

Campus Violence: Begum Zia's Acid Test

by Brig Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd)

Thwarting the Traffickers

Early this week a cloak-and-dagger chase ended in a most dramatic and painful result. The venue of the chase could beat any that occur in western thrillers — the mighty Meghna. And what did it lead to? That also can easily be a world-beater. Sonargaon police had quite a job in getting a giant-sized country-boat to stop — for the vessel was engine-driven — and boarding it. It was all innocuous inside although both the ends of the canopied area were hidden from outside view by layers of jute hessian. About 30 adults were squatting on the boards and there were 15 young women besides. Suspicious enough in these days of trafficking in men and women. Once some boards were pulled from the floor — a harrowing scene hit the prying eyes of the police. Beneath the boards lay 29 children.

From then on the premises of the Sonargaon thana is serving as a place of concourse for people from even far-flung districts — all come in search of their lost or kidnapped children—mostly female. The thana spectacle points straight to a most tragic aspect of our socio-economic failure. It does so in such a grotesque and vivid manner that only morons and hearts steeled by Nazi concentration camps can afford not to react to it, not to know in the depth of their soul the meaning of it all.

Trafficking in men, women and children has been going on for years and on a very broad scale. The news reports that pop up every now and then of police intercepting bands of victims are but, very obviously, the tip of an iceberg that is eluding comprehension in the absence of any spelt-out detailed government programme to size up the problem in order to engage it successfully. The nagging frequency of such reports, instead of invoking a sense of outrage giving birth to social protest, has rather been blunting the sensibilities of the literate few — and they, with the rest of the inert majority of helpless and ignorant masses in tow, seem to have taken this in their stride. Not one denunciation of the most degrading mass-scale crime that now rides our society has been heard from any quarter. Society, it seems, has condemned the matter to be exclusively the preserve of the police — averting its eyes most shamefully from this grossest violation of human rights, violation of the individual's dignity and liberty and the sanctity of the family. To be able to be impervious to such a degree to one's own undoing, the society must be terribly diseased.

Ganged up criminals are on an overdrive spreading their people-catching nets. Up to hauling these thugs and punishing them the police role may be instrumental. But the criminals are only playing on the vulnerability of the innocent and impoverished people. It is obviously true that government hasn't been overly committed to uprooting these trafficking gangs. But it is more importantly true that nothing has been done to see that people do not despair to the point of jumping into an unknown bottomless pit or, for quite some specially young woman, plainly selling themselves into slavery and the human race's worst degradation.

Let us face the truth plainly. For a multitude of people Bangladesh is no more liveable. The situation is so bad for them that anything is better than their present state. That anything includes 'cultural impossibles' of women from farming families of, say, conservative Comilla, walking the unknown and unfriendly streets of, say, Karachi. Social conscience must be lashed into waking up to such realities. Migrations from this over-populous fertile delta have been continuing for ages — and the whole of the eastern quarter of the sub-continent is a living proof of that. But never before have men and women been so gullible to false promises of job etc as they are now.

That is the big question that must be addressed properly by government and society. But before the big task is undertaken, two concrete things await quick action. One is stopping fully and for good kidnappings leading to trafficking. This is possible by executive efficiency alone. Let us see it done. Two, the intercepted bands of innocent victims must be helped into effective rehabilitation.

Raw Deal for Importers

The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) argues that high tariff on imported raw materials is going to bring the local industries to a grinding halt. To back up its argument, the FBCCI has published a detailed list of 33 items in the case of which abnormal distortion in the tariff structures has taken place. Aluminium hydro-oxide is what tops the list. In its case, the increase in tariff value is as high as 617.39 per cent per metric ton. The tariff value increase on the top ten raw materials is no less than 100 per cent. The FBCCI fears the 'unrealistic' tariff value of industrial raw materials will deal a mortal blow to the local industries.

It appears that the FBCCI has a point. Raw materials for industries not available locally, like any other imported commodities, must have their tariff values fixed for the simple reason that it harmonises the price structure of commodities and also contributes to their being rationally competitive. Over-invoicing and under-invoicing are practices businessmen resort to in the hope of making more profits. To avoid such illegal practices and also cheating, the government discreetly uses this method. The question of protecting local industries does not necessarily go out of sight. When the tariff is raised to an astronomical height, the question of protection simply does not arise.

We are not sure if the government has carefully looked into the matter before fixing the tariff values at the level the FBCCI has shown on its list. The fact is that the National Board of Revenue (NBR) and even the finance minister assured that if distortions in the tariff structures took place, there were still room for reviewing the same. Since involved in it is the interests of the country, the issue deserves a thorough analysis for arriving at a decision. What we understand is that fixing tariff values abnormally high, the productive units are placed at a more disadvantaged position rendering them non-competitive.

The scenario that naturally emerges from the haze is most disturbing — a scenario where the production costs of items go up several times opening the floodgates of smuggled goods from across the border. Neither of the prospects are good for the country. Its negative impacts on the whole industrial sector can prove disastrous. It is not even a question of protection but a fair deal in which the importers of raw materials can import at competitive prices and meet their needs accordingly.

A result of long struggle and sacrifice of the people, a democratic government is now installed in the country. No one expects that this government has a magic wand to solve all our problems overnight. But what our people do expect and what the government is capable of doing is to free the universities from the state of siege, by armed terrorists, to stamp out violence, stop bloodshed, armed clashes from the students.

Due to campus violence, our youth is being deprived of higher education. And with our youth uneducated, ignorant, prone to violence and gangsterism and factional feuds, the nation stands crippled. We often hear our political leaders say 'Party is more important than personalities. Country is more important than political parties.' But have they really been able to rise above their petty personal and party interests? Our experience says they have not. Between power and country which is more important? Shall amassing vast wealth and building fortunes at any cost be the all-end-all of my life? Or shall I prefer to earn an honest living and raise my children as honest and conscientious men and women with character and integrity to serve the country and humanity? It is about time our political leaders answered these questions not by words but by deeds. Given political will and commitment and given that party is above personality and country is above party, it is perfectly possible to root out violence and terrorism.

Our students community

THE black and white photograph shows a woman huddled inside her coat. It doesn't say which country she is from, but it doesn't matter. She could be from Mozambique, Colombia or Somalia. She could live in Latin America or Europe.

Now she is on the back of the United Nations Refugee magazine, above the words: 'In some ways, becoming a refugee makes life desperately simple... No home, no work, no decisions to take today. And none to take tomorrow. Or the next day.'

Since the end of the Cold War, the problem of global migration has been attracting more and more of the world's attention. Photographs of refugees from Yugoslavia covered the front pages of international newspapers, while television cameras followed Kurdish people fleeing Iraq.

The number of people forced to move from their homes continues to grow. The world now contains 17 million refugees and an estimated 30 million more still trapped inside their country. But the numbers do not completely explain the media attention.

Ian Linden, General Secretary of the Catholic Institute for International Relations in London, which recently brought together people from various backgrounds to discuss the causes and effects of forced migration, believes industrialised nations are only now discovering what poor countries have recognised as a worldwide crisis for years.

The plight of the Kurds, for example, has been something that has been fairly prevalent for years, but when we get in a war with Iraq we discover it.

'This is one of the characteristics of a world in which the economically and militarily powerful define reality.'

As the North is forced to become more familiar with the issue of refugees, the opportunity for misunderstandings will

Let us not forget that without educated, honest and talented men and women, nothing worthwhile can be done for the people. Funds would only be wasted in the name of development and education. National wealth would be plundered by corrupt and unscrupulous people whose evil influence can be felt in national economy, trade and commerce, in the society and even in national politics.

has a glorious history; one to be proud of. Whenever the nation faced a crisis, they came and stood by the people. Our language movement, peoples uprising against the Ayub regime in 1969, our glorious war of liberation in 1971 and the anti-autocracy movement of the people in the recent past bear eloquent testimony of the bravery and patriotism and fervour of our youth. But the barbaric, violence and terrorism perpetrated by a section of students on the university campus has put a slur on the students community and youth as a whole. This is seemingly because of our national politics being heavily dependent on the support of students rather than the masses. This process of national politics was set in motion by the notorious martial law regime of Ayub Khan. Having no political clout he found it easy to win over students rather than the people to support his political band wagon. Government intelligence services were covertly used to recruit students and supply them with money and arms. This game became popular in successive dictatorial regimes and has led the country to a cul-de-sac. It is time we stopped this game in the interest of our youth and our country.

One wonders why Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Education Minister Zamiruddin

Sarkar, Home Minister Matin Chowdhury, Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina are so smugly unmoved and indifferent towards university campus violence and terrorism? Our youth trapped as it is in the quagmire of party politics at the behest of some power hungry politicians and engaged in violent armed clashes and factional feuds is systematically being decimated. Our political leaders are silently watching the spectacle as if they have nothing to do. We hear our leaders talk of 'politics of production' and 'development'. But how can there be development and production in a country where universities remain closed for months after months because of acts of violence and terrorism by armed students, where we hand over arms and explosives instead of books to our students, where students cannot attend classes regularly and examinations are not held on time?

Let not the government gloat over the fact that highest allocation of funds has been made for education in the budget for the first time. Highest allocation of funds does not necessarily mean spread of education and progress in literacy drive. Nor will it help produce men and women of talent, with character and integrity if we fail to free the

universities from the clutches of armed hoodlums and create peaceful conditions for resumption of classes and normal academic activities. Let us not forget that without educated, honest and talented men and women, nothing worthwhile can be done for the people. Funds would only be wasted in the name of development and education. National wealth would be plundered by corrupt and unscrupulous people whose evil influence can be felt in national economy, trade and commerce, in the society and even in national politics. This is how social degeneration sets in and values erode. This is the lesson both history and experience have taught us.

During the last anti-autocracy opposition movement, Begum Khaleda Zia built up her image as an uncompromising leader in matters of principle which largely helped her rise from the position of a house wife to that of a national leader and ultimately become the first woman prime minister of the country. People want to see the same uncompromising image of Begum Zia in launching a crusade against armed terrorists and criminals who are free to occupy the university campus and take law in their own hands whenever they wish to do so. Time is running out. Our students have already lost valuable years of their aca-

demtic life. The nation has lost many a promising life. This Frankenstein of violence and terror is out not only to terminate its creators but to destroy the whole nation. Hence the supreme need to mount an assault against the terrorist forces and flush them out of all the universities no matter which party or parties support them and which party they may belong to. Elected government must rise to the occasion and pick up the gauntlet thrown by the terrorists.

Once the terrorists are eliminated, the universities will begin to function as they do in civilized countries. Our children will go back to classes; all examinations would be held on time; the standard of our education would rise again; our bright and talented students would once again make their marks at home and abroad; our country will move towards progress and we shall emerge in the world as a progressive self-reliant vibrant nation; and our posterity would remember us with pride and gratitude. These are the expectations of the people. The people would support whatever extreme measures the government may resort to in fighting this monster of campus violence provided that: (a) The Anti-Campus terrorism operation must be impartial and free from any political

party influence. (b) There shall be no unjust harassment of any member or supporter of any political party. (c) The university authorities, the Police and the Judicial system must be allowed to discharge their responsibilities independently and impartially. In matters of police investigation and the conduct of trial there shall be no interference from any quarter government or political. (d) Real and genuine offenders — terrorists, murderers, law breakers, criminals, abettors of crime and others — irrespective of any political party affiliation or any other identity must be brought to book as per existing law of land.

For the present government and Begum Khaleda Zia, to combat campus violence and terrorism will be an acid test.

An opportunity has come to prove whether country is above party. My children will study abroad and receive higher education there, while the children of poor people will be deprived of university education and will end up as armed terrorists, drug addicts and common law breakers. No.

This situation must change. If the government of Begum Khaleda Zia succeeds in eliminating terrorism and violence making it possible for our boys and girls to return to classes and pursue their studies for attaining higher education, it will be a great victory of the people. The nation will come out of the darkness. We will have pulled the biggest chestnuts out of the fire. For Begum Khaleda Zia, this will be another milestone of success in her political career.

Alf Dubs, director of the British Refugee Council, says: 'I found it alarming when government officials have said that to have good race relations we have to keep down the number of asylum seekers. I don't like the idea that we play the numbers game (where) a few are okay, but more than that and Britain will sink into the sea from the burden. Both Dubs and Ian Linden criticise tabloid reaction to a recent asylum bill in Britain. "You can't have impartial justice in a climate in which the mass media is whipping up racism," says Linden. "You can't have racism at the point of entry and not have racism in the society."

Linden speaks of a personal experience less than a month ago, coming through the gates at Heathrow airport.

'A young immigration officer asked a younger woman, who looked as if she might be a trainee: "What plane were those folks on?" And the woman looked back at him, not understanding. And he said: "You know, what plane were the Taiwanese on?"

'One asks oneself if people are talking like that in public, what are their attitudes in private?'

Linden laments that as the world moves towards a continuing breakdown of nation — states, the "interactive vision of human history" may be lost.

'It's clear that the entire history of the United States or Canada is the product of the interactions of a whole range of people coming together to form a state,' he says.

'I think most people would see human history — in fact one of the dynamos of human history — as being that kind of interaction from different backgrounds.'

— GEMINI NEWS

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When the Poor Take in the Poor ...

by Stefani Langenegger

Attitudes on refugees differ between North and South. While the industrialised countries continue to cut back on the number of people granted refugee status, many developing countries are home to millions of refugees. Gemini News Service reports on the contrasting perspectives on the world's 17 million refugees whose lives have been disrupted by poverty, famine and civil wars.



There are 17 million refugees in the world

be high. Linden says that at several meetings recently he has noticed a growing divide between people from the North and those from the South. People from the North emphasise political and civil liberties, as human rights, while people from the South refuse to narrow the definition for fear it might exclude more basic rights.

'People from developing countries emphasise social, economic and cultural rights,' he says; 'the right to food, the right to health and so on — the very, very basic human rights that are denied to people in many countries in Africa for example, because there are millions of people starving.'

The different perspectives of North and South often result in different expectations for countries that have committed human rights violations. Often one of the noblest achievements, in the eyes of Western governments, is a developing country's struggle for democracy. But for refugee workers like Amanda Romero Medina, from Colombia, the pursuit of an ideal political system often clouds the more basic problems in a country.

'You cannot say that you need freedom and then you will have development,' she says. 'We cannot be free when we are hungry. We cannot be free when we are thirsty. After all, we have voted for many years in my country — that is not the problem.'

Linden agrees: 'It's too easy to say that a movement towards democracy is a move towards the end of human rights violations. I think it's easy to be blinded when we see people put ballots into ballot boxes. He offers the example of South Africa where, despite a move towards democracy, there has been an increase in human rights violations. One of the biggest differences between North and South is in their willingness to accept refugees. Many developing countries, which are least able to look after more poor people, harbour a staggeringly disproportionate number of the world's refugees. France, with a population of about 90 million people, is home to almost 200,000 refugees. Iran, with a population two-thirds that of France, has almost three million. Even with their relatively small numbers of refugees, and in the face of increased demand for asylum, European countries continue to cut back on the number of people given refugee status. The number of refugees seeking to enter Europe rose from 13,000 in 1972 to 420,000 in 1990. One in every three was given asylum between 1983 and 1987, with a further 20 per cent allowed to stay on humanitarian grounds. More than half were rejected. Those refugees who do make it to Europe or North America are often greeted with hostility.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Democratic Forum

Sir, May I refer to the brilliant column under the above caption of Mr. S. M. Ali published in your daily of 18th June. The greatest appeal of the column is perhaps the spirit of patriotism in which the columnist delineated with classical insight the Bangladesh political scenario and his passion for success of nascent parliamentary democracy under a strong two-party system. We join him in wishing goodspeed to the Forum. We would, however, not mind even if it would prove eventually a 'third force' in our political firmament.

If a political prodigy is also an intellectual giant, his balance of mind tilts perhaps more in favour of politics than intellectualism. In other words, political passion is generally so overwhelming that it sometimes gets the better of intellectual passion. Besides,

the history of democracy shows that the two-party system is perhaps the final stage of its evolution. So why should we be shy of even if the Forum emerges finally as a real third force in Bangladesh political stage at this time of our political evolution?

In strict sense, therefore, the Forum may lack in generation of new ideas, new styles, new approaches etc. through interaction with others so ardently envisioned in the column. Perhaps the greatest source of new ideas, new angle of vision etc. is the interviews with eminent personalities conducted by Mr. S. M. Ali with so much of scholarship from time to time and published in your esteemed daily. May we, however, suggest that to bring out the absolute truth at least three celebrities — one politician, one professional, one practitioner should be invited round the table for interview to bring to light all the

The last emperor recreated?

Sir, Neighbour India has requested Bangladesh to stop 'propaganda' against her. This diplomatic reaction of South Asian power resenting her implication in the recent mob attack on Chinese chancery in Bangladesh may help detect the root of the rot.

Generically, such a turmoil is what could otherwise be a savage act of ancient times. The event in any case is a cautionary signal to all foreign establishments in Bangladesh as can be a reason for Bangladesh properties abroad to apprehend repercussions.

However, on the basis of protocol investigation, evaluation, and adjustment, specifically considering diplomatic immunity, they would settle the matter and faster the better.

As far as alleged propaganda over the storming of Chinese Embassy is concerned, Indo-Bangla dialogue or a tripartite approach to the confusion, if indispensable, can restore cordiality between these SAARC states along with regained Sino-Bangla amity.

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Private university

Sir, A motion is on in the parliament to establish legal procedures for setting up private universities in the country. Instances are put on and on from the West justifying the substantiveness of such an idea. In this regard, the following deserve consideration:

Only one-fourth of the total population of Bangladesh are literate. Out of them, a microscopic minority have access to higher education. Higher education is now provided in several universities. The present set up there facilitates the poor and middle-class people to send their wards for higher education to those universities. For instance, in Dhaka University, the overwhelming majority of the students come from villages where their par-

ents are not well-off enough to send their wards abroad for higher education. These students stay in the student dormitories where, so to say, no money is required. Other academic fees in Dhaka University have also been very cheap. Had academic expenditures in Dhaka University as well as in other existing universities been very high, higher education would have gone beyond the reach of the poor and middle-class people.

As far as learnt, the proposed private university's academic expenditures would be exorbitantly higher than the ability of the poor and the middle-class people. It is understood that the rich people who are at present apparently unable or unwilling to send their wards abroad for higher education would find this private university a suitable institution to enroll their wards.

The private university would offer attractive salaries and remunerations to the teachers and so almost all the good teachers of the other universities would leave for private university rendering the existing universities with no more teaching and research grounds.

Due to terrorism, sessions jam, poor educational standard and some other causes the

elite of our society send their wards abroad and so those people with decision-making authorities lose interest to improve the state of the existing universities. And again if a private university is set up, the meagre interest which still they do have in the existing universities would be exhaustively diverted to that private university.

In every step, we tend to follow ad verbatim the developed world forgetting the realities underlying our own soil. In the United States, United Kingdom, each man gets a job regardless of his educational qualification. Our society is replete with unemployment problem. The unemployed youths, who have been pursuing their higher education in the cheap-cost existing universities, for a better future, should not be deprived of this meagre facility. Instead of deliberating on the establishment of high-cost private universities, the honourable Members of Parliament are earnestly requested to deliberate on how to develop the existing universities to retrieve them from the present state of chaos and anarchy.

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