

## Our MPs do it again

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

Day after a blistering swipe at the media by the prime minister, when she came down hard on those in the media and in civil society who were, in her words: "Portraying the country in a bad light," a few members of Parliament came down heavily on a respected personality, Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed. Over the years, through his dedicated works, Prof. Sayeed has established himself as a person who people listen to whenever and whatever he preaches. There are not many in our society, unfortunately, who so selflessly uphold the values that we very much wish every citizen emulates.

A few members of the parliament took strong exception to an alleged observation attributed to him, which he supposedly made during a speech in a recent seminar of TIB. The observation attributed to him came out in vernacular daily, which I have not read, where he purportedly said: "MPs and ministers act like thieves and dacoits and break their oath." Although most citizens will hardly differ with the essence of this general observation, its shallowness makes it utterly unlikely to have come from a person of Prof. Sayeed's stature. In their knee-jerk reactions, the MPs and presiding officer of the House went overboard and made remarks not so befitting of those committed to serving the public and being accountable to them for their deeds and discourses.

Just because they are elected by the people, it, by no means, gives the MPs a clean bill of health as regards corruption and does not give them any immunity from criticisms from their direct or indirect constituents, which Prof. Sayeed happens to be one of. On the contrary, the elected representa-

tives are more answerable to the people as compared to their unelected compatriots. One of the honourable members in his criticism of Prof. Sayeed said: "Prof. Sayeed had undermined the lawmakers' dignity and the sovereignty of parliament by making such comments," an unheard of proposition in a Westminster democracy. In fact, it is unfortunate that in elections in Bangladesh, when people make their choices in the polling booth they only choose the lesser of the two evils at the time. If a supplementary question is included in the ballot that asks: "Do you think that your chosen candidate is free from corruption?" hindsight says that the answer would be an overwhelming "no."

A ruling party lawmaker who was interned during the last CTG and gave confessional statement about his corruption castigated Prof. Sayeed by saying: "Intellectuals like Prof. Sayeed had always supported unelected, illegal and military regimes because they get something from those governments." The lawmaker in this instance is either totally ignorant of Prof. Sayeed's past or he deliberately made an absolutely false allegation with the sinister intention of maligning his character, which is surely going to have a boomerang effect in furthering his party's isolation from free thinkers and selfless proponents of our glorious history.

Another member said: "Intellectuals can only give advice but it was the politicians who won independence for the country." Is this true honourable member? It was the death of Prof. Shamsuzzoha that ignited the mass upsurge of 1969. It was the killings of our intellectuals on the fateful night of March 25, 1971 that attracted attention and aroused international conscience in favour of our liberation war, and it was the massacre of our intellectuals on December 14, 1971 that is, even today, providing a superior moral ground in the on-going trials of crimes against humanity. All our free-thinking intellectuals, including Prof. Yunus (who was a tireless activist in America) and Prof. Sayeed, acted from their own vantage points in support of the freedom of their motherland whose pride and prosperity they so dearly cherish.

The worst shot in this one-sided war was fired by the presiding officer of the sitting -- incidentally, neither the Speaker nor his deputy. He said: "Sayeed's remark was tantamount to contempt of parliament and democracy; Parliament should summon him, keep him standing in the House and ask him to offer unconditional apology before the nation." The presiding member's ruling reflects his incomplete perception of freedom of speech and the rules of procedures in a House that follows the Westminster system of democracy, where parlia-

ment is never given any blanket authority to ask its constituents to shut up.

The alleged comment that was attributed to Prof. Sayeed, which created uncalculated uproar in the House, was not really made by him, and too shallow for a man of his intellectual standing. As was reported in a highly-circulated vernacular daily, he was very hurt by this wrong attribution. In fact, he himself elaborated on the statements that he made in the said seminar, which was: "Can stealing by a thief or robbing by a dacoit be termed corruption? I do not think it is corruption. There is another word hidden inside the word *durniti* (corruption) and that word is *niti* (principle). The work of a thief or a dacoit is not *durniti* since neither of them has any declared *niti*. So a declared *niti* is a prerequisite to terming a wrongdoing as *durniti*. Let me give an example. For example, if a minister takes oath to do equal justice to everyone, irrespective of whether he is a friend or foe, and then breaks the pledge, that would be tantamount to corruption."

To those honourable MPs who wrongfully censured Prof. Sayeed for his definition of corruption, let me reassure them that there still are members among them, albeit not many, who command the unqualified reverence of our citizens. For instance, I believe, if the education minister had the absolute authority he would make the above definition by Prof. Sayeed a must read in our schools to give our next generation a philosophical understanding of corruption, the single biggest evil in our society.

The writer is Convener, Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

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## Expediting investigative process

Setting timeline is good idea

THE Human Rights Commission (HRC) demanding of the government to set a time frame to complete investigations into the recent cases of sensational murders, disappearances and human rights violation resonates well with us.

We note that Home Minister Shahara Khatun, who is rather unwavering in her trust in the law-enforcement agency's capacity, finally admitted to the inordinate delay already made in the probes. But admitting failure is one thing, taking a firm decision to finish the task of carrying out the probes with due urgency is another.

Whatever administrative decisions might have led to delays in the investigations, it only lays bare the fact that ultimate responsibility lies with the political authority.

To be as good as her admission, the home minister should now take necessary action to expedite the pace of investigation into the 20 cases of murder, disappearance, and police assault on journalists and women submitted by the HRC chairman to her.

While taking necessary action to this end, the government would also do well to take a fresh look at other cases of human rights violations including disappearances, extrajudicial killings as well as custodial deaths. The probes into these are yet to see the light of day, let alone finding the culprits and punishing them.

We think the home minister is not also unaware of the fact that the delays are often caused by political interference in the probes. The task of completing investigation in time does therefore hinge largely on how firmly the government is ready to exercise its political will in the enforcement of law without fear and favour.

## Ensuring safety on roads

The lessons we all need to learn

A roundtable organised by this newspaper on Tuesday on deaths occurring on the roads may not have revealed anything spectacular, but it certainly threw fresh light on a condition which calls for firmer handling. Perhaps Obaidul Quader, minister for communications and railway, summed it up only too well. In his view, the transport system is so flawed that one quite does not know where to begin overhauling it. Besides, there is the matter of funds where making roads and highways safe is concerned. There are more than 200 accident prone spots all over the country. With the authorities currently trying to make 30 of those spots safe for commuters and vehicles, one can only make a guess about the future of the remaining spots.

That said, it is today imperative that strict measures be taken not only to make roads, in the material sense of the meaning, safe for all but also for drivers of various vehicles to understand that they need to follow all road-related rules. With reports coming in every day from all over the country of deaths on the roads under speeding vehicles, serious steps to handle the situation are in order. And one of those steps cannot but be a set of laws that will hand down exemplary punishment to drivers who operate their vehicles recklessly. There are countries where individuals wishing to be drivers of public transport vehicles must have basic education followed by necessary training on the use of roads. That system can be replicated here. Again, the role of traffic policemen is important. Their need for discipline among themselves and strictness toward bad drivers is essential if we mean to have safe roads.

An important component of any disciplined traffic plan must be a full, proper understanding of the rules of the road by citizens. Jaywalking yet remains an irritant, despite the foot overbridges that are there. Besides, pedestrians must also be told that where there are zebra crossings, they must make use of them. That again means that vehicle drivers must be told firmly that they cannot come to a stop on such zebra crossings.

If we cannot ensure safety on the roads, we cannot be

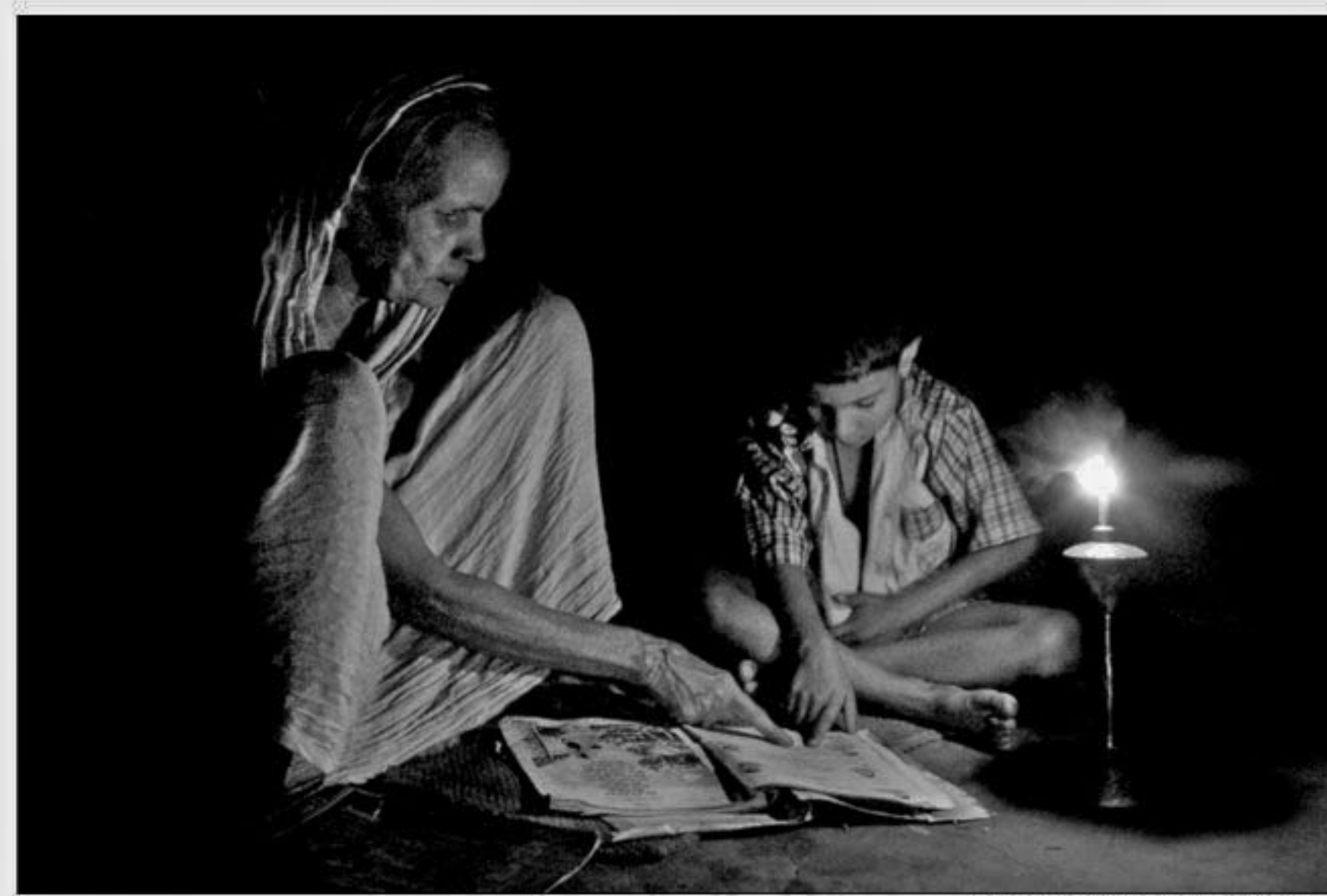
## Who wants interrupted power?

ABDUL MATIN

IT is reported that Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) recently announced a scheme for uninterrupted supply of power for industrial use at a rate which is more than double the existing one. The new scheme is to be effective from June 1. The current average rate of electricity for industrial use is Tk. 5.55 per kWh. BERC calls the privileged group of industrial customers "Q class power consumers" who will pay Tk. 14.44 per kWh but will be assured of uninterrupted supply of electricity. It is not clear what the letter "Q" stands for and whether the BERC has given any assurance for "interrupted supply of power for an indefinite period" to the rest of the consumers!

It is further reported that there has been a mixed reaction to this scheme from the industrial consumers. While welcoming the idea of uninterrupted power, they are complaining about the new rate of electricity which they consider to be too high. They argue that such a high price for electricity will make it difficult for them to compete in the market.

The industrial consumers have a point. Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), on the other hand, may argue that their average cost of production of electricity has gone up because of purchase of high-cost rental power. Now the sixty four million dollar question is, why did BPDB go for inefficient and high-cost rental power in the first place? Why did they not go for long-term contracts based on highly efficient and less expensive combined cycle power plants? Unable to pay for the high fuel costs, BPDB is now resorting to hours of load shedding while a significant generating capacity of rental power remains unutilised. As



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the electricity rates are going up at regular intervals, consumers are now paying for the follies of BPDB.

In addition to the rate of electricity in the new scheme, there is an ethical question involved, which is more serious. We are familiar with different rates of electricity based on the types of consumers. For example, industrial, commercial, domestic and agricultural consumers may have different rates. We are also familiar with "peak" and "off-peak" rates of electricity based on when the energy is consumed. This is for the first time that we are hearing about two rates of electricity based on "interruption" of power supply. As a matter of fact, we do not know of any electric utility which imposes tariffs based on the interruption of power supply.

As far as we know, the BPD was

created in 1972 for supply of uninterrupted power to all consumers. It was never the intention of any government to supply uninterrupted power to some consumers and interrupted power to others. The present government won the last election with the promise of solving the power crisis, which they inherited mainly from the two previous governments, by eliminating load shedding for all consumers.

Is this the solution of the power crisis the present government was looking for during the last three years or so? We wonder why they did not introduce this scheme three years ago, when they came to power, and solve the power crisis by creating two classes of electricity consumers -- the "Q class power consumers" as proposed now and the "non-Q class power consumers"

who would receive "interrupted power supply" for an indefinite period. BPDB will now maintain uninterrupted power to the "Q class of consumers" at the cost of the "non-Q class of consumers," which includes the vast majority of the electricity consumers. The "non-Q class of consumers" will obviously lose their right to uninterrupted supply of electricity, perhaps for an indefinite period.

We also wonder whether BERC properly weighed the implications of the new scheme. By providing uninterrupted power to a privileged class, BERC is issuing a licence to BPDB to supply unlimited interrupted power to other consumers. We also wonder if the new scheme will ultimately apply to other types of consumers, including the domestic consumers. By introducing the new scheme, the BPDB is deviating or escaping from its responsibility of supplying uninterrupted power to all consumers.

Like food, clothing, shelter, education and healthcare, access to electricity is also a fundamental right of every citizen. The government cannot deny the fundamental rights of any of its citizen. By creating a "Q-class of power consumers" the government is indirectly admitting that it failed to provide uninterrupted power to its consumers and is looking for a short-cut solution to the problem.

The new scheme of classification of consumers based on interruption of power supply is unethical, discriminatory and unacceptable. It is, therefore, advisable to dispense with this system as early as possible. BPDB should, instead, try to supply uninterrupted power to all its consumers as it was mandated to do so when it was created forty years ago.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and author of *Rooppur & The Power Crisis*.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 7

- 1099**  
The First Crusade: The Siege of Jerusalem begins.
- 1494**  
Spain and Portugal sign the Treaty of Tordesillas which divides the New World between the two countries.
- 1893**  
Mohandas Gandhi's first act of civil disobedience.
- 1929**  
The Lateran Treaty is ratified, bringing Vatican City into existence.
- 1967**  
Israeli forces enter Jerusalem during the Six-Day War.
- 1977**  
500 million people watch on television as the high day of Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II begins.
- 1981**  
The Israeli Air Force destroys Iraq's Osiraq nuclear reactor during Operation Opera. The facility could have been used to make nuclear weapons.
- 2000**  
The United Nations defines the Blue Line as the border between Israel and Lebanon.
- 2006**  
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, is killed in an airstrike by the United States Air Force.