

Now, a Truth Commission for businessmen

Novel idea, needs public debate

LAW Adviser Mainul Hossain'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 Tk84 thousand, the asking rate went as high as Tk2.5 lakh.

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.

Climate change challenge for the poor (part 2)

If ever there was a time to take extremely seriously the ever-louder alarm bells about climate change, it is now. Human activity, as it is currently taking place, is clearly not sustainable. Where is the leadership that will put into immediate effect an international emergency response plan to cut carbon production dramatically, with the utmost speed possible, and to assist India and China with finding alternative energy to fuel their rapid development?

MIRA KAMDAR

THANKS to the booming biofuels market, wacky weather and increased world demand, global grain stocks have fallen to a scant 57 days of consumption, their lowest level in 34 years. Prices are up sharply. International aid organisations warn they will not have enough emergency food on hand to meet anticipated need. Even consumers in rich countries will have to pay significantly more for their food in 2008.

This risks not only starvation and malnutrition among the world's poor, but also social and political unrest. Governments with the means have nervously shored up national grain stocks. Panic buying by India, which floated tenders to import 50,000 tons of

wheat with an option to buy an additional 50,000 tons earlier this year, was blamed for sending the price of wheat to almost double what it commanded just a year ago. The European Union is so concerned, it recently eliminated its 10 percent grain set-aside entirely, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has warned that governments should end subsidies for biofuels.

There is reason for alarm. In recent decades, when global grain stocks fell, the drop-off was temporary, the overall trend upward. That trend may be reversing. The weather has become increasingly unpredictable, making it hard for farmers to know when to plant or what will thrive. In 2007, producers faced a hot, dry spring followed either by more dry weather or an

overly wet summer, depending on the region. In addition, the biofuels rush has tipped the fuel value of corn in the US above the food value of this staple; 16 percent of the US corn crop was diverted to ethanol production in 2007, and a full third is expected to go to producing ethanol in 2008. And a large sale of corn slated for human consumption redirected to animal feed instead by Cargill and Mexico's Gruma, partly owned by Archer Daniels Midland Co., didn't help. The price of tortillas in Mexico shot up 60 percent, sending angry citizens onto the streets.

Beyond Mexican tortillas, corn, as Michael Pollan so brilliantly points out in his recent book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, has become the basis of the American industrial and processed-food chain. Corn is

now used to produce most of the meat, poultry, dairy and eggs, as well as a host of processed foods and soft drinks that Americans consume every day. Plus, more people in booming India and China can afford to add animal protein to their traditional diets, further driving up world demand for corn.

In addition to corn and wheat, the price of rice is rising. Even soybeans and pulses are more expensive than last year. The upward trend means the poor aren't the only ones affected. The price of bread in the United Kingdom is up nearly a pound, or almost two dollars. The French, where high bread prices in 1989 provoked outright revolution, have been warned that they will have to pay more for their baguette. Italians look at pasta prices up 20 percent. In the US, people can expect to pay 10 percent more for chicken, 14 percent more for milk and 21 percent more for eggs. In Russia, the situation is dire: the price of bread is expected to be up 50 percent by the end of the year, and cabbage up 30 percent, to name just two basic staples of the Russian diet.

As if this wasn't enough, a new report by William Cline of the Center for Global Development and the Peterson Institute for International Economics offers a grim, country-by-country assessment of the impact of climate change on agriculture by the 2080s. Since most developing countries, where the bulk of the world's poor live, happen to be located closer to the equator, they will be hit the hardest by crop damage related to climate change. Africa could see food production drop by as much as 28 percent; India's could fall by a whopping 38 percent, even as its population increases by another 400 million people. Richer countries will not be immune nor will potential gains in more temperate climates compensate for losses overall.

On the whole, global food production is predicted to decline between 3 and 16 percent, even as another 3 billion people are added to the planet. Add to these alarming numbers the fact that world sea fisheries have already collapsed by one third and are predicted to be completely exhausted by the middle of the century. The future of food looks grim indeed.

There are a few potentially positive variables. One is the possible impact of crops genetically engineered to withstand higher global temperatures. Another is the impact of so-called carbon fertilisation, or of an atmosphere richer in the carbon plants love. Cline dismisses these as too speculative, arguing that it is dangerous to count on factors of unknown outcome to rescue us from otherwise certain food catastrophe.

It's no longer a matter of speculation: The era of cheap food is over. Increases in annual grain production have already fallen steadily off their Green-Revolution highs, declining from 2.8 percent in the 1960s and 1970s to 1.6 percent during the past 25 years. While there will continue to be annual and regional fluctuations -- India just announced it is holding off buying more grain in light of a bumper wheat harvest, causing prices to ease slightly -- the year 2007 may represent a watershed moment in human food security, when the world tilted definitively away from growing abundance toward scarcity.

Humanity has only itself to blame for this catastrophe, with the poor, as usual, paying more dearly than the rich. In addition to climate change, a finger can be pointed at rising consumption through population growth and changing food habits, environmental degradation including topsoil loss, acute water shortages, over-fishing, and the loss of agricultural land to urbanisation and industrialisation. Add to this the massive subsidies in the US and Europe that adversely affect food prices and production in developing countries, destroying the food-producing capacity of family farms around the world, and policies that have favoured the development of monoculture-based industrial agriculture, entirely dependent on infusions of carbon-based synthetic fertilisers by the ton -- and the world confronts the makings of a "perfect storm" of catastrophic food shortage.

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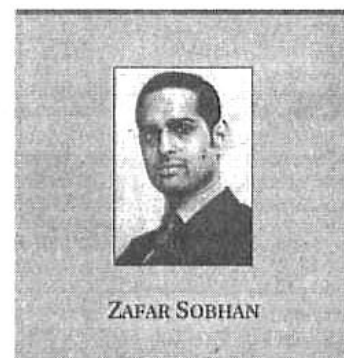
carbon production dramatically, with the utmost speed possible, and to assist India and China with finding alternative energy to fuel their rapid development? Where is the leadership that can break the stranglehold over global agriculture of carbon-addicted monopoly agribusiness and put humanity on a path to sustainable food security? Where is the leadership with the spine to tell the people of the rich world that they can no longer afford to pursue a lifestyle of wanton consumption and pollution for which people in the developing world have to make the ultimate sacrifice?

In the prophetic words of Mahatma Gandhi: "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." At this rate, we will consume ourselves to death.

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The little things



ZAFAR SOBHAN

2007 continues to be the year of sweeping changes and thorough-going reform. Institutions are being shaken up and reimagined and reformulated as the current dispensation attempts to put in place the framework for the brave new democracy they hope to usher in. The latest big idea to be floated is a truth commission.

I personally think that a truth commission is not a bad idea and perhaps next week I shall return to the subject of why I think it might be a practical solution to many of the problems that are hamstringing the anti-corruption drive.

But today I want to write not about massive tectonic changes, not about new institutions, not about ambitious plans and schemes, but in praise of the micro, about small, simple initiatives that can make people's lives better.

It seems to me that for most people while thorough-going change and reform is all well and good (or not), the average person in the street is more concerned with bread and butter issues rather than the construction of a workable scaffolding on which democracy can be built.

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.

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.

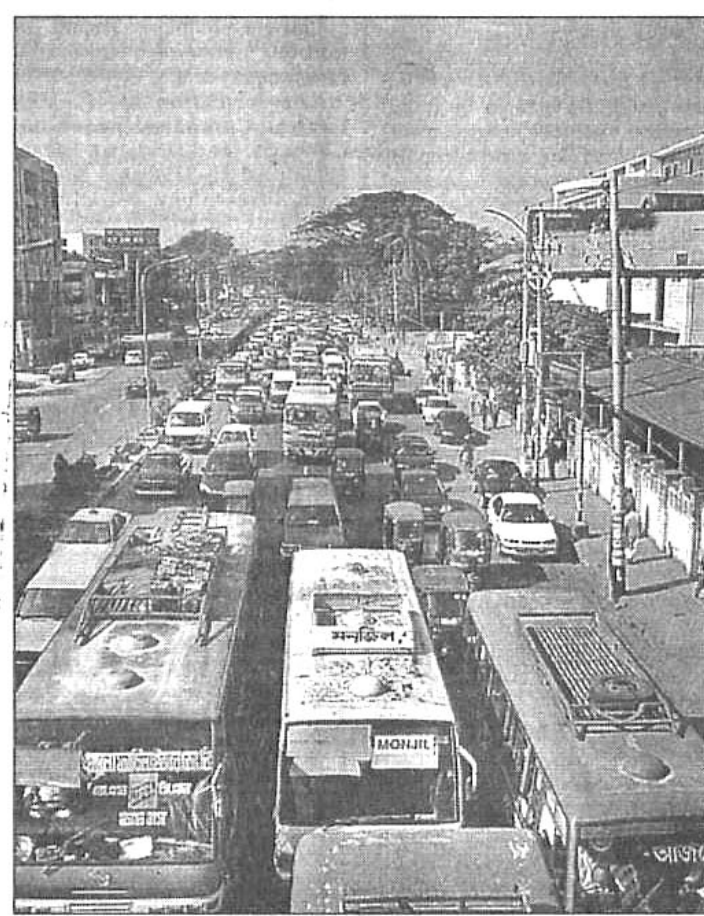
In the city of Dhaka one of the biggest issues affecting people's lives is traffic. Today, roughly ten per cent of the country lives or works here and a huge proportion of economic activity either takes place or originates or is in some way connected to the city. Thus, improving the quality of life for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

STRAIGHT TALK

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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 pay 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 would be fine. But not octane and petrol, and not in urban areas.

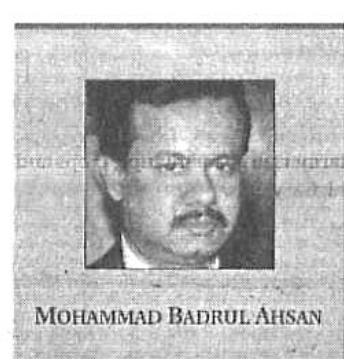
The next thing would be to actually enforce traffic laws. Right now there is impunity, more or less. We need more traffic cops, and not just to direct traffic as they are

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.

The truth omission



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN 1922, American novelist Sinclair Lewis bragged about his country. He said that in other countries art and literature were left to a lot of shabby bums who lived in attics and fed on spaghetti and booze.

But it was not the same in America where a successful writer or painter was indistinguishable from any other decent business man. 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 businessmen, because their indifference threatens to eclipse the economy.

If the prices are rising like galloping horses, if the banks aren't opening LCs and imports are dwindling, it is not unlikely that the economy would slow down,

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.

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-

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?

diture sets off the spectrum of economic activities.

Indeed business is the jewel of the economy. It creates wealth, it distributes wealth and then 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 woke 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't 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 being 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

where one can see the sign of defiance. It remains an insurmountable hurdle, which reminds us that business comes first, everything else afterwards, that this nation can't have the pleasure of anything if it tries to mess with business.

That might of business makes us comparable with America, if not on the economic index, at least on the social index. Business has lot of influence over us because we admire business and it pervades our lives. As a matter of fact, everything about us is based on business models, the give and take, loss and gain, smile and tears, courage and fear, all of these are worked out on shrewd estimation of what is the benefit and what is the cost.

George Canning, who was the British prime minister in 1827, had observed that the Dutch had a fault in the matters of commerce. They offered too little and asked too much.

If the government forms the Truth Commission, where will it draw the line? How will it separate those who have offered too little from those who have asked too much?

While welcoming the Truth Commission, we must be careful. If it wears the business suit, it might transform into truth omission!

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