

Committee system toothless

Govt should let it work to potential

THE parliamentary standing committees, which were primarily constituted to oversee the working of the ministries with the objective of ensuring their transparency and accountability have failed to produce the desired results. The parliamentary committees have formed no fewer than 120 subcommittees to go into the allegations of widespread corruption and irregularities besetting the ministries, but only 20 of them could submit reports in the last two years. Such meagre output is an indication of the inherent weaknesses, topped off by indolence, in what was supposed to be watchdog bodies after all.

The committee system has, on the whole, proved ineffective because of some obvious reasons. First, the committees can and do play only a recommendatory role and their suggestions are not binding on the ministries. The committee on the communications ministry found corruption in the setting up of a CNG refuelling station, but no report has yet been submitted on it. The parliamentary committee on the power, energy and mineral resources ministry found gross irregularities in the installation of pipelines in the Bangabandhu Bridge approach, but could not make any headway beyond detecting the same. These are examples of how the idea of keeping an eye on the governmental activities is faltering at every step.

The second problem arises from the fact that most of the chairmen of these committees have been drawn from the ruling party and they seem to be toothless while dealing with the ministers and other influential leaders. Furthermore, the chairmen and members of some important oversight committees are reported to be getting various facilities from the ministries which obligate them to often toe a softer line.

The JS committees are central to the working of an answerable parliamentary system of government. The committees of the eighth parliament got off to a delayed start because of an opposition boycott which was ended only recently. Structurally, the committees are dominated by the ruling party. Even so, they did well to take up the allegations of corruption and mal-practice; but nothing has been done to make sure that the ministries facing charges of corruption and other anomalies cannot stall the processes of investigation. And the committees do not seem to be tough enough to push through to the end any process they had begun. The government should cooperate in removing some of the limitations that have rendered the parliamentary standing committees ineffective.

Police trap victims

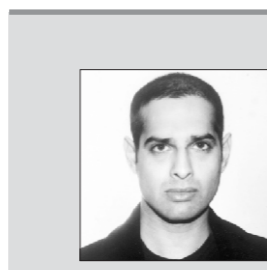
What's the top brass doing?

REPORTS of policemen harassing, intimidating and picking up people either on false charges or framed up allegations and then releasing them upon receiving bribes are not rare. And that's why the story published in this paper on Tuesday about a dozen youngsters having been hauled up by cops on suspicion of involvement in robbery cases in Pallabi area of Dhaka and bribed their way out of detention did not come as a surprise. It was just another incident showing how exploitative even lawmen can get.

Even though the policemen have denied taking any bribe from detainees, the impression remains that innocents were implicated in criminal offences -- just to be trapped, held up and squeezed some money from. Most of them allegedly managed to get out of jail by meeting the demand for bribe; but one of the victims whose family refused to pay was detained for a longer time. He was eventually set free on payment of money. In fact it's been quite apparent that whenever any robbery or crime takes place, cops tend to detain people indiscriminately who in the end would have no choice but to wriggle out of captivity by greasing palms. Such misdeeds earn bad name not just for the police force but also for the government, because police are the public face of the administration.

It is the abuse of power for personal gains that has made them lose out on public goodwill and cooperation without which they cannot think of working effectively. It is not by accident perhaps that their targets are underprivileged low income groups who are ill-connected to have any words of influence put in for their release. We have heard of projects undertaken with donor assistance to motivate the police force against abuse of power and violation of human rights. After the Pallabi incidents, a stocktaking of those initiatives have become extremely necessary. When will the wayward among the police force realise that their duty is towards protecting the public, not exploiting them.

Home truths



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ONE of the striking paradoxes about commentary on the subject of terrorist attacks such as the recent atrocity in London is that so much seems to be left unsaid. Perhaps the reason that so much is not said is that to do so would seem too imprudent or too impolitic. But to my mind it is this kind of thinking that has held back an honest and forthright debate on terrorism and the war on terror that is long overdue.

Perhaps with over fifty more dead in London to add to the thousands dead in Iraq and in other terrorist attacks around the world, it is time at long last to try to say the unsayable in hopes of coming to some kind of insight into where things stand.

The thinking in the west after such attacks always revolves around what needs to be done, specifically what needs to be done by Muslims. British PM Tony Blair has recently made a speech urging British Muslims to confront the "perverted and poisonous" doctrines of Islamic extremism in their midst and to "pull up this evil ideology by its roots."

This sentiment echoes those already made by many Muslims, who see the terrorists for the murderous extremists that they are, and understand that as long as mainstream Muslims do not confront them that they will continue their campaign of terror.

But the simple and unpalatable truth of the matter is that mainstream Muslims are not standing shoulder to shoulder with Bush and

Blair in their war against Islamic extremism (also known as the war on terror).

The question Bush and Blair should be asking is why this is and what can be done about it.

One would expect mainstream Muslims to be natural allies in the war on terror, after all. Mainstream Muslims do not want to see the extremists come to power. Mainstream Muslims know that they would be the first to suffer if the terrorists attain their ultimate goal. And all mainstream Muslims abhor

dated by America's overweening power, as the one man who dared to tell certain Arab rulers that they had no clothes, and as the one man who did something about it. Quietly today, many in the Arab-Muslim world are rooting for bin Laden to get away. They are whispering in their hearts, 'Run, Osama, run!' That's what's really going on out there. I just wish we knew how to change it."

Friedman is right. This is the crux of the matter. Even those Muslims who are horrified by the killing of the

innocent and who have the most to lose from the expansion of the doctrine of the terrorists cannot bring themselves to fully support the war against them.

The same analysis holds true for the Iraq war. No one can take pleasure in the plight of the Iraqis in the nightmarish civil war that their country has been plunged into. Few truly support the insurgents who murder innocent Iraqis with impunity and are determined to ensure that Iraq remains mired in death and misery. But at the same time there is a certain satisfaction taken in the fact that the insurgents are showing Bush and Blair that they were wrong to invade Iraq and are standing up to the occupation. Until Bush and Blair acknowledge these unsettling truths, the war on terror and the war in Iraq will never be won.

The question Bush and Blair must ask themselves is why the Muslim world has reacted the way it has, and what can be done to turn things around. Exhortations to Muslims to "pull up this evil ideology

they want to."

The fact is that many do not relish the thought of living in a unipolar world where the Bush administration gets to do exactly what it wants when it wants. Many feel that an administration that has demonstrated such open contempt for world opinion and whose stated foreign policy makes no bones about the fact that it will use its power solely in the advancement of its own narrow self-interest, is ultimately more dangerous even than the murderous extremists that

are not going to sign up as long as the war is fought the way it is being fought, and specially while it is being fought under President Bush's stewardship.

In this sense, the terrorists are even more short-sighted than Bush and Blair. If anything is going to make mainstream Muslims throw their lot in with two leaders they detest, it is the murder of innocents by the other side. But I suspect it will not be enough.

By my calculation, this foot-dragging will continue either until the Bush administration reverses its strategy in the war on terror (in other words when Hell freezes over) or in three years time when the war will no longer be led by President Bush.

This might sound suicidal and senseless, but there is a precedent for such thinking. The very people the war on terror is being waged against are the ones the US supported during the Cold War because they believed that it was worth it in order to defeat what they saw as the greater threat of the Soviet Union.

Unlike the Reagan administration did in the 1980s, mainstream Muslims are not supporting Islamic extremists, but there is a poignant similarity to the logic being employed. Many have quietly decided (even if they dare not say so openly) that they will simply sit this one out until Bush is gone.

I do not know if this is a smart strategy, or even a moral one, or how long mainstream Muslims can afford not to confront the extremists in their midst due to their distrust of those who are leading the war on terror. But this is the truth that the architects of the war on terror need to face up to if they ever wish to win it.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

Had John Kerry been elected president last November, things might have changed. The Muslim world is waiting, even eager to sign up for the war against Islamic extremism, which ultimately concerns it far more than the west. But the fact is that mainstream Muslims are not going to sign up as long as the war is fought the way it is being fought, and specially while it is being fought under President Bush's stewardship.

it wages war against.

Many feel that in this war between the Bush administration (and Tony Blair) on the one hand and the terrorists on the other, that the only tenable course of action is to sit on their hands until either a change of leadership or a change of strategy permits them to give the war on terror their full support.

The saddest part is that this stalemate could easily have been avoided. It was the Iraq war that fractured the unity of the war on terror. This is the one calculation that Bush and Blair have never made about Iraq. Not so much that it has created more terrorists, but that it has fatally weakened the commitment of the very people they need in their corner to win the war on terror.

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inventory of unsettled scores. She never loved her second husband, yet she spent her life with him while longing for the company of her first husband whom she never met again!

The garden looked so barren and lonely, dry leaves sweeping in the wind to resonate the howling void of life that passed before her in the blink of an eye. Yet she went through so much in life, so much in sorrows and sufferings, so much in unrequited love that bothered her like the throbbing pain from a

day she was going to get back what she had lost. Certain circles never close in life, the calculus of justice and fairness culminating in riddles. One of those riddles is to crave for what is hard to get. She went through life in her own strides, raising children from her two marriages, cooking, cleaning and playing wife to a second man, yet nurturing hope like the dimming lights of a sinking boat that her patience was going to be rewarded in the end.

She looked around her, surveying the plants and trees which grew

and heavy, her mind drifting back and forth between past and present since future no longer looked certain. She has lived with two husbands, six children, and their spouses and children like a tree with two roots and many branches, one of the roots being aerial, her second husband, who swung out there in the wind but never ran deep into her life.

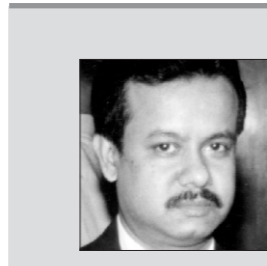
As a young girl she had learned the secrets of being a woman from her mother, who taught her not to trust men and beware of their charm. Yet it was a woman who betrayed her, her own sister who took away the man of her life. Her sister said everything was fair in love and war, and that she had no regrets about snatching the man because she couldn't have lived without him. When her sister died two years later, she didn't go to her funeral and the man who separated them got married for the third time.

Life is a garden, she said to herself, where men and women bear out their fates like plants and trees bear fruits and flowers. Fates are seeded in fates, when every life is no more than a tree which grows from the seed. She has seeded her children who have seeded their children in turn and now the time has come for her to vanish because the seed is always forgotten once the tree has grown.

Today, she wants to forgive her sister, before she too is felled by the axe of fate.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Garden of life



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SHE had hardly walked three steps into the garden before she felt the weight of the world clinging to her legs. Once she bore and reared six children, cooked for a dozen people three times a day, cleaned, washed, and handled numerous chores in the house, worked from daybreak to midnight without ever feeling weak or exhausted. Now the same body threatened to collapse if she lifted her foot to walk a step. An afternoon breeze rustled in the plants and trees in the garden like a chorus of whispering voices telling her that she had already walked the allotted distance in her earthly trip.

When she was young, she often worried about old age, the dreadful stage of life when one is trapped inside a decrepit body like a lost civilisation buried in ruins. She never felt that way when she was young, although she knew that life was always drawing death in every breath. But old age was like having one's back against the wall, when one retreated so far from an approaching assailant that one couldn't recede anymore and

helplessly waited to be taken by him.

So many people she knew had been already taken by that assailant. They vanished like the secret police picking up political activists from their houses in the middle of the night. She has seen them vanishing all around her, her grandparents, parents, in-laws, siblings, uncles, cousins, neighbours, favourite film stars, singers, eminent personalities, her life shaved like a log of wood until it sharpened to the point of preparing

This is how the end had started for her husband. He came back from his walk one afternoon, carried by people who found him unconscious on the sidewalk. He was laid in bed where he stayed until he died one morning, never able to walk again, talking incoherently from time to time, tears trickling down the corner of his eyes like pus oozing out of a festering wound. Old age is like a wound that aches and hurts, when the body rots away in its every cell, when one is spent in flesh

for its own death. This afternoon she wanted to walk in the garden, dragging her aged body for the exercise that kept it light and cheerful. But only three steps made her tired, her legs feeling heavy and numb with the burden of the world strapped around them, her head spinning like a potter's wheel with a vapid sense of life filling her heart like fluid rushing into cavities. She reached for a branch of the henna tree and slowly motioned her body to sit on the grass. For a moment, she thought she was a ripened fruit that had dislodged from the tree and fallen on the ground.

and bones, waiting for death inside a hollow shell like those Greeks, who waited for the Cyclops to come and devour them!

Once she wished to die many years ago, when her body was like a fresh bloom, when she could look in the mirror and feel pride murmuring like a running stream. But still she wished to die because her first husband had left her, because despite her gift of beauty and youth, he was attracted to another woman. Now standing on the edge of life, waiting to fall off and disappear in death, she realised how life in old age was an

wound that couldn't heal.

The gray sky above her head spread out like a canopy, smeared with the soft light of a setting sun that glowed with the anguish of a departing day. Old age is twilight between being and not being, an interstice between light and darkness, a half-way house between the splendours of life and the silence of death, a time when a fully full life is also fully empty, when one is ripe but hollow and insipid.

When her first husband died, she wept for him. The sad news had suddenly snapped a chord inside her heart, disrupting her only conduit to a lingering hope that one

under her hands. She had started to raise this garden since she came to this house, when her husband went to his office and the children went to school, planting seeds, turning earth, mixing manure, sprinkling water, tending creepers and tendrils to avoid the memories of her first marriage, which tried to crowd her mind during lazy afternoons. Every plant in this garden has been aired by her deep sighs, their leaves and branches laden with her grief, their grounds soaked with her tears.

It seemed to her that a tranquilised beast was crouching on the grass, her body feeling inert

CROSS TALK

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OPINION

Don't be wary of Bangladesh

Beware of partial media

MD. HASAN KHALED

EARLIER this year, Professor Yoichi Izumida (Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Tokyo University) visited Bangladesh to examine the role of microcredit in poverty reduction; and how a poor country like Bangladesh survives and progresses despite being afflicted with natural disasters regularly.

Unfortunately, political unrest, natural disasters and a media report entitled: "Beware of Bangladesh" delayed the professor's visit to Bangladesh. Nevertheless, Izumida did finally visit the country earlier this year, accompanied by a Bangladeshi researcher and colleague at Tokyo University.

During his visit, he observed how a Muslim country like Bangladesh has mobilised women in various socio-

economic development programs with due respect to their religious values; how Hindu and Muslim women assembled together at group meetings of a microcredit program; how a Muslim woman improves her life gradually with her husband's support through microcredit and, through a new role of entrepreneurship, enables her household to flourish.

Izumida was astonished to witness the confidence and resilience of Bangladeshis to cope with natural disasters given limited resources; whereas his country, Japan, spends million of dollars to evacuate and rehabilitate disaster-affected people. Upon completion of his visit, Izumida remarked that Bangladesh is not accurately represented in the international media.

The very same day, my Managing Director, (present Governor of Bangladesh Bank) met with the newly appointed French Ambassador to

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Bangladesh. The ambassador informed him that the media was not portraying the socio-economic conditions of Bangladesh as per the actual realities. He also remarked that Bangladesh exhibited far greater potential than his previous working place and that communal harmony and women's social participation in all walks of life are exceptional. He also committed to bring a group of French journalists to Bangladesh to share the real picture of Bangladesh with the people of France.

Mr. H.B. Disanayaka, Chairman of National Development Trust Fund (NDTF) and one of the financial

advisors of the late president Mr. Premadasa of Sri Lanka also visited Bangladesh a couple of months ago. He was charmed by the absence of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, colour, or religion in Bangladesh. He observed how a woman entrepreneur operated two big poultry farms and dealt with male wholesalers. He also opined that microcredit programs with the participation of a large number of women should remain integral to the poverty reduction strategy of Bangladesh.

Few weeks back, the First Lady of Uganda, Her Excellency Mrs. Janet Museveni, visited microcredit,

healthcare and child education programs for the poor in Bangladesh. The President and the First Lady of Uganda have promoted child education and played a key role in HIV/Aids awareness in Africa.

The First Lady, along with her entourage, was delighted to observe the progression of a microcredit program, how targeted members are receiving secondary health care services from a clinic that was set up by the organisation with their own fund and service charge earnings from microcredit and providing child education without the support of donors. Upon returning from a field

trip, Al-Karim Hudda, a member of the First Lady's entourage, commented on the impressive degree of women's participation in the development programs he had observed. He was impressed to see that women maintained Islamic values were roaming and chattering at will and a large number of girls were going to school. In this context, he was bewildered to see inflammatory headlines about Bangladesh, such as: "Beware of Bangladesh" and "Bangladesh a fundamentalist country" in the print media.

I responded to my guest: "Fundamentalism is not a bad quality." In the

course of our discussion, I remarked that Socrates was a fundamentalist, and so were Karl Marx and all who believe in any social, political, or religious dogma. Fundamentalism that is imposed on others is harmful and breeds extremism and, as history reveals, may create chaos, confusion, anarchy, and even bloodshed. Unfortunately, some media use fundamentalism and extremism synonymously, especially when they use these jargons about Islam and Muslims.

As a Bangladeshi, I would like to say, without crossing the boundary of politeness, that not only Muslim religious groups but also Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist alliances are also very much active in this country. They all very freely express their thoughts without any obstruction, particularly from the government mechanism.

During a function at Unicef, the First

Lady of Uganda also commented that the potential of Bangladesh is not fairly portrayed by the media. Similarly, sharing his experiences with journalists at Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) news agency, the French Ambassador said: "I feel ease while moving in most parts of Bangladesh. What I saw in my own eyes in the countryside is magnificent and picturesque. People here are happy and hardworking in good social bondage and maintaining a remarkable religious harmony."

The above remarks by international dignitaries about Bangladesh and the social and religious harmony of this country provide a valuable lesson: Don't be wary of Bangladesh; rather beware of partial media.

MD. Hasan Khaled is Assistant General Manager of PKSF.