

Radioactive irregularity

Monitoring and enforcement needed

That most of an estimated 130,000 X-ray machines used at different hospitals, clinics and diagnosis centres across the country don't have Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission licence is yet another instance of enforcement failure. As is the case with many more such areas, here, too, the law is there all right but is regularly flouted in absence of an effective and efficient enforcement system. In this particular case, failure to regulate and enforce laws has caused, what we may call, a double-barrelled impact, affecting both the public health and the public exchequer. The commission has been deprived of crores of taka in unpaid licence and renewal fees from the establishments using X-ray machines and other sources of radiation since September 1998. Secondly, and crucially, unregulated and unmonitored use of radioactive devices could well result in improper use of these on patients, thereby inflicting irreparable damage on them. We are more concerned about the hazard posed to the public health and cannot help condemn the criminal callousness shown so far by not only the commission but also other relevant government agencies.

In our considered view, the government should immediately undertake a two-dimensional redressal measure to put things in order on the radioactive front, so to speak. The commission's countrywide survey to find out the exact number of radioactive machines currently in use, albeit incomplete, has been a positive development towards accomplishing one of the solutions we have in mind. It is imperative that the commission go ahead with the survey and finish it as soon as possible. Here, however, the commission should try to find out a rough estimate of unauthorised users through an elimination process. We are sure it has a list of those establishments who have been regular in licence renewal. Once the preliminary data is at the commission's disposal, it should segmentise the country and institute a central enforcement and monitoring cell for each segment. There should also be an apex body to co-ordinate the monitoring and enforcement efforts. Unlicensed users of radiation sources should not only be slapped with hefty fines but also be made liable to criminal procedure.

As we have said, this is much too serious an issue to be overlooked. We hope the commission and the relevant government agencies would realise that.

Eid rush beginning

Take precautions in advance

Thousands of people are preparing to travel by bus, train and launch to celebrate Eid ul Adha in their village homes. Most of them do not have the means or the free time to make arrangements in advance. Reports have indicated that most fares have been hiked up by private companies. The percentage increase is simply arbitrary and as high as 100 per cent on some routes. At the same time, most seats have already been 'exhausted', well before the rush, evidently because of block bookings by vested interests who are holding them with the suspected intention of scalping desperate travellers at the eleventh hour.

The authorities should be more than aware that there would be an increasing demand for seats on all forms of transport in the days immediately preceding Eid. We would like to know why they are ignoring the fare hikes? We expect them to take anticipatory preventive action to protect the interests of travellers. Activities of private transport companies should be monitored to prevent underhand sales of tickets and all seasonal price increases. Travellers must be protected from the traumatic experience of battling for seats and paying exorbitant fares to go home.

As the rush intensifies, the temptation to carry unsafe loads must be nipped in the bud. Overcrowding on all modes of transport must be prevented. Additional public vehicles on land and by river should be mobilised to cope with the demand. The law enforcing agencies must discharge their duty honestly and diligently to protect passengers en route from falling prey to coercion and mugging incidents. We urge the appropriate authorities to take note of their responsibilities. Past lapses have led to tragic accidents that have marred the spirit of this celebration. The experience must not be repeated.

Who is on the crest of the roller coaster ride?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

In every society politicians are not the most trusted people around. In a survey, conducted a few years ago, people were asked to name ten most trusted personalities in the United States. Amazingly, none of these ten contained the name of a politician. The result only reflects the degree of apprehension the citizens hold about the very people they elect to lead their nation and collective destiny. The utterances of the first line politicians in Bangladesh, especially, in the past few weeks did not prove themselves otherwise.

No sooner there was a tragic bomb explosion in the CPB meeting at Paltan Miadan, than the leader of the opposition squarely accused the ruling party for carrying out the blast. Did she ever think for a moment that an ordinary man might enquire as to why the ruling party will ever contemplate carrying out such a brutal act against their ideological ally? As if that was not enough of a self-infliction, her public revelation in Rangpur that "AL has killed the policeman and kept inside the mosque", has surpassed every other distortions and would make it impossible for an ordinary man to believe in what even when she makes a truthful exposition in future.

The ruling party stalwarts were not in a mood to give the BNP chief any walkover in preaching the unbelievable. The Home and the Local Government ministers' effort to twist the story of shootings from one of their MP's procession only made them look preposterous to the people who already knew the truth through the objective reporting of the free media. The politicians of both the side of the aisle are, in fact, in a roller coaster ride. They are not in a position to explore if they are in the summit or in the slump. They are doing something when they should do nothing; and are not doing anything when they have a lot of things to do. The AL has a bigger share of responsibility, not only because it is the present ruling party, but also for the fact that it is presumed to stand for some highly acclaimed virtues without which a modern state cannot flourish.

AL is very fortunate for the obvious reality that each of our citizens who still associates himself/herself with the values of our great war of liberation is an AL sympathizer. In fact, it is easy to be branded as an AL sympathizer: one who believes in or utters the undistorted history of our liberation war becomes by default an AL patron. On the other hand, one has to be over creative to invent or digest the story that Sheikh Mujib had no part in the war of liberation and it was an unknown Major's sudden call from a radio station that sparked the mind of the

governance if she would ask her state minister to resign or take leave of absence from the cabinet until the investigation is over. This was one of the few instances where the main opposition party has rightfully asked for the resignation of the minister.

It seems that the PM is more interested to be surrounded by the sycophants rather than the constructive critics who want to bring her to do the right when she is doing the wrong. Her reply to a questioner about the rumour of the Honourable President's resignation was not discreet by any account. In his interview with the TIME magazine editor (in New York, 1974), Bangabandhu was asked about his reaction to Dr. Henry Kissinger's contention that "Bangladesh is an international basket case". Bangabandhu smartly replied, "I am not aware of any such predicament made by Dr. Kissinger". The PM could have given the similar answer to her questioner. The Daily Star wrote a timely editorial advising her not to undo one of her great deeds.

It is now very clear to the people as regard to the group that will dictate the agenda of the government if the BNP alliance is voted to power. Recent two-day of hartal calls, defying the instruction of the BNP chief, shows the power of the partners within the alliance.

damaged cars and properties of the innocent citizens. What parts did those constituents have in the tragic incident or in the trial, for that matter, that they had to suffer in the hands of her supporters? Apparently no legal action was taken against the perpetrators. Aside from the legal aspect, party chief would have been well advised to redress her moral responsibility by offering a public apology to the victims for the misdeeds of the zealot supporters.

One of government ministers has a regular schedule to bring out anti-hartal procession in the city no matter what the issue is or who calls the hartal. Every minister has his constitutional obligations, for which he is accountable to the nation through his oath. Leading an anti-hartal procession, for instance, does not fall within the bounds of the ministerial responsibilities. From a recent such anti-hartal procession, the minister's cadre attacked the peaceful procession of the CPB, the party which was the AL's ally, especially during its rainy days. The minister was neither disciplined nor censured by the party high command. As if that was not enough, the said minister's son was recently implicated in a highly publicized case of homicide. In fact, this was not the first time that the minister's offspring became the subject of news headline. The PM had the avenue to set a precedence of good

governance if she would ask her state minister to resign or take leave of absence from the cabinet until the investigation is over. This was one of the few instances where the main opposition party has rightfully asked for the resignation of the minister.

One does not have to be a great political analyst to ascertain the damage the 'lqbal episode' has inflicted on the image of the ruling party. The PM had and still has a lot of avenue to salvage the situation. No one of sense ever believed that the PM had any hand or knowledge of the incident. But her government has so far failed to bring the culprits to book. People will always question the sincerity of the government, not its ability to roundup the criminals, especially when their photographs were published in various newspapers.

People of good sense had a lot of apprehension about the intention of the ruling party in promulgating the so-called Public Safety Act (PSA). Instead of proving its detractors wrong, the ruling party and the law enforcing authorities have used it mainly to harass the opposition activists as initially apprehended by them. It has been abused in ways, as if there were no other laws to tackle the criminal activists before the introduction of the PSA. In many cases its abuse has been boomeranged on the image of the government at a very huge expense of its popularity. For instance, when the ruling party scored a big point due to the unruly behaviour of the

opposition lawyers at the nation's highest court, the whole advantage has been neutralized due to the initiation of a legal suit against the lawyers concerned under the PSA.

While it is not difficult to identify the misdeeds of the ruling party, it is expediently a hard task to single out any of the activities of the main opposition during their entire tenure that could give them any degree of ovation vis-a-vis the failures of the ruling party. The BNP MPs' absence from the parliament for an untenable reason of 'unfavourable environment' does not bode well with the people. They are holding on to their seats and the benefits from the national exchequer without doing the work that they are constitutionally obligated to carry out inside the parliament. Under their oath and the election mandate, they are supposed to represent the interest of their constituents inside the august body, which they are obviously evading. Any semblance of respect for democracy should have prodded them to resign from the parliament

the AL. It is, indeed, hapless that all of them led to a natural extinction after the independence. The BNP, which evolved as a moderate alternative force while in power, has lamentably shattered that hope while in opposition. Since the party was formed from the echelon of power, it lacks the nerve to digest its presence out of power. It is dismal to observe that the party that ruled the country for the maximum period of time, once through a highly acclaimed election, had formed an alliance with fanatics, religious zealots and autocrats shouldering the rubbles of their crimes and misdeeds. These forces, given the opportunity, will roll back the wheels of progress and will, once and for all, extinguish our dream of making a modern and prosperous state.

In the last few weeks, the BNP has totally alienated itself from the line of moderation to the force of fanaticism. It has openly and directly sided with those who want to make Bangladesh a theocratic state. Moreover, the BNP chief's whole

agenda is influenced by her personal vendetta against the AL. This acrimony has propelled her to become desperate and prevented her from making any objective decisions. Over the last four and a half years, the BNP has done whatever it takes to bring down the government, ignoring even the bitter experience from its adversaries that an elected government cannot be brought down by hartal and street demonstrations. After a period of lull, they have once again resorted to indiscriminate hartal to enhance the suffering of the very people whose support the party is in dire need of to win the next general election. The tenure of the present government is almost at its end. Moreover, the PM has publicly pledged more than once that she would pronounce the date of the election if the leader of the opposition goes back to the parliament and demands it from the floor of the house. If the leader of the opposition wants to reassert her faith in democracy and if she truly wants a peaceful transfer of power, she should grab the opportunity and challenge the PM to be true to her promise. Any other futile effort will take the BNP chief to the date when she has the opportunity to ride on the crest in this round.

The BNP chief's refusal to accept the challenge of the PM will seri-

ously jeopardize her continued affirmation in the universal exercise of democracy. Since the beginning of the last year, the BNP chief was constantly proclaiming her determined conviction of capturing the 269 seats of the parliament, to be exact. If her prediction had any analytical basis, then she has nothing to fear about winning the next election, especially, when the election will be held under a caretaker administration. She does not have to resort to hartal to demand for something that is constitutionally mandated within a few months. However, her actions do not substantiate her apparent convictions. It is true that AL rules have a lot of shortcomings. However, the BNP chief has not visibly done anything that could bring the disgruntled masses to her fold. There is a gulf of difference between her accusations and the real truth. If the economic indicators have to be believed, the economy of the country has not done as badly as her party is preaching every day. The nation, for the first time, has achieved self-sufficiency in food and the image of the country in the international arena was never brighter. At last, Bangladesh is able to project herself as a modern developing democracy. Bangladesh is no less a sovereign state than of April, 1996, when her party relinquished power. In fact, it was the BNP chief, who constantly tries to portray herself as the only apostle of our sovereignty, kept mum in the face of a very derogatory remark made by an erratic Pakistani diplomat about our liberation war.

It is now very clear to the people as regard to the group that will dictate the agenda of the government if the BNP alliance is voted to power. Recent two-day of hartal calls, defying the instruction of the BNP chief, shows the power of the partners within the alliance. It is long known that the fascist and fanatic forces, which once committed genocide in collaboration with the occupation forces, in the name of our religion, have no trust on democracy. They are bent on keeping their guns on BNP's shoulder and control the triggers. The people of the country, in exercising their franchise, will be unlikely to put the future of the country in the direction of darkness and uncertainty. All these phenomena do not point to any positive indicators for the prospect of BNP in the next poll. If the BNP's redundant 'oust the government movement' is hypothesized by its adversary as a detour to bypassing the democratic mean to change the helm of the state, can the hypothesis be rejected outright?

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Close encounters of the writing kind



ALMAS ZAKIUDDIN

call it a fear of learning. "If you write it down," I suggest softly, "there are fewer chances that you will forget."

He looks up at me with the kind of glance that suggests I have accused him of child abuse.

"Forget?" he says. "I never forget."

Wow. He makes that statement with the kind of confidence even an elephant would hesitate to adopt. Elephants, one might add, are endowed with almost mythical powers of long-term memory. And this young man, a tailor with whom I am having a close encounter of the frustrating kind, is no elephant.

Indeed, if one were to find a perch for him on the tree of life, one would place my tailor on the same branch as the industrious squirrel. His features are sharp, his eyes dart about with agility, as do his hands, fingers and mouth. My tailor has a

big mouth. It proceeds to work overtime as I grit my teeth and listen. He flicks his tongue in time with his fingers as he wraps up the various pieces of fabric that I have given him.

"This one, straight cut, no side-slit. This one blouse, like sample. This hem, no hem? Yes, I remember, this one hem to new length. This one I know, no problem, like green one last week, yes?"

Weariness sets in, diluting my persistence. I wave him away. He will appear next week, his hands as dexterous and his mouth as big, trying to talk his way out of trouble. And trouble he will surely be in, because there is no way he will remember accurately all the detailed instructions he has been given today.

He never does. In the last four years, my tailor has never written down instructions and he has never finished a job without making me regret that I have ever set eyes on him.

Why do I continue to patronise him, you ask? The others are worse. They, too, refuse to write down

instructions, but unlike this self-styled maestro, they cannot sew for toffee.

Which is why I am still trying to convert him to an 'organised' way of working. It has been a losing battle, much like many others that have sapped my energy.

Like the other day when someone turns up nearly two hours late for an event and pleads that she has 'forgotten' she was invited. She smiles in, smilingly, and exclaims, "I suddenly remembered it was today! Did I keep everyone waiting?"

Many guests who have been waiting endlessly, laugh indulgently. I cannot help myself, though. I ask her a trifle aggressively if she has ever heard of a handy invention called a diary. She looks at me blankly. Something tells me that perhaps this supposedly educated, well-accomplished, well-to-do businesswoman, really has no idea what I am talking about.

Perhaps that is why so many 'professionals' appear empty-handed at meetings. I realise this won't make me the most popular person on the block, but I include

some members of my own profession in this category as well.

They will sidle in, smartly dressed and very attentive. But catch them carrying anything that remotely resembles a notebook. Sometimes, when it becomes obvious that the proceedings have become slightly more complicated than Einstein's theory of relativity, they will start fidgeting and rummaging through their pockets.

In my previous job, with an organisation that must remain unidentified, there was one unforgettable young man who used to play this game during regular departmental weekly meetings. When the meeting had got going, he would start to squirm.

"Got a piece of paper?" he would ask, completely unabashed. Someone would pass him a piece of paper. He would search fruitlessly in his pockets for a pen.

"Got a pen?" he would ask, also completely unabashed.

Once or twice, there would be an outburst on my part. I would demand to know why, since he knew we were going to have a meeting, he had not

come with paper and pen. His answer?

"I forgot." My mistake then, and now as well, I admit, was to engage in a rhetorical discussion. Like my brusque question to the latecomer asking if she had ever heard of a diary, I would ask my young colleague if he knew what a meeting entailed.

"Don't you know that one needs to write things down in a discussion?" I would bark. "No," he would say, totally confidently. "I don't forget."

Call me stupid or insane, and perhaps both words might describe my state of mind, but responses like the above baffle me.

Do people really not know? Or don't they care? Ignorance, an enemy that one could conceivably vanquish if one persisted, may not be the only culprit. What causes me immense personal and professional grief is the consistent propensity to believe that 'writing' things down is tantamount to accepting that one has failed in some way. Is it a by-product of the machismo

syndrome, I wonder? Would one's worth be diminished if one were to admit that one needed to make a note of important matters in order to remember them later? Is it a genuine lack of knowledge, or a deliberate refusal to contemplate change? Is my tailor's facile, "I never forget" an indication of stupidity or stubbornness?

Whatever the reason, it is the attitude that is daunting. Granted, I have a major shortcoming. I have been brought up in a predominantly organised household, with parents who have believed in planning, scheduling and anticipating. Sure, they have charted mundane matters. But they have done so with a consistent adherence to basics. Make notes. Keep records. Follow a plan. Never be afraid to admit you do not know.

You may think I am boasting, but my mother's household accounts would give any Chancellor of the Exchequer a run for his (or her) money, and my father's filing system would make the Library of Congress cough up and take notice.

I am nowhere near their level of excellence, but the memory of an organised childhood is difficult to shed. And why should I?

People who froth at the mouth when you tell them to write things down, are afraid. They are afraid to learn. Nothing is worse than a fear of learning. Because, before one can learn one must admit one does not know.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Asma Jehangir's visit

The recent visit to Dhaka of Asma Jehangir, the Pakistani international human rights activist, was like a breath of fresh air. This type of candid talk is not generally heard in the metropolis, specially amongst the top local leadership. Her interview by ETV was revealing in its firmness and straightforwardness.

Abd
Dhaka.

Crime and punishment

The article 'Crime and Punishment' by Almas Zakiuddin (February 24) has attracted my attention. She writes about an incident in which the driver of a white Toyota car was pulled out of his car and compelled to do sit-ups in full view of the standing traffic. He had to suffer this humiliation because he was honking loudly while waiting for the traffic lights to change and though several motorcyclists warned him to stop, he did not heed them. That is why he had to suffer the humiliation. Two policemen watched the scene with a smirk on their faces. The writer is distressed by this incident and rightly so. But it seems

to be our lot. Everything has gone haywire and this has become the norm in our country.

Nowadays people are punished for simple offenses while hardened criminals roam about freely. Sense and sensibility are diminishing, people are enjoying a scene which could not be called humorous.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

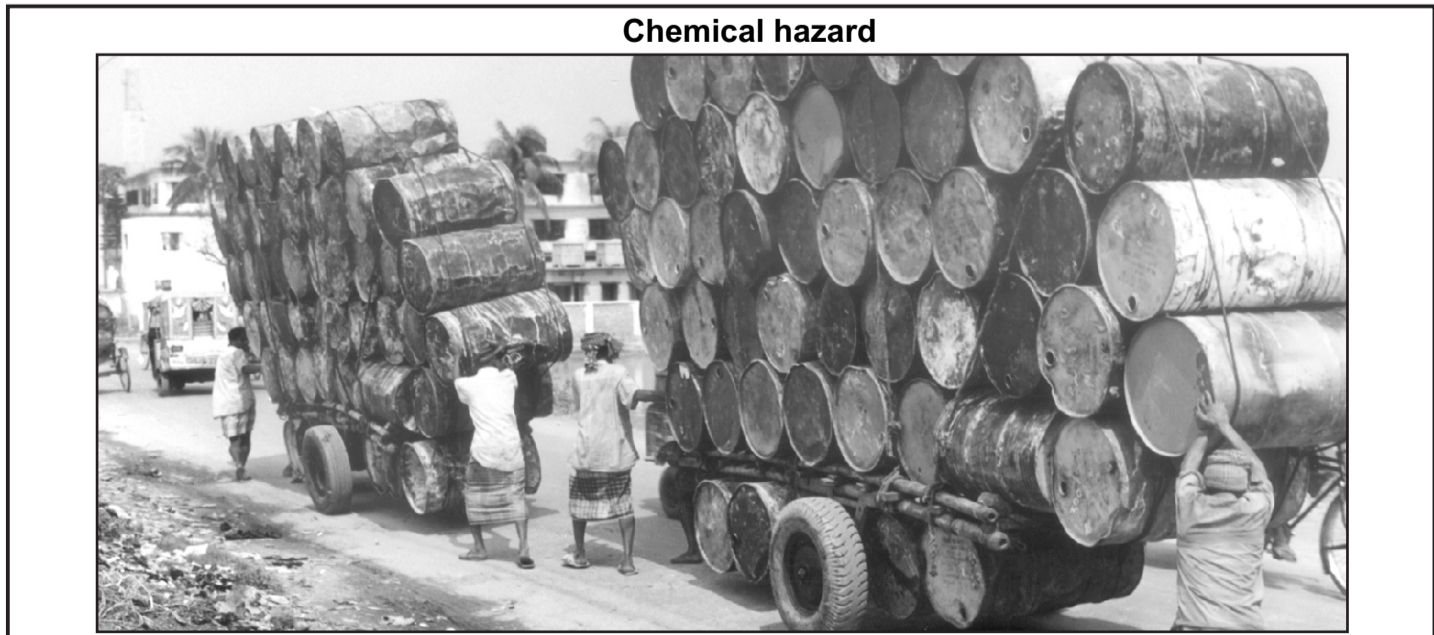
Too confident

The regime is becoming a victim of over-confidence. The latest embarrassment is the abduction of foreigners in the CHT. The peace process in that region is showing cracks and it is disappointing not to have anticipated such nefarious activities. An outward display of sensitivity to public affairs is marred by hidden agendas and ambitions, many of which may not be in the public interest. The monitoring system is poor, as the feedbacks are not being properly analysed for proper application of judgement. People cannot live on mirages in a desert of non-creativity. Make friends, not enemies.

Abd
Dhaka.

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



Spotted in Narayanganj, overloaded carts with drums that contained hazardous chemicals. The drums are held together with ropes that look dangerously inadequate. If any of the drums begins to roll, the residue could leak! Yet, the authorities continue to turn a blind eye.

The future of computing

According to one of the vice presidents of computer mega-giant IBM, the company is banking for its future on Linux. The problem in the future will be whether the software can keep pace with the high-speed hardware technology (processors and other devices) developing by quantum leaps. The future service outlet for computers would be through the Internet, but the international standards and protocols have to be addressed urgently, including the interfacing of computers and the handy mobile telephone after the WAP protocol has been refined.

For the non-technical users of the computers, there is no apprehension, as previous knowledge or training would be minimal (like operating a television set in the drawing room without knowing how it works). Automatic programme generators and voice translation devices would engage the attention of the research and development units at various levels.

The implications for Third World countries have to be monitored constantly at the top level for quick policy updates.

AMMA'abad Dhaka

Hospitals near homes

We simply fail to understand how hospitals and clinics are allowed to operate in residential areas. What surprises us is that new hospitals and clinics are still being opened or existing ones are expanding, despite the government's decision not to open new hospitals or clinics in areas not designated as commercial.

The major health-related problems of having hospitals near homes are indiscriminate disposal of hospital waste and location of ex-ray units adjacent to homes. Given that there is a stream of emergency patients at all times, including nighttime, neighbours find it difficult to sleep. Other social problems are: growth of rickshaw, scooter and car stands and small shops adjacent to the hospitals or clinics, leading to assembly of various people, masts, and traffic jams, and indiscriminate use of car radios and cassettes. In such an environment, children are unable to study.

Residents of Dhanmondi,
Gulshan and Banani