

## Vanishing government vehicles!

*An act of reckless plunder*

GOVERNMENT malfeasance had ceased to surprise us. But this time, the case of more than one thousand government vehicles, that have gone 'missing', surpassing all records of slipshod command and accountability of government ministries, has caught public attention.

No fewer than 13 ministries and divisions of the government have been directed by the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) to furnish details, within four days, of more than a thousand vehicles that have remained unaccounted for, for the last several years. These vehicles were purchased out of public fund for development related projects, which, as per rules should have been reverted to the government motor pool after completion of the relevant projects, which has not been done. Even government inquiries into the matter have failed to track these vehicles, which are on the holding list of very high profile ministries and divisions, except for a negligible number.

The lack of supervision and accountability has been carried to the extreme by the fact that the government exchequer has been further taxed by the purchase of fuel for these 'unaccounted' transports that are used reportedly on unofficial duties that include use by not only high officers of the ministry concerned but also by officers unrelated to the project and even by their family members.

This, to say the least, is gross misuse of government resources and speaks of the poor system of checks and accountability of the ministries and divisions of the government, not to speak of the utter disregard for the tax payers money.

It is perhaps not for nothing that we are ranked as the most corrupt country in the world, and if we are to remove the stigma that has been with us for the last four years we must purge the administration of deadwoods and corrupt officials to start with.

We are happy to note that as the first of its tasks, the ACC has chosen to go into the case of the missing vehicles. It is important that not only are these vehicles traced out to prevent further misuse of public property, those that are found responsible for this must be also made to account for their action and taken to task.

## Free education for poor children

*The big project needs close supervision*

A massive scheme designed to educate nearly half a million deprived and dropped-out children has been launched by the prime minister raising fresh hopes for a fillip to the primary education sector. The six-year-long project called 'Reaching out to School Children' at a massive cost of Tk 400 crore with donor assistance, namely from the World Bank and Swiss Agency Development Cooperation, is probably the first of its kind in the country. Undoubtedly, the move is praiseworthy, though the stage and tenor must be set firmly, early in the day, for the project to be properly and fully implemented.

Given the penchant for corruption in the primary education sector, implementation of such a staggered project with a huge financial involvement will have to be carefully supervised from the beginning till the end. For instance, steps must be taken to ensure that the annual allowance under the project reach the deserving and genuine candidates.

As for the details of the scheme, we would like to know whether it is just a functional literacy project or is geared to provide onward access to higher education for the poor children. Furthermore, is it only the allowance that is going to be provided to the children or there are other components to the project?

Free education for poor children is intertwined with free distribution of textbooks. Only the other day, the news of text books meant to be distributed free of cost to the school-goers having strayed into the open market for sale shocked many people. The education ministry responded promptly to The Daily Star report on the subject and ordered investigation into the scandal. We feel that the culprits, from the officials to the sellers, all must be punished; otherwise, free education goal will be badly compromised.

## Turkey's rocky road to EU



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE Ottomans once entered Europe as conquerors causing a measure of trepidation among the Europeans who covered at the Ottomans' triumphant advance into their continent, traditionally the abode of Christendom. They could be repulsed from the gate of Vienna only in 1683. But for several centuries the ottomans were the virtual master of Europe. It is an irony that their descendants today have been knocking on EU's door for last forty years to get an entry into European Union -- a regional forum for mutual benefit at the best. The EU's public and politicians both have made its membership discriminatory and are uneasy about Turkey's large population, relative poverty and above all Islam, the religion of 70 million Turks, even though the country has a secular constitution.

When compared with some of the new entrants of EU from former communist block Turkey is much more deserving case in terms of its socio-economic advancement. Not only the country has one of the fastest growing economies of Europe its geographical location is a strategic asset for Europe. Turkey's mem-

bership of the EU will boost EU's global standing, infuse much needed dynamism into EU flagging economy and help Europeans build bridge with the Islamic world as well as 15 million Muslims living in Europe itself. Also by admitting a country which has long been member of NATO military alliance but kept out of EU for a host of political, social and religious reason -- the decision to open entry talks with Ankara -- will set the EU on course for even

more significant transformation. For Turks it is an insult upon injury. Although all leading European powers have supported Turkey's membership bid but those supports do not seem to be substantiated by any active steps. Deep down there is a lot of reservations about the very idea of a large Muslim country becoming the member of virtually a Christian club. Turkey, it is feared, would overtake Germany, the EU's most populous country -- a prospect which few Europeans entertain charitably.

The EU and Turkey took a fateful decision weeks before on the settlement over Cyprus -- Commission. He warned that the talks would not be open-ended and the EU could call off the process if Ankara did not continue to move forward on reforms. It is in spite of Ankara staying firm in its drive to ease European concerns. Erdogan and his ministers have in the mean time spent time sweet-talking EU leaders and European big business while Turkish artists showcased the country's modern and traditional culture. Although Erdogan's justice party is also an Islamic party, but very significantly the prime minister has shed the ex-prime minister Erbakan's extremist policies and took up a moderate policy which alone

could lead to the conditional 'yes' by the EU in October last. Yet unfortunately many in the EU have, off late, put emotion and prejudice ahead of rational debate on the pros and cons of Turkey's membership. Although Gerhard Schroeder is a supporter of Turkey's entry but the biggest opposition to Turkish membership is now found in Germany where already more than 3m Turks live. The Germans fear that their country will be

sceptics in Europe illustrate an unabashed anti-Islam bias. At times their demands almost border on claiming Turks to purge themselves of past sins -- their conduct of the imperial days with regards to the Slavs or Armenians. A former EU high-up Frit Bolkestein finds in Turkish entry into EU a denial of its repulsion from the gate of Vienna. The French Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin warns against allowing the 'river of Islam' to mingle with European secularism. Former French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing cautioned that Turkey inside Europe will mean the end of the bloc's dream of ever closer union. The attitude on both sides has recently hardened when Mr Ergodan, the Turkish prime minister categorically said that Turkey has no intention of trading its social and cultural values for EU membership.

There are however silver linings for Turkey because it can count on a number of strong friends and allies, including Britain's Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder as well as the leaders of Spain and Italy. The European Commission itself is on Turkey's side, announcing in October last that Ankara had met all the key pro-democracy and human rights standard to join the EU. It will be interesting to see whether basically an Asian country with barely 3 percent of its territory lying in Europe will at long last be the proud member of EU for which it had to wait for 41 years and pass the litmus test. Even if it does the road will remain rocky till the last.

Big (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## PERSPECTIVES

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Yet the pronouncement of EU leaders meeting on December 16-17 fell far short of expectation that they would signal a go-ahead for membership talk. Instead they offered for talk with strict new conditions which may indeed be difficult to meet. They want the Prime Minister Recep Teyyip Erdogan to recognise Greek Cyprus, accept all time restriction on labour migration to the EU and agree that entry talks could be put on backburner any time if there is Turkish slippage on political reforms.

The conditions are indeed disincentive considering that

Commission. He warned that the talks would not be open-ended and the EU could call off the process if Ankara did not continue to move forward on reforms. It is in spite of Ankara staying firm in its drive to ease European concerns. Erdogan and his ministers have in the mean time spent time sweet-talking EU leaders and European big business while Turkish artists showcased the country's modern and traditional culture. Although Erdogan's justice party is also an Islamic party, but very significantly the prime minister has shed the ex-prime minister Erbakan's extremist policies and took up a moderate policy which alone

swamped by Turks once they are granted membership of EU which does not impose any restriction on transborder movement of population. French President Chirac, once willing to admit Turkey into EU is also lukewarm now and his country demands that Turkey can at best be given a privileged relationship with EU, but not membership.

EU fretting over relation with Turkey is not new. The current EU discussions on the issue has become even more difficult because of many Europeans' post 9/11 weariness of Islam and Muslims. As a result some of the arguments put forward by Turko-

took a calculated risk in allowing the letting off of steam and thus avoiding a pressure cooker situation ripe for exploitation by recalcitrant politicians, concerted and widespread street protest never materialised. This really smart move of allowing such freedoms must be a first for any military rule, it has singularly contributed to Pervez Musharraf's acceptability by both the intelligentsia and the masses. A few cynics dismiss this apathy among the public as born

of trust! All officers from the rank of Brigadier onwards in the Army have been personally selected and promoted to his present rank by Pervez Musharraf. By not retiring as the COAS, he is giving a profound vote of "no confidence" to the very generals he has appointed to positions of trust. There is an aberration afflicting our national culture and psyche, having long service in the Army and being the son of a bureaucrat, Pervez Musharraf understands that psyche only too well, a retired man is a nobody, or nearly so. Ask those poor frustrated pensioners of two decades ago running from pillar to post for increases in their pensions just to keep on living. The moment he doffs his uniform, the "movers and shakers" in Pakistani politics, bureaucracy, business and the Armed Forces, etc will start beating a path to the door of the newly incumbent COAS, whoever he is.

Pervez Musharraf may not have done everything right, but in relative comparison to the political leaders who once ruled us, he has done reasonably well in the mode of his governance. The Catch-22 is that this is certainly not a happy situation, "uniformed democracy a la Musharraf" may be suitable for Pakistan for the moment, it does not bode well for our long-term survivability as a sovereign nation. A President in the uniform of the COAS Pakistan Army creates an unhealthy precedent for adventurers in the future. For the sake of this nation, Pervez Musharraf must come to terms with this reality (and his place in history thereof) sooner than later.

Pervez Musharraf successes in the years since 1999 are many (and not only since 9/11), more particularly in the economic field where growth rate is exceeding 6 per cent and is targeting 8 per cent in 2005-2006. The economy has not only greatly stabilised but is ripe for exploitation by entrepreneurs, however inflation at 9 per cent is a matter of concern as is the "poverty alleviation programme" with rewards still not "trickling down" to the down-trodden and hopelessly poor. His biggest success (and a measure of his personal confidence) was in not outrightly imposing martial law publicly, even though he has run one in all but name. This gave the perception to the public of benign authority, this force-multiplied perception by allowing of unprecedented freedom of the media. With freedom of expression manifest as an article of faith, the military

out of resigned frustration at their hapless fate, that is too simplistic!

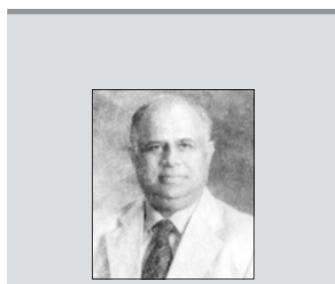
One of Musharraf's lasting legacies is the instituting of accountability, one only wishes it had been across the board. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has done an excellent job in targeting businessmen, bureaucrat and politicians, etc in not touching the superior judiciary and/or the Armed Forces its credibility has been badly undercut. Moreover the "plea bargain" concept is an invitation for legalising corruption. A handful among the superior judiciary and the military hierarchy, both serving and retired, have a vested interest in Musharraf retaining the COAS post, NAB under any future regime will certainly institute cases against them, one serving Lt Gen and one recently retired one have a lot of real-estate Shenanigans to answer for! Which brings us to the question

Since law and order situation before the 2001 election was a major decision making factor for the general people, it shall remain same for the next 2006 election as well. As long as the present government would continually use RAB to contain the law and order situation, and people remain sighing relief with killing of a "notorious killer" in cross-fire or in encounter, the people shall hardly pay any attention to the so-called "Change C T G Law"-type programmes.

Better watch out. Otherwise, AL may lose more seats in the coming general election by not understanding the common people's mind.

Sajjad Waheed is a senior lecturer, Daffodil International University, Sukrabad, Dhaka.

## An unnecessary credibility problem



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

THIS country, far more than others, gives a short shrift to lame-ducks and retirees. Non-elected "popular leaders" become nonentities once they vacate the post they occupy, nobody worships the setting sun. If we are to cater for internal and geo-political extenuating circumstances vis-à-vis Pakistan one does not see how Pervez Musharraf can ever take off his uniform, on Dec 30, 2004 he confirmed this in a live TV and radio address to the nation. Pervez Musharraf's personality reacts to threats rather than bow down before them, in that sense MMA is to blame for making the uniform an issue. If he had not been pressurised by the MMA, the uniform issue would have become inoperative. Pervez Musharraf is a "popular" leader but not a "popularly elected" leader, his staying on as President (and remaining a "popular" leader) is wholly (and solely) dependant upon his continuing as COAS Pakistan Army. Pervez Musharraf would be committing "hara-kiri" by leaving the COAS post, given his personal security situation he is riding a tiger and quite happy about not getting off the tiger.

In a prime time televised address in Dec 2003 Pervez Musharraf gave what amounted to a solemn pledge that he would retire as COAS on or before Dec 31, 2004 because of an understanding reached with the

Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) to break the impasse on the 17th Amendment. The President has now gone back on his public commitment and therefore enmeshed himself in a major credibility problem when there was no need to do so. Because of late Gen Ziaul Haq's notorious "90 day commitment" which Zia did not keep (and had no intention of keeping), the public suspects the credibility of military rulers making any such promises. Pervez Musharraf

Musharraf to keep both the post of President and COAS, to quote Powell, "it is not a matter for the US but of the Pakistanis". The US-led world has differing standards at different times for different countries with respect to democracy, our present mode of democracy fits into their scheme of things, albeit for both national and international security reasons. Logically, even though Pervez Musharraf's continuity in both offices is contingent upon the security environment, given

he would have remained an all powerful non-executive Head of State. However signs now point to a national government in the making in the future, a coalition of liberal forces to politically match the religious parties that are ascendant in some areas on our western and northern borders. Pervez Musharraf's ability to compromise where and when necessary is an asset to the country, consider his U-turn on the Taliban after 9/11. He saved Pakistan from becoming one

that the west is presently under threat of international terrorism, should we have generals running western democracies? It may not be logical in the purest sense to have a uniformed man as a Head of State of any democracy, in the face of Islamic extremism breeding terrorism, the west has decided that to be logical is not to be always right.

Pervez Musharraf has certainly made mistakes, the major being the holding of the Referendum when there was no need to do so. The second being the failure to transfer power to those elected, even after a grossly manipulated election. He was forced to become beholden to the very party his intelligence men artificially created in the first place. Heavens would not have fallen if the PPP would have come to power in Sindh and led a Coalition government at the Federal level. Retaining the Defence Ministry (and thus control of the ISI) and the NAB,

certainly can make a case for not adhering to his volunteered commitment since the MMA only partly kept their reciprocal commitments. One would have been far more comfortable if the President had refrained from making any public announcement, and if he had to do so then he should have made the doffing of his uniform conditional on the MMA keeping to their side of the bargain.

Since the world (which comprises the US and its Coalition partners in the "war against terrorism") is quite comfortable with Pervez Musharraf running a "uniformed democracy", there is no international compulsion on him to gamble with things contrary. In any case we are past-masters at frequently sacrificing morality at the altar of necessity. When asked about Musharraf not leaving the post of COAS as promised, the US Secretary of State referred to the Parliamentary process that had allowed

giant parking lot!

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## OPINION

## Caretaker Government Law: Reform not necessary

SAJJAD WAHEED

JUSTICE M Latifur Rahman correctly pointed out that "the idea of reform of the caretaker system as is a matter purely within the domain of the parliamentarians and the politicians of Bangladesh." Most of the people agree with him.

It is really deplorable that Mr. SAMS Kibria, a former finance minister, and presently a member of the parliament from the Awami League made a mistake, and through which he has "exhibited his uncharitable and unkind frame of mind," as well as "ill-will, wrath, hostile, and immature political mental frame" of his party. He could mention the term 'Justice' before the name of Justice Mohammad Latifur Rahman.

Justice Latifur Rahman may naturally claim that the "omission of the word 'Justice' was obviously deliberate and purposeful." We shall always hope that Mr. Kibria shall not make this type of mistake in the future, and expect that he or his party-men, shall show proper respect to other personages of different opinions.

The AL gives an impression that the 2001 election debacle is still not healed properly, and the party needs a total revamp before going for anti-government agitation programmes to remove this government forcefully and ushering an early election with putting an amendment the constitution for changing the present Caretaker Government Law.

Considering all these factors, one can clearly see that the

reform that the AL is shouting for in the Caretaker Government Law and the electoral system as well as the resignation of the present government all depend on the will of the present elected government.

That is why there are ample reasons to disagree with Mr. Kibria that "the political landscape of Bangladesh" has been altered. And he or his party thought that "morally, if not legally, this government has no right to remain in power" since 21 August grenade attack. Now, if we look back in those horrifying BAL days, there were more severe incidents in the 1996-2001 period, and the BAL government -- the first coalition government in the history of Bangladesh -- did not resign. I do not think this current

government shall resign on those so-called moral grounds. This is all the "talk of the talks!" Even the use of the police forces in the hands of the ruling party was also there in the BAL regime. As a result police lost neutrality. Also there were very less respect for law and legal rights in those days. In fact, the police has been used for partisan interest for a long time.

In the eyes of the opposition, any sitting government turns into an extremely "autocratic, repressive and corrupt" government. Mr. Kibria mentioned that some people are talking "about an 'unconstitutional' solution." Since Bangladesh is not Pakistan, he or his party people or the people who told of the unconstitutional changes fear that the general people may not like one such

in the future.

If people consider this government as "repressive, incompetent and corrupt", then they will like to give their verdict in due time, during the election at end of 2006. But there are very less convincing grounds now for which the "government must resign forthwith."

It seems that Mr. Kibria and his party are dreaming that the sitting government shall do something to save itself as they did in February-March of 1996. Mr. Kibria forgot one thing, in 1996 election, BNP came out as the biggest opposition party in the parliament.

A very important question shall arise in the next election. Mr. Kibria knows that "we will have a new general election." But he does not think that his party can win

this time. Here he raised the question that "How will the election be held?" Actually most people want a free and fair election. We have adopted the CTG system, what Mr. Kibria has mentioned as an invention of BAL. Actually, this is not true.

He mentioned "in enacting the law on the subject, she [Begum Zia] did not consult the Awami League." In fact, Mr. Kibria might have forgot that there was no AL MPs when Caretaker Government Law was passed in the parliament.

Mr. Kibria, his party chief and those supporting AL, strongly desire that the current government MUST resign soon. If there is no change in the Caretaker Government Law, the immediate past Chief Justice of Bangladesh Supreme Court shall take oath as

the Chief of CTG. He will appoint ten advisors, and go ahead with the plan for a general election within ninety-days.

If AL wants to amend the CTG law, it should do it once it is in power with a "two-third" majority in the parliament. AL should also remember that their present demand shall not be fulfilled in the given situation, and the majority of their partners in the race for power shall not bring much support than that AL singly can get. Interestingly, AL chief and the central leadership failed to earn the support of people by criticising the RAB who have taken strong actions to eliminate many staunch murderers, miscreants, and 'mastans'. They could not clearly tell the people what they would do without using RAB.