

## Sloth ministries

*Recognise the real problem*

A recent letter of the Prime Ministers' Office to the ministries conveying its displeasure at their languid attitude in respect of their tasks has drawn our attention. The letter has expressed the dissatisfaction of the prime minister at the slow pace of the work of the administration and inordinate delays in implementing the directives of the government. That has inevitably prevented services intended for the public to be delayed and has impeded solution to many urgent problems.

The PM has touched in an elaborate manner the way that the ministries should function and has gone so far as to suggest that legal action be taken against those that are not up to the mark. We commend the PM for recognising the malaise in the administration early on in the life of the government and articulating her mind in no uncertain terms. It must also be found out whether the absence of dynamism in the administration is due to lack of efficiency or is a deliberate act to impede the function of the government.

However, we are constrained to point out some basic reasons that the PM might have overlooked that might be a major cause for the sluggish way she thinks the ministries are moving.

We feel that much of the malaise has to do with the random transfers and postings that were initiated very soon after the grand alliance led by the AL assumed office and which has now taken a massive proportion. To put the matter in perspective, in the two months of it being in charge, the current government has transferred more than two hundred officers of various ranks, including 7 secretaries, 5 additional secretaries and thirty four joint secretaries reshuffled last week. Nearly fifty officers, including 10 secretaries have been made OSD.

We agree that certain changes in the top echelons of the administration may be necessary with the change of government, but such changes must not be without reasons. Regrettably, it appears that there is no coherent policy that is guiding the government action in this regard. And nobody is quite sure whether the process has come to and end or is likely to end soon. With so many officers on OSD, little wonder that the performance of the ministries is slothful. Such endless and irrational transfer of public servants saps their morale by creating a sense of insecurity in them.

In this regard one is also constrained to ask whether the ministers themselves are able to provide the leadership to their ministries. As far as we can make out, the ministers, whether out of deference to the PM or lack of confidence in themselves, take no decision without referring to her. We suggest that the PM should immediately call a halt to the large-scale transfers and at the same time help the ministers to inculcate self confidence in themselves.

## BCL demands college seats

*What is political quota?*

THE present day version of student politics is proving to be too recalcitrant and intrusive to serve the cause of academic atmosphere in the educational institutions across the country. The latest example is Eden College where the BCL has reportedly demanded 300 seats in the first year honours courses under political quota! The demand is no doubt something unheard of, and it does indicate that strident student politics is spreading its pernicious tentacles in every direction. The BCL's resolve to press it home has brought the whole admission process to a standstill at the premier women's college in the city.

Now, there is perhaps more than one way to interpret the negative developments associated with student politics in its present form. But nothing can alter the truth that it is no longer the same thing as it was in the distant past when students were in the forefront of all progressive movements. What we have observed in recent years is indeed disgraceful. Some young men, masquerading as students and working under the tutelage of this or that political party, dominate the show. They try to control and grab everything as innocent general students are reduced to being helpless bystanders. Muscle gets the better of merit.

The question is how long will this continue? The ruling party leaders, the prime minister to be precise, have to take stock of the situation. It is not morally or legally tenable that the BCL cadres will be allowed to take their turn after being subjected to all kinds of harassment under the previous regime, since one wrong cannot justify another. And the tit-for-tat policy will only further deepen the crisis. Finally, such a policy is bound to be self-defeating in the long run.

Here is an opportunity for the prime minister to rein in the unruly BCL elements, who have already done enough to be termed so, and do a great service to the nation. It may not be possible to regain the lost glory of student politics overnight, but even if they can restore a semblance of it, it will no doubt be a major achievement.

What we cannot ignore is that vicious student politics negates all that is decent in the academic arena. Since merit is its first victim, it cannot have any place in higher seats of learning. The decision makers have to act before more damage is done to our system of education by the unrestrained student activists of the parties.

## Anti-state elements among law enforcers?

Now that the information is coming out about the involvement of extremist elements in the BDR massacre, investigators should also backtrack and scrutinise the records of various forces to trace out others who might have joined with false certificates.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WHEN a responsible member of the cabinet hints at a number of militant groups believed to have been involved in the BDR carnage we should take it seriously. Investigation is slowly revealing the footprints of the extremist elements, who are known for their cruel methods of execution of unarmed captives. They are capable of masterminding and implementing a carnage of such magnitude as we saw in Pilkhana on February 25. It had the imprints of some deranged people who went berserk for revenge. Vendetta, shall we call it?

Well, some analysts do believe in the theory that vendetta was one of the objectives among many, and the name of JMB has come up once again. Various reports say that more than fifty former JMB operatives have been identified in BDR, Pilkhana, and many of them are believed to have been involved in the killing. This needs to be looked into and verified. The truth must come out.

Now, we have some questions that have been bugging us of late. For example, if it is true that many JMB militants have joined BDR, then how could they do so? We know that one needs clearance certificates from the police, the local UP chairman, etc. to join a disciplined force like BDR. The recruitment follows stages of screening, including some mental and physical tests.

Did the JMB men go through all the required examinations and tests to qualify? If any minister of the day had allegedly exerted influence then we want to know who it was and whether the recruitment procedures of BDR can be tampered with so easily.

We also want to know whether an extensive investigation was launched by the police and Rab intelligence soon after the execution of the top JMB leaders to ascertain the whereabouts of the second line leaders. Understandably, they were equally dangerous and posed a veritable threat to law and order. If the operatives of the banned outfit could find their way into a sensitive force like BDR then how safe was the force? Unfortunately, we have come to learn the hard and painful way that it was not safe. We woke up after the damage had been done.

Now, about the number. Do we have any idea, any statistics, any evidence, any record concerning how many extremist elements from JMB and other similar outfits have joined BDR, as well as other forces like the police and the ansar? We fervently hope such elements have been screened out from the army, therefore there is none whatsoever.

Now that the information is coming out about the involvement of extremist elements in the BDR massacre, investigators should also backtrack and scrutinise the records of various forces to trace out others



How were they recruited?

who might have joined with false certificates. Go to the police stations and go to the UP offices to find out who gave them clearance certificates. A nationwide purging is needed to get rid of them once and for all.

We, as a nation, tend to learn unpleasant lessons the hardest possible way and become wiser by default. We excel in analysing events in retrospect. We hardly can anticipate any eventuality. We do not do our homework or advance planning and we do not often use the tactics of surprising the enemy. We, as a nation, like to take a back seat and observe from a safe distance until our own house is set on fire.

More lamentation. Why do we always fortify our position after we have been badly mauled? Why don't we do it before in anticipation? Why do we hesitate to take

the first step or to go on the offensive when we are aware of the presence of the killers in our midst? Why do we mostly remain on the receivers' end of a misfortune?

It may sound scary but it is true. The dark forces that are against the nation, against the state and against the constitution are gaining more ground everyday in their offensive than we are doing against them. They are getting more organised, everyday, than we are. They are moving steadily on with one single goal in mind, we have hundreds of goals. They have unwavering commitment, we falter at every step. They have only a few leaders to follow, we have too many. No wonder they beat us blue whenever they get the chance.

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## Bashundhara City on fire

We have no alternative except to rise vertically because we have serious limitation in spreading horizontally. The government must apply all the rules and regulations regarding high rise buildings stringently. The capacity of Rajuk may further be built to handle pressures from external interventions.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

BASHUNDHARA City mall (reported to be 12th largest mall in the world), was engulfed in a huge fire on March 13. Built at a cost of Tk. 7000 million, it is regarded as the most modern shopping mall in Bangladesh. It houses 2500 shops and has 20-25 thousand visitors a day. Strangely enough, such an important structure is located in a rather congested area.

The mall had the most modern fire fighting equipments (as claimed by Bashundhara authorities), but they did not work at all due to inefficient management. 7 people died, 20 were injured and 2 are missing. Loss of property is yet to be estimated.

The government deserves commendation for pulling out all its resources to extinguish the fire. All the organisations engaged in the operation have shown that

with concerted and well-coordinated effort our people are capable of handling the toughest of jobs.

We are surely happy to see the sincerity, honesty and sensitivity of our prime minister, who is passing her days in great agony due to the crisis created by some misguided jawns of BDR. Once again our armed forces came to the aid of the civil administration to overcome the crisis.

The Bashundhara Group is one of the largest trading groups in the country. However, it has not been able to show its capability in constructing the building and managing it. We are expecting good quality report from the committee set up by the ministry of home affairs.

We hope to see the involvement of the ministries of home affairs, public works and local government, and the Dhaka City Corporation and Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripaksha (Rajuk) in the enquiry.

Such kind of fire may not be the last. No

doubt there has been some spectacular development in the design and structure of buildings in Dhaka. We have a fairly good Building Construction Act. Our building codes are also fairly up to date (2003).

Unfortunately, we have a tendency to ignore legal restrictions if we are rich and powerful. The committee must see whether the Bashundhara City plan was properly cleared by Rajuk before the building was opened in 2004. It is said that lots of irregularities were committed by organisations like the department of public works, Rajuk and the DCC during 2001-06. Thus, we have enough reason to suspect some foul play in the construction of this huge 21-storied structure in a congested area with narrow roads.

If this huge structure had been set up legally, the fire brigade fire fighters would not have such problems in extinguishing the fire above 13th floor. Moreover, how it was possible to build such a huge building with narrow roads around is a mystery.

The government's capacity for facing new challenges brought up by the construction of high rise buildings is poor. After the big fire in the 11-storied BSEC building, the fire brigade department could acquire turntable ladders that reached up to 11-stories. The wisdom of

the department in this acquisition is not clear.

No doubt the government has no magic wand to build its capacity overnight. The immediate need is the people's cooperation to smoothen the job of this 2-month old government. The owners of all the high-rise buildings must arrange training of their security staff in fire fighting.

We have no alternative except to rise vertically because we have serious limitation in spreading horizontally. The government must apply all the rules and regulations regarding high rise buildings stringently. The capacity of Rajuk may further be built to handle pressures from external interventions.

If the government has to build a "Digital Bangladesh" it will have to modernise the fire fighting equipments, city roads, and parks, and discard the jalopies and ramshackle buildings. We have to continue to go forward with all and not with few.

The Bashundhara shopping complex incident has indicated that the all high-rise buildings must have efficient security staff well trained in fighting fires. The real estate developers must construct buildings with adequate safety arrangements against fires or other accidents.

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## The male role

It is critical to incorporate an explicit commitment to gender equality to ensure an involvement that will be mutually beneficial to both men and women. To achieve replacement fertility, involvement of male in reproductive health, including use of male methods -- particularly permanent method -- will be an important direction of the future family planning program strategy.

MD. SHAHJAHAN

FAMILY planning has a long history in virtually every country but reproductive health is a new direction, which got momentum after the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994. Programmatic interest in men's involvement in reproductive health issues is a recent advancement. Previously, reproductive health programs had focused almost exclusively on women.

Promotion and active involvement of men implies responsible parenthood and sexual and reproductive behaviour, including family planning; prenatal, maternal and child health; prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV; prevention of unwanted and high risk pregnancies; shared control and contribution of family income, and empowerment of women.

In Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas, gender roles are clearly demarcated. Usually, men are not involved, nor their interest particularly welcome, in the women's domain. But men could do much to ensure the success of population

and reproductive health programs.

Their role is important for the promotion of gender equity, girls' education, women's empowerment and sharing of household chores and child-rearing within families, communities and work places.

In Bangladesh, the family planning program is woman-focused and, therefore, does not provide any scope for addressing the reproductive health problems of men. The ignorance of men about reproductive morbidity of women is not uncommon in many countries, including Bangladesh.

Most men need to know more about preventing pregnancy, HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases. Family planning programs can address many of the obstacles that men face by developing awareness and advocating safer sexual behaviour.

An effective way of increasing men's role in contraception is to increase women empowerment through economic participation. In Bangladesh, women usually take more responsibility of using contraceptive methods.

Men generally approve of family plan-

ning but contraceptives are mostly used by women. It has also been reported that use of contraceptives by men has declined in recent years. This discrepancy between belief and action may be due, in part, to limited contraceptive choices that men have had.

However, among currently available male methods no method has the widespread acceptability of some of the methods used by women.

Men may not favour using contraceptive methods due to a variety of cultural reasons. In various studies, these have been expressed as; fear that it will undermine their authority as head of the family or encourage their wives to be unfaithful; being opposed on religious grounds; and fear of harmful side effects of contraceptives. The views of men about family planning and fertility issues are important components of the reproductive health program.

Many obstacles prevent men and women from talking about sexual and reproductive issues. A complex web of social and cultural factors impedes such discussions. In many societies, sex is a taboo subject for men and women to discuss. Women's low status and lack of power limit communication between a couple.

Even when men and women discuss reproductive health issues, it is usually not in equal terms.

In a country like Bangladesh, where more than half of the men are illiterate, the mass media can play a significant role in achieving the demographic target. Men are more exposed to radio, television, and newspapers than women, probably

because men generally have more free time, more education, more disposable income, and more freedom of movement than women.

Studies have documented increased contraceptive use and other behavioural changes following use of mass media.

National, regional and international experiences in reproductive health programs show the need for women's healthcare issue in today's world as the most important concern of all because they bear the major health hazards during pregnancy. To protect and ensure safety of women's lives, men's perception about the problems of pregnant women must be enhanced.

In conclusion, it is critically important to design a program involving men that fosters an environment where men's contributions to reproductive health including family planning decisions are valued and desired, while protecting the rights and integrity of women.

One finding that will be important to the development of such a program is that men's knowledge is strongly supportive for their wives.

It is critical to incorporate an explicit commitment to gender equality to ensure an involvement that will be mutually beneficial to both men and women. To achieve replacement fertility, involvement of male in reproductive health, including use of male methods -- particularly permanent method -- will be an important direction of the future family planning program strategy.

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