

Finance Minister's diatribe against CAG

M. HAFIZUDDIN KHAN

ON the August 30, Finance and Planning Minister M. Saifur Rahman, while inaugurating a seminar was quite vocal in criticising the reports of the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). With all due respect to the honourable minister, I cannot refrain from lamenting that on the occasion referred to above, he perhaps went too far when he commented that CAG reports have done positive harm to the country in that the reports consisting of insignificant objections (to quote the minister: "consisting of little little amounts") are published in the newspapers which are then captured by Transparency International for identifying Bangladesh as the number one corrupt country in the world and thus damaging the image of the country.

At the outset, one can question when and at what period of time of our history the country possessed a good image in respect of extent of prevalence of corruption.

Leaving aside the question of image of the country for the moment, we may start the discussion by quoting Article 128 of the Constitution which has delineated the functions of the CAG as follows:

(1)The public accounts of the Republic and of all courts of law and all authorities and officers of the Government shall be audited and reported on by the Auditor-General and for that purpose he or any person authorised by him in that behalf shall have access to all records, books, vouchers, documents, cash, stamps, securities, stores or other government property in the possession of any person in the service of the Republic.

(2)Without prejudice to the provisions of clause (1), if it is prescribed by law in the case of any body corporate directly established by law, the accounts of that body corporate shall be audited and reported on by such person as may be so prescribed.

(3)Parliament may by law require the Auditor-General to exercise such functions, in addition to those specified in clause (1), as such law may prescribe, and until provision is made by law

under this clause the President may, by order, make such provision.

(4)The Auditor-General, in the exercise of his functions under clause (1), shall not be subject to the direction or control of any other person or authority.

In exercise of his functions as quoted above, the CAG conducts audit of accounts of the republic and prepares reports thereof for submission to the president who causes them to be laid before the parliament. The reports contain instances of financial irregularities known as audit paragraphs. The paragraphs thus appearing in

ity as an irregularity irrespective of the amount of money involved unless the governing rules are changed. CAG has, per force, to report all cases of financial irregularities irrespective of the amount involved as mandated by the Constitution, and it should not be left to his discretion to choose only the big ones and ignore the small ones. Obviously allowing such discretion to CAG would be dangerous.

The public servants including the ministers, who are now administrative heads as per the current Rules of Business, are accountable for proper utilisation of every

small. It is, however, not intended to say here that there is no scope or necessity to improve the quality of CAG reports. In fact the CAG reporting obligation leaves much to be desired. He will have to go a long way to improve the quality of his report and to introduce modern concepts of auditing. But there are many constraints his organisation is suffering from and as far as my personal experience goes, the CAG lacks the power and authority to streamline his administration, reorganise his office, develop human resources, and do career planning of his

There are many other problems. For example when a parliament is dissolved and a new one elected, the continuity in the functioning of the PAC is disrupted and the deliberations or decisions of the previous PACs go missing. There is no provision in the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure to follow up the decisions or to maintain continuity. Further, experience shows that a long time is taken to form the PAC. It took fourteen months to form the PAC in the eighth parliament and, as far as I can recollect, seven months in the seventh parliament. In view of this situation, a very good report prepared by the CAG fully conforming to international standards can do little to help establishing transparency and accountability of the administration.

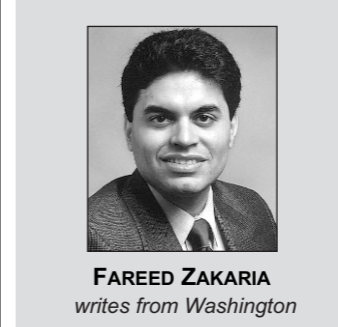
Our honourable ministers are very much obsessed with the image of the country. But when reports of corruption not emanating from CAG reports appear in the newspapers how can the image of the country be upheld? It is not only CAG who unearth cases of corruption; there are various other sources wherefrom the incidents of corruption are dished out. Do we have to believe that the prevailing scale of corruption in Bangladesh is not an alarming one and the reports that appear in the newspapers are all exaggerated?

officers -- these are not under his control.

He does not even administer the BCS (Audit and Accounts) Cadre. The cadre is administered by the Finance Division. The CAG can not create even the post of an MLSS not to speak of a post in any higher category nor can he fill up any existing vacant post without obtaining prior permission from the Ministries of Finance and Establishment. He can not reorganise his various Audit Directorates to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness. Due to various reasons, both internal to CAG and external, beyond his control, the auditing work of CAG was in arrears. After much endeavour and launching a crash programme, the backlog has been cleared, but the backlog has been shifted on to the parliament, the size of the backlog being a staggering one, and considering the speed at which the reports are currently being disposed of by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) it will take decades to clear the backlog. This aspect of the problem is not getting due attention of the authorities concerned.

M. Hafizuddin Khan is a former Comptroller and Auditor General.

A vision and little else



THE Democrats could take a lesson or two from George W. Bush. The president gave a superb speech accepting the Republican nomination. He has come to deliver formal speeches with confidence and poise, quite different from his normal clumsy, gaffe-prone speaking style. But its success was not simply stylistic. Bush's speech had a powerful central theme: the connection between the United States and the progress of liberty worldwide. He celebrated that link and rejoiced in its successes.

Democrats have been too quiet on the issue, perhaps fearful of echoing the president's words. But they are making a mistake. The idea that the United States should stand for something in the world and pursue broad goals has a distinguished Democratic pedigree. Virtually every Democratic president over the last 100 years—Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, even Carter and Clinton—has made this case. It is how John Kennedy began his Inaugural Address that pledged to "pay any price" to "assure the survival and success of liberty." And it happens to be the most powerful, accurate way to think about the war on terror. Middle Eastern terrorism is directly related to the fact that its people live under dysfunctional dictatorships.

The problem with the president's speech was not the lofty goals he outlined, but the fact that his policies are not actually moving us any closer to achieving them. It's true that a democratic Afghanistan and Iraq would be powerful, progressive forces in the Muslim world. But our postwar policies in both places have done little to make that likely. We do not help democracy take root in Afghanistan by ceding large parts of the country to warlords and drug dealers. We have not helped democracy in Iraq by destroying the old order with no idea of what to do

Bush does not seem aware that the intense hostility toward him in every country in the world (save Israel) has made it very difficult for the United States to be the agent of freedom. In every Arab country that I have been to in the last two years, the liberals, reformers, and businessmen say, "Please don't support us. American support today is the kiss of death."

On Iraq, the president seemed strangely disconnected. It was as if it were May 2003 and the statue of Saddam Hussein had just fallen. There was no recognition that events in Iraq are not going well, that for a year our troops have found themselves facing a widening insurgency and, more importantly, deepening hostility from the general public. Islamic fundamentalists with armed militiasou deepest enemies in the war on terror now run several cities in Iraq. Moqtada Sadr has just emerged from a clash against the United States with his militia unharmed and his reputation enhanced. Support for the United States, which was around 70 percent at the start of the occupation, is now under 5 percent.

President Bush mocked press reports detailing the problems in Iraq, comparing them to gloomy accounts of Germany in 1946. If the president really thinks that Iraq today looks like Germany in 1946 — an advanced industrial country with a long liberal tradition, centuries of experience with capitalism, the rule of law and a defeated population that fully cooperated with American occupation—then he's in for a rude surprise.

Bush's attitude is, in fact, partly responsible for the problems in Iraq. Perseverance is a good quality, but one can sometimes persevere in error. Months into the occupation, the administration stubbornly insisted that there was no insurgency (just a few "dead-enders"), that no more troops were necessary, that the Governing Council had widespread support, that disbanded the Army was the right thing to do, and so on. It could not accept the inconvenient facts that were staring it in the face. Commenting on this aspect of Bush's speech, the conservative writer Andrew Sullivan noted, "empirical evidence doesn't

matter for him ... like all religious visionaries, he simply asserts that his own faith will conquer reality. It won't."

President Bush is right to note that after World War II, because "generations of Americans held firm in the cause of liberty, we live in a better and safer world." But in those years the United States adopted a series of wise, generous policies and a conciliatory style that made it much loved in the countries we were trying to help. Spreading democracy requires allies, particularly among the targets of one's affection.

The picture could not be more different today. Bush does not seem aware that the intense hostility toward him in every country in the world (save Israel) has made it very difficult for the United States to be the agent of freedom. In every Arab country that I have been to in the last two years, the liberals, reformers, and businessmen say, "Please don't support us. American support today is the kiss of death."

The Republican convention had two alternating approaches toward foreigners. On the one hand, it repeatedly ridiculed them. The cheapest applause lines in New York last week were ones that ended in "the French," "Paris," or, worst of all, "the United Nations," which was probably meant to conjure up images of envious Third Worlders plotting against America. On the other hand, Republicans constantly declared they were going to deliver the blessings of liberty to the far corners of the world. This is the party's dilemma: wishes to spread liberty to people whom it doesn't really like.

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Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

Ramon Magsaysay Award

One antidote to poverty

ANOM BISWAS

THE Ramon Magsaysay Award, considered as Asia's equivalent of Nobel Prize, was established in April 1957, by the trustees of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) based in New York City.

With the concurrence of the Philippine government, the prize was created to commemorate the late Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay and to perpetuate his example of integrity in government, courageous service to his people, and pragmatic idealism within a democratic society.

In May of the same year, seven prominent Filipinos composed the founding Board of Trustees of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation (RMAF), the non-profit corporation tasked with implementing the awards programme.

During the Foundation's four decades of existence, Asia has made great progress, some nations more than others. Yet the region continues to grapple with problems of poverty, malnutrition, disease, and violence, as well as with newer problems that have come with progress itself.

In recognising individuals and organisations who have addressed these issues with extraordinary vigour, integrity, and selflessness, the Foundation seeks to honour the memory of President Ramon Magsaysay and to place living examples of exceptional service before the public.

The RMAF recognises and honours individuals and organisations in Asia, regardless of race, creed, sex, or nationality, who have achieved distinction in their respective fields and have helped others generously without anticipating public recognition. The awards were given in five categories: government service; public service; community leadership; journalism, literature, and creative communication arts; peace and international understanding.

During the year 2000 Magsaysay Awards presentation ceremonies, the Foundation announced the creation of a sixth Award category — Emergent Leadership.

Now the Award is given in six categories: **Government Service** — for "outstanding service in the public interest in any branch of government, including executive, judicial, legislative or military."

Public Service — for "outstanding service to the public good by a private citizen."

Community Leadership — for "leadership of a community toward helping the disadvantaged have fuller opportunities and a better life."

Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts — for "effective writing, publishing, or



Chairman of the Ramon Magsaysay awards Juan Santos (R) congratulating Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed

photography, or use of radio, television, cinema or theater as a power for public good."

Peace and International Understanding — for "outstanding contributions to the advancement of friendship, peace and solidarity as the foundations for sustainable development within and across countries."

Emergent Leadership — for "outstanding work of an individual, forty years of age or younger, on issues of social change in his or her community, but whose leadership is not yet broadly recognised outside of the community."

Each year, the Foundation solicits award nominations from selected persons throughout Asia, who are qualified by virtue of position, expertise, or experience. Nominations are carefully evaluated and the awards are determined following rigorous consideration by the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Abdullah Abu Sayeed among the awardees

Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed, an outstanding Bangladeshi, is among the recipients of this year's prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award. Founder and head of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro, Prof Sayeed received the Award for Journalism Literature and Creative Communication Arts for "his cultivating in the youth of Bangladesh a love for literature and its humanising values through exposure to the great books of Bengal and the world."

The award was formally conferred during the Presentation Ceremonies held on 31 August 2004, at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines.

Earlier on 02 August 2004, the Board of Trustees of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation announced that this year seven individuals would receive Asia's most prestigious prize. The six others are from China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Jiang Yanyong, a retired military doctor from China, for Public Service.

Dr Jiang is cited for "his brave stand for truth in China, spurring life-saving measures to confront and contain the deadly threat of SARS."

Laxminarayan Ramdas of India and **Ibn Abdur Rehman** of Pakistan, leading advocates in the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPPFD), for *Peace and International Understanding*. Mr Ramdas, former chief of his country's navy, and Mr Rehman, a journalist and human rights advocate, are recognised for "their reaching across a hostile border to nurture a citizen-based consensus for peace between Pakistan and India."

Haydee Yorac, from the Philippines, Chairperson of the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG), for *Government Service*. Miss Yorac is recognised for "her building the people's confidence in government through service of exceptional integrity and rigor and her unwavering pursuit of the rule of law in the Philippines."

Benjamin Abadiano, from the Philippines, a volunteer assisting indigenous peoples, for *Emergent Leadership*. Mr Abadiano is cited for "his steadfast commitment to indigenous Filipinos and their hopes for peace and a better life consonant with their distinctive tradition and hallowed ways of life."

Prayong Ronnarong, a farmer from Thailand, for *Community Leadership*. Khun Prayong is honoured for "his leading fellow-farmers in demonstrating that self-reliant local enterprises, supported by active community learning, are the path to rural prosperity in Thailand."

They each received a certificate, a medallion bearing the likeness of the late President Ramon Magsaysay, and a cash prize.

Anom Biswas is an Editorial Assistant of The Daily Star.

Biman should adopt the ways of modern air travel

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

I have a suggestion for Bangladesh Biman: buy or lease new planes and start a non-stop service between Dhaka and New York. That way Biman will corner the Bangladesh market, because, given a choice, most Bangladeshis would love to save time and travel non-stop to Bangladesh from America. Recently, Emirates started non-stop services between New York (JFK) and Dubai, which takes only 12 hours to traverse because of the tail winds, and Dubai to New York (JFK) which takes 14 hours because of head winds. In June of this year, Singapore Airlines introduced non-stop service between New York (Newark) and Singapore (16 1/2 hours) and Singapore to New York (Newark) (18 1/2 hours). New York-Dhaka non-stop flight should take approximately 14 hours and Dhaka-New York about 16 hours.

For his trip to Bangladesh this July-August, the writer traveled by Emirates, non-stop between New York and Dubai and Dubai and Dhaka. Eighteen months earlier, the writer went to Bangladesh on Singapore Airlines. In previous years, the writer used to make sure to travel by Bangladesh Biman exclusively. Two things have dissuaded the writer from traveling by Biman anymore. First, the hassle of ground services, especially reconfirmation. A visitor to Bangladesh has better things to do than to visit chaotic Bangladesh Biman offices for reconfirmation, which often requires a visitor to surrender his passport for a few days. Passengers traveling on Emirates and Singapore Airlines are not required to reconfirm their tickets. Two days before the writer was to leave Dhaka early last year, he received a call from Singapore Airlines inquiring whether his travel plans were intact! Secondly, Bangladesh Biman maintains a very old fleet: some planes are over 30 years old. Sure, the planes are well maintained. But there must be a reason why the average age of planes belonging to prestigious airlines such as Singapore and Emirates is less than seven years!

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LETTER FROM AMERICA

During the writer's recent visit to Bangladesh there was this bizarre episode concerning a newly acquired, ill-gotten, Bangladesh Biman plane that was stranded in, and could not take off from, Chittagong airport. Our planned trip to Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar had to be cancelled partially because some family members refused to board a Biman internal flight. We could not convince them that the planes for all internal Biman flights were airworthy!

Chittagong airport. Our planned trip to Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar had to be cancelled partially because some family members refused to board a Biman internal flight. We could not convince them that the planes for all internal Biman flights were airworthy! This stands in sharp contrast to what one experiences traveling by Emirates and Singapore Airlines. I wanted to experience Singapore Airlines because it is rated the best in the world. The reputation is well earned. The service is excellent and the gourmet food exquisite! The in-flight entertainment, especially on the Singapore-New York (Newark) route, was better than anything I had experienced before.

Emirates' in-flight entertainment tops even Singapore's! Part of the reason why I prefer a window seat on a plane is to watch the take-off and landing. These are the two most exciting moments of air travel when transitions — land to air, and air to land — take place. These are also the two most dangerous moments, when most accidents take place. Emirates' new Airbus planes are equipped with forward and downward cameras. Every passenger can now monitor take-off and landing on his personal screen. Landings at night are thrilling to watch! After touching down at Dhaka, the first thing one notices is the overgrown grass in and around Dhaka airport, which makes for a bad first impression. Is there any ordinance forbidding grass cutting around Dhaka airport?

Our flight plan in and out of Dubai to and from New York was revealing — hugging the Iranian border, avoiding war-torn Iraq, into Turkey, Caspian Sea, Black Sea, Eastern and Western Europe, Atlantic Ocean into Labrador, Canada and then the US. For day flights, passengers are required to keep the windows

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Taxi Driver and *Lajja Galesi* I had not heard in ages. I listened to each and every song with rapt attention and an avalanche of nostalgia. Every time Lataji sings an old song, she touches my heart! With so much time at hand, I even managed to watch three recent Hindi movies: *Baghban*, *Tezzeb*, and *Devdas*. Watching *Baghban*, which addresses a very pertinent generational question, I was reminded of how great an actor Amitabh Bachchan is and how beautiful Hema Malini still is! (I would advise Amitabh against singing in films, though!) *Tezzeb*, too, was a reminder of the extraordinary acting talents of Shabana Azmi. But I shall remember *Tezzeb* for two very enchanting ghazals scored by A. R. Rahman, *Aap Ko Mujhse* and *Sabak Aisa*.

Some day soon, I hope to be writing a column about my exciting experience aboard a non-stop Bangladesh Biman flight from New York to Dhaka!