

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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DHAKA SATURDAY NOVEMBER 28, 2020, AGRAHAYAN 13, 1427 BS

The loss of a legend

Galileo, you will be missed

IN the early hours of yesterday, we lost Aly Zaker, an extraordinary actor, valiant freedom fighter, progressive cultural activist, successful businessman, long time columnist of *The Daily Star* and an icon of Bangladeshi arts and entertainment. After battling cancer for the last four years, the thespian was admitted to the hospital on November 17 for cardiac issues, where he was also being treated for Covid-19 at the time of his demise. We mourn the death of the maestro whose loss will be felt not just by his family and friends but by the nation at large, though he will no doubt live on in people's memories and the vast and diverse body of work he leaves behind.

Aly Zaker mesmerised audiences for almost five decades with numerous memorable performances, from Nurulddin to Galileo, from Dr Asgor to Farid mama, and his remarkable skills, magnetic presence and boundless charisma lit up not just the stage but the small screen and silver screen as well. His troupe, Nagorik Natya Shampraday, was an integral part of developing Bangladesh theatre post-Liberation and brought in a whole new generation of actors on to the stage. He believed in the power of theatre as a tool to challenge oppression and bigotry, and many of the memorable plays he acted in and directed highlighted important social and political issues of the times. For his contribution to Bangladesh theatre, he was awarded with the state award of Ekushey Padak in 1999.

His unflinching belief in a brighter future for Bangladesh was reflected in his insightful columns for this newspaper, many of which focused on how to build the nation through innovative thinking, especially among the youth. While deeply submerged in the world of literature and theatre in which he was regarded a mentor and an icon, he was also very much in touch with contemporary thinking regarding the development of the country. He was a true Renaissance man—not only did he excel at everything he did but he did them with the utmost conviction.

As a freedom fighter and founding trustee of the Liberation War Museum, he also played a really important role in preserving Liberation War history. He always said with great pride that he was honoured to be a part of a fully people-funded museum which upheld the pro-people values of 1971. He believed in a secular, liberal Bangladesh and he was at the forefront of cultural movements that promoted tolerance, equality and democracy. We can only hope that his legacy will guide us towards a future that is every bit as egalitarian and secular as he had dreamt of.

Blatant disregard for workers' safety

When will workers' lives matter?

A photo published in this paper on November 26 of two men working on a high-rise building without any safety gear or protective measures depicts the vulnerability, precarity and disposability of our construction workers. Only last month, three construction workers met their demise falling from a 10-storey under-construction building in the capital. On November 2, a construction worker died after falling from the sixth floor of an eight-storey under-construction building. But no one—not the errant employers, contractors, building owners nor the relevant government agencies—are ever held to account for these unwarranted and unacceptable deaths.

Despite the construction sector playing a major role in our economic development, we are still lagging behind miserably in creating safe workplaces for our construction workers. Many a time, we have brought the issue of safety of construction workers to the attention of the authorities concerned, but to no avail, and there continues to be a lack of significant measures to ensure the occupational safety and compensation for workplace injuries, namely in the construction sector. According to Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), at least 131 construction workers died in 2019.

The construction workers—one of the worst hit by the pandemic, as they hardly get any government aid or other assistance—precariouly toil on sites, risking their lives to make ends meet on a daily basis. We simply cannot turn a blind eye to their rights and well-being. The Labour Act, unfortunately, covers only the formal sector and the construction sector, still being an informal one, does not get the necessary attention that has long been due. We need to address their hazardous situation with due diligence and leave no stones unturned to end our apathy towards the safety of construction workers. We urge the authorities to take note of the shortcomings that are putting people's lives at risk, and to address them immediately as there can be no substitute to ensuring the safety of workers first.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Air pollution on the rise

Without effective measures in place, our country's air is becoming poisonous day by day. When the quality of the air becomes poor, the chances of suffering from respiratory diseases and infections are significantly higher. Even more so during the ongoing pandemic, when people are more prone to such sufferings.

Brick kilns, exhaust fumes from vehicles and dust from construction sites are some of the main causes behind the deterioration of the quality of air that we breathe. I urge the concerned authorities to look into the matter with urgency. We have lost many to the pandemic already. We simply cannot afford to continue losing more because of reasons that can be brought under control if we remain diligent.

Sadia Afrin, Chattogram



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

ON a day like this, 33 years ago, I became a man. To be precise, on November 28, 1987 at 12:10 pm in the emergency ward of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), I became a man. On that day, I changed my phrasal verb status from "growing old" to "growing up". Just ten minutes before that the Indian opening batsman Dilip Vengsarkar had hit a century in a test match against Pakistan, receiving a standing ovation from the TV audience full of doctors at the DMCH canteen. Ten hours earlier, I was memorising the question bank for the forthcoming medical college test, while my mother was attending to my father's pain. He was on the fourth stage of his cancer, undergoing chemotherapy. Three more bottles to go, as prescribed by his doctors from Nanavati Hospital in Mumbai. The doctors in India had tried to arrest the tumour of "half the size of a cricket ball" that grew in his pancreas with radiotherapy, and told us to mentally prepare for the eventuality with a predicted life inning of seven to eight years. I wanted to make my father proud by joining a profession that would save the lives of many others. He himself had been ill-fortunate to suffer not only from the malignant growth in his personal body but also from the dangerous growth in our social body that lacks empathy.

Just two weeks earlier, on November 10, 1987, one of the most known pro-democracy martyrs Noor Hossain was shot dead at a place near DMCH. There was a countrywide curfew to arrest the spread of political violence. While Bangladesh was battling against a cancerous dictator, my father was engaged in his personal battle. The doctor in Mumbai was surprised that his counterpart in Dhaka did not remove the tumour when he had the chance to do so while operating on my father for his gallbladder stones. A very renowned surgeon of Bangladesh saw the tumour, touched it with his knife expediting its spread—but did not remove it as it was not part of his "treatment package". During a post-operative session, while handing us a bundle of black stones wrapped in surgical gauze, the surgeon suggested that

we should take him to India for further check-up if we could afford it.

And the doctors at Nanavati screamed, "Is he a real doctor or what? How can you open a body, touch a tumour and not remove it? He has simply limited our option." First ray, then chemicals. So, on that fatal morning, following a series of other complications over the next six months, my father had his intestinal obstruction. My mother woke me up early in the morning stating his discomfort. I went to the oncologist's house through

There was no monitor or anything—just the stethoscopes of some intern doctors hovering around "a man" who would soon become "a body" with no BP. I did not cry. I kept on staring at the man who said, why did you bring such a silly case? Meanwhile, there was a guy whispering in my ears, "please buy the shroud and coffin from me. I will give you discounts."

To cut a long story short, I did not become a doctor. That was the last day I stopped learning the names of the chemical components of human cells or



ILLUSTRATION: LUKE BEST

the alleys amid curfew; he told me to take my father to DMCH for an enema. And my younger brother, who was 15 at that time, ran to the Rajarbagh barrack, with police guns being pointed at him during a shoot-to-kill curfew, to get an ambulance. And when we took my father to the DMCH, the intern doctors chided us saying, "Do you really need to bring a silly enema patient during this emergency?" Then the only senior doctor started getting busy demonstrating the CT scan plates of my father to the juniors which was an unknown technology in Bangladesh in 1987.

After a while my uncle took me to the canteen, while the ward boys started preparing him for the enema. The doctors in their white aprons celebrating sports in such close proximity to death made me aware of the greatest paradox of life, and of death too. By the time we returned to the ward, it occurred to me that my father was in the process of breathing his last.

labelling the parts of human bodies. You can call me a quitter. But on that day, I realised how helpless the doctors were in the grand of scheme of things. I also realised how inhuman the system could be. For most of us, we find comfort in raising our hands to the divine almighty thinking that the soul has passed on to a better place. The suffering body has come to an end. We pray for the soul's journey to the next level to shift focus to an earthly journey involving the others who depended on the man who had just died.

I am sorry to bore you with personal details of something "silly" that had happened so long ago. Every day, my Facebook newsfeed is being flooded with such "silly" death news of people or relatives of the people I know or don't know. There is a viral hearse, an endless procession of funeral news during this pandemic. Some touch us like feathers, some hit us like stones. Losing a loved one is never easy. Trying to comfort someone

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Protecting Child Workers During the Pandemic



JINIYA AFROZE

IT is already apparent that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be uneven, with poorer countries bearing the brunt of the fallout. This includes the 1.2 million children in Bangladesh who are engaged in the harshest forms of child labour. In such uncertain times, these children—and millions of others elsewhere—are even more vulnerable to exploitative and hazardous work.

The reason is simple. When major global retail outlets cancelled orders due to lockdown-related cutbacks, the production of low-cost fashion in much of the world came to a standstill, leaving many garment workers in the Global South without an income. Since March, Bangladesh's exports of leather goods have declined by 22 percent. The country's footwear-manufacturing industry, the world's eighth largest, has also been affected, with exports down by 50 percent since the pandemic began.

With leather-goods producers facing cancelled orders and restrictions to slow the transmission of COVID-19, the unregulated informal sector has become much more competitive, with factory owners targeting children as cheap labour. In the informal leather sector, children often work long hours for little or no pay, frequently doing work that is physically and psychologically harmful and dangerous during the production process. But despite the risks, most children rely on such employment to support themselves and their families.

Now, tanneries are slowly resuming production, and raw materials are being channelled to factories filling new international orders, leading to a relative scarcity of materials for domestic production. This creates another opening for leather producers in the unregulated informal sector. Their ability to step in to meet domestic demand depends on the further exploitation of children.

Bangladesh does have laws and policies to address hazardous and exploitative child labour. But policy gaps exist—the Bangladesh Labor Act, for example, does not cover the informal sector.

Here, international brands and corporations have an opportunity to help. Global retail outlets must recognize not only the immediate financial impact of cancelling orders, but also the unintended consequences for both the formal and informal sectors.

This means approaching the problem holistically, with established brands and their customers being well informed about where, how, and by whom goods are produced. Brands need to take responsibility for ensuring ethical behaviour throughout their supply chain. Stricter monitoring is necessary to guarantee that all suppliers, international and local, meet the same standards in terms of labour codes and working conditions. And a transparent system is needed for tracking the sources of raw

in harmful and hazardous conditions. Responsible brands could also implement the "positive deviance" approach, publicly sharing their ethical business strategies and practices, which may encourage other brands to investigate their own practices in turn.

Furthermore, relevant government agencies, civil-society groups, and private-sector organisations must focus on enforcing existing policies and protecting children's rights. Both international and local brands need to be

the COVID-19 pandemic, when they are more likely to be subjected to hazardous conditions. Learning from them about their experiences at all stages of the production process can be pivotal in improving their well-being.

The pandemic has exposed the intricacies of global supply chains and the vulnerability of the people working within them. Even in normal times, children are vulnerable to exploitation by unregulated, informal firms, which will pick up business where other firms



Bangladeshi child labourers wash their hands before lunch at an aluminium pot factory in Dhaka on October 21, 2014. More than 6.3 million children under the age of 14 are working in Bangladesh, according to a UNICEF report on child labour.

AFP PHOTO / MUNIR UZ ZAMAN

materials and ensuring that children are not used in bonded labour or working in hazardous conditions.

While plenty of initiatives to protect child workers have been undertaken in recent decades, they often fall short. Tracking the long supply chain is difficult, so a culture of violence at its origin persists, sustained by structural inequalities that constant global demand for cheap products embeds in the production process.

Having to comply with a monitoring regime would prevent suppliers from subcontracting their work to informal, often unregulated companies in which workers, including many children, labour

held accountable regarding their duty to care for children. All businesses should adhere to a minimum-age requirement, maintain standard working hours, and guarantee safe workplace conditions. To ensure compliance, businesses employing children must have a multi-stakeholder consultation system in place, including representatives from the government, civil society, human-rights organizations, and academia, as well as social workers.

Finally, to protect children from harmful work and modern slavery in industries like leather goods requires listening to children themselves. Children are rarely involved in workplace decision-making, especially during shocks like

cannot. But now this risk is greater than ever.

Understanding global supply chains and the impact of sudden changes on the vulnerable people who form their links is crucial. Advocates and policymakers must devise and implement robust accountability systems to uphold the rights of the millions of children—in Bangladesh and globally—who must work.

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