

Girls being bandied about

But who cares?

THIS is a damning evidence of and a ringing indictment on the new nadir that the country's law and order situation has touched. It is the moving story of a teenage girl's unending saga of helplessness in the diabolical hands of some sex maniacs of cannibalistic proportions. Some three weeks ago, the girl had been abducted, gangraped and left in a pool of blood whereupon she was admitted to a government hospital in Satkhira. The rapists dared reappear on the scene, and took the girl away at gun-point with her mother and the attending nurse looking helplessly on. She has been abducted for the second time, not from her insecure home but from a supposedly fortified government establishment. Who knows what fate awaits the already devastated teenager?

What kind of security are we providing to our citizens, more precisely, our girl children who are witness to a whole lot of leery-eyed hoodlums stalking them every step of the way?

It was three weeks since the girl had been first kidnapped and raped; what happened to the case, was it at all pursued to a point of at least neutralising the culprits? Was the security risk to the girl re-assessed in the light of a possible reprisal facing her if she were to divulge the identity of the rapists? The police far from rounding up the criminals lost track of them. Their failure to set up any vigil at the hospital was culpable. The police had better issue a statement on this case.

The administration goes loud-mouthed about crackdowns, and combing operations to tidy up the law and order mess. But with each hype of a tougher law and a new resolve shouted from the house-top to fight the criminals, insecurity of the ordinary citizens touches another new low. After a plethora of seminars on law and order and good governance topped off by exhortations from the four corners of the world where do we stand in terms of guaranteeing minimum security to our citizens, the girls in particular? Isn't it too much of a shame to put up with?

Export of endangered turtle

Break the unholy alliance of government officials and poachers

IS the country's wildlife safe and secured in the custody of the Ministry of Environment and Forest and the agencies under its wings? We doubt it, especially after the disclosure that the ministry has 'secretly' sanctioned at least five business firms the right to export more than 200 tonnes of endangered flap-shelled spotted turtle. The dubious deal puts a question-mark over not only its competence but also its commitment, which, as it has turned out, is negotiable. It also gives licence to poaching and hunting of wildlife; for, people might start believing that if they could somehow convince the ministry people that they have got some exportable stock of wild animals in their possession, they would be allowed to legally export those. The ministry, one must say, has simply made a mockery of the commitment our government has made before the international community to protect and preserve the wildlife, not to speak of the gazette notification of June 1998 that forbids hunting of all wild animals.

Down from the field inspection up to the final approval, the whole process reeks of corruption and criminality. More conspicuous has been the nonchalance of the officials involved, as if they could not care less about the consequences. They evidently harboured little thought on the havoc their mischief might wreak on the ecosystem or their career if it comes out in the open. The reason is obvious. Nobody has ever been punished for committing environmental crime. In fact, environment has never been a concern for anybody. It is more true for the politicians, ruling and opposition parties regardless. As a result, eco-consciousness has never had the chance to spread its roots in the societal psyche. That's where the question of governmental intervention comes.

Unfortunately, in this particular case, the government itself is the transgressor. There is one bright side about the scenario though. If the law is allowed to take its course in this particular case and officials at different levels of the environment and forest ministry, who are involved, get punished for their aberrations, then it would have a multidimensional effect on the society. People would start believing that crime does not pay, after all.

PM's security : Is the concern genuine or motivated?



REPORTS appearing in the press recently suggest that Prime Minister is thinking of enacting a legislation in the coming parliamentary session for the purpose of providing for herself the same security and facilities during the period of caretaker government as she has been enjoying now as Prime Minister.

The reports, which may have been deliberately leaked to the press in order for the authorities to gauge how the wind blows, have raised heavy storm in the opposition camps. Leaders of the BNP and other opposition political parties bitterly criticized the move and described it another ploy of the ruling party to deceive the public and to gain selfish partisan interests in a calculated manner. The 4-Party Opposition Alliance in a public meeting held on 23 May vowed to oppose the proposed legislation at all costs.

Let us first examine how the people are likely to be deceived. The purported legislation has the ostensible objective of fulfilling the need for providing adequate security to a person, in this case the Prime Minister, who has been reportedly threatened for life more

than once. It is not the Prime Minister but also her sister, who is supposed to be beneficiary of this protection. Attempts are being made to evoke public sympathy for providing security for the two surviving members of the family of the assassinated leader, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. Apparently, the move looks innocuous and is aimed at providing security and facilities to a leader, who is stated to be suffering from a sense of lack of security.

But, the opposition claims that the proposal smacks of some form

Kotalipara. These were discovered shortly before Prime Minister's arrival on the site to attend a public function. There also doubts have been cast in public mind due to lack of transparency and delay in investigation. American experts have found the bombs but have been refrained from publishing their findings. It may be recalled that other Heads of State or Government of Bangladesh in the past had also been subjected to such threats, even greater and more numerous ones. Also, all the state security,

life. The present Prime Minister, as per normal practice, will definitely be accorded due and, if necessary, additional security protection after she leaves office by the 13th July next. All former Presidents of the USA enjoy limited police protection, but most of former British Prime Ministers vanish among the general public and hardly call for special security measures to protect them.

Thirdly, the proposed legislation envisages also some measures of security protection for Leader of the Opposition. The BNP leaders

Frequent requests for replacement of this battered vehicle have not been acceded to, obviously under instructions of the political high command. Was not the life of the Leader of Opposition threatened when a tear gas shell was hurled near her feet in a public meeting and when a bomb exploded during her stay in front of the Secretariat? Instead of according due protection to her, her security was curtailed. This was the height of hypocrisy on the part of the ruling party.

Finally, the most important

political parties. Prime Minister will, in fact, continue to move around all over the country till election with the official entourage, vehicles and show of power, carrying on election campaign for her party. She will thus enjoy all the facilities of Prime Minister, with its inherent grandeur and trimmings, without having authority for it. The caretaker government will evidently be hard put to discharge its primary duty of holding a free, fair and impartial election. The people will apparently witness two Heads of Government at the same time, creating utter confusion. This state of affair was neither envisaged in the 13th amendment to the constitution introducing the system of caretaker government nor is consistent with the letter and spirit of the constitution itself.

In spite of all what was stated above, one must not be oblivious of the fact that Prime Minister of any country and at any time first and foremost is a political being of the highest order. If he or she has to mingle with the general public always with a special contingent of armed personnel, without holding an office of state, he or she tends to forfeit their confidence and status of being their representative. There would then hardly be any difference between her as a democratic leader and another as an autocratic one, who rules with force and is perpetually afraid of public revenge for his or her past misdeeds. A leader should not seek protection from the public, rather the public will be the natural protection of a genuine and sincere leader.

Former Ambassador M M Rezaul Karim is a Member of BNP's Advisory Council.

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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Motherhood is a risky business



IMAGINE waking up to the morning papers, with the horror of an accident screaming across the front page. A bus with 72 passengers has met with an accident on a highway in Bangladesh, killing everyone on board.

Imagine waking up to the same horror the next day, and the next. Imagine what it would be like if the same bus, with another 72 passengers inside it, were to crash again and again, every single day, 365 days of the year, killing everyone on board! Would anyone be able to stomach such a tragedy?

Now look at the dead passengers. They are all pregnant women. Stomach that.

No, this is not an episode from the X-Files. Every day, 72 women die in Bangladesh because of pregnancy related problems. The annual motherhood death toll is more than 26,000 women. In other words, three mothers-to-be die every hour in this country.

In the time that it takes for my colleagues and I to go up to *The Daily Star* canteen and have a tasty meal of *daal, bhaat, begun bhaja* and *khashir dopyaza*, (an editorial section favourite), three pregnant women have failed to make it to a health facility on time or, having made it, have failed to get the proper medical attention on time. Either way, they are dead.

Counting the dead might be an odious preoccupation, but silent deaths such as continue to occur in Bangladesh amongst pregnant women, are simply not being counted. There would be a national

outcry, an outrage of stupendous proportions if that imaginary bus with 72 people on board were to go off the track every single day. Hey, even if it had 72 heads of livestock on it, someone would be beating their chest, demanding to know why nothing was being done to prevent this terrible loss, day after day.

And these are pregnant people, (women are people too). These are flesh and blood females, carrying living beings inside their womb. They die silently, and that is the first tragedy. They die, not because they

unrecognised and therefore unreported.

Motherhood is a risky business because females are not nurtured or nourished to prepare their physique for child bearing. From the moment they are born, girl infants get less to eat in general and less of the good things to eat in particular than boy infants. What do they need? Girls need protein and vitamins, in the form of milk, eggs, cheese, liver, green leafy vegetables. What do they get? Usually just enough rice

scientists and economists would know best, but this I will state: women are ashamed of eating well and men don't care if they do, or don't.

I remember my maternal grandmother's table. The temptation to wolf down her amazing cooking used to be nipped in the bud by a severe glance from her, a glance, I might add, that was never directed at my brother or my father. No, the men were always allowed to be passionate about food--indeed, it was a quality to be encouraged, for it

silence. They tend to view my unabashed explosions of sensuality as an eccentricity, a departure from the norm.

Passionate displays of emotion for food might be reserved for the elite, but attitudes about nourishment are reflections of a widespread reticence. This is basically that females are not supposed to acknowledge desire. One is not suggesting that all women are sensual about food. Nor that all men are natural hedonists. (I know several who are merely mouthed in

prevention of the 'fatherhood' death toll. But there is no such thing. Fathers and husbands do not walk around carrying live bodies inside their wombs.

If girls claim their due share, men and boys might have to do with less than they have been used to before, especially when the quantity of food on the table is limited. This won't deprive the males of anything other than their sense of importance or, as in some cases, of their pot-bellies. Depriving Bangladeshi men of their right to be spoiled might be the best thing that could happen to this country.

And in any case, surely that is a small price to pay if one is trying to save 72 women a day from certain death.

Naturally, the question of saving is important. Does anyone really wish to save the pregnant women of Bangladesh? Is the desire to continue with the status quo, a set habit of food allocation, a cultural and social acceptance of male importance and pre-eminence so strong that suggestions of making drastic changes are simply too challenging? Is everyone convinced that they, individually, are a) not to blame because their women are and have always been extremely well nourished or b) that even if they were to subscribe to this notion of changing eating patterns in households, what could they possibly do?

Accept reality. Acknowledge blame. Attitudes percolating down from generation to generation and family to family have created this world. My dear late grandma contributed to it, in her own unintentional way, as much as the husband who kicks his pregnant wife in the stomach because *his* meal is not ready on time, has contributed to it. Ideas have to begin somewhere. Perhaps this one, to end the motherhood death toll, could begin with you.

With information provided by Naripokkho and Helen Keller International

IF YOU ASK ME

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have caught a contagious disease or developed a terminal illness, but because life treats them with contempt and their condition with indifference. And that is the biggest tragedy of all: 72 women die every day because no one cares. Because there is an acceptance amongst Bangladeshis that pregnant women can and will die. That motherhood is a risky business.

So risky that over 3000 pregnant women die every year as a result of being assaulted. An ICDDR,B study has revealed that 13 per cent of maternal deaths are precipitated by violence. These figures reflect only those maternal deaths that have been linked to physical assault. Women who have been whacked or kicked or pounded or pummeled because they can no longer continue to satisfy a (male) fancy or whim, or to function as workhorses in their own or someone else's household.

Given the level of acceptance of maternal mortality, one can only imagine how many cases of brutality, physical and mental abuse, against pregnant women simply go

and *daal*, carbohydrates, to prevent them from keeling over.

I am not making this up. Growing up is a demanding time for all, boys and girls. But if girls do not get the required nutritional supplements right from the moment they are born, among other things their growth is stunted and their skeletal development is impaired. Which means, when the time comes for them to have babies, their pelvic structure is not strong enough to withstand the challenge of carrying a foetus.

Pregnancy studies in Nepal are showing that females who are given Vitamin A supplements during pregnancy are less prone to complications during pregnancy. One is told that similar studies will be mounted in Bangladesh as well.

What needs to be done in Bangladesh, of course, is for a sea change in attitude to be wrought amongst the men and the women. For it is a two-way street, this business of who gets which portion of limited resources. Food is an economic factor, as much as it is a cultural and social activity. Far be it for me to prescribe what social

reinforced their 'maleness' and made them more endearing to the women.

Girls, on the other hand, had to be kept in check, especially at meal times. Girls had to be taught to eat like ladies. Never show how much you desire the food, (for that may kindle desire, per se) and never express your passion for food by smacking your lips, (a Freudian symbol?) or by licking your fingers or by salivating at the sheer and sensual pleasure of a good meal.

Females are encouraged to eat like birds, if at all. Females do not salivate. Females do not appropriate the best portions of meat or eggs or vegetables for themselves. Even now, nearly 40 years since my grandmother's table provided my first significant lesson in the gendering of food, there are moments when my passion for food creates a sense of illiteness within me. For sure, when I share the delight that I feel about good food with other women, especially women of the upwardly mobile working classes at my various places of work, there is usually a

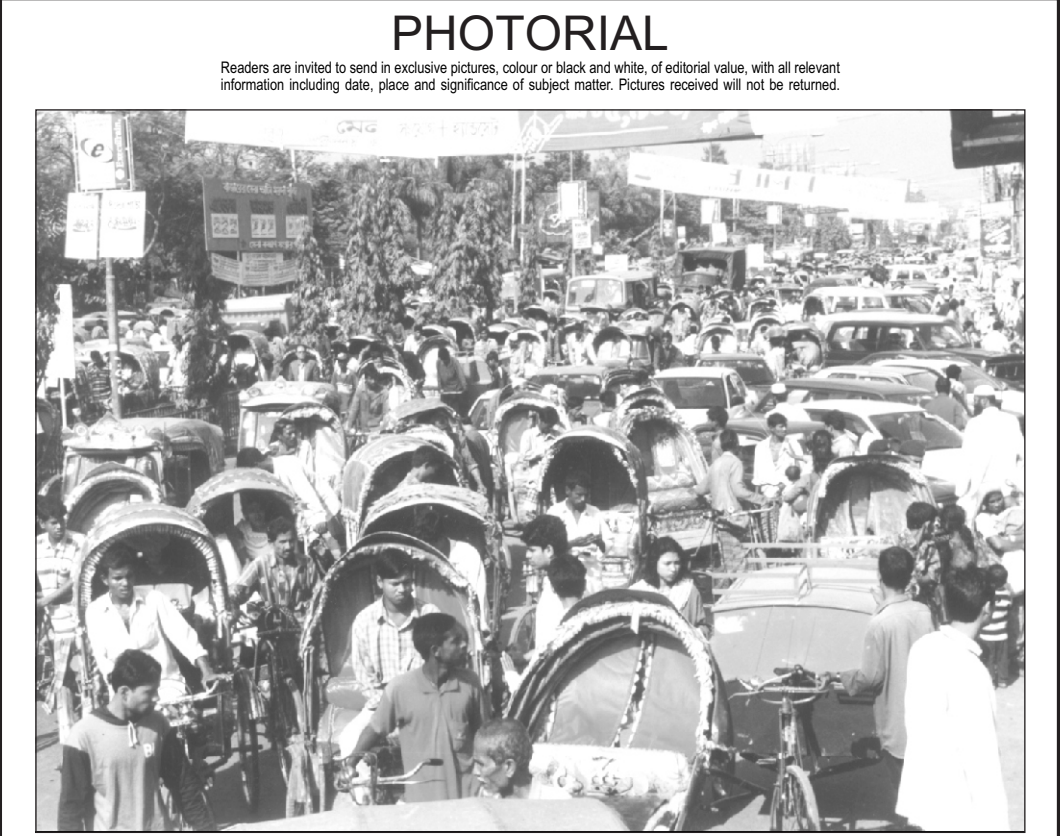
the extreme, don't ask me their names). One is not even suggesting that the gendering of food is a particularly Bangladeshi characteristic. The world over, women's allocation of food has always been at the bottom of the economic and social barrel.

But times change. And so must Bangladesh.

Women must be convinced, somehow, that it is their right to demand and consume the best servings on the table. Not the helpings that are left over, not the helpings that have gone stale and most certainly not the helpings that are cheaper to obtain. Protein and fresh leafy vegetables, eggs, cheese, chicken, liver cost more than rice and *daal*. Women must claim the choice foods for themselves and for their daughters, before they appropriate a lion's share for their husbands and their sons.

So does that mean that boys will end up deprived? That will be the day. Seriously, boys and men are not at issue here. If fatherhood were as unsafe as motherhood, the aim of this discussion would have been the

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Mother of traffic jams

It is pure chaos on the road in front of Dhanmondi Hawker's Market. The road is wide enough, but irresponsible drivers, ignorant pedestrians and uncontrolled movement of vehicles create a jungle for ordinary people. Few shopping complexes and markets here make provisions for parking. Vehicles have no choice but to park on the road and disrupt traffic. Traffic police give up and move away. City residents are fed up.

Corruption in BCIC

For a long time, Karnaphuli Paper Mill (KPM) has been a losing concern of Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC). But some corrupt businessmen in collaboration with the officials of BCIC prepared a proposal during the BNP government to make KPM a profitable company, knowing very well that this project would never be profitable in competition with the private sector paper manufacturing companies.

To avoid criticism, the interested quarter acted very shrewdly and influenced BCIC to announce public tenders three times for Supplier's Credit and China became the lowest. Soon a contract will be signed with CMC of China and BCIC. The contract value is around US \$90 million and the experts say this project cost will cross the US \$100 million mark in the future.

How can the government spend such a huge amount just for BRME of a paper manufacturing company when there are a number of paper manufacturing companies in the country in the private sector?

Concerned sources say that the total amount of money will go down the drain as KPM cannot compete with the paper importers from India, China, Indonesia and other local paper manufacturing companies.

We request *The Daily Star* to thoroughly investigate the matter and also to hold a roundtable conference on whether this project is at all viable for the nation or not.

Concerned official at BCIC Dhaka

Self-criticism, please!

It was heartening to read the report from Kolkata (May 16) about the cultivation of the spirit of self-criticism by the political parties. Mamata's downfall has been attributed to the personalised hate campaign against the personalities of the regime during the election campaign.

In Dhaka, the style is opposite: non-stop tirade and onslaught on the opponents, including filthy personal attacks. The coming elections should bring in a new mode in political behaviour.

A Citizen Dhaka

Indo-Bangladesh synergy

While appreciating R R Lyer's argument (May 20) on the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, certain background factors have to be kept in mind.

After the partition of British India in 1947, Pakistan had to start practically from zero to build up a central government machinery, while East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) had no experience of it till after the 1971 revolution; and therefore had to pass through two revolutions.

The refugee problems in the two wings had deeper implications, while India's foundation that was built by the British for centuries

being left intact for improvisation after freedom. Today Bangladesh and Pakistan are still suffering from political instability even after three decades. Therefore the presence of the big brother across the border is a psychological wall, which cannot be wished away.

India's degree and kind of amity with its neighbours is an open secret, and it does not appear to be interested in giving this aspect any reasonable priority, thereby confirming the big brother attitude.

Then there is the market aspect. The disparity between India and Bangladesh is 10:1 consumer-wise; and smuggling across the borders is in the order of \$1.5 billion per annum.

South Asia is the target of the multinationals for a lucrative market of more than a billion consumers. Financially, and from the point of view of trade and commerce, India's looming presence over the smaller neighbouring states is like a perpetual shadow.

As for the Ganges waters, Bangladesh lies in the deltaic region and the Farakka Barrage is located upstream, without an international control mechanism, with the potential of changing the geological characteristics downstream, existing naturally for millions of years. The fall-out from the barrage experience for decades has yet to be sorted out scientifically.

The synergy between the two nations has not been analysed in depth, remembering that India's west and east neighbours are

predominantly Muslim nations and one is supposed to be hostile while the other passive and neutral. The cumulative effects of partition cannot be wished away. But the LDCs, as usual, are busy with internal problems all the time, distracting attention from long-term inter-border effects.

A Mawaz Dhaka

Compulsory voting?

Voting has been made compulsory in Australia. The idea should be considered in Bangladesh to deter vote rigging. If all voters are required to be present at the polling station whether they vote or do not vote, as that is their own right, to exercise if they choose to, the name of that voter cannot be used to place a vote in absentia.

A cynic Dhaka

Question of rank

Reference your report "6 brigadier generals may be promoted" on May 14, it is good that you are watching developments in the army, an organisation otherwise inaccessible to many on the flimsy grounds of security. The perception of security in the army still dates back to the Official Secrets Act of the early 1930s. It's interesting to note that we are still holding fast to some of the rules that the British themselves have thrown into the Thames!

Promotion in any outfit is regu-

lated by certain criteria so that the deserving get their due and there is no stagnation. But to our utter surprise we see that this totally absent in the army . A person is made a general at such an age that he is still left with 10/12 years of service. This is not the case in any other army. Age is a big factor. Because experience comes with age only. Someone can be very brilliant but lacks experience to handle the complex task of leading in the battlefield. The British army does not consider an officer for the position of a commanding officer (Lt Col) unless he has attained the age of 37, howsoever bright he may be. We are promoting an officer to the highest rank (barring CAS) at the age of 45/46. He is still left with 12 years of service.

What happens in the civil service? When is a joint secretary promoted to the rank of a secretary? What is the mode of promotions in the armies of neighbouring countries? What is the psychological influence on the person enjoying the benefits of high offices for such a long period? Who cares?

Frustration is brewing in the lower ranks. It is better to arrest the situation now.

Love my country Dhaka