

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

"SAARC still has future"

The front-page news item of your esteemed daily "SAARC still has future" (21.4.2003) was indeed a most encouraging change for those having firm belief in SAARC ideals.

Such a message of hope for the people of the region coming from the most revered politician like President Chandrika Kumaratunga during her state visit to our country at a time like this is also very significant. Her words of assurance/optimism for this great dream in the countries of South Asia at these dark days when unions/organisations like EU, NATO after so many years of harmonious and perfect bondage/working, are in total disarray, may perhaps also be relevant to some extent.

As stated by President Kumaratunga, "There are political problems between two member states", despite all odds the forum must move forward; and this is how she reportedly summed up her concluding press-address before she left Bangladesh.

We therefore keep praying with the hope of positive steps by saner elements of the leaderships in the region to realise the objectives of SAARC in the interests of billion people most of whom are still living in abject poverty. Member States and the secretariat of this great forum now more than two decades old must play more than just proactive roles to justify its meaningful existence for the future.

Z. Rahman
Gulshan, Dhaka

On secularism

I am so glad that 'Jens', of Dhaka, has raised the subject of the meaning of the word 'secular'. When I first arrived here, I was totally mystified by the use of the word in the press and I am not sure that I fully understand it now.

The reason for my puzzlement was that, in the UK, and, I am pretty sure, elsewhere, the word, in practice, has come to mean anti-religious - which is why I 'flipped' when I first heard the expression 'a secular Muslim state'! In the UK, the Secular Society is a club mainly for people who think that all religions are a snare and a delusion.

You have to be careful if you are a school teacher because if, at the Primary School Christmas entertainment, you make too much of the religious content of the season, and actually have anything approaching a Nativity Play, rather than keep to Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-nose Reindeer and such 'secular' characters, then you can get into real trouble!

It is obvious that this use of the word 'secular' has nothing whatever to do with being 'rational' or with 'separating church and state' as Jens suggests. Maybe we need to find a different word in order to avoid inevitable misunderstandings. We cannot, like Humpty Dumpty in Alice in Wonderland, just make words mean what we want them to mean.

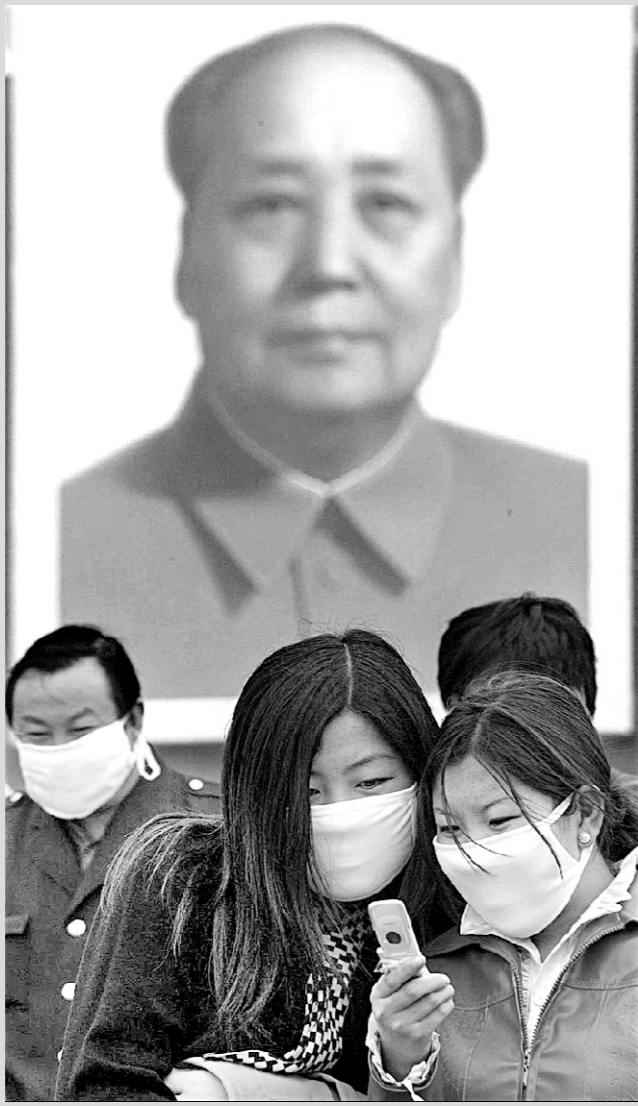
One of the past Secretary Generals of the United Nations, the poet and philosopher, Dag Ham-marskjold, referred to the process of clarifying the meaning of words as 're-digging the wells'. It is absolutely vital in all communication. The world must know what we mean. I am not at all sure that the word 'secular', as it is used at present here, communicates anything clear at all.

Angela Robinson (Rev Mrs)
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Police at Hilli Border

I travelled to India on March 21, 2003 with my valid passport no L 0431324 issued at Dhaka on August 30, 1995, validity extended up to May 6 2005 and my visa for India No L576607 issued at Dhaka, by the High Commission of India, on March 11, 2003. I was accompanying a sick lady of 85 years age. She

SARS and the Bengali students in China



SARS scare

Nowadays, everyone is aware about SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome).

The disease is extremely contagious. It was first detected in Guangdong province of southern China. And now it has already spread over almost all provinces of China. So far, more than 100 people have died of SARS. In Beijing and Tianjin, the official record of death from SARS is 16. And the number of SARS infected is 800 and the number is increasing everyday.

I'm currently studying in Tianjin (100 miles away from Beijing), China. Because of SARS, many foreign students are heading back their home country. In my university there are 200 students from Aichi University of Japan. The Japanese government and the university authority have ordered them to go back to Japan by 29th April. Also some American universities like Minnesota University has started to pull back their students from China. But what about us, the Bengali students? We haven't heard anything from Embassy in Beijing yet. Would the Government please do something about us?
Chanchal Maiti, Nankai University, China

too had her valid travel documents.

At Hilli at first some brokers asked for our passports to complete the formalities. We however submitted our passports personally at about 11.45 am. We saw brokers submitting passports, getting them sealed and leave, but we were kept waiting. Our passports were kept aside and the police officer took out some files printed in English and started looking at them and our passports. After about half an hour were given exit seals. The police on Indian side were cordial both times when we entered on March 21 2003 and again when I returned on April 4 2003. But on our side, again the brokers wanted my passports to help me get the formalities completed. However, I did not agree.

When I entered the passport office, one bearded man asked for money. I refused. He handed over the passports to the police officer who asked me to wait. Brokers came and went with their passports sealed, no question asked. It was about 11.45 am and my transport was supposed to leave for Dhaka at 12.30 pm. I requested them

to seal my passport so that I do not miss the bus. As before he asked me to wait and brought out the same old English typed file. It possibly had the names of criminals, supplied by the DB. Finding nothing he asked me some very humiliating questions "Did you ever loose your passport? Were you ever involved in drug trafficking?" and many more humiliating questions.

May I request the authorities concerned to look into the matter and do the needful? My passport showed my status. It has visas of USA, Singapore's, Malaysia, Thailand etc. If such behaviour is meted out to me, what about the general public?
MNA
Dhaka

Time to wake up

This is in response to the letters by Mr. Iqbal and Mr. Azad. I express my full solidarity with both of them. It is indeed high time for the Muslim countries to wake up from their slumber. If we do not react now, our existence may soon be at stake. We must

n't get carried away by the propaganda spread out by the Bush administration. Do you really think the Coalition invaded Iraq only to install democracy in the country?

Only two decades ago, Saddam was the darling of the US and so was Osama Bin Laden. But just when they stopped serving the US interest, they became their enemy number one.

The leaders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Pakistan, Turkey should take guard. The US might not be targeting them today but you never know what happens tomorrow. It is time for the Muslims to unite and resist all forms of foreign aggression. Hopefully, we will be able to revive our past glory.

Sameer Ahmed Khan Mojlish
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Invasion, looting and...

Get rich, rob East, come home-- that's the single motto upon which the Bush-Blair axis of evil invaded Iraq, absolutely unilaterally, unlawfully and immorally. Never before in the history of mankind has the entire world witnessed, live, such a shattering cluster bombing of 50 thousand tons dropped to wipe out from the surface of the earth a nation of 25 million Muslims of Iraq who were first subjected in a pre-planned manner by the 12 years of UN sanctions, into a weak, humble and ill-equipped nation. The Iraqi government's reserve of gold and silver bullion as well as foreign exchange exceeding TWO THOUSAND BILLION US DOLLARS have already been robbed and feared to be freighted secretly out of that country by the invaders. Street urchins, muggers, thieves and professional robbers are being enticed and protected by the Anglo-American invaders to rob anyone and everyone to cover up the massive secret robbery of a nation's wealth under the 'able' leadership of the Bush-Blair axis!

While the whole world is kept busy watching, live, on CNN, BBC or other Western TV channels that some Iraqis are looting their compatriots' wealth the Anglo-American occupation army are busy to execute the plan of plundering the whole of the national wealth of Iraq and taking it away to America and Britain.

The robbery in Iraq has just begun. It will continue over the generations until and unless the invaders are stopped in their tracks.
Mohammad Basirul Haq
Khilgaon, Dhaka

American hypocrisy

President Bush has commented recently that demonstration staged by the Iraqi people against the American occupation is a beautiful expression of freedom. Why then they killed 15 such people who took part in such a 'beautiful' act of demonstration against their occupation of their motherland recently?

Isn't taking part in demonstration against this occupation is the true and legitimate expression of their freedom which the American government did pledge them for? Mr. Bush categorically says that whatever he has done in Iraq is to free its people from the clutch of brutal Saddam regime which bears testimony to his immense love for the Iraqi people and their country. Then I want to ask Mr. Bush then why did he help those organised looters infiltrate into Iraq with the clear mandate and necessary training and logistic supply from the enemies of Iraq and Islam to systematically destroy its economy, cultural and historical heritage, educational institutions and what not.

Another question comes up in mind. Why did Mr. Bush spare only the Oil Ministry building from their list of destruction? Mr. Bush has cut off oil pipeline linking Syria to stop oil supply to that country and has instead

decided to build up pipeline to supply Iraqi oil to Israel to rebuild its shattered economy. But it should be the right of the lawful Iraqi government where to supply its oil and where to stop it, not the American or its puppet like Challabi.

Monami, Gulshan, Dhaka

"No to America"

As the horror of battle dies down, the ordinary Iraqis finally have the opportunity to express their emotions. And to the shock of the occupying forces, they are saying loud and clear, "No to America"! They rejected Saddam a long time ago and now they are rejecting the lies and propaganda of Britain and America. They know all too well that this promised freedom and democracy is nothing but a sham; capitalism has come to Iraq only to conquer, control and steal. They know that Saddam is being replaced by the dictatorship of Western colonialism. And they do not want to be another pathetic Muslim State under the thumb of America. So today, the Muslims of Iraq, in thousands, are on the streets.

Bangladesh too has expressed a wave of anti-American feeling. But do we now have the clarity of mind to question the basis of this so-called Western Civilisation? Are we blind followers of this American ideology, which CNN tells us has "liberated" the Iraqi people? How can we reject American goods but wholeheartedly embrace its way of life? Are we going to stop drinking Coca-Cola only to see our leaders and intellectuals repeat Bush's dogma of secularism, freedom and democracy?

Perhaps it's time for us to at least think and question. A cruise missile can destroy a building but it cannot control minds. The battle may be over in Baghdad but the war of ideas has only just begun.

Dr Wali
New Elephant Road, Dhaka

"UN needs reform"

This has reference to the letter "UN needs reform" by Mahmood Elahi (April 21) in response to the letter by Jamil Ahmed.

Mr. Elahi seems to glorify W. Bush's call to 'end their violent activities' in the Middle East. But he never sees any violence perpetrated by Bush. He finds nothing wrong with America's killing of thousands of innocent people either in Afghanistan or in Iraq, America's shameful failure to capture Laden or to provide any solid evidence linking Laden to 9/11 incident, its occupation of Iraqi oil fields and Iraq on the pretext of eliminating 'weapons of mass destruction', as all these are directed against the people who are not American. Mr. Elahi also never consider Israeli killing of Palestinians, Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, killing of thousands in Lebanon and now in Palestine by Ariel Sharon, detention of Palestinians without any evidence of their involvement and Israeli denial of civic rights to their Arab population anything wrong, as the only thing that Mr. Elahi considers wrong is the "killing of own people" by any regime. By that standard Bangladesh, where its own "non-violent" people get killed by successive regimes, deserves the treatment that has been meted out to Iraq!

In support of his claim of UN "losing credibility" he probably forgot to mention one important reason - UN resolutions against Israel.

As a general reaction to all the letters Mr. Elahi has written so far I am tempted to say that if Goebbels had Mr. Elahi as his contemporary, he would certainly pale into insignificance.

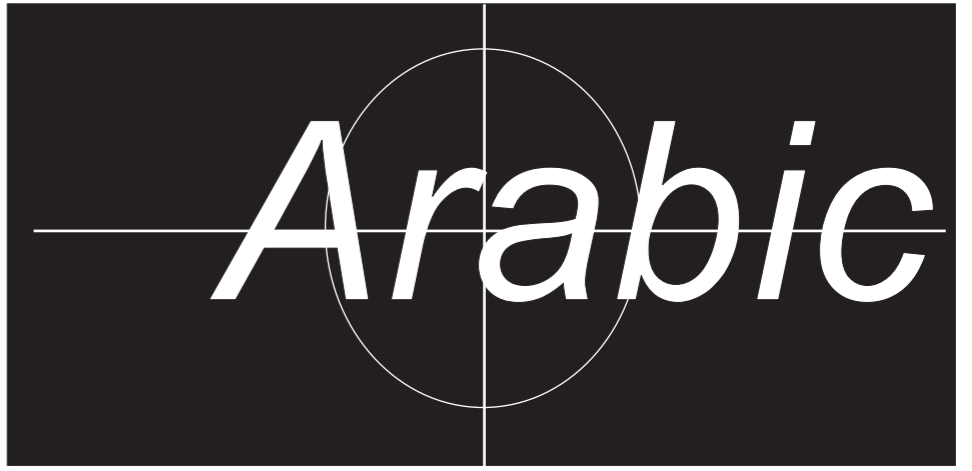
Tareq
Binodpur Bazar, Rajshahi

How serious is Arab anger?

The Daily Star columnist Taj Hashmi ("Is Syria next and then Iran?" April 22) made extensive comments on post 9/11 events. Yes, there is much anger, much frustration in the Arab region. Yet, the anger of Arab street did not translate into strong policy from the Arab rulers.

Frustration remains deep. Palestine occupation and repression continue. So does resistance by the most oppressed and dispossessed people in the Arab region. Yet what net support did the Arab regimes give? Very little other than some money for relief.

As to the Arab League itself, there is more anger than action; more rhetoric than response; astounding hypocrisy dressed with lofty hyperbole. They must be beginning to mean little to the public. How else one explains the lofty resolutions "rejecting" war on a neighbour when some of the Arab League members are hosting the very army getting ready to attack? How do you open your harbour and yet join territory to foreign troops and yet join empty anti-war calls? True to its tradition, the League now calls emphatically on the US troops to leave Iraq. Does the League want to be taken seriously by anyone, even by their gullible or emotional public? Certainly, not by the US, and why should it.
Dr. Zakir Husain, Dhaka



"ZIA neon sign flashes in Arabic"

Is Arabic a sacred language by itself? As like as any other language, Arabic has many words and sentences, which are used to express vulgar sentiment? Are those also sacred? Filthy words, taboo slang and abuse cannot be sacred, whichever language it is in.

Sacred are the verses of the Holly Quran in Arabic which have been revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SM) by Allah. If those verses are translated in any other language it remains sacred as well as before. Sacred are the sayings of Prophet in whichever language, those are expressed.

An Arabic name does not always mean an Islamic name. Tarek Aziz, Vice President of Saddam regime, is a Christian. A Christian is Omar Sheriff-- the renowned Hollywood actor. Arab Christians have Arabic names, for Arabic is their mother tongue.

I would like to say to the ultra-secularists as well as to the ultra-fundamentalists that neon sign in Arabic at ZIA has got nothing to do with secularism or religious sentiment. We will not simply use that sign because of Arabic is neither our state language nor it is an international lingua franca. In this temporal world it is as simple as that.
Faruque Hasan, Dhanmandi, Dhaka

I welcome the letters of Anondo, Mou and Sobur Khan (April 23) expressing their outrage at why people stopped writing letters on the issue of the Arabic sign at ZIA. Mou is spot on when she says that the thousands of people who protested the Iraq war don't care a bit about what happens in our own country.

But I would ask Anondo, Mou and Sobur to look at another equally if not more important domestic issue, that they all have ignored.

What about the wholly arbitrary and arrogant timings enforced by the Army for civilian traffic in the cantonment? Where is your outrage now?

First of all, there are no logical security arguments for all the restrictions on entering the cantonment. We enter the cantonment freely to get married, play golf, to see relatives at the CMH or visit any number of the thousands of civilians and retired staff who live in apartments and houses inside the cantonment.

It's only when I want to drive straight from the Old Airport (also owned by the military) to Uttara that I pose a security risk. Again these security considerations do not apply to politicians, retired officers, civil servants and funnily enough garments workers and public transportation. On top of this ludicrous situation, we now have the army trying to simply put and impose their will on us.

Mou, Anondo etc, are writing asking why people are not outraged by the Arabic signs. But what do you expect when we stay silent even when army forces us to spend several hours, unnecessarily, stuck in the truck-sized potholes of Moakhal?
TAH, Dhaka

It is important to understand that secularism is not an ideology per se, but a convenient means to maintain balance among social cleavages, and to separate Church and the state, the doctrine had developed in the West, so that the judiciary and the affairs of the state remains independent of coercion.

In this respect, secularism is neither antithetical to nor patron of religion per se, but it merely objects to supremacy of a religion based doctrine. Therefore, those respondents, who decree that by a single decision of installing an Arabic sign, Bangladesh becomes a non-secular country, in reality, makes identical mistake similar to them, who believe that Arabic sign embodies our Islamic ethos.

In other words, irrespective of installing the Arabic sign, Bangladesh, as a state, would become neither Islamic nor secular, as gap between theory and social reality exists and all states including Bangladesh, fall in between. Moreover, it is important to remember that despite declaration of Islam as the state religion, it is the English common law and the supremacy of the constitution that dictate our judicial system.

As a result, to equate use of Arabic in Muslim liturgy to that of a sign lacks logical correlation. For, because of liturgical status, as a language, were Arabic to receive such a high status in common places, as Mr. Bashar or Mrs. Mirza claims, following the logic, should not we declare Arabic as official language, impose Sharia and conduct our speech in the language of the Ummah? It is a strange phenomenon for the advocates of Arabic that when they appeal to Ummah, inevitably, they refer to the people of Arab origin and discriminates excluding others, a quite un-Islamic practice!

Therefore, to state that Arabic sign, as Mr. Sobur Khan has suggested, would erode our secular image is utterly exaggeration of reality, as it would not make us a theocracy.

In similar fashion, when Mr. Nazmul Karim and Mr. A. W. Khan sarcastically refer to Urdu, what they do, is expose a gross lack of taste and fickle-mindedness. For, Urdu even for an instance, had no reference in the ongoing debate, and Mr. A.W. Khan's statement that Urdu as the "most significant linguistic purveyor of Islam (within the elite) into Bangladesh" not only betrays reality, but also it indicates his cultural chauvinism and political fanaticism. For, whether one approves of or not of the current decision, it is a de factor reality that Urdu never had its place among Bangladeshi elite. The choice for English among Bangladeshi elite historically remains intact. I wonder where did from Mr. Khan had come up with such a fertile conclusion?

In sum, in the wake of Iraq War, compounded with imminent political and economic crisis, the decision made by the government only indicates its intention to exploit religious symbolism, which is but a futile attempt to deflect inaptitude in managing affairs of the state. The decision therefore, has to be seen and evaluated in this light, and digression from the issue either making an exaggeration of fact or issuing slanderous remarks either against the incumbent government or the people of Bangladesh violates civic decency.
Shibly Azad, Columbia University, USA

As a Bangladeshi we are always in a dilemma to identify ourselves. We tend to put a lot of burden among ourselves to identify our culture (note: not religion) with those of Arabs. Arabs are the people who speak Arabic, live in a specific geographical location and have absolutely nothing in common with us except for religion. They are overwhelmingly arrogant, condescending towards Muslims of the subcontinent.

It is a tricky argument to say that the Quran was bestowed on us in Arabic and we have an obligation to learn Arabic to understand it better. If I read the Quran in Bengali or in English then I am not sure what revelations am I going to miss, had I read in Arabic? If I can understand subjects like Quantum mechanics to Philosophy in either Bengali or English or Japanese and get the same understanding, then I don't see any reason why Arabic is so relevant in understanding the Quran.

If I assume that the famous translators of the Quran were not smarter or qualified enough to do justice to real interpretation of the Quran, then I would think that Arabs understand the Quran or Islam better than any non Arab-speaking Muslims.

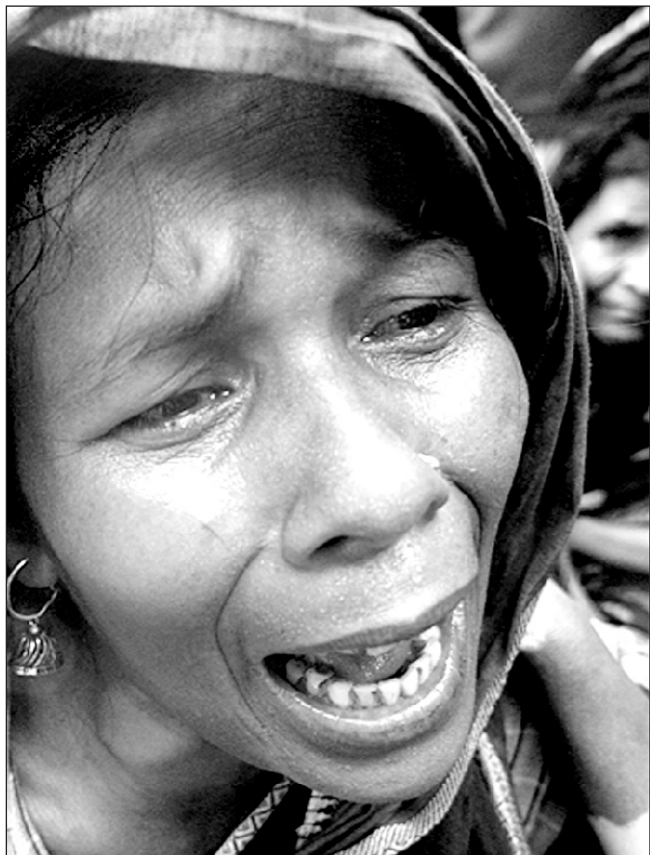
Which is far from the truth, judging by 'the way they follow it'. One needs to study history, philosophy, science and politics to understand any religion. Also one needs to be humble, honest and have an open mind. But collectively, as a nation we are Bangladeshi Muslims, we are nowhere close to Arabs or Arabic culture. One of the reasons we learn Arabic is that it is easy to memorise the suras so we can say our prayers easily. But I will challenge anyone who can say that they understand the Quran better or are better Muslims because they read it in Arabic, to someone who read it in English or Bengali.
M. Hassan, Plano, TX, USA

I am amazed how a newspaper of the stature of The Daily Star can willfully resort to distortion of facts and create cheap controversies that suit their 'lineage' when reporting. When it was reported that an Arabic neon sign was flashing at ZIA, the fact was conveniently suppressed that an Arabic sign has been on the top of the terminal building for as long as I remember. Of course, signs in Bengali and English are also there. The only change is that with the addition of the new terminal building, a new set of signs are installed on it in the same three languages. But The Daily Star report deliberately tried to give an impression that this is the first time an Arabic sign is put in the international gateway of ZIA.

The obvious motive of such reporting is now very clear from some of the reactions seen in this column. It is probably result of the eagerness of some to distance themselves from 'terrorism' and to be on the good book of the 'New World order' that prompted them to make a hue and cry over this.

Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country with 90% Muslims. It has Islam as the state religion, and its constitution starts with "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim", and unconditional faith in God is the major cornerstone of our nationhood. In spite of the strong Islamic identity reflected by the Bangladeshis in all aspects of life, Bangladesh has been an example of communal harmony and minority rights by any standard, and especially compared to some secular lip singer countries. Use of Arabic in Bangladesh is not out of love for Arabs, but for Islamic identity.
Wahid Chowdhury, USA

Dying an unnatural death in Bangladesh



So many people in our country face unnatural deaths from tragic accidents that it is perhaps no more unnatural for us and has become our common cause of death! The recent launch accident may stand as a testimony to this observation. This is not the first time this has happened. The memory of hundreds of people dying from the launch accident in Patuakhali not long ago still haunts my memory. The ship that carried unidentified dead bodies from one river ports to another in the remote southern districts for relatives to identify their loved ones was like a ghost ship that can only appear in the worst nightmare.

More likely than not demand will be raised from the media, civil society, and the general public for ensuring safety of launch passengers. The government will be quick to respond by outlining certain steps and assuring strict implementation to avoid recurrence of such mishaps. We have already observed our Shipping Minister banning passenger launches from plying during the evening hours, although I have my own doubts about the prevalence of northwester only during evening hours. However, interests in and follow-up of such steps, which is called 'urgent measures', will die down soon, and life will return to normal. Abnormality thus becomes the norm. Launches with faulty design with overloaded passengers will continue to be driven by ignorant drivers who care little, if any, for the passenger safety.

When another such terrible incident strikes us again, we will restart the whole cycle with the demand for safety and proper implementation of law, lip service from the government of remedial actions, and eventual return to status quo. This is how it has been and is likely to continue in the future. Surely, how much a life in a country of 140 million can be worth? This is the only thing we have in abundance, so why bother with the loss of a few hundreds!
KM Zubair Sadeque, Duquesne University, USA

Off repeated weeping!