

What a great relief!

Kidnap crisis ends

THE safe return of the kidnapped foreigners back to the civilised fold is a big relief for all concerned their near and dear ones, their countrymen and we, the Bangladeshis, as their hosts. Their agonies were shared by all and sundry, as if these were theirs. We must give credit to where it is due, namely, the foreign specialists, diplomatic missions concerned, tribal leadership, and above all, the security forces for their patient handling and finally their commendable rescue operation to bringing about an end to the problem, however belated it has been.

After a month of topsy-turvy negotiations, punctuated with intimidation and entreaties from the authorities to the kidnapers, the kidnap crisis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) finally came to an end early yesterday morning. What is crucial at this juncture is an assessment of the degree of damage wrought on the country's image in the international community and an objective analysis of the handling of the incident so as to avert recurrence of anything like that in the future. That it has actually been a victory for the authorities over the kidnapers and could, therefore, act as a deterrent for other groups contemplating any such move would not be much of an assurance for the prospective sojourner unless the overall security situation is improved in the area. This is highly imperative for the development activities in the region including the promotion of tourism.

Abduction of Torben Mikkelsen and Niils Hulgaard of Denmark, and Tim Selby of Great Britain should be an eye-opener for the authorities to the fact that the sooner the CHT Peace Accord is implemented the better. Once the peace treaty is fully implemented and people assigned with well-defined authorities and responsibilities, law and order would improve as a logical consequence. The people at the helm should make sure that the process is expedited as much as possible. However, at the same time, the government should engage in an intense diplomatic confidence-building exercise to convince our development partners that the kidnap crisis is a stray incident and not indicative of any pattern or design of hostility towards them.

Mother Language Institute

Produce tangible results

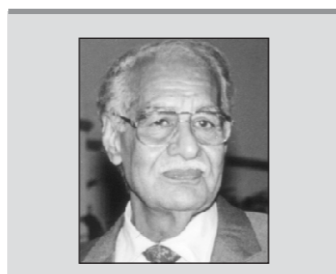
THE International Mother Language Institute, opened by the Prime Minister in the presence of the UN Secretary General on Thursday, holds great promise. As a follow-up to Ekushey February being adopted by the UN as International Mother Language Day, the Institute reinforces sentiments that this nation holds close to its heart, that of upholding and promoting the primacy of the mother language. We laud the establishment of the Institute.

We hope, however, that this would not be allowed to go the way of so many other academies in the country. We can boast of a plethora of bodies dedicated to the pursuit of various high goals. But unfortunately, the collective achievement of these establishments has been virtually negligible. The contributions of even the best of our institutes, such as the Bangla Academy or the Shilpakala Academy, have been less than expected and far short of the heights of excellence that could have been attained.

It is therefore absolutely vital that the government pays sincere attention to realising the true aims and objectives of this new Institute. We would be wary of the body becoming yet another concrete building with a grand title, offering convenient openings for recruitment of personnel without providing tangible results. What we would like to see is a clear-cut set of objectives and a programme geared to achieving these aims.

The scope to utilise this Institute is vast. It could serve as a forum for the research, development and dissemination of knowledge, in a field that has been virtually unexplored. We must not squander this hard-won opportunity. The government must understand that setting up the Institute is merely the beginning of its mission. There must be a productive effort to make this Institute live up to the promise of strengthening our own, as well as other mother languages globally.

Manipulating the PMO



KULDEEP NAYYAR writes from New Delhi

WHAT is going on in the Prime Minister's Office? For the first time, a top bureaucrat of unimpeachable integrity has alleged brazen manipulation of the office by powerful business houses. He has said that the PMO is rigged. Similar rumours were heard in the past but they were never substantiated. This time the charges are specific and pointed.

Dr EAS Sarma, till recently the Secretary in the Ministry of Economic Affairs has said in a tape-recorded interview to the Outlook, a weekly appearing from Delhi, that the PMO does not "respect the role and responsibility of the Cabinet" and issues directives on which ministries "have begun to depend more and more." He has named Brajesh Mishra, the PM's principal secretary, and NK Singh, officer on special duty (OSD), appointed after retirement, as the two key functionaries who are "in a position to influence decisions."

Sarma has said that business lobbies like the Reliance, Essar and the Hinduja have begun to exert "their influence on the PMO" to get "concessions." In other words, the Ambanis and the Hinduja influence Mishra and NK who, in turn, influence government decisions. This is too serious a matter to be ignored.

NK's name does not surprise me because he was as close to Sanjay Gandhi during the emergency (1975-77) as he is to the PM today on economic matters. That Mishra should hobnob with a clutch of business houses comes as a shock. The Prime Minister has implicit faith in him. Surprisingly, both have not reacted to the charges made. They have to prove that what has been said against them is false. They must come clean.

The rejoinder by the PM's spokesperson does not controvert

of accumulating power. The allegation by Sarma is specific, that is, some business houses are getting what they want through Mishra and NK. Obviously, the Congress did not want to annoy business houses. Otherwise, it would have been more direct. The Communists are conspicuous by their silence.

Whether the Congress or any other political party takes up the matter is not the point. The point at issue is what Sarma has spoken. Should it be taken up or not? He has also alleged that "it was the

thing official becomes a question mark.

This also speaks poorly of governance. Even honest transactions and decisions may come to be doubted. Certain things cannot be wished away. They have to be tackled squarely and openly. So should the accusation by Sarma. In fact, silence on the government part is only creating more doubts.

Both Mishra and NK are civil servants. The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), an autonomous body, should be entrusted

junior officers in the PMO go over what the secretaries or even ministers have okayed? This means that the PMO has developed into another tier of decision-making process. All this has come into existence after the death of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's secretary, LK Jha, was the first person who began to concentrate power in the name of coordination of matters relating to economics. Once he was in the finance

initiating it.

This concentration of power came in handy to Mrs Gandhi when she imposed the emergency. There was already a central mechanism which could be used to issue directives. The extra-constitutional authority like Sanjay Gandhi presided over the PMO and used it to do everything, illegal and immoral.

Vajpayee should have demolished the machinery which has existed more or less intact during the regimes of Mrs Gandhi's successors. He let it be as it was, probably to ensure that his writ ran. So, the PMO has stayed on. It has been, in fact, institutionalised when its very existence goes counter to the democratic ethos.

In a way, the presidential system of governance has come to develop in the country. The PMO is like the White House in Washington, commanding full powers and telling the various ministries what to do and what not to. The PMO acts informally, without any responsibility attached to it.

The accountability part, which is essential in the presidential system, is absent in the manner in which the parliamentary system is functioning. The PMO is behind all major decisions and deals but the responsibility is that of the ministries. A call on REX, secret telephone, from the PMO or an unofficial meeting, appears to be doing the trick.

That the PMO is influenced by business houses is a horrifying thought. It makes mockery of Cabinet's collective responsibility. It raises doubts about the governance. The nation needs to be assured that it is not being led up to the garden path. Someone in authority has to tell the truth to set at rest the suspicions raised by Sarma's allegations.

BETWEEN THE LINES

That the PMO is influenced by business houses is a horrifying thought. It makes mockery of Cabinet's collective responsibility. It raises doubts about the governance. The nation needs to be assured that it is not being led up to the garden path. Someone in authority has to tell the truth to set at rest the suspicions raised by allegations.

any allegation. It only says that all decisions, including the ones on economic issues, are taken collectively by the Cabinet. Of course, they are. Even a layman knows that the Cabinet's nod is necessary for major decisions. Sarma's accusation is that Mishra and NK influence decisions at the behest of certain powerful business houses and that the rest, including approval by the Cabinet, is a mere technicality. The entire process of reaching a decision turns out to be a farce.

The only political party to react to Sarma's charge is the Congress. But it has either missed the point or has purposely evaded it. The party spokesman has expressed concern over the PMO's growing clout in all aspects of government decision-making. This is nothing new. Most Prime Ministers have been accused

Hindujas who got me out of the Power Ministry."

The government strategy appears to be not to say anything, hoping that the matter will be forgotten as the days go by. Probably it will happen that way. After all, the public memory is short and the worst of scandals have been forgotten. But it is a sad commentary on the government's working if the allegation is sought to be covered with the dust of time. Should the charge of hoodwinking the Cabinet by the PMO end up that way? It is an attitude of arrogance which considers that no explanation is necessary.

There is something called government credibility. What about that? The impression that the deals can be fixed or obtained through the PMO has dangerous implications for the polity. It suggests pressure by some business houses. Every

with the task of assessing Sarma's charges. He has even alleged that the PMO has "put words in the mouth of Vajpayee" to get a particular MoU (memorandum of understanding) signed. This is not a small matter to be swept under the carpet. If the government is reluctant, CVC should take notice of the charge suo moto.

There is another aspect to the whole thing. Issues like the ones pointed out by Sarma are taking place because too much power has come to be concentrated at the PMO. It has become a parallel government, with separate officers looking after foreign affairs, economic matters and other subjects.

There are regular ministries under the charge of ministers, going into every detail of the work under their purview. The Cabinet Secretary does the coordination. Why should

ministry and he had many personal scores to settle. He reduced the Planning Commission, a powerful organisation during Nehru's days, to a toothless body. Some members were retired. Jha constituted the PMO and he drew a few officers from other ministries to help him. The office was yet small.

It came into full bloom when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appointed PN Haksar from foreign service as her principal secretary. He clipped the wings of Dinesh Singh, Mrs Gandhi's alter ego, who had issued an order that all papers marked to her should be routed through him. Haksar did not rescind the order but only substituted his name in place of Dinesh Singh. Haksar also saw to it that different ministers would clear with the PMO any policy or programme before

A Rip Van Winkle returns home: Mass Cheating in Examination

M. SHAFIULLAH

A kind of well fed Gypsies abroad, diplomats are losing their traditional preserve in the age of information technology. Transmission of information in super sonic speed if armed the diplomats with instant knowledge it has landed them in occasional embarrassment too.

Whatever undesirable happenings taking place in their countries are there for all to read or view on screen before the morning cup of tea is over. The prestige or effectiveness of a diplomat largely depends on the home situation of his country. The mass media reflect the image. The diplomat has no hiding place.

Media labeled stereotype tags on many developing countries. Any form of negative happenings in those countries find generous space in an otherwise hard pressed newspaper columns and television networks or conversely some of those countries are genius in providing powder to the canon to use against them. They most unwittingly reinforce the already held adverse views on their countries through activities detrimental to their societies. In an age of information revolution no amount of hard work of the diplomats will be able to cover up the black spots with white patches. His attempt will be caught at the act and his credibility will be at stake.

Some years ago I was called in at the Consular Section of the Abu Dhabi Foreign Office and presented with a sack of Bangladesh pass-

ports. The bagful were forged passports of many descriptions including some genuine booklets left behind by the workers who deserted the employers. The Arabs are brief in their conversation with the foreigners. I thought my embarrassment was over with the load of unwanted passports.

At the end of his hospitality I was about to leave then the Consul Chief asked if I had a few moments time to share a thought with him. I had not the slightest inkling as to what was on his mind. I became rather curious and offered my time at his disposal. He opened up with a note of apology "I read in the Arabic language daily newspapers this morning that students in Bangladesh came out on the street demonstration demanding right to cheat in the examination. And in another news item some five thousand examinees including invigilators were expelled from examination centers countrywide for cheating."

The second generation Arabs are educated in Europe or in America and talk at ease without causing any offence to the foreigners. After a pause he bemoaned, "Your's is a over populated country and we need people to fill in various position in our country. The expatriates we recruit in many cases land with forged passports or fake degree certificates or false profession. If you are an employer what do you do in such a situation?"

Minutes before he handed over hundred of forged passports and also could read in the face my predicament at the mass cheating reports in the newspapers. Lest I take offence he continued, "Had this happened in our countries, the finger would have been chopped off the hand that indulge in writing fake passport or cheat/copy in the examinations to protect the image of the country and to uphold the moral of the young generation." I responded, "That would have been considered a mediaeval practice of deterrence in our country by civil society, NGOs, political parties and their student fronts." The Consul Chief closed the conversation by offering a prayer, "Let the fake passport writers and the student community in cheating/copying in the examination take Bangladesh into the modern age."

Such an image of our dear motherland is not confined to one foreign country or nor my lone experience in the sphere of diplomacy. I read with interest the posters in the city walls and advertisements in the daily newspapers as a part of an awareness-building campaign to prevent cheating in the examination. In the meanwhile root of the nation is allowed to rot further. And time will take it's toll.

Back home after several years abroad many things appear to be strange. For me it is like the Rip Van Winkle returns home.

M Shafiuallah is former Ambassador to Libya, Tunisia, Malta and the State of Palestine

OPINION

How prepared are we for an earthquake?

THE report on earthquakes, on BTV on March 4, was an interesting telecast. Experts in various aspects of the field were interviewed and their comments were televised.

Most experts, including the minister dealt at length with the aftermath of an earthquake and possible evacuation and other relief plans. Some of the technical experts gave briefs on the causes and origins of earthquakes. It was quite illuminating. Unfortunately none of the experts discussed possible ways of making structures earthquake resistant, so that loss of the life and property are minimal Dr J R Chowdhury of BUET discussed the possibility of retrofitting of existing buildings, but the economics of doing the same was not discussed. We would have been happy had the experts talked on possible ways of making buildings safer.

Reference was made to the National building Code for construction of earthquake resistant structure. It is an irony that though the code was prepared in 1993, it is not yet mandatory as this has not yet been accorded necessary approval of the government. Bangladesh Building Code categorically said

'No' to the use of brick. None of the experts discussed this and the lapse made by all concerned regarding thousands of buildings constructed since 1993.

One of the experts said that there are not enough facilities in hospitals to treat the injured, if an earthquake hits the cities. I wonder whether the hospital building/structures would remain standing after an earthquake?

Key installations like government administrative buildings, presidential, prime minister's secretariat, hospitals, schools are designed and built everywhere to sustain minimum damage in earthquake. What about our installations?

One expert suggested that existing buildings could be strengthened, to make them less vulnerable to earthquake. But has any action been taken on this suggestion yet? Have the affluent building owners been made aware of this technique.

What surprised me is that none of the experts mentioned the techniques developed and adopted in modern building construction technology in earthquake prone countries like Japan, Indonesia, West Coast of USA or Brazil.

None of the experts threw light

on the building materials and the modern technology to be adopted by us for the huge number of new constructions that are coming up every day. Is it that we would retrofit these after the buildings are brought into service?

Bangladesh is in an earthquake-prone zone and the record shows occurrence of at least 7 major earthquakes of above 7 on the Richter scale during the last 150 years. It would be sane for us to examine prevailing building design techniques, building materials used; take pains to look into the techniques and materials being used in countries that have suffered due to earthquake and have developed/evolved better techniques/materials through experience. It is time now to adopt better technology and material in the building sector in our country.

Other countries have suffered terribly due to earthquake and they have sustained the calamity.

With the present density of population and building in Dhaka, what will be the consequence?

S M Kamaluddin

Gulshan-2, Dhaka.

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

Hot issues

I would like to thank you for bringing forward hot issues and exposing corruption that has plagued almost every corner of our country. I do not know if the disease will ever be eradicated from our homeland, but it should give us hope as long as people like you are still speaking without fear. I again commend you for your hard work and honesty.

Shah Huda Virginia, USA

Hostage drama in CHT

Your editorial on the kidnapped foreigners in Chittagong Hill Tracts (March 14) is relevant. Several background question crop up after the authorities have negotiated for almost a month.

During this negotiation period the Prime Minister was out of the country on three occasions, and the Home Ministry once, giving the impression that there was nothing to worry about. One agency termed the episode a drama staged for some ulterior benefit. Why has this happened in the CHT? Was it a diversionary tactic for some ulterior purpose? Why did it take so long? Before the start of the negotiation, it was officially announced that no money would be given. Then there was the threat that force would be used in an army operation. After the return of the PM, the chief negotiator was replaced. Why was this issue tackled in such a leisurely manner?

The development of CHT would be seriously hampered as foreign donor agencies would not invest and as their (foreign) representatives would hesitate to venture into the region for inspection or work. What are the future implications? Under the circumstances, critics cannot be blamed if they smell something fishy in the whole operation. In any case, the facts must be laid before the public, to lay these suspicions to rest.

Abd Dhaka

Right the traffic problem

Traffic jams are becoming a serious problem. A great deal has been written about it, but to no avail. Nothing appears to be happening to alleviate the suffering of commuters. The government has totally failed to keep to its assurances that it would solve this problem.

I have a suggestion for the authorities: change the traffic rules from keeping to the left, to keeping to the right side of the street. If we take a look at the Islamic countries, this is what they are doing. I believe this is an excellent idea and if we were to adopt it, our traffic jam problems could be solved.

Would the proper authorities kindly consider this matter very seriously?

Sheikh Mosharrar Hossain Dhaka University, 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.

Clean up the mess



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

For weeks on end, this pile of construction material, sand, and even a cement mixer have been encroaching on a public road in Dhanmondi. The culprits are totally uncaring about the inconvenience they are causing to other residents, while the authority responsible for the upkeep of the road has also no sense of responsibility. How long would city residents have to put up with these problems?

BTV weather report

BTV's weather report has improved graphically, but the descriptive portion is cryptic and confined to the next day's forecast only. The outlook for the next couple of days should be provided, for information and planning by the listeners. Once a week, a summary forecast for the week ahead should be made.

Dhaka is now experiencing a record of unusually low humidity of 25 per cent. Most of the time the humidity is above 50 per cent in this delta region. The average rainfall has been lower than normal during the last few months. The weather pattern is changing, perhaps due to the Greenhouse Effect, as freak weather is reported from different parts of the world, causing much damage and dismay. In this context, a weather report is of even more interest.

Also, a non-graphic global weather report should be included in the English news bulletin -- don't we recognize the global village concept?.

Abd Dhaka.

PM's Award and Human Rights

I am surprised and not sure what to make of the news item that the Prime Minister has received a 'Personality Award' from the Afro Asian Lawyers' Federation for

Human Rights. Side by side there has been the US State Department Annual Report on Human Rights, highlighting serious human rights violations in Bangladesh, especially during the last year. I did not know that adulation also could be institutionalized!

AF Rahman Dhaka.

Every thing is possible!

I was shocked to see a job advertisement published in The Daily Star of March 14 by Sundarban Bank International Limited, a newly floated bank, in which it was stated that applications were being invited to fill only 20 new positions. The bank asked for a pay order of Tk. 200 with each application. This amount would be non-refundable and would not ensure that all those who paid the money would be called for an interview. The bank said a shortfall of applicants would be interviewed.

Given the dearth of job opportunities, one can say that not less than 50,000 candidates are likely to apply for the 20 posts. If one does one's arithmetic it is clear that the bank would be able to make about Tk 1 crore which is surely a good portion of its paid up capital. In our country, everything is possible!

Mesbahudin Ahmed Jigatala, Dhaka.