

## As the new CIC takes charge ...

*Implementation of RTI should be speeded up*

**M**UHAMMAD Zamir is poised to take over as chief information commissioner (CIC). We take this opportunity to offer our congratulations to him. We believe that a man of his background, with his dynamism and his grasp of the issues that matter, will be able to infuse energy and the sense of purpose that are so much needed for the Information Commission to become a vibrant body. The new CIC should make it his clear objective to have the provisions of the Right to Information Act translated into reality, for that will not only add to the quality of democratic politics but will also enhance the degree of the political consciousness of the people. We wish him the best in his new endeavour.

There is little question that the Right to Information Act has been a major achievement for the people of Bangladesh. And with that the establishment of the Information Commission has rightly been regarded as a positive step. The public expectation is that the commission will be able to establish its credentials as a powerful body which can satisfy public demands for information on subjects of individual and collective concern. However, before such a goal can be attained, it is vital that the institutional preparations so necessary for the commission to get going in that full sense of the meaning are in place. There are already the complaints being heard about the slow pace in the making of necessary rules and regulations regarding the operation and implementation of the RTI. We cannot but note that the dynamism and enthusiasm which went into the formulation of the RTI in these past many months somehow appear to have declined into something of indifference. That is surely not what we had looked forward to. And one surely cannot find fault with those whose energetic campaign for the RTI led to the measure finally being adopted officially. If after all this, implementation of the act doesn't move apace, the onus will be on the administration to set matters right.

That will mean quite a few important steps being taken. In the first place, the rules and regulations relating to an implementation of the RTI must be firmly in place and without further loss of time. In the second, a focused approach must be taken on publicising the RTI, with all its provisions carefully and fully explained to the public through the media and other standard means of dissemination. All of this presupposes the thought that those who will be providing the public with information will be fully trained to do their job. Beyond that, it will be their responsibility, in these coming weeks and months, to inspire and educate citizens in the matter of a demand for information. It will be pointless to have an RTI without the people of the country being made aware of the rights they are actually entitled to under the act. The bottomline here is that for the RTI to have an impact on national life, capacity building is of the essence. Everything else will follow from that.

We understand that the new CIC will be in charge of the Information Commission for the next two years. That should be time enough for him to create a good legacy and working rhythm for the RTI commission.

## Homing in on diarrhoea

*Reach potable water to the affected*

**P**OLLUTED water is giving rise to a public health emergency that should make all concerned roll up their sleeves and act. Combined with drying out of water sources and poor sanitary conditions, contaminated water in extensive city areas is triggering an outbreak of diarrhoeal diseases of a rather dreadful proportion. Empirically, all previous data seem to have been surpassed with a monthly average of some 11,000 requiring and receiving treatment at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases and Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR'B), Mohakhali.

Citing laboratory findings ICDDR'B experts reportedly maintain that 40 percent of patients are suffering from cholera, adding that they are from lower socio-economic stratum. The implication seems to be that this is attributable to poor hygienic conditions, apart from the intake of polluted water. With 80 percent of water samples from a locality said to be containing cholera bacteria, this we believe, is a good ground for a follow-up survey designed to determine the extent of water-borne hazard facing the city.

There is nothing to be panicky about the situation because we have the know-how and the tool to deal with a public health crisis. What we do in the short run is what matters now. But look at the irony of asking people to boil water to drink when we are in the midst of a gas crisis. But if an early alert had been heeded to a predicted short-fall in 2010 and gas extracted from the reserve in good time we would not be in this predicament, according to knowledgeable circles.

However, distribution of water purification tablets is one option, besides reaching pure water through lorries to affected areas. We believe commandeering the services of the army to ferry water to the people is a typical crisis management response given a security concern over pump houses in a situation of acute scarcity. But this is not a durable solution, to be sure. What the decision makers need to do is to expeditiously set up the planned water treatment plants to use more of surface water including harvested excess rain water along with freeing the rivers of pollution and drawing water from it. It is time we reduce our critical dependence on ground water, levels of which are falling dangerously.

## In the theatre of the absurd

Absurdities sometimes add spice to life, especially ours here in this unfortunate country. When some loyalists of the late General Ziaur Rahman unabashedly informed us the other day that it was he who was Bangladesh's first president, we were not quite surprised.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**A**BSURDITIES sometimes add spice to life, especially ours here in this unfortunate country. When some loyalists of the late General Ziaur Rahman unabashedly informed us the other day that it was he who was Bangladesh's first president, we were not quite surprised. And we were not because of so many other silly happenings we have come across over the years. So when we are enlightened on the fiction of Zia being our first president, we wonder if one of these days someone will not spring forth to inform us that Zia also had a secret role to play in the formulation of the Six Points in the 1960s.

We are being serious, only because we have experienced similar absurdities in our lifetime. Let your mind dwell on some of the politicians who these days tell us that in their youthful days as students in Britain in the mid 1960s they worked vigorously for an independent East Pakistan. That is rather hard to believe, considering that at the time it was the harshness of the Ayub Khan regime that was the reality, considering too that had these men actually engaged in the activities they speak of, the junta would have made life miserable for them.

That takes us back to the lies peddled by some academics a few years ago. Among them are former vice chancellors of public universities and naturally you would expect them to be emblems of truth and decency. But then they ended up dishing out the lie that General Zia declared Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 1971. Having known all along that he had actually taken to the airwaves on March 27, this new bit of "information" was truly a mockery of history. Why did these academics go along with this downright falsehood? It is almost like asking why earlier cabals of Bengali academics went around spreading the lie in 1971 that the Pakistan army had killed no one in "East Pakistan."

You could, in a cynical mood, suggest that politics these days is all about absurdities -- and not just in our part of the world. Tony Blair and George W. Bush invented the absurd lie about Saddam

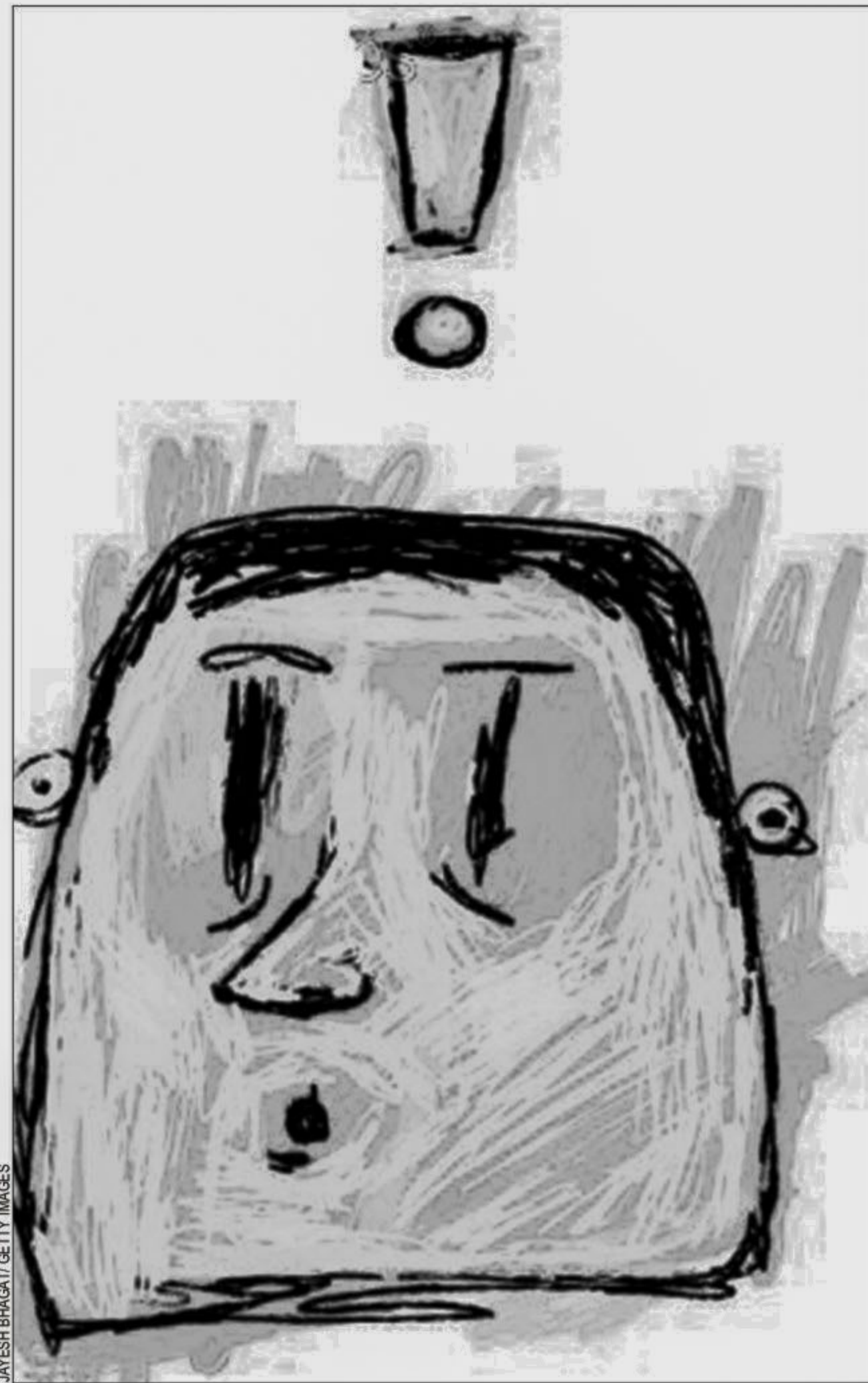
Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. And then they went coolly into destroying the beautiful country that was Iraq. Blair speaks these days of his religious convictions. You watch him and think of the thousands that his search for Churchill-like glory pushed to premature death.

A particular absurdity we have been pelted with over the years is the claim that General M.A.G. Osmany was the supreme commander of Bangladesh's liberation forces. He was commander in chief. If he was supreme commander, where would you place Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam? Move on, to hear followers of Moulana Bhashani let you in on the thought that he was the first man to declare Bangladesh's independence, twice. The first time was in 1957, when at Kagmari he uttered a loud, farewell-like assalam o alaikum to Pakistan; and the second was in December 1970 when four days before the general elections he made it known that Bangladesh was henceforth a sovereign nation.

See how adventurism is being taken for serious politics here. And that is not the end of the absurd. The followers of Golam Azam and Nizami claim that during the War of Liberation it was their fear of Indian or Hindu domination that propelled them into waging war in favour of Pakistan. Ask them why such fears led to the massacre of their fellow Bengalis by their very own al-Badr and al-Shams. They will not answer.

But there remains the far bigger historical absurdity for us here: the Muslim League claimed in the 1940s that Pakistan would be the homeland for all Indian Muslims. In 1947, a bigger number of Muslims stayed back in India and a minority formed the state of Pakistan. There was another absurdity: Jinnah decided, in the infinity of his wisdom, that India's Muslims were a nation, not a community. That was quite something, wasn't it?

Moments before Bangabandhu was gunned down by soldiers in 1975, he telephoned the army chief for help. To our lasting shame, the general asked the Father of the Nation: "Can you come out of the house, Sir?" It was absurdity at its



height. Did he think Bangabandhu would scale some wall and flee to safety even as the bullets whizzed all over his residence? You reflect on such bad judgement and you ask yourself if we are not in such a terrible pass today because of such human inadequacies.

One of our diplomats falls in love with a foreigner and, presto! The caretaker government changes the law on marriage with foreigners to allow the lady to marry. What more could she ask for? Speaking of foreigners, American diplomats have with regularity felt elated at Bangladesh's being a "moderate Muslim" state. Why is

their understanding of our history so poor? And who gave them the prerogative to decide that ours is a Muslim state, that it is not a secular republic? There, again, is absurdity for you.

There are people who speak gleefully of a sepoy-janata biplob in 1975. For all we know, there were the sepoys all around. But the janata, the people? They were nowhere to be seen. And a putsch was passed off as revolution.

The theatre of the absurd? Think, think!

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## Between a rock and a hard place

Another worry for Pakistan is that, in the event of withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by 2011, India will be a dominant power in Afghanistan. Pakistan suspects India has been investing heavily in Afghanistan for creating its sphere of influence in Afghanistan.



HARUN UR RASHID

**T**HE United States and Pakistan held their first strategic dialogue at the ministerial level in Washington on March 24. The talks were co-chaired by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke told reporters at the State Department on March 19 that the talks would mark a "major intensification" of US-Pakistan partnership.

Holbrooke said that the delegations included senior officials of the defense, diplomacy, finance and agriculture departments of both sides. The US delegation included aid and trade officials, and Pakistan's had officials who handled water, power and social issues.

The Obama administration has made improvement and broadening of relations with Pakistan a top priority, but US policies and drone strikes targeting militants in the region remain unpopular.

Speaking to reporters in Islamabad on March 18, Foreign Minister Qureshi said Pakistani and US officials had been talking a lot and, in his words, "the time has come to walk the talk."

The purpose of the talks was to help define the relationship between Pakistan and the United States. Pakistan seeks "non-discriminatory access" to energy resources and a "constructive role" of the US in its dispute with India on Kashmir.

The most pressing concern in the talks will be to establish confidence after several years of a corrosive relationship between allies, which has started to gain some positive momentum in recent months.

It is noted that President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has planned peace talks for the end of April and is issuing invitations to a number of insurgent groups. It is reported that a delegation of one of the most important insurgent groups, Hezb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, met President Karzai and sought a halt to military operations against Afghans and establishment of an interim government as soon as foreign troops withdraw, followed by new elections.

Tensions with Afghanistan have been raised by Pakistan's recent operations against the Taliban, most notably the recent capture in Pakistan of a senior Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The UN's former head of the mission, Kai Eide, reportedly said on March 19 that the arrest had jeopardised back-channel negotiations with the Mullah Baradar faction of the Taliban.

Another worry for Pakistan is that, in the event of withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by 2011, India will be a dominant power in Afghanistan. Pakistan suspects India has been investing heavily in Afghanistan for creating its sphere of influence in Afghanistan.

India is constructing the new Afghan parliament building in Kabul at an estimated cost of \$1 billion and building roads. India has opened two consulates in cities near Pakistan's border since 2001. It dispatched hundreds of professionals, including teachers, trainers and doctors, to Afghanistan.

Now India has offered to train Afghan soldiers at the behest of Nato and US forces. Pakistan reportedly has made a counter-offer to train the Afghans but knows that, given the existing relationship with Afghanistan, it will not be acceptable to President Karzai as Pakistan recognised the Taliban regime.

Afghan leaders cannot forget the past role of Pakistan in assisting and encouraging the Taliban to control Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001.

The third concern for Pakistan is the fear of being squeezed between India on one flank and an Indian-dominated Afghanistan on the other. Strategically, Pakistan cannot let that occur because it would be committing political suicide.

To counter this uncomfortable squeeze, Pakistan's intelligence agencies are likely to provide assistance to extremists in Afghanistan so that India does not succeed in holding sway over Afghanistan. To an average Pakistani, India poses a greater threat to its security than a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

Pakistan wants the US to advise India to back off in Afghanistan so that its strategic interests are safeguarded.

On March 22, the Chief of the Army Staff of Pakistan, General Ashfaq Kayani, concluded his consultations with senior American military commanders in Florida and went straight to the Pentagon for talks with US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. "What we are interested in is looking at the long-term in the relationship between the US and Pakistan," Gates told journalists before his meeting with Gen. Kayani.

Gen. Kayani attended the opening ceremony of the talks between Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi at the State Department on March 24.

In Pakistan, the army chief's role in the Washington delegation raised eyebrows among democratic elements in Pakistan. It is reported that General Ashfaq Kayani has prepared the agenda of the talks and has summoned federal secretaries of foreign affairs and finance to army headquarters to discuss final details, an unusual move in a democratic system.

Professor Riffat Hussain of Islamabad University reportedly said: "General Kayani is in the driver's seat. It is unprecedented that an army chief presides over a meeting of federal secretaries."

The leading financial newspaper *Business Recorder* suggested in the editorial that the civilian government should act more forcefully and "shun creating an environment conducive to military intervention. The government needs to consolidate civilian rule instead of handing over its responsibility, like coordination between different departments, to the military." It is noted that the military has ruled Pakistan for half the time since its independence.

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