

The continuing importance of public education



REHMAN SOBHAN

Please keep in mind that the person who may represent you tomorrow in parliament, the bureaucrat from whom you will seek redress for some problem, the SP who will be responsible for the security of your neighbourhood, even the doctor who may one day have to save your life, are all likely to be graduates of a public university.

tion has also significantly expanded. Our public institutions, therefore, still remain an indispensable part of our educational system.

The public universities still retain scholars of enormous dedication and high professional esteem. The bulk of the student population aspire to nothing more than a good education. Unfortunately, the quality of learning in our public institutions, at various levels, continues to depreciate. There are many reasons for this, but an important factor owes to the hazard that the campus in these institutions remains hostage to a small yet politically powerful minority who are hostile to the very ethos of higher learning. We are, thus, witness to university teachers being murdered on campus with fellow teachers and student leaders being instrumental in the commission of such unthinkable crimes.

The growing participation of our public campuses, over the life of successive regimes, has promoted the debasement of our

educational institutions. This tendency has devalued the importance of scholarship as the route to advancement and elevated political loyalty into the prevailing dynamic of upward mobility. As we have recently observed, to even challenge this process is to put your life at risk. In such a system, the quality of education has become the principal casualty in our public institutions with the added hazard to personal security and the perpetual risk of delays in completing a degree.

The future of a whole generation is now being put at risk, which may have ominous consequences for the nation. Since public higher education remains the main source of recruitment into the public service, if we cannot reverse this systemic decay we may be inflicting irreversible damage to the institutions of governance and the eventual sustainability of our development performance. As a result, in a fast globalizing world, where knowledge is becoming the most valuable source of capital, our

capacity to remain internationally competitive is being compromised.

It is the paramount responsibility not just of the government of the day, but all the political parties, all parents, all members of civil society to make a supreme collective effort to reverse this tragic situation in the institutions to which we owe so much and which were once the pride and joy of generations of Bangladeshis. Institutions such as Dhaka University are part of the history of Bangladesh and were the cradle of our educated elite. We all owe an incalculable debt to our public universities for making us what we are today. We owe it to ourselves as much as to Bangladesh to pledge ourselves to redeem this debt.

To the best of my knowledge, private university campuses are spared terrorism, indiscipline and the parochialism which has debilitated our once famous public institutions of learning. However, Bangladesh cannot do without its public institutions, and will in the

foreseeable future continue to depend on them to accommodate the majority of students seeking higher education.

The graduates of our public universities will continue to influence the quality of governance in Bangladesh for many years to come. Our state of governance will, in turn, affect the quality of everyone's lives and the effectiveness of the private institutions. The regeneration of our public institutions is therefore everyone's concern. Please keep in mind that the person who may represent you tomorrow in parliament, the bureaucrat from whom you will seek redress for some problem, the SP who will be responsible for the security of your neighbourhood, even the doctor who may one day have to save your life, are all likely to be graduates of a public university.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue. This piece is part one of a two-part series based on the address he gave at East-West University's 2006 convocation.

'Not lovers of blood'

The surprise victory of the radical Hamas party in recent Palestinian elections presents the United States and Israel with a dilemma: how to pressure the militant Islamists without causing a humanitarian crisis. Hamas is on the US terrorist list, and the American government currently has no contacts with it. Israel won't deal with Hamas, either. Yet if the international community cuts off millions of dollars in aid to the Hamas-led government, ordinary Palestinians will suffer. Newsweek's Lally Weymouth spoke by phone to the newly designated Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh. He was speaking from Shati refugee camp in Gaza, where he lives with his wife and 12 children. Excerpts.

Weymouth: Were you surprised by the size of the Hamas victory? Haniyeh: Hamas entered the elections planning to be victorious. Palestinian President Abu Mazen and the international community have put forward conditions for dealing with Hamas: (1) recognize Israel, (2) recognize existing agreements with Israel made by the PLO, (3) renounce violence. Will you agree to these conditions?

We are surprised that such conditions are imposed on us. Why don't they direct such conditions and questions to Israel? We say let Israel recognize the legitimate rights of the Palestinians first, and then we will have a position regarding this.

Israel has agreed to a two-state solution, and Israel has signed agreements with the PLO, and it withdrew from Gaza. So, will Hamas accept any of the agreements that the PLO made with Israel?

The withdrawal from Gaza was based on a unilateral decision and a unilateral plan. It was not [done] out of the generosity of Israel. We ask, is Israel committed to all these agreements? We are not war seekers nor are we war initiators. We are not lovers of blood. We are oppressed people with rights. If peace brings us our rights, then this is good.

Do you accept the Oslo agreement, which was signed by Yasir Arafat?

Israel has stopped completely committing itself to Oslo. I am not asking about Israel. Are you, as the new Palestinian prime minister, committed to Oslo?

How do you want me not to pay attention or care about what Israel says? Israel is the other side of the conflict. So you will not abide by past



agreements made by the Palestinians and Israel?

I have not said that. I have said that Israel.

But you are not the prime minister of Israel. Will you abide by past agreements made by the Palestinian governments?

We will review all agreements and abide by those that are in the interest of the Palestinian people.

Do you recognize Israel's right to exist?

The answer is, let Israel say they will recognize a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, release the prisoners and recognize the rights of the refugees to return to Israel. Hamas will have a position if this occurs.

So, would Hamas recognize Israel if it were to withdraw to the '67 borders?

If Israel withdraws to the '67 borders, then we will establish a peace in stages.

Does a peace in stages mean the ultimate obliteration of the Jewish state?

We do not have any feelings of animosity toward Jews. We do not wish to throw them into the sea. All we seek is to be given our land back, not to harm anybody.

So will you extend the present ceasefire?

I will not say yes or no. If Israel gives us a quiet period and stops its incursions and the assassinations, then we will be able to convince our people to continue with a state of quiet.

How is Hamas going to run its government with the US cutting funds and the Palestinian government having a deficit of \$700 million. Will Iran make up the difference?

We have an economic plan for self-sufficiency based on rationing and protection of public money. Number two, our relationship with the Islamic and Arab world has shown indications that these people will not let us down and will support us. Number three, the liberals and free people of the world will not like to see the Palestinian people living under siege.

Prime Minister Sharon accepted a two-state solution, as did President Bush. What do you say about the two-state solution? It all starts with Israel.

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Garments factories are now death traps



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

A little human consideration could have saved many lives. Hapless workers will continue to die like KTS garments workers did. They will die over and over, in incident after incident, until we recognize that the administration in the country is now so venal, so apathetic, so inhuman that it could not care less. We also need to realize that until all of us -- you, me, everybody gets up and says enough is enough, nothing is going to change.

What is most appalling is that because of a deliberate effort to keep the death figure low by the factory owners, the actual casualty figures were always based on newspaper reports.

With the country still reeling under the trauma and shock of the Chittagong garments fire, the worst ever industrial fire incident in Bangladesh, people were jolted by another devastating incident of building collapse at Mohakhali last Saturday evening, that crushed 20 people, mostly construction workers, to death, and many others are buried alive under the debris as the six-storied building owned by the Phoenix Fabrics collapsed due to faulty construction.

These two incidents of factory fire and building collapse were terrible incidents. These tragic deaths seemed to have touched a chord in all of us because the garments industry, employing the largest labour force in the country, especially women, is a part of our national pride and existence.

Now the very work place where young men and women go to earn a living has the shadow of death over it. The incident occurred as hundreds of workers panicked over a fire caused by boiler explosion followed by short circuiting in the whole four-storied building complex, and made a desperate bid to escape through the narrow emer-

gency staircase, wide enough for only one person to walk in.

In Chittagong garments fire incident, the over-cautious management immediately after sensing the fire spark ordered the collapsible gate of the main entrance to be locked in a silly and sinister attempt to prevent theft of the factory products, and on the other hand the emergency exit was neither lighted nor it had space enough to allow such a huge number of people to get out in such a short time when the whole building complex was pitch dark. The chaos and confusion in the wake of such an indiscreet decision resulted in such a huge number of people being roasted alive or dying by asphyxiation or stamped.

Systematic flouting of safety norms and a breakdown in regulation have turned the country's garments factories into veritable death traps. Even today people recall with shock the fire incident in the last year when 28 garments workers in the SAAN garments factory at Siddhirganj were roasted alive. The death toll in the Dora garments in 2001 rose to 16, and the largest death toll of 48 occurred in the same year in the knitwear garments factory situated in the BSCIC industrial estate at Narsingdi.

A post disaster sweep in some of the garments factories in Dhaka and Chittagong in 2001 revealed the sorry state of affairs. About 1,400 out of 2,600 garments factories in the country lack adequate fire fighting tools, and almost 50 per cent of the factories have no exit routes for emergency evacuation.

The garments owners association (BGMEA) along with the ministerial committee set up by the government has so far identified ten causes for such mishaps. These include absence of alternative stairs or emergency exit routes, lack of fire-fighting equipment and materials, faulty gas and electric lines in the factories, violation of building codes that prohibit installing a labour intensive and fire-prone factory above the second floor, non-use of fire retardant materials in walls and the roof, use of low quality fittings, lack of proper warning signal arrangement during a disaster, and lack of disaster drill and training of workers that help them quit the premises in an orderly manner without creating chaos in times of emergency.

After making a tour of the garments factories in the city, one gets a somewhat unhappy impression. In most of these factories, fire safety checks are non-existent. The units are housed in buildings least suited to fire-prone factories with poor safety standards, have a near absence of emergency exits, and operate without a valid license from the fire service and civil defense directorate. Often, the fire safety certificates are taken not from the fire department but the electrical inspectorate that knows little about the fire prevention system.

Reports revealed in the initial probe indicated that KTS garments factory did not have any valid license. Most shockingly, an industry that employs about 30 lakh workers, mostly women, in two big cities, and now ranks as the biggest foreign exchange earner, has given little attention towards ensuring safety and security of its workers. No sensible citizen in the country can compromise the idea of allowing such a vital industry to operate with so little accountability and so scarce periodic inspections or no inspections of its machineries and electrical installations.

In most cases, building laws are violated with impunity. Most of the factories have exit routes or stairs throttled with waste clothes and baskets full of waste. Most shockingly, in most cases the main

entrance gate remains locked without the guard being available to offer immediate assistance on humane consideration. Think of the colossal problem that is likely to be created when some 500 to 600 workers, mostly untrained and uneducated women from the rural areas, want to evacuate through such a narrow three-foot staircase after either hearing a fire alarm or seeing fire spark or smoke in their working areas.

Death and casualty figures in the KTS garments in Chittagong were so high because of the main gate being locked even after the fire engulfed the whole building. Despite the fact that a series of accidents have taken place in quick succession, taking a heavy toll of lives and property, the licensing authorities or the administration never showed up or visited these factories to see if these units meet the safety regulations and norms.

Most of the factories situated in high rise buildings in the narrow by-lanes and densely populated residential areas are almost inaccessible to fire tenders. The Jatiya Sangsad on February 26 passed a toothless law that empowers the government to inflict punishment on a non-compliant owner of the building or an employee of the government of a prison term that may extend to seven years or with fine of not less than Tk.50,000, or with both. Conscientious citizenry thinks this is hardly a deterrent to check the menacing rise of unscrupulous and illegal activities in the construction arena.

Given the terrible toll, some questions were inevitable: who were the persons responsible, the owners or the government agencies or both? The most pertinent question is whether the recalcitrant government agencies and callous factory owners will escape through the exit routes of law that could always be bent in favour of the high and mighty.

In almost no other country in the world could 55 victims have died in such a tragic and needless fashion. They died because of the insensitivity, callousness, and criminal apathy of the garments owners and the concerned agencies in the government. It is this that we are inclined to forget in the plethora of commissions, committees, and whitewashes that will go into the incident.

With smoke filling the hall room and fire engulfing the building, it seems unbelievable that the management could have kept the main collapsible gate locked to protect factory products and imported valuables. A little human consideration could have saved many lives.

Hapless workers will continue to die like KTS garments workers did. They will die over and over, in incident after incident, until we recognize that the administration in the country is now so venal, so apathetic, so inhuman that it could not care less. We also need to realize that until all of us -- you, me, everybody gets up and says enough is enough, nothing is going to change.

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Western protectionism can hurt global growth

The image the West has of Asian mercantilism is becoming rapidly outdated. Chinese exports are indeed growing at a remarkable clip, but its imports are growing even faster. The United States is no longer the world's sole engine of growth, though it remains the most important. Emerging markets, in Asia and elsewhere, not Europe or even Japan, have emerged as the other engine of global growth.

JANADAS DEVAN
The Straits Times, ANN

A Chinese oil company's attempt to buy over an American oil company was stopped. An Indian-owned steel company's attempt to buy over a European steel company is meeting similar resistance. Now, a Dubai-owned company's attempt to buy over a British-owned shipping company, a deal that would give the Arab company control of six ports on the east coast of the United States, has run into a firewall of intense American paranoia.

How can the United States hand over its ports in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Miami and New Orleans to Arabs, of all people? Wouldn't these fellows allow terrorists to infiltrate America? What if they turned a blind eye as a ship loaded with a nuke sailed into New York's harbour?

The answer to that last question is: If that were to happen, it would be the US Department of Homeland Security, not DP World, the Dubai company, that would be at fault. For no matter who owns these ports -- the British, as now, or Arabs, Eskimos or Maoris -- security would remain a US government responsibility.

Unless Americans fear foreigners would one day end up owning the US Coast Guard and the US Customs Service -- which, at the rate the US is borrowing from foreigners to finance its fiscal and current account deficits, is not altogether a theoretical impossibility -- all this Dubai paranoia is poppycock.

The poppycock, however, is paying rich political dividends. Quite aside from the racism involved -- which, as President George W. Bush has suggested, is

one element in the opposition to the Dubai deal -- there is a generalised fear of foreigners squeezing out US corporations and taking over US jobs. The Dubai paranoia, like the suspicion of Chinese-owned oil companies and Indian-owned steel companies -- not to mention the Australian fear of SIA -- are proxies for a growing European and American discomfort with globalisation.

The irony is this discomfort is occurring just as Chinese and Indians, Brazilians and Eastern Europeans are becoming more like Western Europeans and Americans. If protectionism were to rear its ugly head in the West now, the first people to be hurt may not be Asians or Latin Americans, Middle Easterners or Eastern Europeans, but Americans and West Europeans.

Here is why: Emerging economies now account for 40 per cent of global imports, compared to 29 per cent in the 1980s, according to the International Monetary Fund. Chinese demand accounts for a large chunk of that growth, but it is not the only reason for the recent surge in emerging markets' imports. Last year, for instance, Eastern Europe, including Russia, imported 15 per cent more than China did. Even in Asia, China's share of imports, though growing rapidly, accounted for only 30 per cent of the US\$2.1 trillion that developing Asia imported last year.

As the Wall Street Journal's Frederick Kempe noted recently, these figures indicate "globalisation's new era" has begun.

The first stage began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and German unification in 1990. That was followed by Eastern Europe opening for business, Latin Amer-

ica embarking on privatisation, India emerging from its 1991 financial crisis and China gaining traction after its 1980s opening.

The second decade of globalisation is characterised by the maturing of places like China, India and Eastern Europe and their integration into the global economy. The Shanghai factory worker and the Bratislava machinist have increased their earnings and want to buy.

Just as when Chinese workers want to buy Donna Karan perfume and Tommy Hilfinger jackets, Washington wants to slap 27.5 per cent tariffs on Chinese exports to the United States, as some Congressmen propose? Just as when Indians are beginning to buy Gucci shoes and Louis Vuitton bags, and New Delhi is proposing to open up its services sector to foreign companies, the European Union wants to restrict the liberalisation of its own services sector, as the European Parliament did last week?

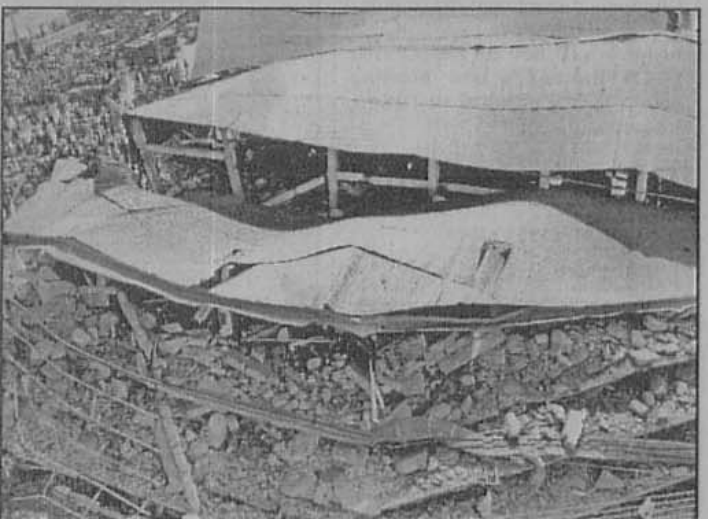
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That engine can indeed sputter, if not die altogether, if protectionist pressures grow in the US and Europe. But the US engine will stall as a result, the European one never start, and the global financial readjustment postponed indefinitely.

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