

A Hollow Promise

The opposition BNP staged a walkout from the Jatiya Sangsad on Wednesday as the Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid did not give floor to the opposition lawmakers seeking to speak on the Jessore bomb blast. The Chief Whip and Deputy Leader of the Opposition argued in vain with the Chair about the importance and urgency of discussing the Jessore killings. The opposition Chief Whip rose on a point of order to request the Deputy Speaker to allow floor to the BNP lawmakers who had submitted notices 'seeking adjournment of the sitting to discuss Sunday's killings at Jessore' to speak on their motions. The Chair's apparent refusal to take up the matter immediately angered the opposition members who felt that they were not being allowed to express their opinion on an important matter. So, they staged a walkout from the Sangsad.

It is a pity that procedural matters took precedence over the pressing need for discussing an urgent matter of public interest. In any democracy worth the salt matters of public safety and administrative ineptitude warrant discussion in Parliament particularly when it is in session. In the House on Sunday though in the fitness of things the ruling party should have on their own raised this outrageous mayhem for discussion in the parliament by issuing a statement on the subject. Not only did they avoid raising this issue in the House, the ruling party failed to cooperate with the opposition when they wanted to discuss it. And once again the Chair has proved the opposition contention that they are not allowed the floor to speak on important national issues in the parliament. We feel whatever be the procedures issues of such gravity cannot be bypassed in the parliament.

The Prime Minister, in the recent past has been urging the opposition to come to the parliament and discuss all issues, leaving the 'path of distraction and confrontation'. But doesn't it sound somewhat hollow and without substance when the opposition lawmakers fail to speak on dastardly killings and public safety?

Biosafety Regulations, Now

We are relatively new in the realm of biotechnology, a fact that shows, more than anything else, how far behind Bangladesh is in the global race for scientific and technological advancement. In an era when genetically-engineered seeds have opened up both hopes and dangers for countries over-laden with booming population, we have been slow to react. There is a brighter side, though; late entry has certainly provided us with the opportunity to weigh merits and demerits of biotechnology, and work out measures to ensure its environment-friendly application. Encouraging is the fact that our agro-scientists have made most of the opportunity — a draft biosafety guideline has already been placed for government's scrutiny. We expect the government to act fast and formulate a policy in this regard as soon as possible.

More importantly, as participants in the just-concluded International Plant Tissue Culture Conference on "Status of Biosafety Regulations in Bangladesh" have pointed out, we need a separate biotechnology cell in the ministry of science and technology. However, for that, we need empowerment of the ministry itself. Unfortunately, in our country, the ministry of science and technology is one of those low-profile ones — at the bottom rung of the government organogram — with a state minister in charge. The scene reflects our collective indifference to advancement in science and technology. Even worse, there have not been adequate encouragement from the top. We need an attitudinal change and the government must initiate it. For starters, the ministry should be empowered and a full-fledged minister put at the helm.

Indeed, we are far behind in the race for scientific and technological advancement; however, the reason behind this has got more to do with concerted effort than dearth of talent. This country is blessed with quite a few brilliant minds — some of them are at home while others working abroad. Convergence of these minds can result in a formidable force that can help the country scale the height of scientific and technological success. So far, we have not been able to do that. It's never too late to give it a try.

Travellers' Insecurity

Hawkish incidents with all the elements of terrorism last week left the on-land travellers frightened more than any time before. Dacoity in disguise on the Subarna Express at Mirshorai, armed assault on 19 night-coaches at Jhenidah and illegal toll-collection on Tangail-Jamuna Bridge route are all indications of a malaise that causes national concern. Attack on the Subarna Express left thirty people injured while being robbed. After Jhenidah incident, inter-district commuters are giving a second thought about travelling at night. And toll collection while approaching Jamuna Bridge created unprecedented traffic jam at Aricha and Kazirhat ferry ghats on the alternative route.

Attacks of such nature, however, are not new. There have been deplorable incidents that caused concern over country's law and order situation in the past as well. But people are not familiar with the latest phenomenon of diabolical assaults. Since communication in the country has become easier, they expect their journeys to be safer as well. But, evidently, our trips on rail-tracks, roads and water ways are rather becoming more hazardous.

We don't hear much of government railway police (GRP), river police and highway patrols these days. Is policing a failed and forgotten concept in these areas now? Then where people should look for security? Isn't the administration responsible to provide them this much assurance? If the police are equipped enough both physically and mentally, as they should be, to resist miscreants people will not be timid to hit the road.

A piece of news may, however, be comforting. Communication Minister Anwar Hossain has proposed for a national highway police force at the Jatiya Sangsad Tuesday last. Commendable thinking, indeed. But it must generate a speedy implementation and there also accompany the plan to form similar force for the railroads and waterways.

The Indispensable Telecom Sector

There has been some progress in the field of development of the telecom sector over the years but the pace is not enough to catch up with fast moving globalisation. To do that Bangladesh needs to step into drastic policy changes.

To a large extent, perhaps, the present underdevelopment and poverty of the country can be attributed to the underdevelopment of its basic physical infrastructure. The vast portion of the rural areas remain largely inaccessible and hence are denied access to opportunities that conduce to growth and development e.g., the diffusion of modern technology, extension services and, above all, a quick and effective dealing with disasters such as floods. It should be mentioned here that a number of research studies established the causal link between infrastructure and development in rural areas of Bangladesh.

As in many countries of the developing world, the role of the telecom sector in economic development does not seem to be duly appreciated in Bangladesh. The traditional notion that appears to prevail on any discussion on telephones is as follows: telephones are such consumer goods as can be reached only by the rich and can hardly be used by the poor to pounce upon their poverty. As a result, the sector received scant attention from policy makers and the country witnessed slower expansion of the network over the years.

A display of good intentions, however, has always been disclosed at least on papers. Successive Plan documents embraced various objectives and strategies to put the sector on an even keel. But unfortunately, many of the objectives and strategies could hardly see the light of proper implementations. Although the share of transport and communication to GDP hovers around 12-15 per cent, the dismal performance, particularly, in the area of telecom, hardly goes unnoticed. The present facilities are considered to be inadequate in terms of requirement, technology and quality of services. A recent report jointly produced by World Bank and Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) aptly presented the scourge of Telecom services in Bangladesh.

• Telephone density of 0.26 lines per 100 population is one of the lowest in the world (India: 1.0, Nepal: 0.5, Pakistan: 2.1, Sri Lanka: 1.0, Thailand, 2.5)

• The installation charge of US \$ 450 for a new line is one of the highest in the world (e.g. Pakistan US \$ 90, India US \$ 60).

• The international call charge for a call to UK of US \$ 1.50/minute is about six times higher than a call originating in UK.

• On average, only 2 out of 10 calls are successfully completed.

• Annual average complaint rate of 50 per 100 lines in service portrays poor quality services. (World Bank and BCAS 1998).

From Monopoly to Market

Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB) assumed the role of the natural monopolist for decades to meet the telecom needs. There was, of course, intrinsic merits in the argument of encouraging state monopoly on two grounds: first, given the size of the start-up investments and the cost of maintaining that service, only a pure titan could do the job properly and second a single monopoly enterprise could convert the economies of scale into improved services at lower costs. With the passage of time, however, digital and cellular technology have made grounds to make these arguments obsolete and redundant all over the world. Bangladesh was also caught by that euphoria. More nimble private operators are now marking their presence in the country demonstrating that the adage "small is beautiful" holds good at least in the area of telecom infrastructure. On the other hand it argued that being small has little disadvantage in cost and being privately and competitively managed has huge advantages in efficiency.

Private Sector Participation

The changes in perceptions resulted in a shift away from state monopoly towards more competition. During the fourth plan (1990-95), a new era dawned in the field of telecom where the newly licensed private sector operators started their operations. Bangladesh Rural Telecom Authority (BRTA) was given license for establishment of telecom services in 199 thanas; BRTA installed 27 exchanges at thana-level rural growth centres.

In November 1996, licenses were provided to cellular mobile phones through which Grameen Bank, Telecom Malaysia, International Bangladesh Ltd. and Sheba Telecom Ltd entered into the market. The basic assumption was that their operations would increase competition and reduce cost of cellular mobile phones considerably. It should be mentioned here that all these are joint venture companies with Bangladesh units having collaboration with foreign companies. Thus, in the private sector, there are seven different operators for different services. In addition, six private companies, namely, Integrated Services Network, Grameen Cybernet, BRAC, Prodesta and Spectranet have started providing Internet and Electronic mail services in the country.

Past Performances

The Fifth Plan document succinctly deals with the past performances. Up to June 1997, the total number of telephone lines stood at 4,63,185 in the public sector and 21,000 in the private sector. The private sector is mainly confined to different thanas and villages. Besides, from a paltry 2000 in 1994/95, the number of cellular phones rose to 39,000 in 1996/97. During the

period 1995-97, 95,000 digital lines were installed in Dhaka. In the same year, 41,250 new digital lines were installed in Chittagong (the main port city). Internet connections were lined in 1995/96 under private initiative with the support of the BTB. In the meantime, allocations to this sector started growing and the Fifth Five Year Plan aims to allocate as the following:

Public Sector: Out of a total outlay of Tk 23,784 million the public sector for communication, Tk 21,865 million has been earmarked for BTB. This is 91 per cent of the total outlay in the sector. The financial outlay would be used for installation and expansion of digital exchange/switching, installation of national and international trunk, innovative programmes like data communication network and information technology.

Private Sector: It is envisaged that the private sector investment will be about Tk 34,500 million for developing different telecom services already licensed and for BLT/BOT schemes of BTB. In the fifth plan, more private sector participation in the value added services like cellular mobile, paging, e-mail, Internet, voice mail etc. is expected.

The Vision of the Fifth Plan

The recently launched Fifth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) document — referred to earlier — duly appreciates the role of the sector and posits the following objectives and strategies regarding the development of the telecom sector of the country:

Objectives: Creating provisions for universal telephone services; expanding the telecom infrastructure in both urban and rural areas so as to enable the providers to give one telephone per 100 people by 2002 against the existing 0.39 telephone per 100 people; expanding the international telephone circuits and ancillary facilities for smooth international telecom operations both in urban and rural areas; ensuring telephone connections to all industries, particularly those located in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and industrial estates; improving quality of services; attracting foreign direct investment; increasing the role of the private sector in telecom and strengthening the telecom regulatory board for the formulation of appropriate legal and institutional frames to introduce and sustain fair competition among the operators to protect consumer's interest.

Strategies: Creation of an environment friendly to telecom-related infrastructural development programmes so as to enable the providers to install adequate telephone lines to meet the increasing demand, both in rural and urban areas; encouragement to private sector for generation of competition between public and private sectors; encouragement for increased participation by private sector in rural areas and cellular mobile service throughout the country; development of necessary incentive packages for attracting private sector investors in the expansion of national and international telephone lines and transmission links; meeting increased investment of BTB primarily by selling bond and debentures and initiation of reform measures to make BTB more efficient and cost effective.

The woes of telecom sector mentioned above are sequel to inadequate investment in the past. The International Telecom (ITU) has even urged the government to recognise basic telecom facility as a human right. "It is a right that Bangladesh lacks because its communications are in the grip of a mismanaged state policy."

The Future

Bangladesh is said to have, as of now, one-third (500,000) of the telephone lines it will need by the end of this century. The need is assessed on the assumption of an average annual GDP growth rate of 6 per cent. As it appears from different sources of information, BTB's current target was to have about 600,000 lines installed by 1998 and 900,000 by 2000. Even with private sector providing another 100,000 line units in 2000, an achievement that will depend heavily on BTB's ability to provide interconnectivity, supply will fall nearly 500,000 short of demand and the number of lines will still be less than 10 per 1000 population — among the lowest in the world. (World Bank and BCAS, 1998).

The above mentioned study gives projections for telephone penetration per 1000 population. The high growth scenario requires the placement of over eight million lines by 2020. Even the conservative projection sets a requirement of more than four million lines. Either way, supporting infrastructure — adequate number of circuits and long distance channels — must be provided to insure effective operation of access lines. The challenge is far beyond the demonstrated capacity of the BTB. Only the earlier conversion to privatisation can build a telecom sub sector strong and modern enough to facilitate support to a 7-8 per cent annual GDP growth rate.

Concluding Remarks

There has been some progress in the field of development of the telecom sector over the years but the pace is not enough to catch up with fast moving globalisation. To do that Bangladesh needs to step into drastic policy changes to: (a) embrace high level telecom technology and investing thereupon, (b) pursue institutional reforms that would invite competing private operators to enter into the market to meet demand and effectively deliver services and (c) develop appropriate government regulatory framework to assure consumers and providers alike a predictable environment in which to do business.

To the Editor...

Deadly criminals on the loose

Sir, The people of Nemaikashari, Sidderganj and Narayanganj are under constant threat and severely terrorised and as a result the people of the area are going through sleepless nights! It may be worth noted that an identified deadly criminal of Nemaikashari, Sidderganj has been indulged in arson, loot, rape and murder. This man was finally behind bars by the local police after strong grounds determined his involvement of murdering his second wife. His second wife was young and goodlooking and was previously married to a local teacher. This marriage was to under gruesome circumstances! He had his wife gangraped and then brutally killed by his gang. Her body was buried inside a rag on the very premises of his own building. This incident took place few days before the Holy Ramadan of 1996. This notorious killer was last taken in custody some two months back. The people of Sidderganj was at peace during his imprisonment but this was short lived, after he managed to bribe taka 2 lakh to the thana concerned.

Since then, this criminal has been carrying on fresh brutal action with much more vigor as to recuperate the expenses he had incurred for his bail.

The people of Nemaikashari, Sidderganj are too frightened to even raise their voice. On the other hand, it appears that the police of the particular thana are either taken care of the criminal and his gang or they are helping him.

CN Hye
A Resident of Nemaikashari, Sidderganj

Stop this madness

Sir, The three-day hartal kept the whole nation paralyzed for three days. Why did we have to go through that? We the citizens know the reason, because the leaders of BNP have again become desperate to come to power and devour all they can. Every hartal is about the

greedy, power-hungry, blood-thirsty politicians; it has nothing to do with us. They don't even care for us; they don't care if our dear ones die. It doesn't matter how many poor people starve to death or get poorer. They want money and power, and we the fools allow them to snatch everything at our stake.

Don't we know most of the so-called political leaders are corrupt? We know where the student cadres get the weapons from? Yet we allow them to destroy our country. The country is ours, the common people fought for it. Politicians have no right to destroy the country.

There are of course good politicians out there, but we cannot find them, can we? Why don't the leaders go on a mass hunger strike to press their demands?

We have only a few days before the next millennium, is this appropriate preparation? There is too much at stake here, we must stop this madness, right now.

Sharmin Shahriar
Nabraska, USA.

Neutrality of the Election Commission

FEMA's Revelation

by M Maniruzzaman Miah

Those who want democracy to flourish here should join hands to see that the process of election is made free and fair. They should suggest legal, procedural, administrative and any other changes that may be brought about to achieve this. Simply crying hoarse against hartal or political agitation will not mean much if election fraud could not be eliminated.

FEMA, acronym for Fair Election Monitoring Alliance, a non-governmental organization which has been monitoring fairness in popular elections held in the country since 1996, recently came out with its evaluation of the by-election held in Pabna-2 constituency on 10 December last. For FEMA, the election was rigged. To buttress its claim, it has revealed at least 13 reasons to the Press. It has listed how two ministers misused their official position and also made promises to the voters not permissible under the electoral rules and how the police confiscated even all licensed arms of the opposition supporters but allowed the government party men to roam about with lethal weapons and terrorise the people. More important, FEMA has advanced some statistical logic to show how unbelievable the election results were.

The FEMA report says that a 75 per cent turnout of voters, as the results show, is simply not possible physically. Then again, in six centres nearly 93 per cent voters exercised their voting right of which less than one per cent was shown to be voted in favour of the BNP candidate and nearly 99 per cent voted for the ruling party (AL) candidate. This is an absurdity. Besides, in some centres, no one was seen to be voting after mid-day, but results showed a turnout of 85 to 90 per cent. This could be possible if only ballot boxes were stuffed with spurious ballots.

The Honourable Prime Minister has been telling the people on the top of her voice that she has restored them their right to vote. But alas, facts on the ground tell a different story altogether. The election results of 1996 general election and the by-elections held since then, observers believe, have been largely rigged. Some arithmetic will, in fact, expose the hollow-ness of the Election Commission's claim of having presented to the nation a free and fair election. First, the turning down by the election tribunal of the results of 1996 declared by the EC in Narayanganj-2 constituency.

Only in two centres in this constituency the votes were re-

counted and the tribunal declared the BNP candidate elected reversing the results earlier announced by the EC by which an AL candidate was declared elected. In Dhaka-10 constituency right under the very nose of the EC, the results of 51 centres out of a total of 78 have been declared null and void by the election tribunal. In this constituency also the fraud was done in favour of the AL candidate. The decision by the tribunal has been contested in the higher court but one does not fail to see what the judgement means.

More on the number game. FEMA observes that a turnout of 75 per cent as has been claimed by the EC in the by-election of Pabna-2 constituency held on 10 December is highly improbable. But lo and behold what happened in 1996 parliamentary general election! In that election the percentage of votes cast was 77 per cent.

The AL candidates polled 90 per cent of votes. Sheikh Hasina herself was favoured by 92 per cent of voters and in eight polling centres of Sunamganj the percentage of voting crossed 90 and the AL candidates won (The New Nation, 4 September 1996). Besides, in 500 centres all over the country the votes cast surpassed 92 per cent and barring a couple of cases in all the constituencies where these centres lie the AL-candidates won. How could the AL candidates muster such high percentage of votes above the 75 per cent mark thought to be the highest percentage attainable under the prevailing circumstances? Knowledgeable people say that it could be possible only if the ballot boxes were stuffed with spurious ballot papers. The EC has never explained to the people how such a fraud could take place.

Reverting back to the by-election of Pabna-2 constituency, FEMA has come out with its observations casting doubts as to the results of the by-poll held. Some statistics will lay bare other aspects of the election game. This constituency is fiercely anti-Awami League as the people of the area suffered a lot during the early years after independence.

Torture, disappearance, killing by the police and the much-hated Rakshi Bahini were the order of the day during that period. In 1979 parliamentary election the BNP candidate won defeating the AL candidate by a margin of 20 thousand votes. In 1986 the JP candidate (BNP did not contest) won over the AL candidate by a margin of 24 thousand and in 1991 election, regarded as the fairest ever in this country, the BNP candidate overwhelmed the AL candidate by over 26 thousand votes. But in 1996 the picture was reversed.

The AL candidate this time gained 1500 more votes than the BNP's one. The margin, however slender, means 1500 votes after having recouped the 26 thousand by which the AL candidate lost to the BNP's candidate in 1991. It must be noted however that in the 1996 election in 45 centres out of a total of 80 in that constituency the BNP candidate had a clear lead over the AL candidate. But in four centres out of the rest 35 the AL candidate was declared to have polled 6935 votes and the BNP only 576. Various observers suggest that this was done through manipulation when it became obvious that the BNP candidate was going to win.

This could be possible only in connivance with the officials running the election show. FEMA has said that in four centres the arrangements for holding polls were not satisfactory. The FEMA has cast doubts about the results of six centres where 93 per cent of voters reportedly voted out of which 99 per cent voted for the AL.

These are the ones, in fact, where manipulation took place both in 1996 and in the recently held by-poll. The agitation by the opposition is to be seen and judged in this backdrop. Those who want democracy to flourish here should join hands to see that the process of election is made free and fair. They should suggest legal, procedural, administrative and any other changes that may be brought about to achieve this. Simply crying hoarse against hartal or political agitation will not mean much if election fraud could not be eliminated. Or else political unrest will continue.

The Gentle Diplomat

by Megasthanes

Ideally a civil servant should be self-effacing, reliable and solid and yet also dynamic, and full of ideas and zest for his or her work. Admittedly not a very easy combination of qualities to achieve. Mustafizur Rahman came closer to this ideal of a civil servant than most.

THERE were so many facets to his character and personality that one could only admire and also strive to emulate. The abiding impressions of the late Mustafizur Rahman in the minds and hearts of his innumerable friends and colleagues will be of his quiet dignity, unimpeachable probity and rectitude in matters personal, professional and financial, of his imperious but not overbearing, mild mannered almost old-world charm and courtliness. To many he was the quintessential gentleman and diplomat — always prepared to listen and discuss, preferring persuasion to pressure or flat as a means to resolve issues or reconcile differences.

He was not inflexible or set in his ways and thoughts. Far from it. He could be very accommodating in matters of detail or even of substance. On certain basics and principles, however, there would be no yielding. He left without hesitation or regret the comfort and security of the coveted PFS in 1971, the moment he felt that he could no longer serve and also be at peace with himself. On at least four other occasions, to my knowledge — later when he had attained much higher echelons of officialdom — he took principled positions on issues which could have cost him dearly career-wise.

He was a good listener, who listened intently and inscrupulously without any interruption, giving no hint of his own inclination. If persuaded of the validity of an argument or complaint, appropriate or remedial action would, however, follow and swiftly. He was known to reward merit and competence, without any approach and entreaty from the person benefited. In fact, he discouraged any such approach.

The word brilliant is much over-used and has almost become a cliché. Certainly it would apply to scientists Einstein and Satyen Bose, lawyers, like Ambedkar and Brohi, scholars such as Joan Robinson and Linbergen, literary figures, of the likes of Tagore and Tolstoy, composers of the calibre Brahms and Beethoven and possibly also actors of the level of Olivier and Gielgud. The qualities that make for an outstanding civil servant, however, have possibly more to do with dependability and integrity, courage of convictions, managerial and administrative skills, commitment and sturdy common sense and knowledge and professionalism, than with brilliance.

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A very instructive story, the authenticity of which I cannot guarantee, relates to Pakistan's first Foreign Secretary, who incidentally remains the only person to have held that office for a second time in his country.

A more unassuming person holding high office would be difficult to imagine. A well wisher or colleague presumably desiring to improve his Foreign Secretary's image, once pointed out that far lesser officials registered their presence and authority through occasional pyrotechnics — files thrown at subordinates, colleagues upbraided before juniors, orders issued abrasively etc.



Late Mustafizur Rahman

Mr Ikramullah replied mildly that whenever he gave instructions in tones that were audible or in writing that was legible, these were faithfully carried out. He thus saw no reason to expend energy and effort and humiliate colleagues simply to underscore his importance. Mustafizur Rahman was surely made from the same mould. He shared the view that the quiet way was the right way to carry one's talents.

Whether authentic or not the story does make a very valid point and there are times when facts perhaps should not be allowed to stand in the way of a good story!

Mustafizur Rahman reached the age of superannuation and received an unprecedented recognition of his services from the Government. He became the first Foreign Secretary in Bangladesh to be given an ex-

tension of service and allowed to continue to hold the same office after retirement. He was a well short of the biblical span of three score years and ten and died young, if not in years and body, certainly in mind, spirit and outlook. On learning of the news of his passing, one was reminded of Laurence Binyon's words, written years back in another context:

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old,
As shadows that we weary them,
Nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
and in the morning
We will remember them."

He did not make much of a fortune in his lifetime. A career in government service is hardly the recommended vocation, if one's aim is to amass a fortune through honest labour. This aspect possibly did not weigh much with him in any case. He preferred instead to devote all his energy and efforts to serving his country, which he did with extraordinary dedication and commitment. Winston Churchill's tribute to F E Smith, the first Earl of Birkenhead could have been written for the 18th Foreign Secretary of free Bangladesh also.

"Some men, when they die after busy, toilsome, successful lives, leave a great stock of scrip and securities, of acres and factories or the goodwill of large undertakings. FE banked his treasure in the hearts of his friends and they will cherish his memory until their time is come."

Mustafizur Rahman at all times seemed to be at peace with himself. On at least two occasions, once as a young officer in London and later when he had already achieved high office, he faced disappointments in his career with stoic and dispassionate calm. Likewise, when he reached the apogee of his professional career on being appointed Foreign Secretary, he did not display excessive or unseemly elation either. To him, as with Kipling, triumph and disaster were both impostors to be treated alike.

As mentioned at the outset, there were many sides to him and he was many things to many people. He was a civil servant, a diplomatist, a writer of no mean achievement, a voracious reader, a more than competent amateur violinist who gave as much pleasure to his listeners as to himself when he played the instrument and, of course, a gentleman to the core of his being. Above all else, he was a patriot of the highest order. That is how he would perhaps himself have wished to be remembered.