

Appointment of ECs

Wish it were consensual

Two new Election Commissioners have taken the oath of office within three days of the retirement of previous incumbents Abidur Rahman and Mushtaq Ahmed Chowdhury. The successors M M Munsef Ali and A K Mohammad Ali have been selected from amongst retired district and session judges.

It was unquestionably the President's Constitutional prerogative to have appointed, on the advise of the Prime Minister, the election commissioners. Also, no one is in any doubt whatsoever that the Election Commission being in a race against time to complete preparations for the polls could not afford vacant positions at that level for an indefinite period of time. While allowing for those objective realities and compelling circumstances surrounding the question of their appointment one cannot overlook the fact that the Opposition had not been consulted in any form or shape before taking those men on board. Strictly speaking, prior consultation with the opposition might not have been either obligatory or incumbent upon the authority concerned but as a matter of convention and practical necessity it would have been in the fitness of things to have done so. Furthermore, it could be a break with the unilateral pattern hitherto observed with regard to the appointment of Shafiqur Rahman as an election commissioner last year.

We had editorially counselled sometime ago that the appointment of new election commissioners be deferred until after the induction of the caretaker government to avert introduction of any fresh controversy into the already recriminatory pre-poll atmosphere. Moreover, there is no denying the importance of consensual appointment to those positions not only as a matter of pragmatism but also as a matter of principle.

At any rate, the incumbents being men from judiciary are not controversial *per se*, although the process of their appointment may have been short-circuited and not quite controversy-free. The opposition would be well advised not to make an issue out of it. While we question the wisdom of this unilateral appointment, we also underscore the neutral and generally acceptable nature of the two new Election Commissioners. We hope that we can now focus on more substantive issues rather than get bogged down in a new controversy.

Biman incident reflects chronic ills

Inquiry needed to prevent repetition

ALLING standards of service in Bangladesh Biman have been highlighted by the recent case of alleged manhandling of a passenger on a Bangkok-Dhaka flight. As reported in this newspaper on April 11th, the passenger was apparently subjected to harassment, manhandling on the flight and detained for several hours at Zia airport on various unsubstantiated charges.

Biman is admitting that the passenger did have an altercation with the First Officer about the delay, but denying that the passenger was 'assaulted'. It is claiming that it made 'necessary arrangements' to deal with the passenger after he made 'derogatory' remarks, and became 'violent'.

Biman's clarification is not just unsatisfactory, but raises serious doubts about the professional standards adhered to by our national airline. Why did an altercation ensue, in the first place? If the passenger made provocative remarks, surely it was up to Biman to diffuse the issue. How did Biman mitigate the passenger's plight? It is reported that refreshments were not evident and hotel arrangements were unclear. Since the flight was delayed, every passenger had the right to voice his or her dismay or even anger. To justify harsh treatment of a passenger, especially under such circumstances, is to defy the guidelines of a service code that any international carrier worth its name must adhere to.

We demand an inquiry into this incident, not merely to get to the bottom of this incident, but also because it points to a serious lapse of service ethics. Innumerable complaints are being voiced about a basic lack of professional courtesy in Biman. Passengers are seldom kept well informed and instead are treated with uncivil, offhand and even hostile responses, particularly when a flight is delayed. The authorities must clarify this incident, and reinforce strict guidelines for the future. Biman must be forced to live up to its status as our national airline.

Decentralisation without tears



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

is a truism to say that in a reformist (as against a revolutionary) politico-bureaucratic milieu, pragmatism holds the key to changing the status quo in the style of governance. Being pragmatic in this area also implies not rushing in post-haste. The need to recognise the crucial role of pragmatism and gradualism arises from the overriding implication of decentralisation viz. redistribution of powers. It is obvious that if the quotient of loss of power is so great and heavy that it hurts the erstwhile wielders beyond tolerance then there is bound to be resistance and even a backlash. But when change takes place with proper preparation and adequate time for adjustment it is more likely to be accepted, even if grudgingly. If on top of this gradual process pragmatism also provides for compensation of one type or another to the losers, change of

departments were not delegated powers from above and did not have decision-making powers worth mentioning. In this sense the administrative reform through TT&DC was nothing more than de-concentration, i.e. transferring part of the offices physically from above to the thanas. Even if symbolic and nothing more than a token for decentralisation the reform measure marked the first and important stage towards bringing government nearer to the people and providing scope for local level participation as well as for greater accountability. The limited and cautious move was pragmatic as it did not threaten the status quo with overnight change which could invite opposition. But though the administrative reform of the sixties opted for pragmatism and gradualism there was no uncertainty or equivocation about the

major step (the great leap forward) in decentralisation in early eighties could not be even conceived, not to speak of being implemented. There is no doubt that in terms of scope of functions, delegation of powers and devolution of authority to local government the Upazila system was the most comprehensive. It took the de-concentration of administration carried out through TT&DC at the thana level to the next logical and momentous stage of decentralisation, complete with delegation and devolution. Ironically, democratisation of the decentralised local government system at Thana (Upazila) was given concrete shape and legal backing under a martial law regime. Since political activity was not allowed at the time, there was no scope for articulating the views of the politicians on the matter. But unofficially it was made clear that

chairman of Upazila as a threat to their traditional role. There was both logic and validity in their apprehension and criticism. An MP is elected in his or her constituency not only to make laws or to participate in discussion in the parliament but also to undertake developmental activities. If the developmental role is hived off from the MPs and assigned to the Upazila chairman backed by allocation of development fund the traditional role of MPs is not only severely undermined, he is also subjected to some degree of humiliation stemming from helplessness. The solution, however, is not to abolish the office of Upazila chairman or to make the MPs the ex-office chairmen of Upazilas. Since the bone of contention is command over development fund it makes great sense to allocate an annual development fund of certain amount to the MPs to

functioning of Upazila system, it will also add a new dimension to local level development. Instead of competition or rivalry, there will be co-operation facilitating the much-talked about process of synergy.

Decentralisation at the District level is a different kettle of fish having its own peculiar problem. Zilla Parishad is likely to face opposition not only from MPs but also from many ministers who may feel uncomfortable about the greater constituency of the Zilla Parishad chairman and through it his/her sphere of influence. Being the policymaker at the highest level minister's support to decentralisation at the district level is very crucial. If to the reservation of ministers' opposition of MPs is added, Zilla Parishad cannot be effective and may create more problems than solve. In view of this it will be pragmatic to go slow on decentralisation at the district level. On the other hand, successful decentralisation at the Upazila level may reduce the urgency of similar reform at the districts. Pragmatism should, therefore, suggest concentration on decentralisation measures at Upazila during the first phase. Its success may even render decentralisation at the district superfluous and shift attention down below at the Union level making it the next and a stronger candidate for decentralisation.

Considerations of pragmatism and gradualism from political perspective require a certain pace and kind of decentralisation, the same hold true on account of bureaucratic reactions. To be effective and self-sustaining decentralisation should comprise discreet steps starting with those activities of the government which are divisible and transferable from higher to lower levels. Rather than bunching activities for delegation at a time they should be taken up in phases. Over time the number of such delegated activities can be expected to increase because of the momentum gained. The reform process will then become inexorable.

There will always be those who would like to see decentralisation across the board and overnight. Their sense of urgency and deep-seated frustration are understandable. What they desire and expect can happen and be a success only in a revolutionary context. In a reformist milieu, one cannot but be cautious, particularly in view of past experiences.

IN MY VIEW

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status quo may not appear as a zero sum game. Yes, to have decentralisation without tears, pragmatism and its concomitant, gradualism should constitute the central part of the strategy.

The establishment of the Thana Training and Development Centre (TT&DC) in the sixties during the last century based on the Comilla model was based on the strategy of both gradualism and pragmatism. It was a radical departure from the past but because of the tact and foresight embedded in the strategy the period of transition was both brief and smooth. Through the TT&DC, for the first time thana, the outpost of the government nearest to the people, changed from a regulatory to a developmental unit of administration. Whereas before the sixties the police station and the revenue office represented the government at the thana level, after the TT&DC almost all the development departments of the government came to have their offices there making thana the microcosm of the government. As a matter of deliberate strategy the thana-level offices of various government

ultimate goal. Having sown the seed of change and (to use a different metaphor) after setting the process of change in motion the graduation from de-concentration to decentralisation resulting in redistribution of power and functions was made inevitable. But since the process leading to this goal was planned to be gradual and delegation of powers was kept implicit there was no scope for bureaucratic resistance or room for reservation. Politically also, the non-representative body of Thana Council was made palatable through incorporation of the elected chairmen of Union Councils into it. Strictly speaking, it was not a democratic arrangement but as a fledgling institution the Thana Council had the potential and promise of acquiring representative character in future. In the days of Basic Democracy even the most ambitious reformer could not be indiscreet and reckless enough to challenge the bureaucratised polity frontal.

With the advantage of hindsight it can be said that in the absence of the TT&DC introduced in the sixties during the past century, the next politicians did not relish the idea of a non-political government tinkering with political institutions, however well intentioned it might be. Though senior bureaucrats at the national level went along with the decentralisation programme there was considerable resistance and criticism from junior bureaucrats at the field (district and thana) levels. Determination of the then authoritarian government coupled with certain changes to mollify the disgruntled junior bureaucrats overcame the resistance against the Upazila system and even made it acceptable to them by large.

The challenge to the Upazila system came later and more from the politicians than the bureaucrats.

Once the martial law regime started civilising itself politicians belonging to the major parties became vocal in their criticism against the new tier of local government at the thana level, with both the major political parties boycotting two consecutive Upazila elections. The opposition to Upazila system was in particular spearheaded by the potential MPs who considered the elected office of the

be spent on development schemes in their constituencies. In India each MP receives Rs. 5 (five) crore annually to implement development schemes of their choice. Before the present martial law, the MPs in Pakistan also enjoyed similar facility while in Nepal the MPs continue to avail of some development fund. Given independent control over development fund MPs in Bangladesh will not have to undergo the ignominy of approaching Upazila chairmen for allocation of fund to schemes selected by them. With guidelines for use of the development fund and a transparent system announcing the selection and implementation of schemes misuse or abuse of fund can be minimised significantly. Moreover, it should be taken for granted that a public representative who is true to his/her salt will balk before squandering public fund on flimsy schemes, not to speak of misappropriating it. Annual audit can further ensure transparency and accountability in this respect. The system of allocation of fund to the MPs will not only remove a source of conflict and grievance ensuring the smooth

Insensitivity was more tragic than the bomb



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

It may be described in as many ways as many words, but nothing will diminish the horror of what happened on the first day of this Bengali New Year. The explosion, which snuffed out nine lives in the ear-splitting flash of a monster, compressed time for those men and women who would be swept into the dark gorge of death from a bright sunny morning while a chorus still lit songs into their ears. Perhaps the last light that glistened in their eyes before the blast blinded them was that of joy with which they had come to welcome the 1408th New Year.

But who could tell that the first day of this year was going to be the last day of their lives? They could have died in many other ways; boat capsized, railcar derailed, road accident, poisoned liquor, food poisoning, conflagration, or even snakebite. Every death is difficult to accept because it jolts the mind with

a transcending force. Yet, there was something demeaning about their death, their bodies strewn like debris of a cataclysm that denied them the sophistication and dignity with they pulsated even a moment before the bomb went off.

In a recent report, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has claimed that one out of every ten Bangladeshis is mental case. Was it a manifestation of our collective madness, the work of that fatal design which has been grooved in our collective cortex? One moment it was the festival of life, another moment everything snapped - the music, the wind and the crowd like a radio programme killed in the middle of its broadcast. Then it all came back in a jiffy, the melee of a deranged crowd suffused with ululation of the dying, the wounded and the terrified. The end came like the climax of a Dionysian revelry when worshippers tear the limbs of victims in their drunken frenzy.

It was a tragedy no doubt, one that demolished the props of civilisation in the gust of the blast, and exposed the beast that prowls in the dark corridors of human instincts. Life is still nasty, brutish and short, when the Hobbesian crisis sets in at the slightest provocation and the animal leaps out to the front of our minds doing the unthinkable. What was the provocation for those who carried the bomb to Ramna? Was it personal vendetta or political agenda? Was it the uncontrolled behaviour of their sick minds or the cold-blooded execution of a chalked-out plan?

Like similar incidents in the past, this particular tragedy might also get lost in the coils of time. We might never know who imprecated this tragedy and why. It might settle in the oblivion of our collective memory, overshadowed by bigger tragedies. Nations go through violent convulsions like individuals when a terrible madness seizes its heart.

After the smoke cleared and the scattered bodies came in view, that madness was visible in the trail of death.

But the stretch of that madness continued even long after the bomb. The concourse of revelling men and women in their prim dresses indulged in unmitigated ecstasy, and the organisers busied themselves with programmes of the day as if the deaths, which occurred not too far away, were not real. Young men and women flocked near the College of Fine Arts to get commemorative tattoos drawn on their faces, and the romancing couples were still adorning the feet of trees inside Suhrawardy Udyan. On the road in front of the Bangla Academy, frolicking families with their sprightly children were riding carriages, which were specially brought for the day. At the end of the road near the Raju square, students were raising money for the victims of the bomb, while a mike was blaring appeal for

blood for the wounded, who were being treated at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Thus the remains of the day were given over to betray what the mornings showed, and that was more tragic than the bomb. Somewhere in the diabolic woods of our conscience, the heart grew sclerotic and bewildered, and John Donne's worst fear came true: 'We asked none leave to love; nor will we owe any, as saying, Go.' The fact that those who died deserved a proper mourning never crossed our minds, as if what had vanished with the wisp of smoke and the bang of the blast was nothing more than a few artifacts of men, not their lives.

The explosion was, therefore, the loud noise of the implosion inside us, one that resounded in the laughter and merriment of our stupefied souls, the shattering sound of crumbling mores. How could we not be touched by the grief of such a pathetic loss? How could we not be

diminished, as John Donne said, by those deaths around us and then go through the undiminished revelries of the day?

Perhaps the bomb had also blown away a large chunk of our sensitivity, that territory where the mind scans the horizon of humanity with compassion and love. That is where one commiserates with others, where the death and destruction in an unseen corner of the world can bring vapours to our eyes. Perhaps the scorching heat of the bomb singed that delicate section of our psychology where human issues are sorted out in their proper contexts.

If you think about it, the first day of this year will go down in history as the first day when the extremes of joy and sorrow came together in the span of a single day. It will also go down in history as the first day when our concerted judgement failed to separate delight from death in the time-honoured tradition of human decency.

And it is proven all the more by the witch-hunt that has begun since the explosion day. What does it matter whether the bomb was the work of a fundamentalist or a foreign agent? What matters is that the sanity amongst us is fraying away. Samuel Johnson writes, 'Condemned to hope's delusive mind As we toil from day to day. By sudden blasts, or slow decline Our social comforts drop away.' That bomb, like the few others before it, was a warning shot that told us what was coming ahead.

CROSS TALK

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Photorial: Death trap

I am glad to inform you that your recently introduced Photorial section is turning out to be highly effective!

On April 14, a Photorial "Death trap" revealing a faulty street light electricity box at Sector#7, Uttara was published. The photograph was noted by officials of Dhaka City Corporation and urgent instructions arrived at the Uttara office of the City Corporation to repair the damaged box within next the couple of days.

On April 16, several high officials of the City Corporation came to the spot and replaced the broken door of the box and sealed it. Now it is completely safe from any sort of accident.

I hope that in the coming days the Photorial section will be able to create more such awareness through its bold and timely publications.

A Citizen
Uttara, Dhaka

Prayer timing

Thank you for publishing the prayer timings in your daily. On April 8, you published the Fajr Jamaat to be held at 5:40 a.m. while the sun rises at 5:43 a.m. Fajr Jamaat is usually held at 5:20 a.m. or 5:25 a.m. because in three minutes Fajr Jamaat can't be completed.

Instead of providing timings of Azan and Jamaat, you may provide the starting time and the last time of prayers so that people may say their prayers within the scheduled time.

Md. Habibur Rahman Bhuiyan
Vice President,
Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited

Shadow politics

The country may not be going to the dogs, but the social predators are becoming cannibals, metaphorically speaking.

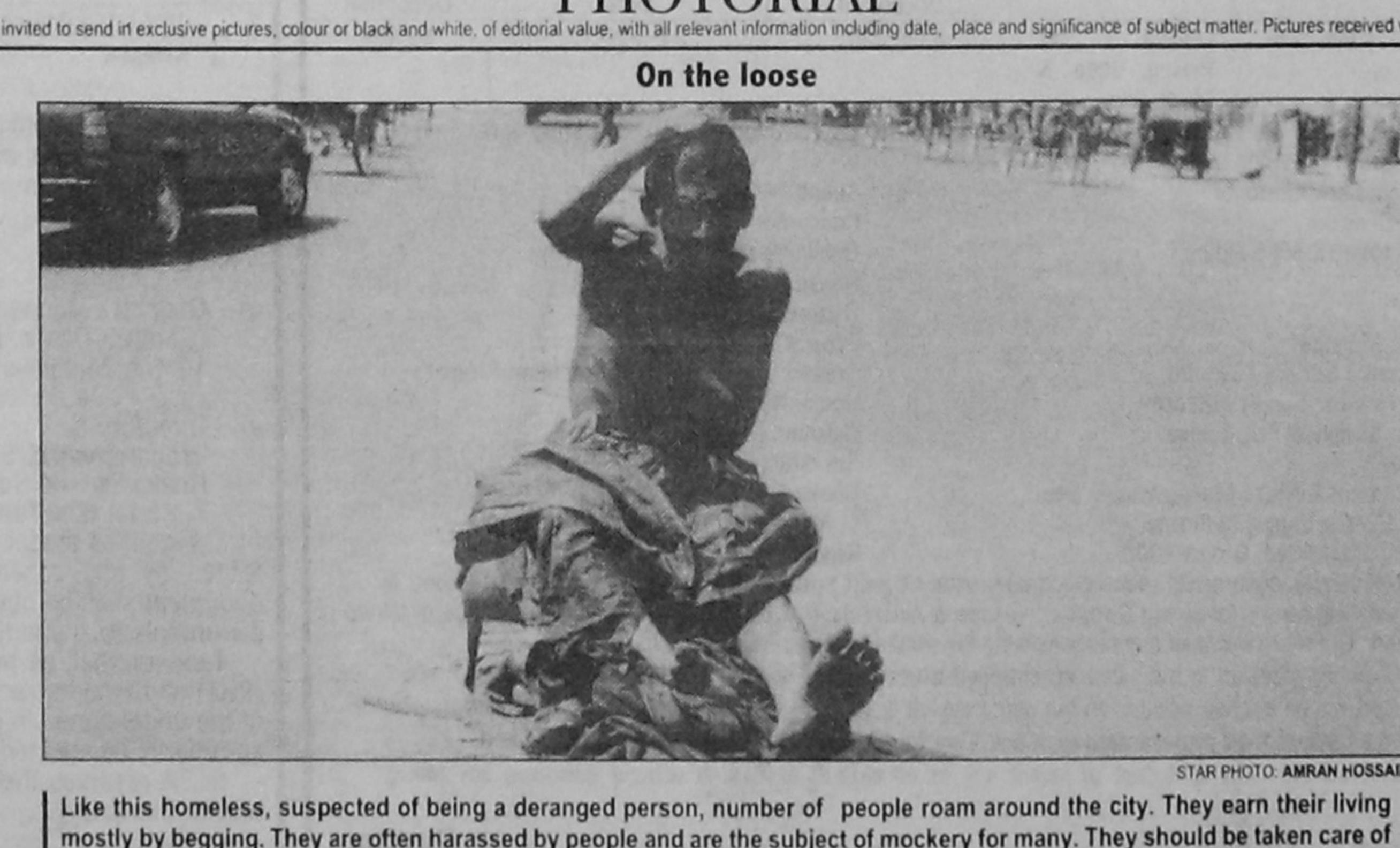
If that were not enough, there is arsenic in the drinking water, to ensure slow poisoning of the future generation. But the political governors have other mundane priorities, and the nation comes second, after the party.

Politics in this country is like one's shadow one cannot get rid of. It is not enough to spot a glimmer of light at the end of a tunnel only to be greeted by a political *meta* at the other end.

Abd
Dhaka

PHOTORIAL

On the loose



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Like this homeless, suspected of being a deranged person, number of people roam around the city. They earn their living mostly by begging. They are often harassed by people and are the subject of mockery for many. They should be taken care of and not in the streets. The authorities should take necessary steps to rehabilitate them and people should be sympathetic to these unfortunates.

Don't edit free minds!

I have observed with a heavy heart that all letters in your daily face an unwarranted and ruthless vivisection or mindless editing! It is normally understood by us, the readers, that a certain amount of clipping in certain letters may be necessary because of their length, clarity or possible profanity of language (if any). But this can't be the case almost always!

This is specially sad, when you change a letter's heading and take off the terms that are used to emphasise an expression, thus making the letter devoid of the very spirit which it was meant for. The English language is still experiencing an evolution, hence before making any grammatical correction/clipping in a letter it is always wise to be well aware and informed of the current trend on use of this language. Readers' views are their inherent right and it is explicitly announced also that 'Editor shall not be responsible for the views expressed in this space'. Why then take the trouble of clipping the thoughts of a free mind as expressed in this space, if that is not too pressing or for grammatical correction?

May I, by this humble letter urge

upon your good self to please spare our poor letters from such whipping when it is not too necessary. At least the letter heading, its language and the spirit of thought be left intact. You may however do only certain grammatical correction as required. Long letters, if they really deal with a serious issue, should be published in full as you feel necessary.

Hope you take this in good spirit.
Shah Mushtaque Ahmed
Lake Circus, Dhaka