

First day in the JS

Decision to make a four-day session does not reflect public aspiration

THE Business Advisory Committee (BAC) of the parliament, the body that decides on the length, content and direction of each session, concluded that the current sitting should last only four days. Reason, there is no business before the House to justify a longer session. We think the BAC must be quite blind to come to such a conclusion. If nothing else there should be serious discussions on how to restore peace and vibrancy in our educational institutions, especially DU and BUET, how to boost exports, control rising crimes against women, reduce corruption, improve quality of trade unionism, etc. We could debate on the Prime Minister's proposal to ban student politics and examine the feasibility of gas export. In fact she did say that she wanted a widespread discussion on these subjects and if possible reach a consensus on them. But how can we reach a consensus if debate is not permitted? We find the BAC decision directed more by political consideration than public need.

As for the first day of this session, we note with regret the politicisation of the prayer speech after adoption of the obituary reference. This simple act of paying respect to the departed was made controversial by one over-zealous MP, Kazi Alauddin, from a Jatitya Party faction, who added political comments in his prayer. The brighter side of this whole sordid episode is that the Treasury bench immediately reprimanded the MP concerned, expressed regrets and supported the Speaker's decision to expunge the relevant portions. This should further help to awaken us to the curse of over-politicisation that has crippled so much of our thinking and actions. Are we on the verge of politicising our prayers too?

The other point of Thursday's debate in the parliament is the comment of our voluble finance minister Saifur Rahman about Saif Nazrul Islam who was the Acting President of the government in exile during our Liberation War. The controversy arose when Saifur was opposing a proposal to name the just opened Bangladesh-UK Friendship Bridge after Nazrul Islam. While we respect Saifur's right to disagree we cannot but criticise his insulting remarks which basically implied that Nazrul Islam was a nobody. Here again (we did so yesterday) we point out our finance minister's propensity to insult as he remarks. This time he attacked one of the leading figures of our Liberation War. By implication he was insulting our Liberation War itself, which is the most glorious phase in our nation's history. This remark unnecessarily (as can be expected, he blamed the press for the controversy and said he was quoted out of context) gives substance to impressions that BNP is lukewarm, if not cold about our Liberation War history. Anyway, we think Saifur Rahman should be matured enough and morally strong enough to admit his mistake and withdraw his comment and thereby save his party and his government from further embarrassment.

BAC, on its part, may do well to reconsider its position on a four-day session.

Doubly devious

Commercial chaos in residential areas

COMMERCIALISATION of residential areas in the capital seems to follow a discernible trend. First comes decision from the Rajuk or the Public Works Department (PWD) that residential plots on either side of a particular stretch of road can be converted for commercial use. Next comes the mad rush for conversion of single-unit residential buildings into multi-storey commercial complexes, shopping plazas, etc. Finally, after almost the entire stretch along the road has been converted, commercialisation sneaks onto interior plots. The government ban on non-residential or commercial use of plots in designated residential neighbourhoods hardly gets in the way -- the developers have money to spend and city development officials rules to bend. In return for hefty bribes, officials facilitate gross violation of city development plans, either by manipulation of legal loopholes or sheer indifference. Gradually, commercial complexes outnumber residential buildings and chaos overwhelms calm.

Illegal commercialisation of residential plots points once again to enforcement and monitoring inadequacy on the part of the city development authorities. The rules are there, which say that residential plots can be converted for commercial use in only those roadside areas marked as commercial site and that a plot-owner has to pay a certain amount to the government as conversion fee. However sound the legal provisions, they simply lose their efficacy in absence of enforcement. Even worse, instead of enforcing the rules, a section of officials of relevant government agencies such as the Rajuk and the PWD actually connive with unscrupulous developers to bend these. In the case of Mainland City, a six-storey commercial complex at the heart of Dhanmondi residential area, the owner went ahead with the construction without any approval. Some PWD engineers told him that there was a plan to allow commercial use of some plots in the area. Besides, they had assured that they would arrange the approval. The PWD has recently sent to the relevant ministry a list of 327 unapproved commercial structures in the Dhanmondi residential area for proper action. Residents believe that it is a ploy by some Rajuk and PWD officials to get bribes from the owners. There is no reason to believe otherwise.

Unauthorised commercialisation of residential areas also leads to other violations, sometimes impinging on residents' rights to public place. Commercial complexes invariably lack adequate parking facilities, with vehicles spilling onto nearby roads and creating traffic congestion. At some areas, plot owners erect fences beyond their boundaries, encroaching on public space, on the pretext of beautification. Such aberrations have their roots in enforcement failure, which, in turn, is caused by a section of corrupt city development officials. Basically, therefore, the Rajuk, the PWD and others need to rid their ranks of corrupt elements, if they want to bring order to city development.

A great shame indeed!



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

MOST corrupt country... What a misfortune for the people of Bangladesh! Last year also the Transparency International (TI) conferred this "laurel" on Bangladesh. Some of us tried to term this assessment of TI as faulty on technical grounds and particularly on modalities adopted, but this year also we have been awarded this shameful "distinction". Technicalities apart, we all are now branded as "civilised" thieves and unfortunately we, Bangladeshis, have to carry this stigma with us wherever we go and suffer the moral humiliation before the world. This is the most unfortunate and indeed devastating thing for the ordinary citizens of Bangladesh, who are honest and sincere. The whole country has been put in such a

disgraceful position by those who are engaged in such shameful activities. This reflects the kind of people we have in the public offices of the country. Of course, all are not to blame, but those who are not directly involved, share some responsibilities as they do not protest nor do they make any effort to stop the misdeeds of others across or around the table in the same offices.

It is unfortunate that TI's report has put all the people of Bangladesh

though highly educated and enjoying the maximum worldly benefits -- more often than not at cost of the poor, are to blame for this disaster.

TI also said that "CPI score relates to perceptions of the degree of corruption as seen by business people ...." Interesting! Still more interesting is that the said business people, though not all, bribe the people in the public offices, get their things done and then report them to the TI. One can term this as double

ceed individually) and refuse to pay bribe. If they are determined they can make joint moves and get their jobs done without paying bribe. Such joint moves could contribute to the reduction of corruption or at least bring the problems to the public focus. But unfortunately we have not seen any serious joint effort from the trade bodies in that direction; at least there has been no report of any such joint activities by the trade bodies against the corrupt practices of the people in the public

offices. They pay bribes to have their dubious deals approved though according to their own countries' law they are forbidden to pay bribes. So it's a vicious circle. Therefore, it is necessary for the TI to consider these aspects before making their assessments on a particular country. Indeed, appropriate apportioning of the burden of such corruption incidents -- may be expressed in terms of numbers between countries involved in the process -- should be introduced in

countries will also bring rational and unbiased approach to the entire work of the TI and the assessments will also reflect better picture of the situations though there could still be questions as these are based only on perceptions. Here lies the crucial point: a country is given a name -- good or bad -- and it becomes a serious burden for a country(s) that carries the bad name. Therefore, TI has to be more practical and realistic as far as possible in its approach.

TI may also like to strengthen the base of collection of information by involving organisations which have no bias or political objectives in providing the information on which TI makes its final assessments. To make things more clear and transparent to the affected countries, the Transparency International should publish locally all the details of the reports on which it based its findings. This will help clear up any confusion or misgivings that the people including me have on the good work of the TI. May I have the liberty of stating clearly that there is acute shortage of good people and good work in this disturbed world and we appreciate the good work of the TI and undoubtedly its work would help bring some favourable changes in the social behaviour of the concerned people.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador and founder president of North South University

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Political cost of corruption

ZIAUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY

THE Transparency International (TI) report branding Bangladesh as a leader of the pack of ten most corrupt countries, and the finger pointing at each other by two major political parties of our country as the architects of this national infamy bring to mind the analogy of recent meltdown of WorldCom (the now infamous telecom giant). On June 26, 2002 U.S. regulators charged WorldCom Inc. with fraud after WorldCom admitted it hid almost \$4 billion of costs, bringing it to the brink of bankruptcy in one of the biggest accounting scandals ever.

or the financial disaster that was wrought upon to the company shareholders, its employees, or to the US economy in general. Some one else was messing up their books, not them.

Like the WorldCom senior management, our political managers

in the Company was the handiwork of a few swindling employees in collusion with conniving managers, but its impact was devastating to the Company. Akin to the WorldCom predicament, corruption in Bangladesh is the handiwork of a minority -- namely its bureaucracy; but its effect

state of Denmark", in stead of taking measures against the pernicious evil of corruption and its deleterious effect on our economy, our government leaders are quick to put it squarely on the "shenanigans" of their predecessors, or are totally ignoring the whole issue by labeling

It is lamentable to see how the avarice and greed of a fraction of our people have blanketed the entire country with the stigma of vice. It is equally appalling to observe how impervious our leaders have become to such accusations and tarnishing of national image. We

reached the nadir last year. We defended the title the second time. It is ironic that despite corruption becoming a buzzword in Bangladesh aid circle, despite corruption being a central theme of a recent World Bank publication (Government That Works), and despite corruption figuring as a major obstacle in the governance process of Bangladesh, we seem to make no headway in addressing it, let alone solve it. Quite a few of recent writings by a few of our thinking elites deal with corruption, its cause and effects, and ways to tackle these. Most of our people are aware what causes corruption, where these are, and some can even suggest how these can be tackled. However, all this knowledge is meaningless if the political will to tackle corruption is lacking. This political will need a determination at all levels starting from the highest. If this does not happen soon, we will not need a crystal ball to predict the winner of the most corrupt country in the next TI report.

Ziauddin M Choudhury, a former civil servant in Bangladesh, works for an international organization in the US.

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The scandal pushed WorldCom stock to an all time low of just 5 cents after being over \$16.00 this year and over \$60.00 just a few years ago. Even though the US Securities and Exchange Commission stated in its civil lawsuit that the scheme was "directed and approved by WorldCom's senior management", both current and former Chief Executives and Chief Financial Officers denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. They would not own up to the financial wreckage of the company,

also seem to suggest that the corruption in Bangladesh is not their creation. Some one else did it.

The TI report did not bring about any havoc in Bangladesh finances, nor did it lead to any legal action; but the report was published internationally, and we as a nation were labeled as the most corrupt country in the world. We may lament it, but the world got around very quickly.

I like to take the WorldCom analogy a bit further to analyze the Bangladesh situation. The alleged fraud

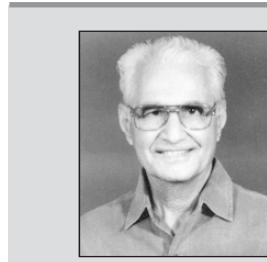
is more overwhelming and far more damaging. The SEC report has damaged financial wealth of a company and its shareholders; the TI report has tarnished the reputation of a whole nation. But the analogy should stop here.

In the US, the SEC has been able to bring to book the major perpetrators of the fraud in WorldCom. In Bangladesh we are looking for scapegoats for this national disgrace. In stead of admitting that there is something "rotten in the

may protest that corruption is confined only to a segment of our population; we may attract others' attention to our neighbouring countries and declare in somewhat righteous indignation that they are no better. The crude reality is that it does not help to shake off this pariah image. Finger pointing of one regime to another, from one leader to another as the origin of this evil does not free us from the consequences of the evil.

It is not that we were actually surprised by the TI report. We had

Things are getting clearer



M B NAQVI writes from Karachi

TWO statements of COAS Gen. Pervez Musharraf deserve praise for their candour: the first, 'democracy may be important, but Pakistan is more important'. It has two implications: for him these two have different values. Preservation of Pakistan is a higher value objective while democracy is secondary. Also, the two are so different that one can stand in opposition to the other. He seems to see democracy as an ornament, to be cast off for something dearer still. Musharraf's natural choice, saving the country, overrides democracy which he visualises can endanger Pakistan.

generals, all under Musharraf's command, will present the Army's views and demands to the people's representatives. That is where top decisions will emerge. God help the people's tribunes if they go against the Army's wishes. They may lead to takeover. Indeed, Musharraf himself has read the riot act: should these new Assemblies reject his constitutional changes or refuse to accept his Presidency by rejecting his self-appointment and referendum's veracity, he will sack them. Well, that's that.

underneath. Would the polls be transparently free or would they be 'managed' by the administration to produce pre-determined results? The writer does not know for sure. But some indications are available and some considerations are revealing.

Politicians of various hues are howling about pre-poll rigging. The Government's postings and massive deployment of political fixers and funds show their determination to do all it takes to 'manage' an election to produce desired results.

aid. The timing of Pentagon's first agreement with Ayub Khan, Oct. 15, 1953, made America a part of the intrigue in which Gulam Muhammad killed a sovereign Constituent Assembly and again sacked Prime Minister Mohammad Ali of Bogra nine days later. That was the first US inspired coup. The US has sustained all Pakistan's subsequent military dictators -- at Pakistani people's cost. Has the US stopped dancing with the dictator?

look up to America for support in the unequal fight against Bonapartism are badly off course.

There is no substitute to winning your own battles for gaining freedoms. No one else will help Pakistan or can. Why complain against the administration's habits and its usual magic in producing pre-determined results from a poll? The Army-supported dictators, do not, and perhaps cannot, give up power after an illegal takeover just out of the goodness of their hearts. Too many officers and soldiers have

the Head Honcho or, if you aim low, the many secondary Honchos to cultivate. The word resistance or the art of saying no has not been learnt by these leaders. Most are chocolate cream soldiers. A few of opposition ones, who will have their electoral stolen, will whine about rigging, writing their hands and appeal to the Viceroy (the US Ambassador) to ensure at least safe survival. But nothing will avail. One fears that the election results -- if the polls are not postponed -- will be those the 'managers' had planned. The chances of another more or less five years for Gen. Musharraf seem as good as already in hand. And if he cannot extend these five years into another five later, his failure will amaze.

Not that it is fated. For the most part it is up to (a) the common voters and (b) the leaders of major parties - PPP, PML(N), MQM, ANP and a few others -- to speak with one voice over these gems of wisdom: let Mr. Musharraf be told with due courtesy that the country and democracy have absolutely no adversarial relationship; the two will stand or fall together; his notion that there is a choice between the two is balderdash. Or 'the Army has to be brought in order to send it out' too is hogwash. Army once in cannot go out -- unless it is 'thrown out'.

Now 'throwing out' does not presuppose violence or anarchy. If only the 60 or 70 million voters decide to throw out the infirm politics lock, stock and barrel, all they have to say is 'boo' and vote for a united front of opposition parties. It is that simple. Nor should the opposition parties' uniting for restoring 1973 Constitution in its original form be difficult -- i.e. if they realise what they are up against. Have they realised what stares them in the face? Can they act -- democratically?

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

Are the people of Pakistan capable of recovering democracy? Their parties have not comprehended what they are up against... There is scarcely any political leadership worth its salt. Most politicians have grown up in the lore of how to advance your own case by flattering the Head Honcho or, if you aim low, the many secondary Honchos to cultivate.

It provides the right perspective on the October polls. They are meant to help Musharraf 'tailor' -- a fine description, that -- democracy around himself. To stay modest he employed a euphemism: democracy thing was to be tailored around the needs of Pakistan. Interesting implications inhere: First, he is equating himself with Pakistan the way Louis XIV regarded himself to be the state. He assumes he knows the needs and requirements of the country better than those who made the Constitution or the Parliament's two-thirds majority can discern. Which is why he feels no need to get the National Assembly's approval.

Then, there is the question of stakes: these are obviously high for the Army which wants to be rid of the tiresome and corrupting business of ruling the country directly, inviting blame and ridicule. Under the Musharraf scheme -- designed to be good for a decade at least -- not only all its interests will be adequately protected but through NSC it can go on exercising a hegemonic authority without any responsibility.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. Replying to a question about President Musharraf's role after the Oct 10 election, he put it squarely: "if he holds free and fair elections and retains his uniform, I don't care". He went further and introduced a new malign concept: a 'reasonable timeframe' to be devised for giving Pakistan a complete civilian government. The US wants democracy to be achieved sometime in distant future through measured steps, with perhaps this year's Oct 10 exercise being the first. Are Armitage and Musharraf playing from a common script?

committed crimes on their orders. They all have to stand or fall together. Which is why the rest of the Army dare not betray Gen. Musharraf; it will ensure he stays. Therein lie its interests.

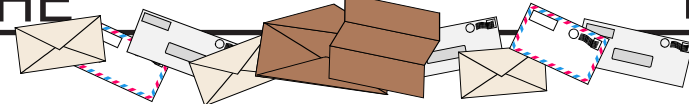
Are the people of Pakistan capable of recovering democracy? Their parties have not comprehended what they are up against. The term administration is perhaps too wide. Specifically, what counts for political purposes is top decision-making officers, whether civilian or uniformed, and the major intelligence agencies; the MI, ISI, IB, FIA and the Special Branches. The rest are less important cogs in the machine. The issue of issues is how can the people, with no guns but with some brains, wrest control of the government from a dictator who has a wide range of resources at its disposal.

One is frankly pessimistic. There is scarcely any political leadership worth its salt. Most politicians have grown up in the lore of how to advance your own case by flattering

Here another force is relevant that has played a malign role in Pakistan: the US. It entered Pakistan politics stealthily in October 1953 by cutting a secret deal with the C-in-C of Pakistan Army, behind the back of the Cabinet and the National Assembly; only a few officials, mainly the Governor General, Defence Secretary and Secretary General seem to have known. The deal comprised Pakistan's entry into bilateral mutual security treaty with the US, involving two multilateral pacts: SEATO and the Baghdad Pact; in return America promised to give Pakistan military

What it amounts to is that for America the services General Musharraf is rendering in the War against Terror are more important than democracy in Pakistan. The US is cynically restarting its familiar role of supporting military dictators with dollars and a few guns -- now only hints of them in future on the condition of good conduct (in the service of the US). Politicians who

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



Students' politics and BUET

We see these days that the left student organisations and the left political elements being backed by BAL and its students front are out to create a wave of students' unrest in all educational institutes with ultimate objective of creating a socio-political crisis in the country. The game plan gets clear when BAL Chief SK Hasina issued an ultimatum to the Government on BUET issue. Failing to present itself openly, the BAL is seen to encourage these left parties to use every possible cause to foment troubles.

After the opening of BUET, the left student's organisations swung into action on the plea of demanding punishment of the culprits responsible for the death of Sony. Even though the government and the university authorities assured that all necessary actions were being taken, they resort to hunger strike by a handful of their cadres. The BUET VC pointed out that six demands of the students were beyond their purview and the two within its authority had already been accepted.

Had these students really cared about academic sessions and the functioning of the universities, they

would have sit for logical discussion. It seems that some quarters are with major objective to do politics rather than attending classes and exams. I would request all political parties to support BUET authorities in this respect for the sake of our national interest setting aside petty political ones.

M Abdur Rab University of Alberta, Canada

TV Guide

When I buy an English newspaper, I expect to find the schedule of English TV programs such as HBO and Star Movies in its TV Guide section. Often programs of these channels

are missing, or wrongly given in your daily. This I have pointed earlier too. But nothing happened. What do you intend to do about it?

Ifthiker Hossain Dhaka

Autorickshaw and rickshaw- relocation as an option!

Rehabilitation is a major and human concern with regards to our wish to resolve the traffic and pollution problems of our beloved city.

Starting with the redundant autorickshaw drivers affected by the ban on 4-wheelers, I would like to

suggest to the authorities that all efforts must be made first to convince and relocate the drivers (not only the vehicles) to their home district as a way of resolving the problem. The authorities, by offering them some kind of incentive can help them go back to their home district, where they can make a fresh start.

With respect to the rickshawpullers, during my travels outside Dhaka City in the recent past, I have noticed a very disturbing trend. Everywhere I have gone, I saw a lot of very young children driving rickshaws. I would like the authorities to seriously look at

relocating the hundreds and thousands of adult rickshawpullers of Dhaka city to outside Dhaka and preferably to their own home districts where they can connect with their roots and build a better future for themselves.

While on the subject, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the authorities for their TV awareness drives on many vital issues like arsenic, depletion of fish stock, female education, health etc. I always admired the various programs on agriculture and am sure it has played a big role in the overall awareness and improvement of agriculture in our country. This is a

very easy way of teaching the masses the cause of a problem and offer practical solutions.

A Thinker Dhaka

On debates

For the last few weeks, I have been really enjoying your Letters Page covering various subjects like the debate on English medium students, Great Army and unrest in University campuses etc.

Our children must learn English as a compulsory subject at all levels. The aim of such education is to help relate the content of the realities of

the world outside. The students are expected not only to become knowledgeable about a particular subject, but to develop a genuine understanding of the principles so that they can apply these principles in other contexts.

I would like to appeal to the government, political parties and the civil society to act unitedly so that debates like army or student politics may never raise and we can prosper as a nation.

Gopal Sengupta Montreal, Quebec, Canada