

## 'Stealing' money with impunity

Public has to pay while trade union leaders make hay under political patronisation

RARELY has a report displayed more vividly the terrifying link between politics and crime midwifed by trade unionism than the recent case involving the millionaire meter reader of Titas Gas Co. This not only explains the root cause of gross theft in publicly owned utilities but shows the high degree of tolerance the official world has for corruption. The public is being forced to pay for politically patronised organised crime.

Under official patronage, a group of thieves hidden behind the masks of trade unionism have looted public money with impunity for long. No action has been taken in the case of Mahub the Titas meter reader till date. In fact, most feel that everything will return to normalcy once the media outcry subsides.

The fact that the caretaker government had brought systems loss down in Titas Gas to 6.22 and that it has jumped to 10.31 under the present regime reads like a report card on corruption. Even under the Awami League rule the loss rate stood at 8.12 percent showing that it's not the system which has failed but the regimes which allow a politically convenient level of corruption to exist.

The close to 19 crores that is therefore plundered every month is the outright amount that reaches the personal pockets of trade union leaders and thugs who naturally line other higher up pockets as well. One doesn't have to point any finger but the facts have already pointed them out rather well making claims of integrity by the government sound hollow and silly. And this is public money that is being stolen.

The message is clear. As long as the political line is toed, almost anything is permissible. The government has been put into the dock and with evidence. The extreme level of corruption tolerated at a meter reader's level in a public sector corporation makes everyone now wonder at the level of tolerance being exercised at the more lucrative policy decision making levels in the higher tiers of power. The meaning of being the most corrupt country in the world is now truly illustrated for all.

It may look like that the BNP will want to sail through blaming everything on other's shoulder but public tolerance is being seriously challenged now. The BNP must clean the house before the house itself crumbles under the weight of its own negative performance.

## Budget looks towards a dry summer

Aid is drying up but can taxes meet the gap?

THE next Annual Development Plan is being prepared with 21.35 per cent less project aid. It has been taken for a fact of life that foreign aid will be less. But the plan to meet the gap through greater tax collection may not be possible. The Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and industry (MCCI) has expressed its deep concern on the law and order situation and said that there may not be any further investment unless the environment improves. Reports of large scale corruption in SOEs will also certainly dampen the general commercial enthusiasm.

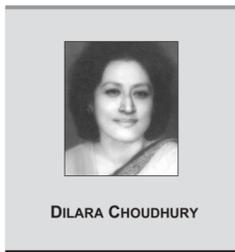
The fond thoughts of the Finance Minister about enlarging the tax net is regularly heard but it shall remain within the domain of dreams if the "Titas gas" syndrome is allowed to go on. This will discourage new entrepreneurs from entering the business scene and existing entrepreneurs will start dropping off when the cost of doing business overwhelms all other calculations.

The Finance Minister should realize that unless law and order is restored, both in respect of the street crime as well as the white collar variety, neither aid nor tax money will collect. If taxpayers feel that the government will tolerate theft in the sector corporation as rewards for party loyalty, the chances of enthusiastic tax payers lining up to assist the ADP run on its own may well remain a fantasy.

The situation has become more serious than we think. Apart from falling aid levels and low tax pool, the looting in the public sector has encouraged similar practices in the private sector as well in the form of loan defaulting.

There is still time to improve the situation but as the gap between promises and performance widens, we are left to ponder what actions can steady the boat. Let's hope the government has some good ideas.

## Dolls' house



DILARA CHOUDHURY

WHEN I was a little girl, thanks to my mother, who was a creative doll maker, I had an impressive collection of dolls. As a matter of fact, there was a colony of dolls that resided under the elevated dresser of my mother. And I used to spend hours playing with them and pretending that they were real. However, the obvious happened. Gradually, I lost interest in them once I realized that despite serious pretending – the dolls were not real, and they were no good when it came to dealing with the realities.

Why this sudden urge to share my childhood memories? The reason being that I could not resist telling the story (my apologies to the readers) in the context of the recent development with regard to women's effective representation in the Jatiyo Sangsad in the backdrop of Dhaka's pledge, as a signatory to both United Nations Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and 1997 Edinburgh Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, to adopt appropriate strategies in order to enhance women's presence to a minimum target of no less than 30 per cent, in all fora of decision-making bodies by year 2005, especially in the parliament.

Needless to add why parliament has been targeted. I can cite dozens of reasons why we need a critical mass of women parliamentarians. It is universally acclaimed that women's effective presence in the parliament can improve the nature and quality of democracy by broadening its base, help formulations of legislation that would address the needs of the society in gender-neutral way, and most importantly, ward off the negative impacts of globalization of which women are the worse victims. I think, it is tantamount to sins if we forget how globalization is adversely affecting the women of Bangladesh. We need to

take serious note that there exist a large number of women in both organized and unorganized sectors due the demand of cheap labour by multi-national companies without any societal or state sponsored security. As a result, human rights violation of Bangladeshi women is a daily feature beginning from rape, sexual harassment, persecution, discrimination, trafficking, illegal migration to exposure to HIV and AIDS. But their predicaments largely go unnoticed. The pictures

The question is as to whether or not our leadership is serious about the issue in the context of the stated reality and the need for women's effective representation in the parliament. Prior to the elections, there were a lot of politics by then government party AL and opposition BNP over this issue when the constitutional provision for 30 reserved seats for women elected by the House expired on April 4, 2001. No satisfactory arrangement could be made due to the ambivalent stance

Even the increase in the number of the seats did not bring any qualitative change in women's representation in the parliament. There are impressive arrays of literature, findings of seminars and roundtable discussions about the ineffectiveness of the system. Time and again, it has been pointed out that the presence of 30 indirectly elected women from reserved seats only demonstrated and reinforced women's dependence on men, how entrenched patriarchy is even in the

nature and kind of state and society we have produced even after 31 years of our liberation war that was fought in the name of democracy -- a promise to create space for every segment of the society, especially for the marginalized, for the poor, for the downtrodden. To our utter dismay, we find that the socio-political reality is still not woman friendly, so much so that women, despite being the equal member of the polity are unable to register our voice in the governance of the

gral part. Tragically, we still find ourselves in a state of psycho-paralysis and are unable to even address it properly.

Is it then timed that we look squarely in the face and come out openly about what exactly Bangladesh State's prophesied gender ideology is? What role the state and the society want the women to play? And whether or not there is any political commitment by the state and society with regard to women's enhanced presence in country's power structure? It is time that we stop beating around the bush and take intermittent steps to please donors because such strategies do not work as they get spent up half way through. Let us not try to instill a moribund system of women's representation so that we can tell the world that we have 10 per cent women's representation in the parliament. Let us call a spade a spade. There is no point in our leadership believing that by having the previous arrangement they can ensure the presence of a critical mass of women parliamentarians. In that case, I am afraid, they had to be living in dolls' house and seriously pretending. Such psychosis is difficult to comprehend since even someone like me -- 'a woman' -- realize that one cannot go through life pretending and that one has to get to serious business in the real world. With this kind of mindset we will end up fooling ourselves instead of fooling others.

My humble suggestion to the ruling coalition is to either have an effective system that works -- effective being the core issue -- or do away with something that does not work. (It would simply be a waste of money as well as corrupting to have the previous arrangement installed). That way the parties and the civil society, being free from illusions, will have enough time to come up with well thought out strategies in the context of the realities. That way promises made need not be broken, as they will be firmly rooted in the commitment of the state and society. That way we will be less pretentious. It is better not to pretend and live in dolls' house so that the reality surfaces. Perhaps, only then, the issue of women's representation in the parliament can be dealt with in proper perspective.

Dilara Choudhury is Professor, Govt and Politics, Jahangirnagar University.

## PANORAMA

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we get in the newspapers about women's vulnerabilities are only the tips of the iceberg. For example, how many of us have any knowledge how the young female garment workers in Savar (Dhaka) alone silently bear with rape and other sexual harassment? Do we have any idea, as evidenced by the findings of Jahangirnagar University Journalists' Forum for Human Rights, that young female workers, especially in the EPZ, are being exposed to HIV and AIDS in an alarming way due to the factors discussed above?

Who will look after these issues and formulate policies to address their concerns if the women do not have effective representation in the parliament? Although male legislators should also be equally concerned about the citizens' plight be they are men or women but undoubtedly it is the women who can feel their pain, their unspoken sorrows, their frustrations, their disappointments, their misfortune and their tragedies more than the men. Inclusion of women as effective parliamentarians, as such, is important so that they can develop leadership, gain expertise, knowledge, and tools so that they can "play a brokering role for change through a synergy of partnership with government (state) and with civil society so that the market forces can be shaped to work in favour of women and gender equality" (Achola Pala Okeyo: 1997).

taken by both BNP and AL. But things got energized due the election pledges of both BNP and AL during the parliamentary elections of 2001 in providing increased number of directly elected women parliamentarians from reserved seats, and the former's subsequent victory at the polls commanding two-third majority in the House. It was expected that the winning party would find ways and means in order to keep its pledge, and that the amendment of the constitution in this regard, would have a smooth sailing. Now, we are saddened by the fact that BNP-led coalition government seems to be going back on its election pledge that would have ensured the need of the day, and seriously contemplating to reintroduce the previous arrangement through a constitutional amendment.

In such eventuality, we will indeed turn our clock back if BNP-led coalition government gets the intended bill passed in the parliament, which is not a problem for them. This development is indeed ominous and it's like a bolt from the blue. How can the ruling coalition, in their right mind, think of bringing back the previous arrangement, knowing fully well that the arrangement, initially introduced in 1973 with 15 indirectly elected lawmakers from reserved seats for women that was subsequently increased to 30, has been more of a cosmetic than substantive treatment of the issue?

highest decision-making body of the country, how they served the interest of the party in power by acting as its vote bank, and how their very representativeness has been questioned as a whole not to speak of being women's representatives. All they (the leadership) have to do is to go through some of these findings to make sure how ineffective it had been. Or perhaps they already are fully aware about it.

It is indeed a great tragedy that present government wants to reintroduce the previous *modus vivendi* that has thoroughly been discredited. At a time when we are looking for women leadership, expertise etc., for the reasons already discussed, the leadership want to put the clock back on the pretext of impracticability like incurring huge cost for almost another election, "a giant task, which is not desirable in the existing political situation" and that the ruling coalition finds it "very difficult" to implement its commitment given the socio-political reality. The reasons cited by the ruling coalition are untenable -- the most obvious one being that raising the number of women lawmakers to 60 or 64, as suggested by different women's organizations, is not viable because House has seating arrangement for 358 without having any scope for further expansion. There could not have been a more ludicrous excuse than this one.

As such, the questions that have begun to haunt us is about the very

country. We are so utterly helpless that the patriarchal state is having its way even using the pretext of cost, which to any rational thinking person, does not hold any water. The excuse reminds us of the girl child's situation within the family that she gets less of everything including calorie intake than her more powerful male sibling does. Aren't we witnessing the replication of the family situation at the national level since there is dearth of money for holding elections to ensure women's effective voice in state affairs whereas there is none when it comes to buying MIG-29s and Frigates or having 60 member Council of Ministers in which all excepting two are men? We also find the limited seating arrangement of House without any scope of expansion, as an excuse, unacceptable. If that was the case then the parties should not have made promise of an expanded House.

It discerns from the above discussion that the issue of women's effective representation has always been and still being treated trivially. One wonders whether it has ever been in the political discourse of the country (Choudhury: 2000). Promises are made without having serious thoughts about them and consequently broken with equal ease. We forget that we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and countries around the world are going ahead with their development agendas with women's development as an inte-

## How to brighten our image abroad?

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

WHEN a derogatory report on Bangladesh appears in an international journal or survey forum the government and the opposition of our country routinely display contradictory reactions.

Thus when the Transparency International (TI) branded Bangladesh as the most corrupt of the countries under their review the then Awami League (AL) government got terribly enraged and launched noisy protests all around without refraining from the routine exercise of accusing the main opposition the BNP of conspiring with the TI to demean country's image abroad. Amusingly, in the consequent row rather not so discreetly kicked up by the government the BNP kept on rejoicing over the issue happily concluding that the AL government could not give the country anything except the blue ribbon of world championship in corruption.

Reciprocally, when a story pointing Bangladesh as a cocoon of terror came up in the Hong Kong-based *The Far Eastern Economic Review* and its usual follow-up in the *Wall Street Journal* that focussed on Bangladesh as a country wallowing in fundamentalism and Talibanism, the BNP, the chief component of four-party alliance government, turned absolutely figdity denouncing the story as absolutely false, fabricated, ill-willed and pointed its accusation finger on the AL alleging that it (AL) had machinated the evil design at the cost of the image of the nation in the outside world. It was then the AL's turn to exult over the defamation of the government. And the latter capitalized on it to the full.

The pertinent question is why have all governments in recent years grown so deadly worried when defamatory report on Bangladesh is published in an international

paper or forum and why has the main opposition exulted over this state of country's disrepute? Why has the party forming the government got so very concerned at the odd focussing of the nation in the international arena? Why has it so loudly cried over what it has fondly termed as a loss of national image in international field? Why this supersensitivity of the party in power, otherwise seeming quite dull and moribund, to the issue of nation's international image? Conversely, why has the main opposition derived pleasure in the situation

of national dishonour? Is the latter devoid of any sense of patriotism and the party in power bubbles with love of the motherland? Probably our present socio-economic scenario and fast deteriorating political norms will suffice to answer them.

Ours is a country grossly dependent on foreign aid for carrying out development works and sometimes continuing some administrative functions even. The donors are increasingly growing strict and unenterprising. For sanction of aids they are in the habit of imposing tougher and tougher preconditions prominent among them being good governance and satisfactory law and order situation. Unfortunately in both the fields Bangladesh figures precariously low. International exposure of a situation testifying to the bars to receiving aids from donor bodies poses a bone stuck in the throat of the government.

It is more than proved that our political parties are interested in capturing power. In our country, so to say, power means money, control of police, a prerogative to oppress the opposition and an immunity from

accountability. Constructive politics prizing country's interest over anything else seems wholly alien to our political parties. The two main political parties come to power by default like a merry game of rotation that the unfortunate electors of Bangladesh so frustratingly conduct without any choice almost perforce. The party driven out of power in national elections feels a five-year term of government by its rival is too long a period to wait upon. So it goes all up to promote factors to weaken, preferably dislodge, the government. Whenever there is a condem-

nation of the government by any quarters, golden if that be from an international arena, it is most welcome to the opposition to swoop on it to discredit the government and pave way for its own ascendancy.

Regardless of the image of Bangladesh in the outside world, could our governments judge what impression about them their own people within the country are holding in their minds?

The print media of our country enjoy a greater amount of freedom and deliver more service to the people by bringing varieties of news on happenings across the country to our doorsteps. These may constitute a reliable index of the true account of the society and nation. One or two of such are given below.

"Compelled by a fundamentalist students organization during the last six months about 500 students belonging to progressive students organizations like Chhatra League, Chhatradal have quietly left ten students dormitories including the Mother Bux hall, the Habibur Rahman hall under the Rajshahi university. 'Monitoring Committees'

have been formed in the halls to keep watch over the students and those considered suspects are sent to 'torture cells' for trials and punishment. Any student unmindful of offering *salam* to the leaders and activists of that fundamentalist organization and desiring to lead a carefree life draws the attention of the members of the 'monitoring committees'. The university administration is not unaware of this state of affair. But they are giving silent support to the evil activities of the fundamentalist students organization and pro-Jamaati teachers in

such a manner that they will not be able to retain their position for long" (Prothom Alo of 10<sup>th</sup> May).

The report goes in for showing the increasing predominance of the fundamentalists in one of the highest seats of learning of the country. It cannot obviously raise the image of the nation. But who is to blame? The man reporting it who is simply guided by the ethics of his profession and commitment to bring out the truth?

The report may be true in respect of the Rajshahi University students halls. Fortunately, there are many strata of the society that do not bear a same reflection. Vast majority of people of Bangladesh are religious but not fanatic or fundamentalist. They have greater attachment to secular values. It is a fact that following 1 October election religious minorities, in some places, were subjected to worst oppression. But its underlying causes were political. It is certain that Bangladesh is far from being least Talibanised. Of course there are some such elements in the society. But they have never been able to penetrate appre-

ciably. Only the other day while paying a visit to our Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia in New York Senator Hillary Clinton emphatically identified Bangladesh as a non-communal liberal Muslim state.

The other day an Iranian tourist couple were attacked in Cox's Bazar by the BNP cadres. The news came up in almost all the dailies. Were the newsmen expected to conceal it considering that this would discourage the foreign tourists to come to Bangladesh and eventually tell upon government earnings under tourism?

The only pragmatic way to prop up our country's image abroad is to introduce good governance based on rule of law, transparency, accountability, commitment to people and, above all, improved law and order situation.

Toll collection by the hoodlums has become a familiar phenomenon of our society. Right from the industrialists, business circles down to a man of middle class venturing to construct a house of his own are fed up with the extortion of innumerable toll collectors all round. Even the foreigners are not spared. It is but natural that when the intending foreign investors will learn about this menace they will feel less urge to invest in Bangladesh. But how can this sort of news be blacked out?

The less is spoken of the item of corruption the better. Irrespective of how desperately the Danish Foreign Ministry under-secretary, in a press conference, spoke of serious intention of corruption in tender process in rehabilitation of four ferries by the Shipping Minister or the government's publication of the latest installment of white paper containing 20 alleged cases of graft to the tune of Taka 2711 crore by the last government, it is the general people who, probably without exception, experience in their day-to-day life the crude hand of governmental corruption, be it in procuring a

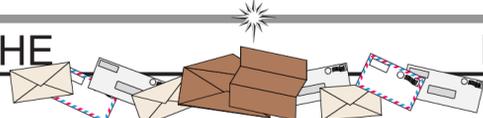
telephone connection, electric line, paying land tax, income tax, sometimes booking a railway reservation even. How money is minted by a ruling party leader or cadre is comfortably realised by a man when he finds that his neighbour, poor and half-starving only yesterday, has built up a palatial residence with a new car parked in front. Thanks to ultra corrupts, they do not play any hide-and-seek. Whereas citizens within the country cannot afford to cherish a bright image of the nation how could a government take the luxury to hope that the foreigners will pick up a finer impression of the same?

In this age of globalisation gifted by a free flow of information go government can suppress what is happening within its country. What a worst communal carnage has ripped through Gujarat shattering India's haughtily claimed secularism, how former US president stooped to Monica to the defamatory of the supreme seat of the lone superpower of the world, when racial riots burst out in the UK sully her fair name etc. became news all over the world. Neither the governments of those countries tried to suppress those news nor their information media wavered to publish the truth.

The only pragmatic way to prop up our country's image abroad is to introduce good governance based on rule of law, transparency, accountability, commitment to people and above all improved law and order situation. Otherwise the recent successive governments' ceaseless harping on the cacophony that the main opposition party has set its dirty hand to demolishing country's international image by vile propaganda will not pull off the national target.

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## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



### Home Minister's philosophy

Bravo, our Home Minister had made a world class discovery. He is the first person in the world who has discovered that behind every crime there is a divine hand. The Scotland Yard and other international law enforcement agencies must be ashamed of themselves for not being able to discover it before him. Now the key issue is how to give recognition to this great talent. I have some suggestions:

1. Khaleda Zia might consider letting the Home Minister go home and do some homework on how to make statements. After all the government has to issue so many press releases and statements. So this great talent can be encouraged to create a Statement Bank for the government.

2. We have so many State Ministers. Maybe next time when

Khaleda Zia is under pressure to expand the cabinet she can create a new post and Altaf Chowdhury the Minister of Statements.

3. We can open a web site www.statements.com.

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This is regarding Mr Faruque Hasan's letter (May 14).

I completely agree with him that since everything is in God's hand anyway, why bother with the VIP security.

Just for example, the PM's motorcade must cost several million dollars and every month lakhs of taka for all those SSF, police and guardsmen who accompany her. Or the Home Minister, who rates a police van to follow his Volvo.

I completely agree, put your faith in God and get rid of all this money wasting security.

**Biggles**  
Dhaka  
D. H. Choudhury

### Dhaka The effect of



### Job market crashed too

"September 11"  
Every year a lot of students fly for the US with student visa and most of them plan to stay back after finishing

studies. Only a few decide to go back to their homeland, Bangladesh. People like me, who like

lucky ones. Right after finishing my under-grad from a university not well known, I got an IT job in one of the mediocre companies of USA. I know about 25 to 30 Bangladeshi students who came here to study. Most of them are very good students. Some of them had place in the Board exams! But only 10 to 12 among the 30 finished under graduation from different universities. Luckily eight of us got jobs right after we finished our university. We all thought that life would be smooth. Most of us are still doing very good. But some of us are out of job and consequently becoming illegal! And the reason is "the attack on America on September 11"

Every day when we turn on the TV, we see the falling economy. The stock price is lower and this is why some companies are laying off people everyday. Some companies are even going out of business. I don't want to make it sound like

we are really in a bad shape here. But things are not going very well for us all the I/T people here in USA. Primarily we foreigners are the main victims of the falling economy. But some of us are still in better shape because we secured our position by working hard every day. Some of us work during the weekends to make our boss happy just to keep the job. So, I want to pass the information to the students who like to come here in USA thinking everything is like ABC after they get in here. We all need to be effective and efficient if we want success. No matter where you are, your knowledge and hard work will never deceive you.

**Mohamma Rana**  
Kansas City, USA

### Emergency services provisions

In order to proceed with the discussion it is important to define what

divisions actually comprise the emergency services. The three most considered emergency services are the fire brigade, police service, and ambulance. Now that the three different sectors of the emergency services have been identified, the pivotal dilemma is that how efficiently the citizens of this city can be connected with them.

From a miniature survey, which I have conducted, the results were alarming. Amongst the friends and family I included in my survey, I found majority of the people do not know of the telephone numbers of the local police, fire brigade, and the nearest ambulance services. Is this problem due to the lack of personal initiative or due to the reason that the emergency service numbers have not been made simple enough for all to remember?

There is a solution for this dilemma, as illustrated by most modern countries where it is usually

a unique three digit numbers. Most importantly one can remember them easily and dial them quickly.

Implementing this system in Bangladesh (especially in Dhaka and other major cities) will be of great benefit to the citizens. At present the three departments are separate entities, the police and the fire services are government owned, whereas the ambulance service provided by the government is extremely limited. Nevertheless, there are a number of private clinics and hospitals, which have their own ambulance services. The best solution would be to combine the three emergency services with one telephone operator service with an easy number from where the call is transferred to the relevant departments efficiently.

**Ahmed**  
West Rampura, Dhaka