

Keep Ctg Port Operational

THE dock workers of Chittagong Port resumed work after last minute negotiations with the port authorities. However, this cannot distract us from taking a close look at what has been going on in the premier port of the country. Hardly was there a substantial stretch of time in the last few months when activities at the Chittagong Port went without any interruption. If it was not political unrest, then it was labour commotion. The latest in the apparently endless sequence of trouble at the port, that occurred when dock workers refused to offload a cargo ship, was a classic example of trade unionism gone awry. First, they demanded recruitment of more hands than required to offload a ship and then, upon the Bangladesh Master Stevedores Association's refusal, went for a strike on that pretext. The resultant chaos and disorder brought the port to a standstill, harming the economy ever more. That was not to be the end, however.

The trouble this time around has been unnecessarily engineered by the workers. More troublingly, their action right from the start has been overtly exploitative. The way they tried to make an issue out of the natural death of an old worker was criminal and so was their work stoppage to force the authority to withdraw its decision to punish 22 of their fellow agitators. There is no reason to view their action otherwise. Any person intent on disrupting port operations should be severely dealt with, regardless of his political affiliation. Often in the past, politicisation of such disturbances led the workers to believe that they are above the law. They must be made to realise that they are not. To ensure that, the authorities should take a tough stand and see to it that punishment is meted out to those who refuse to go by the law. However, until and unless the political parties distance themselves from the such activities subversive of the economic interest of the country, that would not happen.

Whatever may be the short term solutions, we want to underscore that the present situation should not be allowed to continue. Workers must not be allowed to close the port at will. If necessary special laws should be enacted to protect the Chittagong Port.

A Step in the Right Direction

WE welcome the government's decision to have three new earthquake monitoring observatories in Dhaka, Sylhet and Rangpur in addition to renovating the old one in Chittagong. If everything goes according to plan, the country will have these three stations ready by next June.

Recently we have had some tremors that caused more panic in the minds of the people than destruction of property. Almost on all such occasions we had very little information about the epicentre of the tremor, its nature and intensity. In most cases Cox's Bazar and Maheshkhali were hit by the quakes which could not be properly measured on the Richter scale for lack of facility. Though Bangladesh as a whole may not be on the direct path of the tectonic phenomenon, parts of it are, and that's why we had around 275 tremors during the last 28 years, according to a report in The Daily Star on Thursday. It is interesting to note that the earth suffers a mild tremor every two minutes. The division of the land mass of Bangladesh into three zones where the new observatories will be located strangely excludes greater districts of Rajshahi, Pabna, Kushtia and Jessore. Do we understand that these areas are less prone to earthquake or safe from tremors? If so, this will be a welcome relief for the people there. We only hope this important project will not suffer bureaucratic redtape or lack of funding. After all this one is taking shape after 23 years.

Unauthorised Shops

THE Shahbagh area of the city is in the clutches of land grabbers. Reportedly, by violating the Rajuk Master Plan, a shopping complex has emerged in front of the Police Control Room there. Construction of the same had been going on for some time under an interesting signboard reading *Dhaka Metropolitan Police is your friend*. DCC officials, however, confirmed that such extension work has been going on illegally without any permission being sought from them.

Besides breaking the law, these illegal establishments are posing many problems one of which being the police personnel are facing difficulties while moving in and out of the Police Control Room. And, traffic management in front of the Shishu Park has become strenuous. The police, however, have raised objections to the City Corporation about these illegal expansions. But according to them, their objections went unheeded by the city authority. Now, the question looms: if these illegal outfits have been creating so much trouble for the police in carrying out their responsibilities, why did they keep silent when their complaint was shelved? Their subsequent persuasion could have solved the problem by now. The City Corporation is equally, if not more at fault, first because of having allowed such establishments to grow, and then, by neglecting the police objections.

The DCC must have records that some of these markets at Shahbagh were built unauthorisedly during the Ershad regime. We expect the Corporation to start its investigations quickly, with help of the police, of course, and take corrective measures regarding all the plots that have been appropriated in that area. It's time to look at the mole under the nose.

BAKLADESH is in the spotlight as US prepares for Clinton's March 25 trip to Dhaka. Karl F. Inderfurth, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs had delivered a lecture in Washington D.C. talking about the future of this tiny nation that 120 million people call their home. This is just the beginning. As March 25 approaches, more and more write-ups will grace the pages of American and European newspapers. And that is where the problem lies.

With very little achievement, all we shall be writing about is our penchant for "freedom of expression," which translates *hartal* in simple language. No nation on earth "celebrates" *hartal* the way we do it in Bangladesh. In this category, now that US President Bill Clinton will be coming to Dhaka, it remains to be seen if Bangladesh's opposition parties will take a leave from their favourite pastime activities.

We should be worried about the image we portray to the rest of the world. If Bangladesh were just like other aspiring new democracies, then we would not have any problem about the image of this republic. The problem is that while other nations are busily making infrastructure and improving their economy so that they may reap the reward of globalisation in this new century, Bangladesh is not doing as expected. While democracy is a buzzword in the nation, the politicians, and their armed cadres are going berserk to destroy whatever little infrastructure is there for the impoverished nation to hold onto. And they are doing all this in the name of free speech. The western reporters would soon figure out that violence that is spewed from *hartal* has become a political culture of country. This is in stark contrast to the peace and togetherness that is sweeping through in other parts of the world.

A few weeks ago, I sat and watched in increasing frustration and disgust as two executives of a semi-government corporation lied through their teeth while giving evidence under oath. Almost every sentence of their affidavits was a lie, answers to every question was a blatant untruth. Even though this was before one of the best judges ever produced by the judiciary in Pakistan, one could see why the judiciary seems to have become helpless to prevent perjury. The case being sub-judice, one cannot ethically take names, however one can understand the reason why accountability is so difficult in a country where almost all statements or cross-examinations under oath are badly tainted.

For personal gain, whether monetary or otherwise, false representation of facts and distortions, a gentlemanly phrase for "outright lies", is the order of the day. Vested interest wants to keep the facts concealed. Invariably, it is they who volunteer to become witnesses in any enquiry or trial. They manage to disfigure the truth in so brazen faced and bold a manner that law enforcers do not have the courage to intercede and take action against them. That is why corruption has flourished, these old hands creating a wall of lies, impossible for the investigators to penetrate.

The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) is up against it in their search for those who have looted the wealth of this nation, whether from government departments or government or semi-government corporations, etc. To quote Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*, "at lover's perjuries, they say even Jove laughs". That may be the prerogative of lovers in a romance, in the real-life of a nation on its economic knees

President Clinton's Visit to Bangladesh

A.H. Jaffor Ullah writes from New Orleans, USA

Politicians' working philosophy here is: 'If I am not in power, then I surely will make sure no one else should be in power.' Empowered by this maxim, all opposition political parties in Bangladesh do work against as suggested by the civil society. This was true during Khaleda Zia's time from 1991 through 1996 when Sheikh Hasina's Awami League put every possible roadblock by way of staging countless hartals to derail whatever minuscule development taking place in the country at the time. And now we are watching the repeat performance of the same modus operandi, i.e., staging of hartals, but this time by Khaleda Zia's party the BNP.

All other nations appear to be image-conscious, and Bangladesh seems the only exception in this regard. And this attitude has to change before anything good can happen in our poverty-stricken land. The bigger question of course is: who is going to tell this to all the politicians? If you would ask any ordinary citizen whether they favour *hartal* (read political violence), they would reply you in the negative. Why then, only ten thousand armed goons, who belong to political parties, would take the entire nation of 120 million as hostage? This is absurd and the civil society of Bangladesh should come forward in no time to denounce the *hartal* culture of all political parties in Bangladesh.

Now that it is all but certain that President Clinton is coming to town on March 25, it will be a good time now to ask: would the politicians do something unexpected to make PM Hasina and her party to look bad in the eyes of democracy-loving westerners?

All the news coming out of Bangladesh these days portends a political storm that is gathering strength by the minute. Gazing in the crystal ball in the first week of February 2000, one clearly sees the ominous signs of impending political turmoil. Politicians opposing the government party seem uncompromising. We fear

that this may put the country in a collision course with its *kismet*. Will there be a winner or loser in this deadly political game? Only time can tell that.

There was no pressing reason to write this article as the opposition political parties are gearing up one more time to launch their "oust the government" movement. This has also happened in the past. But this is no ordinary time! The president of the most powerful democracy in the world is visiting Bangladesh in late March this year. Naturally, Bangladesh will be on the spotlight.

Now, question looms: is democracy in trouble in Bangladesh? Two conflicting reports on the status of democracy in Bangladesh appeared in the newspaper on February 8, 2000. One of the news reported the speech given by Karl F. Inderfurth of Clinton Administration at Howard University in Washington D.C. The other news came from Sylhet, the northeastern district of Bangladesh. While the speech given by Inderfurth paints a favourable picture of Bangladesh, the report from Sylhet negates what the US Assistant Secretary of State had to say about its status of democracy.

The foreigners seem to have optimistic views about economic future of Bangladesh, and there is some basis for it.

Bangladesh is endowed with about 120 million plus people. A strong labour force ready to work exists in the impoverished land. A sizeable part of this labour force could easily be trained to make them semi-skilled and skilled labourers. Moreover, the country is endowed with a vast reservoir of natural gas buried underneath the ground in northeastern part of the nation. Some industry experts believe Bangladesh may have 50-60 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas reserve. When one compares this to other energy-deficient nations such as Japan, and other Southeast Asian countries, Bangladesh comes out as a real winner.

If Bangladesh could straighten its politics, western analysts think, and make some adjustment in the way it does business with its neighbours, Bangladesh could become a middle-tier nation within the first quarter of this century. But do you think that this rosy scenario will ever be materialised in the distant future? If the recent political stalemate in the country is a harbinger for things to come then the impoverished country is in for a threat!

Regrettably, politicians' working philosophy here is: "If I am not in power, then I surely will make sure no one else should be in power." Empowered by this maxim, all opposi-

tion political parties in Bangladesh do work against as suggested by the civil society. This was true during Khaleda Zia's time from 1991 through 1996 when Sheikh Hasina's Awami League put every possible roadblock by way of staging countless *hartals* to derail whatever minuscule development taking place in the country at the time. And now we are watching the repeat performance of the same *modus operandi*, i.e., staging of *hartals*, but this time by Khaleda Zia's party the BNP. This opposition party has formed some alliance with other minor political parties whose main interest seems to be to stifle the economic growth of the country as the *hartals* go to suggest. So, if someone asks this scribe whether democracy is working in Bangladesh or not, the answer would be in the negative.

Opposition politicians are now converging in Sylhet, which has been targeted as a trouble spot in the nation. In the first week of February 2000, Khaleda Zia, the main opposition leader, sent one of her trusted lieutenants, Saifur Rahman, that already volatile region of the country. In Sylhet's only technological university, the students and some local people are upset that the university authorities have lined up some names of secularist leaders for their student dormitories. They rather would choose names from a list

containing names of Aostas (Muslim Saints) than what the authorities have come up with. Now the virulent politicians are all coming to Sylhet to fuel the fire of student-led agitation.

The naming of college dormitories is a local issue and it ought to be resolved locally by the authorities concerned. It is very possible that it started out as a low-keyed demand from the students but now due to outside interference this has become a "burning issue" for entire Sylhet town.

If these political leaders have an ounce of patriotism and goodwill for the people of Sylhet, then they should all have started out of Sylhet to calm the situation. Instead, they have been taking advantage of the unsettled situation and contributing to mayhem and disorderliness. All indications are this would continue for a while and the opposition politicians badly wanted to score a victory even if it would cost students their academic life. This is not a win-win situation, as the politicians would tell us. We would call it a "lose-lose situation." The Shahjalal University students will be paying a heavy price for other's follies.

Now, as American administration makes preparation for Clinton's forthcoming visit to Bangladesh, the host nation is in a political quagmire of sorts. Since the American Administration these days are saying good things about the state of democracy in Bangladesh and painting a pretty picture for the economy of Bangladesh, the politicians across the board should take a cue from all these and start behaving responsibly to put their better face forward. When would the politicians in Bangladesh realise that the country belongs to the people? The politicians are giving democracy a bad name in Bangladesh. And they better know it.

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Perjury

On the one hand, is the hiding of illegal wealth by misdeclaration, on the other, the failure to pay necessary taxes is endemic. The entire economic system of the country is under pressure because of the large deficit in the revenue collection.

false evidence under oath is an incurable cancer that eats at the heart of our society, the depriving of individual benefit at the cost of the national exchequer, a worthwhile pastimes frustrating pursuit of the concept of collective gain. The *Oxford Dictionary* very correctly gives the meaning of perjury as "an act of willfully telling an untruth when on oath", and goes on to use the words, "lying, mendacity, mendaciousness, falsification, deception, untruthfulness, dishonesty, duplicity". In simple terms, a perjuror is a criminal.

In most countries, perjury carries exemplary punishment, ruthless enough for people to try and avoid giving a statement under oath lest that statement (or part thereof) be detected to be false. The system is so credible that depositions under oath save the time of the courts in long-drawn out examination of witnesses. Automatic and severe punishment acts as a deterrent of sorts, a search of the legal history all over the developed world will show that because of repeated convictions due to perjury, the drop in corruption has been commensurate with that of perjury. Let us start with the declaration of assets by a politician, a public servant, an income taxpayer, etc. On the one hand, is the hiding of illegal wealth by misdeclaration, on the other, the failure to pay necessary taxes is endemic. The entire economic system of the country is under pressure because of the large deficit in the revenue collection. In all modern countries, declaration of income and assets is considered a misdemeanour and carries au-

tomatic conviction and/or penalty thereof. Only about 1.5 million people (of the 130 million population) declare income/wealth in a country where 11.6 million homes have electricity (1.6 million in Karachi alone), at least 40 per cent of these residences fall above the threshold for paying income/wealth taxes, the figure thus comes to 4.64 million homes. Reducing this figure by 25 per cent to cover for those people who have more than one home, the figure comes to 3.48

giving judgement on the basis of the statute books without relevance to the integrity of the evidence being presented before them.

In a jury system, the judge controls the courtroom keeping the flow of facts reasonably credible, giving rulings based on the law books and precedence, giving directions to the jury as a summary of the evidence presented. The twelve jurors on the panel then consult among themselves before arriving on a finding. Whereas

it is quite possible to give false evidence, the body language of the witness while giving answers to questions as seen by 12 pairs of eyes makes it that much more difficult. The literacy level being low in Pakistan, the jury system is not considered a feasible proposition, somewhat of a strange stance in face of the age-old concept of the *Panchayat*.

Let us start with the declaration of assets by a politician, a public servant, an income taxpayer, etc. On the one hand, is the hiding of illegal wealth by misdeclaration, on the other, the failure to pay necessary taxes is endemic. The entire economic system of the country is under pressure because of the large deficit in the revenue collection. In all modern countries, declaration of income and assets is considered a misdemeanour and carries au-

million homeowners who can pay taxes. This would mean there are nearly 2 million homeowners who presently should be paying taxes and don't. The potential taxpayers could give us between Rs. 200-300 billion in additional incomes/wealth taxes alone. This would allow us to reduce import duties across the board, particularly for electronic engineering goods, chemicals, machinery, etc., thus making the economy across the board that much more competitive. And all by ensuring that misdeclaration under oath is perjury, automatic punishment in most cases should be a term of incarceration in prison.

Why are we attempting privatisation? Mainly because the private sector (technocrats have brought the state-owned and nationalised units to their knees by inefficiency and corruption, lining their own pockets at the cost of the nation. All the executives must make an annual declaration of assets clearly showing increases and the volume thereof in a separate column, if the increase is inordinate and the source of income is other than salary, that should be mentioned. That declaration of assets must be filed with income/wealth tax returns so that differing statements are not presented before different authorities, as is the usual practice today.

Furthermore it must be mandated that any misdeclaration, any false statement/evidence, any fabrication of evidence, in short any lie would mean automatic dismissal without any benefits and render them liable for prosecution for perjury offences. Whatsoever charges/punishment can be leveled against them including confiscation of illegally acquired property, penalties, etc.

In the case mentioned by me the two executives were, besides lying under oath, clearly caught fabricating evidence in the form of false letters/affidavits by different people. They did not bat an eyelash, in fact they smirked about the fact, secure in the knowledge that the judge would probably throw out the evidence but would not proceed against them for fabricating evidence.

As it is the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has a difficult task solving white-collar crime, this task is made all that much more difficult in the present environment where perjury does not have right of place in punishment being im-

posed automatically irrespective of the case itself. Unfortunately law enforcement agencies will fabricate evidence or give false statements in order to target the object of their attention. This misuse of legality is also largely ignored. How many times has the prosecution been taken to task by the presiding judge when the case has been dismissed because of the lack of credibility in the evidence? NAB's success rate would snowball if it could send witnesses who commit perjury to prison, you would find a lot of people suddenly telling the truth. Take the contempt case before the Supreme Court (SC) and the storming of the SC in end Nov 1997. That the atrocity took place there is no doubt (read *The Ugly Face of Fascism* The Nation, Nov 29, 1997) most of the leaders can be identified on the tapes recorded by the installed Close-Circuit Television (CCTV) Cameras but first they deny their presence, then wrongfoot thereof. Those identified then pleaded ignorance in further identifying their followers, all who stormed the SC were strangers to each other.

In a far subordinate US or British Court this sudden loss of memory would have been kept them in court custody indefinitely till their memory returned. If those close to the then highest in governance in the land can perjure themselves so blatantly before the highest court in the land with such impunity, what does one expect at the lower end of the spectrum? There is only one solution, we must enact and implement the strictest possible law about perjury or all the attempts of the Executive (CE) and his colleagues to accomplish their stated agenda will remain frustrated.

Learn to protect... Sir, I think we should be asking ourselves the question: "How to civilise ourselves". Why can't we think of woman as a person? If we consider that women are helpless and can only be taken care of by men then we will never be able to civilise ourselves. We always talk about women rights and argue that they should have the same rights as men do.

However, when we get on a bus or any public transportation we see the reserved seats for women. Does that give them the equal right as men? What if she doesn't want to sit at the front row and wants to go the very last row. Will you people say that she should not sit there because that might be dangerous for her? Well, I want everyone to understand that there should not be any such thing as women's seat or row. If we keep that barrier between men and women then women will always feel weak. Women should become stronger and learn how to protect themselves.

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Water shed management
Sir, I have noticed in various technical papers published in the DS regarding water management policy in Bangladesh. The authors have discussed on water issues and made very valuable suggestions, and recommendations. But I failed to find anything about 'watershed management'. Recently, Mr. Qazi Kholluzzaman Ahmad wrote an article under the cap-

S.M. Jalil
Dhaka

The fruits of freedom
Sir, I don't know what to say about the TSC incident. I've been living abroad for quite some time and now I feel that there is a serious lack of security in my country. We fought for our freedom, but if we cannot give to our mothers, sisters and daughters the fruits of freedom, then the whole episode would seem futile.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

PSA 2000

Sir, The AL government has passed the Public Safety Bill 2000 without the participation of the main opposition parties in the JS. The bill now awaits authentication of the President.

Whereas, on one hand the government claims that the bill would bring the terrorists, hijackers, illegal toll-collectors and destructive elements to book and help maintain law and order in the country; on the other hand the opposition says that the government would use the bill to oppress and suppress the opposition.

We feel that when the present political environment in the country is not normal and healthy and both the government and opposition parties are engaged in diatribe and trade accusing and counter accusing each other, the PSA bill would not help improve law and order situation rather it would further aggravate the situation.

We are of the opinion that there is neither any need for supporting or opposing the Special Power Act of 1974 or the Public Safety Bill 2000, the contrary we feel that the government and the opposition parties should jointly take the following constructive and practical steps.

i) Ensure lodging of FIRs by any citizen of the country in police station/thana without

any discrimination, fear, favour or ill will against anybody.

ii) The police should immediately make an enquiry on the basis of the FIR and take necessary legal action.

iii) A list of suspected terrorists, hijackers, smugglers and illegal toll collectors should be compiled and the activities of the unscrupulous elements may be watched carefully by the CID.

iv) Demand, collection of gratification, bakshish, kick-back, tips, commission or bribe by any government servant, public sector corporation employees or police personnel for performing any duty or rendering any public service should be totally stopped.

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Transshipment facility

Sir, Our PM Sheikh Hasina thinks that the transshipment facility to India will help us to enrich our economy. Bangladesh is one of the most underdeveloped countries of the world. Therefore, I believe transshipment facility to India would create more employment opportunities and it will thus help our economy. But my question is, why should it only

be with India? It could be with Nepal or through Nepal to Pakistan. Won't this help our unemployment problem more and make our economy grow stronger?

The government thinks that transshipment facilities to India will be good for both the countries. Indian goods have already ushered the Bangladesh market. But most of these goods are coming through illegal ways. So, before implementing the decision (transshipment facility to India) the law enforcement agencies should ensure that smuggling is totally checked.

Syedna Amina Moosa
Sylhet.

The open letter...

Sir, Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud in his well-drafted and well-written 'open letter' to the two leaders in our politics has, in very clear terms, highlighted the wrong policies being pursued and the pitfalls of the attitudes being shown by both of them. He, in addition, has offered valuable advice and suggestions to the two leaders.

We fear that this situation of confrontation, bickering and negative policies may further aggravate in the days to come. We do not see any ray of hope in any direction towards a change for the better. Nobody knows what will ultimately happen. But, that the symptoms are very ominous. Unfortunately, our leaders seem to be oblivious of the consequences of their thought and action. It is all the more unfortunate that very few wise persons of our society have come up with rational analysis of the political situation as has been done by Dr. Mahmud.

On the other hand, our intel-

lectuals are divided into two camps. Both the groups are seen prompt enough to issue press statements supporting or criticising a particular event. No one looks at a thing dispassionately and speaks out what should be done for the good of the society as a whole. Dr. Mahmud has taken a bold stand by addressing both the leaders and has made a passionate appeal to them to ponder and take steps which are good for the country, not for the party nor for remaining in power or capturing power.

I appeal to our social workers and intellectuals to support Dr. Mahmud and create a pressure on the leaders for positive attitude.

M. Hafizuddin Khan,
Retired Comptroller and Auditor General

Plight of Chechnya

Sir, The Russian campaign against the Chechens is supposed to punish the terrorists who last year carried out deplorable attacks on civilians in Moscow and elsewhere. Terrorist must be controlled and punished. But the ferocity of Russian retaliation, encompassing civilians, snells of a war against a whole race. The suspicion is strengthened as it is learnt that the same people (the Chechens) were forced to settle in that unfriendly terrain by Stalin earlier in the previous century. Is the new popular leader, Putin, trying to annihilate the same race to retake the possession of the same land?

A concerned citizen,
Dhaka