

Tragedy on the high seas



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

men like Mosaddeq, Himmel, Mizan, and their likes -- all of them unemployed and mostly from low income families -- take the foreign route with dreams of finding better jobs and making better money. While some strike it rich, most end up in hell holes, only to get deported to their home country as paupers. And yet others like the 11 Bangladeshis who perished in the boat tragedy off the coast of Morocco meet an even crueler fate.

It is also the get-rich-quick dream which fuels the vast network of travel agents, manpower recruiting agents, and brokers, many of them fake but notoriously emboldened to run this trafficking business because they enjoy the patronage of a group of law enforcers, passport and immigration personnel, and airport staff, as pointed out by the members of the inter-ministerial body investigating this racket.

While some of these hapless youth are carpenters, masons, plumbers, drivers, or cooks, a majority comprise unskilled labourers with moderate education, and some even have university degrees. Mosaddeq and Himmel were two brothers and had graduated from Tongi College. But shockingly, as it is the case with millions of Bangladeshi youths, these educated youths could not find any suitable job in the country to eke out a living. The prospect of good income, citizenship in a country like either Spain, Italy, Canada, or the US is irresistible, and they become easy prey to the brokers like Raju and Mostak who operate their business flashing a dazzling signboard like Tri-Star Travel Agency. Articulating all the best that the world can give in a printed art paper leaflet and setting up branch offices in district towns and rural places with organizational headquarters in Dhaka, the brokers swoop down on gullible youth folks in villages and townships.

These brokers are often people who have already made one or two trips abroad in search of a job

or have worked for sometime. It so happens that when they contact the travel agents for a second chance to go abroad, the agents instead hire them with attractive commissions to trap young men like Mosaddeq and Himmel. These recruiting agents then start operating in their own village or any relative's villages. Himmel and Mosaddeq were trapped by Raju, a broker and a distant relation from their sister's father-in-law's family. They took 6 lakh taka from each of the group comprising 26 young men, all hailing from Dohar

Not surprisingly, because of the appalling economic situation, lack of employment opportunities in the country, rise of terrorism, partisan conflicts, touts and fake recruiting agents are thriving on clandestine operations to lure the gullible youths with tempting offers of jobs or even citizenship status in countries like Canada, Spain and Italy. Most of the agents are fly-by-night operators having bases in places like Doha, Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, Italy, and Spain. They entice the youths and arrange the deal for payments in a

smuggling. Worsening economic situation and galloping unemployment problem have pushed the country to the edge. Young people who experience the pinch of grinding poverty and unemployment situation at home are desperately trying to flee the country. Taking advantage of the lax monitoring by the administration and police inefficiency, crime of all hues has expanded and has engulfed the whole country. Shady travel agents in the country have been thriving because of police patronage. Unsurprisingly,

inhospitable environment have eventually met death, the racket goes on unhindered.

The question that necessarily arises is why these vibrant youths, bubbling with hope and ambition, are trying to flee the country and jumping on to the high seas that eventually swallow them alive. It is undeniably true, unstable political situation in the country, closure of once vibrant industries like jute, textiles, aluminium, and glass, and consequent lack of employment opportunities have propelled the youths to flee the country in

create programmes for empowering ordinary people by building roads and providing them with electricity, clean water, sanitation, and jobs. Paradoxically true, if you have an educated and technically trained population, especially in the IT sector, then even billionaire Bill Gates will be visiting your country and making substantial investment in the industry. This is what happened in India. Aware of the potential of India as a software power, Bill Gates visited India in 1998 and made heavy investments in IT sector industries in Hyderabad and Bangalore. Thousands of skilled IT specialists having basic training in India are now working in the Silicon Valley in the US.

It is undeniably true that the basic field or infrastructure has to be built in the home country to draw such investments. Despite all the potential of cheap labour, a vast cohort of labour force, and congenial climatic condition, the country remains perpetually poor.

The country is suffering from poverty of ideas and not of resources. The country is poor due entirely to bad governance. Bangladesh could, if it had one decent government, make all the money it needs from tourism. It has the Sunderbans, Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, Kuakata, and the Hill districts with lush green forests and impressive locations. And thousands of youth could be employed in these sites to cater to the needs of the tourists. But it hasn't had a tourism minister who has thought of tourism as a possible means of strengthening the economy. So nobody has built roads, hotels, and other infrastructures like telecom and electricity which benefit not just tourists, but locals too. Tragically all the nods have to come from the top and never a single one travels up. If today the very idea of going to the Sunderbans or Hill districts strikes terror in the heart, it is only because we have so long been ruled by men who consider governance, economics, and infotech as irrelevant matters. Ironically true, the Chittagong hill-

tracts are now the safe abode of the militants.

Politicians and bureaucrats, or rather those who rule us, discovered how easy it was to make huge amounts of money out of keeping Bangladesh poor and undeveloped. We did not even begin to notice that these countries were getting ahead of us because they had realized that prosperity came from sound economic policies, not from political cleverness. The present ruling coalition came to power for the second time with a massive majority in the parliament. The ruling coalition could have done a lot of things for the country had they fixed up their mind to ameliorate the condition of the masses.

In parliament sessions hardly any discussion on salient problems of the country is initiated and hardly any measures are taken on the basis of resolutions adopted in the parliament. Parliament sessions on many days could not progress for lack of quorum. One reason is that the parliament members know that resolutions adopted in the parliament have no bearing implementation process. It is the bureaucrats' decisions that will hold.

Given the political will, the government could have initiated any people-oriented policies it wanted during the last three years -- liberalised the economy, invested heavily in infrastructure, improved literacy rate and the quality of education, changed health care methods, brought about massive judicial reforms -- and today we could have been a much richer country instead of languishing among the 100 odd poorest countries in the world.

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Reports have it that Raju and Mostak, owner of Dohar Travels, and Abdus Salam Mia, owner of Al Salam Overseas Agency, operating a clandestine recruiting business in collusion with officials in the government circles, have so far sent 500 young men to different places in Europe, most of whom are now languishing in different jails in Europe. The smuggling of illegal migrants is a thriving few hundred crore taka a year industry. On an average, a few thousand youth are illegally sent to different countries every month through a well-knit network of shady travel agents who have links with local touts and international syndicates. The going rate for the US and Canada is as high as Tk 6 lakh to Tk 8 lakh, for Europe it is Tk 4 lakh to Tk 5 lakh, while for the Gulf countries they charge up to 3 lakh per person. According to trade sources, nearly 50 percent of the money changes hands as bribes to officials in embassies, immigration and airport staff, and the police. The rest is shared as profits.

phased manner. Another trick used by such agents is to spread rumours about the foreign countries offering amnesty or regular citizen status to the illegal immigrants if they can reach these places by a certain deadline.

That's the trick manpower agents Monir and Liton of Linkan Travels reportedly resorted to when they sent 24 Bangladeshis to Italy last year. They were taken to the West African country Mali first and thrown in the Sahara desert where they wandered for some days without food and water. On receiving information, local police airlifted them by a helicopter only to send them to jail where they spent about 11 months. The incident although dating back a year, only came to light when IOM repatriated them to Bangladesh last March 19.

Because the economy of the most desired destinations are not as booming as they were before, most of them, including the US, Canada, UK, Italy, Greece, and Spain, have closed their doors against migrant workers and have tightened their asylum laws. Still, there has been no let up in human

the routes that the agents follow change according to immigration laws and visa regulations.

The arrest of Abdus Salam Mia, owner of Al Salam Overseas, has shed light on the modus operandi of smuggling youths into foreign countries. While a lesser accomplice Abdus Salam Mia has been arrested, the bigwigs, namely Raju and Mostak, who took the hapless 26 Bangladeshis to Dohar are now on the run.

It has been reported that Mostak and Raju took Tk.6 lakh from each of the 26 Bangladeshis mostly hailing from Dohar and Gazipur in Dhaka district. One reason for the thriving of this lucrative racket is the multiplicity of agencies and lack of coordination among them. Hundreds of illegal workers sent by such fake and unscrupulous manpower agencies to Malaysia on forged documents have been hiding in the jungles of Malaysia for fear of police action and imprisonment and some wary of hunger and exhaustion in the

search of jobs and better living elsewhere.

In our 35th year of independence there is no greater shame than the fact that nearly half our people live in such appalling poverty and that so many of them have to go away from the country to escape deprivation and misery. Was it democracy that prevented investments in roads, electricity and the sort of agro-based industries, and most important of all, investment in education, that would have created jobs in rural Bangladesh?

Most of the disillusioned and frustrated youth are in search of a dream and the dream is a promised land called America. But the dream eventually has turned sour. During the last few years beginning with 9/11 the US has closed its doors. Since the Iraq war began, so have many of the Gulf countries. It is the government's failure to create jobs by setting up labour intensive industries in the country that ultimately put the working population in such a critical situation.

The government needed to

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The politics of representation after 9/11

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ATER the horrific event of September 11, 2001, scholars and policy-makers in the West are preoccupied with issues like security and emerging relations between Muslims and the US. The relations have focused on international terrorism, change of regimes, economic and political development, and the promotion of Western democracy and human rights. To suggest that these issues exhaust the content of the relations, however, obscures the productivity of the practices that have been important aspects of these relations.

In other words, the various issues that have been central to the relations between Muslims and the US have been characterized by practices that have been implicated in the production of meanings and identities. These meanings and identities cannot be separated from the relations that have developed between Muslims and the US. In contrast to the traditional orientations, I suggest that the relations have been more than these issues; rather, the practices of representation of meanings and identities of these relations.

By representation, I mean the ways in which Muslims have been discursively represented by policy-makers, scholars, journalists, and the others in the United States and its close allies. This does not refer to the "truth" and "knowledge" that the center of capitalist power, the US, has discovered and accumulated about Muslims, but rather to the ways in which regimes of "truth" and "knowledge" have been produced and constructed in order to justify governance and certain interventions.

Although the construction and representation of Muslims in the Western discourse started long before, it became quite apparent after the Cold War, and more intense after September 11, 2001. After the collapse of the USSR, the center of capitalist power did not have any common enemy, and hence a new domain of thought was necessary to construct. Different intellectuals emerged in the US to construct this "new enemy." Not only that, they also

constructed the world as a "unipolar" one in which the US is the only superpower able to dominate world politics. This kind of construction has two dreadful consequences.

First, it gives an unprecedented status to the US and encourages it to strengthen its domination over the globe at any cost. Secondly, it overlooks and questions the legitimacy and compatibility of other civilizations alongside the American one. For instance, Samuel Huntington, in his theory, "the clash of civilization," constructs a future clash between

monolithic entity despite their political, religious and cultural diversity, and how the horrific actions of a handful of fundamentalists, a tiny deviated fraction of the whole Muslim spectrum, are made a representation for the whole community, in other words, how Muslims are often judged en masse by the standards of their worst representatives. In the Western media and academia, Muslims are discursively constructed as the "other." Many of these constructions equate Islam with evil through portrayals of Muslims as an irrational,

Muslims in the Western discourse is painful, yet interesting. Muslims have been constructed with negativity as opposed to the positivity of the West. "America was targeted for attack," said President Bush, "because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world."

"This conflict," he continues, "is a fight to save the civilized world," because the terrorists hate freedom and democracy. The President's declaration: "You are with us or you are with the terrorists" implies a binary construction of spaces. The social

If Islam/Muslim is juxtaposed with the US, and the relation is constructed in such a way that the former is inimical/antithetical to the latter, then the survival of each increasingly depends on the limiting autonomy (power) of the other. The US had this inimical relation with the former USSR, and the end result was the collapse of one!

civilizations, and he suggests that the US dismantle and emasculate any kind of military as well as economic build-up in other countries especially in the East, and to exploit their differences. Many critics think, this kind of construction is an intellectual blunder as it precludes peaceful co-existence.

As the "Muslims" appeared as a "domain of thought" in Western discourse, Muslim societies witnessed a massive landing of experts, mostly Western, each in charge of investigating, measuring, and theorizing about this or that little aspect of Muslim societies. The proliferation of experts on the "Muslim issue" in the West became more intense after 9/11, and Muslims became an "object of knowledge" and a "new problematization" in the Western discourse. It is interesting, yet an irony, to see how various "problems" were gradually and suddenly discovered in Muslim societies and Muslims were problematized and constructed with various negative images in the Western discourse, and how one-fifth of the world population was put under a regime of control and intervention by these discursive practices.

It is remarkable to see how Muslims were treated as a homogeneous mass or a

uncivilized, threatening and uniquely fundamentalist "other."

"Islam has attacked us," said Franklin Graham in North Carolina shortly after the September 11 attacks (NBC Nightly News, November 16, 2001). Like his father, the Revered Billy Graham, Franklin Graham is one of America's most powerful evangelical leaders. He delivered the benediction at George W. Bush's inauguration, and is heir to his father's extensive ministry.

Americans of all faiths were asked to embrace one another and unite against terrorism. Mr. Graham's words, however, dismiss any interfaith dialogue: "The God of Islam is not the same God," he alleged. "Islam," Mr. Graham concluded, "is a very evil and wicked religion."

Mr. Graham's perception of Islam as an "evil" religion strikes a familiar tone in the United States. Here, hostilities with elements within the Muslim world are commonly constructed and presented as a conflict between good and evil. President Bush responded to the September 11 attacks by launching a "crusade" against terrorism. He promises to "rid the world of evil," to "fight the evil ones," and has invented an "axis of evil" constituted primarily of Muslim nations.

The discursive construction of

production of space implicit in these terms is bound with the production of difference, subjectivities, and social order. This distance, which is not a simple marker of cultural diversity, is branded with inferiority and negativity (terrorist, evil, militant, backward, underdeveloped, poor, lacking, traditional, and so forth).

When these kinds of negative images are constructed on a group of people, they automatically become preamble to certain treatments and interventions, and thus, the former justifies the latter. The construction and representation of Muslims as "others" by different negative images has some obvious implications. First, it limits the social space of Muslims in the West. Starting from their inner-self to the job market to the global arena, Muslims suffer from a considerable amount of distress, lack of a sense of belonging, and massive insecurity. Second, the displacement of Muslims from the West becomes legitimate. As the general public starts viewing Muslims as a potential threat to the West, any form of physical and cultural violence towards them goes on without any major challenge and protest. The oppression of Muslims does not create any sympathy in the minds of the Western people. Third, from the

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