

Plight of women

One more wake-up call

If the results of the survey carried out by various human rights groups on spousal abuse are anything to go by, then it is indeed a very grim picture of the state of women in our country. Statistics like 155 women having been killed by their husbands and 35 others tortured in just one year, according to a survey report by Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), dreadful as these are, may be portraying less than the actual magnitude of the malady, because the numbers were drawn from reported cases. Significantly, the research findings by Oxfam that 47 percent of women are victims of physical abuse in their own homes, should be more than enough for us to sit up and take notice of the plights of the fairer sex in our society.

If this is the reality, then it is a travesty to even try to claim that the condition of women has improved. We need to ask ourselves the question as to whether granting free education, empowering women with micro-credit programmes are the only tools to bring about a change in our attitude towards women. Tragically, women are becoming victims of both physical and mental abuse at almost every stratum of society behind the thick curtains of their homes.

In such circumstances, we are baffled by the lack of governmental initiative to implement the UN's Cedaw convention to protect women from abuse and discrimination, despite our being a signatory to it. Is the government fighting shy of taking bold steps to stop domestic violence for fear of risking unpopularity?

We must praise the women activist groups and human rights organisations for bringing the issue up for public discourse as well as sensitising women about their fundamental and legal rights. Now it's the government's turn to step up the processes of implementing international conventions and enforcing national laws so that the discrimination against women is effectively ended.

Handling Nipah syndrome

Groping in the dark

EVERY time we are hit with a calamity or an epidemic-like situation, inadequacies in our capacity to tackle them are badly exposed. This time we have been once again caught unawares by the recent onset of a virus attack that has the potential of becoming an epidemic. It has taken five lives already and caused some panic in Tangail.

Viruses are no respecters of borders and whenever a new syndrome appears we have no option but to fall back on outside help. This exposes our glaring incapacity to detect or follow the course of the epidemic, far less provide treatment and advise for the control and management of the epidemic.

While the recent cases were reported since early this month it was only the other day that the five deaths in Tangail were confirmed to have been caused by Nipah virus; reportedly, the same virus caused 18 deaths in Faridpur last year. This brings out several features of our epidemiological investigations capacity and disease control.

Investigations were not as quick as it might have been in this case, had we the necessary capacity in place. Time is the essence when it comes to arresting the spread of a virus. Any lacunae or inordinate delay in the investigation will result in the disease becoming an epidemic and make all the difference between life and death.

This brings out the need for enhancing our capacity in not only investigating a new virus but also acquiring a research capacity that would provide advisories for management and control of such diseases. Regrettably, reports appearing in the press about the condition of the only research lab in Bangladesh established for the very purpose on which we are dilating make dismal reading. What is one to make of a situation where the one and only laboratory dealing with epidemic research is without its chief scientific officer and seven of its branches have been without their heads for years making them virtually non-functional?

Admittedly, we have the basic expertise and knowledge, what is lacking is the technological support base. The sooner are the necessary inputs invested in our epidemiological research the better will we be equipped to prevent deaths from epidemics.

Spreading 'freedom and democracy'... Are you serious Mr. President?

Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
psc (Retd)

It is indeed an excellent idea and also a universal aspiration that tyranny is not allowed to go unchecked and that freedom and democracy prevail upon the face of the earth pervading all nations and peoples. These are morals that are enshrined in the universal declaration of Human Rights and also enjoined on man from God.

Thus one would like to take heart when the president of the most powerful nation on earth articulates such noble thoughts. President Bush's inaugural speech, that was reportedly redrafted many times and lasted 21 minutes, mentioned the word 'freedom' or 'liberty' 42 times.

The substantive difference between his first inaugural speech and second is that four years ago he had devoted only seven sentences to foreign policy and the rest to issues of home and economy. This time he has devoted only six to domestic issues.

However, the grave implications of President Bush's predication of the growth of freedom in the US and indeed its security, on the spread of

freedom and democracy around the world, cannot escape the notice of even the casual observer. In fact the US president's speech was pegged entirely on the morals of 'democracy' of which 'freedom' and 'liberty' are the two critical adjuncts. It is not surprising that he chose to do so; with the rationale for the Iraq war transmuting constantly, it was inevitable. How else would one justify a folly except on

prompting him to arrogate to the US the task of 'spreading freedom' in all the world and made so abundantly clear to his international audience when he said: 'The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.' While to the gullible it might sound innocuous and utterly

have been moved to comment that, 'America cares whether the world's leaders support its interests, not whether they have been freely elected'. Undemocratic regimes and loathsome dictators were propped up to supplant democratic regimes. In a glaring illustration of US love for democracy the Turkish military was denounced by the US for failing to intervene to overturn the decision of their par-

dom" always mean a Western-style, or pro-American, democracy?"

Thus, the question is, given the history of disparity between the deeds and the words of the successive US administrations, how does one go about implementing this policy, short of use of force, and, whether the US is indeed qualified to 'export' democracy, as is the purported aim of the US president?

While no one can take issue with the underlying hopes of the US president, one cannot see it being fulfilled if the policy of double standards is not eschewed, if the meaning of freedom and liberty is applied selectively, and if national aspirations to freedom is seen as the exclusive rights of only those that are in accord with US views, and that security is seen not only as the ability to protect oneself from aggression but also to acquire means to deter.

If freedom and democracy are rights ordained by God then selectivity and relativism have no place in the equation. If policies are divested of principles and justice, rhapsodic thoughts will merely become rhetoric and the motivations guiding those policies bear resemblances to those that guided world events of his day which led Thomas Jefferson to characterise those in the following words. 'We believe no more in Bonaparte's fighting merely for the liberties of the seas than in Great Britain's fighting for the liberties of mankind.'

The object is the same, to draw to themselves the power, the wealth and the resources of other nations.'

The author is Editor, Defense and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star

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twisted logic and deceptive arguments.

While to some the speech exposes that element of American nationalism that flourishes on moral conceit and military aggressiveness, even more palpable in the gap between thoughts and actions of not only the current US administration, but also of those that had preceded it.

As for exporting democracy, for the many years before and after the end of the Second World War and into the Cold War, legitimate regimes in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, elected by the free will of the people, were toppled through US' covert and overt intervention, because those regimes were perceived to be against US interests. No wonder some critics

simply, the whole notion of 'spread of democracy' and chastising tyrants will actually give president Bush the excuse to invoke his faulty and rather misplaced policy of preemptive strikes and unauthorised intervention to which he has attempted to provide an ideological prop by lumping together America's 'vital interests with our deepest beliefs.'

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region a better hope for his country's stability than did those who have suffered his repression," according to a report in the New York Times.

While majority of the Americans feel that spreading democracy is essential to US' security, even they are sceptical about ending tyranny in the world. No one could agree more. Some of the greatest tyrants were sponsored by the US administration in the last century. Some of the most oppressive dictatorial regimes in Central and South America, in Asia and the Middle East, were abetted by the US administration only because they helped serve America's national interest. The most despicable apartheid regime in South Africa were supported by the Reagan administration and even Nelson Mandela's African

democracy could return to Pakistan. A feeling of resignation has crept in. But the redeeming factor is that people still talk of politics and parties. Religious parties are losing their support rapidly. Even otherwise, the maulvi's have never been an endearing entity in Pakistan. But it goes to the credit of President Musharraf that he is trying to give modern face to Islam. That he is retaining the position of president

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At the immigration desk, a young lady clears you in no time. She is least bothered about your

the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League in the opposition are constantly harassed so that their members are forced to join the King's Party, the Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam).

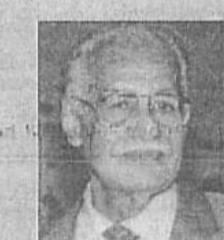
The most disturbed province is Baluchistan. True, a rape case triggered the trouble which led to the attack on Sui gas installation now taken over by the army. But essentially, it is the feeling that the Baluchis are always pushed to the wall. Musharraf reportedly promised them autonomy, the demand that late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto suppressed even by resorting to air bombing. Even he started on a different note: he appointed Nawab Akbar Bugti, chief of Bugti tribe, as the state governor.

I recall meeting Bugti at Quetta when he was the governor. Even then he was full of rancour and bitterness for not getting the autonomy that Bhutto had promised. When I told Bhutto at Islamabad that Baluchistan governor did not like the shackles, he said Bugti should not be saying so, after unburdening himself for four hours in a meeting with an Indian journalist.

Another incident that has rocked Pakistan is the sectarian violence in Gilgit, up in the north. Agha Ziauddin, a Shia leader, and his guard, Tanvir Hussain, were murdered the other day. The army has intervened to restore peace. Against religious fanaticism, this action by the military comes as a relief. This reaction may tell upon democracy but many Pakistanis have come to regard the army as protectors.

Kulid Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

A troubled state but not without welcome changes

KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

PAKISTAN Foreign Minister Kurshid Kasuri is not too happy with the progress of the composite dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad. He suspects that the government of India has deliberately slowed down its pace and he attributes it to "some hawks" in the Ministry of External Affairs. "We know this from our own sources," he says. "But neither the President (Pervez Musharraf) nor I have given up hope despite many Pakistanis blaming us for having been taken for a ride once again."

Kurshid feels personally embarrassed because his reputation is that of a pro-India liberal. Since he has been part of Track II people-to-people contact in the past, he clutches to any straw in the sea of despondency. For example, the day I met him at Islamabad, he saw a positive message in the statement by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that he wanted "out of the box" solutions to settle the country's disputes with neighbours, Pakistan and China.

The breakdown of talks on the Baghban project was on Kurshid's mind. He did not go beyond Pakistan's stated position that India's design of gates was "defective." Yet,

he wished there had been a settlement. He admitted, "all this affects normalisation of relations between the two countries." I told him I could already see the fallout on people-to-people contact. The Pakistan government had refused visas to some 25 NGOs wanting to attend a peace and friendship seminar in Lahore. He said he would look into the matter. I gave details to his ministry's director

and more of peace and friendship. Their warmth towards Indians is overwhelming. The press, including Urdu newspapers, is not that harsh as it was a year ago. Indian films are still banned. But you can see them on TV channels at home or in the comfort of your hotel.

India has suddenly shot up in people's estimate. One, its economic progress is followed admiringly. Two, there is great apprecia-

tion for the country's democratic peaceful change of governments, fair elections and the defined role of the armed forces. A country which has been ruled by the military, off and on, for 45 years in its life span of 57, is understandably envious of free and open society.

Yet, seldom do the press and people in Pakistan join issue with the armed forces. They are conscious of the limit beyond which they cannot go. When a few have crossed it, the punishment has been severe. I did not meet anyone during my four-day stay in Pakistan defending the military rule. But then I also did not meet anyone who would tell me when and how

and that of the chief of army staff is a different story.

The middle class that could challenge the military rule is absorbed in enhancing its standard of living. Economic growth rate is around five per cent and the US aid is substantial, even to finance the students who want to study in America. Vehicles on the road have increased in number. So have people at restaurants and hotels. Shops are well stocked and a large number of customers are milling around the malls and markets. Familiar screaming slogans and posters have disappeared from the roadside walls.

religionists deletion from the Pakistan passport under the government's instructions has evoked opposition from the extremists. My surprise knew no bounds when I found the lady reading news on PTV bareheaded. Pakistan is not a failed state. It is a troubled state. All the four provinces of the country, Baluchistan, Sindh, the NWFP and Punjab are in the midst of one problem or the other. Sectarian violence is increasing, suggesting unrest. Primarily, it is protest against too much centralisation. The one-man rule in the army-led government has emasculated the provincial governments. On the other hand, politicians have very little space to operate from. Both

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BETWEEN THE LINES

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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

There lives a criminal next door whose name is also Munna. Rab showed up one evening to look for Munna, the criminal. You were returning from work having purchased a kitchen knife that your family had asked for. Rab stopped you and asked your name. You replied, "Munna." That's enough to take you into custody and beat the hell out of you before they found out which Munna you actually were. Let's say you survived and while in the hospital you got a chance to read The Daily Star again.

There you see someone writing -- Human Rights Preachers? How would you feel? So many criminals that we need Rab, so many people so we need Tsunami?

Think again.

Concerned citizen

One e-mail

There are so many routes in which the BRTC buses are not allowed to ply which is detrimental to BRTC and its operation. Thanks to the chairman of BRTC for giving an idea of BRTC's financial position. We criticise the public sector enterprises (PSE) often for their poor service without taking into consideration the conditions and environment under which these public sector enterprises operate.

Those who criticise and advocate

its privatisation fail to take into

account the reasons for setting

up these PSEs in the first place,

which is public interest.

We request the chairman of BRTC to

arrange disposal of 100 or so

buses dumped from the eighties

through public auction. The

space so freed can be made use of

for other purposes and the maintenance cost that is incurred recurrently will be saved. Regular auction of the inoperative assets should be made to earn operating assets. The nation waits to see the PSEs profitable, not disinvested. Privatisation frustrates the basic philosophy on which these public enterprises were established.

Tapader Md. Khalilur Rahman

Kazi Para (East)

Rokaya Sarani

Mirpur, Dhaka-1216

Dear readers,

We have a new e-mail address for the Letters to the Editor page.

Please send your letters to

letters@thedadlystar.net

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Blurred image

For months now, your newspaper

has written about the government's failure to protect the Ahmadiyya community of Bangladesh from harassment. I wonder if the government is aware of the New York Times' story this week on Bangladesh, entitled "The next Islamist Revolution"? As it is, Bangladesh is losing out on foreign investment to both India and China. The few foreign companies still willing to come here and help us modernise will surely stay away if such negative portrayals of the country continue in the international media.

This is what we pay for failing to protect our religious minorities.

Zeehan Hasan

Dharmundi, Dhaka

Boston University

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