

Reeking Rot in Ctg Port

THE Chittagong port area never ceases to surprise us with its downside. Even so, what really strikes us as a thunderbolt is the front-page expose by Prothom Alo yesterday of a labour union perversity that surpasses all the customary pejoratives we have seen associated with trade unionism. We learn that eight leaders of four dock workers' unions have grabbed 35 acres of portland, raised houses and shops on them and apparently leased them out for a virtual business bonanza. It is a fraternity based on mutual gains sharing and also muscle-flexing as is evidenced by the existence of a 200-strong *mastaan bahini* to collect monthly rental of approximately 15 lakh taka for fattening the eight leaders' pockets regularly. There is even a touch of altruism as the *prima donna* among the eight leaders, Sirajul Islam, has set up maktab, madrassah and kindergarten to boot.

The cementing factor is evidently mutual gain. The basic question, however, is: who is giving them the oxygen of support? How could they have the temerity to defy the 50 notices hitherto served by the regulatory body called the directorate of dock workers on the eight leaders to vacate their illegal possession? The fact of the matter is that three of the four dock workers' unions claim to be the beneficiaries of ruling party support while the remainder lone one put on a BNP label.

With the political parties cultivating labour union leaders to such a fault, even best-intentioned labour reform will not stand a chance unless it has been brought about by a bipartisan will. But in the meanwhile the ruling party whose clout seems to be earning the trade unions an impregnable immunity to law enforcement should distance itself from such image-wreckers. Just how entrenched the vested labour interests have gotten to thwart any change is for all to see. We are doomed if we cannot neutralise them.

Pending Repression Cases

THE government, it seems, refuses to believe that unless executed and enforced, any legal provision, no matter how tough it sounds, is no more than mere text in a book of law. Also, judicial inertia discourages law enforcement activism, which, in turn, encourages rise in crime. One of the reasons behind the sharp rise in the incidence of crime and terrorism across the country in recent times is absurdly low rate of conviction at the courts of law, albeit rendered so to no small extent by poor prosecution. Overall, there is a huge backlog of cases in the country's judicial system, slowing down to a trickle the pace of dispensation of justice. Although judicial reform has been a burning issue in recent times topped off by a growing concern amongst the conscious section of the society, including some senior judges and jurists, over an ever-increasing logjam of cases in the judiciary, so far no concrete step has been taken for a redressal. Expansion of judicial infrastructure is an issue that has been largely overlooked. The fact that some 30,000 cases under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 are pending for dearth of special tribunals bears strong testimony to that. Overall, one must say, the state has been rather sluggish in its response to the needs of the judicial system which, needless to say, has taken a serious toll on the societal and individual lives of the citizenry.

Now, the decision to commission 35 special tribunals soon, albeit welcome in the dire context, reminds us of a few things. Given the horrific rate of repression on women and children, we wonder how the government could even think of starting off with only 10 tribunals in the first place. Similarly shortsighted was the government's action back in 1995. Then, too, a suggestion set forth by none other than the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government for 51 special tribunals to give effect to an anti-repression law went unheard. Law ministry's recommendation fell by the wayside for the finance ministry's refusal to allocate funds.

We can only hope that there would be no such tangle this time around and the tribunals would be established as promised. In the essence the state has to enhance the judicial capacity to deal with the cases of repression on women and children.

Dengue Spectre, Again?

AFTER a phase of relative lull in dengue affliction, our nonchalant attitude to the incipient danger has led to 10 casualties in 14 days. According to the estimate of the Health Directorate, 77 people have died, 4,127 have been affected, and currently 239 people are receiving treatment in different hospitals in the country. We saw a decrease in the number of dengue victims last month, but because of our complacency over the declining trend it has hit us back with vengeance. Although the experts had warned us of the dengue threat lingering up to December, we lowered the guard on preparedness and paid the price.

Recently there was a workshop on management of dengue in Bangladesh that threw up some excellent ideas. Heads were put together to formulate a set of guidelines for combating dengue which we need to keep handy all the time for use. The WHO has evidence on the potential existence of dengue in Bangladesh. Now is the time to evolve an operational strategy based on this evidence with technical assistance and help from the WHO and other bilateral and multilateral partners to put it to use. Research and capacity building, both institutional and human, should be part of any long-term measure against this disease. Resource mobilisation for such a programme remains an important element in its own right in a country like Bangladesh. Much of the resource that is being spent now to control the menace or treat the infected people could be saved if precautionary measures were taken earlier on to ward off the disease. We must not forget prevention is cost-effective.

THE world has seldom been without a band of rebels challenging its existing order. They might have bruised their nose in vain against the hard rock of status quo, but their quixotic actions did restrain the world's most powerful, imposing caution on the latter's conduct of themselves. As the Qaddafis and Castros of bygone century have considerably mellowed down with their stars fading, the first serious revolutionary of the post-cold war era has surprisingly risen from the backyard of the United States, the hitherto unchallenged leader of the contemporary world. Venezuela, the country known for its beauty queens (even this year a Venezuelan has been titled Miss Universe), has now produced a revolutionary who is none other than the country's president himself. Hugo Chavez, a former paratrooper and a man barely in his mid-forties, spent his first eighteen months of presidency in consolidating his position on the domestic front. Now with the price of oil -- of which Venezuela has the largest reserve outside the Middle East -- soaring to 40 US dollars a barrel, he is about to step out to the world stage in a spectacular way.

But what is he up to? Chavez is a whirlwind of ideas, plans and visions when it comes to international relations and many of them are intended to reshape the world order. He is often critical of or even hostile to the US position on most of the global and regional issues. In fact, Venezuela is just too small for him. He fancies



himself as a regional and hemispheric leader, wants to play a major role on the global stage and is testing the limit of how far he can go in terms of pushing his ideas and showing off pastures in global politics. His ambitions may seem messianic and way out of proportion in a country of modest size and enormous socio-economic problems. But, in Chavez's reckoning, Venezuela has twice as many people as Cuba and he has leverage that his mentor, Fidel Castro, did not possess: oil and a long history of Venezuela as the main supplier of petrol to the United States. That situation of mutual dependence gives Caracas considerable advantage in its dealing with Washington.

By arranging to have his energy minister named the president of the OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries), Chavez has already proved his prowess in using oil as an instrument of foreign policy. As it befits a former soldier his own view of

The Coming of a Rebel

President Hugo Chavez, with his eloquence, exuberance and personal warmth, is perhaps a fitting successor to Fidel Castro's legacy. But it is widely believed that Chavez inherits more of Castro's defiance, not his ideology of communism.

the world and how it should be shaped is strongly coloured by geopolitical and strategic considerations.

"The twentieth century was a bipolar world but twenty-first century is not going to be bipolar," he vowed in a speech in Venezuela in August last. "The twenty-first century should be multipolar and we ought to push for the development of such a

world. So, long live a United Asia, a United Africa, and a United Europe."

But what disturbs the United States most are Chavez's views, which he shares with Roberto Ceresole, one of his early advisers and a neo-fascist Argentine theorist. They both contend that Latin America, long considered by the US as its exclusive sphere of influence, must forge alliance with the Middle East and Asia to counterbalance the power of the US and what they call "the Jewish financial mafia." In their opposition to American hegemony this view has something common with

that of the countries like France and particularly China with whom Venezuela has sought closest ties. In more concrete terms, Chavez believes that "his mission in the world is to restore some sort of equilibrium that favours less developed countries." One key to pursuing that goal is closer ties with what he calls "our ten partners, friends and brothers in the OPEC." In August last Chavez undertook visits to all OPEC countries to invite their leaders to its summit meeting to be held in Caracas. He shocked the Western world by becoming the first head of the state to call on Saddam Hussain in Baghdad since the Gulf War. Eyebrows were raised in western capitals when during a stopover in Libya he described Muammar Gaddafi as his ally. According to analysts his OPEC tour was masterful in geopolitical term. It amply demonstrated that Venezuela was not just another Latin American backwater.

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his eloquence, exuberance and personal warmth, is perhaps a fitting successor to Fidel Castro's legacy. But it is widely believed that Chavez inherits more of Castro's defiance, not his ideology of communism. Like Castro, Chavez seems to enjoy nothing more than tweaking the United States, which Washington, in a reflection of Venezuela's importance as an oil supplier, has so far endured with patience. Apart from this there are also real policy differences between the two. President Chavez has withdrawn the Venezuelan military from regional naval exercises in the Caribbean -- traditionally carried out for long. He also refused to allow the US planes monitoring drug trafficking to fly in Venezuelan air space. Washington's decision to use 1.3 billion US dollars to support Colombian government in its war against the guerrillas and drug dealers is likely to make the US-Venezuela relationship even more difficult. Some of his former associates in the region accuse Chavez of supplying guns to leftist Colombian insurgents known as the Farc. While denying that allegation Chavez made it clear that he definitely dislikes the US-sponsored Plan Colombia to contain the country's insurgents. He warns that it may lead to "the

Vietnamisation of the entire Amazon region" and refers to the helicopters being sent by the US to Colombian government as "death machines."

In reality, Hugo Chavez and his government are on the side of Farc. Chavez wants the Farc to win, or at any rate to be so successful in the peace negotiations that the Farc elements will be incorporated in the government. Should that happen, it will entirely change the political complexion of Colombia. Chavez's involvement in Colombia's internal affairs will thus bring Venezuela in direct confrontation with the United States -- something reminiscent of Cuba's missile crisis of the early 1960s. Observers are unanimous that a crisis of serious nature is brewing up in the Caribbean.

Chavez's principal intellectual hero is Simon Bolivar, the legend of South American independence. Bolivar dreamt of and fought for a United Continent. Like him, Chavez also has argued for the formation of a South Atlantic Treaty Organisation and a Latin American version of the International Monetary Fund. He also proposes a single currency for all of South America. The idea of a reunified America -- of Bolivarian America, has risen again," Chavez said in a speech on Bolivar's birthday in July last. It is not clear as yet how far his dreams will go but any attempt to realise even some of them will cause a tremor that is going to be felt far and wide.

Telecom Privatisation: An Utterly Phoney Policy

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The latest telecom scandal concerns ROW (right of way), i.e. fees payable by telecom operators for laying cables. Public operators pay anything from Rs. 10 to 75 per metre as fees. But the Centre has instructed states not to charge private operators! This is a huge, undeserved, doleout. These rackets-as-policies will prevent India from increasing its miserable telephone density-the need of the hour.

ful cost-saving technology, especially in a country of distances like India. And yet, a telephone rings in only 10 million of India's 200 million homes.

It is absolutely imperative to sharply raise the country's abysmal telecom density (2.8 lines per 100 people, or a fifth of the world average, and worse than in many Third World countries). But the evolving official policy will comprehensively defeat this objective. The policy favours big US and Indian companies, and bankrupts the public sector.

Every official measure can be traced to corporate lobbying and collusion and to an agenda laid down by the US ambassador in a specific note he sent to the government.

Thus, just hours before he left for the US on September 7, Mr A.B. Vajpayee decided to open up India's international telephony to "global competition". The issue was not even on the Cabinet agenda. Earlier, the government had announced it would introduce "competition" only in 2002. This will cost the highly effi-

cient VSNL over a third of its Rs. 7,000 crore revenue as India's sole international call-provider. It will be a bonanza for MNCs like MCI-WorldCom, Concert and Sprint.

This bonanza comes six years after the announcement of ill-thought-out National Telecommunications Policy, which inaugurated mindless privatisation. This too happened on the eve of another PM's (Mr Narasimha Rao's) visit to the US.

The NTP deviously exaggerated telecom demand, and then said the public sector couldn't raise the Rs. 23,000 crore needed to give everyone a "telephone on demand". (Do we have food or safe water "on demand" in India? Ergo, private capital must come in.)

Thus, the government recently ended DoT's "monopoly" on national long-distance telephony and lowered call charges by 20 per cent. This will soon wipe out DoT's annual surplus (Rs. 12,000 crore).

Now, DoT doesn't simply pocket this surplus. It uses it to

expand India's telecom network, especially in villages.

How? DoT earns a lot from long-distance calls, made mainly by relatively affluent Indians (except in emergencies). It costs Rs 27,000 to install a telephone line. But most subscribers are too poor to pay this: it is one-and-a-half times the per capita income! So DoT charges the subscriber Rs 2,000 to 3,000 in deposit, plus a rent. This is a fraction of DoT's capital cost.

With this cross-subsidy, DoT has recently added an impressive 4 to 4.5 million lines annually, the highest expansion anywhere, barring China. A third of these are installed in villages something no private company will do. Rural phones generate little revenue.

There is no substitute for DoT. India's experience with private corporations has been awful. Five years ago, these were allowed to enter all 23 telecom "circles" to "compete" with DoT in basic telephony. Companies bid for high licence fees.

Most were joint ventures with MNCs. They included Bharati,

Reliance, Ispat, Tata, Issar and Shyam (the "Big Six"). Purely Indian companies were barred. The auction process was messy.

Several companies won licences on favourable terms. But their revenue projections were unrealistic. They soon started demanding exemption from paying licence fees. The government yielded to their bullying. The public lost Rs. 45,000 crore in guaranteeing their "viability".

Worse, the government allowed them to violate contracts and move to "revenue-sharing" at DoT's expense. This was patently illegal and drew flak from the Comptroller and Auditor-General.

That's not at all. The private companies have failed to perform. They have installed less than 150,000 new lines during three years against the target of two million. In some regions, e.g. industrialised Gujarat, agriculturally prosperous Punjab, and Rajasthan not a single line was installed. The best performer is Madhya Pradesh (50 per cent).

Most new private lines are in the big cities. Today, 250,000 of India's 600,000 villages remain unconnected to telephones. What an information technology "Superpower"! Private licensees were to install 101, 700 rural lines. They have installed only 43 lines in Rajasthan and 13 in M.P.!

Private operators shamelessly indulge in "cherry-picking" concentrating on high-revenue subscribers like five-star hotels. For instance, Hughes Telecom was to install 600,000 new lines in Maharashtra. It has done only about 30,000 mostly in metropolitan Mumbai and Pune. By offering special rates, it has snatched high-usage businesses away from the public sector.

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These rackets-as-policies will prevent India from increasing its miserable telephone density-the need of the hour. For a big country with poor roads, this is a shame. The Vajpayee government is further compounding the shame by favouring MNCs.

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

PM's US visit

Sir, PM Sheikh Hasina has left for US on 14 October on a two-day official visit. However, as the south-western part of the country is currently in the grip of flood, the general people feel that she should have postponed the visit and stood by the destitute people. When millions of countrymen are suffering is it prudent to leave them at the mercy of "relief thieves"? What the country will gain from her visit I have no idea but her mere presence in the country would have boost the morale of the marooned people and this would have also enhanced the prestige of the PM and the country. The visit could have been deferred till the overall flood situation improves.

Commadore AMA Alam (Retd)
Dhaka

Commendable indeed

Sir, I must applaud the steps taken by The Daily Star to give national recognition to the students who work hard and achieve brilliant results in O levels and A levels under the London University.

Having been a student, who had appeared in these exams, it was frustrating to see that our hard work was not appreciated as much or even close enough to the orthodox examinations (the HSC and the SSC).

But to speak honestly, the praise lavished on the O level examinees is comparatively large than that to A level. In other words, I would like to mention that four A's in O level exam is equal to one A in A level, even

more so in science and math subjects. Now studying in an university in U.S.A, I find that the level of course work we do for our A level exam is almost equal to what they do in their sophomore or junior years. Moreover, reputed universities like Cornell, MIT, Harvard, Upen, Stanford, Washington University, Saint Louis etc give equal credit to "A" and a "B" in A levels. This is of great significance because this shows that students receiving an A or B in A level in three subjects especially science and maths, are very special as well as they receive the same amount of credit as their corresponding mate who receive all A's.

I would like you to ponder on the thought that there may be others out there who deserve appreciation for their hard work but are being overlooked.

Sumaiya Islam
U.S.A

Pregnant mothers, beware

Sir, The atmosphere in our roads and streets is very polluted and becoming more so with each passing day as the traffic jams are increasing in leaps and bounds. But nothing is being done by the concerned authorities.

1. No new roads are being constructed.

2. Nor the way side shops removed.

3. The number of rickshaws and autorickshaws remain the same.

4. Public are not forced to follow the traffic rules.

5. The piles of construction materials still remain heaped on

theroads.

Nobody seems to be bothered about the health hazard these jams and consecutive pollution is causing to the people especially to the pregnant ladies and children.

So this most vulnerable group, especially the pregnant mothers on whom the pollution can cause serious damage, should take care of themselves and their unborn babies. This they can do by staying as much off the road as possible which means minimum outings during the pregnancy period. They should go out only when it is absolutely necessary, otherwise they should stay at home. Those whose houses are by the road side should open their windows towards the roads only in the mornings when the traffic and the pollution is minimum.

Dr. Sabrina Rashid
Dhaka

Middle East crisis

Sir, Whatever is happening in the Middle East, the Israelis are to be solely blamed for it. It is very much apparent that the Likud party leader Ariel Sharon visited the holy place of the Muslims only to provoke the Muslims of Palestine in particular and of the whole world in general. What is happening in Palestine now is nothing but the consequence of that displeasure and unrest. By trespassing the sacred place of the Muslims, Mr Sharon tried to prove their authority over the region, which is nothing but sheer insolence and obstinacy. The Israeli people and Jewish community should realise that the Muslims love their holy place more than their lives. And any further insolence from the part of Israel will definitely exacerbate the situation. At this point, I also call upon the international community to try Mr Sharon for provoking unrest and agitation in Palestine.

Mahmud Hasan
Markfield, Leicester, UK

OPINION

Army Officers in Bank

A H Dewani

We are flabbergasted to learn of the government's concurrence to the appointment of army officers of high rank as Board Directors of our financial institutions which is in fact an anybody's thinking, for the same goes against the established norms of bank management. We felt assured when our Central Bank, which being the custodian of all financial institutions makes rules and regulations for them and oversees their management, opined it as contrary to bank rules when the Ministry of Finance had sent its proposal to that effect. Despite that what prompted the AL government to bring in the members of the Services to share with the civilian personalities is a matter to ponder. That this has made the civilians to raise their eyebrows is not being reckoned with by the government.

We harbour no grudge or prejudice against the defence personnel as they too are the worthy sons of the soil. But when the country's civil society is not wanting in the mellowed persons adept in fiscal management, and even many with authority over our economy or for that matter microeconomy, what came about as incumbent upon the government to go for the officers in uniform to be placed in the civil administration of money markets? In this respect we are fully in clime in with the views expressed in a letter from Mr Tanveer Ahmed, New York published in The Daily Star on 19th September. In his 'Heart of the Matter' piece of 26th September Mr Monsoor Mamoon also referred to this in a critical vein. Even the ordinary men would take exception to this exceptional attitude of the government. The people know it well that the uniformed ranks and files, especially those in the Defence are trained and groomed for specific purpose of defending the country from outside attack. We are grateful to them that they come readily in aid of the distressed people

when there is a flood or natural calamity. A selected sizeable number is from time to time being drafted in UN forces to assist in the war-torn or strife-stricken countries. Their training is best utilised there and in turn they could make a pile in a short time and the country earn forex. But to oversee and share in the fiscal management in the banking operations, the army officers are never a pragmatic choice. With all humility we can assert that suggestively they do neither have schooling on the intricacies of money and banking nor are they bred to acquaint themselves with the know-how of the subjects.

The bringing in the military officers in the public sector like banks is but paving the way for them to make their inroad, as were allowed in the past, to the civil administration. During late President Ziaur Rahman's and General Ershad's regimes the posting of retired majors and colonels in the different ministries and in other sectors were a regular phenomena; many held the posts of deputy secretary and joint secretary, as also the chairmanship of the autonomous organisations. The cadre service officers always took that practice with a grain of salt, but because of the then administration being under military personality turned heads of government all had to swallow the bitter pill in silence. The posting of military officer as Director General of Prisons still continues in the face of protest by the respective cadre service officers. With the civilian government back to power it was to eliminate the trend steadily, if not overnight. But the AL government for reasons best known to it is helping the almost defunct trend to reintroduce, though in small scale. Whatever premises acted for this option this would be treated as an unpalatable instance. Because once before the people had thwarted through their movements an evil design of Ershad who tried to legitimise army's share in the civil administration.

If the army high-ups are being drawn into the public sector from the perception that all of them are above board and they are cut above the civilian experts, it would be a foolish conjecture. The history of the last two military regimes is replete with alleged malpractices and mischiefs done by many.

Another point would not be out of place to mention here. If the serving army officers of high rank could be installed as a bank director, the joint secretaries and the secretaries of the ministries can have the stronger ground for vying for the same in banks. Let alone other officers of the ranks in autonomous organisations. Undoubtedly they are supposed to be far more conversant with and experienced in the country's fiscal management and economy including that of international monetary institutions by virtue of their long involvement in public administration of varied nature concurrently of financial aspects than the army officials who seldom get exposure to those aspects of public services. Nevertheless the secretaries' induction is not proposed or desired.

We have many ace economists and chartered accountants, erudite professors, eminent lawyers and law markers, retired bank officers and distinguished social workers, to be precise, men of head and heart to fill such gap, if any, and it would not be a difficult task to find them from the civil society. The purpose is to revamp the ramshackle management of banking operations, and to identify and put an end to, among other things, the loose working systems, pervading corruption and nepotism that led to the indiscreet loan sanctioning and inconceivable defaulting. What banking in Bangladesh sorely needs is infusion of dynamism in the whole spectrum of banking management with persons of strong moral fibre and rectitude from among the civil society irrespective of their creeds.