

## E-tendering

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At a time when the world is advancing fast by dint of technology, Bangladesh cannot stay behind and, therefore, the government has laid thrust on easy and quick delivery of public services.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deserves appreciation for declaring her government's vision for building a Digital Bangladesh by 2021. Nevertheless, the hurdles to achieving the goal are formidable.

The intention to keep pace with the global scenario is important here. If we do not want to make something happen, who else will

come to do it for us?

The declaration for building a Digital Bangladesh has infused a sense of awareness into the minds of the citizens about the necessity and importance of going digital. The actions of the government in making this happen need to be assessed over a substantial period of time.

Certainly, the government has taken up some pragmatic steps to that end. The Right to Information Act is now in place, ICT Policy and Act have been framed, e-commerce has been initiated, and various programs under the Access to Information (A2I) Project have been undertaken for establishing e-

government. Some utility bills can now be paid through mobile phones. Public exam results, railway ticketing and some other services have gone online.

There is no denying the fact that the biggest hurdles to achieving the goal are the lack of infrastructure like electricity and connectivity, and capacity building. But, on the plea of such limitations, there is hardly any scope to sit idle. Power generation must increase and connectivity has to be raised at all costs.

The objective of establishing e-government has to be materialised in the run-up to a Digital Bangladesh. On all fronts of governance there should be electronic operation to save time, reduce hassles and ensure transparency through widening access to public information. As part of that process, the government has initiated a process to introduce electronic-tendering in its public procurement system. E-tendering is a part of the electronic government procurement (e-GP).

The Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division under the Ministry of Planning has been working in line with the government plan to introduce e-tendering on a limited scale by the end of June, 2010.

Under the auspices of the Public Procurement Reform Project-II (PPRP-II) supported by the World Bank, e-tendering would be introduced first in four target agencies -- Local Government and Engineering Department (LGED), Roads and Highways Department (RHD), Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and Rural Electrification Board (REB).

According to statistics of the World Bank in 2002, the total value of public procurement in the country was estimated to be more than \$3 billion a year. By this time it has increased further. The average annual value of procurement of goods, works and services by the four target agencies is more than Tk.10 thousand crore. It may vary from year to year.

On the basis of the experience, realities and needs learnt from the initial functioning of the e-tendering, the government has a plan to spread it all over the country in phases. As part of that, the CPTU under the PPRP-II has provided computers and other hardware and

accessories to more than 250 offices of the four target entities in different districts. Providing internet connectivity to those offices is now under process. Gradually, the e-GP will also be launched and rolled out to all procuring entities.

In the age of technological advancement and globalisation, e-GP is regarded as a very modern system of procurement. It will save time, remove physical barriers to a great extent and increase competition, leading to improvement in the quality of procurement.

Competent quarters are of the opinion that, along with the opportunities of the e-GP, its challenges are also enormous. These lie in ensuring adequate infrastructures and enhancing skills and awareness of both the procuring officials and the tenderers.

Experience of India and South Korea in having e-GP system fully functional shows that it took about seven years in Hyderabad of Andhra Pradesh and five years in Seoul. Moving to the e-GP system in Bangladesh requires caution, adequate preparation and infrastructures. The government is, therefore, heading towards the system carefully.

The CPTU has already formulated a draft guideline as to how e-GP can be operationalised keeping in view the provisions of the Public Procurement Act-2006, Public Procurement Rules-2008 and the ICT Policy and Act. The guideline is now being finalised in consultation with the relevant stakeholders.

To establish e-GP and to store and use the procurement related information, a central data center will be installed at CPTU. Presently, publishing the notices of tenders worth Tk.1 crore and above for procuring goods and works, and Tk.50 lakh and above for consulting services and the award of contracts on the CPTU website ([www.cptu.gov.bd](http://www.cptu.gov.bd)) is mandatory.

Different procuring entities now send their tender notices both online and offline. When e-tendering will be in place, all such information and monitoring will be done online. And under the e-GP system, the whole cycle of procurement will be done electronically.

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## What were the parents thinking?

A battle has broken out. The government of China has made a list of about 8,000 allowable names for babies. All others are forbidden. A Beijing woman called Ma Cheng, whose name is not listed, has been asked to change her name, the *New York Times* just reported.

A similar row has been bubbling in Japan, where there are even fewer approved names. That's why every single Japanese girl I have ever met has been called Misaki Takahashi. Just stand in central Tokyo and call out that name. Thousands of women will say "Yes" in chorus. There are whole cities of Misaki Takahashis in Japan. Make a t-shirt saying "I am Misaki Takahashi" and you will immediately make thousands of yen, which may be enough to be one cling-film-wrapped banana in Tokyo.

The same discussion about parental freedom to name children is taking place in the West. US authorities recently removed three children from the home of a man with neo-Nazi sympathies. One was Adolf Hitler Campbell, aged three. One sister had Aryan Nation as a middle name, and the other was named after Himmler, Hitler's deputy.

In Sweden, a court prevented parents calling their child Ikea, but allowed the name Lego to slip through recently.

All over the world, critics are outraged. "The right to name children is a basic right of citizens," Zhou Youyung, a university professor from Nanjing, told reporters.

I disagree. In 99 percent of cases, this columnist, like most of my counterparts, will side with The People against the authorities. Reporters are legally obliged to follow the unwritten law of popular journalism, which says "The Underdog is Always Right, Even When He's Wrong."

But on this occasion, the faceless government bureaucrats are right. Parents are a notorious source of misery. (Fact: 100 percent of convicted criminals had parents of one sort or another.)

For proof that mothers and fathers should not be free to name children, here are 10 more or less randomly chosen real names from my files, which we could call:

The "What Where the Parents Thinking?" List

1. Destinee Huker;
2. Ivor Biggan;
3. A. Moron (he was a commissioner of education in the US);
4. Seldom Wright;
5. Sermon Coffin;
6. Wood Burns;
7. Warren Peace;
8. Buncha Love;
9. Marmalade Tin; and
10. Katz Meow.

Parents are dumb. The courts had to stop one Japanese couple from naming their child Akumi, which means Satan.

Among the words proposed as additions to the list in Japan are the kanji characters for Cancer, Corpse, Excrement, Cursed and Hemorrhoid.

But names don't have to be particularly outrageous to be objectionable.

About 15 years ago, I logged on to the Internet for the first time. The first thing I did was to run a search on my own name, which I'm sure you'll agree is a perfectly natural thing to do, assuming you too are a raving egomaniac.

I was amazed to discover that there were 165 people called Nury on the Internet at that time. And every single one of them was female.

I phoned my mother. "Mum. You gave me a female name."

I draw a veil over the rest of that painful conversation.

What if you are a kid cursed with a silly name? Take out a lawsuit against your parents. For a lawyer who will speak with feeling about this, sign up a young woman of Chinese origins who works for US legal firm Sullivan and Cromwell in New York. Her name is Sue Yoo.

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## Rift between America and Israel?

President Obama is reported to have said on March 17 that there was no crisis in ties with Israel, despite a high-profile diplomatic feud over Israeli announcement of construction of homes for Jews in East Jerusalem.

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A hue and cry was raised by some Congressmen, Jewish lobbyists and some media over the strained relations between America and Israel when Israel announced construction of 1,600 Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, a traditionally Arab section. The announcement coincided with the arrival of US Vice-President Joe Biden to hold talks with Israeli and Palestinian authorities with the purpose of reviving the stalled peace process to establish two states.

The vice-president was so upset that he publicly condemned Israel's decision, saying that it undermined the trust needed to move the peace process forward, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton termed the Israeli announcement as an

insult to America. She gave a 45 minute long dressing down to the Israeli prime minister over telephone. While echoing the same sentiment, President Obama's chief political advisor, David Axelrod, holds the opinion that Israel's action was both an affront and an insult which undermines the fragile effort to bring peace to the troubled region.

Believe me or not, the fact is that the Israeli lobby is so strong in America that the secretary of state softened her rhetoric on March 16 by saying that there was a close, unshakable bond between the United States and Israel, and between Americans and the Israelis. President Obama is reported to have said on March 17 that there was no crisis in ties with Israel, despite a high-profile diplomatic feud over Israeli announcement of construction of

homes for Jews in East Jerusalem.

Critics of the Obama administration made blistering attacks on the administration as if the sky has fallen on America. The House Minority Leader, Republican Erik Cantor, blasted the administration as irresponsible in its dealing with Israel, accusing the White House of trying to curry favour with the Arab world by deriding America's closest ally in the Middle East.

Senator John McCain was also critical of the Obama administration so far Israel was concerned. He said that under the present administration "our friend did not trust us while our enemy did not fear us." Senator Joe Lieberman holds views that it is time to get over the family feud between the US and Israel. It does not serve anybody's interests, only the enemies.

Incidentally, the Israeli administration turned a deaf ear to the accusation, knowing fully well that the crisis, if any, would be taken care of by the Jewish community in America. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed the issue as coincidental, but Israel's friends in America have kept the issue alive.

It is not only the Obama administration, but also the preceding administration of the Republican Party of George W. Bush, that maintains opposition to the expansion of settlements in Palestinian territories. It is interesting to know that the Obama administration is surrounded by American Jewish members.

The diplomatic row started after the murder of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Al-Mahbhoub in a hotel in Abu Dhabi in February last by Israeli agents of Mossad, as claimed by the Dubai police. Mahmoud was the co-founder of the military wing of Hamas. Israeli authorities neither denied nor confirmed the allegation. Neither European countries nor America admonished Israel for this heinous murder in a foreign land. Is it not an act of state sponsored terrorism?

The Israeli foreign ministry, however, said that there was no reason to think that it was the Israeli Mossad. With rare exceptions, Dubai does not allow travellers with Israeli passports to enter. Therefore, Mossad agents used stolen passports of British, Irish and German citizens. Dubai has now banned entry of Israeli dual citizens with their non-Israeli passports.

Mossad is a powerful spy agency of Israel, and has a history of kidnapping and execution. The arrest and execution of Adolf Eichman, a prominent Nazi, from Argentina in May, 1960, has left an indelible mark in spy history.

While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is adamant to go ahead with the settlement scheme, the Israeli print media has spoken against the premier. I was reading a number of Jewish newspapers, including the *Jerusalem Post*, *Maariv* and *Haaretz*. These

newspapers hold the opinion that the visit of the US vice-president destroyed the trust; that the US vice-president saw the settlement announcement as an intentional snub; and that Netanyahu should try hard to rebuild the trust.

The newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, however, did not agree with these arguments. It feels that the incident revealed the Obama administration's hidden hatred of Israel. The House representative of the Democratic Party, Gerry Connolly, confided to this writer that Israel needed to repair the damaged relations with the United States of America. He sits on the sub-committee for relations with the Middle East and South Asia. The fact remains that whatever Israel does receives unequivocal support from the United States. There lies the problem that undermines US credibility in the Muslim world.

General David Petraeus, commander of US central command and Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff are of the opinion that the perception that the US supports whatever Israel does has undermined US credibility in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, and is thus jeopardising American lives.

It is not only Israel but also Palestine that are responsible for the tension in the troubled region. The Palestinians have been divided since the election of 2006. The Gaza strip and the West Bank are governed by Hamas and Fatah, respectively. Israel is taking advantage of that. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, on a tour to the Gaza strip on March 20, demanded lifting of the blockade by Israel because the blockade causes unacceptable suffering, undercuts moderates and encourages extremists.

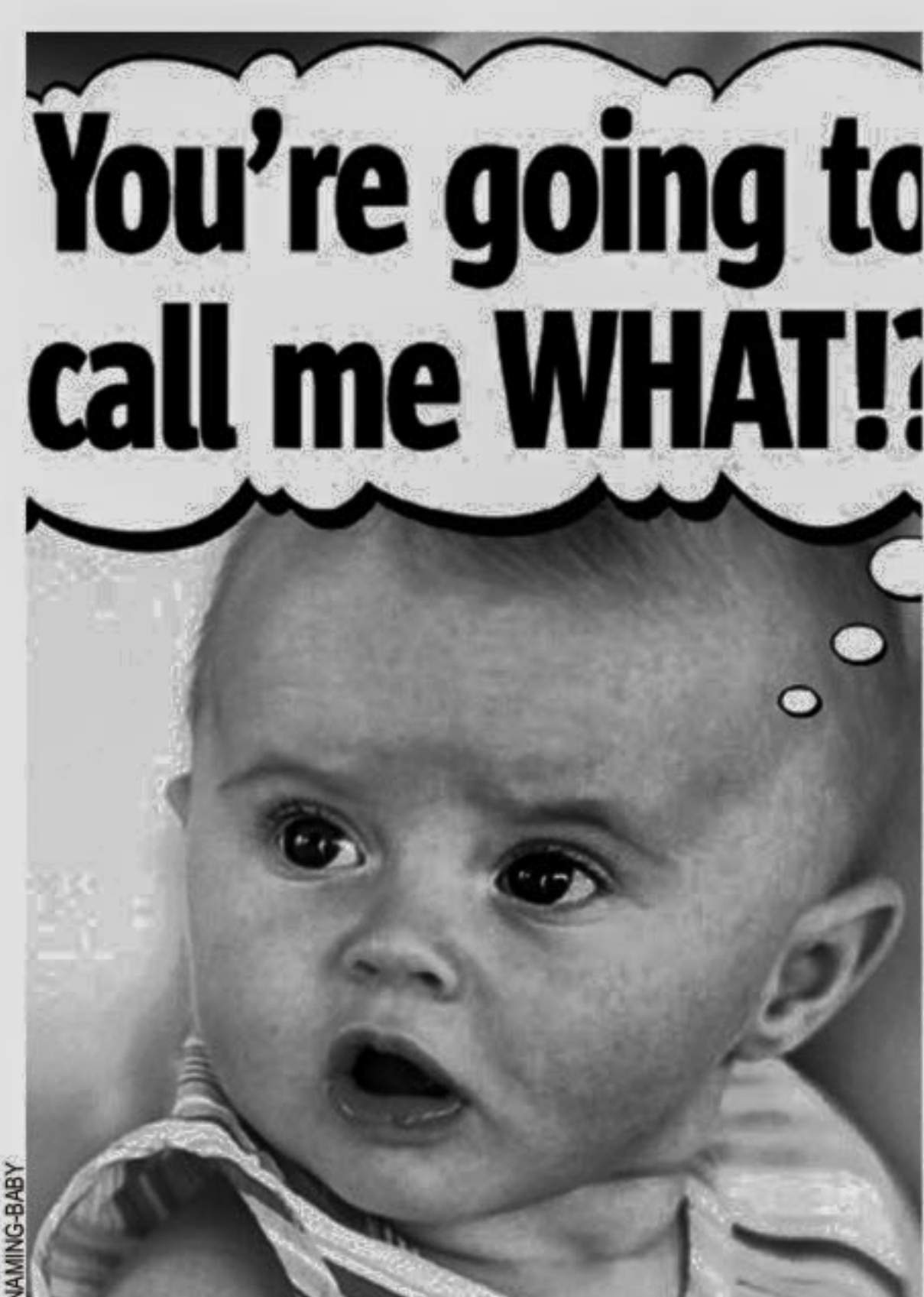
There has been no concerted move by Palestinians to exert pressure on Israel to lift the blockade. Neither will the Obama administration put pressure on Israel to abandon settlement projects in view of the upcoming congressional election in November. The pro-Israel lobby is the most powerful of the ethnic lobbies in the United States, drawing on more than six million American Jews. The Israeli premier will be in the United States to address the annual policy conference of the America-Israel Political Action Committee on March 21. The secretary of state will also address the conference.

Being a close watcher of the developments in the Middle East from 1985, I can vouch for sure that there will no peace in the Middle East unless Israeli authorities recognise the fact that Palestinians and Israelis should live together as cousins. And there is a need to change the mindsets of both the Israelis and the Palestinians to establish peace. Otherwise, peace will remain elusive.

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