

A landmark visit by premier Thaksin

Frontiers of cooperation opening to South-East Asia

SELDOME a foreign dignitary's visit to Bangladesh has produced such a many-splendoured outcome. Aside from its buoyant tone and temper, in terms of pure substance and efficacy it has marked a turning-point -- not merely in Thai-Bangla relationship but also for the foundations of a bride-head it has theoretically laid down for wider links to the South-East Asian region.

At the bilateral level, two agreements were signed at the end of Khaleda Zia-Thaksin talks on Tuesday. One is the Memorandum of Understanding on accounts trading system (ATS) to facilitate maintenance of trading records in the local currency of both countries. The fiscal interests of Dhaka and Bangkok will be served by the MOU. The second agreement has been on protection of investment, certainly a precursor to greater investment from Thailand.

But, to our mind, the whole range of communication linkages that have been agreed upon constitute the most notable feature of the outcome of the Thai Prime Minister's visit to Dhaka. The two countries will develop air, land and sea links between them thereby promising an incremental growth in trade, tourism and joint ventures, the like of which they had covered all along but hardly ever got any near accomplishing it.

The decision to open a road link from Dhaka to Bangkok via Cox's Bazar and Myanmar is a historic one. For, as part of the alternate Asian Highway it would link Dhaka not only to Yangon and Bangkok but also to the ASEAN countries. Even onward connection to China can now be visualised. The proposed inauguration of air services between Thailand's second most important city Chiang Mai and Bangladesh's premier port city Chittagong augurs well indeed. The trilateral sea routes being planned to connect important port cities of Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh open up exciting prospects for vigorous neighborhood trading.

We are highly gratified by the initial Thai response to our request for a duty-free access to her market. Premier Thaksin endearingly said, "If this could be given to other neighbours, why Bangladesh should be denied of it".

By far the most coveted cooperation that Thaksin has hinted at extending to Bangladesh concerns helping us solve the traffic congestion problem in Dhaka through overhead traffic diversion structures like flyovers and overbridges that untangled the severe commutation mess in Bangkok. Thailand specialises in that area. We really look forward to her assistance in the field.

Ban on private TV inside parliament should go

Security versus transparency is an unfair struggle

THE ban on private electronic channels inside the House by the order of the Acting Speaker has caused a great deal of concern. It has also allowed the Opposition leaders of the Awami League to complain that this is being done to prevent the broadcast of assembly proceedings and show the people the performance of the AL inside the House. This has certainly backfired if the intention was to muzzle the face of the Opposition in the parliament and deny coverage. It has also raised questions about the position of the government regarding access to the media in general.

The Acting Speaker is reported to have told the Deputy Leader of the Opposition that private TV crews were not allowed in because of security reasons. This unfortunately has been the privileged argument of the powerful whenever there has been a need or reason to curtail media access. But in this case there is a problem that we are dealing with a sensitive sector where the behaviour of the government denotes how media freedom is going to be defined.

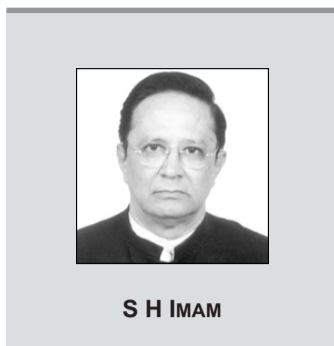
What appears more transparently than anything else is the lack of a clear policy on media access to parliamentary activities. The legislature is the law making body of the state and the process of its reporting is important because it represents procedural aspects of law making or how it's done. It's a right of the people and that right needs to be respected.

The government can't claim that BTV is outside executive censorship and this has in fact been a critical aspect of the information delivery aspect. Private outlets are not under officials hence the need. The private sector TV channels are also as much part of the information system feeding the people and this needs to be recognized by the government. When in power the AL didn't feel particularly enthusiastic about allowing media access but their observations point to the issue of confusion regarding the level of access that the public in general and the media in particular are to be allowed.

Security is not a good enough argument to justify denial of media entry inside the House on legitimate grounds of reporting and talking to the members. BNP should be the last party to oppose this since they themselves had complained about it once. But as they have, it shows that our politicians are still not comfortable with what the press can do or is thought might do.

This must end and we openly advocate for total access. The more people know, better is the quality of ruling.

Hands-on media role: First line of defence against HIV



S H IMAM

AT the Barcelona global conference on AIDS, a terse statement made by a UN think-tank summed it up all: thirty-nine countries which felt they were the least threatened by HIV positive have been the hardest-hit. The lesson drawn is, how AIDS illiteracy can exact a heavy price from countries persisting with it. Education, therefore, holds the answer and it can come in two ways: first, as part of the curriculum in schools or in a collegiate environment; and secondly, through an information dissemination campaign launched by the mass media.

True, the print media can 'embarrass' a government or influence policy-makers by making them sit up and take note of things they overlooked earlier on. But its role in building awareness for prevention of HIV/AIDS better not be overestimated.

because the number of households buying newspapers represent a small portion of our population. One in every 130 persons buy newspapers in the country, although the effective ratio of readership to the actual number of buyers could be larger. Many who cannot afford a newspaper would still read it. But those who buy newspapers tend to be opinion leaders by way of sharing with others what they think and feel about the news and views they have

Lailun Nahar has suggested in a prompt feedback on our previous article on the subject.

There are fault-lines through which the HIV menace enters and breaks out as an epidemic. In simple intelligible language the media should signpost the man of the street to the dangers as well as the facilities available to combat them. What should be the standard set of messages that we need to put across to them? They must know that only a laboratory blood or saliva

test is the only certain way to determine whether an individual is HIV positive. Testing should always be accompanied by pre-and post-test counselling. Limitation of the HIV test is that there is a window period which can throw surveillance through screening off-course. That's why screening of travellers, both foreign and our own nationals, has not been a big help.

It must be consistently hammered away to people that if any one of them has month-long diarrhoea or fever or constant bodily itching, he or she must visit a doctor to verify his

any of these rights is impinged on, the affected person can go to court for a remedy. Should the general public be constantly made aware of the robust policy support being given to the fundamental rights of HIV positive people, those who might contract it in future would not hesitate to subject themselves to the necessary tests voluntarily. Thus, the conflict between the need to detect new cases through surveillance and the prohibition of mandatory tests without informed consent as provided for in the national AIDS policy will wither away.

with security and development ramifications that a country can only ignore at a heavy price to itself. Newspapers will have to set up a system for regular reporting on confirmed HIV positive cases with follow-ups as necessary. But obviously unless, they have full access to facts they won't be able to do all that.

As for maintaining confidentiality or avoiding sensationalism we have set a good trend as compared with some newspapers in Africa, for instance. In South Africa, for example, which is among the most

severely affected country on the HIV positive list, a victim's bravado in holding a press conference led to a pejorative being used against her saying she was 'glorifying AIDS'.

It is important that we have specialised writings on HIV/AIDS. We need a well-trained and motivated cadre of journalists to fulfil such a purpose. The Bangladesh Manabdhikar Sangbadik Forum (BMSF) has trained up a few hundred journalists whose services will now have to be put to good use by newspaper managements. It is only when the top brass in the print and electronic media take to it that reporters will come good and give useful output at the end of the day. The BMSF's advocacy campaign with a human rights angle at the mufassil level needs to be sustained for durable results in terms of social awareness of the do's and don'ts among larger audiences. Apart from BMSF, 18 other NGOs are working in the field. Newspapers should follow their activities and report on them.

We have a strong civil society. The print media will have to build bridges to it so that at the political or policy making levels there is a greater recognition of the urgency to fight HIV/AIDS as a development challenge. (HIV/AIDS series concluded)

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

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read in the newspapers (Ataus Samad).

At the level of poor and illiterate masses it's not quite the print media; rather it is the radio, television, audio-visual documentaries of the government's mass media department, street plays, yatras, billboards and posters that can impact more powerfully on their minds. The cinematic media has the best potential to reach the largest segment of high risk groups such as truck drivers, commercial sex workers, drug addicts and floating people, as one of our esteemed readers Dr

any of these rights is impinged on, the affected person can go to court for a remedy. Should the general public be constantly made aware of the robust policy support being given to the fundamental rights of HIV positive people, those who might contract it in future would not hesitate to subject themselves to the necessary tests voluntarily. Thus, the conflict between the need to detect new cases through surveillance and the prohibition of mandatory tests without informed consent as provided for in the national AIDS policy will wither away.

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years ago but there is no reason to believe that they will be much different now.

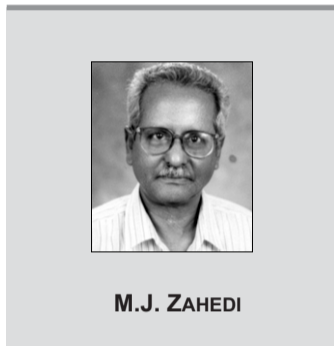
The *hudood* ordinance, promulgated during Ziaul Huq's time, in 1980, has been the centre of controversy and criticism since the Zafra Bibi case in which a woman was awarded the death sentence and its repeal has been demanded. Of course, it is neither against Islam nor against women. The law has been grossly misrepresented and

years ago but there is no reason to believe that they will be much different now.

The country's rights movement has always termed these laws as highly discriminatory against women and has demanded their repeal. Such extreme and shameful crimes like public gang rapes are only possible when the perpetrators know that they can get away with it or they are determined to defy the state authority. An organisation called the Joint Action Committee for Peace has demanded the abolition of all forms of parallel judicial systems, including jirga, panchayat, shariat and military courts. The two incidents tell us all that is horribly wrong with the social structure of this society stemming from its feudal power structure. Imagine the psyche of the father who had to fetch his daughter to be raped. Imagine all the onlookers who were there, not all of them could possibly have approved of this order. But those disapproved, could not take on the powerful ones. Big landowners and wealthy people with their armed gunmen and socio-political clout control the lives of the common villagers. The horrific deed was meant to be a lesson for all the ordinary folks.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan and formerly the Editor of the Khaleez Times.

Severe indictment on raison d'être



M. J. ZAHEDI

THERE is not much that the people of Pakistan have not endured, moaned an editorial in *The News* last week. They have been confronted on a regular basis by extortion, brutalisation, even slavery and sectarian killings. These have hardened their minds.

Yet the terrible calamity that befell an 18-year-old girl in a Punjab village, 600 km south-east of Islamabad, was beyond anyone's worst nightmare. The facts of the case, as published in local papers (although the incident was first reported by a foreign newsmen) are: On the orders of a village *panchayat*, supposedly a conflict resolution body, a 18-year-old-girl was gang-raped by four persons as 'punishment' for her brother having had an affair with a woman of a

'higher tribe'. (The brother is only 12 years old and the woman he was involved with is aged thirty or so). As hundreds of villagers watched, the evil deed was done and the wretched girl forced to walk back home stark naked. The girl has alleged that her brother too had been subjected to similar punishment for his 'crime'. Neither the local police nor the battalions of nazims prevented the crime, as they should have. Nor did they act until the

worse than death for a family, it is one of its members being raped. For the woman's family too. The stigma is unerasable, unbearable, and often leads to suicide or murder. Even so, or perhaps that is why, it is not infrequent for such 'punishments' to be meted out to those who dare to transgress the social hierarchy.

The practice is more common in caste-ridden societies, such as India. But for such abominations to

legacies of undemocratic and sick tribal and feudal societies, which continue to discriminate against women in their most horrible forms. It is being said that this is not merely a women's issue. Every Pakistani should be ashamed of it, said the joint action committee for peace. It shows how primitive and barbarous systems of so-called justice are violating the basic human values.

Demand has also been raised for the immediate abolition of all such

misused due to its inherent flaws and misogyny of our society. Yet more men than women have been punished under this law. According to statistics available at the Federal Shariat Court headquarters in Islamabad, 76 cases were appealed in the shariat court, out of which only nine cases were appealed by women. That means 66 men were convicted under the *hudood* law as compared to only nine women. Of course the figures relate to three

The country's rights movement has always termed these laws as highly discriminatory against women and has demanded their repeal. Such extreme and shameful crimes like public gang rapes are only possible when the perpetrators know that they can get away with it or they are determined to defy the state authority.

despicable deed exploded in the Press over a week later.

Now the Supreme Court of Pakistan has taken suo moto notice of the case and has summoned the head of Punjab police and other officials along with relevant record of the case.

This is a shocking incident in the 21st century concerning violation of human rights as well as of human dignity, said the Chief Justice in his order. Indeed, if there is any fate

occur in the supposedly caste-free Pakistan is an insult to Islam's many injunctions against social and economic discrimination and a severe indictment on our *raison d'être*, commented *The News*. The people are happy that the Supreme Court has taken notice of the case; they hope that justice will be done to the poor girl as also to her brother. Naturally a demand has been raised for the abolition of *jirga* and *panchayat* systems. These are

institutions and laws because they say such extreme and shameful crimes like public gang-rapes are possible only when the perpetrators know that they can get away with it or they are determined to defy state authority. It has been used as a pretext to demand the abolition of all forms of parallel judicial systems, including jirga, panchayat, shariat and military courts. Now that the Supreme Court is aware of the crime committed against the young

had no computer of its own. The plan was that, CPA would buy its own sets of computers and be master of its own software. But, when sometime after computers were purchased in 1987, its management wandered in stray routes to show that it was exploring all avenues of going ahead with computerisation. This was done to remain safe from unfounded audit objections and hassles of allegations made through '*benami*' letters. But to make changes and bring in innovations, managers must take risks and be prepared to face questions and criticisms.

Acting on allegations made in '*benami*' letters and objections raised by Auditor General's office, the government filed a few years back anti-corruption cases against some past and present officials of CPA. But the government lost the cases in court. I was told by a person doing business with CPA that, after the cases had been filed, the port's officials preferred not to take important decisions and put off their pens from paper.

Keeping CPA cent percent owned by the government, there is none to grant it the autonomy some people may talk of. Moreover, the

machinery of CPA is incapable of enduring the force of autonomy under which CPA and CPA only will take major and important decisions, and stand by those.

Some may be thinking of such an arrangement, where without having a stake in CPA through capital investment, they will play a role in its decision making process.

Authority is automatically bestowed on an organization when it is created under Companies Act. This law not only gives birth to entities, but also bestows authority on those who own and run those. Under similar law, thousands and thousands of organizations exist and work in the world.

Conversion of CPA into a public limited company, with not more than 51 per cent shares in the hands of government, will create opportunities for it to attain a good amount of autonomy. All concerned should understand that, CPA needs immediate reorganisation to meet the challenges it will soon face from other sources. Executives of CPA must be required to bring in changes and innovations, show dynamism, and take risk. Governmental ownership and control are not conducive to these.

OPINION

Autonomy to CPA

M. A. KAMAL FCA, FCMA

IN a seminar on 19th June at Dhaka on port activities under the auspices of FBCCI, participants stressed the need for granting autonomy to Chittagong Port Authority (CPA). It was said that, in many cases, administrative matters of CPA were forwarded to Ministry of Shipping (MOS) for decision. Secretary, MOS was present in the seminar. The press did not say whether he disagreed with the observation.

An organization remaining fully under the ownership and control of government cannot be autonomous. Many corporate bodies were created in 1972 in Bangladesh to be autonomous. They were autonomous on paper, but not in reality. Developed countries in order to make many of their public entities enjoy autonomy, so as to be prosperous, either disinvested them or leased out their management.

Keeping in the basket of public enterprises, can CPA be bestowed with the autonomy being talked of? If one issue among many is taken, for instance, can CPA be allowed to formulate its own system of employee recruitment and remuneration to make its labour force

more productive, the answer will be "no." An arrangement that Secretary of MOS will remain, on one hand, answerable to the parliament for CPA's activities and, on the other hand, CPA will have the full authority to decide its matters, cannot work. Since Secretary is answerable to the parliament, he asks CPA to send him a large number of their matters for examination and approval. So much so that, CPA is required to send regularly copies of its board's proceedings to the ministry for study.

In governmental organizations, a web of rules and regulations exists. One is linked to another. If one string is cut, the point of exit may be lost. That is one reason why systems and procedures prevalent in governmental organizations do not change. A few months back, I interviewed Director (Finance) of Glaxo Wellcome (Bangladesh) Ltd. for a fact-finding. When asked, if his company had rules and regulations for procurement of goods and services, his reply was that they had no rules or regulations for it, but had some guidelines. Guidelines keep working system simple and adaptable. In public enterprises, Purchase Officers cannot buy goods

simply on the basis of guidelines.

The other side of the coin should be turned over to have a look.

Is getting autonomy by CPA enough? Getting autonomy means getting authority. To make the authority workable, managers must understand exigencies of situations and go for quick actions, instead of waiting for the situations to develop so that rules could be applied. They are to bring in changes in the organization. Researchers and authors on management emphasize nowadays on the need for bringing in changes to make organisations prosperous. In bringing changes, managers must be prepared to take risk. Is there environment in CPA for these to be done?

People working in public enterprises feel safe to remain under government's working and control mechanism. "Do in the manner done before", "Send the proposal to higher authority for decision", "I will do after the other in the chain does his part" are the tactics adopted there to remain safe. Situation in CPA is not different.

CPA is the ancestor of railway in this country. Many of its systems and procedures have their origin in railway. This was the finding of a

consultant appointed by CPA in the last part of 1980s under World Bank finance. Another consultancy project on manpower development, undertaken by CPA, during that time under World Bank finance has not brought in any remarkable change in its systems, procedures and employees' work habits. The only change that became visible from the second project was palletisation of cargo. Had something more come, things would have improved, and World Bank would not have been pointing to the poor performance of CPA.

We talk of making ICT the prime economic thrust for the country. CPA could be one example of success in this field by developing itself its total requirement of software. It could produce by now at least two dozens of experts in this field from the date of the first batch of its computers was installed in 1987. I know of a person, who after working on computers in CPA for two years or so since 1987, left CPA's job to start his own ICT business. Start of computerization in CPA was made in 1986 with a pack of in-house developed software. It hired time from another organisation's computer installation to develop the software, because it

had no computer of its own. The plan was that, CPA would buy its own sets of computers and be master of its own software. But, when sometime after computers were purchased in 1987, its management wandered in stray routes to show that it was exploring all avenues of going ahead with computerisation. This was done to remain safe from unfounded audit objections and hassles of allegations made through '*benami*' letters. But to make changes and bring in innovations, managers must take risks and be prepared to face questions and criticisms.

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

DCC and IWT-- the common factors

What is common between the IWT launch-sinking syndrome, and the choking metropolis in the Mayor's kingdom of the DCC Empire? It is management at the lowest level and co-ordination mechanism at minus zero level.

We have less than a dozen marine inspectors and a couple of marine river police patrol boats. The media reports that there is severe lack of co-ordination starting from the paper planning of a river boat, on to the successive design, construction, trial, commissioning and certificate stages, as half a dozen government agencies are involved before a launch gets the first passenger on board. The rate corrupt practices are developing is astronomical. In Dhaka, the DCC is facing more severe administrative and co-

ordination problems due to lack of a central metropolitan authority. For the last three decades we cannot solve these urban planning irritations. It is suspected that the political will is missing, otherwise discipline and corrupt practices would not exist.

There are hundreds of reports and recommendations on how to increase efficiency proportional to the rate of development. Subjective ears do not listen, and objective needs have no priority. This citizen has nothing new to recommend. The problems in regard to good governance existing locally are not new-- we are not that original!

A Mawaz
Dhaka

My favourite Daily Star

I am a regular reader of The Daily

Star and I think that it is the most popular English daily in our country. There are Star Weekend Magazine for the weekend. Life Style for ladies. Rising Stars for kids. Then there is the 'Letters to the Editor' section where people can express their views and opinions, angers and grudges and even criticise the paper freely and openly. I must say that your letter section has added a new dimension in print media. Hope the paper offers more attractive sections in future. Keep up the good work.

Sabbir Chowdhury
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

"New budget for a middle-income family"

This is in response to Mr/Ms SBS complaining about the new budget. I find his argument absolutely ridiculous.

1. If he finds it so difficult spending

only 100 taka extra for his son's education then it's obvious that he doesn't want his son to have better education. If it is so difficult for Mr/Ms SBS then why don't he send his son to a Bengali medium school? It would be cheaper at the same time his son might build up his career doing student politics and one day might even become a minister.

2. There are plenty *deshi* fruits which are cheap and nutritious. Why do we always crave for fruits like apples and oranges instead of guava or *batabhilebu*?

3. Why does a middle-income person have to buy fruit juice, soft drinks etc. These are not basic commodities.

4. Again I'd like to remind the writer that there are plenty of local toiletries and cosmetics which are not only of international standard but also affordable. And it is our respon-

sibility to appreciate the local products.

5. We have a lot of new and better transportation now-a-days. There are taxicabs, air-conditioned bus service, luxurious Volvo bus and many more. And I'm sure the writer prefers these luxurious buses than those *murir tin minibuses*. But he probably cannot accept the fact that to enjoy better facilities one needs to pay more.

From Mr/Ms SBS' letter it seemed to me that he either wants the government to withdraw tax from everything and run the country from the government's own pocket or he wants everyone's approval so that he can start taking bribe and be clear to his conscience.

Jahir Rahman
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

This is in response to SBS from Mymensingh ("New budget for a

middle-income family" July 9). I don't see what is wrong with he having to pay TK. 100 per month. He surely can't be that poor and still send his child to an English medium school.

To take advantages of the amenities the government is providing one has to compensate them somehow. How is the government supposed to run? It needs taxes to run. All these sob stories are nothing but an excuse to not pay taxes to the government but keep enjoying its amenities anyway.

Sharmin Zaman
USA

I am stunned to read the letter "New budget for a middle-income family". So what if the writer needs to pay 1500 tk more per month! The government is trying its best to develop the nation but how is it possible if people refuse to pay taxes. Does the citizens want the government to

run the country spending from their own pocket?

This is what the problem with the middle-class people of our country. They find fault with everything. They don't know how to be content. In every country government raises taxes in one way or another but no body raises so much hue and cry like that of our middle-class people. Under the new budget every one has to pay taxes the affluent, the middle-class and the lower middle-class. But why is it only the middle-class people creating uproar about it? Surely they are not in as much hardship as the lower-income people are.

Sabina Samantha
Baridhara, Dhaka

Get rid of those billboards

I support Mr Ananta Ashim's opinion

regarding billboards and banners ("Green Dhaka, clean Dhaka" July 9).

For the last few years Dhaka has been inundated with billboards and festoons. Almost all the streets, roadsides and traffic islands have now been covered up with billboards, festoons and banners destroying the greenery and the beauty of the city.

It is obvious that some unscrupulous officials of Dhaka City Corporation are rampantly leasing out space to advertisers and gradually destroying the greenery along the streets of the city. I would like to take this opportunity to request the new Mayor to do something about it and save the city from being ruined by the advertisers and their agents.

Jamil Ahmed
Purana Paltan, Dhaka