

ACC's continuing travails

When will its woes be removed?

SEVERAL times in the past in this column we had dwelt on the lack of functioning of the Anti-corruption Com-mission (ACC) highlighting the shortcomings that have hampered the work of this very important body. In some ways one could say that such a state of affairs displays the lack of the government's positive attitude to see the anti-graft body function in the manner that it should. There is hardly any cause for new optimism regarding it. Recent report about the ACC suggests that only seventeen months into its existence it is now mired in a large number of litigations with very little prospect of attenuation of its problems in the near future given our lengthy judicial process. The prospect is only too obvious -- a totally non-functional ACC.

We are sorry to note that the Commission has not been able to live up to the sense of optimism that accompanied its birth with the very onerous task of addressing the issue of corruption in Bangladesh that has caused us to top the list of most corrupt countries in the world five years on the trot, and there is a sense of dismay amongst those that wish to see the country rid of the most serious impediment to our progress. As it is, the ACC has very little to show by way of any tangible output except perhaps for unearthing a case of 92 crore Taka tax evasion at Benapole land port customs almost six months ago. And getting tangled in as many as 78 litigations may leave hardly any time for the Commission to address the main issue that it has been entrusted with.

What is exasperating is the fact that it is the absence of an organogram of the Commission with specified posts and defined rules of procedure that are the major grounds of most of the litigations against it, while a good number of stay orders have stemmed from the ACC using investigation report of the now defunct Bureau of Anti-corruption. We fail to see why after so many months the Commission has not been able to finalise an organisational setup. Why there is no harmony of thoughts in the ACC, which has hampered its work?

The government cannot avoid its responsibility of the current state of affairs in the ACC and as days go by our comments not very long ago in this column that unless corrective actions were taken immediately the ACC might turn out to be a thalidomide baby, may well come to be true.

Genuine students to head student bodies

A decision worth emulating

WHILE we have our position on the issue of student politics being pegged to the mainstream political party-lines, Sheikh Hasina's decision to have the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) led by none other than genuine students below the age of twenty-nine, deserves to be commended as also the AL leader's decision not to relent on the issue in spite of the hooliganism that was staged to reverse it.

The recent election of the new President and the Secretary of BCL, student wing of the Awami League, was significant in more ways than one. First, the two elected are younger than those that were traditionally people in older age groups. Second, they are regular students of Dhaka University, and third, the election was held in a democratic manner through secret ballot.

We have noted with consternation the tendency of some to continue at the helms of students' parties long after they had ceased to be students and long after they had established themselves into mainstream politics. The decision of the Awami League, one hopes, will put an end to this practice and set a new precedence in student politics in our country.

It is perhaps relevant to mention that the activities of official students' bodies must be reinvigorated. Elections to DUCSU, the most important student body of DU, have not been held for over ten years now. Absence of new leadership in these bodies deprives the students of representation in the important decision making forum within the university, on issues related to their academic and related needs. However, we feel that such participation must be issue based, with the main focus being on the student matters, and not party based as they are now.

One would hope that election of younger individuals to the student wings of the Awami League based on a refreshingly transparent and free and fair method will not escape the notice of other major political parties having their own student front, and will be emulated by them, sooner rather than later.

Bangladesh shining



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

It is important, of course, to stand in good stead internationally, and we all benefit from an enhanced national image, but this will do nothing to paper over the problems the government faces domestically. The government needs to focus on substance, not image. Electricity, prices, fuel, fertilizer, the boro harvest: in the run-up to the election, these are the issues that the government needs to be focused on more than its image outside the country. Just ask Atal Behar Vajpayee.

It is a good thing that neither Time nor Perry appear to hold grudges.

In 2004, the government again had a similarly infuriated response to the Time magazine piece "State of Disgrace" that painted a certainly one-sided but in truth depressingly accurate picture of the extortion, toll collection, and other lawlessness rampant in Bangladesh.

The foreign ministry poured scorn upon the piece and issued a rejoinder, suggesting that it had been a politically motivated hit-job aimed at undermining the country, and pointing the finger of accusation across the border.

"The timing of the report, the sources quoted, its narrow focus and harsh conclusions point to a highly motivated report. It follows upon the heels of another slanted story "Deadly Cargo" by Alex Perry [there he is again] which sought to smear Bangladesh as a radical Islamic fundamentalist state. Is it an odd coincidence that both the correspondents were based in New Delhi?"

What has always been interesting about the government response to negative stories in the international media is the rather far-fetched belief that the stories are some kind of diabolical conspiracy against the government hatched by its enemies.

It is not enough to accuse the publications concerned of shoddy or sensationalist coverage, which in fact is often the principal reason behind poor or incomplete reporting, but it must also accuse them of being part of a coordinated plot to discredit the government, and by extension, the country.

Why Time magazine, or The New York Times or the Far Eastern Economic Review for that matter, would be part of an anti-Bangladesh conspiracy has always remained unclear.

Hopefully, the recent cover story will have at least have had the effect of removing Time magazine from the alliance government's enemies list.

The cover story coincides, more or less, with the one-hour BBC World debate on Bangladesh that is being screened for the first time tomorrow evening, and for once, Bangladesh seems to be the hot ticket in international news, that too in a good way.

I hope that both the report and the debate will cause more people around the world to take a closer look at this vibrant country of close to 150 million.

Perry's cover story seems to me to be a reasonably accurate depiction of the country. I think that he does a decent job of capturing the contradictions of the country: the

buzz and bustle of economic vitality and the sense of the country on the verge of going places that co-exists with the corruption and the bitter divisions and the tens of millions struggling to make ends meet.

I am not quite so sanguine as Perry is about the extremist threat and would not be so quick to absolve the ruling alliance of the less than honourable role that it has played in the rise of the militants.

But whatever the murky background that Perry chooses to quickly pass over, the fact that Bangladesh, contrary to enthusiastic reporting in the international media, is not on the brink of an Islamic revolution is a story that the world needs to hear, and to the extent that the Time magazine piece makes this clear, it is to be commended.

There is, of course, much to criticize in the piece, from the opening paragraph, with its comical portrayal of the intrepid state minister of home affairs being roused from slumber in the middle of the night and springing into action like some television super-cop, to the "he said-she said" reporting of the accusations traded between the government and the opposition without any effort to inform the reader which accusations are in fact true and which are not.

I do not think that a reputed

publication should give politicians (or anyone else for that matter) the platform to make statements that are either not true or not credible, but since Time magazine, and indeed all western media, routinely extend this courtesy to the Bush administration, it is perhaps to be expected.

But the short-comings of the piece are short-comings in reporting and typical of the slap-dash approach of western journalism, not short-comings of bias. It is an important distinction. Time magazine is not now on the pay-roll of the BNP any more than it used to be on the pay-roll of the AL.

Interestingly enough, though, the Time magazine cover story coincides with a public relations blitz that the government has undertaken in recent months.

The "image of the country" (meaning the image of the ruling alliance) has long been an obsession for this government which is why it has always identified the media who have had the temerity to report on issues of corruption and extremism as public enemy number one.

To this end, the government has made restoring the country's image in the eyes of the international community the top priority in the run-up to the elections. As the Time magazine piece suggests, the

government has had a fair degree of success in getting influential constituencies who had a more jaundiced view of the country to give Bangladesh a fresh look.

Another example of success on the public relations front is the 180 degree turn-around in some sections of the Indian media in the aftermath of the prime minister's recent trip to India.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with public relations campaigns. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the government seems to think that improving its image internationally is the same thing as actually addressing the needs of the Bangladeshi people, and will help its electoral prospects here at home.

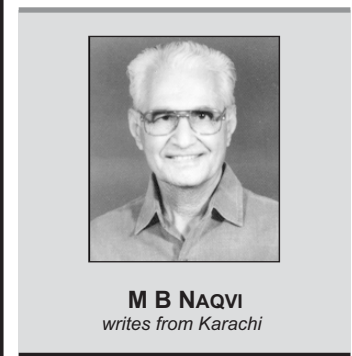
Even more troubling is the danger that the government will start to believe its own propaganda and that this will distract it from taking care of all the very real problems that it has to deal with on the home front.

There is a recent example from just across the border of an insulated and out-of-touch government that got carried away with believing its own propaganda and the hosannas from abroad but did nothing to address the concerns of the only constituency whose good opinion really matters, that of the voters.

It is important, of course, to stand in good stead internationally, and we all benefit from an enhanced national image, but this will do nothing to paper over the problems the government faces domestically. The government needs to focus on substance, not image. Electricity, prices, fuel, fertilizer, the boro harvest: in the run-up to the election, these are the issues that the government needs to be focused on more than its image outside the country. Just ask Atal Behar Vajpayee.

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Issue of issues: What happens to neo-con designs?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

DESPITE three raging crises in West Asia, fears of another war or military strike by the US and Israel combine, with or without consent from UNSC, Russia, China or even EU, or at least UN sanctions abound. The driving force however remains the US, where apparently war weariness is said to be growing and some say America's hands are full with unfinished business in Iraq and Afghanistan. The question is asked by many: can America undertake any kind of military action with continued bloodshed in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestine question facing unending crisis? Some say Israel can alone take aerial action, a la Osirak bombing of 1981. Well, that raises the consequential question of whether US-Israeli duo can be happy about the consequences for the rest of the region of any military action against Iran.

Trend of recent US pronouncements and its diplomatic thrust is aimed at popularizing hard action against Iran, the lesser of which should be mandatory UN sanctions, such as had weakened Iraq since the 1991 war. The menace in John Bolton's, US Permanent Representative, voice, the other day, was unmistakable. The Bush administration is as obsessed with

Iran today as George W Bush was about Iraq in the early years of this supposed American Century, with dreams of a new Holy Roman Empire by the US this time.

These dreams are relevant. They have inspired the official US strategy of the right to use force preemptively and non-tolerance of any other nation surpassing the US in military or even economic power. Let no one make a mistake that it is a Republican Party program only. The other major party, the Democrats, have not disavowed it and also have no differing ideas or other world view. Therefore, the new Bush idea of starting wars that later governments will finish should be noted.

Although there are admitted difficulties in the way of realizing the great dreams being dreamt by neo-conservative thinkers -- they are supposed to have been discredited, people are unwilling to suffer more American casualties and steps in this direction have not hitherto met with shining success -- the logic that drove Bush to go to Iraq would now seem to require subduing Iran before the US can reshape western Asia the way it would like. That design includes the unchallenged sway of Israel and the US over the

whole region, more so as South Asia and Southeast Asia are largely in the American corner. Iran stands out as a sore thumb in the path of the US march towards its destined hyperpowerhood. Wouldn't Bush seek to remove it from the path of America's onward march?

But this is not to say there are no other difficulties. Iran's regime, for one, is inflexibly and more or less permanently against all that Israel seeks to do to help implement US designs. It is thus a strategic target that has to be removed -- a regime change has to be the objective. But the very attempt to change the Iranian regime, sure to require a big military operation, will result in Iran hurting the entire capitalist world by reducing its oil exports and by adopting a forward policy of supporting Shia insurgencies throughout West Asia that may be waiting to happen.

The Iraqi state's chances of survival rest on defeating the design of those who are provoking a Shia-Sunni sectarian war -- no matter who is stoking this fire, though it is necessary to investigate it. That will need cooperation of Iran and the Shia Iraqis as well as of many others. Flames from a recrudescence of ancient animosities will envelop

many more countries in the Arab world, no matter who wins or loses. Many of the pro-western tyrants who rule Arab countries will face existential threats. That conflagration will burn down much of post First and Second World War structures and God knows what will emerge from the ashes.

Israel, no doubt, remains a sturdy yeoman in the service of US and it is no mean power. But its acceptance by a few Arab kings, presidents and dictators is not really shared by Arab masses. No doubt, the latter is still not a factor that can affect the Arab-Israeli conflict. The stark reality remains that the Palestinians remain at the mercy of triumphant Israelis and no Arab potentate will come to their aid. But the more the Israelis oppress the Palestinians and impose borders of their choice on Arabs, the discontent will grow, the more Iran will look like a beacon of light and strength to Arab masses.

Ahmadinejad's harsh anti-Israeli and anti-US rhetoric makes him a factor in the Arab-Israeli quarrel. Iran has not actively backed the Iraqi Shias on sectarian lines; it does not want to stoke sectarian fires. But the option remains. The US strategists will have to weigh the balance of

advantages between taking out Iran's fledgling nuclear program to preserve Israel's supremacy in the region and seeking Iran's cooperation in preventing an all-embracing conflagration in the region.

Insofar as the Palestine question is concerned, the US is the biggest factor enabling Israel to go on imposing a military occupation nearly 40 years after the 1967 war. There is not much to distinguish between the Israelis and Americans, from an Arab point of view. There is no real hope for Palestinians. Israel has defeated all the Arabs. The latter has to suffer Israeli domination as best as it can. Earlier there were hopes that world opinion would act through the UN and provide some reprieve to enslaved Arabs. But the way the US has used the UN and dominated west Asia during the last 61 years, no other power is strong enough to provide succour to the Palestinians.

True, Israelis -- and Americans -- have still not got what they most want; only some Arab potentates have formally recognized Israel; but there is no real Arab "acceptance" of the Israelis. They are as far from their dreams as ever. Perhaps, Israel and the US hope that when

their New Rome has established its sway over the whole globe, things will change. Possibly they will, possibly not. Apart from that uncertain factor, world opinion, new power-centres are growing and they will be, ipso facto, challenges to the hyperpower. The world can hardly remain in one configuration for even two or three decades, let alone for a thousand years.

Then, there are fascist and semi-fascist forces that are growing amidst spreading poverty and despair over large stretches in what is called third world. What shape the world will sport 15 years hence cannot be foretold. But it will be different for sure. Even in Europe the fascist fringe, properly so-called, is growing even as unemployment and immigration grow.

Talking of fascism, one should look around in southern Asia and notice the religio-fascist movements, parties and militias growing in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, and, of course, Pakistan. At least three great religions -- Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism -- are being exploited in quest of power by rousing the gullible and the simple. They can produce mayhem. India and Nepal also have secular Far Left militias that pose a different kind of challenge -- again in the context of extreme poverty, exploitation, oppression and hopelessness. Islamic extremism is growing in most Muslim countries.

There are other challenges for those who aspire to dominate, though not to govern, the world. New ones have arisen and some old ones may revive.

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OPINION

Divine intervention for national unity! Private healthcare service

ABDUL QUADER writes from Canbera

A GAIN, as usual in this year's independence and national day message of Begum Khaleda Zia, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was absent. No surprise at all!

In her message, Begum Zia pays respect to the "proclaimer" of independence war Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman. To harp on the same string, did Zia act as the "announcer" of the declaration of independence over radio in Kalurghat, Chittagong, or he himself proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh and then the liberation war started?

In this context, we can recall the key message of the historic speech made by Bangabandhu on March 7, 1971 at Race Course in Dhaka. In essence, Bangabandhu virtually declared the independence of Bangladesh during this speech in Dhaka in response to the evolving

political situation. It was a point of no-return, so to speak, given the aspirations of the people at that juncture in history.

Nobody doubts the contribution of Zia in the independence of Bangladesh. He was one of the nine sector commanders who valiantly fought the liberation war along with many other freedom fighters during 1971. Being a sector commander in a war was a big achievement. Moreover, Zia's contribution was unique in that he happened to be the person who showed the courage and took the initiative to announce the proclamation of independence over radio on behalf of the indisputable leader of the time Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This was a positive step, however, we should not wilfully overestimate the significance and impact of this announcement for ill political motive.

As we know, there was a historical background, including the language movement and the six-point movement, developed over 23 years before 1971 that culminated

in the fight for independence of Bangladesh. And Bangabandhu played a pivotal role in the struggle for a sovereign land for the Bangalees.

In my view, the issue of declaration of independence should be looked at in light of the political background of Pakistan in general and East Pakistan in particular from 1947 to early 1971. The political activism for autonomy went on for two decades culminating in a struggle for independence in 1971. A nation is not born in a day with a radio announcement. There must be bigger historical context.

The funny thing about the Prime Minister's message is that she invokes divine intervention for national unity in Bangladesh. In her message she says: "I pray for the kind support of most merciful Allah for peace, happiness and affluence of all Bangladeshis including the expatriates and for national unity, progress and accomplishment."

God is neutral, I believe. Will He intervene to unite the government

and the opposition on a common platform for national unity? I doubt it, as this does not fall within God's job description as the regulator of the universe. God has given us intellect and ability to think and act for our own good. So it is the politicians, both in government and also in opposition, who have the responsibility to adopt a sincere and pragmatic approach, and take credible actions to sort out political differences, including the issue of national unity.

Continued distortion of history, twisting of facts and prevarication of truth do not help national unity, for sure. Tolerance to other people's views, mutual respect and recognition of due contribution of historical personalities may contribute to achieving the desired national unity the country needs at this point in time. Insincere and lip-service invoking of God's intervention is unlikely to solve our problems.

ABU IMRAN

PUBLIC healthcare service in Bangladesh is very poor -- that goes without saying. There are traditional, administrative and financial reasons for this. This service being poor, people are forced to seek private clinic/hospital's help -- which of late has grown in size and number. They are founded with claims to render 'better' service to the people. But in fact these clinics mostly operate with commercial motive and are very expensive and not affordable by the common masses. Further the service they render at exorbitant rate is also not up to the mark, as personally experienced, which I may like to share with the readers.

Recently I was hospitalised for an operation as suggested by a surgeon. The ordeal started from the time I saw the doctor. He charged me Tk 400/- as his consultation fee and then referred to get pathological tests. That cost a little over Tk 800/-. With the reports I saw him. Then he asked for physical test to make sure whether the ailment I had needed any surgical operation.

For that he charged Tk 1800/-. The test confirmed I needed the operation. Then I was asked to see the reception for seat with tentative date for operation. The receptionist said that prior booking was not done, I was required to check further. I checked on the operation date. That day low rate cabin (Tk 1300/- per day) was not available. Higher rate (Tk 1700) was available. I had to accept that. I checked in around 2.15 pm. It was a small room with toilet and a very small attendant's bed. Tk 1700/- included food for the patient although the quality of food was far from satisfactory which I shall deal with later.

Then in the late evening I was taken to the OT and operated upon. After the operation I was taken to bed and at late night given a small quantity of soup in place of dinner. Morning followed with breakfast consisting of three slices of untoasted bread, a boiled egg and a very small cup of milk. For medicines, the nurse would direct "Take this before meal and take that after meal." Doctors on duty visited but seemed as if they were on their

heels. Then followed lunch consisting of rice, watery dal, a small quantity of vegetable and a few pieces of chicken meat/fish. This was repeated for dinner. There was arrangement for afternoon tea with two pieces of biscuits. The cooking food was less tasty. But that was understandable since patients are supposed to take less tasty food. But if there was will, that less tasty food could be made somewhat palatable and menu improved to the advantage of the patients. However, this routine was followed until the forth day when I was discharged with a fat bill of around Tk 23000/- plus which included surgeon's fee, room rent, medicine etc.

Though I was treated but at what cost? Almost amazingly unaffordable by Bangladesh standard! It is negation of claims of the clinic operators that they extend service to the humanity. The newspapers and TV channels carry ads in this behalf claiming "foreign facilities in Bangladesh". Yes foreign facilities are available but for too few since costs are prohibitive. Golden doctors are these but to mint gold for them-

selves ignoring the interest of common patients. All these are happening because of lack of medical ethics, lust for money and apparently no control of the government over the operation of private clinics, clinical labs and fees of the doctors. If service to the patients is meant then the clinics and hospitals have to be made affordable and service oriented first their and commercial consideration last government have to take more pains to make it patient oriented. Along side this, services in the government hospitals and clinics have to be improved so that the poor patients are meaningfully benefited and the monopoly of private clinics/hospitals continued.

To conclude, it may be said that private healthcare service in Bangladesh is really far from satisfactory further forcing people who can afford to go to the neighbouring countries or abroad. For the poor it gives a message: "What can't be cured, must be endured!"