

## Forged visas and misery of jobseekers

Identify and punish the cheats

NO fewer than 87 Bangladeshi jobseekers were sent back home from Dubai airport on Monday, after the UAE immigration officials found their visas to be forged. Similar incidents took place in the past also, but no effective measures have so far been taken to save the jobseekers from being swindled by the racket issuing fake visas.

The matter is to be deemed serious enough to draw the attention of all concerned as the cheated jobseekers incurred huge financial loss without being aware of the trap that they were walking into. The report on the latest batch of deportees states that there are some procedural shortcomings which make it possible to forge visas. The biggest problem is that the authenticity of the visas issued by the UAE government cannot be verified here in Bangladesh, as only photocopies of the visas are received by the jobseekers. The governments of the two countries should address the issue and find a way to prevent issuance of forged visas. This is necessary to protect the job seekers' interest and also to avoid the highly embarrassing and regrettable situation created by their deportation.

Our workers are facing all sorts of problems in the Middle Eastern countries like poor salaries and violation of their basic rights. Some host countries are treating them very shabbily even when they are asking for only what is due under employment contracts. This is most unfortunate as violation of workers' rights is not expected in any civilized social setting. But the misfortune that befell the jobseekers at Dubai has more to do with the failure on the part of our government departments concerned to stop fraudulent activities than anything else. When Bangladeshi workers are detected with forged visas at a foreign airport, it does little to lift our already sagging image as a manpower exporting country.

The problems that are arising with our workers in the Middle Eastern countries should pretty much convince the decision makers that recruitment of our workers abroad is still not organised the way it should be. And there are too many loopholes in the recruitment process that expose the workers to all types of foul play. The decision makers should handle the issue on two fronts. First, there should be a clear agreement with the host governments on the terms and conditions of the jobs that will be offered to Bangladeshis. Much emphasis should be laid on the question of their basic rights being upheld. Secondly, the activities of local recruitment agencies must come under some kind of regulation. We cannot allow such a huge number of people being cheated in the name of employment abroad.

## Mobile phones the harbinger of change

Democratisation of access, expansion of opportunity

YESTERDAY one of the mobile phone companies operating in Bangladesh announced that it had hit the 10 million customer mark, and the total number of mobile phone users is now in the region of 50 million, or approximately one phone for every three Bangladeshis. We congratulate all the mobile companies especially the leading ones, who have contributed tremendously in bringing about a fundamental transformation.

The rapid and continuing expansion of this sector has had a tectonic effect on Bangladesh. With the prices of mobile phones and sim cards getting ever cheaper, the mobile phone has found a firm foothold within the middle classes and is already making inroads among the working poor. No longer is it a luxury or a toy of the urban elites. The best thing about the proliferation of mobile phones is that they allow everyone who owns one to access information and communicate freely.

From the taxi driver to the carpenter to the small businessman, owning a mobile phone can massively increase people's ability to earn a good living and transform themselves into more productive citizens, to say nothing of the fact that mobile phones can connect people from even the most far-flung corners of the country and help people to stay in touch with friends and families wherever they might be in the country.

Now, with more and more ingenious applications available every day, we find that the opportunity afforded by mobile phones to the common people is even greater. Now a farmer or a fisherman can check via his mobile phone the price in distant markets and can thus receive a fairer price for his produce. People searching for jobs or second-hand computers need look no further than the mobile phone in their hand to see what the market has to offer.

In the future, mobile phones will be the vehicle for expanding banking and healthcare services to the poor and rural citizens who are currently underserved. The humble mobile phone has morphed into a composite radio, music-player, and internet access -- who knows what benefit it will bestow next?

One dark cloud on the business is that a number of the prominent mobile phone companies have been found guilty of operating illegal VoIP. We are saddened that they would thus tarnish their reputation, and trust that in the future that all activities of the companies will be above board and beneficial to the people.

The mobile phone industry has really transformed Bangladesh and put opportunity into the hands of many who previously didn't have it. It is a prime example of how new technologies and private enterprise can transform a country for the better.

## Exit of a military dictator



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

THE fourth and one of the longest surviving military rulers in the sixty years of Pakistan's existence, has chosen to make an honourable exit. Good sense has prevailed, and by choosing the path of least resistance Pervez Musharraf has spared his country political instability.

Regrettably, his departure validates the opinion that two very important factors, both of which have been key to Pakistan's existence as a state and formulation of its domestic and external policies, the army and the United States, continue to play a vital role in its politics.

It is only when he realised that the army's support was no longer guaranteed, that Musharraf chose to put in his papers. And there are grounds to believe that it was not a little US pressure which played a part in the decision making process of the army regarding its support to Musharraf.

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**STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING**

Although Musharraf's departure has been a great relief for everyone in Pakistan, not least of all the army, yet it is a cause for concern to those in Pakistan committed to the flourishing of democratic culture and strengthening of the country's democratic institutions, that the army continues to play an active power broker role in Pakistan, and by all indications, will continue to do so in future.

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Musharraf will perhaps go the way his predecessors have, to oblivion, unlamented and unremembered for the so called "good acts" that he is supposed to have done for his country during his nine-year rule.

These "good acts" are sheer illusions -- the dictators hardly comprehend the unmitigated damage they do to the national institutions. By the time the country recovers from the ill effects, it is time for another military man to emerge as Pakistan's "saviour." And the same story is repeated.

Musharraf had completed almost ten years of rule, most of it in uniform, a cycle that sits in the annals of Pakistan's history as a decadal phenomenon, proving once again that what goes round must come round.

The man he overthrew to take power was instrumental in his exit, and may yet see to it that the ex-president is put in the dock for usurping power and other illegal acts. Who knows, Nawaz Sharif may well make Musharraf taste Arab hospitality, which he himself was forced to enjoy for ten years, courtesy Musharraf.

The consequences of military takeovers, or the aftermath of prolonged military rule, has been the singular most debilitating factor standing in the way of Pakistan's progress and the consummation of democracy in the country. (So has it been for Bangladesh.)

Unfortunately, the greater part of Pakistan's sixty years history is the story of military rule interspersed, as an interregnum, by democratic or quasi-democratic rule. And the periods of democratic rule were underwritten by the military with the pervasive influence of the ISI all too evident.

Musharraf's regime was termed as a period of "controlled democracy" guided by "enlightened moderation." Controlled democracy is an oxymoron, as made evident by the controversial redrafting of the constitution by Musharraf just prior to the 2002 election, giving the president unlimited power including the power to dismiss an elected parliament.

That was his idea of taking Pakistan down the path of democracy. And excesses and machinations to keep politics under his thumb defiled the notion of "enlightened moderation."

He started off as the "chief executive" and ended up as an arrogant and autocratic president. In his first

address to the nation on October 17, 1999, he tried to assuage the people of Pakistan by saying that the dispensation he was heading was not martial law, only another road towards democracy. And like all military usurpers he said: "The armed forces have no intention to stay in charge any longer than is absolutely necessary to pave the way for true democracy to flourish."

The people of Pakistan are only too painfully aware of the nature of "true democracy." And when it is left to those wielding illegal power through coercion, the definition of "absolutely necessary" assumes unbound elasticity.

At the very seminal stages of his tenure Musharraf's Pakistan was almost sidelined -- having been castigated by the US for going nuclear, till 9/11 restored Pakistan's geopolitical clout. Pakistan became indispensable for the success of US operation in Afghanistan and indeed its so-called global war on terror.

For Pakistan, it was the second time that the Afghanistan situation resurrected its importance to the West, particularly the US -- the first time was when the Russian's invaded Afghanistan. According to one author, immediately after 9/11, "concern for the state of Pakistan's democracy melted away and the

military government was hailed by the West as an "exemplary country in the fight against terrorism."

Musharraf claimed his policy was guided by the need to preserve Pakistan's national interest. But he had very little choice but to join Bush's war on terror, having been given little alternative when, on September 12, 2001, his chief spy Gen. Mahmood Ahmed, who was coincidentally in Washington when the twin towers were attacked, was very tersely conveyed the US "you are with us or against us" option by Richard Armitage, and later reinforced by Powell's telephonic message to the Pakistan president that the American people would not understand if Pakistan was not in this fight with the United States. And Pakistan was paid handsomely for this; among other things was the \$12.5 billion debt rescheduling.

Unfortunately, his Afghan policy has not given Pakistan the dividend that Musharraf had expected. Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan is purely strategic, seen in terms of providing a strategic depth in the event of a war with India. That would require a pliant government in Kabul and prevention of Indian diplomatic foothold in Afghanistan. Neither has happened.

Neither has he been able to help US meet its objective in Afghanistan. Bin-Laden remains at large and his capacity to continue insurgency activities against the Nato forces unimpaired.

In fact, Musharraf had failed to meet most of the 7 requirements that the US had officially handed over to Pakistan on September 13, insofar as they related to anti-terrorism actions on the part of Pakistan.

The border belt is virtually a no-go area for Pak troops, the treaty

with tribal leaders failed to prevent the use of Pakistan territory by the al-Qaeda fighters. His balancing act has rather helped the religious parties to gain a stronger foothold in Pakistan politics.

At home, his policies have spawned terrorism even more and his closeness to the US had made him unpopular at home and a terrorist's target. Much as the US may take comfort in the fact that Musharraf was a good friend of the US, a sentiment that was rearticulated by Condoleezza Rice after Musharraf's departure, what the American administration has failed to find out was whether the people of Pakistan have been equally well disposed to the US?

It has been a resounding victory for the people of Pakistan. Much would depend on how the two parties play their role in this critical moment. So far they have been seized with the issue of Musharraf.

The issue of terrorism and religious radicalism remain the major problem for Pakistan.

Now that they have seen to their "common opponent" it would do very little good to Pakistan if the leadership failed to realise that it is only a liberal and participatory democracy that can combat extremism and terrorism effectively.

There are lessons for us too, and only those that will stop and ponder will internalise those. Military rule is never an option -- but as one eminent historian has said: "History repeats itself in the large because human nature changes with geological leisureliness."

Human nature and mindset must remain alive to the need of the time.

The author is Editor, Defense and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

## Clean and competent candidates in elections



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE holding of elections to four city corporations and nine municipalities in a fair and peaceful manner has given the nation a certain sense of satisfaction. The turnout of voters, particularly of women and minority groups, has been quite remarkable. Familiar incidents like clashes between rival groups of supporters and snatching of ballot boxes, that usually characterise elections in Bangladesh, were also absent.

These are really some positive signs that convince one to believe that transition to democracy would finally be turning into a reality through holding of the parliamentary election in a peaceful manner, and acceptable to all, following the footprints of the August 4 elections.

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**BY THE NUMBERS**

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In all, 1,600 candidates contested in the August 4 elections. Of them, 992 for the city corporations, that include 46 for the mayoral posts, 752 for the councilor posts and 194 women candidates, contested in reserved seats of councilor. 608 candidates contested in the elections for nine municipalities. Four mayors and 157 councilors were elected in the four city corporations, and nine mayors and 108 councilors were elected in the nine municipalities.

As far as cleanliness is concerned, many of these newly elected mayors and councilors are accused in various criminal cases including murder, extortion and corruption. Some of them are still behind bars and waiting to be tried.

Badruddin Ahamed Kamran, who contested from jail, got 83 thousand more votes than his nearest contender and was elected mayor of the Sylhet City Corporation. Kamran, who is still under custody, is accused in four cases of corruption.

Out of 27 newly elected councilors

of the Sylhet City Corporation, at least 10 councilors are accused in criminal cases that include murder, illegal possession of firearms and extortion. Some of them were in jail before the elections, and two of them are still in jail and waiting to be tried.

The newly elected mayor of Barisal City Corporation is accused in two cases and was also among the graft suspects listed by the ACC. In all, 12 councilors are accused in various criminal cases out of 40 newly elected councilors of Barisal City Corporation.

The newly elected mayor of Khulna City Corporation is accused in five cases. Out of 31 newly elected councilors of Khulna City Corporation, eight are accused in criminal cases. Two of them contested from jail while one elected councilor is still absconding to avoid arrest. Six newly elected councilors of the Rajshahi City Corporation are charged with various criminal cases.

The joint forces, carrying out drives against the corrupt politicians, captured at least 112 high profile politicians and businessmen, including several former ministers

and lawmakers of the major political parties.

These high profile politicians, who were so long in jail on the charges of crimes and corruption under the Emergency Power Act, are now being released on bail because of delay in investigation.

The High Court, in a month, has stayed the proceedings of nearly 70 cases filed by the ACC against high-profile graft suspect politicians, including two former prime ministers. Only one bench of the High Court has granted bail to at least 76 graft suspects in a month, 33 of whom were among those listed by the ACC.

The caretaker government (CTG) took a commendable step for purging the polluted politics and bringing the top-most corrupt politicians, who were hitherto believed to be immune from the normal law of the land, to justice.

The CTG won 105 cases filed against 154 people, mostly politicians and their family members, but failed to cross the next hurdle as the top graft convicts challenged the verdicts in the High Court.

Detention of political bigwigs under the Emergency Power Act is the easy part, but the crucial part is to clamp down on the crime lords and the godfathers of graft with a fool-proof case for prosecution.

We have seen in the past that many detained political leaders with alleged links with high-profile crime and corruption could not be punished, as the charges against them were not specific.

It is sheer bad luck for the nation that elections have hardly helped in changing the people's lot or reflected people's will, except for once in 1970, when people mandated Awami League to seek redress from oppression by the Pakistani rulers.

Though the results from the recent local government elections have very little influence on the overall electoral politics involving more than 80 million voters, some trends and indications clearly suggest that election of clean and competent candidates in the upazila and general elections is still a distant dream.

An important lesson for the CTG as well as for the EC is that the political parties did not hesitate to nominate candidates accused in crime and corruption for the August 4 elections, despite the repeated urgings to nominate clean and competent candidates.

A new provision should be added immediately to the Representation of the People Order Ordinance 2008 to disqualify contestants convicted

by a trial court for criminal offences, as the CTG is committed to rid the country's politics from the grip of the corrupt, crooked and criminal.

It is commendable that the EC has launched an investigation into the wealth statements and police records of the people's representatives elected to city corporations and municipalities.

All sorts of documents submitted during the electoral process by the newly elected local government officials were sent to the NBR and to the office of the inspector general of police for scrutiny.

According to the electoral rules, candidature of an elected representative might be cancelled if he or she had submitted false information or suppressed any information during the electoral process, and his or her election to the post will automatically be cancelled even after taking of the oath of the office.

A qualitative change in the country's leadership is a long-cherished demand of the nation. Election of the corrupt in the August 4 election was not an endorsement of corruption by the voters but lack of better substitutes. To bring this to an end, we must encourage the people with wisdom, honesty and ability to contest in the upazila and general elections. And the winners in August 4 elections charged with corruption must not be allowed to evade trial.

A. N. M. Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

## WTO faltering on its way to success?

This time the headlines are the same, but the storyline is different. WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy brought a list of 20 disputed issues to the meeting. Members found tentative solutions to 17. One was rich-country farm subsidies -- the US subsidy limit, for example, would drop from \$20 billion to \$14.5 billion. Another, if a bit less firmly, was manufacturing tariffs, with formulas for tariff cuts generally and progress toward specific industrial "sectoral" agreements. Some smaller issues were settled as well.

EDWARD GRESSER

HEADLINES about last month's breakdown in finishing the trade-liberalisation talks known as the "Doha Round" offered a storyline of failure. But rather than simply break up in disorder, the Geneva talks tentatively settled many long-blocked debates and clarified others.

In fact the talks could be failing their way to success.

To understand the WTO's difficulty, one must examine three background issues: the legacy of past success, the current agenda and participants in the talks.

The past

The Doha Round is the newest in a series of trade negotiations dating back six decades. Between 1947 and 1998, a continuously growing set of members of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT system,

and its successor, the WTO, concluded 12 agreements.

These agreements, plus dozens of "accessions" bringing countries like China, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Ukraine into the WTO, leave a remarkably open world. In 2005, the world's tariff average was 3.3 percent of the \$10.5 trillion in imports -- while freight costs came to 6.2 percent.

Overall, therefore, simple shipping and trucking costs are now almost twice as high as tariffs. And trade in some particular areas -- natural resources like oil, wood and metal ore, or sophisticated technological products like computers and satellites -- is almost completely free.

The agenda

The Doha Round's job is to clear up the issues earlier agreements missed. For example, they mostly skipped textile and agricultural policies as too sensitive. This neglect, plus low participation by big devel-

oping countries in earlier rounds, means many of the Doha Round issues are priorities for the poor.

With food and clothing tariffs especially high, success will mean most to farmers, textile-reliant developing countries and low-income shoppers in the rich world.

Reform of agricultural trade is considered the Round's central pillar. Trade in farm products and food amounts to about 7 percent of world trade. But farm exports are the source of income for tens of millions of people -- cotton-growers in the Sahel, Thai and Vietnamese in their sunny green rice-paddies, American wheat families on the plains and more.

Reforming the high tariffs they face and reducing rich-country subsidies and quota limits is the top goal of big developing-nation exporters like Brazil and Thailand and a principal goal for Canada, Australia and some other rich coun-

tries.

But farming remains the largest part of the economy for dozens of large lower-income countries which fear the disturbance created by opening up and is culturally central to places like France and Japan with their small, but influential farm lobbies.

Agriculture alone makes the Doha talks tough, and the other issues aren't easy either. The other two pillars are manufacturing tariffs -- usually now highest in labour-intensive businesses like clothing, and therefore sensitive -- and services trade, a fast-growing field but arcane topic demanding very specialised knowledge.

Beyond them are smaller bits of architecture with their own complexities, such as a trade-and-environment negotiation designed to eliminate resource-polluting fishery subsidies.

The participants

Third, the difficulty of policy challenges is magnified by the fact that no negotiation can be finished until all WTO members agree. The group has 153 members, ranging from giants like China and the European Union to small island states like Tonga and Grenada, to oil exporters, least-developed states, small high-tech entrepôts and more.

About 70 -- roughly 40 rich countries and 30 larger developing countries -- are fully engaged in the talks, making demands of others and fending off demands on themselves.

The remaining 80 members are very poor and small, exempted from requirement by virtue of deep poverty and a small share of trade, but hoping for relatively small concessions.

Nepal needs duty-free treatment of carpets and shirts in India, China, Europe and the US. Small Sahelian states like Mali, Burkina Faso and Benin earn almost half their export money through cotton sales to textile-manufacturers in other developing countries.

They hope the Doha talks will reduce subsidies to American and Chinese cotton farmers, and make it easier for them to compete.

A mostly open world, plus difficult issues and a large pack of negotiators, makes agreement difficult and posturing easy. Over last seven years, Indians and Brazilians happily bashed richer countries for subsidies and policies slanted against the poor, Americans and Europeans responded by criticising large, fast-growing countries for attempting to avoid responsibility and hide among their small neighbours.

Punctuated by breakdowns in

Cancun in 2003, Hong Kong in 2005 and Potsdam in 2006, their debates achieved little.

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At his generally gloomy closing press conference, Lamy could accurately say that "across a wide range of problems which had remained intractable for years we have found solutions," with the round 80 percent complete.

Even on issues where they could not agree, the delegates' disagreements at least clarified a path forward. The 18th issue, which broke up the talks, is known as a "Special Safeguard Mechanism" for developing countries, or SSM.

In concept, it's a device to let low-income countries with large rural populations limit food imports when the volume suddenly rises. India's

Commerce Minister Kamal Nath is the most enthusiastic advocate of the concept, backed by China.

Here, though the loudest arguments were between India and the US, the fissures are not between rich and poor countries alone, but also among different types of low-income and middle-income states. India's trade patterns illustrate the point. Though Nath's arguments target rich-world subsidies, only about 5 percent of India's \$8 billion worth of foreign food in 2006 -- less than the \$8.5 billion for Malaysia, with its population of 25 million -- comes from the US in the form of non-subsidised almonds and peas; another 15 percent comes from Europe, Canada and Australia.

Most Indian imports are goods from other poor or middle-income countries -- palm oil from Indonesia and Malaysia, soybean oil from Brazil, nuts and grains from Africa.

Trade ministers from other developing countries are well aware of the implication of such facts: Uruguay and Paraguay argued, probably correctly, that the SSM "would be used by big and stronger developing countries against smaller and vulnerable" developing-country agricultural exporters, leaving them "worse off than 15 years ago."

Such gaps aren't easy to close, but

pose questions of judgment and careful compromise rather than ideological divides suited to North-South polemic. After the breakdown, most members expressed a realisation of how much they achieved and reacted accordingly.

Downcast Brazilian president Lula, seeing Brazil's hopes of farm-subsidy reform recede, embarked on a round of calls to Washington, Delhi and Beijing, hoping to revive the talks. Burkina Faso's Commerce Minister Sansanou Amadou, irate over the failure to finish the agreement -- "we cannot control our anger" over the delay in cotton reform -- called for quick resumption. Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya's trade minister, suggests the delay "gravely undermines" the fight against poverty.

The Geneva talks, therefore, ended in failure -- but one that disguised broadening areas of consensus and growing demands for a speedy conclusion to the talks. At a time of generalised worry -- high energy prices, food spikes, inflation and slowing growth -- this is a rare good omen for the future.

Edward Gresser is director of the Trade & Global Markets Project with the Progressive Policy Institute.

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