

Migrant workers' rights

Ratify the 1990 UN Convention

WHAT came out very loud and clear at the dialogue on "Safe Migration and Remittances" organised by the Daily Star and Refugee and Migratory Movement and Research Unit recently in Dhaka, is the strong rationale for ratifying the 1990 UN International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers. Although Bangladesh is one of the earliest signatories to the Convention, the same is yet to be ratified by the government even after almost nine years it was signed in October 1998. Among other things ratification would strengthen our case for negotiating the right kind of employment terms and conditions for our workers.

Let us put the matter in perspective. There are currently around 4 million Bangladeshi migrant workers (excluding the diaspora), whose yearly remittance has crossed the USD 6 billion mark, the largest foreign exchange earner of the country. In fact over the last two decades it has accounted for nearly 35 percent of our export earnings. The number of workers to have gone abroad on foreign employment till May 2007 has nearly caught up with the total number of labour migrants for the entire 2006. Given this reality there is very little of note that has been done to ensure protection of their minimum rights. Just think, as one participant so starkly brought out at the dialogue, what would happen if all the migrant labourers decided one fine morning not to repatriate their earnings!

It is regrettable that our migrant workers face problems and harassments both at home and in the receiving country. And of the five stages a migrant labourer has to pass through from the time he/she decides to seek employment abroad till the time he/she returns home, four of them have to be negotiated at home while only one in the host country. In every one of the four stages the intending person is exploited and cheated, which the government can help stop by identifying and severely punishing those involved in the chain, starting from the recruiting agencies to the related government agencies. The fifth stage, in most cases, is equally arduous, if not more.

It is for the government to also take seriously the argument that but for some complicacies in the procedures of transferring money, the earning from the remittances of our migrant workers would have doubled the present amount.

While the government should constantly seek to expand our labour market, ensuring the basic minimum rights of the migrant workers is an obligation that must be fulfilled in tandem with the host countries. It is time that we stopped looking at our migrant workers as economic commodities that give the country economic returns. They should be treated as human being, and this is what the Convention obligates all signatories to ensure, among other things.

New regional passport offices

Simpler, less bureaucratic issuance process is needed

THE government move toward making it easier for citizens to acquire passports is commendable. It has reportedly decided to set up seventeen new regional passport offices at the district level and at the same time appoint processing agents to facilitate their functions. Until such time as the new measures are in place, the DCs' offices will continue dealing with passport matters. These new measures should ease the burden on the existing passport administration, which at present comprises fifteen regional offices.

In recent weeks, the government has taken some significant steps toward streamlining work in the passport department. One of those has been a crackdown on unauthorised agents and dealers who were wont to strong passport offices offering their services to passport seekers. In quite a few ways and despite occasional cases of fraud, these agents somehow made things easier for those in need of passports. The crackdown on them resulted, therefore, in the passport offices suddenly being unable to deal with the rather huge number of passport applicants. The new offices, along with their new manpower, will hopefully take away much of the pressure off the existing offices. But a mere opening of new offices will not be enough unless the labyrinthine bureaucratic process which has so long been a problem in the passport offices is done away with. One expects that the new offices will not end up being extensions of the red tape one has generally associated with the procedures relating to an issuance or renewal of passports. Of particular concern is the inordinately long time taken for police verification of the information provided by passport seekers. All too often the relevant officials do not visit the addresses mentioned in the applications; but when they do, many of them expect to be gratified financially if the applicant wishes to have his passport speedily granted. That is a shame.

It is such problems that call for attention. At the same time --- and this is a point the authorities have already made note of --- passport forms need to be simpler than the long, pretty redundant documents currently in vogue. Finally, the authorities must get down to serious business about introducing machine-readable passports in order for fraudulence to be put a check to.

Wise leaders, VIPs and ...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

VIP, or Very Important Person, meant a lot to us when we were quite naïve and politically insensitive. Nowadays, we see various interpretations of the acronym. Today, it is used to describe almost anyone riding a car. It is not used to describe an honest teacher in a village, or an honest postmaster. Hence, people going to jail for plundering national wealth and people's money are being called VIPs, and their supporters are demanding division for them in the jail.

WHEN we look at the options left with us to choose leaders to hand over the reins of governance, we fret in fear and we shrivel in shame. Ponder a while dear countrymen (gender bias not intended), we do not have leaders worth the name in a country of 150 million people!

What have we been doing for the last 35 years except for procreating mindlessly?

Where have all the wise and respectable leaders gone? Have we thrown the old die away? Then who do we turn to for giving us courage and direction at times of such prolonged national despondency?

But a nation cannot go on without political leadership, just as a ship cannot set sail on a voyage without a captain. A nation needs a strong-willed, wise, courageous and honest captain, and a dedicated crew to steer it through the troubled waters and reach the shore. Where are those people?

Are we ready to give the steering wheel to the people who are now trying to market themselves as

leaders? Aren't they simply another motley band of riff-raffs, so diversely disoriented, so comically contrasting, and yet yearning for power?

What antecedents do they have to show the courage to fill the void that was once filled by courageous and honest men like Moulana Bhashani, AK Fazlul Haque, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, Gen. MAG Osmani, Nazrul Islam, Captain Mansur Ali, AHM Kamruzzaman and Gen. Ziaur Rahman!

Are these aspirants qualified and experienced enough to handle our education, IT, health, economy, security, diplomacy and social issues with the required prudence,

and turn the country into a thriving economy in South-East Asia? Can they restore the damage already done to the image and prestige of the nation by their cousins in politics?

Well, you and I know it very well that none of the present lot of people who are now crowding the

political corridors have the endowments to become national leaders. They are, and will remain, petty leaders enamoured with all sorts of triviality.

"Serving the people" is hogwash. Strangely enough, in their diversity they remain united on one issue -- plundering national wealth through various schemes.

It is at such times of obscurity, of hopelessness, of gloom, that we remember someone like late Tajuddin Ahmed. Let us remember him for a while. This dedicated politician and a visionary, a think-tank, a born leader having no greed, had single-handedly organized the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971 and came out victorious after nine months.

In fact, he had taken charge of a ship that was pitching and tossing violently in rough waters, without a rudder and without a captain. With his unwavering courage, determination and organizational skill, he had not only raised a large force of Bengali guerrilla fighters, but also traveled half the world to convince

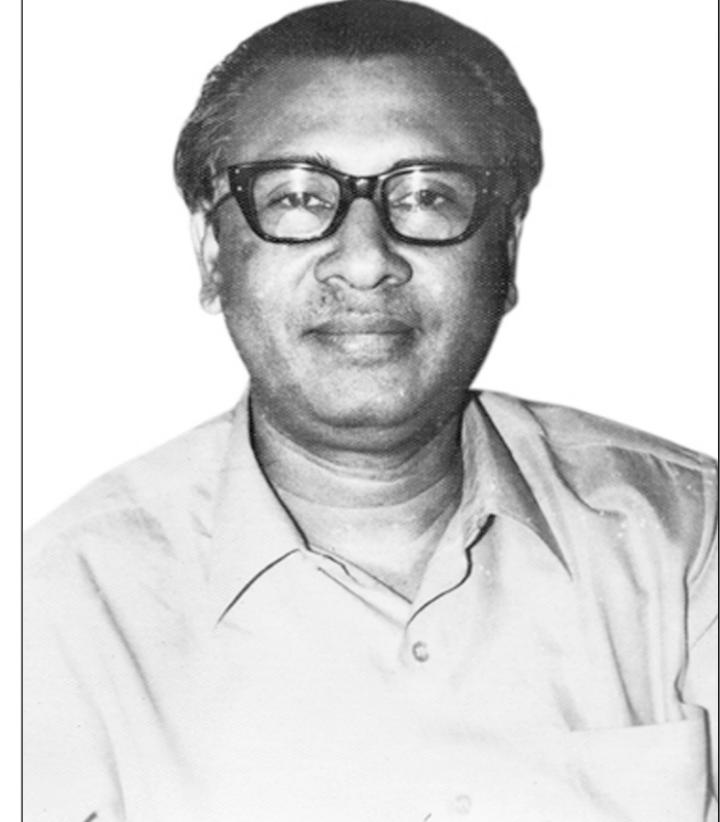
the heads of governments in various foreign countries about our cause and gain their support. He truly had to fight quislings within and without. Like David, he had fought against many a Goliath in the international arena.

But, unfortunately, leaders like Tajuddin Ahmed do not come by anymore. Maybe God does not want to send leaders like him to us anymore for the fact that we kill them in a most brutal manner. Maybe God sends us leaders we deserve.

Redefining a VIP

When someone talks about a VIP, the very face that flashes in my inner eye is Elizabeth Taylor's. She had paired with Richard Burton in the movie The VIP. Afterwards, I had the opportunity to see and occasionally meet some genuine VIPs in real life.

VIP, or Very Important Person, meant a lot to us when we were quite naïve and politically insensitive. Nowadays, we see various interpretations of the acronym.



for comfortable sub-jails (villas in residential areas) for these VIPs (Very Imprisoned Persons).

Who knows, someday our constitution might be amended to allow VIPs immunity from any kind of investigation. VIPs cannot go to jail, can they?

Shahnoor Wahid is Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Extricating Bangladesh from corruption

Eradication of corruption from administration or politics is not enough to root out corruption from a corrupt society like Bangladesh. We have to declare war against corruption. If we cannot kill this giant, we can surely cripple it. With adequate support from the government, civil society and local government at the grass-root level, we hope that ACC will ultimately reach its goal.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

OURS is a thoroughly corrupt society. For the last five years our country has been considered as the most corrupt country in the world. Our previous two democratic governments never felt the need for taking steps to reduce corruption.

Perhaps they strongly believed in Laski's observation that corruption is the lubricant of the political machinery. So these governments felt that they needed corruption to run their respective political machinery.

In fact, corruption is a very wide term. We may be corrupt financially, socially or morally. Thus, ACC's attempt to wipe out corruption is too ambitious.

If corruption is to be totally eradicated, we have to make all-out efforts to change the attitude of the entire population. It would be a travesty of truth if we say that the majority of our people are honest. Truly speaking, the vast majority of our people do not even have a clear conception of corruption.

The is an adage that a grandmother was not happy on hearing that her grandson had become a judge as she had wanted him to be

an officer-in-charge (Daroga), because that post was considered good for making money. Thus, power is intimately related to corruption. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

the common people start avoiding both bribe givers and bribe takers, unless the government servants can be compensated adequately, unless we exorcise the bribe takers and givers, unless we can



Unless we can simplify the rules and regulations and convince the people that the stigma attached to corruption is morally and mentally degrading, unless

avoid social contact with corrupt people, mere catchy slogans and formulation of most stringent rules and regulations may have little effect on those people who have

power (of position or wealth) to exercise.

No society is absolutely free from corruption, but the developed democratic countries have been able to create mechanisms to control corruption. In those countries severe rules are applied seriously and meticulously, and no evil-doer can escape the punishment he deserves.

In Bangladesh, we do not apply our rules/regulations properly and strictly and, because of too much interference from the high-ups (political or non political), proper inquiry cannot be held. In many cases, incidents of bribing of inquiry officers/committee have been reported.

Possession of money has become so important that the wealthy need not be afraid of committing any crime. We are living in a country in which a home minister, who is supposed to be responsible for maintaining peace and law and order in the country, helps criminals to flee from the country in exchange of bribe, stops the police from recording the statements of the complainants, and directs the junior police officers (ignoring the seniors) to protect the criminals.

What is immediately needed is to bring down level of corruption to a minimum level. For rooting out corruption from the society we may have to adopt plans -- short, mid and long term. In preparing these plans the civil society may play an important role. A mid-level committee may be constituted, consisting of representatives from the ministries of finance, industry,

commerce, home, public works, local government, education, food and defence, to prepare the plans within 45 days. To make up for the shortage of manpower, we may consider appointing some competent (reported to be honest) retired persons from both civilian and military sources for two years at this stage.

They may also be trained for a short time (if necessary). These personnel may be provided with proper logistic support. The senior officers of the ACC may be given enough security (if possible), and residential accommodation, so that they may work sincerely and peacefully.

The short-term plan should include only disposal of pending cases of the defunct ACB, and the current cases against leading persons. These cases may be disposed of within 6 to 8 months if an adequate number of courts can be set up.

The mid-term plan should include close monitoring of operations of departments like police, customs, municipal corporations, Rajuk, CDA, and sector corporations like BCIC, Titas Gas, PDB, Desa and Wasa.

The long-term plan should concentrate on changing the attitude of the high schools students from tolerance to "zero-tolerance." In simple language, they should be told about the bad effects of graft on the image of the country.

We know that not only the ACC but also all the advisers of IG are striving hard to block corrupt politicians from participating in the

next election. They have realized that without bringing down the level of corruption drastically no peaceful, free, fair and credible election is possible.

The ACC is trying hard to find the right people in adequate numbers to achieve its goal in time. The task ahead is pretty difficult, because it has to work in an environment where corruption is not hated, where wealth dominates, and honesty sometimes brings suffering. If people cooperate with the ACC, we have much to gain as a nation.

Though the present progress of ACC appears to be slow we may expect that things will improve soon. As there is no provision for summary trials, speedy progress cannot be expected. Related rules and procedures must be simplified quickly.

In investigating a case of bribery against a minister, papers may be examined to find out how far the concerned officials are involved. This will ensure justice and fair play.

Eradication of corruption from administration or politics is not enough to root out corruption from a corrupt society like Bangladesh. We have to declare war against corruption.

If we cannot kill this giant, we can surely cripple it. With adequate support from the government, civil society and local government at the grass-root level, we hope that ACC will ultimately reach its goal.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

The budget has ignored cooperative movement

Unfortunately, the budget of 2007-2008 did not indicate any fiscal measure nor mention the contribution of cooperatives, not to speak of any financial allocation in any way. The poverty reduction strategy paper, "Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction," has been extended upto June 2008, and contains few indications about cooperatives.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE cooperative societies by their nature are enterprises that help macro-economic stability in the country. They maintain balance and integrate economic, environmental and social imperatives. At the same time, cooperatives usually address members' and stakeholders' expectations and, thus, promote "Corporate Social Responsibilities."

Every cooperative society is an economic unit. It focuses on the social and financial success of an enterprise, with the goal of having positive impact in the society due to its visible, accountable and transparent activities. There is no scope for a

cooperative society to hide its margin and areas of operation, provided the members are honest and the authorities audit its functions annually.

The commitments and activities of cooperative societies, small or big, must maintain business ethics, stakeholders' interests, consumers' rights, address issues like health and safety, environmental protection, and respect national interest and human rights.

Cooperatives can maintain balance in stabilizing market prices, continue the supply chain, and tackle the hoarders in critical times of scarcity of essential supplies.

These are the values of cooperative societies, because of

centenary celebration: "I greatly value the changes and the efforts made by Bangladesh Cooperative Movement to increase the social visibility of cooperatives, thus promoting and facilitating the achievement of a better world through the cooperative movement."

The cooperative movement brings together over 800 million people round the world. The United Nations estimated that the livelihood of nearly 3 billion people, or half of the world population, was made secure by cooperative enterprises.

These cooperative enterprises continue to play significant economic and social roles in their communities. It appears from the statistics revealed by the ICA that 1 in 3 people in Canada, Japan, Norway, and 1 in 4 people in USA and Germany, are directly involved with cooperative societies. In China, 180 million, India 236 million, Malaysia 5.4 million, UK 9.8 million people are members of

cooperative societies.

In Belgium, there were 29,993 cooperative societies in 2001, and in Finland S- Group has a membership of 1,468,572 individuals, which represents 62% of Finnish households. In Malaysia, 5.5 millions people, or 20% of the population, are members of the cooperatives, whereas 50% of the total population of Singapore are members of cooperatives.

All these cooperative societies are playing a significant role and contributing remarkably to the national economies. In Belgium, cooperative pharmacies have a market share of 19.5%. In Brazil, cooperatives are responsible for 40% of the agricultural GDP and 6% of the total agro-business exports.

Canadian maple sugar cooperatives produce 35% of the world's maple sugar. In Japan, the agricultural cooperative reports output of \$ 90 million, with 91% of all Japanese farmers in membership. In Kenya, cooperatives are responsible for 45% of GDP and 31% of the national savings and deposits. They have 70% of the coffee market, 76% diary, 90% pyrethrum and 95% cotton.

In Korea, agricultural cooperatives have a membership of over 2 million farmers (90% of all farmers) and an output of \$ 11 billion. The Korean Fisheries Cooperatives also report a market share of 71%. In Norway, dairy cooperatives are responsible for 95% of the milk production.

Besides, cooperatives provide over 100 million jobs around the world, 20% more than multinational enterprises. In Canada, cooperatives and credit unions employ over 1,60,000 people.

The Dejardins movement (savings and credit cooperatives) is the largest employer in the province of Quebec. In France, 21,000 cooperatives provide jobs to 7,00,000 people, in Germany about 8106 cooperatives provides jobs for 440000 people, and in Italy 70400 cooperatives are employed

of GDP and 31% of the national savings and deposits. They have 70% of the coffee market, 76% diary, 90% pyrethrum and 95% cotton.

All this statistical information of developed countries has been given to show how they also patronize the cooperative movement, considering their contributions in the economic growth, generating of opportunities for employment, and discharging of social responsibilities.

Unfortunately, the budget of 2007-2008 did not indicate any fiscal measure nor mention the contribution of cooperatives, not to speak of any financial allocation in any way. The poverty reduction strategy paper, "Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction," has been extended upto June 2008, and contains few indications about cooperatives.

This NSAPR is being implemented through the budget, thus requiring a vision for the cooperatives to be utilized for national development. Around Tk 550 crore has been earmarked for NGOs, which might be utilized through PKSF, and could be partly be shared with cooperatives department.

Equally, around Tk 100 crore could be allocated to the cooperative department to provide seed money to the cooperative societies working in agro marketing