"Of morality, arrogance and accountability"

This refers to a statement-cum-rejoinder issued under the signature of Mr. Shamsuddin Ahmed Chairman of the Staff Association, Dhaka chapter of World Bank office under the caption "World Bank officials of the local variety".

To begin with I am somewhat disappointed by the remark made by Mr. Afsan Chowdhury in his column "Of morality, arrogance and accountability" (July 16). I have all along been an admirer of Mr. Chowdhury and his writings which to my mind, nine out of ten are based on a kind of sensitivity, honesty and morality which is hard to come by these days. It is thus twice more shocking as to how an individual and a seasoned journalist of his calibre could make such a "blunder".

The very statement is not only demeaning it is also highly derogatory about a certain section of people irrespective of their professional calling, more so when Mr. Chowdhury does it standing on 'his' high pedestal of morality.

The World Bank is what one calls an International Organisation under the UN umbrella and enjoys all privileges as envisaged in the UN Charter and also by the covenants of the country agreement. Bangladesh is a signatory to both the agreements. Under the Country Agreement even the local staff enjoys considerable privileges including exemption from all actions performed in their official capacity. Mr. Chowdhury's friend who advised him of the provisions of the subject agreement apparently is not aware of the details of the statutes of either the UN Charter or the country agreement.

At the same time one must also recognise that much criticism exist all over the world about the operational efficacy and transparency of nearly all the UN agencies including its affiliated bodies like that of the World Bank. On the other hand the "fat salaries and the perks" that the local staff draw cannot be their fault. The entire salary and benefit structure is based on a regular survey of cost of living and other socio-economic factors of the country specific.

Thus this matter of the fat salaries etc. cannot be held against the concerned local staff. A point however must be made here that the perks when compared to other local and corporate bodies prevailing within the country do look staggeringly out of focus and unequal.

The local staff of the World Bank are just like any one of us and not of any particular "variety".

Shamsher Chowdhury
Texas, USA

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I am quite amused by the fuss over the arrogance of World Bank local staff. Although to be fair, the World Bank, IMF and IFC officials are hardly the most arrogant of the local staff.

The worse offenders are the UN's local people and the worst of all the *deshis* working in the different embassies. You would not be amiss in imagining that the security guard at the French embassy is a Foreign Legionnaire by his hauteur, or for that matter the guys at the US or Dutch embassies. There's something twisted in the Bengali character that makes us ape our masters and become even more ferocious in following their orders.

The only exceptions I have seen to this were the locals at the British High Commission. I am not sure what the British do different but they seem to be the only foreign embassy in Bangladesh with local staff and guards who are courteous and don't act like they are your masters.

All this fuss about the World Banks staff should not blind us to the fact that what the WB and IMF propose is right and just.

Prosperity and development will come from economic freedoms, actually they are directly proportional. Most of what the IMF and WB suggest would on the long run be beneficial to us.

I am all for bashing WB local staff. But don't let that detract us from the truth of what should be done.

I love Afsan Chowdhury's column, although he is a bleeding heart, for he acts as a conscience. But Afsan Chowdhury's opinions should be just that, a background noise, while we follow the suggestions of the World Bank and the IMF and get rich.

Shonku
Dhaka

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It was very interesting to read Afsan Chowdhury's comments on the World Bank. What I found particularly interesting was his remarks on the World Bank portal. When I was in the States this was a major 'stinker' as it was accused of being an example of 'development corruption'. In fact two Uruguayan activists who are part of the global anti World Bank network had filed a case in the national court against this. The date was July 17, 2001. In that suit two prominent Uruguayans filed a claim alleging "several irregularities" in the World Bank's Development Gateway initiative. Roberto Bissio, coordinator of Social Watch and Latin American secretary of Third World Network, and Dr. Carlos Abin, Executive Director of the Instituto del Tercer Mundo, called on the Bank's Fraud and Corruption Investigations Hotline to investigate: "a misuse of Bank funds and positions, gross waste of Bank funds,

Who feeds whom?

cost mischarging or defective pricing and perhaps even fraud and misleading of public opinion."

The World Bank's plan to establish the Gateway Internet site was widely criticised anyway. One of the complaints had been the initiative's scope: it aims to cover most major development topics, providing analysis and links to material from all perspectives. The threat it posed to existing web initiatives, and the lack of genuine independence from the World Bank had also been raised repeatedly.

The suit said "potential donors are being misled to make grants to a supposedly independent Foundation that in fact is just an appendix of the Bank". It also specifically alleged that World Bank President James Wolfensohn and the former Vice President for Human Resources, Richard Stern, had used their positions at the Bank in ways that transgress the Bank's own staff Ethics guidelines.

The suit was based on quotes leaked from Bank documents that reveal that the 'independent' Foundation being established by the Bank to house the Gateway "will contract the Bank to provide staff, infrastructure and services necessary for it to function". If it is true that this 'Independent Foundation' is contracting back to the Bank, staffed by the Bank, situated in the Bank, entirely designed by the Bank and largely capitalised by the Bank, we may be facing a case where eventual donors and perhaps even the American authorities that granted it legal status as a non-profit organisation, may have been deceived in their good faith to accept a non-existing independence."

I don't know what happened to the gateway or the suit but if it's on.

Will the Bank respond so that we know what happened?

Rashid Elahi
Baridhara, Dhaka

* * *

What happened to the portal which columnist Afsan Chowdhury is talking about? It made a lot of noise when it was happening but seems to be rather silent now. I remember that the World Bank had invested $7 million in developing the Gateway and more was expected. The Gateway's total annual budget was expected to be $50 million when established through contributions from governments and companies. Internet activists were very strongly opposed to it but I lost interest because I am not into what the Bank does.

David Gresham
On e-mail from Dhaka

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This is in connection with Afsan Chowdhury's column on the World Bank. In all fairness while the spirit and tone is fine there is a misquote.

Stiglitz actually made that 'nasty' remark about the IMF and not the World Bank and what he said is that they are: "third-rate economists from first-rate universities". He considered World Bank a better if a more inefficient organisation. But IMF is a totally different chilli powder. When is Afsan Chowdhury going to chat about IMF, especially its well-documented activities in ensuring that Boris Yeltsin won the Russian elections? Maybe we should monitor IMF when election time comes.

As for the Bank Staff Association, they are no different from any other Bangladeshis who have a cool job and sleep in dread of losing it. Please be kind to them. Some of them are also from first rate universities though I refrain from making any assessment.

Tina Naeem
Iskaton, Dhaka

MIGs

Now that the MIGs are gone, probably to be sold for a pittance, won't India invade us? After all, the MIGs were bought to defend us from Indian or Burmese invasion. But I suppose that risk has disappeared, of course only until BNP decides we need SU 27s or some such fighters.

We have no defence strategy and no debate on what our needs are. The defence allocation is just nodded through during the budget session, as it is too sensitive for mere mortals to discuss. Imagine this, the world's greatest power has public debates over new arms developments but the security concerns in Bangladesh are too sensitive to be publicly discussed. That's a joke.

Not only do we not debate what armaments we should buy, we don't even question the steamroller progress of the Military's business wing. Does anyone ask why the military should own a bank, a hotel, half a dozen golf courses, a filling station and a wedding hall? This is probably only the tip of the iceberg, God only knows what more businesses the military has, we can't discuss it because India might invade if we do.

Print a letter criticising the military or publish a white paper mentioning irregular payments made for 'development' to serving officers and there is a storm of protest. Sell the country down the drain, buying fighters we don't need and can't afford and ships that don't work, but everyone is silent.

Policemen and underpaid and under equipped. Compared to army officers they are less than serfs. Yet the police are defending your lives every moment of every day. Why should a police officer have less of everything, from weapons to benefits than an army officer who plays golf all afternoon?

Right in what is becoming the centre of Dhaka, is the old airport.

This airport could be turned into the Central Park of Dhaka. Can you imagine how much nicer it would be to have a huge open park right in the middle of the city? With the PM's office on one side, the Military Museum and Planetarium on the Bijoy Sharani and the NAM Summit centre on the other, with the Parliament and Zia's grave a stones thrown away this could be a cross between Central Park and the Mall in Washington DC.

Do you know how many aircrafts use this airport? One C-130 cargo plane, about four or five helicopters and a few Cessna's. Doesn't it seem like a waste?

But this will have the same fate as any debate about our military. Since the old airport belongs to the air force, closing it down and turning it into a park would be tantamount to inviting India to invade us.

Kireiti
Dhaka

* * *

This letter refers to the letter by MAH (July 20). The writer thanked the PM for her intent to sell the MIGs as these are costing hefty to the country. I also agree with her decision, but in a little different way. How about slashing 90 per cent of the defence budgets every year openly debating on every single paisa spent for those people in the barracks? Why shall the nation help accumulating fats to a large number of useless people in the name of Army who never can protect this country from foreign attacks? During Khaleda Zia's last rule ('91-'96) even Burma attacked suddenly on our *chowkis* and killed 14 members of armed forces including a Lt. colonel which went un-reciprocated, forget about frequent BSF's killing our people.

Khaleda Zia can easily scrap the MIGs because those were purchased by Sheikh Hasina's government. Let's scrap the unnecessary large army which the nation can't afford, and forget about those who take over illegally whenever they can through coup, and stop politicising any democratic govt's purchase decision.

Ahmed Hasan
New York, USA

"Dhaka-Chittagong high speed train"

In continuation of the above-captioned opinion may I speculate that the one-way fare for this trip will be over Tk 5,000 as of today's value of taka. It may double or even tripple when the project is completed after 7 to 15 years. Are we, the majority of travelling public, expected to be that effluent?

Amen, to that!

MAH
Dhaka

straint how would he contest in an election involving crores of taka?

If someone does not have the calibre to become a graduate, what good he will serve the country?

We need people in the Parliament who can at least read and understand the constitution and deliberate in Parliament on various national issues.

Due to the very low literacy rate (35 per cent, as told in the parliament) such a law may not ensure a true representation of our society but to ensure it we should not end up having 65 per cent illiterates in our parliament.

Masum H. Khan
On e-mail

No student politics: Follow BUET example

Students, like any other citizens, have a right to do politics and have their political organisations. What they do not have the right to do is making the taxpayer bear the burden of their political activities.

The Bangladeshi taxpayer generously supports the public universities and colleges from money he can ill-afford to begin with. When students who benefit from this generosity ignore their studies and instead engage in politics, in essence the taxpayer is forced to subsidise political activity.

This is immoral and outrageous. To prevent this, all public universities need to emulate and extend the action of the BUET authorities: there cannot be any politics on taxpayer funded campuses.

What the students do on their own time and in their own homes is their personal matter. They have an absolute right to do politics; I just do not want to pay for them to do so.

ES
Missouri, USA

Why are we surprised?

Everyday I read the letters section of your daily hoping to read something new and exciting. Hoping to read some one's thought which explains the abysmal situation of our society. Hoping to find some light in this darkness. But hope is where it stops. Everyone who writes seems to repeat the same sense of surprise and shock at the daily crime, murder, *mastani, chadabaji,* rape, lawlessness, corruption and the list goes on. Are we really surprised and shocked at all this chaos?

I think not! Everyone is aware of what kind of society we live in. Everyone is aware of the values that are carried by our so-called leaders, influential, professionals, law-enforcing officers and so forth. The bottom line is that 'benefit' has become the order of the day. Every single person is thinking of only his/her benefit. Rather than stating the obvious it is high time to think of how we can improve the situation.

Until we start changing people's idea about life and what their objective in life really is we cannot expect to see any change in our society. We need to start by addressing and working to change this blind culture of individualism and materialism.

Abu Ibrahim
Dhaka

Graduate MPs

The new law in Pakistan allowing only the graduates to qualify for contesting the Parliament Election is an exemplary one to be followed in our country as well. It would clear the misconception among many MP aspirants that only money and muscle power qualifies one to become MP. Such a law would not be baring anyone to become graduates rather it would only bar non-graduates to become Members of Parliament.

Is it too tough to become graduates in our country? I don't think so.

If someone fails to complete his graduation due to financial con-

Kamal Ataturk

I was very impressed with the letter from Farah Islam ("Ataturk the great!" July 10). Regarding the 'pro western' Shahs of Iran and the Turks-- I partly agree with her.

Ataturk is indeed a controversial man and made 'modern' Turkey, as it is today. really think they have an identity crisis. Changing their entire style of living, their way of writing, their 'text' into roman script just to 'fit in' to Europe, whereas 'the sick man of Europe' is located entirely in Asia, maybe excluding a little bit of Istanbul? And hence it goes on fighting for it's lost identity?

Shaker
Dhaka

The plight of the Palestinians

Israel's game plan is to annoy, intimidate and, if possible, exterminate the Palestinians and grab the whole of Palestine. Under one pretext or another Israel has been pursuing this policy and advancing toward its goal. Only the speed varies, depending on the time and situation. By occasionally talking about peace, Israel only tries to buy time, seek cover for its base motive, and deceive the Palestinians and the outside world. While Israel talks about future peace with the Palestinians, it acts against the vital interests of the Palestinians and changes the conditions on the ground.

Israel enjoys the full backing and protection of the US. The US has never been neutral or an honest broker, as some might delude themselves into believing. Without American money, arms and unconditional political support, Israel would have no power to move an inch. It took the U.S. fifty-three years to talk of a Palestinian state. It would not be surprising if the U.S. gave Israel another fifty-three years to finish its job with the Palestinians -- by which time there would be no more need for a Palestinian state.

A.K.M.Mohiuddin
Department of English
Rajshahi University

World-wide racism

Last year in South Africa, the United Nations held a world conference against racism and xenophobia. The forum quickly degenerated into a bigoted stampede against one country: Israel. Is this what the world community means by solidarity?

The Kyoto Agreement on global warming was embraced by nearly everyone on the planet, yet a few knew that the world's two largest countries, which possess booming economies and dismissive attitudes toward the environment, were required to do nothing. Is this a sensible recipe for the future? Did any of those environmental diehards ever choke on the gritty grey air of Beijing? Had any ever walked through an Indian or Bangladeshi moonscape of environmental devastation and death?

When will the wealthy West open its consumer markets to basic agriculture products from impoverished Africa? Why does free trade for the world mean restrictive barriers for Africa?

How many nations are crying out against the demographic and cultural genocide in Tibet? Does this silence mean the Chinese murder of Tibet is all right?

With the support of 74 countries, the International Criminal Court became reality on July 1. The Hague-based institute-- yes, the same country that is up to its eyeballs in the trafficking of Third World children and prostitutes for the pleasure of First World men -- has the authority to prosecute individuals suspected of war crimes anywhere in the world. Specifically, the court has jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

The International Criminal Court, then, will set the moral tone and be the legal courtroom for horrific crimes committed during wartime.

William Pace, head of the International Coalition for a Criminal Court, an NGO supporting the tribunal, said: "This is truly one of the greatest advances of international law since the founding of the United Nations 57 years ago."

Is this really an advancement of merely another guise to impose Western notions of justice on a part of the world that still remains and enigma to most. I urge *The Daily Star* to open a dialogue on not only on the International Criminal Court, but on rapid globalisation of notions of justice itself.

Faruq Hasan
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Two days public holidays: Why it should be

We are aware of the government's concern about how many days should we have as weekly holidays. I am showing below the necessity and merit of two days-holiday (no half-day business) that is maintained in most of the developed countries:

1.The serviceholders may stay with the family on Fridays and Saturdays or any other days suggested,
2. The working parents may come closer with the children -- how they are doing in school, sports, etc,
4. Family gatherings and get-togethers can be enjoyed in a relaxing mood,
5. A two-day-rest will help one to carry on his duties with full vigour.

Iftekhar Ahmed
Dhaka

Communism at large!

Communism in Bangladesh, over the decades has selected its area of interest to be the northern and eastern region of the country. Surely the chronology of its dominance in respect of area could be learnt from history. Once again the boisterous violent actions are ensuring their presence in the recent political flow. As leftist politics has proven its failure to play a significant role over many years it appears they have chosen a wrong attitude to restore some sort of a position which only shows frustration and disrespect to their own policies and nature of *"ism"*.

The PBCP, in Khulna, demanding their responsibility for killing the SI, threatening other officials of the police department to kill and the commando escaping of some of the activists proves an attempt to come in the lime light. The drunken SI probably out of tremendous insecurity went on a rampage and I am not sure of his democracy towards looting and destroying pictures of different leaders generally or he was just tipsy while in action!

A Citizen
Uttara, Dhaka

Telecom woes

Why only bracket the woes of UNDP. What about my woes, yours and innumerable others', all of us are simply fed up with T&T.

I made an application in 1984 from Motijheel C/A. No one considered my application and send a Demand Note(D/N). Afterwards (due to intervention by an activist) I got the D/N in October 2000 and deposited the required money within the due date but no one bothered to give the connection in spite of an Advice Note (collected again through *tadbir*).

In the meantime, I have had shifted my office last year and approached for the change of address (mind it only change of address not shifting of a telephone) last letter being dated, 15th January,'02. Till this writing I could not get the address changed and got tired of approaching different individuals. And in course of last six months I could not get the address changed and to get the actual phone at my new address remains a daydream. In course of my process and *tadbir* (for years) I have frantically moved heaven and earth. I mean the GM, Directors, and a couple of Chairman. But I haven't got the phone.

Recently, one of my phones went out of order and remained dead for over a week in spite of complaints and requests made to different officials; only to be told by the concerned linesman that I have to pay (a good amount) for the cable required for repair!

Last but not the least, in this fiasco, I want to ask who runs this department and how. Workers and officials are very seldom available in their place of work. Tell me Sir, whom should the poor people address for redress?

A suffering subscriber
Dhaka

Cable TV strike

I am a little irritated with this cable TV strike. I see absolutely no logical reason why cable TV operators should get a tax holiday. While you're at it why not just ask for a subsidy too?

When we were young, the only cartoons on TV were at 5.30pm. I suspect we got a lot more out of our one cartoon a day than these kids with their 24-hour cartoon channels. So in the absence of parental discipline, it's not altogether a bad thing that the cable channels are off.

The demands of the cable TV operators are nothing more than extortion. Just because these channels have become so popular with such a cross section of people, these operators logically assumed that the government would cave in to their demands, just as they have for every other group that protested the new levies.

The government, for once, should stand firm and not back down. It'll do us good to be back to the old two-channel format for a few weeks.

T Ali
Dhaka

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BTV must show Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Test Matches starting from July 21. Who has ever heard of showing only one-day matches when the national team is playing at the highest level i.e., Test Matches!

BTV's decision to show the highlights of the Test Matches at a time when the school children go to sleep-- from 10:30 PM to 11:30 PM - would have been justified if the Cable TV were there. As one cable TV channel-- Ten Sports channel is supposed to show Bangladesh's tour of Sri Lanka, including live coverage of Bangladesh's Test Matches.

If the Cable TV strike goes on further, then both BTV and Ekushey TV should take responsibilities on their shoulders and air 'something' during the morning hours for children. As Ekushey TV is a private, not state-owned TV channel, 99 per cent of the responsibilities lie on the shoulders of BTV.

F Waliullah
Dhaka

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The Cable Operators have stopped their service from 18.7.2002.

In every sector two or three companies capture the market first, then they apply *mastaani* force to prevent any other company to do business in the same field providing people better service.

Had there been two or three companies in the same area, these cable operators would not have dared to hold ordinary people hostage like this.

Reaz Mohiuddin
Norte Dame College, Dhaka

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Three days have gone by since the cable operators went on a strike against the budget passed by the BNP that effects the owners cost to an unacceptable height.

Life without surfing

I find this, as an opportunity to learn the merits and the demerits that cable TV has to offer our society, which has been a good subject of controversy for the critics so far. And I do pray that the continuation of the strike to remain for a while. Individuals suffering from cable addiction, this is only the post acute withdrawal (PAW) period of cable abstinence. In the case of mood altering chemicals like heroine, alcohol, marijuana etc-- it is said that the PAW remains quite obviously for at least 2 years. So as cable dependants are not contaminating any chemicals to the body I beg for at least a month (self-estimated may vary!) to sober up and understand the cable consequences with a clear mind.

Though I do not consider myself as a chronic patient of cable addiction I live with many around. And I believe that my sickness may turn chronically. And before that major mishap the strike coincidentally appears and provides each of the viewers to unfold the truth that whether they are addicted to this subtle but destructive illness called 'cable addiction' that effects a person spiritually, mentally and physically.

Zaiami Bodrudduza
Dhaka