

Deaths in ice chamber

Piracy takes a grisly toll, combat it with a plan

DEAD bodies of fourteen fishermen were found in the ice chamber of a fishing trawler that came under attack by pirates in the Bay last Wednesday.

The way the freebooters took control of the vessel, and the manner in which the fishermen were done to death, have brought into sharp focus the no-holds-barred piracy in the fishing zones of the Bay. Fishermen and owners of trawlers have complained time and again that they are exposed to organised piracy in the Meghna estuary and the Bay. A report published in this newspaper in July 2004 gave a detailed account of how the extortionist thugs and pirates are operating in the southern region. The trawlers have to pay tolls regularly and get 'clearance' from the pirates to fish in the Bay. It is like a parallel administration run by the outlaws. Those refusing to pay have been targeted on many occasions. Statistics show that at least 10 fishermen were killed between June 2003 and July 2004 and no fewer than 120 were abducted. The pirates also looted more than 100 trawlers during the period.

The report also said that police officials stationed in southern districts admitted that the pirates were active in many places, but were unable to explain why they could not dislodge them.

Attack on fishing trawlers and a sharp rise in the number of maritime crimes of all other types are a matter of serious concern. The pirates are said to have sophisticated weapons and communication devices at their disposal and are in a position to outgun the law enforcers.

But a situation like this cannot continue for an indefinite period of time. A huge number of people in the southern districts are dependent on fishing as their source of livelihood. So, the economic implications of lawlessness in the Bay cannot also be ignored.

It is imperative that the government succeeded in introducing effective patrol over the vast expanse of water where the pirates are operating. The navy and the coast guards need to coordinate better to mount surveillance at the piracy-prone areas in the southern waters. The grisly deaths of the 14 fishermen should awaken them to the need for acting firmly and quickly to combat piracy. The situation has become critical enough for the authorities to contemplate a special anti-piracy drive.

Ahmadiyya mosque in ruins

Meet the bigotry with full force of law

THE attack on an Ahmadiyya mosque in Brahmanbaria just minutes before the call to Juma prayer on Friday during the holy month of Ramadan must be considered the height of ungodliness. The fact that the perpetrators could defile both themselves and the month of Ramadan by committing such a shameful act at such a time shows that they have little respect for the religion under whose banner they claim to be acting.

It has been reported that the attack consisted of hundreds of machete, axe, stick, and club-wielding fanatics storming the mosque, beating worshippers, and destroying the tin-roofed and bamboo-walled mosque. The hate-filled mob of around 1,000 then went on a rampage, vandalising and robbing Ahmadiyya houses, and injuring a dozen people, including women.

There are no words to describe our outrage at this act of predatory religious intolerance. The constitution and simple human decency mandate that people be secure in their right to worship.

This has gone too far. Anti-Ahmadiyya bigots have been active for the last twelve months, but this is the first time they have actually destroyed an Ahmadiyya mosque.

The government must not remain a mute spectator any more; it has a duty to protect the Ahmadiyya community. It must do everything in its power to prevent persecution taking place against them in any shape or form.

The government claimed that the ban on Ahmadiyya publications would help diminish anti-Ahmadiyya sentiments, but it is clear that this has emboldened the bigots and made the position of the Ahmadiyyas even more insecure.

Repealing the ban on their publications would be a good start, as would bringing to justice the perpetrators of Friday's attack. The government must make clear that violence against Ahmadiyyas will be countered with the full force of the law. Nothing less is good enough.

Hossain Zillur Rahman

Is decentralisation a fading political priority? Certainly the distressingly familiar political cycle in which incoming governments are initially enthusiastic on local governments but gradually settle into a bureaucratic business-as-usual attitude is all too evident. A hard look at exactly where we stand on the local government front may be quite timely.

Some milestones can be noted. The cycle of elections for the two existing forms of local governments i.e. union parishads in the rural areas and pourashavas in urban areas, has proceeded apace, union elections in 2003 and pourashava elections in 2004. The provision for gram sarkars too was implemented in 2003, though amidst a sense of a lack of political consensus. What, however, did not happen is the implementation of the provision for elected upazila parishad despite a majority recommendation of the concerned cabinet sub-committee on the matter. For many, this was the fatal blow to any optimism on the decentralisation agenda. The non-implementation of upazila has also fueled a counter-productive trend whereby rural localities not ready for an urban status have vied to make themselves into pourashavas to ensure a backdoor electoral space. The process has merely served to create a plethora of "sick at birth" pourashavas. A compounding source of concern has been the increasing tendency of members of parliament to intrude into the affairs of union parishads and pourashavas, a process which effectively began from the late 1990s.

Other milestones too have been mixed. A good beginning was made with the first-ever combined orientation training for all union parishad members in late 2003. Job descriptions for women members elected on reserved seats were also developed. Revised model tax sched-

ules for union parishads have been issued. Construction of union parishad complexes has been underway. As against these institutional steps, local governments, particularly union parishads, have become even more starved of resources. ADP allocation has in fact declined in per capita terms. More than anything, it is this lack of resource attention which has reinforced the feeling that local governments have fallen off the political radar.

regarding in particular union parishads. Experiments in Sirajganj, Tangail, Faridpur, and Noakhali have sought to develop a second resource channel outside of the ADP channel for union parishads. The focus of this second channel has been on micro-infrastructure projects identified through a participatory process. Access to this channel is not automatic but linked to specific performance standards. Other experiments have sought to strengthen

the wrong conclusion to draw. While prospects of big-push reform from above have dimmed, the social and developmental visibility of union parishads and pourashavas have, if anything, increased. There have even been attempts to form associations of local governments, albeit in a very donor-driven style. The challenge for decentralisation advocates in today's circumstances, however, is not to remain trapped in the politically correct but ineffective position

gies. PPRC has already completed an inventory exercise on existing training provided by government and NGO sectors. Critical gaps have been identified. Collaborative initiatives between research organisations, government institutions, and NGOs to pursue these openings is a critical necessity. Incremental potentials also lie in consolidating a performance-linked second resource channel (outside of ADP) for union parishads: this has been the focus of many of the pilot experi-

long-term solution. The third course of action is to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive legislation on local governments. At present, there are a plethora of laws and circulars, often outdated and self-contradictory, which govern existing local governments. These need to be streamlined into a comprehensive cct. Government is unlikely to be the driver in this task. The initiative needs to come from advocacy organisations, research institutions, and civil society actors. The approach here has of necessity to be a long-term one and the task realized through a coalition effort. If a working draft on such a comprehensive legislation can come to be prepared, it can be used as a powerful advocacy instrument to persuade and prod politicians and government of the day to adopt and eventually produce a formal legislation. This is how it happened in India with its 1992 constitutional amendment on the matter.

The decentralisation agenda has certainly hit a road-block. But ground reality shows that it is in no sense a dead-end. While the likelihood of big-push political decentralisation appears uncertain, there are promising prospects of pursuing a revised strategic goal of local governance promotion along functional and innovative lines utilising existing local governments.

Paradoxically however, while reform attention from above has dwindled, the political and social importance of union parishads and pourashavas appears to have, if anything, increased. In a highly competitive political atmosphere, union parishads and pourashavas offer vital electoral spaces. A new crop of rural leaders, younger, more educated, and outward-looking, appear to have emerged through the union elections of 2003 as revealed through the PPRC survey on the subject. No doubt, they are stymied in their social and developmental ambitions by the continuing limitations of these local government bodies. But their emergence signals new contenders on the political scene. The same PPRC survey further revealed that union parishads are no longer isolated political entities. 92 percent of elected chairmen have an affiliation with national parties. For good or bad, the rural political rhythm has become entwined with the national political rhythm.

Another interesting development has been the veritable explosion in donor-driven pilot experiments

accountability mechanisms such as open budget sessions. Even NGOs who shunned local governments in yesteryears are eyeing a rich prospect of "capacity-building projects" focused on union parishads and pourashavas.

None of the above makes for any easy reading of the political prospects of the decentralisation agenda. Government appears far from being reform-minded on the issue except where project possibilities exist: for example, linking union parishads to the sanitation for all campaign. The upazila question is effectively in a stalemate as members of parliament of both government and opposition are opposed to upazila implementation. Indeed, not only are they opposed to upazila, they are also actively intruding into the affairs of the lower-level bodies, i.e. union parishads. Meanwhile, a rich body of institutional lessons on incremental strengthening of union parishads are accumulating from the variety of pilot experimentation going on. For advocates of decentralisation, it is easy to despair at the situation. This, however, would be

of demanding only big-push reforms from above. Rather, the challenge really is about how best to re-energize the focus on local government taking into account the ground reality of parliamentary and bureaucratic hostility to strong local governments. Three courses of action are open all of which need to be simultaneously pursued.

The first course of action is to seize and build on the incremental possibilities which lie in the current situation. PPRC research findings show that at least a quarter of the newly elected chairmen of union parishads carry promise as transformative rural leadership. Fostering expanding islands of best practices by targeting such leadership should be a promising line to work on. Incremental potentials also lie in linking union parishads to critical non-functional arenas such as micro-infrastructure, early child development and local economy promotion. The other major entry point is in the field of local government training. The first-ever orientation training initiated last year provides a good base to develop innovative follow-up training strate-

ments. While the strategy of incremental strengthening in institutional, functional, and resource availability arenas is critical, the issue of political decentralisation is not to be abandoned. The meaningful course of action here is to revive the political debate on the upazila question. The non-implementation of upazila is intimately linked to widespread unease and hostility to the issue among members of parliament. In many ways, this hostility has simply been criticised but not engaged with. It is a moot point that the national debate on the upazila question has revolved around simply a restoration argument, namely to restore the upazila model introduced under the Ershad regime in the 1980s. While the principle of an elected upazila parishad has come to find great resonance within the population at large, the specifics of the structure have not been critically engaged with. There may be an important entry point here by which the debate can be revived and a consensus created for a

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For America's sake, if not the world's, George Bush must go

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IF John Kerry loses the November 2 US Presidential election he will regret not having held George Bush accountable for the 9/11 mayhem. September 11 happened on George Bush's watch, nine months into his administration. Although a CIA brief to the president on August 6, 2001 had a headline that said Osama Bin Laden was planning on attacking America with planes, Mr. Bush continued to vacation in his Crawford, Texas ranch. Yet, in none of the three debates, or on the campaign stumps or in his television commercials did he or does Mr. Kerry blame the president for the security lapse that resulted in the unprecedented terrorist act against America on that date.

With such an unexpected and generous pass, Mr. Bush continues to make the case, with much success, that America will be safer as long as he is the president. Bush has succeeded in scaring the American public into thinking that he alone can guarantee their safety. Therefore in the ultimate Orwellian convulsion the draft dodgers, Bush and Cheney, have transformed themselves into security hawks, while reducing the real Vietnam War hero to a wimp! It appears that North-eastern Democratic presidential candidates like John Kerry (and Michael Dukakis before him) are too much of gentlemen to tackle gutter fighters like the Bushes, who would do and say anything to win reelection.

Bush's strategy to make a caricature of Kerry and run against that caricature is working perfectly. Bush's own failures, however, are above criticism. Under Bush, the nation is deeply divided as never

before. Bush led America into a war of choice in Iraq with deceits and lies, and to please the "Israel before America" neo-conservative Zionists. Over eleven hundred American soldiers have been sacrificed and over 8,000 have been maimed to please the neo-con gods. Over 40,000 Iraqis have been killed because of the US invasion. Bush has turned a trillion dollar budget surplus into half a trillion dollar deficit, while giving tax breaks to the

record of the last four years and win. Their strategy has been to make not Bush, but the Democratic candidate John Kerry the issue, and to destroy Kerry through personal attacks and lies. And they have succeeded beyond their wildest expectations.

Taking a cue from Hitler's propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, the Bush campaign has proven that lies and distortions repeated a hundred times do sound like the truth! The Bush administration's shifting

does not understand what terrorism is. How can he keep America safe? On October 17, The New York Times reprinted a cartoon that exemplified how the Bush campaign distorts Kerry statements. In the cartoon Kerry says, "Osama is very good at masterminding terrorist attacks! That's why we must defeat him!" Bush responds: "So my opponent thinks Osama is 'very good'? I don't think Osama is good at all! I think he's very bad!" Adds

Kerry states are referred to as the blue states, and the Bush states are labeled red states. MSNBC has done a survey of the education level of all the states and has come up with an education index for all the fifty states. The blue states of Massachusetts, John Kerry's home state, ranks number one, New Jersey (where the writer lives) is number three, New York is number six, and the red state of Texas, George Bush's home state is 33rd.

their decision of 2000 when they had endorsed Bush for President, Muslim American organisations have endorsed John Kerry for President this year. But if Muslim Americans believe that voting for Kerry will solve their problem, they are mistaken. It will take 7 to 10 more presidential elections before Muslim American voices are heard in the corridors of power.

Increasingly cocky, Mr. Bush seems to have mesmerised the Americans into believing that all his lies are true. Says Joe Klein of Time Magazine: "Indeed, Bush's gleeful willingness to personally join in the mudslinging is unprecedented in modern US politics," as is his "blatant effort to mislead the public." Of course, Mr. Bush famously said in the second debate that he has made no mistake in Iraq and elsewhere. As is well-known, those who do not learn from their mistakes, repeat them. Tom Teepen of Cox News-papers notes: "Bush's most brazen act may not be his decision to rush into Iraq when UN inspections were working. His most brazen act may be that he is daring the nation to re-elect him precisely for all that, and what is more, appears about as likely as not to get away with it."

If Mr. Bush is reelected, his legacy will be that a president can be a catastrophic failure at home and abroad, but as long as he can lie to his people, scare them, and destroy his opponent through more lies and personal attacks, he will win reelection! If the American people so desperately want Mr. Bush, perhaps they should have him and reelect him. Mr. Bush will then truly represent America.

LETTER FROM AMERICA
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wealthy and signing every spending bill. Bush is the first president since Herbert Hoover of the Depression era of the 1920s to preside over an economy that lost jobs (1.6 million).

He has appointed the most right-wing judges to the federal courts to undo civil liberties. He has dangerously relaxed clear air and clean water standards and has wrecked havoc with the environment. Gasoline prices are at an unprecedented \$2.05 a gallon. Bush has given Ariel Sharon's regime carte blanche to murder thousands more Palestinians and steal more Palestinian lands, including all of the West Bank. By showing contempt for the world, Bush has alienated friends and foes alike. America's standing in the world is dangerously low. Yet, none of these seem to matter to many Americans. The Bush campaign realized that they cannot run on Bush's dismal

rationale for invading Iraq has successfully hidden the fact the neocon-instigated war was meant really to make Israel more secure and to give the US control over the world's second largest oil reserves in Iraq. With all the evidence to the contrary, including the findings of the bipartisan 9/11 commission, Bush and Cheney still insist that Al Qaeda had links with Iraq. Bush- Cheney's conflation of Iraq and Al Qaeda is the reason why 56 percent Americans still believe that Iraq and Saddam were responsible for 9/11! Two weeks ago, in a New York Times interview Kerry said that he wanted to fight terrorism hard so that it is reduced to more than a nuisance it was a few years ago.

Bush pounced on the very reasonable statement, distorted it out of recognition and ran an ad that said (I paraphrase): "Kerry thinks terrorism is a nuisance. Obviously he

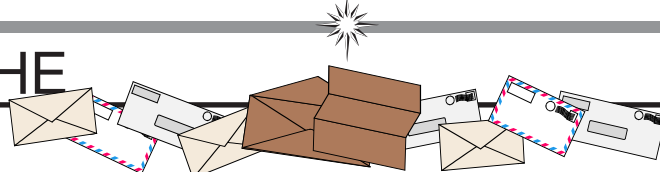
Dick Cheney: "John Kerry is one of Osama's biggest fans! He thinks Osama is really a great guy! They're practically best friends!"

Bush's negative campaigns work because the average citizens have a low opinion of politicians to begin with. When the president bad-mouths a politician, they tend to believe the president. Besides, not all Americans are sophisticated. Even Mr. Bush's questionable intelligence and inarticulateness have become his assets. I have actually heard listeners say over the talk radio that because Bush "talks like me" (incoherent) and has "my kind of intelligence" (dumb) I shall vote for him! Because the president has to deal with complicated domestic and foreign issues shouldn't voters expect their president to be more intelligent and more articulate than they? In the presidential election jargon

Indeed, there is a correlation between blue or Kerry states (highly educated) and the red or Bush states (low education standards). That is why in the red southern and Midwestern states, Bush's weaknesses are considered appealing!

Bush's handlers hide from the American public the fact that Bush's preemptive unilateralism has made the rest of the world a dangerous place for America and the Americans. Americans who visit Western Europe are repeatedly told by the average citizen and leaders alike, "get rid of this buffoon and we will help you, even in Iraq!" President Bush's policies have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. Free of constraints in the second term, at the minimum, the Zionism neo-cons will force Mr. Bush to shed more Muslim blood in Syria and Iran. Not surprisingly, reversing

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



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.

A second look at RAB

My attention was drawn to a news item "RAB activities challenged in court" (DS, October 26th). I had conflicting reaction reading the news. And let me share with your readers why.

The news that RAB is being challenged in a court of law heartens me. This unit has come under public scrutiny because of custodial deaths and there is no better place to judge their actions than the courts. I am sure that the court in its wisdom will provide the right verdict on RAB subjecting it to the law and mot over it.

I am nevertheless sad that those who have brought this case against RAB have done so not to question the custodial deaths but on the whole question of legality of having RAB at all. There is no doubt that the inspiration for this has come from a political party, which has publicly called for the disbanding of RAB calling it a "killing force". The party backs its case against RAB for the 33 or so deaths that

have occurred at the hands of RAB.

It is true that there is a strong case against such deaths. However, there are some other issues here that also need consideration in reaching an assessment on RAB. Despite all the protests from human rights groups, there seems to be considerable public support now for RAB particularly because it has been able to nab or kill some major terrorists. A few incidents have given people the confidence that RAB is working above political bias and even political godfathers are not secure.

I have been very critical of RAB but now I would like to have a second look at it. I would feel better if the government cautioned RAB on human rights issues and also to pursue some of the top criminals through the court to reveal the nexus between them and the politicians. As for these lawyers who filed the case, they should welcome RAB and help keep it above politics while working to ensure that any action that RAB takes, that conflicts the law, is

pursued legally and above politics. Shahjahan Ahmed Dhanjhandi RA, Dhaka

Poor health service and quacks

According to the article entitled "Poor health service leads patients to quacks" (October 24, 2004), the Health and Population Sector Programme has found that more people are choosing to see "quacks" (unqualified medical practitioners) because of better accessibility and lower cost compared to private and government medical practitioners. This is an important finding; however, I felt that the article placed an unfair amount of blame on the qualified medical practitioners for the poor conditions of health services in Bangladesh.

From my conversations with both government and private practitioners, I have come to understand that there are some very simple explanations for their behaviour. First, the ratio of doctors to patients in Bangladesh, especially in the rural areas, is

very low. This leads to an overwhelming number of patients for any given doctor. While they have dedicated themselves to a service occupation, doctors should not be expected to sacrifice their home lives or happiness.

Even more frustrating for qualified practitioners is the lack of appropriate treatment facilities. Surely, the majority of qualified practitioners chose their profession because they sincerely desire to help people lead healthy lives. I know doctors who purchase their own equipment in order to provide better services for their patients. These doctors should be able to recover the costs of purchasing the equipment, as well as make a living while providing treatment to patients.

It takes both money and hard work to achieve a medical degree in Bangladesh. Hopefully, after completing the coursework, practitioners are qualified to offer good quality health care to their patients. Naturally, it is frustrating for doctors to struggle through years of education to be greeted by a small salary, overwhelming working conditions, lack of

facilities, and complaints at each turn. Perhaps this frustration is what leads to the "rudeness, lack of respect, indifference and bias" that survey participants mentioned.

Obviously, the health care consumers of Bangladesh have made it clear that they require less expensive and more accessible care than is currently provided by qualified practitioners, but these practitioners should not be blamed for the poor situation of health care. Instead of pouring resources into training unqualified practitioners, facilities and infrastructure should be developed to enable qualified doctors to perform more efficiently and to provide quality services at an affordable price.

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Summer said good-bye in September

The warm summer days last for a long time from May to August. Summer begins at the end of May. In the summer morning, there are

many birds. The summer skies are clear blue and dotted with puffs of white clouds. "We all live in a planet of the sun: some of us are creatures that can fly in the summer sky, and some of us can swim." The scent of lemon is fresh and lively like a summer day. I hear the "live murmur of a summer day."

The summer beauty plays all day and all evening. It is a time to read fantasy and fairy tales and it is a time to join the Shakespeare festival or the Renaissance festival. It is a time to remember fairies and dragons. Summer came with flowers under the moon. Every single breath that I take is filled with the scent of flowers. In the evening summer scattered bright roses at me. The summer breeze dances through the landscape and almost makes me float and fly into the wind. Summer days were warm and gentle. And then the summer sun became very hot. And then summer came and touched me with the breeze. The breeze is the best thing in summer, blowing the puffs of white clouds. Hundreds of butterflies float in the air. Hundreds

of flowers bloom and add colour to the landscape. Hundreds of insects appear in so many designs and colours. In the forest, hundreds of creatures roam. Colourful kites decorate the sky. Summer is a time to spend outdoors.

The summer land is full of colours. The days are bright and warm. Because the days get hotter, we have a continuous desire for water and it is wonderful to go beside the lake. We can wear light clothing. I can stand in front of the water sprinklers, so that the water sprays all over and helps me to feel cool. The whole world comes to life in the summer. In the summer evenings the insects continue to wander. The butterflies say goodbye and the wings remind me of fairies who will come to visit the summer evening. The moon is very bright in a summer evening. There are hundreds of stars in the sky like Van Gogh's fiery painting of a Starry Night. I listen to Enya's songs as she paints the sky with stars. The fireflies are like bright fairies carrying lanterns. In the sky, is the full summer moon. The

summer evenings continue with the moon changing its shape and design. There are only a few roses, and summer said "I will return again." Summer said goodbye in September.

As the enchantment of summer comes to an end, the August moon sends a message that it will be autumn in a few days. The fresh and lively scent of lemon, and the flowers are fading. The scent of apples fills the air and reminds me of sweet, sparkling apple cider. The bounty of the harvest gives us a sense of fullness. The scent of warm spices like cinnamon sends a feeling of warmth. The morning is foggy and misty as September continues into the October moon. I am spellbound by the magic and enchantment as autumn arrives. Estelle Mahnuma, Frauline M Chaudhry Gulshan, Dhaka