

## DCH automation project

We hope this is start of concerted e-government initiative

WE are gratified to note the government's announcement that it is moving ahead with a plan to automate the operations of the Dhaka Custom House (DCH) and that this is merely the first step in an ambitious plan to computerise the entire governmental apparatus during this government's five-year tenure.

There can be no doubt that automating the customs systems is long overdue and will have myriad benefits to importers and exporters, which one hopes will ultimately be passed on to the consumer in the form of lower prices.

It has been stated that the automation will cut customs formalities to a mere five steps, down from the 42 steps that are necessary now. The benefit in terms of reduced time and hassle of doing business can only be imagined.

This, together with other savings associated with streamlining the process, will cut the cost of doing business dramatically, hopefully reducing the costs of imports and allowing our exporters to be more competitive in the international market.

In addition, automation will play a significant role in cutting down on unlawful activities such as under-invoicing and other measures taken to evade duties and tariffs, and will be key to the NBR collecting the appropriate amount of revenue from the trade sector. This benefit to the economy should not be underestimated.

The government's commitment to e-governance is as commendable as it is crucial. As the DCH project should demonstrate, computerisation will have great benefits in terms of good governance, helping to bring transparency and accountability to the system, as well as efficiency and effectiveness. We hope that this project can serve as a template for the government's e-governance pledge.

Just as e-governance will ensure efficient service delivery to all manner of people in the country, it might be seen as a threat by those who benefit from the corruption and inefficiency that the current system allows. So we should be under no illusions as to any covert opposition that this initiative might face, and the government needs to stand strong to see it through.

## A woman whipped!

Those responsible should be brought to justice

A young woman in Daudkandi was whipped mercilessly, following a decree by the influential locals in the name of *salish*. The girl was lashed 39 times, and had to be hospitalised, as she failed to 'prove' that she had been cheated by a neighbour, who actually rejected her claim that he was the father of her newborn baby. It is another sordid example of a young woman being subjected to gross injustice by the village headmen assuming the role of arbitrators.

Similar incidents took place quite a few times in the past in which the village mullahs and influential people, out of their abysmal ignorance and a marked bias against women, almost always sided with the male offenders, and meted out painful punishment to the women seeking justice.

Now the question is, how can the fate of the hapless poor women be left to the people having no sympathy for them and, obviously, no sense of justice? The Daudkandi woman has appealed for a DNA test of her baby to prove her claim. Without question, this is a highly dependable method of settling all such disputes. But what is extremely disquieting is the fact that the arbitrators did not give the woman any chance to establish her claim and delivered their verdict in favour of the accused. How could they be certain that the man was innocent? And if they were so gullible as to believe what he said in his defence, they were actually further victimising an innocent woman.

The self-styled village judges were also completely unaware of the High Court ruling that in cases of sexual crimes there is no legal bar to accepting the victim's testimony before the court, when no other evidence is available, as the basis for prosecuting the accused. This HC ruling should have gone a long way in curbing such crimes, but the ground reality is that the vulnerable women are still subjected to such an oppressive practice not recognised by the law of the land.

Those involved in passing the order and whipping the woman have actually committed a culpable crime. Who are they to deliver a judgment which could have cost the woman her life? The local administration and the law enforcers should immediately take up the matter and catch the so-called village arbiter having no legal sanction.

## Your country, my country

Just the way they must be feeling now at the Taliban who have occupied some parts of your land. So, like the way we the Bangalees did in 1971, you have to rise together and take up arms to drive out the occupiers for good.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

SOME days back, a friend of mine sent me an interesting article written by a Pakistani college girl. I shall not reveal her name here. She wrote this after arrival in a foreign country, where she went to study at a university. But her heart was left on the soil of Pakistan. The brutality unleashed by the Taliban in Swat and adjacent townships motivated her to write the poignant tale that came from the heart. I reproduce below some paragraphs from her write-up for our readers.

She wrote: "Eight years ago I boarded a plane to the United States to come to college. I was 17. As I left, my father hugged me and told me to never come back because he believed that soon Pakistan would not be a country fit for me to live in. I hugged him goodbye and that day my father and I began our great debate about the fate of Pakistan. I came home twice a year. I refused to do an internship in the US; I worked every summer in Pakistan. I moved back when college ended. I started work in Pakistan. I worked at two jobs because there was so much to do and not enough time to do it in. I was inspired and energised. I was hopeful and optimistic."

Eight years later she was not thinking the same way. She was disillusioned by then. This time she wrote: "Today I am neither. And I have lost the debate with my father about the fate of Pakistan. Today, the elected representatives of the people turned Pakistan into Talibanistan. Today we handed over a part of the country to them. I wonder

how much longer before we surrender it all.

"Today we legislated that a group of criminals would be in charge of governing and dispensing justice in a part of Pakistan according to their own obscurantist views. They have declared that the rulings of their courts will be supreme and no other court in the land can challenge them. They have also declared that their men that killed and maimed innocent civilians, waged war against the Pakistani army and blew up girls schools will be exempt from punishment under this law.

"How can I be expected to return to a country where women are beaten and flogged publicly, where my daughters will not be allowed to go to school, where my sisters will die of common diseases because male doctors cannot see them? How can I be expected to call that country home that denies me the rights given me by my Constitution and religion? I refuse to live in a country where women like me are forced to rot behind the four walls of their homes and not allowed to use their education to benefit the nation."

The young graduate did not hide her emotions. She further wrote: "When there is no hope, no optimism, no security, no justice, no education, no progress, no culture there is no Pakistan. Maybe it is because I am the grandchild of immigrants who was raised on stories of hope, patriotism and sacrifice that even in this misery I cannot forget that Pakistan was created to protect the lives, property, culture and future of the Muslims of the subcontinent. It was not established to be



Pakistan under siege.

a safe haven for terrorists. We fought so that we could protect the culture of the Muslims of the subcontinent, not so that we could import the culture of Saudi Arabia."

The very confused and angry young woman concluded: "Maybe it's because I'm competitive and I don't want to lose the debate to my father, maybe I am afraid to lose the only home I have, or maybe because I love Pakistan too much to ever say goodbye. I hope we can remember the reasons why we made Pakistan, and I hope we can stand up to fight for them. I hope we can revive the spirit of national unity of 1947 and lock arms to battle the monster of the Taliban that threatens our existence. Talibanistan is an insult to my Pakistan. I want my country back."

I can understand the pain and anger of the young Pakistani woman who has graduated from some prestigious university in the US. If she is reading this article then I want to tell her, sister, I can understand your pain

because I felt the same way when some alien men in uniform with blazing guns had invaded my Bangladesh and had tried to force their way of life, language, culture and rule on us. Like you, sister, I became homeless in my own country! I had to prove my identity every step of the way in my own land! I was persecuted and harangued every step of the way in my own country! Like you I cried: "I want my country back."

Sister, I wonder whether your parents or grandparents felt any anger at the brutality of the Pakistani soldiers and officers who were carrying out genocide in my Bangladesh in 1971. Just the way they must be feeling now at the Taliban who have occupied some parts of your land. So, like the way we the Bangalees did in 1971, you have to rise together and take up arms to drive out the occupiers for good.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star. He can be contacted at shahnoorwahid@yahoo.co.uk.

## Metropolitan government: Time to move now

There should be a separate ministry/division to look into the affairs of urban cities and municipalities since the population in urban localities is increasing and problems in good governance are concentrated in urban areas.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE Parliamentary Standing Committee for Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, in its meeting on May 20, was in favour of forming a metropolitan government for Dhaka Metropolitan City, combining Gazipur and Narayanganj, to address the urban population growth and also to improve city life.

In fact, the municipalities of Gazipur, Savar and Narayanganj are so interlinked with Dhaka City Corporation in the movement of population, goods and services that it is difficult to see them as separate.

About 30% of the people live in urban areas, which might increase to 50% by 2020. Dhaka is one of the most densely populated cities of the world, with a population of around 120 million and annual growth of around 6%, as against 1.42% of the national growth rate. In Dhaka City Corporation around 33% live in slums.

According to demographers, Dhaka might be 4th largest city of the world in terms

of population if the rapid migration of people from rural areas continues.

On the other hand, the administration of the city is one of the weakest one in terms of providing services and maintenance of infrastructure and mobilisation of resources. It is beset problems like traffic congestion, flooding, inadequate solid waste management, black smoke from vehicles, air and sound pollution, discharge of industrial effluent, open slaughtering of animals and industrial emission.

These are in addition to the acute shortage of water, electricity and sanitation facility, along with the mosquito menace and other health hazards. Many people call Dhaka a slum of bricks, having no resemblance to a modern city.

Above all, management of the City Corporation is not what is expected from the people's representatives of a 400 years old city. On the other hand, there are widespread allegations that the Nagar Bhaban is a den of corruption. General Moeen U. Ahmed, in his book *Shantir Shapney* (dreaming for peace), mentioned that it was impossible to

describe the amount of corruption in the Corporation.

There are at least two thousand cleaners of DCC who receive salary without performing any duty. There are 23 librarians in 5 libraries of the DCC, who do not feel it necessary to remain present in the library. One market supervisor has traveled abroad at least 15 times because he is a leader of the Trade Union.

The Daily Star, in its May 22 and 23 issues, published pictures showing how the Turag River is being grabbed by sand traders, with the BIWTA turning a blind eye. General Moeen mentioned that BIWTA had failed to maintain the dredging of the rivers and misused the diesel. The grabbing of land and river is being done with the connivance of officials of concerned departments.

In fact, it is very difficult to run the administration of a metropolitan city with only one mayor at the helm of affairs, whatever might be his acumen and capability. In Metro Manila of Philippines, London and New Delhi, there are more than two mayors, with deputy mayors and capable town planners to attend to the expansion, construction and providing of services and facilities.

There is no point in evicting the poor from slum areas without making sure of their resettlement, which is a fundamental human right. This will be possible when a metropolitan government can work to uphold public interest.

In Bangladesh, there are 6 city corpora-

tions and 309 municipalities. All heads of municipalities are also known as mayors, although the post of city corporation mayor carries the rank of minister and state minister, but municipality mayors do not have such status. But that is not enough to be a public representative; he must prove his excellence in providing services with honesty, integrity, transparency and accountability.

It is not possible for a city or municipality mayor to maintain the urban facilities with his initiatives alone, without the support of services providing institutions/agencies like, water supply, gas, health, law enforcing, public works department etc. Thus, there is a need to develop a separate metropolitan government for a city with a population exceeding 10 million. Members of parliament having their constituencies within the city corporations or municipalities might be included as advisers, but their advice should not be made mandatory as provided for the Upazila Parishads Act.

In fact, there should be a separate ministry/division to look into the affairs of urban cities and municipalities since the population in urban localities is increasing and problems in good governance are concentrated in urban areas. There could be a commission to find the ways and means to address these issues, keeping in view the expectations of the public in general.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former Adviser to the caretaker government.

## Equitable globalisation can succeed

Indian citizens enjoy personal freedom. It's impossible to affix an economic value to the right to call the prime minister an idiot on television, or organise anti-government protests. In the end, the powerful symbolism of the idea of India is the country's greatest source of influence.

SADANAND DHUME

CONGRESS party's victory in India's recent election is a shot in the arm for globalisation. The results show that most Indians approve of a policy of gradual economic reform, which can later trickle down to the country's vast rural population. The lesson: A pro-globalisation and democratic government can succeed in a poor country if its policies are seen as favouring the majority.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's victory also feeds two other enduring debates: Does democracy and development go hand-in-hand? And can poor countries embrace the same bedrock democratic values as their richer counterparts?

India's experience suggests an affirmative answer to both questions. Despite global downturn, the International Monetary Fund expects India's economy to grow by 5.1% making it an engine of global economic recovery. Its conservatively regulated banks have escaped the Wall Street contagion.

Also, the second straight defeat of BJP by the ardently multireligious Congress shows that pluralism is a universal value and not

merely a Western one.

The immediate significance of the election lies less in what it promises, than in what it averted -- a government incapable of fashioning a coherent national agenda. Instead, Congress returned with its best performance in nearly 20 years. This puts the coalition it heads, the United Progressive Alliance, within easy reach of a majority, and ensures that the new government will complete its five-year term.

The defeat of the communists also frees the government from relying on a party whose approach to economics and foreign policy remains rooted in the Cold War. Before withdrawing their support to the outgoing Congress government last year over a civil nuclear agreement with the US, the communists stymied economic reforms for four long years. Their crushing defeat gives India what is arguably its most centrist parliament since independence.

The Hindu right has also shrunk. The BJP slumped to 122 seats, its worst performance since 1991. Unless it can find a way to expand its appeal to the more liberals, it faces the prospect of permanent exile to the opposition benches.

This victory gives Singh the opportunity

to revive a lapsed reform agenda. The government is likely to relax foreign investment caps in insurance, banking and retail. Infrastructure spending will remain a priority. But though Singh's economic team are intellectually inclined toward reform, temperamentally they are wedded to gradualism.

Politically sensitive changes will likely remain on the back burner. A costly and patchily implemented "employment guarantee scheme" will almost certainly be expanded. It is the centre-piece of the government's commitment to "the common man," and credited by party strategists as helping them buck the usual anti-incumbent pattern in national politics.

In foreign policy, Congress has more room for manoeuvre. The US-India relationship will no longer be held hostage by communist antipathy to Washington. The failure of the BJP's campaign that focused on handling Pakistan-backed terrorism makes it easier to resume negotiations with Islamabad, if it can prove that it has mended its ways.

India will continue to use development aid and institution building to strengthen moderates in Afghanistan. In Pakistan too, India's interests are aligned with America's -- the prospect of jihadists getting their hands on a nuclear weapon causes sleepless nights both in New Delhi and in Washington.

But any effort by the Obama administration to extract concessions from India will be bluntly rejected. That, in the Indian view, would be tantamount to rewarding Islamabad for its role as the world's leading exporter of Sunni radical Islam.

In the meantime, India will continue to

lobby for a permanent seat on an expanded UN Security Council, and will welcome the shift of the locus of international decision making from the G-8 group to the more representative G-20.

In the long run India's global influence will be determined by the evidence from two central debates that set it apart from other countries: the compatibility of democracy and development, and of poverty and human rights. By growing its economy around 8% per year over the past five years, India has shown that democracy and development can go hand in hand.

But the average Chinese is already twice as rich as the average Indian, and the gap is widening. Unless India can rapidly close this gap, the appeal of its development model will continue to be greater in industrialised countries that see democracy as an end in itself than in Asia and Africa, where China's success spurs envy rather than moral outrage.

Nonetheless, Indian citizens enjoy a much higher degree of personal freedom than their counterparts in China and most of the Muslim world. It's impossible to affix an economic value to the right to call the prime minister an idiot on television, to organise anti-government protests, or attend the temple, church or mosque of your choice. In the end, the powerful symbolism of the idea of India is the country's greatest source of influence.

Sadanand Dhume is a fellow at the Asia Society in Washington, DC, and the author of *My Friend the Fanatic*, a travelogue about radical Islam. His next book examines the impact of globalisation on India.

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