

An eye for the obvious

Finance minister's move should be carried forward

We are heartened to learn that the government is going to reduce land registration and other related fees and, more importantly, unify the hitherto disparate fee collection mechanism. These have been public interest issues that although live and burning had customarily failed to receive attention of governments given to other remote-to-people agenda.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith told an inter-ministerial meeting that the government considers the present land registration fee as prohibitive and spawning corruption. When transacting deal for a land valued at Tk one crore the parties have to pay a levy of Tk 18 lakh, so what happens is the plot gets grossly undervalued to evade tax.

The fee payment would also be eased up by replacing the four separate offices to which the sellers and buyers have to run now by a single point of collection. Now the registration fee, tax at source, transfer fee and local fee would be payable under the same roof.

Whether as a result of the reduced fees alone dishonesty will disappear from the scene is, however, open to question. That is exactly the reason why we would like to go back to our occasional remarks through this column recommending computerisation of land documentation processes encompassing buying and selling, transfer, mutation and all other land-related transactions to address corruption and malpractice on a broad spectrum. Computerisation will mean a unified record keeping system as an anti-dote to fraudulent ownership rights that original land owners often bump into.

Actually, land registration and documentation processes are pivotal not just to ownership rights but also to land use. But ironically these are mired in such a primitive state in our country that we ought to be sorely ashamed of it.

We would be happy if the finance minister and the minister for land build up on the modest but a significant step that the former has initiated. Real estate and housing sector is regarded as a literal building block of economic progress in today's world. But this finds an impediment in our country, as does land acquisition for many a development project that is botched up because of conflicting land-centred claims and complicated procedures of registration or documentation. Many deals are talked of but they stop short of maturing into a signing up stage as they fall through the cracks of the system. For various reasons, therefore, we advocate modernisation of land registration.

Sunken vessel at Chittagong port

Mechanism needed to deal with future crises

THE capsizing of a clinker-laden vessel in the estuary of the river Karnaphuli on Tuesday has brought all shipping movements at Chittagong port to a virtual halt. The seriousness of the situation can be gauged from the fact that all medium and large vessels are now unable either to leave or enter the port. That not only means a stop to all maritime activities but also promises to leave a bad impact on the port economy. For the ships stranded at the port, the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) will lose \$10,000 every day. And if the port is not cleared soon, a huge logjam will be created with the arrival of more ships from various parts of the globe. The clearance, of course, involves salvaging the sunken ship with a sense of immediacy in order for the port to get back to working order. The question, though, is whether the CPA is equipped to do the job. The answer is simple. Given that problems such as those caused by sinking ships can and do happen, and not just everywhere, it is expected that the port authorities will have enough skilled manpower and equipment to deal with the situation that has now arisen. We will expect that the logjam now in place will be removed at the earliest. Beyond the immediate difficulty, however, there are quite a few realities that the CPA must take into cognisance. In the first place and for the future, a foolproof mechanism must be ensured for the removal of impediments to movement of vessels from and into the port. In the modern world, time cannot be unduly lost in exploring the ways in which estuaries can be kept free of hindrances. In the second place, the time has now arrived for the authorities to probe the draught level of the port. There are good reasons to think that draught is now a problem and unless measures are taken to dredge estuaries, new difficulties could come up in future.

In other words, Bangladesh's ports, like everything else, need to be modernised. Such modernisation must cover not only a quick loading and unloading of vessels but also getting them out of trouble if and when that happens. With 43 vessels now waiting at the outer anchorage of Chittagong port, need one say more?

EDITORIAL

The Daily Star

Put down the bottle of hemlock!

Since six of those who have died in custody or following interrogation have reportedly died of heart attacks, perhaps these motivational talks should include a few words on healthy living and the avoidance of too much fatty food? One can never be too careful, after all.

ZAFAR SOBHN

YOU have got to be kidding me. The headline tucked away on the eighth column of the Daily Star front page yesterday really needed to be seen to be believed: "BDR men to be motivated not to commit suicide."

Yup, that's the ticket! It is like something out of the Onion, and merely serves to confirm, if further confirmation was necessary, that Bangladesh truly is Bizarro World.

You see, so far 16 BDR jawans have died in custody or following interrogation since the investigation into the Pilkhana massacre started, of which at least four are reported to have been suicides.

In response, according to a BDR press release issued Wednesday: "BDR authorities instructed all its units to motivate jawans not to commit suicide."

Plenty has been written in editorial and op-ed pages on how it is imperative that these custodial deaths be stopped. On the one hand, it is good to see that the authorities are apparently taking cognizance of the fact that something needs to be done, but, on the other hand... *this is their solution?*

I thought that things would never get as bad as when, during the tenure of the last elected government, we were treated to identical daily press releases from Rab stating that, acting on a tip-off, they had arrested such-and-such criminal, and that he had confessed that he was in possession of illegal arms, and that when he led them

to recover said arms they came under fire from his cohorts (love that word) that prompted them to return fire, and that the criminal (though never any of his cohorts, it seemed) had been killed in the crossfire.

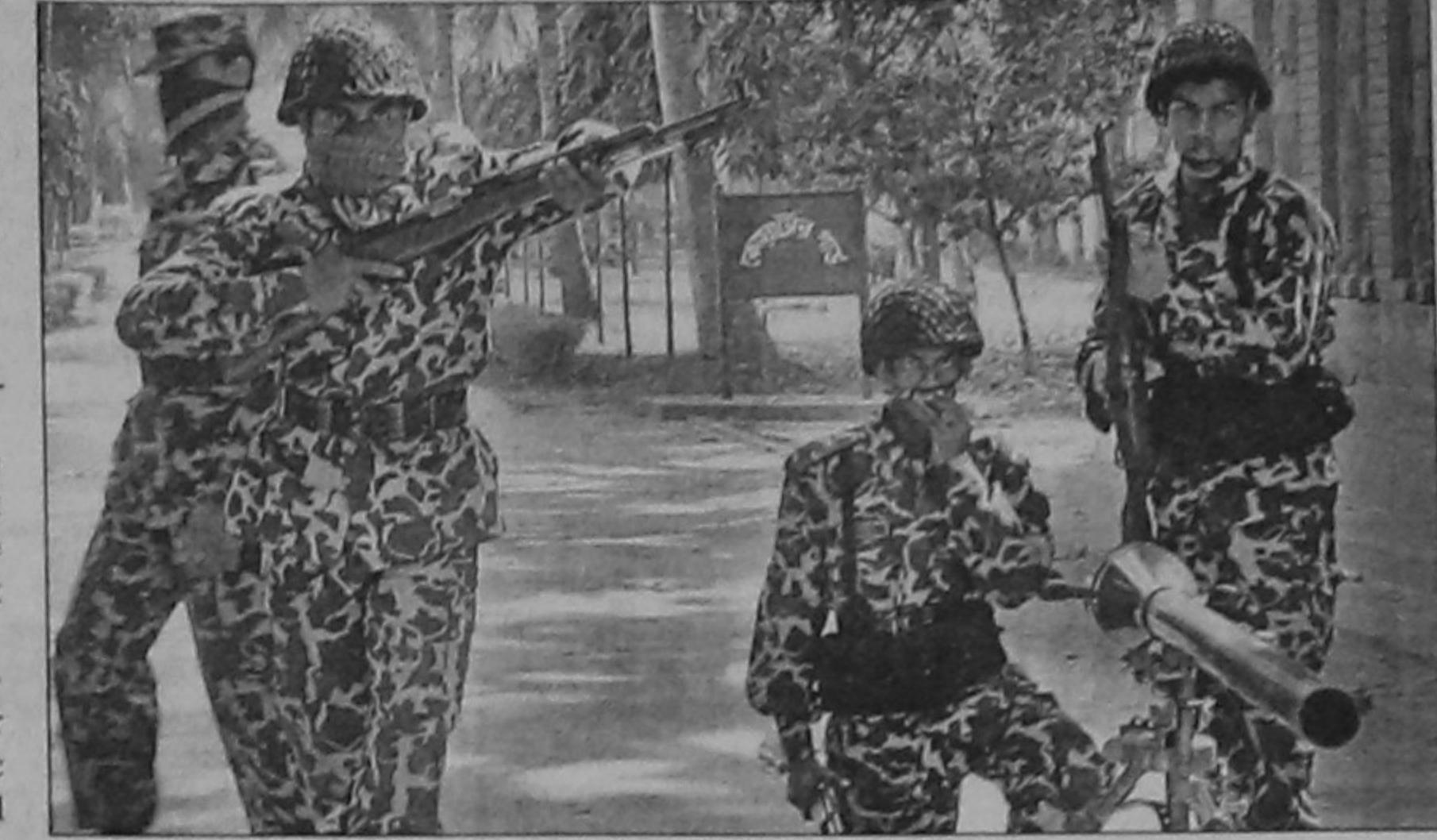
Almost as bad as the fact of the extra-judicial killings themselves, was the sheer contempt for the intelligence of the public that these press releases indicated. Rab and the government made it perfectly clear that they didn't even care enough to come up with a convincing cover story for their illegal actions.

In fact, perhaps this was the point: to signal that they were utterly unaccountable and had nothing but contempt for niceties such as rule of law and due process. This was taking impunity to a whole new level. Perhaps it was calculated to strike fear into the heart of anyone who thought of opposing the government of the day on any issue.

I suppose it is possible that the authorities were simply clueless, not contemptuous, and had no idea how transparent their lies were and how bad it looked to the public. Whether this is better or worse, is, I guess, a matter of opinion.

But, either way, one had hoped that with the election of a new government that such atrocities would be a thing of the past, and this administration has indeed pledged that extra-judicial killings would not occur on its watch.

Now it would seem that not only are we still not free of the disgrace of extra-judicial killings and custodial torture, but that we



Could low self-esteem be the problem?

are still being subjected to the same kind of cover stories that insult the intelligence of the Bangladeshi people.

The mind boggles to imagine what is being imparted in these motivational sessions:

Perhaps the jawans are being taught to look into the mirror and say: I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggonit, people like me!

Or perhaps they are being forced to watch *It's A Wonderful Life* over and over again (though, I should point out, this may backfire).

Since six of those who have died in custody or following interrogation have reportedly died of heart attacks, perhaps these motivational talks should include a few words on healthy living and the avoidance of too much fatty food? One can never be too careful, after all.

But there is a serious point here and I shouldn't be so flippant. The ongoing investigation into the Pilkhana massacre

will make or break this government. It is imperative that the investigation be conducted with the utmost professionalism and that it delivers a credible result.

Suspects (or witnesses, for all we know) dying in custody is not the way to go about things if the authorities wish to get to the bottom of what happened at Pilkhana and if they want their findings to enjoy broad credibility.

Motivational talks, I fear, are not the solution. In fact, I hope that they are an exercise in cynicism. Frankly, the only thing worse than the talks being some lame attempt at a cover up would be if the authorities really did believe that they were facing a suicide epidemic and that this was the way to deal with it.

A modest proposal: perhaps motivational (for want of a better word) sessions with those conducting the interrogations would be a better idea?

Zafar Sobhn is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

A pluperfect dream

That's the first thing we need to learn. Next will be practicing the practice of what we preach. No gaps, no lapses, no emotional freight to carry. It's my dream. One day we shall make money without having to worry what money makes of us.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

"WHAT do we do with the emotional residue of this business?" Lance Morrow asked in *Time* magazine after the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton. In this country, we also have a business in hand ever since the chairman of the National Sports Council drew criticism for sharing the stage with an alleged convict at a signing ceremony. Now that he has resigned from his post citing personal reasons, what do we do with its emotional baggage?

If we take his resignation at face value, it means he has left his position because he didn't want to tell us how it happened. What happened, of course, is a contradiction. A man who had vowed to fight corruption was seen in the company of another man who symbolised its ultimate form. His vaunted words still ring in our ears. The country was like a derailed train, he said. He had promised to pull it back on track.

but life is full of contradictions. The rescue man was worn out by exertion.

I don't intend to criticise a man who has already shown his recompense. Yes, it would have been nicer if he had showed it with an open confession, if he had stated that he was quitting because it was an error in judgment. It would have cautioned others to avoid men of questionable integrity in future. It also would have induced others with the rare courage to admit when they have wronged.

So be it as it should, and the clamour of criticism is going to die down after the resignation. Busybodies we are, life will soon engulf and force us to erase this one incident from our minds like many others before. But it will do us some service if we spend some time peeling this onion to its nub.

To start with, it's not about the money but the man. Nothing was wrong if the Football Federation was relieved to find a generous sponsor, who was going to save it from financial worries. It was nice of a

business house to pledge a substantial amount of money along with two spacious playgrounds so that football could get another chance in this country.

But everything was wrong when we linked the man to his money. We don't know if the criticism would have been as fierce if the sponsorship were signed in absence of the NSC chairman. Would anybody have raised eyebrows if a different man had represented the sponsor?

I ask these questions because there is a gap in our minds, a gaping gap that compels us to live in a world of wishful thinking. In that world we credit the money and debit the man and keep them separate in a bizarre bookkeeping of moral entries. We don't mind taking donation and sponsorship from a company fined for regulatory breach. But when the owner of that company is accused of wrongdoing, we don't want to see his face.

It means we are eclectic when it comes to handling shame. Newspapers can take advertisements, banks can open accounts, buyers can buy products and others can benefit from doing business deals. Then it's not right to take donation and sponsorship from a company whose owner is a fugitive of law. Where do we draw the line between a business and its owner whose immoral practices build its basis?

Practically, we run the musical chair of moral audacity. The tax dodger goes after

the loan defaulter, who goes after the bribe taker who goes after the extorter. This is where the emotional residue overtakes passions and each of us tries to find a wrong with the other man. It was for the same reason that the Football Federation president was perplexed by the criticism. He couldn't figure out what it was that he did which others hadn't done already.

This is where the former NSC chairman also chewed up the scenery. After all, it was being done to create a head start for football. He must have felt equally excited because the rejuvenation of the once most popular game in this country was going to become his legacy. He had his eyes fixed on history, oblivious that it was getting smeared next to him.

His exit will definitely dissipate the criticism of that odious meeting. But long after he is gone, people are going to remain frustrated with a sense of inadequacy. They are still going to wonder when people in this country don't learn to look before they leap.

That's the first thing we need to learn. Next will be practicing the practice of what we preach. No gaps, no lapses, no emotional freight to carry. It's my dream. One day we shall make money without having to worry what money makes of us.

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Imagine a day of silence in the politician's life

The father of modern India, who could never resist the temptation of turning a virtue into a discipline, gave his voice a day off every week. Mahatma Gandhi would keep *maun* every Monday. If he had a meeting he could not avoid, say with a toff like a Viceroy, on a Monday, he would write down his answers on chits of paper and pass them on.

M.J. AKBAR

ISN'T it extraordinary that the country with the largest Hindu population is unaware of the most remarkable holiday in Hinduism? The largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, declares a national holiday each year to mark Hindu-majority Bali's day of silence, Hari Raya Nyepi Tahun Baru. This beautiful concept has been absorbed into the syncretic Muslim-Hindu culture of that unique nation.

We Indians are not averse to holidays, so we must be averse to silence. Since Hinduism went from India to Indonesia, the concept of Nyepi traveled the same route. Silence has been mislaid in the land of its origin.

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off every week. Mahatma Gandhi would keep *maun* every Monday. If he had a meeting he could not avoid, say with a toff like a Viceroy, on a Monday, he would write down his answers on chits of paper and pass them on. It must have been a satisfying experience for the Lords of the Raj, because the British upper classes value eccentricity as a high art form.

One suspects that Gandhi had more than one reason for his wordless Mondays. One of the most strenuous demands on anyone in Indian public life is the pressure on vocal chords. In the case of Gandhi, it was an instance of unremitting pressure on divine vocal chords. People expected words of pure wisdom to flow each time he opened his mouth. What a relief, then, to take a day off from wisdom and words.

Gandhi surely had a supplementary use for *maun*. His closest moral relationship was to his conscience, and he used to be in

continuous dialogue with his "inner voice." Every Monday he enjoyed the luxury of this conversation without interruption from the stream of supplicants looking for solutions to problems that should never have arisen. Gandhi's "inner voice," which he called a "dictator," played a significant part in our history.

Whenever he ran out of persuasive arguments to rationalise a decision, he turned to his conscience as the ultimate arbiter. Having made him their Mahatma, the others were duly stumped. If you begin to question the conscience of a great soul, then what is left of its mystique?

Such questions, even when leavened with mild levels of cynicism, are irrelevant today. Conscience is no longer a participant in politics. The only modern politician who attempted a weekly holiday for his voice, albeit intermittently, was the charming, urbane Ramakrishna Hegde; what a prime minister he would have made!

Since no government of India would dare risk its tenuous hold on popularity by celebrating silence, perhaps the Election Commission could impose the spirit of Nyepi on our democratic process. It should order a day of silence every week during polling season. Could you imagine the bliss of 24 hours without the prattle of commentators, the flinging dung of accusation and response, the flabby and often tired arguments of spokesmen irritated by the pesky

demands of television but fated by their karma to become familiar to millions who can vaguely recall what they look like but have no idea what they said?

There is one potential danger, though: the voter might get confused. So far silence has been the voter's prerogative, and he has become a master at the art, honing its many nuances to brilliant effect. This is why no one really knows what the outcome of an election will be. A candidate might sense the feel on the ground, but no candidate can afford to believe that he does not have support, or the psychology of defeat will ruin him long before the voter does.

Voters enjoy their right to silence, and protect it with great care from the intrusive opinion-pollwallahs who arrive with question board and notepad to photograph his mind. His expertise in posing for a false photograph, creating an image three frames away from reality, is becoming legendary. The honour of the last word goes to that splendid Malayali warhorse, Karnanakaran, who has been in politics for six decades. When asked who would win, he answered: "In every constituency who ever gets the most votes will win." Touche, maestro!

On Nyepi in Bali a priest exorcises an evil force from the island. Come to think of it, that is what the electorate does as well.

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