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Bangladesh among 12 with no freedom of information law

Reaz Ahmad and Shakhawat Liton

Bangladesh figures on a list of 12 countries without the freedom of information law and the 'habits of secrecy' contributes to corruption that leaches away economic lifeblood, a Commonwealth rights group said.

The 'Open Sesame', the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) report, 2003, says 42 others of 54-member Commonwealth either have specific law that guarantees access to information or explicit constitutional guarantees.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the report from Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) headquarters officials yesterday.

"Research shows...countries with access to information laws are...perceived to be the least corrupt. In 2002, of the 10 countries scoring best in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index, no fewer than eight have effective legislation enabling the public to see government files," the report said.

"Of the 10 countries perceived to be worst when it comes to corruption, not even one had a functioning access to information regime."

Bangladesh was pegged as the most corrupt country for three straight years from 2001 to 2003 by the Transparency International.

The CHRI report says a guaranteed right to access to information is an essential, practical anti-corruption measure.

"Corruption undermines democracy. It creates a culture of impunity destroying the rule of law and creating a class of overlords who need secrecy to keep their dark deeds hidden in dark places."

"Crooked politicians care little for their representative duties and serve those who can pay rather than those who elected them. In the worst instances, this leads to the 'criminalisation of politics' and the 'politicisation of criminals'," the report adds.

The report says corruption takes root in society because of lack of government accountability and transparency and habits of secrecy and eats away economic vitality of nations.

"Information is not a gift of the government to be bestowed on a whim. Rather, the right to access information simply returns to citizens what has always been rightfully theirs," the report says.

"Much of the failure of development strategies in the Commonwealth is attributable to the fact that, for years, they were designed and implemented in a closed environment -- between governments and donors and without the involvement of people."

"Poor people know what they want but are out of the habit of questioning aloof

governments. In any case, governments and donors, have not been willing to open up."

The report cites an extreme case that even the parliamentarians in Ghana complained that their Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and crucial decisions to take advantage of the 'Highly Indebted Poor Countries' initiative were not referred to parliament at large.

Focussing on taboo in different countries on defence-related public information, the report says: "While it may not be in the national interest to disclose where a group of new aircraft is to be deployed, there is no reason why, nearly because the Defence Department is involved, citizens should not be given information on how much an airforce jet costs or the details of the purchase agreement."

The CHRI, founded in 1987 as an independent, non-partisan, international non-governmental organisation, is currently chaired by Professor Margaret Reynolds.

It is mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth world.

In the report, the CHRI called for introduction of laws to ensure liberal access to information in all Commonwealth countries by 2005 and guarantee of effective access to information.

Giving backgrounds of the culture of secrecy the report says: "Colonial authorities, which owed no duty to subject populations, purposefully used secrecy to signal their power and distance. A culture of secrecy permeated government, and systems to keep information from the public became embedded."

"Today, except in a handful of countries, governments enthusiastically retain and indeed embrace these symbols of supremacy as if there has been no intervening change from colonial to constitutional governance."

Referring to bureaucratic tangles, the report says public servants who genuinely believe they are serving their masters by denying the public information forget that their masters are the public themselves.

Apart from Bangladesh, the 11 other Commonwealth countries without access to information regime are: Botswana, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nauru, Namibia, Samoa, Singapore, Swaziland, Tonga and Vanuatu.

Only Australia, Belize, Canada, India, Jamaica, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom and Zimbabwe have the access regimes.