

Combating Trafficking in Women and Children

by Farida Akhter

The declaration of the ninth SAARC summit held in Male, 1997 is very crucial because for the first time, one of the most brutal form of violence which has a regional character is addressed by SAARC leaders. Trafficking in Women and Children is considered as the most heinous trade on human bodies

THE Newspaper headlines on the Ninth SAARC Summit focused on its landmark decision of creating a free trade area in South Asia by the year 2001 to facilitate trade and increase economic linkages between SAARC countries. However, women in South Asia and all those who are working on human rights issues are happy to see the other most important decision on combating trafficking in women and children within the South Asian countries. The SAARC leaders have unanimously agreed to take measures against this heinous form of trade within the South Asian countries.

The declaration of the Ninth SAARC Summit, known as the Male Declaration in the section on Women in Development says: "Expressing grave concern at the trafficking of women and children within and between countries, the Heads of State of Government pledged to coordinate their efforts and take effective measures to address this problem. They decided that existing legislation in Member States should be strengthened and strictly enforced. This should include simplification of repatriation procedures for victims of trafficking. They also decided that the feasibility of establishing of Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution be examined by the relevant Technical Committee."

This is the 27th paragraph of the Male Declaration. Indeed, the grave concern expressed by the SAARC leaders about this particular form of violence against women shows that they have committed themselves in raising the status of women in their respective countries as well as the region as whole.

Since 1985, there have been eight declarations of SAARC summit prior to the Male Declaration in 1997. The SAARC leaders first recognised the needs of the children in 1986 in the Bangalore Declaration. The Declaration called for adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and to review the situation of children in SAARC countries. In the SAARC Summit held in Islamabad, in 1988 declared 1990 as the SAARC year of the Girl Child. The Fifth SAARC Summit was held in Male, Maldives. In this Summit, the member-states enthusiastically responded to their call of declaring 1990 as the SAARC year of the Girl Child. They further decided that in order to maintain

focus on the problems of the Girl Child, the years 1991 - 2000 AD should be observed as the "SAARC Decade of the Girl Child."

The seventh summit held in Dhaka in 1993 (i.e. after eight years of the SAARC summits) was the first SAARC meeting where the Declaration had a separate heading called "Women in Development". It called for gender equality and mainstreaming women in development was the main issue. The issue of Girl Child became the second paragraph under this heading. Since then, the Women in Development remained an important section in the Declarations of the SAARC. But it may be noted that the SAARC declarations expressed concerns about gender disparity and showed sincere efforts for achieving gender equality, but the question of eradication of violence of different forms occurring within the South Asian countries did not arise in a serious way.

It is therefore, in this context, that the declaration of the summit held in Male, 1997 is very crucial because for the first time, one of the most brutal form of violence which has a regional character is addressed by SAARC leaders. Trafficking in Women and Children is considered as the most heinous trade on human bodies especially those of women and children is occurring in most of the SAARC countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The information about Bhutan and Maldives is not yet recorded on this matter. Another complex situation related to trafficking is the nature of trafficking routes involves the South Asian as sending and receiving country. For example, so far Bangladesh and Nepal are seen as the sending countries, whereas, India and Pakistan are the receiving countries. India in addition, has become a transit country for sending the women and children beyond South Asia, i.e. to Middle East, Europe, America etc. Women and children from Sri Lanka are trafficked out different countries beyond South Asia.

Bangladeshi and Nepali women are trafficked to India and Pakistan. India is also used as the transit point to traffick women beyond South Asian countries. Realizing the gravity of the situation the activists group in South Asian countries working on women's and human rights issues have joined together and have undertaken several actions to address the question of trafficking at the national as well as at the regional levels. They have recognised the fact that no single government can handle the problem of trafficking alone and therefore considered the SAARC as a forum for regional action. If the governments of SAARC countries agree to join together against this trade, a lot can be achieved.

October, 1996, a South Asian workshop on "Trafficking in Women & Children: Formulating Strategies for Resistance" was organised by UBINIG, a policy advocacy and research group, in Bangladesh. Participants from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh consisting of lawyers, journalists and social activists discussed the alarming phenomenon in both its global and country specific contexts. It was pointed out that the economic, social, political, religious and cultural conditions had attributed largely to the increase in this phenomenon. Also the entire process of globalisation, modernisation, militarisation and the so-called development models are responsible for the commodification of human bodies. The workshop recognised intercountry trafficking as a multilateral issue, therefore, resolved to build an intensive campaign to place the issue on the agenda of the SAARC summit.

To do this, it was necessary to lobby at the preparatory meeting of the SAARC Foreign Ministers. The Asian Women's Human Rights Council (AWHRC) in collaboration with women's and human rights organisations from India, particularly, Jagori (Delhi), Sanlaap (Calcutta) and UBINIG (Bangladesh) met all the For-

eign Ministers of the SAARC countries during the 17th session of the Council of Ministers meeting held in Delhi between 19 - 20 December 1996. A representation was handed over to the ministers, which stressed that trafficking in persons is an international crime and requires the urgent attention of all governments to recognise and actively take measures to stop the trade. And what is primarily needed to alleviate the problem is the building up of political will among all the countries involved.

In April 1997 some fact-finding missions were conducted by the activists groups of Thailand, Nepal, India and Bangladesh respectively in Thai-Burma border, Nepal-India border and Bangladesh-India border areas. The reports of the fact-finding missions presented at the roundtable meeting held in Katmandu, Nepal raised issues with cross-border and internal trafficking such as repatriation and rehabilitation and empowerment of survivors, raids and detention in prisons, detention centers and remand homes, the inefficacy of laws dealing with trafficking, the victimisation, criminalisation and stigmatisation of women trafficked for prostitution, the emerging forms of trafficking for marriages, organ trading, begging and cheap labour etc. The discussions revolved around issues related to globalisation, tourism, war and conflict, the increasing impact of the market on the lives and value systems of the "developing" societies, poverty and economic migration, increasing violence and the fragmentation and displacement of communities.

A public hearing was organised in Katmandu on 30th April, 1997 with testimonies by the organisations working with the affected persons by trafficking in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The jury comprised of Ms. Sahana Pradhan, Nepal Minister for Women and Social Welfare, Ms. Mohini Giri, Chairperson of the National Commission for

Women and Gauri Pradhan from Child Workers in Nepal and Corine Kumar, Coordinator AWHRC.

On the same day, a "Women in Black" demonstration was held in Katmandu in silent protest against trafficking. Women in Black is part of a worldwide movement in which women dressed in black stand in silent protest against all forms of violence.

The set of recommendations have prepared for the SAARC Heads of States/governments was the following:

a) To put the issue of trafficking in women and children in the agenda for discussion at SAARC.

b) To adopt an appropriate definition of trafficking that will take in all the current trends for use in legislation like trafficking for the purpose of cheap wage labour, organ trading, marriage apart from trafficking for prostitution and sex work, sale of women and children for any purpose.

c) To develop a Plan of Action on the issue of trafficking in women and children with NGOs and the respective governments in the region.

d) To evolve a treaty on women and girl trafficking and a special rapporteur to be appointed on violence on trafficking in the region.

e) Each government take effective measures and assist each other to arrest, interrogate and to take appropriate action against trafficking.

f) Effective measures include on the part of the respective governments diplomatic missions to give overall support to the victims in terms of voluntary repatriation. Those who do not want to return should be given asylum. And the traffickers should be made to pay compensation to the victims legal guardian appointed by judiciary.

g) Sensitisation to the law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to the laws at the national and international level.

h) Country reports on the status of trafficking in women and children should be prepared by country governments through law commission, and NGOs and concerned groups.

i) A media ombudsman to be appointed to ensure stringent and ethical consent procedures for the press and electronic media.

j) Creation of a regional resource centre on trafficking in women and children with SAARC support.

k) Set up a regional mechanism where affected persons can seek unconditional and non-discriminatory justice like a regional level court for the violence of trafficking.

A small delegate consisting of five members from Bangladesh, Nepal and India went to Male, Maldives during the 9th SAARC Summit during May 12 - 14, 1997. The delegation representing women's and human rights organisations from South Asia included members of Asian Women's Human Rights Commission (AWHRC), South Asian Network for Resistance against Trafficking in Women and Children (RESISTANCE), UBINIG, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association and SANGRAM (Maharashtra, India) Oxfam-Nepal, Vimochana (Bangalore, India). They presented the set of recommendations that emerged from these initiatives to the SAARC Heads of States at Kurumba Village, Maldives.

The Heads of States/Governments were supportive and responded positively to the recommendations

made to them. On 12th and 13th May, the delegates met the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Nepal. Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina expressed her deep concern over the issue and said that Bangladesh had raised it several times at the SAARC forum. She reiterated her commitment and assured the delegation that she would take up these recommendations for future deliberations.

Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif heard out the delegation and assured them that he would pursue the matter.

Prime Minister of India, I.K. Gujral patiently listened to the concerns and the recommendations suggested by the delegates. Expressing his total commitment to the issue he assured the delegates that he would immediately take up the matter with his counterparts in the region. He regretted the fact that the issue was not included in the agenda for the Ninth SAARC Summit.

On 13th May, during the day, heads of the States already initiated the discussion among themselves. In this regard the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India took special initiatives. There was no resistance from any member country against the proposal. However, the activist delegates continued the lobbying works at the heads of the States level. On 13th May, in the evening, they met the prime Minister of Nepal Lokendra Bahadur Chand. He was very positive and committed himself to taking up the issue at both national and regional level. He assured the delegation that the issue has been included in the Male Declaration and expressed his appreciation at the efforts of the women's groups in the region for having brought it to the attention of SAARC.

The recommendations were also given to the President of Sri Lanka, President of Maldives and the King Bhutan.

The four main recommendations that were emphasised by the delegation, among the others included:

1. To put the issue of trafficking in women and children in the agenda for discussion at SAARC.

2. To initiate a regional level Convention on trafficking in women and children.

3. To appoint a special rapporteur on the violence of trafficking in the region.

4. Set up a regional mechanism, like a regional level court whereby affected persons can seek unconditional and non-discriminatory justice.

Finally, on 14th May the Male Declaration adopted a resolution on Trafficking in Women and Children. The SAARC leaders have unanimously agreed to take measures against this heinous form of trade within the South Asian countries.

However, this is not the end of the actions. A huge task is ahead for the formulation of regional level policy and actions. We know very well, that the SAARC declaration alone does not stop trafficking. We continue to read in the newspapers about trafficking in women and children. We are at least happy the SAARC leaders have shown their collective concern and expressed their commitments to stop this heinous trade. At the national level, we have to work more closely with the government and develop a mechanism at different levels of law enforcement agencies as well as at the social level to prevent and stop trafficking in women and children. We expect that the government will take up the leadership at the regional level initiative for the SAARC convention against trafficking. We also feel since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken special interest in combating this crime, she will continue to take further actions.

Only one step is achieved, more steps need to be taken.

Reminiscing a Royal Visit

by Syed Badrul Haque



The Crown Prince signs autograph as the princess peers at.

THE sixty-third birth anniversary of the Japanese emperor celebrated on December 23 last was a nostalgic reminder to many who had seen the royal couple in Dhaka in the late fifties. The crown prince and the princess, — then decades away from their imperial role, — were here on a goodwill visit on invitation from the government of the day. The protocol-laden engagements drawn for the royal visitors had, however, a pleasant break — a river cruise on the Buriganga. The aging steamer, Mary Anderson, a relic of the British era, was commissioned for the royal ride. It was stylish, not flash and used only discreetly by the high-profile dignitaries.

It was before noon when the pedalled steamer left the anchorage at Pagla ghat on its day-long journey making waves on the placid river water. The royal visitors seemed to savour the ambience of the unspoiled serenity beaming across the horizon as the winter mists were melting away. The crown prince, to recall, took some snaps by his camera of the river-scape sparsely dotted with the rather slow-moving country-boats with colourful sails. He was also gracious in giving his autograph to this writer.

Before sun-down, the royal visitors were back in Dhaka.

In the span of two score years since the royals were here much water has gone down the river Buriganga, Bangladesh, a home of one hundred and

twenty million people wrested her independence through a classic war of liberation, albeit at a near-astronomical price while Japan, the land of the rising sun, emerged on the world map as an economic superpower. Despite the yawning gap in the economic profiles of the two nations what exactly bonded them uniquely is the sun-etched flag they had chosen for themselves. Mentionably, since liberation, Japan has remained a prime-mover of our economy, her robust presence goes far beyond the Toyota craze. Across the economic spectrum, the two nations also share the geo-political concerns as continental partners.

Bangladesh Prime Minister visits Japan on July 1 next, as indicated by media reports. This scheduled visit, the first-ever by Sheikh Hasina as head of the government of Bangladesh, is hopefully poised to scale a new height in further boosting the legacy of mutual friendship and cooperation that exists between the two nations since our independence.

Over the decades, in the vastly changed scenario, a revisit to Bangladesh by the Japanese emperor and his royal consort, if takes place, could well be a landmark visit for Bangladesh, — for no other Japanese emperor and empress had ever visited Bangladesh, let alone its positive impact in bridging the two sun-flagged nations still closer.

Will our government spare some thoughts on the idea?

Socially Cold

ACCORDING to Sheldon Cohen, a psychologist from the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, US, "persistent interpersonal conflicts put people at risk for catching colds. This is part of Chen's study (reported in Science) on the impact of psychological factors and lifestyles on health. Cohen and

his team exposed individuals to cold virus, then kept them isolated for five days to see who got sick. They also interviewed subjects about the stress they had experienced over the past year.

The researchers found that it is only enduring social conflicts that puts people at risk.

Sound and Safe

PESTICIDE containers in the US will soon come with an alarm system to warn users on safe use of the products. ISD, a computer chip manufacturer based in San Jose, California, has developed two prototypes — one for

household use and another for agricultural use. The household pesticide containers have a round chip in the lid while the agricultural pesticides come with a chip the size of a playing card attached to the product's information booklet. CSE/Down To Earth Features

Garfield®



James Bond



by Jim Davis



DRAWN BY JOHN MCLUSKY



'Save the Buriganga' campaign to be launched soon

The Department of Environment (DOE) will soon launch a "Save the Buriganga" campaign to salvage the river from the present polluted condition and restore its original character, reports BSS.

This was stated by the Director General of the Department Saiyid Mubarrak Hussain during exchange of views with the members of the Forum of Environmental Journalists, Bangladesh (FEJB) at Paribesh Bhaban at Agargaon in the city.

He said to make the campaign a success the concerned government ministries and agencies including the District Administration, City Corporation, RAJUK, IWTA, TWTC and Land Survey, the private sector, NGOs and people of all strata would be mobilised on the basis of an action plan.

He said to formulate the action plan a detailed survey of the polluting agents and the polluters would be undertaken at the earliest. An inter-ministerial meeting would be organised before start of the survey, he said.

The Buriganga, the main lifeline of Dhaka city flowing on the south of the capital and a perennial source of surface water and fresh air to the city dwellers, is linking a major part of the country with the metropolis through river com-

munication. Sounding a note of warning Hussain said pollution of the Buriganga is so alarming that unless corrective measures are taken at the earliest it would fast die down like the Jamuna in Agra and would pose a major environmental threat to the city dwellers.

The director general of DOE said presence of Dissolved Oxygen (DO) in the Buriganga river during the lean period (March to May) is below four milligram per litre, a condition in which no organism could survive.

He said preliminary survey shows that the key points of domestic pollution load in the Buriganga are discharges from Rayserbar suicide gate, through Dholaikhal, Pagla sewage treatment outlet, different canals passing through densely populated areas and hanging latrines along the banks of the canals and the river.

He said the key sources of industrial pollution in the Buriganga river are Hazaribagh tanneries, Tejgaon industries and others.

He said apart from waste water discharge solid wastes thrown from different hats and bazars along the river is increasing solidity contributing to reduction of depth and narrowing down of the river.

Khabar editor, reporter granted bail

Dainik Khabar editor and publisher Mizanur Rahman Mizan and staff reporter Nazrul Islam Mithu were granted bail in two defamation cases yesterday, reports UNB.

Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court granted bail when the journalists surrendered before the court as separate cases were filed against them by advocate Sigma Huda and advocate Elina Akhter Khan for alleged libel.

They sued the Khabar journalists and president of Manobadhikar Foundation, a human-rights organisation, in the CMM's Court on Sunday following a news item published in the daily on May 27.

The news item was based on a statement issued by Manobadhikar Foundation president Rafiqul Haq Chowdhury in which he demanded arrest of Sigma Huda, secretary general of Bangladesh Manobadhikar Bastobayan Sangstha.

Armed forces relief activities go on

CHITTAGONG, June 2: Bangladesh armed forces personnel continued their relief and rehabilitation activities in coordination with the local administration and other concerned agencies at different cyclone-hit areas, reports BSS.



Leader of the Opposition and BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda distributing food among the poor on the occasion of the 16th death anniversary of Ziaur Rahman at Maulvibazar in the city yesterday.

DU Graduates Assoc formed

An organisation, titled 'Dhaka University Registered Graduates Association', was launched yesterday at a ceremony held at the TSC of Dhaka University, says a press release.

A 21-member committee was formed with Advocate S M Zillur Rahman and Mahbul Alam as president and general secretary respectively. The occasion was presided over by Mokhlesur Rahman Chowdhury.

Other members of the committee are: Vice-presidents — Jamil Ahmed, Kazi Abdur Razzak, Jesmin Akhter and Mahmud Hossain, joint secretary — Nazrul Islam Khan, organising secretary — Md Zahangir Alam, joint organising secretary — Rashed Ali, office secretary — Md Akhteruzzaman.

The programme, organised by Coastal Area Resource Development and Management Association (CARD), will begin at 4 pm.

Poster competition for children begins Thursday

A poster-drawing competition for children will be held at the Institute of Fine Arts on June 5, marking the World Environment Day, reports UNB.

The programme, organised by Coastal Area Resource Development and Management Association (CARD), will begin at 4 pm.

The subject of the competition is: 'Royal Bengal Tiger of the Sundarbans', said a press release yesterday.

— Star photo

IRC of USIS to open on Fridays in June, July

The United States Information Service (USIS) Information Resource Centre (IRC) located at House No 110, Road No 27, Banani, will be open to interested patrons in June and July on Friday mornings from 9 am to 12 Noon on an experimental basis, says a press release.

For Friday hours only, the USIS Information Resource Centre will offer use of the Internet to perform research on American subjects. The IRC will charge a nominal Tk 50.00 per 15 minutes for this service to cover the cost of the Internet connection. The normal IRC hours are from 10 am to 4 pm Sunday through Thursday, except US and Bangladeshi national holidays.

BNP relief teams leave for Ctg

Two relief teams of opposition BNP yesterday left for Chittagong and Cox's Bazar to distribute relief materials among the cyclone affected people, reports UNB.

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