

RTI begins journey

Create wider awareness among the people

WE commend the government for finally forming the RTI Commission. However, we reserve our comments about the appropriateness of its composition. Out of the three members of the commission, two are former bureaucrats. Ironically, the perception of bureaucrats acting in favour of suppressing information and refusing to make them public still has deep root in people's minds. And there are reasons for that. For decades, government and semi-government sectors have been keeping valuable information tied with the infamous "red tape" in the name of maintaining official secrecy. The practice only resulted in breeding suspicion and contempt in public mind. With the Information Commission now set to start functioning, it would be a trial for the members how best they would perform in breaking the bureaucratic hold on information.

The Right to Information Ordinance 2008, as we recall, was initiated by the caretaker government. It was eventually ratified by parliament on March 29, 2009. The president signed it into a law on April 5, and a gazette notification to that effect was published on April 6. Understandably, all provisions of the act will be retroactive since October 20, 2008.

The Information Commission is the embodiment of a long and arduous struggle of the civil society, non-government organizations, media and human rights organizations for establishing the right to information. Now every citizen of the country will enjoy the right to have access to information regarding any government, semi-government and non-government organization, with the exception of some agencies that are involved in national security and intelligence works.

The officials concerned, however, must not think that their work has been done with the commission coming into being. On the contrary, they have much more to accomplish, especially in building infrastructure right from the capital to the upazila level, and the officials entrusted with the job will have to be sufficiently equipped and empowered to give information. Therefore, the efficacy of the commission will largely depend on the skill and motivation of the group of officials who will work as points of contact. The commission will also have to undertake countrywide public awareness campaigns in collaboration with the civil society, NGOs and media so that people can judiciously exercise the right to their advantage.

We strongly believe the Information Commission would help attain the much needed transparency and accountability in the works of the government, removing unwarranted secrecy and administrative bottleneck. The Chief Information Commissioner has rightly said that once fully in effect, RTI would help strengthen democracy and ensure good governance.

US soldiers depart from Iraq's towns and cities

First step to a return of sovereignty for Baghdad

THE withdrawal of American troops from Iraqi towns and cities six years after the US-led invasion in 2003 is surely glad tidings for the people of Iraq. After all, it is Iraqis who have, in all these years since US and British troops invaded the country on the dubious question of the Saddam Hussein regime concealing weapons of mass destruction, paid a high price in terms of loss of lives and destruction of property. One of the more disturbing manifestations of the invasion of Iraq was the swift breakdown of law and order followed by the rise of extremist groups convinced that the foreigners had to be pushed out of the country. Tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities took an unprecedented shape and tens of thousands of Iraqis lost their lives in such diverse tragedies as suicide killings and assaults by western forces. Not even the Baghdad offices of the United Nations were spared. While Saddam Hussein and his associates met with a grisly end, Iraqis fell prey to chaos of a kind they had never before experienced in their lives. As many as 4,321 American soldiers have been killed in the country since April 2003.

Against such a background, the return of Iraq's towns and cities to the control of the Iraqi government is an important first step in the country's return to sovereignty. Nothing has been more galling for Iraqis than to feel that an immediate aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein was a loss of sovereign status for Iraq. A good fraction of that sovereignty will now come back to the country. It is this feeling that cheers many Iraqis, who have been celebrating the departure of the Americans in the streets. Yet it is also true that American and other western troops will not be departing completely and in fact will be staying on till 2011, by which time their governments expect Iraqi politicians to assert complete control over the country. That in essence means a continuation of the occupation and an Iraqi government operating per courtesy of Washington and its friends. Between now and then, therefore, Iraqis as well as people around the world cannot but hope that things will not spiral out of control again.

Credit must be given to the Obama administration for recognizing early on that the United States could not be expected to stay in Iraq indefinitely. Its stance is clearly a departure from the position adopted by the Bush administration in that President Obama has a clear sense of the priorities he believes America should pursue as part of his policy of change.

Let us now hope that change will from here on mark the transition to respectable nationhood for Iraq, that Iraqis will find new purpose through inaugurating real democratic governance for themselves.

Improving water management

There is also need to introduce a clear mandate of authority and responsibility, particularly, for members of local government institutions. This will not only contribute towards building capacity through training, but also encourage partnerships between such bodies and local non-government organisations and community-based organisations.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

GOOD governance has been recognised as the most important pre-condition in all our strategies pertaining to accelerated poverty reduction and subsequent economic development. It is generally agreed that developing capable and accountable institutions and implementing sound policies are pre-requisites for providing effective public services and combating corruption.

In this context, I agree with our development partners that this paradigm should include strengthening the role of the Central Public Service Commission, particularly important for adoption of a modern human resources development approach within the ambit of public service. This will help to reduce patronage, political pressure and nepotism within institutional mechanisms. It will also help public servants to work with clear terms of reference, job descriptions and transparent accountability arrangements.

There is also need to introduce a clear mandate of authority and responsibility, particularly, for members of local government institutions. This will not only contribute towards building capacity through training, but also encourage partnerships between such bodies and local non-government organisations and community-based organisations. This will eventually facilitate the introduction of e-governance at the local level.

I have referred to the above in the context of our future national water policy and the addressing of some of the core drawbacks regarding improvement of water delivery and sustaining growth.

A few factors need to be highlighted in this regard. The first is the necessity for decentralisation, whereby central government agencies progressively withdraw from activities that can be accomplished by local institutions and the private sector. This will induce greater competitiveness.

The completion of the first step will induce change in the role of central agencies and their restructuring. This will involve changes in the responsibilities of staff members and their re-training. Providing greater financial autonomy to the institutions at this juncture will facili-

tate enhanced performance levels. The third step will be capacity strengthening. Local organisations will need to be strengthened to fulfill their agreed mandates. This in turn will assist them to be financially sustainable through direct access to funding.

I am raising these issues because most of our municipalities responsible for water services are clearly failing to perform. This has assumed that much more importance given the current government's efforts towards devolution of local governance. I feel that municipalities in our non-urban hinterland, within the district structure, along with urban water and sewerage institutions, should be empowered to regulate the use of water and prevent waste and pollution. They can undertake this function in partnership with community-based organisations and the private sector. This has already been tried out with great success in several countries in Europe and Asia.

At the national level, the Local Government Division (LGD) of the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives has overall responsibility for water supply and sanitation. The Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) and the Water and Sewerage Authorities (Wasa) are under the administrative control of the LGD. The responsibility for implementing water supply and sanitation projects in the public sector in rural and urban areas not covered by the Wasa belongs to the DPHE. The Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), also under LGD, implements water and drainage projects in urban areas as part of urban infrastructure development projects.

The responsibilities mentioned in the previous paragraph are, however, not always being discharged satisfactorily. This, in most cases, is the result of poor planning, insufficient institutional capacity, limited technical competence and lack of clear division of responsibility. Examples of under-achievement and poor service delivery is evidenced in the case of solid waste management and on-site sanitation by the Dhaka City Corporation, in the ensuring of effective drainage by the Chittagong City Corporation, and in the tasks regarding

drainage, solid waste management and maintenance of water supply facilities installed by DPHE or LGED by the Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet and Barisal City Corporations.

This is affecting sanitary environment within the boundaries of these institutions. It would also be pertinent to refer here to the municipal level where the DPHE plans and implements water and sanitation schemes. Unfortunately, DPHE is focusing more on technical installation than the need to undertake improvement of local capacity and competence for operation of services.

I have, in my capacity as vice-president of the Bangladesh Water Partnership, had several in-depth discussions with officials of these bodies. They have revealed some important deficiencies, which need to be addressed. It appears that despite their assigned responsibilities, Wasa and the municipalities lack sufficient autonomy to take important decisions on planning, implementation, tariff, staffing and other aspects of water supply and sanitation service. They have also pointed out that tariffs have to be approved by the central government and do not reflect the cost of water production. This eventually hampers sustainability and maintenance.

It is true that the government has introduced some reforms to improve the situation within Dhaka Wasa reconstitution and redefining of the role of the Board in several policy areas (related to corporate planning, tariff setting, appointment of staff and remuneration) and making the management accountable for meeting operational and financial targets.

However, despite these measures,

devolution in the truest sense of the term has not been undertaken. The central government still maintains a firm grip on the affairs of Dhaka Wasa. This retards progress, contributes to politicisation and, eventually, bad governance.

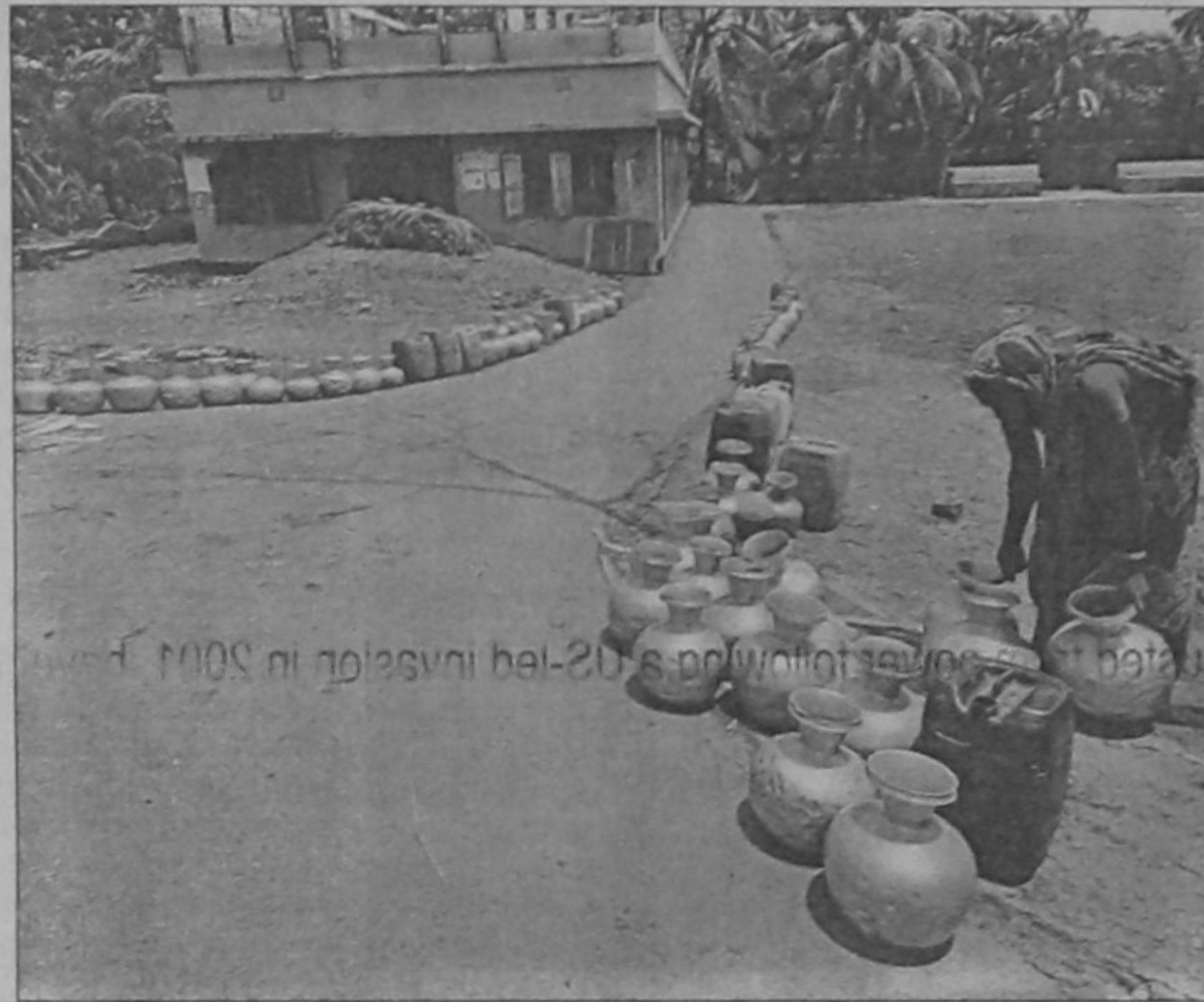
It would also be relevant to point out here that though Dhaka Wasa has made advances in revenue management and loss reduction, yet, there is need for them to work with stakeholders to prevent unauthorised land grabbing, closure of natural channels and retention basins, and improper solid waste disposal.

Similarly, Chittagong Wasa has to address institutional problems related not only to landslides that destroy natural drainage channels but also to the question of "systems loss" (corruption), whereby 35% of the total water supply remains unaccounted for.

The Union Parishads are beginning to play an important role in the rural areas with regard to water and sanitation, hygiene education and community mobilisation. There is also the welcome growing trend of allocating a minimum number of female representatives in the various parishads and in union water and sanitation committees. This will strengthen women's involvement in this sector and, in the long run, will greatly improve the selection, operation and maintenance of water points put in place in villages through public private partnerships.

We have many issues that need attention. Nevertheless, if addressed properly, it will greatly improve water management.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net



Water, water ... nowhere!

Behind the intelligence deficits

We have been criticising the agencies very loudly without, however, appreciating the impediments to the growth of an apolitical professional organisation. Time has come when we must have the honesty to call a spade a spade and realise that governments will change hands but not the state.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE prime minister has impressed upon the very urgent necessity of reorganising and revamping the intelligence organisations that have come under sharp attack from different quarters for the alleged failures in properly forewarning about the potential and actual threats to national security. The accusing fingers point to the BDR carnage which, according to the critics, could have been averted if intelligence operations were on the right track.

The time is perhaps still not appropriate to credibly pronounce on the under performance of different organs, including the intelligence bodies, that had a bearing on the ghastly tragedy at BDR headquarters. Once the criminal investigation is over and the trial of the guilty concludes, one may be able to apportion the blame to intelligence organs.

If lack of proper intelligence is considered to be a deficit area then we ought to know why this has happened. We also have to know if intelligence agencies have operated without adequate accountability and political oversight, and if their personnel have allowed themselves to be misused and abused by the politicians in power for disgraceful and even degrading purposes. The allegation that the shroud of total secrecy is always used to cover up all deeds and misdeeds cannot be summarily dismissed.

It is also important for the citizens to know if the alleged politicisation or lack of impartiality and objectivity in the reports of intelligence organisations have distorted the policy process and damaged the credibility and political legitimacy of the state. It is also pertinent

to ascertain whether our intelligence apparatuses lack a legal framework and a well-honed charter of duties. The feeling is that when an intelligence agency functions in a thoroughly political manner, the reports are often fabricated and give rise to misleading political assessments.

The considered views of present day security experts are to the effect that open discussion by competent and concerned persons may in fact rationalise the operations of intelligence organisation to the benefit of a democratic polity. One may look at recent events in Pakistan, where the military has thought it fit to enlighten all lawmakers about the terror and religious extremism scenario.

One has to remember that intelligence bosses enjoy privileged access to the top political executive, the prime minister and the home minister. The agencies provide direction to police organisations in addition to providing political-analytical inputs to the ruling regimes. The agencies undertake strategic exercises during elections, and conduct election forecasts and analysis to oblige the party in power.

It has been our unfortunate experience to witness that, far from being confined to the proper intelligence role, over-zealous bosses almost became confidants of the chief executive, adept at every task entrusted to them.

We had the unfortunate experience of witnessing a very sensitive intelligence organisation working principally for the whims and caprices of a virtual dictator, and using public funds for creating and destabilising political parties, political horse-trading and shadowing people on personal and flimsy grounds. No wonder that in such a scenario professional

efficiency was sacrificed and public servants turned into personal servants, with the attendant ignominy.

The mission and strategy of our intelligence organisations had not been stable, at least insofar as the domestic threat perception is concerned. It invariably changes with the change of a political government. Differing political agenda often tend to cloud the pragmatic understanding of our real national interests.

The unpleasant truth is that intelligence agencies maintain files on and shadow the leaders and workers of pronouncedly constitutional politics-oriented parties belonging to the opposition who are recognised partners in the business of politics. At some point of time when such opposition party comes to power, there is an uneasy relationship between the political masters and the agencies.

In such a scenario, professionalism becomes the worst casualty, sense of direction is lost and the organisation dips into a lackadaisical environment and interests of the state take a back seat, giving greater space to partisan considerations. It needs to be kept in mind that the values of a democratic polity are universal and as such demand unconditional adherence to them.

A national agency is expected to be able to effectively serve national interests if directed appropriately by the political authority. If they (agencies) have to remain preoccupied with largely inconsequential partisan matters to the detriment of national interest, then we will not be able to manage a crisis situation, not to speak of forestalling tragedies.

We have been criticising the agencies very loudly without, however, appreciating the impediments to the growth of an apolitical professional organisation. Time has come when we must have the honesty to call a spade a spade and realise that governments will change hands but not the state.

In Bangladesh today, we are passing through a sad time when doubts are being expressed publicly about the efficacy and honesty of some vital organs of

the state, whose functions can neither be arrogated to others nor be privatised. The compounding tragedy is that such criticisms by leaders of our society cannot be summarily dismissed.

It would not be prudent to treat a disease by denying its very existence. At the same time we cannot give in to the cynics by agreeing to endure what apparently cannot be cured. We can definitely overcome the impasse by dint of political goodwill and foresight if we admit that the damage caused during the yester-years has to be repaired and the safety and security of the people will receive unbiased attention.

Let us be forewarned that progress in damage repairing will be slow but if we can muster enough courage to initiate the process and avoid being myopic, our future generations would be the proud citizens in a healthy polity. Our politicians have to take the lead. They have to rise to the occasion.

At the heart of the matter, there should be a charter of duties for the intelligence organs, putting responsibilities beyond doubt and indicating what is permitted and what is prohibited.

The purpose for which intelligence has to be collected has to be clearly spelt. The same should not be to sub-serve the interests of a political party or an individual, or to blackmail or control the opponents of the political party in power or hostile elements within the establishment.

The legitimate purpose of intelligence should be to anticipate developments that may imperil national interests so as to enable appropriate action, with the imperative that any effort to equate national interest with party interest should be guarded against. Once the purpose is known, the chances of non-observance of fairness and objectivity in intelligence collection will be reduced. Constant vigilance against misuse will be needed as intelligence activities are carried on in secrecy.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.