

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Modernising the railway

Give the sector priority it deserves

THANKS to the new communications minister Obaidul Quader after decades of inertia, a fresh stimulus appears to have been injected into the long-ailing Bangladesh Railway (BR).

Expansion of the fleet and higher level of punctuality being claimed are a good augury. But compared to the railway's vast potential as bulk carrier of passengers and goods and given its development in neighbouring countries this is a mere drop in the ocean.

The minister has a long way to go.

To really bring the railway at par with modern times, the BR is in need of a complete overhaul in terms of recruitment of adequately trained manpower, extension of network, efficient maintenance, quality service and introduction of modern equipment and rolling stock.

Handicapped by faulty ticketing, poor maintenance of amenities, pilferage and grabbing of its assets, delayed arrivals and departures, the railway has been limping along.

Little wonder, the losses incurred by railway have jumped from Tk 500 million in 1985 to a whopping TK 7500 million by 2010.

Thankfully, a cap on recruitment that was applied some 27 years ago is being lifted. It is as well that this is done, since, some 146 railway stations that were shut down need to be reopened.

We would like to make an especial point about recruitment which has hitherto been shot through with corruption.

Recruitment policy should be strictly geared to induction of qualified personnel into the service based on apolitical consideration of merit, pure and simple.

The state of hopelessness in which the BR has been relegated to will need nothing short of a massive injection of resources in the sector.

While advocating Private-Public-Partnership (PPP) as a mode of financing, we would urge necessary budgetary allocation for the railway.

Did the police have to be brutal?

Non-govt primary school teachers deserve better

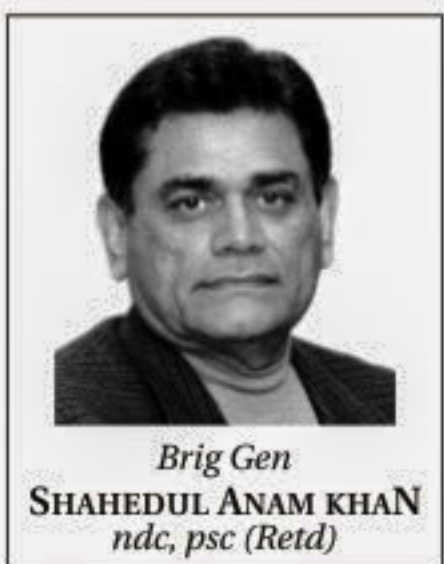
THE non-govt primary school teachers agitating over the demand for nationalisation of their services were lathi-charged on Tuesday by the police. Quite brutally, we must say, as the news photos illustrated. As if that was not enough, hot water was doused on them in this sultry summer at one stage to disrupt their gathering or processions. As a result, a head teacher, Azizur Rahman from Jamalpur, died and several teachers were injured including some senior members of the profession. What signal do we put across by such ham-handed treatment of teachers?

And what was their fault? All they did was to attempt to take out a procession to submit a memorandum of demands to the Prime Minister. This was set against the backdrop of their having received no assurance from the government so far on the issue.

What we fail to understand is why the police had to intervene and why not somebody from the education ministry, or for that matter some police high-ups calm the teachers' nerves? We know nationalisation to be a longstanding demand of non-government primary school teachers and the government too must have had a stance on the issue. Were the primary school teaching community leaders taken into confidence as to what the government's thinking and plan are to mitigate their grievances?

Surely, the primary school teachers outside the government school system are serving a useful purpose by providing basic education to a large number of pupils across the country. The terms and conditions of their service including their remuneration are not matters to be dealt with casually. Either such schools will have to be privately endowed or governmentally aided particularly under the wings of the local bodies. If resource constraints do not allow the government to go for wholesale nationalisation of primary education, then they must have at least a phase-wise programme for it or reasonable alternative solutions. Something needs to be worked out through negotiations with the teaching community lead-

Wonderland demolished -- what about the 'wonder building'?



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

ABOUT the "wonder building" I shall talk about later since that is the focus of this piece. But first about the Wonderland --

the children's park in Gulshan, that has been recently demolished by Rajuk. And Rajuk was following the instructions of the High Court in letter and spirit.

One could not be surprised at the rapidity with which some orders of the judiciary are carried out and the soft-pedaling resorted to in others cases. It is surprising to see the different degrees of attention that the government pays to different matters in litigation that it defends or prosecutes.

A Gulshan resident had challenged in the High Court the construction of a commercial park in a residential area in 1995, i.e. good five years after the park started operating. And one is justified in doing so since such an enterprise can be disturbing for the residents of the area. And it has taken 17 years to put right a wrong. But are all our residential areas truly residential? If one were to take a stock of the ground situation in all the areas declared residential, particularly Gulshan and Dhanmandi, the number of residential buildings would be vastly outnumbered by the number of commercial ones. And neither Rajuk nor DCC is alive to the problems this

creates for the locals.

And as usual with government bodies and government land, which some of us in important places and in important public offices providing public service consider as their paternal property and do whatever we wish to with these, the Wonderland issue is unfortunately, but not surprisingly, laced with opacity. And one is a bit confused because as per the observa-

tion it served a severe indictment on the system and the cogs involved in running it saying that those who were involved in the process, were fully cognisant of the fact that they were indulging in a blatant act of fraudulence. One can only be amazed at the degree of mendacity of all those involved in the scam. And yet we fault the TIB for anointing us with the inglorious appellation of one of the most corrupt countries.

Why, might one ask, is an illegal structure, and clearly declared so by the court, still standing despite the court order to demolish it? Although the BGMEA was given a six-week reprieve by the Appellate Division in April of 2011 no action has been taken by the government to have the stay order vacated until now.

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tions of the court, the lease of DCC land on which the park was built was illegal in the first place. Even more amusing is the fact that the land belongs to Rajuk. It had been allocated to Dhaka City Corporation for constructing a children's park open for all but the city corporation had leased the land to the private company flouting existing rules.

The legal aspect aside, the park was providing immense joy to the children of the city, where such places are becoming a rare commodity. And one could say that the children were enjoying the benefits and pleasure of a park that was illegal all these years. There are reports that the park might not have been managed properly and

illegal building which is impeding government plans to develop the capital. And that is the beautiful BGMEA Bhaban. This may not be occupying as much as the park but stands as an icon of falsehood, deceit and nexus of money and politics. And these are not my own formulations but that of the court which in April of 2011 had said that the whole process of transfer of government land to a private body, and the construction of a high-rise building thereon, has been obtained by deceit, duplicity, fraud and lack of transparency.

The land was sold by the EPB, who did not own it, to the BGMEA who couldn't have been unaware of the facts. And this has been also noted by

the court when through its observation it served a severe indictment on the system and the cogs involved in running it saying that those who were involved in the process, were fully cognisant of the fact that they were indulging in a blatant act of fraudulence. One can only be amazed at the degree of mendacity of all those involved in the scam. And yet we fault the TIB for anointing us with the inglorious appellation of one of the most corrupt countries.

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One doesn't know whether it is unwillingness or inability of the government to act but its attitude is clearly reflected in the comments of the minister for housing who in relation to the matter had at that time said that the government for the time being would not go for demolishing the building but wait for the change of mindset of the BGMEA leadership to pull it down on their own. Whoever has heard of people redacting illegalities on their own? And the fact is that the wrong has been validated by two prime ministers, one by laying the foundation stone and the other by inaugurating the building. Now who has the gumption to tear down a building consecrated by two prime ministers?

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

The poetry of al-Qaeda and the Taliban

FAISAL DEVJI

READERS going through the cache of letters that were released early this month from Osama bin Laden's hideaway in Abbottabad, Pakistan, may have been taken aback by a reference -- in the midst of discussions of tactics, regional politics and exchange rates for ransom money -- to poetry.

One letter written by bin Laden and perhaps an associate went from criticising the news media's coverage of al-Qaeda to commenting on a pre-Islamic tradition of satirical poetry called "hija," which Arab tribes once used to mock their enemies. It's easy to imagine that counterterrorism analysts wondered how to interpret that one.

In fact, poetry has long been a part of Muslim radicalism; Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran, for example, was the author of a large collection of verse. Today, the Taliban's website features poems written by the group's members and sympathisers, both men and women. Recitations are frequently recorded and stored on cellphones and transferred from one person to another by way of Bluetooth technology.

Many Afghan and al-Qaeda poems -- which come from distinct but hybrid literary traditions -- are, as might be expected, political. In a statement broadcast on Al-Jazeera in December 2001, bin Laden quoted the following verses from one of his favourite contemporary poets, Yusuf Abu Hilala, changing the last line and replacing the word "castles" in the original with "towers," as a reference to the destruction of the World Trade Center: "Though the clothes of darkness enveloped us and the poisoned tooth bit us,

Though our homes overflowed with blood and the assailant desecrated our land,

Though from the squares the shining of swords and horses vanished And sound of drums was growing, The fighters' winds blew, striking

their towers and telling them:

We will not cease our raids until you leave our fields."

If al-Qaeda's writers tend to be preoccupied with what they see as Islam's long and global history of conflict with Christendom, from the Crusades to the war on terror, Taliban poets tend to refer to the literature produced in their part of the world by nationalist and socialist movements over the course of the 20th century. And if al-Qaeda poems are characterised by the swords, charging horses and fiery deserts of pre-Islamic lore, Taliban poets praise more recent warriors like Malalai, a 19th-century battlefield heroine. The chief examples of historical conflict in Taliban poetry are the Anglo-Afghan wars, of

Another, by a poet called Jawad, is more explicit:

"Attacks on the enemy are full of joy.

Guns in our hands and magazine belts over my shoulders;

Grenades on my chest are full of joy."

However, violent ideological conflict is far from the sole, or even the most popular, subject of militant poetry. In fact, explicit political statements are a recent adaptation. They are absent from Khomeini's more traditional work, in which mystical couplets portray God as an alluring woman and divine knowledge as intoxicating wine. Although the arid piety of cleric and mosque are rejected in these poems for the pleasures of the bedroom and tavern, they

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which today's US-led war in Afghanistan is seen as a pale reflection.

That conflict figures in a poem on clouds, ducks, turbans and the White House by a poet known as Janbaz, one of many contemporary writers whose works have been translated into English for Poetry of the Taliban, an anthology edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn:

"White, white dew had descended from there.

Sometimes, it came to our place; It was the Kunar river's white, white duck.

This became a martyr's shroud in the Laili desert;

It was the Talib's beautiful white, white turban

That survived this attack.

The cunning enemy's palace was white, white.

do not display a prurient interest in sin but rather an exercise in freedom, where even the most observant Muslim can adopt a critical distance from the regulations of his faith.

Most contemporary poets are as interested in pastoral landscapes and love as in revenge and war. Abdul Hai Mutmain, who has been a Taliban spokesman, writes of the wind in the trees:

"It brushes against the pine needles and makes a low noise ...

The pine tree with its strong structure bows and straightens its head back;

It hangs its branches loose down its face, and dances while standing on one leg."

These poems are not merely propagandistic; they move beyond the hard politics of the Taliban to form a bridge to the world outside the movement.

And the rest of the world would do well to pay attention, because their ideals are more likely than any Taliban communique to survive the insurgency and to play a role in the remaking of Afghanistan. These poets criticise the idea of human rights that coalition forces are supposedly fighting to protect in their country.

Instead, they voice notions of humanity that are linked to private duties like generosity, compassion and, indeed, nonviolence. In the collection of Taliban poetry, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi has this to say about what he takes to be the hypocrisy of humanitarian intervention:

"Trying to find some more forces to kill me.

The green parrots of the United Nations are mute;

Those who talk of Human Rights have sealed their mouths shut."

And here is the poet Samiullah Khalid Sahak on the way the war has dehumanised all its participants, including the Taliban themselves:

"I say this with certainty.

But, Humanity has been forgotten by us, And I don't know when it will come back.

May Allah give it to us, And decorate us with this jewelry."

By excluding the aesthetic dimension from our analyses of militant texts like those recovered from bin Laden's Pakistani lair, we miss a crucial opportunity to confront the humanity of their authors. As the poet Sadullah Saeed Zabuli put it in a recording made during the 1990s, comparing the desire for freedom to that of a famous literary lover for his mistress: "The beautiful Laila of freedom is shining in her beauty,/The Talib is half-drunk for her, approaching like Majnun."

The writer is a fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford, and the author of the preface for the forthcoming anthology *Poetry of the Taliban*. ©New York Times. Distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 17

1915 The last British Liberal Party government (led by Herbert Henry Asquith) falls.

1967 Six-Day War: President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt demands dismantling of the peace-keeping UN Emergency Force in Egypt.

1980 General Chun Doo-hwan of South Korea seizes control of the government and declares martial law in order to suppress student demonstrations.

1983 Lebanon, Israel, and the United States sign an agreement on Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.