

Speaker's Accountability

As far as running of the affairs of the State was concerned late President Zia used to say 'money is no problem'. Our Honourable Speaker seems to be of the same view as far as running up the bill of our legislative branch is concerned. In the latest instance we the taxpayers will have to pay Tk. 50 lakh (nearly 100,000 US dollars) extra to fund his profligate nature for a trip which was fully paid for by the Commonwealth Parliament Association (CPA) in the first place.

Bangladesh was invited to send a five-member delegation, all expenses paid, to the ten-day CPA meeting in the UK which included the Speaker, his Deputy, the Chief Whip and two others. The CPA officials, of course, had no idea about the 'statute' of our leaders and they dared to send tickets without including the hangers on. So eight extras were added at public expense. These include secretary, assistant secretary and the public relations officer of the Speaker among others. That's not all. Our Hon. Speaker cannot travel but in first class, his assistants cannot travel but in the business class. The story hardly ends there. The hotel suites had to be upgraded because those provided for by the hosts were not good enough. These will cost Tk. 30,000 per night.

For God's sake can anybody explain what can justify such mindless and shameless expense when we are suffering from resource constraints everywhere? The seriousness of the trip is amply borne out by the fact that the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker are travelling with their wives and children, though at own expense. We raise serious questions about the propriety of this trip and the extra expenses to the tune of Tk. 50 lakh that is being put upon the poor taxpayers of this country. Last year the Speaker travelled 20 times each time with bigger than necessary entourage. Following his example the secretary of the parliament travelled 21 times in one year. Allegations are rife about fund wastage of a UNDP-funded project to improve the workings of the parliament. A move by this Speaker to build an official house for himself in the Sangsads premises was thwarted when the press exposed it.

For the sake of the dignity and prestige of the parliament we demand that financial disclosure be made of the expenses of the office of the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker and the members of the parliamentary secretariat. We think it will be befitting the public expectation of the sense of self-respect of a person holding the high office of the Speaker that he should himself initiate this process. Can we expect such exemplary behaviour from our Speaker, the Deputy Speaker and the secretary to the parliament?

When will it be Enough?

ATE last month, on August 29 to be precise, police recovered three decomposed bodies from a residential apartment at Khilgaon. Just over two weeks later on Saturday came the recovery of the decapitated corpse of two young men from a sewer line in Sutrapur. Next day there were six murders within a span of 16 hours at various parts of the capital city. What could be more poignant an evidence of a complete law and order failure in the metropolis? In the Sutrapur precinct alone, there have been as many as 30 killings over the last nine months. While killers are on a rampage, the police have played an infuriatingly inert role. In the Sutrapur double murder case, the officer-in-charge of the local police station allegedly made no move despite being repeatedly requested by the relatives of the slaughtered teens. Infuriatingly still, according to media reports, in many murder cases, the police stations concerned refused to initiate first information report (FIR) and advised complainants to lodge general diary (GD) instead. Obviously, question arises whose side are the police actually on, innocent people or criminals?

Whenever faced with the issue of alarming law and order downside, the government tries to pass the buck on, higher judiciary being the latest victim of its indiscriminate finger pointing. The Prime Minister has repeatedly criticised the judiciary in public for granting bails to criminals and thus encouraging rise of crime and terrorist activities. One would surely want to know from the government whether the perpetrators of murders mentioned above were granted bail by any court of law. Punitive measures taken against negligent police officers from time to time often prove inconsequential, for these bring about no tangible change either to police behaviour or the quality of its service. Where would people go when law enforcers themselves, knowingly or unknowingly, side with the killers? Who would they turn to when the police refuse to entertain their complaints? These are some basic questions the authority must answer now.

Parliamentary Inquiry into Magurjhara Mishap

THE government, it seems, is a firm believer of the adage *better late than never*. Otherwise, how would it explain institution of a parliamentary inquiry into the Magurjhara incident more than three years after an Occidental drill had unexpectedly hit a gas pocket, induced a huge blast and sparked off a blaze of infernal proportions? Meanwhile, a lot of changes have taken place. Occidental has rolled back its operations here, selling all its concerns to another US oil company Unocal. Interestingly, then too, the government kept silent over the Tk 612-crore compensation claim. Worse still, despite an unofficial Petrobangla calculation that put the damage in the tune of 200 million US dollars, the government did not initiate any assessment of the toll the Magurjhara blow-out had taken on the sub-soil. Starting from the signing of the production-sharing contract (PSC) with the Occidental the Magurjhara mishap to the damage calculation and compensation, the government has miserably failed to play its due role. The belated parliamentary inquiry into the incident now reflects another facet of its failure.

Now that the three-member JS body has been formed, we would like to see it address some specific issues related to the case. First, it should seek a complete status report from relevant ministries and departments on the disbursement of compensation money to the affected. Second, it must have a closer look at the progress of reforestation around the Magurjhara gas field. Finally, and most importantly, hush-hush over the whole incident must end. The public has every right to know how much damage was actually wrought by the inferno and how much have the Occidental and later Unocal paid so far as compensation.

THOSE who can not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" SANTAYANA. Apparently hurt by Sheikh Hasina's speech at the full-dress summit of the 15-member Security Council on September 8, in which she had called for "taking necessary action against those, who capture power illegally overthrowing elected constitutional governments for the sake of peace, democracy, human rights and economic advancement", an irate General Pervez Musharraf, Chief Executive of Pakistan, cancelled his scheduled meeting in New York with the Bangladesh Prime Minister at the last minute. On his return home on September 15 the General reportedly said he had done the right thing in cancelling the meeting which he had himself sought through sending his emissary to Dhaka with a personal letter addressed to the Prime Minister. Sheikh Hasina reciprocated by sending her Foreign Secretary C M Shafiq Shami with a nod of yes to the Pakistani military ruler's proposal for a meeting with a view to diffusing the current high tension in South Asia sub-continent centering Delhi and Islamabad's confrontational attitudes and arms race causing concern among the smaller countries in the region. Prior to that Shafiq Shami undertook his shuttle diplomacy to the Indian capital probably to allay any possible apprehension of the leadership there to whom the Pak military ruler is an anathema and with whom it has repeatedly refused to sit. In a balancing act the Bangladesh Prime Minister also decided to meet her Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee. Hopes were indeed high that through the good offices of Bangladesh the stalled SAARC summit would once again start rolling towards melting the thickening ice in South Asian scenario. But the possibility was nipped in the bud by General Pervez Musharraf's sudden u-turn.

What Sheikh Hasina voiced was clearly a policy option shared by all democracy-loving people and the civil society

SOME skeletons can never

stay in the closet. From time

to time the Hamoodur

Rahman Commission's Report

(HRCR) surfaces (or is made to

surface) Phoenix-like to haunt

Pakistan, more particularly the

Pakistan Army. The motivation

behind the present radiations is

hardly a mystery; which is the

one institution that remains

between India and regional hege

mony. As a psy-war weapon the

Report is far more cost-effective

in maligning the Army than the

expensive one-page ads ran by

India in major international

newspapers pre-the UN

Millennium Summit. A broad

section of our own intelligentsia

seems to have fallen for this,

proceeding to castigate an Army

that is three decades removed

from the catharsis of 1971. While

politicians have a vested interest

in trying to force the uniformed

personnel under pressure back to

the barracks, a broad spectrum of

the elite facing accountability

have reinforced this unholy

nexus. The 'log of war' invariably

covers the actions of the victors,

only the dirty lines of the vanquished

are on display for public

approbation. In isolation from the

main text the Supplementary

Report is contradictory at places.

The deep underlying root cause

of the disintegration of the experiment

in nationhood of its time is

ignored for the micro-reason of

targeting some individuals and

exonerating others. The Report

comes across simply as an exercise

by the then rulers to pass the

buck to their predecessors and

gloss over their own culpability

not an uncommon occurrence in

this world. Was it a coincidence

that the Report spared all those in

power during 1972-1975 period?

The Army action on night of

25/26 March in Dhaka was the

watershed event that sparked

open rebellion in East Pakistan,

however the Report absolves

those who planned and executed

that charge to blast their way

through the civilian barricades,

among them Tikka Khan and

Farman Ali Khan. In the face of

civilian siege of Dhaka

it is fair to stand in judgement

relying only on misinformation

and distorted facts about events

three decades ago? Samuel

Butler said, 'God cannot alter the

past but historians can'. We have

more things to worry about than

trying to exorcise the faded

ghosts of 1971. The Report's

sudden appearance is a well-

timed Indian strategy; one has

only to read 'The Kautilya

Arthashastra' (Books 11 to 14) as

recommended by R.P. Kangle

and the requirements of a

'Vijigisu' (would be world con-

queror). Five thousand years later

the same principles apply, to

quote Chinese Philosopher and

Strategist Sun Tse Tzu, 'winning a

war without bloodying swords'

is the clear objective here. The

Indians may be laughing them-

selves sick at our becoming a 'tool

of their game'.

One of the names on the list

was that of Brig (Retd)

Muhammad Taj S.J. & Bar. Lt Col

Taj was CO 44 Punjab (now 4

Sindh) during the 1971 war. Just

consider only the events leading

up to battle. As my company gave

a canopy of machine gun fire over

a train burning from end to end

carrying Guides Cav tanks at

Daharki Railway Station on 10

December 1971, he stood defi-

antly on the road only 200 yards

away, arms akimbo, flatly refus-

ing to take cover till the Indian

aircraft had been driven away

and the cavalrymen ran to their

tanks shacked on the MBFRs

and started the engines, making a

sharp right swivel to break the

chains, letting the tanks fall

sideways down the dusty

embankment and putting out the

fire. Now that I call courage!

'Don't be late', Taj growled with

pride at the bravery of Guides

Cavalry. 'Tell Ayub (the Guides

Cav CO) we have an appointment

with the Indians you better not

miss!' Or pummelling Sep Yaqub

(now a PIA Security Guard in

Karachi) and giving him a bear

embrace for shooting down an

SU-7 which crashed and

exploded only a few hundred

yards away a mile or so short of

Umerkot. Try and recapture the

elan he would instill in the sub-

units of 45 Punjab and 46 Baluch

as they fanned out left and right

of us. 'Good hunting, tell the

Ind