

The Daily Star

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Two Concrete Steps towards Greater Accountability

THE World Bank sponsored consultation with the civil society on Tuesday was held in two sessions: one devoted to 'poverty alleviation strategy and governance' and the other to 'accountability and transparency,' both the themes being evidently inter-related. The discussion was highly focused on the accountability issue which is at the heart of the seemingly intractable governance problem our economy is bedevilled by. The government of the day is apt to demand accountability from others with a holier-than-thou attitude. This partly emanates from the arrogance of mandate and partly from an instinct of self-preservation lest the beans were spilled.

But it falls squarely on an elected government to be accountable for all its actions. It remains answerable on the floor of the Jatiya Sangsad and through the whole array of parliamentary standing committees. There, any opposition worth the salt would demand explanation from the government party on its lapses. In practice though the government gets a walk-over through the opposition's boycott of parliament sessions. That is all the more reason on why there should be built-in safeguards against all forms of abuse of power and corruption played out with money from the public exchequer and money or resource garnered from external sources.

We have two specific suggestions to make by way of grappling with the questions of accountability in the government, in the private sector and in the political parties.

In the first place, it is highly imperative for us now to have an independent national commission to fight corruption. It will be no part of the Prime Minister's Office nor should it be an appendage to the police directorate. It will be a full-fledged statutory body required to report only to the Parliament, which in turn, shall cause discussions to be held on the contents of the commission's report and have directives sent to relevant quarters for corrective measures where due. Hong Kong provides the most successful model for such an anti-corruption commission.

There are reasons to believe that politics, by and large, is financed by corruption and black money. The most convenient and profitable way of laundering black money is to funnel it to the political parties for their organisational activities. This is how the government's protection and favour are bought up. At the same time they also fund other major political parties as a future investment.

There is no magical solution to the complicated problem of party funding encompassing tax evasion, extortion, smuggling, over-invoicing, under-invoicing and a whole lot of underhand dealings. Like we have set a unique example by having our elections held under a neutral caretaker government we can think of devising our own way to go round the problem of political parties' critical harmful dependence on black money which obligate them to serve their benefactors.

As for the election campaign expenditure overshooting the Tk 3 lakh ceiling by miles, we have a two-fold recipe to offer: one, equip the Election Commission sufficiently to enable it to monitor election expenses of the contestants effectively; and two, let's specially assign a whole set of qualified private sector chartered accountants to audit the electoral expenses of the candidates after the general elections are held. The onrush of complaints at the turn of every election needs attention.

This could provide sinews to accountability at the most vital stage of our electoral process.

Pope in the Holy Land
Reaffirmed Support for "Palestinian Homeland"

The week-long visit by Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land and particularly his visit to the Western Wall, his sermons and open call for reconciliation would certainly usher in changes in the mental and religious attitude of the people of all faiths in the area. This would, indeed, lead to an environment that would be conducive to peace, religious tolerance and desire to live together side by side — by equitably sharing the available land and resources.



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

helped many Jews to escape death during the Holocaust.

While in the Holocaust Memorial in Yad Vashem, he paid personal homage to the millions of Jews killed by the Nazis and expressed profound grief over the "hated, acts of persecution and display of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by the Christians at any time and in any place." He, however, 'stopped short of an outright apology' on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church for what some Jews say Vatican's "silence, inaction and complicity in the Holocaust". The Pope prayed for a 'new relationship between Christians and Jews'. Prime Minister Barak hailed this as 'noble act' for reaching out to the Jews. Barak also termed Pope's journey to the Holy Land as "Journey of healing". He added, "Here, right now, time itself has come to a standstill. This very moment holds within it 2,000 years of history, and their weight is almost too much to bear."

Prime Minister Barak recalled Pope's personal effort to bring about "historic changes in the attitude of the Church to-

wards the Jewish people's and also to "dress the gaping wounds" and the bitterness that stayed for many centuries. Then the Israeli Prime Minister justified the establishment of Israel by saying that "Israel is the definitive, permanent answer to Auschwitz" and that "since then, no Jew will ever remain helpless or be stripped of the last shred of human dignity". This was a very clear statement from the Israeli Prime Minister giving his reasons and justification for the establishment of the permanent homeland for the Jews who lost their root and had been wandering around the world. Because of the Holocaust the wandering Jewish people intensely felt the need for a permanent homeland in a place where they lived before among the people of Palestine. But the actions for the re-establishment of Palestine (the

State of Palestine) which had been in existence since time immemorial requires no special reason or justification. The Palestinian people have also been suffering immensely for years and the Pope rightly said that the "the torment of Palestinian people has gone on too long" and this must not be ignored any longer. It is expected that the Pope's message would reach the people of Israel and help create and environment of reconciliation.

Indeed, in his Mass on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was attended by nearly 90,000 people, the Pope again called for reconciliation among all faiths — Christianity, Judaism, Islam. The Pope also presided over a Mass at the Cathedral at Nazareth — the boyhood home town of Jesus and repeated his call for recon-

ciliation between all faiths. Only about 100 meters away the Palestinian Muslims want to build a mosque which Vatican objected to but Israel gave permission. The mosque is yet to be built but the Muslims pray in the place regularly. The call for the prayer is given over microphone but while the Mass was going on the Muslims turned off the microphone to show respect to the Pope and his prayer in the Mass which was being attended by many Christians. This shows the religious tolerance the Muslims praying there showed to the people of another faith — the Christianity. Such religious tolerance is a must to maintain religious and communal harmony in a place where the people of all faiths live. Indeed, this event which the Pope himself has witnessed may help remove the objection of the Vatican on the mosque.

The Pope also prayed at the Western (Wailing) Wall where Jews pray and asked for God's forgiveness for those who carried out the persecution of the Jews and expressed his commitment for "genuine brotherhood with the people of the

Covenant". The Pontiff appeared visibly moved and slipped his prayer paper into the stone crevice of the Western Wall. The Jewish people must have been touched by his prayer and the very visit to the Western Wall by the Pope. The week-long visit by Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land and particularly his visit to the Western Wall, his sermons and open call for reconciliation would certainly usher in changes in the mental and religious attitude of the people of all faiths in the area.

This would, indeed, lead to an environment that would be conducive to peace, religious tolerance and desire to live together side by side — by equitably sharing the available land and resources. This would also eventually help and indeed promote the Middle East peace process.

Though it was Pope's personal "soul-stirring" pilgrimage, it was very timely as intense efforts for peace in the region from all sides have been going on. Indeed, time is running out in terms of present leadership and their commitment for peace. This is why President Clinton, on completion of his visit to the land of Royal Bengal Tigers, decided to meet President Hafez-Al Assad in Geneva. The meeting took place but no deal could be struck.

However, the very meeting would certainly pave the way for further useful and positive thought on this issue of withdrawal of Israel from Golan Heights. President Clinton would certainly pursue this vigorously as he needs to strike a deal on comprehensive peace in the Middle East before he leaves the White House in a couple of month's time. Both President Assad and Chairman Arafat appear to be in poor health and they must compete the peace deal before they decide to retire and also President Clinton completes his term.

Moreover, for Chairman Arafat the declaration of the Palestinian State by the end of the year is something he is already committed to President Assad and Chairman Arafat also know that if they cannot do the business with Prime Minister Barak now under Clinton administration, things may become still more difficult and indeed uncertain under a new US Administration. Even in Israel the situation may turn into one which even Prime Minister Barak may find difficult to handle. So it is in the best interest of all to show maximum flexibility now in their negotiations for the purpose of achieving comprehensive peace in the Middle East.



Pope John Paul II prays inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection during his historic visit to the Holy Land, 26 March 2000. — AFP Photo/Vatican Pool

Friday Mailbox

Clinton in an unsafe country!

Sir, Much has been said and written about the reasons behind the cancellation of President Clinton's visit to the National Mausoleum to pay homage to the martyrs of our liberation war. To echo the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, yes, we are hurt more than anything by this decision of the US Secret Service. Thanks to all the precautions taken by the Americans for the safe passage of President Clinton, this country came to a virtual standstill on March 20th. If only the President of the "land of the free and the home of the brave" had shown us a little bit of bravery by exercising his freedom and overruled his advisers! A small gesture from a big personality would have made us all proud. But alas! An opportunity has been lost.

Considering all that has been happening in India and Pakistan lately, is Bangladesh really very unsafe? We wonder.

Dr Ahmed USA

US President's visit, too much ado over nothing

Sir, No nation in this world can afford to command respect from others unless it learns to pay respect to its own self, no matter how resource poor it is. God probably never wanted the mother earth to be an abode for the so-called super powers alone, with their armoury of super destructive arsenals and still be called 'civilised'. It is a pity; we have yet to learn to live upright, with enough sense of self-respect.

I do not quite understand the extraordinary hype and sweat over US President's brief stopover here. Amazing and disheartening as it is to observe how our government functionaries and the hapless people had to stomach hassle and humiliation, when we paved and polished roads, painted structures, blocked public thoroughfares for days, which the US President never visit. And that all at the expense of hard earned public money.

Pity indeed, that our government did not even have the inkling beforehand that those scheduled visits would be clipped or shrugged off. And all in the name of security and where the elite US Marines themselves were in charge of virtually the whole of Dhaka (through, of course, our own defense/security system). They used decoy Chevy jeeps at airport instead of armoured Lincoln Continental. So much so, that they had their satellites positioned over Dhaka to pry upon any untoward security lapses. The US President traveled with his own range of complete security gears good enough for any small scale war anywhere.

It only evokes laughter to think that Laden people were waiting for their shoulder fired Stinger missiles in the woods near Savar to knock off his Marine One chopper! Our security had combed his entire route for days competently and any such mindless excuse sound like fictions cooked inside Pentagon only.

We have a tradition of treating our guests with utmost hospitality, be it a President or a

commoner from abroad. The disgracing act on our part probably is, we often become over exuberant and tend to overdo things.

Mushtaque Ahmed
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Jet flying over densely populated areas

Sir, Air test flights are planned in an airspace over sparsely populated area away from civil air terminal, to keep minimum casualty in any eventuality. Such planning also allows scheduled commercial flights undisturbed and with less flight safety hazards around an airport. In fact, even international air terminals are far off from city build up areas in all advanced countries. A jetfighter test flight has other hazards as well. Fighter is normally a single-engine aircraft except MIG-29 which consists of two engines, and its airman has the provision and option to bail out in any unforeseen unavoidable malfunction, but none can predict where that abandoned kite would hit. To declare an aircraft safe for flying, many sharp turn, pull up, dive and low passes have to be performed to evaluate each parameter's full range operation and optimum performance of all related systems in an air test. A jetfighter, having higher 'mach number' (Ratio of airspeed to the speed of sound), in test, makes more thrilling sounds of various intensities for above reasons, but those reach us all of a sudden, as if from nowhere nearby. Occasionally a violent high pressure 'sonic boom' resembling nearby high explosion appears from such flight.

A week ago, origin of big bang (one of such sonic booms) that rocked Dhaka and the suburb caused panic which could not be traced by DMP, Detective and Meteorology depts (Prothom Alo, Mar-12). From ISPR press release (Mar-20) and last few days' unusual noises of jet, during morning and afternoon hours, it appears, the newly procured and assembled MIG-29s were being flight tested in around ZIA. MIG's sonic boom was that sensational big bang (DS-Mar-20). Such high pressure and high frequency ultrasonic certainly affect the eardrum of those who live nearby. Even such sound and associated panic, affect infants, elderly people, more so, if they suffer from hearing and cardiovascular ailments. Panic stricken may be source of accidents too. In the capital, around ZIA, besides defence services' establishments (living quarters, schools and hospitals), there are civil residential areas, schools, hospitals, and clinics in Banani, Gulshan, Nikunja, Joarsahara and Uttara. Therefore, conducting jet test-flights with low passes and dive, in airspace over these densely populated areas, is an unethical act, at least on public and flight safety considerations. Where, for the purpose, a designated restricted zone available and maintained, in sparsely populated area for test and training flying, ISPR has notified the public about the origin of sonic boom to kill rumors causing panic and cut panic out. Would then, the dept concerned kindly look into the other aspects of safety factors of test flights over densely populated areas of the capital?

A R Choudhury
Uttara, Dhaka

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Quo Vadis, My Country?

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

Is it my destiny to live as meaninglessly for you as to die senselessly? George Bernard Shaw warns us, "You'll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of human race." But the opposite is happening with you, my country. You are getting increasingly disquiet as our love for you wanes.

history started from 1971. Must your politicians be reminded that your history is three dimensional with length, breadth, and depth, and that it reaches far beyond 1971? Must they be told that once you were a land deemed unsuitable for human habitation?

To brush up their knowledge of history, you were neglected as "the land of birds not of men" during the Vedic age. The areas now constituting your territory and that of West Bengal were looked down as "outside the region hallowed by the feet of the wandering Pandava brothers" in the Epic age. In Mughal times, you were called "a hell well stocked with bread." Even in the twentieth century, a US State Department official slighted you as "a bottomless basket."

And all these epithets of derision had befallen you despite your primogeniture in history. Long before any of the modern democratic nations had even an inkling of it, your people had shown a rare spurt of democracy. Hiuen Tsiang recorded that your society had shown great discipline and civility as early as the 8th century during the rule of Harsha. We are talking about a time when England was still coping with the invasion of Germanic tribes. France, far from being a delimited kingdom, was a part of the Carolingian empire; and Russia in the initial period of Slav colonization. Japan was still struggling to forge its own identity outside Chinese influence. China was preparing under Tang regime for one of her periodical disruptions which lasted for one and a half cen-

tury. And the United States still was not drawn on the map of the world.

Another example of your advanced history is the election of Gopal as king by consensus at the time of Matsyana. Such a scarce political wisdom was to be demonstrated in Russia in the 17th century to elect Michael Romanov as Tsar and in Japan in the 18th century to restore the Meiji emperor. In England, an almost similar volition invited William and Mary to sit on the throne in the 16th century, and France reverted to monarchy under Napoleon Bonaparte when the French being frustrated by the disorder of the revolution, wished to restore the old system.

Today, your glorious past is crushed under the burdens of poverty and overpopulation. Today, your future is largely hinged on foreign aid and investment, while your politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and intellectuals scramble to secure their own fortunes. Are you caught in the bum rap of history, my country? Is it one of those periodic turns of history when a nation declines in luck and vigor and faces disappointments? Perhaps like the seasons of human life nations and countries have birth, growth, periods of vigor, then decline and death. Toynbee constructed the cyclical theory of civilizations when one civilisation declines and dies so that another civilization can rise from its ashes. Ibn-Khaldun and Giovanni Battista Vico constructed similar theories at an interval of four hundred years that civilizations rise up in vigor, flourish, mature and

then fall into decadence at periodic intervals in the manner the screensaver blocks a computer from time to time?

Are you undergoing decadence, my country? Are you experiencing something moribund in your culture, a kind of metastasis of despair that occurs when a nation or a country or a society loses faith in its own future? How else can you tolerate when a government railroads special laws in order to undermine the existing ones? Take, for example, the tale of two Joyals in Feni. While the opposition Joyal is nabbed under the Public Safety Act, the government Joyal remains at large even after claiming possession of unauthorized arms. Take for example, the clashes between Awami League activists in Mirpur. While the government nails opposition activists at the slightest provocation, nobody was arrested in that incident. Take for example, the trampling of six women in a college by Chhatra League workers. The government has not even tried to identify the culprits, let alone arresting them.

It will not be too much to say that your future has been lost to the Mephistophelean deals. Your citizens are guilty of simony; they want to make profits out of the sacred thing; their own conscience. One of your foremost writers recently sat in for a hunger strike with his family and friends to protest against what many called "fundamentalism." Although popularly used for religious excesses, fundamentalism is basically

adherence to any set of basic ideals or principles. What fundamentalism is involved in the issue of naming the buildings of a university, which has been mainly sustained by the internal conflicts of the ruling party stalwarts? As a writer, it would have been more appropriate for him to unearth the political conspiracies behind this issue.

But he chose to act, as Julian Benda writes in *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, to stimulate the realism of people instead of acting as its check.

Realism is one thing most elusive within your territory, my country. If one speaks against the pro-liberationist or *rajakar*. If one speaks against the fundamentalists, one is an infidel. Again, if one speaks against the government, one is a reactionary. If one speaks against the opposition, one is a conservative. Once patriotism was love of you, my country, and people wanted to die for that love. Now, you will find nothing but self-love amongst your people, who die of crime and violence in desperate bids to promote their own interests.

Quo vadis, my country? Is it my destiny to live as meaninglessly for you as to die senselessly? George Bernard Shaw warns us, "You'll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of human race." But the opposite is happening with you, my country. You are getting increasingly disquiet as our love for you wanes. I, for one, is having difficulty to sort out which is what? Should I seek love of you and find tranquility of the inner world? Or, should I seek self-love and face turmoil of the outer world? Tell me where am I going, because you, my country, encompass both worlds.