

Foreign tours by government servants

ABDUL MATIN

IN the October 16, 2012, issue of *Energy & Power*, Farid Hossain writes: "They simply love foreign tours. They are the senior officials of the ministry, but they don't mind attending training programmes meant for junior engineers." I heard similar stories from scientists of research organisations also. It is a fact that senior government servants frequently attend scientific conferences abroad.

There are allegations that no file for approval of attendance at scientific conferences abroad by scientists moves smoothly in the secretariat unless some senior officials of the concerned ministry are included in the delegation. Occasionally, the approval comes too late with little time to make necessary arrangements for a visit.

No wonder, some civil servants and a private secretary of a minister were included as members of a technical team that went abroad to inspect the equipment of a power plant. Couldn't the equipment be inspected more professionally by a competent body like Lloyds and at a much lower cost?

An eight-member delegation led by a state minister visited Moscow in October 2009 "for having clearer ideas about that country's nuclear technology." Other members of the delegation included the power secretary, the energy secretary, the secretary to the economic relations division, a joint secretary to the power, energy and mineral resources ministry, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on the same ministry, project director of Rooppur Nuclear Power Project (RNPP) and a member of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC) (DS October 13, 2009).

The desire of the civil servants to have "clearer ideas" about Russian nuclear technology is most appreciable. We could get the benefit of their visit if any of the secretaries addressed a seminar or wrote an article on the status of Russian nuclear technology after their return to Dhaka.

I wonder where the four secretaries are now. They are unlikely to stay at the same posts after more than three years. If not retired, they have most probably been transferred to other ministries together with all the knowledge they acquired from their Moscow visit. How will the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP) benefit now from their knowledge if my assumption is correct?

Secondly, was it really necessary to travel to Moscow "for having clearer ideas" on Russia's nuclear technology? In this digital age, is it not possible to get all the information the secretaries wanted from the internet? Alternatively, couldn't the BAEC arrange a workshop for the secretaries in Dhaka and provide them with the information they needed?

Thirdly, universities and different professional bodies frequently organise seminars on science and technology in Dhaka and other cities in Bangladesh. How many secretaries attend such seminars for having "clearer ideas" on any scientific and technical subject? Why are they so keen on acquiring knowledge by travelling to Moscow?

Last December, a 15-member delegation spent one week in Moscow to negotiate the terms of the \$500 million loan for the RNPP.

Does it require 15 members and seven days only to negotiate the terms of a loan? Did anyone enquire exactly what role each member of the delegation played during their stay in Moscow?

It is also noticeable that the delegations to Moscow in connection with the RNPP were accompanied by ministers and several secretaries. I was directly involved with the Rooppur Project during the late 1960s. I made ¾ visits to Moscow and Brussels for discussions with the reactor vendors. Our delegations, much smaller size, were always composed of technical personnel only. No minister or secretary ever accompanied us.

A 14-member delegation, including 11 from Dhaka, attended the annual general conference of the International Atomic Energy (IAEA) in Vienna in 1974. I attended such a conference in 1974. Only two members, the chairman and a member of BAEC, flew from Bangladesh and Justice Abu Syed Chowdhury, then Head of the Bangladesh Mission in Geneva, joined as the leader of the delegation. I joined as the fourth member from Vienna where I was stationed at that time to carry out a nuclear power planning study for Bangladesh.

The general conference of the IAEA is an annual event where only the leader of the delegation delivers a speech. The rest of the members of the delegation have very few functions apart from listening to the speeches by the heads of other delegations and attending receptions. The size of such delegations hardly exceeded 4 or 5 members in the past. It is not clear why it was necessary to send a 14-member delegation to the general conference last year.

These are only few examples to show how public money is being wasted by some public servants. I am not suggesting that official foreign trips by the ministers and civil servants are not necessary. Of course, they need to go abroad for important official tasks but such visits should be made only in the interest of the country and its people. Unnecessary foreign trips not only increase the financial burden of the government but also hamper normal official work during their absence.

I am, however, glad to note that the parliamentary committee on the ministry of water resources recently asked for detailed information on foreign visits by the minister, state minister and high officials of the ministry. The committee wants to know how much money was spent and what was achieved by such visits (*Prothom Alo*, January 21). It is very encouraging to note that the parliamentary committee wants to bring some kind of accountability to foreign visits by ministers and high officials. Other parliamentary committees should follow this example.

It is also necessary to formulate a general policy on foreign visits by ministers and government servants in order to bring accountability to such visits and to stop unnecessary and prolonged trips in the name of official visits. The policy should attach due priority to visits by research scientists, doctors, engineers and other professionals to attend scientific and technical conferences.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

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Made-up characters invade the real world



ZOOMING up the *New York Times* bestseller chart this week is a romantic novel called *Charm* by Kendall Hart. Nothing odd about that. Except for the fact that she doesn't exist. Kendall Hart is a made-up character from a TV show.

I pointed this out to my publisher, who couldn't see anything wrong with it. "Look," he said, huffily clicking on the computer. "Here's a video clip from the TV episode in which you can see her write it."

This of course proved nothing except that the logical thought processes of publishers are a mystery more arcane and complex than Einstein's dreams or my wife's purchasing decisions.

Now I don't know about you, but I have a serious problem with non-existent people doing stuff in the real world. This is our world, dang it. We spent years building it. I object to fictional people coming over here and taking our jobs, sleeping with our women and so on.

I was fuming about this when I got a letter from the person who buys my novels. "To be honest, I don't really like your writing that much," the man wrote. "But I like Mr. Wong's. Where can I buy his book?"

I made the mistake of mentioning this to my publisher. "This person wants to know where to buy a fictional book written by one of my fictional characters," I said. "Like duh." "What a great idea," he said, completely missing the point. "I could publish Mr. Wong's book. It could hardly sell worse than yours."

At first I thought he had been taking illegal substances (mandatory for publishers who want to stay sane), but he was serious. "Look at this," he said, pointing to his shelves. "A *Series of Unfortunate Events* was written by Lemony Snicket, a fictional character in the story." He showed me two books written by fictional authors from the world of Harry Potter. Kennilworthy Whisp wrote *Quidditch Through the Ages* and Newt Scamander wrote *Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them*.

"Why hasn't J.K. Rowling sued them, like she has sued everyone else?" I asked. "You can't sue fictional characters," he said. "And even if you did, what would you get? Fictional dollars?"

Intrigued, I did some research. The author who has most been tormented by his creations coming alive must be Chicago author Edward Gorey. He had a habit of dreaming up characters whose names were anagrams of his own name. His publishers soon started releasing books by Ogdred Weary, Mrs. Regeera Dowdy, Raddory Gewe, Dogear Wryde, E. G. Deadworry, D. Awdrey-Gore, Wardore Edgy, and Madame Groeda Weyrd. Some of these outsold Gorey's own books.

Further investigation revealed that Ogure Ito, credited with having produced several top Japanese manga books, is also fictional. The name Ogure Ito is really just a Japanese-accented spelling of the English phrase "Oh great." Apparently the publishers did not realise that when English speakers say "Oh great" they actually mean the opposite, as in "that's really baaaaad." (Which is what English-speakers say when they mean something is really good.) Oh well, if you can't beat them... I told my publisher that I intended to write my next book under the name of my fictional detective, Mr Wong. "Fine. The book will be issued under his name," he replied. "As will the paycheck."

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Mursi's presidency under serious threat

MUHAMMAD ARIF IQBAL KHAN

ABDEL Fattah Al Sissi, Egypt's army chief and defence minister, warned: "The continuation of the conflict between the different political forces and their differences over how the country should be run could lead to the collapse of the state and threaten future generations." As of January 29, 60 people were reportedly killed in clashes. Cairo and other important cities were witnessing widespread chaos, protests and general disorder. Is the presidency on the verge of a collapse? Or is it being directed by Mubarak era loyalists to bring a return of military rule in Egypt?

Muslim Brotherhood was victorious in presidential elections yet it is desperate to bring stability to the most important Arab Muslim country. Israel and its regional allies would want nothing more than to see Muslim Brotherhood's Mursi collapse under the twin burdens of economic hardship and social chaos.

A failed democratically elected Islamist party would go a long way to prove Muslims fit to be ruled by an iron fist on a no-choice basis. Mubarak used the threat of rising fundamentalism to his advantage. He could convince the world that it was either Mubarak or the Islamists.

Israel's occupation of Palestine rests on autocrats and dictators remaining in charge of Cairo and Damascus primarily. Mubarak's offer to silence Muslim Brotherhood by the use of force was the best solution for Israel and its allies. Mubarak could be counted as an extension of the Israeli security plan for the region.

Mubarak's state machinery went to work overtime since his ascendancy to power. Government officers and loyalist politicians built up their power base on the back of a pro-secular liberal dictatorship headed by the armed forces. It was worked remarkably because of the high reputation of army officers in public eyes thanks to their role in Arab-Israeli wars which made heroes out of soldiers.

Intelligence agencies, local spies, informers, and their likes carried on with their objectives in ministries and government offices, and in schools and social organisations. It is alleged NGOs also played a complimentary role to Mubarak loyalists in intelligence and security operations.

State machinery built up by Mubarak over 30 years entrenched itself in the executive, legislative and judi-

cial branches touching all levels in the hierarchy. Mubarak era loyalists come from the ranks of government, semi government and private sector institutions. Most importantly, state organs administering justice and law and order are said to be heavily loyal to Mubarak. President Mursi will find his greatest challenge in moving these loyalists towards his cause.

Without support and co-operation from all the vital state organs Mursi's presidency is a sitting duck. Keeping stability is now a question of life or death for his presidency and for Muslim Brotherhood's overall political road map in Egypt and beyond as well.

Mursi's collapse will be evidence that political parties of Arab Muslim countries are bound to fail in keeping law, order and social harmony. The result of politicians coming to power is chaos, anarchy, economic collapse and general disorder for common people. In other words, experimentation with democratic rule would only bring trouble for common people.

Therefore, in order to keep social harmony and law and order it is necessary that Arab countries abandon political parties in favour of liberal secular authoritarian rule. This theory justifies grabbing of power by a dictator followed by heavy clamp-down of political activists by using brute force.

For decades it was assumed that civilians could not be allowed to take over national interests. There is some truth in that fear. Civilians carry a badge of distrust and dishonesty when compared with soldiers with weapons ready to defend national boundary and state sovereignty.

Military officers are adequately trained, properly organised, well equipped and mentally prepared to hold leadership. This quality is uniquely built into the psyche of armed forces as the protector of state's sovereignty.

Leadership quality of military officers stands distinguished from politicians painted with corruption cases

in third world countries. A civilian government may adopt different styles of governance but the armed forces will never be allowed to experiment with order and chain of command. People are likely to believe armed forces are genuine national saviours as opposed to greedy civilian office seekers.

Most defence forces of third world countries carry legacies from former colonialist forces. Old structures left behind are still being followed in liberated countries with customary zeal and respect. Armed forces are perhaps the last remaining institutional symbol of real connection with former western colonial powers. This makes armed forces a trustworthy and highly disciplined organisation to take charge of a former colony.

It gets more complicated as Arabs and Muslims are sympathetic and supportive of the Palestinian struggle for freedom. As war with Israel is a possibility Egyptian military will always have a special place in national strategic planning and control.

Egypt is the only country in the world to have inflicted a crushing blow to Israel. Lebanon's Hizbollah fought off Israeli aggression in 2006 in southern Lebanon. Hizbollah being a non-state actor can't be held in the same rank as Egypt's national defence force. Egypt's military might is an existential threat for Israel considered from a regional perspective.

In Cairo and Alexandria rallies were supposed to be about the January 25 uprising at Tahrir Square, which toppled Mubarak. But rioters allegedly hired by remnants of the old regime went on a rampage and set fire to several buildings including the Ministry of Services, the old American University and a military storage facility.

In the charged atmosphere rioters were easily able to incite violence by playing on people's emotions. Police stations were attacked in Suez City and Port Said as were offices of the Muslim Brotherhood. Violence erupted in Cairo, Alexandria, Beheira, Luxor, Kafr El-

Sheikh, Gharbia, Sharqia, Ismailia and Suez.

Opposition politicians exploited the situation by blaming President Mursi and his government for failing to fulfill "the demands of the revolution" after assuming power. While the opposition and their foreign sponsors have been harping on "democracy" and "elections", a survey showed that 82% of Egyptians wanted justice to be provided to all. This was the top demand, far ahead of any other consideration because the thugish Mubarak regime had brutalised people through kangaroo courts for decades.

Given the violence and uncertainty caused as a result of riots and arson attacks, President Mursi cancelled plans to travel to Ethiopia to attend the African economic summit. On late Saturday evening, Egypt's National Defence Council (NDC), headed by President Mursi, said it might consider declaring a state of emergency in areas of violence. The Council also called for dialogue with opposition forces over ongoing clashes in several governorates, but the opposition as usual rejected the call.

National Salvation Front (NSF) put forward five demands including its inclusion in the government and scrapping of the constitution. In the absence of a constitution, however flawed, the country would be put in political limbo. This is what the opposition wants: endless chaos so that it would force the military to intervene and overthrow an elected government.

NSF also warned that if its "legitimate" demands were not met in the coming days, it would hold protests next Friday to topple the "invalid" constitution and to readopt temporarily the scrapped Constitution of '71. NSF also demanded an early date for new presidential elections even while declaring that it will not participate in parliamentary elections as stipulated in the constitution.

Muslim Brotherhood's agenda for Egypt remains in anticipation of a simplified vision. Egyptians are not interested in theoretical arguments and electioneering models. They want social justice, law and order, economic progress and pluralistic harmony. Muslim Brotherhood's response has to be specific and result oriented. President Mursi should have only one agenda on his table. Bringing stability back to Egypt quickly before time runs out.

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