

Dhaka, Sunday, July 25, 1999

MPs As Bill Evaders, Again!

WHY must members of Parliament habitually dodge payment of telephone bills defies our understanding! And the fact that the number of defaulters shows no sign of declining adds another preposterous dimension to their disrespect for rules. As lawmakers they have set an example in breaking rules good enough perhaps for an entry into the Guinness Book of World Record.

The upward curve provides a damning evidence of a system's elected upholders virtually acting against it. The number of lawmakers of the seventh parliament having outstanding dues worth Tk 1.85 crore to pay stands at 217 compared with 459 MPs of the third, fourth and fifth parliaments taken together, who have amassed Tk 5.51 crore worth of arrear telephone bills. This makes up Tk 7.26 crore owed to the government till-date. Some of them have strung out for 20 long years without having paid the telephone bills.

When the non-paying legislators of the preceding parliaments came under considerable media and public criticism and the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) duly issued reminders to them to pay up one had thought that the wheels would turn for the better: not merely would they make amends but their successors would also be on guard not to repeat their mistake. But this expectation has been belied as the mental barrier against payment of telephone bills continues as a manifestation of unconcealed exhibition of an exaggerated feel of power.

How terribly devoid of propriety is this that even though they were drawing Tk 4000 as telephone allowance per mensem they did not have any qualm to pay their bills.

While we deride at the MPs making light of their rudimentary obligations as elected public representatives we are no less disenchanted with the BTTB's kid-glove handling of the issue. It has deplorably failed to pin the MPs down on the question of rules being equally applicable to all citizens, if not more to the MPs because they are elected lawmakers. The matter being now before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Post and Telecommunications it must be prepared to do something more than merely issue another bunch of letters to the MPs on the defaulters' list.

Narrow Escape

MAYBE it was sheer good fortune, or superlative skill of the pilot, or a bit of both that brought the Biman DC-10 aircraft back home with the 270-odd passengers safe and sound, completely unaware that their very lives hung in balance throughout the trip from Rome to Dhaka. It might not have been a 'real' emergency, as the purported refusal from air traffic control at London and Rome aerodromes to the pilot's request for emergency landing suggested; nevertheless, the way Captain Alimuzzaman handled the whole situation has been unquestionably commendable. Above all, he not only kept his composure under the circumstances, he did not also let panic set in. Surely, Biman should be proud to have such an efficient pilot.

However, the narrow escape, amazing it was though, is not quite an unfamiliar phenomenon. Similar operational failures have occurred before and in most of the cases, the pilots have evaded disaster with sheer skill or good luck. The latest in the harrowingly long list of close calls certainly comes as another reminder for the authorities to shore up maintenance; for, more often than not, it has been poor maintenance job that exposed the aircraft and the passengers to fatal consequences. If the trend continues, there will be a time when the pilots, no matter how good they are, will have very little to do. There are widespread allegations of irregularities in such matters. Not very long ago, a Biman aircraft had engine failure within a week after it had been D-checked.

The authorities have initiated a probe into the near-disaster, a regulation procedure, so to speak. Whether the inquisition and its subsequent report would bring about any positive development remains doubtful, nonetheless. So far, there have been a number of probe committees and their reports, but they don't appear to have brought about any appreciable change on the ground whatsoever. We can only hope it would this time around, it better be, because we are not only talking about aircraft, we are talking about hundreds of lives.

LP Gas Crisis

LIQUEFIED Petroleum Gas (LPG), one major fuel for cooking in the northern region of Bangladesh, has once again become a rare commodity there. Thousands of households use this gas as a clean fuel which relieves pressure on conventional fuels like the fire wood for one. Shortage of LP gas in that part of the country has often been highlighted in the national dailies but to no avail. An influential Bangla daily reported on Saturday that LP gas has vanished from Thakurgaon. The scarcity of such an essential household item obviously affects its users very badly with the unscrupulous agents and dealers capitalising on their misery.

Three nationalised oil companies have distributed 14 thousand plus cylinders to three hundred dealers for northern districts against an estimated demand of 60 thousand cylinders. This built-in shortage has given rise to all sorts of bad business practices including asking a cut-throat price for a cylinder. In actual fact the demand for cylinders is rapidly rising as more and more households crave for this convenient and clean fuel. This has a bearing on the business of the manufacturers of gas cookers and burners. To encourage people to switch over to gas from conventional firewood the ministry concerned and the ancillary organisations should take up a comprehensive scheme to maintain uninterrupted supply of LP gas to the northern region. This will help protect and preserve the environment till such time as the government is able to supply natural gas through the east-west pipeline across the river Jamuna.

Case for an Objective Assessment

There is a case for study, more so an inquiry into ill-preparedness and negligence on the part of the government... One did not want to apportion blame in the thick of war. But we should now find out who failed where... There are so many aspects of defence which have remained neglected. Political leaders have a lot to explain.

VICTORY is announced with the beat of drum, but reverses are suppressed with all the subterfuge. Both India and Pakistan have indulged in a cover-up job during the recent hostilities. Briefing on both sides was boastful. Why? Probably to keep the morale high. Does it help? The truth can be devastating when it comes out. The public realised that it has been fed on lies and kept ignorant.

How the intruders came or occupied the territory on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC) is pretty well-known. The newsy part is that Pakistan had been preparing for the intrusion for the last three winters. How much of it was known to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is still a matter of conjecture. But he had a general idea of what was being planned.

By the time the Indian soldiers saw men from the other side, India had lost part of its territory. The infiltrators, who included Pakistan forces, had occupied pockets along the 120 kilometres of the LoC, which is 776 km long. The deepest intrusion was of 11 kilometres each, in Batalik, Drass and Mushkoh.

The thrust in Kakashar was to the extent of four

kilometres. There was an effort to advance in Turtock but it was repulsed effectively because the Pakistan push was aimed at cutting off the Siachen glacier from the rest of the area.

Nonetheless, the Pakistan intruders made the traffic on the Srinagar-Leh road called, IA national highway, come to stop. They overlooked the highway and shelled it from the positions they were occupying.

It took us much too long to gear up to it. The plan on the offensive by our army was not ready till America had mooted a proposal for the withdrawal of the intruders. Although at a disadvantage, the Indian forces showed grit and fought bravely. The air force coordinated well. India had cleared two thirds of the occupied territory when Pakistan asked the intruders to return home. There was miscalculation on the part of Pakistan's top brass that it could demarcate another LoC to its advantage. However, they are still dragging their feet in Muskhoh.

Just as New Delhi never gave out how much territory it lost, Islamabad too did not tell about its reverses. The Tiger Hill had been re-captured by India when Pakistan briefed the media that the mujahideen control on the Tiger Hill was intact. Had the Pakistanis soon kept informed on the reverses, their feeling of humiliation would not have been so deep as it is today.

Such observations have been made as: No matter what sort of a face one might try to put on the mujahideen disengagement from the commanding heights of Kargil "it has an element of abruptness hard to swallow", whether it is just an intermission or the end of a climatic real life play remains to be seen.

Of course, people like General Mirza Aslam Beg, Pakistan's former chief of army staff, and Lt Gen Hamid Gul, former ISI chief, are fuming with rage and putting all the blame on the Sharif government. Beg writes in an article: "... The end result of all diplomatic, political manoeuvres and military measures has been that it is the Pakistani army whose image is being tarnished. The US media, Israel and India have collaborated in the vilification campaign and Pakistan's bastion of strength — its armed forces — stand scapegoat for the Kargil fiasco, and the civil government is being projected as if it was the only responsible entity which saved the country from a catastrophic war."

Addressing the Lahore High Court Bar Association, Gul has said: "The mujahideen had won the battle while India was in trouble when our immature leadership tried to turn this victory into a debacle. American leaning towards India is obvious as it is engaged against China." In his opinion,

the Shimla Accord was not a treaty or an agreement having legal value to turn the ceasefire line into the LoC.

Both Beg and Gul are considered hawks in Pakistan itself. But practically every retired military officer or ex-bureaucrat is against close, much less friendly, relations with India. Sharif's own camp has many such persons. All of them are behind the fundamentalists indulging in the cold-blooded murders in Kashmir. How can the process to span the distance between the two countries begin? And even if it does, how far will it reach when there is so much hatred? Pakistan's attitude is attributed to books, schools, the teaching at madrasas and New Delhi's big brother posture. The list of reasons why there is bad blood between the two is long. Maybe, this is a case for an in-depth study by some objective outsiders.

In India, there is a case for another type of study, more so an inquiry into ill-preparedness and negligence on the part of the government and the armed forces. One did not want to apportion blame in the thick of war. But we should now find out who failed where. There was a long list of weapons and other supplies pending with the Defence Ministry when the Pakistani forces crossed into

Kargil. Some are still pending. There are so many aspects of defence which have remained neglected. Political leaders have a lot to explain. So have

the armed forces, although they have done a tremendous job in pushing out the infiltrators.

There are no two opinions that the intelligence agencies failed miserably. RAW, IB, the army's own intelligence branch and others are blaming one another. But all of them were found wanting. Lt Gen Harbans Singh, hero of the 1965 war, has demanded in an interview that some heads must roll. There is no such likelihood because the government feels on the top of the world.

However, one positive thing is that the government is in favour of appointing a commission of inquiry to pinpoint the responsibility for three things: one, unpreparedness, two, negligence and three, intelligence failure. The probe is important, not only to punish the guilty but also to plug the loopholes. The job should be entrusted to a top, respected person. But he or she should not belong to a political party, the bureaucracy or the armed forces. An objective assessment is required.

The government should also give an assurance to publish the inquiry report. The Henderson Brooks inquiry report on the 1962 debacle at the hands of the Chinese is still a top secret document. Some of the guilty have died by now. I demanded the publication of the report through a question in Parliament. The reply given by the Defence Minister was that it was "a state secret" which could not be disclosed in the "public interest". Where does public interest come in? Even after 37 years, such a plea makes mockery of the right to know. By this time the report should have been placed in the archives of India for scholars and experts to analyse.

Incidentally, the Jawaharlal Nehru papers of those days are also not in the archives. The Nehru Library has them. But they are the property of the Nehru parivar, headed by Sonia Gandhi. None can have access to them until she gives permission. The papers are part of India's history. They should be for consultation by historians, scholars and others. Why should they be under the custody of one family is not understandable. Strange as it may sound, the papers were made available for more than two years to an American scholar who is writing a book.

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Let the Truth Come Out

The cost to the nation has been very high. Above all, it has undercut the PM's image as a man of peace, coming right on the heels of the "bus diplomacy" it short-changed his credibility as a negotiator... He ate humble pie for the Washington accord to pull someone else's chestnuts out of the fire for the sake of the country, even to the peril of his reputation and political career.

FOR over 50 years the rulers of India have operated on the theory that if you repeat a lie often enough, it will eventually be believed to be the truth. This goes back 5000 years in line with Kautalaya's Arthashastra. Kargil has been a high point of sorts in the colouring of facts, focusing on public perception as a finessed art the Indians have turned a crippling battlefield defeat into a resounding victory. The illusion created by India has been picked up as reality by the western media and the Indians themselves have been carried away by their own lies e.g. Lt Gen (Retd) Satish Nambari appearing in a repeated TV AD talking about Indian forces now having the capacity of imposing hegemony in the region. The reality is that 1000 to 1200 men held up the better part of six Indian infantry divisions for over 45 days despite being pounded by over 500 artillery pieces and on the receiving end of more than 15-20 aircraft sorties on a daily basis. And then a majority lived to walk away from the battleground having inflicted casualties many times their own strength! However day in and day out, the Indian TVs — Doordarshan, ZeeTV, Star TV, TV Asia, etc. — churn out blatantly false propaganda, one has become sick listening to such a litany of lies.

As the dust settles over Kargil, some truths are emerging in Pakistan which were not discernible earlier due to "the fog of war". These need to be addressed so that lessons can be learnt.

Kargil. Some are still pending. There are so many aspects of defence which have remained neglected. Political leaders have a lot to explain. So have the armed forces, although they have done a tremendous job in pushing out the infiltrators. There are no two opinions that the intelligence agencies failed miserably. RAW, IB, the army's own intelligence branch and others are blaming one another. But all of them were found wanting. Lt Gen Harbans Singh, hero of the 1965 war, has demanded in an interview that some heads must roll. There is no such likelihood because the government feels on the top of the world.

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The necessity for exploitation in the Kargil operation seems to have arisen when it was discovered the Indians remained oblivious for an extended period of time, whether Mujahideen solely or Mujahideen forces beefed up and backed up by regulars of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI). It was incumbent upon our army hierarchy to inform superior civilian authority before we embarked further about possible Indian reaction to the threat to their lines of communication (LoC) to Ladakh and Siachen, containing the best part of two Indian Divisions. Government had to be brought "on board" because diplomatic and media nuances had to be taken care of. There is a grey area here that led to disaster and finger-pointing thereof.

As conceived Kargil was a brilliant military plan, succeeding in turning a tactical situation to strategic advantage. Unfortunately we criminally neglected to put in place vital ingredients, giving professionals in the diplomatic field no war ring as well as not allowing private sector in the media to get into the act as the Indians have done on a broad front. We were wrong-footed from May 28 onwards when two Indian aircraft were downed on our side of the line. Unfortunately when the objective is to make "heroes" out of one's cronies and hog all the glory, the selection of aims disintegrates into mismanagement rather than the maintenance of.

The smell of cordite and battlefield casualties is a necessary ingredient for superior rank, the lack of it propels small men of high rank into

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

For the sake of posterity let us sift fact from fiction lest this deliberate misinformation is contrived to be the truth as it does in such cases with amazing regularity whenever people manoeuvre to escape responsibility by passing the buck.

The PM has firmly believed that the economic emancipation of the people of Pakistan (and South Asia) is only possible if there is lasting peace with India, that this peace is only possible on a long-term priority if there is an amicable settlement of the core issue of Kashmir. When this aim was selected and maintained at great political risk given the emotions of our masses, then it is out of character for the PM to have associated himself with allowing any adventure that would not only scuttle the peace process but would isolate us diplomatically.

With India having severe losses in men and morale, this cannot be kept for ever under a "Bollywood" wrap, incessantly and stridently claiming victory in the face of defeat. truth will come out. In the meantime Indian propaganda has snatched victory from defeat. Similarly withdrawal of our forces from Kargil is a tangible event that has been a severe morale damper for us and needs careful analysis. Not the first time we have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. However, in all fairness, whatever motives one can assume about those individuals who sent the flower of our youth to their lonely deaths on snowy heights and deep ravines, the bringing of Kashmir up to world centrestage as a nuclear flashpoint, their bloody sacrifice may not have been in vain.

The cost to the nation has been very high. Above all, it has undercut the PM's image as a man of peace, coming right on the heels of the "bus diplomacy" it short-changed his credibility as a negotiator. One may criticise many aspects of Mian Nawaz Sharif's rule, he ate humble pie for the Washington accord to pull someone else's chestnuts out of the fire for the sake of the country, even to the peril of his reputation and political career.

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Is Not the Kargil War Won by the US?

by A R Shamsul Islam

The US subjugated both India and Pakistan without fighting any battle. In a sense, blissful unintelligence of the governments and armies of two countries spooned out fruits of the war to the mouth of the world's ace superpower.

HOWEVER bombastic be the claims of India and Pakistan to have won, from their own typical angles, the Kargil war, the brutal fact is that none of the two claimants has reached the vicinity of victory in the real sense of the term.

Pak soldiers and Pakistan-backed mujahideen stealthily sneaked into and occupied the strategic peaks of the mountains of Kargil beyond the line of control in the Indian held territory known as no-man's land. But they could not hold on to their occupations in the face of heavy Indian attacks by air and land and world diplomatic pressure spearheaded by the US.

As a matter of fact, Pak soldiers and mujahideen infiltrated into Kargil not with a view of keeping the occupations under their control for perpetuity but with a motive of arresting world attention to the Kashmir problem which has otherwise gone almost forgotten and forlorn by the world powers. But their wishful thinking failed badly to materialise.

The slackness of Defence Intelligence of India is alarmingly exposed. The Kargil infiltration started in the last winter of Sept-Oct 98. Strangely India could not start smelling the intrusion before a few months were out. To cover up Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee declared there was no

success achieved in the Kargil issue by internationalising the Kashmir problem. Later he amended saying eternal vigilance is the price of security. That vigilance will entail staggering costs which will in fact cost morsels of food from the mouth of hungry millions of India.

The biggest defeat that India inflicted on herself, knowingly or unknowingly, is her approach to America, the first of its kind, to pressure Pakistan for pullout of troops from Kargil. India has always cried hoarse to establish principle of bilateralism in total disregard to Pakistan's repeated insistence on inclusion of a third country to facilitate solution of the Kashmir problem. Here the acts of India tantamount to swallow her own words. If for solution of a few-month old Kargil problem the US prescription stands seekable and acceptable, why is it not for re-

solving 52-year old Kashmir problem?

Pakistan is America's tried and tested ally. What support Pakistan got from the US on the Kargil issue is far less than expected. Still it is the study of the Pentagon that Pakistan will remain as steadfastly loyal to the US as before. Washington is no fool to write off Pakistan as a friend. Only the other day she persuaded the World Bank and IMF to give bail-out aids to Pakistan.

After detonation of nuclear bombs by India and Pakistan, Clinton has got to be specially watchful against these two countries coming to a nuclear flash point. The stand that the US took on the Kargil issue was not only relieving but also highly tasteful to