

## Development work hampered

*One more reason for strong local bodies*

JUST what sort of complications can arise in the absence of a strong local government system in Bangladesh has been highlighted yet once again. An evaluation meeting related to development works in the zilla parishads has exposed all too clearly the many difficulties which chief executive officers of these parishads are hamstrung by. They have made it clear that their work and in broad measure plans for development at the local level are almost always made hostage to the demands made on them both by lawmakers and elected upazilla chairmen. Intriguingly, neither the MPs nor the upazilla chairmen feel it necessary to interact with one another on the priorities for their areas, which again is a powerful hint of the adversarial relationship between them now hampering progress in nearly every area.

Quite a few points arise from the grievances voiced by the CEOs at the conference. The first one relates, of course, to their role as part of the bureaucracy in local government activities. With no clearly defined framework of local government in place, it is always the bureaucracy which tends to take the centre, which again may not be conducive to the public interest. That said, the move by the government to have lawmakers operate as advisors to local bodies considerably dilutes the authority, indeed undermines the very concept of local government. Those elected to shape and implement of social uplift programmes in Bangladesh's rural regions at the local level are thus at sea. The preponderant role of the MPs has left the elected upazilla parishads in a state of non-function, affording them little opportunity to fulfill the mandate given them by the electorate. Overall, this segmentation of authority among the chief executive officers, lawmakers and upazilla representatives has created a stalemate where a smooth administration of local government affairs should have been.

Serious rethinking is called for to remedy the situation. One could suggest a greater and more positive coordination of activities by these three levels of local government instruments, but that would still leave the problem unresolved. Which leaves one raising the old question of the need for a strong local government system to evolve and to be encouraged, one which will truly devolve power to the grassroots.

## Carjackings on the rise

*Emphasis should be on prevention*

THE significant rise in carjackings in Dhaka and Chittagong reflects the immediate and urgent need for strict law enforcement.

It has been reported that the perpetrators are in a cycle of being arrested, being released on bail only to be back in action again. Some of them have been arrested over 30 times only to be released again. The crimes involved in these carjackings include theft of automobile parts and the vehicle itself, sometimes with the help of arms, ropes to strangle the drivers and chemicals or poisons to render the drivers unconscious or to kill them.

The cars once stolen are often used for crimes such as drug peddling, arms dealing and mugging.

What is in serious question here is whether in some way, some officials in the BRTA (Bangladesh Road Transport Authority) are in collusion with the perpetrators. Furthermore, many people from whom cars are stolen do not even bother to file police reports. It is perhaps this complacency which gives way to this vicious cycle. If the authorities become lax towards the criminals and citizens are simply content to recover their vehicles without being concerned about the larger problem at hand and filing police reports, how are these crimes to be curtailed in a systematic manner?

It is high time to implement stricter measures. One such example is the installation of global positioning systems (GPS) on all cars made mandatory by the government. Another measure of prevention could be the provision for safety kits for drivers and car owners, equipped with pepper spray. Also, installation by the police department of a carjacking hotline could be implemented.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 19

1796

George Washington's farewell address is printed across America as an open letter to the public.

1881

U.S. President James A. Garfield dies of wounds suffered in a July 2 shooting.

1957

First American underground nuclear bomb test.

1959

Nikita Khrushchev is barred from visiting Disneyland.

1971

Montagnard troops of South Vietnam revolt against the rule of Nguyen Khanh, killing 70 ethnic Vietnamese soldiers.

2006

The Thai military stages a coup in Bangkok. The Constitution is revoked and martial law is declared.

### KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

Wikileaks, in a recent release claimed that a few months after the incumbent Awami League-led grand alliance had taken office, the Commerce Minister Faruk Khan offered a piece of good advice to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It was that unless the government did some good work, the opposition may be voted into office in the next election, and in that case they (that is, leaders of incumbent government) might have to end up in jail.

The official circles, the opposition and members of the intelligentsia may openly take the Wikileaks revelations about Bangladesh politics with a grain of salt. But in confidence they may have a different view. Only the commerce minister knows whether what has been reported by the Wikileaks about him is true or not. Whatever the case, let us assume that he really uttered those wise words before the prime minister. In that case, it was certainly a flash of great wisdom and farsightedness on his part and, given his characteristic style of speaking we know of from his recent comments, that was indeed enlightening. And such a realisation at an early stage of the government, and more significantly, just after a massive victory in the polls! If truth be told, that kind of realisation is something very rare among our politicians. The prime minister must have listened with great interest to his valuable advice.

It is this amazing aspect of the statement, as attributed to the commerce minister by the Wikileaks that has left many wondering. But what happened afterwards?

Now the common people to their utter dismay see that in the face of

### BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

at Cardiff, watching as Rahul Dravid bounded towards the dressing room after his last one-day innings, with a spring in his jump that belied the fact that he was in the winter of his career. She held a placard saying, "I love you Rahul." So far, so normal.

Then the image slipped out of the conventional matrix that television drools on, worried that if 13 men on a green field cannot generate sufficient excitement, then it must look for the mildly salacious in the audience. She had lost the hourglass of youth, and acquired the comfortable demeanour that comes from happy Indian contentment; not fat, but not a pencil either. Her face was flush with adoration as a heedless Dravid bounded by. She could not care whether Rahul had noticed her or not; she had made her statement, and that was enough. Her eyes told a story: she had fallen in love with Rahul Dravid when she was 19 and he was 20, and this was her coming-out statement, nearly two decades later, on the last day possible, a moment of liberation that was profoundly innocent because it would change nothing in either her life or Rahul's. She looked closer to 40 than Rahul did because she had not been playing professional cricket; but she had shared the joy of Rahul's heroic



FUSE

*With our politicians' faces dug deep in the sand like an ostrich, they cannot see the storm gathering on the horizon. But does that make any difference to the storm?*

runaway price hike of essential commodities, he is uttering words that have drawn a lot of public opprobrium. If the Wikileaks is correct, is it the same commerce minister, one wonders?

It may well be that the minister and his cabinet colleagues think otherwise. And from their complacent attitude, it appears that they are not worried in the least about their performance. If that was not the case, how could the communications minister remain so unperturbed after a series of road tragedies among which one claimed the lives of two media celebrities? And look at another of his cabinet colleagues, who believes the driving of a motorised vehicle is a domain that has nothing to do with training and education. The man in

the street is simply flabbergasted. God help the hapless travellers.

A conclusion that can be drawn from our ministers' attitude is that they are all sacrosanct and cannot do any wrong. And now that the prime minister has herself given them the benefit of doubt, they would be in no hurry to be upset by any public criticism about their performance. For now, the burden of proof would rest on the complaining people, not on the government leaders!

Our culture, work culture, to be specific, has an element of immunity to it. And that is true of those who have money and power. They can do anything and get away with it. And if the power emanates from politics, then there is none to challenge it. The wall of impunity is also the

right to let him down. It is tough being a hero.

There will be others, far better than me in their knowledge, more loquacious than me in their chatter, who will analyse the spark and cool fire of his cricket. There was never the burst of fire-crackers in his luminosity. His batting glowed with a consistent light; you could almost measure the periodicity of his runs by the yardstick of the team's requirement. I shall dine out with the obstinacy of a bore on his century at Lord's, a privilege to watch through the folds of a day, as confident in the morning as it was

assured in the evening.

Rahul Dravid could not end his cricket without the testament of a century at Lord's, and he did not. I met him on the night before; briefly, perhaps for fifteen minutes or so, just the two of us. That Lord's century had a Platonic quality. It existed in his mind the previous day, as a tableau, more real than the reality that would become performance art a sunrise later.

stronger there.

There is never an instance of a minister or any government functionary taking the responsibility for any lapse under his watch, much less of stepping down from office.

We claim that it is a democracy and it is the sacred duty of the people to cast their votes for electing their representatives in parliament. But as soon as they complete this ritual after every five years, their responsibility ends there. The members of parliament, the luckier ones among them being those who may find favour with the Leader of the House are poised to get the top job of a minister, the ultimate prize.

That is all about our democracy. Here the common voters' job is to empower the politicians with their votes and then go to retirement. And in the process, power is transferred from the people to their representatives, so much so that the people become powerless. They cannot anymore hold their representatives, the members of parliament (MP), to account. They are to watch helplessly as their representatives, far from being sympathetic to their sufferings would rather like to ride roughshod over them. Hence this culture of impunity and it is so endemic among our politicians in power.

The people have become a universal sink. Whatever you say in their name goes. There is none to verify.

The words of wisdom ascribed to the Commerce minister by the Wikileaks are now history. But history is also not always dead.

If someday it so happens that history decides to speak up at the most inopportune time and our politicians are caught unawares!

With our politicians' faces dug deep in the sand like an ostrich, they cannot see the storm gathering on the horizon. But does that make any difference to the storm?

The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star.

# In the memory of millions

*Rahul Dravid's long career will survive not merely on the mantelpiece of his drawing room, or a den that has become a private museum, but in the memory of millions who will argue passionately about which was his finest innings, about his stoic determination when the cycle of decline became a dip, about this stupendous finale in England 2011.*

Rahul Dravid has never been able to boast, because he does not know how to. His career coincided with the onslaught of wealth in the game, and he made his deserved share. But he preserved his dignity in the shower of money, when the game is now full of climbers who dance in the shower of unforeseen cash, unconscious that they have thereby also stripped themselves of respect. Rahul has always been a bit awkward in his advertising presence; self-promotion makes him self-conscious. He has been simple. He has been clean. He has been fair, without turning into a surrender-freak. A genius cannot be born without instinct, but his talent was honed by values, as if his bat was simultaneously a lesson in some code of conduct. The hypocrisy of some of current tributes must have irritated Rahul, particularly from contemporaries whose jealousy made them destructive. But he is too much of a gentleman to do anything but smile.

Every genius is also a meteor. Too many meteors insist on roaming the sky when their body has lost its blaze, when the tail has diminished to ash. Rahul Dravid is leaving cricket when it has swelled into more raucous directions, when it demands too much compromise, a thought alien to Rahul's temperament. We love you, Rahul, not only for what you did but for who you are.

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