an easy task to achieve because nothing of it will go unchallenged, in court or in street.

The irony is that he sought to pick up legislators like Badruddoza Chowdhury, Sheikh Razzak Ali and MK Anwar as the main troublemakers. He has accused them of hurling some weightless projectiles at him, of advancing in an offensive manner towards the chair, of breaking furniture and TV camera and of showering some filthy abuses at him. However the three men have a reputation for their equanimity, for their remarkable phlegm. Doing something for which they have been alleged is just against their grain.

The key question, therefore, is: Who is responsible for the so-called *dance macabre*? History will tell us that howling, hurling, breaking, shouting are not BNP specialties. It is of AL. Their representative have done so umpteen times in the party's 42 years of existence. The latest one perhaps was in early 1994. A powerful minister in the current cabinet, backed by a group of his supporters, was about to physically attack the Deputy Speaker Humayun Khan Panni who was then presiding. Clearly unhappy with one of his rulings, they rushed to the dais

with their faces red with bell-cose anger. On being stopped by Sergeant-at-Arms, they showered Panni with abuses before staging a walkout.

Pity is that those who pretend to be somewhat non-partisan do not have any qualms for the things that the Awami League had done in the past. Their preposterous argument is that the BNP must now apologise to the Speaker for what some of their legislators have allegedly done. If the Awami League did not apologise at that time, well it didn't matter much. They didn't think that the Awami League had insulted the Parliament at that time.

These people had nothing to say at the time when one of the Awami League legislators dangled a shoe at the Leader of the House. They didn't consider it as an insult to the Parliament. They had also no comments when a minister of the present government brazenly thumbed them, not an insult to the Parliament either. The only insult, according to them, is when the BNP does a thing that its adversary perceives as being similar to the ones it used to do while in the opposition. How much double standard are we going to encounter?

I have no comments on the pro-government commentators, because they are put up for that kind of job. But what about others? What about those who fault the BNP in every twist and turn, give the Awami League a clean bill of health and yet brag

about their non-partisan presentation? The maxim that non-partisanship does not countenance double standards should not be unknown to them.

The question now comes to the apology. Apology for what? For the Speaker's generosity in not letting the opposition speak in the House? For the success of the chair in silencing the voice of the opposition on the police firing that killed at least three of their men?

If the BNP has brought the so-called shame and dishonour upon the Parliament by its alleged behaviour, has the Speaker brought glory, honour and dignity to the Parliament by his? Some tend to provide cosmetic criticism of the Speaker. They say his actions were not a Himalayan mistake. In other words, it amounts to saying that what the Speaker did by silencing the voice of the opposition was not that wrong anyway.

However, even if it is accepted that this was not a Himalayan mistake, what was the best course open to the opposition in a situation like that? Sit quiet, suck thumb and then go home like a good boy after the Home Minister has had a free run of his story and flayed the opposition in the process? Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury never, repeat never, spelt out that he would give the opposition the right to discuss the Home Minister's homily. His only assertion was that he would give them "a chance to speak after the minister has finished."

This is a tactics by which the opposition has long been injured.

The opposition knew he would wind up proceedings as soon as the Home Minister had spoken. Would those protagonists of apology still insist that the opposition would even not make any noisy protest at such an event? They cannot even have any outburst of anger on seeing that the very fabric of the 7th Parliament is being destroyed ruthlessly?

The Speaker has undermined his own office, brought indignity to the House. Why don't the protagonists ask him, rather than the BNP legislators, to apologise to the nation for the systematic destruction of the Parliament?

It has become a moral responsibility for the BNP Parliamentary Party to move a No Confidence motion against him. This is the most honourable attempt to save the remnants of the 7th Parliament. Agreed, it would not be as easy task to achieve. The ruling party has larger number of seats in the Parliament than that of the BNP. But it would be interesting to see how the Jatiya Party, which once discarded him, votes in that motion. Let historical records be straightened.

Apology? No and Never; No-Confidence? Yes. Of Course.

The writer is a member of National Standing Committee of BNP and former minister and MP and former president of FBCCI.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

English or Bengali medium — a dilemma

Sir, The tendency to attack the English medium schools has recently become very common. People are attacking such schools from different viewpoints. As an English medium student myself, I have noticed both positive and negative sides of being a student in such an institution. English medium schools generally have more experienced teachers and the quality of students is better as well. This is evident from the fact that these institutions have better results. The English medium schools are not affordable for everyone and so they land up catering for only the cream of the society. On the other hand, a good percentage of the people are able to study in a Bengali medium school. They are also smart and can speak English fluently.

Bengali medium students cannot speak English that well, but why should they be ashamed of not being able to speak a second language properly? Shouldn't the fact that they are more intimate friends as well as better human beings count for anything? Yes, I strongly stress that they are better human beings than the English medium students. They are not snobs who waste their time noticing how much money their friends have, how well they dress etc., rather they view friends the way they should be looked at.

I have noticed that the Bengali medium students are generally prepared to share what they have and are not jealous of each other. We must understand that most of these students are

not very well off, although there are some rich students attending such institutions and most of them are smart, the majority do not possess the required smartness because their atmosphere does not allow them to do so. I am sure they will do even better than the English medium students had they the means because being a good human being in addition, would have raised them to the skies.

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Think before blaming opponents

Sir, Undoubtedly almost all of us are subject to the whimsical hie-and-seek playing of electricity these days. Last year Minister Nooruddin (for power and energy) told that the government was fully aware of the crisis and hoped to solve the problem within the shortest possible time. He also gave time limit for twice or three and never failed to iterate and reiterate that the crisis was the result of the negligence of the former government.

He also took the trouble to let the countrymen know that Khaleda Zia's government established no power station which was supposed to be done to keep pace with the growing demand of power and did not add a single megawatt to the then existing production.

Since then almost ten months have passed away and with the departure of winter the horrible loadshedding has returned. That means no improvement worth mentioning has been accomplished during the last one and a half years.

No more road accident

Sir, It is a matter of great sorrow that reckless driving of motor cars, trucks and buses on the streets is not only a nuisance but also causes unnatural death which is feared to imagine. Pedestrians are often knocked down and sometimes run over by the trucks running at a very high speed. On an average, more than 10 people die in road accident per day.

It is true that there are penalties for exceeding speed-limits while driving. But such offences are most often committed by the police as well as by the government. It is high time for the City Corporation authorities to take a very serious view of the matter and enforce their laws more strictly ever before. It may be a rumour or a fact that the drivers who have no licences are also allowed to drive by the traffic police who also take bribes. If it is true, they should think that our lives are more valuable than money. Public safety demands greater attention of the lawmakers (who were elected by us).

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Pollution

Sir, Most of the Dhaka city dwellers are facing these unbearable environmental problems. On the streets we can see out-of-order vehicles plying. Also we have to stop using hydrolic horns which are harmful for road-side hospital patients.

A K M Mahabubul Hoque  
Dhaka City College, Dhaka

Smelling rat

Sir, We were all very relieved to see the arrest of a Obayedul Mather who is the accused of violating a 6-year-old girl within the CMM building. I was, for a very short time, proud of the police force too. But it only lasted not more than 24 hours. On March 24 we learnt that the culprit had been forced by bribes and injections to confess. I small rat in it.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak  
Dhaka

Reporting rape cases

Sir, In an article in the Reader's Digest, Nov '93 under the heading, 'Have Thy No Shame', one Ginger Casey wrote that the way most journalists now-a-days behave, in order to 'get a story' or best to 'make a story', is shocking. With independent news agencies and tabloid people everywhere for taking 'live shots' or for 'firsthand' stories, it becomes very painful, at times, for people in distress.

In the world of newspaper reporting or/and TV news, viewers only see the end products of journalism, never its process. While those affected are struggling to pick up the pieces of life, the journalists rarely consider the consequences of their presence there. For, to them, a crying child/woman on camera is a powerful image to sell. They rarely understand in their game-plan that they are overstepping the bounds.

In general, they don't want their competitors to have any angle they don't have. Again, during highly charged events the reporters do not necessarily act, but mostly react and use the tragedy for their advancement. The journalists have some moral and ethical responsibility that goes beyond objective reporting. It is the responsibility to be gentle and compassionate to those in pain. Take cases of rapes recently reported in our national

dailies/weeklies.

Why must we name a victim or put up the address? The worse is the descriptions: "raped repeatedly, one after another for the whole night, till leaving the victim critically injured in the morning..." etc. It is rather corruptionism. It is a sort of perversion. The event itself was painful; why 'kill' her a second time?

Col Mirza Shafi (Rtd)  
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Community-policing is a must now

Sir, It is beyond my comprehension as to why deteriorating state of violation of basic human rights, physical assault and abuses — rampantly and unabatedly occurring in almost all parts of the country. Each day's news and pictures make me sick and I have no expression to ventilate my disgust. I wonder how many such cases of rape, child abuse and other heinous crimes go unnoticed or unpublished?

Much has been said, discussed (at the highest level i.e. the Parliament) without any result. I regret to say that I am losing confidence on all these law enforcing agencies and even on myself. It is time for us to think quickly and positively and I suggest we may adopt community policing to combat these social evils. If conscious citizens, important personalities etc., are inspired to come forward, we shall definitely have a breakthrough combination of sincere efforts by law enforcing agencies, and help from community police with surely yield in better result.

However, I must point out that the present lacking of our police department with PR and to infuse trust and confidence in each and every citizen may deter many willing persons to come forward. These shortcomings must be overcome before undertaking such project. System of reward and recognition

should also be thought of. I expect the readers of the DS will find my proposal worthy of a try.

Tanzia Chowdhury  
Comilla.

Spreading slums

Sir, As reported in a national daily based on a survey in 1996, there are 3000 slums and squatter settlements in and around the metropolises, and 77 per cent are located in private properties. Mass exodus from the countryside is taking place — more and more people are congregating in urban areas as their cities of hope. In fact, the megacities of today are not cities in the traditional sense of the term, they are urban agglomerations with increasingly ill-defined boundaries.

The Reader's Digest of March '98 states, 'These cities of excess are all in the grip of similar problems: poor housing conditions, air pollution, overcrowding, insecurity, inequality and exclusion.' The article describes four of them — Bangkok, Mumbai, Lagos and Rio. In reporting on the two Asian cities: — Sixty per cent of Bangkok police suffer from respiratory and hearing problems; lead and dust suspension is nearly three times higher than levels human can tolerate; forty working days per year are lost to traffic delays and pollution amounts for 1,400 deaths per year.

— In Mumbai, property and riches live side-by-side, slums have half the city's population; per sqm price of real estate is very high; the rich, about 1 per cent holds the reins of the city's economy and cultural life and despite successive pregnancies females in slums work long hours etc. Slum living never helps these unfortunate families and as we cannot improve their living conditions there and services to city dwellers suffer — more they are discouraged, the better.

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