Dhaka, Thursday, May 11, 2000

Manpower Sinners COME of the ministries which come under fire for Otheir slack in dealing with malpractices under their jurisdiction have a set-piece reaction to such criticism. "Please furnish me with a specific instance of wrong-doing or supervisory lapse, I promise you action on it," would the ministries say

But when confronted with a bad laundry they won't clean it up.

with a sardonic smile.

Of all the ministries it is perhaps the Ministry of Labour and Employment which has a special flair for keeping the eyes shut to eye-openers howsoever optically searing these may be and being thickskinned towards any suggestion for compassion for the victims of deception.

Take for instance the 'manpower export' to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which over the years has had a large malcontent of dubious dealings of brokers, agents, labour contractors and companies with absolute impunity.

Were it not for a notice conscientiously served by a ruling party member to the relevant parliamentary committee underlining the plight of hundreds of Bangladeshis cheated with job promises in the KSA the latest scandal would have escaped inquiry. The ministry's failure to act on the specific details of malpractices furnished by the Bangladesh Mission in Saudi Arabia four months ago obviously induced the subsequent cheating incidents. Despatch of more men than required by the employing country, salary underpayments, treatment of employees like bonded labour with no free choice to leave recruiters since passports were taken away by them - all amount to barbaric exploitation of poor job seekers. Why is there no effective cross-checking of documents either at our end or the Saudi embassy end where visas are issued?

The Prime Minister's exhortations upon a delegation of the newly elected executive committee of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) on Tuesday were of generalised nature. Her speech did not contain a reference to the startling revelations of misdeeds in manpower export to Saudi Arabia which could have shed some light on the action her government contemplated to take on the issue.

There are three dimensions to the question: one, the human misery part of it; two, the slur brought on to the country's name; and three, the forebodings of goodwill erosion in manpower export which is huge foreign exchange earner for us.

The stakes being so high we urge the government to immediately set up a task force to identify the manpower exporters who brought the country good name and those who blackened our face so that an award-punishment policy helps streamline the

Care for the Adolescents

T UESDAY'S -dialogue on Adolescent Reproductive Health: A Challenge underlined societal indifference to the dire necessity of making aware some 30 million adolescents in the country of nutritional needs, do's and don'ts about sex and, most importantly, the ill-effects of marriage at an early age. Adolescent fertility is one of the highest in the world at 155 births per 1,000 women in the 15-19 years age group; proportion of women under 20 years of age giving birth every year is the highest at 66 per cent; and 40 per cent of over 44 per cent adolescents who suffer from any degree of ailments do not seek treatment. The situation is all the more grievous because of the society's unwillingness to change its mind-set that regards imparting knowledge on these issues, especially on reproductive health, to the teenagers a taboo. Unlike the developed and some developing countries, sexology is not even incorporated in the secondary and higher secondary curricula.

So, basically, the most difficult of the "multifaceted and interwoven challenges" to an overall improvement of the whole scenario lies in bringing about a change in our psyche, individually and socially. For a start, as the speakers at the dialogue unanimously agreed on, mothers and the female guardians should be educated and made aware of the needs, psychological and physical, of their adolescent wards. Education is of key importance here. The responsibility, therefore, rests on the policy-planners to figure out how best it can be spread around. Obviously, the resistance would come from within the society itself. The ultra-religious elements would surely raise a furore over any attempt to include sex education in the curriculum.

Nevertheless, given the gravity of the issue and its far-reaching implications, we must act and act fast. Of course, any decision on this should be consensual. First and foremost, therefore, a comprehensive awareness campaign should be launched and people from all walks of life should be made to understand why education on reproductive health is of key importance. The media, electronic and print, and the civil society organisations must come forward to give the government a helping hand in this regard. Some NGOs, as we understand, have already been on it for quite some time but now is the time to orchestrate the efforts.

On to Sierra Leone

THE United Nations has requested Bangladesh to send troops to the strife-torn west African state of Sierra Leone and Bangladesh has decided to respond to the request of the world body promptly. Sierra Leone has been passing through a difficult phase since the rebel Revolutionary United Front took around 500 United Nations peacekeepers hostage. The UN, in the meantime, has announced withdrawal of non-essential staff from the capital Freetown. The date of departure and the size of the contingent have not been finalised yet but from all accounts a battalion-strength, numbering around 800 troops, is likely to proceed to Freetown very

shortly. Sierra Leone already has a dozen Bangladeshi military observers and it's a great relief that none of them has been taken hostage by the rebels; nonetheless our concern for those in hostile hands knows no bound. The UN request reflects the confidence and faith the world body has had in the ca-

pability of Bangladeshi troops. We pride ourselves on the achievements of our troops under exceptionally difficult circumstances in Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo and many other places.

Portrait of a State

UP's biggest drawback is its size. It should have been divided into three parts as K.M. Panikkar had suggested in the States' Reorganisation Commission report in 1955. His argument that it was "essential for the successful working of a federation that the units should be fairly evenly balanced" was considered outrageous.

assembly or council member cannot take the oath of allegiance to the country and the constitution in Urdu. That this ficult to expect objectivity. rule was enforced by Govind much less justice. One does not Bhallabh Pant during the lifepin any hope on the machinery time of Jawaharlal Nehru and which was party to the demoli-Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has tion of the Babri Masjid and come as a shock to me. One does which has withdrawn cases not expect the BJP government against those involved in the to make any change because it massacre at Meerut. One feels so is an unalloyed RSS-run adhelpless. The Home Ministry ministration. The sanchalaks says that law and order is a are the links in districts. Colstate subject and the state uses lectors have to obey their order. the law and order machinery to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vaimplement its own communal jpayee, whose Lok Sabha conagenda. UP has made a mockery stituency is Lucknow, can act to of India's secular ethos. do away with the abominable ban on oath in Urdu. He will not

The Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) is still the most notorious force. It continues to be known for its parochial attitude. Members of minorities do not speak out against it, as they used to do in the past, because they have been silenced. Anyone raising his voice is clubbed down. Such a force comes in handy to a party which believes that the Hindu community as such and the upper castes are the real rulers.

This does not mean that the minorities are angels. Fundamentalism is rearing its head among them. A few desperadoes are trying to capture centrestage and making all types of promises if the community were to unite. Such a solution has been tried earlier and it has landed the community in more troubles. There is no alternative to secularism. When there is danger, there should be more

of it, not less. During the brief period I was

on the roads of Lucknow, I found travelling precarious. There are hordes of cars with screaming sirens and blinking red-lamps going up and down all the time. They belong to nearly one hundred ministers the state has and twice the number enjoying the same status. On the one hand the Vajpayee government says that one job of the Constitution Review

America's smile is important ance will be corrected. But UP but not at the expense of India's own interests. Khurana is correct when he says that the lifting of duty on scores of commodities was not so urgent when the WTO had laid down 2003 as the deadline. But he should know that one letter by US Commerce Secretary to N.K. Singh in the Prime Minister's Office acted like Open Sesame.

UP's biggest drawback is its size. It should have been divided

should be divided into four or five states so that every part gets attention. A chief minister does not find time during his five-year tenure to visit every district, nearly 100 of them now. UP has the example of Himachal Pradesh and Haryana before it. They made progress only because they were cut off from the large state of Punjab. The Vajpayee government would have done well if it had set up another States' Reorganisation Commission. It is creating three new states because of political pressures, not because of the need or merit. A commission could have studied the claims of various areas more methodically. Now many, who are demanding a state of their own, have not got the

chance to explain their case. It is undoubtedly an advantage to have compact and manageable units. The administration is more accessible to the people and there is a livelier sense of local needs and appreciation of local problems on the the negative. After a pause, he part of the government. A closer link between the electorate and its representatives helps to bring about a real unity of outlook and community of interests between the people and those charged with their governance. I wish UP would do something about conserving water. Conditions there are far

parts of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. But certain areas are feeling the scarcity. If proper steps are not taken today, the situation will be difficult tomorrow. New Delhi woke up late. Only three years ago did it constitute the Central Ground Water Authority and that too at the behest of the Supreme Court after a public interest litigation (PIL) regard. ing water depletion and pollution. The necessary data has been more or less collected. We face two problems. One, the underground water sources are lessening. Two, the water is getting polluted. Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal told me the other day at Chandigarh that ponds in the countryside were black with polluted water. In towns and cities, there is yet another problem of increasing demand, half of which is being met with underground water. Several years ago, I was sit-

better than those prevailing in

ting next to a Nobel Prize winner at an official banquet. He was an economist. We started talking about India, I asked him what he would consider our worst problem. Before he could reply, I asked: "Is it population?" He swayed his head in said: "Water." One day you would realise, he said, that you had to find 'more and more water.' But he ended the conversation on an optimistic note. The Indo-Gangetic plain has an ocean beneath it," he said. "You should tap it. There will be enough water for the entire country.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Committee will be to curtail the into three parts as K.M. over-sized ministries but on the other. Vajpayee's party encourages cabinet expansions so as to swell its strength by attracting members from the opposition benches. In the midst of politicking, there is hardly any economic development. The considered outrageous. Both growth rate is less than three per cent, while the population increase is a little over three per cent. In a way, the state BJP reflects the dilemma that Madan Lal Khurana, a party leader at Delhi, faces. The economic problems are becoming too acute to be swept under the car-

Panikkar had suggested in the States' Reorganisation Commission report in 1955. His argument that it was "essential for the successful working of a federation that the units should be fairly evenly balanced" was Nehru and Pant were deadly opposed to it. In fact, Pant did not forgive Panikkar for the 'mischievous proposal' he made and saw to it that he would not get any government position, although Nehru wanted to utilise his services.

Now that a hill state is being pet of Hindutva. Winning carved out of UP, some imbal-

PM's Offer for Talks is Constructive, Opposition's Response is Not

Continued from page 1 'ignores' the existence of the Prime Minister. It tries to make the President the ultimate arbiter, which the Constitution and the norms of parliamentary democracy do not permit. This is wrong and everybody knows it.

VEN a short visit to Luc-

know is instructive. I find

Uttar Pradesh is the only

state in the country where an

only earn the gratitude of Urdu

lovers but also rectify a recur-

alise that the bill relating to re-

ligious places can be misused.

West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh

and Rajasthan, which have a

similar bill in force, do not

have the type of government

which would misuse it. Even the

BJP government in Rajasthan

and Madhya Pradesh erred on

the right side when the party

was in power. But in UP, even

before the bill has received the

President's assent, the govern-

ment has begun harassing the

people who have been saying

prayers at a particular place for

many years. A statewide cam-

administration in the state are

so communalised that it is dif-

In fact, the police and the

paign is building up.

UP is the state where you re-

ring wrong.

BNP, as the former party in power, and Khaleda Zia, as the former Prime Minister, know very well the prerogatives of the Prime Minister, and the limits of the powers of the President. They used these powers while appointing Justice Sadeq as the CEC. It is speculated that the opposition leader will seek an appointment with the President to urge him to take a lead role in appointing a new CEC. The question is, under what provision of the Constitution will he do that? He can only take an initiative if the Prime Minister asks him to. If Sheikh Hasina is to be persuaded to agree to a Presidential initiative then also the initial dialogue will have to be with the Prime Minister, and NOT with the President. So, whichever direction we wish to take - direct talks between the political parties or an indirect one through the office of the President - the ball must be set rolling by the Prime Minister. Therefore, rejecting talks with her makes no political sense.

Md. Abu Hena was selected as a consensus candidate of all parties and his name was sent by the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker government to President Biswas for appointment. How was that consensus reached? Then, too, a direct dialogue between Sheikh Hasina

and Khaleda Zia was considered impossible, as is considered to be the case now. At that time a group of senior BNP leaders and their counterparts in the opposition did the essential ground-

Today we suggest the same method. Without involving the two top leaders, let the opposition nominate a group of senior leaders to hold talks with their counterparts in the ruling party. Let both sides present their candidates and thrash out the pros and cons of each suggested candidate.

Let the nation see and judge for themselves as to how sincerely each side tries to reach a solution. If formal talks are not possible at this time, then let us start with informal talks.

We foresee the point being made that it was a caretaker government, which was in power at the time of selecting Abu Hena and not a party government. The focus of our argument here is the process of dialogue between the two sides and NOT who was in power. Reaching a consensus between the two sides is the issue at hand. If the CEC candidate is a consensus one then whether or not AL is in power becomes irrelevant. We believe that the same process can be set in motion to reach consensus today, if the intention is to solve the

We like to suggest that given the moral authority enjoyed by the President and his continued acceptance by both sides, he should NOT be used as 'problem solver of the first resort' but be kept as our 'last re-

sort'. Why not try and see if the senior politicians on both sides can solve this problem by themselves. After all, it is a question of finding a person of integrity. courage, competence, stamina, experience, and all round acceptability. There are not too many of them around. So, the selection process will, by definition, be focused, and result oriented.

We strongly urge that the opposition should name a group of senior leaders and propose to talk to their counterparts in the ruling party. Talking to the President should be kept for a later stage in the eventuality that no consensus is reached by the senior leaders from both sides. The ruling party at that stage will be more amenable to the suggestion of going to the President as it will not appear as a SLIGHT on the PM as it

On the side of the ruling party, we strongly urge the PM not to go ahead with the nomination of the CEC on the pretext that the opposition did not respond to her invitation for talks. The goodwill and public support she has earned by making the move will be lost completely if she now uses it as a justification to move ahead unilaterally. First, there is no need for such hurry. Second, the credibility of the next election, and as such its acceptability to the public (not to the opposition alone) will totally depend on the stature and acceptability of the CEC under whom it is conducted. Any one-sided selection will lead to the erosion of prestige, power, dignity and accept-

stitutional post. Such a move will help galvanise the opposition and convince them further about the mal-intention of the ruling party from the start. It wil definitely trigger mass agitation leading to frequent hartals. which appear to have subsided a bit for the moment. We see no reason for the ruling party to unnecessarily provoke the opposition into such a position when the former has already made a good start by the offer of

It is good that the ruling party itself brought forward the example of Justice Sadeq's appointment as the CEC by the government of Khaleda Zia Prime Minister's Press Secretary Jawadul Karim cited the case as an example of how the then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, unilaterally nominated the CEC and how the President had no alternative but to act on the 'advice' of the PM. This example was given to prove that it is the PM who has the right to choose the CEC and NOT the President who only assents to it as the Constitution obliges him

to act on the 'advice' of the PM. We would like to point out that Justice Sadeq's example has more lessons for the Awami League than just proving the powers of the PM. Let no one forget, least of all the AL, what happened to Sadeq afterwards and to the party that had nominated him. The election that Justice Sadeq conducted caused the fall of BNP government and contributed much to its defeat in the June 1996 election. Why should AL repeat the worst mistakes of its political opponent?

Buchwald's COLUMNI

From Ocean to Earth

MOW business and politics are getting closer and closer. Just last week Leonardo DiCaprio, of "Titanic" fame, was persuaded by ABC to interview President Bill Clinton for Planet Earth 2000. This angered other show business personalities who felt Regis Philbin should have had the honour, as he has more money to give away for the environment.

The DiCaprio selection was made by the CIA, the Voice of America and Walt Disney. However, there was some resistance from those who felt DiCaprio should be questioned on his ozone

There were several big glitches. One was when some of the president's advisers suggested that Vice President Al Gore do the interview while others insisted on Warren Beatty, Janet Reno, Julia Roberts or David Letterman.

The next glitch was that regular White House reporters felt they should have had first rights to interview the president about anything since they had not had an interview for months. The White House staff decided that White House reporters couldn't ask the tough questions that an actor would. Disney predicted the rating would be much higher going with the Screen Actors Guild than it would with the boys on the bus.

Another idea was to have Hillary Clinton interview the president on the subject of why she thinks Earth Day is so important for New York State. The committee kept insisting on other candidates, such as Barbra Streisand, Madonna or Matt

With ABC in a bind, they decided to use DiCaprio after all. The decision was made because of his work on global warming

below decks just before the Titanic hit the iceberg. The president had not heard the story of the Titanic before and vowed it would never happen again. Leonardo revealed how he was short of lifeboats and had just enough musicians to play "Hail to the Chief." The president had no choice but to blame the Republicans.

One final question by DiCaprio to the president was what would he do when he is no longer in office.

The president was ready for it and said, "I will devote the rest

of my Earth Days to developing a much cleaner gasoline. By arrangement with the Los Angeles Times Syndicate and

In the Editor

IT and BTTB

Sir, Attention of the Prime Minister is drawn to the keynote address by Dr Yunus at Atlanta USA (published in the DS of May 7) as some high-level policy recommendations have been offered to take the BTTB out of the nefarious game of choking this high-tech industry, even though lately some stray measures have been

The main issues are: BTTB should not be an operator and regulator simultaneously. It is most unfair; sabotaging the national development through corruption, unfair means, and delaying tactics. The Ministry should carefully scrutinise the advice coming from the BTTB and seek independent advice as and where necessary (ITU can help). A technical agency cannot rule a Ministry.

There should be immediate formation of an independent Telecoms Authority for regulatory, monitoring, implementation and watchdog operations This is being delayed too long for suspected reasons. Bangladesh is not developing in the telecoms sector, thanks to seemingly blind policies. Open up the telecoms sector

as much as possible, in rapid phases, to remove the waiting period, and availability of latest marketing techniques to the operators, for the benefit of the users. Why this is being intentionally delayed? The 2-year waiting list for new telephones can be reduced to one week within 18 months or less. Where is the will, and who are the vested groups who secretly ensure that the supply is always less than the demand? Why a probe is not being carried out? The official transparency in the telecoms sector is poor, and it is known to the higher authori-

Carry out a complete overhauling of the way the BTTB works — an independent probe is called for.

A Husnain Dhaka

"Reliable BTV news"

Sir, It is a matter of regret that the mindset of our people is like that we take it for granted that BTV news could never be genuine or authentic. I would like to mention

about a letter published in your daily on the 5th of May. In that letter "reliable BTV News" one Mr S M Enayatur Rahim blamed BTV for presenting untrue news. He wrote that on May 2, 2000 ETV had telecast the launch capsize news, reporting death of 28 people and recovery of 5 bodies, while he said just after the ETV news BTV stated "no dead body was found till then." But I refute his accusation. I had the opportunity to watch BTV news bulletin both Bangla/English of May 2nd, from BTV library. The news stated that "the fire service men have so far recovered 28 dead bodies from the capsized launch which was bound to Bhairab from Nabinagar." However BTV also stated, "no bodies have so far been recovered from the other ill-fated launch which sank at the same time on its way to Nabinagar from Bhairab."

Mr Rahim perhaps is not an attentive listener. Anyway, we should not look down on BTV news personnel. At least we cannot deny the value of experience.

Nima Haq Mirpur, Dhaka

Computerize the civil service

Sir. As the government is keen to encourage the local computer industry to enable Bangladesh to occupy a niche in the IT global network, it can start the process at home by adopting a master plan to computerize the government offices in phases, priority-wise. The administrations maintain a large number of databases, which are now easier to maintain and update with the help of the computers. Billions of clerical and man-hours would be

saved in a five to ten-year pe-

ability of this exalted and con-

An example: my local Election office has no computer, so I had to make a number of trips to this office to get my wife's plastic ID card corrected for some slight inaccuracy; but still I am waiting after several months of file hunting. A computer could have edited the data within minutes, on the spot

(one-visit service). Government patronisation of computerized offices would increase the sale of hardware, expand the training field and attract thousands of young men and women with new jobs as computer operators in government and other offices. The huge clerical staffs have to be made computer-literate (like typing in the former days). It is a long-term big business, with god investment return.

Dhaka

Is there any way? Sir, Some of our political leaders are over enthusiastic of their aims and objectives and they suffer from superiority complex. They consider that the best and easiest way to achieve their goal and to fulfill their dreams is to indulge themselves in animosity and hostility against their political opponents. They blame their rivals at random and pour out a flood of billingsgate without any check and balance, which pollute the polity, democracy and socio-economic environment of the country.

and blaming their political opponents, their admiration for their party chief grows into a foolish admiration And the party chief soon starts living in fool's paradise at the cost of untold sufferings of the people.

Time to time government changes, a party loses its power and another party comes in but the fate of the people of this country remains the same. The unscrupulous elements remain unaffected and the law and order situation remains un-

Isn't there any way to get rid of these corrupt political leaders and bring back peace and sanity in the country? O.H Kabir

Wari, Dhaka-1205 Doomsday hoax

6. Hare Street

Sir, Being in the information age today, we still cannot resist having a glance on the newspapers every morning. This is why print media has this enormous impact on our private and social life. But this fact should not be exploited by the media. The misinformation about the 5th May doomsday was an unforgivable crime committed by one particular newspaper. It even tried (on 5th May issue) to relate its so-called doomsday speculation with the earthquake in Indonesia which has nothing to do with the great conjunction as per NASA and also with the present sea condition which is absolutely normal to any sea going person in this particular season. To their dismay, the tidal condition was also far from their expected 500 feet (?) surge on May the 5th. It was an ordinary day as ever to any fisherman. But not so ordinary for the mass as the whole nation was panicked like never before on this so-called dooms-

M R Khan Khulna

Police reforms

Sir, Our police force still works in the colonial style serving more the regime than Side by side while criticising the people. Secondly, it has to be modernised (DS editorial, April 22) — the criminals are better equipped than the lawenforcing network.

Politicisation has to be resisted by the people through strong public opinion: The politicians (majority undisciplined) enjoy more autonomy than the people, thereby encouraging corruption.

A less corrupted police can work wonders (if the politicians look the other way). Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

Bugged Life

by Alif Zabr

when five planets were These days, not only hi-tech destabilized with bugs in the po- (for three decades). litical systems in many countries, including Bangladesh. Political anti-virus technology in this field is lagging behind, because the demand is high, as there are too many emerged or emerging countries; and the call of the nation cannot wait for

gadgets. is ready with his comment: if the political situation im-Citizen is ready to equate al- fight against the people; they most all problems with the local political culture, which is neither sitting or standing, nor dozing or sleeping. Our politics is not moving, but running (or, is it fleeing?). But there are no tracks. Although the track records of the performers are readily available, there is no referee or umpire. The Political Code of Practice is under numerous revisions, and a copy approved through consensus is not yet available. Diversity in unity is turning us into 'Late Latifs.'

The political wrestling is of the no-holds-barred category. The resilience of the politicians is remarkable; but it cannot compete with that of our chasi bhais in the rural areas, accusreveals that the base is stronger than the swaying top. But lately, lots of modern monkeys have climbed up, who are up to of armament on the slightest all sorts of pranks, entertaining or harassing different secriods due to load shedding or 'I.hate.you' virus, which has al-

THE latest 'i.love.you' com- What happens during such dark puter virus hit the globe periods is anybody's guess.

As for political principles, it aligned menacingly on May 5. is very much there, not only due Since we can still read this to the rich historical backnewspaper, the planetary ground, but also judging by the aspects appear to be benign. obdurate stands by the different parties, who are all waving gadgets or systems have bugs or their own flags; while the pilotvirus inside, but the dedicated ing service for national politicians have been berthing has lost its priority

Are we suffering from political sea-sickness? The staggering gait is noticeable, as also bouts of vomiting. The national political health service is in tatters. This should not be judged by the healthy stance of the leaders. The overflow is jamming the roads from time to The man-in-the-street critic time, competing with the pedal

rickshaws (who are also voters). A politician cannot be Xproves, the country will take rayed, because, if you can read off. But the politicians are sit- his mind, he cannot be a polititing tight, and not moving. Mr cian. The politicians never

always fight among themselves - for the sake of the nation. This state of nationhood is displayed at numerous anniversaries throughout the year; but the latter never contaminate the daily life cycle, which always quickly comes back to

normal This normal state is our undoing, as it is not allowing us to get away from the mooring and set sail. Where to? The response to this query is rather effusive. like our luxuriant tropical growth. Practising democracy in the tropics is beset with viral infections of the political kind. There is shortage of political doctors who could be termed as specialists. These poor fellows have no social status in the sotomed to cyclones of 200kph. It ciety of maatbars. The latter personalities are armed with everything except piety; and are ever ready to use their arsenal

Civilian curfew is available tions of the society. It means in this country, but not politithat some of the spotlights are cal curfew, for reasons not clear shifting from the veneered to many. This writer suspects politicians. There are dark pe- he might be suffering from the electrical power black-outs. ready hit Bangladesh.

pretext