

The Daily Star

Why are thousands of local govt employees without pay?

The matter must be resolved immediately!

It is unthinkable that 35,000 employees of 260 municipalities nationwide have been working without pay for years! Of them, 6,000 staff members got no pay for last five years, 12,000 for two years and for a further 5,000, no salaries for one year. Needless to say, this has caused unthinkable suffering for the thousands of employees and many of whom are all but bankrupt. The government, as per the Paurashava Act, is supposed to provide salaries to at least 0.04 percent of salaries to Paurashava staff. The balance is supposed to come from the municipalities' revenue collection—holding tax and lease on local markets. Beyond this, municipalities are able to meet a mere two percent from land tax. Given the realities on the ground, most municipalities are unable to collect enough revenue to pay salaries.

We have learnt that Tk 1,249 crore is needed annually to pay monthly salaries of all staff (including mayors and counsellors). Since the government pays a mere 0.04 percent of salaries, it is hardly surprising that only Tk 13.67 crore was allocated for the 2018-2019 fiscal. There is of course another side to this entire argument. Local government experts contend that many of the municipalities were set up on political consideration despite having little merit to qualify for that status, i.e. without having much scope to generate the income needed to maintain the staff required of a municipality.

The demand that Pourashava staff should receive regular salaries like the staff members of 17 types of local government bodies receive under Upazila parishad Act 1988 merits consideration. For the time being, some emergency funds should be released from government coffers to mitigate the sufferings of these employees while a more permanent solution is sought. The relevant ministry should set up a commission to conduct a needs assessment of the municipality issue, rationalise their number and make necessary budgetary allocations to that effect. Because at the end of the day, these are employees of the State and they must be paid for their services.

The Rohingya crisis persists

And, Bangladesh faces a difficult challenge

It's been nearly two years since more than seven lakh Rohingya people have entered Bangladesh having fled violent crackdown in Myanmar. There's no viable solution in sight. As Myanmar continues to procrastinate when it comes to the repatriation, signs on the ground suggest a dismal prospect: the Rohingya crisis is deepening.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees are currently sheltered in several vast camps, spanning several Upazillas in Cox's Bazar. Their lack of access to education, income-generating activities and recreation is affecting them psychologically. On the other hand, having so many refugees in a relatively small area has created societal tensions and hurt the local environment. Bangladesh, therefore, is reluctant to pursue programmes that may act as pull factors.

While Bangladesh is faced with a complicated conundrum, Myanmar isn't pressurised enough to repatriate its nationals. It has employed delaying tactics to evade its responsibility to take back the Rohingyas.

As we have repeatedly stressed, the international community must come down heavily on Myanmar for its ethnic cleansing operations against the Rohingya and its refusal to take its nationals back with their full rights guaranteed.

The world's reluctance to take stringent measures against those responsible for the genocidal crackdown allows Myanmar's military to act with impunity. Its new crackdown targeting other ethnic groups has already prompted new exodus of Buddhist community to Bangladesh. UN must engage with Myanmar's closest allies to persuade it to shun violence and take back its citizens.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Reduce the retirement age requirement

At present the voluntary retirement age of government employees is 25 years of service, according to the Public Servants Retirement Act 1974. But there seems to be quite a bit of disagreement among public servants as to what it should be.

Veteran economist, Dr Mohammed Farashuddin, in his Pay-scale Proposal 2015, proposed that the age requirement should be reduced to 20 years of service. The recommendation, however, has been overlooked. The government passed a new act, Civil Service Act 2018, which simply retained all the old rules.

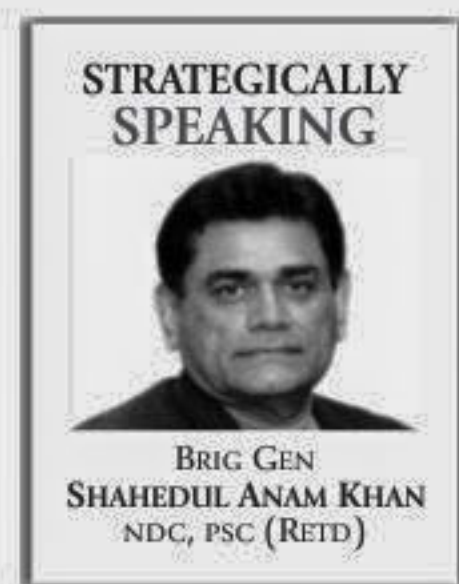
Many government employees cannot leave their jobs even after obtaining better opportunities because if they quit their jobs before the prescribed 25 years period, they will not get any retirement benefits.

Secondly, many of the employees might just want to switch their jobs because they no longer feel drawn to it. However, it's difficult for someone to take the risk of changing their job after spending 25 years in just one organisation without having any job protection.

Most importantly, reducing the retirement age requirement will also benefit the government as it may be more cost effective.

Jahangir Alam, By e-mail

Can citizens' expectations from the police be met?



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

It was absorbing to read the very insightful article by an esteemed columnist of this newspaper entitled, "A citizen's expectations from the police." He had charted his thoughts on what the police should do to ensure that it did exactly what the people expected it to do, which is not much different from what in some instances the letter of the current law, albeit antiquated, and in general its spirit, burdens it to do. It is a burden certainly because of the variety of centrifugal forces that influence the function of the police.

He lays out a list of eight public expectations too, which nobody can take issue with, but the readers, and hopefully the police, would have been further benefited from his opinion as to why the police are often found woefully incapable of meeting most of those to the satisfaction of the public they are supposed to serve. What has prevented the police from being a people-friendly force, run on the well-known principle, but dishonored more often, of policing by consent and not by force? However, in all fairness to the erudite writer, he does offer his reasons as to why the Police Act of 1861 should be scrapped and replaced by a law befitting the time and the country we live in.

While we shall go into those aspects a little later, I must at this point admit my inability to comprehend some of the points made in the said article. I wonder what the writer means when he claims that the police are finding it increasingly difficult to perform their primary task of securing "law and order and the balance of power within our society has turned ominously against the forces of peace and order." One would like to know who

the "balance of power" is, and, more importantly, what has caused that particular power to turn against the "forces of peace and order." Is it because the "forces of peace and order" are no longer viewed by the public as such that they have become an ancillary of the ruling party rather than a state apparatus for maintaining law and order and doing their job without favour?

He follows up by arguing that an attendant predicament is the "absence of an agreement among different segments of the society as to what is expected from the police department." Does there have

character of the force which the Police Act 1861 was meant to govern in the pursuit of colonial interest? Has the people's perception of the police, a force set up to suit the colonisers during the Indian movement for freedom, as a coercive arm of the colonial government changed?

But the writer hits the most pertinent chord when he suggests why the current police law should be binned. What he doesn't spell out, however, is the fact that there is a draft ordinance: the Draft Police Ordinance (DPO) 2007. But that document, containing suggestions that

would want to introduce a statute that makes political interference a criminal offence, as does the DPO-2007?

Thus, we continue to have a police force in a modern state carrying on its shoulders the vestiges of a law of the feudal and colonial past. Colonial laws infuse colonial mentality, and this has been eminently clear in the attitude of the policemen so far, although one must admit that there are periodic efforts by the police leadership to purge that mindset through motivational training of all ranks of the force.

It is sad but true that the colonial law that has guided the function of the police in Bangladesh has served the successive governments—the military, pseudo-democratic, and the democratically elected—very well. The 1861 Act was legislated very soon after 1857; the motivation was not to serve the people of India but to crush dissent and irredentist aspirations of the people. As we have said so often, the parameters under which the police in Bangladesh function are a relic of the colonial past—a relic that, regrettably, some would like to hang on to even now.



PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

to be an "agreement" on what the different segments of the society expect the police to do? Is there not a suggestion in that argument that different sections of society have different interests? One would have thought that the police have well-defined terms of reference (TOR) although they have been bound by an out-of-date law (1861), even after nearly 50 years of our independence.

The question that begs to be answered is: Have our police been able to shed the

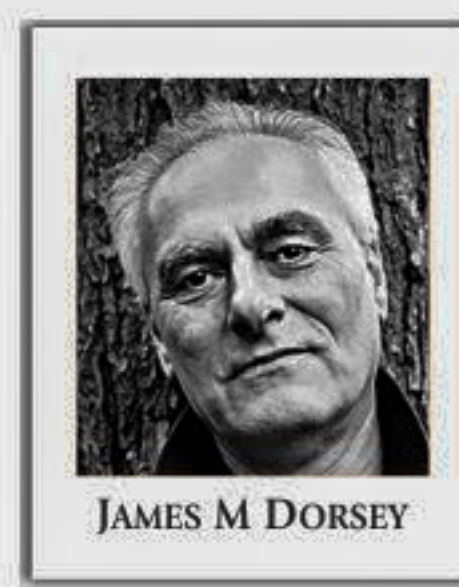
would allow the police to be an effective instrument for the service of the people, has not emerged from its incubation cell even a long 11 years after it was drafted and submitted to the ministry. But while the writer suggests that administrative and legal reforms related to the police have been stymied by an antiquated administrative legacy, I feel that not only the bureaucracy but also the reluctant politicians are unwilling to let go of their hold on the most powerful segment of the executive branch. Which politician

The DPO-2007 had suggested very appropriate and significant changes which, if implemented, could make the police free of political interference, accountable to the people, and, certainly, with a changed mind-frame of the force, more efficient. But that is not to be, we fear.

We re-emphasise as we have done before that alongside police reform there is a need to reform the police too. The mindset, both of the police, and more importantly, their political masters, has to change. Political interference must end. And the police must be given the resources to carry out their mission efficiently. Without these conditions being fulfilled, neither can the best of legislations deliver nor can the people's expectations be met.

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Papal visit boosts UAE effort to redefine concepts of tolerance



JAMES M DORSEY

THE United Arab Emirates is projecting itself as a leader of inter-communal and inter-faith harmony with the first ever visit by a Catholic pope to the Gulf and an inter-faith conference that is as much about dialogue as it is about absolute political control.

There is no doubt that the UAE is a leader in the Muslim world in promoting concepts of religious tolerance and prevention of religiously packaged militancy.

The UAE has bolstered perceptions of its leadership by declaring February, the month of Pope Francis's visit and the conference, a month of tolerance. The UAE is one of a few if not the only country that has a government ministry of tolerance.

The UAE, unlike its ally and more powerful neighbour, Saudi Arabia, increasingly allows adherents of other faiths like Jews, Christians and Hindus, to openly worship and practice their beliefs.

"Today, the UAE is home to 200 different nationalities, more than 40 churches and approximately 700 Christian ministries. Sikh and Buddhist temples welcome multinational congregations. Last year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi broke ground for a new Hindu temple. Evangelical Christian ministries abound in the country. The Jewish community is vibrant and growing," Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador to the United States, noted in an op-ed in Politico.

In hosting the pope as the star of an inter-faith dialogue organised by the UAE-sponsored Council of Elders, entitled International Interfaith Meeting on Human Fraternity in the United Arab Emirates, the UAE hopes to cement its position as the icon of Muslim tolerance.

The council is a brainchild of Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar, the revered 1,000-year-old seat of Sunni Muslim learning.

It groups Muslim scholars that in its words purportedly are "known for their wisdom, sense of justice, independence and moderateness...to promote peace, to discourage infighting and to address the sources of conflict, divisiveness and fragmentation in Muslim communities."

The council is part of a broader UAE and Saudi effort that includes groups like the Global Forum for Prompting Peace in Muslim Societies and the Sawab and Hedayah Centres that aim to counter the influence of controversial, Qatar-based

Islamic scholar, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and more political and militant Islamist forces.

The effort targets any political expression of Islam and promotes an interpretation of the faith that dictates absolute obedience to the ruler. It competes with Turkish efforts to globally promote a more activist form of Islam supportive of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authoritarianism and Morocco's projection of itself as a paradigm of Islamic moderation.

Timed to coincide with the council's meeting, Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, a former Saudi justice minister and secretary general of Saudi Arabia's Muslim World League, once a major vehicle for the propagation of the

grab.

In line with ultra-conservative precepts, Mr Al-Issa's past track record includes denunciation of witchcraft defined as including, among other things astrology, the use of plants for medicine, palm-reading, and animal calling.

In a bid to deprive the council as well as the league of a monopoly on Muslim empathy with non-Muslim groups, Iranian-born Australian Shiite Muslim imam Mohamad Tawhid tweeted on Sunday about his visit to Auschwitz, one of Nazi Germany's foremost extermination camps for Jews.

"I am proud to be the first 'Shia' Muslim Imam to pay his respects at Auschwitz," Mr Tawhid said in a tweet hashtagged #NeverAgain and featuring a picture of himself sporting a black T-shirt

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PHOTO: ANDREW MEDICHINI/REUTERS

Pope Francis being welcomed by Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, February 3, 2019.

kingdom's intolerant ultra-conservative segment of Muslims, highlighted his inter-faith outreach in an op-ed in Newsweek magazine.

"I have travelled to the Vatican to elevate interfaith understanding with His Holiness, Pope Francis. I visited the Grand Synagogue of Paris and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I welcomed the highest-level delegation of US evangelical Christian leaders ever to visit Saudi Arabia... Among my proudest achievements (as justice minister) was licensing Saudi Arabia's first women lawyers. I also reformed the Saudi judiciary system," Mr Al-Issa wrote.

While segments of the justice system were indeed reformed, it remains a system that equates atheism with terrorism, enables authorities to imprison people for the slightest expression of criticism and allows for an anti-corruption campaign that lacks transparency and accountability and has the appearance of a power and asset

with the slogan #WeRemember.

While there can be no doubt that the UAE's example of tolerance of non-Muslim belief systems constitutes an important contribution to more harmonious inter-faith relations, there is also little question that it is part of an effort to fortify autocratic rule in the greater Middle East and cement an environment that is intolerant towards any form of criticism or dissent.

In doing so, the UAE's advocacy of religious tolerance and political intolerance is part of a global struggle about values that underlies tectonic shifts shaping a new world order. That struggle involves a redefinition of concepts of tolerance designed to ensure autocratic regime survival and enhance ways of avoiding and/or resolving conflict without bolstering transparency, accountability and a free flow of ideas.

The dark side of the UAE's concept of tolerance manifests itself in the country's conduct together with Saudi Arabia of its four-year old war in Yemen, the 20-

month old rift in the Gulf with Qatar, and its harsh repression of dissent and freedom of expression.

In a letter to the pope, Human Rights Watch called on Pope Francis to use his visit to press the government to address "the serious human rights violations by its forces in Yemen and to end its repression of critics at home."

The human rights group asserted that the Saudi-UAE military coalition in Yemen had "indiscriminately bombed homes, markets, and schools, impeded the delivery of humanitarian aid, and used widely banned cluster munitions. Domestically, UAE authorities have carried out a sustained assault on freedom of expression and association since 2011. And the many thousands of low-paid migrant workers in the country remain acutely vulnerable to forced labour."

Sarah Leah Whitson, the group's Middle East and North Africa director argued that the Pope was in a position to capitalise on the fact that the UAE is sensitive about its international image that is to a significant extent dependent on projecting itself as a cutting-edge proponent of tolerance in the Muslim world.

In a more hard-hitting comment, Islam scholar Usaama al-Azmi warned that "whether engaged in brutal wars like the one in Yemen with hundreds of thousands displaced and tens of thousands killed, or crushing dissent and political liberties at home, the UAE government is no better than its neighbour next door. Yet its savvy PR means that such matters frequently fall below the radar of international observers."

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