

Now, a Truth Commission for businessmen

Novel idea, needs public debate

LAW Adviser Mainul Hosein's comments on the possibility of the formation of a Truth Commission that will give businessmen accused of corruption the scope to 'confess' and so let them get back to doing their jobs took us a bit by surprise. Part of our surprise springs from the fact that the commission is meant only for businessmen. The suggestion also lacks details. While we certainly appreciate the novelty of the idea, there are some significant aspects of the issue that are not known to us. Among those aspects are the probable terms of reference of the body, its legal basis, the morality governing its establishment and functions and finally the applicability of the commission's decisions. Besides, to what extent does such a commission affect the working of the normal laws pertaining to criminal conduct?

One worrying part of any talk about a Truth Commission is whether the idea was at all discussed by the council of advisers before the media were let into it by the law adviser. If it was not, it is important that it be deliberated on. After all, a Truth Commission must have some strong moral and legal basis to work on. A common thread running through the commissions we so far know about is that they have largely been concerned with inquiring into human rights violations, political violence, ethnic killings and the like. A Truth Commission is an essentially late twentieth century development and is generally concerned with bringing together the fragmented parts of a shattered society back into one whole piece again. As far as we in Bangladesh are aware, nothing has happened to suggest that our nation has essentially dwindled into a fragmented society requiring such a commission. Moreover, it is hard to understand why a Truth Commission should apply only to businessmen and leave out the politicians now in jail or on the run. The suggestion does not offer a level playing field to all.

The law adviser thinks a Truth Commission could help encourage businessmen into bringing back enthusiasm in trade and industry. The reality, though, is that the business community has itself suggested some tangible measures for a revival of business confidence. We are not certain as to how seriously those suggestions have been examined. The government can work on those suggestions in earnest. As for a Truth Commission being there, it will need detailed discussions with business circles and the legal community. The suggestion needs to be further crystallised before we can consider adopting it.

Manpower export to Malaysia

We hope suspension would be short-lived

THERE is no denying a sense of loss being unfortunately felt over the Malaysian authorities applying a freeze on fresh intake of Bangladeshi workers into their country. In the middle of last month two incidents occurred highlighting mismanagement and nexus between Bangladeshi agents and their counterparts in Malaysia over export of manpower to that country. Bangladeshi workers' agitation and hunger strike at the Bangladesh High Commission premises protesting poor working conditions and a few thousand of them being stranded at the airport without any Malaysian company receiving them created a disconcerting situation for all concerned. While the poor exploited workers suffered in the process and there was no satisfactory resolution of the issues, the suspension of new intake comes as a heart-breaker for the employment seekers from Bangladesh. More so because an earlier ban put in 1999 had been lifted not so long ago. Currently, the country is hosting about 200,000 Bangladeshi workers and 100,000 more are expected to arrive in Malaysia by virtue of a previous approval. The potential for intake is huge into that country.

The question is, why are we running into interminable difficulties with manpower export to such a friendly and fraternal country like Malaysia where the contribution of our workers to the economy is a well recognised fact? The government to government relations are in an excellent state; but it is the manpower agents and their middlemen on both sides that have made a mess of the affair. A lot of money came into play and despite the stipulated rate per person being Tk 2,500, the asking rate went as high as Tk 2,500.

While the returnees must get back their money from the agents, we should set our house in order and then take the matter up seriously with the Malaysian government to see how best both sides can be ready to resume their manpower business.

The little things



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

Don't get me wrong. I want a functional democracy as much as the next man. But alongside the big plans, perhaps we also should not lose sight of the little things that can be done. I understand that it has a lot on its plate, but it might not be a bad idea for the interim government to look at small-scale things that it has the authority to do that would improve the average person's quality of life.

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The little things are what people care about the most. Prices. Law and order. Housing. Jobs. Simple day-to-day concerns. Separation of the judiciary from the executive, the right to information, civil service reform -- these are all necessary and worthwhile initiatives, but while we are doing that, in the meantime, perhaps we should be looking at smaller scale ideas as well.

In the city of Dhaka one of the biggest issues affecting people's lives is traffic. Today, roughly ten per cent of the country lives or works here and a huge proportion of economic activity either takes place or originates or is in some way connected to the city. Thus, improving the quality of life for its residents would be both popular and smart.

Now, there are a lot of problem in Dhaka from power to water to schools, but anyone you ask will tell you that the biggest problem is traffic. It doesn't matter whether you are a businessman or a day labourer, if your mode of transport is a chauffeur-driven car or a bus, if you live in Gulshan or Jatrabari -- the problem is the same everywhere and for everyone.

The average man and woman has to spend hours a day in traffic,

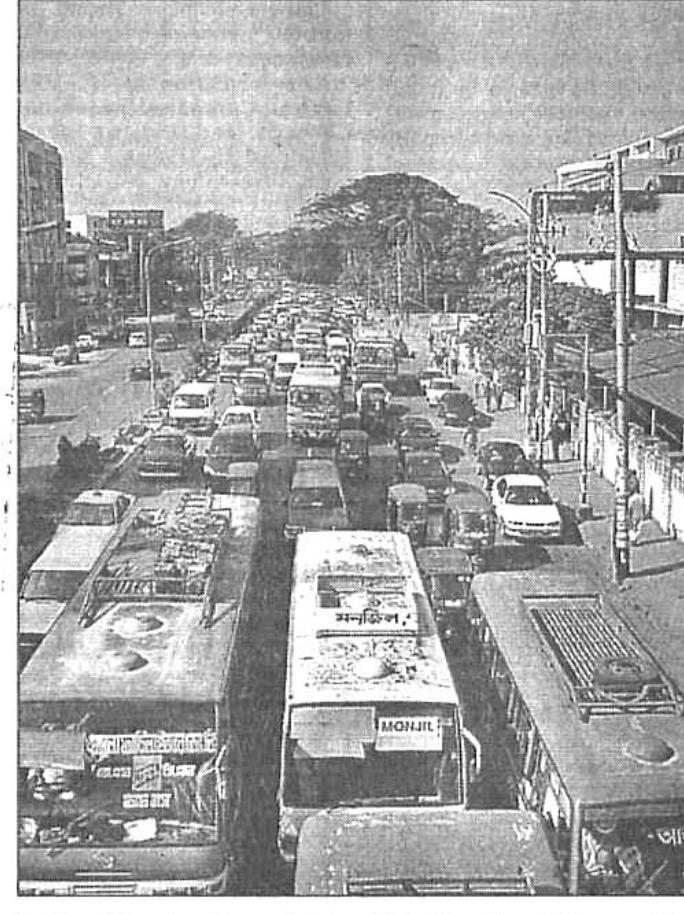


PHOTO: FIAZ

just to get to work, or the market, or even to visit friends and relatives. The traffic is frustrating, dispiriting, soul-crushing.

Traffic has fundamentally altered how residents of Dhaka live

their lives. Gone is the casual culture of popping by without a phone call in advance. After all, who would brave an hour-long journey unless they are sure that the other party is home to receive them.

Dhaka today is fragmented, with people loath to set foot outside their own localities. Each locality has become self-contained, and areas such as, say, Baridhara and Mohammadpur might as well be in two entirely different cities for the amount of interaction between the residents of the two localities.

This does not even get into the crippling economic costs that are associated with the horrendous traffic situation in terms of lost productivity, delays, etc.

Now to fix this, of course, requires long-term thinking and bold steps. Simply put, we do not have enough roads. To fix this will require a city-wide master-plan that must be strictly adhered to once adopted. Illegal buildings will need to be demolished. Hundreds of miles of new roads, ring-roads, and over-passes will need to be built. Housing will need to be completely reimagined. Perhaps an underground rail system will need to be put in place. This is obviously a long-term vision.

But in the short-run there is also plenty that can be done to ease the crush.

First (and I know this won't be popular), we can put market price for octane and petrol. There is no reason why urban car-owners such as you and I should get subsidised fuel. The benefits would be immediate. With fuel more costly, people would be forced to take their cars out less frequently. Traffic would thin, the nation's balance of payments would improve, and the environment would be cleaner.

If we need to continue to subsidise diesel and kerosene for farmers and those in rural areas, that will do more to improve the lives of Dhaka city residents than just about any other measure.

The next thing would be to actually enforce traffic laws. Right now there is impunity, more or less. We need more traffic cops, and not just to direct traffic as they are

doing today. They need to be empowered to write tickets and impound vehicles. In other words, we need a functional traffic court.

I know it sounds outlandish when the courts are currently overloaded and there seem to be so many more important issues facing the nation. But, believe me, such an initiative would have a more measurably beneficial impact on Dhaka residents' lives than any other.

Another simple thing to cut down on the number of vehicles plying the streets at any one time is to restrict parking and to crack down on illegal parking. If there is no place to park, then people will take their cars outless.

For those parking on main roads or otherwise obstructing traffic, I personally support capital punishment, but would be willing to settle for impoundment of the vehicle, with a stiff penalty for its release. That ought to do the trick.

Another thing that would help would be if all schools mandated bus service for their students. Other possibilities are congestion fees (like in London) or more one-way roads (as has been started, with some success, in parts of the city).

But for all of these, enforcement is the key. If we do that and can make the roads passable again, then it will do more to improve the lives of Dhaka city residents than just about any other measure. It would be a good thing to do and (there's the kicker) it would be sensationaly popular -- and the government could use a crowd-pleaser.

So let's see some more thinking along these lines. The big things are all very well, but it is the little things that will have the most immediate and gratifying impact on people's lives, and it is the little things that they will notice and remember.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

The truth omission



MUHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

CROSS TALK

Let there be no doubt that money has been always connected with good life, with comfort, security and authority. If we eliminate corruption, bribery and extortion, money can come from business only, the splurge of cash, the confluence of influence and affluence, which measures a man by the weight of his fortune. No surprise if the businessman is the iconic figure, the head priest of the cult of money. But should business be the measure of everything?

even come to a grinding halt one fine morning!

I believe like most people in the country that businessman is the god of small things. He creates jobs, jobs create earnings and earnings create spending. It works like blood circulation, going from the heart through the arteries to rest of the body. In the scheme of modern economics, businessman is the center of everything. He puts purchasing power in otherwise idle hands, which leads to consumption which leads to the multiplier effect across the economy.

But it was not the same in America where a successful writer or painter was indistinguishable from any other decent businessman. I say, such is the creed of capitalism. It makes business the measure of everything.

Don't we know it? In this country, the government is willing to give many concessions to business so that it will not deprive us of its magic. And then everybody else is busy wooing the businessman, because their indifference threatens to eclipse the economy.

So the product he makes not only brings foreign exchange for the country. The salary he pays to the workers creates many streams of spending. The house rent, groceries, cosmetics, baby milk, clothes, transportation, medicine, alms to beggars, from one hand the money goes to many and that is how one fountainhead of expen-

iture sets off the spectrum of economic activities.

Indeed business is the jewel of the economy. It creates wealth, it distributes wealth and thus raises the standard of living. Sinclair Lewis was talking about this when he compared the writers and painters of America with those in other countries. He was not comparing the talents of these men, he didn't doubt their creative abilities, but he was questioning their return on investment, whether they were making enough money.

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cult of money.

But should business be the measure of everything? Should we measure everything with return on investment? Should mother's love, spouse's fidelity, filial obedience and dog's loyalty be measured on the basis of monetary gains? Should we go to bed on the calculation if there is a gain if we wake up in the morning?

Probably in the end there is a cost-benefit analysis to everything. People do things mostly when benefit exceeds cost. But people also do costly things for no monetary benefit. The man who dies in the battlefield, political demonstration or fight against drug trafficking dies for a dream. In his own way he wants to change the world, because he can not accept it.

How would this man look in a business suit? He gives his life for a cause. He exacts the ultimate price on himself and pays it with his

own blood. This man has no sense of bookkeeping, withdrawal of his deposit. He bargains with himself and wins in the losing deal. He will look like a joke in the business skin.

A businessman is unlike him. He transacts his business for a price and squeezes his profit margin. His suit is his uniform, which shows that he is in the profession of making money. And that is what sets him apart from the rest of us. His success is measured by money, and our success is measured by him.

If we call it the Sinclair test, then no man is successful if he is differentiable from a businessman. Whether he is a leader, writer, thinker, teacher, performer and man of any other profession, he has to look like a businessman, the same lavish life, the same flashy lifestyle, the same glamour which reeks with the smell of money, easy come and easy gone.

"Business first, pleasure afterwards," wrote William Makepeace Thackeray in 1855, which was a prophetic statement that now resonates through everything in this country. We have defeated the politicians. We have defeated some of the godfathers and some of their musclemen. Even bureaucrats, police and others are at least showing their willingness to walk the straight line.

But the stumbling block appears to be business. This is

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