

## The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali  
Dhaka, Friday, March 24, 2000

## Fallout of Cancelled Trips

US President Bill Clinton's walk through the choreographed garden path at Joytura village and Savar National Mausoleum was abandoned at the last minute. Thanks to 'security reasons' shrouded in mystery before being finally revealed from Washington courtesy a New York Times report. The disclosure comes as a bombshell reading like this: his visit to a Bangladesh village was called off due to intelligence reports of a possible attack by terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden. The planned helicopter trip involved 'passing over a wooded area which the US Secret Service felt could have easily concealed an attacker armed with a shoulder-launched missile.' It was as part of the same outing that Clinton was to have visited the Savar National Mausoleum to pay homage to the Martyrs of our Liberation War.

Besides sharing the countrywide disappointment over the cancellation of his trips which were potentially the high point of his Bangladesh itinerary, we are taken aback by the suddenness of the alarmist view taken by the US Secret Service even though they had been in charge of the US President's security since before the word 'go'.

This is not to question the credibility or validity of the security-related anxiety for President Clinton's physical safety but to draw attention to the whole series of precautions the US Secret Service had taken well in advance of his trip. In several phases spread over months we have seen preparatory visits paid to Dhaka and its outskirts by pre-advance teams, advance teams and US GIs conjuring up in the process a reassuring vision of a fool-proof security arrangement being put in place right across the enclave of his planned visitation. We were not allowed the full play of our natural hospitality flair in terms of not merely greeting the US President out of Dhaka city but also being entrusted with a greater involvement in security matters commensurate with our expectations as a friendly host country. In good faith and grace did we let them look after the security details in a country we knew like the thumb of our hand; but what have we got in return: a blackened, smeared face to a country abrasively considered 'unsafe' for a visit by a high dignitary.

Granted, the US President's security risk rating is high. But was it beyond the capability of the advance US security contingent to secure that wooded patch under the flight route of the helicopter with logistics support from local security forces who were only keen to offer it. Our established credentials in UN peacekeeping operations could not be trifled with. President Clinton's remark that the security threat against him in Bangladesh was not the fault of Bangladesh Government or the people of that country (as indeed it could not be, because the matter was principally placed under the US jurisdiction) is welcome but it does not go far enough to assuage our feelings to be candid.

It is a gracious piece of consolation that we take in our stride alright, but not without demurring at what we regard as a frigid security concern betraying scant regard for the goodwill and trustworthiness of a traditional ally with justified sensitivity in such matters.

Agreed it was unwitting, but admittedly it was irresponsible as well on their part to have been so dismissive of our minimal sensibilities. Indeed we will take time to live down the effect of it all.

## Friday Mailbox

## Clinton's visit in Bangladesh

Sir, As a Bangladeshi currently living in USA, I was very much enthusiastic about the US President's visit in my country. I eagerly watched the CNN channel and read Bangladeshi newspapers online to get the news regarding this visit. But when I learnt that President Clinton did not go to the Savar mausoleum to pay homage to our martyrs, I was really shocked!

Lack of security cannot be a good enough reason for Clinton not going to Savar.

M. Nazmul Ahsan Khan  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, USA

## "In an Antique Land"

Sir, I would like to draw your attention to the editorial titled "In an Antique Land" of the March 6 issue of *India Today* published from New Delhi, India. In the editorial it was highlighted how Bihar, once rated 'India's best governed state' has come to symbolise all that can go wrong — has gone wrong due to subsequent poor governance. As a result, Bihar has turned into 'India's most impoverished state' in spite of having vast natural resources.

But I was surprised at their remarks comparing Bihar as the national basket case, an in-house Bangladesh or Somalia. I thought these kinds of irresponsible and discourteous remarks were the exclusive preserves of some arrogant western nations. Even Henry Kissinger later regretted that he had made similar remarks during early 1970s. I definitely did not expect such display from a weekly of the stature of the *India Today* and that too published from a developing country with great heritage.

Liaquat Ali  
Dhaka

## Medical practitioners and market forces

Sir, The doctors are reluctant to accept posting in the rural areas (DS front-page news, 14 March) due to the prevailing market forces working in favour of the doctor's residents in the bigger cities. This problem has to be realistically addressed by the government in the case of medical practitioners serving in the public sector.

One way is to offer temporary incentives and perks in cash or kind to provide indirect compensation against the contrasting working conditions in the rural environment, to brighten the urge to stay in a rural area for a period of posting not exceeding three years, and not below two years.

A committee may look into the issue and draft some recommendations. Some of the areas to cover may include: Family allowance for doctors staying at site without family; educational allowance for children not attending school at site; and a rural allowance. The BMA has to be cooperative with the national objectives, otherwise no practical progress can be made to solve this acute crisis; especially in view of the latest news report that the government is contemplating to appoint 1000 doctors.

This problem of the doctors is similar to the general urban migration pattern prevailing in the society, due to economic disparity of opportunities not available in the rural areas. The national planners have to go for some 'Equalizer Programmes' to democratise motivations in the different sectors, for harnessing greater response from more respondents. We talk a lot about integrated development, but it is all in the papers, and not seen in reality in practical proportions.

Abul M Ahmad  
Dhaka

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.

## Clinton's Visit: What Did Bangladesh Get?

by Mansoor Mamoon

Clinton's visit did not bring about any strong US commitment excepting the assurances for some assistance. But that at long last a US President set his foot on the soil of Bangladesh for the first time, and indeed briefly, brought it into international limelight and global attention.

fused to sign the PSC.

Bangladeshis were greatly shocked when Clinton suddenly dropped his visit to National Mausoleum. It was unprecedented on the part of any visiting head of the government. The reasons given were surprising and incredible. How could Muslim fundamentalists sneak into the impenetrable security network which the United States took in its own hand right from the very beginning as it did not seemingly have faith in the local authority. Islamic funda-

mentalists are minuscule in number and it is simply unbelievable that they will have access to such sophisticated devices as to bring down the chopped carrying Clinton and his entourage to Savar. Bangladesh was treated as a so-called Muslim state though this government tries its utmost to project the country as a secular state. The US administration perhaps cannot trust a Muslim state however secular a posture it may take.

Clinton even described

Sheikh Mujib as the "father of the present Prime Minister" and not as "the father of the nation" much to the chagrin of the Awami Leaguers. This has, no doubt, frustrated them to a great extent. While Clinton called for more regional trade his Commerce Secretary told a separate business seminar that United States seeks more export and increased bureaucratic snag in increasing investment in Bangladesh.

Clinton prolonged his tete-tete with the opposition BNP

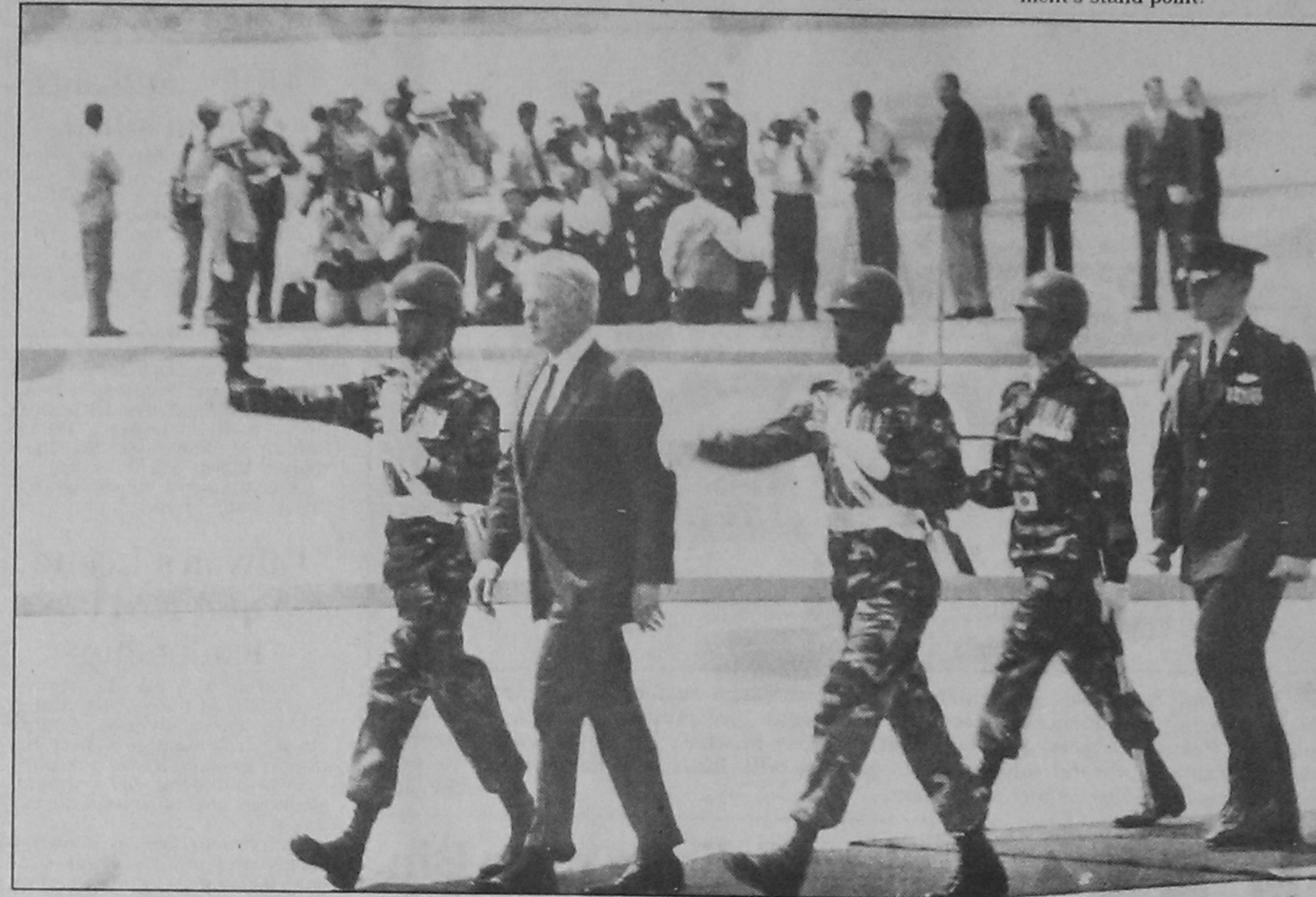
Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia for forty-five minutes. The courtesy call turned out to be a full dressed discussion session and many things were discussed which normally did not come under the purview of such meetings. In India the leader of the opposition Sonia Gandhi had only ten-minutes meeting including photo session. Unlike Khaleda Zia did not complain against the Vajpayee government rather pinpointed with equal force the government's stand point.

Immediately after the World War II Winston Churchill was unexpectedly defeated in the general elections in UK. In his place came Clement Attlee. Soon after that as Churchill, as the leader of the opposition, came on a visit to New York the journalists pressed him for his views towards his country's new government. Churchill told them point-blank that in his country there are many forums to express his views. So he would not pass any remark against his country's government in a foreign land. These are instances of patriotism which both the major parties are palpably lacking in. Clinton reportedly reminded Begum Zia that she and other political leaders should themselves sort out their problems through dialogue. No foreigner, however mighty he may be, can and should be expected to solve our own national problem.

It is nothing but sheer inferiority complex to approach foreigners for our problem-solving. But both the ruling party and the mainstream opposition are accustomed to this practice since long. Rather than humiliating oneself before a foreigner one should sit with one's opponent and iron out all differences. In assessing the visit, first-ever of a US President, it was something of a flop for the government. It failed to strongly handle Clinton's itinerary with the result that it lost its face before the people who appeared more critical than appreciative of the way the much-vaunted visit took place. The opposition BNP has no reason to feel complacent; for Clinton clearly and loudly told it that "you have to find constructive ways to resolve your differences and go on". It was a rebuff to BNP's no-dialogue approach.

Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League will have the satisfaction that the US President recognised Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the architect of Bangladesh. This recognition, however, may not be liked by the BNP and fundamentalist political parties.

Clinton's visit did not bring about any strong US commitment excepting the assurances for some assistance. But that at long last a US President set his foot on the soil of Bangladesh for the first time, and indeed briefly, brought it into international limelight and global attention.



President Clinton after arrival at the Zia International Airport on March 20th.

— Star photo by AKM Mohsin

## The Year of Cheating Dangerously

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

Some British and overseas Commonwealth universities hold oral examinations to confirm or resolve doubtful results on written papers. This is not to suggest that we introduce oral examinations at the SSC level. But it is essential to ensure that examinations are an honest method of ascertaining merits, because when merit is compromised for convenience it creates the ultimate scope of corruption.

In seriousness for studies or gift of intellect or memory to prepare for examinations. T S Eliot railed in *The Sacred Woods*, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." Is cheating in examinations, therefore, an indication of our maturity — the sign of a society coming of age? A developed society offers support to its disabled citizens. Are we accepting cheating in the similar way to support our students who are studiously and meritoriously deficient or impaired? There is a witticism in our country that stealing is a great art so long as one does not get caught doing it. Are we trying to cleanse the last stigma, which is attached to stealing? Was our insouciance towards the indiscriminate cheating in SSC examinations an affirmation that one need not worry about getting caught so long as one is good at stealing?

Cheating in examinations is imitation by stealing — it is devotion laced with dishonesty. If knowledge is the essence of education filtered through enlightened minds, cheating violates its sanctity by purloining lessons that ought to be learned. Just like pirated work is not masterpiece, what a copier writes on the examination book doesn't reflect his knowledge.

To put a Freudian twist to the whole thing, the unrestrained cheating reflected something else. A nation simmering in the angst of its own disillusion gave vent to its growing depravity yet through another channel. When before have unruly youths barged into an examination centre and molested its female candidates? When before a family sent miscreants to bruise the fingers of their daughter's competitor? Frankly speaking, while the students cheated in the SSC examinations abetted by their families, the entire nation sat through a trying test.

Sisyphus was punished in Hades as the penalty for cheating Death, and condemned to push a stone that was set to roll down every time he took it to the top of a slope. The cheating committed by our children have placed a burden of shame on our chest, which will keep rolling back for years no matter how hard it is pushed. But cheating is often the sublimation of greater vices, which permeate into the rock of social values and corrode its mass. During the reign of Liao dynasty the government had become increasingly ineffective in China. The reform movement implemented by a previous regime had enlarged both the size and

duties of the clerical staff. When Ch'in-tung introduced anti-reform programmes, it brought a cutback but also a confusion that presented manipulative opportunities to some clerks. Supervision was difficult because officials stayed only a few years, whereas clerks remained in office for long periods. Bureaucratic laxity spread quickly to the clerical level. Bribes for appointments went either to them or through their hands. It was they who made cheating possible at examinations, using literary agents as intermediaries between candidates and themselves.

If we take the Chinese experience as an example, it is probably fair to conclude that cheating in examinations is a pre-emption of unfair means practiced in other sectors of society. If politicians can switch parties, bureaucrats take bribes, businessmen default loans, professionals negotiate favours, and intellectuals compromise ideals, the underlying connection amongst all these lapses is a fine thread of flexibility, which is called convenience. It is convenient to desire without having to deserve. It is convenient to succeed without having to struggle. It is convenient to win without having to work. If a school kid to-

day has to grow up for a convenient life tomorrow, what is wrong if he starts with it now?

No matter how infallible that logic may sound, examinations are to promote the idea that one has to learn to earn the recognition one yearns. Some British and overseas Commonwealth universities hold oral examinations to confirm or resolve doubtful results on written papers. This is not to suggest that we introduce oral examinations at the SSC level. But it is essential to ensure that examinations are an honest method of ascertaining merits, because when merit is compromised for convenience it creates the ultimate scope of corruption. For that matter, a society is comparable to a shrimp. In both, rotting starts from the head.

Now the excitement of Eid holidays is over and Bill Clinton has come and left. Before the fresh round of political bickering starts may the politicians take a pause to analyse the shame, which belongs to us all. Mao Zedong, according to his personal physician Dr Zhisui Li, used to go for a swim in the Yangtze River every time he returned from his self-imposed political exile. For a while, the Eid and the Clinton visit had diverted the minds of our politicians from political strife. Before they return to it, I suggest they take a swim in the streams of good sense! If they are going to leave behind a nation where students cheat in learning their lessons, it will eventually catch up with their profession as well, because their trade secret will turn into a national passion. Beware for your own sake at least, if not for the sake of your country!

## OPINION

## Reforming the Civil Service

Alif Zabr

"Bureaucracy trying to torpedo move for effective HR body" was the banner headline in the front page of *The Daily Star* of March 7. Quite a few PARCs Reports have drafted and demolished, and the mummified remains lie stored in the Bangladesh pyramid located inside the archives of the Secretariat.

Where there is a will, there is way out, or way in. When the gate of concurrence is kept locked, proposals and recommendations stall. There is a traditional wisecrack that three Bengalees cannot run a company due to severe differences of opinion. There is some truth in the prevalent assumption that it is difficult to penetrate the steel frame of public administration (BCS).

Iron is brittle, but steel is a bit pliable, but if it is stainless steel, the reacting outside influence for bringing about in-

ternal reforms within the civil service has hardly any effect. The molting point of steel is also very high, hence the temperature of the political reforming furnace (the will of the people through the elected representatives in the parliament) has to be very high. We do not need "Freedom Fighters" to bring about this needed change!

But it is not so, as the weak political pressure cannot persuade the bureaucrats to sit down for an amicable agreement to a set of phased reforms in civil administration, knowing fully well that the present system is old and obsolete, being based on colonial rule of 200 years. The politicians depend too much on the bureaucrats, and the latter obviously take advantage of the situation. Keep them in good humour, but the boundary line has to be demarcated.

Dhaka metropolis had experience of provincial rule and administration during the Pakistan period. The position could not improve after independence in 1971, as the continuity could not be maintained, and martial regimes intervened — again due to the weaknesses of the budding political culture. The politicians returned to power in 1991, but the decade of the 1990s saw political instability and lack of consensus on national approaches and objectives. The confrontation politics is still continuing, and it is anybody's guess how long this instability will last, so long the two leaders remain active (and popular) in 'umbrella politics'.

Another setback was the politically indoctrinated *mancha* (platform) set up by the bureaucrats in the mid-90s, causing serious erosion of the neutral steel frame of the civil service.

Now, before the Administrative Reforms are initiated, and then processed, the big question is: how first to return to neutral, non-politicised bureaucracy? To undo a damage is sometimes more difficult.

There is another scenario: drafting the modality of the decentralisation of the administrative structure (concentrated in Dhaka) through the new set-up after the upazilla elections. Some talk about converting the Divisions into Provinces, with proper redistribution of administrative powers. The ticklish question is: which should come first, the PARC, or the new set ups outside Dhaka? It is not a chicken-and-egg situation.

The bureaucrats have to make up their minds, and come out with objectives to pave the way for the mutually agreed administrative reforms to be set into motion, which are

long overdue. They have to make some sacrifices in national interest. At the same time, the politicians in the parliament have to take some firm decisions not to keep this urgent national issue pending indefinitely. The stalemate between the politicians and the bureaucrats must be resolved, regardless of the regime in power and in the opposition.

Now that the next general elections is round the corner, no spectacular move can be expected right now, but the coming election manifestoes have to be categorical on this vital issue. The very accelerated development of Bangladesh depends on having a modernised civil service geared to fast-changing needs of the information age. Had the reforms been affected two decades earlier, the economic scene in Bangladesh would have been brighter today.