

## Phensidyl Haul

A clandestine wholesale centre for phensidyl trade, hitherto operated from underground tunnels by an organised gang, has been uncovered near the city-centre at Gopibagh. No less than 17,000 bottles of the addictive cough syrup, banned quite sometime ago because of the endemic manner in which our youngsters were getting hooked to it, were recovered on Saturday from well-bunkered cells right under the nose of the Railway Nirapatta Bahini. The demolition of the slum situated on the railway police barrack premises doubtlessly removed the first veil of secrecy around the place; but the more important thing to bear in mind by way of a clincher is the crucial tip-off which the Motijheel police got and acted so effectively on. But for that piece of fingerprinting information the den would have remained unexposed. Going by The Daily Star report on the subject, the police dog squads and the narcotics department officials had in fact raided the place several times during the last six months, but they consistently drew a blank. So, while we give a big hand to the police for hauling up such a large stock-pile of phensidyl and shedding light on the likely operational methods of the drug dealers we are obliged nonetheless to tell them this: please note that the weakness of your normal surveillance has been exposed by the fact that you only succeeded on a tip-off.

The discovery of the drugs hide-out within the railway compound, that too near the Railway Nirapatta Bahini barracks, smacks of a possible nexus between a section of the RNB and the phensidyl gangsters and dealers. Some other railway personnel (non-GRP people) might have been involved in the clandestine business, because the wider suspicion is that the phensidyl bottles "were smuggled through Akhaura-Cosba area and brought here by train." Then, presumably, these would have been sent to other parts of the country by train as always. It will be worthwhile to examine how phensidyl syrup which used to be a cough reliever at one time has become such a lethal brew now.

All of this calls for follow-up investigations because it is our belief that what has been revealed just now is but the tip of an iceberg.

## Trouble at Dighinala

It appears from the chain events since the signing of the peace accord between the government and PCJSS in 1997 that trouble-mongers are out to disturb peace in an otherwise peaceful area — the latest incident being the tense situation created at Dighinala in Khagrachhari district.

It is the minority of anti-accord elements who are up to fomenting trouble in the CHT. The latest trouble erupted when, according to press reports, three intelligence people along with eight others were beaten up on Friday following eviction of a dozen repatriated tribal families from a primary school they were using as a temporary transit camp. The eviction triggered a series of backlash including the torching of a farmhouse belonging to the Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Minister Kalparanj Chakma. This angering the non-tribals they went on a rampage.

The fallout from such skirmishes among the tribals and between tribals and non-tribals can have far reaching effects. Why were the repatriated families housed in the school for such a long time? When the Regional Council and its head Shantu Larma and the minister for CHT affairs are firmly saddled, these problems should not have arisen at all. A long rope is being given to the trouble mongers by some interested quarters. Situation in the Dighinala area is volatile and the local administration must be careful in dealing with it so that it does not escalate.

The CHT peace accord cannot be left to the whims and caprices of any quarters. There must be an all-out effort to implement it.

## Lessons from Izmit

WITH 76,000-plus buildings damaged in the Izmit quake, rescue operators, in their round-the-clock excavations, have experienced miracles as far as some survival stories went. To cite a few instances, a 95-year-old lady who spent 100 hours under the debris has been found alive, so also an 11-year-old girl who remained under a seven-storey building for 98 hours and a 15-day-old baby girl who was dug out after eight hours of intensive work. This human endurance lends poignancy to the tragedy, because rescuers had estimated that those trapped under the rubble could at best survive about 72 hours without water.

Century's worst earthquake in Turkey on Tuesday last has raised a global concern for safety against severe earthquake. As the human scale of the tragedy unfolds and before we are struck by another such disaster we should have a better preparedness level to meet such a challenge.

Since Turkish nightmare is partly the result of faulty building constructions, a specialised body should be formed under the auspices of the United Nations to plan, suggest and monitor the "concretisation" activities in all its quake-prone member-countries. It's worthwhile to note that Bangladesh is also one of the high-risk countries. The recent earthquake centred "underneath" Maheshkhali bore testimony to the fact. We urge our government to conduct a review of building designs.

# The Air Laden with Bin Laden's Ire

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wealthy Muslims including his family and supporters in Saudi Arabia.

It is evident that another US-bin Laden confrontation is looming. According to US diplomatic sources, the surveillance of bin-Laden's worldwide alliance of Islamic terrorist groups, Al-Qaeda or The Base, picked up signals that he is busy planning new attacks. Earlier, George Tenet, the CIA Director, warned that Osama bin Laden and his allies and sympathisers all over the world were planning further attacks against the US. As a result, the US put its embassies on alert in early July. There are rumours that on the US part it also will attempt preemptive attacks. US commando group is learnt to have arrived in Pakistani city of Peshawar. With the US aircraft carriers in support from the Persian Gulf it is preparing to storm the bin Laden's camp and grab him.

Notwithstanding these efforts the US State Department, throughout the year, preferred to keep up a dialogue with the Taliban in its fond hope of eventually extraditing bin Laden whose exact whereabouts was known only to a few Taliban leaders. But a flurry of diplomacy as well as record \$5 million reward has so far failed to get his clue — let alone the question of a possible extradition. The information emanating from Taliban sources have been inadequate and at times confusing. So, at long last an exasperated US administration has chosen to freeze Taliban finances and property assets in the US and banned the US trade with the Taliban militia to bring it to its heels. Last month,

the US slapped sweeping sanctions on Afghanistan and took steps just short of declaring Taliban a terrorist movement. There are however few signs that the Taliban would yield to the pressure and abandon their valuable 'guest'.

While bin Laden might have held up in a remote hideout in Hindukush mountains and have been nourishing his zeal for a global Islamic revolution he is however not one of those traditional clerics unaware of the ignorance of his pursuing a religious fantasy and not the spirit. On the other hand he is

hundreds of thousands of youngmen disaffected equally by arrogant and unjust nations of the west and their own weak corrupt rulers he is the hero to whom they would turn for deliverance. They want to restore their honour, pride and interests. They know that it is the American backing that keeps in power the 'anti Islamic regimes' which is turn safeguard western interests across the Islamic world. By turning against those Americans whom he found desecrating his own land with two of the holiest places of Islam during the Gulf war he was ban-

shelter after he was on the run in Arab countries including Saudi Arabia for years. In 1996 he was for the first time introduced to Taliban by now came to control major parts of the country. This time bin Laden, however, pulled his fellow Arab volunteers together to form a force with much larger agenda to support fundamentalist Islamic uprisings across the region.

But before bin Laden's return to Afghanistan in 1995 the battle line was already drawn. In spite of his opposition to Saudi Arabia's alliance with the US-led coalition during the Gulf war bin Laden had not so long challenged the United States. Even when Saudi Arabia revoked his citizenship in 1994 under American pressure, bin Laden's focus how still been on reform and renewal in Islamic world. But in a Declaration of Jihad in August 1996 bin Laden finally threw in his gauntlet. After convening a meeting with various terrorist groups in the Arab world, bin Laden called for attacks on American interests anywhere in the world. Only after months the African embassies were bombed.

The Americans squarely blamed bin Laden to have masterminded the massacre — a glowing compliments to bin Laden's ability. The compliments were copiously bestowed on him when the US pointed its accusing fingers to bin Laden also for all other recent atrocities against American interests. It thought that bin Laden who had a hand in World Trade Centre bombing in 1993 could have influenced the killing of 18 American soldiers in Mogadishu in 1995 and his men had certainly

planted the bomb in Riyadh that killed five US servicemen in 1996. The same year another 18 soldiers were killed when their barracks in Dhahran were bombed, presumably by one of the same terrorist groups. It was only helped improve bin Laden's image before his followers who could not but be impressed with the international reach of their revered supremo.

The Americans have more reasons to worry over bin Laden who is not just another Islamic militant challenging the US might. This is bin Laden, a member of a family with extraordinarily close links to Saudi royalty. When 1998 indictment brought in blanket accusation against bin Laden for all anti-US terrorism including two bombing incidents in Saudi Arabia in 1996, Prince Nayef, the Saudi Interior Minister protested saying that bin Laden could not be responsible for those bombings. There are those who say that some influential members of the royal family — men who would like the kingdom to return to purer Islamic ways — also recognise that bin Laden is an authentic hero to many young Saudis and can imagine a day in which he would return home — duly crowned with the success of his mission. In any case bin Laden does have powerful friends in the palace who would not like him to be tormented by any quarter.

With all of their wraths against bin Laden — the man of whom they think is at the root of all evils — the Americans have miserably failed to turn him into the Don Corleone of terror. The more they tried, the more became bin Laden a man of myth given to the resistance of oppression and justice to his community. He could not be demonised, instead his appeal has grown irresistible.



## PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

very much a worldly man, the scion of one of the wealthiest families of Saudi Arabia and was afforded a high class upbringing. Before becoming a wanted man he had been in his profession as a talented civil engineer, an agronomist and a credible staff on his father's construction firm enjoying royal patronisation. Yet his real strength lay in his piety, unquestionable honesty and the courage of conviction. That is where are the sources of the US worries. The phenomenon the US and her allies are dealing with is indeed extraordinary, already a legend and an icon of resistance against western hegemony.

In the teeming cities of the Islamic world and among the

ished from his homeland but became a messiah, a popular hero for the Muslims across the world.

Although bin Laden is often blamed for his support of Taliban extremism, the Americans know exactly that his mission is global and not for just putting the Taliban in power. In early eighties soon after the Soviet invasion he came to Afghanistan in search of a cause. For a while he found the cause and bravely defended it. With the Arab-Afghans who accompanied him to Afghanistan he fought like "crazy brave" according to Israeli intelligence which had already spotted bin Laden's skill by the mid-1980s. Second time when he came to Afghanistan it was purely for

## Indian Election Scene

# What Prospect Does Sonia Gandhi Hold?

By Zaglul A Chowdhury

For Sonia Gandhi, the traditional "Amethi" cannot be a favourable area since the Congress lost there in the last election despite hectic electioneering by Sonia for party candidate Satish Sharma.

for Sonia is not assured. And as such, she would look for a "safe seat" where the party has strong following. But which is the constituency that will guarantee a victory for the Congress chief, who is contesting an election for parliament for the first time?

Many thought it would be south or Orissa where some seats are "sure" for Congress and former prime minister P V Narasimha Rao had gone for one of these seats in Orissa when his election from own state Andhra Pradesh had appeared uncertain. Mr Rao had not been a popular figure in his own state where the party, however, had always been well-trenched either as the number one or main opposition party. Contrary to widely held expectations that Sonia may opt for a seat from Andhra Pradesh, she

finally filed nomination from "Bellary" in Karnataka amidst suspense and dramatic circumstances. The Congress leadership wanted to keep this "safe constituency" for Sonia a closely guarded secret and only after the filing of the nominations it known that she is seeking election from there.

Just to divert attention and confuse the scene, Sonia flew to Andhra Pradesh from New Delhi a day before filing the nominations to give the impression that she would be a candidate from there. But she spent the night there and reached adjacent Karnataka to file the nomination raising eyebrows in many quarters. The seat that she will contest has always been held by the Congress and largely seen as a "safe" one.

Interestingly, Congress's

principal political foe — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — kept a close watch on the developments and Congress failed to take it by surprise as BJP leadership had already secretly despatched one of its women stalwarts Mrs. Sushma Swaraj to "Bellary" to submit her own nomination papers should Mrs. Gandhi become a candidate from there. Moments after Sonia filed the nomination, Mrs. Swaraj emerged there and filed her nominations which took the Congress "off-guard". It is not that BJP will win the seat but certainly the candidature of Sushma will carry more weight for the party than of anybody else since she is a top ranking leader of the party with fairly good record in addition to being a woman. She was the information minister in Vajpayee government and later chief minister

of Delhi not long ago. The "Bellary" constituency has suddenly become cynosure of all eyes and a good contest seems on the card despite the fact that the seat has been a stronghold for the Congress and Sonia is relatively better placed. Much of the interest of the election scenario in India will now concentrate on this constituency.

Certain "constituencies" in parliamentary democracy become well-known because leaders and stalwarts are associated with them. In India, such seats are "Phulpur" for Jawaharlal Nehru, "Rai Bareilly" for Indira Gandhi, "Amethi" for her sons Sanjay and Rajiv — all in the Uttar Pradesh. Earlier were "Satara" in Maharashtra for Y B Chavan, "Sasaram" in Bihar for Jagjivan Ram, "Maldah" in West Bengal for Ghanu Khan Chowdhury and "Jalandhar" in

Punjab for I K Gujral. Similarly, in our own country too, present-day leaders prime minister Sheikh Hasina from "Gopalganj", leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia from "Feni", Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury from "Chandpur", Abdus Samad Azad from "Sunamganj", Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury from Sylhet, Saifur Rahman from Maulavibazar, Prof. Muzafer Ahmad of NAP from "Devidwar" of Comilla etc. seem so favourite. Some seek election from more than one seat.

Anyway, for Sonia Gandhi, the traditional "Amethi" cannot be a favourable area since the Congress lost there in the last election despite hectic electioneering by Sonia for party candidate Satish Sharma. The Congress also lost in the seats of Nehru and Indira Gandhi as the party drew a total blank in the UP by failing to win a single of the 85 Lok Sabha seats which sounded unbelievable. Such an erosion in the largest state of India by the traditional party has been a sad experience for Congress. Although it is making a desperate attempt to regain the lost glory here, it may succeed only marginally.

## OPINION

# Three Thousand Telephones and One Simple Question

by Abu Saeed Khan

INTERNATIONAL Telecommunications Union (ITU) is the oldest UN organ responsible for global telecom operations. Since 1865 it has been acting as an international facilitator of telecom services among the 187 member countries. Headquarters in Geneva, the ITU also sets technical parameters for the telecom technologies. In its 1982 Nairobi Plenipotentiary Conference, the ITU, through Resolution 20, created an independent Commission for worldwide telecommunications development. The Commission chaired by Sir Donald Maitland submitted a report "The Missing Link" in December 1984.

This report identified huge telecom gap between the industrialized and developing countries in order to bridge that gap, a concept of development telecom called WorldTel was conceived by ITU. WorldTel was proposed as an independent telecom development company in January 1995, and was unanimously endorsed by the ITU Council in June 1995 under Resolution 1081. Incorporated in London, WorldTel was launched in July 1996 with a branch office in Geneva. Later it formed a company in Bermuda named WorldTel Holding Limited. Core investors in WorldTel include GE Capital, American International Group (AIG), International Investment Group (IIG), NatWest Markets and others. World Bank declared that it would promote WorldTel in the developing world.

Satyen (Sam) Pitroda is the CEO of WorldTel. He is a physics graduate from India and mi-

grated to the US in 1964. Sam worked for the GTE Corporation in Chicago where he developed and patented more than 50 products including Novel switching systems. Later he formed a company named Wescom Switching with two colleagues. He sold Wescom to Rockwell International in 1980 and secured personal fortune. Sam came home as a telecom adviser to the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. India is indebted to this charismatic professional for its recent telecom development. Finally Sam joined in WorldTel as its CEO.

As a commercial arm of ITU, WorldTel enjoys a unique and strategic privilege — unlimited access to the bureaucracy of client countries. Alan Cane of the Financial Times reported on March 19, 1997, "It (WorldTel) is already in discussion with senior officials in some 10 different countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe." Ignoring the angelic verses of ITU Resolution 1081, Alan reported, "The idea (of WorldTel) is to identify profitable projects costing anything from \$100 million to \$1 billion in each country before bringing together telecoms companies, governments and private investors to carry them out. WorldTel's investors will provide the funds and the revenues will be shared between the participants."

Most of the countries targeted by WorldTel have one common ailment — bad governance. Using that weakness as

its strength, WorldTel dropped an unsolicited bid for 300,000 telephones immediately after Awami League formed government. But the new leadership straightaway rejected that impractical proposal of US\$700 million. A World Bank officer from its Country Department 1 of Energy and Project Finance Division was instrumental behind this failed attempt of WorldTel. Here begins the drama of 300,000-line telephone project.

Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTBB) charges the world's premium connection fee (US\$375) for a telephone. That caused concentrating most telephones among the high-income zone. Nearly ten million people live in metropolitan Dhaka, which is 8 per cent of the national gross. Some 23,000 telephones are operating in this area which is 46 per cent of BTBB's national total (500,000 lines). Remaining 54 per cent (269,000 lines) telephones are shared by most of the towns and rest of the country is almost unconnected. That is "the missing link" of ITU's Maitland Commission and perhaps WorldTel was specifically created to provide them the dial tone. But, preaching and practising seldom goes together, especially if it is a prospect of multi-million-dollar business.

World Bank persuaded Bangladesh government for installing 300,000 telephones in its capital on Build, Operate and Own (BOO) basis. An operator would build and own the network and do business as the mobile operators are doing. Rather this BOO project in metropolitan Dhaka is much easier than the nation-wide cellular ventures. World Bank, for some reason, preferred reinventing the wheel. They appointed McCarthy Tetrault, a Toronto (Canada) law firm to prepare the bid document, licensing and operating agreements, as if there is no qualified lawyer in Bangladesh to deliver this US\$800,000 assignment.

However, in November 4, 1998, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) invited bids to select an operator for 300,000 telephones in Dhaka. Altogether 54 bid documents were sold at US\$500 each. The operator should install minimum 100,000 lines by the first year and the remaining

200,000 to be connected by the second year of its operation. MPT may allow the operator to roll out 200,000 more telephones subject to the performance of 300,000 telephones.

Term of this licence is 25 years with 5 years exclusivity commencing from the date of issuing the licence. Operating licence fee is Tk.500,000 for the first year and then Taka one million for each subsequent four years. MPT reserves the right to increase or decrease this annual operating fees from the sixth year. Besides, the operator is to pay for the radio frequencies and all other levies, taxes duties etc.

In the bid, MPT stipulated a revenue sharing formula with incumbent operator BTBB. The new operator and BTBB shall retain respective local call charges. But the operator has to pay 60 per cent revenue to BTBB for outgoing NWD and ISD calls. The operator also has to pay 70 per cent revenue to BTBB for incoming ISD calls. The operator gets nothing for the incoming NWD calls as BTBB keeps it all. The operator is required to pay all necessary fees to BTBB for interconnecting with its network.

Mandated usage of BTBB's infrastructure for NWD/ISD calls besides paying them the larger chunk of earned revenue, immediately diminished competition from two mobile operators. Telenor (Norway) of GramenPhone and Telecom Malaysia of TMIB are the successful national operators in respective countries. Their experience in basic telephony coupled with understanding the Bangladesh market is a strategic threat for WorldTel. Because, GramenPhone acquired the nation-wide optical fiber network from Railway. Financial structure of their bid would be inherently decisive. If TMIB wins the contract, they would be either leasing GramenPhone's fiber or rolling out own microwave backbone for GSM application and using the same for 300,000 telephones.

Financial aspects of selection criterion knocked out rest of the bidders. In excess of sacrificing the most lucrative long distance revenues, the BOO operator has to share its gross revenue with MPT. Twenty per cent score to win the bid depends on this issue. The operator also has to pay an up-front licence fee to MPT and it car-

ries 80 per cent score. Sum of these two is the primary determinant of successful bidder.

All these stipulations seemed not enough to secure the position of WorldTel. On January 7, 1999 — MPT amended this criterion and demanded unconditional equity participation in the BOO venture! Qualifying scores were revised as license acquisition fee 30 per cent, sharing gross revenue 40 per cent and equity share 30 per cent. MPT's lust for free lunch was the death knell to competition.

World Bank conducted a study "Bangladesh: Competition and Regulation in Telecommunications" in 1996. Article 3.6 of the study says, "New operators should be licensed to utilise digital wireless technologies for the rapid expansion of basic services. International investors/operators have demonstrated interest in the cellular licenses; therefore, GOB should pursue this option expeditiously." Whereas in this BOO bidding, the government drifted from regulatory role and demanded equity from the bidder. World Bank has been sponsoring this BOO bidding, which is absolutely reversal of its own recommendations.

Thirtynine out of 54 bidders showed up in the pre-bid conference on February 18, 1999. They were all vocal against the extortion in the name of equity participation. But the MPT officials were stone faced. The bidders were also critical about the absence of World Bank representative in that event.

I sent an e-mail on February 22, 1999 to James Bond, Division Chief of Telecom and Informatics in World Bank. I inquired if such equity participation of the government in a BOO project is rational. Bond forwarded my message to Ratin Singh, the officer responsible for Bangladesh. Ratin was involved in the Bangladesh telecom study in 1996 and has been the World Bank interface on this 300,000 line BOO project.

Ratin Singh replied "The Bank had assisted MPT in some aspects of the BOO project. Your queries on the evaluation criteria and other matters should be addressed by the Secretary, Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications." I inquired him that it is useless talking to MPT as they already failed to provide any answer. He asked, "Does the official

guideline of World Bank allow financing such a project, where the government is playing contradictory and controversial role?" Ratin again advised me to contact the MPT officials for this clarification. My sense of sanity discouraged further communications with World Bank.

Then I contacted Dr. K.V.K. Prasad in Hyderabad, India, a notable telecom analyst. He said, "I am not aware of any equity sharing by government in BOO kind of operation. The government wants to eat the cake and have it too." More interestingly Dr. Prasad said, "Since many of these projects involve huge investments, financial institutions provide the loans and also share the equity, and these institutions may in turn be related to the government services."

Pye Roger is the Consulting Partner in KPMG's Information, Communication and Entertainment Practice in London. He said, "...there does seem to be a risk that the government is trying to take too much value out of the BOO project. BOO and similar deals (BTO etc.) are generally used as a means of bringing foreign private sector finance (and expertise) into the provision of a country's telecommunications services, without giving any equity in the national telecommunication system."

Only three out of 54 bidders participated in this BOO mockery. Besides WorldTel, one is a Pakistan-Bangladesh JV and the other from China. There had been no competition, let alone any transparency. It has been reported that only the financial bid of WorldTel was accepted for evaluation.

It is a disgrace for an achiever like Sam Pitroda. Talking to Khaleez Times in 1996 he said, "The traditional thinking in the telecoms world is that you skim business from the big cities with high net-worth individuals. There is nothing wrong with this. But they do not realise that there is money to be made outside urban areas as well. We have done it in India. You make more money out of rural areas than in some urban areas."

What Sam did in India, why does not he do that in Bangladesh? Is it chauvinism or he is being dwarfed by the financial giants in WorldTel? Only Mr. Satyen (Sam) Pitroda can answer that.

The writer is a freelance telecoms writer.