

# TEENS and TWENTIES

## The Harkin Bill and Its Effects



Photo Credit Shehzad Noorani

**"10 Years From Now, I Want Child Labour to be Viewed as People See Slavery Today" — Senator Tom Harkin**

It would be almost impossible to write about the current child labour situation in Bangladesh without referring to Tom Harkin of the US Senate. Far from being an upper-class drone, this Senator has introduced a bill to the US Senate which, even before it has been legislated, has triggered a chain of events that has helped to reduce child labour.

Basically, what the "Harkin Bill," as it is so widely known, states is that America shall refuse to import any product that has been manufactured by a child's hands.

It applies to the garment industry, which, by the way, though celebrated, comprises only 5% of the child work force. Around April, 1993, it was to be discovered that factory owners, in order to counter this Bill, were firing all their child labourers, who, instead of going to school, sought work in the informal sector — a relatively worse situation. However, eventually a provision was made for ex-garment factory workers. On the 4th of July, 1995, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between UNICEF, ILO (International Labour Office) and BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association). This MOU states that child labourers, i.e. workers below the age of 14, are to be educated at special schools, and provided with a monthly stipend of Tk 300. This is about half of what a worker would have earned in a garment factory. Also, there are no provisions for any sort of further education or vocational training once a child crosses 14. In the long run, how effective can this be?

BGMEA, when it was interviewed by Josh, Erica & I, said that there are plans, on the

drawing board for an increased stipend.

What about the informal sector, and why has child labour in general been neglected until the mid-90s?

Susan Bissill and Waheed Hassan of UNICEF were interviewed by US (Josh, Erica & I) and had answers to both these questions. "Child labour was always there, but UNICEF was pretty slow in trying to tackle it. The Harkin Bill acted as a catalyst to UNICEF's social productivity." All of a sudden there were all these kids with nowhere to go — the MOU helped them all, and UNICEF was awakened from its relatively dormant state. As for the informal sector UNICEF already started collecting information for projects in the near future.

Is the Harkin Bill just a magnet for voters or does Tom Harkin know what he's talking about?

He was interviewed by Katie, Tori & me in New York. It was done over the phone, and he was much more well informed than I would have thought before. We talked. He referred to instances where child labourers has been upheld, for example when an activist was killed in Pakistan. Even then, there's a limit to what one can learn from books, files and films. In February Senator Harkin is leaving his chauffeur, the grand limousine and his stately mansion to see how The Third Worlders who've turned him into a celebrity really live. He also talked about revising the Bill and putting in something in it to ensure that the child labourers don't get thrown out on the streets just for being kids.

What right does an American Senator have over some children thousands of miles away? Since the USA is in a position to do something about it, I think we should try to improve situations like this and battle things like child labour. There you got it — straight from the Harkin's mouth.

## Hunger is for Those Who Can Afford It

I was about 3 O'clock in the afternoon, and I with attitude sat on the bench at a tea stall at a corner of a road in Dhanmondi, another typical hang-out for unemployed, overbored twenty-somethings and their "younger brothers" who always find it a convenient place to refer to if ever in trouble. It's a pharmacist's alter eight and sometimes a slaughterhouse if a parliamentary puppeteer wishes it.

There, in the eternal hothouse of contemporary Bengali culture, dressed in the perpetual Bongo plaid, and drinking elixir-surrogate tea, I was experiencing diminishing returns in the case of bangla-fives. Even though I was blessed by having nothing better to do than think up a plot for a short story, I was feeling pretty phat, since it had only been a couple of weeks that I'd returned home after a one-week trip to the states.

Now if my father had paid for the tickets, they wouldn't have been business class and I would have allowed people to forget about it if they wished. But I'm a natural megalomaniac, and UNICEF had wanted to send three journalists to the USA to see

the drones making otherwise honey for the third world, and to benefit from working children here and get an attitude boost on their behalf. And this country is in such a wretched state that they couldn't find anyone better than me and a couple of self-assured jerks. So it was a pretty big thing, with my parents proud of me for the first time in a year, my school happy with me for the first time in the decade I've been there.

Aside from that, there's a certain girl I've been trying to impress for a long, long time, and while we're pretty good friends, all my endeavours at lankibaji have failed. She thought pretty highly of the trip (but for those who want to know, she still won't go out with me). And what about my friends? My lifelong pals didn't let it create any difference in our buddyship, but they said they would have if I hadn't brought home any gifts.

Maybe in all this excitement of recent recollection I forgot for a moment what the whole thing was all about. Child Labour. Three teenagers get a free trip because there are hundreds of thousands of others who

never got to properly experience, once in their lives, what their three representatives throw tantrums for, if they don't get it less than three times a day; those who, when they unchain the dogs after a hard struggle on the wolf in the monkey darkness, get bitten themselves. I guess I should be grateful to these kids because they missed out on life as they were standing on Mirpur Road, begging, and life had better things to do and not a taka to spare. Because that's why I went to a really cool place and bought a Sepultura.

### T-shirt. How Fair.

WHILE I was thinking along, a little kid came over to me, it's sex had to tell because the child had on a pair of very old shorts and lots of talismans. He/she was young, about the age at which other children realize that going to school is the labour of kindergarten rather than the fun of nursery. I had cousins of this age who I pampered a lot. This kid could just as well have been one of them, another reason for blowing my monthly allowance over

dolls and ice cream, if she (I noticed the slightly longer hair now) had been born into some other home. What if some careless stork had made a book-keeping error and this child a result of unaccounted for accounting? Some money "Please, bhaiya, give me that I can buy some food."

I reflected on the fact that most of my little sisters had to be bribed by their parents or coerced into having lunch; I also knew that it was about a quarter past three, the time of day you feel hungriest if you haven't had breakfast — And, since it had been the misery of this child with a million faces that had recently caused me to be paraded around the richest nation on Earth to salivate my opinions on how the planet was being run, I fished in my pocket and found a dirty two-taka note. With it the girl could afford some atheism for the God of hunger.

If any soft-spoken, well-fed, civilized and happy middle-class reader think, that the story will have a happy ending, I'm sorry, because, even though I hated myself for the next fifteen minutes, I told the girl to shove off and ordered another cup of tea.

## We'd Understand Better!

ON the 29th of November, 1996 three journalists from Bangladesh left for New York, along with their American counterparts. The people, mentioned in the list of participants, were all on a sort of research-trip-cum-exchange-

The Daily Star since '94. The Bangladeshi team was made up of people with really diverse tastes. Tori, for example, can commit suicide by jumping off a pile of all her clothes (but she's nice in spite of that). Personally, I think she's a bit stuck



Photo Credit Shehzad Noorani

program, sponsored by UNICEF. They were to look in to the socio-economical problems of child labour from a teenage perspective, and try to see the other side of an ambiguous coin — to go to the United States of America, the richest country in the world, also a land defiled with pre-teen delinquencies and teenage pregnancies. The aim was to focus on child labour. (As a matter of fact, only two child labourers were found, and most of the journalism featured politicians and representatives of corporations whose policies affect the third world).

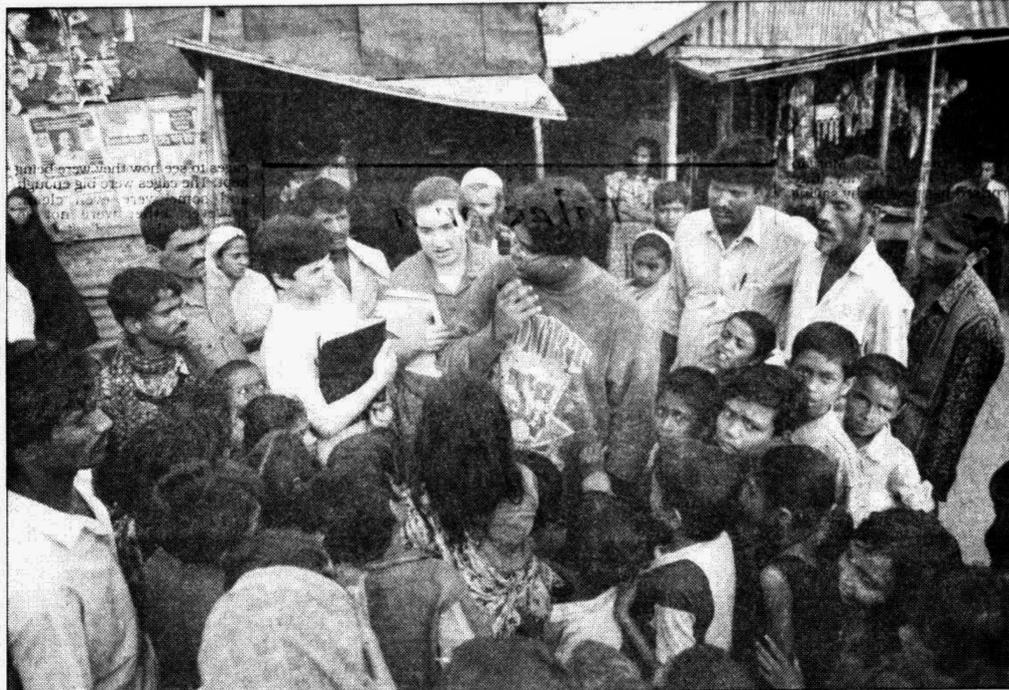
Half a dozen nothing-better-to-do reporters, then, hitched a free ride from a multi-national money-waster. Big deal! Actually it was a big deal, because of a discrepancy which made this program so special and worth the crock of bull I've been feeding you. The reporters were all teenagers of the same ages as the labourers they exchanged opinions with. UNICEF funded the program, judging from this point of views: the problems of children could be understood better by children. They can identify and learn about them in first-hand experiences, and, thinking in this line, we contacted various institutions in Bangladesh and Children's Express in the States.

The selection process was pretty complicated over here. As far as I know, over a dozen or so kids were interviewed before they got chosen. Tori used to work in the Observer and the Independent before coming to The Daily Star. Saikat is supposedly supposed to have founded an organization about children's rights. I've been with

up, and she's going to kill me for writing this comment (if it's not edited), but she's an excellent person with full soul, talent and an empty head. Saikat has an inherently wussy character (personal impression) and is hypocritical enough to be the president of his country if he goes into politics (personal reasons), though. What can I write about myself, the superduper genius poet, writer, journalist, reporter, drummer, metalhead, world leader-to-be i.e. an egotistic "makafol"? To be absolutely honest, I have an attitude problem and am too self-centered. I also happen to be the best all the same!

The selection process in America was different. CE (Children's Express) has, since 1975, been publishing news reports, about issues which affect most kids and lots of adults. The CE is edited by the children themselves. As such it had access to lots of excellent reporters, and the entire American team are members of CE, now (so are we now). Josh is a really quiet person who knows more than he shows, never gets angry, is a bit boring but a truly nice guy. Erica smiles and shops all day long, but when it comes to work I guess she's really efficient and is a lot smarter than she seems. Alia listens to metal and is a streetwise NY kid who I got along well with, since we both have attitude. Katie has attitudes, too, and thinks that the world is five thousand years old.

Thanks to all of them for putting up with me and me on their behalf for putting up with them.



In the first exchange visit of its kind, three American teenage journalists from the Children's Express News Service in the United States (US) and three Bangladeshi counterparts who write for various newspapers and magazines, visited each others' countries (in New York City and Dhaka, respectively) from 30 November to 7 December 1996; to report on child labour. The reporters, from 13 to 17 years old, first met in Dhaka where they held a workshop, then visited and interviewed child labourers, including children attending classes created in a unique Memorandum of Understanding between the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF. The BGMEA agreed to stop employing children under 14 years old and contribute to a stipend for those no longer employed, allowing them to attend informal schools run by national NGOs including BRAC (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), GSS and Phulki.

In New York, the journalists spoke with US Senator Tom Harkin on a proposed Congressional bill governing imports involving child labour, interviewed Department of Labor officials, spokespersons from carpet import companies and the apparel producers Nike and Gap, and gained access to garment factories in the city where they witnessed under-age children working.

Amid a crowd (left-right centre, holding books), Children's Express journalists Josh Kretzman and Erica Bellamy, and Bangladeshi journalist Arafat Kazi Khaled interview children in a poor neighbourhood in Dhaka, the capital.

Photo Credit Shehzad Noorani

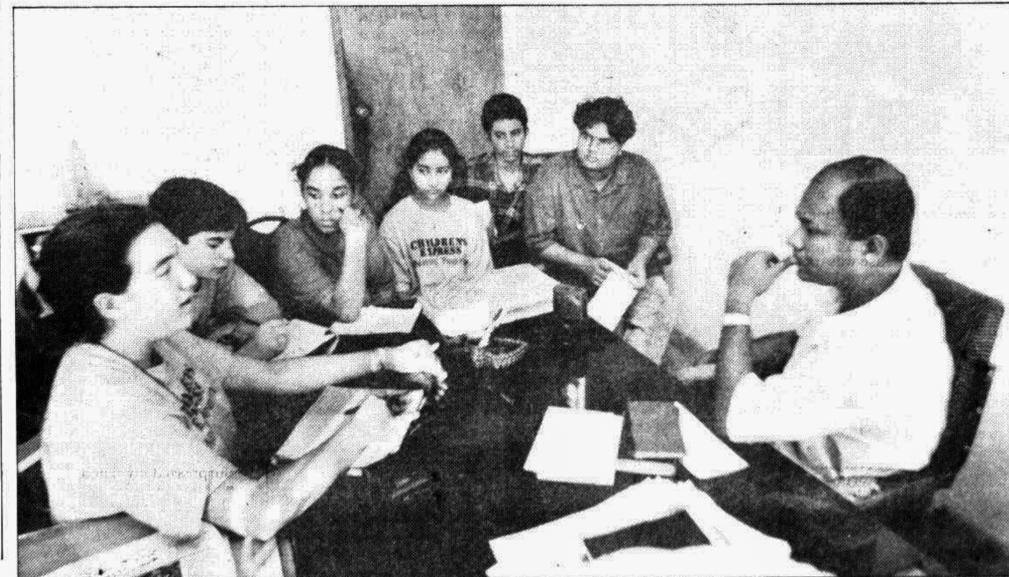


Photo Credit Shehzad Noorani

## Profitable Poverty

by Kazi Khaled Arafat

Having failed to fail in life

I'm miserable contemplating my lack of misery from the point of view that poets write better when their left shoulder angels run out of plutonium ink & order more.

I find myself looking at (here comes the cliches — tarararat-taraaa) those who are about half as old as your shoulder measurements on the shirt you've wearing and who get paid less than your waistline by joining dozens of these numbers for about 13 hours a day.

Their teeth biting the commercial crud for the coin paraders of the Ivory Temple the neo-human fascists with a diashea of dollars to digest

And the others, for whom it would be a matter of capitalist luck to have a life like that which would in fact be less defactory than their current existences.

To HELL With All Exploitative Laissez-Faire Pigs!

To Hell with me: I should thank those pushers of the unrotating wheel, since it's because their life is shit that mise is not.

## List of Participants

### AMERICAN TEAM

Josh Kretzman — 13, from Washington D.C  
Alia Taliaferrow — 17, from New York  
Erica Bellamy — 15, from Indianapolis  
Katie Minkner — 16, also from Indianapolis, was there for the American part of the trip.  
All of them are from "Children's Express," a news service where journalists between the ages of 8 and 18 report and edit. They all go to school.

### BANGLADESHI TEAM

Sayeema T Hassan — 15, O'Level candidate for May '97/Jan '98 from Sunbeams.  
Kazi Omar Khaiyam — 17, passed his HSCs, O'Level candidate for Jan '98.  
Kazi Khaled Arafat — 15, O'Level candidate for May '97/Jan '98 from Sunnydale.  
Tori (Sayeema T Hassan) and Arafat got into the program through The Daily Star.

### OTHERS

Cliff Hahn — Director, Children's Express New York Bureau, in it for the free trip.  
Frank Fournier — Photographer from New York (UNICEF)  
Anna Wright — Organizer for the whole thing (UNICEF)  
Tasmia Bashir — Team Leader, Bangladesh past (UNICEF)  
Seraad Noorani — Photographer (UNICEF)  
Various child labourers we interviewed — Pawys on a capitalist chessboard.

**Kazi K Arafat has been an avid contributor to these supplements, The Rising Stars and the Teens and Twenties, since 1994. He was chosen as one of the three young journalists by UNICEF to make an indepth analysis of child labour. Their research took them to many places, from slums of Dhaka to sky-scrapers of New York city.**