

UNDP's BTTB woes

A fresh eye-opener to the organisation's mismanagement

THE story of UNDP's telephone bills is indicative of what's going on in almost all our utility bodies. It seems the caprice of this strange and non-accountable outfit like the BTTB has caught up with the organisations that had thought themselves to be impervious to the aberrations in a Bangladeshi organisation. The UN may have felt themselves immune but as they are finding out much to their own surprise, that no one is immune from the hands of the arbitrary functioning of organisations like the BTTB. It also shows that management of public bodies has reached a point of near collapse.

Every BTTB telephone user knows the arrogance and disregard for the notion of public service which this organisation displays towards common people. False bills, line disconnection by claiming unpaid bills even when they are paid, poor service, refusal to repair lines on time and unless services are paid for, bloated bills and using million other excuses to enrich themselves while the public suffers are a story as old as the oldest hat. Since everyone has to suffer at the hands of BTTB the fact of the UNDP being distraught of it merely reinforces an old piece of knowledge. But this with the difference perhaps that some heads at the BTTB might roll now because of the unenviable publicity they have already received from the expose.

Our story reveals how deep and elaborate corruption has become in the public sector bodies. The present example also shows how vulnerable everyone is. One can only hope that by investigating the UN organisation case, the public will also gain something in the process. At least public suffering at the hands of the BTTB will be a public knowledge and the next loan which the government will negotiate from some multilateral agency and bilateral body, for expanding the telephone system will include a quality service component as a conditionality.

The JCD again

When will the ruling party rein in its own goons?

THE scene that unfolded in Chittagong Medical College was so terrifying that no words can adequately describe it. Blood banks were shut down along with emergency services. Doctors were not allowed in to treat the patients. This has thus put everyone's life at risk and patients are seriously under the threat of death due to lack of emergency treatment.

But the most dreadful news is that the BNP sponsored students wing of the CMCH engineered the clampdown after police hauled in a few members and leaders on charges of extortion. How does the government expect the situation to improve as it promised in the parliament recently when the law breakers are more often than not members of its own student party?

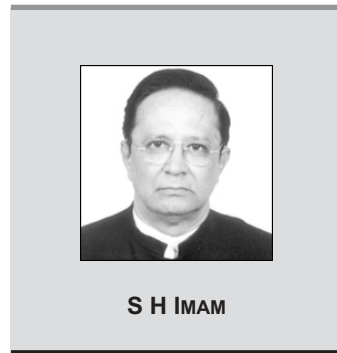
Something has certainly gone wrong with the state of Bangladesh if student activists can shut down hospitals putting hundreds of lives in danger. Surely they would not have dared to do this kind of thing if they hadn't had some belief that such behaviour would be tolerated. This happens when the ego of a political group becomes bigger than the obligations of a political party that won an election. The verdict on what has happened at CMCH can only be harsh given the gravity of the event.

Media has reported various versions and statements also of the JCD leaders about unfair arrest and so on but nothing in the canons of civil governance can justify what has happened. It has exposed not just the level of public helplessness but the level of disregard towards ordinary voters.

In the end it's about voters because it's they who have brought BNP to power and it's to them that the party is obligated to reining in any arbitrary behaviour from its student wing.

They should not forget that it is such incidents that make people change their opinion on a ruling party. No political party is voted in permanently and the party in power must rein its unruly supporters if it wants to continue enjoying the goodwill it had started out with.

We-they hautiness has to go



S H IMAM

OVERLOOKING The Daily Star office building is an affront, an ungainly sight of a trickle-down from marriage ceremonies or partying of different kinds. Colourless lumps of toxicated and fly-infested left-overs of Biryani, Polao, Tikka and Chicken Roast are on sale at the Karwan Bazar food vending corner outside the main market building.

The small crowd wistfully looking to buy the rotten stuff are not ghosts, they are human beings in flesh and blood. The appetite is a pathetic expression of poverty induced morbidity seeping through to the taste-buds of the clientele.

This is sneering at the trickle-down theory of prosperity dollops falling into the mouths of the poorest of poor.

A mirror-image of inhumanity at its revolting worst, this is hardly any different than a proverbial snap-shot of a skeletal human figure and a

snarling pariah dog each trying to reach the crumbs of food littered under a pile of garbage faster than the other.

But that was the image of a post-war famine situation, perhaps a common sight to be countenanced anywhere in the world under similar circumstances. The question is: why must we have any gap at all in the food distribution chain when the output of cereals has been consistently at high levels for some years

and free press accompanied by a participatory local government system can do wonders to alleviate poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

Back to poor man's Biryani, that was privileged eating by a few among the poor who could afford it marking out those who cannot. That would just be a pin-prick to a conscience ready to take it, the larger shock is administered by the apologies for victuals in tiny shreds and gruel, ubiquitous along the pave-

ment to the injury have we not had a plenty of public health hazards already to blunt our sensibility, more precisely, our ability to distinguish the old ones from a new kind?

There are other forms of denigration of humanity we have been either too thick-witted or too much under the spell of high fluting ideas to recognise. Dhaka has become a city of beggars, traffic intersections are a stark proof of that depressive reality.

majority of our people that it has lost some of its earlier connotation. Nobody even remembers today the inspirational qualities, even poetic justice, attributed to it by our poets:

"Poverty you have done me the honour of Christ' or a shredded roti is like a dazzling full moon to me."

The issue is one of attitudes. There is an unintelligent acceptance of what has been going on the poverty alleviation front, even a philosophical justification is

pendence. And the real impediment to any turn-around is that those who can change things are busy serving themselves. Exceptions are there, but they are swamped by the rule.

There is, however a simple, straightforward, compact and implementable blue-print for progress. First, we finance our own studies, especially on how poverty can be alleviated. Collaterally, therefore, we encourage people with more money than they can spend to put part of their surplus into endowments and trusts for research, capacity building and enhancement of skill. We build a circular railway to have most working people of Dhaka move to the peripheries of the metropolis for living at costs they can afford. They come to Dhaka for work only. While encouraging small savings, this will help ease the pressure off the highly strained amenities situation in Dhaka.

Over all, our best poverty alleviation success can come from having a comprehensive action plan to prise open the huge reservoir of potential held by the rising sea-level accretions measuring several thousand square kilometres.

Let the idle and impetuous youth force be employed in developing the new land mass. What a blessing in prospect that is in a land-short country!

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

The issue is one of attitudes. There is an unintelligent acceptance of what has been going on the poverty alleviation front, even a philosophical justification is advanced for it with a somewhat asinine regularity...Over all, our best poverty alleviation success can come from having a comprehensive action plan to prise open the huge reservoir of potential held by the rising sea-level accretions measuring several thousand square kilometres. Let the idle and impetuous youth force be employed in developing the new land mass.

now and the stocks fairly large to feed more mouths than before.

It will be worthwhile to remember this though: "incentives in a democracy are more potent in averting major economic disasters than addressing the problem of persistent poverty, hunger and malnutrition (Wahiduddin Mahmud referring to Amartya Sen in the former's book titled "Popular Economics: Unpopular Essays)".

Democratic practices of good governance, effective opposition

ments. The street children and their mothers are seen huddling over to nibble at them beside the squalor and stench of their own living.

A public health hazard, a potential threat to the well-being of the all the rest of the world but not to those who are living with it; what a comedy of errors! That is our perception of public health and environment protection, the human side being subordinate to the hyped concern and basically obscured by the advocacy hubbubs. Then as an

To say that they have made begging into a mini industry and that in their shags is closeted more money than that available with small businessmen is to miss out on the root cause of it: rural pauperisation and highly asymmetrical wealth distribution. Distributive injustice has been most pronounced in the recent years -- thanks to corruption topped off by criminalisation of politics.

Poverty is so endemic and has meant such hardship for a vast

advanced for it with a somewhat asinine regularity. The stock reactions to poverty are a strange admixture of non-chalance and escapism; "Well the poor deserve their poverty because of their habits or thanks to God I am not one of them and so long as I am not, how does it matter?"

The problem is the society remains discriminatory, exploitative expropriatory and, above all, community unfriendly. All this even after 32 years of gaining national inde-

OPINION

Banning of student politics

SHAMSER CHOWDHURY
writes from USA

WE have been deliberating on the subject for quite some time now. Like every move for a good deed in the country, this too remains an issue so long the memory of a dead, innocent victim of the so called Student Politics lasts. Enough is enough. If we are to survive as a civilised nation, then there cannot be two opinion on the matter. I am amazed at the fact that some people still consider this as an issue of further debate and discussion. I was simply shocked to see that none other than the Leader of the Opposition in her response to PM's call on the proposed ban comes up with a statement that "politics is not bad," indicating that the student politics is not bad and that it should be allowed to continue.

However, one has to acknowledge the fact that we should all be politically conscious and that we may even pursue a particular school of political philosophy. If that be the case, then one may wonder as to what are we trying to ban? We want partisan politics, of armed vandalism, of extortion, of money and powerplay to come to an end in all our educational institutions once for all. In the USA, politics is quite a serious matter in all its Graduate Schools and the Universities. The universities do encourage, what they call, the Young Democrats and the Young Republicans to engage themselves in healthy and productive debates and discussions on national issues of importance of all dimensions. No guns, no picketing, no vandalism within or around the campus at anytime.

While we are on the subject we cannot ignore the question of banning of Teachers' Politics too. To my mind, in some respects, the indulgence in partisan politics by

the teachers is of no less significance and consequence than that of the students. Thus the move should be, for all practical purposes, aimed at the simultaneous banning of both. Consider the fact that even if student politics is banned with the teachers' being allowed to continue, the threat for re-emergence of student politics at a future date will remain. I sincerely believe that the present state of students' and teachers' politics are inter-linked. We, therefore, have no alternative but to ban both. Now comes the critical part: how to proceed with the banning? I have the following suggestions:

1. Without any question, the first move should come from the two Leaders. There should be a joint declaration to the effect that the respective parties are disbanding each other's political wings in all educational institutions across the country. If a total ban appears too harsh and hasty, then a five year moratorium may be considered.

2. This should be followed by a similar move by the intelligentsia and the civil society in no uncertain terms.

3. The above should be followed by certain administrative measures by the government or the authorities concerned:

a. Identify, revise and implement the admission policies of all educational institutions of the country particularly relating to the Colleges and the Universities. One of the major purposes of which alongside others is to ensure that the entrants are to pursue education and learning only. There should be no room for anyone to hang around or be enrolled as a so called student year after year. One must remember that throughout the developed and the developing world, higher education, particularly University education, is not a right as such but a privilege for the

fittest.

b. Ensure that all existing firearms in the hands of the students are recovered and hauled up. Despite the fact that many such moves in the past have been unproductive, I still believe that this is quite possible if the measures suggested above are effected.

c. The security measures in and around the campuses should be more comprehensive and effective. Considerations could be given in creating a separate agency titled University Security Forces under the administrative control of respective educational institutions.

d. Relocate the campuses particularly of the Universities outside the city limits. This however must be followed by an effective transportation system in and out of the campuses at all times.

e. In the case of the teachers there should be a more critical assessment of individual's qualifications, both academic and otherwise, relating to recruitment and subsequent in-house career development within the system. It is often alleged that teachers are recruited below the required qualifications. On the other hand, all teachers should be required to sign a statutory code of conduct which, among others, will specify that any involvement in partisan-- I repeat, partisan-- politics, directly or indirectly, will call for disciplinary actions against the individuals concerned.

f. On the other hand, teachers should not be allowed to formulate shadow political wings representing one or more political parties like those currently in existence at the University of Dhaka. Last, but not least, the will of the government has to be there to go out with all its resources both financial and otherwise to see a reversal of the sorry state of our educational institutions.

A CONCERNED GEOLOGIST

I read with interest an article "Rating Bangladesh for gas reserve: The present controversy" (D S July 2) written by Dr. Badrul Imam of Geology Department of Dhaka University. I noticed that the author spent considerable amount of time to define the terms "reserve", "resource", "proven reserve" and "potential reserve" etc. Although, these definitions are interesting, anyone can find these definitions in a "Dictionary of Geology" or in elementary book on "Energy Economics".

Dr. Imam mentioned, "Because the issue of gas reserve assessment is of technical nature, it is easy to confuse people on this subject" It is very true, especially when people with seemingly lesser experience in exploration and development of gas fields start to give professional advice. It will be interesting to know if Dr. Imam was ever involved in discovering and assessing reserve of a gas field. Is it fair for him to say, "The estimation of undiscovered gas resource is based on hypothetical and speculative data and this is conjectural and imaginative"? Then what are the basis for exploring a sedimentary basin for oil and gas? Is there any reason for employing geologists, geophysicists in an oil and gas exploration and development company? Perhaps Dr. Imam knows that data cannot be speculative, it has to be factual. Some assumed values could be assigned during geological evaluation of a gas field. This does not mean everything is imaginative and speculative. There are highly sophisticated methods of estimating gas present in a sedimentary basin. This includes mathematical models as well as geophysical, geological and geochemical tools for reserve estimation. What is called "proven gas reserve" of Bangladesh can change with increased exploration activities. Otherwise gas reserve of

Bangladesh would have remained the same since the discovery of first gas field. Moreover, if proven oil and gas reserve is the only criterion for developing oil and gas of a sedimentary basin, then oil and gas of North Sea, Alaska and Scotia Shelf (Canada) would have never been developed. At the beginning, these basins did not have any significant proven reserve of oil and gas!

Mr. Nuruddin M. Kamal, in his writeup "Gas resource assessment report: The confusions and conflicts" (published in The Daily Star on July 4, 2002) states, "Mr. Barber has given a textbook description on gas reserves and resources, which I learned as an undergraduate student in Geology in late 1950's. So much has been published in the media these days that even a common man with some common-sense has become familiar with proven, probable and possible gas definition. I simply fail to understand why did the gentleman waste valuable time to redefine all these". I think the same applies to Dr. Imam's definition of reserve and resources. Mr. Kamal claims to have a degree in Petroleum Geology, completed higher studies in USA on the subject. Information available to geologists in Bangladesh, however, suggests he has a limited exposure as a geologist, not to speak as Petroleum Geologist.

Bangladesh's gas reserve estimates have been carried out by some of the world's leading natural resource estimating organizations like USGS, NPD. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) is considered to be the world's largest research and resource assessment organization. Similarly the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate (NPD) is also a very reputable organization and has a lot of experience from the North Sea and other parts of the world. When international oil companies (IOC) start exploration in a country, they go through a rigorous process of resource evaluation and assess-

ment. It is unlikely that their Board of Directors will approve exploration programme for a country, which has hardly any hydrocarbon potential.

Dr. Imam mentioned, "Because of the uncertainty involved in the reserve calculation, reserves cannot be measured but are estimated". Perhaps the author understands that oil and gas underground can be compared with fish in an ocean. Small amount of catch can be traded in the short-term in the local markets; however, large-scale exploitation of resources requires long-term strategy and vision. Without proper development of the market, natural gas resource of a country cannot be developed. IOCs may explore options for developing gas market, however, it will be too much to expect them to invest in power plants, fertilizer plants etc. Oil companies may not be very good in doing business in electricity and fertilizer. In a free market environment, the gas market will develop itself either within the country or outside the country. All it needs is perhaps less interference by so-called experts.

When they suggest, "When we look at the hard realities of the insignificant gas reserves in Bangladesh" (Mr. Kamal "Gas resource assessment reports: The confusions and conflicts" The Daily Star, July 4, 2002), the matter needs to be taken seriously. Why are they so keen to prove that Bangladesh has hardly any significant gas reserve? When activities of a few individuals may give a wrong impression about oil and gas prospects of the world's largest delta, government should look into the matter seriously. Who will be benefited if it is established by distorted information that the gas reserve of Bangladesh is insignificant?

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

"World Bank officials of the local variety"

We are deeply shocked to see the aspersion cast on the integrity and motivation of the so-called "WB officials of the local variety" in an op-ed published in the editorial page of July 16 edition of *The Daily Star*. These remarks are quite contrary to the principles of objective and professional journalism.

This highly derogatory categorisation of the Bangladeshi staff members of the World Bank office in Dhaka, based on nationality, is indeed mind-boggling and insulting to the 74 Bangladeshi staff who work in this office. The article has questioned their "conscience". It claims that they "aren't even clogs in the wheel, they are dead grass willing to live on if paid mega-bucks to sing along." The claim is that they are amenable to "easy manipulation." The remarks are baseless, and reflect a misunderstanding about the role played by Bangladeshi staff members of the World Bank Office in Dhaka. These are extremely unprofessional and unethical remarks and we wonder

how they found a place in your daily, which has contributed to professional and objective journalism in Bangladesh. When the value of national expertise in Bangladesh's development has been established over many years and well recognised we find it incomprehensible what your newspaper intends to achieve by introducing a discriminatory and highly derogatory terminology "WB officials of the local variety", based on nationality.

At a meeting of the Staff Association of the World Bank Office, Dhaka, the staff unanimously expressed a deep sense of shock and indignation about such unprofessional remarks. On behalf of all members of the Staff Association, I am conveying our sentiments and hope you will share these with your readers.

Shamsuddin Ahmad
Chair, Staff Association
Dhaka Chapter
World Bank Office, Dhaka

But what is unforgivable about this report is the misinformation regarding Hamida Ali's age. In your report it was mentioned that she is 56 years old whereas she reached 65 on July 8, 2002. How could *The Daily Star* make such a grave mistake and also write an editorial on it? The government asking a 56-year-old to resign is absolutely different from asking a 65-year-old to hand over charge.

Though Hamida Ali did hand over the charge on July 16, *The Daily Star* should take the responsibility of printing a misleading report.

Sonia Shaheen
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

We regret the inadvertent 'typos' (the figures got reversed). However, the thrust of our report and the editorial was not based on her age, but on her achievement, and the fact that the newly elected governing body recommended her contribution.

--Editor

Hamida Ali hands over charge

Hamida Ali no doubt contributed a lot for the development of Viharunissa Noon School and College. But as per existing rule there was no provision to extend her contract anymore.

I fail to understand why the media publicised in favour of

Hamida Ali. I was surprised to see the enlarged photo in your front-page-- a girl student with a banner written in "We need Hamida Ali" and also your editorial. I blame the media to put VNSC in the clutches of politics.

Ziaul Huda
Uttara, Dhaka

Hamida Apa had a long and successful career. Why did she need another two-year extension? I sometimes wonder why people in the sub-continent are hesitant to change and like to hold on to what they have. Having lived here in the West, I have learnt to adopt new ways and things every day. It is initially hard but eventually it works out for the better.

Students, teachers, and parents should all realise this. I am sure Hamida Apa does and that's why she resigned.

Salehuddin Zarzis
Virginia, USA

From where the word "politics" came into the picture? I am a former student of Viharunissa and I share the feelings of the rest of the *Viqis* regarding the retirement of our beloved Principle Hamida Ali.

But she has already enjoyed 3 extensions and reached the age of 65. The Education Board was only following the standard rule and we should've accepted their decision in

the first place. The way the students protested is not at all a good example for other schools and this might become a practice.

Total number of Board Stands or 5.0 CGPA is never the ultimate tool to evaluate a school's standard and it's time for the *Viqis* to face the challenge and prove themselves that they are well educated in true sense. Let's hope the new Principal will be able to keep this good name and bring prosperity to Viharunissa School and College.

SC
Connecticut, USA

TI's report on bureaucrats

Does Bangladesh want to remain the number one corrupt country in the world? Last year on July 9, *The Daily Star* published a letter "A question to Mr Kibria" in which specific corruption charges were levelled against some Planning Commission officials. One year down the line, I am forced to ask this question as it is impossible to clean up the country, keeping the same old corrupt officials in place.

Corruption in the Planning Commission, that controls the project formulation, is now quite prevalent. While it is normal to be transferred every three years there are some in the Planning Commission who have been there for many years, some work for more than two decades.

These people, especially a few in collusion with high-ups in different wings of the Commission are engaged in increasing allocations in projects against kickbacks. It is now a common practise for them to allocate the money saved in various projects towards the end of the fiscal year to distribute to rural roads and highway sub-sector projects.

It is known that a lot of contractors and executive engineers of the Roads and Highways department take allocation letters directly from the said people in exchange of money.

Because of a few corrupt bureaucrats, the whole class of the government officials often gets dubbed as the most corrupt as recently has been by the Transparency International. I am mentioning these because when the country is in need for funds to execute its various projects such corrupt practises simply lead to wastage of money.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Meter reader - that powerful!

Is the press report that the Enquiry Committee formed to probe corruption of the Titus meter reader Mahubb, which gave him a clean slate, had been handpicked by (that powerful) Mahubb himself and there was no official complaint-- in spite of (SB's) Special Branch's

substantially evidenced report against him and allegedly being shielded by the state owned company!

The meter reader is so powerful that although he had confessed, he is still to be booked for crimes. The Airport Police have caught him red handed with forged documents and filed case under the Passport Act but nothing so far has been done about it.

What a shame, that reportedly a Minister is trying to protect Mahubb and the State Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources has publicly criticised the media for carrying reports against the meter reader. And how on earth (while a news item which was on public record), tampering with his date of detention and change of charge sheets (not been charged for faking his identity and docs) is being taking place in broad daylight under the rules of law!

AF Rahman
Dhaka

Our political parties

Democracy is in practice in Bangladesh for more than eleven years now. But what have the people learnt? They have learnt to apply their right to choose. They now know what a voter's right is. They know what a voter can do at the end of a five-year term of a government elected by them.

Unfortunately, our political

parties-- particularly the major two have learnt nothing. BNP enjoyed a full term from 1991 to 1996. Awami League had the same privilege during 1996 to 2001. In the 2001 elections BNP earned a brute majority in the parliament and are now in their second term. We expected BNP, having been equipped with the experience of one previous term, to show maturity in every aspect of its governance this time round. But alas! That is not to happen.

Since the day they took their office we have yet to find even a single day where they have not made some error or foolish mistakes. I do not want to go into the details. If you only just close your eyes for a moment, rewind the days and play them then you will note how correct I am.

In the matter of politics, law and order situation, administration, gas export, taxes, control over media, handing out wrong licenses, education... you name it, everywhere they have made blunders and later retracted. This cannot be the sign of a matured political party. May I request both BNP and Awami League to seriously make a self-assessment and try to do something constructive for the suffering lot of the country?

Wahid Shafi
Dhaka