

## Topper in corruption again!

*Fight the perception with deeds, not words*

WE are saddened by Bangladesh's ranking at the top of the Transparency International (TI) corruption perception index. But we are more saddened and angered by the fact that the government has done so little and taken so few steps to mitigate the disrepute against the backdrop of four consecutive such rankings, prior to the latest one.

We are tired of being perceived to be the most corrupt country in the world. And we are even more tired of the government's inaction over time not to have shed the stigma thus far.

Corruption is no doubt deep-rooted in our society and institutions. But if examples are anything to go by, countries like Nigeria and Kenya had at one time or the other taken drastic steps to redress some legitimate concerns over corruption in one or the other aspect of governance in those countries. Interestingly, they have been able to eliminate some specific factors of corruption. So, there is no reason why the government of Bangladesh could not have done so if similar ruthless steps were taken in good time.

The government vehemently protests the TI report after its release every year. But the question is, what tangible steps have been taken to reduce corruption which has been endemic anyway -- never mind the ranking?

Unfortunately, we have had to say the same thing over and over again to the government for bettering its records, but to no avail. Other than a lame ACC, what does the government have to show to prove that it is fighting corruption in all seriousness? Even here, the government took three years to form the ACC, the election pledge notwithstanding.

Every day new reports of corruption keep hogging headlines. The cabinet ministers, PMO, political leaders and their relatives are often alleged to have had links to corruption. Have these been investigated, have any heads rolled? None, to our knowledge.

The government responds to the corruption stories by putting the press itself in the dock without doing its part to ameliorate the situation. And ministers are on record having dubbed the TI reports as a deliberate attempt to stigmatise the government. In fact, the TI reports are a mere reflection of the perception held, analysed and evaluated globally by 12-14 monitoring groups. If the government so wishes, it can elicit public opinion on the corruption issue with the predictable result that their perception wouldn't be fundamentally any different from the TI's.

## Squeeze on gas supply

*Mismanagement extracts its price*

GOVERNMENT'S plan for rationing gas supplies in a desperate bid to shore up the crisis-ridden energy sector cannot but raise questions. For a number of years people were given to understand that Bangladesh is one of the better gas producing nations of the world. We were told that we had gas reserves good for a period of 30 years. At one stage, considerations were also given to the possibility of its export to fetch precious foreign currency. But now we are facing a serious gas supply crunch, to an extent of being incapable of meeting our own domestic demand.

Gas rationing is about to be applied to the industrial sector until next December, together with a cap on new connections except for those to export-oriented industries. Even Tongi power plant and Polish fertiliser factory are in for a shut-down. If illegal connections were cut off we wouldn't have landed nose down as we have.

The principal cause of the crisis is put down to the delay in implementing the 37 km Ashuganj-Monohardi gas pipeline. It is indeed hard to stomach as to how such a vital project envisioned to go into operation by June 2004, is catapulted on to a delayed course -- to be completed by June, 2006? Like the power sector, our gas production and supply situation remains in an abysmal state: a perfect recipe for public suffering on top of the hardship caused by unprecedented price hikes in the market.

For long we have not seen any significant investment in the gas sector -- thanks to policy indecision and partisan opacity in dealing with investment proposals. We have not been able to go for increased production from prospective gas fields. The legacy of mismanagement and longstanding corruption continues to stalk the sector.

Dealing with issues until they become endemic and reach critical proportions has become a part of our management culture. Surely, we can, and must, do better.

# AFD: To have or not to have



WICE in the last four months the Armed Forces Division (AFD) was in the news, primarily because it came in for discussion in the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Defence several times in as many months. The fact that its members chose to discuss the function of the AFD in its last meeting few days ago, belies the criticism that it was something out of their ambit of scrutiny, being directly a part of the Prime Minister's Office. But that is not the point at issue for this piece. Instead, we will dwell on whether or not the AFD merits existence at all in our defence management setup.

The criticism of the AFD was on two counts primarily. Some questioned the very rationale of the AFD under a democratic dispensation, and that too in a parliamentary form of government. The other critique was that, because it was placed under the PM's office it did not come under the scrutiny of any of the Standing Committees of the parliament and thus by implication was not accountable to it, like other elements of the armed forces were. One of the opposite members of the committee

opined, without actually expanding on his observation, that there were some flaws in the functioning of the AFD. Yet on another count it is considered a parallel organisation to the ministry of defence with the potential of duplication and therefore wastage of efforts.

In fact in the last several years observers and analysts as well the media have been talking at the same

length, calling into question the existence of a supra-ministerial body that merely diluted the function of the ministry of defence, if not side-lined it altogether. Nobody can question the right of the public to bring under scrutiny any institution of the government, and who better to do it than their elected representatives? But the fact that the AFD had existed during the past two democratic regimes without anyone questioning its merit makes one wonder what has gone wrong all of a sudden to compel some of the legislators to call for reviewing the need for the AFD. More so when it had worked in the same vein during the tenure of the past government, whose members are now vocal against it?

If the AFD is considered a legacy of the martial law regimes it seems to have survived well in the democratic times without anybody taking any notice of it until only recently. It may

be worth mentioning that in fact it has survived 14 years of democracy as against 13 years of military rule. Not only that, the revised organogram of the AFD was approved in 1998 by a government whose party members are now questioning its very rationale.

There is perhaps a view amongst some that it is better done away with, or that its terms of reference be reduced to make it merely an interme-

diating body for reviewing the existing organisation of the AFD. But one must be very sure of the rationale for doing away with it altogether, without suggesting a viable alternative.

It is therefore pertinent to go into the background of the AFD to put the matter in perspective. The AFD mutated over the last 27 years from the initial C-in-C's Secretariat to Supreme Commander's Headquarter to the

emphasis is predominantly on joint operations. The appellation C-in-C's Secretariat went well with the CMLA, he was also the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. The purpose was not only to coordinate the peacetime activities of the three services, the C-in-C's Secretariat was also responsible for tri-service operation and formulating a joint service opera-

responsibility of higher defense planning now rests with the AFD. But then there are several things in Bangladesh that are unique to it, not found anywhere in the world, for example the 'Caretaker' system. Of course there can be other arrangements than what we have today in managing our military affairs. One could argue whether or not a joint services headquarters under the ministry of defence would serve the purpose better. It would, perhaps. But what we must see is whether the existing arrangement is serving the purpose for what it was set up. The general feeling is that it has proved to be an efficient arrangement, with no unnecessary bureaucratic delays caused by insensitivity and in some cases, ignorance. The fear of duplication is perhaps unfounded too. The division of work is very clearly laid out that brooks no duplication at all. However, none should be beyond scrutiny and accountability or political control. It is for the government to determine how that is to be effected.

There is indeed a need for a structured joint services headquarters which must not only be a forum for strategic military planning, the Services HQ must be an integral part of it and provide necessary input for the ministry of defence and the cabinet for formulation of the defence policy. The AFD is fulfilling this role, but only to a limited extent. Contrary to claims its present manpower does not appear adequate to even fulfil its current charter of duties.

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

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diating headquarters between the services and the ministry of defence. In fact one member of the standing committee did indeed suggest doing away with it altogether. One of the apprehensions is the possibility of friction should the defence minister be anyone else other than the PM. This may not be altogether unfounded.

Any organisational setup must be dynamic, amenable to changes in keeping with the need of the time, all the more so a defence organisation. The organisational setup must relate to the function that it is supposed to perform and must conform to the changing nature of the requirements. It is a good organisation that has inbuilt mechanism for adapting to developments not foreseen at the time of its establishment. And the next best thing is to constantly review and assess its setup and incorporate necessary changes if required. To that extent one cannot question the need

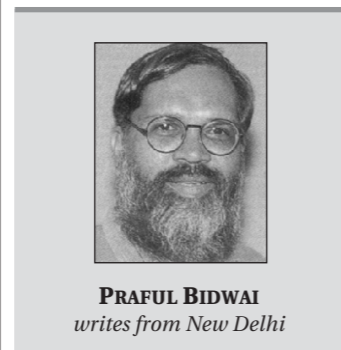
present Armed Forces Division. The primary compulsion of setting up the C-in-C's Secretariat was operational, which was, to evolve such an arrangement that would cater for tri-service training and operational command and control that was totally absent at that time. It is very important to keep in mind that for a cash strapped country, where military expenditure is considered 'wasteful' by some, the more 'jointly' one can ensure the more will it be cost effective in both operational and logistic terms. A typical example of joint effort is the Defence Services Command & Staff College where tri-service training is conducted under one roof. The gut feeling is that given half a chance, each of the three services would have opted for their own staff college. The present arrangement has economised on the resources of the armed forces. The same philosophy applies to actual operations where the doctrinal

plan. In fact it was intended to act as a joint service headquarters, and the purpose remains the same today. After the martial law the president as the supreme commander had the C-in-C's Secretariat renamed as the Supreme Commander's HQ, primarily as an expedient to retain his control over the armed forces. It eventually became a division in 1988 with enhanced tasks and increased responsibility. In 1991 it became the AFD under the PM's secretariat. Interestingly, since the formation of this virtual tri-service headquarters, it has remained directly under the chief executive.

To say that no such arrangements exist in other countries would be like comparing apples and lemons. Indeed Bangladesh is an exception, to quote the present Chairman of the Standing Committee on Defence, where the AFD is performing the tasks of the ministry. In fact the

# Emerging from the shadows, darkly

## Manmohan asserts himself



WHEN Dr Manmohan Singh was sworn-in as India's Prime Minister 16 months ago, many regarded him as a political lightweight who got that job entirely because of his proximity and loyalty to Ms Sonia Gandhi. They predicted he would remain under her shadow, and consult her on every issue forever.

Many pundits forecast *duopoly*: two centres of power, one (Ms Gandhi's) greater than the other; or separation between political and economic decision-making. Ms Gandhi would retain primacy in the first; Dr Singh would dominate the second.

This theory started looking shaky early on. Dr Singh hand-picked his team, including Mr Pranab Mukherjee, a known hawk, and Mr Montek Singh Ahluwalia, a committed neo-liberal, with a strong International Monetary Fund-World Bank background.

Dr Singh wanted Mr Ahluwalia to be at least as important as Finance Minister P. Chidambaram. As

Planning Commission deputy chair, he would influence economic priorities and distribution of Central expenditure. Mr Chidambaram, at the end of the day, is a politician, who cannot ignore his constituency. Mr Ahluwalia has no popular constituency.

However, Dr Singh soon dealt another blow to the *duopoly* hypothesis. He followed Mr Vajpayee in creating a strong Prime Minister's

Westminster-style democracy. The exercise of power through the Cabinet and its institutions favours the PM. The PMO multiplies the effect, through its managers, fire-fighters, and spin-doctors.

So far, this is pretty straightforward. But Dr Singh is attempting a *miracle*: he leads a party with no more than 145 seats in the 545-strong Lok Sabha and yet rules as if he commanded a single-party majority!

to exercise disproportionate influence and become increasingly autonomous of Ms Gandhi and the Congress apparatus. His own political personality is becoming clear.

Regrettably, that personality has its angularities and a dark, conservative, side. Dr Singh came to power on a broad Left-of-Centre platform. But his preferred policies are Right-of-Centre. This is not a pejorative description. Evidence for it comes from a number

sector to foreign investment (which could ruin millions of small traders and street-vendors), and unequal trade-related agreements on agriculture and services with the OECD.

India compromised on this last at the Geneva ministerial of the World Trade Organisation by breaking ranks with the developing countries' G-20 -- in contrast to its firm position at Cancun. India's stand at the coming

These are precisely the domains from which Ms Gandhi has reclused herself, because she has been so advised thanks to her "foreign origins."

Thus, the decision to sign the June 28 defence cooperation and the July 18 nuclear deals with the US was very much Singh's. As was the September 24 vote accusing Iran of "non-compliance" with the NPT.

By all accounts, Dr Singh was greatly impressed by President Bush's interest in India as an emerging power and "partner." But Dr Singh weighed this so much higher than principle or self-interest -- in energy security via Iran and Central Asia, and the larger issue of Asian economic integration. Dr Singh's major Right-ward turn could cost India dearly.

It's hard to fault Dr Singh's policy of befriending China or talking peace with Pakistan. But he has often left its actual implementation to dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrats. Dr Singh has failed to engage Nepal and Bangladesh by taking a secular, pro-democracy approach.

All in all, Dr Singh's policy record is conservative. He has pushed this through so far without a confrontation with the Left or the Congress, except on BHEL divestment. But this may well change with the Iran-US-India triangle.

In that case, Dr Singh may have to clip his ambitions and learn to respect coalitional consensus.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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Office. He had definite ideas about who would be in the Planning Commission or head the Indian Council of Social Science Research. In his first three months as PM, he vetoed more appointments than he approved.

Soon, Dr Singh quietly started asserting himself in areas such as foreign policy. His style was never confrontational, but beneath the polite exterior lay a hard-nosed, shrewd persona.

Today, Dr Singh has emerged from Ms Gandhi's shadow as his own man, with definite ideas, policies, and preferences. This in part follows the power of his office.

It cannot be otherwise in a

This is partly explained by the ideologically disparate, fragmented nature of the Congress's United Progressive Alliance partners (mostly regional or Mandal-inspired OBC parties) and "outside" supporters (especially the Left).

Dr Singh has left a good deal of party-level political negotiation to others, including Ms Gandhi, while concentrating on government. Thus, Ms Gandhi as UPA chairperson "handles" the Congress's allies, but is finessed from many areas of policy-making. And Dr Singh extends his influence to areas to which he is relatively new.

This peculiar balance-of-power and division of labour has allowed the PM

of decisions attributable to Dr Singh and his confidants.

Take economics. Dr Singh has been content to follow the "free-market," pro-liberalisation orientation of the National Democratic Alliance -- barring on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the UPA's single greatest achievement. He has continued with the NDA's macro-economic approach, taxation policies, funds allocation priorities, emphasis on foreign investment, commitment to globalisation, and public sector divestment.

Three of Dr Singh's top priorities are labour "reform" (read, removal of worker protection through hire-and-fire policies), opening up the retail

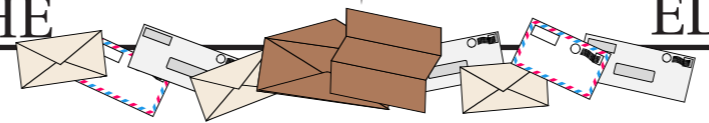
crucial Hong Kong meeting will substantially impact its economy.

Last year, Dr Singh talked of empowering the underprivileged. Now, he only talks of growth. Thus, in his Independence Day address he said: "If we maintain this momentum of growth (approximately 7 percent) for the next 5-10 years, then it would be possible for us to eradicate poverty, ignorance, hunger and disease. This is not a dream but something that is possible in our times."

This regurgitates the notorious *trickle-down theory*, which stands belied by India's own experience.

However, it's in the foreign and security policy areas that Dr Singh's conservative influence is starkest.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Trishal-Shibganj Road

The road running from Trishal to Shibganj in Mymensingh district has been built and maintained by the LGED. It runs through thickly populous areas and is heavily used. A large number of vehicles move through this road. Affluent people visiting their village homes pass through this road. The overall condition of the road is fine but it is a matter of great regret that only two holes near Chakrampur Bazar are obstructing easy movement of the vehicles and causing sufferings to the passengers. Small vehicles are being damaged while crossing this place. It surprises me that the 30km road is quite good but due to the holes people face great difficulties.

Considering the sufferings of the people, and also taking the huge costs of constructing the road into consideration, I urge the LGED authorities to take necessary action for repairing the road.

MA Matin  
Trishal, Mymensingh

### Help the retarded

Forty-two thousand children in Bangladesh, writes Syeda Nazma Ahmed (A Bright Girl, The Daily Star, 26.10.05), suffer from one form of mental or physical retardation or the other. My first reaction was: Why so many are handicapped? How are they and their families coping with the problems? Here is yet another disadvantaged group besides street children and child labourers who need our help. But what, exactly, are we doing?

The first step to understanding any issue, I believe, is to know as much as possible about it and then to share that understanding. Regular sensitisation is a must (never mind those jaded few who deny that there are problems or that they can be solved). That the handicapped deserve our sympathy and support is very evident.

What is the nature and scope of retardation in our country? How have we intervened and can we prevent it from escalating? The handicapped within our borders can well be our

teachers or we can learn from the examples of those in other countries. Whatever way we choose, it is obvious that with the right kind of support, the handicapped (or as the politically correct would say, the variously challenged) need not be a burden to themselves or anyone else, but another source of contribution for the country.

Zakia's feat as mentioned by Nazma Ahmed is not only a lesson in humility but a reminder to be a more inclusive society, to feel for and regularly focus on such special people in our midst.

The media in general should regularly feature their plight and highlight their accomplishments, as did The Daily Star. Bangladesh's greatest resource will always be its people - no matter how disadvantaged or underprivileged. Instead of their struggling to be seen or heard, let us, the privileged, get together to find them and be their voice. They are an impetus for betterment. It is such betterment that will make us a more humane, caring and civilised society. Naeema C. Quayes  
Male, Maldives

### Anomalies in tax collection

Against my newly constructed two-storied building at section 11, block A, Mirpur, Pallabi, Dhaka, an amount of Tk 960/00 was imposed as annual corporation tax for the first time in 1997. But all of a sudden the amount of corporation tax was raised to Tk 15,000/00 (fifteen thousand ) on 17.02.2004. This sky-high increase of tax was made without any inquiry. I brought the matter to the notice of the Divisional Commissioner, Dhaka division, the appellate authority, who after examination of the case reduced the amount to Tk 5,977/00 with retrospective effect. As a result, a huge amount of Tk 41,837/00 stood as arrears which was split up into 7 equal monthly instalments. I paid six instalments in six months. But while paying the 7th and last instalment on 09.10.05, it was detected by my utter surprise that only one instalment was noted in a kutchra register. No trace of other six instalments could be made. The next day I personally called on

the Zonal Officer and solicited a clarification. In my presence the staffs concerned could not account for my monthly deposits. I found that the Zonal Officer had no hand in the affairs of levy, realisation, reassessment, enhancement of taxes etc. of the holdings within the corporation area. I also gathered from the Zonal Officer that the office is not audited by any audit authority. The tax collectors collect the tax money in cash. They also collect taxes by personally visiting the tax payers. They are not responsible to the Zonal Officer for their functions and activities. They are directly responsible to the 'Nagor Bhaban'. If properly audited, I am sure, many cases of financial indiscipline, irregularities and even misappropriation will come to light. The authorities concerned should take immediate steps to remove these anomalies. As the first step, collection of all kinds should be handed over to a scheduled bank. S.M. Matiar Rahman  
Pallabi, Dhaka

### Fate of Hindus

A good friend of mine said "My village temple has been broken and burnt three times". He added, "Katrina or Rita is on the horizon for the Hindus." I know that he is telling the truth, because my good friend doesn't lie. He has no motivation of deceiving me, or taking advantage of our friendship. I must point out that I have never met my good friend, nor have I seen his picture, or we have ever talked. He had sent me an email to register his grievance, because he felt that he could trust me as a friend. As I read his emotional email, I felt a bond of friendship that goes back to the innocent playful days of childhood. Thinking of those playful days, I do not remember my parents ever forbidding me from having a Hindu friend, or instigating me to hate a Hindu. As a matter of fact, I doubt if any of our parents ever did. Yet, there are intolerant adults who were never intolerant in their childhood. So what could have transformed a few ignorant elements

of the society in this natural aging process? Can it be Religious Dogma, maybe Patriotism or perhaps it is simply one's Ignorance?

Well, Patriotism is a feeling of love and devotion to one's own homeland, and its citizens. That said, Bangladeshi Hindus are also equal citizens of our homeland. They fought against the occupiers of our land no less ferociously, & selflessly than Muslims. For that reason, one cannot vandalise Temples and Statues of Hindu religion in the name of patriotism, because that goes against the principles of Patriotism. A patriot, who engages in such acts, must know that his or her actions are not patriotic. It is rather terrorism.

Now what about Islam? Well, Islam teaches us that all humanity is one large family. It teaches us to stand for Justice and Equality, and if any elements in a society violate these principles, there is every reason for Muslims to fight against them. So, if some elements of Islamic faith are engaged in such racial terrorism in the name of Islam, please remember

that Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) had a message for you. The message is "Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds." (An extract from the last sermon of the Prophet)

I believe individuals who are involved in such racial terrorism against Hindu minorities often try to hide behind Islam, or patriotism to justify their crimes. If anyone is doing so, it is due to lack of broader knowledge of Islam, and definition of Patriotism.

Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) said, "Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart."

On that note, the purpose of my writing is not to give a lecture on morality; it is rather intended to educate the ignorant souls as the Prophet instructed all of us to do. Shadabul Mujib  
One-mail