

Let us do more for the farmers

It is also encouraging to see that the caretaker government, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, made some budgetary allocations for alleviating the sufferings of the rural people. This is a good beginning, and future governments should make more efforts to help and protect the interests of the farmers who make so much sacrifice for feeding the people.

NURUL H. CHOUDHURY

SOME leaders of the political parties and members of the civil society often say that the armed forces of Bangladesh are "patriotic." No one can dispute the services rendered by our armed forces. In any case, the armed forces of every country must be patriotic; otherwise, the country's edifice will fall apart and become vulnerable to foreign invasion. That does not mean that others living in and working for the country are less patriotic. There are many others who keep a very low profile but make significant contributions to the welfare of the country.

Bangladesh, called a "bottomless basket" by Dr. Henry Kissinger because of the rampant corruption immediately after independence, has come a long way since then and has become a vibrant country.

The garments factories are booming and readymade garments

are exported to Europe and North America. Bangladesh is exporting pharmaceutical products to many countries of Africa and Europe. Flowers of different varieties are also exported. Bangladesh is exporting ocean-going ships to Scandinavian countries and Japan.

Nevertheless, there can be no denying the fact that Bangladesh is not free from corruption and maladministration. Large-scale corruption in the bureaucracy and lack of appropriate policies led to the destruction of our jute mills, while such mills are flourishing in India.

Similarly, our education system and health care facilities are collapsing. As a result, more and more students and patients are going abroad for higher education and treatment. In the process, the state is losing hard-earned foreign exchange.

One cannot deny that the high rate of population growth has compounded the problem. The popula-

tion of Bangladesh has almost doubled since independence. Such a huge population in such a small territory takes a heavy toll on our budget and planning. Yet, increased population has a positive side as well. It has created a huge workforce, a large portion of which has been absorbed in our garment factories.

Garment factories have been set up in almost all major cities of the country. The owners of these factories amassed immense wealth. There are allegations that the workers are not paid enough to survive in cities.

In the face of agitation from the workers, the government undertook measures to fix a minimum wage for workers in garments factories. There are also allegations that the owners do not pay the wages regularly. Thus, the workers and owners are always at loggerheads. The nation has witnessed a number of outbursts of the work-

ers' anger in the recent past.

It is surprising that while the factory owners take credit for their role in keeping the economic wheel of the country moving, they pay less attention to the interests of their workers. Moreover, many of these owners are enjoying many facilities as Commercially Important Persons (CIP).

Bangladesh is also exporting workers to Middle Eastern and South East Asian countries. These workers send money back home, and are the second highest foreign-exchange earners. Even though some of these workers are exploited or cheated by their employers, our embassies/high commissions hardly help them out.

There are allegations that our missions do not pay sufficient attention to these people. Even when these workers return home, they are either attacked by the airport thugs or are robbed of their money and belongings on their way home. What has the government done to protect these foreign exchange earners? While the government classifies the successful businessmen as CIPs and gives special facilities to them, it does practically nothing for the foreign exchange earning workers.

Those who silently work for the

country and make significant contributions to the very existence of the people are the workers of Bangladesh. It is to be remembered that most people are engaged in the agriculture sector, and they have almost doubled the food production since independence. What is particularly remarkable about them is that so far they have been able to produce bumper crops 13 times since independence.

These farmers deserve warm appreciation, especially because they did it in the face of heavy odds. It is a glowing example of patriotism. Sometimes there wasn't sufficient rainfall, often their crops were washed away by flood; the government at times could not provide them with fertiliser, seeds and sufficient diesel/electricity required for irrigation. Still the workers did their job. They are among the few people who never neglect their duties.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the farmers of Bangladesh are the most neglected among all the classes. The political parties and the successive governments of Bangladesh had always given lip service to the needs of the peasants without taking sufficient measure to redress their difficulties. They do not want to be classified

as the VIP (Very Important Person), or CIP, they simply want a guaranteed supply of diesel/electricity, seed, fertiliser and fair price for their produce. Unfortunately, fertiliser dealers thrive on the plight of the farmers, and after the harvest the middlemen reap the benefit.

The half-fed farmers of Bangladesh go to their fields everyday in the morning and return home after the sunset. They work in the scorching heat and do not require any air-conditioner. They go to their fields either on foot or use bullock-carts, not Pajero jeeps. Most of them sleep in dilapidated huts, not in beautifully decorated apartments or government quarters.

When they fall ill, most of them blindly depend on providence; they do not have the means to go to any of the 5-star hospitals/clinics. Many of them die without treatment.

Very recently, through the courtesy of a TV channel and relentless efforts of Dr. S. Seraj, the problems faced by the farmers have been projected before the viewing millions. Some pragmatic suggestions towards redressing these problems have also been put forward.

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The survival of a state and its economic growth depend not just on any section or class of people. Rather, the cumulative efforts of every citizen help a country move forward. The government's duty is to harness

these efforts and reward the outstanding contributors.

It is evident that the farmers of Bangladesh have made significant contributions to the development of the country, but the governments always failed to ensure the supply of their basic requirements, let alone reward them. It is time that we acknowledge the importance of the agriculture sector and do more for the helpless farmers who are engaged in it.

Dr. Nurul H. Choudhury, Professor, Department of History, University of Rajshahi.

Controlling administrative corruption

In starting the action, the ACC committed some mistakes due to lack of proper manpower, experience and inadequate cooperation from various agencies of the government. However, it got full cooperation from the armed forces. Like any other new venture, its actions initially were slow and in certain cases incomplete. Later, its activities gathered momentum, and are now running smoothly.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

COMMON people welcomed the present caretaker government because they expected from it a peaceful, neutral, free, fair and credible election. This government's main task was to assist the Election Commission (EC) in holding the said election. However, it was beyond anybody's comprehension as to how a fair, free and neutral election could be held under the chairmanship of a totally partisan fellow like Justice Aziz. Furthermore, the voters' list was defective.

The EC had to be thoroughly reorganised and strengthened. To increase its capacity it was reorganised and made independent. To

prepare a level playing field for contestants in the election it started working on saving politics from the evil influence of money and muscle power. Thus, it had to concentrate on curbing corruption in politics and administration.

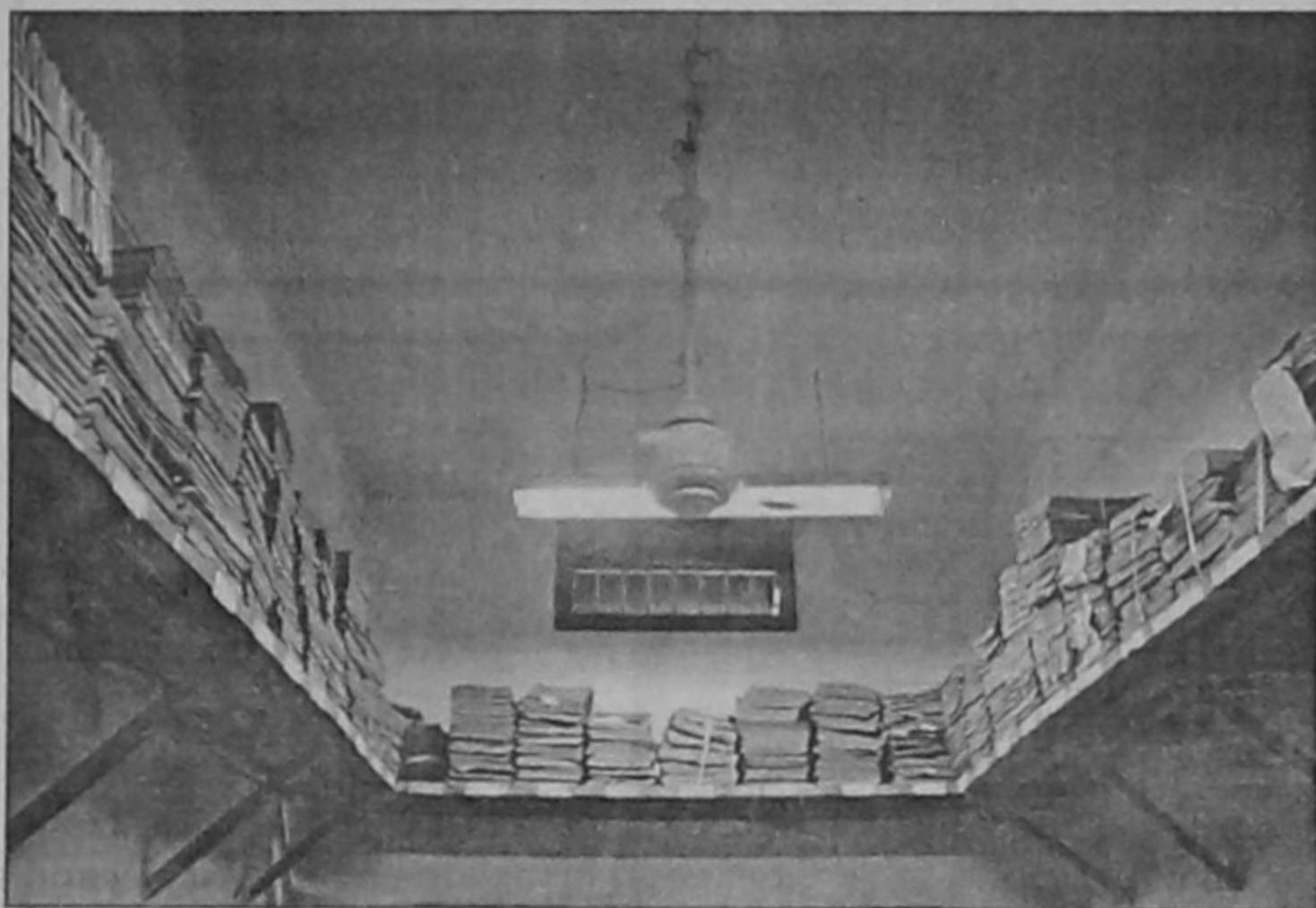
The four-party alliance government had set up an Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) replacing the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), a government department, only to hoodwink the people to make them believe that it had a pious wish for cleansing the administration. It existed only in name. It was deliberately made a dysfunctional body.

The new setup of the organisation under the chairmanship of Lt. Gen. (retired) Hasan Mashud Chowdhury started working in March 2007. At the initial stage it

had to overcome a large number of administrative hurdles (such as preparing and obtaining approval of a new setup, taking decision about absorbing the staff of former ACB, sorting out some legal matters etc.).

Catching the big fish (about whom general impression was that they were above law) was an extremely risky and difficult job. To our utter surprise, the ACC proved that equality before law still exists in the country and many powerful corrupt people had to surrender to the ACC.

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Files move when money moves.

any other new venture, its actions initially were slow and in certain cases incomplete. Later, its activities gathered momentum, and are now running smoothly.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) published a household survey report on June 18. It states that though there are some signs of improvement in certain areas after the taking over by the CTG, overall condition of

graft has not improved much.

It says that from January 2007 to June 30, 2007, out of eleven governmental sectors the rate of corruption has increased in six sectors and slightly decreased in five sectors. The six sectors are education, health, land administration, local government, NGO and law enforcement agencies.

Dr. Muzaffar Ahmed, chairman of TIB, observed that corruption

had increased at the lower level after 1/11. The report also states that it is difficult to uproot the poisonous tree of corruption. Permanent elimination of corruption cannot be achieved by punishing the big fish only.

During the last 35 years, no real measure was taken to curb corruption, by either a civil or a military government. Ershad took a step or two in the beginning, only to deceive the public. Later, he was charged with a large number of cases of corruption. In fact, during his rule corruption started spreading rapidly throughout Bangladesh.

In analysing the TIB report, it appears to be relevant to consider the following points:

- The ACC started working from March 2007, and not from first January 2007.
- No organisation can be assessed as either efficient or inefficient before it runs at least six months. Moreover, the former ACC was a completely dysfunctional body, and transforming a dysfunctional body into a reasonably efficient one is no mean job.

- A large number of personnel of former ACB with questionable reputations had to be absorbed.
- Some ministries failed to provide requisite information in time in the early stage.

- The ACC, it appears, paid too much attention to publicising its activities. What is necessary is to blunt the proclivity of the average Bangladeshi for corruption. It has to be admitted that in a majority of cases honesty is nothing but lack of opportunity.
- The bureaucrats were treated rather liberally, perhaps due to the apprehension that creation of a panicky situation in bureaucracy may bring the administration to a standstill. This has tarnished the image of both ACC and CTG.
- TIB reports are not as authentic as they should be because these are almost fully based on secondary sources (mainly newspaper reports). The present report is based on a survey report of 3,000 households. Thus, it lacks the depth needed in such serious matters.

The World Bank's observation that Bangladesh is still the most corrupt country cannot be accepted because it has certain gaps. The comments of a senior Bangladeshi politician that the performance of the CTG is poor aim at downgrading the CTG. It is indeed a big joke when the said politician of the immediate past government claimed that his regime was the golden age.

May I ask the said politician as to why then events like 1/11 and incarceration of so many dynamic politicians happened? It was certainly the golden age for a few politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen close to the high command of the said regime.

The initial stage of ACC is over. We hope to see much better performance soon if it is allowed to work independently and if it remains consistent in its performance. After all, it has no magic wand to make the corruption accumulated during the last 35 years disappear. Why not wait some time more.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.

Big country ... big problems

US military officials accuse Iran of helping Shia militia groups like those run by hard-line cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. **Mohammad Reza Baghban** is on the frontline of those accusations. As Tehran's consul general and point man in Basra for the past two years, he took the heat when 11 British sailors were taken captive by Revolutionary Guard forces off the coast of Basra last year and his convoy has been ambushed more than once while traveling through the city. Still, he maintains a sense of humor and brushes off accusations of Iranian meddling in Iraq. Newsweek's **Babak Dehghanpisheh** recently met with Baghban at the Iranian consulate in Basra.

Newsweek: Has the security situation improved since the British pulled back from Basra last December?

Baghban: There have been a lot of ups and downs. When the English were here it wasn't an ideal situation. The occupiers, because of their ignorance and their lack of understanding of social traditions, have created a lot of problems for the people.

Did the recent security operation by the Iraqi government help?

There has been a noticeable improvement in the security situation. Some of the insecurity and kidnapping has gone down. And the reason is the increase of the security forces in the city. But if the unemployment and other economic problems aren't resolved there could be more instability.

Were there any clashes around you in this latest round of violence?

No, the clashes were mainly in the centre and west of (Basra). There wasn't much happening around

here. As a matter of fact, after the British left it got calmer. Because when they were around, it was an excuse [for militants] to fire mortars and rockets. Sometimes they would put bombs in their path.

What's the situation at the nearby border between Iraq and Iran?

We have a lot of border protocols between the two countries. There was a group from the foreign ministry that came to discuss this but none of the ideas have become operational yet. For example, to

establish direct communication between border guards. There is some communication now but it's not as much as it should be. The problem is that it's a vast border. There are problems at the marine borders with fishermen and smugglers. With the land borders it's the same. There are smugglers. There are tribes. There are a lot of problems on both sides that need to be monitored continuously.

US military officials have repeatedly accused you of arming militant groups in Basra.

The Americans want to hang their problems around the necks of others. This is the truth. They talk a lot but they haven't been able to show documentation. And the reason is the Americans still haven't been able to answer the question of where the equipment of the former Iraqi army has gone. If they can say that weapons are being smuggled from Iran or elsewhere. Where is the equipment of the former military? What happened? The Iraqi

army was the fifth largest in the world. It was a very formidable military. They fought us for eight years and invaded Kuwait and also dealt with various internal conflicts. These weapons are all now in the hands of the groups that are attacking the Americans or setting off explosions among Iraqi civilians. [The Americans] don't want to accept that a big country like this also has big problems.

US officials have also accused Iran of sheltering militants who escaped the recent fighting in Basra.

The two countries have had relations for a long time. In the summer of last year, we had 1,200 people applying for visas every day. Mostly for religious pilgrimages or seeing families -- because there are visits between families on both sides. In Dowlatabad, in southern Tehran, the whole population is Iraqi. Their relatives are here. What are we supposed to do about it? These are historical ties, not just something that came up in the past three, four,

ten years. Saddam couldn't wipe out these ties, much less the Americans. These ties aren't something the Americans can understand.

[The Americans] attack us and say groups have crossed the border to get training and so on. There's nothing of the sort. [The Americans] don't want to accept that people here oppose them. Some people resist them politically, others, like Seyed Moqtada [Sadr], resist them in an armed fashion. This resistance exists among the Sunnis, the Shias, and even the Kurds. The Americans have to accept this. And they can't. **Has there been much reconstruction help?**

There is one big problem with reconstruction in Basra and that is the lack of a comprehensive reconstruction plan. Until they put together a plan, not only Iran but no country or company can come. Because they don't know what they want to do. They say they want to fix a particular bridge or something

else but it's always in the talking stages. There's no foreign company who's going to come to Iraq to invest 100 million dollars for a one million dollar payoff.

Do you have contact with all the political parties in Basra?

All the important parties, yes. **Is there more of a political struggle or an economic struggle between these parties?**

It's a political struggle. A struggle to gain power. There's no doubt about that. But it goes back to the bottom line that the presence of the occupiers feeds the violence.

Do you think the provincial elections scheduled later this year will be violent?

I don't think it will be as bad as what we've seen before.

Are you surprised that these various Shia groups have been fighting against each other?

A part of it is expected if you know this society. Iraqi society is practically a tribal society. In a tribal society, rivalries exist and sometimes disputes can lead to armed

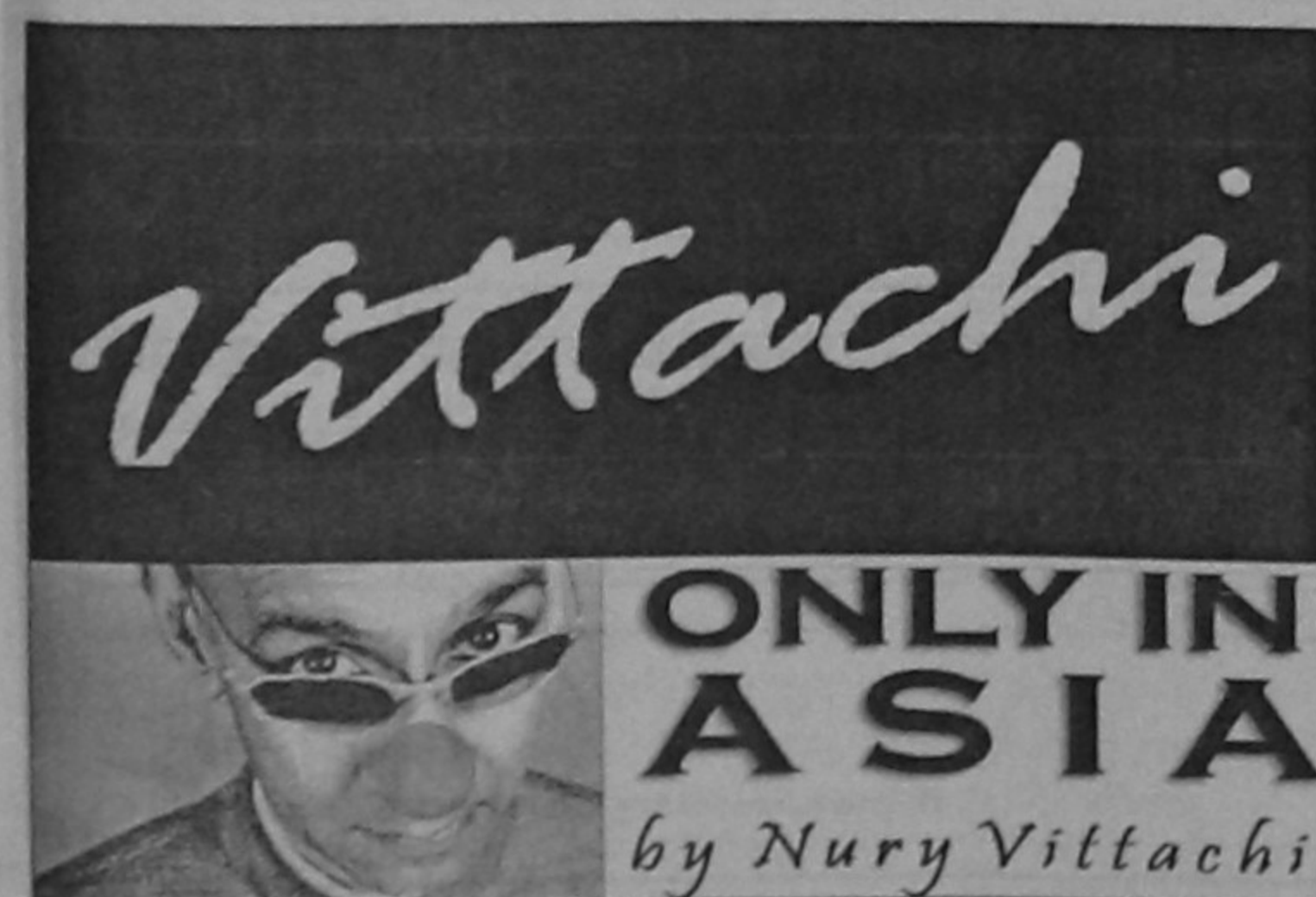
clashes. A part of it goes back to the serious differences between [pause]...well, after all the Sadrist see the situation one way, the Supreme Council [Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq] followers have their own views. Part of it goes back to the way the previous regime treated people. And the regime's injection of violence into society. So you've got a society that has been brought up with war and conflict and confronting enemies. Where the use of force and strength are encouraged -- so the violence increases.

Are you closer with the Sadrists or the Supreme Council?

The Islamic Republic, in general, has ties with all sides -- with Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Arabs. For us, there really isn't a big difference who comes to power. It's more important that whoever comes to power can solve the internal problems of the country.

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People who write disclaimers should be eligible for the Booker Prize



DISCLAIMER: This column is not intended to be funny unless it makes you smile, in which case that's what we meant to happen.

Ah, I love disclaimers. They give you such POWER. You can get away with anything.

For example, Homer Simpson sells ice cream from a truck while a recorded disclaimer plays the following words: "Products contain neither ice nor cream; may contain trace elements of Mexican cheese. Do not consume."

And did you see that column I wrote about car park disclaimers on this page? One sign gave staff

the right to smash up my car, steal my stereo, trace my home address and move their relatives into my spare bedroom.

It produced an interesting call from a lawyer. "Those signs are there to scare you into taking no action if your car gets scrunched. There's a whole branch of the legal profession whose main activity is intimidation," he said.

"Isn't intimidation illegal?" I asked. "No. Only criminal intimidation is illegal," he replied.

"I suppose 'criminal intimidation' is defined as 'intimidation by persons other than lawyers'?"

"Precisely."

Cunning these legal types. He said he had seen worse signs: "I've seen disclaimers that make consumers liable for every activity a company does, from fraud to armed robbery."

He explained that they were works of creative fiction, and should really be eligible for literary prizes. (Next year's Booker, perhaps?) "The ones you quote are produced by lawyers of property developers who want to get away with murder, and are scattered around willy-nilly in the hope that some day, some time, their car park will be used by someone thick enough to believe them."

I realised, of course, that I was

being insulted. "I am not as naive as you think I am," I replied, making a mental note to ask the car park attendant's family to vacate my spare bedroom immediately.

I made further enquiries and learned that he was right about intimidation. Most legal letters are not connected to legal proceedings but are simply letters sent to scare people.

California now has a specific law, which stops organisations suing members of the public for criticising them. "Litigation cannot be used to intimidate people into silence," state Attorney General Bill Lockyer told the San Francisco Chronicle. Canada is this month introducing a similar bill.

"Could we ever get such a law in Asia?" I asked.

My lawyer contact laughed hollowly (I'm not sure how to laugh hollowly, or indeed solidly, but I see this phrase in books all the time). "In Asia, the rich control society and would never allow anything to stop them using lawyers to harass poor people. They think that's what lawyers are for."

It's so true. I ruefully remembered my early days as a news reporter. I worked for one newspaper where my department head was so nervous about upsetting anyone rich that he re-wrote every report I ever filed.

A typical news report, after editing, read like this: "Fifty millimetres of 'rain' reportedly fell 'yesterday,' the alleged meteorological station claimed last night, sources said. Meanwhile, the alleged 'president' reportedly opening an alleged community centre yesterday, alleged 'sources' reportedly claimed."

It was unreadable. We junior reporters knew that it was only a matter of time before he was removed.

We were right. The bosses took him out of our department and made him editor.

Disclaimer: there may not be anything funny on our columnist's website: www.vittachi.com