

Thieves or Liars?

ACCORDING to our present Prime Minister, the former PM, that is Khaleda Zia, is a thief who took at least US\$ 5 million in kickbacks in one deal during her tenure while purchasing Airbus planes for our national airlines, Bangladesh Biman. And according to our former Prime Minister, the present one, that is Sheikh Hasina, is a thief because she took at least Tk 400 crore as commission while purchasing the MIG 29s for our Air Force. So, if we are to believe two of our most popular, most powerful and by far the most respected of leaders, then both of them are thieves. If, on the contrary, what one is saying about the other are not FACTS then they are telling lies about each other. So, the sad conclusion is that either they are THIEVES or LIARS. **And all this is from their own statements.** Is that how these two supreme leaders of our political arena would like to be thought of by our people? Worst still, what are our youngsters and children suppose to make from all this?

Those who belong to neither AL nor BNP, and who constitute by far the majority of the people of the country, are extremely saddened and worried at this turn of events. So far it was confrontational and acrimonious. **Now it is vulgar and personal.**

If we take the results of the two most recent elections, that of 1991 and 1996, it becomes clear that people have tremendous faith in both the AL and the BNP. In the first election these parties polled slightly above 30 per cent votes each. Then in 1996 election AL and BNP got 37 and 34 per cent of votes, respectively. This clearly shows that voters wanted to give power to both parties, one after another, without really rejecting the other. This also shows that people hold both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia in very high esteem and want to see them both either in the government or in the opposition. The personal vilification becomes all the more tragic because both are unwilling to provide proof of their claims. The PM has rightly thrown a challenge to the BNP chief who avoided doing that by saying "proof will be provided at the proper time", probably meaning when she comes to power. PM is also guilty of the same by not making public any evidence supporting her claims of Khaleda Zia's corruption.

There is a general expectation from leaders of the level of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia that a certain degree of sophistication and decency will be maintained. On the contrary it is getting worse. The biggest losers are the two leaders themselves. Stop this mudslinging or prove your case before the courts and the public.

Public Hospitals in Poor Health

T HURSDAY'S meeting between the health minister and chiefs of the leading state-run hospitals highlighted a fact that the people, especially the poor and the marginalised, are quite aware of: the country's public healthcare system itself is in poor health. Years of neglect from the government combined with systemic inadequacies of their own have rendered most of these hospitals dysfunctional. Annual allocation for each of them is often inconsequential compared to their needs and it shows in perennial shortage of supply in medicines — even the commonly used ones —, food, surgical equipment and other accessories. Another compelling inadequacy is in the number of doctors, nurses and paramedic staff. To top these off, there is mismanagement and corruption, not to speak of external evil influences in the shape of extortion, encroachment on hospital lands etc. The overall scenario is poignant enough to frighten the service-seekers, especially those who have no other option to avail.

Encouragingly, however, the health minister, as a sequence of events suggests, appears determined to usher in an era of change to the public healthcare system. Already, to shore up the district hospitals and thana health complexes across the country, he has initiated a stricter policy that makes it mandatory for each and every doctor on the state pay-roll to serve at the outstations for at least three years. Also, he has made efforts to speed up implementation of Health and Population Sector Programme (HPS) that appears to have lost its way in the bureaucratic tangle. Although welcome, it is however not enough. The pitiable state that our public sector healthcare system is in can only be overcome by drastic measures.

For a start, the health ministry, now that it is made aware of the problems, must do something about raising budgetary allocation for the leading hospitals. Once the financial side is taken care of, it should pay attention to other infrastructural needs. Whatever course it decides to take, it needs to act as soon as possible; for, related to its action, or inaction, is the healthcare needs of a vast section of the populace.

Benches in Police Custody?

T HERE are a lot of stories about police bravery as well as brutality and at the same time about their intelligence and foolhardiness etched on their performance. And once in a while we come across an exceptional story that brightens up our mundane and stressful life.

Such a news item was offered to the readers of *Prothom Alo* as a May Day gift, a snippet as it were, originating from the Nimtala bus stand of Kaliganj police station in the southwestern district of Jhenidah. The local police there 'took into custody' a couple of benches perched in front of a tea stall. The 'offence' of these lifeless furniture is that 'terrorists' regularly sat on them. The benches were kept by the police for about a week. The police however could not say which provision of the law they invoked to 'arrest' the benches; but they were plumb embarrassed when the question was put to them. This is a very interesting story of block-headedness playing pranks with the law of the land while the terrorists in flesh and blood went scot-free. Be that as it may, the owner of the benches must thank his stars that he was not harassed after all.

THE Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) recently organised its annual council meeting in Ghana. Held at the premises of the University of Cape Coast, it was attended by as many as 23 vice-chancellors (VCs) from different Commonwealth universities representing their respective associations. I was there during 15-20 April representing Bangladesh as Chairman of the Association of Universities of Bangladesh (AUB).

It may be mentioned that AUB comprises of 12 public universities. The council meeting took off to a good start and could be termed fairly successful at the end. ACU top-notchers like Michael Gibbons, Garland Dorothy and other team members worked very hard to see the success. The VC of the University of Cape Coast and his staff and students threw in their best for making our short stay astoundingly pleasant and peaceful.

There was a brief session on the perennial problems that universities are confronted with. Each VC was allotted 5-10 minutes to deliberate on problems and prospects of their respective institutions. Quite obviously, the time given was too little to talk about the plethora of problems plaguing the universities. Again, the problems aired by the VCs varied widely among universities. However, the common problem among Commonwealth Universities appeared to be the dwindling government grants to universities. There seems to have been no disagreement on the notion that, of late, governments have increasingly become apathetic to fund universities. Limited resources and unlimited wants — the basic economic problem

The 'Vulnerable' Vice-Chancellors

Unless governments pour more resources to public universities and at the same time, universities also themselves undertake reform measures, VCs are going to remain vulnerable as ever. Only replacement of VCs will not help. The only thing that will possibly help stem the rot is the change in attitude towards the highest citadel of learning.

that we are taught in first year economics class — tend to make the expected functions of VCs vulnerable in the face of surging demands from different quarters.

In private conversations with VCs especially those attending from developing countries, I realized that it is not only in Bangladesh but also in other countries that VCs remain prone to such problems. Since Ghana lies in Africa — a continent about which I knew little — I wanted to know more about the countries of this region, especially the condition of their higher seats of learning. I approached Rame Shabe (alias Rames) of the university of Lesotho. Lesotho is a landlocked country like Bhutan and like Bangladesh, has a big neighbour, South Africa. A country of the size of Sri Lanka with a population of 2.5 million, Lesotho has only one University. Rames complained that some teachers of his university are always involved in "group politics" to create chaos and they are least concerned about academics. Student unrest tends to cripple normal activities. A man of good health throughout his whole life, Mr. Rames has now developed diabetes and high blood pressure. His wife who accompanied him informed me that university related problems had made her husband's life miserable. The University of Lesotho VC hinted that teachers demand more money although they do not

want to teach in more classes and students do not want to pay an extra penny but demand better services anyway.

Prof CA Abraham (Cecil), is the Rector and VC of the University of the Western Cape. An ANC activist during the apartheid regime, Cecil was forced to spend most of his years abroad. He taught at different universities in Canada and returned home at the call of Nelson Mandela. Discussion with him about the situation

cant. Cecil continued to say, "but I am sure that the degree of seriousness of our problem is much higher".

Cecil then cited two episodes to give me an idea of the gravity of the situation. One of the VCs recently fled from South Africa and took refuge in a neighbouring country. Growing opposition from students and teachers coupled with corruption charges levelled against him forced him to abandon his post. The gentleman is now teaching

measures that go to change the status quo are also met with violent opposition and it is often the VC who has to take the full brunt of it.

I then picked up Cecil's comment on vacancies. "You have a number of vacancies of VCs and we have a number of aspirants in our country who are vying for the posts of VCs. Why don't you 'import' some VCs from Bangladesh?" — I said jokingly. "Yes, most welcome. We are going to advertise very soon and let your colleagues apply for the posts" — Cecil seriously suggested. The VC of the Moi University of Kenya also described few incidents that tend to imply that a peaceful campus is almost like a day-dream in Kenya. Campuses in Cameroon are relatively calm but are like a volcano which might erupt any time.

So, VCs are vulnerable everywhere. The underlying reason for this is the steep fall in government allocation to universities and a surge in revenue expenses. To get out of the impasse, universities need to undertake various reform measures although they are not likely to be welcome by the incumbents. The main concern of VCs is how to raise funds while the opponents tend to oppose it. As a result campuses hardly remain calm due to continuing confrontations. As to student politics, I was told that in all the universities, student politics is mostly related to their own problems within the boundary of the campus. They

do have links with mainstream political parties but they always assign top priority to academics. There is infighting too but no gun shots or extortion within the campus. "What about the situation in your country?" they asked me. I mentioned of gun fights, extortion, rapes and killings in some of our campuses. "God bless you Bayes" — they said as they said good bye to me.

The private universities are not members of the ACU and so any account to that effect could hardly be collected. However, discussions with the learned VCs representing public universities in that council meeting tend to show that private universities are not rated very high especially in the developing world. There are lot of allegations about the accountability and transparency of these universities. Their quality of education is also not beyond question. In other countries also, only the richer class can afford to be educated in these universities.

When I left Bangladesh for Ghana, I presumed that possibly I was the only one who had more headaches than the head could bear. But I found some other people who could relate to my problems as they also appeared to face similar problems. Unless governments pour more resources to public universities and at the same time, universities also themselves undertake reform measures, VCs are going to remain vulnerable as ever. Only replacement of VCs will not help. The only thing that will possibly help stem the rot is the change in attitude towards the highest citadel of learning.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



the university and some of his frank remarks revealed that South African VCs are also facing a lot of problems. I was told that, at present there are vacancies of VCs at 10 out of 21 public universities in South Africa. "Why so many vacancies?" I asked. "It is because none dares to face the 'doomsday'". There are agitations, corruption charges, teachers' strike — all these make a VC's life always vulnerable" Cecil told me. I told him that similar kind of problems are prevalent in other countries also and these shouldn't be the reasons for the posts of VCs to lie

in a neighbouring country. Citing another example, Cecil told me that he met one of the VCs in London who went there to buy a gun to protect himself. The employees of the university had threatened to kill him. Cecil further opined that teachers and students hardly welcome reform measures and so whenever the authorities come up with plans for changing the rules and regulations, they take to violence. For example, he said, in the face of drastic fall in government revenues, one needs to enhance various fees of students and also get rid of excess staff. All these reform

It's the Economy

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the company of the last SBP Governor and the present Secretary General, Finance. Our problems stem from failing to collect the quantum of revenues we should and then spending far more frivolously than what we actually collect. Professor Stephen Leacock's hero used to jump on his horse and gallop off in all directions, our financial sector continues to operate on the same concept, without any real planning or direction, chugging on mainly on the momentum of the yesterdays.

Do not look at the booming Stock Markets, they are manipulated at the government's (and lead stock market players') will by pumping in money from NIT, ICP, the national commercial banks (NCBs), etc, they do not reflect stark reality. The state of the private banks gives a far more genuine reading of the economy, barring for exceptions on the fingertips of one hand, the rest are in trouble. One expects that by raising the requirements of capital, the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) will force some mergers and acquisitions among the weaker financial institutions. However that is only a peripheral initiative, what is needed are pragmatic and tangible moves to break out of this logjam.

Collecting more taxes, easier said than done! Year after year we have failed to reach our projected revenues. The simple

mathematics is that 1.5 million people cannot continue to be an "Atlas" bearing the burden of 130 million people. For that matter neither can 3.5 million people be but at least the numbers would be better, with the doubling of revenues the deficits would be wiped out. We may even begin to repay some of our increasing national debt. But how do we collect 2.5 million people into the net? Every now and then we hear about tax

statistics about the houses which should be surveyed. Moinuddin Khan, former Chairman CBR and an ex-banking colleague of the present Finance Minister, has returned to Pakistan less than a week back after completing his contract in Saudi Arabia. Will Shaukat pick up the telephone and call Moinuddin Khan in Lahore on Tel 6655042 to understand how PROJECT FOXHUNT was conceived and was in the process of

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

survey teams that never seem to take off. In the circumstances one cannot be blamed for urging the military hierarchy to remember Capt Liddell Hart and his "Indirect Strategy and Deep Penetration".

Pakistan has 11.6 million houses with electricity, 10 million directly with WAPDA and 1.6 million with KESC. Obviously these are either owned and/or rented by somebody. At least 4.5 houses are constructed of such quality that prima facie the occupants can be assessed as able to pay taxes. From the electricity, telephone, gas and water bills a financial picture can be developed that will produce

being implemented when Moin was sacked as Chairman CBR?

The survey teams have to be deployed only for verifying the data compiled and analysed, not act like foxes in a chicken coop, spreading apprehension and disturbance. What one needs is a few computers and persons capable of keying in data, add a bit of sophisticated software to it and well before economic apocalypse puts out the lights one will have 2.5 million (and more) individuals in the tax net. That should add Rs. 200-250 billion more to revenues. National interest requires one to reach out beyond

the very limited capabilities of one's cronies, it requires a sincerity of intent that no amount of smart public relationing can camouflage for an extended period of time.

One should treat Income Tax and Wealth Tax Returns as well as GST very much in a mercantilist way in the manner Insurance companies deal with clients. Let's say a car is insured for Rs. 1 million @ 5 per cent premium i.e. the individual pays Rs. 50,000 premium. If the car is stolen then the maximum liability of the insurance company is for Rs. 1 million. Similarly the Wealth Tax return should be made a necessary document when filing an FIR for any loss, similarly the GST payment should act as the indicator for the loss. If a man pays GST for goods worth only Rs. 1 million, he cannot claim a loss in his FIR for more than a million. Similarly no police station in the country should register a loss of more than Rs. 1 million (the threshold for wealth tax) unless the person provides his wealth tax and shows the items lost have been declared by him or her. The insurance companies should also be bound by the wealth tax when taking out policies. How can someone have insurance for more than he has declared in his returns for each item?

And why attack the Baras only? Why not interdict the whole process? The biggest racket in this country is of old clothes, imported mainly from Japan. In Pakistan these are allowed duty free. Containers full of old clothes reach Karachi Port but are cleared in one of the up-country dry ports like Multan, Lahore, etc. They mostly have cartons of old

clothes as an outside layer but inside this "protective" layer they have electronics, electrical goods, crockery, cutlery, toys, etc. Since old clothes are duty free these containers are cleared without any government revenues.

As for old clothes, people in Pakistan use old clothes far less than in India. Since India has completely banned old clothes, the same shirt for Rs. 5 in Pakistan sells for Rs. 40 in India, almost 60-70 per cent is smuggled there. We are in fact spending our precious foreign exchange to clothe the Indian masses, they are conserving theirs to buy artillery shells to pound us with. So why go for the Baras? If the Finance or Interior Minister or anybody else with the authority (and inclination to do so) is reading this article, please pick up the telephone and freeze all containers of old clothes wherever they are. Then kindly use the Rangers (or the Army) to inspect these containers, the Customs officials being too corrupt to be trusted, with sincere respects for the honest ones (few and far between). Even though these containers are usually "switched" enroute to the dry ports, let's see what turns up!

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— but in an indirect way that does not upset the applecart by unnecessary confrontation that opens up fronts that this military regime needs as much as two left feet. As much as reforms are needed through the broad spectrum of all the institutions in Pakistan, the ultimate truth lies in the fact that its the economy that matter, its the economy that is vital ground!

OPINION

Can Ombudsman Deliver?

Abul M Ahmad

This is a pessimistic appraisal after going through the piece on the wishful dream on Ombudsman (DS April 27). The local environment and culture have not yet been attained to sustain successfully the post of an Ombudsman (too much instability at the foundation level). The Administrative foundation in under-developed countries cannot sustain novelties, where even to run the daily administration at a routine level is a huge strain. Why add to the options which won't work?

The main drawback is the poor, backward, infested, and subjective, political culture and standard prevailing for decades, which the Ombudsman cannot wipe out as if by magic (the combined mass of the bad system is too unwieldy to handle or process). Nothing will work normally in this country unless politicization, direct and indirect, is resisted by the political parties and the informed citizens.

The politicians are the main culprit in this shadow drama, and the two major political parties are not playing in public interest (talking of backdoor methods). The environment in the developed and industrialized countries is different, because the standard of living is sustainable, and the horizontal spread of corruption is contained due to less taxing moral and financial temptations; and because the citizens expect a higher standard of service in all sectors. We in the LDCs have to stoop down to the lowest levels of performance and ethics, due to the mad chase for money, regardless of the means to attain

The PARC reforms is going round and round in vicious circles; the judicial reforms have not seen the light of the day; decentralization is still a far cry; and the hold of the bureaucracy is as strong as ever (the politicians depend on them, and the latter know it).

Looks like we are headed for a civil disobedience movement, excited involuntarily (mass accumulated time-delay effect). Let us wait for the next general elections and its outcome (more still-born babies?).

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.

Judicial process in Bangladesh

Sir, Inheriting from British (but not British system as prevailing U.K.) imperial system which even incorporated anti people laws like Suppression of Terrorist Act, our judicial system has completely failed to deliver justice to the common people. Those lucky ones who could afford to get justice are those who could spend money by engaging eminent lawyers and fight for justice up to the level of Supreme Court as the Lower Courts in the district level are absolutely within the clutches of the Administrative set up that again is the legacy of the British.

The time has come for the completed and progressive reform of our legal system and it should, definitely, be in tune with the modern trend.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury Dhaka.

Bangladesh Railway

Sir, Bangladesh Railways had always been receiving step-motherly treatment on rehabilitation since the end of the World War II (1939-45), when its rolling stock was severely mauled and was overhauled in the war effort against the enemy forces, which had reached the eastern borders of British India (Burma and Manipur). Since then the railway has been limping, priority-wise.

Now as the road, surface transport and communication systems have improved considerably, the BR is running at a loss, and cannot attract economical payloads in passenger and goods traffic. A large number of official studies have been

lication of books as depicted in the article in the DS Focus page of April 23 (Thoughts on World Book Day), it is a fact that not enough publicity is forthcoming in two areas to project Bangladeshi literature at the international readers, through two subsidised programmes: (a) translation of selected Bangla literature into English (a world language), and (b) compilation of selected writings in English by Bangladeshi writers, residing at home