

We Condemn This

A JKER Kagoj reporter Aminur Rahman Taj unsuspiciously walked into a trap laid for his arrest, such appears to be the inescapable conclusion from Tuesday's newspaper reports on the subject. He was detained without any apparent or furnished valid reasons, a post-facto GD got made and on that basis was issued a warrant of arrest against him. First, he was shown to have been arrested under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure on no specific grounds and then followed the framing of the defamation charges against him on account of a news report the police attributed to him. Though subsequently set on bail, the manner in which he was treated must be open to question.

The process could not have been the handiwork of middle or lower order police personnel, it smacks of somebody at the top calling the shot. Although the paper, whose reporter fell victim to it, has surmised that the home minister himself might have set the ball rolling, yet without verifying the same we would not like to be name-specific here except to suggest that it bore the stamp of somebody in high authority out to throw his weight around.

If that be the case then it is a clear instance of harassing a journalist for his work. Here we would like to draw a clear line between freedom of press and the right of an institution to seek redressal in a genuine case of libel or defamation. Quite apart from the issue relating to the merit, quality or authenticity of the report published in Ajker Kagoj which is a different issue, the core question here is: can a worker of the fourth estate be subjected to such a behaviour even after the police authority's rejoinder to the report was duly published in Ajker Kagoj?

Yes, publication of a rebuttal does not preclude the right to seek redressal if an institution has genuinely felt wronged but there is a time-honoured way to do it. In Aminur Rahman's case, therefore, the home ministry and the police have misused power to harass a journalist and intimidate the journalist community.

We condemn it in the strongest possible term and demand that the law take its course in place of some officials bending the rules to suit somebody's sweet will.

We also urge the journalists, who have announced a boycott of sorts, to realise that they cannot shrug off their fundamental responsibility to keep the people informed about what's happening on the police front.

Tribute to Zia

THE 19th death anniversary of late president Ziaur Rahman was observed throughout the country on Tuesday. President Zia was brutally assassinated on 30 May, 1981 at Chittagong Circuit House by a group of army officers. Zia joined the liberation war as a major posted in Chittagong. He was to boost the morale of a struggling people against the Pakistani marauders through his declaration of independence in the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the Kalurghat transmitter of then Radio Pakistan Chittagong. Major Zia will always be remembered by those who listened to his voice over the transistor during those trying moments. Apart from his valuable contributions as a freedom fighter, Ziaur Rahman earned respect for the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in the country. A large number of political parties which lost their identity through the introduction of one-party BKS rule in the country were resurrected by virtue of the historic decision of President Zia. Vitally also, he restored the chain of command in the armed forces of the country.

In addition to all that, he should be remembered for his contributions to the freedom of press in Bangladesh. The print media, especially the daily and weekly newspapers, were freed during his time from direct government ownership and control. Today as we remember him we also record our condemnation of his assassination.

We call upon all political parties to show respect where it is due. We do not want our children to grow up in an environment of hatred and intolerance and with a split vision of our leadership heritage. Time has come when, needs to be taught to show respect to all political leaders, irrespective of the parties they belonged to; otherwise, we shall be failing in our duty to develop a political culture that teaches respect for and tolerance of each other which are the cornerstone of a truly democratic society that we all aspire to belong to.

Officers on Special Duty

THE fact that some 150 senior government officials, ranging from senior assistant secretary to additional secretary, have been officers on special duty (OSD) — for one to eight years — makes a strong case for an immediate and expeditious reform of the bureaucracy. With so many senior members of the administration sitting idle for years together, it is no wonder that the bureaucracy works at the pace it does. Moreover, the reason why majority of these officials have been 'marked out' — on political consideration, according to a Bangla daily — sends across a disquieting signal to the public, not to speak of that within the system. Blatant politicisation such as this stands detrimental to the essence and efficiency of the bureaucracy.

Basically therefore, the OSDs galore, if we may call it so, is part of a complicated problem that does not have any piece-meal solution. Still, we would urge the government to look into the matter right-away and reassign them on to an active list. Of course, if there is a professional ground like ineptitude or aberration for which the OSD status has been conferred on them we would expect disciplinary measures against those found guilty instead of paying them for no work. The problem should be placed in a broader perspective with a comprehensive redressal of it contemplated. The fact of the matter is, our bureaucracy is not delivering and therefore needs a major overhaul. The sooner the reform takes place the better. Isn't it?

A Report Card on Russia

Price stability is one of the main success stories in an otherwise ordinary economic report. The basic fundamentals for an economic revival is there. The new Russian President occupies a position of immense power, given to him by one of Europe's most lop-sided constitutions. It is thus in his power to initiate a process of genuine reform and renewal.

To issue a report card on the survival of Russia is not to ask whether Russia will survive. It will. The question, rather, is what the Russia of the 21st century will be like. Will it, for example, be democratic or autocratic or some mixture of the two? Will it be prosperous or poor, corrupt or efficient, stable or turbulent?

These are the questions of importance not only for diplomats, policy makers and academics, but for ordinary people around the globe. Russia still possesses lethal stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and the safety and security of these weapons — given Russia's internal problems — can no longer be assumed. In addition, international lenders have invested billions of dollars in an attempt to promote democracy and free-market economic reforms in Russia. Potentially, Russia is a very rich country, and as a global citizen we have every interest in seeing that its prosperity is realised.

At this point, though, Russia is preoccupied with war, poverty, and economic and legal turmoil. Since last year, it has been bogged down in a civil war in Chechnya. The Russians claim to have driven rebels out of the Chechen capital, but how long they will stay out remains to be seen. Even less clear is whether the Russian army will be able to tame the rebel force if it retreats to the south and begins insurgent operations from the mountain there. The new administration in Moscow routinely gives out their assurances of an impending settlement in Chechnya. But with Russian

forces continuing to pound Chechen rebels, with allegations of Russian abuse and torture of Chechen prisoners still unanswered, and with no political negotiations to end the war yet in sight, it is hard to take these assurances seriously. In fact, the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe last month voted to suspend the voting rights of the Russian delegation because of their government's role in Chechnya. This is, as it should be, an embarrassment for Moscow. The Chechen war is also imposing enormous burdens on an economy that can ill-afford new burdens. Russia's annual gross national product was cut in half during the 1990s, and it is now ten times smaller than that of the US and five times smaller than that of China.

Russian economists say that even if their economy grows by 8 per cent a year — which is a fairly rapid growth rate — it will take 15 years to match the annual gross national product of countries like Portugal and Spain. It would take a faster growth rate, and far longer, to catch up to Britain and France. These aren't just numbers on a page; a nose-diving economy kills people. Human beings are living longer, better lives in many parts of the world, but a Russian teenager living today is far less likely to survive until

the age of 60 than a Russian teenager who lived under the Czars 100 years ago. A source of major concern for Russia is the web of corruption which has entangled much of the economy, including the banks and energy industry. A case in point is the evidence of apparently massive money-laundering through the Bank of New York in the US. It only confirms what has long

been the de-monetisation of the economy. Recent studies have shown that the share of non-cash receipts at the major industrial concerns is hovering around 50 per cent. What makes the Russian non-cash economy offset is that the barter and offset prices of a product are typically close to each other and roughly about 50 per cent higher than the cash prices.

secondary and higher education. Its scientists, for example, are some of the world's best. And if the Russian people are highly educated, they also are highly patient, willing to endure sacrifices and setbacks that people in many other developed countries would never tolerate.

For once, Russians may also have an effective leader in President Putin. Unlike his predecessors, Putin seems to have few illusions, and none at all about the inherent failures of the system that existed in the former Soviet Union. He has spelled out his beliefs and plans openly. If he can end the war in Chechnya on reasonably honourable terms, and if he and the Russian parliament can bring about the rule of law — laws, for example, governing banking and foreign investment — it will be possible for Russia to attack its problems in a reasonably effective way.

Dead many months, legal reform needs to be revived to put the country on a par with the leading powers with which Russia aims to compete. But all aspects of life are denied due to the flawed system. Russian lawyers have shown no determination to set things right, mirroring the broader society. Putin has the potential to extend the tradition of Russian jurists who advanced legal reform. A test of his bona fides would be, for example, the successful privatisa-

tion of land. Putin's recent appointment of Mikhail Kasyanov, as his prime minister, has created the possibility of a technocratic administration inclined to towards liberal economic reform which could trigger fresh lending from international financial organisations. Putin has also made several appointments in key economic positions who share reformist views. Such appointments would appear to reflect a strategy of creating a government of loyal technicians in charge of steering the Russian economy who present no political threat to Putin. The country is undergoing a traumatic process of adjustment. In less than a decade it has lost an empire, its super power status, its all-pervasive ideology, and much of its economic structure.

But it is not all negative. The economy is buoyed up by the benefits of recent devaluation and high oil prices. Price stability is one of the main success stories in an otherwise ordinary economic report. The basic fundamentals for an economic revival is there. The new Russian President occupies a position of immense power, given to him by one of Europe's most lop-sided constitutions. It is thus in his power to initiate a process of genuine reform and renewal.

Thomas Pickering's Mission to South Asia

Pickering's talks in New Delhi and Islamabad are significant. Washington possibly wants to know if the two countries have made any progress towards reducing tensions ... Evidently, both say that they are keen to see a better political climate in the region but it is being thwarted by the 'other' side.

THE US Under-secretary of State Thomas Pickering is on the last leg of his three-nation trip to South Asia. His agenda with the leaders of India and Pakistan includes the sensitive nuclear issue, as both these countries are now atomic powers. He met the Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and they discussed Indo-Pak relations and the nuclear issue. Earlier, he held similar discussions in New Delhi. The third country covered by his trip is Sri Lanka. Pickering's task is to lessen tensions between two South Asian rivals, and more importantly, efforts to convince both the countries on the need for signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Obviously, both the matters are important for Washington. It wants New Delhi and Islamabad to resolve their problems through discussions and also demonstrate their adherence to the nuclear non-proliferation activities. Undoubtedly, both these subjects are too difficult to resolve but the US is continuing its efforts knowing full well the complexities involved in the whole exercise.

Indeed, Indo-Pak relations are going through a difficult time — a phase certainly very dangerous even when viewed in the context of their traditional rivalry. US President Bill

Clinton's visit to India and Pakistan in March this year failed to bring about any visible improvement in the bitter relationship between two hostile neighbours. Arguably, it is a Herculean task. It will be a height of folly to expect such a development given the difficulties of the situation. Nonetheless, some kind of upswing in the New Delhi-Islamabad relations following President Clinton's visit was expected since the leader of the most powerful nation of the world exhorted upon both to shed their hostile approaches as far as possible.

Soldom a visit from the highest level of the US takes place to any country and more so in the South Asian region. Clinton's visit took place at a time when the Indo-Pak relations nose-dived on various reasons. The US President was to come here much earlier but the scheduled trip was called off as both India and Pakistan exploded nuclear devices in early 1998. Since Washington was known to be against further spread of the atomic power, its president, not surprisingly, postponed the visit to South Asia. Subsequently, it took a rather long time to re-schedule the visit, after much of the dust

raised by their atomic explosions settled down despite the fact that the two countries are still bearing the burn of the explosions. Then again, his visit into trouble because of the internal situation in Pakistan in the form of a military takeover. President Clinton found it difficult to visit a country where an undemocratic government was in power. But

Pakistan. The US President forcefully echoed the same during his talks with those at the helm of affairs in New Delhi and Islamabad. Washington is known to be enjoying considerable clout over the two countries and as such some kind of sobering effect was expected on their ties following the visit of the US President. But no noticeable change is discernible in the

payee and erstwhile Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Ties worsened, first as a fallout of Kargil conflict and followed by the change of government in Pakistan.

Although the change is an internal matter of that country, it has adversely affected bilateral ties. India views General Pervez Musharraf as the mastermind of Kargil when Pakistan-backed fighters occupied several hills in the Indian side of the line of control (LoC) in the disputed Kashmir region. Islamabad had to call off its following pressures from the US. The development was seen as a setback for Pakistan where the army understandably blamed the government of Nawaz Sharif for the capitulation. This rift between the army and the civilian government eventually led to the ouster of the elected government of Sharif and New Delhi considers General Musharraf as rabidly anti-Indian, while also questioning the legitimacy of his regime. For Pakistan, the new regime has to demonstrate tough postures against India compared to Sharif government against a background of an impression that Pakistan has been the loser in the Kargil conflict. The hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane from Kathmandu to Kandahar further worsened the relationship.

Evidently, both say that they are keen to see a better political climate in the region but it is being thwarted by the 'other' side. This situation, notwithstanding, continuous push for peace may create hope for better Indo-Pak relationship.

It was thought that there could be some glimmer of hope as the US President tried to per-

MATTERS AROUND US
Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

strategic importance and other considerations led him to visit Pakistan.

His visit to Pakistan was brief compared to the long stay in India. He urged the leaders in both countries to try to resolve their differences through a spirit of reconciliation and dialogue. The US officially says that the wellbeing of the vast multitude living in this region depends on peace and stability, which centres on good relationship between two principal actors of the scene — India and

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is the case with the underground crossings.

One such pedestrian Dhaka

PARC reports

Sir. Why cricket tournaments (Asia Cup) are held (in Dhaka) during the monsoon season?

Nowadays, it appears that all outdoor games are played round the year. Is it due to commercialisation (profit making)?

And if all tournaments have to be sponsored then what would happen to the amateurs?

A.H.
Dhaka

To the concerned authority

Sir. Recently, the sewerage system of our locality has stopped functioning and the area has turned out to be a breeding ground for mosquitoes, which is posing serious health hazard to the people of the locality.

And furthermore, for the last two weeks, the sweepers allotted to our area have also been absent due to some unknown reason. As a result, heaps of garbage are lying unattended along the side of the roads causing severe environmental menace.

I, therefore, would like to request the authorities concerned to take necessary steps to save us from mosquito menace and arrange to clean up the garbage from such a congested locality.

Sultana Mahmood
Gulshan Nagar,
Parbatipur,
Dinajpur

High-rise walking

Sir. A simple question for the Mayor of DCC, though a large number of overhead pedestrian crossings have been constructed at a huge cost, why only less than 10 per cent of the potential users use it? The same

BCS are not happy at the restrictions at the top, at the lag end of their career. Each of the 29 cadres should have a say in the proceedings.

Now Prokrichi-BCS rallies are being held (DS May 28) — a non-stop agitational process for many years under different regimes. What is the feedback of the BCS cadres on PARC recommendations? These summaries may be published for formation of public opinion. It is not fair to blame the BCS for slow programmes; the politicians also play a definite steering role behind the scenes. What PARC has to say on these issues?

Administrative reforms is a tough assignment for any regime. Without thorough debate in the parliament, nothing definite can be imposed. The process has to be transparent; the third party has to come in; namely, the public opinion (through public debates); it is not a two-way process between the PARC and the regime. The beating about the bush has to stop.

It means that the evil practices and deeds at the top are eroding the other sectors of the society, adversely affecting the minors. Also in the education sector, unfair means at the exams have reached its peak, and is seemingly out of control; and the education sector is in shambles.

The ex-political student leaders are now engaged in toll collection, control of tenders, coercion, forced occupation, and other kinds of illegal activi-

ties. The Nagar Bhavan (DCG) has reportedly become a den of terrorists. Vacant plots of lands are being openly occupied illegally by the activists of hidden godfathers. The government appears to be helpless; or is abetting. The seriousness in tackling the social and criminal problems is simply nowhere. The effectiveness of the new PSA-2000 is invisible. The BCS Judicial cadre is said to be ultra vires (DS May 21). Bangladesh is becoming a mad house of illegal liberties; while the numerous anniversaries of personalities go ahead unabated. Are we better dreamers than pragmatist?

On the other hand, as per press reports, the government is hard up with cash flow problems, and has borrowed about Taka five thousand crore from the banks to pay the salaries of the civil servants, causing liquidity crisis in the banking sector. How to balance the recurring budget vis a vis the available resources?

The engineers within the BCS are not happy at the restrictions at the top, at the lag end of their career. Each of the 29 cadres should have a say in the proceedings.

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