

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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Amnesty Report for 1998

WE are hardly surprised that Amnesty International (AI) has not given us a clean bill of health on the human rights situation. If the local media reports of and different activist groups' outcries against human rights violations have been any guide to understanding the state of affairs then we should have known that by the probing standards of AI things on this front could not appear in any better light than they have. And, we find no reason to draw any amount of satisfaction from the fact that we have fared better in comparison with some other countries grilled for their extremely poor human rights records. Resting on consolation laurels amounts to court-judging perpetuation of the status quo and negation of all possibilities for self-correction and improvement.

While casting a weary eye on such a prospect we also plead with the government to refrain from being allergic to the critical aspects of the Amnesty International's report. Rather than showing any knee-jerk reaction to the adverse remarks made by the AI it is eminently advisable that we speed up disposal of long delayed test-cases in human rights violations such as the government's appeal against the court decision to acquit four police officers accused of raping Shima Chowdhury and the Rubel murder case, to name the two obvious ones. The AI has highlighted the incidence of rape, torture and murder under police custody, something we know only too well to slur over.

It is significant that the AI report, 1999 covering the state of human rights during 1998 in different countries says that it is not the delay in the judicial system but the slow pursuit of cases by the government which is the prime reason why cases of gross violations of human rights are less attended to in Bangladesh. There is no doubt that a plethora of incidents that occur in the country entirely go unreported to the police, to say nothing of being unregistered with them. Moreover, where the thana officers smell influence-peddling in a case they might not entertain it at all. So, the self-corrective process ought to basically begin with case-filing and registration and then move on to investigation and arraignment. As a matter of fact, the preparation of cases is more often than not so very perfunctory, flawed and weak that these are often dismissed at the courts. No wonder, there are so few convictions in the end. Sometimes the legal wheels also move slowly.

A news report in a major Bangla daily has recently revealed that court warrants are not executed by the police allegedly in collusion with the prosecution wing of courts. The number of such virtually aborted warrant orders runs into quite a few thousand. There is a dire need for both police and law reforms, something which is promised all the time but remains a far cry.

Little wonder, the Amnesty International has recommended annulment of the SPA which allegedly has been used against the political opposition in a number of cases. Most of these detentions made under the law eventually fail to stand court scrutiny.

It is absolutely vital for our image as a democratic country that we set up the much-awaited Human Rights Commission and the Ombudsman's office to ensure full protection to basic human rights.

Did Russia Outmanoeuvre NATO?

by Harun ur Rashid

The strategy of Russian leadership seems to be superb, signalling to the West that Russia continues to play an important role in European affairs. This is more so when everyone in the West discounted the presence of Russian troops so early in Kosovo because of its crisis-plagued economy.

not by the Foreign Ministry that unless there is quick presence of Russian troops in Kosovo, the Serbs will be completely let down by the Russians. Their presence will inspire confidence among the demoralised Serbian population in Kosovo. Foreign Minister Ivanov explained to his counter-parts in NATO countries that the presence of Russian troops was a mistake. If this is so, there seems to be a greater concern in the West as to who is then controlling Russia's policy in respect of Kosovo.

NATO's victory over Yugoslavia appears to have been denied considerably by the entry of Russian troops in Kosovo. Neither President Clinton nor British Prime Minister Tony Blair could say that they were the first to enter Kosovo after the withdrawal of Serbian forces. NATO leaders would find it difficult to explain to the public. The procrastination in sending their troops in Kosovo.

The question that arises is: why did Russia do it? Several possible reasons could be attributed to for such action.

Russian leadership is under severe criticism from its na-

tionalist politicians and Communist members of the Parliament (Duma) over its "weak-kneed" policy over Yugoslavia. Many of them wanted to assist Yugoslavia during the war and they failed because the ruling Russian leadership headed by President Boris Yeltsin did not wish to engage in armed conflict with NATO. The peace-deal brokered by former Russia's Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was also criticised by the nationalist Russian leaders as they considered that the interests of Serbs had been sold out. We may not forget that Russia's Presidential election and Parliamentary election are to be held within six months to one year and given this background all politicians in Russia have to demonstrate their credibility and patriotism to the public. The NATO's war on Yugoslavia offered them an opportunity to express their views.

Russia's cultural and religious affinity with Serbs are well-known. Their written scripts are similar as well. The Russians and the Serbs were on the same side in the First World War and the Second World War. During the Second World War,

it was the Russian troops which entered first Belgrade even before the Yugoslav resistance soldiers ("partisans") led by Marshal Tito could do so.

While Russia agreed to the peace-deal and to the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution, it made it clear that Russia's role in the command and make-up of the peace-keeping forces in Kosovo needed to be thrashed out. However, NATO appeared to have divided Kosovo into five regions, each zone allocated to five NATO countries, US, Britain, Germany, France and Italy.

What about Russia? NATO seemed to ignore Russia's participation and Russian leadership felt slighted at this attitude. Russia was not able to tolerate this indifference to it by NATO. Furthermore, Russia could not face the Yugoslav leadership about its perceived subservient role under NATO.

Russian wants that their troops should not be under NATO command structure, although they agreed in case of Bosnia under Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995. They want a separate command and the Russian troops and its commander would report to their commander in Moscow and not

to NATO. The UN Security Council resolution adopted on 10 June on Kosovo is silent on the unified command. Russia could argue that there is nothing in the text of the resolution that subordinates their forces to NATO.

What was agreed in 1995 by Russia could not be accepted now. A view prevails that time has changed for Russia between 1995 and 1999. Russia's domestic scene is different now because of the coming election and also because of the low popularity of President Boris Yeltsin, partly due to his poor handling of the economy. The nationalist and the communists in Russia are not happy that NATO, instead of being a defensive organisation, has shown its true colour and projected in a robust manner its aggressive designs. NATO's war on Yugoslavia without the approval of the UN is an instance in point.

Russian ruling leadership realised that they could not do much during NATO's war on Yugoslavia. Seventy-two days of bombing continued over Yugoslavia and Russia was seen playing a second fiddle to the West. After all Russia was a

former superpower and has all the nuclear arsenals. Only its economy let it down to assert itself as a dominant power. Russia appears to have realised the reality in the political mathematics that had there been no veto power in the UN by Russia, the West might have ignored it completely.

All these considerations appear to have led Russia to direct its troops to enter Kosovo first. The strategy worked perfectly. The Serbs in Kosovo found their ally on the streets in Pristina and they greeted them with applause. Russia could tell the Serbs that they entered first Kosovo and they have nothing to fear from NATO forces. Furthermore the Serb's interest will be fully protected by them.

NATO may now as a face-saving device explain that they do not object to Russia's presence in the peace-keeping force. In fact they welcome it. However NATO's leadership felt let down by the Russian leadership in their move to send their troops to Pristina. NATO forces, despite their assurances to the US leaders, Russian felt that NATO leaders continued the war disregarding the Russian's views. If they can do it, why can't Russia do it? Russia appears to have given a tit-for-tat response to NATO's insensitivity to their views.

There is a lurking fear in NATO that if Russia controls a separate zone in Kosovo, it might encourage de-facto partition of Kosovo because all the Serb population within Kosovo might feel safe to live in that zone controlled by the Russians. In that event, Yugoslav leader President Milosovic might be credible to assert that he has won the war over NATO. There is a view that the presence of Russian troops in Kosovo has a beneficial impact on the existing volatile situation. Their presence might allay the fear of reprisals on the Serbs by the Albanian Kosovo refugees returning to Kosovo. The Serbs may not leave Kosovo because of Russian presence and there may not be another exodus of Serbs refugees leaving Kosovo to Serbia.

The peace-keeping in Kosovo is a complex operation. NATO will principally control the military, the UN will oversee its civil administration and the UNHCR will supervise the return of refugees to Kosovo and re-settlement of 500,000 internally displaced Kosovars. It is just a gigantic task in reshaping and rebuilding the Balkans. The impact of Russian presence in Kosovo is yet to be determined and time will only tell. But one fact appears to be clear that the Western leaders have been outmaneuvered by their Russian counterparts in Kosovo.

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An Italian soldier stands in front of destroyed buildings in the outskirts of the south-western city of Pec, 14 June 1999. Serb forces are pursuing their withdrawal from Kosovo in line with timetable set up in a technical agreement signed at Kumanovo, Macedonia.

OPINION

Bangla Daze: Why Not Pretend the "Bus" is Moving?

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

While I barely mention the myriad problems with our national bus, I hope some smart Aleck may step forward and point out that all we have to do is pretend as if our national bus is moving. That will surely take care of our perception problem.

DON'T get me wrong! When I talk about the "Bus," I don't mean the one that may take us to Calcutta in just few days.

Is Bangladesh missing the other bus? The metaphorical bus that is supposed to take us all to a destination called prosperity. As you know the "bus" is taking the rest of the world to a preferred destination called "A Better Life."

"You must be kidding," one enthusiastic deshi might snap back at me for asking. Of course, we have 120 million plus strong labor force — a force very eager to work. On top of it, we have natural resources down below us. Then, what is holding us back? Why are we moving so slowly, ever so slowly, towards the destination? Characteristically, some cynics might say that the bus has never left the depot. Others may even say that all the four tires are flat, never mind the smooth ride. Some may point out that the engine is a bit rusty and desperately in need of a tune up. Some may say — the gear of the bus is permanently jammed in the "Reverse Mode." The list detailing the problems is too long.

The bottom line is — should we abandon this rusty and reconditioned bus in a hurry and look for a brand new bus as a replacement? I am afraid if we don't do that then rest of our neighbors will move towards the destination, while we Bengalis will be left to rot in a quagmire created by our not so civil society.

While I barely mention the myriad problems with our national bus, I hope some smart Aleck may step forward and point out that all we have to do is pretend as if our national bus is moving. That will surely take care of our perception problem. I must admit here that in the '70s a popular joke among Russian intellectuals was that Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev might have said about a stalled train in Russian tundra that he was riding along with Lenin and Stalin. While the train stopped in the middle of nowhere in the vast taiga of Siberia, Lenin proposed to deliver a fiery speech on communism and thereby inspiring the train crew to re-start the engine. Stalin had a better proposal. He wanted to summarily execute all the inept crewmembers and appoint a new crew so that

the train can move forward. Leonid Brezhnev was a practical man. He looked at his comrade and said, "Please pull down the curtain and pretend the train is moving."

In Bangladesh, also, we also see a similar perception among our leaders. They are very eager to say that the nation's economy is moving forward and prosperity is right around the corner. However, the reality is quite the opposite. Bangladesh is in existence since 1971, but the nation never did make a stride in the right direction to uplift the lot of our common people. The proverbial bus (economy) must have been stuck in the monsoon mud for quite some time. Otherwise, why did the lot of average folks of Bangladesh do not change for the better? May be for too long our leaders also have pulled down the curtains of the bus and pretended a la Brezhnev that the vehicle was moving full steam.

At the core of all sorts of worldly problems is our image to the outsiders. The capital that is so much needed in this day of globalization won't simply come as long as we portray ourselves as a low trust society. Let me bring this issue up from the perspective of our Southeast Asian neighbors. It is vital that something be done about it otherwise external funding could dry up very fast and the "bus" will rot right in our backyard. We will have no choice then but to pretend that the 'bus' is moving. Now, do we want that?

Let us be honest here and admit conclusively that Bangladesh has a serious image problem. The foreigners all over the globe consider us a corrupt nation. They do not mean that our folks in the rural communities are unprincipled. It is quite the opposite. The city folks and in particular the people in power (government, semi-government, and others) are disingenuous and unscrupulous. How do you straighten our corrupt government workforce?

Let me now delve into the heart of the story. It is an old story. When was the last time you heard any foreigner uttering some kind words about us? So, as I read the business news published in 'News from Bangladesh,' some 21 months earlier, I was least perturbed by the remarks of South Korean Ambassador in Dhaka. The Korean envoy has certainly earned his rights to say that he

compiled a long list of complaints against Bangladesh (actually against us, the Bengalis).

I'm very confident that he won't be the first time any foreign envoy or a businessman complained against Bangladesh's government or its people. I reckon most Bengalis know these complaints by heart now. With oriental sensibilities, Mr. Tae Kyu-Han, the ROK envoy, politely mentioned the "inefficient bureaucracy" of Bangladesh. I think Mr. Kyu-Han had meant disingenuous nature of our bureaucrats and government office workers when he talked about the inefficient bureaucracy of our land. Does this surprise anyone?

Of course, one can make our bureaucracy an efficient right away provided one is liberal with the usage of one's wallet. You know very well what I do mean!

During British Raj it was a common practice in India was to continue to give "Baksheesh" to the low income clerks, peons and others for expediting the vertical movement of a file (hopefully, up the ladder). Our fathers or grandfathers did not mind giving tips to the low-waged government workers. After all, the word Baksheesh was derived from Persian word meaning tips, gifts, or gratuity. Furthermore, the peons, clerks, and anything like them never demanded a Baksheesh before taking up the task. It is altogether a different story now! In Bangladesh, any office workers, irrespective of whom they work for, would demand an advance Baksheesh from you before undertaking the task. It gives me heartache to see that an honorable practice such as Baksheesh-giving had been transformed into an extortion game by a section of our society. Hardly anyone cares about this aspect of the decay in our moral values. It is very puzzling to me that most Baksheesh-giver and Baksheesh-taker claim to be the adherent to a faith where extortion is very much rebuked. I guess reading the scriptures from the holy book is one thing while practicing it is another matter, altogether.

As you know, corrupting the whole administrative cadre of our government has been going on for such a long time that I would not even dare to point

fingers at any particular group and proclaim them to be the guilty party. It is only fair to say that our society has permitted this coercion to thrive in the guise of benign "Baksheesh."

The bigger damage this advance Baksheesh-giving (or is it bribe by any other name?) has done to our offices and courts in our motherland is regrettable. The ultimate result is — inefficiency in every workplace. The Korean envoy tried to be pleasant while describing the ills of our society.

The second problem the envoy mentioned is a surprise new development. He said, "It is very difficult to find suitable land. Almost all land is involved in legal disputes."

A country of only 56,000 square miles, Bangladesh is a small nation by all accounts; I'm not ashamed to acknowledge that land is scarce in Bangladesh. Housing 120 million plus people in this delta where rivers take a sizeable bite, is not an easy task. But that does not mean that we have to be dishonest, immoral and above all litigious to claim the dubious ownership of a land or a building. About two years ago someone wrote a piece in NFB detailing the harrowing experience his parents had to endure to protect a building in Dhaka from the clutch of a politically connected person. Examples of these kinds of forcible occupation of others' land and property are plenty in our impoverished land. Forgery is a very big business in Bangladesh, folks! All kinds of fake documents can be created in a short notice.

Can someone tell me — who is going to be interested in investing in the private sector of our country knowing fully well, what goes on in Bangladesh!

The Koreans, Japanese, and others from the Pacific Rim countries had discovered very easily our national characteristics. You can sum it up by just one word. Bengali lexicographers enlisted the word in our dictionary as "Dhandhami." Believe me, there is no equivalent English word for "Dhandhami," folks!

The envoy was simply referring to our characteristic by citing some examples of "Dhandhami." He also had mentioned another great vice of ours that is localized in our banking sector. He had said, "One of our major complaints is about financial transaction. Local banks are not paying for LCs."

Are you surprised hearing this "Dhandhami" of our bank folks?

To the contrary, if our prudent businessmen would pay up the bills in its entirety, that would be a news to me.

In a lamenting tone the Korean envoy had said, "Unfortunately, none of the joint ventures has succeeded in Bangladesh. All of them have been involved in some kind of dispute with local partners. Disposal of such problems should be fair and quick."

What the Korean envoy had hinted is the pathetic shape of our present day judiciary system. He had asked for expediency in our legal system. The bottom line of Korean envoy's plea is — enforce strong law and order in Bangladesh. That is what the foreigners would like to see now. The rule of thug-gery, chicanery, and

"Dhandhami" has to end before any of our Asian neighbors would invest a dime in Bangladesh. The message that had been delivered by the Asian envoy was very clear. They were saying — "Shape up or else face the consequences."

To be honest, if we do not straighten our act and bring some kind of orderliness in our chaotic (unruly) national life, I see nothing but trouble ahead. I feel a sense of urgency here. Our civic and political leaders should take immediate corrective action to put our country in the right direction. Otherwise, amidst all this ongoing prosperity in Southeast Asia, we will be left out in a barren place branded as a social pariah.

Amidst all these negativities we thought Bangladesh is going to join the bandwagon of free market economy and open the doors to her neighbors. After all, there is nothing wrong to be greedy to improve the lot of our common folks. One by one, our neighbors from the southeast quadrant came with an open arm to do business with us. Of course, they brought their sack full of money! However, they were frightened by our "inefficiencies" and by the flagrant display of our amoral character.

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Friday Mailbox

In search of a safe home

Sir, In our country as almost every building in urban areas is concrete-made, the safety is correlated with concrete mixture. No matter how solid the structural design of the building is, it is in vain when the field performance is poor. Designs of concrete structures depend on the assumption that the used steel and the prepared concrete will have certain minimum strength. But in almost every case, the concrete is prepared on the spot maintaining no standard. Suitable proportioning of the concrete for economy is only a text-book theory for our country, as practicing engineers are not interested.

Well, that is not all. The more serious concern is — the water-cement ratio by weight which is the chief factor that controls the strength of the concrete. For water-cement ratio, one selects the minimum amount of cement, the most expensive element. The irony is that, mixing is always done by eye estimation and consequently the strength is totally unpredictable.

So, what our sincere(?) practicing engineers are doing? They are providing more factor of safety by using WSD method of design (which is discarded in the modern world, long ago) instead of more rational and much more economical (at least one-third less cost) USD method. Mixture machines are often seen here and there, but has anyone seen one with water container above? Authority concerned should take proper step to ensure that mixture machine comes with properly graduated water container.

Enamur Rahim Latif

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GM crops

Sir, In a recent article for the 'Daily Mail', Britain's Prince Charles has expressed his concern over the safety of genetically modified (GM) crops. Accusing supporters of GM foods of using "emotional blackmail" in pressing their case, the Prince of Wales also voiced concerns about the toughness of regulations on cultivation of GM crops. In his article he wrote — "But what I believe the public's reaction shows, is that instinctively we are nervous about tampering with Nature when we cannot be sure that we know enough about all the consequences."

While fully appreciating the concern of the Prince, I would like to emphasize on taking further time to observe the consequences of genetically modified crops in restricted fields and to conduct laboratory as well as clinical tests on GM foods with a view to determine their effects on humans before finally releasing these for large-scale cultivation all over the world.

It may be mentioned here that scientists of a joint Australian and Belgium team have made a major breakthrough that will help produce genetically modified crops which they called the "Genetic Switch" or gene-promoter. My point is, we have learned only to switch on the genetic switch but I am afraid it would take a longer period to develop a regulator plus putting off technique through extensive experimentation. The question so far raised by the people in general concerning — how far the GM foods are safe to eat' remains still unanswered.

M Zahidul Haque

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Review the 5-day working week

Sir, The government should review the 5-day working week, after a wide-spectrum public debate. Underdeveloped Bangladesh cannot progress fast not working two days a week.

Our predilection for laziness and a tendency to shirk work, duties and responsibilities are

well known (notice the local proverb: *boshite dilay shutey chail* — thanks to the tropical torpor. It is not necessary to mix up (a) religion; and (b) false political 'popularity'. Life is a mixture of the pleasant and the unpleasant; and hardship and leisure, while the pot has to be kept boiling. How many millions of man-hours are we losing annually or in a decade? Is this in public interest? Are we too sentimental?

Abul M Ahmad

Dhaka

Road digging

Sir, Over last eight months, T&T Department is carrying out road digging works at Wari area at a snail's pace causing untold difficulties and sufferings to the members of public.

We would request the authority concerned to complete its works expeditiously and to dig a new road only after filling in and repairing the excavated road for the convenience of the people and uninterrupted movement of road traffic.

O. H. Kabir

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Why electricity in village?

Sir, I visited my village home in Sylhet, Dhakadakhin Nagar in the second week of June, 1999. A part of the village was brought under electricity network in 1988. But when the evening approached, the voltage started to drop below to a level when all electric appliances including fans and lights became deem. It continued till 12:30 am. One could imagine the unbearable condition one had to face in the scorching heat of the humid summer. The villagers have to supplement light with lanterns and candles. It has been happening for many years. Last year I could find the adequate voltage level at around 10:00 pm. Now it is coming almost to zero. Nobody in PDB bothers to look after this matter. On the contrary in con-nivance with the local PDB field worker unauthorised connections are being extended. It is done without considering the total load; as a result genuine consumers are going through unbearable sufferings.

I ask myself what is the purpose of our having electricity in the village?

Dr M Ahmed

Dhaka

Liquor tragedy

Sir, Only a few weeks back, more than 100 people died from drinking spurious liquor at Narsingdi. The same case occurred at Gibandha last year when also a good number of people died by taking 'rectified spirit'(?). But what the law enforcement agencies are doing? Why are they neglecting their duties? Those hapless, poor people often take spirits to revive their 'spirit' after day's hard work. Of course, some other big shots like cinema producers and hotel owners faced such fate by overdrinking from luxurious bottles. This dishonest trade is still going on under the very nose of the administration. It's reported that, the police take money from the traders ensuring their free and safe business. The police even seem to be more interested to collect toll from them than to carry on their duties. Recently liquor-related deaths have become more frequent. The availability of liquor attract more people and our young generation is becoming an easy victim. It is time the government take some stern steps against illegal liquor business.

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