

Intimidating culture of numbers

Inroad into medicine market wreaks havoc

THE running battle between drug traders all over the country and the government has dealt a severe jolt to continuity of medical treatment of a huge number of patient population in the country. The wholesale market and retail chains enforcing strike on Thursday in consequence of a mobile court action on Saturday speaks of a long drawn out row between the two sides.

We are appalled at the drug traders' arbitrary and arrogant behaviour holding people to ransom. On the one hand, the troublemakers are selling spurious and even date-expired drugs, and on the other, they are shamelessly calling for strikes.

Instead of apologising to the people for having forced them to go without medicines they are demanding a license to sell spurious drugs. How dare they!

Two points are to be made here: One, the sheer number of drug dealers makes them feel clannish and even in genuine cases where action would have been due, they would have their association rally behind an unjust cause bandying about their trade union rights. This has happened with transport workers, or for that matter even any unorganised body unleashing mob power every now and then. This trend will have to be bucked or else we are in for a disaster.

The second pointer is towards the government agencies' belated action allowing indulgence to drug rackets dealing in contraband medicines. That regular monitoring is of the essence cannot be lost on them.

Fixing storm sewers

A step that must be replicated

SOME overdue measures are finally being taken by Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa). They have moved to fix the water logging and sewerage problem the city has been facing for years. Wasa signed an MOU with a Dutch company VitensEvides International to clean the storm sewers of the capital using modern technology available in the Netherlands.

The water logging from this monsoon is still fresh in our minds. It did not take much rain for Dhaka city to be under-water which caused disruption in daily life for the city-dwellers and created long term issues like road damage in many areas. Many roads are now showing up fresh potholes as scars and they are left in a deplorable state.

Under the project in question, Segunbagicha Box Culvert (Drain) and Kalyanpur Canal will be cleaned up first. The rest of the sewers will be cleansed gradually in the next 10 years. Ten years is, of course, a long time and we are not entirely sure if we can afford to keep damaging our city infrastructure and interrupt the lives of people for that long.

We urge Wasa to start this work immediately and to use the Dutch technology extensively so that when next monsoon comes around we are not singing the same sad song again.

The Statesman

Shutters down

EDITORIAL

AMERICA went into crisis as it flipped the calendar on Tuesday... to October 1, 2013, indeed the start of its fiscal year. The legislature of the richest and most powerful country, indeed a self-proclaimed model of democracy, has failed in its primary task -- to provide funds to keep the federal government running. The government has no budget and the president has been held to ransom by an almost hopelessly disconnected legislature. Despite the vote for a second term, the quirky electoral arithmetic gives the Democrats a majority in the Senate and the Republicans in the House of Representatives. Not that a gridlock over critical legislation was not unexpected; indeed a shutdown over a short span of time may yet be tackled because of the intrinsic resilience of its democracy and economy. Yet the impact could be shattering, if not catastrophic, should it drag for a few weeks with unpaid wages expected to hit the \$300-million mark per day with a most certain impact on the GDP. An estimated 800,000 government staff are already without work. Tragically, legislative consensus has floundered on the core welfare index of healthcare. The Republican-dominated House of Representatives refused to pass the budget without amendments, in effect scuppering Barack Obama's signal legislative achievement -- the Affordable Care Act.

Indeed, the president had won the 2012 election on the strength of "Obamacare," an epithet that signifies a personal achievement. On several occasions over the past few months, the Democratic Senate had rejected the amended Bill, specifically the changes that were brought in despite the fact that the US healthcare system is direly in need of reform. In the net, the Democrats, the Republicans and also, of course, the Tea Party will have to contend with the grim reality of millions of people unable to afford to be ill. If the price to be paid for being under the weather is so hideously exorbitant as to be almost prohibitive, the resultant hardship can scarcely help the Republicans, let alone the country. The political system that the Republicans wish to nurture stands discredited and shattering must be the damage to the psyche of the average American.

Beyond the budget debacle, looms a more critical issue -- within a few weeks, Congress must agree to raise the ceiling on government borrowing once again. Should it not materialise, the impact of the shutdown is bound to be far wider than locked museums and unpaid government staff. Most certainly, it will result in an increase in interest rates, if not a return to the uncertainty of 2008. Global financial markets will be in turmoil if the Treasury defaults on US debt. The longer the shutdown lingers, the more alarming will be the impact.

EDITORIAL

Deputy commissioners and national election



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

know how politicised the government machinery has become ... We cannot rely on the DCs," TIB Trustee M. Hafizuddin Khan said at the launch of TIB research report in the capital recently.

The above observations are a scathing indictment on the unreliability of a significant part of the country's public service. The DC is invariably a senior official belonging to the Bangladesh Civil Service (Administration) Cadre who is posted at the district level in a supervisory and coordinating post. Adequate care is supposed to be taken to ensure the merit and integrity of such holders of important public office.

Under the circumstances, it would indeed be very unfortunate if our citizens have to forsake their trust that is reposed in the exalted office of the DC. However, one can take issue with the TIB trustee's observation that EC should be able to conduct the election with its own officials and that employees of a constitutional body like the EC are capable and trustworthy enough to conduct the election.

In needs to be pointed out that since mid-1990s constitutional appointees like High Court judges have proved to be dimly incapable in performing the onerous functions of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). In fact, the caretaker controversy owes its origin to the bungled and mismanaged bye-election of Magura in mid-1990s when a CEC belonging to the higher judiciary failed to rise to the occasion for doing the needful despite overwhelming evidence on the field to warrant the postponement of a malpractice-laden election.

Readers may recollect the antics of Justice M.A. Aziz, another former CEC, who till date stands accused of preparing fake voter's list and squandering crores of public money on procurement that could not be accounted for. The less said about former Judge Sadeque Ali, another election commissioner, the better.

The point to note is that the smooth holding of national and mayoral elections depends to a large extent on the unstinted assistance and cooperation of the regulatory outfits of general administration and the law enforcement machinery. District level principal officers of these outfits are generally senior officers belonging to the regularly constituted service cadre, and it is highly unlikely that they will extend ungrudging support to the election officers who are junior appointees.

UN Resolution on Syria: Putin outsmarts Obama

MAHMOOD HASAN

ON September 27, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2118 (2013) requiring Syria to destroy its chemical weapons. All the Security Council members are happy at their unusual unity. The world heaved a sigh of relief as a new war was not started by the Americans. Syria too is relieved that US missiles will not rain on Damascus, at least for now.

It all started in St. Petersburg at the G20 Summit (Sept. 5-6). Though the group was expected to discuss the world economic situation, the Syrian issue dominated and preoccupied the leaders attending the Summit. That was because President Obama, before coming to the Summit, had threatened to punish Damascus for using chemical weapons on August 21, in which more than 1,300 people were killed. American warships were ready in Eastern Mediterranean to launch missiles at Damascus.

Relations between Washington and Moscow are already strained because of the Snowden affair. Yet, at the Summit, President Obama and President Putin met on the sidelines of the meeting. It was Putin, long time ally of Bashar Al Assad, who hinted that Syria should surrender its chemical weapons arsenal to international control. Obama grabbed at the idea because, back in Washington, he was having trouble trying to convince the Congress to approve a military assault on Syria.

Wary of a decade-long war, American public opinion was hostile to the idea of another war. Obama's leadership credibility was at stake. He could not go to war, he could not "not go to war." Putin's hint was a face-saving strategy and Obama fell for it. Putin's suggestion was not abrupt, but well thought out. He knew that Obama would have to accept it as he had no other alternative.

Thereafter the two foreign ministers -- John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov -- started a bout of rhetoric. Kerry stated in London (Sept. 9) that Syria could avoid US bombing if it turned in all its chemical weapons. But he did not think the Syrians would actually agree to that. Lavrov went a step ahead and stated that if there were no air strikes against Syria, he would work with Syria to not only get the weapons under international control but also to have them destroyed. Despite differences in views, Kerry and Lavrov agreed to meet in Geneva (Sept. 12-14), which produced the "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons." The Framework was actually the basis for the Security Council Resolution.

A reading of the Resolution brings out several interesting points: i) Syria has to give up all its chemical weapons to the "Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons" (OPCW), which will destroy them; ii) there is no mention of other weapons which are as dangerous as chemical weapons; iii) the timeframe has been fixed for mid-2014; iv) no blame has been apportioned for the use of chemical weapons -- neither the Syrian government nor the rebels have been accused; v) most significantly, there is no provision for punishing

If TIB's proposal has to be acted upon by engaging those junior appointees as returning officers then imbalance and inconvenience are likely outcomes on account of seniority and the status syndrome prevalent in our bureaucratic culture. As of now, this reality cannot be lost sight of. While it is true that the last mayoral election at Chittagong was well managed by a capable lady officer belonging to the EC it has to be remembered that national election is a different ball game in which large-scale departure from existing practice will entail serious risk.

In a democratic state, the electoral process exercises determining power over those who hold political office. It is the electorate which confers the power to govern and calls government to account. The electoral system should be able to ensure a full franchise, and make sure that the value of each vote cast is equal to that of every other vote. It has to ensure that the conduct of election campaigns is regulated to ensure legality and fairness; and voting system is capable of producing both a legislative body representative of the electorate and a government with sufficient democratic support to be able to govern effectively.

We need to know that each aspect of the electoral process combines to form a system. Political bosses must not be able to gerrymander constituencies so as to suit their own interests. Legal provisions would mean nothing if enforcement is left wholly in the hands of those who profit by breaking them.

In our situation, if DCs have been politicised, as alleged, then what is the guarantee that other segments of our public service including election officers have remained immune to the virus? Are we sure that election officials recruited during political governments did not receive political patronage? The moot point is, who has caused the so-called politicisation and how has it occurred? Would it not be proper to treat the malaise with a view to establishing a healthy polity?

Must we not gain by emphasising that the Civil Service owes its loyalty to the government of the day, irrespective of political party, and it is imperative that the Service avoids creating the impression of political bias. The anonymity and political neutrality of civil servants is reinforced by the rules restricting political activity. If the Civil Service is to serve governments of all political persuasions, it is imperative that civil servants, whatever their private political views, should not be seen to be politically active in a manner which would inevitably compromise their neutrality under one political party or another.

Divesting the DCs of their duties as returning officers on grounds of alleged politicisation would be untenably ludicrous because they will continue to perform multiple executive functions of developmental significance even after being branded unreliable for electoral assignments. Let there be a halt to the pernicious institution bashing. Let us treat the disease and not the symptoms.

It may not be incorrect to presume that the job of the EC pertaining to holding of election has largely been an executive assignment accompanied by quasi-judicial functions. Experiences in Bangladesh indicate that the EC has fared well under the stewardship of former executives. We still require well-rounded executives to adequately perform the onerous functions of returning officers in the national election.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Commemorating a brave soul

Please recall my letter in your column published on 26th May, about the valiant efforts of (Late) Md. Chowdhury Kaikobad, who selflessly laid down his life to save injured and trapped victims from the Rana Plaza. In it, I proposed and still request that at least the BGMEA should put up a simple permanent plaque on the Dhaka- Savar Road, near the tragic location, to permanently commemorate the memory of this brave soul. Nearly four months have gone by but nothing seems to have been done. Are the garment factory owners so heartless and self-centred? Surely BGMEA can spare, say, a couple of lac takas at most to put up this memorial. A public response from BGMEA would be welcome. The sooner it comes, the better.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Suicidal power plant

The government appears to be very adamant to set up the power plant at Rampal. The Sundarbans has protected us from various natural disasters. India is assisting in this project but will it bear the responsibility for damage that it may cause?

Surprisingly, our opposition party gave support to Hefajat's radical demands but it did not raise its voice about preserving our national heritage and it still remains silent. There is no other example in the world where power is generated by damaging natural resources.

Juthi
Department of Physics
Dhaka University

No one beside primary teachers!

We, the primary school teachers of Bangladesh, were agitating for fulfilling some of our very basic demands but police charged their batons against us. What was our fault? Do we work less than the other job holders? Don't we have any contribution to nation-building? We demanded for pay scale and upgrading our position. But no newspapers highlighted this issue on their front pages. No one has come forward to write a column justifying our demands.

Haider Jahan
Headmaster
Hatnaia Government Primary school
Mohongonj, Netrakona

Drug abuse at JU

Drug addiction in Jahangirnagar University has gone out of control. Almost 50% of the students are addicted to various drugs. Ganja, heroin, phensidyl, etc. are taken by many because these drugs are easily available. The drug addicts are also involved in many anti-social activities. JU administration as well as the local law enforcement authorities should take necessary steps to eradicate drug business on the campus. Otherwise, the day is not very far when JU's image will be tarnished completely.

Md. Rasel Rana
Department of Government and Politics
Jahangirnagar University

Comments on news report, "Death to SQ Chy," published on October 2, 2013

Rooster

At last the most pressing issues have been solved. Now see, how Bangladesh progresses by leaps and bounds.

Vikram Khan

Good riddance.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

BNP's lawmaker is going to be hanged for his crimes against humanity in '71. He always sneered at his opponents, even in court proceedings.

Zaid Bin Kalam

At last the law of the land has proved him a convicted war criminal and with it the treacherous legacy of this audacious man should end up in a swift execution of the court verdict! Let this be echoed all over the country that no one will be spared who conspire against the interest of the country.

Sadsada

These verdicts are inspiring... but think of the incident of Rana plaza... 1000+ people were murdered but Mr. Rana is still safe. This is the culture of this land...culture of impunity.

"Judgment 'farcical'" (October 2, 2013)

Nds

It appears that BNP is the only political party to determine what is fair or unfair in this country. They never thought of holding any trial of the war criminals possibly because that was the fairest thinking for a civilised nation.

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Obviously, these parties have no coordination among themselves and they only care for their own interests. All they are looking for is any excuse to call a shutdown. It's time that people shun these outdated policies of these political parties.

The writer is a former ambassador and secretary.