

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Minister reinstated, scandal gapes

Trivialisation of a most serious issue

THE daily unfolding drama of the cash-laden railway ministry car -- particularly in relation to the former railway minister, Suranjit Sengupta -- borders on the farcical. He came into focus last week after the discovery was made and at least three ministry officials who were in the car claimed that they were headed to his residence with a large amount of cash now speculated to be bribe money taken from railway job seekers. At the time, though the minister formed two internal probe committees and suspended his assistant personal secretary and two other railway officials who were in the vehicle, we suggested that he also disengage himself from his duties in the interests of a fair investigation. Two days ago, he of his own volition in the interests of fairness and democracy, resigned from his post -- a move we welcomed. Then yesterday, he was again reinstated as minister but without a portfolio.

The message being conveyed by the government is puzzling, to say the least. Even assuming that the minister is blameless, it must be proven by a probe that is free from any sort of influence. A thorough and impartial investigation can only be of benefit to the innocent.

The public is confused by the arbitrariness of this latest move -- as if anything can be done and undone at will by those in positions of power. There is an over-arching lack of accountability running through the entire episode, topped by Suranjit's reinstatement thanks to a prime ministerial intervention. This is contrary, if not contradictory, to the principle of complete disengagement from a process of investigation that his temporary removal from the government would have ensured. The way the events have played out have denigrated the government.

So far, the government has not addressed the issue with the seriousness it clearly merits, which raises questions about its sincerity. Whether it is about clearing the name of the minister or restoring the credibility of the government, it can only be achieved by getting to the truth of the matter and bringing to book those responsible for the corruption. As for the minister who declared that he would return to politics after being proven innocent by a fair investigation, he may already feel vindicated, perhaps to his surprise, although a question mark remains in the public as to the judiciousness of the government's latest move.

Striking Buget teachers

Why must students suffer?

IT is regrettable that students of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology have become a hostage of the continuing strike by its teachers.

The strike called with the demand for resignation of the Vice Chancellor (VC) and pro-VC of the university has been in force since April 7 causing serious dislocation in the academic life.

Buget Teachers' Association, which is spearheading the agitation, has been protesting, what it termed, breach of the university's tradition by the VC through giving politically-biased appointment to the pro-VC and restructuring the administration. Teachers have even threatened to boycott classes until the present VC and the pro-VC resign. The VC, on his part, explaining that the appointment was made by the president, also the chancellor of the universities, refuted all the allegations brought against him.

No immediate solution to the ongoing crisis is in sight. The Association leaders could not resolve the dispute even after seeking the intervention of the education minister, because all he did was to advise them to hold talk with the VC to resolve the crisis.

This is a very unfortunate development, to say the least. Concerned over the harmful impact of this indefinite teachers' strike on their studies and for return of normal academic atmosphere on the campus, students organised several human chains to register their protest.

But so far, teachers have not responded to the students' plea.

Granted teachers have their right to seek redress of their grievances, but why should they abstain from their classes forcing students to suffer?

Teachers should, therefore, join the classes without further delay. As an administrative problem should be resolved administratively, if necessary through the intervention of the education ministry, teachers are duty-bound to take their classes.

Whatever the nature of the problems and their gravity, teachers and administration should resolve those among themselves in the best interest of the students' academic



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NOT many years ago, during the period of the erstwhile caretaker government, when the ACC was going after the ill-

gotten money of some ill-starred people, we found a gentleman, entrusted to look after the forests of Bangladesh, make pillows out of currency notes that he did not find advisable to keep in the bank. During the same time too, expensive cars were found discarded on the roadside without any claimant, like rotten tomatoes. And now we have, what some have described as the "railway-gate," reaching scandalous proportion. And listening to insipid explanations now, like then, makes one feel like being Alice in Wonderland.

Many heads have rolled, belatedly though, but not the one that should have been the first to roll -- the minister's. Why did he take seven days to realise that his resignation as the railway minister would redeem the intrinsic splendour of democracy in Bangladesh and allow the process of investigation to run unimpeded? He should have relinquished his post on the very first day, and declined to be reinstated as a minister without portfolio, at least for the sake of what he claims to have resigned in the first place -- a transparent process in the enquiry. This was the time for him to show his moral fibre.

This, however, is not the first time in Bangladesh that a minister has resigned but is of course the first instance that a minister was reinstated the very day after he put in his papers. Others have resigned in the past, but very few have done so on their own volition. In any case, neither the AL should glorify the resignation, because that would be an unsuccessful attempt to put a patina of respect-

ability on an otherwise sordid story; nor should the BNP rejoice at the AL predicament because being corrupt has not been the monopoly of any one single party or regime.

It is interesting to read the smug comments of some of the BNP leaders. There is very little reason for them to bask in self-righteousness, for the party's record too is not very much better than their successor in power. When the BNP calls for the resignation of the entire AL cabinet on the Suranjit saga, they perhaps forget

principle cannot be applied here, since his remaining in office would have laid the process of investigation open to question. The initial off-the-cuff explanation of the minister was very injudicious, which he wanted the public to swallow. It is difficult even for a moron to believe that a black-mailer, that is what he accused the driver of initially, would drive the vehicle into the premises of a law enforcing agency.

The minister is only too painfully aware, by his own admission, that

return, one to cause pain and the other to give joy. It seems that it is only arrows that the minister had been shooting.

As we see the drama unfold we are constrained to ask ourselves whether this is fairly representative of the state of affairs in all the other ministries and departments, whether it reconfirms the ranking we are bestowed upon by the TIB in the list of most corrupt countries every year, and whether the highly critical and dismissive attitude of successive governments over the years against the TIB reports, are in fact the "offence is the best defence" game, the most vocal being those that are trying to hide the skeleton in their cupboards. Is it only the tip of the iceberg, at least in so far as the matter relates to the railway ministry?

The recent incident has not only besmirched the country's image, what is also disturbing is the reality that we are faced with, of pervasive corruption that has confounded the system, particularly because the corrupt have been allowed to evade the judicial process, benefiting from the regime of impunity which has been the order of the day, not only in recent times but from the very day we became independent. And that is what worries the people in general.

The government has sacked the APS, who was perhaps working as the errand boy and the collector, and suspended the GM (East) and the commandant of railway security. But that's not enough. There ought to be a judicial enquiry to find out the truth, at the very least to prove or disprove the conspiracy theory that a few have come up with, including the ex-minister. However, reinstatement of the minister only shows the government's patent indifference to the issue, and casts doubts in our minds about its avowed commitment to root out corruption from the society.

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The Suranjit saga



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the many instances of unabashed corruption indulged in by people in high levels during the five years of BNP rule.

Some people wanted to give the ex-railway minister the benefit of innocence until proven guilty, but that

some of the arrows that he had directed against others have returned to smite him. And to paraphrase Longfellow, neither is man's sight so acute or his sense so keen that he can follow the flight of the arrow he shoots or the song he sings. But both can

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

To stop the killing, deal with Assad

ASLI U. BALI AND AZIZ F. RANA

IN the wake of the recent Friends of Syria conference, the United States and Middle Eastern powers that include Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are stepping up aid to armed resistance groups in Syria. Under American leadership, the conference pledged \$100 million to provide salary payments to rebel fighters.

Whatever the humanitarian intentions, this strategy, along with discussions of "safe zones" and "nonlethal aid," is misguided at best, and counterproductive at worst. For all the talk about safeguarding civilians, the proposals are far more likely to escalate violence than to reduce civilian casualties.

To appreciate why, look at events in Syria: An authoritarian regime is engaged in brutal repression and large-scale human rights violations. According to the United Nations, the death toll exceeds 9,000, with thousands more wounded.

But arguments for direct assistance to the rebels miss the political complexities within Syria. On one side, large sections of the country oppose President Bashar al-Assad, and a significant proportion back efforts of armed rebel groups to topple his government. In cities like Homs and Dara'a, the Syrian army's brutality has consolidated support for rebels.

Elsewhere, however, in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo, the picture is more mixed. Some neighborhoods support a network of anti-government protest organisers known as the Local Coordination Committees. But large sectors of soci-

ety -- including most minority groups like the Christians, Druse and Alawites, along with much of the middle class and business owners -- have, for the most part, withheld support from the rebels. The most likely explanation is that they fear more instability and violence, as well as some possible outcomes, like rule by the Muslim Brotherhood.

These internal divisions belie the argument that all segments of the civilian population would welcome intervention. Given these realities, international actions like those discussed at the Friends of Syria meeting risk worsening the situation. Aid to opposition forces is fungible; even when it is "non-lethal" or financial, it amounts to arming the rebels and taking sides in a civil war. Those advocating such measures include Sunni-majority countries whose assistance against the Alawite-dominated regime could fuel sectarian and ethnic tensions.

And establishing "humanitarian corridors" on Syrian soil would require defending them to protect fleeing civilians. If foreign forces offered these defenses and came

under threat, escalation into direct intervention would be likely. Further, such internationally defended lines would be tempting grounds for armed opponents to retreat behind after their attacks -- another scenario that would increase rather than reduce the risk to civilians.

The prospect of intervention must seem welcome to protesters subjected to brutal repression by the government. But the principal requirement of an intervention on humanitarian grounds is the prospect, on balance, that it will offer greater protection to vulnerable civilian populations. And this is absent in Syria.

So what else is at stake in the calls for intervention? If the involvement of outside actors turns a civil conflict in Syria into a proxy war against Syria's government and its allies -- namely Iran and Russia -- then intervention

would bolster pro-Western powers at the expense of Syrian civilians. And such action would continue to erode international constraints on the use of force, especially those based on national sovereignty.

Ultimately, the best way to reduce violence is to pursue negotiations for a political transition that would include rather than explicitly threaten the Assad government. Given the mortal fears of communities on each side of the conflict, the first goal has to be making clear that all groups

have a future in a new Syria.

The six-point plan offered by Kofi Annan, the United Nations intermediary, is a good starting point. But both sides have to treat a cease-fire seriously, and any arms embargo would have to apply equally to each party. Crucially, real negotiations would have to include Iran and Russia. Both have stakes in the Assad government; their involvement in an inclusive mediation process could set the stage for concessions by the government.

Some will argue that we shouldn't engage with the Syrian government or its backers. But further isolation tells the Assad government and its social constituencies that their only options are victory through mass violence or annihilation.

By relying exclusively on coercion through sanctions and threats, the practical effect of the current American approach has been to squeeze out all other diplomatic options and to make a proxy war (with local and international players on both sides) the only remaining possibility.

If we are really interested in protecting the civilian population -- rather than using this as a strategic opportunity to flip regional alliances -- the benefits of a negotiated transition are clear. It may not reinforce our geopolitical position, but it will help safeguard ordinary Syrians caught in the cross-fire.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 19

- 1948** Burma joins the United Nations.
- 1954** The Constituent Assembly of Pakistan recognises Urdu and Bengali as the national languages of Pakistan.
- 1961** The Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba ends in success for the defenders.
- 2011** Fidel Castro resigns from the Communist Party of Cuba's central committee after 45 years of holding the title.