

Auditing Culture

IT was no customary emotion-packed valedictory speech the outgoing Comptroller and Auditor General M Hafizuddin Khan made on his last day in the statutory office. He submitted 21 audit reports to the President getting nearest ever to the calendar year and in effect reflecting inefficiency and corruption in the government's expenditure pattern since 1987-88. Executives could not account for Tk 1601 crore and DESA failed to collect Tk 999 crore in arrears electricity bills. Closely on the heels of such dismal disclosures, Khan, on being interviewed by the BBC, made a pronouncement that confirmed most people's worst apprehension about the level of official corruption. "Bangladeshis are pretty close to be regarded as a corrupt nation", warned the outgoing CAGB. Earlier, an independent international commission on corruption had placed Bangladesh among the top ten corrupt countries of the world. The financial irregularities committed across the board mirrored violation of rules, wastage of government resources and outright defalcation and expropriation.

Auditing standards in Bangladesh have been generally weak but these are the weakest in the government sector. In the governmental behemoth it has been a case of post-auditing, meaning thereby that the CAGB's office scrutinises the expenditure incurred and not the expenditure proposed. So, it is the head of an office who has to primarily do the expenditure control job if the resources of the state are not to be drained out. Secretaries to the government being the chief accounting officers of the ministries under their charge have a clearly laid-out responsibility in seeing that the financial rules are strictly followed by all concerned. A CAGB's representative may be placed in every ministry but not surely at every directorate, corporation or an office. Even so, their strength needs to be increased given the volume of budgetary allocations.

Auditing has had a very low priority with successive governments. If it were not so, then the CAGB, as the holder of a constitutional post, would have been more effective as a state functionary. His warnings are hardly heeded, his recommendations are trifled with.

Without proper auditing there cannot be any transparency and accountability of the government. In a resource-poor country that has a crucial foreign aid component to its budgeting, auditing is sine qua non for good management. Let there be a push for a strong auditing culture in the country.

Hours without Oxygen

WHETHER the death of four patients at the intensive care unit of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) on Friday was caused by or coincided with the malfunction in the centralised oxygen supply system can be belaboured for hours, or even days, together. In fact, the debate is already on. While the relatives of the deceased see a correlation, the on-duty doctors refuse, and obviously so, to draw such a conclusion. However, what is beyond contention is that the six-hour disruption could have taken a heavier toll of human lives. Fortunately, it didn't, by virtue of either the hospital's back-up system or sheer luck.

Nevertheless, the temporary collapse of the oxygen supply network certainly calls for intense brain-storming by the high-ups at the DMCH as well as the BOC, which is responsible for supplying oxygen at the hospital. After all, under no circumstances, such a glitch should go unaddressed, especially when it involves an extremely sensitive system.

The DMCH, like other public healthcare establishments in the country, is reported, by leading news dailies, to have been plagued by multifarious problems related to mainly inadequate logistic support and mismanagement. This paper has also very recently revealed the poor conditions of its operation theatres, inadequate supply of medicine, so on and so forth. Now comes this to underline our apprehension that the hospital needs to be shored up sooner than later lest there should be a failure of even a greater magnitude. Admittedly, mishaps such as this actually cause irreparable damage to the credibility of any medicare institution.

Such knee-jerk reaction as forming a probe committee upon occurrence of failure of any degree, as we have seen over and over again, seldom brings any change for the better. More often than not, it has turned into an exercise in futility. It is about time the high-ups took a comprehensive view of the problems plaguing the country's healthcare system and devised a redressal accordingly.

Improve Seismic Observatory

BANGLADESH is now one of the most earthquake-prone areas of the world. The finding has been made public by a number of seismologists. Since we have not seen any big earthquake in recent years we have almost pushed back the necessity for a modern seismic observatory in the country. The one that we have in Chittagong is quite old and obsolete to an extent that the recent quake which took the lives of five children and injured around two hundred people at Maheshkhali was not even recorded in the machine. As a result neither the epicentre nor the intensity of the shock could be instantly known.

In the last few years we have had light tremors in some parts of the country, specially in the north and the south. It may not be possible to forecast earthquakes but in a modern observatory it is always possible to exactly locate the epicentre of the tremor and measure the intensity of the shock, information that can come handy for relief and rescue operations. Once this region has been mentioned in the expert group's report as being vulnerable to earthquake we may brace ourselves for harrowing times ahead.

In such a context how could the successive governments shelve the proposals for modernisation of the existing observatory and establishment of two new ones at Rangpur and Sylhet? How could the government be so naive as to totally ignore the importance of seismic observatories in a country that is widely suspected to be in a seismic zone and having quakes on and off. We urge the government to arrange funds immediately for the two projects mentioned above.

Where will this Kind of Politics Take the Country to?

When guns boom, they suppress the people's voice. Something like that happened after the Kargil incursions. There is no doubt that one day the high walls that fear and distrust have raised on the borders will crumble and the peoples of the subcontinent, without giving up their separate identities, will work together for the common good.

THAT the success at Kargil will be claimed by the BJP and its allies was not really in doubt. Nor is its adoption by them as the poll plank. There was a flicker of hope that they might refrain from doing so because of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's assurance not to politicise the triumph of the armed forces.

At one time it looked as if his word had prevailed in the BJP. Party chief Kushabhau Thackeray retracted his statement on using the Kargil conflict for the election purposes. Even hard-liner LK Advani lay low. But all that has turned out to be a part of tactics.

It seems that when Vajpayee gave the assurance and Thackeray changed his line to concur with the Prime Minister, they were not sure whether the intruders would be pushed out so quickly and so convincingly. The briefing that they had from the army also said that the operations could go right up to winter. Then their assessment was that they might not have a categorical win to project the *vijay* at the polls in September.

Since the pieces have fallen into the slots early enough, the BJP and its allies have shed their tactical hesitation and have come out in the open to exploit the Kargil conflict. But they are neither ethically nor otherwise justified to do so. The armed forces fought the war and won it. The entire country stood behind them and the government. Then why should the BJP exclude others and take the credit for the expulsion of the intruders?

This was my plea to President K R Narayanan when I met him in the midst of the conflict. My argument was that the country would eventually restore the line of Control (LoC). To stall the Vajpayee government from appropriating all the kudos, the President should constitute an advisory committee, drawing members from the main political parties, to supervise the affairs of war and peace. Vajpayee, in fact, told me that they were finalising the names of members to man the advisory committee. Apparently, the withdrawal by Pakistan hastened matters in such a way that everything else was forgotten. Hogging the glory by the BJP is robbing the nation of what is its due. The entire country deserves congratulations. That means all political parties, not just the BJP.

Still more disturbing is the effort by the BJP and its mentor, the RSS, to give the success at Kargil a saffron colouring. Religion is sought to be mixed with the state at different functions. The silence of Vajpayee is intriguing. He has emerged as a leader with sagacity. He should assert himself to stop the fanatic lot — the RSS and its *partivar* members, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal — from communalising the atmosphere which has remained harmonious and secular for the first time during the hostilities with Pakistan.

The *Sindhu Darshan Yatra*, an annual festival, held by the RSS on the banks of the River Sind in Leh, was converted this year into a victory parade. The presence of RSS activists and their associates on the dais was not a surprise but that of the top brass was. It was an RSS show. Why did the army participate in it? A cheque of Rs 25,000 to every family of soldiers killed is understandable but not the portraits of Hindu gods and a citation signed by the RSS chief Rajinder Singh to each recipient. Even Lt Gen VS Budhwar made a speech on the occasion.

Not long ago, Chief of Army Staff VP Malik strongly objected to my observation that he had briefed the BJP executive at Delhi. He was justified in expressing his resentment because it was not he but some senior army officers who had conducted the briefing. However, when he spoke to me on the phone to deny his presence at the BJP executive, he said he was not responsible for what his senior

officers did. Budhwar probably comes in that category. No doubt, Malik "is not responsible" for what Budhwar does or says. But the army chief can at least pull up senior officers for not making a distinction between a function held by the state and the one organised by a political party.

Of course, one has no complaint against Defence Minister George Fernandes because his commitment is not to principles but to the power politics he has played for years. That he was present at the *Yatra*, along with Advani, who took the party in his official plane, does not come as a surprise. Fernandes had to ensure the presence of the army officials at the function. The RSS is highly pleased with him. And so is Advani.

Where will this kind of politics take the country to? It is ironic that the progressives find nothing to like once they move from left to right. Persons like Sharan Yadav, Ram Villas Paswan and the outgoing Karnataka Chief Minister H M Patel, who have socialist background, should go the Fernandes way and sup with the BJP underlines a point: once the progressives cut themselves loose from the ideology, they find harmony only in conservatism. It means that their faith in pluralism is skin deep. In contrast, the BJP has seen from its experience that by even deferring its *Hindutva* programme, it has been able to form the government at the Centre and carry conviction with a large section of the intelligentsia. Of course, Vajpayee's leadership is the key to its success.

It is sad to find the BJP government at Gujarat still going soft against the BHP and Bajrang Dal. State Minister for Home Affairs Haren Pandey has admitted that the activists of both organisation were involved in the recent violent incidents against the minorities in Ahmedabad. And how can Vajpayee reconcile himself to the BJP-Sena alliance in Maharashtra when Shiv Sena supreme Bal Thackeray says that he will not give up the *Hindutva* plank?

The Congress is not helping the situation either. By parading some Muslim Ulema or others at poll functions, it is making a mockery of secularism. Once again the party is at its old game of playing with the sentiments of Muslims. What the BJP is trying to do through its thesis of *Hindutva*, the Congress is doing by conveying that Muslims are its preserve. The principle is the same: invoking religion for electoral purposes. Somewhere the two parties should focus attention on the Kargil fallout: how the Hindus and the Muslims have spanned the distance between them.

The unhappy fallout from Kargil is the cancellation of the vigil at the India-Pakistan border on the 14-15th August midnight. Some of us, members of the *Hind-Pakistan Dosti Manch*, have been celebrating for the last four years the Independence Day of both countries by lighting candles at the Wagah border. This time we have felt that when the armed forces of both countries are standing eyeball to eyeball and when dead bodies of soldiers have drowned homes and hamlets in sorrow, the lighting of candles will be out of place and out of tune.

When guns boom, they suppress the people's voice. Something like that happened after the Kargil incursions. There is no doubt that one day the high walls that fear and distrust have raised on the borders will crumble and the peoples of the subcontinent, without giving up their separate identities, will work together for the common good. To bring those times closer, people on both sides will have to work hard to oust bigotry and terrorism. They will have to bring about conciliation and normalcy to solve their differences. Only then will they be able to silence the guns.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

To the Editor...

Tower in power

Sir, PM Sheikh Hasina seeks another term to institutionalise democracy (the DS 11.7.99). Power makes one a power-seeker and power retains. So our present PM's desire to seek another term is nothing unusual.

Leaving power and making room for other is actually the institutionalisation of democracy. Retaining power term after term creates autocracy. I have not seen Nelson Mandela, the legendary leader leaving power with name, fame and love only after one term as the president of South Africa?

Once our PM says, she will retire from politics by 2004 and again she intends another term in power.

Weaving fiction, is it? Nur Hossain 151, Bangshal Road, Dhaka-1100

Eastern Dam

Sir, The PM declared during the last year's devastating flood that she would do everything possible to start the work of the Eastern Dam-cum-Bypass by November last year. But it is really disheartening to see that she could not keep her commitment at all. Flood, water-logging and traffic jam — these are the sources of innumerable sufferings of millions of people in and around the city. Nothing could be done to alleviate the distressing condition of the people for the last few years. Delivering lofty speeches and giving valuable messages in the one hand and calling hartals and demonstrations on the other — these are not democracy.

Improve Seismic Observatory

BANGLADESH is now one of the most earthquake-prone areas of the world. The finding has been made public by a number of seismologists. Since we have not seen any big earthquake in recent years we have almost pushed back the necessity for a modern seismic observatory in the country. The one that we have in Chittagong is quite old and obsolete to an extent that the recent quake which took the lives of five children and injured around two hundred people at Maheshkhali was not even recorded in the machine. As a result neither the epicentre nor the intensity of the shock could be instantly known.

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Both the party in power and, the opposition appear to be utterly indifferent to these urgent and basic issues. They are voted to power and they should at least try to do what they have promised to do. A Samad Patwari 89, Uttar Badda, Dhaka

Black hole DCC!

Sir, It is common sight to find manholes without covers or damaged covers all over the city. The drains below are choked, and the manholes are open. The damaged ones crack or give way at the edges, which means, it cannot withstand the pressure of vehicles passing over it.

This is not a new or mysterious problem. Why this manhole-cover problem cannot be licked? (It won't taste nice!). It is reasonable to suspect that the construction of the covers is sub-standard, both in design and in the materials used, and in the materials used, and did not improve the design after detection?

There is no high or new technology involved here. Therefore the obvious implication is that of graft and corrupted practices involved in the tendering, inspection and acceptance of the goods, and subsequent payment. If there are any guarantee or warranty clauses, these may be brought to public attention, to avoid criticism of the sincere efforts of the mighty DCC.

Open manhole covers in public roads endanger life. Legal experts may opine if such negligence of duty and responsibility could be construed as manslaughter charge. The theft

A bandage without antiseptics

Sir, Throughout the history of civilization sex-workers existed. Sex-workers, all around the world, are never socially accepted — not even in the most developed countries. So in a backward country like ours, with all the backward mentalities, we may try to rehabilitate the sex-workers, but can we forget their background history and accept them as normal human beings? I am sure the answer is no.

Most of those people who are the customers of these sex workers are able to provide any of these girls with decent jobs, but why haven't they done that so far? Because the society is still not ready to accept a previous sex worker as a decent jobholder. The government is trying to take all of them in rehabilitation centres. They probably will be trained to do some manual works. But this will take so much time — as anything in Bangladesh takes time — but what about their families that depend upon the income of these sex workers? Who will feed them until the sex workers find decent jobs? I think the government's decision to evict the sex workers from the brothels is whimsical. I have few questions to ask to the government.

Omar Sharif Turza MSS (Final Year), Department of Sociology University of Dhaka

IMF Prescription Time Again

What is needed is to lessen the taxes but to enlarge the tax-base from 1.2 million to 4.5 million. Bringing those who can pay taxes into the tax net is the only redemption that can sustain our existence as a nation. And maybe keep IMF away from making our entire middle class a poverty-stricken disaster zone.

IF the diplomatic and media backlash from Kargil was not enough, IMF tightened the economic squeeze on Pakistan. Insisting on GST of various percentage on electricity, water and gas, IMF delayed the release of the fund expected by Pakistan in July. The latest date for expecting IMF funds is September. The Finance Minister Mr. Ishaq Dar is quite confident about receiving the IMF funds and the market seemed to agree with him, various financial experts remained pessimistic. Even without IMF adding to the proverbial pound of flesh, we are in serious economic straits. The Finance Minister, an incurable optimist, kept a brave face as he sought to minimise the effect on the common man but he might as well be speaking into the wind, which as everyone knows, can howl but cannot reach. More financial misery is in store for the man in the street. Pakistan is a strange place, all the economic indicators point to severe recession, yet the consumer market is booming, at least the shelves are full and people seem to have enough money to buy goods and produce. That is because fully two-thirds of our economy remains undocumented and outside the regulation of banks and other financial institutions. However, the lower middle class has vanished into poverty.

The Pakistani Rupee has steadied against the US dollar, mainly because of intervention by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), which offloaded US dollar to shore up the falling rupee and lessened the gap between the official and the market rate. The nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) have been busy sopping up funds because of the "Cronepati"-type schemes but stick-in-the-mud SBP has succumbed to Islamic pressure to put a stop to the lotteries that added billions to the banks' coffers. The banks' success in attracting semi-hot funds is by itself a failure — the very epitome of financial credibility having to fall back on criss-cross type lotteries to fill the banks' coffers. While Ishaq Dar strives manfully to plug the various loopholes, his major problem remains revenue collection and for that no finance minister in Pakistan over the past 52 years has had an answer in the face of political expediency and blatant corruption among the tax collectors.

Even military dictators have used discretion to preserve their seats of power. There is something drastically wrong in a country of 130 million which has less than 1.2 million taxpayers i.e. less than 1 per cent of the population. It is impossible for so few to bear the burden of so many for long and it is hardly a surprise that our foreign debts have risen by leaps and bounds since 1988. To add insult to the injury, any mention of taxes not being paid by those liable can evoke a concerted hue and cry from them.

Till today the decision to impose GST on shopkeepers has never been even partially implemented, they form the core constituency of Mian Nawaz Sharif's political support. Yet not so long ago, these very men had willingly lined up behind Ms Benazir Bhutto's spouse-in-power Asif Zardari, eulogising him as the Second Coming of a financial Christ. In the meantime, the bill for our national security just went up post-Kargil and in the absence of ready foreign exchange as well as a dearth of suppliers, our efforts to meet our material needs has to be multiplied both in terms of effort and funds. Even though the US is tugging towards India and our traditional source of military supplies has virtually dried up, there is always a buyers' market in this unipolar world, provided the funds are available. The freeze on the overhauled French-origin Mirages and the new generation submarines must have been bitter to swallow, particularly when the equivalent, albeit less sophisticated, was available from the Chinese at many times less in cost. Despite the perceived Chinese neutrality in

the present crisis, many people have failed to note that the Super-7 aircraft deal was signed during the PM's visit and that should be an oblique signal if any about China's continued support to Pakistan. As it is, China realises that to contain China, other than Taiwan, the US would like to build up Japan and India.

Already Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF) are venturing on international missions and India-appeasement has become a stated western policy, the vast consumer market India has to offer duly adds to the lustre. Pakistan has to be self-reliant if it wants to survive as an independent entity. We are not only geo-politically but geo-economically at an important crossroads, unfortunately we have remained export-oriented only and have never regularised the Services sector enough for the government to take financial advantage of this natural factor. We have been blessed with natural resources but are burning them away at an accelerated pace. Our road infra-structure is improving, thanks to the Sher Shah-ness of the PM but our rail communication is far worse than the British network in the 19th century. PIA has taken a dynamic initiative in increasing domestic traffic, striving to make the public more air-minded. To an extent they seem to be succeeding, at what cost one shudders to hear. One supposes that better a

calculated risk than losing out by not doing anything to break the status-quo. While PIA has a number of imperponderables like over-staffing in almost all categories, there is a definite move to improve working and it has started to show, though still in patches.

While food autarky is hardly possible when we are feeding Afghanistan, some of the States of Central Asia, parts of India and Iran, many times our own population. We can maximise the yield by better farm practices and increasing the area under cultivation but what support do we give to the farmer? If we had given even 10 per cent of the loans we have given to industry over the years our produce would have doubled, even trebled by the turn of the century.

However, we continued to give loans to industrialists, who continued to milk their industries and make them sick, particularly in the textile sector. Paradoxically, the men who have made maximum of their industries sick are the richest in the country, having salted away their money mostly abroad. Unless we take some steps to stop this money drain, we will continue to face economic apocalypse. Is there hope of ever bringing this money back? And who will redeem that desire? The Government of Pakistan has no choice but to enhance revenue collection immediately. Some of it can be accomplished by decentralising part of tax administration to the Provinces but a major portion of the revenues must come from sophisticated tax collection methods that should penalise offenders to the maximum.

This is a national security issue. Kargil has shown that we cannot afford to let our defensive guard down but that keeping guard-up costs money. So does propaganda and we could only watch while India kept throwing money at defence and the media to turn defeat at the hands of a handful into a "victory", at least on paper. The Armed Forces need infusion of funds as does development work throughout the country. By adding to taxes on the already burdened ones will only break the tax-payers' back. What is needed is to lessen the taxes but to enlarge the tax-base from 1.2 million to 4.5 million. Bringing those who can pay taxes into the tax net is the only redemption that can sustain our existence as a nation. And maybe keep IMF away from making our entire middle class a poverty-stricken disaster zone.

OPINION

Service-oriented Governance

Abul M Ahmad

Although the government claims to be service-oriented towards the people, there are practical gaps at the lower end of the spectrum; as there is hardly any energy left after providing exclusive and privileged services to the top tiers of the society. Still the mega-offenders remain untouched. Our religion does not believe in in-achability, but of course it is not a religious issue. It has been raised here to serve as a pointer: be religious in the performance of official and public duties.

The regulators are silent about net control, especially in the big cities. In Calcutta, West Bengal, for example, the 30-year old House Control Regs are being updated, to plug the modern loop-holes. Here, the government department concerned do not tell the tenants what they are doing. Where is transparency?

The landlords do not provide official receipt in official format. The government is silent on the issue. The landlords raise the rent every second year on one plea of another. No reaction from the monitoring agencies. Why hide the inspection teams?

The doctors' fees chart is not being officially publicised for public information. The rate charges for the Professors, MBBA and the Diploma holders are separate in both the areas: consultation at the clinic, and home visits. But what are these rates, and how to check over-charging? On the road behind the Geneva Camp in Moham-madpur, I saw a signboard at a private medical clinic stating the doctor's consultation fee only Tk 25. What are the rates for quacks? The answer is zero, because the number of quacks should also be zero.

The retail prices of consumer goods are raised in the name of additional or new VAT and Supplementary duties, but these are not mentioned on the wrapper of the packing. Perishable packed food products do not print the expiry date or the contact address. The Health Services are Supplementary or Complementary?

The inspectors are invisible to the public. Why they are not issued uniforms, a standard international practice. There are regulations, but it is not enforced.

Update the rules from time to time.

A Husain Dhaka