

Chaos reigns supreme in road repair

No coordination among utility agencies

THIS year is no different from years gone by when the many utility agencies commence their various repairs works that involve digging up roads and leaving them in a state of disrepair after completion of the job at hand. Interestingly, practically all the agencies, whether it be the laying of new water pipes by WASA or the repair of gas lines, work during the rainy season that not only prolongs the particular job at hand but adds to the misery of city dwellers who must travel through sludge or mud ridden roads. The incidents of accidents increase manifold as vehicles get either stuck or overturn as they run over pot holes; while the average pedestrian must count extra pennies and countless hours having to ride rickshaws to get from Point A to B, since roads are inundated by the downpour.

We are forced to ask precisely why all agencies cannot coordinate their activities with one another and precisely why the activities of different utility bodies cannot be staggered throughout the year so that the damage to city roads is lessened and public woes mitigated. It remains a mystery to us as to why each agency must dig up the roads every single year. If it is a major new activity like enhancement of the sewerage network that is understandable. But then, why do we need maintenance every single year? Public utilities in other cities of the world do not undergo such extensive round-the-year activity. The question that comes to mind is that either our service providers are not doing the work properly resulting in poor workmanship or there is rampant corruption involving a nexus between contractors and corrupt officials who gain financially by doing repeat jobs on the same work.

The fact that the city corporation is unable to maintain deadlines within which other agencies must complete their work is a particularly disturbing trend. The question of city government becomes more imperative for a way out of this bureaucratic quagmire. Bringing all utility services under one body could perhaps pave the way for some reprieve for city dwellers as both planning and execution of services would be done by one central authority.

Passport theft worrisome

Security measures need strengthening

IT is highly disconcerting to learn that 6,000 Machine Readable Passports (MRP) have been stolen from the Agargaon passport office. What is more worrisome is the apprehension expressed by the six-member probe committee that the number may stand well beyond what has been given.

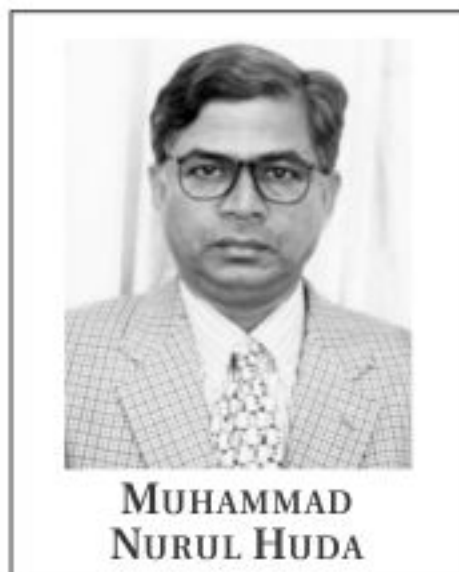
The passport office is an extremely important national agency where high security measures should have been put in place 24-7. Far from being put on alert, the security personnel were so lax and lenient that they could not even smell a rat in the office until the immigration at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport detected some forged MRPs in early June. It clearly reveals the abysmal state of security at the passport office and also indicates pre-existing collusive arrangements among security personnel, concerned passport officials and external vested quarters.

There was concerted effort by a number of senior government officials to direct the whole affair towards a case of stealing by outsiders. This explanation simply does not wash given the oversight of certain activities by army personnel. Evidently, this is an inside job involving a nexus of unscrupulous officials. Therefore, a full-fledged investigation is called for and we demand exemplary punishment to all corrupt officials.

It is a worrying trend to think that these stolen passports may fall into the hands of those who are not legally eligible to have passports. Although it is reassuring to know there are 38 features in the MRP book to prevent a passport from being used by others, the recent technological upswing in criminal activities has made it possible for many to forge documents even when they are preserved in a digital format. So chances are that anyone, even those with criminal track records, can appropriate the stolen passports and sully the image of the country abroad.

Therefore, we demand a strict check and balance policy and strengthened monitoring on a regular basis to ensure that no passport is stolen or handed to a wrong

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

A report in a daily newspaper informs us that the government has upgraded the post of police inspector to

class one from class two, and those of sergeant and sub-inspector to class two from class three. According to one considered view, this up-gradation will have very significant impact on the morale of policemen and thus on the overall law and order administration. One has to wait to see the outcome. There is, however, no denying that the present government has taken a laudable step by fulfilling a long-felt demand of mainstream policing.

The cynical observer would say that cops' status has been upgraded in the eyes of the government but their real status in the society would depend on their conduct and performance vis-à-vis the members of public. In other words, the crux of the matter is whether the cops would serve the establishment's interest without venturing to check its legal standing and if they would work as true public servants maintained by public money.

Answers to the above queries would not be easy to come by, as policing in this part of the world, for reasons well-known, is yet to be a respectable profession. That, however, has not prevented the guardians from waxing eloquent on the virtues of an impartial professional police organisation. The reality is that while their concern is admirable, remedial actions on ground have been less than adequate.

Those wishing to take a deeper look into the status question may find that the public do not trust the police although they have to depend on them. Even if the public starts trusting the police, the law does not. This puts the police in a unique predicament. The mistrust between police and the public is a historical creation. Laws which govern the

police were created to raise the trust of the people in British Empire so that the colonial occupation could continue forever.

When the police were organised, they were given a low status, a low salary, but more fetters so that they could not really serve the people but only the masters who were ruling the people. This background has to be

efforts at reform have met with increasing resistance from the entrenched privileged classes in politics and the so-called civil service. Our society looks at and treats a policeman with revulsion and contempt, little realising that there is no such thing as "scientific investigation" and "clean interrogation" under a legal system where the guardians of



PHOTO: AFP

There is a consensus that the police has been misused and abused, leading to the decline in the rule of law and thereby increasing distrust in police performance. This factor is directly related to the status question.

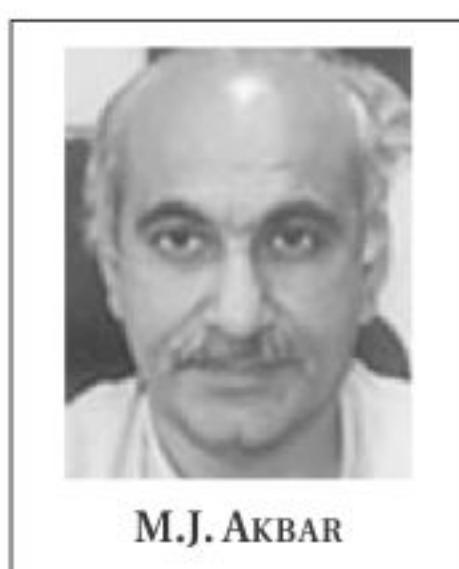
understood clearly while studying the evolution of police in our country. There is a consensus that the police has been misused and abused, leading to the decline in the rule of law and thereby increasing distrust in police performance. This factor is directly related to the status question.

The laws of crime, evidence and procedure dating back to mid-nineteenth century and designed to serve the colonial interests of an imperial power still govern the day-to-day functioning of our police force. The question is: can a colonialist police meet the needs of a free society in a flux? It would not be an exaggeration to say that most

law are not even recognised as such.

The Criminal Procedure Code and the Evidence Act look upon police officers with distrust, which lowers their morale, reduces their efficiency and affects their character. The considered view is that the public cannot be expected to trust the police when the law of the land does not do so. This distrust of the police is not only widely known but also manifests itself every day in courts throughout the country. It is thus not unusual to see police officers resorting to padding of evidence and other dubious methods partly because what they do and what they say are invariably looked upon with suspicions. The question is how can the police func-

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

PERHAPS the question is not asked as often as it should be because the answer is either unexpected or

unwelcome. Does a prime minister become stronger or weaker after re-election? The record, across the world of democracy, is heavily weighted in favour of pessimism. What should be a rejuvenation gradually slips into an unsavoury confusion. The reason lies in the leader rather than the system. The agenda of a first term is driven primarily by the perfectly legitimate ambition to return to office. It, therefore, encourages a practical programme of governance rooted in the public's immediate needs. A second term breeds both exhaustion and complacency: After the high of re-election there seems nowhere to go except downhill. A democracy like America has ended the very concept of a third term; in India, no national government has obtained one after Jawaharlal Nehru, and that was half a century ago.

The concentration of a re-elected PM invariably shifts away from basics; he is content with a holding operation that serves nothing more than the personal comfort of glamour events like world summits, opportunity is frittered away in staged drama, and thoughts turn to

largely unattainable temptations like world or regional peace. If Dr. Manmohan Singh seems to be doing all three, it is because he is doing all three.

To be fair, he declared as early as in 2009 that he did not belong to the future and the future did not belong to him, when he offered to step aside for Rahul Gandhi at any time of the latter's choosing. The next election is Rahul Gandhi's to win or lose, not his. This might have worked if there

fore, is swimming in a vacuum; it is going nowhere very slowly and sweating profusely in the process. A veteran like Pranab Mukherjee could have held the wheel, as he did so ably between 2004 and 2009.

But convinced, justifiably, that there was no hope of Congress making him Dr. Singh's successor, he took a practical exit ramp to a high office that offers a chance to provide leadership of ideas, if you have any ideas, but is above political mine-

There is not much talent left in the present Congress; the stage is full of hams, not stars. The party, therefore, clings on to Dr. Singh, despite his minimalist attitude to performance. The government has shifted gear from fast forward to drift to idle.

was someone furrowing a parallel policy line; but there is no one at the wheel, driving towards a political destination. Sonia Gandhi has lost the way because her nominated driver, her son, dispirited by defeat in Uttar Pradesh, has abandoned the midterm moment when a transition to the next generation could have taken place.

It does not matter, in 2012, whether Rahul Gandhi spends his time abroad or in India, for even when he is in his country he does not contribute to public life by setting out a framework for the future with which he or the Congress can be identified. The Congress, there-

fields. The most senior cabinet member after him, Sharad Pawar, leads a single-digit party; with less than 10 MPs he cannot even hope for a miracle that elevates him to the top of the UPA coalition. The power of a prime minister is, in a sense, office-neutral; he is only as powerful as his personal drive and circumstance permit him to be.

Dr. Singh's second term has been neutered by the simple fact that he has ruled himself out of contention. He has sabotaged his own best asset, his record, with this denial. Neither his cabinet nor his party is in any mood to listen to him, because he does not promise any reward. Rahul

tion if they are not trusted?

In our country the law maintains that statement of witness recorded by the police need not be signed by them. Confessions made before a police officer are not admissible in evidence. Even when the fact of recovery of a crime weapon becomes admissible, any self-incriminating statement of the accused will render it suspect before the court and a conviction can be sustained only on independent evidence of witnesses. For example, if the police officer is the only witness in a crime like murder, rape or robbery, a conviction cannot be sustained merely on his evidence.

The increasing violence, the changing patterns of crime, more sophistication of weapons used in crime and the general atmosphere of insecurity demand a review of the provisions of law to empower the police for effectively dealing with lawless activities. We have to (a) free the police from the clutches of extraneous forces (b) make the police accountable to people and law (c) improve police credibility by reposing more trust in his depositions, at least at the assistant superintendent level (d) raise his status to make him trustworthy in the eyes of the citizen (e) regulate police behaviour through internal controls and external supervision through an independent agency.

The above steps may appear unusual for transforming an organisation abruptly from being unreliable to being virtuous. But there is no alternative left to us. The way character, ethics and morals are being lowered; the manner in which educated people flout the law; the helpless way in which the state is witnessing the ordeal of the citizens compel us to do something drastic. When trust is reposed in police, there will be proper response also to honour the trust. There should be no premonition that the situation will not improve. It will once substantive police reforms are started. In such a scenario, the real status of the police would desirably and appropriately be stable.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 28

1794 Maximilien Robespierre and Louis Antoine de Saint-Just are executed by guillotine in Paris during the French Revolution.

1933 Diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Spain are established.

1965 Vietnam War: U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson announces his order to increase the number of United States troops in South Vietnam from 75,000 to 125,000.

2005 The Provisional Irish Republican Army calls an end to its thirty year long armed campaign in Northern Ireland.

The writer is Editor, The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.