

The Kashmir Cross-fire

This is no ordinary report of gunfire across the disputed Kashmir border between India and Pakistan. Interminably picking up in August every year somewhat remindfully coinciding with independence anniversary celebrations of both countries and then tapering off with the wintry silence of the advancing glacial stare in that region. When 88 soldiers and civilians die on both sides from barely five days of artillery exchanges across the line of control, some hamlets are deserted, violation of air space is alleged, Pakistan claims demolition of a Brigadier-level outfit at the border, India decries terrorist forays into Himachal Pradesh, well, the situation is evidently 'unprecedentedly' tense there.

Barring a few instances, it seems the mortars are largely falling on village hamlets, taking civilian tolls, something which, we must say, hurts our sensibilities deeply, especially as a SAARC nation. This warlike situation is set against the overall backdrop of both India and Pakistan having gone openly nuclear raising the risk rating of South Asian security. They have no command and control structure as yet to obviate nuclear misadventure. At a time like this, even frayed tempers and trading of provocative utterances are better avoided, to say nothing of exchanging fire-balls. If the perception is that one could stretch the use of conventional weaponry latching on to the nuclear deterrence factor then we would of course say it is flawed on two counts: First, there could be an overuse of the conventional weapons option and secondly, with patience thus taxed and nerves gone taut, the nuclear button might just get pressed in desperation.

We have always held that Indo-Pak equanimity is central to peace and stability in the whole of South Asia. It is inexplicable why closely on the heels of the just-staged Vajpayee-Sharif meeting in Colombo, their joint announcement of a resolve to re-start a dialogue process and the actual follow-up on this through talks at the secretary-level, Indo-Pak relations have deteriorated so sharply. Just the first round of talks have failed, so what?

We don't think they have walked the full avenues of diplomacy and exhausted all their skill and imagination falling flat out on the Kashmir question. With Kashmir reaching the centre-stage of global concerns following South Asia's nuclearisation, it is diplomacy and not militarism should rightly be the instrument to address it wholly and squarely.

Unpleasant Expose

Health Ministry's health is not in the pink, no one was in the dark about it. Rumbles of discontentment were filtering through to the press for quite some time. Either it was in the form of dispute between the Minister and the State Minister for the latter not having much to do, or it was the little less audible nevertheless more significant bad vibes between the Minister and the Secretary.

It all came to a head Sunday last in the parliamentary committee meeting when the Secretary according to the report of a leading Bangla daily openly called the Minister 'a liar'. The hell reportedly broke loose over the tendering process of an ADB funded project. We do not know exactly what led to this ugly outburst but it has gone to confirm whatever we have come to hear all this while. This cannot be anyone's idea of a professional atmosphere. There is not even a modicum of understanding, so it seems, at the upper echelons of the said ministry. Apparently the Minister did not have updated information on the tendering process. Things took a different course from what he had instructed before leaving the country on a trip abroad. We all understand the scope and range of difference in opinion between two individuals specially when they are from fields as varied as bureaucracy and politics. It is natural. The Minister and Secretary may not have shared the same perception of the matter but professionalism demanded that they came to the meeting after having ironed out those differences beforehand. There is no denying that by bringing up their differences in public no good has been done to the system. Government offices and agencies in our country are not really known for enjoying public confidence nor are all the ministers and secretaries in an ideal relationship with each other. People can't be blamed for thinking that with such hiccups the future of public welfare, let alone health, is not all that encouraging. Every manifestation of internal glitch among the authorities dents the ebbing confidence of public in government institutions.

The matter which has been brought to the notice of both Prime Minister and the Speaker, we hope, would be promptly resolved for an early return of normalcy to the ministry. A blend of truth and propriety should help us do that.

A Friend Indeed!

What is friendship? Who is a friend? Everyone knows a friend in need to be a friend in deed. Indeed! What did Majibur Rahman need from his friend Manirul Huq? We don't know. But we know about the latter's deed. On Sunday afternoon, Mukta, the teenage school going daughter of Majib, was kidnapped by her chaacha Manir. The rogue, accompanied by an accomplice, travelled up to Mujib's courtyard where Mukta was playing with her dog. The two caught hold of the girl, dragged her to the microbus, forced her in and drove away. There was no trace of them till late last night.

Some newspaper reports suggest that Manir had a scuffle with his friend a few days back and had warned him that he would kidnap his daughter. He proved true to his word. A man of honour and a friend indeed!

In a society of crumbling values man's oldest and most enduring devices of human relationship, no wonder, would also suffer and degenerate. Love and understanding, sympathy and mutual respect — are each a stupendous thing not having now many aspiring to attain. And friendship is something that embodies all four and, perhaps, much more. Down the ages the dog's loyalty to his master had only one parallel—a friend's loyalty to his/her friend. More enduring and abiding than any other human bonding — filial and conjugal included.

The word is now much abused and mere acquaintances are described as friends. Parties to marriages of convenience are also said to be friends. The end of convenience quite so often sliding into a stab in the back. But to abuse a relationship that exists between an uncle and his niece, is what turns a dagger inside one's guts.

Men are by nature reformers. Endeavouring to change others in order to maintain or create desired situations for themselves, or to change themselves in order to accommodate to unyielding circumstances or to realise a new dream. If this is a realistic description of reform, then we may assume that the present administrative reformers in Bangladesh are either interested to change others for the sake of the former or change themselves for the sake of the latter. As for the 'new dream', there is none to our knowledge.

There has been no demand in the country for public administrative reforms from any quarters — either government, NGOs, universities, private organizations, citizens' groups or even administrators themselves. Why then have Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC) with its chairman enjoying the status of a minister, with necessary paraphernalia and perquisites of office? It has been a fashion with every in-coming government — beginning with the Martial Law government of Ayub Khan — to set up PARCs and keep some high officials engaged in low profiles. When the PARC submits its report, it is examined by a higher body of officials — sometimes by ministers, and then referred to another body of experts to examine their recommendations. Such bodies of experts have other business to take care of, and they seldom meet, and if they meet, they don't agree on this or that matter. The net result of all these exercises — involving lots of money, time, and energy — is almost zero. For the PARCs are almost never accepted, let alone implemented. Yet PARCs are formed and resources expended on them with little or no good accruing to the people.

Yet, some benefit of doubt may be given to the present PARC whose chairman 'stressed the need for administrative reforms' (DS 11.7.98) and 'decided to distribute questionnaires among people for fixing reform modalities... holding seminars and workshops and arranging interviews and roundtable conferences in the civil society' (ibid), and opined that 'comprehensive status papers on some specific issues will be presented at the next meeting of the PARC'. This paper is an humble attempt to assist the PARC with some thoughts.

The amorphous nomenclature

To the Editor

The trap of drugs

Sir, With the help of drugs the young generation enter seemingly a world of charm and colourful dreams. But after a short period it turns out to be a nightmare. Though various reasons may be recognised behind such abuse, mere recognition and policy-making to prevent it can do a little. No effective and bold steps have so far been taken, and as a result, there is no positive sign to prevent this misuse of drugs.

Some well-recognised places like, Gulistan, Chankharup, Naya Bazar, Malibag Raigata area have been the open market of drugs. Buying, selling and taking drugs are as easy as buying cigarettes. Even our Home Minister, Rafiqul Islam himself is a witness of an event of drug-dealing at Malibag, the news of which was printed in the national dailies.

But still the situation has not changed.

Dr Zahurul Haq Dept. of Law, DU

A different zone

Sir, As we all know, there was a time when red-light zones in and around Dhaka were restricted in Tanbazaar, Kandupatti, English Road, and the like. Some time back the inmates of the Kandupatti brothel were evicted by some local influential group. Finding no alternative the girls had to move to the streets of the capital and some shifting to other brothels of the country. Now these floating sex workers are polluting the city's atmosphere to a great deal, attracting clients mainly the youth section. May be a time will come in the near future when these evicted girls will be rehabilitated, but will the so-called 'pollution' end? Not at all, till the camouflaged call-girls are wiped away from the society! We give a bad name only to the unlucky girls from Kandupatti, Tanbazaar, etc., as prostitutes but, we never think of the 'aristocratic' girls/women from the city's posh areas who nowadays sell themselves for sheer joy or for money to clients of their similar social calibre.

Rehabilitating the evicted inmates of Kandupatti is far less a problem than that of these 'elite' girls/women of the society who are poisoning the country.

S M Hossain Banani, Dhaka

Pre-shipment inspection

Sir, The voluntary pre-shipment inspection (PSI) introduced in 1991 has cropped up as bane and not boon to our national exchequer losing revenue worth crores of taka in every fiscal year. The unscrupulous importers in connivance with PSI agent evade huge import duty and other related taxes.

In order to check forgery and corruptions, our business community demands Voluntary

PSI to be replaced by Comprehensive PSI along with the appointment of bona fide PSI agents registered with International Custom Union.

It may be mentioned that Comprehensive PSI is working most satisfactorily in 50 countries of the world and Voluntary PSI is in force in Bangladesh only and nowhere else in the world.

Abdul Mazed 13, Rajani Bose Lane, Dhaka

Reconstruction in Bosnia

Sir, A German minister visited Sarajevo and agreed with President Izetbegovic recently that refugees should return to their homeland as soon as possible. This is urgently needed to reconstruct the war-ravaged Bosnia.

Though there are various problems for the refugees like shortage of job, lack of international assistance, danger of landmines etc., yet for a lasting peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina, all of them must return.

And the culprits of the war must be properly punished to restore human rights all over the world.

Amir Dhaka

Helping the victims

A news item reporting that the Muktiuddha Sangshad is setting up booths at different city junctions to raise money for the flood victims raised my eye-brows.

It is definitely important that we all stand by the unfortunate victims of the natural calamity. But trying to collect donations on streets not only will hamper the smooth traffic but unless monitored very closely may cause unnecessary criticism for the organisers and the organization. I hope the organisers will reconsider their decision and come up with some other way to help the flood victims.

Akku Chowdhury Banani, Dhaka

Rehabilitation of orphans

Sir, The government runs several programmes for the protection of children. At present there are about 76 government orphanages in which 9500 children live. Also there are over 1000 private registered orphanages where 66,000 children are taken care of. Besides the orphanages there are three baby homes, twelve institutions for the disabled children where 2,300 children live.

But this is unfortunate that these organisations don't receive enough grant from the government. Authorities should make strong plan and programme for the rehabilitation of those orphans.

Mostafa Sohel Dhaka

Public Administration Reforms Commission

People as Prologue

by M Anisuzzaman

All you need is to go to a village, union, thana, or district, and observe how the people suffer at the hands of officials. Then pause a while, ask officers to expedite the process — if necessary by using your high office — then and there without losing a moment. The people will see for themselves what senior officers can do in mitigating their sufferings.

to others.

If the PM considers that a particular PARC matter needs her quick attention, it will be disposed of so quickly. If she does not so consider, the matter must wait. It appears from the PARC meeting (DS 11.7.98) that the meeting reviewed the progress in this sector and the pace of implementation of the interim recommendations on some issues submitted early to the prime minister (ibid). One may read whatever he wants in these sentences. It is however clear that some issues have been under submission for a considerable time.

For a layman, I don't understand why everything must be referred to the PM. A foreign visitor, who had an appointment with an official in the secretariat narrated this incident to me. He was on time and the official was available. When the former opened his bag for the papers for discussion, the latter was interrupted by several phone calls and visits of lesser officials in connection with the visit of a Joint Secretary to Singapore. The poor fellow could hardly talk. There were talks, movement of the files, phone, and repeated visits by clerks and peons — leading to such a hue and cry that the foreign visitor rose thanking his guest that nothing could be done in such a milieu. The latter remarked: 'What can I do? The JS must have PM's clearance to enable him to proceed with his programme. We are connecting this office with other offices. So we care busy.' The visiting foreign guest remarked: 'I am Joint Secretary myself and I came here with my Secretary's permission. Why can't your JS do that?'

Now, imagine that 30 JS go abroad every month. So every day the PM has a JS file on her desk. With Bangladesh entering into the fast moving world, such visits would increase creating additional work load for the PM. Can this be simplified by revising the Rules of Business enabling the Secretary or Additional Secretary to permit JS visits abroad. For the Secretary the Minister should be the one to permit. This little revision would free the PM to devote to more useful work. The PARC might consider studying the Rules of Business and suggest necessary modifications.

There was a news item that

the government was updating the Warrant of Precedence. This book lays down who is upon whom — a book of hierarchy — with ministers and others graded into categories — a legacy left by the British rulers. Is this something worth doing? Should a democracy spend time on such trivialities? How does it help the people for whom alone the entire government exists? Can the PARC show the government a much better thing to keep itself busy with? At any rate, the Warrant of Precedence must be the last thing to engage a free government.

Decision delays: The WB Report — to which a reference is already made — lists bureaucratic hassles of doing business in Bangladesh. It conducted a survey and presents the following findings:

* Customs delays: On average it took 12 days (with a maximum of 30 days for the exporters) imported inputs to be released through customs at ports or airports.

* 9 days (with a maximum of 75 days) to obtain customs clearance for exporting a shipment.

* 7 days (with a maximum of 30 days) to complete all the documents required for exports.

* Cost of Interaction: A great deal of time — more than half a person-year — is needed to deal with government agencies... Firms had to spend, on average 7% of their sales revenue to overcome the import and export delays by government agencies.

* Duty drawback — on average it takes 58 days with a maximum of 120 days, and 6% additional expenditure, to get a refund cheque from the Duty Exemption and Drawback office.

* Lost orders — 73% of the exporters have lost export orders at some point..... (WB, Op. Cit. P. 6)

It would be futile to comment on these. The matter is crystal clear: businessmen are suffering because of bureaucratic mentalities and modalities — most of which are dispensable. Would PARC find it relevant and within their province to take a look?

Such examples can be multiplied. The people's suffering knows no bounds while our officers are impervious — saving their skin by the rules they

themselves have helped frame.

The elusive 'Public': The public — viz., the people are the prologue of Public Administration for whose service alone there can be the only rationalization of government — its *Raison d'être*. Yet it is this people who are conspicuous by their absence in any forum of Public Administration. Even if the Public Administration is not of and by the public, the people would condone it if it is for the public. The PM has been on record that it is not and not only that, it is anti-people in that the people are made to suffer on this or that rule — whenever they interact with officials. Not only the PM, the donor agencies, the NGOs, the citizens forums, and the suffering members of the public have from time to time registered voices, but to no avail.

The public hears the talk of 'Ombudsman' the Citizens' Grievance Body — provided for in our constitution (Art. 77) to seek redress from official inaction. Yet no concrete action follows. Our only redeeming feature is that the PM has been underscoring two principles: 'accountability' and 'transparency' — meaning that government officials — both elected and appointed — must be held responsible for their actions and that the methods by which they operate must be visible to the public eye. While the principles are laudable, these are not yet practiced. The author of the precepts is yet to give us the operational means by which to translate the principles into reality.

No greater proof of this can be seen than the BTV programme — *Partiprekhhit* — where the defaulting officers were shown and asked why the members of the public were made to suffer because of administrative delays, inaction and insensitivity. It must be said to the credit of the young man who underwent considerable hardships in producing the programme. In some cases, he was able to redress the grievance of the people, assuage their wounds, lessen their suffering, while in most cases, he was not able to achieve a modicum of success. Yet the attempt inspires confidence in our people that it is possible to turn a corner of the table given proper attention. The issues and problems — isolated for action by

the people — are not isolated for action by

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OPINION

In Anger and in Sorrow

by Humayun Kabir, Bir Pratik

RUBEL's tragic death in the hands of the police that has shocked and traumatized the whole country, is an incident as good as any among a multitude of other woes and ills that are choking the sanity and the very basis of our existence in Bangladesh society today.

In despair and in anger I have taken to pen and paper which at best today is a weak protest and perhaps will fail to reach the eyes and ears of those that run the affairs of the state and govern the country on people's choice. Living in today's Bangladesh with its poverty, illiteracy, over-population, we are of course under no illusion that, we are the citizens of one of the world's poorest countries burdened with a host of problems. As befits a poor country and a materially poor society, we will be having our share of problems and wants will remain. We cannot compare our life standards with that of the developed countries in terms of material prosperity and social benefits. It is only obvious.

But everything considered, when we recollect our heritage and rich culture, the history of our great struggle and sacrifice and the glorious emergence of Bangladesh as a free nation on the world's map, the most important question that comes to the forefront of our mind is have we as a nation after 27 years of our independence reached our logical and expected goal? Bangladesh emerged on the world map triumphantly, after a bloody and cruel war, challenging the machinations of many a power and super power. What a beginning and what promises the birth of Bangladesh held for its expectant millions! And then, what happened next?

We must need now to ask this question of ourselves and those that control our destiny, and seek and deserve an equitable and satisfactory answer. Our people, our leaders, our brothers and sisters have made great sacrifices for this country, for this independent Bangladesh. We had fought a heroic and tragic war. The freedom was earned through a great price, the blood of three million martyrs, honour of our mothers and sisters and sufferings of countless millions. All this cannot go in vain, it must count for something!

We Bangladeshes as a race are an interesting matrix. A people, emotionally charged, mercurial in nature, quick to fear and anger and quick in forgetting and forgiveness. Historical amnesia shrouds our national mind. Our spine possesses an unusual elasticity and we can

almost adjust to any circumstances and absorb any amounts of abuse. Collectively we nurture a passive attitude to life and its businesses, our religious inheritance helping us to develop a fatalist approach to the conditions all around us. We are able to compromise and perhaps rationalize everything that annoys us with a show of mild anger, weak protest then passing through the phases of frustration, despair and finally settling in a state of apathy.

This is not to disparage my fellow countrymen, but spoken in sorrow and in anger. For, there is nothing wrong with our people. They are humble, poor, diligent, submissive, simple, peace loving and basically a good lot. They are the silent majority, the passive mass, who only help to make up the total and usually are at the receiving end of things. The movers, who run the show, control and manipulate the destiny of our people conducting the affairs of the Government, belong to an elitist structure constituting no more than 2 per cent of our population. Our rulers (I shall not call them representatives of the people, by the people or for the people) knew and recognized this, took full advantage to run the country for their own selfish ends, to realize their way they had been able to dash all our hopes and squander all our dreams away.

I only touch upon the cumulative results here without elaborating or analyzing on this aspect of history of our nation after Liberation as it will be long chapter and require a separate premise. But the sum total is that the country was headed in the wrong direction early on, contrary to all our hopes and expectation, uninspired or guided by the spirit and the ideals of the Liberation War.

What has essentially gone wrong? As a Freedom Fighter, the great affliction I suffer these days is a haunting question that turns over and over in my mind, is this the country we fought for in 1971? Were all those lives lost and sacrifices made only to come to this end which is our present reality? Whether culmination of all our dreams? The doubt grips and corrodes the mind like acid with the rising feeling that many things have gone drastically wrong. Bangladesh has become an unweeded garden and many things have gone rotten in this state of ours today. I with all my countrymen would want to know what does our Freedom and our Independence really mean! I do not

want my life and the lives of my children to be valueless commodity. I don't want my innocent son to be picked up by an agency of the government (that we helped to come to power), tortured and killed without compunction, without rhyme, reason or justice.

I don't want our daughters and sisters raped, as if it were a sport, and then helplessly see the rapists go unpunished. I don't want acid thrown on young girls and women, their lives shattered, condemned to live in a condition that is worse than hell, and with abject horror see the criminals walk free, weasled or greased out of the clutches of law.

There is no justice, the moral fabric is degenerated. Compromising all our values has become the acceptable norm. Our life today is an existence of convenience only, not for goodness, not for anything worthy. There is corruption in every sphere — in education institutions, in administrative, in social and civil services, in medical services, utility services. It is rife and pervasive and we seem not to be shocked or bothered anymore. This acquiescence and the lost ability to question or protest is ominous for our nation and an unworthy legacy for a people who snatched their Independence after a baptism in blood.

I see the anger and often lapse into despair. What are we really coming to? It is said that we Bangladeshes have the unique merit of spoiling or destroying whatever good is there in us. It is uttered neither in cynicism nor in zest. Or, how can we explain that wayward morality that allows our values to disintegrate, our morality to slide for the sake of gaining and retaining political power. This poor country which must count its human resource as its major asset and national wealth to be exploited towards any meaningful development should allow the two most potential actors the Students (who will be our future leaders, doctors, engineers, businessmen, bureaucrats, etc.) and the Labourers (who actually give production contributing to national income and growth) to become the worst victims of our political games! This is absolutely myopic, selfish, unpardonable and suicidal for this nation.

Once roused the Bangladeshes can create moments and events that often rise to great proportions leaving marks upon history. Language movement of '52, six point movement in the closing sixties, election of '70 and the war of '71 will amply bear

this social or administrative reformer — relate to some one not getting his salary for months, or pensions withheld on a pretext hardly justifiable, patients not getting medicine at hospitals, doctors not available when the patients need them, and even if the doctor is available, diagnostic laboratories are not functioning for lack of technicians, X-ray-films, electricity, etc. The Post & Telecommunications Minister himself was shown on TV calling No. 17 (enquiry) several times and getting no answer. If the minister gets such service, what service the ordinary people are getting from T&T Department can be easily imagined. These are occasions when the members of the public come in touch with officials and their experience leaves much to be desired. These are what Public Administration is and should be all about.

To PARC: A humble supplication: The reason for the above scenario points up one lesson for PARC. In the past, PARC — efficiency, economy, human resource development, training, decentralization, etc. This time for a change, why not take up simple, small things indicated earlier here and lessen the suffering of the people. That little step — if taken in all earnestness — might lead to a quantum jump — a great leap forward in Public Administration. To do so, all you need is to go to a village, union, thana, or district, and observe how the people suffer at the hands of officials. Then pause a while, ask officers to expedite the process — if necessary by using your high office — then and there without losing a moment. The people will see for themselves what senior officers can do in mitigating their sufferings.

The 'people' phenomenon is highlighted here because the present PARC is about to 'distribute questionnaires for fixing reform modalities... holding seminars, roundtable conferences... This method of data collection is anti-people — as most of them are not literate. They are not interested in questionnaires, seminars and conferences. They want their sufferings redressed. The answers to the questionnaires are already known to the PARC — the point is to go to them, observe them suffering, and do something on the spot.

To end this diatribe, let me quote the English journalist G K Chesterton:

'Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget; For we the people of England, that have never spoken yet.'

The writer, a former member of Administrative Reform Commission (1982), is a part-time teacher of Public Administration, University of Dhaka.

that out. In recent memory we can recall the public tribunal organized for the trial of war criminals of '71 led by Zahanara Imam, the mother symbol for all Freedom Fighters, when people unhesitatingly rallied round demonstrating once again their massive support, that called upon a worthy cause our people never fail.

After living in this Independent Bangladesh for 27 years I am increasingly convinced and forced to the sad conclusion that we had won the war in '71 in the battle field with great panache and then lost the prize of victory in peace time subsequently. What a pity! We had triumphantly announced to the world that we have become free and then we gradually discover that we still remain in bondage. Bondage of class exploitation, poverty, superstitions, often even religious persecution, illiteracy and greatest of them all the bureaucratic oppression. Specially the bureaucracy, for in character it still retains the colonial mould, exploitative and serving the purpose of an elitist minority. Colonial administration that the British developed over a period of 200 years was for one purpose only to subjugate the people and exploit the sub-continent's resources for their benefit. With the sub-continent's Independence in 1947, the bureaucracy per force went through same change but it still retained 80 per cent of its original oppressive and exploitative nature.

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Is the tragic death of Rubel an omen? The final straw? Has not the time come for us to shake ourselves from amnesia, from apathy, from lethargy to rise, to make a stand, to declare and demand an end to this state of things and try for a better life, the life we deserve as free citizens of liberated Bangladesh, the golden Bengal of our dreams?