

CHILD RIGHTS WEEK

Children Demand their Rights?

by Simon Mollison

It would be nice to think that our current practices in the name of children's rights will have been replaced with something which more closely reflects the dreams of children themselves.

CHILD Rights Week is beginning in Bangladesh and once more we will be subjected to the spectacle of abused and exploited children marching, ostensibly for their rights. But what are they really marching for? Or perhaps I should ask who are they really marching for?

Most of the children who march on the streets during child rights week carry the banners of various NGOs which we are led to believe, have promoted the children in this display of their demands. The banners represent a ritualistic call for better observance of something called 'children's rights' (and perhaps also for specific rights). Amongst other rights listed for children in the UN Convention (on the Rights of the Child) are the rights of being consulted in matters which concern them, the right to express their views, the right to opportunity for recreation and the right to educational opportunities. It seems a shame but for many of the children who will be marching, the experience will not represent a good example of these rights. Rather, the marchers themselves may represent a phenomenon that comes close to being an abuse of the very rights which are apparently being demanded.

Firstly, who are these marching children? Where did they come from? It is clear that

they will not have been elected by the children of Bangladesh as their representatives and, fair enough — how could they be? But also not many of them will be children who have spontaneously joined the event so as to march under a banner proclaiming something that they feel strongly about. Of course, few children in Bangladesh might enjoy the freedom to participate in something so spontaneously — but it does all seem rather similar to the orchestrated children's marches which occur during hartals.

So these marching children have been sent and are organised by NGOs. They are the beneficiaries of NGOs. Some will have been selected by NGO workers and sent (or lent) for the day. Others might have been selected by a more democratic process organised by the NGOs they 'belong to'. But, the decision to march will often not have been a decision of the children (although) most of them will probably be there

willingly enough) and it is fairly unlikely that many of the children will have known much about what they will be marching for prior to their arrival for the actual event.

What about the slogans that the children will march under and, perhaps, chant? Where have they come from? Actually, they will mostly (there will be exceptions) have come from the NGOs (and less directly from UN and other documents) to which the children belong. They were probably chosen before the children were selected. Some of them will be in English and most will probably be rather abstract and uncertain. Just as the decision to march will not represent the children's choice for demonstrating their demands, so the slogans will not necessarily represent the views or demands of the marching children. They are most unlikely to match — except in very general way — the actual priorities of the children who are carrying them.

The children might (or might not) have a good time, of course. They may (or may not) be well looked after and kindly treated. But what is the purpose of this sham? If it is to give a few poor children a good day out, surely the Zoo or Shishu Park might have offered more potential.

Could it have been different? Yes it could. Even given the apparent necessity of the NGO starting point, children could have been consulted about their needs and even helped to formulate a set of practical demands. Different groups might have had different priorities and demands but that is alright (in fact it is reality). These could have been announced and others could have been invited to join the marches.

But then we should also not assume that the children would necessarily see marching as the best option for making their demands. The children could have been involved in decisions about how the demands would

be pressed as well as what the demands would be. Finally, the children could have been involved in planning and managing the way the whole campaign would be run.

Imagine if it had been that way (rather than the way it is to be)! The children would have had a wonderful opportunity to explore their situations and to consider the options for doing something about them. They would have learned a lot about organising and managing activities. And as for the activities which would have resulted from such a process — I would be prepared to bet that they would be more meaningful to us. Gone would be the vague, abstract demands. Gone would have been the impression (given the way things are, I might almost say 'the fact') that children's rights are some inexplicable and alien demand. Instead we would have something palpable: a demonstration in every sense of the word and an example of how poor children are capable of much more than we give them credit for.

It would be nice to think that our current practices in the name of children's rights will have been replaced with something which more closely reflects the dreams enshrined in the UNCR — by which I mean the dreams of children themselves — by next year's Children's Rights Day. — SCF (UK)



Not in a garments factory or a farmer's field — but not in a school either. Child worker — one of the other kinds. Photo: Sovash Kumer Barman

Little Hands, Heavy Tasks

Burden of Child Workers

by Ayesha Kabir

THE scorching rays of the midday sun beating relentlessly down on their backs, ten-year-old Nahar and eleven-year-old Shamsu sit on a mound of broken bricks, chipping away with almost mechanical automation. A haze of red dust surrounds their corner at the construction site. The blisters on their little hands have turned into calluses long ago. Harsh economic reality has mercilessly chipped at their childhood, but somehow a glimmer of hope lives on. Their eyes seem to cherish some far away dream, a vague expectation of better things to come.

And they have the right to dream. They have the right to much more.

With the Child Rights Week being observed from 29 September to 6 October this year, all our efforts will be made to drive home the very fact that children too have rights. The week is not being seen as merely seven days of campaigning for children's welfare, but the beginning of an extensive public mobilisation for the realisation of children's rights.

During the Child Rights Week this year, the government is highlighting certain particularly pertinent issues. One of the key themes of the week is the elimination of child labour from hazardous and exploitative industries.

Child labour, in any form at all, is not desirable. At the same time, however, economic realities cannot be denied either. A teddy bear in a child's hand cannot put a meal on his or her plate, but a hammer might. That does not mean one can turn one's back on a child. A child has the right to education, to protection, to leisure and recreation. A working child does not often get any of these.

With such circumstances existing in the country, sincere efforts must be made by all parties concerned to ensure the implementation of children's rights. It is not an easy task to deal with the issue of child labour where the survival of so many are concerned, but endeavours in the past have proven that ways can be worked out. If everyone puts their heads together, the best interests of children can be upheld.

Hazardous labour includes industries where children are exposed to various forms of poisonous gases, toxic chemicals, electrical risks, excessive heat or light and unhygienic working conditions. The commercial

sex trade is perhaps where a child's well-being is most at risk.

Minor girls in the commercial sex business are certainly at risk," says Dr Julia Ahmed, Deputy Medical Director of Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition. "There are two aspects in this regard — physical and psychological. On the physical side, a young girl's body is still in the formative stage. Repeated acts of sex will change a young girl's pelvic bone structure leading to physical problems. The body of a girlchild during puberty does not have the hormonal balance of a woman's body. This leaves her all the more vulnerable to genital tract infections. On the psychological side, the hazards are immense."

Commercial sex exploitation involves the probability of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and drug addiction. 'Social' ostracism, depression, violence and frustration often drive the child sex workers to suicide.

In the tannery industry, children are exposed to highly toxic chemicals. Simply passing a tannery factory, a person balks at the pungency of the fumes emitted from the waste chemicals which pollute the surrounding environment. The chromates used in the industry, says a young environmentalist, "are extremely harmful." The long term effects are more alarming than the immediate unpleasantness of the job. Children in the industry are prone to skin diseases and respiratory problems.

The transport industry is also seen as a hazardous one where children are concerned. It is a common sight to see young boys perched precariously on the backs of 'tempo', the three-wheeler auto vans, a popular mode of public transport in Bangladesh. With the van hurtling down the streets at full speed and reckless abandon, the young boys hang on with one hand and collect fares with the other. It is little wonder that the front pages of the

daily papers are splashed with the reports: "Young tempo helper crushed under wheels of truck," or "Transport worker injured in accident." And the world of transport workers is certainly not a world appropriate for children. They tend to get involved in all sorts of petty crimes and even drug abuse. There are innumerable examples of hazards in other industries.

Domestic housework is also exploitative, children are often not receiving any wages at all, working round the clock merely for meagre meals and shelter. Young girls in domestic employment are also at the risk of sexual abuse. Here too newspapers speak volumes on rape and torture regarding young house maids.

There are laws in the land which do regulate the types of labour in which children can be employed. The relevant laws lay down the minimum ages for working in various commercial establishments. The laws prohibit children up to 11 years from working in shops, offices, hotels or certain workshops (except as apprentices). The National Children's Policy prohibits children up to 13 years from working in factories. Children up to 14 years cannot work in certain parts of the transport sector.

But the question remains, do these laws actually protect children against hazardous labour? Are the existing laws implemented? Are fresh laws being formulated to ensure that children's rights are really upheld?

As long as we still see little boys struggling with the pedals of a rickshaw, as long as we still see young girls trapped in the brothels around the country, children carrying heavy loads on construction sites, working in proximity to the unbearable heat of furnaces in the glass factories, handling chemicals which are dangerous to their health and being employed in other such dangerous jobs, the social movement must continue the endeavour to implement the rights of the child.

Unicef Feature

	Proportion of Children Working by Gender and Area		
	Female %	Male %	Both gender %
Urban	13.8	16.5	15.2
Rural	16.7	23.4	20.2
Bangladesh	16.0	21.9	19.1

Source: National Sample Survey of Child Labour in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

Taking the Bit between the Teeth

by Ekram Kabir

ENSURING rights for the children will only be a daunting responsibility for Bangladesh policy makers, especially for the politicians, because the children are not "voters". It goes without saying that people's representatives will care the least for a section of people who are not going to — and did not — elect them to power. But, we as a nation are very proficient in giving three-cheers to the international, and for that matter, western buzzwords as far as the social progress is concerned.

We incessantly and instantly give our consent and accept whatever they, at the international level, prescribe for us. And we promise to accomplish the same while attending, say, a UN conference in a capital of an affluent state. But back home, the signs of pledge are all hot air.

The point-to-ponder here is to protect the rights of the children. Experience reveals we are not — and haven't been — serious about while considering that children have their rights too. But meanwhile, what has Bangladesh done? Definitely, it

has carried out something for its children: We were among the first countries to ratify the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (CRC) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. And also, we have become a signatory to the 1996 Rawalpindi Resolution on Children of South Asia, setting the year 2000 as the target-date for eliminating 'child labour' in unsafe environments.

The memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Employers Association (BGMEA), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund) is apparently a praiseworthy example in providing the children a future — presumably a little better than what they are enjoying now. This, too, was not an overnight performance — taking the children out of the factories and putting them into school. This was a difficult and

carefully thought-out plan to begin a process to phase out child labour out of the garment units, arranging designated schools for them, replacing the children with appropriate members of the family and, possibly, providing them with allowance to compensate for the lost income. But this endeavour is yet to yield result worth mentioning.

A question bugs in this respect: Why do we get concerned only about the garment-factory child workers? There are uncountable under-18 who work as house maids all over the country, a swarm of teenage rickshaw-pullers pedalling in its cities and towns. And in the rural areas, farmers cannot but engage their boys (most of them are under-10) in the fields, because if they send their wards to school, there will be nobody to help them plough, in a situation of their financial inability for hiring hands. Other unfulfilling instances are not hard to find: children are active in leather,

chemical, bidi and a host of other hazardous factories all over the country — even in the countryside.

Why do these tender-age children go for work — instead of going to school? One has to look at the realities of Bangladesh — an overpopulated country where majority of the children cannot eat properly and are malnourished. This brings us to the country's poverty situation which over the years has been increasing even after scores of efforts by both governments and non-government agencies. The manifold realities of Bangladesh cannot be ignored for realising the rights of the children.

Children of Bangladesh are being clandestinely taken through Indian territory to become camel-race jockeys in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to news reports from New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore, scores of children, reportedly from Bangladesh, have been appren-

hended along with adults accompanying them to the UAE. The children are said to be from poor families in Bangladesh which have been duped by a good life in the Gulf nation. So the poverty element is responsible here also.

What really is the purpose of observing this "child rights week" (September 29-October 6)? If it is to give a "few" poor children "a nice day out" on the streets of Dhaka with colourful outfit and chanting hymns of rights, then it would be nothing less than a "shame" on the part of the NGOs, UN organisations and finally for the government.

Well, no doubt, a few of these children will learn considerably about organising and managing activities during the week. But the majority will remain in the dark and possibly be toiling to eke out a living in this hostile world.

We, however, forget or keep quiet over the fact that the children are ought to be made aware of their own rights modeled by the elders who may be policy makers, non-government organisation workers etc., at the national level and people in the global watchdogs. Because among other rights gazetted for children in the UNCR are the rights to be consulted in matters that concern them — the right to assert their views, the right to opportunity for everything that life holds for them.

If the children are not involved in decisions about how their demands would be pressed as well as what their demands would be, then setting targets for them could be a futile exercise.

There are some chosen universal rights for the children — the right to be educated, the right to life, survival and development, and the right to health and medical care. Fine, we give them all the rights they deserve. Then what? Are the authorities concerned going to make the leader available to them to become civil servants, diplomats, politicians, lawyers etc., in the future? Certainly not. Because the mindset of the society is too inhibitive and rigid to allow the privileged the privileges.

In a country like Bangladesh, protecting rights of the children lies elsewhere. Since majority of the children come from poor families, it has its roots linked with the people who willfully create a society of "have-nots" and intentionally keep them as "have-nots". Until they truly feel about the children, other than their own, there will be no "rights" at all for the country's children. The word — rights — will only remain as a UN jargon.

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Metropolitan

DU authorities urged to keep Kataban Gate open

By DU Correspondent

Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), the student wing of the opposition BNP, has urged the authorities of the Dhaka University to keep the Kataban Gate open that separates the Kataban Market from the campus.

The demand of the JCD came from a rally held on the Dhaka University campus yesterday Noon. JCD also brought out a procession on the campus before the rally.

The university authorities closed the gate erecting a wall after a leader of JCD was killed in the Bangabandhu Hall of the university on March 13 this year for security reasons.

A group of students of Surya Sen, Ziaur Rahman, Jasimuddin and Bangabandhu halls led by some leaders of the JCD demolished the wall located behind the Surya Sen Hall on Friday. The university authorities had again closed the entrance the same day.

Shahiduddin Chowdhury Anze, the president of the JCD, said that the university authorities had closed the gate ignoring the inconveniences of the students.

He said that JCD would go for a greater movement with the general students of the univer-

DUICSP concludes Child mortality rate down in project areas

State Minister for Information Prof Abu Sayeed yesterday laid emphasis on turning the country's huge population into effective human resources for poverty alleviation, reports BSS.

"We have to keep our heads high in the comity of nations by turning our population into human resources and removing poverty and illiteracy from the country," he said while addressing a function marking the completion of a ten-year long project titled Dhaka Urban Integrated Child Survival Project (DUICSP) in the city yesterday.

World Vision of Bangladesh ran the project at Mohanmadpur and Kamalapur areas of the city.

Prof Sayeed regretted that more than 80 per cent children still suffer from malnutrition in the country while child mortality is 86 per thousand.

The state minister however, noted with appreciation that the rate of child mortality in the project areas had come down to 14 per thousand. He said the workers of the project had succeeded in the field of child health, mother care and population control.



BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia being presented with a bouquet at a prize-distribution ceremony organised by Zia Sanskritik Sangshtha at the BCIC auditorium yesterday. — Star photo

Prize distribution ceremony held

Health and Family Welfare Minister Salahuddin Yusuf has said the present government is committed to ensure health care services to common people by the year 2000, reports UNB.

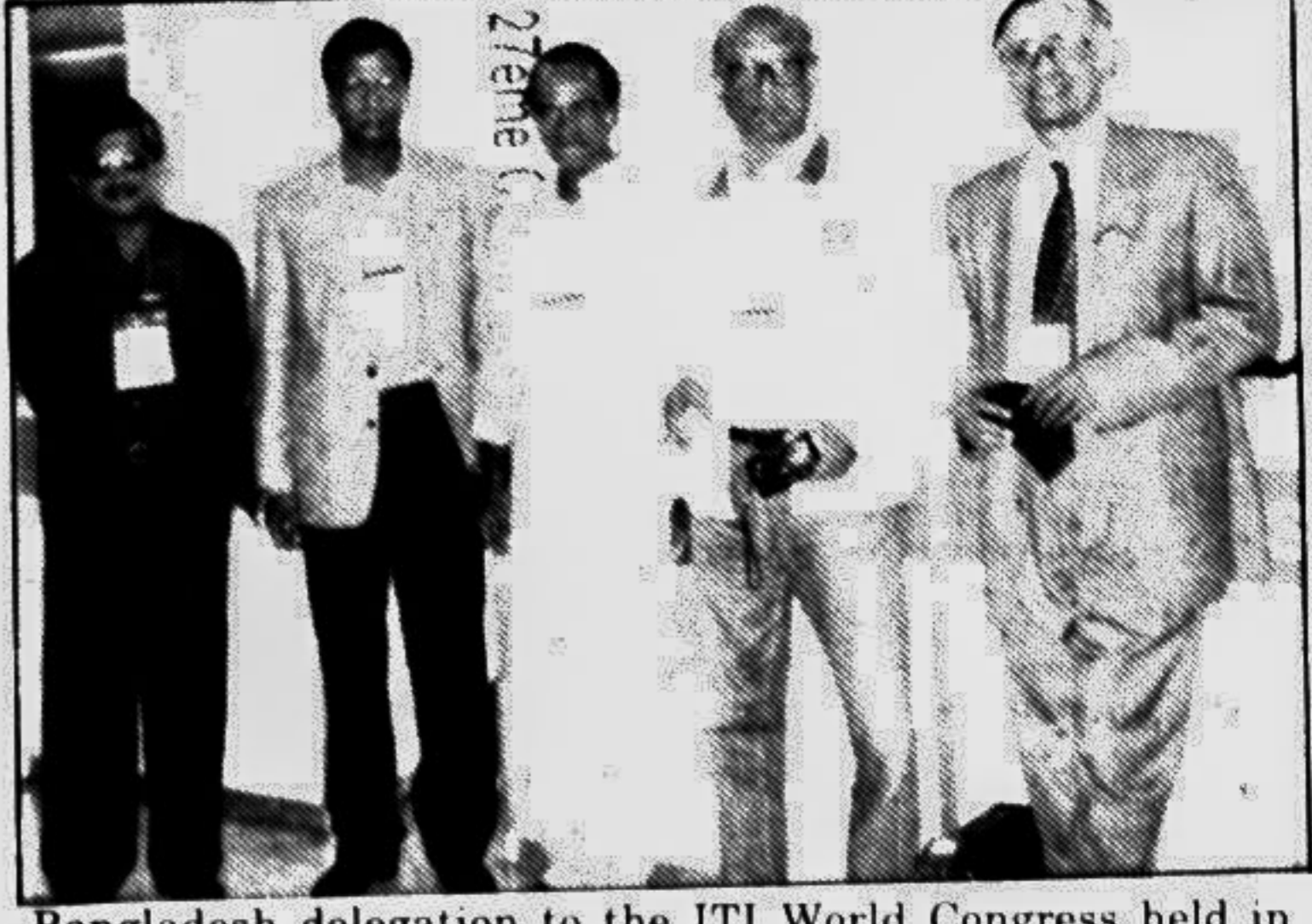
He was distributing prizes among successful personalities in the field of medical science at the National Press Club yesterday.

Bangladesh elected member of ITI executive body

Bangladesh was elected for the fourth time to the 14-member worldwide executive committee of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) at the 27th World Congress of the Institute, held from Sept 14 to 20 in Seoul, South Korea, says a press release.

The five-member Bangladesh delegation, comprising Ramendu Majumdar, Ataur Rahman, Nasiruddin Yusuf, Mofidul Hoque and Debaprasad Deb Nath, attended different sessions of the general assembly and seven other permanent committees of ITI.

The ITI Congress accepted Bangladesh's proposal to hold an international monopoly festival and seminar in Dhaka in February, 1999.



Bangladesh delegation to the ITI World Congress held in Seoul recently.

Weather

Moderate rain likely

Light to moderate rain or thundershower accompanied by temporary gusty wind is likely at a few places over Chittagong, Barisal, Dhaka and Sylhet divisions and at one or two places over Rajshahi and Khulna divisions in the next 12 hours till 6 pm today, reports UNB.

Met Office says day temperature may rise by 1 to 2 degree Celsius across the country.

The sun sets today at 5:48 pm and rises tomorrow at 5:50 am.