

Inhuman Prisons

People who are admitted to prisons are not expected to be treated as tourists on holiday. Prisons are supposed to be a form of punishment, by ensuring that inmates are deprived of freedom for a prescribed period of time. However, while some may well feel that people sent to prisons should be made to live in punishing surroundings, there is a limit to which this can be tolerated. This is more so, when the prisons contain more people yet to be pronounced guilty than convicts, and many who are not even accused of any crime.

The nation's prisons have long suffered from over-crowding and prisoners have been subjected to a regime that far from projects a humane face of a democratic state. A report in a vernacular daily has revealed that Dhaka Central Jail now contains over 7,000 prisoners even though its capacity is 2,300. Living conditions are atrocious, with denial of even the most basic of amenities. But it appears the authorities are simply oblivious to the problem. But the worst part is that Dhaka jail contains several hundred innocent children who have been sent there for "safe custody". Many of these children were rescued from traffickers but, instead of being rehabilitated under the care of the state or voluntary organisations, they are being made to live among criminals in an environment unfit for adult human beings, let alone children.

The state of Dhaka central jail exposes the callous indifference of the government towards prisoners. The government needs to understand that even criminals in its custody have to be given a minimum level of human comfort, such as decent meals, regular and unhindered access to washing and bathing facilities etc. It remains a mystery as to why the government persists with treating prisoners in such an inhuman manner, or why undertrial prisoners are made to share the same premises as convicted criminals. But the sheer injustice of the whole situation is driven home by the presence of innocent children among the inmates. The time has surely come for the government to thoroughly reform the prison system, by improving the living conditions in the jails, by constructing separate jails for convicts and those in remand, and by totally doing away with the practice of keeping women and children in prison in the name of "safe custody".

The Sick ICU

The intensive care unit of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital (formerly IPGMR) needs immediate intensive care for itself. The report in The Daily Star on Monday provides a graphic description of the dismal condition and plight of the patients and their attendants respectively at the ICU, which normally is the place for critically, and sometimes terminally ill patients. Among so many allegations by the attendants of patients the ratio of nurses vis-a-vis the number of beds is pathetic and so is the fact that some doctors untrained in the use of life-saving equipment work in the ICU. On weekends doctors hardly make their rounds. Only three nurses work for a maximum of 10 patients in each shift at the unit and in case of an emergency the attendants have to look for the doctor to attend the patient. The consultant-in-charge of the unit admits that the ICU faces shortage of medicines, trained nurses and doctors. There is talk about encouraging attendants of patients to get familiarised with the activities of the ICU. He must be knowing that these attendants will not come back to join the ICU as trained hands to look after other patients. Why cannot the professional nurses be trained to do their job properly in this important unit?

Head of the Anesthesiology Department claimed that the ICU is not recognised as an individual entity. Whatever we have achieved is the contribution of our doctors. Sounds great. We compliment the doctors for their zeal to serve the suffering humanity but at the same time wish to ask the authorities what are the reasons for not minding the business of a vital part of the most important medical institution in the country. If a huge amount of money can be spent on the expansion schemes of the hospital then a smaller amount can easily be earmarked for the improvement of its vital services. What we all need is planning and the urge for it. We strongly feel that the health ministry will wake up from its slumber and earnestly address itself to the task of providing adequate funds and proper service facilities required to maintain an efficient intensive care unit at the BBSMMUH. This has to be done not only for the better treatment of gravely ill patients but also to uphold the prestige and image of the premier medical institution of the country, now named after Bangabandhu.

Failure Gets Muscular

Rangpur Medical College (RMC) suffered an ordeal from rather unexpected quarters on Sunday when students who had failed the final MBBS examinations went on a rampage within its premises. The publication of the results which showed 67 in the 'failed' category as against a minority of 58 who came out 'successful' set off violent outbursts from the 'brute majority' who had flunked. That a hell was let loose there could be gauged from the telling toll: principal's office ransacked, three private cars of doctors damaged, administrative building incurred loss worth Tk 5 lakh and the college closed sine die. When the college reopens it might reel in the embittered relations the students' academic failure has created between the college students' union who led the agitation and the RMC unit of Bangladesh Medical Association looking after the doctors' interests.

The incident should be taken seriously, not just shrugged off as something of a tragic-comedy. RMC may have unconsciously pioneered a trend of agitation based on intolerance of poor exam results whose magnitude is clearly on the rise.

Hence we suggest that the probe body already set up to investigate the incident should go to the roots of it. While deprecating the failed students' obnoxious behaviour in the strongest language we are capable of, let's stress the obvious question that arises: why so many more students failed than passed? Isn't it time we reviewed the teaching standards, had a good laboratory-cum-equipment base and enriched the academic atmosphere sufficiently to draw more students to the academic mainstream?

IRAQ'S bombing by Anglo-American forces is a disgusting act of brigandage. It "diminishes and degrades" not so much Iraq's military capabilities as the US's and Britain's global stature. If the US stooped to a new low in executing this operation, Britain, to quote Labour MP George Galloway, was "reduced to being a tail on this verminous and mangy Desert Fox".

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If the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) couldn't even locate weapons of mass destruction (WMD) facilities for seven years, it is unlikely that

the US could have accurately hit them. Mr Hussein's Republican Guards and tanks probably went largely unaffected. Iraq now seems set to kick out UNSCOM inspectors: "The Special Commission is now behind us. Its mission is over."

Desert Fox's stated objectives were contradictory: "degrading" Mr Hussein's WMD capability is not the same as overthrowing him. But that is what Mr Clinton now wants: "The best way to end the threat that Saddam poses... is for Iraq to have a different government". The conflation of objectives derives from Mr Clinton's "Wag the Dog" response to his impeachment.

The US and UK lacked legal sanction for using armed force against Iraq. Nothing in the UN Charter permits any state to use force except in self-defence. In Iraq's case, the only sanction for force came from Security Council Resolution 678 authorising the vacation of Iraq's

A 'Mangy Desert Fox'

by Praful Bidwai

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invasion of Kuwait. But that ceased being effective in 1991. Resolution 1154 (March 1998) warned Iraq of "the severest consequences" if it did not grant UNSCOM "unconditional" access. However, Washington and London were not authorised to impose such consequences.

The US and UK are dishonest to cite UNSCOM chief Richard Butler's report in justification. The report exaggerated the five instances where Iraq resisted inspections, underplaying the fact that it cooperated in 300 recent cases. UNSCOM has been unfair and invasive. Its inspections were to last 40 days. They have gone on for 86 months — without yielding clinching evidence of WMD production. Mr Butler wrote his report at Washington's behest. And he was even more mistaken to withdraw inspectors without consulting the UN Secretary-General. This speaks of dangerous collusion with the US.

Even America's NATO allies were lukewarm towards Desert Fox. France and Italy were sharply critical. Even more so were Russia and China. This has not changed with Washington's new plea that it wants to promote democracy in Iraq. Mr Hussein is indeed a dictator; he has ruled Iraq as such for 20 years. But in 12 of those 20 years, he was America's ally. Washington did not protest when he used chemical poisons against the Kurds in 1988.

In truth, the US has shifted its policy — from dual containment of Iran and Iraq, to militarily targeting Iraq. In 1991, it did not dislodge Mr Hussein when it could — because it wanted him to contain Iran. It also allowed him to crush the southern Shia rebellion. Iraq's unfortunate civilians have been paying the price of US venality. Their situation is grim. According to UNICEF, 5-6,000 Iraqi children die each month from infections, starvation,

and lack of medicines, all related to sanctions. In Iraq's hospitals, surgical operations are routinely performed without anaesthesia. Scholars and doctors have turned into tax-drivers.

Schoolchildren have to do without pencils: graphite imports are not permitted for fear they will be used to make weapons. Nor can chlorine be used to purify water. Unlike some of the US's own allies, India and Pakistan were timid and mealy-mouthed in criticising the Anglo-American action. India only "deplored" it. This is a far cry from New Delhi's initial position of 1991. New Delhi wants to do nothing that might upset the US with which it has held seven rounds of talks on nuclear weapons. That also explains why it only agreed to issue a weak statement with Mr Yevgeny Primakov on the Gulf crisis. India is voluntarily restraining its policy options. There lies the rub. Those who thought that nuclearisation would at least

enable India and Pakistan to pursue an independent foreign policy must now concede they were wrong. Nuclearisation has shrunk our room for manoeuvre.

India and Pakistan stand isolated. They have courted their neighbours' hostility and suspicion. And they have lost leverage and moral stature. Nuclear weapons have proved a counterfeit currency of power. But then, they were always that. Nuclear America could not prevent China from joining the Korean war, or avoid its own humiliation in Vietnam. The mighty USSR had to beat an ignominious retreat from Afghanistan: nuclear weapons could not ensure even its survival.

Britain's nuclear weapons did not deter Argentina from fighting the Falklands War. And France's bombs have done little except satisfy national pomposity. There is a lesson here. The pursuit of hegemony through massive military force is not just immoral. It may not even be realistic. The US and UK will gain little by turning Iraqs — who once had among the highest living standards in the Middle East — into half-starved, sullen, paupers. New Delhi has gained little by departing from a principled stand against unilateral use of force, or by embracing nuclear deterrence. It has lost goodwill everywhere.

Don't Mince Words on Iraq's Invasion

by Praful Bidwai

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LL he wanted was to get off the BRTC double-decker bus in front of the Jatiya Press Club. The bus did not stop nor slow down. Altercation with the conductor followed. The angry conductor grabbed his neck, shoved and kicked him out of the bus. "Get out now," he yelled. Out went the hapless passenger, down under the rear wheels.

The driver tried to get away with the bus but angry passengers and passers-by did not let him. Riot police intervened, and rescued the conductor and the driver from the agitated crowd. Then they recovered the virtually headless body and sent it for autopsy. The Dhaka Medical College Hospital sources identified the unfortunate young man as Khalequzzaman, an employee of an architecture firm in Dhammandi. Police couldn't, however, ascertain his identity. He went down into police books as the victim in an unnatural death case.

On Wednesday last it was once again proved that death comes easy in this country of ours. The reaction of the people present was typical. They hurled abuses and pelted stones at vehicles that went by, creating utter disorder in traffic movement for a few hours and as soon as the police intervened their enthusiasm and zeal to establish the just died down. The next day the hapless death was reported on almost every news daily. The reports were poignant representation of popular sentiment — the culprits should be tried and punished. By Sunday, everyone conveniently forgot everything. The authorities would cer-

tainly like to rule Wednesday's death a stray incident. A conductor kicks a passenger out of the bus and the passenger dies crushed under the rear wheels — it doesn't have anything to do with the system, let alone the flaws in the system, they would argue. If they look deeper, they will find out, it does. Why was there an alteration between the conductor and the passenger in the first place? Was the bus scheduled to stop in front of the National Press Club? If yes, why did the bus not stop? If no, why did the passenger get on the bus? Did the conductor promise him he would stop the car and let him get off? Did the passenger insist?

Altercation between the conductor and passengers on a public bus is a familiar feature. There are so many areas that two sides differ on — fare, stoppage, delay, overloading, so on and so forth. Sometimes for no apparent reason the two sides engage in heated exchange. Sometimes pushing and shoving follows. This time around it went beyond that, it led to death.

Fare, stoppage, delay at the stands, overloading are problems that can be easily taken care of. The authorities concerned don't need much exertion to regulate these. The solutions are very simple, perhaps too simple to be credible. They have to make sure that all the public buses carry a chart of fare with the stoppages clearly designated; do not make unscheduled stoppages; do not load passengers beyond capacity; do not hang around at the stoppages beyond a designated period.

Coupled with strict enforcement, there should also be sensitising campaigns to create awareness among the regular public. Both passengers and operators on public transport should be conscious of their re-

spective rights and responsibilities. That the passengers find themselves hostage to the whims of the operators is because they are not aware, and not quite convinced, of their rights. They resign, seldom questioning the high-handedness of the drivers and the conductors. When there is protest, it appears frail, for it stems, quite often, from individual, unfortunately not collective, interest. When a driver violates a law, if it serves their purpose, the passengers keep quiet, their silence suggesting support. If otherwise, they raise hue and cry. Seldom a passenger protests an act that, instead of affecting his own individual interest, disturbs the system as a whole. If he is in a hurry and the driver ignores the red light, his act is justified. Passengers object vehemently to unscheduled stoppages but talk the driver into it when it serves their own purpose.

We do what we are not supposed to do. To make matters worse, the law-enforcers let us do what we are not supposed. Overhead bridges and underpasses, constructed with a view to keeping the pedestrians off the road, are hardly used. Instead of climbing stairs up or down, the pedestrians find it auspicious to sprint across the road — it saves them time and energy. People stationed to regulate the traffic generously ignore the breach of law, perhaps viewing it as an innocent aberration. What they fail to realise is that these small deviations start defabrication of the whole system.

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OPINION

Their Unending Political Dribbles

A R Shamsul Islam

During the 1971 genocide, Today the suffering in Bhutto's land is deeper than here.

It is insane for the world's

only superpower to depend on

force to bring about peace; and

premature firing of missiles.

What will happen, if in similar

cases some other country fired

missiles into the US? How

the Americans would take it,

including the campaign to tell

the Americans how to run US,

as they are telling Iraq how to run

their country (removal of Sad-

dam)?

The West does not believe in

spiritual moral values, only

markets and competition and

monopolies. Many there also do

not believe in the sacred institu-

tion of marriage, and the

bondage of a family and home.

A strong, united and happy

family is the basic social unit of

any nation (Confucius). Today

the western values are crum-

pling down. The Wall is the last

line of defence, now that Eu-

rope, Japan and Russia are in

fatal depression phases.

Abul M Ahmad

Dhaka.

Good work, BTV!

Sir, May I add a few lines to

Syed Wallajah's letter of Dec

21. BTV is very democratic, car-

rying the obituary notices of

class III/IV officials in the

main news bulletins, including

obscure octogenarians, relation

of a relation of some semi-VIP.

There appears to be no screen-

ing system what items to in-

clude and what to leave out, and

who make it to the "Local News"

slot (in fact, BTV has no Local

news slot!).

Another important issue or

policy: News is not views. When

50,000 persons attend an op-

position public meeting, it is not

considered news and included

in the news bulletin.

Such news items cannot be sup-

pressed by the mass media — it ap-