

Ambitious EC Plan

The voter identity card project undertaken by the Election Commission in 1995 has not had a smooth going, to say the least. Over the last four years, the commission has been able to prepare only 3.10 crore cards and distribute 1.60 crore of them. Against this backdrop, the commission's plans to complete distribution of the ID cards among nearly six crore eligible voters of the country by June 30 next sounds extremely ambitious, if not preposterous. True, the project was suspended for one and a half years due to a government probe into allegations of corruption in the project and subsequent delay in resumption. Yet, the progress made in the remaining two and a half years inspire anything but confidence in the EC's projection.

There seem to be areas that the commission has not quite directed its attention towards. Photograph collection has been slower than anticipated. To date, photographs of only 3.65 crore registered voters have been taken, leaving the authorities with a daunting task of collecting roughly 2.34 crore more in less than three months. Moreover, there have been complaints of negligence on the people concerned. In some cases, voters were kept waiting and sometimes photographers did not even turn up. Similar irregularities exist in registration activities. Besides, allocation of funds is yet to be completed. The overall scenario hardly gives credence to EC's commitment. Moreover, there is the question of fool-proof execution. Many of the cards already issued contain ludicrous errors, leading to apprehension that the commission, in its haste to meet the deadline, would end up with more cards strewn with similar errors.

It is imperative that the ID cards should be flawless as far as factual representation is concerned, primarily because, we believe, these will go a long way towards facilitating free and fair elections. Besides, the cards will also be used as supportive documents in such purposes as handing over assets, marriage registration, application for passports and driving licences, VGF cards, etc. Thus, flawed cards would not only disturb the electoral process but also create confusion in other equally important government functions. Therefore, the Election Commission should put accent on elimination of errors more than anything else. If that requires time, then the EC should revise its schedule and refix its deadline.

Plugging the AJM Hole

The Adamjee Jute Mills area went wild on Tuesday and Wednesday. Sabre-rattling, gun-firing clashes between two rival groups of workers left two persons dead and more than two hundred injured. Allegation of wage earning without work has, reportedly, led to this gruesome consequence. Since the CBA election held on March 14, after a nine-year gap, amidst unprecedented security, the 'clash of interest' kept brewing. And Wednesday's violence are enough perturbing to re-think about the future of the country's one of the premium industrial establishments.

As a commercial unit, AJM's failure is regrettable. That it has not paid any positive dividend for a long time is not without proof. Now it is just doubtful whether it will at all do. The AJM is not more than a dead horse now, taking enormous toll on the socio-economy as a whole. Both workers as well as national-level political leaders are responsible for turning this once bastion of growth into a traditional trouble spot over the decades.

If work means wage, then what are they fighting against, involving themselves with politics and no work? The majority of workers have been acting as "willing political pawns" for successive parties-in-power. The parties, by taking the advantage of their inclination, have been exploiting the workers to suit their (party's) designs, absolutely ignoring the objective this biggest horde of people is supposed to perform. It has been observed that parties in power explore prospects of support while keeping the stronghold of the CBA in their favour. Because workers form the biggest crowd while amassing rallies and political congregations.

This must stop. More so the mill workers have to realise that they are being wronged for equally wrong purpose. For them the way out is that they become apolitical. And as far as output of the AJM is concerned, if the perennially loss-making trend cannot be reversed, then time is ripe that the government conceive the idea of dismantling the unit and installing something that actually pays off.

How Rich is an AC?

A sub-divisional officer (SDO) offered a lift to a stranded old woman in his boat across the river. The old lady was impressed with the power of the SDO and unwittingly prayed for his promotion as a 'daroga' (police sub-inspector). This is an old story known to many in our society, the significance of which is never missed by any. To the old lady a 'daroga' was the most powerful man under the sun and this realisation must have dawned on her through personal experience.

In recent times the police have come up for closer public scrutiny, all of which were their own doing. Murder of Rubel at DB office, death of Tuhin at Motijheel thana, killing of Mujib at Rampura lake and slaughter of Jalal, again at DB office premises are a few examples that have proved, beyond any reasonable doubt, that police are really the most powerful as well as dreadful people in the society. Along with this horrible fact runs the allegation of corruption against the entire department. It is a common knowledge in the society that police are rottenly corrupt in their dealing with the law as well as the public who look towards them for protection. They have acquired this 'distinction' certainly over decades of 'hard work'.

During interrogation by his colleagues in the Jalal murder case startling stories have come out in the national press about huge property and lavish expenditure of an Assistant Commissioner of Police. The figures will run into millions of taka which the officer cannot possibly earn honestly even in a hundred years of service. Apart from owning a palatial building the AC possesses a couple of cars that must have cost him million of taka, and he provides his two sons with costly education at Singapore. Besides, he is living in an apartment the rent of which is almost double his salary, the press reports allege.

But this will not be the only case or the last one. This piece of information has come out because the officer has fallen in bad days. However, we have no knowledge, so far, of the income and property of the officers who are conducting the inquiry. We believe, such an account, if made public, will make interesting reading, too.

Famine: Causes, Responses and Prevention

Continued deprivation and erosion of capabilities of the population gradually converge to create a situation like famine. So, any government should see that the factors that slowly work to affect those capabilities are dealt with effectively. Good policies, good governance and regular monitoring are essential.

THE beginning of the twentieth century witnessed — almost regularly — a global human tragedy called famine. Famine is a devastating disruption of the socio-economic and institutional fabric that provide for production, distribution and consumption in a given society. Famines cannot only destroy life but also can dash the hope for development. However, frightful famines have been fading away in many parts of the world, including South Asia — with the rapid advancement of early monitoring system and the development of other mitigating measures. More importantly, scholars observed a negative correlation between famine and the development of democratic governance, between information technology and the advent of famine. This is not to say that the risk of famines has altogether withered. It still looms large in countries passing through badly managed economic transformation often combined with social unrest, war and other political crises. Famines also haunt these parts of the world which are isolated or poorly integrated with global trade and aid and have limited capacities to develop package of policies to deal with mass poverty.

But at the turn of the twenty-first century, famines seem to be largely confined to Africa.

The persistence of famines in Africa emerged as a research issue to some famous economists who wrote a book titled: 'Famines in Africa: Causes, Responses and Prevention' (Joachim von Braun, Testafay Taklu and Patrick Webb). Although related to African context, the authors of the book are of the view that: (a) lessons learnt elsewhere can easily be transmitted to the affected regions of Africa and (b) the experiences of African countries could provide lessons to other countries.

The book starts with some conceptual issues related to famines. It calls for a distinction between famine, hunger and malnutrition. Hunger is said to be the hang-over of an individual's inability to eat sufficient food to lead a healthy and active life. It comprises a series of feelings, emotions and behavioural changes not easily measurable in themselves that result from disruption in an individual's access to food. Naturally, hunger is a recurring feature of food insecurity of households and their members in developing countries. In contrast, undernutrition is de-

scribed, "as the measurable nutrient deficiencies in a diet that can lead to illness (lack of energy, retardation, blindness) or even death." Finally, famine is "a widespread and extreme hunger that results for individuals in a drastic loss of body weight and an increase in morbidity and at the community level, in a rise in death rate and

socio-economic processes that occur during famine.

The authors of the book land with some policy conclusions which are claimed to be relevant for other countries also. First, Africa's famines are largely the products of 'military conflicts' that arise due to oppressive, unaccountable and non-participatory government.

concerned with general conflict resolution between and within states as well as with the human and economic problem of absolute poverty."

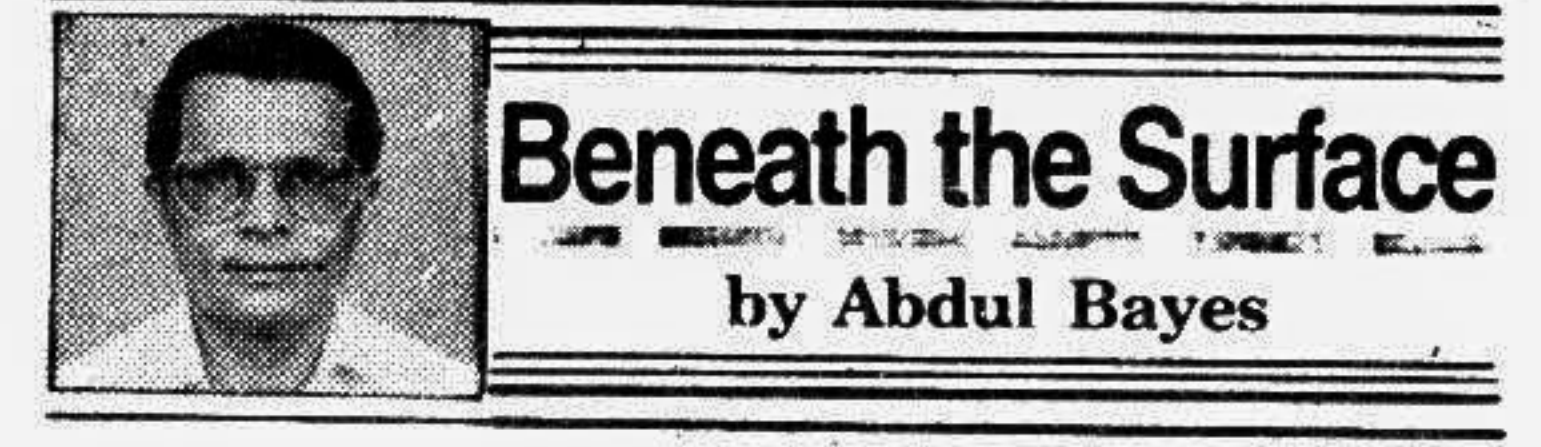
The second lesson to be learnt is that famines are not strangers — they do not happen suddenly. "They are an accumulation of events and policies that progressively erode the capacities of countries as well as households to deal with short-term shocks to the economy and food supply." As drops of water could make an ocean so do occasional vulnerabilities accumulate to give rise to permanent destruction of capabilities to cope with severe shocks.

To add fuel to the flame, misguided macroeconomic policies and past family policies — which cannot be rectified in the short run — tell upon the teeth of the preventive mechanisms. Third, the prevention of food insecurity and famine call for a comprehensive development strategy that adorns agricultural growth (both of subsistence and cash types) as the linchpin of survival in rural areas. Fourth, 'one of the main stumbling blocks that prevent

turning knowledge into action is the lack of political and financial commitment to create and maintain legal and administrative framework essential to efficient interventions." Co-ordination in the activities of government, NGOs and other social organisations is a must.

In the conclusion, the authors tend to argue that "famines represent a failure of politics and action at every step from the local to the international community. Public intervention based on partnership between communities and government agencies can and does effectively overcome to them. Having enough food for eat is not just an abstract human right, it is the basis of all functioning of society and hence must be the foundation for sustainable development."

As noted earlier, famines have faded away in many countries of the world due to improvements in some of the mitigatory measures mentioned above. However, the most important lesson to be drawn upon is that continued deprivation and erosion of capabilities of the population gradually converge to create a situation like famine. So, any government should see that the factors that slowly work to affect those capabilities are dealt with effectively. Good policies, good governance and regular monitoring are essential.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

A lasting peace and improved rural participation are considered to be solutions to the crisis of famine. However, it would, perhaps, be ominous to shoulder the whole show only on military conflicts. Arguably, inappropriate domestic, economic and international aid policies themselves fueled the fire to contribute to a political climate of conflicts. Famine prevention policy must, therefore, be

Privatising Infrastructure: Consumer is the Victim

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

High-cost privatisation is suicidal. We must get the state to generate revenues, finance the infrastructure, and run it well. That is part of our demo

IMAGINE driving in Year 2000 along the ultra-modern six-lane Rs. 1,600-crore Mumbai-Pune expressway. You are doing 80 km an hour along the extra-smooth stretch between Dehu Road and Panvel.

And then, you suddenly hit Mumbai's urban sprawl, which slows you down to the 18th century speed of 10 kmph. Or you get choked into suburban Pune at the 19th century speed of 15 kmph. The choice is yours. It has taken you three and a half hours to make it — a saving of just 30 minutes over a trip by the old National Highway Four (NH-4). The price you pay for the time saved? Rs. 80 if you drive a car, Rs. 190 for a truck. (Two-wheelers are naturally banned.)

Too high? Adds a hefty 30 per cent to the fuel bill and 15 per cent to freight? Welcome to the world of the private tollway! But wait till Year 2004. The volume of traffic has now increased by 50 per cent. The six lanes are not enough. The expressway needs 10. But there is no space for them. The maximum speed is down to just 40 kmph. This is what you would do on Good Old NH-4 too. But NH-4 no longer exists! The Maharashtra government decided not to repair NH-4. Otherwise, who would use the expressway? It even refused the Rs. 110 crores sanctioned by the National Highway Authority for NH-4. It just killed it.

The Mumbai-Pune expressway is being built in excep-

tional haste, without full environmental clearance, so it gets ready as a Shiv Sena-BJP high-technology "showpiece" before the assembly elections due next March.

In many ways, the expressway is not exceptional. It prefigures what will happen to our infrastructure if private capital builds it in ways that violate consumer interests and sound economics. This trend extends to the railways, telephones, health care, water supply and other services. We risk introducing dualism, which is morally undesirable, socially divisive and economically harmful. Consider highways again. Mr A.B. Vajpayee was wrong by a margin of 300 per cent when he announced plans to build 10 km six-lane "Golden Quadrilaterals" at a cost of Rs. 28,000 crores. Such expressways, say experts, cost Rs. 12 crores per km — or Rs. 84,000 crores totally. This is way beyond the government's capacity. If private capital comes in, its expected rate of return will virtually double our transportation costs. Private highways will nearly divide price between those who can pay high tolls, up to Rs. 1.40 per km, and those who can't.

Such high tolls have the same effect as suddenly raising petrol prices by two-thirds. Those who can't afford this must drive through potholes. Expressway transportation will hugely increase freight rates, generally raising costs in the economy. Consumers will also be divided between those who can afford high charges (adding a fifth or more to the price, say, of food), and the rest.

Other disturbing phenomena are also in evidence in the infrastructure. Enron is about to sell power to the Maharashtra Electricity Board at three times the Board's average tariff. This will either bankrupt MSEB, or make downstream consuming industries uncompetitive. Such gold-plated power will prove even more ruinous than the misguided policies — e.g. free power to farmers — which have brought the SEBs to their knees.

Take telephones. Poorly regulated private entry into this sector will impose an unfair burden upon the consumer. If high TRAI-fixed tariffs go through, they would harm the small, typically semi-urban, consumer, raising his/her charges by up to 140 per cent,

while favouring long-distance callers and business subscribers.

Besides being iniquitous, this would discourage the growth of new telephone connections. But providing connectivity at reasonable rates is our topmost priority, especially in rural India, which has just 0.4 telephones per 100 people. TRAI is more concerned to secure high returns for private operators than to promote network expansion, and achieve a balance between competing interests, including consumers, private investors and the government.

The government too was wrong to first give TRAI statutory authority and then overrule it. But as constituted, TRAI lacks a discriminating judgment. Now the government's Group on Telecom is producing

our third telecom policy in five years! It proposes that instead of competing with DoT, private operators should be granted a share of its revenue.

Whoever thought that privatisation is meant to introduce competition, cut costs and benefit the consumer, was mistaken. The idea is to guarantee profits to private capital.

That certainly is true of civil aviation. Its unregulated opening-up created gross overcapacity, sending all domestic airlines into the red, and raising airfares by an unprecedented 50 per cent. Apart from marginal improvement in customer service — achievable in other ways — the exercise was counter-productive. It has inflicted a big loss on Indian Airlines, a national asset.

There are pressures to extend the private-entry formula

to sectors such as railways. At work is an article of faith: private enterprise is inherently more efficient than the state. There is no evidence for this.

In most such proposals, there is no competitive bidding, and there is usually no efficiency gain either. Such privatisation makes no sense.

Reluctant to tax the rich, the Indian state is becoming bankrupt and withdrawing from vital public services like health, education, water supply and sanitation. Privatising these means levying high fees and shutting the poor majority out.

This trend must be resisted. No country has ever built its basic infrastructure by relying on private capital which demands 12 and 16 per cent returns. In the U.S., the power supply industry was financed with 2.5 per cent bonds. So were Indian Railways.

High-cost privatisation is suicidal. We must get the state to generate revenues, finance the infrastructure, and run it well. That is part of our democratic agenda.

To the Editor...

Change in power policy

Sir, Recently the government announced a policy modification in the national electric power generation sector: now providing the additional option of encouraging the local generation (area-wise) of electricity, in contrast to the usual mega generation of power and its transmission through the national grid (the large-mounted generators are also there for emergency shifting for time to time as and when necessary in the near future). The private sector is now being encouraged to invest in new 10/20MW generating plants.

There are several new implications for careful technical and economic considerations. While continuity of supply will be maintained to a large extent, the cost of the factory products and byproducts will go up due to the higher cost of generation from smaller generating stations. One relief would be knocking up these units to the national grid as and when required. It all becomes complicated. The rules of the game have to be spelled out clearly for the new investors (the foreign investors will sell electricity to the local users in foreign exchange?).

Then there is the question of reliability of the regular supply of natural gas for the prime movers. Will there be a state guarantee, or the market forces will take over? The marketing of gas by the foreign exploiters in Bangladesh is in the news these days — contract terms, payment in foreign exchange, and a host of other hidden issues now surfacing under investigation. We appear to be still passing through teething troubles in these new enterprises. When things are going to settle down is anybody's guess.

The development of the energy and power sectors is passing through a period of uncertainty. It is necessary to clarify the position officially from time to time; otherwise private investment will be shy, so long the investment returns are not clearly understood — and not changed with the change of regimes, in an environment of constant political hostility.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

It's worse

Sir, The law and order situation of the country has deteriorated. After the appointment of the new home minister the situation has become worse. Each and every citizen of the country has become concerned of his personal security. It is felt that what the former

home minister could not control in three years, it cannot be put in track by the new home minister in three months. It is the home secretary who should control these matters and guide the minister accordingly.

We believe it is primarily the home secretary's failure because he has the information and knowledge about the whole situation. We feel that the change of home secretary will definitely effect the present law and order situation of the country. In the image of the government and save the helpless citizen from such a terrible situation.

Pervez Ahmed
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"Better Mind Your Business"

Sir, I have some comments on your editorial "Better Mind Your Business" published on March 22, 1999, it was about a comment made by FBCCI chief Abdul Awal Minto. Mr. Minto made a suggestion for electing a new government every two and half years.

Mr Minto views that if election is held in every two and half years the opposition party would think that they will not need to wait much and consequently there will be political stability. However, I think the opposite may happen. The opposition may not want to wait two and half years. In our country the leaders of both the ruling and the opposition parties are holding the chair for more than a decade.

Unlike Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan they are not yet declared life time President but in reality they are life time President of their party. They have developed the mentality that it is their right to stay in power for all the time. So they will not allow any other party to capture political power. Recently the ruling party offered to arrange new election in 2000, one year earlier than the original schedule.

The opposition now contemplates to topple the ruling party in 3 years. That is they will not wait for 4 years. Another reason for present opposition movement may be that they want to make ruling party unpopular by creating lawlessness and other troubles. If the ruling party becomes unpopular only then they can hope to win the next election. So the opposition will always go for creating troubles in order to make the ruling party unpopular. Whatever the term of the government they will do the same.

So what is the solution? The solution lies with the people. Nowadays the people are highly politicised and everybody is linked with either opposition

or position.

They need to change such tendency and they have to be made conscious about the ill motives of political parties. The risk-takers, the shop owners and the businessmen should come about with their own demand by themselves. Recently many of such organisations protest the hartal by opposition. This is a good sign. In the long run the parties must respond to the demand of people.

E Latif
Winnipeg, Canada

Life in SPACE

Sir, While surfing the Internet the other day, I came across a news which says that the US space agency NASA is spending 20 million dollars on a new area of study called 'astrobiology'. The idea of life on other planets is no longer a science fiction. David Morrison, who coordinates the new effort at the NASA's Ames Research Center in California explains "What is astrobiology. It's simply the study of life in the universe. It's an effort to answer some very fundamental questions that have been with us for a long time — questions of what was the origin and evolution of life, is there life on other worlds, and what's the future of life on Earth and in space."

NASA is working on a plan to take a closer look. For example, more probes are bound for Mars, including one that will bring back samples of the Martian soil. And an orbital mission is planned for Europa. That moon of Jupiter appears to have a liquid ocean under a cover of ice. The mission is scheduled for the year 2003. All those craft will be unmanned, with the work done by remote control. But Morrison says that the effort to find signs of life in space will require all kinds of scientists here on Earth.

Astrobiology is multi-disciplinary. For the first time, we're trying to bring together scientists from very different backgrounds on the assumption that by bringing together chemists, physicists, astronomers, microbiologists and so forth, we'll be able to find answers where perhaps scientists working individually or within their own disciplines wouldn't.

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OPINION

Cleaning the Rot in Police

Open any newspaper of any day of recent times, weeks or months, you will be beset with gloom and unspeakable insecurity. Reports of gruesome violence not only by the *mastans* of all sorts and brands, worse still by the so-called disciplined members of the police force are seen. Are we going to digest these or turn a deaf ear against the impending national disaster and accept it with equanimity or cherish the myth of hope that "something good will turn up?" Today, industrial production at the rock-bottom is not only hampered, but this all pervasive environment of insecurity prevails in the industries, banks and commercial set-ups alongwith the wanton behaviour of the so-called CBA, whose only business is how to secure or turn a maximum, even at the cost of the national interest of the losing mills. The total effect of all these is that in spite of attractive terms and conditions to allure local and foreign investors especially the latter has in fact remained unrelaxed.

Which local or foreign investors are going to stick out their neck by investing their life time's earnings, — unless their banks' unlimited ODBs which are required to be paid back, as it happened in Bangladesh in recent times? Even the prospect of this kind of credit accommodation for which the mouths of certain groups of local investors were always watering, are reportedly thinking out.

The donors, the World Bank, not to speak of the possible foreign investors are waiting impatiently to see that something immediate and fruitful is done to set the rot right.

But if the society, government and the state are to be protected immediately from chaos and confusion, even anarchy, in my view, immediate first step must be that of cleaning the rot from within the police organisation. Not even the TNOs at the Upazila levels, nor the district administration of all departments come so much in day to day contact with the public in the villages and cities or the country side as with the police. The lack of confidence of the members of the public or even the sense of fear and the rock-bottom image the police is now suffering from, calls for some immediate remedial measures and not tinkering window dressing, as the malaise has gone too deep into marrows. All right-thinking persons, even ordinary citizens are looking forward for some immediate steps that will stem the rot. What should be done? This is not the time just to sit and wait and indulge in step by step tinkering measures or sit idle(?) waiting for the worst only to be swept away for the benefit of the enemies.

Some serious minded persons feel that the normal law of the land should be allowed to operate without let or hindrance. It is only because of the normal law and criminal justice situation has been ob-

structed in so many different ways in the past decade or two that the ordinary citizens has lost their confidence in the normal process, because they do not see the wrong-doers ever punished, as reported in the media, or they see or hear that anyone is afraid of his wrongdoing that he will be caught sooner or later and will be punished. This impunity and absence of normal operation of law and order is what killing the society. Slightly differing from the above point of view, I, however, submit the following suggestions for a serious thinking and, if possible, acceptance by the decision makers:

We may not wait or expect for the national level Ombudsman to appear in the horizon as the talk has been going on for at least over five years, but the great Messiah is yet to appear on the scene! Why not appoint an immediate and interim basis an Ombudsman for cleaning up operation of corrupt men and officers from within the police department — who will not be less than a serving or recently retired Judge of the Supreme Court/High Court? But not even an angel of a human being in Bangladesh will know all the intricate things of such a huge department, consisting of almost about a lac personnel with problems of normal running of thanas, districts, Criminal Investigation Dept (CID) and Special Branch involving the internal security of the country, traffic policing including riverine traffic and hundred other social problems. So, the learned Ombudsman may have to be advised, supported and assisted by some very effective members of a council, say consisting of members numbering up to 10 who will know some of the intricacies of the problems that are afflicting over 12 crore people of Bangladesh.

I am compelled to invoke here my experience of the activities of the Screening Committee under the hated Martial Law Dictator Ayub Khan. I am sure, not he, but some of his learned advisers might be instrumental in devising Screening Committees for all the administrative divisions/police ranges headed by the Deputy Inspector Generals of Police and assisted by two or three best known Superintendents from within the division. I shall go further by recommending that some non-police members, say one Additional Commissioner of the Division or senior-most Deputy Commissioner of the Division well-known for his integrity and honesty and one of the elected members of the Parliament, perhaps not belong to the same Division or district where the Ombudsman Screening Committee will be operating may be included, perhaps another very well-known academician of the Division or from the district, serving or retired, could also be enlisted in

Salahuddin Ahmed

this Divisional Screening Committee of which the DIG will be the Chairman. The decision whether in cases of lack of integrity, honesty etc. one is to be sacked or not, should rest on a consensus, generally speaking, in the basis of officers' records, service books, Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) etc. In case of consensus, the majority view may be accepted by the Chairman. Before the Screening Committee starts its operation, all men, and their records, should be scrutinised and the Screening Committee members will also test at random 10/15 per cent of other cases which have been placed on the passed over list as "clean."

The Ombudsman should be assisted by at least two or three retired IGP of unquestioned reputation and integrity. The Home Secretary and the serving IGP will be automatically members of this committee. But normally they may like to visit the different divisional headquarters or other places where the Screening Committee will be operating. The district police authorities may be given at least four to six weeks time to prepare their records, supervised by their higher authorities. And the whole screening operation or a substantial part thereof must be completed in six months time. Those who will come in adverse notice of the committee/Ombudsman shall have their right to appeal. From the time of submission of their appeal to the time of disposal shall not exceed more than a month. All appeals will lie before the Ombudsman assisted by the team. The special Ombudsman may like to keep the Home Minister and the Prime Minister well aware once a month of the progress, problems faced in the actual operation and to get some guidelines or advices and directives, if necessary.

If the above suggestions are taken up in right earnest it should set right the police image, as not all of them apparently are bad people. Perhaps most of them are victims of circumstances or a vicious circle created by the society at large and the society is now getting back its due return.

But will the decision makers take this suggestion or any other suggestions? Do they feel that they have a political commitment to take the steps at the appropriate time, which is already too late?

The writer is a former Secretary, Government of Bangladesh