

Where Will the Evictees Go?

Bayezid Dawla has a few woeful tales to tell

Where shall we go, my dear?
We shall 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 wailing for the loss of their smallest dents 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, Jurain, Khilgaon, Bazaar, Malibag, Malibag Bazaar, Wireless Gate, Magbazaar, Bashpatti slums and those of the railway dwellings 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 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 Khatoon, 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 gnomes — 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 their prostitution exists, argues Navine Murshid



Evicted sex workers 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 Nimgali 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 brand of prostitutes," commented Laila Mustari, a housewife living near Nimgali.

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 severe. 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 Nimgali. Shoving 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. These people cannot be forced to cooperate. 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 brothel.

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.

For proper functioning 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.

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

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 perpetration, 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 as 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 the way 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.

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.

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