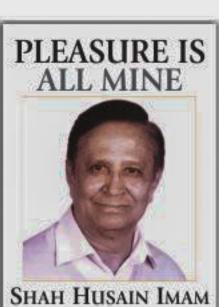
ARACK Obama

## Our girls' feat in football and localised pinpricks



HE all-win success story of our U-16 girls' football team at the group championship stage has been a head turner. But with their entry into the top eight league which pits them against teams like Japan and South Korea, their struggle has only begun. They have a long way to go.

Of course, we must rejoice in their astounding feat clinched so far with magically resilient footwork

and skill. Alongside, let's prepare them to scale the next hurdle through mind and body training sessions that hopefully Bangladesh football federation would arrange in good time. We marvel at the fact that they are basically the products of local trainers.

In this testing time for our mid-teen football performers two things will have to be scrupulously guarded against and discarded: First, while resting on their laurels, the victory should not go to their head; in other words, complacency should not be allowed to creep into their system. Secondly, and very importantly, no opaque, gender biased treatment may be even unwittingly meted out to them. The U-16 football team is playing a huge add-on role in the advancement of women in fields so far considered as the exclusive preserves of men.

In the second category of expectation we have lately bumped against intolerant, even abusive behaviour towards the girls or their parents. The girls, whilst on their return journey, reportedly without any guardian from Dhaka to Kalsindur in Mymensingh on regular bus service, were teased and harassed.

The second incident proves a Shakespearian adage on the abomination of "man, proud man, dressed in brief authority" never failing to show off his hubris - in this case, by a quixotic control freak of a teacher.

The drill teacher of Kalsindur School and College had asked the just - returned members of the U-16 team to play an interschool tournament in Comilla on September 18. The girls and their parents ruled out that possibility arguing that the BFF had scheduled a reception for them on September 17 in Dhaka. The BFF would not permit the girls' participation in the inter-school tournament, parents informed the teacher who was insistent on a change of plans. And he was in no mood to listen to logic.

This led to a spat, altercation and finally physical assault on goal-keeper Taslima's father Sabuj Mia. A case has been filed against the teacher, a proforma suspension order issued against him by the school management and the man is absconding.

The point is that with our exposure to global or regional sporting circuits and women clinching laurels on them, some are yet to display a matching cultural uplift to gracefully embrace the positive transformation.

The upward curve in girls' football is so impressive: We have defeated Maldives, Iran, even Taiwan, Kyrgyzstan

sponsors will have to come forward in patronising sports on a programmatic basis. As the government sets up facilities and modernises sport infrastructure, event management is largely in the hands of cashstrapped federations who have to depend on sponsors.

Women should be encouraged in individual and in group events like for instance shooting, chess, archery, weight lifting, kabadi, swimming, cricket, football and hockey. We have had two iconic women mountain climbers bearing testimony to the grit, determination and skill levels displayed in pushing new frontiers in



before crushing UAE to stay undefeated through the qualifier round.

What is highly interesting to note is that village Kalsindur alone has contributed nine footballers to the team. Soccer experts suggest that the Mymensingh-Kishoreganj-Netrokona-Sunamganj belt has been the breeding ground for good footballers among men as well as women. The haor areas with open spaces may be conducive to supply of footballers. We may not be too hung up with place names; instead scout for talents all over the country.

The private sector including corporate houses and

the sporting world.

In all, there is a paramount need for a structured approach to sports that will not just help consolidate the gains but build on them to ensure sustainability of successes and continuous bettering of records.

With a huge youth population we are ideally placed to develop a groundswell of sporting talents. The best antidote to drugs and extremism which are intertwined addictions is offered by the passion and pursuit of sports.

The writer is a contributor of The Daily Star. Email:shahhusainimam@gmail.com

## The right to ask for information and the obligation to provide it

SHAMSUL BARI

RUNENDU works for the Rangamati Hill District Council in ▲ the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh. He is known for his dedication and commitment to public service. So his office appointed him the designated official (DO) to deal with Right to Information (RTI) queries from the public.

On receiving RTI applications from journalists and the general public, Arunendu seeks the advice of is seniors in order to prepare the replies. In his own words: "As the Hill Council has to deal with many government departments, in preparing replies to people's RTI applications we need to seek information from several offices. Officials at such offices sometimes say there are objections from the authorities on sharing information." Arunendu, however, does not take 'no' for an answer. "I caution them that if I don't get the information from them and cannot satisfy the people who have asked for them, they would be in trouble too, not

only me." This level of dedication to the RTI act in a public servant is rare. And yet, in order for the RTI Act to succeed, citizens must believe that the law was enacted to promote open governance and public officials must realise that it is meant to be respected or else they may have to face its

sanctions.

The two sides involved in implementing the law - citizens who seek information and public officials who provide it - both find it difficult to believe that the government is serious about opening up its vast reservoir of information to public scrutiny. Citizens, long used to secretive governance, are instinctively sceptical about the sincerity of government's intention to be transparent and accountable. Public officials are equally unconvinced that the

government really wants them to disclose information to the people which was previously denied in the past and for which public servants took the oath to secrecy when joining service.

In other words, citizens must feel confident that they may ask public officials for most of the information held by the government without fear or justification. Public officials, on the other hand, must understand that citizens are entitled to obtain such information as of their right and not as of grace. More simply put, citizens are the rights-holders and public officials the service-providers.

There are encouraging signs that we have made a start towards this mindset. This was confirmed at a seminar in Dhaka last month, organised to discuss the findings of a research project on the prospects and challenges of the implementation of the RTI Act in the country.

What was most heart-warming about the seminar was that almost half of the large gathering was composed of government officials. They belonged mostly to the Cabinet Division of the Government, which spearheads the implementation of Government's National Integration Strategy (NIS). An integral part of this strategy is the promotion of people's right to information. In fact, the Cabinet Secretary to the Government, who was the chief guest at the seminar, endorsed many of the recommendations that were made.

As was expected, the research findings indicated that there was still a great deal of hesitation on the part of government officials to play their role under the Act in a robust manner. Many public servants are appalled by RTI applications from people who would tremble even to speak to them in the past.

Such findings were, of course, not very pleasant for many government participants at the seminar. Some claimed that the

picture was perhaps not always so negative. They felt that some of their colleagues were slowly but surely opening up to their responsibilities under the law, though their numbers may still be very small. We very much hope that they are right.

We thought it useful, therefore, to focus in our column this month on two positive stories from the government side. They were reported to us by MRDI, an important NGO of the country, dedicated to the promotion of the RTI Act. Both our individual examples are cited from MRDI's report.

Arunendu, our public servant in the Hill Tracts, explains to reluctant officials that if they do not cooperate by providing the requested information under the RTI Act, people could exercise their right to appeal to higher officials or even complain to the Information Commission, which has quasi-judicial power even to penalise them. He thought that as a member of the public, he himself expected certain services from government offices like the one he was serving now: "So I like to create an environment in the District Council so that people can get access to all the information they require. As there was no provision for people to seek information through formal written procedure before, a culture of providing information has not developed. Now together with the filing of RTI applications, and subsequent appeals that may follow, one can seek legal redress if s/he is not furnished with the information So for obvious reasons, officials holding the information are now bound to change their mindset and share information with the people. For example, in the past there were no conscious efforts to follow the government rules on recruitment for public jobs through a quota system. There were many instances of job quota violations. Not anymore. Now there is RTI fear. Officials in charge of recruitment can now

afford to disregard undue lobbying from high-ups in favour of the candidates of their choices."

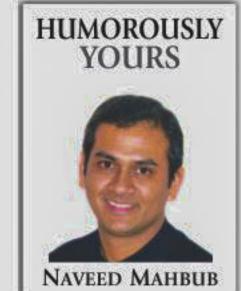
Iqbal is another public official who is engaged in promoting RTI. He worked for the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh. According to him: "We've assigned designated information officials in all of our subordinate offices. We uploaded RTI-related information on our website. And work is underway to draft a disclosure policy," says Iqbal. He further notes: "People have a tendency to get information from us informally, verbally. However, one organisation and eight journalists sought information from us through RTI applications over the last one year. Not a single case of appeal was registered against us as we furnished them with the required information on time."

Such stories give hope. It is important that they are made public as they will certainly help generate people's confidence in the law. Among suggestions made in this regard at the above seminar, one was to institute an award system by the government, whereby public officials displaying exemplary efforts to make the RTI Act work will be recognised annually and additionally considered for promotion. Another suggestion was to hold Annual RTI conventions, with the participation of all concerned, in which highest personalities of the government would reiterate their support and commitment to the law.

Together with such efforts on the part of the government, if citizens were to wake up to the immense possibilities that the law offers for their empowerment vis a vis the government, the RTI Act may indeed prove to be one of the most powerful laws of the land for change, good governance and progress.

The writer is the Chairman of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh, (RIB). Email rib@citech-bd.com.

## **Eid Moooobarak!**



graduates from Harvard. Mark Zuckerberg drops out of Harvard. To cover all bases in order to succeed, I graduate from BUET and University of Michigan but drop out of Berkeley. Maybe I am

seeing a shimmering light as I get featured on Comedy Central. And then my tour of shows at the Zee TV Desi Comedy Festival in the US with the opening line: "I'm a Muslim. This is my last series of shows in the US before Donald Trump becomes president." Even if Mr. Trump doesn't make it to 1600

Pennsylvania Avenue (of course he can always as a tourist), it's just not that I can lay out my prayer rug in the middle of a shopping mall in Uncle Sam's land and start praying without attracting some uncomfortable attention. But necessity is the mother of invention. If you can't find a mosque in the vicinity (surprisingly it's hard not to in the US), pick a large clothing store right at that very mall, pick a shirt as a pretext to enter the trial (fitting) room, lock the door and say your prayers at peace and privacy. Just make sure you don't pick a piece of attire of the opposite gender. If you still get accosted later on based on a candid CCIV camera footage of your 'suspicious' acts INSIDE the fitting room, you can always make a fast buck by suing the store for being a peeping tom. One thing, don't use the piece of clothing as a prayer rug - I don't think my religion will look at me kindly for praying at the cost of soiling a fresh attire I didn't pay for.

Note, some places may have a policy of 'no clothes, no trial room' (sounds like don't ask, don't tell).

I take pride in inventing this clever scheme of being a practicing Muslim in a Donald Trump like setting. After all, I am of a people who are ingenious at every step. Example, a recent clever way of grabbing government land for an illegal market in Chatmohar Upazila - it's named 'AC Land Supermarket'. I'm sure the 'explanation': "Air Conditioned [as opposed to Assistant Commissioner], Land [as opposed to floating] Supermarket."

Then I doubt my brilliance – I'd be surprised if I'm the inventor as claimed above. I'm sure smarter minds are ten steps ahead, such as those in France with precise store policies: "No praying inside trial rooms." After all, French President Francois Holland has recently said: "Islam could coexist with French values." But I thought it did – when the French occupied Morocco and Algeria. Just as it does now based on my own experiences. During a comedy show of mine in Paris' beautiful and artsy Théâtre de Dix Heures, located in the not so artsy red light district of Pigalle, it is the same French comedians who stand in guard in front of the green room as I quickly say my Maghreb prayers, making sure the cabaret dancers just finishing up their acts on stage don't enter the green room and freak out discovering a 'terrorist'. All is not doom and all French are not burkini-banning mayor material.

Hey, even in Bangladesh, saying our prayers used to be a matter of praise and appreciation, now that of suspicion. Chanting Allahu Akbar (Allah is Great), unless I'm the Imam leading a prayer in a mosque, prompts people to duck to the ground.

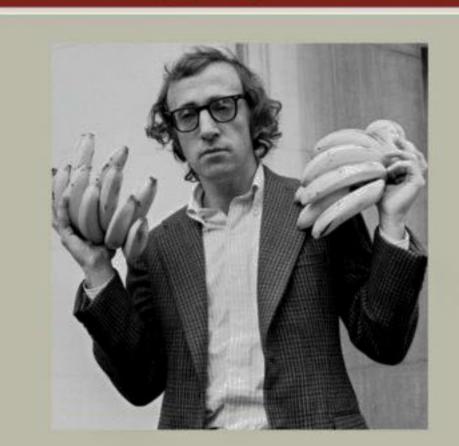
Is that one reason we 'escape', instead of 'celebrate' religious occasions such as Eid? If it's a matter of status to leave town for a foreign vacation, then I sure am not up to the mark as I choose to stay put in Dhaka. But I guess it's all a matter of personal choice. But with some Bangladeshis visiting Bangkok and complaining about how crowded it is there due to Bangladeshis being there for Eid, is something we can do without. After all, they themselves are part of the 'problem', if it must be called so. It's like complaining about traffic without realising they are the traffic.

But all I say to you all, irrespective of colour, race, religion, cast is . . . Eid Moooobarak!

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ABC Radio's Good Morning Bangladesh and the founder of Naveed's Comedy

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## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH



## **WOODY ALLEN**

I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens.

## ACROSS

1 Ten: Prefix 5 Ernie's pal

9 Rust, for one 11 Sports official

12 Simple fellow 13 Singer Cara

14 Yale supporter 15 Nerve cell part

17 Mass per volume 19 "Vamoose!"

20 Summer of song 21 For every

22 Like gymnasts 24 Nile snake 26 Singer Ronstadt 29 Gardner of film

30 Crown repairer 32 Hamlet's home 34 "Sprechen -- Deutsch?"

35 Flexible conjunction 36 Skirt 38 Liquefy

41 Dick Tracy's love

39 Out of bed 40 Brewed beverages DOWN 1 Gave medicine to

2 Banished 3 "The Deer Hunter" director 4 Bustle

5 Robin or wren 6 Come into view 7 "The Bathers" painter 8 Politician Lott 10 Finale

11 Wee 16 Online merchant 18 Ginger cookie 21 Cooped (up)

23 Programming program 24 Broad street 25 Keanu's "Speed" costar 27 Neglect

28 Stage comments 29 Make fitting 30 Be bold

31 New drivers, usually 33 "The Simpsons" saloon 37 Tipsy

## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

M A N Y A L O E HOARDS UNSEAT BASERUNNERS FRED MESS DOUR PORTAL COY SAMOA ROADRUNNERS INTOSECRET STEADY

## by Mort Walker **BEETLE BAILEY** YOU TALKING HEY, TO ME?

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## **BABY BLUES** HAMMIE IS WATERING

YOUR

FLOWERS.

by Kirkman & Scott

