

Audit report on seven ministries

Financial mismanagement at its worst

THE audit report of the Comptroller and Auditor General's office has found seven ministries silent over an unspent amount of Tk 867 crore which was supposed to be returned to the exchequer. That is indeed the ultimate in financial mismanagement.

The report shows how the ministries concerned have made a mockery of basic financial rules. It is not known what they have done with that huge amount of money. It is a big blow to the credibility of the government's financial management which can only engender an apparition that the country might be a 'bottomless basket'. And when such an incredible account of public finance management is reported, the possibility of large scale misappropriation could not be ruled out.

After all, what signal will different ministries, departments, directorates and outlying offices get from such gross violation of rules of financial accountability in the ministries put on the spot? The government and public sector functionaries might begin to feel that budgetary allocations are something that need not be accounted for.

Unspent money is itself a reflection of incompetence in that the purposes for which it was allocated were not served. Moreover, keeping the government in the dark about it lends itself to an interpretation that the allocation or some of it might have been misspent.

Audit reports that expose big flaws in public finance management were submitted in the past also. But governments hardly ever felt the necessity for follow-up -- let alone take tough action against the errant agencies or individuals. It usually turns a blind eye to the heap of financial anomalies and irregularities.

Financial transparency and discipline are pivotal to effective governance. The government should immediately go for corrective steps to have the ministries account for the unspent money and ensure full compliance with financial rules from now on. It is not an issue that the decision-makers can ignore without exposing the exchequer to huge losses and the national development efforts to peril. We must not also forget that the country's track record in tackling corruption has been very poor. If the government wants to slay the demon of corruption, which has a stranglehold on society as a whole, it has to do some house-cleaning job, so it seems.

Toxic fish

Formalin adulteration must be stopped

FORMALDEHYDE is typically used to preserve dead bodies in hospitals, laboratories, and morgues. This is the substance with which a large proportion of fish, mostly of the imported variety, that is sold in kitchen markets across the country is adulterated. Formalin is nothing more than the liquid form of formaldehyde, and it is shocking that such a toxic contaminant should be in such common use.

The issue of formalin adulteration has been widely reported in the media, and various government departments seem to have taken cognisance of the fact that it presents a serious public health crisis. But that is where government action has ended. There has been much finger-pointing and buck-passing between the Public Health Laboratory under the DCC and Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute under the commerce ministry as to who is responsible.

The stance of the PHL, that they are powerless to act as fish does not come under the purview of the Pure Food Ordinance of 1958 is unpersuasive. Nor do the excuses offered by the BSTI hold much water. But the ultimate blame for this dismal state of affairs must fall to the government.

There can scarcely be an issue more deserving of official oversight than the food we eat and the danger to the public from contaminated or toxic food products. The government should have given this issue far greater priority and long ago sorted out whatever differences existed between the relevant agencies in order to effectively resolve the crisis. Sufficient fidelity to the duty of care the government owes the public is what has been missing.

The first step would be to institute a food inspection regimen to monitor the fish that is brought to market, and to keep adulterated fish away from the consumers. And a crackdown on those who peddle such toxic produce is long overdue. Finally, wholesalers and traders inject formalin into fish to simulate freshness due to the shortage of adequate freezing facilities and poor infrastructure that makes transportation of fish time-consuming. Official attention to remedy these problems would go a long way to helping ensure the freshness of the fish that we eat.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

ANGLADESH Constitution, though side-stepped either due to titanic presence of a leader or through extra-Constitutional measures in the past, has the general characteristics of a rigid Constitution. It is written; amendment procedures have been made difficult; in case of amendment to the Preamble, form of government, and the Fundamental Principles of State Policy it provides for referendum in addition to two-thirds majority in Parliament; legislative powers vested in Parliament have been subordinated to the provisions of the Constitution; and the Supreme Court has been made the guardian of the Constitution and the fundamental rights enumerated in the Constitution.

The founding fathers of the American Constitution were not free of the fear that even legislative bodies can be tyrannical and felt the need to enact a law superior to the legislature itself and put restraint on it from becoming despotic and absolutist. President James Madison in the Federalist Paper laid great importance to guard the society against the oppression of the rulers and also to guard one part of the society against the injustices of the other. Edmund Burke was acutely aware of the possibility of the cruelest oppression which the majority can inflict upon the minority. In the case of Bangladesh the ruling party (not the four-party coalition) received marginally more percentage of popular votes than the main opposition party in the last general election. Can one then morally support the cabalistic efforts of the numerical majority to impose on the nation their vision of propriety through amending a document universally regarded as sacred? Is it of great consequence to a poverty stricken nation whose photographs should be hung in government offices or how quickly the elected members of Parliament should be sworn in? Equally, why was it necessary to draw the curtain upon a yet unresolved debate over how women members are to be elected?

Constitutional amendments by definition are of great importance to any nation. That is why amendment

procedures are made so difficult. Clearly a Constitution is created to facilitate formation of a government which would serve and not rule the people because there may be time when the government does not represent the people and its interests and those of the people are not the same. In such cases as Henry David Thoreau advocated in the 19th century for the people to publicly disobey the laws of an unjust government which in turn would encourage and bring other people to oppose the government. It is, therefore, of utmost necessity that the government of the day should not use its executive powers to serve only parochial interests by giving legal coverage to such acts on the strength of brute majority. It has

tially communitarian in the creation of a solidaristic whole so that the government is impelled to respond to, implement and embody the vision of this collective solidarity and to create conditions to nurture its growth.

Inevitably conflict would arise among communitarians resulting in fractious groups in which the government has to take the side of one group or the other. Clearly then an ethical question would arise as perceived by Italian political scientist Luigi Bonante while discussing the difference between the individual and the state. He argues that while the state has sufficient tools to defend its rights and reject its duties, or the individual as recipient it is much harder to elude his duties than

one in Asia in terms of violence against journalists. She deplored the recent attack on Dr. Humyun Azad and several journalists at the Dhaka University campus and killing of journalist Manik Saha. CPJ Executive Director urged the Bangladesh government to vigorously investigate and prosecute all those who murdered, assaulted or threatened Bangladeshi journalists.

What is truly surprising is that repressive rulers fail to realise that Bangladeshis of different generations were baptised in fire. If the forties generation and their predecessors decided voluntarily to walk into the 'land of the believers', the sixties generation and their predecessors fought to walk out of that mythical world. When Pakistan's

power, rapacity of the rich and the powerful are present afflictions of Bangladesh society presaging its eventual disintegration. Drunk with the overwhelming moral power of the 'majority rule' added with the ability to ostracise and enforce conformity or exclusion of the non-conformists' warnings against such authoritarian acts could find resonance in De Tocqueville's observation that 'the moral authority of the majority is partly based on the notion that there is more intelligence and wisdom in a number of men united than a single individual and that the number of legislators is more important than their quality'.

The Orwellian tyranny of the majority is further compounded by increasing activism of Islamists who

been corrupted by religious extremism. But disquieting factors like almost total collapse of law and order in the country, enduring character of violence by the authorities against opposition parties, deteriorating living standard of the people, decay in the infrastructure of daily life, overwhelming greed of the rulers, existence of patronage based system of extraction from ordinary people, inability to deliver political goods like education, health, economic opportunities etc. point towards failure of governance. One must remember that state collapse is a long term degenerative disease and an extreme case of governance problem. It is also to be recognised that regimes unable to raise the quality of life of the people run the risk of popularly based challenges.

If we accept David Held's (of London School of Economics) assertion that we no longer live in a world of discrete national communities but in a world, in David Held's words, 'overlapping communities of fate', then the Muslims in Bangladesh are a majority in their own country but are surrounded by Hindu majority India and Buddhist majority Myanmar and in the vicinity by non-Muslim South East and Far East Asian countries. It would, therefore, be prudent not to go for an excessive display of Islamic exuberance, and more so as the Muslim diaspora in the West has been experiencing 'spiraling progressive alienation' and is forced to continually negotiate the parameters of minority citizenship.

Under these conditions the interests of the government would be best served not by increasing repression on dissent but seeking common ground keeping in mind that five-year term is not divinely ordained nor elections before the term end unknown in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the world. It is imperative to realise before it is too late that country is always more important than political parties or individuals.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

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been said that a state's raison d'etre does not lie in the protection of equal individual rights but in the guarantee of an inclusive process of opinion and will formation in which free and equal citizens reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in the equal interest of all (The Political-David Ingram 2002).

Hence the concept of popular sovereignty which though stemmed from efforts to dissociate from absolutist regimes and central to the present discourse, argues that popular sovereignty cannot be totally delegated and that a framework of unbroken accountability of the government has to be maintained to guard against Lord Acton's proverbial warning about corruption of power. This strand of argument is also supported by Thoreau's reluctance to 'resign his conscience to the legislator since every man has a conscience... I think we should be men first and subjects afterwards. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right'. The idea is not to rebel against a lawfully elected government but to communicate one's dissent as forcefully as possible, to be essen-

to achieve his freedom. This asymmetry provides strong argument for the protection of human rights. Unfortunately the confrontational politics in Bangladesh does not help create an environment for respect for human rights.

US State Department's 2003 Human Rights Report has termed Bangladesh's human rights record as 'poor' with violence being a pervasive feature of politics. The report accused the security forces of committing 'a number of politically motivated and extrajudicial killings' and of using 'unwarranted lethal force'. Nearly all abuses went unpunished, the report added, and the resulting climate of impunity remained a serious obstacle to ending abuse and killings. The report further alleged that the government arrested and detained persons arbitrarily under draconian laws. As if Berlin based Transparency International's labeling of Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world was not enough, the people had to hear from the Executive Director of The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) that Bangladesh ranked number

founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah declared at Dhaka that only Urdu would be the state language in Pakistan the students rebelled culminating in the 1952 language movement which proved to be the irreparable fracture in the foundation of the newly formed Muslim League from power only to be shackled by the martial law regime of General Ayub Khan. Then came the glorious War of Liberation. This very brief walk through history is to emphasise the utter uselessness of repression against Bangladeshis attempted at intervals by both foreigners as well as aberrant compatriots only to fail again and again.

Ordinarily one would have thought that almost all of the 130 million Bangladeshis speaking the same language, belonging to the same race, and for most part practising the same religion should have a coherent, cogent and non-dissident society free from the risk of the contagion of chaos. But the opposite appears to be the case. Intolerant of opposing views, sclerosis of thought, mono-centric locus

wish to recreate a truly Islamic society not simply by imposing the sharia but by establishing an Islamic state where religious edicts will be integrated into all aspects of society. US State Department's Religious Freedom Report of 2002 recognised the disadvantages faced by the minority community in access to jobs in government, in the military and in political office. Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) report of July last year observed that the Bangladesh government was not doing enough to prevent the country from becoming a haven for Islamic terrorists. Washington based Centre for Strategic and International Studies in its Transnational Threat Update of July last year stated: 'The current security climate in Bangladesh may allow terrorist groups to organise attacks using a radiological dispersal device. Concerns over this possibility are plausible given that radio substance have proven accessible to terror groups within the country' (http://www.csis.org/tn4)

Though critical of human rights abuses the western powers have not yet labeled Bangladesh as having

Who should get this year's Nobel Peace Prize?

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

IT is not a tough question as it appears. And a simple layman's answer is: one who is devoted and committed to establish peace at home and abroad, and abhors war in all its manifestations, deserves the coveted laurel of Nobel prize for peace. And you need not go for a deep dive in an ocean, nor fly sky-high to find such personalities. Such 'peace-men' are already known and famed world over. Just look around and survey the global scenario with master actors active there and you find your choice.

However, the world peace-market is already agog with a heavy and longlist of some 178 candidates, so far proposed by different groups and agencies for this year's Nobel Peace Prize, this being the largest list of candidates in the history of this prestigious annual award. The list includes the world's most leading figures, including US President Bush, British PM Blair, French President Chirac, Pope John Paul. Among these aspirants, names of Bush and Blair, and I would like to add Israel's PM Sharon's name to make it a 'trio' outshining the rest of the candidates at least for this year's peace award.

In order to understand and justify the acceptability of the peace 'axis of the trio', namely, Bush-Blair-Sharon, as the most formidable candidates, we can have a glimpse, in brief, into their peace activities, particularly during the last two years. The history of last two years is lying open before everybody with their irrefutable track-record in their peace mission, overcoming the heavy odds and obstacles created by some world leaders, lacking foresight.

The universal truth is that the events, good or bad, that lead to the making of history, take their shape according to the interpretation

made from different angles. From one angle or viewpoint, what is presented as angelic, may be painted as devilish from another angle. Hence the victorious are always landed as heroes, while the vanquished lies down as a rogue waiting for inevitable punishment. As they say, even the devil is not so black as he is painted. The devil has its own glamour, surrounded by sincere devil-worshippers. Similarly, US President Bush, British PM Blair and Israeli PM Sharon are not as bad as they are projected by

that radical change was needed to ensure that this good old Earth of God once again become a 'paradise on earth', with peace, security and prosperity reigning supreme. That is why Bush, along with his closest ally Blair, put his hands on the neck of that greatest of the great devil Saddam, catching him red-handed - while he was getting ready to 'violate' the world peace, with his massive collection of WMD. Undoubtedly, Bush had to swallow many unpalatable and uncharitable remarks from vested quarters for

tumult, following the great fall of Saddam, though there are still some 'rowdy elements' around, to mock the dead sacrifices made by the US forces, both in money and lives, preparations are now afoot for handing over the full control of the authority to the people through holding a country-wide general election within a year or so, as professed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's representative after a week-long tour of Iraq, to give the most-wanted 'UN-touch' to the US stand of unavoidable delay in clearing the

also to the peoples of the world. But they forget one thing. There is a missing link, between a 'lie' and a 'truth'. A lie and truth always go together like inseparable twins, having rather an embryonic link. One cannot live without the other. They can make history and they can mar history at the same time. That is why history is often full of 'true lies' or 'lying truth'. Had there been no 'lie', nobody could realise what 'truth' is. It is the darkness that makes the light more dazzling when it goes behind the screen. Exception proves the rule. Hence if Bush and

matter of Bush, just have a cursory look at the sub-continent where the two nuke rivals, India and Pakistan, had at last agreed on a basic roadmap aimed at solving all of their problems, including Kashmir, that had been a bone of contention for the last five decades. It was a miracle that the two countries which had fought two wars and a third one was averted due to the timely diplomatic intervention by America. There was a sigh of relief all around due to this unexpected development. And the credit for this latest U-turn by two arch-rivals to agree to go for a 'composite dialogue', on all issues, including Kashmir, goes undoubtedly to Bush for his behind the scene but active and most fruitful role -- to bring about lasting peace in this region. Nobody can deny that President Bush had hit the right chord at the right time and at the right place. It won't be at all surprising if America allows both India and Pakistan to be on their respective nuclear tracks, but under the watchful eyes of America. Undoubtedly, this would nicely juxtapose with the US strategy to ensure peace in the whole of South Asian region.

From this brief analysis we can conclude that 'all roads lead to Rome'. Hence the recommendation already made by some groups or agencies that this year's Nobel Prize for Peace should be awarded to Bush and Blair deserves utmost attention of the Peace Award Committee. However, the third name of Israeli PM Sharon should be added to the names of Bush and Blair, to make it a strong 'trio' for the Peace Prize. Thus the dream for world peace for the trio would come true and the peoples of the world would celebrate the day as a great victory for the champions of peace.

AMM Shahabuddin is a retired UN official

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some because all the three are working for establishing peace in the world by cleansing the devilish elements from peace roadmap.

"America Unbound": Bush's foreign policy for peace

In a recent review of a new publication, titled, "America Unbound", published in an Western weekly, the reviewer had presented president Bush as a thorough-bread statesman and diplomat, giving a new turn to US foreign policy to fit in the fast-changing world scenario. The bottom line of the review is that president Bush is not an ordinary fellow who rose from a "callow" man to the position of a governor of one of the states of America, then within a few years made a successful entry into the US presidency. Therefore, he is not just a 'bone-headed', man with less brain and more brawn. He is a perfect politician, knowing well where to put his hands and mouth at right time. By doing so, Bush might have turned US foreign policy upside down but

his noble mission. But he faced boldly the opposition posed by anti-war groups and leaders. Perhaps the anti-war forces against Bush lacked the foresight about the most powerful long-lasting impact of freeing the world's second-largest oil wealth in Iraq from the clutches of an intransigent dictator Saddam who was a perfect 'blue-eyed boy' of America during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. They failed to catch the theme of Bush mission in Iraq that it would bring a two-pronged result: First, it would clip the wings of an uncooperative over-ambitious Arab dictator and cut him to size, putting up a hard lesson for other Arab leaders. Secondly, it would add further strength to Israel, who has been long working as a 'security guard' of America in the Middle East, to play a more gleeful role in establishing complete peace in the region.

Bush and honey-seeking bees

Now that the much-desired peace has come to stay in Iraq after the

debris to hold the election. At this crucial stage when America wants other world leaders, who had opposed US-war on Iraq, to share the 'whiteman's burden', they seem to have realised their mistake and are now eager to extend their hands of cooperation to share with America the juicy fruits of peace in Iraq, by taking part in Iraq's reconstruction programme. Peace, soaked with honey, seems to be attracting more 'bees' than expected to the last laugha of the White House. Money not only talks, but it can also buy peace. It all depends on how you use it. After all, honey always attracts more bees than vinegar. President Bush, as a peace-lover, knows it well and he also knows how to net the honey-loving bees. Bush, as a successful peace-strategist, wants to enjoy honey-moon with the 'bees' gathered in one honey-comb.

A 'lie' and truth: Twins?

There are still many who accuse both Bush and Blair of telling blatant lies not only to their own peoples but

Blair had lied in the greater interest of truth, they can't be blamed.

It is argued that during the last one year or so, since the fall of that 'Thief of Baghdad', neither the UN weapons inspectors, nor over one thousand American weapons experts, who had literally ploughed through the soil of Iraq from one end to the other, including Saddam's 'Rat hole', couldn't trace a single WMD. So what? Whether any WMD is found or not, matters little. Using the WMD phobia as a strong shield, the objective has been achieved in establishing a 'highway to peace' with change of an evil regime. The end always justifies the means. As they say, in love and war everything is fair. Therefore, those who had shown the courage and conviction to turn the table in favour of establishing peace must be given their due credit, whether the goal has been reached by hook or crook.

Indo-Pak peace dialogue: Bush's big success

To get more proof about the honest intention of America, and for that

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Khaleda and Hasina, can you tell us why?

You placed a stunning photo on your front-page on 10 March, showing a farmer pulling a plough by himself because he can't afford to buy an ox. Anyone seeing this photo will simply freeze for few minutes, but this is not new. Like many of our readers, I have seen these in real life. I have saved this picture and our readers should also save it in a very special archive. Also, some massive-size posters of that picture should be placed all over Dhaka, with a message "Khaleda and Hasina, can you tell us why this?" But most importantly, few copies of that picture should be sent to all

those countries that donate billions to Bangladesh for eliminating exactly this type of poverty. Copies should also be sent to Kofi Annan, International Criminal Court in Hague, and to those countries that give us billions of dollars of loans that these poor people never get to see! In respect to the hard-working farmer Abdur Rashid, and in protest and condemnation to Khaleda and Hasina, may I request DS to put that picture here once again. Our land is fertile, our people are hard-working; why then are we so poor? Azad Miah Oldham, UK

Saifur Rahman's comments

I am an avid reader of your paper's Letters to the Editor section. For the past few weeks, I was expecting the public to comment on Finance Minister Saifur Rahman's statement on the price spiral that "If people can afford building expensive houses, why can't they afford expensive foods". These comments sounded similar to King Louis the Sixteenth's wife's comment, "If people can't eat bread, let them eat cake." We have to see who this price hike is hurting the most. Is it hurting the rich and influential people who are eating cake out of the

people's coffers, or is it hurting the poor, who are more than 90% of the population. We have to assess the situation correctly before passing any comment. A citizen Dhaka

After six decades... I have read the Star report on the happenings at Muktangan, (what an appropriate name where everyone is allowed to speak freely) where former president Dr. B. Chowdhury was to launch a new political platform. For over six decades, covering the British Raj, the Pakistani Hakumat, and some of our own, I

have been keenly watching the political chess in this remote corner of the earth. Here, to say the least, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gets the biggest reception of his life from the very people he loathed and, then invited by destiny, kisses the hangman's rope in his own holy land less than a decade later. Here presidents are killed as if it is a game of fun. To me, Prof. Badruddoza Chowdhury is the only lucky person so far who survived many ups and downs and now, after discarding the president's cloak, is beginning to enjoy the pleasure of presiding over his own destiny. Fayaz Khan On e-mail

Taiwanese office in Dhaka

The news item published today (March 11) in The Daily Star shows incompetence of our senior level bureaucrats in handling simple matters. Any sensible and reasonably informed person in the whole globe knows China's stand on Taiwan and vice versa. It is known that Bangladesh follows 'One China' policy and does not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign independent state. We do not have diplomatic relations with that island either. Whatever business is going on, these are through some other mechanisms. Business and other peoples from the two coun-

tries are visiting each other by some means not officially recognised. Under this situation, how a Taiwanese office, which boastfully declared that it will issue visa, can be set up in Dhaka without the knowledge of our foreign office? And then, the BOI chief says that it is not the concern of other ministries. Now we find our officials are running here and there, including one being called from Beijing to prepare him so that he can explain our position to China. What an embarrassment for the nation. One newspaper indicated that the office opening was done under a package deal with some influential persons. I think the persons

involved in the package deal, if any, was unaware that their clients made them simply pawns in their greater move to harm Bangladesh's good business relations with China. A Citizen Dhaka

Dr. B Chowdhury We condemn the bombing of Dr. B. Chowdhury's office. He should be allowed to have free speech and have a political rally. We support Dr. B. Chowdhury and wish him the best, as it is in the best interest of the country. A Citizen Dhaka