

Drug administration in comatose

Govt action needed to resuscitate it

OVERWHELMED as we are by some pressing national agenda, we have willy-nilly tended to look askance at some institutional weaknesses that seem set to impact on national health, and perhaps the economy. One such problem relates to the drug administration organisation having virtually turned dysfunctional. The organisation's long list of functions include issuance of drug manufacturing licences, inspection of pharmaceutical factories, evaluation of drug quality, grant of permission for import of raw materials and export of medicines.

It's a pity that such an important organisation finds itself in a state of collapse due to manpower shortage at the top and lower down. It is working like a headless chicken for the last three months with the director's post lying vacant. A joint secretary is in current charge, but he cannot devote full time to the office, being present only once or twice a week. As for the mandatory inspection of the factories, out of 42 officials meant for the job, 15 have gone abroad. Of the remainder 27, only seven are posted in Dhaka and 20 spread thin all over the country. No wonder, drugs of questionable quality from several factories which are not subjected to any oversight have intruded into the market.

Equally important is the fact that import of raw materials being hindered due to slow pace of work at the drug administration, output of medicine would decline with the possibility of drug prices going up. Already there is a price pressure on the market.

Last but not least, export is being hurt. Among the developing countries Bangladesh has a strong pharmaceutical base, even enjoying a comparative advantage over Malaysia and Pakistan which are more import-dependent than us. In fact, our drug export potential is estimated to have gone higher with the WTO waiver on intellectual property rights for some specialised drug manufacturing being granted to the LDCs. Amongst the LDCs in Africa and Asia, Bangladesh is considered to be a potential front runner in the manufacture of some highly exportable drugs. Forex earning could be substantial if we tap this potential.

We draw the attention of the government to the stuttering state of drug administration and urge them to fully equip the body with expert manpower and logistical backup so that it can deliver the goods in a vital area of national life and economy.

Our workers in Malaysia

Take immediate steps to end their woes

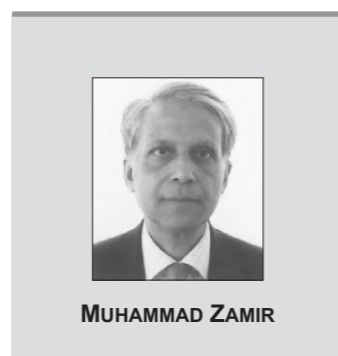
THERE seems to be a never-ending tale of sufferings of a large number of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. Having fallen victims to fraudulent dealings among corrupt recruitment agents in both Bangladesh and Malaysia, today these workers are passing their days in uncertainty regarding the authenticity of their work permits, payment of promised salary, fixation of working hours and working conditions and finding a decent accommodation. Unknowingly, these Bangladeshi citizens have landed themselves in a grave situation that demands immediate attention of the highest authorities of both the countries.

The tale of their woe began at home, where, driven by poverty and lack of employment opportunities, these young men sought employment in Malaysia. This destination being nearer to home, and the offered salary seemingly attractive enough, the young men sold off valuables to meet the demand of the local agents to get a job. But reports suggest that upon landing in Malaysia they either failed to find the employers or discovered that they have been cheated as far as the amount of salary and other facilities were concerned. Eventually they came to learn about a vicious circle of corrupt elements in Malaysia operating to cheat the Bangladeshi workers. Some of these workers are now forced to work at much cheaper rates elsewhere and some are on the run from the law.

The racket has been going on for many years and it is time the matter has been taken up at the highest level of the two friendly countries. The Bangladesh Mission in Malaysia should look into the matter as a top priority and take it up with their local counterparts to stop this trading on human misery. It is their official duty and moral obligation to stand beside the unfortunate Bangladeshis who are starving for days with some of them hiding in the jungles.

We urge the caretaker government to take immediate steps through the relevant ministry in collaboration with the association of the recruiting agencies (BAIRA) to either bring back the stranded workers or arrange for their employment with the help of the Malaysian government. This goes without saying that the vicious syndicate behind the scam must be apprehended and put behind bars.

Extortion or donation?



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE other day someone explained to me the essential difference between an optimist and a pessimist. Confronted with an awkward situation, an optimist is likely to retort that 'it could have been worse.' A pessimist, on the contrary, in similar circumstance, is likely to remark that 'it could have been better.' Most interesting, when one applies these views to what is currently going on within the country.

Since 1/11, in general, and the last few weeks in particular, the evolving process of governance has become that much more complex. Sordid details have surfaced of graft and greed. It has been a soap opera. There is a very simple denotation of the term governance that has been endorsed by the World Bank and most major development partners. It has been described as 'the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development.'

The same multilateral financial institution has also highlighted some significant signposts of mis-governance. A few common denominators in this regard relate to -- (a) inability to clearly distinguish between what is public and what is private; (b) failure to establish a

predictable institutional framework pertaining to upholding of law and dispensation of justice; (c) creation of regulatory frameworks in different sectors that impede rather than facilitate growth and expansion; (d) non-transparent and non-accountable decision making and (e) selection of decision makers through an arbitrary nomination process.

It is generally agreed that the above factors eventually lead to a scenario that affects country's

enormous amount of money to finance the honeymoon of two members of the Saudi royal family. Such a gesture might have enabled this company to profit from sale of defence equipment to that country. The strangest aspect of this sordid subversion of governance was the way it was explained by some associated with the deal. They commented that sponsoring such a lavish honeymoon showed that 'big business also has a heart'.

This leads me to a discussion of

months the filing of many extortion cases by controversial individuals who have greatly profited from certain political parties in the past. Some senior representatives and officials of these political parties have responded in their own way to these criminal charges of misdeemeanor. They have suggested that such payments, if made at all, were donations to the respective political parties. They have even pointed out that political parties all over the

were equally guilty. It is their illegal actions that furthered corruption, gave them an added edge and caused loss to the State.

Obviously, the authorities are pursuing the requisite judicial investigative process related to the framing of charges. That is good. However, at the same time, steps need to be taken to ascertain how these crooked plaintiffs obtained the money, paid for within the definition of 'extortion' or 'donation.' Was it clean and post-tax paid? If not, they

requisite period stipulated in law.

I now return to the element of optimism as opposed to pessimism. Before 1/11, we were facing a form of political paralysis. We were all concerned with the 'election engineering' that had been put in place to ensure BNP's continuance in power, overriding all democratic principles. There was disaster waiting to happen. Fortunately for all of us, the efforts and the sustained opposition of certain political parties to the holding of a one-sided election, under a partial caretaker government, were recognised and an emergency promulgated. The tacit help of the armed forces in this regard also reiterated their commitment to good governance.

Since then we have moved forward. A lot of dirty linen has been washed in public. Such a purge was required. I am optimistic that this will lead to a more responsible political leadership. Hopefully, it will also help to clarify the process that will have to be followed before political parties can accept donations in the future. There is, at present, a lot of ambiguity that will have to be removed. We also require specific laws on this issue and the drafting of principles of auditing that need to be followed. The scenario has to change.

These steps are vital for ensuring proper preparation for the subsequent general elections. This will be the only way towards the strengthening of transparent, accountable, efficient and effective governance both at the national and the local government levels.

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POST BREAKFAST

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growth. It creates a matrix where scarce public resources are directed towards private gain. It also facilitates corruption.

Normally, failures of governance and accountability are mostly a result of unscrupulous local actors, associated with business interests, eager to make a fast buck (with the connivance of crooked politicians and bureaucrats) at public expense. This process is also sometimes pursued by local agents of foreign companies who deal under the table to win contracts as suppliers of commodities or other industrial products.

We have witnessed the insidious aspects of this form of abusive alford corruption in the case of Bofors in India. We are also currently reading of the disappointing manner in which the British defence firm BAE Systems carefully paid an

the word 'extortion,' I read with interest an article the other day in 'The Daily Star' by Dr. Mozammel H. Khan, an expatriate in Canada. He has referred to extortion as defined in the Random House dictionary and highlighted some of the factors associated with this process. He has pointed out that it is an act of 'wringing money from a person by 'violence, intimidation or abuse of authority'.

He has also correctly suggested that those who willingly associate themselves with such a relationship use such payment to acquire socio-metric overlay and then try to extract favours pertaining to lucrative deals. In the process, if so required, they flout or side step established legal regulatory mechanisms (associated with the tendering process) and basic ethical standards. We have seen in the last few

world regularly receive donations. They have also disagreed and remonstrated that such alleged controversial 'donations' were not bribery.

They have however failed to clarify their positions with regard to 'donations' reportedly made in kind, e.g. apartments, landed property and shops in ultra modern shopping complexes (which were subsequently supposedly registered in the names of different family members of politicians). They have also not explained why in most cases such acquisitions were not reported in their respective wealth statements submitted with their yearly income tax returns.

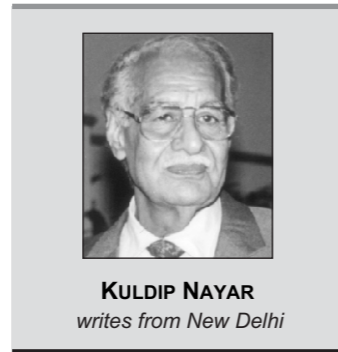
On the other hand, there is also the question regarding the motive of those who are now eagerly registering such 'extortion' cases. I personally believe that these bad apples

should also be charged under the existing laws of the land. After all, a man committing a misdeed and another tolerating it are both equally guilty.

In any case it is good that such allegations have surfaced. They have underlined abuse of power, authority and politicisation of administration. This was a malaise that was affecting the body politic of the country and needed to be addressed with full vigour. Difficult situations demand extreme action.

The interim caretaker government has taken several steps. Many have been rounded up on charges of corruption. One hopes that after a transparent judicial process (with defendants given full access to judicial rights) most of these criminals will end up not only debarred from future politics for some time to come but also behind bars for the

Through democracy alone



KULDEEP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

ISLAMABAD is a broad city, with wide roads and deep runs of thick trees and green grass. Houses are expansive, neatly tucked into self-sufficient sectors with markets, eating places and a mosque. General Mohammad Ayub Khan who founded the city had a neighbourhood concept, with people from different provinces and thoughts living as a community.

Lal Masjid, where radical Islamic students and the government forces clashed on Tuesday, is one of the mosques, not far from the diplomatic enclave, the president's house, the National Assembly and the Supreme Court.

The mosque has become more of a seminary (Jamia Hafsa) than a place for praying. Nobody expected that the students studying there would one day copy the Taliban, demanding the Sharia, the imposition of Islamic laws in Pakistan.

The posture of students, increasingly militant over the last few months, would not have brought the security forces to confront them if the Lal Masjid-cum-seminary had not become a state within the state.

The slogans of jihad against the General Pervez Musharraf government, and the threats of the use of the suicide squads of Fidayen were

bad enough. The worst was when the students began kidnapping policemen to prove that their writ ran whenever they wanted to prove it. When the students whisked away the six Chinese, they went too far. No doubt, they were released, but the government lost face because the Chinese government behaved as if it did not have enough confidence in the authority of the Musharraf government.

The students did not sit still, and

religious parties rule there with the help of the Musharraf-blessed Muslim League (Qaid).

This also proves that the religious parties are opposed to what the Lal Masjid crowd, including burqa-clad women, has been doing. It is difficult to imagine what kind of pressures would be brought on the religious parties to part company with Musarraf. But the Lal Masjid incident has infuriated the radicals to do their best to wean away the MMA

retaining his uniform, may not want to demolish the bridges with him in case he turns towards them, if and when his efforts for rapprochement with Benazir Bhutto fail.

Musharraf's confrontation at Lal Masjid definitely suits the PPP, because the spread of radicalism affects the democratic temper. Benazir Bhutto has been warning repeatedly that only the return of democracy -- through free and fair elections -- could stop fundamen-

reprimanded Musharraf for failing to rein in the militants. The CIA is said to have told Islamabad that the Lal Masjid crowd was being guided by the Al-Qaida, and that the Taliban-like students constituted the bulk of radicals. After giving an extra \$750 million, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher said that "the development of Pakistan" was what they had in view, and it was spelled out as the defeat of

the class, following the lawyers' courageous agitation, and with the alienated political parties, Musharraf cannot fight the Taliban or their type. This has to be done by people who can be harnessed by political parties through a democratic set-up. Weapons do not represent democracy, the public response does.

In fact, the Lal Masjid crowd would not have gained the importance -- and the strength -- if Pakistan had a democratic structure.

Yet, democracy does not come by holding free and fair elections alone. The institutions have to be strengthened so that they can assert themselves. For example, the manner in which Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhary has been dismissed shows that the president's fiat rules, not the law.

Former chief justice of Sind High Court, Wajuddin Ahmed, has aptly said: "If the full court restores the Chief Justice, it would be a salutary step in the direction of an independent judiciary. If that comes about, it is a bitter pill that those in power have to swallow. A bitter pill because they are not used to dealing with an independent judiciary. They will need to make changes in order to be able to live with it, and they will have to live it."

Unless democracy is restored in Pakistan to full length -- Washington should note it -- religious militancy cannot be fought. Today, there is one Lal Masjid, tomorrow there will be many more. Only democratic credentials can retrieve Pakistan.

Kuldeep Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

With the sullen middle class, following the lawyers' courageous agitation, and with the alienated political parties, Musharraf cannot fight the Taliban or their type. This has to be done by people who can be harnessed by political parties through a democratic set-up. Weapons do not represent democracy, the public response does. In fact, the Lal Masjid crowd would not have gained the importance -- and the strength -- if Pakistan had a democratic structure. Yet, democracy does not come by holding free and fair elections alone. The institutions have to be strengthened so that they can assert themselves

some 100 of them attacked the adjoining government building and a security picket. This was the official version. When the confrontation converts into a clash, it is difficult to say who fired the first shot. The curfew in the area has quietened things at the time of writing. Except for stray incidents at Abbotabad and a couple of other places, the clash at Lal Masjid had no visible effect.

I feared a strong reaction by the religious parties or its conglomeration of MMA. Apparently, President Musharraf had discussed the matter with them before taking action.

Otherwise, the state governments in Baluchistan and the NWFP would not have been intact, since the

from the Muslim League (Qaid).

The religious parties may themselves be facing a dilemma. They realise that Pakistan's general public want a liberal, democratic Muslim state, while the Lal Masjid crowd wants to impose bigotry and a system which people are not ready to adopt. In fact, even religious parties have little support with the public. But for Musharraf's help in the last election, the religious parties would not have secured as many seats as they did.

His strategy was to stall as many members of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the then Muslim League from entering the National Assembly. The religious parties, which supported Musharraf in

talism taking roots in Pakistan. My impression is that once Musharraf contains the Lal Masjid crowd and its sympathisers, he might go for an election with Benazir Bhutto if possible, or without her if necessary.

He has realised that the genie of religious chauvinism he had released to fight progressive and democratic forces was not going to go back into the bottle, and is turning its attention on him. Probably, he saw the ground reality when there was a fatal attack on him last year.

America may have applied too much pressure. US vice-president Dick Cheney, during his visit to Pakistan in March, reportedly

Talibanisation.

Islamabad itself has been worried over a report which was presented to its National Security Council. The report, running into 15 pages, has said that the Taliban have reorganised themselves and their influence was spilling over to the areas other than those bordering Afghanistan, to the detriment of the security forces' morale. The report may have been the last straw.

It looks as if Musharraf had no option except to act when the Talibanisation was taking place under his nose, in the Lal Masjid at Islamabad.

The military action is all right as far as it goes. With the sullen mid-

OPINION

How practicable are the reform proposals?

M A S MOLLA

BANGLADESH politics was going down to the abyss and such politics was letting the nation as a whole down. The party constitutions have bestowed more power upon the single party chiefs than on the plural councilors. Whatever weak democracy has constitutionally been there in the parties has not been practiced at all.

For years and even decades together there were no council meetings of major political parties including the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), though the Jatiya Party (JP) claims to hold such meetings almost regularly. As regards council meetings, the leftist parties including the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and the rightist ones including the Jamaat were rather more democratic than the mid-line main-stream parties. So, political reform has long been a 'due' on the parties.

The disclosure of large scale corruption and nepotism of 'politi-

cians' after January 11 change in state governance, this 'due' has reached state of 'overdue'. The reorganised Election Commission (EC) has come up with some good proposals and enacted some rules for political reform. The interim government is also patronising (in some way or the other) some forms of reform.

Being driven by so many factors, the most popular three parties (AL, BNP and JP) have been bound to come up with some reform proposals separately. About two weeks ago, Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, the incumbent Secretary General of the BNP, first announced his plan of reforms in the party. He proposed drastic cut in the authority of the party chairperson.

The proposal says, a person will not be allowed to hold the post of the chairperson for more than two terms and one term will be of three years' duration. The provision will also be applicable to the person who has already served six years as chairperson. Mr. Bhuiyan disclosed his 15-point reform plan at a press

Can the government enact rules supporting the impractical reform proposals? Who can head a party and for how long is the internal affair of a party. But the proposal of barring party chiefs from heading the government or from leading the Parliament can be supported by rules enacted by the government even if the party councilors do not like that. Who can head the government or lead the JS is the concern of all people, not only of the party councilors.

briefing and the reform proposals need to be supported and executed by the party councilors in the next council meeting. The proposal added that the party chairperson would be barred from holding the office of the Prime Minister (PM). In less than a week, he realised that the same rule should be applicable to the Secretary General as well. So he amended the proposal accordingly.

The AL required more time to draft the reform proposals. So Begum Roushan Ershad stood second in coming up with reform proposals (in JP). The proposals seemed very like that proposed by Mr. Bhuiyan for BNP. By this time General Ershad has left chairmanship and 'appointed' Anisul Islam

Mahmud the party chief. Four presidium members of the AL have drafted reform proposals for the party. But they are announcing the proposals individually saying that these are their mere personal proposals!

However, the proposals are not only similar to those first announced by Mr. Bhuiyan for BNP, but also seem almost identical to those announced by different presidium members of the AL. The AL proposal announced by Mr. Abdur Razzak has a specific item that says, "An individual cannot simultaneously hold a party and a governmental position. This rule will also apply to the party president and presidium members as well as the general secretary and other party secretar-

ies."

If the reform proposals so far announced are passed in the council meetings, none of Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia or Ershad could be the party chief. But ironically each of them would have every chance to be the PM, the Leader of the Parliament (Jatiya Sangsad -- JS) or the Opposition Leader in the JS!

So far I can understand, state power is exercised by the PM and both the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition have leading roles in enacting laws by the Parliament. If there is no bar on them in assuming those powerful positions, what will that matter if they are party chiefs or not? That is, the proposed reform will NOT be

effective as envisaged.

Now let us see the opposite side of the coin. Why they were made the party chiefs? Is it because they have been the most knowledgeable and expert politicians in the parties? The answer is, everybody knows they had to hold the posts of party chiefs to web the 'expert politicians' together so that the parties are not broken into pieces.

Has that need of symbolic unity in the parties ended? Is it right that true democracy can be established in our formulae overnight? Can any magic formula hold 'expert politicians' together to respect anybody as the party chief? One can tell with almost absolute confidence that the 'No' to the symbols of unity in parties

will divide the parties into several pieces having so many brackets that somebody may try to fish in the troubled water!

But that somebody may also fail. Then what will happen? May be the result will be a total chaos in the political arena. Do we want that? Will that bring sanity in politics and prosperity to the nation?

I am sure the impractical proposal of saying no to them to head the parties will not be accepted by the councilors. The councilors live with the general mass and can feel the pulse of the people. Then what will happen to the reform proposals? The result would be no reform at all!

I emphasise on the need of keeping them in party chairmanship as long as the councilors elect them. But assuming the position of party chiefs, they became supreme in the parties and nobody questioned their upper hand in every affair of the party including who would lead the youth front or student front in a district or upazila or in a specific educational institution. Reforms within parties should aim at estab-

lishing the system of secret ballot in electing party leaders and in holding council meetings regularly.

Now I come to a legal point. Can the government enact rules supporting the impractical reform proposals? Who can head a party and for how long is the internal affair of a party. The government has no moral authority to enact rules defying the assumed support of the councilors. But the proposal of barring party chiefs from heading the government or from leading the Parliament can be supported by rules enacted by the government even if the party councilors do not like that. Who can head the government or lead the JS is the concern of all people, not only of the party councilors. So accepting only the proposal of barring the party chiefs from heading the government and from leading the JS will be enough and realistic for the greater benefit of the nation.

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