

MPs' obligations and duties

People have a right to expect more from elected reps

SERVING as an elected representative of the people is a solemn obligation, but one that the nation's MPs have not, by and large, fulfilled to the extent that those who voted for them would expect. It is thus incumbent upon our parliamentarians to redouble their efforts and buckle down to do the job they were elected to do.

We were discouraged to learn that, according to a recent report issued by TIB, over Tk 5 crore has been wasted already this year due to the failure of the parliament to sit on time for lack of quorum. When quorum requires a mere 60 members out of a House of 330, failure to achieve it is really unacceptable.

This quorum crisis is emblematic of the failure of our MPs to serve with sincerity and conscientiousness. Indeed, it is tantamount to not even bothering to show up for work. It is thus clear that serious self-corrective steps must be taken by the parliamentarians to bring their conduct into line with what is expected of them and what their obligations are.

We support TIB's suggestion that absence of 30 days, instead of 90, should lead to loss of seat. In fact, 30 days, unless it is a health related problem, may even be excessively generous. What other line of work would countenance such prolonged absence for no good cause? We also agree that there should be no remuneration for those absent, as would be the case in any other line of work.

As for the opposition, we once again urge it to eschew the politics of boycott. The provision for staging a walk-out is there to be used to express dissent, but this is very different from refusing to attend the parliament at all. Continuous boycott, thus neglecting the job you have been elected to perform, is nothing more or less than a dereliction of duty.

In short, the parliamentarians, both government and opposition, must get their act together and ensure that parliament functions as intended. If the nation is to have any faith in its elected leaders and, indeed, in the very institution of parliamentary democracy, then it is imperative that our parliamentarians be more conscientious and make more of an effort to ensure that parliament is functional. It is their job, after all.

A zoo or a deathtrap for animals?

It needs a thorough overhaul, urgently

WE cannot but be horrified by a recent report appearing in this newspaper regarding the horrendous conditions that the animals in the Dhaka zoo are living in. What causes us concern in particular is the number of deaths at the zoo. We find the reported death of 18 rare animals in one year very abnormal, particularly of rare species brought in from abroad and relocated to a completely new environment.

We would like to see the zoo authorities not make the 'acceptable limits' of animal deaths a statistic to hide behind. Much better would have been if they had striven to turn the figure in favour of the animals by increasing the survival rate. The zoo authorities should have done everything to ensure that the conditions which the rare species had been used to living in are replicated as closely as possible in their new abode and that the process of adapting was made as easy and as bearable as possible.

We all too often forget that even animals require humane treatment, more so when they are living in a confined and new environment which they consider hostile. Their physical needs are overlooked and provisions meant for them are often pilfered, depriving the animals of their full requirement of food and forage, causing them to be emaciated and making them prone to diseases. The animals have medical needs too, and it is for the zoo authorities to ensure that they are not infected by diseases prevailing outside the zoo, which it has not.

It is unfortunate but true that the greatest danger animals in the cage face is from us, the human beings. Needless to say, the visitors at the zoo too have a role to play in the wellbeing of the inmates. It is said that many of the ailments the animals suffer from are attributable to overfeeding by the visitors who take pleasure in feeding them without realising the harm they are doing. Given that nearly 10,000 people visit the zoo daily there is need to make them aware of the do's and don'ts inside the zoo.

If there is anything worse than not having a zoo at all is having a poorly kept one. The prevalent condition of Dhaka zoo is unacceptable. It needs radical improvement urgently.

Prioritising the pedestrian

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MAKING cities "livable for all," is a goal pursued by planners and sought by governments. As income disparity widens in Bangladesh, it is all the more imperative to ensure inclusiveness. One essential area of inclusiveness is the "Right to Movement." The pedestrian has been ignored and the mass bus operations have been marginalised for too long. The government must give the pedestrian the highest priority in the urban movement system along with mass public transport (MPT).

The mindset associated with walking and using public transportation must change. The sequence of urban road construction must be reversed so that footpaths are constructed first, then the section along the edge of the footpath for public buses, with the central lanes for private transport constructed last. Footpaths must become an integral and inseparable part of urban roads.

The routine traffic jams are evidence of misplaced transportation priorities. We read about ambitious flyover and sky-rail projects, not much is heard about provision of adequate footpaths and pedestrian facilities, although the civility of a city is judged by the adequacy of its pedestrian comfort and availability of mass public transport.

In respect to cities, we need to adopt a "transport prioritisation policy" that prioritises the pedestrian and promotes mass public transport. The order of priority should be:

- The pedestrians: Since they form the majority. Walking does not consume energy or cause pollution. It saves scarce road space for other commuters.
- Mass public transport: Since they carry a large number of people per unit road space and are the most efficient form of urban transportation.
- The private car: Since it is the most uneconomic form of transportation. It occupies the most per unit road space, adds to congestion and pollution. (CNG's would fall in this category)

In respect to footpaths, if we look at the residential areas (R/A), where walking should be the primary mode of movement, we find that footpaths are almost nonexistent in even the planned residential areas in Dhaka or Chittagong. Footpaths in Dhanmandi R/A were

constructed in the late '80's and '90's, the roads and houses in the '50's and '60's.

There are no footpaths in the planned R/A's of Gulshan, Banani, DOHS or Uttara. In Chittagong, no planned R/A has footpaths. Other areas evolved without provisions for footpaths. As multifamily apartments quickly replaced low-rise residences, population densities increased. Lack of footpaths presupposes that those who commute are dependent on private cars or other vehicles. Safety or convenience has been totally disregarded in pedestrian movement. This condition must change.

Footpaths in the CBD and other commercial areas are usually inadequate or unusable. The city development authorities (Rajuk, CDA, etc) have permitted construction of large buildings on the edge of roads without considering the traffic jam they are responsible for. Adequate dropping and parking areas have not been ensured. The existing pavements and roads are illegally occupied to serve the building users. This shows a total lack of community responsibility on the part of the developers and lack of foresight and professionalism by the controlling authorities.

A few recommendations for introducing inclusiveness in the urban movement system have been provided to get the attention of the policy makers. First and foremost, there has to be provision of adequate footpaths along all new urban roads across the country.

In the existing roads innovative ways must be explored, such as elevating the footpath where there is space constraints and making parts of the ground floor accessible to pedestrians. Provision for footpaths is a legal requirement for owners of road frontage development in many western and Asian cities. This provision is an integral part of the statutory building/planning rules. Road front property owners are required to allocate a strip of land to the urban municipality for pedestrian movement only.

Once footpaths are established, local surveillance must be ensured to keep them free from storage of construction materials, garbage/garbage bins, extension of shops, use as car parking bays or as dropping areas for the massive shopping malls littered across the city's thoroughfares.

Maintenance may also be made a legal requirement for the roadside



Spilling out onto the street!

building owners. The building owner may receive a small fee, get tax benefits, and obtain additional floor space benefit beyond the existing building rules for such services.

On a different note, it must be kept in mind that footpaths provide the only space for trading wares for a large section of the urban poor. Therefore, instead of eviction or neglect, innovative ways to make provision for street vendors must be explored, keeping provisions for pedestrian movement.

A mechanism to formalise their operations must be an integral function of the City Corporations/Municipalities, which they should pursue in association with the development authorities.

When adequate footpaths and pedestrian facilities exist, mass bus transport becomes an acceptable and popular option. Appropriate provisions for the operation of an efficient bus system should be included by the government through fiscal and spatial measures. Spatial measures include ensuring that the existing road network caters to the needs of bus operations, such as bus lanes, and designated waiting and dropping areas for passengers.

The surface of the bus lanes may have a different colour or texture. This helps to become self-regulatory. Once this is done, all efforts must be taken to reserve this portion for public transportations, particularly during peak hours.

Private cars should get the least preference in the urban movement system. Our government must discourage the ownership and use of private cars through fiscal and spatial measures. Fiscal measures may include amongst others:

- High yearly car ownership tax;
 - Low availability of institutional credit for purchasing private cars; and
 - Higher fuel prices for private cars.
- Spatial restrictions may limit the

entry of private cars into certain roads during peak hours.

Many Asian cities, such as Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore and Taiwan, imposed restrictions on private car ownership as early as the '70's and opted for developing efficient mass public transportations. Other Asian capitals have, through the years, introduced fiscal measures to reduce car ownership, thereby slowing the motorisation process while keeping facilities for commuters.

Contrast this with Bangladesh's use of luxury private cars, which crossed all time records, and easy and attractive credit line under consumer credit scheme offered by banks. The hundreds of imported cars lined up for sale, occupying scarce port storage yards (Prothom Alo June, 28) are evidence of misplaced policies.

The CNG scooters operate like private transportation. They create discipline and chaos. As a mode of transport, they are expensive, unreliable and inefficient in terms of road space occupancy. It's time to look at long-term benefits against short-term prescriptions. Innovative ways to operate non-motorised transportation can be explored. Options have run out for many areas in the capital city but creativity can work wonders.

We appeal to the government to take a firm decision to provide safe and adequate footpaths, pursue mass public transportations, construct parking garages in all areas according to projected demand, and discourage "private car." Combined and innovative actions towards these goals will make Dhaka and other cities livable, will boost the economy and establish social justice.

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Resisting e-governance

Not only government officials, but also non-scientists all over the world are afraid of technology. They don't like to involve themselves in it. E-governance (electronic governance) is digital technology based activities.

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FINANCE Minister A.M.A. Muhith has accused a section of government officials for creating obstacles to the introduction of e-governance in the country, saying that these officials consider information technology (IT) detrimental to their interests. "There are vested quarters in the administration, who never want such development that can affect their interests," he said at a seminar in the city.

I am neither a politician nor a government official, but a senior citizen and academic and industrial scientist. Before blaming anybody, we should understand what the science and technology atmosphere of the country was before Sheikh Hasina's government came to power. How much importance was given to scientific activities in Bangladesh? How much recognition did a scientist get?

We can take the example of Dr. M.A. Wajed Mia. There are a lot of examples when scientists and scientific activities were seriously overlooked in the country. We are lucky that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her intention of establishing Digital Bangladesh. The general mass started to find out what Digital Bangladesh actually meant, and realised the relevance of science and technology to Digital Bangladesh.

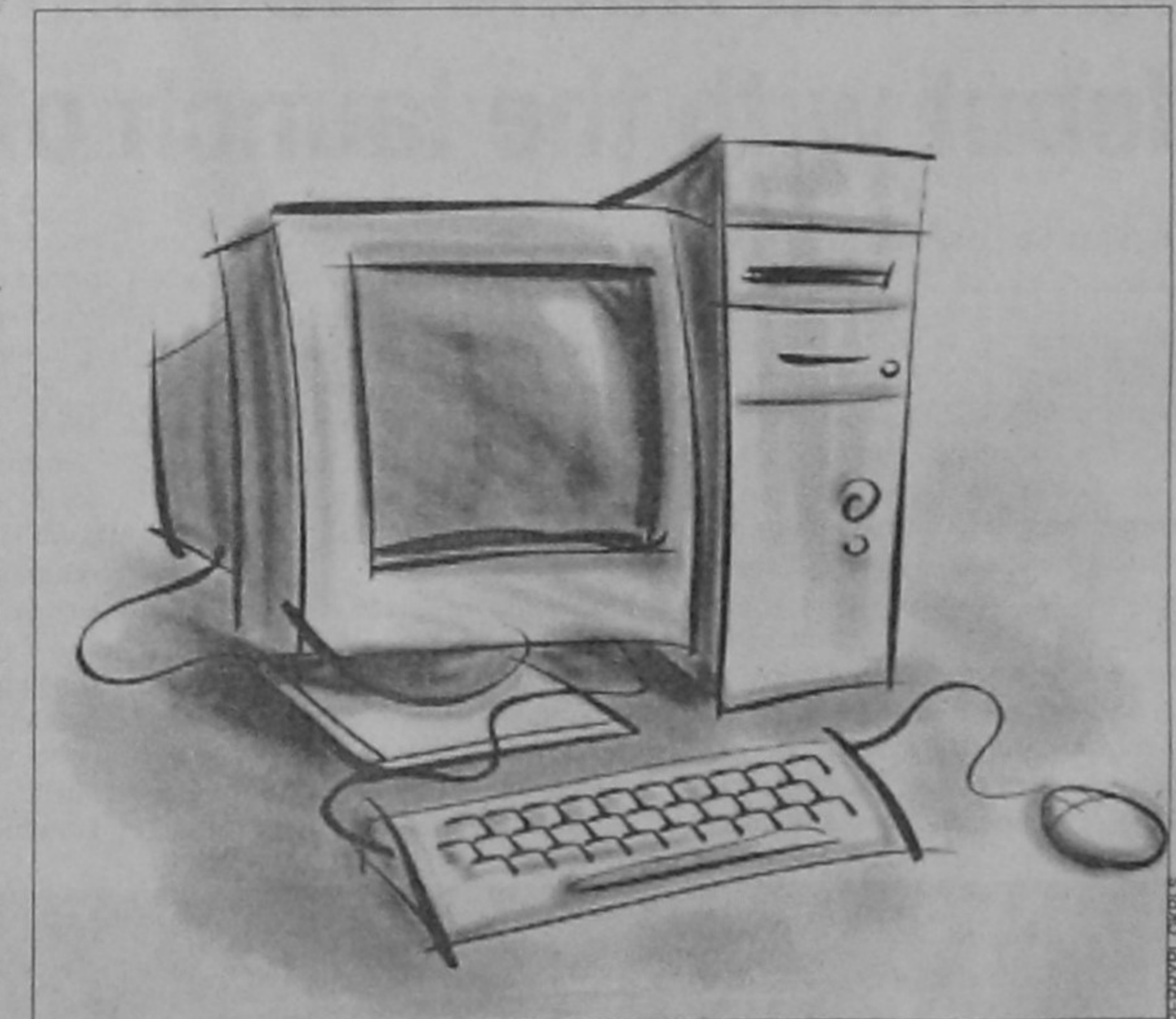
As mentioned earlier in many of my articles, technology cannot develop in a

vacuum. Not only government officials, but also non-scientists all over the world are afraid of technology. They don't like to involve themselves in it. E-governance (electronic governance) is digital technology based activities. It is good that our respected ministers are taking an interest in technology and realising the importance of information and communication technology (ICT).

Earlier, a lot of initiatives were taken to introduce new technology, particularly ICT, in government offices, health care sector and the education sector including universities, under the auspices of the international organisations like Commonwealth Science Council (CSC) of the Commonwealth Secretariat, but there was not much cooperation from the government. Many high officials at that time commented that learning ICT applications was the job of typists.

Implementation of the e-governance won't be possible through confrontation with them or through issuing orders. We'll have to encourage them, keep them with us," the minister said. Very right, and I appreciate him for the comments. Being an economist, he realised the importance and the strategy of implementations.

"Only supply of computers would not ensure the digital Bangladesh. There is a need to train manpower and revise the complex rules and regulations to make



Are government officials scared of technology?

the vision success." This is also true.

The following comments are also very effective and timely. The government is working to frame a "digital policy" in a bid to digitise the country. "We are ready to make the country fully digital. But there is a concern over the issue as it could create a digital division in the society. If there is any digital division among the society, it would be very shocking for the nation. So the government is very cautious before making Bangladesh fully digital," he said.

It is worth mentioning here that many non-scientists and technologists are giving statements on science and tech-

nology that must be very carefully examined and reviewed. They may become dangerous or their statements might be disastrous for Digital Bangladesh.

One of the most important jobs of the policy makers, particularly the respected ministers, is to find out the real talents in science and technology. Their scientific learning at university level and experience in the proper fields should get priority. We must remember: "A fool with a costly tool in hand is still a fool."

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