

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 under-trial 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 tragi-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 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".

Operation Desert Fox holds three sour ironies. First, it may have ended up strengthening Mr Saddam Hussein. Second, it has weakened the US's claim to leadership within the Western alliance and badly strained its relations with Russia and China. And third, the timid Indian and Pakistani responses to the attack undermine the claim that nuclear weapons enhance independent foreign policy-making. Mr Hussein had declared in 1991, "If I survive, I win". This is likely to prove truer of Desert Fox. Anglo-American troops fired 425 cruise missiles and flew 650 bombing sorties against Iraq. But only 28 of their 97 targets were "destroyed" or "severely damaged".

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

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 taxi-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 Iraqis — 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.

A 'Mangy Desert Fox'

by Praful Bidwai

Don't Mince Words on Iraq's Invasion

Operation Desert Fox holds three sour ironies. First, it may have ended up strengthening Mr Saddam Hussein. Second, it has weakened the US's claim to leadership within the Western alliance and badly strained its relations with Russia and China. And third, the timid Indian and Pakistani responses to the attack undermine the claim that nuclear weapons enhance independent foreign policy-making.

Dying under the Wheels of the System

by Mir A Zaman

If it is not at Gulistan, it is at Azimpur; if it is not in Dhaka, it is in Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sirajganj or anywhere else. It is not just the reckless driver or the insensate conductor or the hapless pedestrian who ran across the road only to get run over, it is the flaw in the system. The authorities concerned must react now and find out where lies the leak.

ALL he wanted was to get off the BRTC double-decker bus in front of the Jayra Press Club. The bus did neither 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 Dhanmondi. 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 altercation 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.

These provisions are surely there in the books. There is no need for new sets of rules and regulations. All that is needed is enforcement of extant laws. People lose respect in the system only when they see violations of law go unpunished. In our country, unfortunately, the violations have created an alternative system. Interesting is our apathy, if not antipathy, towards rules and regulations. The zebra crossing is there and so are the overhead bridge, still pedestrians would simply cross the road wherever they find convenient. Constables literally throw themselves on the streets to make the vehicles stop at the red light. Defiance seems to have sunk in our psyche.

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.

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.

The death of Khalequzzaman, if that is the name of the hapless young man, for that matter, any such death, points to one simple but scathing truth — the system is not working. More people get killed in road mishap everyday. If it is not at Gulistan, it is at Azimpur; if it is not in Dhaka, it is in Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sirajganj or anywhere else. It is not just the reckless driver or the insensate conductor or the hapless pedestrian who ran across the road only to get run over, it is the flaw in the system. The authorities concerned must react now and find out where lies the leak. They must plug the loopholes before the whole system collapses.

To the Editor...

"Pakistan's Afghan Policy..."

Sir, The article entitled "Pakistan's Afghan Policy: Chasing a Mirage" by Brig (Retd) M Abdul Hafiz published in the DS on 28 December needs some clarifications.

It is not historically correct to say that the non-Pakistani composition of "Rabbani-Masud combination" and its "propensity to accommodate left leaning forces" was unacceptable to Pakistan and that is why the relations between the two soured. In reality, the situation within Afghanistan worsened because Rabbani and Masud refused to hold the promised elections by 1995, thus violating the premise on which they had been given power by the Mujahideen. Their short-sighted policies plunged the country into the mess that followed.

Pakistan had recognised the Taliban not when they captured Kabul, but when Mazar Sharif also fell to them in 1996. We are glad that Brig. Hafiz acknowledges that the Taliban do not follow Pakistan's "dictates". This is how it is. Pakistan does not wish to be involved in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

Pakistan believes that the only way to resolve the domestic turmoil of Afghanistan is non-interference from abroad and an encouragement to its people to find a resolute, through accommodation and compromise. This will naturally be possible only when supply of arms from abroad is completely stopped and the reality on the ground is recognised by all.

Arif Mahmud
First Secretary
High Commission for Pakistan
in Dhaka

'Clintomania'

Sir, Why President Clinton of the US is trigger-happy (and Monica-happy?) Serves him right — now he has faced the impeachment triggering. Lot of Bangladesh are inclined to believe that Bhutto's death was somehow linked to the *bad-doa* (curse) of the Bangladeshis

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 Saddam)?

The West does not believe in spiritual moral values, only markets and competition and monopolies. Many there also do not believe in the sacred institution 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 crumbling down. The Wall is the last line of defence, now that Europe, Japan and Russia are in fatal depression phases.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka.

"Good work, BTV"

Sir, May I add a few lines to Syed Walullah's letter of Dec 21. BTV is very democratic, carrying 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 screening system what items to include 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 opposition public meeting, it is not considered news and included in the news bulletin. A full-day hartal is not announced in advance for advance planning by millions of citizens. Such news items cannot be suppressed by the mass media — it appears in print 'free press' the next day, but the government-controlled electronic media is not a part of free media, as per unofficial 'official' stand.

The authority misguided the public on the recent BMR of BTV

(digital conversion of the BH) on the past causes for non-compliance. The Japanese government agreed for assistance on certain pre-conditions pertaining to granting more freedom to this media. This may be disclosed to the public or announced in the parliament.

Good protection, BTV!

A Zabr
Dhaka.

Uttara 'Model Town'

Sir, I wonder how the Uttara town was specifically named a 'model' town. This township is probably the largest of all Rajuk townships and growing quite fast with the new Sectors coming up.

We have seen very indiscriminate growth of the Dhaka city over the last 50 years even though we got a wonderful chance to plan our city, a chance, which does not come quite frequently in a nation's life. Uttara is no difference. The shopping centres here are being built without proper car parking facilities underneath or around. There was supposed to be a bifurcating line between commercial and residential zones with woods in between but no such thing is visible. Drains were being made pucca a few years back but after starting of the work to-date it stopped.

Sewerage system is yet a dream! Most of the roads require immediate repairs but the authorities seem unaware. The uncontrolled and haphazard throwing of wastes around from commercial buildings have been littering the areas creating environmental hazards for the residents of the area. Cleaning is in deplorable state.

The unauthorised shops are increasing unabated on roads littering filth around making the lives of the residents miserable. A MODEL town indeed!

Unless immediate corrective steps are taken, whatever left of the 'Model' town will be diminished to zero.

A citizen
Uttara, Dhaka.

OPINION

Their Unending Political Dribbles

A R Shamsul Islam

the AL and then back to the BNP in an interval of a couple of hours may vary in details but the central theme of the whole story is more or less the same. It is another exposure of mean opportunism mazed by uncertainty, indecision and even blackmailing.

The Khaleques are not few in our politics. Rather they are a lot. Big, medium, small. Only difference is in stature and not in spirit. Big ones hit headlines. Small ones are denied publicity often on the ground of paucity of space. Cabal's Khaleque was championed in news importance, while co-actor commissioner Benu was dismissed before a dozen words were spent.

The Khaleques are political blackmailers. They drive from one party to another to earn political capital. With this capital they amass material fortune and keep hold on the herdsman and shanty rabble. They display it as a decisive vote base and thus enhance their price tag in the eyes of the crazy political parties.

What agonises us most is that the political parties, particularly the two top-seeded, have gone so neurotic as to run amuck to capture the Khaleques. They blow out incessantly that people are with them and they are for them meaning people's welfare. But by their hankering for the Khaleques they themselves have raised doubt if they really believed in the heart of hearts that people are with them. Had they been sanguine about people's support, which can only be built up by solid works for the mass, to them these Khaleques would have been dwarfed and diminished in the political scenario of Bangladesh.

To the dismay of the people, the two chief political parties of the country the Awami League and the BNP are inching towards a death grapple. In fact, the BNP has flexed full muscle to liquidate the Awami gov-

ernment. It has threatened to launch a movement unto death of the Awami League government after the Eid. It has been hitting for issues to rest movements upon them literally since the first day the Awami League got into the office. Still the Awami League has no right to resent it. Because, while in the Opposition the Awami League pulled the cart likewise. It is mystifying that the BNP, which otherwise steadfastly runs just counter to the Awami League, has been absolutely faithful to take solid cues from the Awami League regarding the Opposition conduct to the government. With mortal confrontation feared to be near ahead both the parties are making utmost efforts to augment their respective arsenals. The Khaleques famed for muscle and money pose for an attractive ammunition.

It is both the two parties' equally strong lack of confidence in the ballot as the real arbiter for seating and unseating the government that has led to woo and coo the Khaleques. A belief seems to have fouled up their mind that bullet, fired overt or covert, will ultimately win the state mantle. Overt hitting for issues to rock the streets. Covert when concealing varnished and money-spiced terrorism under a glazy garb of democracy a poll is practically hijacked sometimes much ahead of the day of polling hoodwinking crowded observers and even Election Commission.

The Khaleques are for the *Kaleques*. Neither for the Awami League's nor the BNP's. The Khaleques prohibit politics to be people's. The Khaleques nautic politics to be subservient to the Khaleques.

This is a plain truth that neither the Awami League nor the BNP can afford to miss reading at this moment when the air is highly charged with political evil fire.

The writer is retired Principal, Pabna Govt. Mohila College.



Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Oil and Marriage

THE good news is that Mobil and Exxon are going to be joined at the hip in the largest merger known to mankind. Some people (not many) are curious as to why two gasoline godzillas who sell the same product would think of getting married. Here are some of the questions that the merger has raised:

Q: Why would Exxon and Mobil want to get together when they could have so much more fun competing against each other in the open market?

A: It would give both companies an opportunity to get rid of their workers. In the past it took two people in the oil industry to screw in a light bulb. Now it will take only one person, providing the customer holds the nozzle himself.

Q: Will the merger stifle competition?

A: If you mean will it prevent one company from selling its gasoline at a lower price than the other, it should not be a problem because gasoline companies wouldn't know about price fixing or anything close to it. The price of petroleum is set by Arab sheikhs and Alaskan natives. Oil companies are happy to go along with any price that oil sells for on the open market.

Q: Why would someone pay \$80 billion for another gasoline company?

A: Some people collect baseball cards, others glass paperweights and still others giant monopolies. Keep in mind, if you have to ask the price of Mobil, you can't afford it.

Q: If the workers get the shaft, who stands to gain on a deal like this?

A: The stockholders, who are not in business for their health.

Q: Why would the Justice Department allow Exxon to buy Mobil when years and years ago the government broke up Standard Oil and created the two companies that now want to merge?

A: No one knows the answer to that question, which is why the two mega-companies are going ahead. The good news is that for every employee being laid off by the merger, a defense lawyer will be hired to replace him.

Q: What will the merger mean to the motorist?

A: Nothing at the beginning, but as time goes on we will all be at the mercy of Exxon-Mobil, particularly if there is another gasoline shortage.

Q: Is there anything a person can do to prevent the merger?

A: Throw yourself over a gasoline pump and yell, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

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