

Rajuk's Dithering

The plot appears to be thickening in the Gulshan Lake drama being enacted behind-the-curtains by the Rajdhani Unnyan Kartipakhha (Rajuk). Once again, the air is thick with allegations of underhand dealings to thwart a government move to stop illegal encroachment on and filling of the lake. It is alleged that Rajuk officials who constituted the probe committee set up by the government showed little stomach for the enquiry in the first place. It now appears that they have successfully put the brakes on the investigations altogether, which is nothing short of a wilful disregard for a government order by officials paid out of the public purse.

Back in May, this paper published a series of reports which blew the lid on one of the most extensive land-grabbing scams in the history of the metropolis. The land-grabbing involved encroachment on and filling up of Gulshan Lake, which is one of the few open water-bodies left in this city of 8.5 million. This meant the scam was not only depriving the government of money, but also threatening to devastate the city's environment as well. It appeared then that good sense would prevail, as the government ordered a probe into all illegal land-acquisition in and around the lake. But it is apparent that the well-oiled Rajuk machinery is working overtime to bury the lake.

The question now is whether the government can remain a mere spectator to this most obnoxious drama, involving enormous damage to the environment and loss of public land. It is not just a matter of maintaining green spaces and water-bodies around Dhaka for the health and well-being of citizens. It is also a question of establishing the government's authority over its own agencies. Clearly, Rajuk has disqualified itself as an upholder of its own rules. The need now is for the government to institute an independent commission, with appropriate judicial powers, to investigate both the land-grabbing at the lake and corruption inside Rajuk.

The Good Samaritan

Its great news. Great for Bangladesh's victims of the cruellest of crimes — throwing acid on the face of female children and nubile girls. Great for Bangladesh itself. For without the Good Samaritan act by a Spanish organisation six of such girls were doomed to a life of a walking carcass, with the government hardly taking any notice. The government's failure to do something effective to treat the 'acid girls' and give them back their lives is further compounded by its failure to arrest and eliminate, the despicable crime. A crimeless society is still to come — every nation suffers in differing degrees from acts of criminal aberration. Bangladesh is very special in that in no other nation a failed lover or a 'lusting macho type' throws acid on the beautiful face of a girl all set to begin life. Bangladesh is special for its special crime that knows no abating, in spite of there being a government here — with all the trappings that attend on governments of the leading nations. It's a special shame for us.

Thanks to the Spanish outfit Corporacion Dermocostetica for taking under their care the treatment of six acid victims from Bangladesh. The organisation hopes to subsequently treat 10 such victims every year. And similar offers have come from UK, Italy and Sweden. The six are already in Spain and have been featured on the television invoking wide sympathy from the Spanish society.

How can our government match this magnanimity, such kindness? By beginning to be serious about eliminating the abominable crime. The rate of conviction is deplorably low — one will be hard put to it to remember the last case of punishment while anyone can recall numbers of aid throwing in the past year.

Acid must be made difficult to get. How, the government should know. The acid cases must be treated specially — with firmness and dispatch. The retribution must be so as to effectively deter the criminals and, as such, clear the name of Bangladesh.

Diabetic Concerns

The World Diabetic Day was observed only a couple of days back; but its spell remains for what may not have been said about the management of the malady. Early detection makes it containable whereas if allowed to fester without treatment it could lead to blindness, kidney complications, physical retardation and even death especially in association with hypertension.

BIRDDEM has carved a niche for the services it renders to the victims of diabetes or those who are on the borderline of the disease. But this facility has remained over-pressed given the high incidence of the scourge all over the country. While it is almost creaking under the weight of treatment-seekers in Dhaka, the referrals from outlying areas are an added load on its shoulders.

As well as treating diabetes the hospital looks after patients suffering from other diseases, so that centrally there needs to be a constant vigil to make sure that the standard of diabetes treatment is not compromised in any way. Furthermore, the distracting staff unionism has to be kept at bay to let the hospital perform as a specialised medicare centre.

The diabetic treatment facility has to branch out for a reach commensurate with the countrywide incidence of the malady. It is only a small step forward that construction of seven 25-bed diabetic hospitals in as many district towns is nearing completion. The 15 other hospitals contemplated under the ADP need to be set up without a hitch. Ideally, there should be one mini BIRDDEM at every district town in Bangladesh.

Saving the Last of Our Hopes

At the core of the campus problem is the students' political linkage through their respective organisations which are in turn supported and patronised by major political parties. This unholy nexus provides them a measure of impunity while committing any excess either for themselves or for the party their organisation is affiliated with.

Twenty-six masters degree certificates — certainly not for making shopping wraps out of them — during their trafficking and a teacher was relieved of his job because of upgrading the result of the student from whom he took bribe. These can not perhaps be the news of isolated incidents. Because not all thieves can ever be caught; neither they all can be brought to book. The news which come to light are only indicative of enormous sleaze that lie underneath the serene surface of the most sanctimonious of the country's institutions.

What could once be looked upon by the liberals as matters of juvenile delinquencies and used to be dismissed by the elite as a way of youthful indulgence — the collection and extortion of money from others — has now become an organised crime on the campus and booming business for pseudo-students. It is reported that the students' dormitories are now virtually criminals' den where the innocent citizens can be held to ransom for extracting huge money from the traders and businessmen. But the real grim spectacle has been played out by the campus where within the safety and sanctity of the protected area the female students are violated for months after months by the organised gang of pervers from among the so-called students. It is a permanent slur on the face of any university worth the name where a handful of teachers enjoying, of course, immunity from their political connection can at ease turn the campus into a legal hotting ground for their prey. And this all happens under the very nose of the outfit's entire administration and in all probability without its knowledge. Still worse is the perfunctory manner in which the rogues were let

off with just pinpricks thus making the campus all the more unsafe. Because any culprit will be prepared to pay that much price for his licentious carnal revel.

We have no precise knowledge about the origin of this festering wound on the campus but they have been rapidly spreading over the years. Usually the accusing fingers are pointed to the events in the mid-sixties when a gang of criminals was reared in the student halls by the governor of erstwhile East Pakistan to contain the rising tide of students' movement in the background of country's prevailing political situation. The estab-

litical leaders to keep the students' organisations affiliated to their respective political parties. So long the students were fed with high ideals. Now they seemed to be demanding their price in a mundane dispensation of favours, compensations and recognitions after the independence. The price soared when the ruling party desperately needed students' support in the face of growing radical opposition. It cultivated the organisational heavyweights, the so-called student leaders, and ensured their loyalties with tangible gains like contract, permits and licences.

General Zia attracted them with goodies of life and often

points of rules and principles was enormous.

Nevertheless, with the introduction of handsome largesse in the students politics a large number of competitors vied for its leadership. This led to an endemic intra-organisational infighting while the affiliated student organisations of different political parties clashed violently. Soon the halls became the arsenal and campuses turned frequently into battle field. The violence became the order of the day and gun running a culture on the campus vitiating its normal atmosphere and interrupting the regularity of its academic sessions. The murder of seven students in Mohini Hall in a single sweep in 1994, it may be recalled, sent shock wave across the country. The trauma continued with the internecine killings of more number of students even afterwards. Gradually both the students and teachers took sides along the invisible line of a divide. A chronic unrest on the campus deflected its inmates from their primary objectives thus setting in motion a moral and intellectual decadence. This has nosedived now.

The campus unrest in Bangladesh — its complexity, politicisation and violent character — has few parallels in this part of the world. Although South Asian countries are constantly in political turmoil they are spared of this curse except in Bangladesh. The political class in other countries of the region has been sensible enough to discreetly keep the students out of its ambit. Omnisciently our politicians as well as intellectual and academic community have been callously insensitive to the menace. While the leaders of the main political parties remain mum on the issue, others have, at the

best, mumbled and minced their words. The intellectuals try to keep their conscience clear only by staging an inconsequential silent sit-in which was decreed even by the worn-out activists. For a quarter of the century we have been watching an ever deteriorating situation on the campus with utter helplessness and almost total inaction. Even if there were efforts to tackle the situation a piecemeal approach to the crisis has marked those initiatives. A business house has been interested in stopping extortion by the students' political groups vocal in their protest against rape and a worried guardian more concerned about the regularity of academic session. But the campus unrest is a total problem and has to be resolved in its entirety.

At the core of the campus problem is the students' political linkage through their respective organisations which are in turn supported and patronised by major political parties. This unholy nexus provides them a measure of impunity while committing any excess either for themselves or for the party their organisation is affiliated with. So, the onus of breaking this nexus lies squarely with the politicians who however have shown great reluctance of doing so. Where do we go from here? Some noble expressions are transmitted from our presidency from time to time but there has been hardly any practical step to give them shape. The experts would better understand its limitations but a constitutional head of the state like our President in neighbouring India has earned appreciation by stepping in and overriding a number of government decisions and recommendations in recent time. The nation wonders whether the President of the republic can play a role — constitutional or mediatory — to delink our student community, the last of our hopes, from the sleaze of the country's bankrupt politics devoid of any substance.

PERSPECTIVES  
by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

lishment gave these criminals an open licence to terrorise and intimidate the student community with their muscle power and provided them with all they wanted — even including money, liquor and women — in return. That was how perhaps the desecration of the campus started. But the response was a resounding blanket condemnation of that criminalisation and it is now the part of the history as to how the criminals and their masters met their ignominious end.

It was in the post-independence Bangladesh an occasion came for making a discreet choice, ironically, the country's new rulers failed. They succumbed to the temptation of using the potent student force to promote their party politics. It was found expedient by the po-

litical leaders to keep the students' organisations affiliated to their respective political parties. So long the students were fed with high ideals. Now they seemed to be demanding their price in a mundane dispensation of favours, compensations and recognitions after the independence. The price soared when the ruling party desperately needed students' support in the face of growing radical opposition. It cultivated the organisational heavyweights, the so-called student leaders, and ensured their loyalties with tangible gains like contract, permits and licences.

Balancing the Costs

There is a cost to the US consideration. The price may not be the nuclear rollback that everyone seems to be suspicious about but it will take the government its full credibility count to make both the intelligentsia and the masses believe what the government is serving out is the truth.

China to start with, and then Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait providing critical 'bridge-financing' funds, we would have been bankrupt and in default, in fact we are already almost at the end of the grace period.

At the same time IMF, bent on extracting its own pound of flesh, set conditions guaranteed to make the common man come out in the streets in violent protest. Such harsh terms would be unacceptable to any self-respecting government in Pakistan, caught in an economic vice, between the devil and the deep sea, we had few choices but to opt either for seeming confrontation or roll over and play dead. One may or may not agree with either Mian Nawaz Sharif or Ms Benazir, as different from each other as chalk from cheese, on any number of counts but they have one feature in common admirable in any leader, both not only have plenty of courage but on vital issues can stand their ground even to the perils of the seats — and their lives. It is only when they take up confrontation on extraneous issues less than a matter of life and death that one questions their judgement.

On the core issue of routine IMF conditionality like raising electricity tariffs, etc Mian Nawaz Sharif took the route of populism, lowering the tariffs by as much as 30 per cent, positioning himself as a champion of the masses. This reduction was also meant to serve as a factor to stimulate the economy by lowering the price of production across the board. That premise fell apart at the altar of the greed of our industrial bosses who have not responded in kind, opting for profit-taking

rather than passing on the benefit to the consumer. This confrontation was mind-boggling, was it voodoo economics or noora kushi? In deep economic trouble, about to default on our repayments unless we got IMF funds and here we were, thumbing our nose at the IMF. Ishaq Dar, who was then only Federal Commerce Minister but a member of the PM's inner circle had been made a member of the negotiating team in Washington at the last minute, was opting for being gung-ho rather than accept the IMF conditionalities.

AS I SEE IT  
Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

Obviously something here does not gel. In an earlier article I had written that Mian Nawaz Sharif and his close aides seemed to know something we did not, that he was gambling but that it was a well-calculated risk. The leader of a free country must take such risks to maintain self-respect and sovereignty.

During the course of the Washington meeting with IMF, both Economic Advisor Hafiz Pasha and Secretary Finance Moeen Afzal were opting to get the best deal by compromising with the IMF. However, the Governor of State Bank of Pakistan, Mohammad Yaqoob, took a different reading of the situation. Having served for long years in IMF and World Bank (and being an unconquered rebel of the system

thereof), he sensed that the world financial institutions were running scared because of the Asian economic disaster where their set-piece prescriptions had added to the economic woes rather than solving them. At the same time there were clear indications that the White House was pressurising the financial units to look at Pakistan with compassion and to come through. When Ishaq Dar got to Washington, Dr Yaqoob found a willing ear and both of them got through to the PM in Islamabad to get a green

signal to stand their ground, effectively leaving Pasha and Moeen Afzal hanging out in the cold. Playing a game of chicken with the IMF, the PM raised the stakes by lowering the electricity tariffs 30 per cent in the face of a tacit understanding for an increase of 15 per cent. Obviously the talks stalled and the team flew back.

The US Administration now got into the act in earnest and invited the PM for a State visit, the meeting with the US President being in early December. Not only is the White House concerned about Pakistan's impending default situation but it is very concerned about nuclear proliferation and wanted Pakistan to sign the CTBT and make a commitment of sorts, restricting our nuclear potential. Moreover, the impending

Shariat Bill (CA-15) in the face of the looming Taliban presence in Afghanistan gave indications of our vulnerability to destabilisation, with the prospect that the whole region could be drawn into the religious sectarian warfare. Domestic policy considerations about nuclear proliferation further fuelled the White House to come down hard on the side of Pakistan. Within days of the historic mid-term US elections in which the Democratic Party confounded sceptics by gaining rather than losing seats, US President Bill Clinton used his powers under an Amended Bill to lift sanctions partially against Pakistan. In sum, Pakistan's days of adversity and misery worked in Pakistan's favour. For a number of variable reasons the world needed that he was saved, to Mian Nawaz Sharif's credit, he has done well in his cues right and is gambling that confrontation will result in a good deal for Pakistan. If it works out why should we quibble about the means?

A complete change has taken place in the PM's economic team. Ishaq Dar has taken over as Minister for Finance while retaining Commerce. Hafiz Pasha has asked to be relieved as Advisor. Moeen Afzal has resigned rather than be sent away from Finance to oblivion in Economic Affairs. Moinuddin Khan, having virtually sacrificed his international career at Standard Chartered Bank, made a larger-than-life heroic effort to re-create CBR. As a sop, he was offered the Chairman's job in the Bank of Punjab, he refused the offer and opted to go back abroad. In his place, consummate bureaucrat

and Dar confidante Iqbal Faareed has moved from Commerce to Finance. The SSB Governor managed to bring his confidante and Lahoreite Khalid Javed, back from retirement to Finance.

One feels for people like Moinuddin Khan, an outstanding international technocrat, who was uprooted from a top-notch executive position in a major multi-national institution and brought in to perform a thankless job where brickbats are more in supply than bouquets. He was advised not to do so before he accepted the PM's request to take the post of Chairman CBR, that he lasted as long as he did is a credit to him. His fate will serve as a deterrent example to other enthusiastic patriots who opted (or may try to opt) to help Mian Nawaz Sharif save Pakistan economically, there is no future for sacrifice in an environment where merit is a disqualifier. If there is a brain drain in Pakistan, count Moinuddin Khan's experience as the final watershed.

There is a cost to the US consideration. The price may not be the nuclear rollback that everyone seems to be suspicious about but it will take the government its full credibility count to make both the intelligentsia and the masses believe what the government is serving out is the truth. As for the unforgotten last after the episode of JFC, 'principled' retirement, it will require real strength of character to stand up and be counted in the matter of truth versus public perception. One may well feel we have come out ahead in the balancing of costs but if there is no linkage with the solution of Kashmir and India does not succumb to international pressure on the nuclear issue, which it may well not, we may have lost out in the long run.

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.

How long? How far? I pine, I despair

Sir, In the lengthening shadows of the sweltering afternoon, I distinctly recollected the spot. It was where the 20th Punjab Regiment used to station during 1970. The spectacle was taking place opposite the lane approaching Ibrahimpur. A motor-vehicle with his wain load had tress-passed into the road, an 'out of bound' for peddlers like him. The man in uniform's omniscience took immediate cognizance of the offense in spite of the vendor's expression of contrition.

Before many on-looking pedestrians and other passers-by, the offender, was instructed to clasp both his ears by his hands and continue standing up and sitting down on the road. Verily, the offender had committed a wrong. But is such a punishment authorised by law in a free country? Was the dispenser of justice law-incarnate itself. A defenceless and gullible offender can be punished so easily!

But what happens to the offenders in innumerable incidents like inclement beating by police on controller of Food,

the role of outsider colonial rulers. Now we are no more being ruled by overseas white 'shahibs' or by infidels or by Khans, Talpurs, Legharis, Kid-wais, Wattos, Maliks, Gurmarnes, Arbabs or Quizilbashes from Banno, Jung, Gujran-wala, Campbellpur, Bahawalpur or Rahim Yar Khan. Everybody is now sons of the soil.

A little more than two and a half decades have elapsed since our independence. Now what liberties can be offered to account for the situation we are in? It is strongly reasonable that we will continue to remain poor for several years in spite of all the window-dressing of the 'emerging-tiger' or hocus-pocus and hoax of development seminars, but why should ensuring a minimum honour for every human being remain so expensive and distant?

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Age limit for SBA

Sir, Should there be any age limit regarding opening of a Savings Bank Account (SBA) in any bank? The answer ought to be a 'no' but in reality even the government banks have age restriction. No minor can open an account unless it is a 'Joint Account' with another senior or adult person. Anyone below 18 years of age cannot open an account, which prevents or discourages youngsters to save money.

Banks ought to make some amendments to allow minors to open an SBA with ease and thus

encourage them from a tender age to go for savings. We must remember that in the past several changes have been made in order that smooth banking system could be run in the country among which the most popular one is naming of nominees in case of an account holder's natural death.

Let us hope banks will begin to behave in a different manner, reflecting the social commitment which is part of the modern relationship between business-finance and the community. And those holding the power to bring about some sort of modification would act accordingly and with promptness. Surely a student of eight, nine or ten these days knows how to save money and is also aware that spending too much is sheer wastage.

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Delivery of telegrams and letters

Sir, Following declaration of two days weekly holiday for the staff, the delivery of telegrams and letters of common people have increased in many ways. The government works and functions which have always been unsatisfactory have further deteriorated, stagnated and deadlocked. Even urgent telegrams and important letters are not being delivered to the addressees in time and those are over-delayed.

The members of the public fail to understand the wisdom of the government, justifica-

tion, its benefit and public service, which resulted in the government decision of two days weekly holiday for a poor and underdeveloped Bangladesh.

Can our government ensure delivery of telegrams and letters in time by observing two days weekly holiday?

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Stop campus politics, please

Sir, We expressed our wish to stop student politics, but all our efforts were in vain. Some of the political parties are determined to run their so-called politics with the help of the innocent, young but impractical people, living in the educational institutions. Some teachers are also engaged in the campus politics. If the government and the other political parties were truly committed to stop their student front/teacher front, the situation would have been different.

Md Abdul Latif  
Jessore

Apartments and problems

Sir, We are all aware of the fact that a substantial portion of the population is living in apartment houses, in different parts of Dhaka. Some are on rental basis, and some are owners. Unfortunately, I happen to be one of the tenants, living in a six-storied apartment building in one of the most posh areas like

Gulshan. There are 15 apartments, occupied by different nationalities including Bangladeshis, having different attitudes. Every apartment complex in this city usually has a management society formed by the owners of apartments only, to look after all kinds of problems, which occurs from time to time.

I am sure, most of the conscious citizens/family members, living in the apartment buildings in this city, have experienced various kinds of public nuisance, created either by the neighbouring residents or by their subordinates/paid servants or drivers, one way or the other.

Given below, some problems that we face in our apartment complex:

- 1) Unnecessary honking of cars during early and late hours by the drivers.
- 2) Haphazard parking of vehicles within the premises every off and on.
- 3) Hue and cry made by the servants all day, sometimes until midnight.
- 4) Use of radio and tape recorders in a high volume within the premises.
- 5) Frequent use of lift by drivers and servants all day up and down.
- 6) Servants use lift to carry everyday kachha bazar and surprisingly sometimes live chicken and slaughtered chickens as well. It will not be surprised, if live goats and calves are carried via apartment lift (if true).

Azad Hafiz  
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