

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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Matter of Governance

WHEN will the government wake up to the tyrannization of business and industry by extortionist goons? The news reports of extortion-related abduction and murder have passed us by. The complaints aired by chamber body leaders from time to time about terror toll hanging as the Sword of Damocles over their heads and incapacitating them in their pursuit of industrial and trade activities have also fallen on deaf ears.

But overwhelming all these comes now to the fore the narrative of systematic coercion and torture suffered by Fazlur Rahman, an industrialist running the Tk 150-crore City Vegetable Oil Mills and three other factories at Rupganj, 20 kms off Narayanganj town. Rahman's story published by our newspaper on Thursday graphically described the storming of his establishment by a group of two dozen miscreants led by Altaf Hossain and Habibur Rahman, both alleged to be local leaders of the ruling party having a 'close contact' with AL MP Maj Gen (retd) K M Shafiullah. As well as having assaulted five of the industrialist's employees, damaged his equipment and taken some valuables from the factory they are purportedly preventing his workers from going to the police station or the hospital for treatment. The terrorised place is said to be guarded now by a police posse of five only. Rahman has demanded justice saying that if the government did not intervene soon enough he would have to close down his huge industrial establishment. This could reduce edible oil supply to the market by thirty per cent of the total availability. The proximate reason for his industry being attacked by the goons whom, by his own admission, he has been paying toll all the time to survive, was his refusal to give them contract. He did not want to let them in like that; so he thought it safe to offer them goods on credit instead of the contract they were apparently 'recommended for.'

Fazlur Rahman at some grave risk to his life and limb and the industry he runs has volunteered to lay bare his ordeals. He has also told names in a manifestation of personal courage that has become a rarity these days. This also underlines how pushed to the walls he must have felt not to be able to keep his predicament to himself any longer. We thank him for all this and urge the government to bring the culprits to justice.

Beyond that legal action, the government ought to feel obliged to take, it is also imperative for them to realise that **this has been basically a failure of governance, one time too many. That there is a linkage between governance and industrial activity has been amply underscored by the Rupganj incident.** The ruling party has to disassociate itself from elements that use its sign-board to do what they want which often amounts to acts of economic sabotage.

How Long Will This Eviction Continue?

by Anu Muhammad

THE first phase of 'heroic' operations by thousands of police and BDR appears to have been successful. Different parts of 'criminal' Dhaka now bear vivid signs of their victory: thousands of *jhupris* (shanties), home to thousands of 'delinquent' children, old people and working men and women have been destroyed. Around 50 thousand people, 'saved from being bulldozed' have joined the thousands that are already in the streets. They were forced to come to terms with the grim reality that they don't have the right to live even in a *jhupri*, that they don't have the right to try to live a better life. They have to live under the mercy of thugs moving around with strong 'legal' authority.

The law enforcement in Bangladesh has 'developed' a lot. Its police, BDR have now been modernized appreciably and are very smart-looking indeed. Smartly dressed and driving around in awe-inspiring vehicles, they exude an air of supremacy, thanks to the hard-earned foreign currency through the labour of poor, destitute people like garment workers. But unfortunately, the main brunt of their brute force falls not on the thugs, but on the poor and destitute 'scum of the society'.

Anybody who witnessed their 'clean-up' operations in the last few days would agree that our police and BDR members really behave like Royal Bengal tigers. Their blood-curdling roars turn their victims into meek lambs. They are capable, within minutes, of demolishing *jhupris*, fruits of years of love's labour. They are trained to land efficient flying kicks on children and women and capable of destroying their belongings with maniacal ecstasy. It seemed like they were telling those defeated, ruined garment girl workers they kicked out of their *jhupris*: 'yes, we got training and equipment purchased by the dollars you earned working round the clock for the country. Now, take the rewards.'

The poor working people, specially children, aged ones and women, seem to be perfect targets for practice for these 'law' enforcing agencies where they can display their heroic performances. However, on the flip side of the coin, these very same 'law-enforcers' possess a much kinder, gentler, almost servile personality when they stand in front of godfathers of criminals, powerful and influential killers, rapists, women traffickers, druglords etc, and they behave like pet cats. These small fries usually are given assignments to perform in the slums.

The mastans, drug dealers, sex-traders living in *bastis* are allegedly in the pay-roll of police authorities or big criminals with political power. The slum dwellers sometimes fail to un-

derstand the way things work in our society and start believing that police is 'gariber bandhu'. So when mastans torture them, collect tolls from them or forcefully turn their homes into a cache for arms and drugs through intimidation etc., they inform the police in the hope of redress. But it doesn't take them too long to get disillusioned when those mastans after initial hazards, if any at all, come back with renewed strength and furor and the simpletons have to pay the price.

The demolition of slums by bulldozing and burning told the press with strong confidence and a discernible pride that all the slums in Dhaka city would be removed as those had become dens of criminals. He said if slums were allowed to grow on government lands then the whole of Dhaka city would turn into a big slum (Daily Star, 9.8.99). What a discovery! Is Dhaka yet to become a big slum? What else can Dhaka be with the present ruling class, its development strategy and the lumpen socio-economic scenario? How can a city, with more than 60% of its population living in extreme poverty appear other than a city of slums? The home minister may not notice it since the neighbourhood he lives in is far removed from slums and completely different.

Mayor of Dhaka city Mohammad Hanif also supported the eviction programme and expressed his strong determination to get rid of rickshaws, hawkers and *bastis* to beautify Dhaka city and create a peaceful environment for its citizens. After all, he must be feeling an utter sense of impotence for not being able to address himself to the big issues in hand; issues like severe air pollution, land-grabbing for lake-grabbing for that matter, deforestation of the Osmani Uddyan etc. So how else can he exercise his power except over poor people?

In fact, nobody can support the cruel existence of the slums where more than 3 million people of Dhaka city live. We all want permanent solution to this slum problem. We want *bashatis* (human settlements) and not *bastis* (slums). But why and how has Dhaka become a city of slums? Who are responsible for it? Who need slums and poor people? Who create and recreate them? Public figures like Mohammad Nasim or Mohammad Hanif know the answer well. They know people who have made fortunes at the expense of millions of poor slum-dwellers: who use the poor people in elections, in

public meetings, in shows of strength, for bringing in foreign aid to be actually consumed by the rich in the end. They know their friends in rural areas who are capable of creating a situation that forces people to migrate.

The whole episode of eviction reflects hypocrisy, contradictions and cruel jokes from the ruling elite. Another joke came from the Prime Minister herself, who, after two days of the demolition spree became kind enough to propose 5 crore taka for rehabilitation programme for those who were scattered all over under the sky. The destiny of this money however, is anybody's guess.

At this point, I would like to summarize the hypocritical statements and steps of the authorities in this regard as follows: The authorities who are in fact creators, protectors, friends and guides of the mastans-criminals have come out in thousands to bully tens of thousands of helpless people into abandoning their homes, forcing them to live under the sky in the name of eradicating crime! On the other hand, the godfathers are being invited to sumptuous dinners and given honour and protection as V.I.Ps.

Governments always love to inform us that our main strength lies in the garments industry and a major portion of government revenues come from export earnings from this sector. Ironically, the workers who make this possible are always abused and cheated by the people of power -- owners, mastans and police. Eviction from their home and hearth is the latest incident.

The Government and the all powerful civil society on the one hand are full of praise for the microcredit programme but, on the other hand, are very annoyed with those who want to earn their livelihood by investing an amount that is comparable with microcredit. The amount provided by the microcredit programme is not enough to start a shop in any Plaza of the city. The money could help one start a business on the footpath only.

Unable to save state-owned industrial enterprises and create a congenial atmosphere for the development of private sector industry, governments in this country have always advised people to rely on self-employment. In fact, for a long time, people have survived mostly through their own hard labour and creative ideas without much help, if any at all, from the government. They hardly expect any favour from the government but they certainly don't want any repression. But whatever they do to stay out of harm's way, they become vicious targets of the 'mastan-police-local ruling party leader-government official' clique. Even after giving this clique their dues in both cash and kind, these self-employed people are unable to protect themselves from government cleansing programmes.

According to government statistics, revenue allocation for development and poverty alleviation has increased over 500 per cent during the last 15 years, but the question is what happened as a result of this huge increase? Less than 2 per cent of the poor population could cross the poverty line. The decrease in the number of poor people in rural areas has gone hand in hand with an increase by the same number in the urban areas. The much-vaunted huge 'success' stories of poverty alleviation in rural areas was actually invented to serve as a cover-up for the exodus of poor and hungry people to the mega city of Dhaka in search of jobs.

Governments have been expressing their determination to destroy *jhupris* to give security to the citizens and to give Dhaka a better look. But, who are the citizens? Who are the criteria of being a citizen? The people who are always under the threat of eviction and all sorts of uncertainties are the majority in Dhaka city. Are they not citizens of this country? In 19th century western countries, only propertied males were recognized as citizens. After long period of struggle and changes in the socio-economic formation, the foundation of that system has been weakened. But its legacy continues to this day, as people's power could not have sufficient import on the social system to transform it into a people-oriented one. We see slavery-type systems in various sectors in our country including the much acclaimed garments industry, much to the detriment of the well-being of the society. And to make matters worse, the government has kicked these poor day-labourers in the streets in the name of cutting crime and beautifying the capital city. Most of these people are in fact, not considered citizens except during election times.

Rehabilitation is really a joke. Only a few days ago, eviction operation was successfully completed in Tanbazar and Nimtoli brotels. More than 3000 girls and women who were oppressed phase by phase at different levels were forced out in the streets. They accused mastans and also the police for looting their years' earnings. About 300 of them were forcefully taken to a rehabilitation center only to be disillusioned and they ran away to revert to prostitution. Without any shame or hesitation, the government is still claiming that they had carried out the eviction to rehabilitate the girls. Rehabilitation in a society where women traffickers, sex-traders, rapists, illegal commission agents, extortionists and a corrupt police force have the upper hand is nothing more than a day-dream.

The eviction of slum-dwellers in Dhaka city has rendered more than 50000 people homeless, putting more than 15000 girls, including infants, into a very vulnerable situation and most of them are undoubtedly going to fall easy prey to sex-traders. Meanwhile, the Government Rehabilitation Programme in support of a larger scale eviction continues.

Slum-dwellers are under attack on the grounds that the slums proliferated illegally on government lands. Now slum-dwellers don't live in slums for free. These *Bastibashis* pay rent to *Bastimaliks*. Question is, why attack these poor slum-dwellers instead of the *dakhaldars* or illegal *khasnaddars* or *bastimaliks* that really are the ones who broke the law? They are the powerful leaders, mastans of the area. They live in buildings built by the money collected from poor *bastibashis*. These *maliks* will be badly affected by the government's cleansing programmes. It's just a matter of time before they will be planning for another round of illegal activities in the very same lands the poor people were evicted from.

On 12th August, in a protest rally held in Muktangan, ignoring heavy rain, some poor women who received wounds while being physically assaulted by the police during the eviction operations, broke into tears. They put forth the following questions and comments to the government leaders:

You call us criminals, but we are always terrified and tortured by mastans protected by your people. That's why whenever we tried to inform police about criminal activities within the *basties* we faced more trouble than before. Your people brought in arms, drugs, they fought each other and you put the blame squarely on us.

You cried and begged for our votes, promising that you would bring changes in our lives. Is this the change you had in your mind?

* Who raped 15 year old Yasmin, 7 year old Tania? Who was responsible for the dead body found in the DB office water-tank? Who raped female university students? Who openly move with arms? What have you done to punish them?

Where will we go? Once we were forced to leave our villages either due to erosion or because we had to forfeit our lands to loan sharks or rural jotdars. Now you are forcing us to leave Dhaka. We want to work hard for a better life; we want to educate our children. We are not criminals. What are we being punished for? For believing in your election campaign rhetoric?

Anybody may ask why this election campaign has become so important for this government? Is it to make the way easy for some powerful gang leaders to grab khas lands for building supermarkets or apartment complexes? Is it to rearrange *basties* in order to raise the prospects of the coming election and to ensure a monopolistic control of the ruling party over the criminal network? Is it to show foreign powers the authority of the present regime? Or is it to hide failures in other areas?

Time will tell what the real motive was behind these cruel evictions. But the question remains where will these lakhs of people, most of whom are women and children, go? Village politics ejected them from their dwellings before. Now they will have to go somewhere. Where? Mantripara? Sangshad Bhabar? Police line.....? No?

In that case, doesn't the government realise that these poor people, when pushed to the extreme, might take the law in their own hands in desperation? Wouldn't that lead to anarchy? Will anybody in the government pay heed?

The author teaches Economics at the Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka.

Friday Mailbox

Bulldozing slums: implications

Sir, Better late than never. Late, but why in such a hurry, without any notice whatsoever to the poor slum families (the same style prevailed in Tanbazar)? Unless it was a surprise raid to trap the terrorist dens — alleged to be swearing allegiance to the godfathers of the different political parties who wish to exert their influence by hook or by crook. It is easy to disperse the poor families, but the real birds had flown away. Self-defence against whom?

The surrender of armed bandits has been faked, according to a section of the press. Why the newspapers cannot bestow the benefit of the doubt in their editorials? This is one way to express no-confidence.

Is this police blitz just for the unnatural death of one policeman, when there are thousands of political and unattached goondas at large whom the police are able to spot but not arrest; can and do arrest, but they slip out on bail (depends on how they were charge-sheeted)? This type of 'moody governance' has to be explained to avoid public misunderstanding.

Is the regime fond of living from crisis to crisis? The preceding successive crises are easy to recapitulate: the public uproar over approval on principle of the transit of Indian goods; the grey MiG purchase; the new political pollution in BUET and JU; the official chasing of the sex workers of Tanbazar. It is not difficult to go on building unstable pockets if the intention is to create conditions for eventual declaration of an emergency condition constitutionally. However, the investment return is questionable, and might ricochet.

If the intention of these actions are in public interest, then the next targets should be the unlicensed drivers and unregistered vehicles in the metropolis; followed by raids on the pavement hawkers. The land grabbers should be on alert to take evasive action; while the secretariat staff are licking their wounds.

Well, let us have a crisis in Dhaka. The odds look even.

A Husnain
Dhaka

MPs' telephone bill relief fund

Sir, The publication of the list of names of 'honorable' MPs not paying the telephone bills is an appreciable social responsibility by *The Daily Star*. DS did publish this list once before but it appears that publishing of such list once in a while fails to create any impact on our 'not caring' MPs.

I request to publish this list every week for the next six months with names. With this effort, the DS and the public can try to force some MPs to give in their due bills.

Additionally, I propose the creation of 'MPs Telephone Bill Relief Fund' for those who declare their financial incapability of payments. The conscious public through this fund will organise payment of their bills.

Dr. M. Rafiqul Islam
Dhaka

Killer medicine!

Sir, I narrate hereunder my nightmarish experience at Birdem Hospital, Dhaka, recently while attending a patient who was admitted in a very critical stage at the age of 75. The doctors in such critical case of diabetes prescribed insulin injections. Finding no improvement whatsoever even after one week, the attending doctors suspected foul play. Accordingly, one of the injections was sent for laboratory testing. The result revealed contents to be soap water inside the insulin injection ampoule. These injections were purchased from the pharmacy of Birdem Hospital.

Unfortunately, in spite of such monstrosity, the doctors were found to maintain a callous silence, obviously they are hand in glove with these criminal elements. I, therefore, appeal the Minister for Health, the Director General of Birdem Hospital, all other relevant authorities and right-thinking people to ensure that such criminal elements receive exemplary punishment to the maximum extent for their indulgence in collective killings of the innocent patients.

Uttam Das
Logistic Shipping Services Ltd,
Chittagong

Abusing departed souls

Sir, Two of our heads of state, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman, were the victims of political assassinations. For losing one's life in such an unnatural way, the general reaction would be similar universally, and human.

But, it appears, the politicians, especially in Bangladesh, (who are also human beings), react in different ways, depending on the political polarisation. It implies that death is not the leveller; at least not in the political arena!

A dead person is not subject to legal judgement in the human court. A death sentence by the court is also a severe kind of punishment; and it is not assassination, and it is respected legally and socially (religiously it is also accepted otherwise there would be mass movements).

In our country, as Muslims, the dead are criticised by the politicians as a general practice. Is it proper, when we pray 'may his soul rest in peace', and then assert it is not hypocrisy?

How to look at this disturbing trend in our society. Nobody might dare to cite even the accepted *fatwa* on this issue, as he would immediately be branded negatively by a section of the politicians or vested interest group.

Deaths and killings leave trails; but political assassinations seem to bug us for generations; as if such novel actions take place only in this country and there are no historical precedents. It is time to debate this issue openly and publicly, to get it out of our mind as it becomes a moral issue, with due respect to legal proceedings, which is a different issue altogether.

Confused Citizen
Dhaka

OPINION

Newly Discovered Mass Grave in Dhaka Opens Old Wound of 1971

by Dr. A.H. Jaffar Ullah

IT is a fortuitous finding. As workers dug in Pallabi (Mirpur) to extend the square-footage of a Mosque, they find remains of young adults. It was a mass grave. During the nine-month period in 1971 from late-March to mid-December when our struggle for independence was raging every which way one can look, a large number of shallow mass graves were dug by Pakistani army and their cohorts all over the land to bury the victims who were innocent and unarmed Bangladeshis of age group 16 through 32.

After a long 28-year silence, a mass grave was accidentally unearthed in Mirpur, which used to be a stronghold of both Pakistani military and their business in 1971. With the discovery of shattered human bones and skulls in the newly found mass grave in this site, more questions are now being asked than the forensic experts can answer with certainty. One thing is very clear though; the victims were all Bangladeshis and they fell prey to gratuitous killing by the Pakistani army and their right-hand men.

The Pakistani army and their cohorts, to muzzle the political aspirations of freedom-loving Bangladeshis, butchered an astounding three million Bangladeshis and raped in excess of quarter million Bangladeshi women. Pakistani authorities had denied this all along by saying that the number claimed by the Bangladeshis was exaggerated.

I wonder how would they respond this time — now that the identity of one of the many grave sites had been unearthed. However, if history is any guide, Pakistani administration would look the other way assuming that nothing ever happened in erstwhile East Pakistan.

As the dedicated forensic experts are piecing together the bones from the mass grave, an outrage is being heard in Dhaka, where the bodies were unearthed. Hundreds and thousands of people around the city have never heard from their loved ones who simply had vanished in the thin air during the nine-month period in 1971. For them, the news of the discovery of a mass grave is too heartrending. The shattered bones those were found in the mass grave are a grim reminder of what might have happened to their loved ones. Thus, the old wound was opened one more time after all these years.

Pakistani army and their accomplices have gotten away too easily after the surrender on December 16, 1971. Bangladesh Genocide was never publicised in the West too vigorously in the early 1970s by Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for whatever reasons. To add insult to the injury, Sheikh Mujib went all the way to Islamabad to shake hands with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Pakistani politician who led the Pakistani army in 1971 to crush our freedom movement and start the genocide. What did motivate Sheikh Mujib to visit the architect of Bengali Genocide is a total mystery. Nevertheless, it was an insensible act on the leader's part and it undermines the sacrifice of millions who gave their lives to make Bangladesh a free country.

Unable to save state-owned industrial enterprises and create a congenial atmosphere for the development of private sector industry, governments in this country have always advised people to rely on self-employment. In fact, for a long time, people have survived mostly through their own hard labour and creative ideas without much help, if any at all, from the government. They hardly expect any favour from the government but they certainly don't want any repression. But whatever they do to stay out of harm's way, they become vicious targets of the 'mastan-police-local ruling party leader-government official' clique. Even after giving this clique their dues in both cash and kind, these self-employed people are unable to protect themselves from government cleansing programmes.

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The author teaches Economics at the Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka.

The Style of Governance

by Abul M Ahmad

MONITORING the print media it reveals that some right-minded persons in the society (a micro minority) are not happy with the style of governance of the present regime. Only some areas inviting criticism (why invite criticism when it could be avoided through judicious decisions?) are touched upon below, but the general trend is political guesswork on the part of ordinary citizens who have none to back them when the guardian is polluted.

Constantly chanting like a mantra 'Jatir Janak Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League' the 'government of Sheikh Hasina' (it is the government of Bangladesh, plain and simple), leaves a bad taste in the mouth and an unpleasant ringing in the air, after listening to the parrot-like propaganda thousands of times, day in and day out by the sycophants who have nothing much to offer the na-

tional third class platitudes and pointing out the deficiencies in others. Are all Bangladeshis toll and tale collectors?

One example is the illegal allotment of Rajuk plots in favour of party workers which has severely damaged the credibility and image of the regime (see Editor Mahfuz Anam's commentary DS July 16). However, the PM had the sense to cancel it. Why she does not take action against some of her discreditable advisors? That would be in public interest (there are black sheep in every organisation).

Abusive and vicious language are used by the party leaders when it is not necessary. The snubbing tone has to be eliminated. It is very provocative (the Awami League are proud of themselves, so are the others). There is a popular tendency to pass on the buck at the slightest opportunity. During a change-over, both the liabilities and the assets are taken over; as no

society or administration is perfect, and every issue cannot be handed over in a perfect condition. Why grumble over the present style?

The party is unrealistic in its approach to problems, and looks at national problems through party lens. All decisions need not be political; as there are other disciplines (it means only politicians can take decision, nobody else!).

The leaders get lost in the jungle and talk from the branches and the leaves; forgetting about the roots. They come from the same society, armed with the same garbage! One cannot disown one's society and its weaknesses. Corruption has become institutional and personalised, and it is accelerating. The governors cannot protect themselves! Intolerance has a distancing effect, and one cannot learn anything, as the invisible wall intervenes. There is no political ventilation in this country; so we all have to suffer by paying the price. It is a

sort of toll payment, for political services not rendered.

The blatant politicisation of the institutions, posts and privileges have exceeded the average limits expected or prevailing in developing societies. Now, here it is open and naked. The grabbing culture has to be stopped. It is, plainly speaking, anti-national.

The style of governance is seriously eroding the ethics and morals of the society; and the people cannot look to the state for relief. The regime of the government of Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangabandhu, has not announced any programme, project or campaign of even the first phase of the operation (who will draft it?).

There is too much suppression around, and too many court cases against opponents. Why so much reliance on the legal steps? Meet the people, not the lawyers. What are advising Sheikh Hasina the Prime Minister, and Sheikh Hasina the AL leader? These two types of ad-

vice may not coincide all the time; and may also not be concentric.

As one correspondent pointed out (DS, July 16), she is acting more as a party boss than as the Prime Minister of the country. She has to separate the party and the state in her dual capacity; sometimes very clearly. She has to draw the line, using her own judgement as PM. As PM, why she has to reveal that she is an Awami Leaguer? It is not necessary all the time. A government works in an anonymous manner, without naming names.

The AL leaders consider themselves the wisest bunch of mortals in Bangladesh, according to their self-estimation and practices. They have to come down to peer level (respect for others). They are talking down to 'inferiors' all the time. They are out to teach lessons to every body. Question: By what percentage stories of our hqafat occupancy has increased during this AL regime?

It will be deemed too big a crime on our part if we shy away from publicising the follies of Pakistani army officers. The horror stories of our freedom fight no matter how ugly and gruesome it was should be told in clearest term to the rest of the world. The sooner we do this, the better off our motherland will be. So, why wait then?

The author is a senior research scientist; he writes from New Orleans, America