

Ending with a whimper

I am not trying to say that the politicians of these two parties are not corrupt. Most of them are. But then, who is not? Can we name any profession or class of our society which is not corrupt? Corruption has been so widespread and deep rooted in this country that there are only a few people left whom corruption has not touched in one way or other.

HUSAIN IMAM

AFTER 20 months of arduous journey along a tricky path, the anti-corruption drive of the caretaker government seems to have run into serious trouble. The pain the CTG went through and the time and energy they expended in catching the big fry and bringing them to trial have apparently failed to yield the desired result. The big fry are escaping from the net, one after another, before the catchers could even know how and when the knots came loose.

Lt. Gen. (Retd) Hasan Mashud Choudhury, chairman of ACC, is known to be a man of high integrity. I admire him for his simplicity and straight-forwardness. He worked very hard. He moved from city to city, telling people to develop social antipathy against

corruption. After twenty months of relentless effort he must be frustrated now to see the same people waiting at the jail gates to garland their dear godfathers coming out from jail.

Gen. Choudhury certainly looked puzzled when he was talking the other day with a television crew about the latest position of his anti-corruption drive. I have full sympathy for him. He has been doing his job with courage and sincerity, and I am sure he will continue to do so as long as he is in this post.

To me, he and his colleagues haven't done a bad job. If not anything else, they were at least able to send a message that nobody is above the law, never mind that the law in a third world country like ours cannot or does not always take its own course.

As an ordinary citizen, let me in

my small capacity try to assess what went wrong with the anti-corruption drive. Firstly, a caretaker government should not have taken this anti-corruption drive, and that also on such a massive scale, as its main agenda. Its main agenda should have been to reconstitute the Election Commission, which it did, depoliticise the administration, maintain law and order, assist the EC in the preparation of a correct voter list with photos (not ID) in the shortest possible time, reform electoral laws, and create a congenial atmosphere for holding a free, fair and credible election in a peaceful manner.

Secondly, targeting only politicians and a few businessmen -- and that also mainly of the two major political parties, Awami League and BNP -- for their misdeeds and mischief over the last

10 years was wrong. Why not the business community, government officials, professionals, intellectuals and so on -- and also why not the offenders in the regimes of Ershad, Ziaur Rahman, and even Sheikh Mujib?

It is not that corruption began with Sheikh Hasina in power in 1996. It had its origin long before that. In fact, corruption became institutional from the day General Zia said that money was no problem, and kept the vaults of the nationalised banks open for those who showed express loyalty to him and his party.

But it is true that never before had corruption, loot, violence and abuse of state power taken place on such a massive scale as was seen during the period (2001-2006) of BNP-Jamaat rule under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia.

Given the time-frame and resources available with ACC, or for that matter with the CTG, it would have been only fair and rational had the operation "clean ship," if I may call it so, begun with a limited number of high profile corrupt suspects of recent times, picked up from all sectors -- political, social, intellectual, civil, business -- and allowed to

go through due process of law.

The caretaker government along with some vested quarters, including some members of our so called civil society, by their acts, deeds and deliberations tried to make us believe that the politicians were all corrupt and were the cause of all the problems of the country. That was not fair.

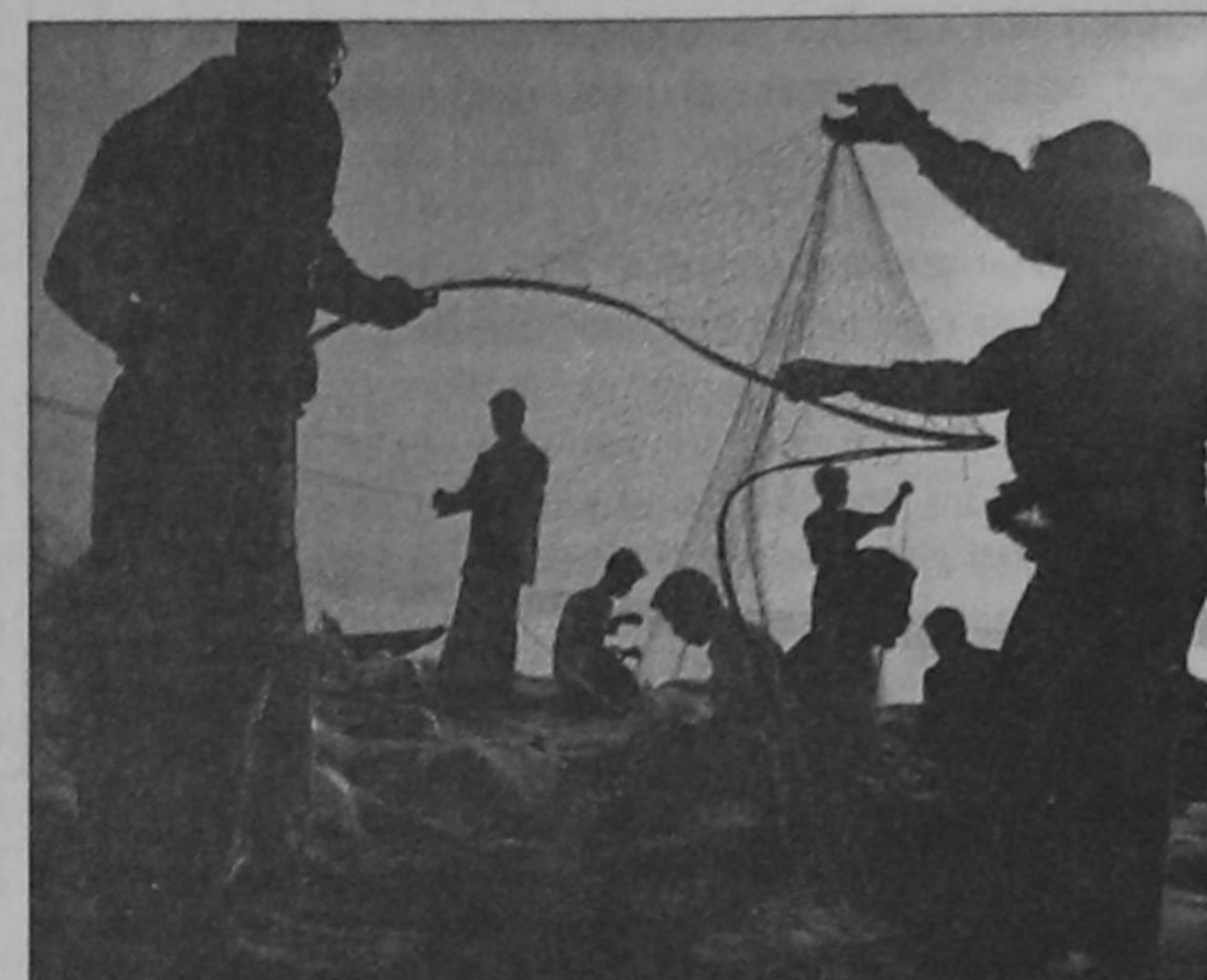
Frankly speaking, the anti-corruption drive of the CTG looked more a battle against politicians than a battle against corruption. At one stage, it looked as if, in the name of freeing the country from the stigma of corruption, they were actually freeing the country from the existing politicians of the two major parties to facilitate entry of those who cannot win election by popular votes.

I am not trying to say that the politicians of these two parties are not corrupt. Most of them are. But then, who is not? Can we name any profession or class of our society which is not corrupt? Corruption has been so widespread and deep rooted in this country that there are only a few people left whom corruption has not touched in one way or other.

How would you classify a professor of a university when he

gives first class to 52 of his students on considerations other than merit? How would you classify an educationist when he, sitting on the chair of a constitutional institution like the Public Service Commission, illegally helps candidates of a particular party in passing the test? How would you classify a judge, the ultimate custodian of citizen's fundamental human rights, fair play and justice, when he has to face trial for alleged corruption?

The charges of corruption brought against some of them were so insignificant, in some cases ridiculous, that people started doubting the very purpose of the operation. Arresting Barrister Moudud Ahmed, a former vice president and law minister of the country, for keeping wine illegally in his house, Barrister Nazmul Huda, several times MP and minister of the country, for stealing a mobile phone, or Sheikh Hasina, a former prime minister, the daughter of Bangabandhu and chief of Awami League, for extorting money from someone who himself denied having any allegation against her, was not only ridiculous but also utterly senseless



Are the holes too big?

and irresponsible on the part of the government.

Indeed, so extensive have the mis-steps of the anti-corruption drive been that they give rise to the suspicion that the operation might never really have been meant for eradicating corruption from the society, but was all a part of the blue-print to restore the lost image of a particular political party to make a balance with the

other for the coming election.

But whether such a suspicion is founded or unfounded, and regardless of the sincerity of the motives of the ACC chief and his staff, there can be little doubt that the anti-corruption drive that began with a bang now appears to be set to end with a whimper.

Husain Imam is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Citizens' charter

In Bangladesh, making the citizens' charter initiative successful is really a hard nut to crack. The bureaucracy in Bangladesh, with its colonial legacy, is often considered to be a closed system. It tends to resist change and rejects innovations. Despite that, the government's proactive initiative to introduce citizens' charter is an expression of its commitment to improve public service delivery.

ARIF H. KHAN

THE initiative for a citizens' charter is one of the commendable initiatives of the present government. A citizens' charter, indeed, is the expression of understanding between citizens and the provider of a public service with respect to the quantity and quality of service. It reflects the expectation of the clients and the commitment of the providers.

The main purpose of developing

a charter is to improve access to public services and promote quality. It does this by encouraging the involvement of users in discussions about the service, telling them how to make contact, what level of service to expect, and how to seek a remedy if something goes wrong.

In 2000, the Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) recommended introduction of citizens' charter in a number of public

agencies. In June 2007, the caretaker government (CTG) asked all ministries to formulate citizens' charters.

Following this order, all ministries and most of the public agencies have already formulated citizens' charters. However, the initiative has not yet been proved to be successful due to a number of flaws.

Firstly, people's participation in formulation of the charters has not been ensured. As a result, the charters failed to reflect the expectation of the citizens, i.e. the service recipients.

Unlike many other countries, the government did not give its own definition of a citizens' charter or the objective of the initiative. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding across the civil service as far as citizens' charter is concerned.

All ministries and a large number of public agencies undertook the initiative without previous experience. The initiative was not piloted in a smaller number of agencies to gather experience.

No specific body has been assigned to coordinate the whole initiative.

The people who were supposed to implement the charter were not involved in the process, and there was no effort to build their capacity regarding citizens' charter.

The charters have not been publicised adequately. Even some staff members of respective ministries/agencies are ignorant about their own departmental charter.

There is no system in place to monitor whether the performance of an agency is in conformity with the charter, and evaluate if the charter is in line with clients' expectations.

Charters for local level agencies should have been formulated locally through the participation of local people, but were formulated at the central level by the senior staff. As a result, those charters neither reflect the expectation of the local people nor are they owned by the local administration.

In case of some services, there is only a service specific generic citizens' charter and no institution specific charter, which, indeed, is more important.

Due to the above-mentioned conceptual and procedural problems, the charters formulated so far have failed to bring any remarkable change in public service delivery. Even the charter documents have serious shortcomings.

For instance, in most charters, there is no vision and mission of the agency concerned. Standard of services is missing or ambiguous in many charters. No time limit has been fixed for delivering services and, in some cases -- the charter of the Bangladesh police for instance -- vague terms like "as soon as possible" (*jothashighree*), "to the extent possible" (*jothasombhob*) have been used.

Cost/charge for getting service has not been specified in many cases. A grievance redressing mechanism has not been outlined in most charters. In some cases, there is only provision for complaint

lodging, and, in other cases, that is also missing.

In order to make the citizens' charter initiative successful, the government should take necessary measures based on international experience and considering the context of the country:

- A particular agency (regulatory body) should be assigned to coordinate the whole initiative.
- The government should ask the ministries to give more emphasis on the formulation of institution specific charters rather than service specific charters.
- Instead of introducing citizens' charter in all public agencies at one time, the government should start with a few agencies with large public interface, such as hospitals, railway stations, passport offices etc. One or two agencies can be selected for exemplary implementation of citizens' charter so that they can be models for others.
- A taskforce should be formed in each agency in order to formulate a citizens' charter or modify the existing one. Representation of clients and cutting edge staff must be ensured in the taskforce.
- To mobilise people in the citizens' charter process and publicise the charters widely, the government may work in collaboration with NGOs, civil society organisations and community-based organisations.
- For successful implementation of the charters, capacity building of cutting edge staff is crucial. Capacity building initiatives like training, seminars, workshops etc. should be organised on a regular basis. Governmental training insti-

tutes like BPATC, BARD, NILG, JATI and the Police Academy may incorporate citizens' charter in their training curricula. A training manual can be developed for this purpose.

- Performance appraisal of the staff can be linked with citizens' charter of the agency concerned.
- A special budget should be earmarked for the citizens' charter initiative.

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It tends to resist change and rejects innovations. Despite that, the government's proactive initiative to introduce citizens' charter is an expression of its commitment to improve public service delivery.

The initiative, if successful, would be considered as a landmark initiative in making public service pro-people. The government, therefore, should take necessary steps to get rid of the shortcomings of the initiative as mentioned above.

More importantly, commitment of the civil servants to the charters should be developed. This cannot be expected to take place overnight. A long-term, planned and coordinated effort is required to achieve this.

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(Abstract from the authors keynote paper presented in a seminar jointly organised by Manusher Jono Foundation and Transparency International Bangladesh on September 1. Translation: Author)



Who looks after their interests?

Drawing even

Overall, a majority of voters (52%) have a favorable opinion of Palin, even if they are not familiar with some of the details in her record. Fifty-seven percent of registered voters did not know that Palin opposes abortion even in instances of rape and incest. 69% did not know that she favors teaching creationism in public schools.

JONATHAN DARMAN

WITH 53 days until Election Day, John McCain has pulled even with Barack Obama in the latest Newsweek poll. Buoyed by the Republican convention and overwhelming partisan enthusiasm for his choice of Sarah Palin as his running mate, McCain is now tied with Obama among registered voters nationwide, 46% to 46%.

Two weeks of all-Sarah Palin-all-the-time media coverage, and the McCain bounce in national and battleground state polls, has spurred Democratic anxieties that despite President Bush's dismal approval ratings, the party might be squandering the chance to take advantage and reclaim the White

House.

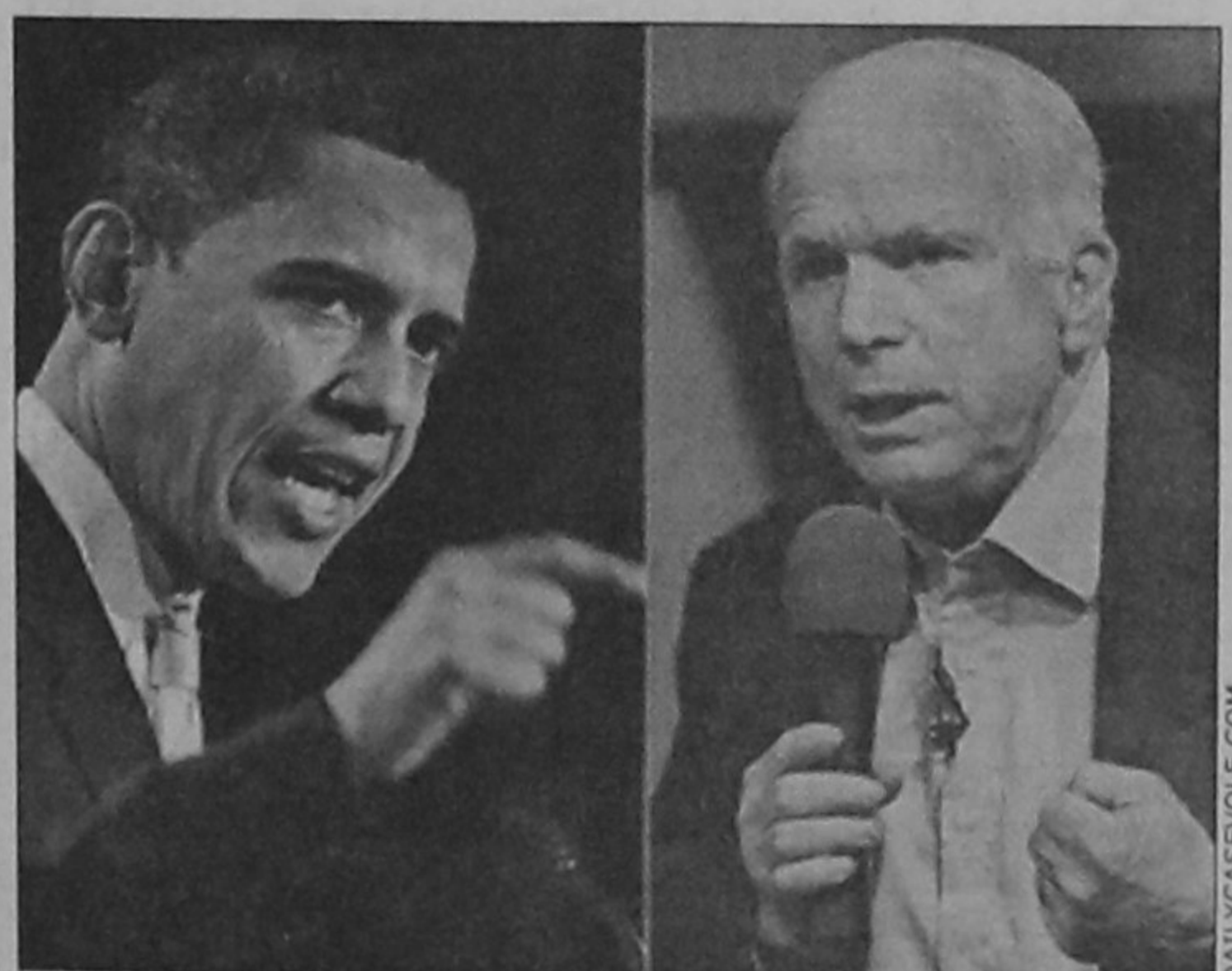
But Newsweek's Poll suggests the race is very much still in play. McCain's current level of support, after all, is up just 5 points from July, before either party's nominating convention, when Obama led McCain 44 to 41%.

Perhaps more troubling for the Obama campaign than the overall head-to-head numbers, however, is the dramatic hardening of McCain's support suggested in the poll. In July, only 39% of McCain voters said they supported McCain strongly. By contrast, 71% now say they strongly support the Republican nominee.

Obama, meanwhile, has seen support increase from his voters, as well, but far less dramatically -- 67% now say they support him

strongly, compared to 61% in July. Enthusiastic support will prove crucial to both parties in a close election, as voters are more likely to turn out for, give money to and volunteer on behalf of candidates they firmly back.

Quantifying how much of this McCain bounce is attributable to the Palin pick can be tricky. When asked, only 29% of respondents in the poll said Palin makes them more likely to support McCain in the fall, a proportion on par with other running-mate selections in recent history, like Al Gore in 1992 and Jack Kemp in 1996. In fact, 22% of voters say Palin makes them less likely to support McCain, more than any other recent vice presidential candidate.



But clearly, McCain has benefited enormously from the avalanche of attention his vice presidential selection triggered. On a signature Obama issue, the war in Iraq, the Republican nominee now leads his Democratic opponent 51% to 41%, a marked change from an April Newsweek Poll, which had Obama leading McCain on the

issue, 54% to 34%.

McCain also leads Obama on the issue of taxes and spending and on national security and terrorism. On the No. 1 issue on voters' minds in this election, the economy, 49% to 40% prefer Obama to McCain -- though the Democrat's lead there has narrowed significantly since June, when a Newsweek Poll showed

him with a 54% to 29% lead over McCain.

One key group driving McCain's bounce on these issues: white women. McCain now leads Obama in this group by 16 points, 53% to 37%, up from July, when white women backed McCain by only 5 points -- 44% to 39%. Twenty-four percent of these women say they are more inclined to vote for McCain now that he has a female running mate.

Overall, a majority of voters (52%) have a favorable opinion of Palin, even if they are not familiar with some of the details in her record. Fifty-seven percent of registered voters did not know that Palin opposes abortion even in instances of rape and incest. 69% did not know that she favors teaching creationism in public schools. Asked if Palin shares their view on abortion, 43% of white women said yes, 41% said no and 16% did not know.

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Never rob a bank without the right condiment

A man woke up to find that an intruder had broken into his house and was rubbing seasoning into his body. The food powder was "Pappy's Seasoning," a popular mixture of dried spices, herbs and salt, said to bring out the flavor in a variety of meats. ("Human" was not listed among recommendations on the package.)

The intruder attacked another man in the house with an eight-inch sausage before fleeing, reports reader Joe Rocas, writing from Texas. To complete the impression that real life had turned into a farce, the sausage-wielding attacker lost his trousers, leaving behind his wallet and ID.

Police caught him hiding nearby in his underclothes but were unable to reach the sausage before it was consumed. "A dog ate the weapon," police lieutenant Ian Burrirmond told the Fresno Bee newspaper a few days ago. "I tell you, this was one weird case."

Actually, from an Asian point of view, it's not that weird. Curry powder is frequently used by Asian muggers to disorientate victims, and the famous chilli sauce bandit of Jakarta used to raid banks armed only with a bottle of extra-hot pepper condiment. ("Hand over the money or I'll season you piquantly.")

As an aficionado of spicy accompaniments, I would like to advise the US criminal establishment that Western condiments are utterly hopeless as weapons. You guys are in the dark ages on this front! You can rub steak marinade or low-fat mayonnaise all over my body and it will have no effect, as many of my critics have discovered to their dismay.

No. To do serious damage, you need weapons-grade condiments, and they come from Asia. My mother used to have this Sri Lankan stuff called Seeni Sambol (Extra Strong), which could make your eyes sting two houses away.

My father usually extinguished his cigarettes to eat dinner, but the tobacco smoke would soon be replaced by steam from his eyes

as he attempted to consume his meal before it melted the table and caused third degree burns to his bare feet.

I've inherited his tastes to some extent, and often meet South Asian and Southeast Asian buddies to eat meals, which blow our heads off.

One diner's wife asked why men liked food that caused pain.

My wife answered on our behalf: "It's a guy thing. Men do it out of competitiveness since they are motivated by machismo, which is Latin for imbecility."

I took great exception to this statement and explained that machismo was not synonymous with imbecility, but hovered somewhere between "foolishness" and "idiocy."

All this is preface to complaining about the numerous reports in the international press and all over the Internet about the "Dorset Naga," all expressing amazement that the hottest chilli in the world comes from a UK country town rather than Asia.

This is absolute rubbish. The naga is a well-known Asian chilli, widely consumed by males in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other places. It is not from Dorset.

The sad fact is that Westerners are far better at patenting and marketing things than Asians, so once more an ancient Asian treasure has been ripped off and channelled to the world by clever Western business people.

This makes me want to beat myself up. But I think I'll go and eat a super-hot curry instead.

Same thing, really.

All sorts of spicy news can be sent to our columnist via his website: www.vittachi.com.

