

Feature

Where Will the Evictees Go?

Bayezid Dawla has a few woeful tales to tell

Where shall we go, my dear?
Where shall we go?
The Consul banged the table
and said,
"If you have no passport, you
are officially dead".
But we are still alive, my dear;
We are still alive.

—W H Auden: The Refugee Blues
THOUSANDS were crying incessantly. They were staring helplessly at the houses on fire and waiting for the loss of their smallest dens of shelter on earth. They did not know what they would have to encounter next. Fear, tension, uncertainty, insecurity and helplessness — all these gripped their minds and paralysed their urge to survive and ability to exist.

Rickshawpuller Kalu went out early in the morning in search of the day's bread leaving his wife and child in the slum. He did not know that the police would bulldoze their tiny existence in the TT para slum. The wife with the newborn baby on her lap was waiting 'amid the blaze of noon' for the return of Kalu. She did not know when husband Kalu would come to her rescue.

The police evicted 60,000 people from the Dhaka city and bulldozed their shanties. These

people were living in TT para, Gopibag, Metharpatti, Balurmath, Dayaganj, Sayedabad, Juraine, Khilgaon Bazaar, Malibag, Malibag Bazaar Wireless Gate, Magbazaar Bashpatti slums and those of the railway sidelines from Khilgaon to Magbazaar rail-crossings.

The TT para slum was set ablaze. The police demolished 10,000 shanties in an operation drive over the three consecutive days since August 8 last. Bulldozers razed the slums to the ground. Around 60,000 dwellers were evicted. The Home Minister reiterated the commitment to evict terrorists who allegedly live in the slums. The inevitable question facing the government now is where the three million poor will go after this massive demolition.

The three million dwellers constitute the low-income groups living in slums of Dhaka City. They live by an income which is too low to support their survival in this great 'city of joy'. Some of these inmates are small grocers, beggars, transport workers, rickshawpullers and are garment workers. Some women work as housemaids, and some people earn from begging. These people demonstrate very little of their

existence in terms of demand and consumption, and their shanties were set on blaze that devastated all of their belongings.

They have nowhere to go. They are haunted by never-ending questions, "Where shall we go? Where shall we seek shelter to signify our existence?" They do not have any foreseeable future nor do these natives have an answer that predicts a secure alternative for these rootless nomadic lives.

Sharmin is one of these evictees. A part-time maid, Sharmin went out in the morning of August 8 to attend her work. She came back at noon and turned to stone seeing that there was none she could identify at her dwelling place, which she left in the morning. Her crippled husband could not move any luggage. The raging fire engulfed the household articles which were the hard-earned resources the poor family had deposited over the years. Visually impaired Sharmin is now living with a dark future accompanied by an overriding question: Where shall we go?

The other victim of eviction is Amena Khatoun, a garment worker deserted by her husband, was sitting with her two

kids amid the rubble and debris of the devastated shanties. Kamal her daughter was groaning there with 104-degree fever and lamenting: Where shall I go now? What shall I eat? Balurmath slum had been demolished. Anwara Begum, a widow, was living with her six daughters in their slum. After the eviction, these seven inmates were shrieking in utter distress and asking for an answer to this inhuman assault. She was bewildered and did not know where she would go with her six daughters in this insecure society amid the persistent state of lawlessness.

Abdul Khaleque was a middle-aged small shopkeeper evicted from the Magbazaar Railway Slum. Without any prior notice, the police bulldozed this small shop that earned daily bread for the 10-member family of this shopkeeper. Choked with emotion, he told a news daily (published on 11 August 1999):

"I do not know how to survive along with my innocent children".

The police would continue this operation until the 74 slums are wiped out of the city.

Home Minister Mohammad Nasim has already determined

the destiny of these evictees. He said,

"The evicted people will go back to their own places. A rehabilitation centre is being built at the city's Bhasantek area. These people will either be rehabilitated there or they will go back to their own villages."

The three million evictees will be rehabilitated at Bhasantek! And the centre has not yet been constructed! This is indeed a mockery of rehabilitation. This is just a way of kicking out these 'illegitimate children' polluting the city environment' before housing measures are undertaken for them. This is a cruel and filthy strike forcing the poor back to the villages that have no room for them because they lost the last particle of their lands either to the rivers or to their lords on earth — the powerful elite of those villages. This is, indeed, a push-back of the poor to the world of gnawes — a precarious dark world of misfortune that ends up with the inevitable spell of anarchy, demolition and death. This is the ultimate fate of three million populations 'looking for a hungry fix'. This is a horrendous reward from a democratic government to its people.

Ignorance is Not Bliss

Rehabilitation programmes for sex workers are bound to fail if the reality is ignored. Men should also be included; it is because of them prostitution exists, argues Navine Murshid



Evicted sex worker at Gazipur Vagrant Home

—Star Photo

PROSTITUTES have been evicted in the name of rehabilitation. One simple question that looms is: why?

Why did we choose these people from Nimali and Tanbazar. These people are visible. We know they exist, and where they exist. And therefore, when we want to abolish prostitution, attacking such institutional practices seem to be the easiest way to solve the problem.

Removing them would not solve anything because the scenario includes many other parties, primarily the customers. Rehabilitation programmes should include the men as well, for it is because of them prostitution exists.

"What will happen if they are taken away? The men will find new girls to satisfy their desires. Another 2,000 sex workers will be added to the already existing 2,000. I suppose a few years later they will be taken away for rehabilitation as well, only to create a fresh band of prostitutes," commented Laila Mustari, a housewife living near Nimali.

What about the many other girls floating around, who are in this trade? Is it only because those who roam around do not live in brothels, they are getting away with it? They can go on with their practices because we cannot point our fingers at them. But that hardly means they do not exist. This selective rehabilitation would only serve to make the problem worse. As Laila Mustari said, the 'men' will bring into the profession many more girls. What will happen then?

We cannot ignore and say this will not happen, because it is bound to happen. We talk of spread of the AIDS virus and justify the rehabilitation programme. Dream on. In a bid to prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, more people will be infected along with who are already suffering.

If this 'selective rehabilitation' is a process of 'phasing-out', then the process went wrong in the first place. The process should have started where the problem lies i.e., at Tanbazar and Nimali. Showing them off at Kashimpur or at some other 'Vagrant Home' would hardly solve the problem. To make any programme work, voluntary participation of all people concerned is a must. The torture and pain that has been inflicted on the sex workers has been enough to kill any intentions to come out of the wicked cycle of prostitution. The problem should have been tackled at the grassroots. And time should have been given as far as the process is concerned. These things cannot be solved in a day. Rehabilitation should have started at the broth-

els and then the 'outside prostitutes' could have been included. The way it is being conducted, is not only a gross violation of human rights, but it is bound to deter any prostitute to join the government rehabilitation.

Poverty makes the sex workers what they are today. Many would want to come out of the viciousness of the trade. When the government first decided to rehabilitate them, they had seen hope for a better future; they thought the nightmare they called life was about to come to an end. However, what has been done in the name of rehabilitation crushed their dreams and hopes. Moreover, it has served to drive away the rest of the prostitutes as far as possible. No one would now want to be 'rehabilitated' because the government has given it a new definition.

The government does not have the capability to rehabilitate these people. It does not have the necessary mentality to do so, let alone the financial constraints. The government also lacks experience and expertise to handle such delicate issues. At a time like this, the option left for the government is to let an upright group of NGOs tackle the matter — NGOs that have had far more experience with working with people at the grassroots. A partnership between the government and NGOs would certainly be a positive sign. Only then can a proper and sustainable mechanism be built for rehabilitation. The government cannot do anything single-handedly. A partnership is a must.

The way Sathi, one of the sex workers, threatened to reveal the name of her child's father speaks of the venom that they nourish inside them. Whether the child's father really is a member of parliament is not the point. The point is that today they are an angry crowd with a common hatred towards the government and 'life'. If their future was bleak before, then it is bleaker today. At least they had a steady income. Today, no one will be willing to employ them because of their 'past', their children will be made fun of at educational institutions.

If we think they will go back to normal life, then we are simply day-dreaming. We are still not as open-minded to accept them as human beings. How can we manage to help them out of their complexities? A government directive in such a complex matter does not work like this. The nation as a whole has to accept them as their fellow mates. People at large need to be morally rehabilitated. Otherwise, a directive like this is bound to fail.

Shielding our eyes will not solve the matter; ignorance is not bliss.

Human Rights and Wrongs

It is up to the honesty of politicians to see that promises are kept. Esam Sohail suggests remedies

IN the last few months several international human rights reports have been published, as they do every year. Two of the most well-known are the ones published by the US State Department and the Freedom House. The State Department report catalogues a long list of cases involving official persecution, concealment, or condoning of gross human rights violations.

Almost in tandem, the report by the Freedom House classified Bangladesh as 'partly free', which is in the middle of being 'free' and 'not free'. Freedom House reports seemed ironic at one point: in 1990-1991, Bangladesh, for the only time in its history, was classified a 'free' country. We have regressed on the human rights front, it would seem.

The bigger irony and, perhaps, tragedy is the fact that Bangladesh is considered no better in treating its citizens than Pakistan is. Did we not shed the blood of three million people in '71 so that we would no longer be treated as a 'Pakistan treated its ordinary citizens? It would appear that all such sacrifice was in vain. Of course the government of the day will always dismiss these reports as 'biased' and tantamount to 'interference in our internal affairs' while the opposition will highlight them as validation of their claims of injustice.

One should not put much stock in either of those pronouncements since as soon as the roles are reversed, as we saw after '96, the same people will be parroting the exact opposite line. Something more fundamental needs to be done than convincing political leaders to lend their collective ears to the plight of the victims of human rights abuses.

Based on historical evidence, I suggest that Bangladesh consider certain more fundamental

changes of a constitutional kind. Firstly, let us go ahead and fulfill the Constitution's 26-year-old promise of the complete separation of the executive from the judiciary. That will embolden the local magistrates to be more active in investigating abuses by the police or by activists of the ruling party. At present, the magistrates allegedly are often afraid to act

It is high time that we get rid of pernicious and colonial laws from our statute books. The much-talked about Special Powers Act was designed to be a tool in the hands of an authoritarian regime. It has served its purpose too well.

decisively fearing retaliation by the executive which controls their livelihood, salary and promotion.

Secondly, it is high time that we get rid of pernicious and colonial laws from our statute books. The much-talked about Special Powers Act was designed to be a tool in the hands of an authoritarian regime. It has served its purpose too well. So has Section 54 of the Penal Code which allows for preven-

tive detention on the mere suspicion of thoughts considered dangerous by the regime.

None of these statutes have a place in a free society. While no government of the day will move to abolish them, perhaps a united opposition manifesto will promise the people a repeal of these laws when the said opposition is in power. Then it is up to the honesty of politicians and the vigilance of their constituents to see that such a promise is carried out.

Thirdly, Bangladesh needs a formal, written Bill of Rights as an amendment to the Constitution. The said Bill should, at the minimum, contain five provisions:

a. an absolute guarantee of free speech, press, worship, and association subject only to libel and slander laws;

b. a prohibition of any search and seizure of private property unless authorised by a competent magistrate;

c. an absolute right to a free, fair, open, and immediate trial for any accused;

d. the creation of a Human Rights Authority headed by the Chief Justice to monitor the human rights situation, receive complaints, and enforce remedies;

e. accession to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

None of the above-mentioned constitutional remedies will solve the human rights problem overnight. But, in time, these constitutional changes will diminish the legitimacy of petty state functionaries to randomly violate the inherent rights of their fellow citizens. Such changes will also bolster the confidence of the victims of such abuses to seek judicial remedies more readily. And, significantly, these changes will finally help us become a truly 'free' country accepted as such by our fellow members of the international community.

Dynamics of People's Participation

For proper implementation of local-level planning and ensuring people's participation, the local institutions should be made strong and capable enough to shoulder the responsibilities and carefully handle the problems, says Saleha Begum

POVERTY alleviation and employment generation are the prime objectives of the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002). It emphasises that the public sector must play the role of a catalyst in associating the vast underprivileged population, who are often left out of the development process. Local level participatory planning, therefore, will start building a mechanism where people will provide inputs to the planning process and people at the grassroots through consentation, consultation and participation, will get the scope to determine the local needs and priorities and integrate them into an overall planning exercise of the country through their elected local bodies.

At present people's participation in the development process is well accepted as a policy imperative in all the developing countries, an decentralisation of power is identified as an important step towards its success. But in practice decentralisation is seen in different dimensions, generally envisaged as a strategy of bureaucratic expansion.

Sometimes it is like only a separation of management functions, which means planning is done at the centre and implementation left as the decentralised responsibility. In democratic participatory political system, there are two parallel hierarchies: developmental and political. The developmental hierarchy consists of officials appointed by centre or national agency but posted in the 'field' to act as representatives of the centre. The political hierarchy, on the other hand, consists of elected representatives within specific geographical unit at the local level. Both the organisations should be strengthened equally.

"Strengthening of field offices without strengthening local government institutions will contribute to tightening of central control, this will harm develop-

ment activities of that area and to call the process 'decentralisation' is surely a misuse of language". Wallis (1989).

In reality, politicians at various levels play a very critical role in distributing benefits among the people. It normally skews distribution of benefits and development in favour of the power structure at the local level.

The second hindrance is, in absence of effective integration and coordination, decentralisation is left ineffective in achieving development objectives. It remains purely an administrative exercise. It has also been observed that in making decentralisation effective for the development it was relevant to examine the relationship between state organisation, rural institutions and NGOs. Integration and coordination, necessary to make decentralization effective, were seen to be multi-level, inter-agency and functional.

The crucial issue in planning is to relate grassroots participation and that could be done through village level organisations.

For successful mobilisation of villagers in rural development activities, it is important that they should have access to productive resources, be it land, water, education or credit. This access to resources is contingent upon a political will and commitment. To achieve this basic goal, government, usually launch programmes designed to improve the quality of life in the rural areas where the majority live.

For proper functioning of this type of programmes, regular interaction of field workers with beneficiaries is one of the most effective strategies of implementation. It is now increasingly appreciated that communications play a vital role in rural development activities and perhaps it could play a vital role in the field of enhancing people's participation in development activities. By and large it is the content of communication that determines the response of the receivers; hence it becomes sensitive to the needs of rural poor, and tries to contact them as often as possible. It is equally important that contents of the message are relevant to the level of economic development, social structure, cultural and ethical value system, and political climate in the rural community.

In reaching the people and

involving them effectively in rural development programmes, the importance of motivating rural people to organise themselves in order to obtain resources is needed, mainly because the people had to be reminded of their rights as well as duties time and again. It is experienced that personal contacts, training programmes and informed awareness about receiving mechanism could go a long way in involving the people in rural development.

Monitoring and evaluation of rural development programmes have received a great deal of attention, for identifying the bottlenecks in implementing the programmes and to take possible remedial measure to rectify shortcomings. If villagers could be involved with monitoring and evaluation system, they will feel that they are important in their locality which develops a strong sense of team work and instills a sense of commitment to the work.

It needs to keep in cognisance that the objective of local-level planning includes increase in local production, employment generation, construction of physical infrastructure, improvement of standard of living of rural people through local institutions, creation of awareness of local people and ensuring people's participation in the development process, so that sustainable development becomes reality.

The important feature of local level planning is the level at which planning is carried out and the necessity for ensuring adequate institutional support for implementation of the plans through ensuring people's participation. But planning at the local level by the people can achieve very limited success, if commitment of resources and services from the national and regional level could not be ensured at the same time.

For proper implementation of local-level planning and ensuring people's participation, the local institutions should be made strong and capable enough to shoulder the responsibilities and carefully handle the problems.

The author is one of the Directors of the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARAD), Comilla and now working with CARE Bangladesh on deputation.

If one needs to plan for, it's the poor lot of the country

—Star Photo



Labour of Love to Save the Leatherback

Leatherback turtle soup and meat were highly-prized delicacies in the Trinidad and Tobago, and the eggs were considered an aphrodisiac. Now coastal villagers have a taste for the profits that stem from turtle-watching. Gemini News Service reports on one man's efforts to save the leisurely leatherbacks from extinction. Sandra Chouthi writes from Grand Riviere beach, Trinidad.

THERE is an edge of anxiety in Sherwyn Ruiz's voice as he directs two shirtless boys to run in the direction of the turtles that have descended on the golden sand beach in Grande Riviere on Trinidad's northern coast. The boys charge clumsily into the feeding frenzy, swinging their buckets upwards as the turtles fly effortlessly out of reach, annoyed at being denied what Ruiz fears are leatherback turtle hatchlings.

This time he is wrong. The turtles had descended on a dead fish washed up on the beach. The turtle hatchlings are untouched.

The boys' job, for which they are about \$16 for three days' work, is to find the hatchlings before vultures, poachers or leatherbacks nest on the mile-long beach from March to October, each one laying up to 80

eggs. Hatchlings are born about 90 days later.

Hawkbills and green turtles can also be found here, and on several other beaches in twin-island state.

The boys hand the hatchlings to Ruiz, who keeps them in buckets or in bathtubs filled with seawater. In the evening, when the danger from predators has receded, he releases them into the ocean.

Ruiz's work shows how times have changed since the hunt for turtle meat and eggs — the latter for their perceived aphrodisiac qualities — prompted experts to put leatherbacks on the international endangered species list.

"The interest in killing turtles is no longer there," believes 52-year-old Ruiz, president of the Grande Riviere Awareness Environmental Trust, a community group which has evolved into an organisation

sponsoring eco-tourism in an area with high unemployment.

"Things have changed drastically," agrees Wendy Cudjoe, assistant manager of a beachfront hotel. "Before, no one took an interest in preserving the turtles. Now I would say there is no poaching." She says 90 per cent of her guests, most of them foreigners, come to watch turtles.

Back in the early 1990s Ruiz waged a one-man battle, patrolling the beach at nights to keep poachers at bay. "I was [threatened] many times. People pulled cutlasses on me," he recalls.

In 1997, however, his struggle was recognised when the Trust received support from the United Nations Development Programme. With further help from the wildlife section of Trinidad's Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the organisation began training

young Grande Riviere men as turtle-watching guides.

Visitors pay the equivalent of \$0.80 to the guides. To avoid overcrowding, a maximum of 100 visitors are allowed on the beach and no more than 25 around a nesting turtle. The turtles are located by 'turtle scouts' — youngsters who scan the beach at night, when it is a prohibited area.

Other Caribbean islands have turtle protection programmes. Barbados monitors nesting and hatching activity during the turtle season and has a 24-hour sea-turtle hotline. Barbados bans the harvesting of hawkbills, leatherbacks, the green turtle, and their eggs.

"Efforts to manage turtle fisheries to ensure the sustainability of [turtle] populations have failed and the best option available now is to allow depleted stocks to recover by prohibiting the harvest of marine turtles, turtle parts and their eggs until further notice," emphasises a Barbadian official.

Hawkbills, widely used to

make shell ornaments, are the subject of a United States-funded satellite tracking programme involving researchers in Barbados, Antigua, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Mexico.

The aim, explains Lotus Vermeer of the Bellairs Research Institute, is to counter the arguments of countries which claim that turtles belong to them and they therefore have the right to capture and kill the creatures. Research which shows the turtles are a shared resource might help save them.

There is also concern that Cuba may withdraw from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and resume large-scale harvesting of marine turtles.

These are just some of the reasons that back in Grand Riviere, Ruiz continues to be vigilant, his eyes nervously watching the turtles, ready to shout out — with just a hint of hysteria — to his enthusiastic bucket brigade.

—Gemini News

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