

Where the PM should really be an 'Iron Lady'

On her 'zero tolerance against corruption'



THE THIRD VIEW

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"I will not tolerate corruption and irregularity," said the newly elected prime minister in her maiden cabinet meeting on January 15, as she began her fourth consecutive term as Bangladesh's premier. She added that "transparency and accountability" must be ensured.

Zero tolerance for corruption and the guarantee of accountable and transparent administration are like music to our ears, though this tune has now been played for the umpteenth time to the extent that it has lost its credibility. We still want to hear this music in our never-ending and, according to some, utterly foolish hope that this time it will be for real.

Sheikh Hasina has been termed "South Asia's iron lady" in the latest issue of *The Economist*. The reasons behind this could be the way she has run the country for the last 15 years, the way she conducted and won (for herself and her party) a fifth term in office, and/or the way she suppressed the opposition BNP, her critics, and dissent in general. But now, by turning her toughest face against corruption, she could truly be the Iron Lady that we need.

In an executive opinion survey titled Bangladesh Business Environment 2023, conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in partnership with the World Economic Forum (WEF) in May-July of 2023 and published on January 17, 2024, it was found that 67.6 percent of business leaders identified corruption as the main hurdle for doing business. A total of 71 senior officials of large, medium, and small companies from different sectors were surveyed. Although the survey showed a slight reduction in bribery, the overall impact of corruption

on business remained the highest concern.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of corrupt people: those who are corrupt in spite of the system and those who are corrupt because of it. In today's Bangladesh, the second category of people vastly outnumbers the first. The hard, and of course sad, truth is that most members of that group—people who have severely damaged our economy and have greatly harmed the country—are within the PM's proximity. Some even enjoy official positions. If we consider the biggest loan defaulters, money launderers, and "Begum Para" inhabitants in Canada and Malaysia, we will find that these are mostly people we see hovering around the powers that be. In fact, many of these individuals flaunt their proximity to power to "tease the honest" and use it as protection against official investigations—should, God forbid, any of the institutions concerned become delusional enough to conduct one.

One of the first tasks the PM needs to undertake—to generate the crucial public confidence that her "zero tolerance" policy against corruption is genuine—is to draw a clear line between "wilful" and "non-wilful" loan defaulters, and go after the former most vigorously. These people are outright bank robbers of a sophisticated variety. What traditional robbers do in the dead of night, these wilful defaulters do in broad daylight. The latter also faces none of the risks of the former, as their actions have a veneer of legality. There is sufficient ground to assume that much of the money laundered abroad originates from these defaulted bank loans.

These people borrow money with the intention, from the very outset, of not paying it back and instead sending the fund abroad through hundi. What has been appalling is that, instead of holding wilful defaulters responsible for breaking the law, the concerned laws have been amended, time and time again, to give more time and, worse

extension while 55.68 percent—201 projects—required cost escalation. Of these, 179 projects needed both time extensions and cost escalation. The study also showed that a delay of one month resulted in a cost hike of nearly one percentage point. The delays are in land acquisition, work order placement, negotiations, consultant hiring, etc. All of this

delays and it is this same group that is preventing positive reforms.

Additionally, we should consider strengthening the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) and give it more staff and power. To start, the OCAG's recent reports should be looked at to identify the most damaging irregularities. At the moment,

answerable to the minister, a sea of change is likely to occur in the running of the administration.

The Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), under the Ministry of Planning, brings out very important and well-researched reports on project implementation, especially regarding project cost enhancement and time extensions. These reports give a superb, though limited, picture of how most of our projects suffer both cost and time overruns. Strengthening this body could also serve well to turn it into an effective authority in terms of project supervision. Setting up regional IMED bodies has long been a demand which we believe should be realised in order to improve project monitoring.

The functioning of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) also deserves an in-depth look. Often, the ACC has been described as a toothless tiger. How we can make it effective in fighting corruption deserves immediate attention. One approach could be to amend laws and add more staff and resources to the ACC. Most importantly, its autonomous capabilities and ability to investigate must be improved.

The point we are making is that the practice of auditing and monitoring must be made an integral part of administrative culture in Bangladesh. This is the most difficult of the tasks which PM Hasina will face as, over the decades, the utter lack of auditing and monitoring has been the order of the day.

Corruption today stands as the most dangerous and debilitating barrier to Bangladesh's advancement. It has greatly corroded general confidence in public institutions. Service-providing officials need to be paid extra "fees" in order for the public to benefit from their services. There is hardly any public institution where anything can be done without speed money. Corruption is far more seriously affecting our future growth than we even remotely realise. The "zero tolerance" should, thus, be implemented with "zero delay."

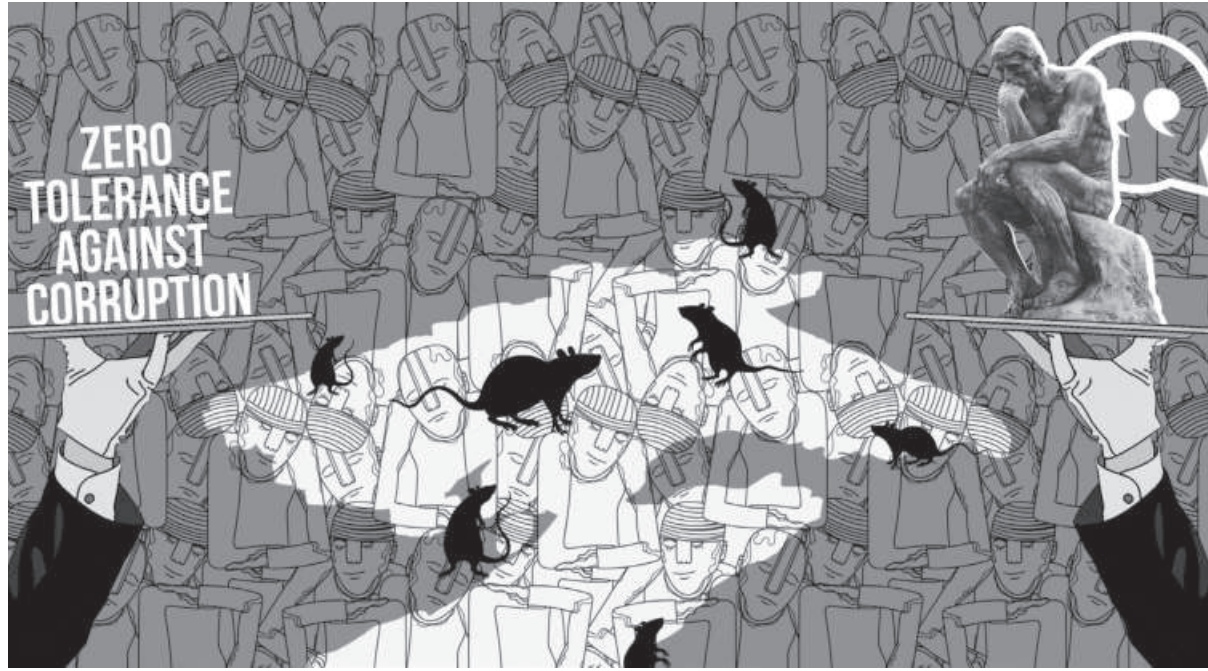


ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

still, more money from which to pay the requisite instalments. A part of that money was sent abroad, and the banks were left with a bigger loan defaulted. Unbelievable laxity was shown in the cases of these wilful defaulters, making those who actually repaid their loans feel stupid.

The other area in which the PM needs to take a deep look into, and from where a large share of the laundered money comes, is the extensions of deadlines and budgets during the implementation of big projects. According to a Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) study of 361 projects implemented by the Roads and Highways Department during the 2012-13 to 2021-22 period, 80.06 percent—289 projects—needed time

happens due to a lack of skilled human resources, said BIDS.

It is our assumption that the continuation of projects exceeding cost and time limits over the past decades as well as our failure to address these issues are not by chance. There is quite a bit of incentive to continue this practice, which drains the public exchequer but fattens personal wallets.

We suggest an immediate setting of a high-powered official body, headed by the PM, to recommend the necessary reforms, the implementation of which should be supervised personally by the PM. If we can implement some megaprojects on time, we can also implement most—if not all other—projects on time. There is a vested interest group that benefits from

these reports are submitted to the president and parliament, whose Standing Committee on Public Accounts examines them and does some accountability exercises. But, to the best of our knowledge, no tough actions have been taken against corrupt departments and officials for committing gross irregularities. Due to the low priority given to OCAG reports, the overall importance of this vital accountability institution has fallen by the wayside.

A productive and crucial method of ensuring the proper use of resources given to ministries is to strengthen the department-level auditing mechanism, which currently exists more as a formality. If this body can be headed by a powerful chief who will be directly

When the mind gets foggier than the weather



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Some people believe this cold, foggy weather is romantic and can elicit all kinds of creative thinking, while sipping hot beverages and munching on unnecessary carbohydrates. I am not one of them—I mean the being romantic about fog part, not the consuming of refreshments (which I eagerly partake in, regardless of weather conditions). No, to me, this foggy weather is just, well, fogging up not just my glasses, but my brain too. I feel distracted and dull, my sinuses get clogged, and this pale sepia-tinged ambience, created by the chemistry between fog and pollution to give birth to this suffocating smog, is just not giving me any inspiration to write anything meaningful.

You see, I feel really foggy-brained when I read that our Dhaka airport's authorities have decided to shut down the Instrument Landing System (ILS) that helps planes land during periods of poor visibility. Why would they do this at a time when airlines are having trouble scheduling flights because of the dense fog and when pilots are tearing out their hair (those who have some) trying to land through the cloak of invisibility? Apparently, it's because they are upgrading the system to install a better one that will provide better visibility during the foggy days. If you are going to be silly enough to ask why they decided to "upgrade" just when denser fog has already been predicted and wonder, "So, wouldn't it have been logical to do this at a time when there was no fog?"—you obviously don't know how things work around here.

Logic is subjective, which means that, contrary to universal beliefs, one person's logic is another person's craziness. While pilots and other officials are grumbling about the timing, the airport regulatory authorities



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

are spewing fancy justifications: the new system has to be calibrated by an international organisation and then audited, which has to be pre-scheduled, and who on earth would mess with a schedule that is carved in stone and more important than the safe landing of passenger planes? Illogical!

Why, for instance, would you breeze through immigration only to wait an hour and a half for your luggage? Well, because the luggage truck guys' shift has changed and there's a bit of a gap until the next shift starts, or the truck is being used for another flight so you just have to wait till it's back and meanwhile ward off the mosquitoes as best as you can. See, there is an explanation, however infuriating, to each of these delightful conundrums.

Shutting down the fog-defying system just when Dhaka is at its foggiest follows

the same logic of waiting all throughout the dry season and then digging up the roads for maintenance, repair, gas lines or water lines just before monsoon. Or the logic of starting a larvicide-spraying spree well into the dengue season, after a few hundreds have already died of the disease.

There are many things that make me foggy these days. Like the recent

epiphany of the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) in deciding to take "stern action" against air polluters. This category includes personnel involved in construction or maintenance work (such as road excavation and development projects), who will be held accountable for the air pollution generated by these activities that pollute water bodies. No doubt, this move follows Dhaka coming second on the list of cities worldwide with the worst air quality. But Dhaka has maintained its position in the first, second or third positions in the Air Quality Index (AQI) for quite a few years and is experiencing the choking consequences that come with such admirable consistency. Why did it take several years for the DSCC to decide to become "stern"? Is it because we have a new environment minister who may actually do something about the dusty

fog of our city? Will he also tackle the issue of the black smoke-emitting buses, some of which belong to various state agencies and Very Important People? We hope the fogginess of the matter will be cleared up soon.

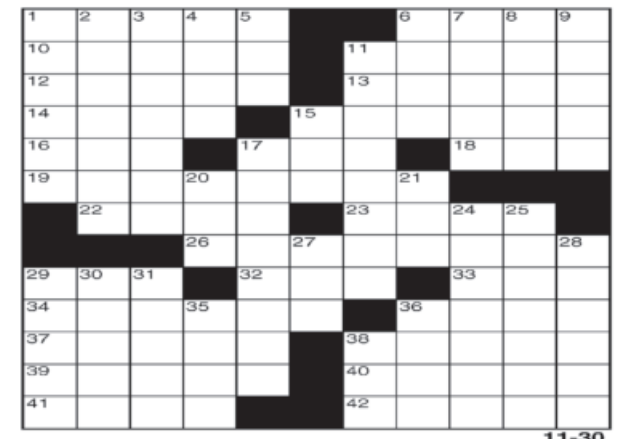
If all this is not befuddling your grey cells, then think about these realities: we have hospitals that have sophisticated medical machines but no trained staff

who can operate them, so they become obsolete; or hospitals with enough staff, but also essential equipment such as X-ray machines or radiology machines that went out of order many moons ago and have not been replaced—because, who knows? In fact, here's a riddle that keeps muddying my mind: we see high unemployment among educated youth, yet from public hospitals to city corporations to primary schools to universities, severe shortage of manpower is cited as reasons behind why these organisations cannot be as efficient as expected, even though there are many vacant posts there which remain unfilled for years on end. So, why have we not been able to train these jobless, hapless young people and fill the vacant posts and get the life-saving equipment in hospitals up and running? Haven't the foggiest idea.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Veep Agnew
 - 6 Lingerie items
 - 10 Ready for bed
 - 11 Oyster product
 - 12 Without aid
 - 13 Kitchen fixture
 - 14 Circus sight
 - 15 Dipping dish
 - 16 Wedding words
 - 17 Quick taste
 - 18 So far
 - 19 Brain layers
 - 22 Very bright
 - 23 Woodwind part
 - 26 Whirlpools
 - 29 Used to be
 - 32 Beam of light
 - 33 Touch lightly
- DOWN**
- 1 Unmoving
 - 2 Kept adding
 - 3 Magnetite, e.g.
 - 4 Monthly bill
 - 5 Keats work
 - 6 Noggin part
 - 7 Lustful
 - 8 Have a spat
 - 9 Wintery weather
 - 11 Investment choice
 - 15 Mend
 - 17 Mexican miss point
 - 20 "Mazel —!"
 - 21 Spot
 - 24 Sends overseas
 - 25 Salt lake of the Midwest
 - 27 Scoundrel
 - 28 Takes the wheel
 - 29 Used a sponge
 - 30 Sprightly
 - 31 Middling card
 - 35 Theater award
 - 36 Volcano shape
 - 38 Clothes line



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	R	E	R	U	L	T	R	A
A	D	O	B	E	M	I	R	E	D
P	E	B	B	L	E	B	E	A	C
E	L	I	A	T	E	F	E	E	
S	E	N	A	T	O	R	F	I	R
R	E	G	I	S	P	E	N	D	I
R	E	G	I	S	M	A	C	E	S
E	P	E	E	R	E	Y			
T	I	N	M	O	N	O	C	L	E
A	C	E	A	B	U	H	U	T	
P	U	R	P	L	E	B	E	E	C
E	R	A	S	E	A	W	A	R	E
D	E	L	I	S	R	E	P	E	L

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