

Take the Bull by the Horn

MONG the ills that most poignantly portray our lack of governance, the worst one must be the mushrooming of so-called offices on public lands in the city under the banner of political parties. Front organisations of political parties and various clubs claiming linkage to them encroach on public land including pavements to set up their illegal structures. So tendentious has all this become that youngsters even with a fictitious sign-board of a party front organisation might dare it.

This scourge of illegal occupation is demonstrably disdainful of the law of the land, let alone infecting others with the disease. But quite apart from undermining the law, it vitiates the atmosphere with loud mouthed arrogance of power, degenerates into extortionist behaviour and occasionally leads up to violent flare-ups.

It is the activists of the ruling party front organisations who are at the lead in such occupation bids. There are places they took over on their party's ascension to power forcing the activists of the former ruling party into hibernation. In the last couple of years the ruling party followers have monopolised this with their rivals being on the sideline maintaining a presence behind, maybe, an 'innocuous-looking' sign-board.

What is the answer to the resurgence of this diabolical office or club culture? The Dhaka City Corporation with the police by their side had launched a special drive in October 1998 that met with a degree of success, evidently a very short-lived one. It is said that since the bulldozers did not scoop up the rubble and dump it at a safe distance the brick and mortars strewn around helped the evictees regroup and reconstruct subsequently.

To our understanding, the important moral of the story, however, lies in the fact that the demolition effort of 1998 achieved a modicum of success because it did neither spare the illegal offices of the ruling party front organisations nor those of the opposition party followers. And how did that happen? The move could then cut across party lines only because the city supremos of both the parties agreed to carry it out regardless of whose supporters were 'affected' thereby.

Let's revive that bi-partisan spirited resolve to take the bull of illegal occupation of public land by the horn.

Dating with Disaster in the Air?

IGHTLY or wrongly, air passengers, on domestic or international route, might think twice before booking for a flight with Bangladesh Biman. The balance sheet every year would testify to that. Apart from services that leave room for improvement, especially in the punctuality area, one of the major passenger-repellents is possibly the dilapidated air fleet operated in the domestic and regional sectors. Each of them is running on extended lease of life, having landed in Biman's ownership after more than one detour. The number of mishaps bears testimony to it. The tragic air-crash of the Dhaka-Chittagong flight near the Zia International Airport in the early eighties aside, there have been too many operational hiccups to inspire the slightest sense of on-board security for passengers.

Against such a grim backdrop, comes the news that one Biman F-28 has been on the sick bay in Calcutta since May 16 and although a team of 15 engineers has flown to the West Bengal capital, it is still uncertain when the aircraft will be back in air.

That is, however, not the central issue here: what certainly is so, happens to be the procurement of dilapidated aeroplanes from time to time. There may be financial constraints, we agree; but does it justify putting the lives of hundreds of people in jeopardy? It seems that the government refuses to learn from experience. Two aircraft of 1978 and 1979 vintage were bought after a similar one almost crashed in Sylhet. In our view, there is a grey area in the whole procurement process which needs to be closely looked at.

If Biman cannot ensure safe flight to the passengers, it better discontinue some domestic flights until such time as new aircraft are purchased and commissioned after exhaustive reliability checks.

Murder at Matrichhaya

ABU Bayazid Mohammed Ummid, 12, a student of class VI of Matrichhaya Pre-Cadet School at Madhubagh in the city, was called out of his room on Wednesday night by his seniors and ruthlessly beaten to death. The allegation was that Bayazid stole some mangoes from their rooms. Although he pleaded innocence he was murdered and left on the staircase. The body was recovered the next day by the police on receipt of the information from the teachers. Ramna police said the boy died in the early hours of Thursday.

Bayazid was the son of Abu Jafar M Saleh of Agaljhara in Barisal district who had left the boy to the care of the school authorities hoping for the best. They were supposed to pay special attention to those coming from distant places. It is hard to believe that a gang of ruffians could have killed a boy without a hue and cry being raised by the victim and heard by others in the vicinity. The residents of the dorm might have been scared by the culprits to keep quiet; but may we ask what was the super or the person in charge, whoever he may be, doing? Why was the police informed so late and why did the teachers tried in the FIR to prove that Bayazid died of bleeding in the nose when they knew that autopsy would be done on the unfortunate child?

Bayazid's murder has given rise to a very disturbing question: where are our children going to? If this trend of reprisals, resulting in the killing of innocent people, is not put to halt by the authority, this country is really racing towards a chaotic future where social peace and security of life will be in total danger. We strongly urge the police to launch a vigorous investigation into this brutal incident, bringing the delinquents and those who are trying to abet and hide facts to justice. We condole Bayazid's tragic death and offer our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family.

State of the Subcontinent: A Bird's Eye View

The 'go it alone' and the 'go against each other' approach of the two principal state actors of this region, viz, India and Pakistan, in building up linkages with the rest of the world, will not help the desired goal as much as it would, if these two countries in particular and this region in general did it together. SAARC lends a useful forum to achieve that. Rendering it impotent on account of bilateral differences mitigates against the vital long term interests of all South-Asian countries, big and small.

According to India's national census commission's population clock, the billionth Indian, a girl named Aastha, was born on May 11, this year. One wishes the new born a long and prosperous life. But one cannot, at the same time, help the thought that she will be growing up in, perhaps potentially, the most dangerous region of the world, where a fifth of the world's population live, more than half of them below the poverty line. That is not all. This region now contains two nuclear countries, India and Pakistan, who have been at hammer and tongs with each other, in varying degrees of intensity, ever since their independence fifty years ago. Today they do not even leave the world too confident that they will forever be in their best of nuclear behaviour. Since Kargil and General Parvez Musharraf's assumption of power in Pakistan, far from talking peace, the two countries seem hardly in speaking terms. In fact they are today further from each other than they have ever been in discussing Kashmir, the cancer that has cost, not only them, but also this entire region so dear.

For the first time its formation in Dhaka in 1985, SAARC has gone into a near total limbo due to the uncertainty about the Kathmandu Summit. This regional forum that has at least occasionally served as a talking shop, today lies pathetically deserted. The irony is that only the other day, an earnest and heated debate raged in the Upper House of the Indian Parliament between the BJP and the Congress, not about finding ways to peace but about the comparative measure of India's performance in the Kargil conflict and in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war! The debate ultimately led to a walk-out by the Congress, Mr Advani, the Home Minister of the BJP holding forth that Kargil was both a diplomatic and military triumph for India and Karan

Singh the veteran Congress leader and one time Crown prince of Kashmir opining that Advani's claim 'berated' India's 'victory' in the 1971 war, a military triumph which according to the wise ex-prince, led to the birth of a nation. The heated exchanges between the two ignored two basic facts that would have made their worth their while. These are that, after all it is Kashmir that had caused Kargil and so much of misery both before and after, and that Bangladesh was born because that was our national aspiration for which no sacrifice was too great for us and not because India had found it fit to help the process.

In Pakistan, on the other hand, there is, alas no parliament where public views can at least be aired, for whatever they are worth. Pakistan's official views are made public through statements by the Chief Executive and at times by lesser mortals. Coming from a man in uniform and his military and civilian cohorts, these lack the flexibility of political posturings and lead to the blind alley of confrontation. The recent judgement of Pakistan's Supreme Court has now put the stamp of a make believe legality on the military takeover and the present political dispensation in Pakistan is likely to last at least another three years. This does not, other concerns apart, augur well for a turn around in Indo-Pakistani relations in the foreseeable future.

What is the lot of the land, beyond India and Pakistan in the subcontinent? In the euphoric days of the early nineties, the people of Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh adopted the parliamentary form of

government in their respective countries around the same period. Democracy is contagious or so one hopefully thought in those heady days. That euphoria has now given way to despair. Pakistan has demonstrated that in this region it is yet premature to assume that military take over is a thing of the past. In Nepal the game of political musical chairs being played by unscrupulous politicians makes a mockery of democracy. In the south of the country, where disgruntled people have to take to

American Embassy for him to see, as he was advised not to venture out. One cannot view this merely as a sign of over caution on the part of the Americans about the security of their President. After all during his trip he experienced a fair degree of public exposure in India. The security concern in Bangladesh was obviously of a special nature.

Further down the peninsula, Sri Lanka continues to bleed in a civil war getting bloodier by the day. The struggle for a Tamil National State has ramified

Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury



arms, a low intensity guerrilla warfare is now being waged.

Bangladesh is now a nation divided where there is an almost total political impasse created by professional politicians who are taking the people for granted. If this situation endures, the future of democracy in this country will be at stake. The law and order situation in the country has reached its nadir. More people in Bangladesh today die of violence and lawlessness than in any other time in its turbulent history. The security situation is alarming to the extent that in spite of the tremendous public interest in President Clinton, a little Bangladesh had to be created within the four walls of the

region is that unlike many other regions of the world we have ceased to attach priority to intra regional interactions. As a result, regional development, both human and infrastructural, remains stymied. For instance, communications among our countries is still at a primitive state. Not even all our capitals are yet connected by direct air services. Such is the state of inter-state relations that far from building inter-country physical contacts, we do not even exploit the existing facilities. So much so that though road network has existed for centuries, the commencement of bus services between Lahore and Delhi and Dhaka and Calcutta made jubilant headlines! It is impossible even to conceive of travelling overland from Dhaka to Lahore, via Delhi, over the road that Sher Shah built as early as the sixteenth century. Starting a Dhaka-Thimpu bus service, if and when it comes through, is likely to be regarded as a major diplomatic triumph, although a picturesque and perfectly serviceable land route exists between the two capitals. Travelling over the Bangabandhu bridge by car, one can now set off from Dhaka after early breakfast and have a satisfying 'Momo' dinner in Thimpu on the same day provided of course Kashim is any pointer, this may last through decades.

The biggest victim of all this is the overall development of South Asia, inhabited by a billion and a half people, who in spite of their present poverty, have the capacity to contribute substantially to human progress in the current century and beyond. The tragedy of this

endeavour and achievement. The question is as to why cannot they do so from the soil region. Answers may vary, but the principal underlying reason is that the countries of the sub-continent, for reasons of intra regional conflicts and rivalries, do not have the inclination and will to undertake human and economic development of this region through mutual interactions and cooperation. This has a negative impact on the people of this region, who consequently look without for what should be achieved within.

With the collapse of communism the so called ideological states have disappeared and a global unipolar pattern has emerged marked by the supremacy of the United States. This severely restricts the space for manoeuvrability for the developing countries which should unitedly work for a more equitable international system that takes into account the new economic, geopolitical and demographic realities. The 'go it alone' and the 'go against each other' approach of the two principal state actors of this region, viz, India and Pakistan, in building up linkages with the rest of the world, will not help the desired goal as much as it would, if these two countries in particular and this region in general did it together. SAARC lends a useful forum to achieve that. Rendering it impotent on account of bilateral differences mitigates against the vital long term interests of all South-Asian countries, big and small.

India's mercurial Defense Minister declared the other day his country's strategic intent on becoming more than a regional power. Representing a strife torn and divided region, he may, notwithstanding India's new found nuclear status and remarkable technological progress, find the going tough.

Putin, Problems and Promises

Vladimir Putin in Russia has many problems to solve. People are depending on him. And it remains to be seen how he faces or resolves the problems as he strives to take Russia to a new height. The task is Herculean, but people's hopes are high.

Vladimir Putin has recently taken oath as the President of Russia. He was elected to this high office of the country on March 26. He is currently charting Russia's future strategy. The former spy of the erstwhile great communist power Soviet Union has risen to the current position in a spectacular manner. Few in the country heard his name at the national level except when former president Boris Yeltsin surprisingly chose as the prime minister of the country in August last year. His tenure as prime minister under Yeltsin was a short one as he stepped into the shoes of Yeltsin when the latter resigned on December 31, last year. This raised eyebrows in many circles across the world.

True, Yeltsin had exhausted two terms as president granted by Russian constitution and the election was due in mid-2000, but his abrupt resignation had taken many by surprise. It was equally true that because of failing health and reliance on new prime minister, Vladimir Putin, several quarters thought he might not complete his full term and choose to resign earlier than expected. Still, Yeltsin's dramatic announcement to disappear from the scene from the first day of the new century contrasted previous assessments.

When Vladimir Putin took oath as the second democratically elected president of the Russian federation - only after Boris Yeltsin - the man who picked him up from obscurity for the position of premiership,

was besides him. Yeltsin was on the verge of tears on the day. Putin had not only established himself as a strong leader within a short span of time but also raised image of Yeltsin because he had chosen Putin for the high level political position. It was in the fitness of things that new president Vladimir Putin had not forgotten his predecessor, who helped to catapult him to the zenith of success, to be invited in the swearing-in ceremony.

The emergence of the Russian Federation - through a stunning transformation of a communist society and disintegration of the Soviet Union - represents an important chapter in world history. Who had really thought even a year before the disintegration of the Soviet Union that it would collapse and several independent nations would emerge? Certainly, the Soviet Union, the country of V. I. Lenin, was the embodiment of socialism. And its disintegration was a severe setback to the entire communist philosophy. But this situation notwithstanding, it will be a folly to assume that socialism as such has collapsed. China, Vietnam and Cuba are there in the picture despite the demise of communism in the Soviet Union. The ideology itself is very much in existence across the world. Even in the present-day Russia, the communists are

gaining strength in the multi-party system. I had the occasion to be in Moscow and Leningrad in 1991 - only months before the startling changes. Mikhail Gorbachev was still at the helm, but things were discernible about the coming metamorphosis even though the magnitude of changes was unbelievable. Within weeks of our departure from Moscow there was a failed coup led by the then vice-

president of the country against President Gorbachev, whose role in the whole pattern of political and economic changes is viewed with scepticism as far as his sincerity to retain the Soviet Union was concerned. Anyway, the turmoil that was to follow brought Boris Yeltsin in power as president and he served nearly two four-year terms as the head of the state before getting out of the scene.

Yeltsin may have earned laurels as the first elected president of Russia, but he has also confronted many problems, as

the country went through phases of political and economic experiments. The country had to cope with the new system supported by the West. Yeltsin landed from one problem to another but largely remained firm in the saddle. He appointed several people as prime ministers and lastly relied on Vladimir Putin, most unknown of all.

Putin's grandfather was the cook of Lenin and Putin spent

persons like Primakov who got embroiled in political polemics. Yeltsin felt the state apparatus suffered due to this. He went on searching for a person who would mean business. And he found Putin. Putin with his wisdom and tenacity as an intelligence man identified the problems and concentrated in the problems. The Chechnya tangle gave him a unique opportunity to show his firmness. And this helped him to earn the confidence of a populace whose one-time pride as a superpower was at an abysmally low level.

Putin went all-out against the rebellious Republic which had enjoyed *de facto* independence and was firm to get it back within the Russian domain. Putin got people's support. They found in him a great 'hero' hell-bent on reviving Russian glory. The timing also synchronised with his new presidency.

Yeltsin also believed that his confidant successor would give him the support to save him from charges of corruption and other failures. The communists in the Duma had initiated impeachment proceedings against him but the bid failed due to lack of majority. It was no wonder that the former president was on the verge of tears at the oath-taking ceremony of the new president because he had chosen were mostly notable

several years as a spy leader in the erstwhile East Germany. Returning home, he got involved with politics under the former Mayor of Leningrad. When in Leningrad, he was spotted as a calm but intelligent person by Yeltsin. He was brought to Kremlin to shoulder security-related responsibilities and was later made prime minister. Rest of the story is well known.

During the last two years of his tenure, Yeltsin mostly spent in hospitals because of ill health. The prime ministers he had chosen were mostly notable

for their support of the parliament. He has retained the key ministers in their posts after unveiling a radical change in parliament that would give Kremlin much power to deal with the powerful regional governors. He seeks power from parliament to fire the governors who may give him trouble.

Putin has other problems as well. It remains to be seen how he faces or resolves them as he strives to take Russia to a new height of past glory. The task is no doubt Herculean. He has come in a particular time when hopes and aspirations of the people are high.

To the Editor ...

CEC and BNP

Sir, Though the BNP Secretary General is gloating over the departure of the former CEC, I think it is a sad matter for the country. When a senior bureaucrat is reluctant to perform his duty it is either because he is too sick or feels let down by a vested quarter of some sort. But what astonishes one most is the attitude of BNP in the matter of selecting a new CEC. In stead of coming forward to solve the crisis they are eagerly waiting at the prospect of a new 'issue'?

When Vladimir Putin took oath as the second democratically elected president of the Russian federation - only after Boris Yeltsin - the man who picked him up from obscurity for the position of premiership,

the auditorium has no fan either. On the first day during the math exam the students had to suffer immensely in this sweltering heat. Due to humidity, the students were drenching in sweat and thereby facing immense difficulty in writing. The auditorium did not even have windows for natural airflow. Therefore, the room turned out to be a virtual hell with the students sweating and the exam

papers getting wet with sweat drops falling from the forehead and hands. It was a pitiable and suffocating situation. NSU should have been equipped properly before accepting to hold public exams like O' Level and such in their venue. Through this letter we would like to request the NSU authority to immediately make their AC system functional with proper ventilation in their

exam halls and provide additional stand fan to avoid the examinees falling sick.

A student's mother Dhaka

published in your letter column under the above heading regarding a BTV news item. In the letter Mr. Raheem apprehended that I am related with BTV somehow. But it does not matter who I am, does it? The important thing is, whether Mr. Raheem's accusation about BTV on the particular news item was based on fact or not. I am happy that Mr. Raheem had confessed that he only listened to the headlines, not the whole news. But again I'm sorry to say that he is not an attentive listener as the headline of the said item went as follows: "At least 28 people were killed and over 100 missing in two separate launch capsizes in the river Meghna." "28 people killed" clearly indicates that 28 dead bodies were found.

And about "experience" that Mr. Raheem mentioned in his last letter, I agree that it does not always reflect "creativity". But I must say "experience" always goes hand in hand with objectivity and accuracy. An experienced journalist may not disclose or may suppress many things, but can never speak/write baseless news.

Anyway, it is heartening to learn that we are very much concerned about our broadcast media.

Nima Haq
Mirpur, Dhaka

UNICEF clarifies...

Sir, The Daily Star article of 19 May 2000 on arsenic in Bangladesh contained several major inaccuracies and misleading statements, and unfortunately has tended to sensationalise and simplify a complex issue, and draw unfounded conclusions.

Moreover, the writer alleged that "UNICEF continues to sell test kits". This is completely false and we demand a retraction of this statement. UNICEF does not sell arsenic test kits, and never has. We procure them and provide them free of cost to Government and NGO field workers to carry out testing in a coordinated manner. We also strongly disagree with the writer that it is a "waste of time" to test wells - in fact, testing determines which wells continue to provide water safe from arsenic. Results from the national survey conducted by DPHE show that 29 per cent of wells tested contained arsenic at levels above the national standard, which means that seven out of ten wells tested were safe, and, with continuous monitoring, would be a viable source of safe water. Your writer incorrectly reversed the ratio, stating that "70 per cent of the people are already affected with arsenic". Such incorrect statements that are not backed up by scientific evidence create wrong impressions, and in such a highly charged environment, can contribute to panic. UNICEF and other development partners have always strived to take action based on the