

Must be an Eye-opener for the PM

When our Prime Minister with her police escort has to break the law to avoid being stuck in traffic, then one can imagine the plight of the common people. As The Daily Star front-page photograph snapped by staffer Enamul Huq with a split-second wit depicted, PM's motorcade arched into the wrong side of the thoroughfare after failing to make its way through the jampacked 'right side' of it.

So horrendous was the traffic congestion ahead of the prime ministerial paraphernalia that it had to break the rule, both of which — the jam and the departure from normal practice — were seen by the Prime Minister with her own eyes. As she rode along the avenue she must have also seen some of the backlash forming into traffic thickets at road-crossings while for the most part the ripple effects lasted well beyond her journey-time.

If seeing is believing, then she must have absorbed some of the dangerous slide the urban traffic situation has taken. That VIP road being rickshaw-free, the problem goes deeper than a quick-fix of a theory that the rickshaws are the spoilers.

We have strained our vocal chords a few times over along with the rest of the print media to point out that the increasingly snarling metropolitan traffic that also belches out the worst pollutants in the environmental book, needs immediate government intervention to save manhours and the civic health from utter ruin. Nobody seems to care. Whatever sign of recognition of the immensity of the problem one occasionally sees is mostly by way of displaying knowledge of the subject with a dash of anecdotal exchanges much the same way that victims of the situation i.e., the ordinary people usually do. Resolutions intermittently pop up from coordination meetings and a minister or two were heard setting target dates to stamp out traffic congestion and pollution but the resolves applied more in their breach. Most plans are long term-bound but that the problem's bristly aspect is remediable in the short term is routinely lost sight of.

The Sunday incident better not be explained away as an one-off aberration linked to the Eid-eve congestion. That is the surest way to 'taking things in the stride.' True, there is no trifling, with the free mobility of the chief executive of the state, but when this contrasts starkly with the avoidable inconvenience of the citizens she is mandated to serve then obviously it is the latter that demands her urgent personal initiative. From her own experience the PM must have realised last Sunday that the city traffic has crossed all limits of tolerance. She, we hope, will do something about it now that she was forced to break the law to avoid the traffic jam.

Sound Market Moves

At long last, there are some positive signals emanating from the much-maligned capital market. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has adopted new rules governing the issuance of Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), which are designed to ensure "full and fair" disclosure in prospectuses. This would enable potential investors to weigh up the risk factors properly. This comes hard on the heels of the Dhaka Stock Exchange's recent tough action against a brokerage firm for price manipulation. The two together give a clear signal that both the SEC and DSE are beginning to take seriously their duties to make capital market transparent and investor-friendly.

Ever since the highly contrived "boom-and-bust" fiasco at the Dhaka Stock Exchange in 1996, both the management of the DSE and SEC have faced a great deal of criticism. There have also been allegations about prospectuses issued by companies floating IPOs containing misleading information or lacking in adequate disclosure. Since scrutiny of IPOs is one of the SEC's prime functions, blame for this major flaw in market operations has naturally been laid at the door of the regulatory authority. As a result, public confidence in the capital market has remained low.

The new moves by the SEC and DSE are fine. But while potential investors would shoulder the responsibility for their investment decisions, the SEC would also be expected to do its job effectively, and ensure that IPOs do contain "full and fair" disclosures. Once the IPOs have been issued, investors should be able to hold the SEC responsible for the accuracy of the information. If necessary, the government ought to enhance the SEC's technical capability to scrutinise IPOs, through recruitment of professional manpower and logistical support. As for the DSE, the only guarantor of its autonomy is that the Council exercises its authority to protect investor interest, and act decisively against manipulation.

Shame on Thackeray

The efforts of the two warring nations to soothe nerves through renewed cricketing contacts have met with communal frenzy from the Hindu chauvinist party Shiv Sena led by the sadistic Bal Thackeray. The hatred manifested last Wednesday with the vandalism of the cricket pitch at Firozeshah Kotla Stadium in Delhi. A similar incident took place in 1991 as Shiv Sena extremists dug up pitch in Bombay to prevent Pakistan playing in India. The match was shifted to another venue outside the State of Maharashtra. But this time the tentacles of Bal Thackeray even reached Delhi causing tensions in the Cricket Boards and embarrassment to the BJP government at Delhi which is an ally of Thackeray's Shiv Sena Party. A cricket series between arch rivals India and Pakistan generates tremendous heat, expectation, anxiety and interest among millions of people not only in the countries concerned but in the sub-continent as a whole, let alone the people of sub-continent origin wherever they are.

Little wonder, these teams have been meeting outside the subcontinent for the past nine years. In fact Pakistan have not been able to play a full series in India in the last 13 years. What a pity! But we must congratulate Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for his whole-hearted support for and commitment to the safety of the Pakistani players and the BJP's assurance to back the government in its endeavour to stage the games. The Pakistan captain Wasim Akram has also expressed the wishes of his team to go ahead with the tour. This is a very positive approach and even if no match is played in Bombay we hope the series will produce a thriller in the opener at Delhi on 28 January. Thackeray and his communal army should burn in the hell as the tour progresses.

THE round of accusations and counter-accusations is more or less over. Now is the time to determine the truth. Let us wear wigs and act as judges. The case before us is that of Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat's dismissal from the office of naval chief. The general charge against him is that he committed a series of acts of 'disobedience, defiance, lies and threats.'

Specifically, (1) seriously jeopardised national security concerns; (2) lodged a written protest directly with Pakistan High Commission against a Pakistani surveillance aircraft tailing an Indian naval vessel; (3) he publicly criticised the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW); (4) he defied civilian authorities on a sustained basis; (5) he deliberately kept from the defence minister the representations by vice-admiral Sushil Kumar, now the naval chief; and (6) Bhagwat went out of the way to stall the appointment of vice-admiral Harinder Singh.

Let us take up charge by charge. The first, that of endangering national security, is the most serious. A top officer found tampering with security eight months before retirement is, indeed, disturbing. If it is true, he deserved to be court-martialed, not just dismissed. Government has given no evidence to prove how Bhagwat acted against India's security. Official statement says that his "series of actions" threatened "national security" but does not tell how. Defence Minister George Fernandes refrains from elaborating in his TV interview. All that he says is that he cannot talk about it "as it concerns national security."

They are meaningful words. But they suggest more than what they say. With great difficulty I have obtained from official sources one 'evidence.' This is an interview by Bhagwat that was printed in *The Hindu* on October 2. The allegation is that he was incompetent in indulging in "nuclear submarine." The pertinent part of his interview is: 'The world has no better vehicle for ensuring second strike or retaliatory capability than the nuclear submarine. These are, of course, principles we are theorising about.'

How does this observation violate security considerations is not understandable. Firstly, Bhagwat revealed nothing; secondly, he emphasised that he was only 'theorising.' The impression that government has left in the minds of people is as if he was passing on defence secrets to the enemy. It is a pity that the defence ministry should stoop so low to question the patriotism of a person like Bhagwat on the basis of an interview, which even stretched, does not disclose anything.

The second charge is that he approached the Pakistan High Commission to lodge the protest. This betrays his familiarity with the rules of diplomatic corps, not disloyalty to the country. He authorised his directorate of naval intelligence to write to the naval advisor to the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi. He sent copies of the communication to the defence and external affairs ministries. When the ministry of external affairs advised him not to employ such channel, he issued instructions "not to engage" the Pakistan High Commission directly. It was a procedural mistake. To interpret it as an act of

That the morale of the armed forces remains high is no credit to government. They have refused to get involved in politics. They are a professional force, committed to the dictates of democracy.

subordination is a deliberate act of vindictiveness by the defence ministry.

Bhagwat's remark that the RAW was incompetent is indiscreet but by no means it violates national security demands. As an officer of long standing, he may have come across examples of RAW's ineptness. He gave vent to his annoyance. At worst, it was an outburst, which should have been ignored as it was done when he made it. The defence minister could have mentioned it at one of his weekly morning meetings with the service chiefs. Why to pick

Finding fault with Bhagwat for having sat over the appointment of Vice-admiral Harinder Singh does not tally with facts. In a letter to Cabinet Secretary Prabhakar Kumar, Bhagwat has written: 'It is respectfully reiterated and clarified to the honourable members of the ACC (Appointment Committee of the Cabinet) through the cabinet secretary that the chief of naval staff has never once stated that the directions of the ACC will not be implemented.' Bhagwat is a stickler for rules. He said the order was 'unimplementable' because the ap-

pointment was "violative of the relevant/basic features of the Constitution of Indian Navy Act, 1975." His grievance was that the rules had not been brought to the notice of the ACC members.

The most reprehensible part of the entire episode is that no disciplinary action has been taken against Harinder Singh, who tried to communalise appointments and promotions. He went to the extent of alleging that Bhagwat was 'prejudicial' because of his wife, Niloufer, half Muslim and half Parsi. By attending the New Year eve party at Harinder Singh's headquarters in the Andamans, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has committed an act of indiscretion, which is neither

explainable nor forgivable. When Harinder Singh's allegation had appeared in the press, former defence minister Sharad Pawar had written to the Prime Minister to take action against Harinder Singh for introducing communalism in the services. That Agriculture Minister Surjit Singh Barnala met Fernandes on behalf of Harinder Singh supports the allegation that the Akali Dal had interfered in the matter.

There is nothing in the charges levelled against Bhagwat. He, in turn, has alleged that "the BJP-led government has punished him for his secular views." As far back as August, his wife wrote to Fernandes. 'What is particularly disturbing and inexcusable is that Ministry of Defence officials have not deemed it appropriate to direct Vice-admiral Harinder Singh to explain the violation of his oath to the Constitution of India and his mala fide referring to the religious roots of the family of the incumbent chief of the naval staff...'

It appears that the matter was simmering for several months. Congress wanted to raise it in the last session of parliament but did not do so because it expected an early settlement. Why didn't the defence minister take timely steps to sort it out? Instead, government went ahead with the dismissal of Bhagwat and then tried to cover up by raising unrelated questions. The feud between the services and the defence ministry is nothing new. The ministry cannot justify Bhagwat's dismissal by issuing a press note that government "has the

responsibility of ensuring that our armed forces function effectively, objectively and with their traditional mentality, within the democratic set up. There was no basis for this type of thinking in the first instance.

If government was still determined to find fault with Bhagwat, he should have been given notice to explain his conduct. It cannot stage a coup as it did. Bhagwat came to know about his dismissal 15 minutes before his successor walked in. A RAW plane flew in the later from Kochi. He had no permission from the naval chief to move away from his headquarters. Under whose authority did he travel to Delhi?

And it is intriguing how Sushil Kumar came to be selected from among the four equally ranked officers. Dossiers of all the four were lying in the safe custody of Bhagwat. Were the other three considered and rejected? The hush-hush operation does not suggest that.

Where does government go from Bhagwat's dismissal? The two Congress leaders, Sharad Pawar and Manmohan Singh, who were 'manned' on the dismissal, have denied it. The entire opposition, including the coalition partner, Jayalalitha's ALADMK, has criticised the dismissal and demanded an inquiry. Even President K R Narayanan has reportedly said that it was a mistake. That the morale of the armed forces remains high is no credit to government. They have refused to get involved in politics. They are a professional force, committed to the dictates of democracy. Some one in government must make amends for the mistake committed in Bhagwat's dismissal.

Picking up Peccadilloes to Make a Case!

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

up peccadilloes to make a case?

Government's unhappiness over not forwarding as many as six representations by Sushil Kumar has a point. He wanted to be posted to an operational command. But the representations were addressed to the naval chief. Sushil Kumar did not even want to pursue his statutory complaint to the defence minister. Bhagwat should have been told not to stall any representation in the future. But this is too flimsy a ground to be construed as a challenge to the civilian authority. Bhagwat denies Fernandes' charge that Sushil Kumar was threatened with court-martial. 'It is a lie,' he says. He is ready to face an inquiry. Is Fernandes prepared for it?

Government's unhappiness over not forwarding as many as six representations by Sushil Kumar has a point. He wanted to be posted to an operational command. But the representations were addressed to the naval chief. Sushil Kumar did not even want to pursue his statutory complaint to the defence minister. Bhagwat should have been told not to stall any representation in the future. But this is too flimsy a ground to be construed as a challenge to the civilian authority. Bhagwat denies Fernandes' charge that Sushil Kumar was threatened with court-martial. 'It is a lie,' he says. He is ready to face an inquiry. Is Fernandes prepared for it?

Government's unhappiness over not forwarding as many as six representations by Sushil Kumar has a point. He wanted to be posted to an operational command. But the representations were addressed to the naval chief. Sushil Kumar did not even want to pursue his statutory complaint to the defence minister. Bhagwat should have been told not to stall any representation in the future. But this is too flimsy a ground to be construed as a challenge to the civilian authority. Bhagwat denies Fernandes' charge that Sushil Kumar was threatened with court-martial. 'It is a lie,' he says. He is ready to face an inquiry. Is Fernandes prepared for it?

Coining a New Future: End of the Lira

More than joy, the arrival of the Euro to Italy marks a moment of triumph for a country that almost did not make it to the shared currency of the European Union. Italy was where EU's founding act was signed, in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, and Italy has always been an enthusiast of the European Monetary Union.

ALMOST a century and a half ago, on August 24, 1862, the Lira was born to Modern Italy, itself a fledgling state that had freshly emerged in 1860. As the national currency of its turbulent economy, the Lira had an eventful and checkered career. Recently, on Thursday, 31 December 1998, it resigned as an independent currency, making way for the current star on the EU horizon, the newly-launched single currency of Europe, the new money of the new year: the Euro.

In Italy, as Treasury Minister Clampi minted the first Euro, the event was remarked upon by Italy's Director of Mint, Nicolo Ielpo with a mixture of nostalgic regret and optimism: 'It is a sad day for the death of the Lira but one of joy for the birth of the Euro.'

More than joy, the arrival of the Euro to Italy marks a moment of triumph for a country that almost did not make it to the shared currency of the European Union. Italy was where EU's founding act was signed, in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, and Italy has always been an enthusiast of the European Monetary Union. When the Maastricht Treaty laid down its stringent goals for individual countries to streamline their economies to bring them in line with the common objectives, Italy had a hard time qualifying to meet those conditions.

But with political determination and financial rigour, it lowered its inflation rate and trimmed its budget deficit accordingly to meet the Maastricht standard. For this eager country to have not qualified

for the single currency would have been a great disappointment. But it has made the dream possible. And today, the image of Leonardo Da Vinci proudly graces the shining face of the newly minted Euro coin, symbolically bringing to the common European currency, traditional Italian resourcefulness and the wide-ranging creativity and versatility of Leonardo's Renaissance Man.

Never a very strong currency, the lira has found new life and vigour in merging its identity with and cashing in on the strength of this artificially created, common currency of Europe. By itself a wobbly entity, the lira in its transformation into Euro, will now get a new lease of life, and more stability.

Economic historian Carlo Maria Cipolla wrote in *La Stampa*, 'During its history, the lira has had moments of weakness and strengths. But it has tended to be weaker more often to help exports. Its fragility of the currency was an extraordinary asset in the hands of businessmen.' He also mentioned, how a shaky lira had helped speculators make a killing in the financial markets.

The Italian premier D'Alema said in *La Repubblica*, that the age of frequent devaluations was over. 'Today, we are witnessing the end of Italian exceptions, a long line of

POSTSCRIPT

Neeman A Sobhan

anomalies. Italy is like an animal, which has been on a diet. Now it can start to run again. The only thing it has to overcome is its fear of the future.'

This anxiety about the shape of an Euro-driven future, however rosy it seems presently, is something that not just Italy but many other countries in Europe will have to overcome. Italy, of course is only one of eleven countries of the European Union that from Jan 1, 1999, that has agreed to subsume its national currency into becoming a sub-division of the Euro. The other countries are alphabetically, Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Greece failed to qualify, and Britain, Denmark and Sweden have opted out, adopting a wait-and-see attitude. Early reports after the successful launching of the Euro to the financial and stock markets has been a renewed interest among these countries to get back on the wagon. There is a lurking fear in these countries of being marginalised by this energetic young currency, which is already creating a strong impression in a world

market dominated for long by the dollar, the sterling and the yen.

The general feeling world wide is enthusiasm for the launching of what is perceived as a much needed element to shift the balance of global economic power in the world's financial and trading market place where dollar's dominance was unchallenged. Countries within Europe whose economies were not very strong feel a surge of potency as part of the EMU because they know that collectively they have an economy, which is equivalent to the US. The GDP of the United States in 1997 was \$8.1 trillion, and that of the EMU countries was \$6.5 trillion. Also the EMU countries make up a larger share of the international trade market than the US.

Apart from its role in the international market, the euro is foremost an instrument for creating sound economic condition within Europe, facilitating trade and encouraging easy interaction among the member economies, spurring economic growth and stimulating job creation. It is an important and irrevocable step towards the cre-

ation of a strong and unified Europe.

The designs on the freshly printed Euro notes and newly-minted coins, reflect the vision that inspired the concept of a shared currency. The 7 notes, of various denominations ranging across 500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5, all carry designs that show windows and gateways that are symbolic for openness and cooperation in the EU. On the obverse side are bridges from various eras linking the shared architectural heritage of the member countries. Among the 8 Euro coins of various denominations are 2 and 1 Euro coins, and the rest are Euro cents ranging from 50 to 1. All coins have a common European face, while the obverse side gives member countries the freedom to decorate with their own motifs. As regards the common face of the coins, the 1, 2 and 5 cent coins emphasise Europe's place in the world, depicting Europe without frontiers, while 10, 20 and 50 represent the Union as a gathering of nations. The symbol for the Euro itself is inspired by the Greek letter epsilon in reference to the common cradle of European civilisation, as well as to the first letter of Europe.

Of course, neither these coins, nor the new notes are in circulation yet, and Italians like the other participating member-countries of the EU will have to wait till 2002 before they actually pay for a French Brie or a Spanish Sombrero with an Euro. In Italy, while the arrival of Euro is still not being felt on an every-day basis, people are aware that though they cannot yet use it for cash payments of goods and

services, they can make payments or receive them into bank accounts by other means, like bank transfers, cheques, credit cards and electronic cards. Not until January 1, 2002 will the lira, like other national currencies of EU member-countries, start to be replaced. By July, 2002 lires will have to be withdrawn totally, though the invalid money may continue to be exchanged for the Euro for a permitted period.

The best part of eliminating the lira will be getting rid of the string of zeroes that come with it at the same time, one will miss its uniqueness. However, the most welcome part of having a frontier-less currency will be cutting out the time wasted at the CAMBIO or Currency Exchanges trying to get the best exchange rates. All that will be history.

Something else that is now only of historical interest is tracing the uncertain route the lira has traveled so far. At its inception, the Italian lira was pegged to the stronger French franc. Vis-à-vis the dollar it has always been a weak currency. During the post-war years, as in 1949, it was 625 lire to the dollar. Then, in the '80s it fell to its all time low of 2,200 to the dollar! At the end of 1998, which also marked the final day of its existence as the sovereign currency of Italy, it was lire 1,656 to the dollar. Today its value, at a fixed rate of exchange, makes 1,366 in its early days of fluctuations is around 1.17 Euro to the dollar.

It feels strange to have to say goodbye to the mila notes and coins in Italy. But the sentimental feelings of leaving the lyricism of the lira is replaced by an overwhelming 'euphoria' at the conversion to a more practical and potent money: replacing the zeroes with the new hero of the era, the Euro of the hour!

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.

Who are these VIPs?

Sir, I was appalled to read a front page report in a local daily on the 4th January that out of 625 seats available for admission into the beginners' class in Viharunnessa Noon School, 400 are reserved for the children of the VIPs and for the remaining 225 seats there are 3000 young contestants. This means that 2775 little angels will be returning disappointed and possibly facing the prospect of losing one year from the beginning of their academic life.

This is a democratic country and it is infuriating that like the colonial days we are still maintaining a servile attitude towards the influential 'few' of the society.

Who are these VIPs? What entitles them to have their children get admitted into a school without hindrance whereas those of the common citizens of our country (who have every right of an independent nation) have to struggle and compete with the multitude around them?

M Mahmood Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Calling BRTA

Sir, The BRTA (Bangladesh Road Transport Authority) is the controlling and regulating agency for transport and traffic safety, coordinated by the field working agencies such as the traffic police, DCC and others. It is inexplicable to find that these sectors are in a chaos (*moghe mulluk* in the vernacular). There is nothing hi-tech about the working, and plenty of know-how is available from the developed countries through Technical Assistance Programmes on bilateral basis or UN agencies. How many foreign

expert consulting teams were employed during the last ten years? Where there is a will, there is a way.

But the antibiotic to the local corruption virus cannot be imported. This is a self-cure scheme, although proper checks and balances are usually embedded in the daily procedures and rules. Some of the latter measures are designed for the bad personnel who break the official discipline and indulge in corrupt practices or dereliction of duty. Why the undesirables cannot be controlled and checked, and punished? It is a billion dollar question.

The job of the higher authorities of the administration is to undertake through overhauling of the system from time to time, for catharsis. This is applicable to all departments and offices. Here we lag behind, and show poor initiative, (there are other examples, Rajuk, BRTC, Telecoms, PDB, Customs, Immigration, Employment and Human Resources, Medical, Passport, Inspectorates, municipal work, etc.).

If Administration is lax, nothing can be tight. First work or take some action, then talk.

A Husnain Dhaka.

Heart-searching

Sir, At long last the powerful but rather impotent Arab League has taken notice of the Anglo-American (not UN) attack on Iraq. The OIC has yet to come up with a positive statement on future strategy. The UN Secretary General is going to resign? This is a question which is being raised in many minds in the East. Some of the Industrialised nations in the West have gone

insane in its worry how to feed its people and maintain its colonial standard during the next 100 years. The Americans are not content to live within rich and big USA. They are assisting the winds of change, and misusing its role as the lone superpower.

The Muslim nations have to overcome their weaknesses and remove the divisiveness and erect a common platform. Europe has already started the operation with the Euro. Regional groups are the current fashion. Let us not have a Global Village with caste system.

The US has nothing to offer except gross materialism of a 'high standard' (I) and the display of arms. Science has disarmed moral values. Without moral trimmings, it is a futile effort, similar to Soviet communism. Russia today is paying the price through the nose, and the regimes since 1980s are helpless to stem the tide.

The time has come for the Islamic world to unite, because the fight today is between the West and the Muslims. In spite of the holy gospels about modern 'secularism', religion lags behind every move, followed by colour discrimination. Cultural disparities cannot be ignored, despite the creation of WTO and global concepts. Tribalism is a hidden fact of life, in all countries, and the political rulers have to recognise it, if not support it.

We have to review the situation right from the bottom up.

Atif Zabr Dhaka.

Numberless rickshaws

Sir, Who is the authority for issuing licenses to thousands of rickshaws which ply the DCC area? Few months back when the attention of the Mayor was drawn, he categorically claimed that DCC is the sole authority to issue all the rickshaw licenses. But since the present ruling party came to power, thousands of new rickshaws are seen plying the city roads with a special type of plate bearing the words

'Identity of Numberless Rickshaw, Experiment Conducted by a labour fraction of the ruling party.'

It means, I think, that a particular labour front of the ruling party is the authority for issuing licenses to those rickshaws. One will be amazed if he goes outskirt of the city where a large number of factories are established and hundreds of those unauthorised rickshaws are assembled there.

Everyday those rickshaws without having any licence are seen in the city, sticking a plate of 'numberless rickshaw'. These rickshaws have been creating additional pressure on the shaky traffic jam of the city. Besides, since the month of Ramadan began, a large number of rickshaw-pullers have migrated in DCC area. There is no one to control them. The law enforcing authorities as well as DCC are quite mum about it while daily life of the city dwellers has become unbearable due to heavy traffic jam all over the city.

M A Jalil 372/B, Khatgaon, Dhaka

Peace: A New-Year wish

Sir, Wishing a happy new year to all the readers hoping 1999 will bring peace and prosperity. 1998 was a disappointing year — devastating flood gripped the country, cold wave killed many people, crimes of all sorts surpassed previous records, and a great number of people lost their lives in road and rail accidents and in the hands of miscreants.

Prices of essentials soared so high that people are passing their days in great misery and utter desolation not knowing what to do as the government failed to bring the price down.

We hope in the coming year the government will concentrate all its efforts to alleviate people's misery and every individual should also contribute in this respect.

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Lessons Learned

THE bottom line of President Bill Clinton's impeachment problem is sex. We can't escape it. Even *The New York Times* talks about it. The airwaves are full of it, and lately it has been the subject of rancorous debate in the House of Representatives.

The reason Americans are paying an attention at all to the story is that they can understand sex, but they can't understand Iraq. They are hard put to fathom the economic recession in the Far East, but they're very much at home discussing adultery in a bar.

If the president has any faults, and I'm not saying he does, it is in the area of candor. He did something he shouldn't have, which is OK, but then he lied about it. All of us do things we shouldn't but all us are not president of the United States.

So, as far as the Republicans are concerned, it is not the act but the denial that requires punishment. The problem is that the majority of the people don't want to lose their leader over an affair with an intern — at least not while the price of heating oil is the lowest it's been in a long time.

At the same time, lying about adultery is a serious crime — in the same class with hitting a Coke machine to see if any coins will spill out.

We can't let the president off scot-free. He has offered to be censured and fogged in times by Attorney General Janet Reno at Camp David. But for the Republicans that have been suggested:

- Have Dr Kevorkian given him a physical examination.
- Attach a steel cuff to his ankle so we'll know where he is at all times.
- Make him apologize to the People's Republic of China in Mandarin.

After this dark nightmare is over, we will have to decide what we really have learned from the scandal.

What we have learned is that if you commit an indiscreet act, gladly admit to it if there are tapes to prove it.

Don't trust people who say that stories about sex bore them. They are lying.

When a sex story breaks, you should be very careful wrapping fish in your newspaper.

Women are not always victims in a sexual situation. Sometimes they are the ones who ask you to RSVP.

The conventional wisdom is that sex is too serious to be left to Congress.

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.