

THE pre-dawn swoop Saturday on Nimgali and Tanbazar brothels in Narayanganj to round up the inmates for a trip to the government's vagrant homes at Kashimpur and Pubail in Gazipur, for the very nature of it, appears to have done the rehabilitation programme more harm than good. The raid carried out almost in the likeness of the combing operation to nab terrorists seems only to have succeeded in intensifying fears among sex-workers of the wrath of the authority instead of inspiring in them any desire to be integrated in the mainstream of the society. The result: nearly 600 prostitutes joined the already 'outlawed' 2,400 who had left the brothels following the murder of Jasmine, one of their fellow inmates, on July 1. On the whole, in the name of rehabilitation, the government has successfully dispersed thousands of sex workers in the localities, thereby exposing the residents to a number of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including AIDS of which many a prostitute has been identified as a potential carrier.

The way the government has so far gone about the task does not even remotely accommodate the sex-workers' right to make a choice between rehabilitation and continuation of the trade they are currently in. On the contrary, it can safely be called an arbitrary attempt to impose a rather regimented lifestyle on a group of people—the government 'considers'—in need of immediate rehabilitation. As usual, the government agency concerned—in this case, the Social Services Department—has its reason: some 698 sex workers from the two brothels have applied to be rehabilitated. Nearly two crore taka has already been allocated for a country-wide UNDP-assisted rehabilitation scheme. More is in the offing, so suggested state ministers for social welfare, children and women's affairs, and youth, sports and cultural affairs in their speeches at different public meetings, according to an influential Bangla news daily. However, the plan, noble though, has come unstuck at the implementation level, revealing thereby its in-built inadequacy. The planners appear to have failed to envision the possible fall-outs the drive may lead to.

The government itself, through its precipitous action, has let the situation go out of control. It has, knowingly or unknowingly, given weight to wide-spread suspicion over an ulterior political motive behind the whole exercise. Besides, by spreading around the sex workers, it has only augmented the bleak prospect of a major health emergency. We reiterate our position on this issue and urge the government to let go of the sex workers until such time as it comes up with a fool-proof plan in this regard.

We Mourn the King's Death

KING Hassan II, a powerful influence on the life of Moroccan people for long 38 years, a discreetly astute peace-maker in the Middle East and a bridge-builder between different cultures is no more. We join the whole world in condoling his death and paying tributes to his memories.

Barely four years after its political independence from France, Morocco came under his kingship in 1961 in the wake of his father King Mohammed V's death. Nearly every facet of the North African Kingdom's life, therefore, bears the stamp of his personality and that goes to explain the hysteria of grief that has gripped his people. It is a constitutional monarchy that he tried to steer through to the modern era so that it grew to acquire some democratic and liberal tempers in his lifetime. But of course, the 300-year old monarchy has been an example of continuity in the basic political traditions of the country. The sheer political stability of Morocco has enabled it to be near the bottom half of the middle income countries in the world.

Uninhibited by his North African identity, King Hassan II played a larger than life role basically as a catalyst between some conflicting chemistries in the region. Islam being the predominant religion in his country he enjoyed a clout in the Arab world but at the same time he had a window open to the Israelis, tens of thousands of whom are of Moroccan origin. Little wonder, the peace accord between Israel and Egypt and the subsequent agreements between Israel and the PLO and Israel and Jordan bear imprints of his diplomatic vision, initiative and skill. Highly acceptable to the West, he was the first Islamic head of state to have visited Pope John Paul II in the Vatican. A world conference of Muslim leaders hosted by him in 1994 issued a public statement against Islamic extremism. But he was unparalleled in his balancing acts. He chaired the Jerusalem committee made up of members from Arab and Islamic states which aimed at supporting the Palestinians in the Holy City.

We wish the fraternal country of Morocco god-speed under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, the able son and successor of the venerable deceased King Hassan II.

Build Flood Shelters

NEW habitats are being constructed on the western flank of the town protection embankment in Dhaka. Hundreds of *kutcha* houses are dotted with *pucca* office-spaces being built by some health clinics and a private entrepreneur. Some of the NGOs have also constructed schools, clinics etc. and imparting lessons in good health care.

A pictorial report in an influential Bangla daily on Sunday described in detail how this embankment is being occupied by needy people as well as landgrabbers who are constructing new houses to offer them on rentals. Repair and extension work on the embankment was supposed to start as soon as last year's flood waters receded but this has actually got underway now, in full monsoon; the result being the fattening of bills of the contractors without their doing the stipulated work in an area of three and a half kilometres. A number of cooperative societies have sprung up in different names and are doing various kinds of business. Shops of various sizes and categories have mushroomed to cater to the needs of the inhabitants. All these *pucca* and *kutcha* constructions have their definite impact on the embankment. This will have an adverse effect during the coming floods. But where would these people go? They are always in search of high lands to save themselves from flooding. The government should have built flood shelters before the monsoon set in.

An Ignominious Defeat against Corruption

Whom can we turn to for rescue? Anyone, but the government. Although it holds all the power, its inept leaders could do precious little, for example, to recover huge bank money from the defaulters or stop the country-wide pilferage of electricity... None of the successive governments since independence had been sincere in stopping bribe, toll collection or extortion — the multiple facets of corruption.

IN 1971 it was a thumping victory on the battle front. It was with a bang that we won our independence. But subsequently we courted defeat on almost all other fronts. Not only we stumbled in our nation-state building, the dawn of the independence witnessed an alarming spate of violence, terror and crimes — something that represents the syndrome of a bad start. The country's internal order virtually crumbled down. We were already impoverished — now we saw the naked face of hunger with more number of people living under the poverty line. The exploitation, nepotism and social injustice against which we fought for the ages deftly raised their ugly heads. Our economic woes multiplied as a result of state level larceny. There started a moral precipitation with no visible efforts to reverse the trend. The corruption became epidemic. In fact, many dreams we nourished for long came crashing down.

All the aberrations were however slow and creeping ones, although it could not be ascertained when exactly they had begun. But all of them seemed to have combined to appear like a national catastrophe in the early seventies. One thing was obvious that we could not manage our great social and political transition and apparently failed to exploit it to our advantage. Before independence we felt circumscribed in our thoughts and actions but wanted to grow and develop ourselves. Unable to do so within the framework of Pakistani rule a spirit of revolt grew against that rule. Yet this spirit was not directed against the decay that had been selling in. So, when the historic opportunity did arrive with the independent statehood our failures were colossal and blunders Himalayan.

Now almost for three decades we have been struggling to get over initial setback. Although there are few successes we have not at any point of time given up our efforts to catalyse change. We still have commitments for and projects to alle-

viate poverty, at least the pretensions for fair play and myriad measures against rising crimes. There is no open acceptance of defeat in the sectors where we bungled in the past and that in itself generates hope that we may one day succeed. But there is at least one monster, the corruption, to which we have totally capitulated. We lie prostrate before its overwhelming power.

The corruption does not anymore elicit any reaction. Even if one grumbles over its enormity there is no serious complaints. It is now an accepted norm of our society and does not taint one's reputation. No one asks a police inspector or a national airlines purser how he owns a chauffeur-driven car or possesses three houses in the city's posh locality. The politicians, social workers and even the intellectuals prefer to maintain calculated silence over a plethora of corruptions taking place in front of their eyes — let alone the question of their raising battle cry against its assault. It does not sensitise the conscience of the most sanctimonious of the savants of our moral standard. The picture is bleak and one of total resignation.

It is true that the corruption is an universal phenomenon. Man throughout the history succumbed to acquiring easy money and his avarice for material possession knew no bound. Despite its multiplicity of forms, most of them stem from the lust for money. The sensational news of blatant corruption often hit the news headlines. Even in the developed countries the people amidst affluence unabashedly resort to corruption. There are stories of giant multinationals securing market by heavily bribing the officials and politicians in poor third world countries. Even in our country the politicians and high officials

are believed to have lucrative share in state deals. The common men remain non-challant to such transactions, consider them to be the preserve of high-ups in high society and tend to be amused by those graft stories. Indeed, the life in the lower strata of the society remains untouched by its sleaze and is seldom concerned about what happens in a MIG-29 deal and who becomes its beneficiary.

No more so. The culture of graft in our country has now filtered down to each layer of the society and administration. What worries us today is its alarming spread affecting not only the high ups but all citi-

visitors to those offices to fleece them of their last penny. The premises of these offices are infested with such parasites who cleverly intercept the clients to extract extra fee or commissions before the latter have an access to the dealing officer for help or advice. Those are worlds by themselves in the maze of which the ordinary folks are lost and bewildered.

Have you ever visited a revenue office administered by a tiny Tehsildar? There is nothing possible in his office. He will draw your attention to the intricacies of your problem and innocently let you know of his inability to help. Again there is

come tax return for which the statement is a requirement, in time.

Your crusading attitude not to compromise with the bribe can put you in real trouble. You will be put through a never-ending process of formalities, of course with due courtesies, about the job you want to get done. At the end of the day, you will not find it worthwhile or cost effective to adopt that meandering path. You will be adequately punished for your puritan impulse in a world which is profane and intriguing at the same time. And your tormentor will be bemused at your impracticability. Because by then you would have spent much more in term of time, efforts and also money than what was originally demanded from you.

There was a time when the corrupt officials did have in them an element of hesitation which could have stemmed from their fear of being detected or their latent conscience. Even now some of them are shy enough not to openly demand their 'cha-a-paani'. They, instead, often ask you to send your 'man' next time. But their veil of that hesitation is now lifted. They now audaciously bargain for their 'dues'. The police, without a grain of shame in their eyes, want their hands to be greased by poor rickshaw-puller or pavement vendor in front of whole lot of crowd.

There is a price tag for every job in every office. The organisations packing in clout also devise contrivances and bottlenecks in the way of getting a work smoothly done to make their importance felt. Getting a computer print of the annual loan statement from the HBFC takes several arduous trips to its office. If they also paste a price tag to cut down those trips a poor pensioner, for example, will be obliged to comply. Because he has another set of worries to be able to submit his in-

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