

## Eating poisonous fish

*Break their chain of operations*

THE government must be commended for its action against the fish vendors who are playing with the lives of the people by using harmful chemicals to make the fish appear fresh. Very rightly, exemplary punishments have been meted out to some of the culprits on the spot.

Fish is a favourite diet of the Bengalis and a good source of protein, but not cheap any longer. And even those with meager means would like to have fish on his or her plate as often as possible. To poison an easily accessible source of protein is a criminal act of the most unpardonable nature.

What we are not able to rationalize, however, is that it is not that treating fish with formalin is a new phenomenon among the immoral fish traders. The unscrupulous fish merchants have been resorting to this practice for a long time. Many reports on the matter have appeared in the media in the past. One wonders what took the authorities so long to act decisively. We cannot accept the argument that requisite instruments to test the fish were not available so long. When people are going to the moon it seems that lack of chemical testing equipment seems rather a trite argument to offer. It is a legitimate question to ask as to who will pay for the damages done to the people who have been ingesting the very harmful chemical over the years.

We would hope that this would not be a one-off action, that it would be a continuous drive to ensure that those that indulge in such harmful practices are put behind bars. There is no doubt that a strong syndicate is involved in this business. We know too that most of the formalin-treated fish come from a particular country and a particular region of Bangladesh. Thus a constant vigil is the need of the time if the country is to be saved from being slowly poisoned by some of our own people. Action should be taken not only to make people aware of the dangers but also to ensure that all the fish that enter the market all-over the country are free of the chemical. This is a big ask indeed. But for a start why not restrict the sale of formalin or exercise a very stringent oversight on its sale?

## Deterrent punishment to the guilty

*Time to save the coastline from grabbers*

LAND-GRABBING like occasional land recovery, with the magnitude of the former far outstripping the latter, hardly ever made any inspiring news up until the other day. With stiffer administration and no political axe to grind, ratio of land reclamation to land expropriation is now something to write to home about.

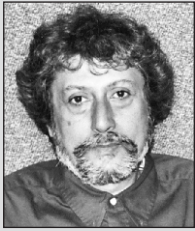
Take this as a sample and you cannot but be greatly heartened by the change of scenario. In a massive drive by the joint forces and local administration the government has recovered 1486 acres of forest land from a band of 15 grabbers from Sonadia island in Cox's Bazar lately. The challenge of course is to retain them in government possession with strong legal underpinnings.

Remoter the land area more convenient is the prospect for grabbing and keeping it by illegal documentation. In this case, the illegal occupants have been using this land for more than five years for shrimp and salt farming by shearing of the mangrove forest. Concocted lease agreements have been managed under what authority -- the land ministry, forest department or what?

So powerful were the vested rackets of government officials, political leaders and other influentials that land gobbling and indiscriminate destruction of forests became the order of the day in the Cox's Bazar coastal areas which turned out to be the happy hunting ground for shrimp cultivation. Millions in government revenue were denied. They would defy forest department cases and even court verdicts couldn't deter them from going about their business. It is time to deal with them with an iron hand.

Not only the expropriators of the people's land should be meted out exemplary punishment and the respective ministries should get back their lands for the protection of environmental balance in the country, a data-based pattern of land administration, management and utilisation will have to be evolved before it is too late for irreversible climatic changes to set in.

# Take care, caretaker government



SHAHNOOR WAHID

YES, the time has come to utter it loud and clear addressing the caretaker government in power... do take care, sirs. It is a well-meaning and friendly advice coming from the common people who want to see you succeed in your endeavors. It is immensely important for you to succeed for them so that they can have respectability back in their lives.

To be candid, you have raised their expectation level to a greater height, and it is likely that they will start to ask for more. Because, it is after a gap of many years that they are enjoying decency, propriety and rule of law in almost all the sectors at the moment in the country. They are hoping to be treated as human beings once again by those who will govern the country in future.

Therefore, take all the care and be cautious when you are galloping down the dark forests in shining

**That is why we began with the words: take care and be cautious. You have a long way to go. You cannot afford to let go at this stage. The dragnet has to be made bigger to cover the entire country. The list must include everyone, irrespective of power, position and identity. But while you do all these do take care, because everyday the number of your enemies is increasing. Strengthen your hands with legal and moral power, and that is the best way to take care. Your advantage is -- you have the people's mandate. So, good luck.**

ing armour, chasing vicious groups of smugglers, arms dealers, heroin dealers, militants and state property looters.

You have already netted many big fishes, and we expect to see some more going down soon. Therefore, you have no way to turn back now. You know you shall have to finish what you have started, because if you leave it half-way then that would mean disaster for the nation.

But, while going after them, we are sure you have kept this in mind that these people that you are after are ferocious, violent and devoid of any qualms, and they do not operate in isolation.

Their networks cover the entire region, having connections with similar groups in almost all the countries in South-East Asia and even beyond. Collectively, they have more money than you have at your disposal, and they can

spend in terms of millions of dollars to keep their illegal trade going on without interruption.

Respected chief adviser and council of advisers, so long we have been talking about some criminals who operate big mafia networks in the region. Now we want to talk about yet another group of people who live in Bangladesh, in our midst.

We are sure that, by now, your intelligence agencies have submitted secret files on these people. These are the extremely corrupt civil and police officials who have been willingly working as tools or lackeys of the past governments.

They have been party to many excesses done by the past MPs and ministers and their party goons in blatant violation of all laws, decorum and ethics. Where are they today? Have they sud-

denly vanished, or turned into saints overnight?

We, the common people, do not have any intelligence agency at our disposal, but we have our own ancient method of doing some probing. That is why there is a common understanding among us that a great majority of these officials maintain secret liaison with the local and regional mafia groups to protect their unholy interest in the country? They know very well who use mafia money and guns to keep their power base intact, so that they could go on exploiting the common people and looting public property.

These suave, literate, highly intelligent officials are dangerous enemies of the state, as they hover around the hub of administration while in service. And after retirement they conveniently join a political party to continue their

## BYLINE

**This is going to be a high-energy year, politically. Bofors has returned, literally from the blue. But this will be only the beginning. Election results from Punjab and Uttaranchal will come this week, and Uttar Pradesh has been set alight by Congress ham-handedness in its effort to subvert the law for political gain. It doesn't work. It did not work in Bihar, and will not work in Uttar Pradesh. At the best of times you need an extra pair of eyes to survive in Delhi: this year, you might need eight. 2007 is an Ottavio year.**

jurisdiction of Interpol, or does Italy make an exception for specially favoured sons? If the warrant could lead to detention in Latin America, then what was Scotland Yard doing when the ageing Quattrocchi withdrew funds that had been frozen in his British bank accounts? Why did the Argentineans, who must be as indifferent to Indian politics as we are to the shenanigans in Buenos Aires, break the silent code that protected Quattrocchi from Interpol for so long? Was there someone in Delhi who tipped the Argentineans off?

These are grave matters, and let someone more competent than me search for answers.

There is always something amusing in the gravest of events, and I am not talking about the "Four Eyes" name.

My sympathies are with the police officer in the Central Bureau of Investigation who was told to cook up a reason for the mysterious 17-day delay between Quattrocchi's arrest and the release of the news by CBI. We know now that the matter went up, but obviously, to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, where it lay for 17 days before a decision could

be taken on what to do. One option that was surely considered was whether the arrest could remain a secret, and the thirty-day period, during which a demand for extradition had to be made, be permitted to lapse. The vibrant Indian media had been fooled for 17 days; why not another 13? The risk, of course, was that if the story broke while Parliament was in session, and the government was found culpable of protecting as highly wanted a man as Quattrocchi, the session would have come to a halt. Dr Singh also surely knew that his personal credibility was on the line. He opted for transparency.

But how then to explain those 17 non-transparent days? I can see a CBI officer scratching his head very hard as he came up with two reasons. The first was that it took time to identify Quattrocchi. But these are days of the telephone and the Internet. A photograph can be transmitted instantly. Try again. The second round of head-scratching must have removed all traces of dandruff. Ah: the CBI could not find anyone to translate from the Spanish.

Narasimha Raoji! Where are

you when we need you? There was a time when an Indian prime minister used to be fluent in Spanish, and now we cannot find someone competent enough to do a simple translation -- not in Delhi, not in our mission in Argentina, not in the foreign office, not even in the language departments of Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Questions, of course, will be raised in Parliament; and decibel levels could hit the ceiling. The government has surely formulated all the answers. The Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, or even the prime minister, will certainly assure the House that every effort will be made to bring Quattrocchi to trial in Delhi. The opposition will milk Bofors again, as it has done often enough in the past. Somnath Chatterjee, now in the speaker's chair, might even suffer from a twinge of nostalgia for the good old days when he used to thunder with increasing levels of moral indignation at Rajiv Gandhi. This will be the nth Parliament session to echo with the Bofors boom.

Unavoidable, I suppose, but I hope that Bofors does not become obscure, or even drive away, a far more important issue, particularly since this is a budget session. The

binge of looting.

They print impressive calling cards, identifying themselves as business leaders, industrialists, importers, exporters, consultants and so on, and continue to exploit state power and wealth.

And sir, to be frank, we have this uncomfortable gut feeling that they are getting impatient with what you are doing at the moment. We can sense that tinge of impatience in their voices when they talk about your reform measures, about the importance of an early election, about the importance of upholding democracy, or about the legality and duration of a caretaker government etc. They are glib talkers, so they have a plethora of reasons and logic to put ideas in the heads of the listeners.

Therefore, we feel that a special task force should be created to go deeper into the past records of these people --these professionals turned politicians. You have to proceed with courage, caution and determination to make a list of these people, and then bring them before the camera to reveal the wealth amassed while they were in service and afterwards.

We understand this is unpleasant work, and risky too. It is most likely that the impatient criminals are secretly meeting to plan their strategy as to how they can deny you any further leverage. They

country is angry about economic policy, and in particular about prices. Economic reform was launched by Narasimha Rao, continued by Atal Behari Vajpayee and pursued by Dr Manmohan Singh. The policy itself has acquired support across party lines, but there is a fundamental problem with its consequences that no one has had either the will or the time to address.

All change, or progress, tends to displace some section of the economic chain. Cotton factories, for instance, made the weaver either irrelevant or marginal. This is inevitable. The answer is not to stop installing new machinery in cotton mills, but to create a new economy around the displaced, so that reasonably prosperous communities do not sink into impoverishment and despair. Democracy, as well as humanity, demands concern for the dispossessed. There is no trace of such concern in the much-vaunted economic reform. Voices are beginning to rise, as the poor begin to understand that the haves are driven by profits and share prices, not by notions of social justice. Anger from the forests is taking the form of Naxalite violence; anxiety from farmlands is turning into angry demonstrations against Special Economic Zones; the threat to food-sellers from the capital-driven malls is driving an agitation in Chennai. The fires are burning separately, but if Delhi continues to show an obstinate indifference, flame could touch flame to create a conflagration.

After more than half a decade of stability, prices of basic products have risen sharply. In such a climate, traders are happily raising prices of even those commodities that are not propelled

are suffering loss in terms of millions of dollars -- from heroin, arms and smuggled goods deals -- and they are not ready to tolerate it any more.

That is why we began with the words: take care and be cautious. You have a long way to go. You cannot afford to let go at this stage. The dragnet has to be made bigger to cover the entire country.

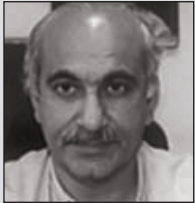
The list must include everyone, irrespective of power, position and identity. If he is a secretary, go for him. If he is a physician, go for him. If he is a university teacher, do not spare him. If he is a former chief engineer or chairman or director, catch him.

If he has sold the country an anti-people project as a consultant, send him to jail. If he has siphoned away foreign currency as an exporter, seize his property. If he has done over-invoicing as an importer, get him.

But while you do all these do take care, because everyday the number of your enemies is increasing. Strengthen your hands with legal and moral power, and that is the best way to take care. Your advantage is -- you have the people's mandate. So, good luck.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## Four into Two



MJ AKBAR

DO you know what Quattrocchi means in Italian?

Four eyes. I have this from an extremely reliable source. Actually, the source isn't that exciting, but the information is correct.

And what does Ottavio indicate?

The eighth. The Eighth Man with Four Eyes. This sounds as mysterious as something out of The Da Vinci Code, but let us just agree that even if Ottavio Quattrocchi, the Italian businessman accused in Bofors payoffs, had eight eyes instead of four he could not possibly have foreseen that he would be picked up in February by the Argentinean police, in a barely-known province called Misiones, in pursuit of an Interpol "red corner notice number A-44/2/1997."

He could be forgiven if he had begun to believe that he was safe from the arm of Indian law, his money out of the freeze of British bank accounts. He had been sitting for years in his comfortable home in Milan, talking to media when he chose to do so, and no one from the Italian police ever interfered with his peace.

Doesn't Italy come under the

jurisdiction of Interpol, or does Italy make an exception for specially favoured sons? If the warrant could lead to detention in Latin America, then what was Scotland Yard doing when the ageing Quattrocchi withdrew funds that had been frozen in his British bank accounts? Why did the Argentineans, who must be as indifferent to Indian politics as we are to the shenanigans in Buenos Aires, break the silent code that protected Quattrocchi from Interpol for so long? Was there someone in Delhi who tipped the Argentineans off?

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# Moral bankruptcy of PSC



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE Public Service Commission (PSC), the lone constitutional body for recruiting competent persons for appointment to the civil service of the republic, has no credibility left.

It has miserably failed to perform its crucial responsibility, entrusted by the constitution, over the past several years. Politicization, nepotism and rampant corruption have replaced its constitutional obligation.

According to Article 139(2) of the constitution, the chairman and other members of PSC shall not be removed from office, except in like manner and on the like grounds as a judge of the Supreme Court. The constitution has provided such a

safe-guard to its chairman and members so that they can act upholding the spirit of the institution, and not bow to any sort of pressure or intimidation.

The recent misdemeanors of the PSC have manifested the moral bankruptcy of this constitutional body. Leakage of questions of a highly competitive examination like BCS has become a regular event in the PSC. Such an undesirable situation has already taken heavy toll on the quality of the civil administration, bringing the entire system down.

The underlying truth is that the successive governments posted loyal persons, who implemented the agenda of their benefactors, to the key positions of the PSC.

The two major political parties, BNP and AL, who ruled the country for the past 15 years, influenced the recruitment process of the civil service, depriving many deserving candidates.

According to media reports, corruption in the PSC has been so rampant that bribes worth Tk 50 lakhs changed hands every day, in connection with recruitment and promotion of government officials during the last five years.

The PSC officials also did thriving business by allowing some candidates to fill up their answer sheets outside the examination halls. Tampering of BCS written test results was reported on many occasions.

The utter depravity of the PSC

was exposed in the unfair selection process of 300 Upazila Election Officers, of whom 150 were activists of the Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal, the student wing of the BNP, and relatives of the BNP leaders.

Such recruitment has also made the election process vulnerable to corruption.

The leakage of BCS question papers has gone a step further to diminish the credibility of the PSC. A good number of photocopy shops in the Dhaka University campus were found openly selling the leaked-out question papers of the 24th BCS examination of 2003.

Despite having such vivid evidence the PSC, at first, did not admit the leakage. In the face of severe protest by the students,

BCS candidates and their guardians, the PSC finally canceled that examination and arranged a fresh one.

The newspapers carried numerous reports on the leakage of question papers of the 25th BCS examination. Despite the wrangling, and the admission that the questions were leaked out, the chairman was adamant on her stand and did not postpone the examination.

Such a shameful turn of events has crippled the credibility of the PSC.

The Prothom Alo on February 18 ran a revealing report on PSC for making records in recruitment and also in corruption. PSC recruited 16, 418 officials in both cadre and non-cadre services during the past five years, which is almost equal to the total number of recruitments made in the last 25 years.

The PSC has also been made a den of corruption in the devious process of recruiting the record number of people in the service of the republic, leaving a large number of deserving candidates in deep frustration.

According to the media reports, Zinnatun Nesa Tahmidia Begum, a

teacher of Dhaka University who was loyal to BNP and made PSC chairman in 2001, played the vital role in making the PSC a champion in corruption.

Among the other nine members of the PSC, Prof Mahfuzur Rahman, Dr. Ashrafur Islam Chowdhury, Latifur Rahman, Dr. Shahadat Hossain and Abdur Rouf have also been accused of being involved in massive corruption.

The recent World Bank (WB) policy note on governance, titled "Can the civil service be a key to progress in Bangladesh?" argued that the country urgently needs to develop a merit-based and efficient civil service capable of making policies and delivering services relevant in the 21st century.

The WB memo stressed the need for enactment of laws defining the role and responsibilities of the PSC as a legal framework for civil service management.

It also emphasized establishment of the PSC as an independent judge of merit to ensure recruitment of meritorious people in the civil service.

The members of the civil society demanded immediate resignation of the PSC chairman and mem-

bers, confiscation of their properties, and bringing them to book for destroying the credibility of the constitutional body.

The demand came from the seminar titled "Structural reforms to ensure transparency and accountability of PSC," held on February 19 at TSC of Dhaka University.

The local government adviser to the caretaker government has already hinted at voluntary resignation of the chairman and members of the PSC, following the instance of the Election Commission and the Anti-corruption Commission. But it has been learnt that the PSC chairman and the members are not willing to resign voluntarily.

The PSC is an institution which people look up to as the epitome of uprightness, and it has to shoulder the sacred responsibility of regulating recruitment to public bodies and the promotions. Sadly, the PSC has been embroiled in allegations of massive corruption, nepotism and incompetence.

In an unprecedented act of corruption and nepotism during the tenure of the BNP-led alliance government, the PSC recruited a large number of officers on the basis of their political affiliation, not on their merit. Its fall-out will be felt

for years to come.

The PSC chairman and the members are provided with constitutional protection for their services only for performing duties without fear or favour, not for massive corruption in civil service recruitment, which is tantamount to crime against the nation.

To restore its reputation and credibility, there is obviously a need for total reconstitution of the PSC. It must be manned by neutral and non-pliable personalities who will not bow to temptation. The quotas in service, which allow more room for corruption, also needs total elimination.

It is important to devise ways and means to extricate the PSC from political influence by bringing necessary modifications to its ordinance. The PSC chairman and the members are appointed by the president. A partisan president cannot select non-partisan persons for obvious reasons. A search committee, headed by the chief justice, may be formed to help selection of competent persons as the chairman and members of the PSC.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.