

KALEIDOSCOPE

A good augury

Give full cooperation to the external panel

WE welcome the World Bank's constitution of a panel of international experts to assess transparency and credibility of Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)'s investigation into alleged corruption in the Padma Bridge project. A little over a fortnight since the revival of its loan deal in September 20, the WB has taken this forward-looking step. The sense of urgency conveyed by this move to see the dream project materialise for Bangladesh finds a resonance with the people of Bangladesh.

The three-member external panel is constituted by men of considerable experience and impeccable credentials in their respective fields that they will bring to bear on their assignment. The team will be headed by Luis Moreno Ocampo, a former chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) with Timothy Tong, a former commissioner of the Independent Commission against Corruption in Hong Kong and Richard Alderman, a former director of the UK Serious Fraud Office as members.

The importance of the mission is reflected on the fact that based on its findings on the status and progress of the investigations being made by the ACC, the World Bank will go ahead on the project.

Actually, we believe it is an extraordinary opportunity for Bangladesh government to gain in two ways: First, by way of identifying the gaps between the international multilateral financing agency's expectations and our approaches. This will help raise our standards in terms of transparency, public accountability and governance. Secondly, the government has the opportunity to redeem and vindicate itself. This is necessitated because of the way the government handled the issue with the World Bank which admittedly tainted the image of the country.

Thus, the job is cut out for the government, and the ACC in particular to extend their fullest cooperation to the external panel in fulfilling our goal to ensure integrity of the implementation of the project from the very word go. It is heartening to note that the government has given positive vibes to provide cooperation to the World Bank's panel.

It is in everybody's interest to put the whole controversy behind and move ahead on getting the project on the ground without further loss of time.

Rundown city streets

DCC's indifference costing heavily

THE seriously aggravated condition of city streets is a source of immense suffering to city dwellers. It takes on a new severity during the rainy season when roads and streets are often waterlogged. It is in this season utility service providers dig up roads to install pipes of different sizes. All too predictably, those dug-up trenches are not filled up in time and so the dire straits the roads are being left in and circuitous traffic movement.

As we know it, the remit for carrying out repairs of dug-up roads is the DCC's. When utility service providers dig up a city street, they do so after notifying the city corporation along with a payment made to put the roads back in shape. Therefore, the responsibility lies clearly with the city corporation to repair and look after any street that has been dug up or damaged for whatever reasons. Nevertheless, the city bosses' lackadaisical attitude to their given obligations results in inordinate delay which further aggravates the road conditions.

Speculations are rife that delay often leads to expensive repairs making way for bigger misappropriation of funds. It is indeed baffling that some people court rundown roads to spin money when those are causing suffering to public in numerous ways, including accidents at times. This gross lack of social commitment will have to be decisively overcome.

When the historical city of Dhaka was bifurcated by this government for the purpose of setting up two city corporations, we were told that it was necessary for better management. What we are seeing instead is greater indifference and total lack of public accountability. Therefore, we would like to ask how unselected representatives can be relied on indefinitely to look after the city of a burgeoning population. There can be no greater compulsion for holding election to the DCCs than the

The stubborn 'railwaygate' scam



SYED FATAHUL ALAM

THE railwaygate scandal seems to be too stubborn to get buried decently. The whistleblower, the driver who opened the can of

worms at the Border Guards, Bangladesh (BGB) headquarters at Pilkhana, some six months ago and then vanished into thin air, has spoken from an undisclosed location to an electronic TV channel the other day. Though essentially he has only retold the old story, what is intriguing is how he could elude the grip of police assuming that the latter at all gave him a hot chase. His remaining in hiding for so long raises more questions than answers. Of course he felt threatened for life after having spilled the beans. Yet it begs questions as to the absence of any serious full-blown attempt at unearthing the scandal which should have included probing interrogation of the driver himself. The driver is the crucial witness in this case.

What is he afraid of that the Rtv reporters had to interview him from a secret place? Is he witness to something more unsettling than he revealed on the night of April 9? Don't these questions deserve a satisfactory answer for the sake of untangling the knot created over the railway scam?

But we are also surprised at Suranjit Sengupta's snide remark about the media on this occasion. What did he mean by what he termed "media creature" when his attention was drawn to the interview given by driver Ali Azam Khan to the Rtv? Did he mean to say that the story about the bagful of money stashed in his former APS's car and which the driver brought to the full glare of the BGB personnel at Pilkhana on that eventful



STAR ARCHIVE

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night is "bogus" or that the person, Azam Khan, himself is a chimera?

We want to believe that Mr. Sengupta is clean. We would like to make it abundantly clear that the media in general has nothing personal against him, or against any other highly placed public representative in the government. On the contrary, it was the media that profusely showered him with praise when he set a new precedent in the country by resigning on his own volition from his cabinet position only a week after the story of graft scam came to light. But we also know how by a fresh stroke of luck he got back, though without any portfolio, his ministerial status, thanks to the prime minister's unwavering trust in him.

The public, at whose service the media is, also wants to place trust in a senior politician and public leader like Suranjit Sengupta. But even though the government has tried to

sweep the matter under the carpet, things have simply refused to go by its dictate. They have again raised their heads. Public memory is still fresh enough to recall the chain of events that followed after that night's incident and swearing in of a new railway minister to fill Mr. Sengupta's vacant position. So it would be rather naïve to assume that the railwaygate has forever been wiped out completely from public memory.

Since he has dismissed driver Azam's version of the story, can we not expect that he would extend his help for the sake of the truth to come out? Of course, just dismissing it all out of hand is not the standard and accepted way of establishing the truth. Conducting a credible and impartial investigation into whole incident is the only way. Will the minister show the courage of his conviction?

We may recall that after the driver

first spilled the beans, two internal probe bodies were formed by Mr. Sengupta when he was still in chair as railway minister. The APS was sacked and the other two railway officers were sent to the end of fifth week after the ACC probe body was formed to look into the case, it announced on May 22 that the probe could not be completed until the driver was found.

Now that the driver has given a TV interview and expressed willingness to emerge from his fugitive state if given state protection, will not the government take hold of this opportunity to reopen the ACC probe?

The public is concerned about corruption in the railway and want a satisfactory outcome of the stalled ACC case. The probe should relate to further investigation into the driver's motivation to reveal the scam.

Because all that he says cannot be taken at its face value. He should also be made to substantiate his honesty that he claims in connection with this case.

In the interest of the railway's going forward, the whole controversy should be squarely put behind in a credible manner.

Until and unless a fresh investigation by the ACC or any other probe body having the necessary credentials and integrity is done, Mr. Sengupta will not be able to come out of the controversy clean by only denials or hitting at the media with his artful remarks.

The government and the prime minister in particular cannot and should not miss this opportunity to demonstrate to the nation with the general election for the 10th Jatiya Sangsad round the corner that the people she puts trust in are clean and really above board.

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Politics of fantasy or fantastic politics?

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

POLITICS is about power. How to be in position of power is what drives politicians. Some politicians will follow the culturally acceptable rules to attain power, others will be innovative. They will try to twist some of the rules provided they can get away with it. That is real life politics in Bangladesh today.

Once in position of power, good politicians -- sometimes, sadly, a contradiction in terms -- will try to do something for the public good. They will build and repair infrastructures, lay foundations for new projects and so on. Most run-of-the-mill politicians will do a mixture of things, public good; personal enrichment; benefitting relatives and friends, fellow party members, loyalists; inaugurate events and give speeches. When politicians in power fail to add electrical power to the national grid they are criticised by their opponents and they are also criticised when they do.

For those who are in power, the main item on their "things to do list" is how to stay in power. For those in opposition, their main goal is how to unseat those in power and replace them. This is the reality of politics in Bangladesh that most people are used to.

Politicians are brilliant in preparing their own strategies for either staying in power or for removing people already in power. They will come up with new strategies, plans, ideas as situations demand.

Academics should not even pretend to advise politicians and should keep a safe distance. Academics should mind their own business, not criticise business people or politicians (and sometimes they are the same people).

Academics or eggheads, as they are sometimes referred to somewhat uncharitably, are people who often live in the world of fantasy. Today, I pretend to be one of them and indulge in a little exercise in fantasy.

Now imagine a fantasy world where politics becomes unreal, that is, politicians suddenly become

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romantics and begin to listen to the people -- especially the reasonable people. I know it is just a fantasy. But let us give a listen to what the reasonable people want to see in Bangladesh today.

My data comes from talking to reasonable people. Defining "reasonableness" will be a distraction and I will avoid that for the moment. The following is a summary of what they want the government to do in a month's time:

- Invite Professor Muhammad Yunus to address the joint session of the Parliament (that is, both the government party and the opposition party present in the Parliament) to explain social business. And explore whether social business

model can be followed with regard to building the deep sea port in Chittagong. Reinstate him as the chairman of Grameen Bank and invite him to be the chief banking adviser to the government and a roving ambassador after profusely offering him apologies for the harassment;

- Propose a new bill or modify an existing bill that will allow arrest of influential or powerful people on suspicion of wrongdoing so that they cannot influence investigation of their wrongdoings. Arrest first, investigate later;

- Ask the finance minister to summarise the commission report on stock market scandal, Destiny Group scheme, and Hall-Mark Group misappropriation of money and land to the Parliament, and ask the home minister to arrest everyone involved in those scams (big businessmen, ministers and influential officials) immediately;
- Ask all the ministers and others involved in alleged Padma Bridge scandal to present their side of the story to the Parliament and allow the members of the parliament to question them. Again for the neutrality of the investigation, people accused should be put in custody first; and
- Declare big corruption as a threat

to national security and deal with the Godfathers of corruption on a war footing.

Politicians are intelligent folks and they know very well how to distinguish between fantasy and reality. They also know that those who live in the world of fantasy are a small number. The majority -- the real people -- those who count in an election -- need to be approached with an alternative reality of a promised world. If you vote for X party, you will pay less for everything in the market (do not worry about global economic crisis and world market). More important, everything promised in the past but could not be fulfilled will now be fulfilled in the second term. If you vote for Y party, there will be two Padma Bridges. Those who lost money in the stock-market will be compensated (no matter whether it is a drain on the exchequer or not). Politicians do not have time for such small details.

If you are a politician do not even worry about what the so-called reasonable people say. Besides, the above can be just an interpretation of what the so-called reasonable are saying. Those in academia live in ivory towers because they were rejected by the voters -- the real people. Hence, do not pay attention to what losers have to say.

Life is short, stop dreaming and start living. Leave the world of fantasy and better live in the real world and please listen to your politicians.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 8

- 1932** The Indian Air Force is established.
- 1967** Guerrilla leader Che Guevara and his men are captured in Bolivia.
- 1970** Vietnam War: In Paris, a Communist delegation rejects US President Richard Nixon's October 7 peace proposal as "a maneuver to deceive world opinion".
- 1973** Yom Kippur War: Gabi Amir's armored brigade attacks Egyptian occupied positions on the Israeli side of the Suez Canal, in hope of driving them away. The attack fails, and over 150 Israeli tanks are destroyed.
- 1974** Franklin National Bank collapses due to fraud and mismanagement; at the time it is the largest bank failure in the history of the United States.
- 1982** Poland bans Solidarity and all trade unions.