

Flyover caught in mid-air

Get bureaucracy out of the way

JATRABARI flyover, contrary to public expectations, will not open any time soon. That is a depressing thought. And it becomes outrageous when the reasons for the delay are looked into. The overhead electric lines, supposed to be cleared by the authorities long ago, have remained untouched. In similar manner, hardly any effort has been made toward relocating the Phulbaria bus stand as a way of smoothening work on the flyover.

The authorities come up with the excuse that they are still trying to find space where the bus stand can be shifted. They ought to have done the job by December 2010. Because they could not, they were given a grace period till June last year. Nothing has happened. The chairman of Belhasa Accom and Associates Ltd, the concessionaire involved in the work on the flyover, tries to reassure people that the flyover can be opened in the next two months. That is hard to understand, though. As for the overhead cables and poles which need to be repositioned along a 200-metre stretch, the problem persists.

Not even reminders from the Prime Minister's Office and a series of decisions reached at crucial meetings have been able to compel the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, Dhaka Power Distribution Company Ltd, Titas Gas and Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Ltd in ensuring that impediments get out of the way of the flyover.

In Jatrabari, we have only a fresh new instance of bureaucratic red-tape. Must this go on?

Why the poor response on amnesty offer?

Persuade workers to utilise the opportunity

DESPITE the earlier decision by Saudi authorities not to extend the deadline on amnesty beyond July 3, an extension now appears to be on the cards. We are happy to learn of this change in attitude. Perhaps the decision to do so revolves around the fact that only about half of the eight million workers took advantage of regularising their illegal stay in the Kingdom until June 25. The trouble with Bangladeshi workers, a good deal of whom have overstayed beyond their permissible periods since many now work for employers other than those who recruited them originally. Lack of valid documentation has automatically rendered them illegal.

It has become imperative that our mission in the Kingdom prioritise the need to reach out to the hundreds of thousands of illegal Bangladeshi workers. It must be impressed upon them by our officials that they should not fear coming forward to take advantage of the opportunity. For the alternative is either imprisonment or hefty fines. The extension of deadline could be anywhere between three and six months, depending primarily on success in negotiating with Saudi authorities. The time extension may only be considered effective if word can be reached out to the workers that the Bangladesh mission is there to help smoothen the transition process. Otherwise, there is a possibility that large numbers of illegal workers might take chances of dodging authorities and eke out a living for a fraction of the wage that a legal worker may earn.

Why can't we do that?

NAFIS ZUBAIR KHAN

BILL Gates started Microsoft and Mark Zuckerberg registered the domain name for Facebook when they were 19. Is that only because they come from the land of opportunities? Then how come our neighbouring country has so many successful entrepreneurs? Truth is, we have a lot of successful young people.

Now, take a while to think about how we came to know the name of Zuckerberg. The Facebook homepage doesn't show his name. Not many of us know the founder of Bdjobs.com or Onnorokom Software Ltd. because they are not publicised. Our young generation knows every singer or TV actor. The successful entrepreneurs of our times should have been given this stardom. We tend to talk about politicians, musicians and players. It's high time we talked about our entrepreneurs and followed them instead.

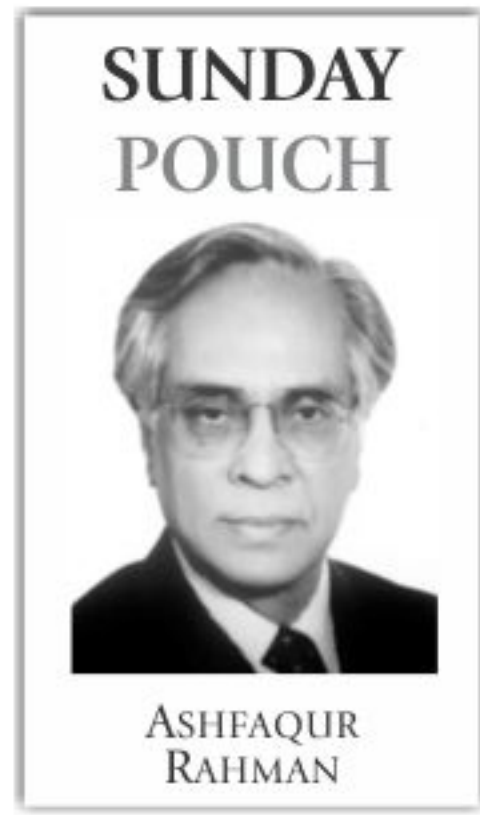
Another reason we are not being able to build great business ventures is the fear of social gossip. If a college student starts selling shoes in the streets of Dhaka, everyone will talk ill about him. But, if he grows up to start a shoe factory, everybody will praise him. People in our country start a business out of need not to create or experiment. Need doesn't motivate innovation.

The idea sharing space is limited. Our young generation has great ideas which can be turned into successful businesses. But those ideas remain to themselves due to the limited space to express and work on it further. There are workshops and competitions being arranged nowadays to encourage young entrepreneurs and business leaders. But there should be a permanent platform. There is only one venture-capital firm in Bangladesh and no company to provide initial seed funding to start-ups. The large corporations don't have an open policy towards people who want to share new ideas. There should be an idea sharing and discussion unit in every large company where anyone can pitch his idea and discuss about its business potential. Lastly, the copyright laws should be strengthened. Great creations are going in vain due to piracy as it's difficult to create something, but very easy to reproduce it.

We may not have a Ron Conway among us, but we have people who understand the value of a dream. Our country will see great things when the dreamers and the believers unite to take the path less traveled. As Eleanor Roosevelt said: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

The writer is an undergrad student at Dhaka University

US: From protector to predator of privacy!



THE 21st century is known by many as the Age of Information. Millions of people around the world access information that helps keep them safe, healthy and prosperous. Bangladesh is also no exception. Our government has coined the slogan 'Digital Bangladesh' to allow the people to use modern technology, including the use of the internet, to acquire, use and disseminate information.

There are, however, restrictions in many countries on accessing personal information of any citizen or visitor. In exceptional cases, a government is allowed under strict provision of its law to gather personal information if such information is relevant for the security of the state or the people. There are no exceptions. Any organisation or individual clandestinely acquiring details about the activities of a citizen could be subject to investigation and prosecution according to privacy law of the land.

So when we were told a few weeks back that the US, which is a big protector of individual privacy of its citizens, on a secret order from a national security court established by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, has been tapping telephone calls of millions as well as monitoring internet browsing of millions others in a meta-data collection programme, it was like the proverbial child being caught with his hands in the jam jar.

The intriguing aspect is that this scandal was revealed by one of their own, a US government (NSA) contractor called Edward Snowden. According to him, the US government was infringing the right of privacy of millions of Americans by resorting to covert means to access private information which is kept on state records for easy access and prosecution. The data collection focuses on logs of internet communications like e-mails sent or received from whom, how frequently and in what patterns, as well as telephone call logs.

The US government, by collecting data on a mass scale, is not only in breach of its own privacy law which it is mandated to protect, it is also violating the ethos on the basis of which the freedom loving people of the US are governed.

But the US government, in spite of this, is not willing to give in. It has been trying to apprehend Snowden, charge him for disclosing state secrets and try him in a court of law in the US. What an irony for a whistle-blower in the 21st century who, in pursuit of what he thought was right and proper to do in collective interest, is now accused and asked to face the music.

There are several reasons why the mass collection of personal information by US authorities is wrong. Last week, word came through that logs of telephone calls are still being maintained under a separate National Security Agency (NSA) programme. But it is still not clear whether

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Internet meta-data collection programme still continues. In any case, it will be better for the US to close down these programmes. There are good reasons for that.

To begin with, the US, by covertly collecting mass data, has put in question the 'presumption of innocence' of every citizen of its country as well as visitors to that country. Anyone or everyone the US government now taps is presumed to be guilty of some infraction, otherwise why should such gargantuan machines be directed towards him or her?

Secondly, individuals in the US can no longer be presumed to be in control over their own information. Every morning, the 'Big Brother' swoops in and sweeps away material information and relocates them in the US government computer system. The privacy law is therefore being flouted at random.

But who benefits from this transfer? Surely it must be the US intelligence authorities. The third aspect is that intelligence spooks are the gainers while the people are the losers.

The data that this clandestine mechanism collects is also, we are told, used to profile a citizen there. Theoretically, if you had been making regular calls to a friend who is under state suspicion, then you could be targeted and the timing and pattern of your calls could be used against you. Mind you, all this is being done without your knowledge.

Initially, it was security of the state and general well being that was of interest to the US government. But who knows new areas of concern could be discovered that would require the use of this 'honey pot' of information. These new areas could be those which draw on patterns culled out from the huge data base created for an individual citizen.

There is no doubt that political corruption breeds where there are 'grey areas' of governance. Wherever there is lack of transparency there is scope for causing immense distress to individual citizens. So there is no doubt that this collection of data on individuals could result in personal inconveniences and perhaps political repression.

Political corruption is always preceded by personal abuse of power. So, if breaching of privacy law is not stopped there could be many cases of revenge, blackmail and extortion.

A worrying aspect of infringement of privacy by the state is that it is like a trumpet call to all kind of miscreants. Computer hackers will ask for bribes on pretence that they will otherwise look into every activity of a citizen and report to the authorities. Coercion and extortion will rule the day. How shameful for a freedom loving country as the US!

Because the Snowden episode is happening so far away from our shores, we can in a way bask in the sun and rest unconcerned. Not so, say some analysts. When the US was a protector of individual privacy the world was at sync with itself. Now that many assume it is turning out to be a predator of privacy all need to be concerned in their backyards.

The purdah of privacy is going. When will it be totally gone? Count your beads. It may not be far away.

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China, US building lasting peace

FU YING

THERE has been continuous debate on how to and can we maintain world peace since the time when mankind entered the "era of peace and development."

Have we in the 21st century learned to value the hard-won peace? Can big countries maintain peace when the established world structure is undergoing transition?

According to Nicholas Boyle, a University of Cambridge professor, there has been a cataclysmic "Great Event" of international significance at the start of each century in the last 500 years.

Occurring in the middle of the second decade of each century, they could be events that sparked wars or religious conflicts, or brought peace.

With Professor Boyle's research in mind, it should be no surprise that where the relationship between China and United States is heading has become a heated topic of international academia.

In terms of the size of its population and territory, China is a big country. But from the perspective of its economic development level and comprehensive national strength, there is still a sizeable gap between China and the developed world, not to mention the US, the world's largest developed country.

As a developing nation, China is confronted with numerous difficulties and challenges, which people outside cannot imagine. This means China has to focus its efforts on the realisation of its development goals and the target of common prosperity for its people for a long period in the future. It's important that China has a peaceful external environment to facilitate the fulfillment of these goals.

China as the world's largest developing country and the US as the strongest developed nation have expressed the political will to maintain lasting peace and will try to build a new model for the relationship between two powers. They have expressed wishes to strike a balance among their interests and disagreements through multi-channel dialogue, and this will undoubtedly be a long and arduous trust-building process.

The US concentrated its strategic focus on Europe during the Cold War era and shifted it to the Middle East after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Now Washington has redeployed its strategic investment eastward to Asia.

The Asia-bound strategic shift came at a time when the region was witnessing prospering economic growth and booming cooperation among countries. The US has strengthened military collaboration with its Asian allies. Now that we are seeing increased frictions and conflicts in China's surrounding region, a question has arisen: should the US' increase military and strategic presence in Asia accord with the trend of the region's cooperation and development?

In his book titled "For the Soul of Mankind: The United

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States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War," Melvyn P. Leffler, a US historian, made a detailed analysis of four major opportunities for the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union to promote entente in their relations and the causes for them missing those chances. The book left two impressions. First, the two superpowers never concealed their policy target of seeking the demise of each other, but what exhausted them most proved to be how to prevent a head-on conflict between them. Second, the two superpowers were never on the same track or established mutual trust with each other, the former Soviet Union focused on an arms race, while the US kept high vigilance and readiness against a Soviet threat.

Entering the 21st century, the world has undergone new changes and gone is the history of seeking hegemony among the world's big powers. Some previously impoverished developing countries are already on the track of fast industrialisation, while some traditional developed nations have been entangled in an effort to extricate themselves from protracted financial and economic woes.

These have resulted in the narrowing of the gap between them.

In the West where the view that capital means power prevails, some scholars claim the centre of world power is shifting from the West to the East. Such a view has kindled debates about whether emerging powers will pose a threat, how they should undertake their international responsibilities or whether the world's leadership will have a peaceful transfer.

In fact, the centre of world power has not been seen shifting in one direction as some scholars have claimed. But there is a possibility that the power that influences international governance and world leadership will have a peaceful transfer.

The diversification of world power is taking shape and expediting, but the transformation of the established world structure and international governance pattern at a peaceful time will come in a long and gradual manner. During this transitional period, the old structure, if timely reformed and adjusted, should continue to operate for some time.

Facing a series of common global challenges, ranging from degradation of the environment, climate change and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to food safety, terrorism and internal safety, countries, both big and small, are in the same boat.

If all countries transcend the old era and look at others in a new light, then the common challenges facing them can be tackled more easily. Otherwise, the difficulties will only become more complicated and harder to resolve.

The writer is a member of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress and director of the top legislature's foreign affairs committee.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Code of conduct in JS

It is beyond any doubt that the MPs attend the Sangsad either to retain their post and draw salary or to exchange vulgarisms. Unfortunately, the leaders are just onlookers pretending to work. They are fully responsible for making such an ugly image of the topmost institution of law making of Bangladesh. They must stop these nonsensical acts in parliament or resign to uphold the dignity of the House. The Honourable Speaker will soon become a paper tigriss if she fails to work on the code of conduct of the House.

Anami
CA, USA

Please extend amnesty deadline

It would be a great gesture and generosity if the authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) extend the July 3 deadline for amnesty and regularisation process of Bangladeshi workers working in the Kingdom. This opportunity will help Bangladeshi workers accomplish legal status and inspire them to devote themselves to the service of the KSA.

It is sincerely hoped that the KSA will extend the amnesty deadline considering greater welfare of the Bangladeshi workers.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Plight of a senior citizen

There is already a practice of collecting Advance Income Tax (AIT) from a TIN holder during renewal of vehicle fitness. It might be effective for reaching the target to some extent but it is injustice to a retired person who is maintaining a car without having a regular source of income.

I retired from government service in 2004. Except for a car, I don't have a house or a plot. My source of income is mainly interests on my retirement benefits, consultancy fees and savings from my around 32 years' government service. I submitted my income tax returns in fairs the last two years. One gentleman from Income Tax department suggested that I sell the car if I don't pay tax. But it is not the inability to pay tax as AIT, as it is adjustable with the total tax to be paid at the end of fiscal year. But how will it be adjusted as the bank is straight away deducting 10% at source? AIT payment has been made compulsory, without which BRTA will not renew fitness. Moreover, being a senior citizen I am not in a position to avail 0% tax relief slab on my taxable income. Will anybody in the media, NBR, or ministry of finance show me a solution?

Md. Matiur Rahman
Dhaka

Comments on commentary, "Arrogance, whims and vengeance," published on June 27, 2013

Faisal

Prof. Yunus' name and achievement will be bright like a shining star long after the world will forget people like Shiekh Hasina and Abdul Muhi.

sa

Excellent article!

propremik

The downfall has started and signs show that the AL government will go berserk at the end of its tenure.

Bangla Bright

I salute AL for dismantling GB because it has been used to suck the blood out of the poor to make its management rich. So the quicker it is killed off the better. I think AL will suffer heavy defeat but BNP will do the same when it comes to power because both party leaders as well as MPs are mostly arrogant with low education!

Shahin Huq

We feel so helpless in Bangladesh where our rulers have perennially been our oppressors.

Faridul Islam

I want to congratulate you, Mr. Mahfuz Anam, for the courage you have demonstrated in writing this commentary about an arrogant leader who is more like a despot, getting worse day by day. She talks of democracy but her own background is most undemocratic. She is vengeful and puts her party workers above the nation.

Mohammad A. Auwal

AL government has lost their opportunity to establish good governance. People ran away from BNP's corruption, hoping AL would give them shelter. But AL has let them down. Now if there is a fair election, I believe people will run away from AL, though not out of love for BNP, but in search of better governance.

Saleh Tanveer

Our prime minister has shown complete disregard for anyone who might disagree with her. All the flattery from the coterie around her has gotten into her head and she appears to believe she is invincible. She has to remember that pride brings downfall. For those who fell into line with her, despite knowing better, will suffer pangs of conscience, if they have any left.