

Dhaka Day by Day

They Help Where Legs Fail

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed

Anybody passing by the 'Pangu Hospital' (hospital for the disabled) in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar seldom fails to notice the row of small crutch shops on the opposite of the hospital. The crudely made wooden crutches and walking frames displayed stand out like a notice board, as if announcing: life is very unpredictable.

The nine shops or rather shacks are pretty much the rudimentary type with a couple of worn-out chairs and tables. The essential materials for making crutches and other contraptions for the injured are stacked on the shelves and scattered everywhere on the floors. For the crutch-makers the shacks are their workshops as well as sales centre. They work there from morning till night.

All the shops offer the same kind of apparatus. It is a very basic but sturdy-looking wooden frame encased with red, blue and green rexin hand supports. The shopkeepers confide that they sell 3-10 pairs of crutches each day, reminding one of the high accident rate of the country. The crutches usually made from Mango or Gamari wood cost about Tk 150 each. While there are some Thai Aluminium ones available at Tk 700-800. Also, displayed at one of the shops was a pair of solid steel crutches. The shopkeepers quickly point out that, it is made in China and costs Tk 1000. However they don't really deal in foreign made stuff as they are too expensive and the demand for them is low.

Among the workers an authoritative, shrewd looking businessman comes forward and talks about their entry into the business. They have been making crutches for almost twelve years. He informs that they were mostly poor rickshaw-pullers and restaurant workers in the beginning. At that time they were frustrated from having to live from hand to mouth. Then they heard of this training centre at Tongi, which rehabilitated the handicapped and the poor of society. It was a turning point in their lives. The renowned American Dr R J Garst virtually himself collected these vagrant, disillusioned people and gave them a new meaning of life. Notably, there are a few disabled workers with them. "We were taught how to make crutches and other vital things like, walking frames, lumber corset, spinal corset, fake legs, pelvic traction, collar traction etc," he exclaims proudly, showing

some of the specimens of their work.

But unfortunately no occupation is free of hassles, say the aggrieved crutch merchants. Firstly, there are the police to keep happy. Confusion? After all as the men state, "It is a government property and the shacks are not authorized. There is the constant fear of being thrown out of the area, hence the 'private pact' with the law enforcing agents. Until now, they have been forced to vacate a couple of times, one of them informs. Incidentally these men hold quite cynical views regarding human nature. "Most people are dishonest, so why take on us?" As for the government, why does not it build for us a permanent shop and provide us with electricity? — the question. At present, they have to make do with batteries, which is not only bothersome but also very costly. They believe that they are doing something worthwhile for the crippled.

To make things worse there are also those self-appointed 'dalals' (agents) always on the lookout for making some easy bucks. Normally the hospital staff, these people direct the patients to their shops and incessantly harass them for a commission. They profess to be the only crutch dealers in the metropolis, even some of the hospital are supplied by them. If they can sell 5-6 pairs each day, they can make a profit of Tk 200-300. Regrettably though, a few 'honourable' physicians of the adjacent hospital make a small fortune out of them.

Despite their occupation, they have just as much as compassion as the next person, they assure us. They claim to have sold crutches at give-away price like Tk 80-90 to the really hard-up. At the moment they are busy making a wheelchair and exhibit an unfinished one dexterously attended by two craftsmen. It will cost about Tk 2000-3000, they say, adding that a similar Indian one would cost no less than Tk 5000. Still people (who can afford) opt for the 'bideshi mal' (foreign item). It is not a wise decision, because if a part breaks it is often irreplaceable and the whole gadget lies useless, they explain, pointing at an Indian wheelchair which will require Tk 900 for its repair.

There is nothing we can't construct if the samples are shown or explicit details given, they announce. One can't help admiring their quiet confidence and simplicity.



Speakers at a workshop titled 'From Cairo to Beijing: Women, Environment and Development' held at city's NEC Auditorium yesterday. From left: Health and Family Welfare Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, State Minister for Planning Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan and Dr Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of UNFPA. — Star photo

Concern over future of democracy in the region

By Staff Correspondent

The Fourth South Asian Regional Dialogue ended Wednesday in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu expressing concern over the state of democratic process in the region and its impact on the people.

Scholars, public figures and opinion leaders from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka — discussed the issues of peace, stability and development of the countries in South Asia during the three-day meeting.

They discussed decentralisation of power, reform of the electoral process, institutionalisation of democracy and human rights, according to information received in Dhaka.

Most of the participants in the Regional Dialogue questioned what would happen if democracy failed in the economically and politically unstable countries in the region.

Comparing with situations in Eastern Europe, they pointed out that short-sighted political and economic reforms in that region had often compelled governments to step down creating insecurity and instability.

The question of accountability of the political leadership

was also discussed at the meeting.

Accountability of the governments now belongs more to the donors, than to the voters, some of the participants observed.

External constituencies are more powerful than domestic constituencies, according to another speaker.

They also proposed a consultative forum in South Asia to share and discuss commonalities, and work together for enhancing cooperation at the people's level.

Organised by the South Asia Centre, Nepal, the meeting was participated by Professor Rehman Sobhan, Dr Meghna Guhathakurta, retired secretary M Munir-uz-Zaman, Barrister Amirul Islam and economist Dr Atiur Rahman from Bangladesh.

Besides, former finance minister of Pakistan Dr Mubashir Hasan, Dr V A Panandiker of India, former finance minister of Nepal, Dr Divendra Raj Pandey and Prof G H Peiris were also among the 20 participants.

The organisers agreed to hold the fifth round of dialogue in Dhaka next year.

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— Fayza

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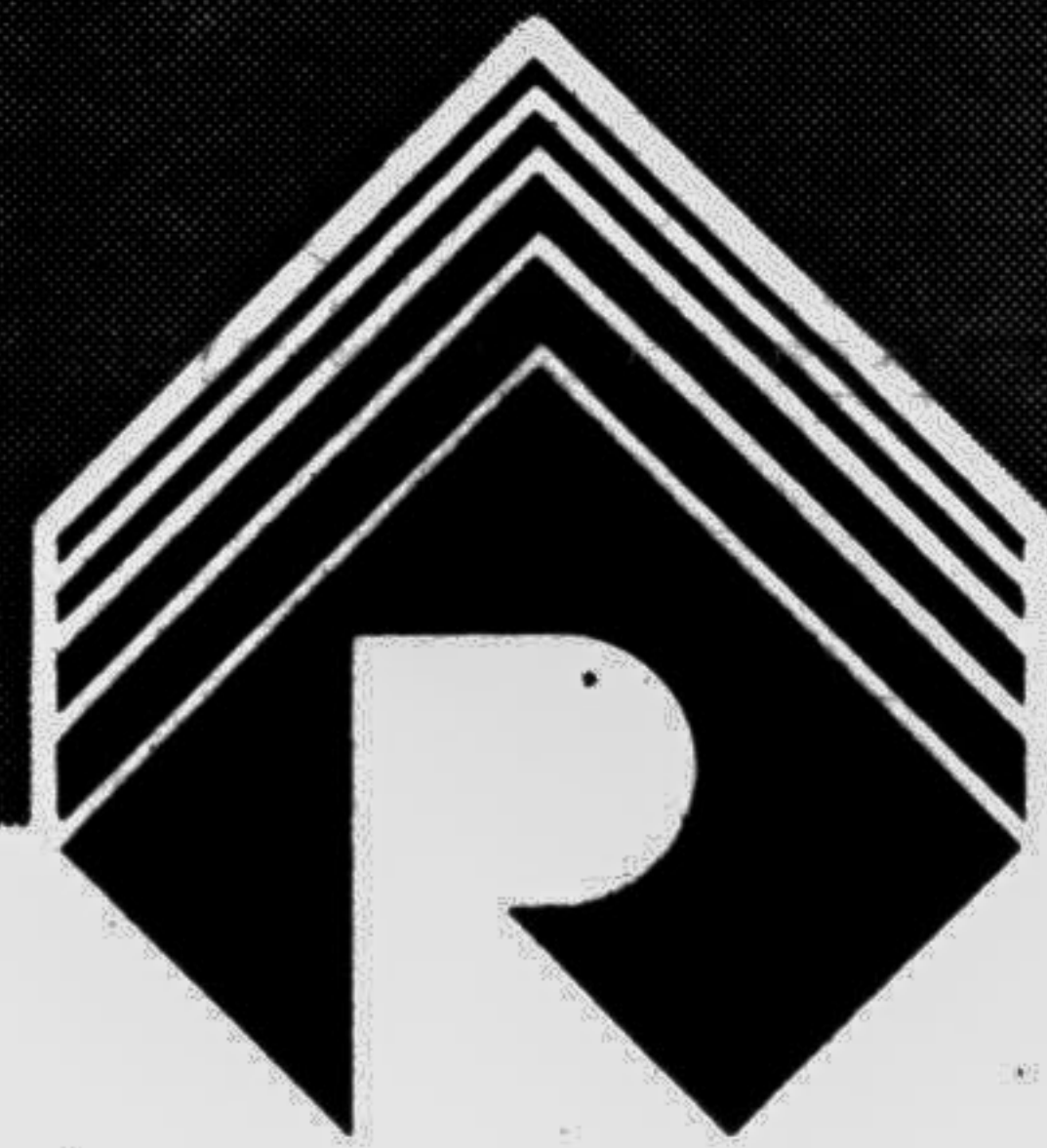
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Shishu Academy honours Rokonzuzaman

Renowned child litterateur Rokonzuzaman Khan, popularly known as Dada Bhai, has been awarded Bangladesh Shishu Academy Literature Award for the Bengali year 1400, reports UNB.

State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Begum Sarwari Rahman formally handed over the award to him at Bangladesh Shishu Academy premises here yesterday.

The accolades include a cheque for Tk 32,000 and a certificate.



Photo-journalist Aftab Ahmed addressing a publication ceremony of his colour photo album, which covers remarkable events from 1952 Language Movement to the country's War of Liberation, at the VIP lounge of Jatiya Press Club yesterday. — Star photo

Failed robbery

By Staff Correspondent

Three youths, disguised as students, entered the flat of a professor on the BUET campus at 9 pm Saturday to commit robbery.

However, their attempt failed when the wife of the professor raised an alarm and people in the area came to their rescue. The three fled immediately.

Professor Dipak Kanti Das told The Daily Star over telephone last night that the three youths pressed the door bell of his flat and when asked about their identities introduced themselves as his students.

"When I opened the door, I found the three chaps carrying daggers which they held against my chest and they pushed me inside the house," he said, adding that they instantly snatched the gold chain he was wearing.

However, Dipak's wife, who was present, rushed to a room, closed the door and started screaming for help. The robbers fled with only the gold chain.

A general diary has been filed with the Kotwali thana in this connection.

6 KCC woman commissioners sworn in

From Our Correspondent

KHULNA, Dec 4: Six female ward commissioners of Khulna City Corporation (KCC) elected on October 11 were sworn in by Mayor Shaikh Tayebur Rahman at a simple ceremony here yesterday.

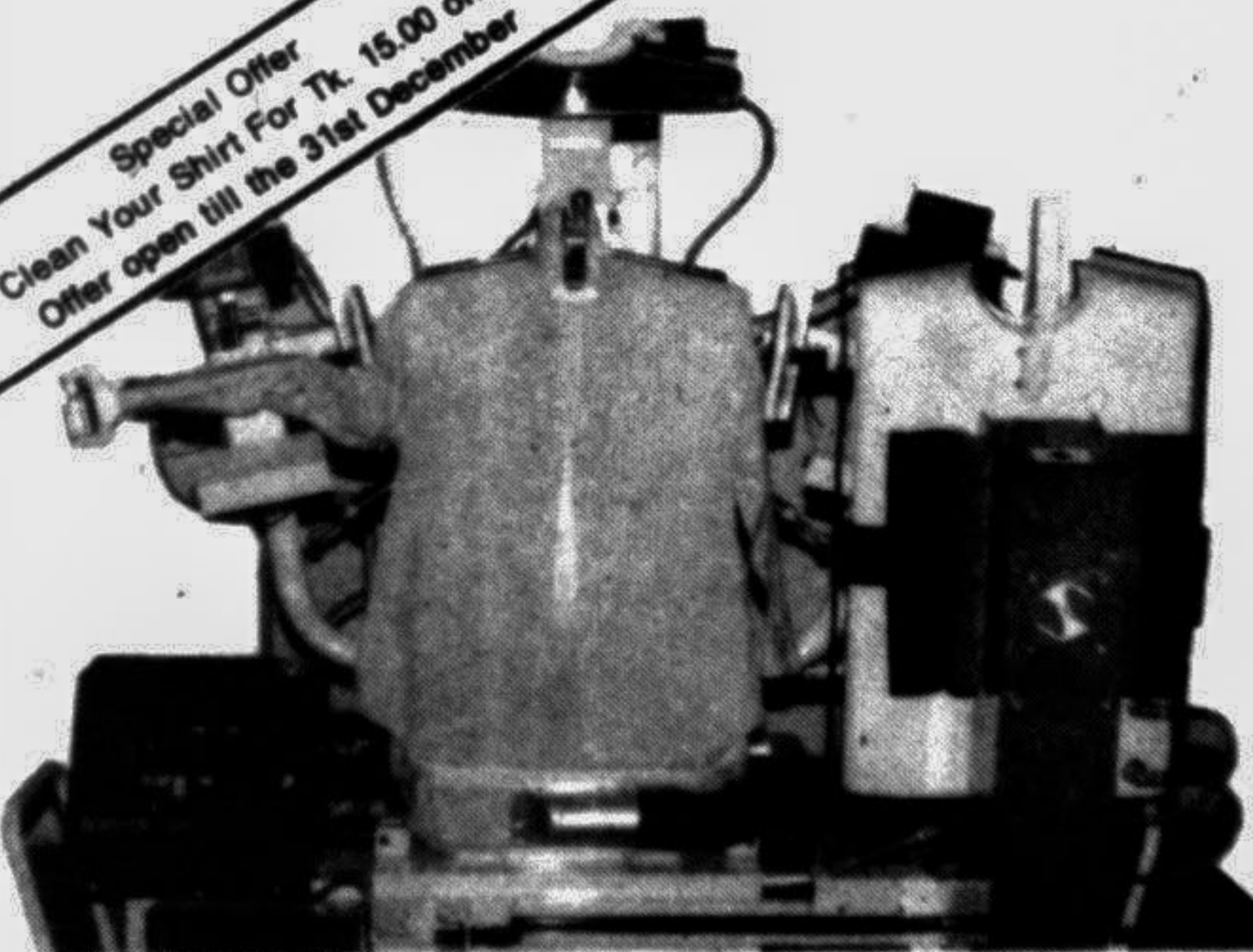
The commissioners are Fatema Chowdhury, Naznin Sultana, Razia Sultana, Maniraj Ashraf, Ruma Khatun and Rozy Rahman.

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S. M. Ali

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— Nasreen

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Dhaka-Bangkok TG 322	Mon/Tue/Wed/Thu/Sat/Sun/	1810	2120

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