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Monopolised cellphone business

Cellphone service was launched in Bangladesh in 1989 by CityCell. Apparently, Bangladesh is an ideal country for cellphone business. Though the per capita income of Bangladesh is \$400 and most people live under poverty line, more than two million people use mobile phones.

But cellphone market has been monopolised by the mobile phone cartel.

GrameenPhone, Airtel, CityCell and Sheba are four mobile phone providers in Bangladesh. The tariff is very high. Due to business monopoly, competition has been marginalised. The BRTC should monitor the situation and set the rules to cut cellphone tariff in Bangladesh.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English, Dhaka University



How heartless we are....

On Thursday December 25, 2003, in a tragic plane crash in Benin we lost 16 of our beloved people. They were army personnel representing Bangladesh in a UN mission in Sierra Leone and Liberia. After successful completion of their duty, they had been on their way home to Bangladesh. They had lots of dreams when they boarded the plane. But destiny was written differently. Their body and dreams all crashed in the Atlantic. Even for two days, none of the relatives could know the fate of their home coming fellows. I do not blame the fate or destiny they have suffered. But the reaction of the nation hurt me.

They came merely as the headlines in all the national TV channels at night on 27 December 2003 as commercial news and nothing more. It reminded me of my days in Sierra Leone. One long year devoid of relatives and dear ones, we did a tremendous job for Sierra Leone, we risked our lives to the sword edge of death meeting the RUF leaders like General Issa, rebel Brigade commander Colonel Basemarine and many others. Many lives of Nigerian and other West African ECOMOG troops

perished while facing those rebels. It is we, the Bangladeshis, risked our lives, faced them, brought them to the negotiating table, arranged arms hand over and finally organised fair elections in Sierra Leone. Besides, we provided free medical treatment to people where the medical infrastructure had totally collapsed. We helped them to build their ruined homes and to build mosques.

What we got in return? The UN did not pay a single dollar more to us for this service. We were not asked to do such welfare works under the UN mandate. This is our national heritage to be beside the distressed. But we were flowered by Sierra Leoneans. Everywhere we moved we were applauded by the local people. They started considering us as their real friends. Our national image to the international community was brightened. We brought reputation for our nation. Those who have died in that accident were the predecessors of us and they upheld our image in the same manner.

The deaths have shocked Sierra Leone and Liberia. They mourned the deaths as if their own relatives have died. But here, except a news headline, no sense of sorrow was reflected in any of the TV channels. Those who died could not go seeing

us what a heartless nation we are. The TV channels, it seemed to me, were broadcasting foreign news.

Do we have no time to stand a while for them, no time to sacrifice our precious entertainment and say only for once but aloud together "we are proud of you"?

An army officer who also served in Sierra Leone
On e-mail

Sufferings of pilgrims
As a non-ballot pilgrim from Uttara area, I, accompanied by three of my colleagues, visited the Hajj camp medical centre at Ashkona on December 28, 2003 for taking meningitis vaccine which is a must for every pilgrim as prescribed by the Saudi government. We had with us a request letter from the concerned Hajj agent addressed to the medical officer of the Hajj camp. But when we approached the medical camp personnel to vaccinate us, they refused to do so.

They advised us to go to the civil surgeon's office at Malibagh.

We came to know from the Hajj office that they want every pilgrim who comes to the medical camp with necessary papers to be vaccinated, because they think that it might not be possible for everybody to go to the respective civil sur-

geon's office. The Hajj camp authorities appeared to be sympathetic to the pilgrims.

We smelt a cold dispute between the medical personnel and the general administration of the Hajj camp causing sufferings to the innocent pilgrims. We wonder why specific instructions from the ministry of health to the Ashkona medical centre have not been given. We know that this vaccine is given free of cost. So common sense goes that nobody is answerable for the number of vaccines they offer, if proper statistics are maintained.

Under such circumstances, may we request the authorities concerned to investigate the matter and instruct the Hajj camp medical centre, Ashkona, to serve the pilgrims coming over there with proper identification with a view to reducing the sufferings of the pilgrims.

MA Matin

Uttara, Dhaka

Indian IT centres

People who have a bit of IT knowledge must be aware of those "Indian franchised IT Centres". Let's call them IFIC for the time being.

The question is, do they really have any contribution in creating good or quality software developers in our country?

Once, I used to work for one of those IFICs. After working there for a few months, what I noticed is as follows.

1. They offer a lot of courses with fancy names. But, the contents of the courses are not so practical. Sometimes, there is not even any experienced teacher to teach the subject.

2. A couple of years ago, they used to promise a lot of things like 100% job guarantee, degree from Australian university, bla bla. I would rather call it cheating than advertising.

3. Tuition fees are very high compared to the service they offer. But, most of the people agree to pay that high amount because they are promised that they will get a job once they get their degree (but most of the time they do not).

There are many more complaints.

What is the future of the students graduating from these IFICs? Are they eligible to enter into any software firm in Bangladesh? Can they compete with hundreds of IT talents graduating from public/private universities every year? Software firms do not like to employ any graduate from IFICs.

In conclusion, I would like to say that these IFICs are simply taking away our money to India which is not good for our economy. They are also destroying the future of our youths.

Shouldn't this be stopped?

Firoz Mannan

Uttara, Dhaka

NYT smear campaign

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed's article of 23

December on the NYT editorial smearing Bangladesh and Mr. Edward al Hussainy's views on it are worth commenting upon. The journalist in question, Mr. Shoaib Chowdhury is a non-descript Bangladeshi journalist. Yet, the NYT has found time and space for an editorial on him. Would the NYT have written this article had he been stopped from going somewhere else and not Israel?

Years ago, Ms. Taslima Nasreen, a rare Bangladeshi novelist, found space for a front page interview in the Washington Post. Her credentials were that she chose to deride Islam and earned the wrath of the people. Would the WP have interviewed her if her subject of attack was not Islam and those condemning her were not Muslims? I doubt that. The fact that both the NYT and the WP are Jewish owned does raise in our minds legitimate questions about a Jewish conspiracy.

The NYT editorial is also detectable because it uses a legitimate action by the government of Bangladesh to smear its 130 million people. We feel legitimately proud, despite many problems, that we are winning our struggle for democracy. After years of military dictatorship, that was encouraged and sustained by so-called democratic forces that these papers represent, we have since 1991 achieved 3 successive changes of government where the people's will has been properly reflected. We have had just 12 years of this process of democratisation which, when seen on a comparative scale with the US process of democratisation, would look better for even as late as the 1960s, after a century of such growth the US had not given the blacks their civil rights. The

about Bangladesh and terrorism is also very unfortunate, for since 9/11 Bangladesh with over 100 million of Muslims has not seen any terrorist act, nor has any terrorist turned up in the country.

The conclusion drawn by Mr. Hussainy about the arrest of Mr. Chowdhury and lack of press freedom in Bangladesh is also unacceptable. Mr. Chowdhury violated a Bangladeshi law that prohibits travel to Israel. Journalists are not immune from the law and Mr. Chowdhury's incarceration was a legal action. As for RSF's statistics about arrests of journalists in Bangladesh, Mr. Hussainy should first find out how many of these people were arrested or intimidated for expressing views under freedom of information. In fact, majority of these cases that he cites could as well be for activities that have nothing to do with journalism. In Bangladesh, there are many who work in newspapers but are hardly journalists as understood abroad. Why should their arrests be seen as lack of press freedom when they are arrested for activities that violate the law? Does Mr. Hussainy know that in Dhaka city alone there are a few dozen daily newspapers, and many, who serve these papers

as journalists, have other occupations as well? We, who live in Bangladesh, know how much freedom journalists have, for there are really no libel laws against them. And on the issue of Israel itself, Dr. Fakhruddin has pointed out that two newspapers, namely the DS and the New Age, carried in recent times pro-Israeli articles on which many people expressed views both in favour of and against Israel.

Like Mr. Hussainy, we would not like to see any Jewish conspiracy when it comes to Muslim interests. But facts compel us to think otherwise.

Shahjahan Ahmed
Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka

Dead peacekeepers

First, I would like to express my deep shock and condolence to the bereaved families. There are no words to say to lessen their pain. Only those who have lost their dear ones can feel the pain. Second, it is surprising that our officers boarded an uncertified plane and took off from an irregular airport. Why they had to board that plane? Why they failed to board a regular aircraft?

I personally knew Major Rawnak who left behind his wife and a six-year old kid among others. He was our senior cadet when we were in Comilla Cadet College. He is also elder brother of one of our batch mates. What a tragedy for them? A hearty reunion turned into a goodbye from far away without a single word spoken.

Mohammad Fakhrul Islam Chowdhury
Cantonment R/A, Dhaka

Who is he?

Thanks to Mr. Badal Habib for his letter published in The Daily Star on 29 December. I fully agree with him.

It is also my question to the UNO - who is Mr. Bush to decide the fate of another country's elected president? Is Mr. Bush the president of the world?

Why Mr. Bush is trying to impose his views ignoring the world opinion and the UN charter?

Although the Americans always cry for democracy, I want to know how do they define the American style of democracy?

Why are they violating the human rights everywhere, especially in the Muslim countries?

What are the international human rights organisations doing? Why are they silent now?

Very often, these human right organisations poke their nose in other third world (LDC) countries and talk of democracy, human rights, freedom of press etc. But they never speak on America's violation of freedom, democracy and human rights. This is really disgraceful.

MA Bashir
Dhaka

Strike by travel agents

I consider the strike called by the Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (ATAB) from January 1, to protest reduction of agency commissions by airlines an irresponsible move. At present, travel agents get nine per cent commission from airlines. I believe airlines have decided to pay only seven per cent to agents with effect from January 1.

It is well known that travel agents share their commissions with travellers and sell tickets keeping only two per cent for themselves. Many agents keep only one per cent to undercut his fellow agent. Some agents even go out to share with travellers the incentives given to agents by airlines during lean periods. Travel agents' undercutting each other has been going on for many years now and the ATAB has failed to stop this dirty game. Whatever may be the reduction of commissions by airlines, I am quite certain that travel agents in Bangladesh will continue to do business keeping only a fraction of the benefit for themselves. In reality the passengers would be paying more if airlines reduce the commission given to travel agents.

Travel agents in Bangladesh are probably not aware that airlines are now selling tickets directly to passengers through internet known as e-travel. In all developed countries due to sale and purchase of air tickets through internet air ticketing business is gradually shifting away from travel agents. This shift in business may have prompted the airlines to reduce agent's commission and go for cost cutting. In Dhaka, many expatriates are also buying tickets through internet. In the coming years, travel agents will be left with only organising package tours. Under these circumstances, I doubt if the ATAB will be able to coerce airlines to pay more commission.

Ziauddin Ahmed
On e-mail

BTV misses deadline

Star City (DS December 28, 2003) reports, "BTV satellite transmission could not meet the December 25 deadline, as the information ministry did not yet ink a deal with Asia Sat." Is it an old story?

Syed Waliullah
Dhaka



Former PM's observations

This refers to a news item covering a former prime minister's address to a rally organised by Bangladesh Non-government Primary Teachers' Association at Paltan Maidan on December 26, 2003 (DS 27.12.2003).

From the list of speakers it is very difficult to distinguish this organisation from an 'Awami Primary Teachers' Association', if there was any. This is the saddest example of corrupt practice of politicising everything from the root level. If the leaders of this organisation change their colour when their demands are met by the present government, shall we see the incumbent PM addressing the same rally organised by the same men and women?

But my observation is aimed at the release of statistical data by our former PM regarding corruption and other issues allegedly perpetrated by the present government. It is very apparent up to what extent a former PM could spit venom against a government which has not completed even half its tenure.

The former PM has said that the present government has released 70,000 criminals from jails. Is it so? Can she bring some acceptable proof in support of her claim? Thousands of alleged criminals are languishing in our jails without trial, some for real crimes others for their political attachments. Those lucky ones having this or that political connection are getting bail on which no government can have any control, until we change our criminal laws enacted more than a hundred years ago. But, in any case, the number is not 70,000, nowhere near it.

The present government, after coming to power, lodged criminal cases against many of the opposition leaders including the former PM. But could the government influence the honourable courts to keep them in jail? Or is it an act of kindness of the present government to their political opponents?

Most satirical is the former PM's data about grabbing of state money by the ruling party men, the amount of which is a horrendous Tk 24,000 crore. Where did she get this data? Is there any organisation which can support her if she is challenged in a court of law for this kind of ugly attacks. Does she know what is our development budget and what will be the figures in terms of percentage of the development budget?

The last Awami League government deserves some credit for raising the literacy rate. But again this was the result of the present PM's bold decision to waive tuition fees for girls up to class ten. In no way literacy rate can fall to 60 per cent from 65 per cent in two years as claimed by the former PM.

Our only desire is to see the country prospering, who is ruling is a matter of secondary importance.

Dewan G. Ahmed, Shyamoli, Dhaka



NYT story

Many years ago I had an argument with an American friend where I raised the issue of the US media's blind support for Israel. I cited the sacrosanct New York Times' one-sided view of the Palestinian Intifada as an example of the stranglehold the Zionist lobby had over the mass media in the US. At that time, his simple counter argument proved fatal when he uttered, "New York Times is a public limited company; its shares are publicly traded in the market accessible to all, it's a transparent company, therefore the ownership is not concentrated to a vested group or entity. The insinuation that a single lobby group (Zionist/Israeli) could influence the opinions/news being published is absolutely ludicrous". I was dumbstruck. I had little knowledge. I was silenced. I had lost the argument.

It was not until much later when I read (probably in The Economist) that 88% of the voting rights of the New York Times' board basically belonged to one Jewish family (Sulzberger/Dryfoos). That being the case, it is not surprising that the NYT has chosen to marginalise a Muslim majority country like Bangladesh – no matter how secular, or democratic, or moderate most Bangladeshis are; they (NYT) have been the mouthpiece of a pro-Zionist/Israeli lobby since Adolph S. Ochs purchased the controlling shares in 1896. What is unfortunate is that despite the billions of petro dollars amassed by our so-called Arab/Muslim brothers, the Arab leadership has failed miserably to counterbalance this lopsided view of the western media towards Muslims.

Farjad Ahmed, Rajshahi House, Bara Maghbazar, Dhaka



Another thing I'd like to see is how the Bush administration deals with the trial with regards to the WMD, which was the reason they cited for going to war. They had not used the Kurdish genocide or corrupt administration as reasons for the war. Since the WMD have not turned up yet, will Bush still attempt to try Saddam as possessor of illegal WMD, or simply as the hub of all evil? Maybe I am being too hasty, maybe the WMD will be found yet! I am greatly to see the recent interview that Bremer gave, denying statements made

just a few short days ago by Blair, that nuclear laboratories were found in Iraq. Talk about "sexed up" statistics! And the Hutton Inquiry report hasn't even come out yet! One might suggest that the Bush administration start doing something about the smaller weapons that are so prolific in Iraq today.

The guns and bombs are causing more deaths than the mythical WMD have caused in this war.

An excellent illustration of America's "exceptionalism" is how the war is influencing their domestic politics. Bush may say that he is not going to use this war for re-election in November 2004, but given the state of the economy and the Democrats, Americans are probably going for another term of Bush. On the other side of the pond, the very same war is spelling all kinds of woes for Blair, with Claire Short suggesting he resign immediately. Given the Hutton Inquiry debacle, the Gordon Brown rebellion, top-up fees and foundation hospitals, it's been a remarkably bad year for Blair. I look forward to the next year with much trepidation. Hey, if nothing else, the Michael Jackson trial should be entertainment enough!

Shahpar Selim
Department of Geography, London
School of Economics

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