

Petrobangla's SOS to cabinet committee

What a costly same-side folly!

WE are aghast to learn that Petrobangla is facing a cash crunch as 30 government entities have not paid gas bills worth a staggering Tk 697 crore over a long period of time. The state oil and gas authority has asked for help from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs to recover the money. It has sent an SOS signal, belatedly though, to the committee to bail it out from the difficult situation. The liquidity crisis is impeding the normal functioning of Petrobangla which has to pay the international oil companies for purchasing gas in costly foreign exchange.

Now, the problem stems from lack of internal financial discipline within the government. The defaulting offices are showing a callous indifference towards payment for an essential utility service they can't do without. They seem to be convinced that their failure to pay the bills will not invoke any punitive action as the whole thing is an 'internal affair' of the government. So the default culture had a hey-day and huge arrears piled up.

The culture not only causes financial dislocation at the receiving end, but also sets a bad example in a far-reaching sense. The government as the trendsetter better not indulge in something which greatly undermines its moral authority to demand timely payment from the private sector and citizens in general. In fact, the entire edifice of budget might crumble if payment defaults assume such proportions. It is now a pervasive syndrome. Is it in any way better than financial defalcation and wastage?

The fundamental issue is governance or sound financial administration required to maintain accountability and responsibility in handling such matters within the government. Internal financial discipline is a prerequisite for enforcing discipline in the financial sector. The men in charge of government organisations should not be under the impression that they can violate the rules with impunity.

The other utility service providers are facing a more or less similar problem. So, it is a case of lack of accountability across the board. The government must wake up to the alarm bell ringing to serve a notice on it regarding the high degree of internal financial indiscipline engulfing it.

Heritage Park

Government should encourage such initiatives

THE Heritage Park set up by the Concord Group is the first of its kind in Bangladesh and we would definitely like to extend our congratulations to the group for conceiving and bringing to fruition such an innovative and unique project. The park which stands on 20 bighas of land in Ashulia beside the group's Fantasy Kingdom theme park is intended to provide visitors with the opportunity to learn a little about this nation's cultural heritage in a fun-filled and enjoyable setting.

The novelty of the heritage park is that it combines the concept of education and entertainment. The park consists of replicas of well-known heritage sites of the country such as Ahsan Manzil and the Sat Gambuj Mosque, and will also include ten different rides to entertain children and adults. The entrance price is a reasonable Tk 60.

The heritage park is thus an excellent means through which the nation's children -- or anyone else for that matter -- can get an opportunity to see the panorama of our nation's cultural heritage. It is to be hoped that those whose minds are opened by a first exposure to the nation's heritage will be thus encouraged to journey one day to see the real thing, and that respect for our cultural heritage and support for its preservation will thereby be enhanced.

The park is a superb way to open young people's eyes to the history and culture of our nation in a way that is fun and accessible. Hopefully the park will kindle the kind of interest and enthusiasm that is often hard to reproduce in the classroom or in text-books. The park may even have the effect of giving a boost to tourism in the country, and at the very least, will shine a spotlight on the actual heritage sights and help ensure that they continue to be preserved.

The government should take steps to encourage this kind of enterprise which has such scope for educational benefit. Measures the government might wish to take in order to promote projects such as the heritage park are tax breaks, allocation of land on favourable terms, loans, etc.

There is no doubt that the government must be vigilant to make sure that assistance only goes to projects that have a legitimate educational purpose. But it seems to us that projects such as heritage parks are good candidates for public-private partnerships that the government should promote, as they provide a social good and at the same time are likely to be profitable enterprises if conceived and run properly.

Iraq elections: A choice between the devil and the deep blue sea



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

COME January 30, 2005, Iraqi voters will choose 275 members of a national assembly, as well as electing members to 18 provincial assemblies and to the autonomous Kurdish parliament in the north, that is, if the elections can be held fairly, peacefully, with full participation of all, and without hindrance and let.

That appears to be a difficult proposition given the current security situation in Iraq. In large parts of the country, because of insecurity, many voters have not been able to register as yet. No proper census of an estimated 12 million voters has been possible, understandable, given the constraints of time and compulsions of security. Security and lack of time has also forced the Iraqi election commission to reportedly sacrifice both voter education and the safeguards necessary for a fair election.

However, one hopes that the Iraqis are better educated about the purpose of the election than the US president, whose response to a query as to whether Sunni participation was essential in the upcoming

Iraqi election to make it free and fair, replied that he was, "confident when people realise that there is a chance to vote on a president, they will participate." Well, the fact of the matter is that Iraqis will be voting neither for a president nor any other executive in the January 2005 elections!

Iraq elections are indeed a test case for the US. The Daily Star editorial hit the nail on the head when it said: "Most Iraqis see the election as perhaps the beginning

well as the Iraqi security forces and those involved in the election process were targets. Between the last week of December 2004 and now, nearly 150 people were killed due to insurgent actions.

More cold water has been thrown on the election plans with the Iraqi Islamic Party, the country's largest Sunni Muslim political group, pulling out of the election because of what they term as lack of security and the difficulties of holding elections all over Iraq at the

cities of Fallujah and Ramadi are located, there are only 43 candidates competing for a 41-seat provincial council. While this does not merit cancellation of the election, there being more candidates than seats, according to a Christian Science Monitor report, a new memo from the chief UN election official in Iraq indicates, "the board is carefully studying the situation to determine whether that election should go ahead as planned."

The ground reality is that the US

US, and the reasons are obvious.

There is also a discrete attempt by the US to influence the upcoming elections in Iraq. While the world has been made aware, through the pliant US media, (with some honourable exceptions) of the so-called Syrian and Iranian plans to influence the elections in Iraq, the so-called free US media has hardly bothered to look at a report that exposes the sinister work of groups funded by the US administration to manipulate the upcoming elections

to the two US political parties as the names suggest, and both are, according to Croke and Dominick tied to alleged covert plans to install US-favoured regimes in Third World countries

It is a fact that manipulating elections through covert means to install pliant regimes in many parts of the globe has been a US stock in trade. Where persuasion has failed, direct intervention has been resorted to. It is thus no wonder that the Bush administration would resort to all manners of things to see a pliant Transitional National Assembly whose task it would be to legislate the future constitution of Iraq basing on which a permanent national election for the national assembly would be organised, all by the end of 2005. At all order indeed!

Given the many factors that are bearing upon the elections in Iraq, the United Nations special envoy to Iraq, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi's statement to the Security Council, "The electoral process will be an Iraqi process conducted by Iraqis for Iraqis," has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

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The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

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of the end of US occupation. On the other hand, the US would see this as a fulfillment of a 'just' endeavour, which was to 'free' the Iraqi people, and through it establish the justness of their cause."

In as much as it is a test case for the US and the occupation forces to hold elections as per schedule, a schedule sanctioned by UN Resolution 1546, there is strong opposition against the proposed elections in Iraq amongst the insurgents as well as the Iraqi Sunnis.

The strong opposition, led by the insurgents, to the US plans of holding the election in January 2005, which will set into motion the future democratic and intuitional process in Iraq, has manifested itself through the recent spate of bomb attacks in Baghdad, Mosul, Fallujah and Karbala. In some places the US combat elements, as

same time. Clearly, the Sunnis are not sure whether elections can actually be organised in some areas in the Sunni belt and they fear that violence in their areas will keep the voters away from the polling stations on January 30. According to the Iraqi Islamic party leader Mr. Hamid, six out of 18 provinces in Iraq would not be able to hold credible elections under the current circumstances. Even the Iraqi interim president has suggested reconsidering holding of elections in January, and in an interview with the Washington Post, Iraq's UN ambassador also proposed a delay of two or three weeks.

Surely, after the recent decimation of Fallujah, it would be foolhardy, if not downright asinine, even to attempt to motivate the Fallujans to vote. In the province of Anbar, where the violence-torn

occupation forces are hard pressed on the ground for their own security. Under the circumstances it is quite imponderable as to how they would provide security to the more than 30,000 polling centres simultaneously. With the Iraqi security forces melting away in places, the US has admitted that these elements are in no position to act and operate on their own.

The US has already touted ideas of granting special dispensation to the Sunnis should the Sunni boycott deprive the legislative assembly of a diverse character. But, as per press reports, Iraq's election body has rejected a suggestion in Washington that it "adjust" the results of next month's vote if low turnout in Sunni areas means an overwhelming Shiites majority in the new assembly. Even a predominant Shiite majority in the new assembly is not acceptable to

in Iraq. This is what Lisa Croke and Brian Dominick, writing in The New Standard on December 13 had to say: "Even as the White House decries the ominous prospect of Iranian influence on the upcoming Iraqi national elections, US-funded organizations with long records of manipulating foreign democracies in the direction of Washington's interests are quietly but deeply involved in essentially every aspect of the upcoming Iraqi elections."

Reportedly, two such groups, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), are part of a group of NGOs that have been provided over \$80 million for political and electoral activities in post-Saddam Iraq. In spite of public assertions that they are nonpartisan, each has close links

OPINION

Caretaker government system needs some fine tuning

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

THE first election under the newly enacted constitutional provision was conducted by Justice M Habibur Rahman, a highly educated and enlightened person in his own right. He had to work under a partisan President and unfortunately did not have a smooth sailing in his tenure. His great wisdom saved the day and the election was by and large fair. There was no major allegation against the impartiality of his administration notwithstanding some noise from the defeated party chief. Likewise, the election of 1991 under Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed was equally credible despite the utterance of 'subtle rigging' from the defeated party chief. However, that utterance, as was proven later, was not meant to cut any aspersions on the neutrality and integrity of that highly regarded justice since the same party chief invited him to be the head of the Republic during his tenure as the head of the government.

Is there any broad consensus among our citizens in attributing the caretaker administration under Justice Latifur Rahman with the similar connotation of impartiality and neutrality? The Latifur Rahman administration played itself with controversy since the day it took the oath of office. I myself wrote an article in the DS (*CTG on Tight Rope*) pointing out the flaws about transferring of the top bureaucrats and of selection of his advisers. His administration, obviously, categorised the civil servants into two categories:

the Awami sympathisers and the neutral. Those who either took part or still nourish the values of our great war of liberation, were classified as the Awami sympathisers.

Many other ways the CTG under Justice Latifur Rahman was different from two of his predecessors. Neither of the earlier chief advisers needed any SSF protection involving a huge drainage of resources from national exchequer, not they had to stay in the lavish state guest house for a year after the election, albeit in each of their tenures there

even graced the honouring ceremony of a minister's wife who (minister) donated a 300 million taka worth government property to his wife's NGO. A few months ago he was the chief guest in the forum of the government backed journalist union (Sheikh Hasina was the chief guest in the other faction) in which he castigated the news media for their lack of policies. Justice Latifur Rahman now abhors the (lack of) policy of those news media, whose support was vital for his administration, in unveiling

the *misdeeds* of the government of the day, specially in reflecting the astronomical magnitude of those three *'misdeeds'* that have engulfed the nation in the alliance ruled Bangladesh. As a former chief justice of the Supreme Court, he is no more disturbed by the extra judicial killing (in *'heart attack'* during operation clean heart and in *'cross fire'* during the current RAB operation) or by *'rule of Banglabbai'*, unheard of phenomenon in any *'(un)failed state'*. He found fault with Mr. Kibria: *'a bureaucrat suddenly turned into a politician can hardly get along with the essence of democracy'*, while he himself selected the bulk of his advisers from the same pool to

teach the AL leaders the *'essence of democracy'*. For the first time the pool of advisers of a CTG did not include a single academician.

The provision of caretaker government, though very hastily formulated, is by and large a very well documented piece of legislation. It stipulates a wide range of flexibilities in choosing the chief adviser, which includes clause 58 C (5) that empowers the President to choose the chief adviser in consultation with the major political parties. If our honourable judges

the fine tuning should come into play. The current government's enactment of a new law on age limit of the judges is a clear manifestation of that manipulation.

The legislation has put an added liability on Justice KM Hasan (who has to go part in it whatsoever), in addition to the fact that he used to be an office-bearer of the BNP and had been embarrassed to sit on the bench in the Bangabandhu murder case, because he is the relative of one of the self-confessed and convicted killers. I met Justice Hasan a number of times while he was the ambassador in a country where I was a university professor and found him to be a decent and lucid individual, albeit a staunch Zia loyalist. Amid all these liabilities he will do himself and the nation a great service if he once again feels *'embarrassed'*, exactly the way he did in the Bangabandhu murder case and voluntarily relinquishes himself from the future chief (adviser) of the next CTG and let the constitutional provision take the alternative course. Unfortunately, we have a highly partisan President in the Bangabandhu and it would be too much for Justice Hasan to carry the burden of his past to prove otherwise in the future. After all, no other position in the land carries enough stature to be even comparable with that of the chief justice of its highest court.

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The provision of caretaker government, though very hastily formulated, is by and large a very well documented piece of legislation. The letter and spirit of the provision is the neutrality which was superbly demonstrated by both Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed (though he did not work under this framework) and Justice M Habibur Rahman. This was possible only because they listened to all the stakeholders of the system and did not have the prior mindset about the 'misdeeds' of any of the stakeholders.

was a defeated side. Neither of them had to write a book to defend their actions nor had they felt honoured to present that book to the Prime Minister. Neither of them had to endure the criticisms about 'heinous persecution' of supporters of the defeated party in the hands of the victors during their tenures and thereafter. Neither of them had to come to New York to testify that 'no persecution of minority took place under my administration' nor they had to say that 'my responsibility was only to hold a fair election, nothing more'. Neither of them attended any of the congregations or forums participated by the ministers of the winning side.

In fact, so much have been written about the actions of the CTG under Justice Latifur Rahman during his tenure and thereafter in our news media, it was appalling to read his reactions vis-à-vis some observations made by Mr. Shahi A M S Kibria about 'the last CTG'. So far the criticisms of the Latifur Rahman administration is concerned in our news media, Mr. Kibria's assertions were really a tip of the iceberg. His rejoinder to Mr. Kibria's observations has unveiled his mindset on the AL government's *'misdeeds (criminality, corruption and terrorism)*' and naturally he took upon himself the responsibility of redressing the nation from the clutches of that *'misdeeds'*. In fact, Justice Latifur Rahman already knew that the *'misdeeds'* of AL *'were intolerable to the well meaning voters'*. This mindset drove him to prioritise his agenda, the least of which was to run an impartial administration.

It is probably the time to rejoice that those three *'misdeeds'* have now been dispersed from the society and as such Justice Latifur Rahman is now glorifying the seminars and symposiums with his attendance in which the current government ministers are lauding their successes! On the other day he

the *misdeeds* of the government of the day, specially in reflecting the astronomical magnitude of those three *'misdeeds'* that have engulfed the nation in the alliance ruled Bangladesh. As a former chief justice of the Supreme Court, he is no more disturbed by the extra judicial killing (in *'heart attack'* during operation clean heart and in *'cross fire'* during the current RAB operation) or by *'rule of Banglabbai'*, unheard of phenomenon in any *'(un)failed state'*. He found fault with Mr. Kibria: *'a bureaucrat suddenly turned into a politician can hardly get along with the essence of democracy'*, while he himself selected the bulk of his advisers from the same pool to

on line to succession are prudent enough to realise that they do not carry the confidence of all sides to begin with, the said clause will automatically triggers on. The letter and spirit of the provision is the neutrality which was superbly demonstrated by both Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed (though he did not work under this framework) and Justice M Habibur Rahman. This was possible only because they listened to all the stakeholders of the system and did not have the prior mindset about the *'misdeeds'* of any of the stakeholders.

No legislation is fool-proof and the possibility of its manipulation exists in all cases and that is where

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.

Don't forget them

We must not forget the needy people in this winter as due to the cold a great number of them are suffering, especially in the villages and rural areas. And in those remote places, distribution of cloths [new or old/used] are rare, as in most of the cases, we distribute those in our vicinity in the town, where many people have the ability to donate such things.

So we need to collect money, used cloths from our surroundings, educational institutes, relatives, areas, etc. and then distribute them in remote areas where the misery is inexpressible.

And so we have to form some small groups with 2/3/4/5 enthusiastic people to work in each area. Some students of Botany Dept. of DU are ready to help the donors and organisers of relief operations.
Anonymous
Lecturer, DU

Reckless driving

Reckless driving of motor cars, trucks and all kinds of automobiles has become a menace to the pedestrians. It is a matter of risk to walk along the streets now-a-days. It seems that the streets were made only for the drivers of the cars, taxis, CNGs, buses and trucks. As soon as they get into vehicles they seem to forget all about the world except themselves. But everybody has equal rights on the streets. Though there is a penalty for exceeding the speed limit, yet these are considered as light offences and most of them are ignored by the traffic police. As a result, accidents are happening daily in our country.

The government should be more active to provide safety to the help-less pedestrians and the police should be more attentive to enforce traffic rules on the drivers. The relevant authorities have to take it up tenderly.
Md. Tareque Kamal
One-mail

It's good going

Actually, we are happy to see the actions of Rab. When the criminals are made to face the law, they manage to come out somehow or the other. So I think Rab is doing a good work.

We can only appreciate the job being done by Rab.
SK Kamrul Hasan Nizami, IUC

Construction, reconstruction and destruction

In the distant past the 'sardars' of Dhaka City were vested with some functions to maintain discipline in their *mohallas*. Some parts of Old Dhaka have still retained the system. No meat seller then would have been allowed to slaughter a young cow/bull. This was a norm. Those days are gone. We now prefer meat of young cows. The policy of sardars had its point. A young cow and bull can come to our use for some further

time. Its slaughter deprives us from further service. But an old cow will not come to further use. We need to slaughter it for supply of meat. We have deviated from this principle. We construct roads, culverts, bridges either with our own resources or with external assistance and after lapse of some time, which is not reasonable, we destroy and reconstruct them. We are in a continuous process of construction, destruction and reconstruction. We had so many Baily Bridges. We know that a Baily Bridge has got a minimum of 100 years life span, if maintained properly.

On replacement its scrap value is not unmentionable. The scrap value is almost close to the installation value. So many 'Baily Bridges' have been removed for replacing those by concrete bridges with RCC pillars. But we see that these bridges are short lived. We are a poor country. Fifty per cent of our people live under poverty line. How can we then engage in a continuous pro-

cess of construction and reconstruction?
Tapader Md Khalilur Rahman
Mirpur, Dhaka

Meter forgas

Gas is our most valuable natural resource. Since this resource is limited, we must use it in a prudent way. But, unfortunately, we are wasting this valuable thing.

The government announced many times that meter would be introduced for measuring gas consumption. And we, the people, welcomed it. It will prevent wastage of gas. But the planners should ensure that when meter is introduced, no loopholes are left for the corrupt elements in the department concerned to exploit.
Sheuly Akter
Dhaka

Kudos to Rab

At present Rab is doing an excellent job, curbing terrorism all over Ban-

gladesh. Some human rights activists consider crossfire a gross violation of human rights. Paradoxically, these same activists were raising a hue and cry when criminality was at its peak. We should keep in mind that human rights are for the general people, not for terrorists.

Before the introduction of Rab, our police department arrested these criminals and after some time they were freed. We should appreciate Rab's actions as the real criminals are being targeted.

Shahadat Hossain
Dhaka

Rab

I fully support the views of Mohammad Ataul Hoque and Murshid concerning Rab, which have been expressed in their letters that were published a few days back in The Daily Star.

We are baffled by the attitude of

the Awami League and the words of Sheikh Hasina about Rab's actions. When people all over the country are happy and praising Rab for their sincere efforts to contain crime, and they have succeeded to a great extent in their mission, instead of uttering words of appreciation, the Awami League has started blaming them. The party is trying to imply that Rab's actions are politically motivated and Sheikh Hasina openly said, "Rab is Khaled Zia's Bahini." But we know very well that Rab is not sparing anybody.

Therefore, for their own good, the Awami League should stop saying anything against Rab's activities because people have started wondering whether the party really cares for the people, wants them to live in peace, or prefers chaos and anarchy to prevail in the country. We hope the AL will support the government in its efforts to curb crime.
Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Contrasting reality

Some days ago I attended a wedding ceremony of one of my friends. We had a lot of fun and enjoyed ourselves. We also enjoyed the feast. Finally the occasion came to an end and I was walking along the footpath to get a rickshaw. On the footpath I noticed the poor people, the sons and daughters of hapless families. A family was having their dinner. Some rice and one or two pieces of meat like substance (probably they collected or bought the same from a hotel at noon).

Apparently they loved the meal as they were eating with a sparkle of delight in their eyes. All my joys vanished at the scene. It is true that in society there will be classes and some people will be in better condition than others.

But in our country the difference seems to be too much and I wonder if it will ever decrease.
Said
Dhaka