

## Children in hazardous occupation

*What the law can't do, awareness can*

OUT of a total of 74 lakh engaged in child labour all over the country as many as 13 lakh children are trying to make a living out of most hazardous occupation such as work in motor garages and workshops that include welding shops, too. They are mostly concentrated in and around the capital city. Boys and girls are often required to work from 7am through 7pm and that too without pay at least initially. The employers justify non-payment of remuneration on the ground that these children are receiving hands-on training free of charge. Payment of remuneration will be considered only after completion of the "apprenticeship" that may take at least as long as a year.

According to a joint survey conducted by Unicef and ILO, children in Bangladesh are involved in 49 categories of hazardous work. It is interesting to note that Bangladesh has identified only 21 categories as hazardous for children.

It is of some consolation however that the draft policy document covering this issue that was prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Employment as early as June last year will be presented before the Council of Advisers next month for approval. The draft document contains a proposal that no one below the age of 18 is to be engaged in any occupation perceived to be hazardous for children. It is worthwhile to note that such work is banned by virtue of the Workers' Compensation Act, 1923, the Children's Employment Act, 1938 and the Child Rights Convention of the UN.

Be that as it may, it must be said, that child labour situation with its various compulsive factors and dimensions in Bangladesh could neither be regulated nor improved upon through legislation, enactment or declarations. Side by side with laws and regulatory measures, we need to implement more and more forward looking projects like the "basic education for hard-to-reach urban working children" that aims at imparting skill to as many as two lakh children between the age 10 and 14 to help them earn a living with a certain level of dignity eventually. On the other hand, alongside such projects, we need to build comprehensive social awareness, understanding and appreciation of the stakes involved in child labour.

The ILO convention 2001 relating to the most degrading forms of child labour has been ratified by us, but we are yet to live up to it. So, the sensitisation programme should be targeted to the employers as well.

We have already neglected our children, for too long, particularly those belonging to the poor and the disadvantaged segments. There should be synchronised efforts by the government, NGOs and the media to address the issues of child labour based on awareness building across the country.

## Events in Turkey

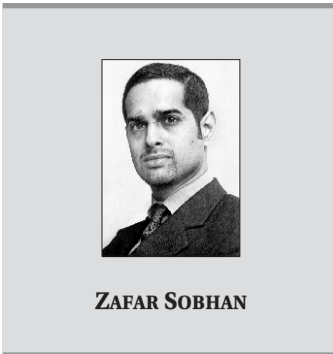
*Maintaining political stability is important*

POLITICS in Turkey these days is in a state of ferment. For once in a long time, the question of secularism has come up in a country now governed by Islamists, of the mild sort. Briefly, this is the story: millions of Turks came out on the streets in Ankara and Istanbul to protest moves by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to be a candidate for the presidency as President Necdet Sezer's term reaches an end. Their fear was Erdogan would take Turkey towards an Islamist orientation and thus upset the political order left in place by the state's founder Kamal Ataturk. The prime minister was then forced to nominate his foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, for the presidency. Mr. Gul failed to get elected on the first ballot. And then the Constitutional Court annulled the vote itself, a move Mr. Erdogan swiftly denounced.

All of this raises the very important question of Turkey's place in the world. In these past few years, the Erdogan government has provided stability to the country and at the same time has convinced the European Union that Ankara deserves to be considered for membership in it. He has made sure that his Islamist leanings do not come in the way of governance, though there are good reasons to think that his being in power has emboldened a large section of Turks into thinking that their country needs to move into an Islamic direction. That was enough to alarm the military, which has traditionally been the guarantor of Turkey's secularism. The last time the army moved in to ensure the continuity of secular democracy was when it forced the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan from prime ministerial office. Erdogan has turned out to be different from Erbakan, if only for strategic reasons. He has little record of trying to undermine the existing foundations of the state. That of course did not stop the soldiers from worrying. They made sure, through a clear behind the scenes role in the demonstrations against the prime minister, that enough voices were raised for secularism in order for Erdogan to back down.

Now that the prime minister has suggested new elections as a way of getting Turkey out of its crisis, it will be interesting to see how the secular opposition and the military respond. It will be unfortunate if Turkey is pushed into uncertainty after all these years of political and economic stability.

## Freedom from fear



ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHAT was the worst thing about pre-January 11 Bangladesh? Different people will have different answers to this question: some would point to the unbridled corruption that reached its tentacles into every corner of the country's affairs, some would say that it was the culture of complete lack of transparency and accountability.

Some others might suggest the absence of any kind of rule of law which meant that the powerful could do whatever they wanted with virtual impunity. Then again, some might point to the lack of opportunities or the government's inability to (or unwillingness) to focus on the concerns of the poor.

I would suggest that the worst aspect of pre-January 11 Bangladesh -- and a failing that encompasses many of the above complaints (many of which are inter-connected) -- can be classi-

**STRAIGHT TALK**  
So, whatever we do and whatever else is going on, I would suggest that the most important task before the interim government is to remove this uncertainty and fear from the air. If that were done, then the benefits -- to the country, to the individual, and to the government -- would be incalculable.

fied under the rubric of lack of human security.

Human security, which can also be understood as freedom from fear, has two components. The first is a simple law and order equation: Can the government of the day ensure my safety and security from non-state actors?

However, far more salient is the second component of human security: Can the government of the day ensure my safety and security from the state (or its representatives) itself? In the context of Bangladesh, this is an especially relevant question, as the bulk of the insecurity that everyday men and women have had to suffer through the years has come at the hands of representatives of the state.

In other words, it is not so much non-state actors but state actors that we need protection from -- i.e. from the police, from Rab, and even when it is non-state actors (e.g. common criminals or

mastans) the bulk of the threat comes from those who are politically connected, which again implicates state actors. Similarly, the nexus between criminals and the police and the courts is again a function of the individual being persecuted by the state's actions and inactions.

To me, human security is the bare minimum. The absolute minimum I expect from any government is that it keeps me safe and protects my security. Specifically, I would expect that it keep me safe from its own clutches. This, to me, is the overriding responsibility of a government. If it cannot keep me safe from non-state actors, then, at the very least, I should not have to worry about my safety at the hands of state actors.

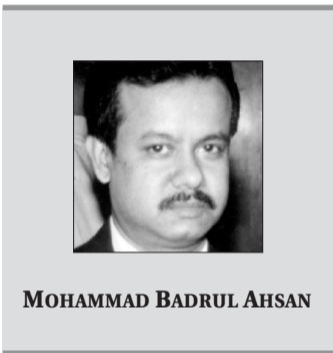
Nor do I think that this is an elite/urban concern. Indeed, I would argue that this concern is heightened the further down the social and economic ladder you

go. The less money and status you have, the more vulnerable you are, both to common or garden crooks and also to persecution at the hands of the authorities. You are more likely to have to pay tolls and extortions, to have to worry about physical and sexual assault, and will have even less ability to access the courts and police stations to seek redress for your grievances.

Human security is the cornerstone of existence. If we can be secure in our person and effects, then the rest will follow. If we are not secure in our person and properties, then everything else is evanescent and ephemeral, everything we have can be taken away from us at a moment's notice.

So, when I look at the current government, this is the question I ask: Are we now more secure than we were before January 11? And in judging what comes after the current dispensation, the question that I would ask is the same: Will we be more secure than we were

## Giornata



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE carpenter sat down in a corner of the roof where the coconut fronds spread out like an umbrella. He sat down with a glass of sugar water in one hand and a few loaves of bread in another, love of god burning in his heart. Then he took a deep breath, as if good preparation was half the appetite, before he realized that the air was still filled with the smell of death.

He returned to work after forty days of mourning for the owner of the house, who had abruptly died in the middle of a night. But since this morning he couldn't concentrate on his work, thinking of death as he took out the auger, hammer, crimper, bench vise, handsaw, awl, screwdriver, plane and chisel from his tool box, and then laid them out on the roof. From time to time he shook up with a start, as if the dead man was standing next to him and supervising the work.

When he took the first bite of bread, it tasted watery and bland

**CROSS TALK**  
The widow of the dead man had come up on the roof, carrying bundles of wet washing in her hand and she threw them across the rope one by one before spreading them out like curtains in the wind. The woman in her mid-fifties looked older than her age, her face shriveled and puckered with locks of wispy hairs hanging around it. She walked with a stoop, unaware that the hem of her petticoat, hanging below the carelessly fixed sari, was dragging on the floor.

and he wished he had more sugar to put in the water. He has been eating this diet of sugar water and bread everyday for lunch, except when asked to eat in the houses where he goes to work. But he could never buy enough sugar to sweeten the water. His father told him it was a tragedy of life that one could never get enough of one's choice.

After the lunch, the carpenter lighted a cheap cigarette, one that brews a deadly storm inside his chest every time he inhales the smoke. Soon a cloud of smoke hung over his head, and he swept the air with his head and then started to cough with the sound of a long-drawn sneeze followed by jittery hiccups. He eyed the roughly-hewn pieces of wood which were lying in a pile of wood shaving and sawdust. They reminded him of the dead man who had commissioned him to do this work.

He held his hands in front of his eyes and then turned them to see both the front and the back and said to himself that carpen-

ters were like morticians. The living tree is felled and chopped, and then scaled and chiseled, grooved and hollowed out as if to embalm its body limb by limb. In his life he has made countless furniture, the skin of his palms and fingers thickened like the leather strop used by barbers to sharpen their razors. His hands have held the tools so many times to prepare tree after tree for burial.

The summer wind swept like the wailing voice of thousand spirits and dispersed sorrow over the roof. The carpenter felt drowsy in the sweltering heat as the angry sun burned above his head, and spread his legs straight on the roof while leaning his torso against the railing, overcome by a sudden sense of lightness as if the limbs had fallen off his body. His eyes burned in the rising vapour and tears welled up when he tried to remember the departed souls, how they left one by one, leaving a lengthening trail of memories, people who walked on this earth with him,

loved him, fought with him, sang and danced and then disappeared like shadows at the burst of light.

The carpenter remembered his parents, his first wife, friends, neighbours and acquaintances, familiar faces which shuffled and marched into the gorge of death. He wept for all of them, because it seemed that their loss had peeled away his own life. He lowered them to the grave, mates of life wrapped in white shroud like merchandises unloaded from a cargo ship. His wife sat next to him and said that death was such a departure from life that those who went away never returned.

But of all deaths, this one death devastated him most. It hurt him more than it would if he were to mourn his own death. A vacuous gurgle came out of his mouth which sounded like suction of air and then a spurt of saliva drooled out of his mouth. The carpenter felt numb and heady as the heat soaked through his skin, but the sound of foot-

before January 11?

What kind of security should we expect and demand from our government? The security that we will not be killed in cross-fire. The security that we will not be subjected to any extra-judicial punishment. The security that we will not be subject to arbitrary arrest. The security that we will not have to worry about being disappeared. These kinds of abuses were routine prior to January 11, and to the extent that they are still happening and that they may still continue in the future, are serious cause for concern.

Freedom from fear is the most important of freedoms. If you don't have that, you don't have anything. No freedom of the press -- who would dare criticize the government in such a climate? No accountability -- how can one begin to petition for redress if such petitioning earns one a one-way ticket to the slammer? No peace of mind -- how can we enjoy anything if we are constantly looking over our shoulders or weighing every word, wondering whether this will lead to a phone call or a late night visit from the authorities?.

So, whatever we do and whatever else is going on, I would suggest that the most important task before the interim government is to remove this uncertainty and

steps on the stairs knocked him out of the drowsy spell and he calculated that his lunch break was over.

The widow of the dead man had come up on the roof, carrying bundles of wet washing in her hand and she threw them across the rope one by one before spreading them out like curtains in the wind. The woman in her mid-fifties looked older than her age, her face shriveled and puckered with locks of wispy hairs hanging around it. She walked with a stoop, unaware that the hem of her petticoat, hanging below the carelessly fixed sari, was dragging on the floor.

She ducked under the rope and crossed over to the other side and asked why it was taking so long to make one piece of furniture. The humorous slant ringing in her voice embarrassed the carpenter and he opened his mouth to explain that he had started only three days before her husband died and then the work was held up for forty long days. But then he took pity on the woman who had only recently lost her loved one and controlled his emotions.

Then the carpenter begged her leave to ask a question and while craning the neck over the railing she told him to go ahead. He cleared his throat with an emphatic cough so that what he was about to ask was loud and clear. She turned around when

fear from the air. If that were done, then the benefits -- to the country, to the individual, and to the government -- would be incalculable.

At a very basic level, creating a climate of security, free from fear, is simply the right thing to do, and the benefits are self-evident. Life without security is no life. But, beyond that, the pragmatic benefits for the country would be immense.

Think of the creative energy that would be unleashed if the people of Bangladesh were able to feel fully secure in their persons and properties. Think of the knock-on effect to the economy if people didn't have to fear repercussions for whistle-blowing or uncovering corruption.

So let's judge this current interim government by how successfully it is able to create this atmosphere -- and let us look at any future government according to the same lights. If they succeed in ensuring our security and freeing us from fear, then I will think that maybe, at long last, we are getting somewhere as a nation. But if they do not, and all we can look forward to are more years of looking over our shoulders, then it isn't entirely apparent to me how this would be different from where we were on January 10.

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he asked his question and then walked towards him before pulling a piece of wood from the stack and sat on it.

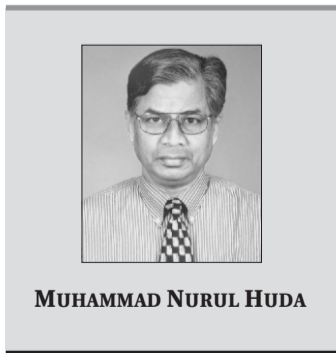
She narrated the last hours of her husband when doctors had pronounced him three-fourth dead, his arms and legs were numb and cold, his body turned inert right up to the chest where his last breath was trapped like a bird in the cage. Tears rolled down her cheeks as the stupefied carpenter looked her in the face. Her husband was a brave man she said, who buried their three grownup sons and then lived to see their only daughter go insane.

He often said that the mural artists planned it out when they started painting a picture. They paint it section by section, each day's completed work being called a giornata. The showcase was his last wish where he wanted to put the mementos of their children as if to gather all them in one place once again. The world should know that what he painted was quickly erased.

She would spend the remainder of her life dusting and arranging the showcase. It would be her giornata to remember everyday what she would like to forget. The carpenter returned to work, and tried to think if he should put more sugar in his lunch tomorrow.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## The enormity of our political reforms



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE desire and demand for substantive political reforms and, thus, a healthy and clean body-politics is understood and appreciated. The question is, do we have a clear grasp of the enormity of the task ahead? The suspicion is that many of us do not realize how deeply mired we are in irregularities. In other words, have we ventured to ascertain whether disobedience to law has become a way of life for the dominant section of the population? Have we institutionalized and, therefore, culturally internalized many vices?

There is no denying that in Bangladesh we have scant concern for public good, and far too few citizens are

**STRAIGHT LINE**  
With a powerful, effective, and financially viable local government the changes at the national level would not affect people's lives. That, however, is a tall ask requiring large-scale de-feudalization of the mindset of the political class. A process of reform, and the ability to implement it in a city or in sectors like primary education, public transport, sanitation and basic health care, could be the test of the politicians. Do we have the political will to take bold and far-reaching decisions?

interested in public welfare. Discharging the statutory duty of protecting national assets has not received any priority.

Our legal system has been forced into making life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens. The once regular and now intermittent killing of persons, often in broad daylight, by state agencies under the garb of so-called crossfires arouses as little public attention as the going down of the sun in the evening.

Our politicians are largely preoccupied in maintaining a system, which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. They are

served by deception and craftiness, instead of vision and imagination, while our political institutions have not acquired durability through age and tradition.

Additionally, our economic growth does not make up for the weaknesses of the political institutions. The danger is that we do not have a resilient economy, but are burdened with the handicap of fragile institutions and a constitution, which is looked upon by politicians as being so pliant that it can be bent to any whim or caprice of the ruling clan.

The spirit of moderation has not prevailed in our political discourses and, as a result, our society had degenerated

into divisions and hatred has replaced goodwill. We do not realize that we need to do away with that temper which presses a partisan advantage to its bitter end, which does not respect and understand the other side. We are yet to witness the practice of consent and compromise that are attributes of mature political societies.

Our first task is to have leadership at all levels, from the prime minister's to the Union Council's. True leadership is the exact opposite of the concentration of all power and decision making authority in one individual.

In our political arena there are well-dressed foolish ideas, just as there are

well-dressed fools. So we should be able to recognize them as such. It is not the members of parliament, dressed in brief authority, who are supreme. It is the constitution, which is supreme. It is the people who are supreme, and it is they who have given the constitution unto themselves.

Moves for effecting internal democracy in our political parties will not succeed if the profligates continue to be rewarded because they flatter the leadership in order to betray them. Talented people must take to public life, however distasteful it may be, if democracy is to survive in Bangladesh. The opting out of the democratic process by the honest and knowledgeable persons should end.

The process of voting ignorant professional politicians to power should be gradually reversed, because the time has come when citizens must wrest the initiative from professional politicians. Simultaneously, there is a pressing need for an intelligent organisation of voters along the line of the initiative demonstrated by the civil society movements and eminent persons in Bangladesh. Public life cannot be cleansed unless

individuals of talent and integrity enter politics.

The political party system takes grievous toll of a member's independence, individual judgment and freedom of action, but the system does bring about coherence and unity of purpose in the actual working of democracy. The right man in the wrong party should be preferable to the wrong man in the right party.

Democracy is admittedly the most difficult of all forms of government, as it requires the widest spread of intelligence. It appears that we have forgotten to make ourselves intelligent after we became sovereign. Ignorance has been sustained for too long and, as such, it has been possible to fool enough people to be able to rule a large democracy. We have not progressed in the desired manner because knowledge and power have resided in different compartments in Bangladesh.

We can make some desirable changes in our fundamental laws without amending the constitution. Firstly, the election commission should recognize no political party unless it is willing to maintain audited accounts of

all its receipts and expenditure. A mere addition of a section in the Peoples Representation Order will be sufficient for effecting the change.

Secondly, some minimum qualifications should be prescribed for those who seek election to Parliament. The present qualifications of citizenship and age are matters involving accident of birth and the result of inexorable passage of time.

Thirdly, some percentage of parliamentary seats may be reserved for election on the basis of proportional representation. The advantage of proportional representation is that it would enable the voice of the significant segments of the public to be heard in Parliament.

Real democracy, consequent upon substantive political reforms, cannot come by the acquisition of authority by a few. It will come through the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused.

For political reforms in Bangladesh, in so far as the functioning of political parties is concerned, we have to do away with the patron-client relationship. The need of the hour is institutional devel-

opment, which, indeed, might prove to be very painful. Habits die hard. This is so because we have a "rentier culture," where the strongly held belief is that wealth is created through political power.

Instead of focusing all our attention on national and international politics, we should try and find out what is happening in our city and the neighbourhood. Our order of priority should be: local, regional, national, and not the other way round.

With a powerful, effective, and financially viable local government the changes at the national level would not affect people's lives. That, however, is a tall ask requiring large-scale de-feudalization of the mindset of the political class.

A process of reform, and the ability to implement it in a city or in sectors like primary education, public transport, sanitation and basic health care, could be the test of the politicians. Do we have the political will to take bold and far-reaching decisions?

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.