The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Sunday, April 9, 2000

HR Commission in a Bind

WE certainly excel in the art of making a normal thing sound like a big dream because of putting it on hold for too long. The still missing Human Rights Commission is a case in point. As if the idea at the subconscious level has been to keep the options open for human rights violations or sweep things under the carpet lest some skeletons should drop off the cupboard.

What an agenda it was to have put off the establishment of a human rights commission based on an appropriate law which we were required to do in terms of the basic principles of our Constitution. let alone the Universal Human Rights Declaration of the United Nations.

While internationally our standing went down because of an incurable dithering on the issue despite our declining human rights records, clamours were heard inside the country for setting up a human rights commission at the earliest. The Prime Minister gauged the prevailing mood and promised to set up a human rights commission sooner than later. A bill was duly drafted in late 1997 and it even went on to receive the approval of the Cabinet in principle in April, 1999. Subsequently referred to the cabinet committee for review it finally landed on the Home Ministry's turf. Vital provisions of the bill appear close to being scuttled there.

The Home Ministry seems averse to 'the broad definition of human rights' in the draft bill. It does not take kindly to the prospect of the commission conducting investigation - suo moto or upon an application by an aggrieved person. But the draft law has basically defined human rights as the rights guaranteed in the State's Constitution, those enshrined in international human rights instruments ratified by Bangladesh and those that are enforceable through any court of the country. So, where is the vagueness about it?

To us the heart of the matter is this: we are not setting up an institution that is unique to our country. All we need to do is to follow others in getting a truly independent human rights commission for ourselves. Let's not allow a big thing to be a casualty of petty thinking.

Tele Tyranny

THE fact that telephone installation charge in I the country is the highest in the world certainly adds to the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board's ever-growing list of dubious distinctions. What with such nagging problems as infrastructure inadequacy, poor maintenance, corrupt management and the like, the board still remains possibly one of the most sought after utility service organisations in the globe, so suggests the number of pending applications some 150,000 - for new telephone connections. Given an extremely high subscription rate, the highest in South Asia, it adds up to a sorry tale of an underperforming telecommunication sector.

Telecommunications has never been the country's forte and still isn't. Ever growing bulk of applications for new telephone lines only exposes our poor performance on the infrastructure development front. The failure, however, has been a blessing for the BTTB; for it allows the board to get away with such a stupendous price for its services. Not only that, it has also allowed them the handle to use exorbitant increase of fees to "control the registered demand for telephone." It's ultimately the people who pay the price for the state's failure to provide them with one of the most important utility services. That's not the end of the story, however. From the top notch in the BTTB administration down to the linemen at the field level, there are allegations of rampant corruption; and on this count, too, the subscribers suffer. Over-billing is just one of the irritants in this regard.

In this era of information technology, telephone is no longer a luxury but a necessity. The BTTB, therefore, should be obliged to deliver on demand. If the state-owned enterprise is not adequately equipped, then the private sector should be allowed to join in. Encouragingly, a deal with WorldTel for installation of 300,000 new lines holds a promise for improvement in the overall situation. We only expect the expansion effort would not end there. At the same time, the government should start having serious thoughts on relieving the subscribers of the heavy burden of high installation and subscription charges.

Gas Hiccup

large number of households were caught napping by stoppage of gas supply on Friday. In some areas suffering was long, starting from the peak period when meals are generally cooked for the family.

That there would be disruption in certain areas of the city due to modification works in the Tejgaon Town Bordering Station was earlier notified by the company, but it proved inadequate in the end. And the areas not covered by the notice should not have come under the crunch which proved embarrassing as well as irritating for the thousands of gas users. According to newspaper reports supply was to remain suspended for 24 hours mainly on the east and north-eastern parts of the city comprising such densely populated areas as Nandipara, Basabo, Goran, Sabujbag, Malibagh, Gulshan, Banani, etc. But in actual fact, it encompassed more areas of the city, causing enormous hardship to numerous households. In recent times low pressure of gas at peak hours has been causing a lot of problems for the users and the situation was confounded by Friday's stoppage of supply. There may be difference of opinion about the correct approach in such cases but one thing must be ensured at all costs: the people need to be informed repeatedly of the timings of the withdrawal as well as of supply areas coming under the exercise. It may be done through radio, television, newspapers and also miking in the areas. The users must also reciprocate by taking pre-cautions in time to tide over any temporary dislocation in supply.

Nawaz Sharif: The Verdict

by Harun ur Rashid

It may tend to complicate the politics in Pakistan. There is a view that Sharif could be regarded as "hero" by some section of the people and his continued presence in the jail will be a "thorn" on the military regime. Sharif could be a powerful voice from jail to unsettle the military regime. Nawaz Sharif is expected to continue through his wife Kulsum and relatives to focus on General Musharraf's conduct in the coming months. However, some say that Nawaz Sharif is neither a hero nor is eliminated from the political scene.

come out of this difficult time." It appears that the verdict did not satisfy either side for different reasons. The Government prosecutor wanted death sentence for Sharif while the defence lawyer expected his acquittal. Chief public prosecutor Raja Quereshi who demanded death penalty said that he was considering an appeal against the lesser punishment of life imprisonment which is 25-year jail in Pakistan.

The defence lawyer Manzoor Malik said that an appeal would be filed at the Sindh High Court and he seems to be confi-

dent of Sharif's acquittal. Where does the verdict leave it in so far as the domestic and international scene concerned

It appears that the imposition of lesser penalty has provided an air credibility to the judicial system of Pakistan as everyone feared the worst. Pak-Allah (God willing) we will istan had a record of hanging a

former Prime Minister Bhutto in 1979 under the military regime. There is a view that the response from the major powers on the sentence of life imprisonment is likely to be a low-key affair.

First death penalty would have provoked stronger reaction, secondly the co-accuseds were acquitted and thirdly the judicial process has not yet been exhausted, Mr. Javed Jabbar, a special adviser to General Musharraf in an interview with BBC called the trial fair. The Commonwealth Secretary General Don Mckinnon (a former Foreign Minister of New Zealand) was reported to have been critical of the trial itself on the ground that an elected Prime Minister was put on the dock by an extra-constitutional government in Pakistan.

On the domestic scene it may tend to complicate the politics in Pakistan. There is a view



that Sharif could be regarded as "hero" by some section of the people and his continued pres-

ence in the jail will be a "thorn" on the military regime. Sharif could be a powerful voice from jail to unsettle the military regime. Nawaz Sharif is expected to continue through his wife Kulsum and relatives to focus on General Musharrafs conduct in the coming months. However, some say that Nawaz Sharif is neither a hero nor is eliminated from the political

A view prevails that the presence of Sharif in prison from a wealthy industrialist family from the Punjab, is likely to alienate the majority of the people of the Punjab as the time elapses and here lies the danger. The Punjab is the most populous province and is the granary of Pakistan. The leaders of the Punjab have been playing the dominant role in the political scene in Pakistan A few observers believe that the situation may to a certain extent depend on how the Punjabi top military officials view Sharif's imprisonment in the days ahead

Chief Executive General Musharraf found out during his recent visit to South-east Asia that every leader advised him to restore democracy in Pakistan. Thailand, Malaysia and Singaporean leaders told him that he should bring back democratic government in the country. The days of military regime is gone and no one tends to support extra-constitutional government even the motivations could be to establish "genuine" democracy and fight corruption in the country. Even Pakistan's old ally USA has now distanced itself from the military regime.

There is a view that General Musharraf's attempt to make of Sharif an example of his commitment to eliminate corruption and terrorism may rebound on his administration because many of the elite groups in Pakistan could be guilty of such actions and they roam freely on the streets in Pakistan. One may find an element of paradox and injustice in such a situation.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Syrian-Israeli Peace Talks in Doldrums

by A S M Nurunnabi

For all their military might, most Israelis yearn for symbols of acceptance. Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Jordan's King Hussain and now Yasser Arafat appreciated the crucial role of public opinion, with all its fickleness and sentimentality, in Israeli Peace-making. The Syrians seem oblivious to it and look more to America's mediation initiatives.

TS President Bill Clinton and Syrian President Hafez al Assad met in Geneva on March 26 last to explore ways of restarting the stalled peace talks with Israeli. After the meeting, lasting more than three hours, the Middle East peace prospects appeared dimmer as the two leaders failed to put the stalled peace gaps between Israel and Syria remained too wide to permit an immediate restart of negotiations between the two countries suspended since January last.

ORMER Pakistani Prime

Minister Nawaz Sharif

(52) was jailed for life on

6th April after he was found

guilty of hijacking and

terrorism. He was found "not

guilty" of attempted murder and

kidnapping, while his six co-

accused including Sharif's

brother Shahbaz (the former

Premier of the Punjab) were

fiscation of Sharif's entire

property. Judge Rahmat Hus-

sein Jafri ordered Sharif to pay

2 million rupees compensation

to those aboard the PIA plane

and fined an additional one

million rupees. The sentence, it

is believed, will go through the

process of appeal in two stages

-- first the High Court of Sindh

and thereafter the Supreme

Court of Pakistan, the highest

as the sentence was read out

Sharif's family, who had been

reading verses from the Holy

shouting "Long Live Nawaz

Sharif'. Some of Sharif's

women relatives wept as the

sentence was delivered. Mr.

Sharif told his family before

being led away to jail to have

faith in Allah and was reported

to have said: " Don't worry; ev-

erything will be all right. Insha

Quoran, leapt from their seats

Media reports indicated that

judiciary.

The Court also ordered con-

acquitted of all four charges.

spokesman said the two leaders had reviewed" the obstacles which Israel put and is still putting in front of the resumpfor resuming negotiations must be an Israeli commitment to withdraw fully from the Golan Heights it occupied in the 1967 Middle East war.

Prime Minister, the plodding way, the referendum might not. pace of the Syrian-Israeli talks During earlier negotiations so far had been somewhat an advantage. After all, if a "Golan for peace' deal were finalised without much delay and Baraks took it to his country for a referendum he promised, he would very likely lose in view of the prevailing mood in that country. Some 150,000 anti-withdrawal activists singing in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv last January was an impressive demonstration of the Prime Minister's domestic problem. The organisers insisted that their movement transcended party politics reflecting broad public sympathy for the 17,000 settlers in the Golan Heights, some of whom have been there for more than 30 years ever since Israel captured it from

Israel's demands include extensive limits on Syrian forces right across the Golan plateau and much of the way to Damascus, monitoring and verification arrangements, including a continued Israeli presence in a ground surveillance station on peace track. The Palestinians

top of Mount Hermon, which would be controlled by the Americans, full diplomatic relations, trade and tourism ties. and Syrian curbs on the Hizbullah resistance movement once Israel withdraws from south Lebanon. A lot of this was un-derstood to be attainable, provided the two sides could agree on where the borders should be. talks on track. The US said the So far they have not, Syria wants a withdrawal to the June 4th 1967 line. Israel indicates it is prepared to pull back to the international border set by Britain and France in 1923. The Syrian presidential differences are small but significant. For instance, in 1967 Syria was sitting on the edge of the Sea of Gallilee. The 1923 border ran a bit to the east and tion of talks. He repeated As- Barak publicly pledged against sad's insistence that the basis allowing Syrian soldiers splashing in the Sea of Gallilee

But some members of Barak's Labour Party have worried that even if the negotia-For Ehud Barak, the Israeli tions eventually go Barak's Barak's team pointed to what they saw as the impolitic coldness that Syria's Foreign Minister, Farouk Shara, radiated in the talks. Barak said these "matters are of no import" compared with the issues of substance. Barak was rationally right. But national calculations are the only ones that influence public opinion, especially in the supercharged atmosphere of a first-ever referendum in a politically and ideologically divided society.

> For all their military might, most Israelis yearn for symbols of acceptance. Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Jordan's King Hussain and now Yasser Arafat appreciated the crucial role of public opinion, with all its fickleness and sentimentality, in Israeli Peace-making. The Syrians seem oblivious to it and look more to America's mediation initiatives.

There is also more criticism of Barak from within his own camp, concerning the other suspected that they were somewhat shoved to one side while the focus previously was on Syria. This misgiving of the Palestinians has lately been partly allayed by the recent 6. per cent transfer of West Bank land by Israel to the Palestini-

Some Israelis, however think that Barak might do well to submit a comprehensive peace package, made up of accords with Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians, to a single ref erendum. In the opinion of watchers of ME situation, far from galvanizing supporters of West Bank and Golan settlers into a united opposition, this approach by presenting one sweeping choice would unite the moderates and isolate the hardcore of anti-peace ideologues.

The pro-peace campaign in Israel has lately faced other troubles: the silencing of its most popular and respected spokesman, President Ezer Weizman who was on the verge of resigning after disclosures that he received money form a foreign businessman while serving as a minister or Knesset member in the late 80s and early 90s. After the disclosure. in a convention-defying interview, Weizman said he would campaign for peace without inhibition, and threatened to resign if the referendum went against the government. The anti-withdrawal lobby demanded that he go at once for contravening the non-political nature of the presidency.

In case Weizman steps down, his likely successor will be Shimon Peres, who is a junior minister in Barak's government. No doubt Peres personifles the peace process but he lacks the common touch that has made Weizman loved beyond the peace camp.

The Israeli-Syrian talks, for the present, therefore seem to have been caught in doldrums and there is uncertainty about when they may get re-started, as lately opined by a spokesman of the Clinton administration.

The Future Should Not be Uncertain

by A Husnain

The politics of personal destruction needs urgent review, as tough development decisions lie ahead — for the benefit of the people. Decisions cannot be kept pending in a market-oriented development perspective. Enough political mileage has been garnered by living on the past... We are searching for profiles in courage. It is in short supply, and instant replacement is not possible.

potentiality to become a regional energy trading hub in South Asia. This allurement for a few hours. President East and the West had global significance. Therefore the government has to plan its longterm strategy carefully, to provide maximum service in the flowing outwards.

Political consensus on national issues have been stressed by the visiting dignitaries. US presidents may come and go. but so long the two political parties in Dhaka stick to their old-fashioned game of pungent rhetorics, the politicians themselves may be accused of hampering the development of the country. (In contrast, in the biography of President Clinton, his soft, compassionate approach was thought to be one the secrets of his political suc-

So the first need is development of local national political standards. The Code of Conduct has to be drafted, accepted, and followed in a sporting manner not done in three decades. Politics has to be conducted in a new modern way, which the investors and the masses under-

stand. Lack of political transparency has been bugging us since independence, and at present it is our greatest enemy. Our leadership has not yet been able to lick it, whatever the taste of the exercise. With the next general elec-

tions round the corner, the voters have to make up their mind which horses to bet upon, now that the performance index of both the parties are available

T is apparent to many, in- since the beginning of the last cluding foreign experts, that decade. Both must be prepared Bangladesh has the for lose erosive votes as a result of their rigid, negative stands; but the ruling party has more to lose, as Bengalees like change might have brought to Dhaka for the sake of change (anti-eseven the US President even if tablishment mentality); and fresh wounds and disappoint-Clinton paid a tribute to ments take longer to heal. The Bangladesh when he stressed in voters have the right to bring up Dhaka that this meeting of the a third party or force, to break up the bipolar politics. As to external affairs, there

are two hurdles, both involving big neighbour India. One is the half a century of the Kashmir SAARC region, thereafter conflict with Pakistan, which is not allowing SAARC to flower, and the other is the India's big-brother syndrome over the neighbouring smaller nations in the region. It is hoped . Clinton's visit to New Delhi would soften and reorient the inward vision of the Indian leadership, so that the outward vision towards the neighbours are seen more transparently. Religion has to remain in the background (as it should), and not interfere in the foreground; but the creeping effect of religion in global politics can neither be ignored nor dismissed.

The Hindu-Muslim equation, made more sensitive by the direct or indirect introduction of religion in politics in 'secular' India, as India's two neighbours on two sides are Muslim-majority countries. The US approach to the Muslim world is in the melting pot at the present moment, and no clear signals are likely to be available till the Palestine problem is solved (like the Irish

GoB's thrust in the IT sector is commendable, and US technical assistance may be welcomed, to build up a source alternative to the neighbour's mighty foundation (competition is a healthy sign

in democratic trading). Another issue which went into low key during the visit is taking a clear long-term stance on the development of alternative port facilities in Bangladesh; while the foreign container site issue near Chittagong port reaching an embarrassing stage for the government. The fact cannot be ignored that NE India need alternative sea outlets, and Calcutta port is clogging, facing a slow death. (The long-term effects of the Farakka barrage has to be reviewed by independent international agencies).

Nepal and the sub-Himalayan countries will come into the limelight with their hydroelectric potentialities, once scientifically surveyed and accessed. It means the regional energy market will be changing for the next few decades, providing vending problems based on static and stale policies. Has Dhaka done some home work? (The US is providing some funds for such studies.) The future Rooppur nuclear power station may look nice on paper, but the marketing prospects have to outlive the average life of the plant. Not only technical risks are involved, but also economic via-

The politics of personal destruction needs urgent review, as tough development decisions lie ahead - for the benefit of the people. Decisions cannot be kept pending in a market-oriented development perspective. Enough political mileage has been garnered by living on the past. The coming talks with the donors in Paris is going to be tough. The present is weak, and the future is uncertain. Wither our trusted leadership? We are searching for profiles in courage. It is in short supply, and instant replacement is not

To the Editor ...

Who is to blame?

Sir, I had thought that the put of these 'Days'? Unforturuling party's rhetoric had reached its nadir when the Prime Minister made certain objectionable remarks about the Leader of the Opposition in the Jatiyo Sangsad earlier. But now the Home Minister appears to have taken the political attacks even to a greater depth. To suggest that Begum Khaleda Zia "and her rajakar associates" prevented (DS 3 April) the US President from visiting the National Mausoleum at Savar is both preposterous and amusing.

The entire nation had felt disappointed at the cancellation of the US President's visit to Savar and Joypura. The Home Minister and his Party, under whose aegis President Clinton visited this country, should be responsible enough to accept the blame for their own ineptitude.

Syed Hamde Ali Choudhury

One more

anniversary!

Sir, Since Bangladesh is one the most advanced nations in the ritualistic observance of anniversaries and 'Days', it is expected that from now on March 20 would be solemnly observed as the first visit of a

US president to the country! Why are we so fond of rituals, sparesly observed in the industrialised countries? Is it a sort of escapism, or a substitu-

tion of unrealised dreams? What has been the tangible outnately, not much research documents are available on this topic. No endowments are forthcoming. Is the attraction inversely proportional to some economic yardstick?

The political parties, when in power, appear to be more

days to observe rituals not observed before - beyond the traditional items. An analysis of the past 36 months would reveal the extent of the state observance of anniversaries. We have two types of flooding - water, and anniversaries!

more sober and spartan in its

keen to search out additional coverage, the electronic media (still tightly state-controlled) seem to go gaga over the number of minutes devoted to each item in the news bulletins and special programmes. What has come out of such devotional exercises? Nobody is interested in looking for the relevant re-While the print media is search data. The speech-makers and the writers bring out the

Thank you

Sir, During February, I had the privilege of participating in the World Health Organisation's 9th International Conference on Safe Communities, which was excellently organised by Professor Talukder, Dr Fazlur Rahaman and Dr Sanchoy Kumar Chanda from the Institute of Child and Mother Health (ICMH) Matuail, Dhaka.

This was my first visit to your country and I wanted to share my impressions with you. First, the people I met in Bangladesh were the warmest and kindest people you would ever want to meet. They were genuinely interested in finding out about where we came from and why we were

Since returning to Australia, I have been inundated with questions about Bangladesh from amily and colleagues. We would all agree that there are many obstacles to the development of community safety in your country to be overcome, but my main memories are of a beautiful. culturally rich country with so much potential and a very hard working, friendly people who were delightful to be with.

Second, the conference was an extremely valuable forum for exchange and learning regarding the prevention of injury to young people in different settings around the world.

In the excellent facilities of the ICMH, we were 250 professionals from some 19 countries, all

willing to share and learn from each other. I have come away with new knowledge, new contacts and a host of e-mail addresses and web pages from which to better enhance the work of Noarlunga Health Services, an organisation serving the health needs of the community here in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, South

Already these contacts have initiated exchanges of safety information and programmes and

will hopefully, in the end, translate into collaborative, long lasting partnerships. We have so much to learn from each other. My sincere thanks to the Government of Bangladesh for its vision in investing in the safety of all young people in this conference. Thank you Bangladesh for sharing your kindness and friendship to those of us who will now

Stephen Parker Community Safety Consultant Noarlunga Health Services

carry you in our thoughts.

We are delightful to receive your letter and your kind words about us. Your positive reaction to our development efforts is a welcome contrast to what is usually written about us. We hope you keep up contacts with your Bangladeshi counterparts.

dusty old files, and serve the 'old wine in new bottle'. Perhaps even the participants yawn in-

wardly. The man-hours thus 'lost' every year must be in billions. If even 25 per cent of this time could be salvaged, the GDP might have gone up by a few dec-imal points. This brings up another soul-searching question: are we more efficient during the leisure hours compared to the efficiency during the working hours (the weakness for the Bangali adda)? Perhaps that is one of the deep psychological reasons why the 5-day working week is not being altered. In many developed countries, due to continued recessive cycles, the weekly working hours are being reduced continuously. The heartless BBC 24-hour news service hardly mention any anniversary (local, national, regional, international and global).

The inventor of new anniversaries should look forward to a national award, at least in Dhaka!

Allf Zabr Dhaka

"PMO, Peer and a Children's Park"

Sir, I would like to commend you for your above titled edito-

rial of April 1, 2000. It is indeed a cause of both shame and concern that the office of the country's chief executive should be belittled by the unscrupulous use of officials in

dealing with public land like asking the Dhaka Mayor to hand over land earmarked for a children's park to a peer for their own name and gain. You have rightly mentioned in parenthesis that there must be a strict procedure for dealing with public land and also hailed the Mayor being firm in his admirable decision and not yielding to pressure. In this context I would like to point out that perhaps it is time for us to think about how to prevent handing over public land and open spaces which are the lungs of any city as political rewards, building unnecessary markets, public housing, squatters, etc. The only way to get around doing this is by introduction of protective legislation. For example the Royal Parks of London (Regent's Park, Hyde Park, St. James Park, Hampstead Heath, etc.) and the Commons of UK are all protected by Acts of Parliament.

It is now up to our Ministry of Public Works and the Law Ministry to formulate an appropriate bill to table before the Members of Parliament to protect these declining spaces be-fore it is too late. Our young generation bears a heavy burden of responsibility for protecting and preserving whatever natural resources we have. Let not the future progeny blame us for failing in our sacred and national duty.

Dr. Omar Faruque Yusuf Associate Professor of Surgery Chittagong Medical College & Hospital