

Truth and Accountability Commission

It is on a testing ground to prove its efficacy

THE much-vaunted, though not necessarily much-coveted, Truth and Accountability Commission has come into being. It has onerous responsibility to prove its efficacy, not just because the experiment is getting underway in the country for the first time with no experience to fall back on but also owing to the huge load of mercy petitions it will have to dispose of without undermining the integrity of the justice system in any way.

In fact, the chief criticism of the unique contrivance has been that in dealing with corruption there cannot be two sets of laws: one, exempting the corrupt from prosecution by virtue of confession and return of ill-gotten wealth, and another, subjecting similar people to the rigours of legal processes, and finally, handing out conviction to those found guilty. Of course, we can see that the extra-ordinary measure is being taken to reduce the loads of graft cases on the judicial system. Still, the point about being extra cautious from the legalistic point of view in operating the measure can hardly be overemphasised.

One would have thought that if the courts themselves had ordered reprieve on the basis of admission of guilt, the point about discrimination wouldn't have arisen at all. There lies the obligation of the Truth and Accountability Commission to be correct in juridical terms by at least verifying the truth or otherwise of the disclosures made by those seeking mercy through independent investigations. The neutrality and professional integrity of the investigations should be above reproach.

It is understood that until such time as its working procedures are formulated, the commission will act according to the modus operandi determined by it, subject of course, to the Right to Voluntary Disclosure Ordinance 2008. Apart from those who solicit pardon there is an aperture provided for recommending pardon. There are actually two areas in which the commission will have to act cautiously; first, it has to make sure that the entirety of the ill-gotten money has been surrendered by the person concerned; and second, that none except those making voluntary confessions should be encouraged to come forward.

It is good to note though, the persons availing themselves of the reprieve from prosecution will be debarred from national or local elections and disqualified from holding public office or executive positions in any collective bargaining agents, associations or banks or financial institutions for five years.

Deportation of Bangladeshi workers unacceptable

It is time the Foreign Office took a bold stand

THE crisis resulting from the agitation by Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait has clearly taken a turn for the unsavoury. With the Kuwaiti authorities deporting as many as a hundred of the workers, with the very real possibility of more such workers being forced to come back home, matters get extremely awkward for relations between the two countries. Conditions ought not to have come to such a pass, given that the workers, at their wits' end, were only agitating for better wages and living conditions in the state. As far as issues of this kind go, it should have been the responsibility of Kuwait to look into the workers' grievances and so prevent the crisis from taking a bigger shape. That has unfortunately not been done. And what is certainly unacceptable now is the deportation measure.

Which brings us to the matter of what Bangladesh's Foreign Office has been doing, or not doing, in the matter of raising the issue firmly with the Kuwaiti authorities. We have earlier written of the need for the FO to ask the Kuwaiti diplomatic mission for clarifications or explanations on the matter. There is precious little sign that such action has been taken. Indeed, the virtual silence of the Foreign Office on the problems confronting our workers in Malaysia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is as baffling as it is troubling. The simplest move that Dhaka could have made was to go for a study of how workers from other countries are treated in the Middle East and what the nature of the discrimination against Bangladeshis in terms of wages and behaviour is. Judging by the ill-treatment meted out to our workers in the Middle East, the question of whether these hapless people are regarded as bonded labour in the region will arise. Neither the Middle Eastern authorities nor their Bangladeshi counterparts have lifted a finger to address the grievances of our workers. That is unacceptable, morally unethical behaviour.

The Bangladesh government is in huge need of a strategy to combat the situation. Pusillanimity in dealing with such governments as those in Kuwait can only embolden them into more bad behaviour toward our hard-working citizens. Let a strong stand be taken. And that can begin by asking that the firms which employed the deported Bangladeshis give them the compensation they are morally entitled to, together with their arrears in pay. Will our Foreign Office adopt such a bold stand?

A conspiracy in London?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ONCE I read something striking about conspiracy theories that they were like a black hole, which sucked in everything, irrespective of origin or content. Last week, that black hole sucked in words from London that the Awami League president held a series of meetings with Jatiyo Party leaders in the city of Big Ben. Ding dong, they talked about working together in a grand alliance. That is if they met. That is if they talked.

In my mind I couldn't be certain. No, it's not about the meetings. But I wasn't sure if they needed to hatch any conspiracy in a foreign capital when it was so conveniently done at home. I mean the awful thing was already done in 2006. The party, which led us to freedom in 1971, had done handholding with a military dictator, who was ousted in 1990 for usurping the

CROSS TALK
For the time being, I would like to believe that the meetings in London never took place. I mean if two wrongs don't make one right, why worry if a wrong has got an extension? It was wrong of Awami League to go in cahoots with a despicable dictator in 2006. It will be even more wrong if it continues to do so in 2008. What difference does it make whether the renewal of that continuation took place in Dhaka or London?

democratic rights of our people. Not to mention that the military strongman served five years in jail that emblazoned his corruption.

It will run roughshod if we criticise something twice for the same reason. If the leaders of the two parties had indeed met, as the rumour suggests, then it could be over tying the loose ends from last time so that both sides were reassured the deal was on. It could be for many other reasons as well. Since the leader of the alliance is out of the country, she can be consulted only on foreign soil. It also could be that Jatiyo Party sensed grumbling from other alliance partners, and its leaders wanted to hear the last words from nothing less than the horse's mouth.

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Now is the time to bring in David Icke, a British writer and public speaker, who is also a former football player, reporter, television sports presenter, spokesman for the Green Party and the author of 20 books. He has devoted himself since 1990 to research on who and what is really controlling the world, and concluded in his book, *The Big Secret* (1999), that the world was ruled by a secret group called the "Global Elite," or "Illuminati." The "Illuminati" are a race of shape-shifting reptiles known as the Babylonian Brotherhood, which

includes many prominent names such as George W. Bush, Queen Elizabeth, American country singer Boxcar Willie and American actor-singer Kris Kristofferson.

Reads like a fantasy, but a good metaphor nonetheless. If not before, it should be clear by now that politics in this country is controlled by an elite group who use different doors to enter power and then mingle in the same corridor of greed and abuse. Perhaps that is also true for any other country where politicians are slithering beasts, chameleons of conscience who cut the coat of their personalities according to the cloth of their opportunities.

But our politicians stand out particularly for their short memories. Otherwise, how could the two largest parties in the country have even considered an alliance with the same man they had spent years to bring down?

People died and the country suffered during those years of upheavals. How could a confirmed convict be once again allowed to figure so prominently on the political drawing board of this country? How could anybody talk about these two extremes in the same breath: "Democracy Day" smeared with the blood of martyrs like Nur Hossain and political alliance with an icon of that national misfortune?

The fact of life is that those who aspire to power indulge in conspiracy because so much lies in the gray between white and black. Nothing is wrong if Awami League wants to return to power. I don't even mind if the leader of the party sits with an Assistant Secretary of the US State Department in Washington DC if that is what it takes.

But why sit with Ershad and his party, which is an anathema to the principles of freedom? Why sit with him anywhere on earth, be it Dhaka, London or Gilligan's Island? What has he done since he stepped down from power that he has to be an integral part of our political solution?

So, it's not the conspiracy that should be of any concern to us. The politicians will meet and mingle, openly or behind closed

doors, inside the country or at overseas locations. It's not where and how they meet that is important. What is important is why they meet, and that's where comes the shock. In the hubbub of a conspiracy theory which hit us like a passing storm, one thing has been cleverly positioned that Ershad and the alliance are going to stay put.

If there had been any conspiracy in London last week, then that is only one layer in the labyrinth of a larger conspiracy to alienate government from the people. As always, politics is still run by the elites of power, and that is one constant which hasn't changed since 1/11. We have failed to shift the center. Signs are there of a full circle, end coming to where it started.

In 1840 Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*: "In countries where associations are free, secret societies are unknown. In America there are factions, but no conspiracies." That explains why we are still bereft of democracy. We have both factions and conspiracies chasing each other. United we collide, divided we collude, going round in cycles.

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Impossible to save Doha



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

AFTER seven years of wrangling and recent marathon meetings in Geneva, which were often acrimonious, world trade talks collapsed on July 29, thus effectively putting an end to the hopes of saving the Doha Round.

After the end of the Second World War, there was a great desire to break down the pre-war barriers and establish a new economic order. The movement to dismantle the complex structure of trade barriers and to promote international free trade owes its origin to the International Trade Conference, held more than 60 years ago in Geneva. There, in 1947, a multi-lateral treaty called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the GATT) was signed by 23 countries. The treaty provided an international forum for member countries to pursue a policy of trade negotiations with a view to minimising trade barriers. The GATT members agreed to extend the most-favoured-nation status among all its members.

The World Trade Organisation was established in 1993. It

LETTER FROM EUROPE
Actually, the official title of the Doha round was Doha Development Agenda. Its principal objective was to help millions of people in poor countries to lift them out of poverty by eliminating the wrongs of unfair trade. Unfortunately, seven years of arduous negotiations have not produced many positive results. In 2006, after a series of missed deadlines, the director general of the WTO formally announced the abandonment of the last deadline (April 30, 2006).

replaced the GATT forum and incorporated all existing GATT treaties. But there was an important difference between the GATT and the WTO -- the WTO was given legal powers to enforce the treaty provisions. Actually, in theory, the WTO's goals are even more ambitious, than those of the GATT -- these are to promote and enforce global multilateral trade including trade in services, intellectual property and investment.

With 153 members, the WTO today is a huge organisation. Developing countries constitute three-quarters of the membership of the WTO. So far there have been nine rounds of negotiations. The latest one, called the Doha round, started with much fanfare in 2001. The poorer countries still keep reminding the rich nations like the United States, the EU, Japan and Canada that from the beginning the Doha round had a development agenda.

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eliminating the wrongs of unfair trade. Unfortunately, seven years of arduous negotiations have not produced many positive results. In 2006, after a series of missed deadlines, the director general of the WTO formally announced the abandonment of the last deadline (April 30, 2006).

From the very beginning, negotiations centred on three principal subjects -- gradual elimination of tariffs on high-tech manufactured products from the developed nations to the developing ones, abolition of domestic subsidies to agricultural products in the developed nations, and gradual elimination of tariffs and other restrictions on farm products, textiles and other low-tech manufactured products from the emerging nations to the developed ones.

Under the Uruguay Round, the poor countries took significant steps to lower tariffs on manufactured products from the rich countries. Since then, rich countries have been insisting on further cuts in tariffs on manufactured products. But agriculture has definitely been

the most controversial subject in these negotiations. Why? Because on the one hand, the rich industrialised nations "impose tariffs on imported farm products that are eight or ten times higher than those levied on industrial products," which effectively rigs the trade game. On the other hand, they spend billions of dollars on domestic farm subsidies. These generous subsidies generate vast surpluses, which inundate the international markets at prices below the production cost. This policy, which cannot be described by any other name but dumping, ruins the possibility of poor countries ever getting out of poverty.

Immediately before the beginning of the current talks, ministers representing a group of developing countries and food exporters from rich and poor nations held an unofficial meeting in Geneva and urged the United States, the EU and Japan "to open up their farm markets and to eliminate trade-distorting subsidies." According to newspaper reports, the US offered to lower the ceiling to \$14.5 billion a year. But the

developing countries pointed out that American agricultural subsidies had already fallen sharply because of skyrocketing food prices all over the world. Therefore, the poor countries demanded deeper cuts in agricultural subsidies to American farmers.

Peter Mandelson, the EU trade representative, made an offer to cut trade distorting subsidies by 80%, and also lower the tariffs on farm products from developing countries. (By the way, the EU's common agricultural policy swallows up approximately 40% of its total budget.) But President Sarkozy of France has already warned that the French government would not approve such a deal.

Negotiations to reduce tariffs on farm products were further complicated by the Chinese and Indian insistence on shielding some of their important farm products from competition and on delaying the implementation of tariff cuts for a number of years in order to protect hundreds of millions of their subsistence farmers. At the same time, China's hugely successful export policy also generated fear in many developing countries because of its aggressive nature.

Referring to a world economy strained by soaring food and energy prices, protectionist tendencies in the United States and France, and a global financial crisis, Robert Zoellick, the former US trade representative and the current World Bank president, said: "An open and fair trading system would give farmers in developing countries

a reason to expand production." Then he pointed out that in this manner consumers would benefit from lower prices, governments could save billions of dollars on farm subsidies and, thus, improve their budgets.

In any case, as pointed out by two Democratic Party senators, the US delegation did not have any authority to negotiate a final deal because the president's "fast track" authority to negotiate trade deals had expired on June 30, 2007. This procedure would have obliged the Congress to accept or reject any trade deal as a package. Now the Congress has got back the power to examine individual parts.

So the maximum that could have been achieved from these negotiations was to lock up a deal on cutting tariffs and subsidies in agriculture and manufactured goods before the American presidential election. Now that the talks have failed, analysts fear that the protectionist tendency in the rich countries, especially in the US, will grow, and the next US president would feel free to restart the negotiations on every item from zero. But many developing countries are not particularly scared of this possibility. On the contrary, they feel that this failure would go a long way in putting an end to the West's stranglehold on the current multilateral trading system which, besides being biased, was also utterly hypocritical.

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam is a columnist for The Daily Star.

The Indian Left's true colours

The need for the nuclear treaty had been discussed so completely threadbare in the media and the parliament that the Left Front's sudden turnabout in July last year caught the government by surprise. To put it in a nutshell, India needed both nuclear power in vast quantities and a removal of the ban on access to dual-use technologies, if it was to sustain its eight to nine percent rate of growth.

PREM SHANKAR JHA

THE debate in the Indian parliament on whether or not to go through with the Indo-US nuclear deal that Dr. Manmohan Singh's government had signed with the US in July 2007, saw the worst in Indian democracy, but also, towards its end, the best.

During the run-up to the vote the air was thick in Delhi with allegations that MPs votes were being bought. No one needed proof to believe these rumours because it had already happened in a previous confidence vote, faced by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, in 1993. But no one doubted it also because, in

the sixty and more years since India adopted democracy and the simple majority voting system, a combination of the two had created something unique in the annals of democracy, a central parliament with as many as 60 stable political parties, each commanding a large chunk of the vote in its home state.

In the nearly two decades since the Congress party lost its absolute majority in parliament, and coalition governments became the order of the day, buying the support of the smaller parties has become normal. All that the trust vote of July 22 did was to raise the price

to levels never seen before.

What shocked and dismayed Indians was not the manifest corruption -- so graphically displayed when three MPs of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party walked into parliament waving fistfuls of money and hollering that they had been bribed. It was the fact that the ruling UPA alliance had been forced into asking for a trust vote on an issue that deeply affected the national interest.

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government by surprise. To put it in a nutshell, India needed both nuclear power in vast quantities and a removal of the ban on access to dual-use technologies, if it was to sustain its eight to nine percent rate of growth.

In power alone, the arithmetic is unambiguous. India's current power generating capacity of around 180,000 MW is short of its needs by at least 30,000 MW. Even after allowing for increases in energy efficiency, for long-term growth rate of eight percent it will have to double its generating capacity every ten years. By 2028, therefore it will have to add around 630,000 MW of power generating capacity, of which all but around 50,000 MW will necessarily have to be thermal-based. India does have to meet this need, but most definitely not enough to add yet another 600,000 MW between 2028 and 2038.

Availability apart, as Dr.

Manmohan Singh pointed out at the G-8 summit in Hokkaido, Japan this amount of additional CO2 would have a disastrous effect on global warming and the atmosphere.

The damage that India has sustained from the technology ban is more insidious but no less serious. Scientists are exceptionally poor communicators, which is why few laymen are aware of the price India has paid for being shut out for forty years ago. But the consistent denial of small but crucial bits of proprietary technology is what lies behind the 20 year delay in indigenising the original (and now obsolete) CANDU nuclear power generation technology obtained from Canada, the consistent failure of its defence research laboratories to complete the development of new weapons systems until these systems have themselves become obsolete, its failure to develop an aeronautics indus-

try, and most glaringly, its failure to develop the Kaveri engines for a now all-but-forgotten light fighter aircraft that would have been state-of-the-art in the late eighties. It had also slowed down almost interminably the program to develop fast breeder reactors that would use thorium as a raw material and eventually produce more fuel than they used.

But none of this made the slightest dent on either Prakash Karat, the general secretary of the Left Front, or on L.K. Advani, the leader of the BJP and, arguably, the prime minister in waiting, should the Congress-led UPA lose its majority. For both of them, all that mattered was getting the Congress out of power. Nothing was sacred, and as for the national interest, it had altogether ceased to exist.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that as the vote on July 22 approached, more and more Indians began to ask themselves

whether the price of remaining a democracy -- at least the kind of democracy India had -- was not too high.

But on Tuesday, hours before the end of the two-day debate and the vote that followed, something wonderful began to happen. It began with a speech given by Rahul Gandhi, son of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. In it, he asked the members of parliament to stop thinking of themselves as members of various parties and to think of the issue before the house purely in terms of the national interest.

In the hours that followed, a succession of MPs, all of them young and a majority of them Muslim, took the floor to support the deal, and all of them specifically cited the national interest. "We have strong reservations about the impact of Indo-US nuclear deal on foreign policy aspects," said Asaduddin Owaisi, of the Hyderabad-based

Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen. "But for us the top priority is to stop the Bharatiya Janata Party and L.K. Advani from coming to power." Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti from Kashmir were even more explicit. While they expressed strong reservations about US foreign policy, they asserted that the national interest demanded that the deal go through.

As these and other MPs -- young, and often belonging to tiny hill states in the North-East, spoke their minds, the discomfiture of the BJP and the Left grew more and more visible. In the end the trust motion was carried, 275 to 256, largely because as many as eight MPs from the BJP defied their party whip, and Somnath Chatterjee, the speaker of the house, refused to step down and join his colleagues from the Left in the voting.

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