

Still a non-starter ACC!

Govt should act to straighten things out

THE Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the setting up of which was a long-awaited move, has yet to become operational, thanks to a host of inhibitory factors. Immediately upon its advent on November 21 last year, there was a discordant note sounded by a member of the commission suggesting he had a difference of opinion with the chairman. This tended to cast doubts on the commission becoming effective within a short time. And now it has been reported that an official of the dissolved Bureau of Anti-Corruption (Bac) is working for the ACC in clear violation of government orders making absorption of Bac staffers in the ACC contingent upon a screening exercise. So, the self-appointment spree is bound to raise eye brows, and with it, some questions about how the government runs!

The Bac was a small outfit, a mere appendage to a ministry. It was rightly believed to be incapable of handling the all-pervasive corruption in the government offices. There was thus considerable pressure from the civil society as well as development partners to form an independent anti-corruption commission. The stage was set for the ACC to make its mark as a deterrent to corruption. But the decision-makers, it seems, did not attach due importance to its mandate and organogram. The hesitation to reinstate the Bac staffers in the ACC may have a lot to do with the image of the former, which was never good in the public eye. That's why the necessity for screening was felt. But then the fate of a section of government employees should not have been allowed to hang in the balance for such a long time to create the mess it has. The formation of the ACC should have been preceded by a clear plan of who would man it down the tiers.

The government is reported to be thinking in terms of punitive action against the former Bac official who signed the official order in his self-assigned capacity of a director. Of course this is an issue pertaining to service discipline. But the fact remains that the ACC has not got off to a start even in terms of the fundamentals. It has been unable to resolve the administrative tangles, let alone working as a fully-fledged anti-corruption body. The only initiative it took was the attempt to unearth the mystery behind the 'vanishing vehicles' which ended in a failure, and perhaps, a provocation for a reprisal of sorts.

The government should act swiftly to make the ACC fully operational with all the logistical support it needs. It is imperative that bureaucratic procrastination does not stand in the way of achieving the prime goal -- fighting corruption.

Accusing children of crime

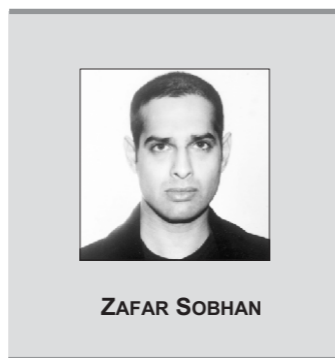
A line needs to be drawn

WE were simply shocked to learn that children, aged between three months and four years, were made accused by the police in a criminal case. This is not the first time such an incident took place, but this time the two children have been accused of involvement in dacoity. How absurd it sounds! It seems that the investigation officer did not bother to find out about their age. They have been falsely implicated at some stage; their names were not even mentioned in the FIR.

Should we call it simple callousness or deliberate mischief? Let's not forget that children having been implicated in criminal cases and getting bail from the court is nothing new. In 2003, when two and a half year old Kashem came to court sitting on his father's lap for bail in Habiganj everyone's sensibilities were deeply hurt. There, too, it was found that the investigation officer did not do his job properly. This must stop. In such sensitive cases, the police have to be better aware of their responsibilities.

We have noticed that the children are granted bail, which in other words, means that they are being treated as suspects. Bangladesh was one of the first signatories to the Convention of Rights for a Child (CRC) which we need to live up to by implementing it in toto.

Demanding better



ZAFAR SOBHAN

IN my column last week I posed the question: what would it take for people to abandon their long-held tribal allegiance to one party or another. My theory was that it was these tribal allegiances and our unwillingness to rethink them that are shielding the political parties from accountability for their poor performances, and that ultimately it was the institution of democracy, and by extension, the country, that suffers.

I understand that for many people clinging to their tribal allegiance is a matter of self-preservation. We live in a polarized country where too often the only path to personal and professional advancement is fealty to one party or the other, and for many there is little choice but to continue to pay obeisance to one's political sponsors.

Licences, contracts, tenders, positions, favourable treatment, absence of harassment, protection, etc -- all of these are dependent on toeing the party line.

So perhaps it is asking too much for people to sacrifice so much for the sake of their consciences and the country. I don't think so, though.

I retain my greatest admiration for those who are willing to endure the loss and sacrifice that is occasioned by being an independent

thinker and being guided by their sense of right and wrong. Bangladesh is filled with examples of such heroes (and I use the term advisedly) who toil in obscurity and often in considerable difficulty, relinquishing any hope of riches or prestige or honour in favour of following the dictates of their conscience and doing the right thing.

Then again, some might argue that however misguided or short-sighted the policies followed by the political party of their backing, that their party can never reach the depths of the other party and thus

agree with and that they find troubling. There is no one who is entirely happy with their party's record either in government or out, and there is no one who denies that there is much room for improvement.

The question then becomes: what are we doing about it.

Not much is the honest answer, and here lies a big part of the problem.

Political parties ultimately belong to the people. We are the ones who vote for them and it is only through our consent that they

continue to be dictated to by a small coterie of insiders.

The first reform that each of us can demand of their party is that the party only nominate honest and capable candidates for our constituencies. There is no shortage of good candidates in any of the parties. The trouble is that too often they are pushed aside in favour of local musclemen or party financiers.

Petition your party heads. Tell them that you want a good candidate to vote for and not some thug or money-man. Get together with

sweep the massive Chittagong arms haul under the carpet.

Demand that the government fulfill its election pledge and separate the judiciary from the executive. Demand that the government provide the opposition democratic space in which to function. Demand that the government crack down on the corruption that is bleeding the national coffers dry. Demand that the government admit its errors, and above all, demand accountability for its mis-steps.

The same goes for AL supporters. Not even the most die-hard

deeds marred the last AL tenure.

Demand that the AL listen to the will of the people and forsake calling hartals between now and election day. Demand that the AL find less destructive means to express their dissent. Demand that the AL fulfill its responsibilities by attending parliament. Demand that the party ratchet down the rhetoric of forcing the government to step down before its constitutionally mandated term.

You get the idea.

The same goes for the supporters of the Jamaat or the JP who confide in private that they are embarrassed by the statements and excesses of some party leaders. The parties belong in the final analysis to the people who vote for them. There should be no reason why a party can get away with policies and pronouncements that most of the people who support it do not agree with. The parties' platforms and positions should be dictated by the people to whom they are ultimately accountable.

This power resides with us. All we have to do is to exercise it. All we need to do is demand better of our elected representatives. The day we see the people demanding of their leaders that our views be listened to and respected and responded to is the day that we will begin to move forward as a country. But as long as we sit back and permit a few hundred insiders and a few thousand of their sycophants and lackeys to run the affairs of state with no input from the rest of us, we shouldn't be surprised nor can we complain when they continue to run the country into the ground.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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switching allegiances is unthinkable. In many cases, people carry with them some ancient grudge against one party or another due to some injustice or indignity suffered in the distant past and can thus never reconcile themselves to their once and future nemesis.

But if people are unwilling to abandon their tribal allegiances, there still remains one path left to them in order to bring accountability to the system and to push their party and the polity in a more productive and positive direction.

This is to demand better.

There isn't a single person I have met in this country -- be they BNP or AL or Jamaat or JP or what have you -- who does not concede that there are many things that their party does or stands for that they do not

are permitted to govern. There is thus no excuse for the fact that the political parties are so unrepresentative of the people's wishes and unresponsive to our needs.

If we are not willing to contemplate switching allegiances -- though I continue to maintain that for the democratic system to work effectively we need to mature enough politically to put this option on the table -- then at the very least we should each be working to reform the parties from within.

This is something that we can all demand, regardless of party affiliation, and would occasion a tectonic shift in power away from the parties and politicians and towards the people, which in a democracy is where it ought to reside in the first place. There is no excuse for us to

other members of your constituency and put up a slate of possible candidates who would be acceptable both to the party and the people.

If you are a BNP supporter then make it known that you are bitterly disappointed with the party's performance in office these past three years. Make it known that you expected better when you voted for the party in 2001 and that you demand better for the next elections.

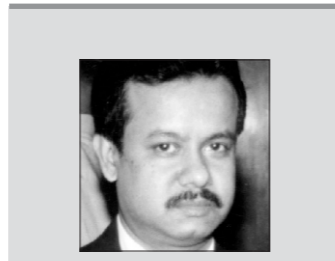
Demand that the government get to the bottom of the terrorism that has disfigured the face of the country during their tenure. Demand that the government root out extremism, even if it means upsetting their coalition partners. Demand that the government not

loyalist would say that he or she was satisfied with either of the periods of AL rule in the past. If the AL expects people to vote for it in the coming elections it should have to convince its supporters and potential voters that it has learned its lesson and will not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Its supporters should demand that the AL put together a credible political platform that addresses the needs of the people.

It is not enough to campaign on the fact that it is not the BNP or that the BNP has not done enough to merit re-election. Demand that it pledge to remove the corrupt and the criminal from its ranks and that it will not condone or defend members like ex-MP Joyrul Hazari and the other bad apples whose mis-

Flame of fame



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

not mind dropping his pants in order to become famous. Ultimately the Mafia kept most of the money, because they took over the distribution of the film. By then Linda Lovelace and Harry Reems were reduced to two naked bodies, ogled by lustful millions all over the world, who tended to remember the private parts of the porno stars more than their faces.

Fame can be downright insulting when it backfires. Bollywood actress Parvin Bobby was found dead in her Mumbai flat when her body had

those who are internationally famous. Many people stay famous for a year, others for decades, and only a handful of people are famous for centuries. There are even those who are famous for the day. Andy Warhol promised that in the future everybody would be famous for 15 minutes.

Francis Bacon wrote in one of his essays that men in great places are servants to three things, one of which is fame. There are people who are ready to do anything for fame, give up families, give up

wind, another spread by words. Fame does not exist unless others talk about it, recognition coming from sound bites, which magnify the profile of a person. An unsung hero becomes a tragic case because nobody likes to talk about his success.

But people can become tragic cases even when others talk about them. Aviator tycoon Howard Hughes died a recluse in his flight from country to country to hide from the US Internal Revenue Service. A popular singer in Hong Kong com-

sure, but both of them lived in pain. Mickey Rooney and Gary Coleman were child celebrities, who are all but forgotten, living in distress. An American actress named Frances ended up in a lunatic asylum where guards used to sell her body to those men who were still besotted by her fame. It is a shame to have fame and lose it, because it incredibly shrinks the personality. But it is even worse to seek fame without shame and still not to get it, because one is almost left without any personality.

That is what happened to Linda

CROSS TALK

Fame is, therefore, incremental reputation, varying in degrees and deportment. Socrates called it the perfume of heroic deeds. It is not enough to be known unless one is known for a good reason. If you are powerful today, newspapers quote you, and your face is flashed on TV every day, you will be recognized by people, but that is not fame any more than love is sex.

already started to decompose. She was lonely and depressed, the once winsome actress, who bloated like a balloon, was shunned by her friends and colleagues for more than a decade. The first Indian actress to appear on the cover page of Time magazine, her funeral was attended by an oddly small group of people.

So what is fame and what does it mean to be famous? Perhaps it is when the quality of a person is widely honoured and acclaimed, when his reputation is recognized to exalt his position. And it varies like everything else, more famous, less famous, more or less famous. Some are locally famous, others are nationally famous and there are

values, bend over backward, and have no shame. Linda and Harry were desperate for fame, bared their bodies like museum displays, subjecting themselves to intimate humiliations in order to earn public name.

It is also common in other lines of business. People exploit people in the name of success. People suck up to their bosses, the subordinate flatters his superior, beautiful women throw themselves at powerful men, and the ambitious make compromises, because all of them have got one thing in common. All of them want to have success.

Now, fragrance is to flower what fame is to success, one is spread by

mitted suicide. Marilyn Monroe took her life with an overdose of barbiturates. Ernest Hemingway killed himself with a double-barreled gun. At times even fame fails to tame the aspirations which drive ambitious minds.

Why? Probably, because fame is like intoxication and for some people the influence does not last very long. People are hungry for immortality, which afflicts them like an ailment, as the desire to leave one's mark in life runs counter to the threat of being erased. Fame is the distant image of immortal life, sort of footprints on an elusive road that vanishes into dense forest.

Linda and Harry gave us plea-

and Harry. They were used as objects of pleasure, their bodies being treated as tools so that other people could feel aroused. If you really think, porno stars are no more than sexual paraphernalia with human face. People like them, people talk about them, and people even imitate them. But people do not respect them.

In fact, fame is fame when respect is the name of the game. Movie actors, politicians, wise men, reformers, wealthy folks, creative minds, no matter who is prominent and who is powerful, fame is if any of them command respect when people want to remember them. Koose Muniswamy Veerappan, the

Indian brigand, remained elusive for several decades until he was killed in an encounter last October. He comes right in the middle of the range, commanding respect amongst his own people and villagers, but hated by everybody else.

So, there may be something called limited fame, time-bound, territorial, tantamount only to the exposure it gets. Every country has its beauty queens, teen idols, movie stars, popular leaders, scholars, thinkers, and entrepreneurs. But then there are those at the regional level, and there are those at the global level, the regimen of fame divided like spheres of influence. If you look at India, Telegu or Malayalam film stars are not known in the rest of the country. But Bollywood stars are famous all over India, some of them are even recognized throughout the world.

Fame is, therefore, incremental reputation, varying in degrees and deportment. Socrates called it the perfume of heroic deeds. It is not enough to be known unless one is known for a good reason. If you are powerful today, newspapers quote you, and your face is flashed on TV every day, you will be recognized by people, but that is not fame any more than love is sex.

Linda Lovelace and Harry Reems loved that difference the hard way, their lives shattered in the aftermath of what was their desperate bid for fame. They did lot of sex on the screen, but love remained in short supply for them. The message is clear if you wish to have fame. First learn how to keep your shame.

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Bangladesh gets emotionally hurt by visit decision

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

IT has already been reported in the media that the prime minister of Japan will be visiting India and Pakistan as part of his four-nation tour in April. The other two countries being Holland and Luxembourg, the South Asian share of the visit has narrowly been confined to only two countries, which is in stark contrast with the earlier practice being followed by the Japanese prime ministers who used to cover four or five countries of the region in one go. The previous practice was also seen as welcoming and rational by host countries, as the heads of the governments of Japan are not frequent guests to the whole region. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi will be the third Japanese premier to visit South Asia in more than fifteen years. As a result, it wouldn't be wrong to calculate that the region would most likely not get another opportunity to host a distinguished guest as the prime minister of Japan in the next five-year period. The forthcoming visit of the Japanese prime minister to the region has therefore become more of an emotional issue for the people of Bangladesh, who see Japan a country very close to their heart from the early days of country's independence.

The author of this column has already focused on the issue in one of the earlier segments and tried to locate the reasons for Japan to avoid Dhaka as a destination for possible stopover during the prime minister's South Asia trip. Japanese scholars, media personnel, and others who show active interest in the affairs of Bangladesh do not hesitate to talk about the reason they think to be most important in this particular case.

It is quite significant that many foreign watchers of Bangladesh find it disturbing the way things have been moving in our country recently. To their eyes the situation has deteriorated significantly since the August 2004 bombing. Surprisingly, few subscribe to the official version, that hartals together with the conspirators in the opposition camp through their relentless effort to undermine the administration by involving in negative publicity, are to be blamed for the image of the country taking a nosedive in the eyes of the outside world. They do not hesitate to say what they think, and what they think is the failure of the government to protect its citizens from systematic attacks by certain quarters linked to the extremist ideas that flourished recently as a result of hate teaching



The decision to bypass Bangladesh by the Japanese prime minister during his forthcoming state visit to South Asia can in no way be interpreted as a diplomatic or political debacle for the present administration of Bangladesh in favour of others now out of power. Japan traditionally does not consider any of the political groupings of Bangladesh closer to Tokyo than others. For the policy makers in Tokyo, more important for Bangladesh is a leadership capable of handling successfully the various problems being faced by the country. Whoever proves to be doing the job, Japan is willing to recognize the side as being a true friend.

preached in the name of religion, to which those in power have turned a blind eye. And many in Japan are convinced too, that this was the main reason for the Japanese prime minister's decision to avoid a place that is increasingly becoming dangerous as it fails even to protect even those who are trying hard to uplift the image of Bangladesh in international community. Many Bangladesh watchers in Japan and elsewhere thus have seen the violent death of Shah AMS Kibria, as the prime example in support of their view.

At the same time, contrary to our jubilation in response to the cold

blooded murders by a section of law enforcement agencies, Japanese who are aware of what is happening in Bangladesh, too believe that the practice runs contrary to the idea of democracy and human rights, and it does not fit in to a country where democracy seems to be in practice for more than a decade. Many see the indemnity given to the "crossfire" killers as similar to something that in earlier days was practiced by the so-called death squads in countries that were run by ruthless dictators.

All such equations, they feel, might have an impact on the official

decision of the Japanese government in setting the itinerary of the prime minister's visit to South Asia. The announcement of the visit also came in the wake of the Washington meeting of the donors, where it was reported that Japan, along with Germany, Denmark and Great Britain, was among the most vocal critics of the situation in Bangladesh, though Tokyo opposed taking any hard line as was pushed by some countries.

According to the Bangladesh embassy in Japan, the reason why Koizumi is not going to Bangladesh in April has no link at all with the political situation back in Bangla-

desh. Embassy officials firmly hold the idea that it is a matter related exclusively to the norms of diplomatic practices. The Japanese prime minister is scheduled to visit India and Pakistan in reply to the earlier visits by the leaders of those two countries who were in Tokyo during Koizumi's premiership. As for Bangladesh, the last exchange of visits by the two countries was that of the former Japanese Prime Minister, Yoshiro Mori, who was in Dhaka in August 2000. The expected visit to Japan by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in May 2002 could not have been materialized, as she had to go for surgical opera-

tion during the same period. There is no doubt that the Bangladesh embassy in Japan tried very hard to get specific dates of the visit much earlier from the day prime minister took office in October 2001. The Japanese side extended an official invitation for a five-day state visit in May the following year, which circumstances didn't allow our head of the government to avail.

As getting a fixed schedule for official visits to Japan by the leaders of developing countries is not an easy task due to the involvement of various ministries and agencies, including the Imperial Household Agency responsible for granting an imperial audience during the visit, it is indeed a time consuming matter to fix a second schedule in case one is missed. Our embassy in Tokyo is now in close contact with the Japanese side and it is expected that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Japan visit might materialize as early as at the first half of next fiscal year starting from April.

Such norms of diplomatic practices are part of routine works of officials responsible for pursuing the matter. But as for the people in Bangladesh, the emotional side of getting sidetracked by the neighbors no doubt comes as a shock. It

is more, because there might not be another opportunity in five or more years to welcome the leader of a country that each and every Bangladeshi considers a true friend. If we take into account that between three visits to the region by the prime ministers of Japan there is a long gap of 17 years, the average would come down to a little over five years.

At the same time, the decision to bypass Bangladesh by the Japanese prime minister during his forthcoming state visit to South Asia can in no way be interpreted as a diplomatic or political debacle for the present administration of Bangladesh in favour of others now out of power. Japan traditionally does not consider any of the political groupings of Bangladesh closer to Tokyo than others. For the policy makers in Tokyo, more important for Bangladesh is a leadership capable of handling successfully the various problems being faced by the country. Whoever proves to be doing the job, Japan is willing to recognize the side as being a true friend.