

Shame from Ghorasal

Ghorasal electrical plant last Tuesday saw holism let loose on a 7-member team of foreign experts, a lady included, that had come to investigate the recently shattering breakdown of the national power grid. Five hundred workers in a body, and armed with wooden spears and pebbles performed to a blue-print master-minded by vested quarters chasing the guest experts, accompanied by PDB officials and power grid company executives, out of the compound. There were manhandling, pelting of stone, and vehicular damages. Director of the power grid company Nani Gopal Saha was quite seriously wounded. The traumatised foreigners on return to Dhaka said they would never come back to help unless they were guaranteed security.

The interested quarters within the plant premises in an apparent hideous nexus with the broader trade union leadership outside worked at two levels: first, some insiders feeling threatened by an imminent authentic exposure of the truth about the power breakdown were anxious to scream the facts from an expert view. Secondly, all of them together fell for whipping up the workers' sentiments on the disinvestment issue pointing out that the visit of foreign experts was linked to privatisation of the Ghorasal plant itself.

The passions of the workers were ignoble to the core. They were pawns on the chessboard of people having things to hide in the power grid fiasco; and secondly, our commitment to privatisation was sought to be shown in poor light before a foreigners' team. So, aside from hurting our international goodwill, the perpetrators have worked against national interest.

How the rumpus was allowed to happen is a matter for more serious condemnation than perhaps the incident itself. The failure of PDB, plant level authorities and the local administration strikes cannot be condoned given that they had all the prior notice of the coming circus. The army and police personnel who are a fixture in that 'protected area' appeared powerless. The local police station was not kept informed of the agitational build-up fuelled by constant miking. Even after the incident the police station failed to instantly receive the FIR. It happened at noon but was formally recorded at 2 am into the night. There being many so many 'whys' to answer we demand an immediate investigation into the happenings followed by action against ring leaders, perpetrators and duty-shirkers.

Ready for IT

The success of the trade show organised by the Bangladesh Computer Samity (BCS) being held at the International Development Bank (IDB) premises in Agargaon has once again shown the immense potential of information technology (IT). Since the lifting of duties and VAT from computer products, many positive signs have emerged. Computer firms aiming to enter the regional and global software and data processing markets have grown in numbers and improved their professional abilities. The public have shown tremendous interest in computer technology, promising to ensure flow of trained and innovative manpower for this highly lucrative industry.

Unfortunately, politics of the regressive kind, which stifles the growth of industry and commerce in Bangladesh with monotonous regularity, now threatens to hold back the development of the IT sector as well. The organisers have already extended the duration of the exhibition by two days, but this looks set to go to waste, as the BNP has called a 12-hour hartal for today. It may not be possible to calculate the impact the loss of one day of the exhibition would have. But the BNP would have shown a high regard for the national interest, if it had responded to an appeal by BCS to call off the hartal.

However, hartal or not, life must go on and so must the development of IT. The computer sector is currently enjoying unprecedented tariff concessions, and it is essential that this translates into high value addition. Therefore, the BCS needs to concentrate more on the development of software writers and data processors. The government needs to provide the infrastructure, particularly dedicated satellite circuits, for the emerging IT industry. Without such telecommunications networks, the IT industry would not be able to fulfil its potential. In other words, the signs are sound, but there is still a lot to do before IT emerges as a major industry in Bangladesh.

New Thanas in the City

Six new Police Stations for Dhaka city have been formally inaugurated by the Prime Minister at the Police headquarters Wednesday.

The proposal for creation of these police stations was being mooted in the highest circles of administration for quite some time, and the decision to finally constitute and put them in place will be welcomed by all and sundry. The burgeoning demographic curve of the metropolitan city accentuated by the sharp rise in crimes makes it imperative for any government worth its salt to introduce drastic measures for improving law and order situation and thus steadying the dwindling confidence of taxpayers in the law enforcing agencies.

The jurisdiction of the new thanas has been clearly spelt out to reduce the chances of confusion, and minimise, if not totally remove, the chances of harassment of genuine help-seekers. It is also expected that the new thanas will successfully contain terrorism. The gigantic rise in the number of residents of the city coupled with staggering number of commuters from the outskirts in search of livelihood have given rise to crimes that range from petty stealing and mugging to horrifying murders everyday. These need to be addressed in right earnest; and the six new police stations, even with their limited resources should be able to make their contributions in containing and combating crimes and criminals.

The Prime Minister, while marking the opening of these new thanas, remarked that post-75 governments used the police force for political gains. She also declared her party will never do so. This is most heartening come as it has from the party chief herself. Let there be no discrepancy between words and deeds.

First Visit of a US President to the Palestine Territory

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

It appears strange that Israel cannot come to terms with a separate Palestine State which the UN resolution recognised in 1948 and upon which Israel itself was founded. Israel must acknowledge that the Palestine State is a political reality as the former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres claimed that a Palestine State would be a safety valve and not a threat for Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister agreed that 750 Palestinian prisoners would be released. The Palestine people expected to include political prisoners as well. However when Israel released 250 prisoners, it was found that not a single political prisoner was released to the utter disappointment and anger of the Palestinians. Most of the prisoners released were in the Israeli custody for drug related offences. This action by Israel is perceived to be serious breach of the Agreement and as a result a wave of protests by the Palestinians erupted over the refusal to release political prisoners. This anger was exacerbated by the Israeli troops who shot and

killed a youth (16) on 9th December by a live bullet to his chest. The death of the Palestinian youth led to violent clashes between hundreds of stone throwers and Israeli troops. The clashes occurred when the US special envoy Dennis Rose came to Jerusalem to prepare the ground for Mr. Clinton's visit. The violence which engulfed in the area appears to be an embarrassment for the US administration at a time of President Clinton's visit.

Furthermore, Israeli Prime Minister's position became tougher when Chairman Arafat announced that he would declare a Palestine State by next

May. The Oslo Accord of 1993 contemplated that all the issues between Israeli and Palestinian sides would be resolved by the end of May 1999.

Although the Palestinians see the establishment of a Palestine State as their inherent right on their homeland, Israeli leadership is stubborn not to accept an independent State of Palestine. It appears strange that Israel cannot come to terms with a separate Palestine State which the UN resolution recognised in 1948 and upon which Israel itself was founded. Israel must acknowledge that the Palestine State is a political reality as the former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres

claimed that a Palestine State would be a safety valve and not a threat for Israel.

The right wingers in Israel perceive Prime Minister Netanyahu as a betrayer of their interests and Netanyahu needs them to retain his political power. Although Netanyahu signed the Agreement under pressure from the US, he did not wish to honour the Agreement from the very beginning. His procrastination in implementing the Agreement demonstrated his pusillanimity to face the reality. Mr. Netanyahu suspended a further troop withdrawal from the West Bank, due next week saying that the Palestine Authority must fundamen-

tally change its behaviour.

It appears that the Israeli Prime Minister is to be blamed for the violence in the West Bank. The Wye Agreement should first be implemented by Israel and once the Agreement is honoured, the mutual state between the two sides will be restored and Israel's misplaced apprehension on the founding of a Palestine State is most likely to disappear.

Let me give an analogy. In 1988 Chairman Arafat was refused a visa to visit the US and the special session of the UN General Assembly had to be held in Geneva for his participation. Now the same person (Mr. Arafat) is an invited guest of the US President Clinton. I hold the view that trust begets trust and Israel will be profited in the long run if it honours its commitment and trusts the Palestine Authority.

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Is Congress on the Way In and BJP on the Way Out?

Results in the state assembly elections have sparked off intense debates on two issues: how much impact will they have on the federal government and, more importantly, do they herald the re-entry of the Nehru family into power?

MR. Sonia Gandhi, widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, has finally underlined her presence in the political arena. The 'Sonia factor' coupled with spiralling price-hike of essential commodities like onion and tomato contributed greatly to the BJP rout in two states in the recent elections. The party also failed to make inroads in the Madhya Pradesh, where they were expected to win, and failed to wrest power from the Congress. It has surely been a dismal performance by the BJP.

Results in the state assembly

elections have sparked off intense debates on two issues: how much impact will they have on the federal government and, more importantly, do they herald the re-entry of the Nehru family into power? The family has been virtually out of the political scenario since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, while campaigning in the southern India just before the general elections, was assassinated by a suicide bomber more than seven years ago.

The Nehrus, both admired and criticised in the country, came to limelight when Motilal Nehru was in the forefront of public life in the British-India. Then came his son, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of the independent India in 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru remained at the helm until his death in 1964. His daughter Indira Priyadarshini, who later became Indira Gandhi by marrying Congressman Feroze Gandhi, rose to prominence as



the president of the Congress when her father was still alive. She became a minister in the Lal Bahadur Shastri's government that took over after Nehru's death. But she did not have to wait long.

Indira Gandhi became the prime minister after Shastri's death and ruled the country with great aplomb. She was admired for leadership qualities but was also hated for many reasons including excesses during the emergency and 'dictatorial' tendencies in running the party and the government. Indira won elections resoundingly, lost them disastrously

and was finally killed by her Sikh bodyguards after she had staged a comeback to power.

Her son Rajiv Gandhi stepped into the shoes of his mother both as the prime minister and the party chief. He gained popularity as a charismatic leader, incurred people's wrath for alleged involvement in the financial scandals centering the Bofors deal and was assassinated while he was campaigning to regain power. His younger brother Sanjay, groomed by Indira as her heir apparent, was earlier killed in a stunt plane crash, leaving brother Rajiv, a commercial

airlines pilot, to carry on the legacy of the Nehrus.

But when Rajiv was killed, the legacy appeared headed for an end. Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv's Italian-born widow, was not familiar with Indian affairs and had even opposed her husband's entry into politics. But there was no option. Sanjay's widow Maneka had a penchant for public life but Mrs. Indira Gandhi did not approve her daughter-in-law taking the family heritage in politics and consequently, she was estranged and finally took her own line in politics. She is very much in the thick of politics but neither as a link to the Nehrus nor as a Congress politician.

Rajiv's daughter Priyanka and son Rahul were quite young when their father died and mother Sonia spurned appeals from party leaders and workers to fill the vacuum created by her husband's death. She remained reclusive even as the Congress ap-

peared to be losing grounds due to lack of dynamic leadership although it was in power for five years after Rajiv's assassination.

However, she slowly developed interest in the party affairs and finally threw her hat into the ring of politics just before the last general elections. Sonia campaigned for the party but failed to make much impact and the party once again failed to come to power. Questions were raised about her ability to lead although supporters said she halted further decline of the Congress. She was still made president of the Congress and it is assumed that she will remain in the scene until either her daughter or son takes up the family mantle. Have the state assembly polls effectively increased her image at the national and international levels? And if so, to what extent? Is the Congress getting nearer to power and in that case what are the chances of Sonia becoming the prime minister? Is the victory in the states an indication that the Congress is on the way to power at the centre and the BJP on the way out?

OPINION

Tragedy of Saline Injection at Rangpur Medical College Hospital

Nadaraja Bathirunathan

On the 22nd of last month the country received the tragic news of seven patients dying after receiving an injection of saline at Rangpur Medical College Hospital. It was an important news item and nearly all the newspapers in this country gave prominence to this story.

The news item brings to us forcefully how the authorities face and deal with problems of this nature and to me it seems quite different from how the authorities took up a similar situation in England at Southampton hospital 20 years ago.

The seven patients died one after another in about two hours after the administration of the injection, another 20 patients were described as being in a critical condition and the saline had been given to a total of 50 patients.

The patients reacted with fever and rigours almost immediately, that is, within half an hour of the injection; yet the doctors took no notice of it. It is the nurses who later took the initiative and stopped administering the injection without permission from the doctors. Otherwise the death toll would have been higher.

How did the hospital authorities react to this situation?

The Director of the Hospital hurriedly arranged for the dead bodies to be handed over to the patients' relatives, and held a secret meeting in order to suppress the information without much success (Daily Bhorer Kago, 22.11.98).

I feel sorry for the Director. Why should he take the blame for this? Did he make the saline? supply it? or administer it? It is beyond my imagination to understand why he should be frightened of the information or why he would want to suppress it. In any of the hospitals which I know of, the Director would have gone round the hospital workers responsible for this tragedy and

he would have done everything possible to trace the culprit. The bodies would have been sent for autopsy. The remaining saline would have been despatched to different laboratories to be tested for purity, sterility, and the absence of pyrogens. He would have given press releases as and when any information became available. Why should he want to suppress the information? That information is vital for protecting his patients and of immense importance to him as Director of a Hospital.

The preparation is described as Dextrose Saline and is believed to have been manufactured 16 years ago because of the letters Dacca on it. Obviously it is bad manufacturing practice not to have put the date of manufacture, date of expiry and batch number on it. In Western countries even a packet of flour should have these particulars on it and I think it is criminal for the manufacturers of a medicinal product not to have done so.

A large volume injection like dextrose saline should have been tested for the absence of substances known as pyrogens. A pyrogen is a substance which when injected into the body causes fever, shivering and rigours. The most important pyrogen is the lipopolysaccharide (endotoxin) found on the outer membrane of Gram negative bacteria which are very common organisms everywhere. Nanogram (one thousand millionth of a gram) amount of endotoxin can cause fever and rigours in humans who are naturally very sensitive to it. A hundred nanograms could kill a normal healthy person. The pharmaceutical preparations in this country should conform to the requirements of the British Pharmacopoeia (B.P.) which stipulates that water for injection should satisfy the test for absence of pyrogens and the test for sterility.

Let us see whether this is a feasible story. What is the probability of death of an ordinary patient dying within 2 hours or so after giving a safe infusion of Dextrose Saline B.P.? One in 100,000? One in 10,000? Or one in 1,00,000? I do not know. You tell me. It is a rare occurrence and I would put it at less than even 1 in 10. What is the probability of seven rare occur-

rences happening together? It is the product of the individual probabilities. That is 10 multiplied 7 times which is 10. Ask a statistician to explain this to you, the probability of 10. What type of story do the authorities want us to swallow?

In my opinion, the Chairman of the Committee on the RMCH deaths has made a criminally dangerous statement. A large number of patients get fever and rigours immediately following a saline infusion. Seven of them die one after another in about 2 hours after the injection and a medical authority states then these deaths are not due to the saline.

What does he expect the nurses and the doctors to do, the next time, when this happens? Don't worry. Continue giving the saline injection for if they have fever, rigours and are dying, they are dying of their own diseases. The saline is OK and there is nothing wrong with it! I have been teaching medical and pharmacy students for the past 40 years. Every year I have told them about pyrogens and microorganisms and the reaction to expect if pyrogens are present in intravenous solutions. Here for the first time I am faced with a revolutionary statement from the Head of a Surgery Department contradicting all my medical knowledge and teaching.

I do not want to put the blame on Rangpur Medical College Hospital. It is only the symptom of a malaise that affects our whole country and the President spelled it out clearly at the 7th convocation of Rajshahi University. There is something wrong with our educational system, especially medical education.

It is a strange coincidence that at the beginning of this month I offered to give a talk on

endotoxic shock, among other things at a medical school. I was invited but no talk was arranged. One member of the staff who had done his post graduate studies in UK conversed with me in English. Others kept mum. Later I noticed some of the lecturers finding it difficult to speak in English. Most of the students could not speak English either. One of them explained to me that they cannot speak English but could read and understand it. I have reason to doubt this. In the library, textbooks were of the 1970 vintage. They had an auditorium which was built at a cost of around 40 million taka. How much did they spend on buying books and journals for the library? Practically nothing and even then it would have been of little use because most of them do not understand English.

Medical education is in English. In the examinations the questions are set in English and answered in English. How do they manage this? I heard strange rumours. The answers could be written in Bangla. During examination, there is wholesale open copying from textbooks and this is even encouraged by the authorities. I do not know how far these things are true. But it is very important the government looks seriously into this cancer eating into our educational system.

Language is a tool for acquiring knowledge. The only tool available to us for receiving medical education is English. By neglecting English as an important second language in our schools we have allowed the rot to set in and eventually we will be faced with an impossible situation. I cannot overemphasise the importance of English in this world which is moving fast (quoting from the President, Justice Shahabuddin) and modern age and civilisation are indisputably dependant on sci-

ence and technology.

There are so many things I could write about our medical education. Nobody has looked into the medical curriculum over all these years and it is outdated. The ever expanding pool of medical knowledge is beyond the grasp of any human individual. Traditional methods of education with heavy reliance on teaching of subject matter knowledge are inadequate. In western universities the curriculum is revised every year. The education is practically oriented and all students are trained in reading, thinking and reasoning skills and become competent in comprehending the knowledge they encounter and use it to make decisions and solve problems. Computers have become knowledge banks and in the first year of their studies every medical student is made competent in storing and retrieving information. They also start seeing and examining patients from the first day of their arrival in the medical school and a heavy reliance is placed on practical training.

It is sad this tragedy occurred at Rangpur and seven patients died. We grieve their deaths and let us not insult them by pushing the unpalatable facts under the carpet and pretend that all is well. The system is seriously at fault and this is a matter for urgent consideration by the government, the health and the educational authorities.

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To the Editor...

A hasty allotment

Sir, It is agreed that late president Ziaur Rahman left no house or piece of land for his family in Dhaka. In normal and logical situations, President Ziaur Rahman, as an officer of armed forces, would have been allotted a plot at Old DOHS or New DOHS or Gulshan. He would have constructed a house on that plot. But it transpires that he was not interested in any of those which is quite intriguing. After his tragic and unfortunate death, his family was provided with two houses — one in Gulshan and the other in Dhaka Cantonment — the house in controversy. Allotting that particular house to the family of President Zia in Cantonment area was not a good decision. President Ziaur with all the acumen and intelligence of a justice and a learned person did not ponder over the consequences of such a highly emotional and hasty decision. A president can do anything but shouldn't always do so. That's why he is the President.

S Nasrullah, Bara Maghbazar, Dhaka

The ABC of rates

Sir, The value of currency varies from one country to another and so is the rate of exchange. How many people in our country know and understand how the value and rate of exchange of currency is worked out, determined and fixed with the rates of exchange of various currencies of different foreign countries?

In our country people feel and realise that whenever our government devalue our currency the prices of foreign and domestic goods and commodities increase, the hardships and sufferings of the people also increase. Simultaneously there is a colossal amount of increase in our outstanding foreign loans and rate of interest thereon.

The US is known to be the world's number-one economy and the cost of one US dollar is Taka 48. Japan is world's second largest economy but the cost of one Japanese yen is Taka 0.40 only. We fail to understand why there is so great a difference between the price of one US dollar and one Japanese yen. Kuwait is not a strong and flourishing economy but one wonders why a Kuwaiti dinar

costs Taka 160. The cost of one rial of rich oil producing country Saudi Arabia stands at Taka 12 only. Why?

Would some of our financial experts, economists and bankers kindly come forward and let the members of the public know the ABC of rate of foreign exchange?

O. H. Kabir, 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203a

Street and streetlight

Sir, We pay taxes to the government and the City Corporation for cleaning roads and dustbins, keeping the tube lights on in the streets at night, repairing and making new roads etc. The Corporation takes more than 12 per cent of house rent for holding tax, for cleaning and electricity cost. We have a five-story house 60feetx60feet in Shekerteek Mohammapur area. We are paying more than Taka 47,000 tax each year since 1993. If everybody pays tax truly or if the Corporation is honest about to collect the same then it could be possible to accumulate Taka

1700,000 (1100/30X47000) approximately. If we deduct 50 per cent for various reasons then approximate collection of tax could be Taka 750,000 per 1000 feet road. With this amount the Corporation can make 1000/20 feet road each year.

Unfortunately, we never relish admissible road and garbage disposal facilities since we construct our house. We have been living without streetlights for last six months. We have shaped the present road ourselves with some help from neighbours and the housing authority.

Shahem Moheemadpur, Dhaka

Healthcare cost

Sir, At the end of the 20th century health and healthcare pattern has been changed drastically. Coping with healthcare cost is one of the causes of concern among many families. Normally, many of us do not think about this. Because the healthcare cost does not only includes doctors' fee or drug price but also many other areas need to be considered. First, the healthcare cost can be divided

into two gross headlines, namely:

- Direct cost
 - Indirect cost
- Again direct cost is subdivided under two heads:
- Direct medical cost
 - Direct non-medical cost

Direct medical cost includes the doctors' fees, lab test fees and drug prices. Direct non-medical cost includes special diet for the patients and bed charge in hospitals. Indirect cost can also be divided into two parts:

- Tangible cost
- Intangible cost

Tangible cost includes the transportation cost, travel time value, waiting time (for doctor) value, loss of working hour, loss of productivity and extra food for traveling (if any). All mentioned costs account for the patient himself but in our country most of the patients are accompanied with someone. In that case the cost will multiply accordingly.

Therefore, it is time to think seriously about our life style and healthcare cost.

Dr Nadra Sultana, Dhaka

Onion — more precious than gold

Sir, Where the onions have disappeared? The price has not come down in Dhaka even after a week; and it is not selling in Chittagong at Tk 20 a kg as reported in some papers.

The hoarding and delaying tendency by unscrupulous traders could have been anticipated by the government and necessary measures taken, as black-marketing is not a new game practiced in this country. The administration is silent on the movement of onion, and its speedy disposal in the retail market. No onion-trucks of the government were reported selling onion by the roadside. Smell a rat or onion? Now the Ramadan is due within days, and the official silence is not golden. What happened to the high gear publicity on onions? Across the borders some state governments came down during the state elections due not due to crocodile tears, but onion tears.

Onion at Tk 50 per kg is not good governance, even the government officials would agree.

Abul M Ahmad, Dhaka