

Six years after 21 August 2004

It is time for justice to be done

SIX years after the carnage of 21 August 2004, the nation is yet to know the full, unadulterated truth behind the conspiracy which claimed the lives of 24 people and left more than 200 others severely wounded at a rally of the Awami League. Among the dead were the prominent AL politician Ivy Rahman. It was a tragedy which left the nation in a state of the deepest shock. It was expected that the government of the day, led by the BNP, would move swiftly and professionally to unmask those responsible for the grenade blasts. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort was done. What was done, as was clear at the time, was a despicable attempt to cover up the whole conspiracy through measures that left no one convinced the government was sincere in its actions.

We are happy to be reassured by the present investigating officer of the case that the masterminds behind the grenade blasts of 21 August 2004 will be found. The reopening of the investigation, which has meant filing charges against several individuals already, is a move that should lead to a logical and convincing conclusion in the interest of the rule of law. We cannot but recapitulate here the incredible tales which were given out within days of the blasts by those in power at the time. The then ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, in an act that was as disgusting as it was outrageous, quickly blamed the opposition Awami League for the blasts at its own rally! And that was not all. Where an incident of such a devastating nature called for a preservation of evidence at the scene of the crime, the authorities quickly made sure that the spot where the explosions occurred was washed clean and everything removed from there. No effort was made to inquire into the sources of the Arges grenades used in the explosions. Some grenades that did not explode simply vanished. That the inquiry was a farce was made all the clearer when the authorities found a scapegoat in Joge Mia by letting it be known that he had exploded the grenades! The farce went on when a one-man inquiry commission headed by Justice Joyrul Abedin concluded, in just forty days, that a foreign hand was involved in the attack on the Awami League rally.

That is the shame the nation has lived with. It is now time to unearth the entire truth behind the 21 August tragedy. If the authorities have identified the masterminds behind the explosions, let them act quickly in the interest of justice. The principle of rule of law and indeed the interests of the state demand that anyone and everyone involved in the crime, whoever and however highly he or she may have been placed, be punished for their acts. It should also be a necessary part of the current investigations to take to task those who earlier submitted false or imaginary inquiry reports on the tragedy. The same holds true of those who, in authority, made a mockery of governance by blaming the opposition for the carnage. They have caused grave damage to the country and they must therefore answer to the country.

Let the tragedy and its aftermath be wrapped up through a proper, normal turning of the wheels of justice. We have waited six long years for the truth. Let the truth now emerge.

Toxic chemicals in food chain

Take steps to reverse the practice

WE are alarmed at the news item that scientists have discovered high concentration of toxic chemicals like cadmium, lead and chromium in fertilisers that are being used by our farmers for better yield of agricultural produce. Zinc, cadmium and lead are basic ingredients for manufacturing batteries and tin but zinc fertiliser is being used in Bangladesh for the last three decades to save soil from sterility.

Experts are of the opinion that such harmful chemicals, if used for a long time, find their way into the food chain and thereby put human health at considerable risk. On top of that, if the situation is not reversed toxic chemicals are likely to endanger microscopic organisms and eventually the entire agriculture ecosystem of the country. Prof Dr ABM Faroque of the department of pharmacy of the University of Dhaka has to say that once in food chain, cadmium and lead could affect liver, kidney and cause blood cancer and thalassemia. Chromium in blood could affect human reproductive system resulting in the birth of deformed babies. The vulnerability of the consumers therefore is obvious and it needs to be addressed without further loss of time.

Some good words must be said about the Soil Resources Development Institute (SRDI) which has been able to identify highest 40,258 ppm (parts per million) cadmium and 31,292 ppm lead in zinc sulphate, whereas the allowable level of cadmium and lead is only 10 ppm and 100 ppm respectively. Furthermore, the experts suspect that manufacturers use expired battery cells, waste of tin or steel as zinc for low cost. We wonder with so much risks in evidence around how the various government agencies responsible for checking such things could remain oblivious to the danger for such a long time!

There is no scope for debate on the importance of launching a massive laboratory testing campaign pertaining to chemicals and other substances being used in crops, vegetables, bottled water, soft drinks, confectionary items and other varieties of finished foods. Such action no doubt would go a long way in ensuring safety of the health of the citizens of the country. We are reassured by the fact that agriculture minister Matia Chowdhury has spoken about taking action against fertiliser adulteration. We only hope her words would be translated into action very soon.

Administrative reforms: Professionalise or perish

Almost all the previous governments concentrated mainly upon structural changes rather than behavioural ones. We saw that structural changes brought through decentralisation of administration at the grass-roots level in 1982 did not produce positive results because little was done to foster attitudinal change in the political and administrative actors.

SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

EVERY country, developing or developed, carries out administrative reforms intermittently or regularly to make its administrative system efficient, responsive and dynamic to the changing needs and aspirations of the citizens.

According to Frederick Mosher, all administrative reforms aim at "major changes in purpose, function, procedures, and relationships." Dror, a policy expert, perceives the rationale of administrative reforms as "directed change of the main features of an administrative system."

Convergence of views has it that the administrative system of Bangladesh is still conventional in substance and spirit, and therefore it needs to be modernised to gain optimal level of the Civil Service (CS) efficiency. For a developing country like Bangladesh, modernisation of the CS is a necessity.

All governments had taken reform initiatives to modernise the age-old administrative system. Each time, the prevailing administrative system became a guinea-pig for experiments by almost all the governments, which paid lip-service to the issue to appease the expectant citizenry and to meet, on an ad hoc basis, the pre-conditions of the donor community. Consequently, the efficiency of the administration and the degree of public satisfaction have not truly improved.

Trimming the size

The CS seems "gargantuan" in size but "Lilliputian" in the quality of performance. During the last decade, the role of the government has diminished, so further expansion of the CS will not be justified because redundant workforce will affect the efficiency of the government. Efficiency inheres more in quality than in quantity.

Almost every year, scores of civil servants are recruited by the Public Service Commission, but whether the number of recruits is determined scientifically by each requisitioning ministry with a valid projection is not certain. The recruitment rate does not seem to match with the retirement or mortality rate of the government employees. The relevant ministry is not often staffed with proper persons to carry out research on these vital issues.

The existing CS has to be trimmed to a reasonable size so that the members do not turn parasitic, and the government does not have to pay them simply for unionisation or for acting as "ghost labour." Honest, efficient and neutral civil servants are an asset to all governments. According to a survey, nowadays meritorious persons do not feel attracted to work in the civil service; 47% are eager to go abroad for jobs, 20% are willing to join the civil service, and the rest join other occupations.

If the size of the bureaucracy is reduced to an optimal proportion, the government can save a lot of money, and thus afford to pay attractive emoluments to genuine workers. This will have a positive impact on the efficiency of the administration. The provision of "golden handshake" may also be applied to those government employees who are a liability.

A rational incentive structure has to be formulated to attract and retain scholarly and efficient people, and to depoliticise the CS and make it meritocratic. This will also

enable honest civil servants to shun corruption or malpractices. The new pay scales declared by the finance minister in November, 2009, speaks of the benign intent of the government, but the benefits will be meaningful if price control and market monitoring mechanisms are made truly functional.

Rationalising training activities

Efficiency lies at the centre of all reforms. Administrative efficiency rests on the quality of training delivered by the civil service human resources development (HRD) centres. Training is, therefore, a major area of civil service reforms as it plays a critical role in fostering psychological change in the members of the CS. All governments should attach due importance to civil service training based on pragmatic curricula.

The training contents now delivered at the training institutes are mostly economics-biased and rule-oriented; less emphasis is laid on management, ethics, social psychology, behavioural science and English. My long experience as a trainer at BPATC suggests that course contents are designed more on personal choice and on ability of the faculty members to deliver subjects than on the genuine occupational needs of job holders. With the transfer of faculty members elsewhere, subjects of training get altered at the expediency of trainers.

A new kind of micro-politics seems to have penetrated civil service training, which precludes genuine or committed officials from designing need-based, market-driven training curricula. Again, proper persons are not tipped as resource persons to choose vital subjects for training. Personal bias or private interest seem to be

the governing principles in selecting resource persons. Consequently, trainees do not get the appropriate inputs needed to develop their professionalism in the respective fields.

With rare exceptions, inefficient people are placed in the CS institutes to head the HRD centres of the civil service. Political expediency and accommodation often act as parameters for designating leadership positions.

Ideally, training needs of the government employees are based on job analysis, and the curricula are based on the assessed training needs. This is not practised by a majority of the public sector training institutes. They are not staffed with competent and committed trainers, so the institutional ethos of the training organisations is not being built.

Administrators who are seconded to the training institutes to work as trainers are expected to be role models. But, in place of role models, unfit persons are pushed into the CS training institutions. There should be a clear policy on the recruitment/appointment/deputation of officers to be placed in the training institutes.

The government has to keep track of the officers who are efficient performers and who have the aptitude for and commitment to training. They should be provided adequate incentive for retention in the HRD centres for a reasonable period. Work experience in training institutes should never be perceived as a minus point during promotion to the higher rank.

Like INTAN of Malaysia, all high-achievers in the civil service should be prepared to work at the training institutions on rotation or at intervals. Thus, in Bangladesh also, training institutes should be staffed with efficient, honest and brilliant officers with aptitude for and commitment to training.

Putting emphasis on training for attitude development is not enough. We have to respond to the global slogan "Professionalise or Perish," which implies setting up a training culture in every government office. But before that what is most needed is operationalisation of the training policy promulgated through an ordinance in

2003. The existing mismatch between training needs and training curricula, and between training and career development has to be minimised.

In the public sector, training is still considered a discrete event having little link with career development and promotion. Most of the training activities are classroom based and there is little scope for training on the job. To meet the deficiencies of the institutional training, practice of systematic on-the-job training (OJT) in all the government offices should be emphasised, and compulsory training on "Training of Trainers" (TOT) to all the supervisors of the ministries/directorates corporations should be carried out.

TOT is important as it is only through this activity that we can produce a new breed of supervisors who will nurture or nourish the new entrants of the civil service and who will be the source of instruction or sustainable learning on the job.

It is high time for us to ask what we have achieved so far by investing money in training. The achievement seems minimal because we could begin with the "self"; the "self" remained undiscovered, undeveloped. B.F. Skinner said decades ago: "Everyone should begin with himself." This never happened in the training institutes because behavioural science was never given importance, as is done in the developed countries.

Infusing democratic values

Almost all the previous governments concentrated mainly upon structural changes rather than behavioural ones. We saw that structural changes brought through decentralisation of administration at the grass-roots level in 1982 did not produce positive results because little was done to foster attitudinal change in the political and administrative actors.

Democracy is more a state of mind, and unless mindset is properly moulded, democracy cannot truly function. Mere rules and laws can hardly help if the attitude to enforce and practise them is not built correspondingly.

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The centre of administration.

Temple dispute a minefield for Thai PM

The PAD is mounting pressure on the government, while Abhisit is in a difficult position of having to steer away from his own rhetoric. He cannot fiercely oppose the PAD, because his Democrat Party and the PAD's New Politics Party share the same political bas.

SUPALAK GANJANAKHUNDEE

PERHAPS Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has finally realised that he jumped on the wrong bandwagon over the controversial Preah Vihear Temple because his yellow shirts have turned against him and his government, accusing them of losing Thai territory.

The nationalist People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) alleges that the government had already recognised Cambodia's right over the temple, and victory over the delay in the consideration of Phnom Penh's management plan means nothing.

It's strange but true that the PAD, which is supposed to back this government, is echoing Cambodian deputy prime minister Sok An's claim that natural resource and environment minister Suwit Khunkitti had accepted and signed the World Heritage Committee's decision 34 COM 7B.66.

One of five points in the decision cited

that the committee "welcomed" steps taken by the state party (Cambodia) toward the establishment of an international coordinating committee (ICC) for the sustainable conservation of Preah Vihear.

Establishing the ICC is good, because the temple has been given World Heritage status since 2008. It is a basic requirement to have such a body run a heritage property.

However, much to PAD's delight, Thailand declined Cambodia's invitation to sit on the ICC. Establishing the ICC is equivalent to implementing the management plan, and the "welcome" as well as Suwit's acceptance justifies its implementation.

Common sense tells you that being invited to participate in the management of a World Heritage property should be an honour for Thailand. However, this government thought that joining the committee would be equivalent to accepting and recognising Cambodia's sovereignty over

the temple and surrounding areas.

According to an International Court of Justice ruling in 1962, the Hindu temple of Preah Vihear is situated in territory that is under the sovereignty of Cambodia.

When Abhisit was opposition leader, he and his alliance PAD used a very strange argument -- the court ruling was only on the ruins of the temple, not the area, which comes under the sovereignty of Thailand. In other words, Thailand accepted that the temple belonged to Cambodia, but not the land the temple is sitting on.

If Thailand recognised any activities -- be they by Cambodia or the World Heritage Committee -- in the area under question, it could be seen as recognising Cambodia's sovereignty, they said.

In reality though, the 250,000 square metres that the temple is sitting on was relinquished by a 1962 Cabinet decision to Cambodia. Like it or not, that land has already been given away.

The area that should be under dispute is the 4.6 square kilometres to the west and the north of the temple, as both sides claim it is theirs. In its management plan for Preah Vihear, Cambodia does not include the disputed area in the buffer zone. So, there's not much point in Thailand opposing the plan.

Yet, the PAD has been going beyond expectations -- declaring that Cambodia dared to claim the temple's surrounding area because Phnom Penh used and Thailand recognised the French-Siamese joint boundary committee's 1:200,000-scale map. According to the PAD, the best thing would be for Thailand to reject this map.

Unfortunately though, it was a Democrat-led government under Chuan Leekpai that signed the memorandum of understanding for boundary demarcation in 2000. The pact recognised the map and Siam-Franco treaties as historical documents for boundary demarcation.

The PAD is mounting pressure on the government, while Abhisit is in a difficult position of having to steer away from his own rhetoric. He cannot fiercely oppose the PAD, because his Democrat Party and the PAD's New Politics Party share the same political bas.

The only option would be to blame Cambodia, but that's not easy either because border security and lives of people could end up being at stake.

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