

Move to clip ACC wings

Government must not take such a step

ANY move to dilute the authority of the Anti-Corruption Commission can only send out very bad signals to the country. There is a clear reason why. In these past two years and more, the degree to which the ACC was empowered to handle acts of corruption (and that was per courtesy of the caretaker government) was without question something that rekindled hope among people about the future of democratic governance. To be sure, the ACC has not been above criticism and has indeed been condemned for some of its more controversial acts. But what surely cannot be denied is the principle upon which it has been working since early 2007. Whether the body will continue to wield that kind of authority in the future now depends on what the present political dispensation means to do about it. If reports of a possible clipping of the ACC's wings turn out to be true, all one can say is that it will be a regressive move that can only impede the nation's journey to a full and meaningful democratic order.

Our understanding is that proposals are being readied that will leave the ACC in a badly emasculated state. Briefly, these proposals would have bureaucrats, policy makers and lawmakers acquire immunity from any prosecution by the ACC. If that comes to pass, one does not require much wisdom to understand that the organization will be effectively and swiftly reduced to the state the old Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BAC) was in before the concept of the ACC came in. Then again, the ACC was not much of a credible organization until the caretaker government, through placing former army chief Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury at its helm, injected much needed vitality to it. The fact that Chowdhury enjoyed ministerial status and was free to investigate corruption went a long way in convincing people that things were finally on the right track. But the ACC received a jolt when circumstances (and they are not hard to understand) compelled Chowdhury to quit. His successor was not to enjoy the ministerial rank that underlined his authority. Even so, new chairman Ghulam Rahman made it known that he would vigorously pursue corruption and that the ACC would not falter.

Of course, the ACC has not faltered. But the way in which the political classes have remained busy to slice away at its authority is not only regrettable but outrageous as well. If now it is put in a straitjacket (and that is what will happen if bureaucrats, lawmakers and policy makers have their way), it will become a redundant body. The more important point here is that if with an elected parliament in place, the ACC or for that matter other such organizations lose their power and so their effectiveness, it will be transparency and accountability that will be the casualty.

The government must think twice before embarking on such a backward move. Diminishing the ACC will only debase the structure of democracy.

Tense Bangladesh Myanmar border

Arrest worsening of the situation

WE cannot but be concerned by the reported buildup of large number of Myanmar military force in very close proximity of our border. This is in addition to the Nasaka or the Myanmar border force whose strength has also been increased manifold.

It is disconcerting that not only have Myanmar light infantry battalions been moved to the border, supporting arms including heavy artillery as well as fighter aircraft have been moved to the forward operating bases. These are very definitive battle indicators, and the Bangladesh Rifles as well as the army has quite rightly moved to reinforce the troops on our side of the border.

We fail to understand the rationale behind such an unwarranted buildup by our eastern neighbour since there has been nothing on our side of the border to warrant such a move on its part. We are concerned too about the reported amassing of thousands of Rohingyas on the Myanmar side of the border, waiting to be pushed into our territory.

By and large the Bangladesh-Myanmar border has been quiet and peaceful over the last many years and there have not been any incident that could not be tackled at the local level by the two border forces. However, we have noticed the propensity of the military junta in Yangon to up the ante from time to time, particularly since the maritime stand-off in October of last year when Bangladesh faced a similar situation due to the deployment of Myanmar forces in strategic locations along the 200-mile Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

We would hope that Myanmar, with whom we have good relations, would dispense with the sabre-rattling and seek a resolution of disputes, if any, peacefully and through discussion.

There are indeed several issues that need to be addressed by the two countries. There is the longstanding issue of repatriation of Myanmar nationals since 1991, when more than 250 thousand Rohingyas were pushed into Bangladesh, and which generated a war like situation, has not seen its conclusion. Last year, tension flared up when our maritime boundary was transgressed by the Myanmar navy in support of its offshore gas exploration activity. But the situation did not get out of hand, thanks to the prudence of both the parties.

We are sure that the rulers in Yangon are well aware that nothing can be resolved through force or coercion. If anything, aggressive posturing would only create undue hurdles to an amicable solution. We would hope that both sides would act positively to reduce the tension on the border.

The pariah's nuclear blackmail

But one can imagine that Senior General Than Shwe and his colleagues would be a great deal relieved. Because then the US and other great powers, instead of condemning and boycotting the Burmese dictatorship, would be begging it to be responsible and give up its nuclear weapons.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

NO ONE would dispute the generally held belief that North Korea and Burma have the two most oppressive regimes in Asia. They rule over two of the continent's backwater, and that's no coincidence whatever. Notwithstanding the many common features they, however, have stark differences between them. No foreign leader of distinction cares to pay court to the ruling generals of Burma in their weirdly grandiose new capital of Naypyidaw. In sharp contrast, even Bill Clinton, one of the world's most recognizable celebrity statesmen, makes pilgrimage to Pyongyang.

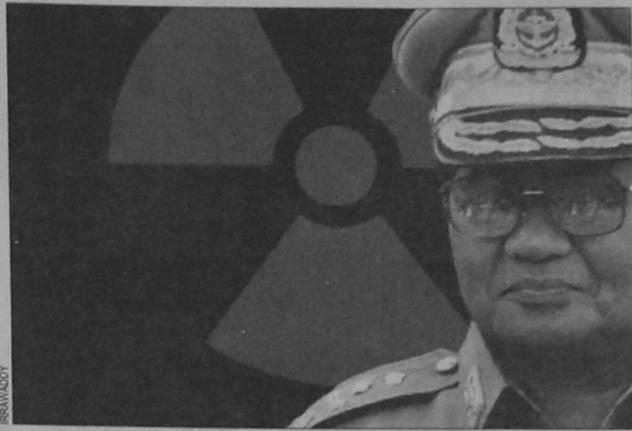
Clinton had gone there, of course, to secure the release of two American journalists who were apprehended on the China-North Korea border a few months ago and held hostage since then. It is presumed that the North Koreans did so with the explicit purpose of forcing a high level American visit and hitting the news headlines. The US did pay the Devil but with a private US citizen rather than his wife, the US secretary of state, making the visit to Kim Jong-il.

However, here's the big difference. The Burmese regime is looked upon by most foreign governments as ugly but basically harmless except to its own people, but the North Korean regime is seen both as ugly and as extremely dangerous. And the dangerous thing about North Korea is its nuclear weapons. If the Burmese generals also want to have emissaries from great powers genuflecting at their doorstep they

need some nuclear pieces in their arsenal, although a nuclear-armed Burma is indeed a ridiculous idea. Burma has no external enemy that it needs to deter, let alone wants to attack.

But respect also matters for a regime like the one at Burma, otherwise it feels neglected and the regime's legitimacy is always put to the question. According to the regime's estimate, a few Burmese nukes on a launching pad would elicit a whole lot of foreign attention as well as respect. The articles published recently by Prof. Desmond Ball of ANU (an authority on strategic matters) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Bangkok Post* pointed for the first time to the Burmese nuclear ambition. Ball's revelations suggest that the Burmese military regime has already sought North Korean help to build its own nuclear weapon. It specifically wants the North Koreans to create a plutonium reprocessing plant in the caves near Laung Laing in Northern Burma -- not far from the site of a civilian nuclear reactor that is being built with Russian help.

So far, the story surrounding Burma's nuclear activity sounds like a fantasy. But the usually reliable website "Dictator Watch" has been publishing warnings about Burmese nuclear weapon projects for several years now. Most of the information emanating from the website come from the defectors. For example, a former army officer who was sent to Moscow for two years training in nuclear engineering never returned, and joined the ranks of informers on Burma's nuclear secrets.



Blackmailing the world?

The speculations, however, are about why North Korea would be in complicity with Burma to further proliferate nuclear technology. One guess is that North Korea is being paid in "yellow cake" -- partially refined uranium which Burma is endowed with. And North Korean help is also needed because of the fact that the country is willing to sell technology to anybody equally willing to pay. These make her more dangerous. And being so dangerous is what forces people like Clinton and Hillary to visit this otherwise pariah state. In this process of appeasement, a stage may be reached when even Barack Obama may be willing to talk to it.

There are several other pointers that North Korea is really helping Burma to develop its nuclear weapon -- Prof. Ball suggested that Burma could be processing 8 kg of plutonium per year by 2014, after which it could produce one atomic bomb per year. But it is also known that apparently competent intelligence agencies like CIA

and Mossad have been predicting that Iran would have nuclear weapons within five years -- practically every year since 1990. They were wrong about Iran every year. And Iran is a much more advanced country in scientific, technological and industrial terms, than Burma.

Supposing the prediction as regards Burma comes true, why would Burma be doing it? Not to nuke Thailand, Malaysia or Bangladesh for it has no serious quarrel with these neighbours. But one can imagine that Senior General Than Shwe and his colleagues would be a great deal relieved. Because then the US and other great powers, instead of condemning and boycotting the Burmese dictatorship, would be begging it to be responsible and give up its nuclear weapons. North Korea also developed nuclear weapon precisely for the same purpose.

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The son also rises

Still, if the prime minister has so much confidence in her son, she should appoint him to a befitting position. Then, he can become a part of her government and work with her on matters of national interest.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THIS is what we saw in a photograph. The mother was addressing the US investors in New York last month, and the son was sitting next to her. She was the prime minister of Bangladesh, but who was he other than being her own son? We have reports he went there as an advisor to the prime minister. This newspaper published a report on September 26, which described him as "prime minister's son living in America." If Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide* were amongst us, he would have reiterated that we are living in the best of all possible worlds.

The partisan hawks should know that it doesn't get my goat. If we can trust the mother, we can also trust the son. But I am curious to know in what capacity did the son not only go to that seminar, but also sat next to the prime minister. Did he go in his

own right as an investment expert? Was he there in his official capacity as an advisor to the prime minister? Was it because his powerful mother so wished that her son should share her limelight?

If for one am happy that our prime minister has a qualified son. He lives in the US, speaks good English, dresses well, looks dapper and has done a stint at Harvard. Then why is all that hush-hush about what was he doing at the seminar? Why should we see his picture next to his mother and scratch our heads, not so sure if he should have gone there?

Let us forget this country has many more sons who live in America. Let us forget we have many more sons living in this country who possibly could have done a better job at that seminar. But the prime minister is the prime minister. Her wish is our command. Dr. Pangloss repeated. We are living in the best of all possible worlds. Her son has an edge over the rest of us.

But the United States is a different world, and I am sure the businessmen, who attended that seminar, asked about an attractive young man sitting next to the prime minister. And, I can vouch they chuckled and whispered. I can vouch they talked amongst themselves what to expect if they wished to invest under yet another mother-and-son saga.

It's customary in the business world to exchange visiting cards. What did the prime minister's son write on his business card? How did he introduce himself to the US investors? What credentials did he show, which should have convinced the audience that they had come to hear it straight from the horse's mouth?

If the purpose of the seminar was to encourage foreign investors to invest in Bangladesh, it must have created more questions than were answered. The reason why many investors left Bangladesh and new ones never showed interest is lack of confidence. The seminar may have reinforced their doubts that our government is still swirling in the vortex of family influence.

Still, if the prime minister has so much confidence in her son, she should appoint him to a befitting position. Then, he can become a part of her government and work with her on matters of national interest.

Then, it won't rattle public sentiments when he is sighted in state functions. Although I think the best choice is to keep him entirely out of national affairs.

If that isn't an option, it's better to tell us what is his role in the government. Why should the government hesitate if that's what it takes the prime minister to effectively run the country? Instead, it should be more embarrassing when her decision is questioned, when people want to know what business her son had been where he shouldn't have been.

Ideally, every mother should see the best goes to her son. Likewise, a prime minister should see the best job goes to the most deserving person. This government occasionally runs into problems with making that decision.

The cabinet has been reshuffled. Postings and promotions have been bungled. Two judicial officers were sacked and reinstated. A foreign citizen has been appointed advisor to the prime minister. Nobody knows his plans to split his time between his adopted country and land of birth.

The prime minister can't be blamed for everything. But her son is her responsibility.

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Taking rickshaws off increased traffic jam

Policymakers thought that taking rickshaws off the road would give the limited number of people riding cars the freedom to roam about unobstructed. They could not realise that so many had the capacity to buy cars.

K. SIDDIQUE-E-RABBANI

MANY eyebrows will surely be raised on reading the title. Let's try to work out the sums. It's reported that in 1995, there were about 35,000 private cars and jeeps. By 2009, that number exploded to a massive 200,000, and still more are being added every month. Why? Most people, riding the additional 165,000 cars and jeeps, were riding rickshaws earlier. When the roads they had to pass through became off-limits to rickshaws, these people had no other option than to buy cars, even if that needed selling property or taking loans. Policymakers thought that taking rickshaws off the road would give the limited number of people riding cars the freedom to roam about unobstructed. They could not realise that so many had the capacity to buy cars.

Most of the time now, one car carries one passenger and occupies a certain road space almost all day. In the current reality of Dhaka, this is because even when it is parked, whether at an office or at a shopping area, it will most probably occupy road space. On the other hand, a rickshaw, occupying about one-third the road space, will carry more than 20 passengers (assuming it carries one passenger at a time) in the same time. Since a car would carry a person twice, from home to office and back, or from home to the market and back, the effective number of people that a rickshaw would serve, calculated on an equal setting, would be about 10 per working day. That means about 20,000 rickshaws could have carried the above mentioned 200,000 car passengers. Now think of the road space utilised; this equals that of about 7,000 cars (one third of 20,000). So, taking private cars off the road will clear the traffic jam instantly!

We frequently talk about the dearth of road space in Dhaka, and our policymakers use it as an excuse for doing nothing right now. A capable leader achieves an improvement under existing situations through innovations, and then thinks of the future. Any hired vehicle uses road space much more efficiently than does a private car. While our traffic policies should have tried to shift car passengers to buses, taxis, autorickshaws and rickshaws, we did the opposite. We tried to move passengers from the more road-efficient rickshaws to buses, which evidently backfired.

The sad part is that most people who write about Dhaka transport in newspa-



More rickshaws equal less traffic jam!

pers, or who make the policies, themselves ride cars, and their self-interest comes up subconsciously and blocks their ability to think with reason. To sustain Dhaka, we have to provide transport to its 15 million people. Just thinking of a small percentage and then burying one's head in the sand will only make Dhaka unliveable.

I have a suggestion. Why not try an experiment just for two weeks and see the results? Put a ban on all private cars and jeeps (including the government ones carrying ministers and officers -- exclud-

ing only the convoy of the president and the prime minister) from Sunday to Thursday, between 7am and 7pm! What will be needed is a well-publicised announcement beforehand so that rickshaws can be available on the roads that were off limits to them thus far. I am sure you can reach your destination much earlier; the air will be much less polluted, and the country will save a large amount of scarce fuel.

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