

Land-grab at Gunpoint

THREE newspapers carried this stunning story yesterday. Land ministry officials bypassing all rules and practices leased out 1.5 bigha (about 20,000 square feet) of land, designated as a parking lot in the Gulistan area, for a shopping complex to a dubious outfit called the Bangabandhu Baboshayee Samobaya Samity (BBSS). This group, in connivance with a minister, two secretaries, one state minister's son and several ruling party high-ups, brought about this highly illegal action. Providing active support to the whole process were several officials — both high and midlevel — from the land ministry and Rajuk. When a few conscientious Rajuk officials tried to resist it, firearms were brandished and some senior officers were dragged by their collar and forced to sign on the dotted lines at gunpoint. Tragically when the incident was brought to the notice of the Rajuk chairman, who was on the verge of retirement, preferred not to get himself involved and pretended not to have heard anything.

The land originally belonged to the Public Works Department (PWD), under the works ministry. During the autocratic regime of Ershad the management — not ownership — of this land was transferred to DCC for construction and maintenance of city parking lots. The land ministry had no claim on this land and had no business to give a 60-year lease on it at Tk 1.5 crore. The land value is estimated to be Tk 50 crore at the minimum.

We are convinced that this was nothing short of an elaborate scam to grab a prime land and cheat the public of its rightful asset. We demand an immediate inquiry into the whole episode and punishment of the people concerned. The minister, son of another state minister and the government high officials involved must be exposed and brought to justice. While criminal investigation is in process the land ministry and Rajuk officials must be reshuffled. As an immediate step the land in question must immediately be restored as a parking lot and all the papers signed with the so-called BBSS cancelled. The government must also investigate the origin and membership of this body who had the audacity to get their plan approved at gunpoint. This is most important for the government. If it is once proven that government decisions can be procured by brandishing guns and that the perpetrators of such an act can get away with it, then no government official will be safe any more.

Our final demand is to the PM herself. Please immediately ban use of Bangabandhu's name by all unauthorised bodies. Many bodies, like the one above, use Bangabandhu's name as part of their organisations' name only to get some benefit out of it. PM's previous instruction in this regard is followed more in violation than in adherence. Now the time has come to severely punish those who use Bangabandhu's name in carrying out illegal and anti-people activities.

PAC's Plight

THE abysmal track record of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in reviewing and hearing the audit observations forwarded to it by the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) Office would indeed make one wonder whether there is any justification of having the parliamentary body or not. A backlog of 450 audit reports, which might take the committee at least 12 years to review and act upon, is representative of anything but a functional entity. The figures, however, do not reflect the committee's efficiency; these only highlight a set of poignant facts.

The PAC, one of the most important parliamentary committees, has been decimated almost into theoretical existence. It does not get the necessary state support — in terms of both finance and policy — to efficiently and effectively discharge its responsibilities. Budgetary constraints have obviously eliminated the possibility of having a research and analysis cell, without which effective functioning of a committee like PAC becomes an impossible proposition. What's worse, the members reportedly are not aware of the rules and procedures of the committee. As one World Bank official working on the Strengthening the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General pointed, the PAC "lacks the expertise and resources to deal with the issues and the volume of the audit reports."

Enhancement of budgetary, personnel and logistic support alone does not hold the key to an efficient and effective PAC. Empowerment is of crucial significance. Until and unless the PAC is given the authority to initiate corrective measures against institutions found to have financial irregularities, its very function and concomitantly that of the CAG would have no consequence whatsoever. It is surely undesirable that the whims and wishes of the ministries should dictate a watchdog body like the PAC. Why would the decision of an inquisition into financial irregularities of any public establishment, and prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators thereby, be in the hands of the ministry concerned?

That there are major irregularities in financial management of the public establishments goes beyond an iota of doubt. Seemingly, the CAG observations and subsequently the PAC recommendations lose way in the bureaucratic web. Such a stand-off shouldn't be allowed to continue.

To the Editor ...

Faulty approach to development projects

Sir, It appears from reports in the press (DS Nov 30) that huge contracts are awarded to single or limited number of printing firms for printing scores of copies of school text books, instead of distributing the contracts to one dozen or half a dozen contractors (maintain a minimum pool for handling emergency situations), to take care of capacity handling and contingency situations, which are common in the developing countries including Bangladesh (failure to maintain the deadline). This is not a new situation, but we are not learning from the weak system in operation. Where are the official critics (the system analysts)?

The procedure for evaluation of the tender offers may be reviewed so that the contracts are awarded keeping in view the ultimate public interest, instead of splitting hairs over the technical requirements of the terms and conditions of the tendering terms and conditions. It appears that vested groups are able to influence unduly the tender committees to award dubious contracts to firms, which simply cannot

undertake the offers they make. This is the symptom in all departments, including the inability to spend the donor foreign exchange allocations in time for projects in Bangladesh (report on SEMP projects in Bangladesh).

The planners have to be careful to ensure that all development projects carry provision for mini development projects at the routine daily work level also (logistics and manpower, the latter with provision for training and orientation courses). Several examples may be cited. The number of inspectors are too few in the garment sector, and for checking of medicine shops (30,000 of these are unregistered DS Nov 30), and other shops and the bazaar. The police work force (including the traffic police) cannot meet the increased demand for metrolines.

The political decision-making must ensure that bureaucracy is updated along with a new project (including BMREs). On the other hand there are too many government employees working in the old and outdated methods.

The Planning Commission and the government's planning department need to be revamped with new synergy, to be able to assist the other ministries with

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and in stampede, but only a few from burn injury.

Prime Minister and other leaders conveyed their deep shock and urged the factory owner to provide proper compensation to the victims' families. However I feel, with compensation, they should emphasise on proper management system as well. This management problem has already engulfed our national life and mismanagement has become the order of the day.

We demand that from now on strict safety measures be followed in all factories and establishments. Only proper management can reduce such pathetic incidents.

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Mismanagement in garments factories

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