

## Looting of relief goods

Abolish the system of allotment against lawmakers

THE moral bankruptcy of a good number of lawmakers of the immediate-past government has become shamefully evident with the unearthing of large quantity of government relief goods from their possession. Emergency relief goods such as blankets, corrugated iron sheets, wheat, rice and biscuits have been salvaged from the residential quarters or warehouses of influential political leaders after a successful crackdown by the law enforcing agencies. The discovery of blankets in the warehouse of the people's representatives has particularly shocked the nation as severe cold took some lives in the northern region of the country this winter.

These essential items were allocated against the lawmakers from the prime minister's office at the fag end of the tenure of the last government supposedly for distribution among the needy in their respective constituencies. But in reality it was done with an ulterior motive keeping the election in mind.

It is appalling indeed that while most of the lawmakers have turned into super rich from obscurity in five years, they find it hard to resist devouring relief goods meant for the poor people. The whole sordid episode brings forth the question whether the system of allocation of relief goods against the lawmakers should be abolished. It has become obvious over the years that such goods are usually kept under lock and key by the government of the day only to be allocated against their party leaders for distribution among the voters before the national elections. Relief goods are state property, but these are used by corrupt politicians for attaining political gains.

We are happy to note that already the present caretaker government has taken the decision to henceforth place relief goods under the responsibility of the deputy commissioners to avoid misuse and ensure their proper and timely distribution. On this point we would like to suggest forming of local committees with government officials and representatives at union level for better identification of the real needy.

We feel removal of the pockets of corruption and restructuring of the administrative and political system would help the caretaker government in holding a free and fair election.

## Mangrove forest denuded

Shoreline protection weakened

MANGROVES provide a wall of protection to the coastline. When new accretions emerge out of the sea, these are fledgling, flaccid marshy stretches. Mangroves are planted to spread a cover of vegetation on them providing valuable soil capital to the new accretions thereby making it habitable and productive in many ways. The firming up of the soil through plants and shrubs is the best guarantee for the durability of the new land along with the obvious fact that mangrove forest help save them from the fury of cyclones.

When such are the multi-dimensional benefits to follow from mangrove forests, it is little wonder that the new accretions are placed in the hands of forest department for at least 20 years to develop the soil capital it needs to consolidate into a land mass. It is a great pity that such far out places of tremendous value to land-short Bangladesh are so out of sight that these have become criminal dens for land grabbing syndicates rather than thriving new habitats or lebensraum.

In collusion with local officials, vested quarters like scavengers swoop down the area in a bid to illegally wrest out lease of the land and raise embankments in order to make shrimp farms. The whole project is a money spinner; even in its rudimentary phase workers gleefully chop down the mangrove forest moving the timbers somewhere else for business and building embankments for shrimp projects as the ultimate goal. This government being up against criminals can take on this challenge to save a huge national waste.

A lead item in The Daily Star on Thursday ran a story titled 'mangrove forest in death throes' which certainly merits further official investigation and apprehension of the racket behind the whole business.

## Easing tensions in the Korean peninsula



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

shunned. This latest deal will require Pyongyang to shut down its Yongbyon nuclear facility, readmit inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency to verify compliance, and prepare a 'complete' accounting of all its other nuclear facilities and programmes within 60 days.

Within 30 days, the US treasury will review and partially lift financial sanctions imposed in late 2005 to punish North Korea for alleged counterfeiting and other illicit activi-

ties. It has also been hinted that given sufficient compliance over the next 60 days, the foreign ministers of all the six parties will meet to assess progress and then launch the second phase of the process that would include the continued supply of heavy fuel oil to North Korea in exchange for the disabling of all of Pyongyang's nuclear facilities.

Unfortunately, despite some hints, there is still lack of clear specifics that have to be adhered to at every stage. This leads me to

tional community. It did not miss the chance to show that a country, which had detonated a nuclear bomb just four months ago can be peacefully disarmed.

For some time Bush's foreign policy and National Security teams have been paralysed through an ideological debate in the context of North Korea. There have been those who wanted to bring down North Korea, if necessary by force. There have also been those who have thought that it would be worth

analysts both in the USA and also in Europe have of course rebutted this.

Despite criticism from the extreme-right in the US Republican Party and some quarters of the neo-conservatives, the agreement has been welcomed, as expected, by a relieved South Korea. One day after the accord, both Koreas have announced the resumption of ministerial level talks, suspended since July 2006. Discussions at the level of senior officials have already started in Kaesong, just north of the

However, despite such calls for caution by the Japanese, I believe that this latest step will be helpful in establishing and widening the scope for multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

The head of the IAEA, who has described the agreement as 'good news and the start of a constructive process,' has also recognised this potential. In this context, it is now expected that IAEA Inspectors will be authorised by its Board of Governors to return to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

It is true that there are still uncertainties that may make the accord vulnerable at a future date. There is also the worry that North Korea might be playing Bush for time, knowing full well that there is distraction ahead in the USA because of the coming Presidential election. There are also a lot of negotiations to be completed before North Korea fully disarms.

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## POST BREAKFAST

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ties. Washington is also expected to help finance an initial shipment of 50,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil to the North Koreans. The US, in addition, will begin the process by which North Korea can be removed from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

In addition, the parties will create five working groups to work out outstanding issues with Pyongyang. This will include its total denuclearisation, how aid will be tied to progress in this process and what steps will be taken to within this framework for normalisation of diplomatic relations with the United States and Japan. It is understood that this dynamics will also examine measures for arriving at a peace agreement that would bring a formal end to the Korean war and establish a new regional security mechanism.

Such a negotiation for a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula will be held at an 'appropriate separate forum.'

observe that the accord only marks a beginning in a long and circuitous process with no guarantee of ultimate success. US secretary Rice has shown optimism but is probably nearer to the truth with her comment that 'This is still the first quarter.'

There is still a lot of time to go on the clock, but the six parties have now taken a promising step in the right direction.'

A year ago, such an agreement would have appeared most unlikely given President Bush's declared statements about the North Korean leadership. Flexibility now, on the part of the Bush negotiating team, has probably been because of the changes that have taken place in the last few months. Bush is bogged down in Iraq and has been undercut by the November Congressional elections. Consequently, it appears logical that the Bush Administration should have used this opportunity to attain a higher image in the interna-

one more try to lure the country out of isolation. Bush, thanks to Secretary Rice, appears to have sided with those who have concluded an agreement.

This movement forward, in all likelihood, would not also have been possible without North Korea's understanding that their nuclear detonation some months ago was a strategic mistake, that had affected their settled relationship with the Chinese government.

This suppleness on the part of the US Administration has however been denounced as a defeat by Mr John Bolton, the former US Ambassador to the United Nations. A leading hawk in the Republican Administration and a close ally of US Vice President Dick Cheney, he has claimed that such an agreement will send the wrong signal to other would-be nuclear proliferators and would weaken and compromise the US profile in Iraq. Other progressive

heavily fortified frontier aimed at finalising preparations and formulating the agenda for future negotiations. Economists in South Korea are also seeing this latest development as a 'turning point' and a confidence building measure. This has already been reflected in gains in the South Korean Stock Exchange.

At the same time, it would be fitting to record that one understands the hesitation that exists within the Japanese government and its skeptical press about this agreement. Politicians in Japan still feel particularly vulnerable over the missile fired by the North Koreans over Japanese territory in 1998. The Japanese media has consequently warned that the accord has neither focused closely enough on North Korea's existing nuclear arms, nor referred to its alleged uranium enrichment, a dispute that ruined the earlier deal of 1994.

mutual benefit of each other, none disagreed and none left the cabinet other than the lone Maj. Gen (Retd) Anwar Kabir Talukdar, then state minister for power quitting the cabinet at the fag end of the BNP led alliance rule citing allegations of corruption in the power sector.

Tarique Rahman was promoted openly as heir apparent and nobody protested. Not one minister got up and said that it was wrong for him to have more authority than the elected representatives. It was bad politics and bad business. On the national front the rot had spread too far and too deep and a radical surgery was needed to eradicate the cancerous cells.

True as the army chief told a cross section of audience at Borguna on February 13 last that the army in its new found role would help the civil administration to weed out the vices of corruption from all spheres of the society and the corrupt whoever they might be -- politician, business magnate or bureaucrat -- will not be spared. Undeniably true, the caretaker government's crusade against corrupt politicians and business syndicates has reinforced people's faith in the administration's ability to set an era of clean politics.

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## Cleaning up the rot in politics and business



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

Shockingly, some of our so-called prominent and suddenly rich business men have sworn themselves to unbridled corruption, scam and last of all irresponsibility. This is an attitude that cannot be condoned: and certainly not when it affects human lives. Our people are consuming these poisoned stuff much beyond their knowledge. They fall sick without knowing that the wheat, sugar, milk food or lentil they bought and ate had caused the ailment. Undeniably true, these

sheets were used by some influential and very affluent M.P belonging to the ruling party for construction of sheds in his factory? The matter did not end there. People watched over TV with anguished suspense and shock the pictures of sarees, quilts and tube well pipes meant for distribution as relief among the poor being seized from a house allegedly owned by senior joint secretary general of the BNP and eldest son of the immediate past prime minister at Bogra. Helaluzzaman Talukdar

19) at that time who was fired in 2004, she turned a blind eye to the allegations and rode roughshod over the rules of the cabinet purchase committee.

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## BITTER TRUTH

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unscrupulous business groups were not alone to blame. They got emboldened to indulge in such nefarious activities and unbridled corruption because of the patronage they enjoyed through exchange of commissions and kick backs. The last perhaps has been one of the blackest weeks in recent times as newspaper reports and TV pictures show these scams being unearthed and storage sites of rotten food items being discovered.

How could one compromise the fact that relief goods, namely C.I.

Lalu, a BNP law maker of the past government who was allegedly arrested for corruption relating to swindling off around 12 crore taka from the Janata Bank branch at Bogra along with dubious deals in wheat scandal in 2002, it is allegedly learnt, made a gift of this house to

Tarique Rahman.

All this unearthing of the corruption rackets now by the army led joint forces is a blot on image of the past government which always boasted of

having transformed the country into a prosperous land. It wasn't as much

even when the scam relating to wheat purchase in 2002, the purchase of machinery parts for the civil aviation and tourism ministry, the purchase of pillars and transformers for the power division and the allocation of abandoned gas fields came under the media's spotlight with evidences of dubious deals and manipulations by some interested coteries and lobbyists 'close to the prime minister' as now revealed by her private secretary AHM Nurul Islam (details of the interview published in the Prothom Alo on February 19) that time who was fired in 2004, she turned a blind eye to the allegations and rode roughshod over the rules of the cabinet purchase committee.

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almost turned into a private limited company. The metamorphosis began when took the reins of administration for the second time the party chairperson. Apparently she made it clear that her political secretaries and sycophants around her were more important than cabinet ministers. Because of the symbiotic relationship the ruling coteries developed with some fake and dishonest business groups in matters starting from investment contracts to development projects in the country to the

wanted that CTG should take account of the wealth of those who were in power during the last 25 years. We do not expect any strong measure from JP because of past deeds of its chairperson. Even some members of LDP are becoming controversial. Thus our only hope lies with the CTG.

Only a well planned sustained effort of government, strongly supported by civil society, political parties, business community and others can be successful in eradicating corruption. While our political parties are serious about holding of election as early as possible they are not as vocal about the urgency for eliminating corruption. The BNP committed in 2001 election about elimination of corruption only to capture votes. We are also not convinced about the seriousness of Sheikh Hasina's press statement on 7 February 2007 that she

believe that we would be able to see a reconstituted and reformed ACC efficient and effective enough to extricate the country from the morass of corruption soon.

Of all the tasks undertaken by the CTG it appears that the most difficult would be to start successfully curbing corruption from our thoroughly corrupt society. While our political parties are serious about holding of election as early as possible they are not as vocal about the urgency for eliminating corruption.

Some legal researchers recommend for enactment of law to ensure easy access to information to journalists, to make the common men ultimately benefitted. In fact such a measure has proved very useful in India where corruption has been reduced by

## ABMS ZAHUR

restoration of freely elected governments since 1991 it remained difficult to realign distorted patterns.

Corruption in Bangladesh represents a disguised form of taxation. Instead of paying high public sector wages through general taxation, people end up paying for public services by bribing officials; when bureaucratic and regulatory controls are pervasive, corruption may be seen as the way of overcoming them. This may seem rational but the risks and uncertainties attached to corruption make it much less efficient than a more transparent system of raising revenue.

The reasons for the extensive nature of official corruption are numerous. However, we shall confine our discussion only on organisational and economic policy related causes. The main causes of public corruption appears to include the following: (a) Regulatory environment: The extensive and opaque regulatory structure provides fertile environment for rent-seeking. The bureaucrats cannot be punished because of absence of effective means of redressing through legal or

administrative means. (b) Lack of transparency in government: Businesses are not averse to bribing officials. Even many foreign companies regard bribery as one of the costs of doing business. (c) Inadequate salaries of public servants: Rather low compensation packages for policy-makers and bureaucrats has increased temptations for them to supplement their incomes illegally.

Bureaucratic corruption cannot exist in isolation. It is a reflection of prevailing behavioral patterns and cultural mores in society. Corruption in government is sustained only by the willing participation of many people in the private sector and the business community. Political leaders must also take the blame. Certainly the political graft plays an important part in the spread of corruption. Political corruption is a source of funding of political parties. The corruption of politicians has a strong demonstration effect throughout the public service.

Costs of corruption: From the perspective of the private sector, corruption introduces a potentially large and uncertain cost element, and diverts resources towards the non-productive policy-induced rents. Fighting corruption: It is extremely difficult to tackle underlying structural issues of corruption. Concentration on better enforcement of the rules and procedures without strong legal system cannot bring desired result. Reliance on punishment may have some deterrent effects but the root of the problem must be addressed.

It is said that powerful politicians and bureaucrats are never prosecuted in Bangladesh while in office. The defunct Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) used to take average three years to investigate cases. Out of this only 15 percent cases used to be sent to the courts. During 1991 to 94 only 365 were convicted and only 95 of them were officers. The 4-party alliance government established a dysfunctional

Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) with a chairman and two commissioners replacing the ACB. The CTG, however, has started activation of ACC through reconstitution and reform. We have enough reason to believe that we would be able to see a reconstituted and reformed ACC efficient and effective enough to extricate the country from the morass of corruption soon. Of all the tasks undertaken by the CTG it appears that the most difficult would be to start successfully curbing corruption from our thoroughly corrupt society. While our political parties are serious about holding of election as early as possible they are not as vocal about the urgency for eliminating corruption. The BNP committed in 2001 election about elimination of corruption only to capture votes. We are also not convinced about the seriousness of Sheikh Hasina's press statement on 7 February 2007 that she

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