

## Tendering online by PDB is a right move

*The method should be replicated in other govt procurement wings*

BY introducing tender-bidding on online, the Power Development Board (PDB) blazing the trail for its rental power plants, the government has at last taken a right step towards freeing the tendering process from the curse of violence, manipulation and corruption. Though going online may not instantly present us with a smooth and hassle-free tendering procedure, it does at least indicate the most scientific method available to develop a less human-biased system of tendering.

The need for such a system with fewer points of human intervention cannot be overemphasised, given the fact that the government procurement process through tender is riddled with limitless corruption, highhandedness and violence. The types of irregularity, indiscipline and roguery that go with the traditional style of open tender bidding are simply unspeakable. A recent report on how the ruling party toughs in Comilla foiled the public health engineering department's attempt to receive offers from prospective bidders through pouring water in the tender box speaks volumes for that. And even such incidents are just the tip of the iceberg.

It is therefore easy to understand that the work orders for the jobs indicated in the tender hardly ever reach the right bidders. To avoid such consequences, the authorities sometimes resort to re-tendering of the works involved. But in most cases, those, too, prove to be futile exercises and a mere wastage of time and public money.

Such state of affairs has been prevailing in the government's public procurement regime for long. Even the latest move of the authorities to create multiple spots for the bidders to drop their tenders or sending their offers by mail, too, appears half-hearted in the face of the scale of the corruption and other vices that the public procurement regime has become a hotbed of.

Against such a bleak backdrop, the PDB's initiative to go digital in its tendering process is certainly a welcome move, if only for the reason that physical presence of the tendering officers and bidders would become redundant at least at the initial phase. But that in itself is no mean achievement. So, it is time the government should also encourage its other public procurement bodies, which are susceptible to serious corruption and other irregularities, to go digital, that is online, in their tendering process in the first stage.

As indicated in the beginning, going online is not itself the last word about guaranteeing a corruption-and-trouble-free as well as a transparent public procurement system. Nonetheless, the automation will create quite a new environment in the procurement regime. The old style of corruption including violence-mongering will become ineffective in this new system. And that would go a long way in saving a lot of time, money, energy as well as avoiding wastage in the tendering process.

## Crime and extortion, as Eid approaches

*More police vigilance is called for*

THE police department informs us that highway patrolmen have of late been keeping a lookout for criminal activities in the guise of traders at different points across the country. They are equipped with video cameras, which of course will come handy in identifying and nabbing those indulging in crime. Citizens have also been informed that these policemen in disguise have not spotted any of their fellow law enforcers engaging in extortion or any similar activity. Traders, at least some of them, have a different story to tell, though. As they note, they yet have to monetarily gratify a number of policemen, and at various points of their long journey before they can reach the capital. One certainly must wait to hear the police version of the story.

Meanwhile, disturbing reports of a rise in crime continue to come in. It appears that in the run-up to Eid ul Fitr, instances of extortion and attempted mugging have gone up, particularly in different parts of the nation's capital. It is particularly around markets and shopping malls that organized criminal gangs have been trying to operate. The good news, though, is that stepped up vigilance by the law enforcers has quite blunted the activities of these elements. Obviously, such security precautions have brought about a certain sense of relief for citizens. The point now is to make sure that such measures are sustained and indeed become a regular feature of life for residents of Dhaka city. But for people to feel reassured about security, it is hugely important that concerted action be taken where extortion is concerned. If mugging on the streets has been checked to some extent by the vigilance of the police, RAB and other agencies, extortion has not. The very fact that policemen have been deployed to guard furniture establishments in the city points to the organized way in which criminal gangs have now begun to operate. There are too the demands for money made over the phone, a method of operation which cannot but leave intended victims feeling ill protected or not protected at all. On top of it all, the reported failure or reluctance of officers at the police stations to take victims' statements and follow it up with action is dismaying. The recent instance of an Iranian woman getting robbed and beaten up by a gang of muggers in a taxi is a case in point.

The bottomline is that while certain security measures, such as increased vigilance in the markets and use of dog squads to identify contraband on various modes of transport, have struck some degree of fear among criminal elements, much more remains to be done. A sustained, no-holds barred operation against crime is a necessity if people are to breathe a little easier.

## Toying with the war crimes trial

We have fiddled away thirty-eight years toying with the idea of a trial. For thirty-eight years we have fretted over the slaughter of three million people and rape of two hundred thousand women. For as many years, we have given lip service to their memories, and did scantily to bring the criminals to justice.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NINE months running, the government has been in power for as long as the war crimes were committed in 1971. Long on words and short on actions, the trial may have reached its equinox, because the chance of holding it appears equally likely as the chance of being postponed again. At a time like this, it's appropriate to invoke my most favourite American poet, "In three words I can sum up everything I have learned in life," said Robert Frost. "It goes on," was his lesson.

If the Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee is being antsy and pushing for a deadline, it's because they might have also learned a similar lesson. They might not say it, and you don't want to ask them. But once burned, twice warned, they have learned since the Committee was formed in 1992 that foot-dragging could be a telltale sign that the cards are being reshuffled. The trial is perhaps going to go on, as Frost said.

Not to forget, we have an assurance from the government. The Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs minister has said that the trial would be held and nobody guilty of war crimes was going to be spared. We are glad he also went the extra mile to put our minds to rest. There is no pressure from abroad against the trial, he confirmed.

That leaves it entirely to us. What remains to be done is the logistic part. Special courts need to be set up and then prosecutors and judges have to be appointed. Obviously, jury

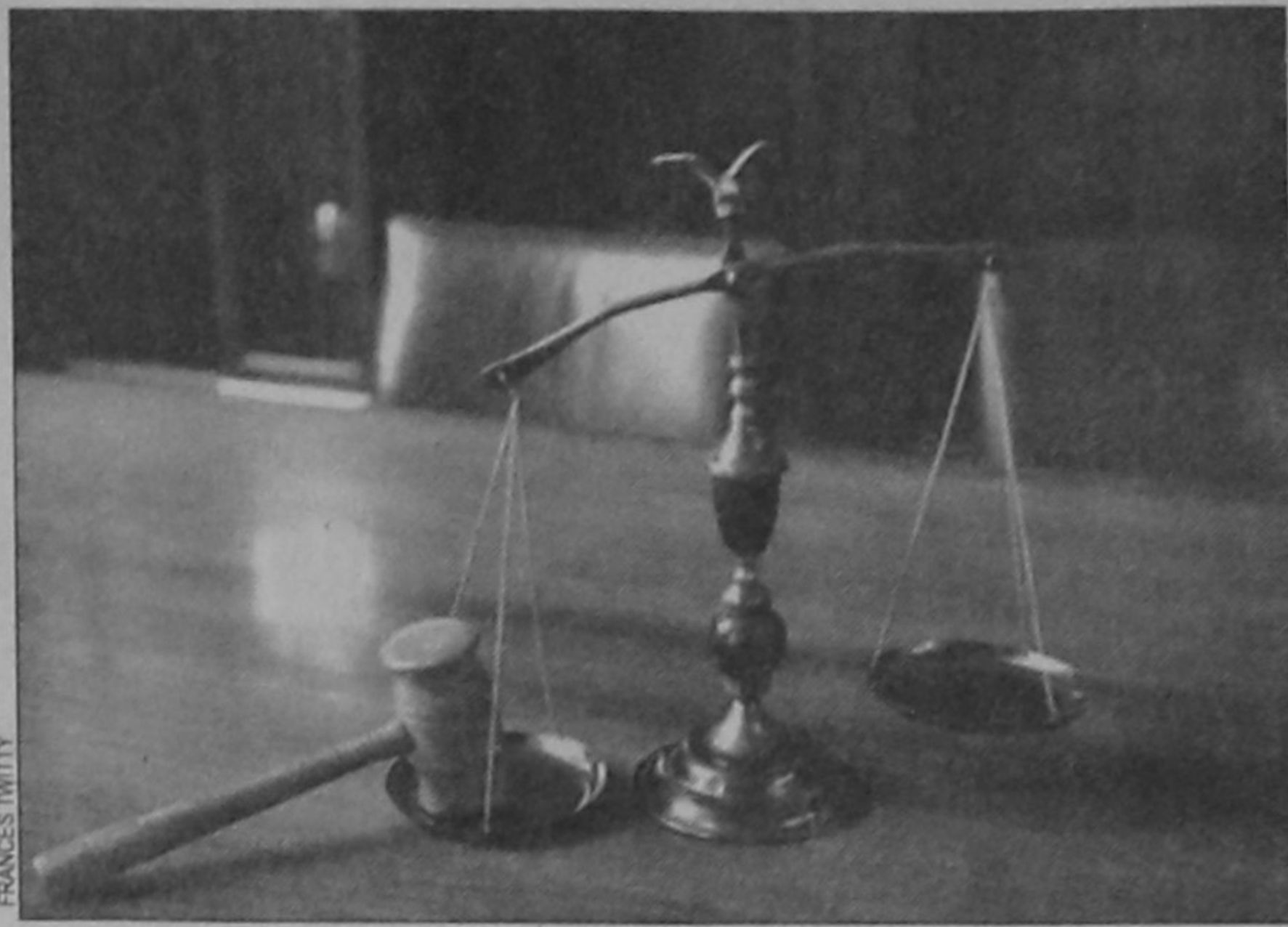
box, witness stand, judge's bench, and, most importantly, the gavel, have to be ready before the trial. Crimes are committed on the spur of the moment. But trials must go the whole nine yards.

All the more reason why there should be a roadmap. People should know in advance there could be delays and deliberations. Personally, I am not a big believer in roadmaps. Judging by the Middle East peace process, roadmaps lead to dead ends.

In our case, a roadmap is essential for an altogether different reason. It's not so much to find the way as to tell us if the journey has begun. It could convince us that the government is ready, that it means business. Right now the whole thing is fluid. The trial was expected to start last June. The new target is December. If the start shifts again, the end can drift to nowhere.

This is where we stumbled last Sunday when the minister announced that there was no roadmap. If there is going to be a trial, and if the government is working on logistics so that the trial can happen, why can't it give us a roadmap? Shouldn't that make us shaky if this government is serious about the trial? Shouldn't that make us doubtful if this government has actually thought it through?

Shoppers need shopping lists. Weddings require planning. How can a trial of such national importance happen without a planner? It doesn't have to be cast in stone. It can be modified and updated depending on progress of work. People can be briefed from time to time on the changes. It doesn't have



Justice delayed?

to be an earthshaking affair.

But ruling out the possibility of having the roadmap throws a monkey wrench into popular imagination. The Nirmul Committee must be worried exactly for that reason. They must be afraid lest the progress of trial is once again dragged through the procedural molasses of political pragmatism. They must be afraid lest it's shoved again to the backburner under the coercive direction of an invisible hand.

We have fiddled away thirty-eight years toying with the idea of a trial. For thirty-eight years we have fretted over the slaughter of three million people and rape of two hundred thousand women. For as many years, we have given lip service to their memories, and did scantily to bring the criminals to justice.

Why? Has it been due to lack of evidence?

Is it because we don't know who they are? Are these people absconding or hard to find? No. We have failed because of our irreverent handling and lack of political will. Those who were killed and raped, we have used them as hyena's share of the lion's skill.

Pardon me if I have to invoke my poet one last time. While addressing students at Harvard University, he suddenly looked up at the heavens. "Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee, and I'll forgive Thy great big joke on me," he said in jest.

The burden of guilt has shifted meanwhile. It's no longer the question whether we are going to spare the monsters of 1971. The question is if their victims will forgive the great big joke we pulled on them for 51 times longer than the period of the crime.

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## Investment in doldrums

The main problems regarding investment include among others: unwillingness to invest, acute shortage of gas, frequent disruption in power supply, dilatory procedures in approving projects coupled with unnecessary regulations, and global recession -- to mention a few.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

THERE is an intrinsic connection between economic growth and investment. Growth without investment is quite unthinkable. The government aims to attain two-digit growth definitely through long-term plans as reflected in AL's election manifesto based on Vision 2021. The national budget (2008/2009) is supposed to build a platform for transformation with "a vision of a happy and prosperous nation."

So there is a glimmer of hope for a change as there are lots of optimistic notes projecting astounding progress of the nation in the years to come. Of course, private-public partnership (PPP) is ready for implementation, but all infrastructural development projects under the new paradigm (PPP) have to be efficiently handled.

An apparently rosy list of priorities does not match with a black list of the ghosts. Exorcising these ghosts vitiating the investment environment is an insurmountable challenge. The chief among them are slow-

paced administration, overstuffed bureaucracy, rampant corruption, dysfunctional procurement process, lack of co-ordination, bureaucratic tangles, politicisation, cronyism, formalism and so fourth.

The crisis arising out of extortion, political influence in the tender process and illegal occupation, vitiating the investment-friendly environment, has become a matter of serious concern. Implementation will be difficult given the contextual realities. On the other hand, implementation of lofty goals of development through investment will be an acid test of the performance of the government.

The main problems regarding investment include among others: unwillingness to invest, acute shortage of gas, frequent disruption in power supply, dilatory procedures in approving projects coupled with unnecessary regulations, and global recession -- to mention a few.

The main concern of those willing to invest has been the acute crisis of gas. Although the recent recovery trend in global

economy is boosting confidence of investors, the gas crisis continues to dampen their mood. While existing industrial units are facing an inadequate supply of gas, new ones are not getting gas connection.

A columnist wrote that "advances to the manufacturing sector increased by 48 percent in the current calendar year. Investments of banks in the country's manufacturing sector stood at Tk.78,672.40 crore as of March 2009. Advances of the private commercial banks increased by 65 percent in March from 2005 figures, while state-owned commercial banks lent 11.36 percent higher to industries. Economic growth was 6 percent or a little more for the past five years before slowing down to 5.8 percent in the last fiscal year as impacts of global financial turmoil caused some decline in export demand."

A marked reduction in investment threatens to stymie macro economic growth. The result is likely to be concentration of idle money. Credit demand in the private sector is showing downward trend. Now banks are offering credits to the investors, investors are not hankering after bank loans. This is really a strange situation.

Bangladesh Bank said that credit to the private sector declined to 14.6 percent in the last fiscal year from 24.9 percent a year ago. According to Dhaka Bank: "Gas has become the most vital issue for industrial development. Everything will collapse if no new gas sources are explored and adequate supplies

ensured."

It is a high time for the government to steer the investment situation out of the woods. Everyone believes that investment is a *pace-setter for the long cherished proactive moves towards prosperity*. We want to see prosperity through guarding the frontier of investment. Investment from foreign countries, even with cheap labour force in Bangladesh, will be in the dock if the local investors do not come forward to buttress the private sector.

A well-conceived paradigm PPP augers well for co-operation between government and the private sector. The government is looking to establish Digital Bangladesh. Besides, there are ambitious communication projects taken up for "urgent implementation" under the PPP budget. They include Dhaka city access control highway, construction of a sky railway around Dhaka city, elevated express railway, Dhaka-Narayanganj-Gazipur elevated express, 4-year gas or coal fired 450 megawatt power stations and construction of a deep-sea port in Chittagong.

One may well predict that if the public and private sectors do not sit together in the spirit of partnership to combat this crisis, implementation of a plethora of important projects under ADP and PPP will be stymied.

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## Has coalition path meandered?

The lessons learned from that failure must be used to ensure the successful operation of the coalition government on this occasion. But the path the negotiations took in reaching the agreement was somewhat less than reassuring.

RICHIRO MAEKI

THE Democratic Party of Japan, which is set to become the ruling party after its overwhelming victory in the recent House of Representatives election, finally reached agreement with the Social Democratic Party and the People's New Party on the formation of a new coalition government to be led by the DPJ's Yukio Hatoyama as prime minister.

The negotiations that led up to that agreement focused on what kind of forum to create for coordinating policies among the three coalition parties.

The SDP was very keen to form a standing consultative panel involving the three parties. SDP Secretary General Yasumasa Shigeno expressed concern about the mechanism of his party's involvement in the coalition government, saying: "If a national strategy bureau and an administrative reform council are to be established (as proposed by the DPJ) within the government, then how will the SDP and the PNP be involved in the policymaking process?"

The DPJ, on the other hand, attached importance to unifying the policymaking process under the leadership of the cabinet

and is against granting parties strong policymaking powers. In its August 30 general election manifesto, the DPJ called for switching from the current "two-track system in which policymaking proceeds in parallel in government and in the ruling party to a unitary system of cabinet-centered policymaking."

As a compromise in the coalition negotiations, the DPJ said it would establish a "cabinet committee" as a consultative body of the three coalition party leaders after having the leaders of the SDP and the PNP join the cabinet. Earlier, SDP President Mizuho Fukushima telephoned DPJ President Hatoyama and directly asked him to establish this kind of consultative panel made up of the top leaders of the three parties.

If the coalition's consultative body comprises cabinet ministers, the DPJ can explain that it does not represent a contradiction of its policy of unifying the decision-making process under cabinet leadership. The SDP, for its part, considers the establishment of a standing decision-making consultative council of party leaders a significant move.

But the DPJ's original manifesto pro-

posed called for the establishment of a cabinet committee involving all cabinet members. In the manifesto, the party says: "Politicians themselves will coordinate difficult issues under cabinet leadership. We will abolish administrative vice-ministers' meetings and put politicians in charge of decision-making."

When the DPJ compiled the policy platform, it is believed to have envisaged cabinet committees comprising the prime minister and the 17 other cabinet ministers.

It remains to be seen how the new administration's cabinet committees will function. There will be two types of committee, one to be established on each policy and consisting of cabinet ministers and the other to involve party leaders.

If the second type of committee is limited to lawmakers at the very top of their respective parties, it will consist of a mere three members. In this case, the SDP and the PNP would each presumably have a one-third share of the policymaking say of the new government, six times the influence they each would have as one voice out of 18, as originally envisioned by the DPJ in its manifesto.

In the aftermath of the general election, the DPJ has 308 lower house members, compared with the SDP's seven members and the PNP's three. At the start of the negotiations there were differences among the three parties on policy, especially when it came to diplomatic and national security policies. But if the new government fails to carry out policies envisaged by the DPJ due

to opposition from the SDP, this will represent a betrayal of the faith people placed in the party as reflected by the election results.

If the DPJ considers it more important to secure a majority vote in the House of Councillors by wooing the SDP to stabilise the management of the coalition government than to carry out its policy pledges to voters, it would be getting its priorities wrong way round.

When the then prime minister Morihiro Hosokawa formed a coalition government that excluded the Liberal Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party in August 1993, Ichiro Ozawa, then secretary general of the Japan Renewal Party, did not join the Hosokawa cabinet. Instead, Ozawa flexed his political muscle within a panel of coalition party leaders.

But communication between the cabinet and the Ozawa-led panel was not just insufficient; the panel also intentionally distanced itself from the cabinet in the policymaking process. This caused a rift between the two sides and, eventually, the breakup of the Hosokawa administration after just eight months in power.

Both Hatoyama and Ozawa must know all the minute details of this political drama. The lessons learned from that failure must be used to ensure the successful operation of the coalition government on this occasion. But the path the negotiations took in reaching the agreement was somewhat less than reassuring.

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