

## Sonali bank's board cannot avoid responsibility

*Did it not happen under their watch?*

WE are dismayed to see that the parliamentary probe committee has apparently accepted the explanations of former Sonali bank directors that they were kept in the dark about the Tk.2,686 crore. Graft that has rocked the foundations of the banking system. Unfortunately, the Board of Directors cannot exonerate itself of any blame. The board is supposed to play a supervisory role. They receive copies of audit reports and most important of all, directors are supposed to vet the process by which large loans are disbursed. As it is, the management works under their watch from policy watch to operations. Hence, the board cannot absolve itself of any responsibility in this case. Whatever may be claimed, board members cannot pass the buck over to the management since they did not object to or raise any suspicion on the big chunks of cash that were taken in loans by Hall-Mark over a six month period since October 2011.

The culture of appointment of directors in state-owned-banks has for too long been based on political considerations. One really doesn't know whether there is any set criterion for their appointment. They are given jobs largely on political grounds perhaps with a 'wink' that they facilitate loans which may not necessarily meet banking requirements. Institutional integrity needs to be fully ensured since Sonali Bank is particularly viewed as the 'Treasury Bank' of the government.

The recruitment process must be brought above board. It is essential to appoint people who have adequate banking knowledge so that the bank's interests are safeguarded above all else. Removal of political influence from the board will help banks like Sonali to streamline operations by removing impediments to internal audit. It is worthwhile to note that state owned banks were transformed into public limited companies but their shares have not been floated to the general public. Had that been the case, bank's management and board would be held accountable for their actions, which at present they are not.

## Free to shoot and vandalize?

*Such BCL elements should not be sheltered by AL leaders*

THERE are indeed times when our perception of the right and the wrong is shaken due to the impossible that happens through the cracks of the system. On Wednesday this newspaper carried a photograph of a BCL activist who during a turf war with Shibir on the RU campus was holding a sharp weapon in one hand and shooting at his opponents with the other. Yet to our astonishment, it was he who filed a case against more than a hundred students with a Rajshahi police station. He was not interrogated, let alone arrested for his involvement.

This is a glaring example of how BCL activists in all educational institutions have been given a free hand by law enforcing agencies as well as their party bosses.

It is not an isolated incident, a fact which worries us all the more. Ever since the present AL-led grand alliance assumed office, BCL activists at DU, JU, RU, CU and other institutions have continued to vitiate the environment for ordinary students what with their vandalism, extortion, and violent in-fighting and assault on other students' parties with shocking fatalities sometimes. However, not a single accused has ever been arrested or punished. Resultantly, public universities have virtually become dens of arms-brandishing goons. One must ask why?

As party insiders themselves have given out, the reason lies in the fact that BCL men are sheltered by their local AL bosses, no matter how detestable their crimes are. Law enforcers, in the process, are made toothless to protect these student-turned-hooligans.

In this context we recall the prime minister warning rowdy BCL men of tougher action. But we believe their continued excesses harm the prime minister's credibility since there has been no change to that effect at institutional and law enforcement levels.

We think it is time now for the prime minister to intervene and ensure that BCL men are not shielded by local AL leaders and all of their unlawful activities are dealt

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- October 5
- 1864

The Indian city of Calcutta is almost totally destroyed by a cyclone; 60,000 die.
- 1910

In a revolution in Portugal the monarchy is overthrown and a republic is declared.
- 1944

Suffrage is extended to women in France.
- 1986

Israeli secret nuclear weapons are revealed. The British newspaper The Sunday Times runs Mordechai Vanunu's story on its front page under the headline: "Revealed the secrets of Israel's nuclear arsenal".
- 2000

Protesters storm Yugoslav parliament. Opposition supporters storm the Yugoslav parliament building and proclaim Vojislav Kostunica as the new president.

## CROSS TALK



offer to head the next caretaker government, and his answer was as spontaneous as the question itself. At this terminal stage of his life, he replied, he had nothing to lose or gain. So, he is ready to serve his country any which way he can.

That gives us hope. The centre is ready before the circle is drawn. It's better than the other idea floated by another mandarin of our civil society. I bet he was joking when he suggested that the next chief of the next caretaker government could be chosen by flipping a coin or drawing lots ("lottery" is the word he used). Perhaps he was talking from experience when he was appointed advisor to a caretaker government.

The highest minds in a country are like mountain tops; the ray of sun (wisdom) touches them first before reaching the valleys down below. But why are these minds suddenly jumping gun? Why is this oiling of moustaches when jackfruits still hang on trees?

May be, they know something we don't. They are busy scouting for a chief, even willing to volunteer for the job, probably because in the end they believe some sort of a quickly cobbled solution will emerge

between caretaker and interim forms of government. May be, they are trying to pre-empt the crisis of 2006 first by identifying a candidate who will be acceptable to all. It's hard to find anybody, who wants to take care of this country. Everybody is more interested in taking care of the government.

Our present politics is plagued by the Hobbesian dilemma, which states that any ruler with enough power to prevent or end war will also have the power to start war for his own purposes. It was Awami League that once insisted caretaker government was the solution. It's the same Awami League that per-

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sists now that caretaker government is the problem.

That being the game plan, our legal man's pre-emptive zest has been misunderstood. Even worse, he has been misunderstood by himself. A referee, who tells others how to play the game, fancied doing a better job if he were to play it himself. An astute mind snapped somewhere like a bad joke falling flat.

In hindsight, the legal mind probably realises that he should have

answered that question in a different way. He has built a thriving practice banking on his immense wisdom and presence of mind. How couldn't he realise that a gatecrasher doesn't get the same respect as an invited guest!

Hence, this burning question. Why has our politics incrementally declined if we have got so many brilliant minds as sons of this soil? We have got more people with higher education than before. We have more foreign-educated people in this country. Yet in 42 years since independence, this country has moved away farther from dream and closer to horror.

French philosopher Julien Benda

It has nothing to do with their age. But somehow 42 years of mismanagement and misguided judgments make them a suspect. Their doubts, decisions, convictions, inhibitions, erudition, perceptions, predictions, corruptions, complacencies, courage, and visions rolled together give us a political quagmire whose surface to this day continues to yield under the tread.

Meanwhile, interesting things have happened in the world. Carnegie Endowment scholar David Rothkopf said: "When the cold war ended, we thought we were going to have a clash of civilisations. It turns out we are having a clash of generations." The poster of a baby at Syntagma Square in Athens says: "Father, whose side were you on when they were selling our country?"

Blood transfusion can replace blood. New owners can change the management of an acquired business. But we are stuck with generations of people, who were once part of the problem and now wish to become part of the solution. Nothing is impossible in a country where a disgraced dictator still goes around flexing his muscle.

Last week, we heard the wrong sound bite from someone who served under this dictator as his attorney general. Generation gap is when the old and the young have their differences. That gap felt like a trap when an elderly wise man made those differences look odiously redundant.

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# Some forward movement

NAJMUDDIN A. SHAIKH

IT seems that the theme of reconciliation within Afghanistan has by and large dominated the many discussions held on that country in New York over the last fortnight.

President Hamid Karzai did reiterate the charge made first by his foreign minister in the UN Security Council, perhaps with his domestic audience in mind, that the bombing of Afghan villages by Pakistan risked undermining the efforts of the two governments to work together.

The greater emphasis appeared to be on the critical role Pakistan had to play in bringing peace to Afghanistan. He added as was to be expected that this was critical for "Pakistan's own security, and of the security of the wider region and beyond."

He also called upon the UN Security Council to aid efforts at reconciliation and urged the sanctions committee to take more active measures towards delisting Taliban leaders to facilitate direct negotiations.

Some "understandings" reached at the trilateral meeting of American, Afghan and Pakistani officials were also discussed and their implementation was also agreed upon when Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari met separately and then in a trilateral summit with British Prime Minister David Cameron.

From the relatively sparse reporting, it seems that the Afghans made it clear that they were looking for ways to bring the Taliban into the mainstream, that they were looking for Pakistan's assistance in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table with Karzai, rather than insisting, as they have been doing so far, that they will talk only to the Americans.

Implicit it seems is the "understanding" now that Pakistan will have a seat at the table when these negotiations do start and that in the meanwhile both sides will work at eliminating or at least reducing the trust deficit that has bedevilled relations between the two countries.

One important step in this direction may be the announcement that the two sides have agreed on signing a strategic partnership agreement. No further details have been made

available at this time but it would seem that Pakistan must have insisted that Afghanistan sign such an agreement given that it has concluded such agreements with a host of countries including, most importantly from Pakistan's perspective, India.

What this agreement will contain may well determine the extent to which trust is created and the extent to which Pakistan is able to extend assistance in the reconciliation process which may well require it to engage in "tough talk" with the Taliban on its soil and risk the ire of

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some of the Taliban supporters in the Pakistani body politic.

Perhaps the most significant meeting in terms of moving reconciliation forward was the one that President Zardari and his aides had with a US team led by Marc Grossman, the point man for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Obama administration.

According to a report in the Washington Post based on briefings from American participants in the "nearly five-hour meeting" the focus was on planning a joint US-Pakistan effort "to draw the Taliban towards peace talks in Afghanistan, an initiative that could help reconcile some militants and give Pakistan a say in the political future of its larger [sic] neighbour."

The report goes on to suggest that, while not yet agreed upon, there

would be a sort of joint vetting process to determine who the "reconcilables" are among the Taliban using Pakistan's extensive intelligence on this subject and also working out modalities for providing "safe passage" for such Taliban to participate in peace talks.

This report concludes that "Any deal is likely to take years, far outlasting the current plans to end formal combat against the Taliban in 2014."

So far of course the American idea has not been to end formal combat against the Taliban in 2014 but only that such combat will be conducted



by the Afghan National Security Forces and the American or Nato forces will only be in a supportive role as training advisers and providers of intelligence and air support.

One assumes that this phrasing was sloppy reporting but it could perhaps also mean that those talking to the reporter entertained the forlorn hope that some sort of ceasefire would be in place by the time the major part of the American and Nato forces had withdrawn.

By and large despite the many hurdles that remain these agreements or understandings represent a step forward and offer some hope that reconciliation will move forward.

Certainly there have been indications from some prominent Taliban that they cannot expect to prevail on the battlefield and are prepared to

move towards some form of reconciliation to spare the country further destruction. If the reading of these meetings is correct, Pakistan's negotiators appear also to have won the long-desired right to have a seat at the negotiating table.

What Pakistan will do with this right is not clear. Perhaps it will seek a guarantee that the new regime that emerges in Afghanistan will not seek to play India off against Pakistan. Perhaps such a guarantee will even be forthcoming but one can be sure that this will not be durable. Perhaps it will also seek an Afghan acknowl-

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The writer is a former foreign secretary of Pakistan.  
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