

Multimetering, more telephone allowance and defaulting MPs

BTTB arrears should be cleared first

THE Ministry of Post and Telecommunications has certainly pulled a fast one on the taxpayers by even suggesting an increase in monthly telephone allowance for the members of the Jatiya Sangsad, in the context of a recently introduced multimetering in the billing system. When most of them don't even pay their bills to the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB), a raise in their monthly allowance could only be construed as pandering to their prodigality. The legislators are already entitled to exorbitant endowment in terms of telecommunication facilities. They don't have to pay connection fee and have access to nationwide and international subscribers dialling facilities without any additional charges. There is also virtually no restriction on the number of nationwide or international calls they can make. Plus they get a monthly allowance of Tk 4,000. Still, they more often than not default on their telephone bills. As a result, the BTTB now reels under the burden of nearly eight crore taka, defaulted on by legislators of the first down to the seventh Jatiya Sangsad. There is no reason to believe that the lawmakers of the eighth Jatiya Sangsad are any exception, which means the figure is rising every day.

And now comes the proposal for a raise in their telephone allowance. The proposed allowance, which is not specified as yet, is based on "such allowances" given to lawmakers in "five South Asian countries", explained a highly placed source in the ministry to The Daily Star. Sounds reasonable except for the fact that in all likelihood members of parliament in those five countries do not, and are not allowed to, default on their telephone bills. To give the devil its due, the ministry has sought suggestions from the cabinet on modalities to realise the arrears. Here is one: let the monthly telephone allowance for defaulting legislators be directly channelled to the BTTB account until such time the defaulted amount is cleared to the last penny.

The seed of the defaulting culture among people's representatives and public servants lies in their complete indifference to taxpayers' right to wellbeing. They take it for granted that election or selection to public offices automatically entitles them to prodigality even it means unbearable strain on public exchequer. Hence, comes regular defaulting on telephone, electricity, gas and other utility bills. Unless they are made to pay, and pay regularly, such improprieties are bound to continue.

Abduction scare chilling schools

Writer of threat-letter no spiderman, so catch them

AUTHORITIES of some prominent city schools and parents of children enrolled with them are reeling in panic. They have taken fright of threats issued through anonymous letters which require that they either pay Tk three lakh or face abduction of three pupils from each school on the expiry of a specified deadline.

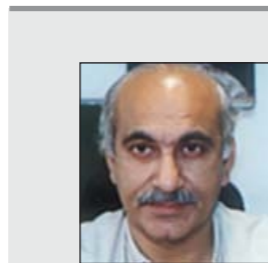
Just how much of gung-ho they have become is driven home by their not merely spelling out a specific address (some say, with phone numbers) where they want the money delivered but also by upscaling the threat: "should anybody report it to the police, the number of children to be kidnapped will be raised from three to five".

The letters issued in the name of Purbabangla Sarbahara Communist Party were addressed to several institutions including Engineering University Higher Secondary School, Udayan School and Agrani Higher Secondary Girls' Schools. Even though the letters bear the label of an outlawed extremist organisation these can have a contagion effect on others having no political pretense. For, what is palpably tendentious about this letter-writing dare-devilry is that this is set against the backdrop of a spate in the incidence of child abduction and murder cases. The gangsters under whatever name or garb they can manage to flaunt their criminal agenda are trying to exploit the highly volatile law and order situation to their advantage. And the danger is just as their peerage is growing so are the ingenious methods being applied to extort money.

The school authorities have made GD entries with the police; plainclothes cops are keeping vigil on school surroundings; and guardians are waiting it out within the school compound as a precaution to take their wards home after their classes are over. But even with all that happening, the attendance in the school has dropped and the parents cannot be too sure that no school boy or girl would be picked up by any sleight of hands.

The question is: how long can or should such things go on? It is highly imperative that the police launch a manhunt for the insidious bunch of letter-writers with some quick-footed intelligence work to ensure they are ferreted out. After all, it cannot be a needle in the haystack exercise in a city like Dhaka. So, catch them!

The speech Vajpayee may never make



M.J. AKBAR

HERE is the speech we may not quite hear on Thursday 15 August when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee climbs up the ramparts of the Red Fort to start yet another birthday party for India.

Friends (in the BJP), Indians (in cities and villages) and countrymen (across the world)

You were kind enough to elect me, and support me if you could not vote, in a general election three years ago because I was the Prime Minister of economic reform, the Lahore peace initiative and Kargil. Since then reform has tripped over uncertainty, while those old-fashioned rogues and sharks who hover over public money have continued to steal and loot thousands of crores with impunity, bribing their way through any problem, laughing their way through media and politicians, and fattening the foreign accounts of men at the head of financial institutions who sold their trust unit by unit and betrayed blue chip companies like IDBI chip by chip.

In self-defence I will say that I did not create this scam. I inherited this class from decades of misrule and corruption, of deals between money power and political authority at the cost of your development, your jobs, your schools, your hospitals, your roads, your hunger. Where my self-defence collapses is in the fact that I too did nothing to heal this corrosive cancer that has gnawed at the heart and soul of our country. Our trust with destiny was not meant to suffocate in sleaze. I am guilty of indiffer-

ence. And I will tell you the reason for my indifference. Because my own party, which was born and nurtured in puritan zeal, has become a mob of sleazebags. I know many of you -- let's make that most of you -- do not share the ideology and beliefs of men like Shyamprasad Mukherjee and Deendayal Upadhyay. I mention these names because they were my leaders when I was a young man with a dream. I have become an old man now, and I am not certain whether I have the courage to dream any more... But even those who would not want

of transparency, the hope of peace and a dream of prosperity. Instead, I have become Prime Minister of Tehelka, sleaze, scams, petrol pumps and Narendra Modi. I must say a deliberate word about Tehelka, particularly since I have been re-reading my friend Advanji's prison diaries, written when we were in jail together. Normally people do not advertise prison terms. We are proud that we went to jail during Mrs Indira Gandhi's Emergency in 1975 -- I wonder how many of you even remember that blot of shame in our nation's history. If you do not know about the Emergency, ask your

excuses. I have always respected those who live by the pen. Alas, I have not been able to live on my poetry, but I think my pen may have served my country as much as my politics, if not more. What further irony is the fact that we are being vengeful against journalists in order to protect a shining hero of the Emergency, my old colleague George Fernandes. How time makes dwarfs out of giants. As a collective gesture of atonement, I am asking the home ministry to drop all frivolous cases against Tehelka, and to end the harassment and persecution that has replaced

Godhra I should have ensured that a community was not punished for the wild misdeeds of a few. Revenge is no answer to barbarism. We criticised Rajiv Gandhi after the massacre of the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. There was provocation then as well. But we took a moral position and I am proud we did so. I cannot reverse time but I do want to ensure an election that is held without the slightest hint of terror and fully participated by every citizen. Gujarat will be placed under President's Rule till a new elected government is sworn in.

As will be Kashmir.

BYLINE

I know that many of my fellow Indians in Jammu and Kashmir are angry with Delhi and its policies particularly over the last 15 years. There was joy and harmony in the province during the days of the great Sheikh Abdullah. He was elected in a free and fair election, through an expression of the people's will. I am determined to ensure that the same free and fair spirit awaits the coming Assembly elections. The elected representatives who emerge from such an election will find a place on the high table as together we chart a route map towards peace and prosperity.

Shyamprasadji and Deendayalji to lead India will admit and accept that they did not enter public life to split the scum with hyenas. They were honest men who died with less in their bank accounts than they had inherited. What a tragedy therefore that my lifetime colleague and deputy prime minister Lal Krishna Advanji should be giving orders to BJP leaders to compete with the Congress in petty corruption. My petrol pump is smaller than yours! Your scam is bigger than mine! My Ram Naik is nothing compared to your S.M. Krishna and even watch out for this one, Manmohan Singh! Ha ha ha. What a sight we must be to voters who thought that we were capable of their trust, who believed that we knew the meaning of a faded word known as integrity. I am truly sorry. As Prime Minister of the country, as leader of the BJP, I know that the buck, even the corrupt buck, stops here.

You made me Prime Minister, as I said, because of reform, the prom-

ponents, ask your teachers to drill that memory so deeply in your mind that it becomes an imperishable part of your consciousness. We must never forget, if only to ensure that it never happens again. Advanji has written so eloquently about those nineteen months of dictatorship, censorship and terror. I remember when we won the elections in 1977 and Advanji became minister for information and broadcasting in Morarji Desai's government, he taunted all those journalists who had surrendered before Indira Gandhi, who had compromised. Advanji told them that when Indira Gandhi had asked such journalists to bend, they had crawled.

I cannot believe that it is the same Advanji who is inflicting a reign of terror on selected journalists from Tehelka, whose only crime is that they exposed outrageous and scandalous corruption in defence deals. I cannot believe that I am keeping quiet while journalists are being arrested on whimsical

accountability.

My colleagues in the BJP have made me Prime Minister of Narendra Modi as well. I did not want this. As I said in Parliament I had made my mind up before that party conference in Goa, where everything went wrong, including my own speech, that Modi should be told to resign. I should have trusted my instincts instead of being cowed down by those who wanted victory at the cost of principle. The BJP has been called a communal party. But till Gujarat I could hold my head high and claim that the BJP, when in power, had never permitted any largescale communal riots. Of course we could not stop communal incidents, including those engineered by members of our own party. But we ran responsible governments. We did not use state power to encourage lynch mobs. That was a Congress speciality.

I slipped on blood shed in Goa. After the contemptible barbarism of

The tensions generated over Kashmir constitute the gravest danger to our subcontinent. It is a crisis that is eating away our present and could destroy our future. You, I hope, will agree I have done my best to find peace ever since I became Prime Minister of this great nation. Acting upon our commitment to the people as clearly outlined in our manifesto, we made India a nuclear power. The world tried to browbeat us; today it has accepted our nuclear status as a legitimate right of an important nation.

But we cannot be a true world power without being a powerhouse economy. And a great economy is impossible without the will to release our national wealth and energy for infrastructure, and capital for the biggest as well as the smallest. Industry must hum with growth at every level, from the roar of heavy industry to the gentle tap of a master craftsman. I dream of the day when shops across the country and the

Haven for immigrants

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

AN independent think-tank called MigrationWatch UK has recently published a report which claims that the number of immigrants entering Britain has reached a staggering 250,000 a year! This figure is equivalent to adding to the overall population of the UK a city the size of Cambridge every six months or that of Birmingham every five years. Using the latest Government statistics as well as what the report terms 'modest estimates of illegal immigrants', it calculates that the overall influx has more than doubled in the last ten years and there is 'no sign of any significant reduction.' This quarter of a million annual newcomers are made up of legal immigrants, asylum seekers whose applications for shelter have been rejected but who for some reason or other are not sent back to where they came from and illegal arrivals who vanish almost as soon as they set foot in Britain and for most parts remain totally untraceable. The breakdown of the report's estimate includes, roughly, 60,000 failed asylum seekers not sent back, 35,000 legitimate visitors from the Third World and Eastern Europe who stay on illegally even after the expiry of their permission to stay and at least 25,000 people a year entering undetected. The total, between 120,000 and 125,000 in 2000 - and expected to rise to around 180,000 by 2005 - is added to Home Office figures for people allowed to settle in the UK, including those joining spouses or relatives and genuine asylum seekers. A significant proportion of those given the permission to stay are doctors and nurses drafted in from abroad to fill gaps in the National Health Service. According to official figures, a total of 41,940 people - 115 a day - were allowed to stay in Britain last year because they were granted asylum, given exceptional leave to remain or won their cases on appeal. And Britain had the highest number of asylum applications in the European Union for the second year running - a total of 92,000.

According to the MigrationWatch report, an important 'pull factor' for migrants is the presence of sizeable

ethnic minority communities in Britain and the relative ease of finding illegal work. The Chairman of the think-tank said that the objective of this report is "to get the facts out into the open" and then enable "the political process to tackle these issues" and warned: "Continued failure to get a grip of this situation will play into the hands of the far Right, who seek to exploit it for their own ends." One of the major weaknesses of the system for controlling immigration in this country is the absence of a really efficient method of accurately recording the departure of foreign citizens from the UK which amounts to 'an invitation to overstay', since officials have no idea who is still here. There are, in fact, no official targets to limit the number of people allowed into Britain - everyone who meets the criteria is allowed to stay. The Chair-

figures on children and their lives by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reveals that one British child in eight is now from an ethnic minority background, a figure that is nearly double the proportion of ethnic minorities among adults. Details of a survey conducted by the ONS show how numbers of ethnic minority children are growing compared to White British children, pointing to a future in which non-White ethnic groups become an increasingly influential section of the British population. The survey also shows that in some cities the proportion of children under 16 from minority groups is even higher than one in eight. In Inner London, for example, the figure is one in three. Taking all UK cities together, six per cent of all children are from the Indian sub-Continent backgrounds, three per cent are Black, that is, of African or

achieved five high-grade GCSEs than any other group including White British pupils and, measured by GCSE passes, almost all ethnic groups saw rising achievement levels. The only exceptions were the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis - the pass rate among Pakistani pupils neither rose nor fell, but the pass rate among Bangladeshi pupils dropped.

Bedtime stories

THERE used to be a time when little children put to bed at night would drop off to sleep lulled by the voice of their mother or father - or perhaps grandfather or grandmother - reading them their favourite stories. But, with the advent of the age of popular science, these story-reading sessions were gradually dying out. Children would no longer be satisfied with stories that came

generation gap between adults and children and encouraging parents to read these - as well as other similar books - to their children because they too are hooked by the stories. More than 50 per cent of the adults questioned in the survey conducted during the research admitted that they had read at least one 'kid-ult' book such as Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone or one of its sequels. This suggests a very welcome healthy trend in the relationship of parents with their children since despite a busy day at work, many of them are now making an effort to devote some time exclusively to the kids.

Many children's books indeed have a massive appeal for both adults and youngsters. A front-ranking psychologist and author says: "With the current revival of children's classics in the cinema,

Thousands of cheques, direct debits, standing orders and other paperwork are also being processed there. When customers telephone the bank, they just pay a local rate to access the service and the bank diverts the calls via satellite link to India at no extra cost to the customers, which is met by the bank. This expense, according to bank executives, is dwarfed by the huge savings on salaries paid to the India-based personnel. And that is certainly practical accounting because whereas call centre workers in the UK have to be paid between £12,000 and £15,000 a year, those based in the sub-Continent are content with just between £2,500 and £3,000 annually and, moreover, firms do not have to pay National Insurance or pension contributions for the staff. The Chief Executive of HSBC is also full of praise for the efficiency of their Indian employees: "They are quicker at answering the phone, highly numerate and keen to come to work every day," he says. "Staff are hugely enthusiastic about their jobs, they dress well. A lot have degrees. The quality of work is exceptionally high." On the other hand, HSBC is known as one of the best employers in Hyderabad.

Other big names in the UK banking business considering a similar shift include Lloyds TSB, while the American bank GE Capital is already operating call centres in India to deal with UK customer queries. It also runs a call centre in Delhi for big superstore chains like Debenhams and Topshop. Other important UK firms who have relocated their call centres in India include insurance companies like BUPA, Royal & Sun Alliance and Churchill Insurance. On an average, five new call centres are opening in India every month and financial management consultancy firms predict that around 350,000 British insurance jobs are likely to be transferred to the sub-Continent by 2010. Indian workers recruited by UK companies for these jobs have to take a crash course in British culture which includes watching British soaps to familiarise themselves with accents, regional foods and the British obsession with the weather.

LETTER FROM LONDON

man of MigrationWatch says that the think-tank has nothing against people who have valid reasons for wanting to stay in this country or seeking shelter from persecution of any kind and wholeheartedly backs Britain's record as a safe haven for genuine refugees, but currently only around five per cent or even less of immigrants qualified for political asylum. Meanwhile, a spokesperson for the Home Office said: "We will always honour our international obligations but we are taking steps to curb abuse of the asylum system." At the same time, the Government also plans to make it easier for foreigners to work legitimately in Britain, because they are needed to fill shortages in the labour force.

Changing face of British cities

HIGHER birth rate among the non-White population of Britain and the booming number of marriages and partnerships among non-White and White men and women are steadily blurring racial boundaries among the various communities residing in the country. A new breakdown of

Afro-Caribbean origin, three per cent are the offspring of mixed parentage, another one per cent come from Chinese and other groups while, the fastest growing single group is mixed-race children.

Based on a continuous Labour Force Survey, the ONS analysis provides clear evidence of the rapidly changing ethnic patterns of British cities. Demographers suggest that, apart from those London boroughs which already have a majority of non-White people, over the next two decades Birmingham and Leicester will become the first cities in the UK in which ethnic communities will outnumber the White British population and thus, they will no longer remain 'minority' communities as such. The ONS survey also shows that the educational performance of ethnic minority children is steadily on the rise and that the younger generation are making their way out of the poverty, manual work and cheap housing often faced by first-generation immigrants. At Secondary school level between 1998 and 2001, for example, more Indian pupils

out books and their appetite would only be appeased by TV programmes, VCRs, DVDs and computer games. It was sad indeed, but one had to accept the inevitable, and parents too would rarely have the time or the energy to indulge their little ones. However, according to the results of a successful series of storytelling events run in libraries in different parts of Britain, there has recently been an explosion in the number of parents reading stories to their children. The research shows that 90 per cent of parents now make the time and effort to tell or read a bedtime story to their children at least once a week compared to less than 40 per cent a couple of years ago.

The research attributes this regenerated interest in books to the new phenomenon termed 'kid-ult' - as opposed to 'adult' - literature, in the forefront of which are stories such as Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings, which appeal to children and adults alike. These books, as readers may know, have been made into hugely successful films which in turn have succeeded in bridging the

parents are rediscovering books they read when they were younger or are inspired to read them for the first time." The 'kid-ult' books are thus a perfect way for parents to bond to their children because these stories also raise important issues they can talk about together and the "sharing of ideas and opinions is critical to the emotional and creative development of children." So authors like J K Rowling, the creator of the Harry Potter series, and J R R Tolkien who wrote The Hobbit and The Lord of The Rings are doing sterling service for both our own generation and posterity.

Call India for your local bank

A number of big banks in Britain, led by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Corporation or HSBC, have started using 'telephone bank tellers' based in India in order to answer queries from their UK customers. In a trial run of this practice, about 15,000 queries a week from British small business customers are being handled at an HSBC call centre in the South Indian city of Hyderabad.

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

"Great Army"

This is in reference to S Rahman's letter (August 12) and other letters regarding the Army and Cantonment. I can't figure out why every one is trying to find fault with our Army. As if our Army has nothing to do except for harassing and creating trouble for the civilians. Bangladesh Army is no different than the Army in other countries. Whatever they do they do it under the purview of their duty and responsibility.

Army deals with the security and sovereignty of a country, which is of utmost importance to any nation. Their job demands confidentiality and discipline and that's why they have to maintain certain strict policies regarding their job and also regarding Cantonments. In no other countries the Cantonment is open to civilians then why would it be different in Bangladesh?

After the government instruction to use the Cantonment route because of the construction of fly-

over, I have used that route many a times. And I've never faced any problem. Because the problem lies with the civilians, not with the army. Just because we pay taxes we expect everything to be our private property.

We have voted BNP to power and we also pay for their salary but have they fulfilled their election pledges or at least gave a sincere effort, have they been able to improve the law and order situation or save us from dengue? Unlike the politicians at least the army have not indulged in corruption and nepotism. We should be praising the Army not complaining about them

Sobhan Chowdhury
Uttara, Dhaka

This is in response to Mr. R. Ali's letter "Great Army". It is sad to see that a little inconvenience faced at the MP check post has generated such a notion of arrogance in him that he had gone to the extent of ganging up opinion from those who

also probably has had similar experiences in the past. Mr. R. Ali and others who support the idea of free flow of traffic through the Cantonment must know that throughout the free world, even in the most advanced democracies, open societies and secured countries like USA, UK Germany or France, garrisons and cantonments are highly restricted areas where all entry and exits are strictly controlled. Refusal to allow entry for military personnel in uniform who might have mistakenly left their IDs at home is a usual experience in those countries.

Entry into military property without specific purpose is prohibited by law and all entries are subjected to scrutiny. The regulation in Bangladesh is no different though imposition is much moderate. Perhaps more people pass through the MP check post unchallenged than the number of people who are stopped for identity checks. Mr. R. Ali's and others (mostly residents of Uttara) displeasure comes out

because of their personal inconvenience as against the norms of the garrison (which percolates from state law) in minimising security hazards to thousands of expensive military gadgets and equipment that belong to the state.

Why are we so intolerant to anything that does not suit our personal convenience? Can't we see what's going on around our neighbouring countries where acts of sabotage are order of the day. Can't we have little respect for government law which prohibits a foreign personnel and vehicle to enter military bases without security checks? Can Mr R Ali site one example from one country of the free world where military bases and garrisons are accessed without security checks and allows thoroughfare?

The government regulation demand military personnel to be alert, proactive and sensitive to situations that might trigger breach of security of men, equipment and information. The application of this basic theme by an old soldier who

stands at the MP check post for a prolonged period of time, physically checking hundreds of vehicles and facing arrogant reactions from people like Mr. R. Ali can not justifiably be attributed to terming the Army 'Great' or 'Small'. After all, the Army is the army of the country and people who constitute the Army are people of our society.

Nafis
New York, USA

Ban students and teachers' politics

I appreciate the PM's call for banning student and teachers' politics. Too much time has already been wasted. Student politics totally destroyed the academic environment in the educational institutions. The teachers' community has also been engaged in party politics and siding with different student fronts. They failed to uphold the institutional interest and instead they have turned our educational institutions into a battlefield.

It is high time the government

banned student politics and save our younger generation from ruin

Mohammad Elias
Titas Gas, Brahmanbaria

Why is it taking the government such a long time to ban student and teachers' politics? After the recent DU incident we thought that the government would expedite the process and we would soon get rid off the cancerous cell - student politics from our educational institutions. But that seems not to be the case.

Obviously the government is reconsidering their decision but why and for whose interest?

Samia Sultana
Dhaka

Dengue alert

We are stunned at the government's indifferent approach in combating dengue. This deadly disease has already taken more than 20 lives. How many more does the government need to wake up from their

slumber?

Every year our hapless nation faces several calamities like flood and diseases like dengue. And we wait till the calamity strikes. What is the problem with us? Why can't we take preventive measures and try to prepare ourselves beforehand to fight these problems? Why are we such a lazy nation?

For this dengue attack we are to be blamed as much as the government should be. Along with the authorities it was also our failure that we couldn't, to be more specific, we didn't keep our city clean even though we knew very well that this nonchalant attitude of ours would take its toll on our dear ones and on ourselves as well.

Rahima Siddiqui
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

To a friend of Bangladesh

While I have mostly disagreed with

her political opinions, I have thoroughly enjoyed the letters and columns of that fine Englishwoman Mrs. Angela Robinson. But most of all, I am overwhelmed by the love and devotion she has shown us in all these years.

She, and thousands of others like her, have come to our impoverished shores for no other reason than love of God and man. They have healed our sick, educated our youth, and helped those nobody else would. I hope that such men and women, the truest friends Bangladesh has, will not be deterred by anyone. Bangladesh is better off because of people like Mrs. Robinson. As she departs from our midst, I am sure I speak for many when I say "Thank you friend and Godspeed".

ES
Missouri, USA