

Statistics are like miniskirts, they reveal more than they hide

The denial that brings discredit to govt

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STATISTICS are notoriously bad, but some have the yearning to nibble to fill their appetite for some unrevealing facts. Here are some of those crunchy feed! (from USA)

George W. Bush, President: With a mixed bag of business ventures to his credential, Bush's calculative move to sell a minuscule company, which he started in 1970s called Bush Exploration/Arbusto to Spectrum 7, which was latter

acquired by Harken Energy. In return he received lucrative US\$600,000 worth stock, a US\$120,000 contract per year and a lot of buddies in the Texas oil scene. His existence helped Harken score contracts in the Middle East when Harken's management mentioned to the government of Bahrain that President Bush's (Sr) kid "is on our board." No doubt Bush's background with Harken helped them to accelerate their oppression against well-organized campaign in Costa

Rica, trying to stop this company from offshore oil drilling and exploration. Unfortunate for Harken, even with strong backing of Bush they failed and eventually the Costa Rican Minister of the Environment Elizabeth Odio upheld the decision of the government's technical panel, declaring oil development on Costa Rica Caribbean coast "environmentally unviable."

During Bush's campaign for President like oil money gushed out into his campaign coffer: US\$2.8 billion from energy companies and another US\$2.3 million from auto sector. Enron alone donated more than a million dollars to the Republican National Committee. President Bush owns stock in General Electric, BP, Duke Energy, Exxon Mobil, Newmont Gold Mining Corporation, Pennzoil and Tom Brown, Inc.

Dickey Cheney, Vice President: After serving as Secretary of Defense under George Bush Sr., Dick left "public service" and settled in Dallas, Texas the hub of oil giants where he was the CEO of Halliburton a world's major player in the oil industry having a market value of US\$18.2 billion. It is reported that since 1992, Halliburton, has contributed US\$1.6 billion to the campaign of Washington-bound politicians. Cheney's record as a Wyoming Congressman from 1978 to 1989 hints at what's to come. He co-sponsored a measure to open the Artic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling and voted against the Clean Water Act, which required releasing their toxic emission records. Cheney is a member of a group called COMPASS (Committee to Preserve American Security and Sovereignty). One ponders whether or not Dick Cheney is calling all the shots in the Bush administration or just most of them he clearly brings oil interest to the White House.

Spencer Abraham, Secretary of Energy: Coming from Michigan, the state most identified with the automobile industry and home to "Motown" (aka Detroit) and to most major car manufacturers in the US, it is no wonder General Motors, Ford, FaimlerChrysler are on the list of campaign contributors. Though, Abraham lost his race for re-election as Senator in his home state of Michigan, but that didn't disqualify him from directing the Department of Energy whose mission is to "foster a secure and reliable energy system" for US. Given that this new Energy Secretary will be deciding on the thorny issue of fuel economy regulations, which have been the subject of a major environmental pressure campaign in order to reduce the number of gas-guzzling "Sport Utility Vehicles" (SUVs) on American roads, Abraham personally fought to limit fuel-efficiency in SUV's, as well as to cut research into renewable energy and to wipe out the federal gasoline tax. The car industry should now be confident they have nothing to fear. His connections to Lear, the maker of private jets, probably also eschews any hope of taxing aviation as in the United States in this term.

Gale Norton, Secretary of Interior: A former corporate lawyer

and passionate believer in "free-market environmentalism", she is a longtime supporter of wide-open drilling in the Artic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska and in Rocky Mountains. As Secretary of the Interior she informs the President on issues of management of "public" or federally controlled land. When she was Attorney General of Colorado, British Petroleum and Ford were amongst her contributors. An example of her attitude towards Corporate Criminals was set when she settled a case with Robert Friedland, the mining magnate who caused the largest cyanide spill in Colorado history at the Summitville mine in 1992. The settlement was for a paltry sum despite the fact that the government has spent US\$200 million to reclaim it and will spend another 100 years trying to repair the damage. On her appointment, staffer at the Interior Department building down pictures celebrating US national parks and replaced them with pictures of the Trapper Mining Company in Craig, Colorado and its reclamation, where grass was planted after mining operations were done. Other pictures mounted were of an oil derrick off the US coast somewhere. A third is of a dam with US flag on top and another is of the Rosebud Mine in Montana.

Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser: Rice is so conservative; she puts Ronald Regan to a newer shame. Her doctrine is to support only US national interests, and not that of the "international community" which she considers to be a myth. She spent a decade on the Board of oil giant Chevron Corporation; a service that earned her the honour of having one of its super tankers named "Condoleezza". Chevron is a big player in Nigeria where there is increasing US military movement, including training of Nigerian military to police the oil fields and secure pipelines. Before her appointment as Security Adviser, she declared environmental and human rights organizations "The Enemy".

Don Evans, Secretary of Commerce: One of Evan's greatest qualifications of running this agency responsible for promoting job creation, economic growth and sustainable development is that he was George W. Bush's campaign manager and chief fundraiser in three separate elections. Other than that he has been CEO and Chairman of relatively lacklustre oil company called Tom Brown Inc. with interests in the inner western states of the US. Evans was also a Board member of Sharp Drilling, an oil industry contractor. As the Secretary of Commerce he oversees the oceans and air. This will likely torpedo any worthwhile research, science or policy recommendations on the issue of climate change. And since 25 per cent of America's domestic oil and natural gas production comes from offshore drilling the industry must be glad to have a friend on the inside.

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Think for a moment about what is happening. First, there is that fearful list or lists whose preparation has not been either explained or owned (we do not yet know who prepared the list or lists). Second, on the basis of that anonymous list people are being picked up at random. A total of 5,300 people are now in custody. We do not know under what law they have been picked up, how are they being treated, whether or not family members were allowed to see them, how long will they be incarcerated and -- most importantly -- what are the charges against them. Third, there are 24 deaths about which the government has not bothered to tell anybody, not even the wives and the children of the deceased or the relatives, as to how these perfectly healthy persons died. And finally we were told that no one has died as a result of the recent army action in spite of the whole nation knowing about. There is a limit to the indifference that we can take from our government, and lately we have been taking a lot of it. Here are some examples.

First, in a luncheon meeting with several hundred journalists, within a couple of days of the army drive, the Prime Minister instructed her political secretary to give to the press the executive order that launched the joint army operation to curb crime. More than a month has passed and the press is yet to get it. Second, the Prime Minister on two occasions publicly instructed the armed forces to see to it that people are not harassed while the anti-crime drive is on, meaning -- without saying so in public -- that she did not want any more deaths in army custody. Several people have died after those two strictures, including one last Wednesday. Third, the army chief himself assured us that his forces would respect people's rights in dealing with the public. Still the custodial deaths continue.

The no-death claim could be technically correct in some instances. In other words after torturing a suspect severely and when he is about to succumb, the victim is handed over to the police, or sent to some hospital or just left by the way side or sent to his relatives where he ultimately passes away. So technically the person does not die in army custody. Is that what is being meant here? So are we to understand that a healthy citizen's death is a mere technicality for our government? Is a human being a mere garbage bag that one throws over the wall and says my house is clean? Will our armed forces hide behind a technicality to exonerate themselves from actions that they know very well to be fundamentally wrong? Will our government -- freely and fairly elected in a democratic election -- participate in a charade of an explanation that does nothing but twist facts, hides the truth and misleads the press and the people? Where is that concern for ordinary lives, that respect for fundamental rights, that determination to ensure the life for every citizen that constitute the very essence of a government of the people, by the people and for the people? Where is the openness that is so important to a democratic way of life? Twenty-four lives have been lost and we have heard no words from our government except to say that they did not happen in army custody! Ok, then where did

they happen and how? A government under law and one that is entrusted to uphold the Constitution and ensure justice cannot show such indifference to its citizens' lives.

There are some among us who feel that we shouldn't be too concerned about the custodial deaths because these are criminals and they are getting what they deserve. These elements killed many innocent people and made our lives unbearable and as such deserve no mercy from us. Let them have a taste of their own violent medicine, is what these people may tell us. There is also the fact that in the village areas and in most urban slum areas the coming of the army has made life more secure and safe. This is also cited as a reason why we should not pay too much attention to the custodial deaths, which are brushed aside as incidental and unfortunate casualty of a good action.

As we have learnt from history, ends cannot justify means. However noble the end, the means must be just as ethical and acceptable within the broad range of values of the modern world. We cannot emulate the very criminals whom we are trying to eliminate. Then again can we be sure that all those who were killed were murderers, rapists or criminals of that nature? We definitely cannot, and they were not, according to official reports. Except a few none had any significant criminal record to speak about. Then how does it serve our purpose of ridding the society of the worst criminals by killing those who died? Some deaths have already been linked to land disputes where the army was mistakenly involved. Who will answer for those deaths? We should not forget for a moment that democracy, modernity and our own values are about justice before law even for the worst of criminals.

Yes, we have had a terrible problem with law and order. Yes, criminals had nearly taken over our lives. Yes, almost everyday some one or the other was being killed in a gun battle or in committing some criminal act. Yes, our business activities came to a near stand still. And of course yes, our armed forces were called into action to retrieve us from such a state of affairs. To their credit this drive has succeeded considerably in curbing crime. But that does not make them above the law?

We write this column both from a concern for the fundamental rights of our citizens and also from a bigger concern for the relations between the armed forces and the people. After decades of being associated with martial law and all its accompanying vices of corruption and abuse of power the armed forces have made a name for themselves as a strong pillar of democracy and rule of law. Over the last twelve years through their strict adherence to their fundamental task of protecting the nation and keeping a safe distance from all civilian activities and also by coming to our aide during natural calamities our army, navy and air force earned our respect and love. In the recent times their work as the foremost UN peacekeepers has also earned them and the country the highest of respect in the international arena, of which we are sincerely proud. We must all work together to protect this well deserved respect.

The army leaders may say that on the one hand government calls them to catch criminals and on the other we in the press criticise them for what they are doing. The fact is that there are rules even in war. The Geneva Convention prevents an enemy soldier from being killed once he surrenders and is taken into custody. WE are NOT at war, and our citizens are not the enemies that an army is supposed to fight. Still OUR people are dying in their hands (or after they have been in their hands) of OUR OWN army. This can definitely be prevented if greater care is taken in conducting the operation.

To the best of our knowledge, throughout the operations as peacekeepers abroad none had died in custody of our own armed forces. Those were more trying circumstances and in many cases the adversary in Sierra Leon, Kosovo, East Timor, and some such places were heavily armed. Yet our forces performed their duties with impeccable discipline and restraint. The result was that none died in their custody. Why can't that brilliant performance be replicated in their own homeland? Why can't the same discipline and restraint be shown here?

The drive against criminals must be made more effective and less death prone. It can be done. What is happening is an uncontrolled use of force at the interrogation level and total disregard for rights of those who are being picked up. We must remember that we cannot resort to breaking the law in catching the law-breakers. If we do then we lose the moral high ground and just replace one form of violence by another. Neither rule of law nor democracy is served in that process. For the record we want to point out that except for the Kolkata arrests of Tuesday, even after one month in operation, none of the 15 criminals for whom the government had announced Tk 50,000 award has been arrested. Similarly none of the eight for whom Tk 1 lakh award was announced has so far been nabbed. In fact, all from the

big crime syndicate of Dhaka who really control all the big tender business and most of the construction business in the city have eluded the army drive.

In conclusion we say, individuals lie, so do private organisations. But governments don't. For if it does then the whole edifice of governance crumbles, public trust evaporates and the sacred covenant between the government and the governed disappears because no longer can the people believe what the government is saying. What we find extremely disconcerting about the PIO's comments is that they are fundamental distortion of facts, in fact they are lies hidden in Machiavellian technicalities. The PIO being who he is, couldn't have said so on his own. He was no doubt instructed to go for a complete denial about the deaths related to army operation.

Therefore the question is, are we seeing the beginning of a government practice which, instead of sharing facts with the public, both pleasant and unpleasant, will now feed us lies or grossly distorted versions of events? We are used to getting that from the political parties and our politicians. We are even used to hearing them on the floor of the parliament. Tragically speeches of Prime Ministers of both sides have not been immune from this disease. What appears new is the official government spokesman and the armed forces are now getting into that act. Truth had long been in exile from our political discourse. For the PIO's comments are any indication, the process is on to exile it from official government statements.

In her aforementioned luncheon meeting with the journalists the Prime Minister had committed that the army would be withdrawn at the earliest possible moment. Now we are hearing that it will be here till the task is finished. Meanwhile the task remains undefined, unspecified and ever expanding.

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