

The Prophet of Islam

An ever shining light

EID-E-MILADUNNABI, marking the birth and death anniversaries of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), is being celebrated in the Islamic world with great solemnity and fervour. To the Muslims, the day bears special significance as Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) appeared in the deserts of Arabia as the saviour of a people steeped in darkness more than 1400 years ago. He accomplished his mission of salvaging humanity with remarkable success. His message of peace and brotherhood has earned him a permanent place in the hearts of not only Muslims but also followers of other religions. With the vast moral influence that he wielded, the Prophet transformed the nomadic Arabs, plagued by a plethora of social ills and sunk in the depths of hedonic abyss, into an enlightened and disciplined nation.

The day is an occasion to remember with a sense of gratitude the debt that mankind owes to this great man. But it is a matter of regret that the values he truly championed to ensure universal peace and tolerance is sought to be misinterpreted by a minuscule minority, totally unconcerned that it is going to be at the expense of the common civilisational march towards fulfillment of a universal goal for collective human advancement and weal. The Prophet took an uncompromising stand against all kinds of injustice and inequity. And, under no circumstances did he approve of violence and senseless bloodletting. However, in today's global context what we observe are vile attempts at misrepresenting what Islam stands for and abusing religion for political purposes and with other ulterior motives. We also witness that some mavericks with a mischievous bent of utter irresponsibility towards the task of defending equilibrium in societies are raring to foment rift across them with creepy sophistry.

It is with a sense of great recognition of the Prophet's achievements that GB Shaw said, "If Muhammad (pbuh) were alive today, he would succeed in solving all those problems which threaten to destroy human civilisation in our times." We must not miss the point that his teachings are alive, which can help us resolve communal, sectarian and all other types of conflicts and establish peace and justice on a durable basis all over the world.

Simmering Kansat

Important to handle crisis with maturity

THE tense situation in Kansat may have been artificially defused due to the imposition of a ban on public gatherings, but as an astute action on the part of the High Court in a public interest litigation shows, there is so much for the government to account for.

The tension in Kansat, which has as its root the failure of the government to be able to provide an adequate supply of electricity to the area and then the shocking violence with which the ensuing protests were met by the authorities, still needs to be faced squarely.

In the first place, the question as to why the area was being so starved of power that the locals were forced to demonstrate must be addressed. The government must come up with some explanation for its inability to provide this basic service and corrective action must be taken.

The next question raises the issue of the administration's brutal response that left 10 dead and the continuing violence attributed to ruling alliance affiliated activists which has killed four more in the past few days.

As many as 14 people killed in a small place like Kansat demonstrates the absurdity of how a grossly mishandled simple grievance-related issue could snowball into such tragic repercussions.

The High Court verdict is a good start. In its rule, these questions have been put to the government: why no electricity, why no compensation, explain the firings. This is as it should be. The administration must be held accountable both for its initial failure and also for its provocative response that ignored the roots of the problem.

There remains a suspicion that the local authorities are planning to use the restrictive laws as cover to continue to target the leaders of the protests. This is regrettable.

It smacks of the same high-handed official approach that ended up leaving 14 people dead in the first place. The government must not compound its initial error by continuing to respond to the crisis with denial and oppression in any form or shape.

The court process represents the best way to sort out this mess. The government will be well-advised not use any heavy-handed police or extra-judicial means to deal with the situation, which will only make things worse. Rather than going for witch-hunting, they should do the much-awaited damage control exercise and provide the people with the power supply they can't do without.

No more Spectrums!

A call for corporate responsibility

The question of compensation needs to be taken up more seriously through appropriate court intervention or legislative changes. Currently industrial giants have found an escape in archaic laws to part with Tk 21,000 in case of a worker's death. How can anyone assume that this paltry amount would compensate for a worker who was in the prime of his/her life, and would have supported several dependents for their basic needs of food security, education and health?

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

LAST year on April 11, 2005, 73 workers died and 84 were reported to have been grievously injured in Polashbari, Savar, following the collapse of the building housing the Spectrum Sweater Industries.

There was a hue and cry not only from the families of the dead workers. Widespread condemnation for gross criminal negligence was followed by demands for attributing liability of the owners, the trade association and regulatory agencies.

The publicity this incident received both at home and abroad prompted renewed promises from the BGMEA and BKMEA for steps to ensure safety measures. Some payments by way of compensation were also promised to the families of the dead workers.

But promises are soon forgotten in Bangladesh as economic and political interests prevail. Before the year was out BGMEA's promise was put to the test again as one of its members KTS Textile and Garment Industries in Kalurghat caught fire on February 23, 2006. The gates were locked, the internal stairs were blocked with goods and there was no alternate exit.

The official death toll was

estimated at 63; over a hundred were injured and of these 49 were admitted to hospital. Thirteen workers were under treatment for critical burns in Chittagong Medical College Hospital and in the Burn Unit in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Later three of them were reported to have succumbed to burn injuries. Many others injured were given medical care by voluntary organizations, and they were not listed amongst casualties.

A day later, faulty construction, to convert the former Phoenix Garments Building into a five hundred bed hospital, led to its sudden collapse, killing at least 22 construction workers and injuring 42. In all three incidents there was no accounting for the many missing, because the rescue operations were themselves handicapped by inadequate equipments and expertise.

In fact the garment export industry could have avoided its reputation as a death trap if it had paid attention to court orders to correct its defaults:

- In 2001 the High Court directed that government agencies and BGMEA set up a National Commission of Enquiry to investigate the causes of industrial disasters and to take appropriate remedial measures; it called for workers' representation in this body. This was not complied with.

which factories keep their gates closed, their stairs blocked. They have also given notice to factories to construct alternative exit stairs within 45 days of the notice, that is by now.

Fair enough. But how transparent and credible are these inspections likely to be? Even if they include representatives of two regulatory agencies, the Inspector of Factories and the Fire Service Department, we know how prone they have been to evade their responsibilities in the first place. The inspection teams include no workers' representatives. The inspection is supposed to have started from 1 April, but, except for an initial findings against 53 factories, the public has not been informed regularly of its outcome. A weekly record of factories visited by the teams and those found defaulting would go some way to establish credibility.

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● In 2005, the High Court again pressed for reports on the causes of fire accidents and measures to prevent such accidents. While the BGMEA submitted a report by its engineers that indicated that the construction faults led to the collapse of Spectrum Sweater Industries, the Inspector of Factories and the Director General of Fire Services did not submit any report.

- The High Court also gave directions that the Bangladesh Bank reject loan applications from factories that have not obtained proper licences from the regulatory bodies and clearance from the BGMEA and BKMEA. Has the Bank observed these directions?

- In 2006, the High Court has once again asked for compliance with its previous directions and has called for payment of appropriate compensation to families of dead workers and for the treatment and rehabilitation of injured workers. These directions have yet to be complied with.

The court hearings in the KTS case are due. There is a pressing need for compliance so workers can meet the orders without fear of being trapped in an inferno. With international buyers subject to embarrassing questions by their consumers, and the national media echoing citizens' concerns, the pressure is rising on the industry for workplace compliance.

But the efforts of the BGMEA may not go far enough to avoid workplace casualties, if its monitoring is limited to only three specifications. It is necessary for garment factories to ensure safety by checking on the wiring, maintaining dual exits on every floor, and installing equipment such as smoke and heat warning signals, sand

buckets, etc. In addition the fire drills need to be done more seriously and not as tokenism. An efficient, conscientious, industrial management is essential to maintain a competitive advantage; merely lowering production cost is not the only variable.

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- Design stronger, regulatory measures to prevent work place fires due to faulty wiring or other construction defects.

- Introduce practices such as regular fire drills, maintaining open exits to prevent stampedes. Maintain fire drill records.

- Organize and train workers' teams on each floor to ensure disciplined egress during fire accidents.

- Restructure the Inspectorate of Factories for efficient enforcement of its responsibilities; to ensure that all safety conditions are in place before licensing factories.

- Set up a tripartite system for monitoring and inspection of safety conditions, to include workers and human rights organizations, in the interest of transparency and efficiency, and to make the reports public.

- Calculate compensation for death and injury commensurate to the loss incurred in each case.

- Allot public land with proper infrastructure, without delay, and relocate factories away from congested urban areas.

It is time that both the state and the industry recognize their responsibility to workers, and not merely gloat over the foreign exchange accumulated from its exports. They have not only legal responsibility but a moral obligation towards maintaining a healthy industry.

concern for workers injured in the KTS fire but even so their long term rehabilitation needs have been left unaddressed.

Compliance with safety conditions can be met by both short term measures and long term planning to:

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Hameeda Hossain is convenor of the Sromik Nirapota Forum.

Rough ride in US Congress



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

Even if the deal gets ratified by Congress, it will face obstacles in the 45-state Nuclear Suppliers' Group. Washington's recent informal consultations with the NSG didn't produce the desired result. Japan vocally criticised the deal. China and the Scandinavian countries too expressed reservations. There may be opposition from Germany, South Africa, Brazil and Argentina too. Whatever happens, New Delhi has no fall-back option. It's unprepared for the deal's collapse. It has staked everything on it -- to the point of abandoning sovereign policies on Iran, the economy and trade. The deal's collapse will create bitter anti-US resentment among the Indian public.

by the Bush administration in the Congress to facilitate the resumption of nuclear commerce with India.

Why has this happened? The answer lies in three factors. The deal's proponents grossly overestimated likely bipartisan support.

But no ranking Democrat has full-throatedly backed the deal without reservations -- although none has said they would block it.

Senators John Kerry and Joseph Biden have softened their stand vis-a-vis the nuclear deal. But it's not clear that they will vote for the administration's bill as it stands.

These lobbies would like to test the claim that India is indeed becoming one of America's closest allies and a dependable counterweight to China, Cuba, Iran and the movement for Palestinian nationhood. This will involve severe erosion of India's foreign policy options.

A third factor is Bush's finalisation of the deal without consulting his foreign-affairs bureaucracy, influential Congressmen, White House staff or government nuclear specialists. An April 3-4 Washington Post report documents how Mr Bush and Ms Rice

wants to make the deal conditional upon tangible changes in India's position on Iran, Palestine and Non-Aligned.

The Zionists would like India to have no truck with the Hamas-dominated government in Palestine, although that group won a free and fair election. Anti-Castro Cuban-Americans too want India to disassociate itself from the Non-Aligned Movement whose next summit is due in Havana.

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is well-nigh non-existent. That risks dismantling the agreement.

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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.

Blurred image of politics

The government appears to be too lenient with the city corporations. The lax attitudes towards the staff increase the systems loss, and the cities look dirty, and "fatherless"!

The society lacks discipline hence the bosses have to be more strict; more so when 'corruption is added to the list, plus political nepotism. The political image has been badly mauled. The glamour has gone from politics, but not the black wealth. This is a new type of feudalism. Our freedom is at stake.

Alif Zabir, Dhaka

Why are we poor?

This is in response to Miraz Ahmed's opinion on "Why are we poor?". The last sentence "Is there anyone to help us?" attracted me most. We the young generation need to change the concept of help from others and dependency. Why

What does it mean?

I came across a banner in the lobby of a hospital in Dhanmondi. The text was as follows:

"We seek your support to frustrate unhygienic attempts of vested quarters to turn Bangladesh into a market of foreign hospitals."

Why does the banner use the word "unhygienic"? What does it mean?

Shafirul Rahman

Cambridge, UK

Bird flu