Dhaka, Wednesday, September 16, 1998 A New Challenge for NGOs

Just as we had expected, the principal NGOs of the country have voiced a collective response to the demands of the situation created by the outgoing century's most pauperising floods. The bottomline of their approach seems to be the immediate shoring up of a virtually collapsing micro-credit system. This is indispensable for three reasons: first, income-generating activities are the best form of economic rehabilitation one can think of. They are an anti-dote to recession which the floods otherwise raise the spectre of. Secondly, this will bolster people's plummetting purchasing power. Last but not the least, the much-acclaimed microcredit system has to help the poor to their feet at the hour of their greatest need to prove its worth in

a crisis situation. Most of the NGOs carrying out micro-credit operations are contemplating a few months' moratorium on loan repayment by poor borrowers in the calamity-stricken areas to enable them to pick up the pieces of their wrecked lives. At the operational level, this could mean a snapping of the microcredit cycle which has been moving around the orbit of augmentation and recycling of money. But now comes the possibility of a temporary limbo in the rotation and revolution of funds through the prospect of a moratorium.

Since the temporary reprieve on loan repayment is a dire necessity at this juncture which must now unquestionably be met we have to take special measures to bridge the gap and keep the microcredit system running at the maximum efficiency level. Some NGOs are thinking of creating new funds for their stake-holders with a view to supporting income-generating activities immediately on the heels of water recession.

Principally, we think, the government has to inject fresh funds into the micro-credit system via Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) which has the skill and know-how in the area to make it work at an optimal level.

Untenable

This is how an attitudinal flaw in the form of systemic inefficiency gums up the works even in an emergency situation. A Daily Star report yesterday dwelt on the sufferings of country's ready-made garment exporters due to non-cooperation by the Civil Aviation and Biman authorities. An aircraft hired with the express intention of helping struggling exporters meet the international business deadline has reportedly made three round trips in two days when it was supposed to be doing six sorties a day. Imagine! Only after an intervention from the PM's office the apparently pernickety CAAB people who were earlier making unnecessary fuss over the code of the destinations stopped dragging their feet. Biman employees purportedly, however, continued their non-co-operation in loading or unloading operations at both the airports in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Valuable time is being lost and the whole purpose of emergency procurement of a plane stands to lose its efficacy. Also a huge financial loss stares in the face of BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association). Apart from the fact that the export time-table is being upset, it is obligated to pay Taka 2.25 crore to the local firm that hired the plane. Besides, it is not only readymade garment business that is put in jeopardy. Distribution of emergency relief material is being hampered as well. In addition to the job of carrying export garments to Chittagong the rented Y-8 aircraft has the added responsibility of bringing emergency relief imports to the capital on its way back to Dhaka from Chittagong.

Then the messing around has taken the mickey out of not only the businessmen but also the foreign crew of the aircraft. What an image of the country they are projecting to the outside world! Everything, no matter how urgent it is, has to suffer a detour through bureaucratic ambages in Bangladesh. Sometimes it is the system, sometimes it is temperament of the people who keep the system going which plays a havoc with an otherwise good initiative. In this case it is clearly attitudinal problem which deserves to be dealt with severely. But before the authorities go about taking the people responsible for the hassle into task, some emergency measure should be taken for the optimal use of the hired aircraft.

Good Luck, Primakov

When President Yeltsin, rebuffed twice by the Duma on his nomination of Chernomyrdin as Prime Minister, stumbled on the unlikely Primakov, formerly of the KGB, and the Communists accepted him, it was thought on all hands that the political crisis was over in Moscow. But everyone knew Primakov was no economic healer. And what Russia needed at the moment was to set her economy right.

The economic crisis has only been compounded by Primakov's appointing a Communist as the new Finance Minister and inducting into his cabinet another Communist. In a swift reaction the western financing organisations, IMF included, have told off Primakov not to expect of them any further bail-out dollar.

While this should not be taken as an empty threat it is also true that the west has by now too much financial stake in Russia not to help her out of this present predicament. Perhaps much will depend on the performance of the new cabinet rather than prejudices against the Communists. If the new government — new in spite of Yeltsin being there at the head — can infuse in the Russian public a semblance of confidence in the native economy, the day surely will have been saved. The western backers wouldn't have reason to rue over this sign of turning around.

It is being said, however, that the problem is, all said and done, political rather than economic. Wholesale reform, as per the western prescriptions, or going back to old ways if partially? Russian society seems to be about half and half divided over the question. There cannot be any cut and dried solution to this. Good luck, Premier Primakov.

Some Thoughts on this Year's Flood

EFORE I arrived in Dhaka last week on home leave, I was generally aware of the devastation caused by this year's flood. As the plane began its descent on Bangladesh territory. I got a visual picture of the vast expanse of the inundation. But it's only after my arrival and the experience in the last one week that I began to understand the extent and magnitude of the disaster it has

caused. It is widely recognized that this year's flood has been the worst natural calamity befalling Bangladesh in this century. Concerned and knowledgeable observers have urged the government to deal with the crisis on a war footing.

A few days ago the editor of The Daily Star, Mr Mahfuz Anam, appealed to the government to declare a national disaster emergency. His objective, I believe, was to put the entire nation and, as for that matter, the international community, on full alert about the gigantic tasks which lie ahead. Similarly, Prof. Yunus, in his article in The Daily Star last Sunday, described the effects of this year's flood as 'a disaster with catastrophic dimensions' and urged 'everybody to work with the worst case scenario, (and) nothing less than that'.

I am prompted by the impressions of these and other knowledgeable observers to add some of my own thoughts and impressions in this regard. The thoughts are based on my personal experience in dealing with large emergencies relating to displacements of population as a result of civil war or other man-made disasters. I am aware that such emergencies often differ a great deal, both in nature and magnitude, from natural disasters of the type facing Bangladesh today. And my knowledge about the latter is rather insignificant. Moreover, my knowledge about the government's emergency mechanism is almost non-existent. Hence, these thoughts may not be all that relevant. Let me nevertheless share them with the readers for whatever their worth. The impressions are, however, those I gathered over

the last one week. Some observers have compared the effects of this year's floods - particularly the damage it has caused to agriculture and some of the basic infrastructures of the country — to the destruction caused by the liberation war of 1971. At that time international sympathy for the plight of the new born country and generous financial support from donor governments helped to put the country back on its feet. This time around, however, we are a more matured and experienced nation and are expected to face the situation largely with our own means and expertise. There would of course be a need for substantial doses of international assistance because of the extent of the damage and the enormity of the losses suffered by the national economy. We must remember, however, that such assistance can only be forthcoming if, as a nation, we are able to demonstrate our seriousness and ability to deal with the situation in an effective manner. This will help generate the necessary international confidence and trust in us which has been on the wane for sometime in the past.

To establish its credibility, the government must show that a mechanism exists which is able to manage, co-ordinate and channel national and international efforts both during the floods as well as in the postflood reconstruction in an efficient and cost effective manner. Such a mechanism should be able to impress the people of Bangladesh as well as the international community, that the government is indeed dealing with the situation on a war

footing and with expertise. The impression that one gets today through the media is that a great deal is indeed being done by the government, political parties, civil societies, as well as concerned individuals and groups in the country to relieve the immediate plight of the flood-affected population. But it is not clear whether there is proper co-ordination mechanism to channel the efforts of

by Shamsul Bari programmes and the mecha-

nism for delivery?

As a start therefore, the government should come out with a well-defined programme of action, based on a thorough and professional assessment of needs, careful budgeting, and efficient implementing and monitoring mechanisms. The development, as well as the implementation, of such a programme of action would require, first and foremost, a proper co-ordination mechanism among the different sectors of activities. One is aware that there is a Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief to co-ordinate government's efforts in disaster situations generally. However, since the present emergency is more than a disaster, and has assumed the status of a national calamity, a new and higher level of co-ordination mechanism may be

necessary. From my personal experience, nominating a Chief Coordinator in disaster management is always very useful. The Prime Minster herself could be the Chief Co-ordinator for flood relief and rehabilitation or she could name someone else to undertake this responsibility. The

tasks for the duration of the emergency. [All these are probably taking place already with the Prime Minister serving as the Chief Co-ordinator and her Ministers as Sector Co-ordinators. If that is the case, it may be helpful for the government to publish reports of the meetings of the co-ordinating body on a regular basis. This will be immensely reassuring to the peo-

To be effective, any emergency assistance must be based on a sound assessment of the needs of the affected population. It is not clear whether this is being done presently on a systematic basis. It should be the responsibility of the Sector Coordinators to assess and quantify the needs in their respective sectors of responsibility. They in turn will be assisted in their tasks by Site Co-ordinators in charge of specific geographical areas. In Bangladesh, I believe, this would be the role of District Commissioners. They are the key players in establishing the real needs in all the sectors. They should be able to discharge their responsibilities on an objective basis without undue pressure from political or other forces. The political parties and

have proven time and again their legendary resilience in acing and surviving calamities of all sorts. This time too they have demonstrated over the last two months their ability to bear pain and suffering with dignity. equanimity and courage. The smiles on the faces of people standing in neck-deep flood water or living on rooftops have amazed many foreign observers. This is the strength of our people, this is our pride. But no one should take this for granted for ever. It is surprising that even in the face of such horrendous difficulties the people do not break into rage more often. This may, however, happen if they are not satisfied with the sincerity and efficacy of the government's efforts. The real test will come after the water has receded and people start returning to their home, or whatever is left of it, to rebuild their lives once again. What means would they have to undertake such a task when they have lost virtually everything during the flood should concern us all, and more particularly.

the government. Prof. Yunus, in his article, has drawn attention to the critical needs of the people in the post -flood phase. He has identified the most urgent require-

ments to be in the shelter, food,

health, agriculture, employ-

ment and transportation sec-

tors. He has suggested a number

of measures which are emi-

nently sensible and should be

taken into account in the gov-

ernment's strategy for this

phase. The key elements in his

recommendation is the empow-

erment of the people through

the advancement of credit and

rehabilitation of their sources

of income, so that they can at-

tend to their immediate needs

and international donors must be made convinced about it. This, to my mind, is the key to the support that the government would need, both internally and externally, in the coming months. It is not enough to claim that the mechanism exists; it must be seen to exist.

Another key factor to ensure people's and international donors' confidence and support would be the creation of an atmosphere of co-operation and solidarity in the country under which the entire nation is geared to face the situation in an unified manner. The government, the opposition parties, other political forces, the civil societies, individual efforts, must all coalesce for the same cause. To create this atmosphere, the government may consider the formation of an advisory group composed of political leaders, eminent personalities and experts on the key sectors of emergency response. Their ideas, suggestions, advice and guidance could, among other things, contribute to the government's policy and decision making process, as well as co-ordination efforts. The recent call for unity made by the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition augurs well in this regard. The government should take advantage of this rare unity to mobilize the entire nation under one programme of action for the monumental tasks which lie ahead. This opportunity should not be lost.

Let me conclude with a personal plea. This year's flood has provided Bangladesh with an opportunity to draw lessons from its experience in this enormous task. After things have settled down to some sort of normalcy, it would indeed be useful to look back at the way we responded to it, prepare a list of best and worst practices, and draw appropriate lessons. This will be immensely useful to deal with future calamities which unfortunately are likely to continue to visit us at regular intervals. Over the years Bangladesh must have achieved world's greatest expertise in dealing with natural calamities. It is time we translate this expertise into a definitive Handbook for Emergencies, for the world-wide use of other nations facing similar circumstances. No other nation is better placed than Bangladesh to undertake this important task.

The author is Director, Regional Bureau for Central Asia, South-West Asia, Middle East and North Africa, in the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR), Geneva. It may be mentioned that though UNHCR has no mandate to deal with natural calamities. as a gesture of its solidarity with the people and government of Bangladesh, UNHCR Branch Office in Dhaka has contributed 4,000 pieces of plastic sheets as shelter material for 20,000

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The real test will come after the water has receded and people start returning to their home, or whatever is left of it, to rebuild their lives once again. What means would they have to undertake such a task when they have lost virtually everything during the flood should concern us all, and more particularly, the government.

these various groups to all the affected areas and people. Nor whether there is clear programme of action for the post-

flood period. The television images of the Prime Minister, members of the cabinet, as well as leaders of various political parties of the country, distributing relief items to the affected population may help create an impression about their humanitarian concerns but do they help to generate a sense that there is a concerted and comprehensive plan of action to deal with the problem as a whole rather than on a piece-meal basis? If the Prime Minister and the members of the cabinet are constantly seen busy distributing relief items. one wonders who deals with the larger tasks of policy and decision making as well as ensuring co-ordination. I do not, however, wish to underestimate the importance in a democracy of the Prime Minister and other members of the government visiting the flood affected areas and people to boost their morale and show solidarity with their suffering. But it would appear to me that the people would feel more confident to see their Prime Minister serve as the .Commander-in-Chief of all relief and rehabilitation activities of the government -- leading, directing, guiding and cajoling all concerned with this enormous task. It would be good if she could let the people know how she plans to lead the nation in the critical

Co-ordinator should ideally be seen conducting her/his efforts from a central emergency coordination cell equivalent to a commander's control room during the time of war. He/she should be seen as the focal point of all the efforts of the government, draw up a programme of action and oversee its proper

implementation. Common sense and past experience would indicate that the sectors which require particular attention during the emergency phase of the flood are food, shelter, water, health, sanitation, transport and communication. Added to this other sectors which would assume particular importance during the post-flood rehabilitation phase are agriculture, income generation and road reconstruction. The Chief Co-ordinator would have the authority to ensure proper co-ordination among all these sectors. each headed by a Sector Co-ordinator, to be appointed by the government The Chief Co-ordinator would chair all meetings of the co-ordinating body composed of these Sector Co-ordinators and others as necessary on a regular basis. The co-ordinating body would establish the aims and objectives of the emergency and post-flood programme of activities as well as adopt common standards for all the key players to follow. It is imperative that the Chief Coordinator and the Sector Co-ordinators have the required expertise and are dedicated primarily to their co-ordinating

the civil societies could help by co-operating with the Site Coordinators in their needs assessment process which would include establishing numbers, locations, health status, material conditions including clothing, food, shelters, livestocks, etc., social needs and the means to deliver assistance. In other words, the Site Co-ordinators will assess the needs and implement the assistance measures. They are, therefore, key to the situation and must be equipped accordingly.

Once the needs are assessed and confirmed by Site Co-ordinators, these are conveyed to the central co-ordinating body headed by the Chief Co-ordinator who will seek and ensure the availability of the necessary resources, whether material, financial or human. It will be the responsibility of the government to allocate the necessary resources to the Site Co-ordinators either from its own means or through appeal to the public or foreign governments and agencies. As in the past, civil societies, private groups or individuals could play an important role. However, their role would be more effective if channelled to the right location and people through the office of the Site Co-ordinators in a systematic manner. Individual or groups seeking to assist should be able to obtain necessary information from the Site Co-ordination Cells in the respective

locations. The people of Bangladesh

themselves, albeit with generous doses of relief, during the first three critical months. I am convinced that the government is fully committed to meet the situation. Relief efforts are visibly there, but clearly not enough to reach everybody or meet the needs of all those reached. Orders have been placed for more food imports to meet the catastrophic short-fall. Clearly much more food will have to be imported. Appeals have been made for international assistance and there are positive responses already. But the amount pledged will not be enough to meet the

As emphasized above, an important requirement in this regard would be the existence of a finely-tuned management and co-ordination mechanism. Both the people of the country

requirements. However, a great

deal more would be forthcom-

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of the government's efforts are

well established.

months ahead. What are her Is it Bureaucratic Ego vs Ministerial Ineffectiveness?

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

There is a perpetual "famine" of "guts" in out polician-ministers. The bureaucrats take advantage of such a

situation, at times, to terrible embarrassment and dismay of the minister. It is not to suggest that the minister

should undermine a civil servant in case of any disagreement on any policy matter. Nor it is to accept umbra-

HE bureaucrat has been rewarded. The Minister has L been openly slighted. The intervention of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Health proved infractuous Other designated Members of Parliament in the Committee expressed utter consternation at the outrageous remarks of the Health Secretary on the face of the Health Minister. The former was quoted in news papers to have branded the latter as a 'liar'. Consequently an elected representative of the people, besides a cabinet minister, nay, one of the stalwarts of the party in power, was poohed

The unfortunate incident was reportedly brought to the personal attention of the Prime Minister by all the members of the Parliamentary Committee together. Nothing was heard about it after that. There is no point in making a surmise. Still then, it could be anyone's guess that the matter died its natural death. But it would have surprised many like me to see the same bureaucrat comfortably installed as the chairman of a nationalized bank on contractual basis! Indeed he proved himself most formidable and of course, indispensable.

Traditionally, bureaucracy has been viewed as a monolithic institution in the sub-continent. Initially, during the British days, the top bureaucrats recruited through series of stiff written and oral examination, used to be brilliant students and almost invariably coming from aristocratic families and feudal lords in the garb of Zeminders. The post-partition India and Pakistan could continue for sometime to hold on to the tradition — atleast for the period of transition. In India, however, the academic bril-

liance of the civil servants fitted, for a longer time, to the rigid English trend. But in the erstwhile Pakistan, for a couple of years, precisely for little over a decade, the civil service could show flickers of excellence. This was, however, centred around a few persons having real outstanding educational background. The family lineage, which, in British rule, was an unwritten condition to be met by individual candidate seeking a place in the civil ser-Rift between the bureaucrats

and the ministers has not been a new phenomenon. There had been ample instances of political ministers coming in open controversies with the secretaries of the ministries. Even Britishers in the (British) Indian Civil Service (ICS) used to come in clash with the ministers — on formulation or implementation of policies of the government. And where the personality, educational background and stock of the minister had been respectively towering, excellent and most venerable in the civil society, the politician - minister could never be dictated by the civil

servant. In undivided Bengal, a story was in the air that the Chief Secretary, a Britisher had a big jolt from no other a personality than Hussein Shahid Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of the time. Mr Suhrawardy was reportedly having a private discussion with one of his close

followers (perhaps it was the legendary Mina Peshawari) in his chamber. The Chief Secretary peeped through the curtain seeking Chief Minister's permission to get in on an urgent errand. Mr Suhrawardy asked him to wait outside for a few minutes. The Chief Secretary, true to British etiquette stepped back but in about 3/4 minutes later he peeped again. And again he was asked out. A few minutes elapsing the Chief Secretary, being visibly restive. trotted inside the threshold and this time the Chief Minister was furious. He asked the Britisher curtly if it was the English courtesy to pry in private moments. The visitor was about to leave then. He was intelligent enough to bid good-bye right at that moment leaving the Chief Minister and the Chief Secretary closeted in the room. Barring the extra hue that might have been spilled on the incident, it was anybody's guess that something happened and it did only due to the great 'guts' of the Chief Minister, no matter how bitter it was for the

Unfortunately, there is a perpetual "famine" of such guts" in out polician-ministers. The bureaucrats take advantage of such a situation, at times, to terrible embarrassment and dismay of the minister. It is not to suggest that the minister should undermine a civil servant in case of any disagreement on any policy matter. Nor it is to accept umbrageous be-

haviour of a bureaucrat towards a minister in such cases. In view of the fact that the Minister is responsible to the Prime Minister, and ipso facto, to the cabinet as a whole for the performance of his Ministry, he is certainly the boss. The Secretary can only and very rightly and legitimately point out the implications of the ministerial decision and if the latter does not agree the former can simply record his note of dissent. There cannot be any point in entering into a wordy duel over the matter to eventually cross the bounds of decency. It was indeed very sad that, in the cited case, both had unknowingly ridiculed themselves creating a very unsavoury atmosphere in the Health Ministry which allowed the lesser ones wild boons to gossip about.

At this stage we can turn to the observation, among others, in an article recently published in an English daily recently. The writer, presumably an excivil servant (I may be wrong since I do not know the gentleman) alluded to a press conference of a High Court Justice where he "lamented over the non-consideration of his report (Police commission — 1988) by the Government". Finding such non-acceptance attributable to a non-explicable "paradox" the writer made some assumptive comments. I quote: "one explanation is that few ministers can comprehend the subject of reports, let alone possess the ability of processing

geous behaviour of a bureaucrat towards a minister in such cases ... their recommendations into decisions. This is not the entire explanation. They (ministers) are busy with more mundane, and in their judgment, more pressing, matters of their constituents, friends and relations or matters of transfers, postings and promotions of petty officials - matters beyond the pale of ministerial domain. A former minister was known to have ordered transfer of darwans to be submitted to him for

Though the picture or rather, the portrait of a minister drawn may be true in some cases. But have, induction of political ual contribution to the party in

Such persons have got to be accommodated to reciprocate their dedicated service to the party. We must accept this practical aspect and restrain ourselves from expecting too much out of them. On the other hand, we cannot also appreciate any major breach in the norms of administrative discipline or, so to say, in the effective functioning of any ministry. Such a stance on our part would call for a number of preventive measures to haul up instances of personal vilfication of the minister by the Secretary and

Inevitably therefore, it

a) elucidative presentation of

tions of a ministry: the minister (or future incumbents) must have forehand theoretical and practical orientation of the jurisdiction and functions of

the minister, to be looked at as the ultimate decision maker, must keep himself/herself abreast of the "do's and don'ts" and

the minister must advance with great caution when seeking to fulfil his/her party's election promises so as not to come in clash with greater national interests and objectives;

implementation of the decision will be entirely his/her (minister's) personal responsibility; the secretary will be obliged to execute the right or wrong (dispite his advice on the contrary) decision of the minister — his protec-

records: the secretary must not overact his/her authority as an executive — he/she must not have any confusion that he/she is just a part of the ministry, not

Notwithstanding the sugges-

tions above and irrespective of

the whole of it.

the rules and regulations governing a high ranking functionary of the Government, it can be said with reasonable impunity that some of our civil servants in the upper echelon suffer from a sort of inferiority complex. Let me cite and example. A couple of months ago I represented my employers in a

meeting of their industrial association where one State Minister was the chief guest and the Secretary in-charge was the special guest. We were all closeted in an air-conditioned conference room where none would be ordinarily expected to smoke. But to our utter dismay, the brazen-faced secretary incharge (additional secretary substantively) sitting by the side of the Minister kept on smoking a very costly brand of cigarette. His attitude was conspicuous of a deliberate and intemperate air to "pooh" his boss in the ministry with every puff. Such an awful display of wild, uncouth ego by the Secretary in a meeting could be an isolated sample of the current status of our civil service. Perhaps this is the type of people for whom the menacing input of 'stock' can be

legitimately evoked. Sorry, Mr

Secretary! Very sorry!

Efficient management Sir. The World Bank in their various reports has indicated

that there is no efficient man-

agement system in the banking sector. It has suggested to raise the pay scale of the bankers to stop their job hopping. But the World Bank has not given any thought to the retirement age of

It has talked about CBA activities, loan discipline, surplus staff, inefficient management etc. It has never suggested about the raising of retirement age although the retirement age of bankers in USA and European

the bankers.

countries varies from 60 to 65 years. The WB authority should also study the age limit of an elficient banker to increase efficiency.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury 153 Lake Circus, Kalabagan, Dhaka

> Good step, indeed Sir, I have read the wonder-

ful news about the government's intention to privatise all power sector operations. Perhaps we are finally going to put at rest the ghost of 'systems loss' which in our country is essentially an euphemism for theft.

right in asking why revenue recovery from the poor rural consumers is much better than that from the rich urban consumers. The answer is blowing in the wind, isn't it? What is important is to make sure that our electricity is produced and sold competitively, and soon gone will be the days of being able to use electricity without paying. or paying several months or years later.

Good on you prime minister for taking this marvelous initial step. If our infrastructure is managed on a sound basis, we will be well on our way to sustained economic development,

and it is about time for that! The prime minister is quite Dr M Khaled School of Economics and Finance. University Victoria Wellington, New Zealand. Biman

flights as 'no-smoking'.

follow the instance set by Biadverse effects of smoking. M Zahidul Haque BAI, Dhaka

Sir, Biman Bangladesh Airlines deserves appreciation for declaring all its domestic flights and some international Let other organisations also

man for protecting the nonsmokers and children from the

decisions.....

above cannot be generalized, it the parliamentary democracy and type of government we workers on the basis of individpower, cannot, for obvious reasons, be ruled out.

would require:-

the jurisdiction and func-

his ministry;

he/she must give topmost priority to issues of national importance;

the civil servant (precisely