

Corruption at the Central Medical Store

Audit findings must be followed up by action

WE have headlined in our paper that the government's Central Medicine Storage Depot (CMSD) either misused or misappropriated Tk 170 crore in one single year. Not only are valid documents missing but whatever is available may not be the right ones either. Without avoiding coyness, we should ask if we are really surprised. To be honest, people would have been more surprised if somebody reported that no corrupt practices were on there.

The report published yesterday has spelt out a host of misdeeds but that's not what matters. As a matter of fact, what will this discovery be worth if it is not followed up by punitive and corrective actions?

Given the kind of control ordinary Bangladeshis exert over the governance process, they have very little to say on the matter. They have to live with it because there is no screening system, no accountability and certainly no punishment for corruption. It's a society where full-throttled corruption is possible because the corrupt are shielded by the power of the state. Should one dare and say that in Bangladesh it's not corrupt people that is the problem but that the nature of the state is pro-corrupt cannot be in doubt.

Many experts also say that the level of corruption is so high that most of the foreign aid disappears through the hole of corruption and a small band of smart citizens eat most of the aid. But now the donors are waking up to it and saying under pressure from their own tax-payers that generosity depends on reduction of extreme corruption of aid money. This will spawn something of a bother for the rich and the powerful who have to depend on such monies for their economic advancement.

It's therefore in the interest of all to reduce some degree of corruption so that it's within tolerable limits and everything can move on, however jerkily.

We are realists and realise that seeking end to corruption is futile given our over-centralised governance culture easily given to a spoils system. We only hope that the leaders realize that even for their own sake we need to be a little less corrupt. That will be enough.

Meanwhile, we also seek an end to the malpractices in the CMSD. It has a long tradition in this sector and such calls have been made before. But nothing short of utilising the audit findings to home in on the corrupt elements and punish them in an exemplary fashion will seal the routes of recurrence.

Lessons not learnt

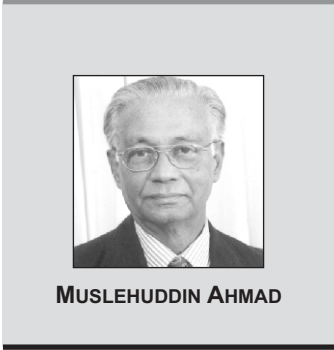
Delay in dismantling flawed girders could cause more death

LAST year, immediately after a 60-tonne girder of an under-construction bridge at Badda in the city came crashing down on a passenger bus, the Dhaka mayor blacklisted Surma International, the contractor, and ordered an inquiry. This paper carried the photograph of another precariously positioned girder of the under-construction footbridge near the Science Laboratory two days after the November 26 incident along with the warning that it could also crash down on the busy traffic any moment. The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) apparently could not act on that because of a High Court ruling requiring submission of an inquiry report by the DCC before the construction work could be stopped. But the DCC's dithering in the matter of filing the report points the blame at its direction.

On March 14 this year, our worst fears came true. A 40-tonne girder fell off from the Science Laboratory footbridge, crushing two people inside a Mitsubishi Pajero. Still, Surma International, its contractor, remains audaciously indifferent. Despite specific instructions from the government to dismantle the flawed girders, it has dismantled only two; that too, after much foot dragging. We wonder why the DCC and other relevant government agencies should allow any procrastination to occur in securing the construction company's compliance with a government order involving a serious public interest. The fact that Surma International's owner is a ruling party lawmaker makes it even more compelling that he be shown no mercy.

The *Prothom Alo* draws on several sources to report that the lawmaker in question has already started lobbying with the higher authorities to stay the orders. Encouragingly, according to the report, he has not received any leniency from the relevant quarters on this score. Surma International must pay the price for constructing flawed footbridges that so ominously endangered public safety. We demand that the company be forced to dismantle the rest of the faulty girders immediately. It must not be allowed to toy with people's lives.

Sharon's war, bloodbath and thereafter



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

FRIDAY, March 8 was the deadly day in over 17 months of Intifada against Israelis. The media reported 36 Palestinian deaths from Israeli attacks on Gaza from all fronts - land, air and sea. This was in retaliation of Palestinian gunman's earlier attack on Israeli military training school at a settlement where five Israeli officers under training were killed. The headquarters of President Arafat was reduced to rubble by repeated missile and bomb attacks. Luckily the building was evacuated earlier in anticipation of the attacks. The other Palestinian security checkpoints and civilian houses were also demolished.

Saturday, March 9 witnessed two suicide bombings -- one in the "Café Moment" in the posh area of Jerusalem, a couple of yards away from Prime Minister Sharon's official residence. He was in his ranch. The café suicide attack was really a bloody one and 11 Israelis were dead and dozens injured. In another suicide attack, three Israelis were killed thus making it a total of 14 on that day. Tanks rolled into the several of the refugee camps. The attacks from air, land and navy also continued in other areas. Many of the Palestinian controlled areas were temporarily occupied by Israeli defense forces and house to house search continued. In the process dozens of Palestinians were killed and hundreds were rounded up and taken away blindfolded. Israeli Chief of Staff General Mofaz said, " 200 Palestinians have been killed since IDF entered the Balata refugee camp 10 days ago, and 1200 suspected terrorists have been arrested, mostly in Tulkarm." [J. Post/March 11].

The balance sheet of dead on both sides in the area looked very striking with the present escalation of the violence. Earlier calculation before the present Intifada shows death ratio at 1 Israeli to 12 Palestinians but the present ratio stands at 1:3. The tactics used by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Tanzim particularly suicide bombing were considered to be at the very root of this change in the balance sheet. Hamas said it was using indigenous

numbers to force them to the bargaining table as was stated earlier by Sharon was leading Israel nowhere. He thereafter decided to send General Anthony Zinni to the area with the mission to establish cease-fire as per Tenet plan and then move to Mitchell plan leading to peace negotiations which President Bush agreed to. It was also reported that Secretary Powell spoke in very clear terms with Prime Minister Sharon over telephone, which led

patch General Zinni to the area. It should have been clear to Washington that this would allow Sharon to take advantage of the situation and inflict as much damage as possible on the Palestinians.

About 20,000 Israeli army and 50 tanks supported by personnel carriers rolled into Jebaliya refugee camp in Gaza and West bank town of Ramallah and other nearby areas and started the military operation which was considered as even

to the identity numbers given on the arm and forehead of the arrested Palestinians: "Is that not what they say the Nazis did to the Jews? What do they have to say about this matter?" This was also severely criticized by several Israeli politicians. An Israeli Knesset (parliament) member who is a Nazi camp survivor said, " It is totally unbearable for me. This is something that was done to us in Auschwitz."

In the meantime, the Foreign

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

As it seems, the whole episode has gone against Sharon as he has lost grounds at home and antagonised the US Administration somewhat. This indeed obliged the US Administration to take an unusual step to propose a UN resolution in favour of the Palestinians and have it passed. President Bush made a particular reference to this in the press conference and said, "we helped engineer" the UNSC resolution which "explicitly called for the creation of a Palestinian state, even as it reaffirmed Israel's right to existence and security."

F11 against Israel's F16 provided by the US. F11 means a suicide bomber with two legs which walks up to the target(s) -- Israeli army terrorists or their supporters, bomb and die, but F16 Israeli bombers target Palestinian civilians from air through electronic device, kill them and return home safely. So if Israeli bombers are not terrorists, then "our bombers are also not terrorists". Hamas continue to argue that "our bombers sacrifice life whereas Israeli bombers return home safely".

Today, the Palestinian attacks have turned towards guerilla fight which the Israelis are very afraid of. Today, no place in Israel is safe. There is total tension all over and many Israelis are turning against Sharon as shown in the latest poll. The Labour, peace activists and other leftist groups are asking for withdrawal from the occupied territories. In a TV interview the former Labour Minister was openly speaking against Sharon's policies and particularly against settlements and supported the withdrawal from the occupied areas. The chief spokesman of Sharon government Mr Gissin was present and was also interviewed. He obviously tried to defend government policies.

Apparently, Secretary Colin Powell was convinced that a policy of killing of Palestinians in massive

Sharon to declare that he would no longer insist on his earlier condition of complete calm of seven days and would be ready to talk to the Palestinians even "under fire". He also decided to lift travel restrictions on Arafat and said Arafat could travel now within his controlled areas but must not go out of West Bank and Gaza. *New York Times* gave headline news saying "Sharon Offering A New Concession". How on earth any one of these could be termed as concession? Sharon indeed had no authority to impose such conditions to start with. He did so as these were so long taken to be okayed by Washington. Even as late as last week, on Arafat's mobility, "the United States appeared less interested..." we think the Israelis should take a careful look at this question of Arafat's travel and determine what's in their interests," a State Department spokesman said. [NY Times March 12.]. It has always been observed that Israel's policies and actions depended on Washington's yes, no or silence etc. Unfortunately, silence is always interpreted by Israel as yes.

Washington's intervention has forced Prime Minister Sharon agree to talk "under fire", but now it is being questioned why Washington took so much time, nearly a week, to dis-

bigger than Israel's Lebanon invasion of 1982, when Ariel Sharon, was the Defense Minister of Israel. Indeed, he used his lethal experience of 1982 and took probably the last chance of his life to inflict the maximum casualties on the Palestinians. Dozens of Palestinians have been killed and hundreds arrested. Reportedly Israeli Defense Minister Ben Elieser, a Labour Party head, unilaterally wanted to withdraw the troops from Ramallah. There were hot exchanges in the cabinet meeting between Defense Minister Ben Elieser and Prime Minister Sharon. Sharon obviously prevailed and asked Israeli army to continue its operation against the Palestinians. This shows his vengeance and deliberateness to pursue the killing operation. But it is not understood why Ben Elieser and his colleagues including Shimon Peres are still hanging on with Sharon to share the blame of mass murder.

As the situation has turned out to be, Israeli army operations in the refugee camps led to killing of over 33 civilians and arrest of all men between 16 and 45 years of age. All the arrested persons were taken away blindfolded. Arafat responded to this by accusing Israeli soldiers of "new Nazi racism." He said referring

Minister of Arab League met at Cairo to prepare for the Beirut summit that is scheduled to take place on March 27-28. The ministers were very critical of Israeli military actions against Palestinians and called for international intervention, but did not say that the League members might be forced to act to defend the Palestinians. Arab League members supported the Saudi peace plan which is set to be adopted in Beirut summit.

The atrocities of Israeli army against the Palestinians under Sharon's order and also sudden increase in the suicide bombings that killed several Israelis, made Washington deeply concerned. President Bush looked fairly agitated in White House press conference held on March 13 while the reporters questioned him on M-East issue. *NY Times* reported that 'President Bush delivered a harsh rebuke to Israel for its deadly military operations against Palestinians... saying that the actions of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government were "not helpful" and suggested that they went all beyond self-defense.' "Frankly, it's not helpful what the Israelis have recently done in order to create conditions for peace. I understand someone trying to defend them-

selfes and to fight terror. But recent actions aren't helpful." President Bush added.

This is the first time President Bush did not say ask Arafat to do anything. As it was, he did not even mention Arafat at all. Apparently, President Bush personally got convinced of the irrational behavior of Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, which has indeed embarrassed him and his Administration. One can see Secretary Powell's personal contributions in the turn around of the Administration in M-E affairs. The other factor that might have worked on president Bush was near failure of Vice-President's visit to the Middle-East because of Sharon's madness at such a crucial time. This was good for President Saddam Hussein at least for the time being. One, however, does not know whether the US would act unilaterally against Iraq.

As it seems, the whole episode has gone against Sharon as he has lost grounds at home and antagonised the US Administration somewhat. This indeed obliged the US Administration to take an unusual step to propose a UN resolution in favour of the Palestinians and have it passed. President Bush made a particular reference to this in the press conference and said, "we helped engineer" the UNSC resolution which "explicitly called for the creation of a Palestinian state, even as it reaffirmed Israel's right to existence and security."

General Anthony Zinni is already in the area. Sharon has started phased withdrawal of the troops from Ramallah and said he would be in favour of a full cease-fire. Arafat, however, said he would not sit in the negotiating table until the last Israeli soldier leaves the reoccupied Ramallah. Indeed, this is the time for Arafat to press for full withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Palestinian controlled area, lifting of the total siege and end of all restrictions against the movement of the Palestinians. Arafat should also demand Sharon's apology for confining him against international law in Ramallah for about three months.

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Mugabe wins but Zimbabwe lost



HARUN UR RASHID

All reports indicate that President Mugabe (78) was able to 'steal' the election to run the Presidency for another six years. The Commonwealth observers led by Nigerian former President Abulsalam Abu Bakar said that the election was neither free nor fair. He further elaborated that "the conditions in Zimbabwe did not adequately allow free and fair expression of will by the electorate". The 14-member South African Development Community observer team slammed the poll for not complying with the normal election standards.

Zimbabwe (formerly Northern Rhodesia) achieved independence in 1980 from Britain. It is a land-locked country north to South Africa. The total population is about 12 million in a land territory which is more than three times of the size of Bangladesh. Seven per cent of land is arable and 62 per cent is forested. Unemployment is about 45 per cent of adult population. Main industries are mining, steel, and manufactured products. Tourism is a great industry for its wild game parks. In 1995 the GDP was about US\$18 billion.

Since last two years the economy has stagnated because of

President Mugabe's confrontational policy towards Britain. The US and the European Union have imposed limited sanctions against Zimbabwe because of its dictatorial nature of rule. Libya appears to provide a life-line with oil and funds to Zimbabwe.

The result of the election is likely to strain its relations further with the US and European Union. President Bush did not recognise the poll result. The European Union is making noises to expand the ambit

Commonwealth with respect to the poll result and Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth.

The 90s saw restoration of democracy in Africa. Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana and Nigeria have pursued democratic ideals. Angola after the death of rebel leader Savimbi is crawling towards democracy. Many observers believe that Zimbabwe's election is a dark day for democracy for Africa. Signs were there for months in Zimbabwe

developing countries?

First there is a view that the concept of democracy as we know today is a Western one. Many argue that institutions in a country are invariably linked with history, culture and ethos of a nation. They cannot be imposed on a country. It must originate from its people and democracy cannot flourish in a country where people are mostly illiterate and poor. Power and poverty often corrupt people. In Africa,

of liberal democracy that we see today in Western countries.

Third, tolerance is almost absent for others in most of developing countries. Many social scientists argue that the reasons for intolerance are historical, political and philosophical. History and politics provide the institutions of democracy and philosophy gives them meaning. If we look at the history of political independence, leaders of developing countries fought coura-

an exception).While in power, maximising leverage and influence on state machinery is the name of the game. The more people presses for transparency of actions of government, the more anxious it shows itself covering things up and the more it attempts to ingratiate itself with state power.

Finally, the political parties in most of developing countries are not democratic in character. The leaders are hardly elected in a democratic and open way. Leadership is imposed on the rank and file and they have to accept it.

Conclusion:

Although the notion of democracy is not universal in all its aspects, it is believed that a minimal notion of democratic norms exists. Leaders must respond to the basic needs (food, shelter, primary health care) of the nationals and protect their fundamental human rights. Whatever may be the reasons, there is no excuse for any developing country to deny voting rights to its citizens at the dawn of the 21st century. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has linked democracy with human welfare and concluded that there would be no famine in a democratic country. Some social scientists may argue that it is all too often the failure of good government and the absence of the rule of law that keeps developing nations poor. Zimbabwe should be seen as no exception.

Zimbabwe is likely to face tough sanctions from the US and the European Union in the near future. Foreign investment and tourism is bound to decline not only in Zimbabwe but also in neighbouring countries including South Africa. There is a great danger of instability in the region. The people of Zimbabwe are likely to suffer most and the tragedy is that it is not their making.

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BOTTOM LINE

Although the notion of democracy is not universal in all its aspects, it is believed that a minimal notion of democratic norms exists. Leaders must respond to the basic needs (food, shelter, primary health care) of the nationals and protect their fundamental human rights. Whatever may be the reasons, there is no excuse for any developing country to deny voting rights to its citizens at the dawn of the 21st century. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has linked democracy with human welfare and concluded that there would be no famine in a democratic country.

of sanctions. The Commonwealth has to decide whether to suspend Zimbabwe from the organisation (Pakistan has been suspended after the coup in 1998).

At the last Commonwealth Heads of Government summit in Australia, the three heads of government -- Australia, Nigeria and South Africa -- were entrusted with the task of taking action in respect to Zimbabwe and they would come to a decision on receipt of the reports of the Commonwealth observers. Initial reactions of most of the African leaders appear to be that they do not find anything dramatically wrong to threaten the integrity of the outcome of the election. There could be a sharp divide between "black and white" leaders of the

before the election. It has been alleged by the opposition party that the state machinery was not independent, the police were not impartial, censorship and misuse of media was rampant and the election commission was not independent. The TV footage indicated that many voters were disenfranchised on the election-day because of the absence of sufficient number of polling booths in cities where opposition supporters were believed to be strong. In the climate of such alleged unfairness of election, President Mugabe is sure to win.

Zimbabwe is not the only developing country where election is 'managed' to the advantage of the ruling party. The question is : Why does democracy get a battering in

tribal loyalty complicates further the issue.

Second, democracy cannot be established in one day. It takes years to build up democratic institutions. The English experience shows first the declaration of Magna Carta (1215), followed by the Bill of Rights (1689). All these documents are directed simply to distribute powers between King and common people. Gradually the ascendancy of power of common people rose over the monarch in Britain. While the French Revolution (1789) had its dark sides on human rights, it was essentially concerned with the demolition of absolutist system of government. The English, American and French revolutions contributed towards the development of forms

geously with colonial masters. They were generally bold and sensible. But when they come to power after independence, they often lapse into megalomania. They try to copy their colonial masters with trappings of absolute power. Greed and opulence often tarnish the image of most of the leaders in developing countries. Zaire's late President Mobutu had reportedly amassed a fortune of US\$5 billion overseas while his country had no decent roads even in the capital city.

Fourth, most leaders in developing countries wish to continue their rule because leaders believe that without power they do not command influence. Very few leaders resign on their own (Nelson Mandela was

Peace plan in pieces: Ayodhya needs a just solution

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE Supreme Court order is a slap in the face of the VHP and the Vajpayee government, which to its disgrace, pleaded the *Hindutva* case. This vindicates the argument below for a just, balanced, solution.

With the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB) rejecting the Kanchi Sankaracharya's proposal to allow symbolic *shila puja* leading to temple construction at Ayodhya, there will be no negotiated settlement of the issue.

At best, or at worst, there could be an underhand *shila daan* deal between the VHP - Ramjannabhoomi Nyas (RJN) and the government. But this will lack support of Muslims and India's secular opinion. It is hard to fault the MPLB's rejection of the Sankaracharya's formula as "incomplete". The formula one-sidedly transfers a 42-acre plot to the RJN and legitimises temple construction -- with the *garbha griha* (sanctum sanctorum) located where the

mosque stood. The MPLB has put the onus on the government to maintain peace and the *status quo* till the title suit is settled.

By contrast, the VHP has threatened to punish Muslims for "playing with the feelings of Hindus" and turn "*the whole country [into] Ayodhya*." This puts a huge question-mark over the VHP's "undertaking" to abide by the judgment in the title suit. RJN leaders reject that possibility outright.

Clearly, Mr Vajpayee has failed to persuade the VHP and RJN to respect legal rulings and give up insisting that Ayodhya is a matter of "faith", not law, history or facts.

This is a poor comment on his leadership and his eroding authority within the *parivar*.

After the BJP's recent electoral rout, Mr Vajpayee is under pressure to revive "divisive" issues like Ayodhya. His government cannot be expected to handle the VHP-RJN's militant mobilisation competently and fairly.

It is very likely that the opportunity for a consensual out-of-court

There are only two ways in which the Ayodhya issue can be resolved. First is an equitable mosque-plus-temple solution, based upon strict legality, and informed consent of all -- not just self-appointed sadhus and imams who represent little in their own communities. Alternatively, there should be a radical, non-religious, solution: build secular structures which serve the Ayodhya-Faizabad community.

settlement will be squandered. Violence could break out in Ayodhya and elsewhere. After the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, this will inflict unbearable, unacceptable damage upon India.

This makes it imperative that the Ayodhya issue is treated with the utmost decency, balance and fairness, while totally rejecting guile, deception and deviousness, as well as parochial goals.

Such an approach would sharply contrast with the past. In 1949, fanatics were permitted to sneak into the Babri mosque and install Ram idols. In 1986, the temple's gates were unlocked, but the mosque was closed for prayer. In 1992, an illegal temple was constructed, which has since survived.

Only an approach based on worthy principles of justice can rectify the flaws in the 1993 Act acquiring the Ayodhya land. As one of India's great jurists, H.M. Seervai, argued, this Act "violates the fundamental rights of Muslims ...". Seervai says: "The Supreme Court has held ... that any law which extinguishes a religious trust or removes the trustees or managers of properties" belonging to it is "void".

Regrettably, in 1994, the Act was declared valid by the Supreme Court by a majority of three against two. The bench split along religious lines.

This flawed ruling nevertheless has some safeguards: The land can only be transferred as part of a

package deal *after* a settlement is arrived at, and that too to a trust to be created *after* 1993, unlike the RJN. The Act's purpose is to build "a Ram temple, a mosque, amenities for pilgrims, a library, museum and other suitable facilities." It would be absurd to break up the land and transfer the 42-acre "undisputed" plot. This ceased being "undisputed" in 1993. In the first place, it never belonged to the RJN. It was *leased* to it by the Kalyan Singh government in March 1992 for "tourism" to "develop and maintain" the Ram-Katha Park and other sites within the Ayodhya complex. It would be ludicrous to gift to the RJN.

The rationale of the land takeover was to *rebuild* the mosque -- an act of restitution. This was promised by

Prime Minister Rao and reiterated in the 1994 judgment.

An out-of-court settlement of the dispute is possible, but the Kanchi Sankaracharya didn't attempt one. His formula is biased in favour of the VHP-RJN; it offers nothing to the Muslims.

No fair settlement can be coercive or manipulative of Muslims or Hindus. However, with the *political* temple agitation and Gujarat's communal pogrom, the present "negotiations" have a acquired coercive character.

There are only two ways in which the Ayodhya issue can be resolved. First is an equitable mosque-plus-temple solution, based upon strict legality, and informed consent of all - not just self-appointed *sadhus* and

imams who represent little in their own communities. Alternatively, there should be a radical, non-religious, solution: build secular structures which serve the Ayodhya-Faizabad community. The course offers a good opportunity to break the stranglehold of "identity politics". The masses of eastern UP--one of India's most backward regions--need a patient-friendly good-quality hospital and a solidly secular school.

The hospital should be a model for free primary and preventive healthcare, all the way to super-specialities. The school should offer alternatives to the cocktail of superstition, irrationality, and half-lies doled out in NCERT and *madrasa* syllabi.

However, this can only happen if secular political parties and civil society organisations launch a spirited counter-campaign. This means collecting bricks from every village and *basti* for the hospital/school. It means confronting *Hindutva* in the streets.

This will evoke infinitely greater resonance than the tired, shop-

worn, temple issue. Going by *India Today's* conservative opinion poll, issues like employment, prices and corruption rate five to 19 times higher in people's concerns than "religious and caste issues."

Secular India has far too long condoned *Hindutva's* fanatical politics and self-appointed *sadhus'* antics. Some people mistakenly assume this society is less welcoming of modern, liberal, rational ideas than of "tradition", religiosity or superstition.

This passivity must give way to active opposition. The appeasement-prone Vajpayee government must be legally restrained. But that's not enough. There is no substitute for a mass-level campaign.

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