

## Army pullout from CHT

Step towards implementation of CHT Accord

**T**HE first major pullout of the army from the CHT since 1997 -- when the CHT Peace Accord was signed followed by limited withdrawal -- began last Friday with the dismantling of an army camp.

The issue has to be placed in the right perspective, as it has far-reaching implications insofar as the future of the CHT and its people are concerned. The first point to be taken note of is that the pullout is in keeping with the accord. It is a solid step towards its implementation and is an indicator of the government's trust in the abilities of the local administration and the people of the CHT to maintain peace and order. After all, deployment of the army for patrolling the areas, which were once the scene of a long-drawn, self-attritional insurgency, had to come to an end with the end of the insurgency itself. People of the CHT have begun their journey along the path to peaceful coexistence and it was necessary to go by the accord which laid the foundation of a fresh beginning. A government official has quite rightly expressed his optimism, which reflects the opinion of the majority, that law and order will not worsen after the army camps are dismantled.

The critics of the government move are apparently getting a partial picture of the situation. It is not a total withdrawal, that some quarters are apparently worried about, for a cantonment will remain in the CHT as any other part of the country.

The withdrawal of the camps is indeed a sign of the army's success in its CHT mission. Their work in the CHT over the years has created a situation in which maintenance of law and order can be vested in the civil administration which will, we believe, get full cooperation of the local people. The work done by the army has actually changed the lives of the CHT people in many ways. The army has set up schools, libraries and constructed roads and buildings as part of the plan to improve the overall infrastructure facilities in the hill districts.

The security concerns as expressed by those opposed to the pullout, if any, have to be addressed, but no less important is normalisation of life in the CHT and handing over matters pertaining to administration and enforcement of the law to civilian authorities.

## River channels under threat

Sand traders and BIWTA staff unholy nexus

**T**HIS is yet another story of devilish connection between ones whose job it is to ensure the navigability of the water channels, and sand traders who excavate rivers to extract sand, defying the orders and bending the rules for illegal gains. The whole system of oversight has been cast overboard because most in the loop are allegedly involved in the illegal deal.

Reportedly, not one or two persons but an entire chain of the BIWTA, its hydrographic, ports conservancy and engineering departments, seems involved in the nexus, that is turning a blind eye to the illegal excavation of water channels in the vicinity of the capital and extraction in excess of ten times the permitted quantity of sand than allowed by the contract because those in public employment have been bribed by the contractor to turn a blind eye; and the contractor makes no secret of it.

This is not only causing damage to the river channels and forcing the rivers to alter course, thereby posing a threat to the lives and property of those residing by the riverbank, it is also a potential risk to the underconstruction third Buriganga Bridge, according to site engineers.

We find it rather incomprehensible that some unscrupulous officials of the BIWTA would take advantage of the absence of a policy on excavation of river beds to mint money at the expense of public safety.

The absolute lack of concern on the part of the relevant officials of the inland water transport authority is illustrated by the fact that they had not taken any action to prevent excess extraction; and their orders to the contractor to suspend work were not given of their own volition but after a report was published in this newspaper and public outcry raised by the inhabitants of Basila.

The relevant authorities must sit up and take note. Not only there is no policy on extraction, the contractors do not have even the requisite expertise. Some excavations take place even when the river, like the Buriganga, needs no dredging at all, because, according to officials, extraction has been a long standing practice. It is time these people, who feathered their own nest disregarding public safety, were taken to task and meted out the severest punishment.

## Information Commission bureaucratised

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ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

**O**N its July 14 Web posting (IFEX, International Freedom of Expression eXchange), the International Press Institute (IPI) hailed the enactment of Bangladesh's 2009 Right to Information (RTI) Act and the formation of Bangladesh Information Commission (BIC) as important steps towards recognition of the people's right to access information. The IPI also expressed its disappointment by stressing that the regime of exclusions in the Act is too broad and the scope of accessibility to information too restrictive.

Referring to the IPI delegation's December 2008 meeting with Sheikh Hasina, IPI Director David Dudge called on the government "to take all necessary steps to implement the RTI law so that it truly facilitates journalists' access to information and thereby with promotes the people's right to know."

While talking to an IPI delegation at a separate meeting, *Janakantha* editor Toab Khan said: "The right to information law is a milestone in the country's history, but there are only four reasons for providing information, while there are 20 reasons for blocking information."

The 2009 RTI Act -- originally drafted and promulgated by the last interim government as the RTI Ordinance 2008 -- overrides all previous acts in whatever forms they existed. Many of us now wonder whether the government will dawdle in setting up the information delivery systems in government offices within the 60 days of the enactment of the Act, as required.

In his August 2 piece "Making right to information laws effective," A.N.M. Nurul Haque expressed his concerns as follows: "Many people are doubtful about the sincerity of the officials who have been assigned to provide information to people, as the offi-

cials are accustomed to acting as a barrier between the government and the people because of their bureaucratic background."

The concerns of Toab Khan, Nurul Haque and the IPI delegation have one discernible common element -- a suspicion about bureaucratic bungles in implementing the provisions of the RTI Act. The qualifications and experience of the three appointees in BIC simply reinforced and magnified that mistrust.

The appointment of BIC commissioners -- two bureaucrats (former EPCS and BCS officers) and one sociologist (university professor) -- appears to be, prima facie, a slapdash decision, one that may have been driven by political expediency of bureaucratisation of the commission rather than premised on considerations of appropriate qualification, experience and aptitude.

Bureaucratisation -- according to the German sociologist Max Weber (1922) -- refers to the organisation of political and economic administrative institutions created on the basis of the principles of a bureaucracy. It is broadly interpreted as a tendency to manage an organisation by adding more controls, adherence to rigid procedures, and attention to every detail for its own sake. It's no coincidence that bureaucrats everywhere are generally viewed as being antithetical to openness. Thus, there exists a clear disjuncture between their background and the nature of their job as members of the BIC.

Look around and you will see who heads over half a dozen statutory/constitutional bodies of the country -- nearly all are former bureaucrats. One may call this "politicisation" but I choose to call it "bureaucratisation" by appointing politically sympathetic former bureaucrats. Once appointed, they are untouchable



Remove the red-tape.

during their fixed tenure of office. Naturally, politicians would like to appoint people who they believe would protect their interests when that comes in conflict with transparency and accountability.

Have we ever heard of a public official being reprimanded -- let alone face other disciplinary measures -- for serving his political master faithfully while being inefficient in delivering the desired services to the taxpayers.

Aptitude, qualification, background and experience are among the important attributes the US Senate painstakingly examines in Senate confirmation hearings prior to confirming the president's nominees for appointments to all executive positions in the US government, including judicial, diplomatic and cabinet appointments. Serving the political interest of the party in power ahead of public interest will warrant immediate impeachment whoever he/she may be.

When our politicians refer to political appointments in the US government -- in a bid to justify politicisation -- they conveniently ignore delving into the grueling Senate confirmation process for eventual appointments -- no inexperienced and inept Tom, Dick and Harry have any chance here.

However smart, honest and sincere they may be, bureaucrats, because of the nature of their job, have little scope to develop or manifest themselves overtly as intellectually independent thinkers -- at least during their years of service. Obviously, when a political government appoints them in statutory bodies they are chosen not for their independent thinking and policy making aptitude but, rather, for their political pedigree and past subservience to political leadership.

I am utterly disappointed because the government could have appointed at least one journalist and one lawyer to assure all concerned about the proper checks and balances in the operations of the BIC. No one comes ahead of journalists when it comes to promoting the right to freedom of information and voicing public interest. You will never see such illogical appointments as in the BIC in any developed democracies in the world.

Finally, will the government and the BIC take it as a challenge to dispel the concerns and criticisms advanced by me, Nurul Haque, and all others concerned, through implementation of the RTI Act?

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## Remittance in investment

The government should formulate a well thought-out policy encouraging the migrant workers and their families to invest in small-scale agro-based industries, and provide them with the necessary technical assistance and marketing facilities.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

**E**XPATRIATE Bangladeshis remitted \$10 billion in the just-ended fiscal year, posting a strong 22% rise over the same period in last fiscal. The per capita amount that our migrant workers have remitted is higher than that of India, which is the highest remittance receiving country in the world.

This robust inflow of remittance has raised the country's foreign currency reserve to an all time high of \$7.84 billion, well above the safe threshold to meet three months' import bills. This is borne out by the near doubling of the country's foreign currency reserve during this period through notably higher remittance inflow in the last few years.

The inflow of remittances has increased by about 150% in the past few years. It stood at \$8.86 million in the first month of the ongoing fiscal year, marking an 8% growth over the month of July of last fiscal.

The World Bank said on July 29 that Bangladesh was expected to receive remit-

tance worth \$10.87 billion in the current fiscal year if the global oil price did not fall and the local currency was not appreciated. But the negative side is that a high proportion of the remittances is used just for consumption, without helping to boost up the country's economy on a long-term basis.

We may learn a lesson from the Philippines on use of remittances, where they are a source of investment. An increasing number of migrant workers there are using remittance not just for consumption but also for investing in small businesses.

Philippines, a major labour exporting and remittance receiving country, which received \$16 billion in 2008, has developed a trend among the remittance recipients to spend a higher proportion of remittances in investment instead of consumption.

There is increasing evidences that the families receiving a significant amount of remittance prefer to have at least one family member as self-employed or heading a small enterprise, suggesting that remittance may also help them to start and sustain small businesses.

A recent survey of Asian Development Bank revealed that, 900,000 Filipinos shifted from the low income group to the middle-income group by using remittance to invest in small business enterprises. Which has reduced the poverty rate by at least 5%.

The migrant workers of Bangladesh are not lagging behind in any way. But in the absence of state patronisation or an appropriate investment policy, the higher proportion of their remittances are being used by their family members just for consumption or to improve their lifestyles.

A recent World Bank study revealed that migrant's households in Bangladesh spend more on food and lifestyle rather than in a productive way. They eat better, dress better and buy more household appliances than a non-migrant household.

Earning of the migrant workers is a prominent source of foreign currency for Bangladesh. But their earnings have not been contributing towards boosting the country's economy for the lack of proper initiatives.

The government introduced Wage Earners Development Bonds for its migrant workers, which were out of reach for most of the migrant workers and their families living in the rural areas and unable to go through cumbersome process of buying it.

The government is now planning to provide banking services to a huge number of migrant workers and their families through mobile phone, and to set up an expatriate welfare bank.

The expatriate welfare ministry should seriously consider issuance of bonds specially designed for the migrant workers, which can be easily bought, and make them available in rural areas so that their families can buy them.

The funds thus mobilised should be invested through a competent management board, with public and private sector representatives, for taking up well thought-out projects having relevance to the welfare of our migrant workers.

India issued Resurgent Bonds in 1998 in the wake of international sanctions imposed on it because of its nuclear tests, and raised \$4.2 billion, which helped it to withstand the shock of economic sanctions.

Use of remittance as a means to run small business enterprises may be a good solution. The government should formulate a well thought-out policy encouraging the migrant workers and their families to invest in small-scale agro-based industries, and provide them with the necessary technical assistance and marketing facilities.

To use the untapped potential of our migrant workers, the government, on the one hand, should take serious steps to keep the present robust inflow of remittance alive and, on the other, formulate an appropriate investment policy for the migrant workers to invest their remittances in the productive sectors.

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## The madrassa myth

What is needed is a complete rethink of Arab education, giving local communities a greater say in what and how their children are taught and helping the system respond to the marketplace.

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

**Y**OU'VE probably heard of Madrasas. The word, which means "schools" in Arabic, took on ominous overtones after 9/11, when Western pundits and politicians warned that extremist Saudi-financed religious schools were filling the education gap throughout the Muslim world but sending youngsters straight into the arms of al-Qaeda.

If anything, you'd think the problem would have gotten worse since then, thanks to the global financial crisis. But it turns out that the madrassa storyline was never so stark -- and the real problem with education in the Muslim world is more complicated.

The good news is that religious madrasas have never been for the masses; even the infamous ones in Pakistan edu-

cate less than 3% of the total student population in the country, and the numbers are equally negligible in the Arab world. Yet that's little cause for celebration. Government schools that do educate the masses are mind-numbing and anachronistic, utterly useless for helping graduates face global competition. And their failures are far more dangerous.

This wound is largely self-inflicted. "Generations have been raised not to question authority" or think critically, says a leading Arab reform advocate, who asked not to be named because of the political sensitivities involved. "This was on the premise that by doing so you raise a docile population -- but the results have been just the opposite."

A major report issued by the World Bank last year documents the problem. Arab public schools, which educate roughly 80%

of the population, are often designed to turn out minimally skilled bureaucrats who are not even guaranteed government jobs any longer. And good luck finding work in the private sector.

The result, says Marwan Muasher, who was previously an architect of Jordan's long-term development strategy, "is a huge number of young people who are unemployed, frustrated, and may be subject to radical ideologies."

Muasher's warning is frightening: throughout modern history, revolutions have started among people whose aspirations were raised and then crushed. The total population of the Muslim Middle East and North Africa has almost quadrupled since 1950, and more than 65% of its people are under the age of 25.

Mass media have given them a view of the wider world, but their schools haven't given them the tools to access it. While there have been recent improvements in some areas like literacy, the massive youth bulge is creating a huge burden for state education systems.

Parents who hope for better have turned increasingly to private institutions -- but not just Saudi-run madrasas. Two good

examples are the Choueifat Schools, founded in Lebanon way back in 1886, and Global Education Managements Systems, which originated in Dubai in the 1980s. Both have grown rapidly throughout the region, offering secular education by skilled professionals.

In Qatar, 72% of primary-school students now go to private schools, and in the United Arab Emirates it's 58%. (The numbers drop dramatically in the bigger Arab states.)

But private schools are a lousy fix, as they risk perpetuating elites and heightening class divisions that are already a source of enormous tensions. What is needed is a complete rethink of Arab education, giving local communities a greater say in what and how their children are taught and helping the system respond to the marketplace.

But don't count on such a change being made soon. In the meantime, madrasas may not be filling the gap. But that's cold consolation for the poorly served kids of the greater Middle East.

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