

Manpower Sinners

SOME of the ministries which come under fire for their 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 with a sardonic smile.

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

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 thick-skinned 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 sector.

Care for the Adolescents

TUESDAY'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, sexuality 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 capability of Bangladeshi troops.

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

EVEN a short visit to Lucknow is instructive. I find 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.

UP is the state where you realise that the bill relating to religious 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 government has begun harassing the people who have been saying prayers at a particular place for many years. A statewide campaign is being launched.

In fact, the police and the administration in the state are so communalised that it is difficult to expect objectivity, much less justice. One does not pin any hope on the machinery which was party to the demolition of the Babri Masjid and which has withdrawn cases against those involved in the massacre at Meerut. One feels so helpless. The Home Ministry says that law and order is a state subject and the state uses the law and order machinery to implement its own communal agenda. UP has made a mockery of India's secular ethos.

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. Any one 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 centrastage 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

Committee will be to curtail the over-sized ministries but on the other, Vajpayee's party encourages its members to attract members from the opposition benches. In the midst of political ticking, there is hardly any economic development. The 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 carpet of Hindutva. Winning

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Now that a hill state is being carved out of UP, some imbalance will be corrected. But UP 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 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 better than those prevailing in 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) regarding water depletion and pollution. The necessary data has been more or less collected. We face two problems. One, the underground water sources are 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 sitting 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 the negative. After a pause, he 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 Ganga-Gangetic plain has an ocean beneath it," he said. "You should tap it. There will be enough water for the entire country."

Portrait of a State

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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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.

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 groundwork. 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 problem.

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 a 'problem solver' of the first resort but be kept as our 'last resort'. 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 does now.

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 respect 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 acceptability of this exalted and constitutional 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 will 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 talks.

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 Jawad 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?

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, 6/Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1205

Doomsday hoax 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 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 doomsday.

MR Khan, Khulna

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Art Buchwald's COLUMN

From Ocean to Earth

SHOW 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 credentials. 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 Advertisers 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 Damon.

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."

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Bugged Life

by Alif Zabr

THE latest 'love you' computer virus hit the globe when five planets were aligned menacingly on May 5. Since we can still read the newspaper, the planetary aspects appear to be benign. These days, not only hi-tech gadgets or systems have bugs or virus inside, but the dedicated politicians have been destabilized with bugs in the political 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 emerging or emerging countries, and the call of the nation cannot wait for gadgets.

The man-in-the-street critic is ready with his comment: if the political situation improves, the country will take off. But the politicians are sitting tight, and not moving. Mr Citizen is ready to equate almost 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 reference to 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 chashis in the rural areas, accustomed to cyclones of 200kph. It reveals that the base is stronger than the swaying top. But lately, lots of modern monkeys have climbed up, who are up to all sorts of pranks, entertaining or harassing different sections of the society. It means that some of the spotlights are shifting from the venerated politicians. There are dark periods due to load shedding or electrical power black-outs.

What happens during such dark periods is anybody's guess. As for political principles, it is very much there, not only due to the rich historical background, but also judging by the obvious stands by the different parties, who are all waving their own flags, while the piloting service for national berthing has lost its priority (for three decades).

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, jamming the roads from time to time, competing with the pedal rickshaws (who are also voters). A politician cannot be X-rayed, because, if you can read his mind, he cannot be a politician. The politicians never fight against the people; they 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 elusive, 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 society of maabars. The latter personalities are armed with everything except piety; and are ever ready to use their arsenal of armament on the slightest pretext. Civilian curfew is available in this country, but not political curfew, for reasons not clear to many. This writer suspects he might be suffering from the 'I hate you' virus, which has already hit Bangladesh.