

Why must Khalishpur die?

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

AST week, I accompanied members of the "Jatiyo Tran Committee" (a voluntary group headed by Justice Gholam Rabbani, formed to provide assistance to distressed citizens) who had collected funds to help the jute workers of Khalishpur tide over the very difficult times they faced, with the sudden termination of their employment in four jute mills: Eastern, Platinum, People's and Crescent. Khalishpur, an industrial area, looked dead, as mills had ground to a halt, shops were closed, and total uncertainty faced its large population of workers.

The local volunteers of the Committee, mostly jute workers themselves, had done a brilliant job of organising the food distribution to about 7,000 families, and as we arrived at each site, we found disciplined lines of workers, their children or wives, waiting for their share of khichuri.

Earlier, the workers had been given slips by the organisers to identify family members of those who's jobs had been terminated since April, without receiving their back wages.

The distribution took place outside three of the mills. The manager in one of the mills had told the Committee that there was no crisis, and workers were doing well! Yet it was from this mill that workers brought their vessels for food. Before the distribution started, personnel claiming to represent intelligence agencies did the rounds of the Committee in Dhaka and Khulna to find out the purpose of the distribution.

Justice Rabbani, too, was telephoned by the BJMC chief. The Committee had collected sufficient funds to keep the distribution going for about 5 days, but at the end of the first day, the local organisers were told to remove their cooking vessels and stop distribution. Four workers were roughly handled, allegedly by the police, and told to stop their

voluntary work.

When the police commissioner was asked, he claimed he had given no such orders. So who had, and why was it necessary to stop this support? When milad mahfils are held, no one is stopped from distributing food to the needy, it is seen as an act of kindness. With floods staring us in the face, will not the government want citizens' involvement in managing the disaster, as they have done in previous years? So, what's so different about Khalishpur?

The loss of workers' jobs means starvation for their families, deprivation of education for their children, sickness, and social instability. In other words, what we are hoping to create in the name of industrial efficiency is likely to be a social disaster. In April, the termination of jobs of 1500 workers of People's Jute Mills led to protests and demands of payment of back wages and other benefits. This brought on police violence and filing of criminal charges against 5000 workers.

While legal aid organisations obtained release of the arrested workers on bail and appealed for withdrawal of cases against them, other citizens' groups helped with medical care and other forms of support. Why should these actions be called into question? Do we want Bangladesh to be known as a country where citizens are callous to each other's needs?

On July 18, the jute advisor announced a "rescue" plan, which rests on closure of four mills and over 50 raw jute sales centres, and termination of 14,000 jobs. She hoped to clear all workers' dues in July and August. What are workers expected to live on between April and July? As it is, they have taken loans at high interest from local money lenders, as it is, they are being told to vacate their houses in the mill colonies, as it is, they are told that the cost of rent and utilities will be deducted from



MOJIB WASIF/BRK NEWS

their wages.

Will it help Bangladesh's image if these workers and their families end up on the bread line, their

children unable to go to school because there is no money for school fees? Are they not likely to become easy victims of trafficking?

ing? An interim government is not expected to solve all the accumulated problems of Bangladesh.

Dealing with corruption and walking the road map to elections are, themselves, mighty forbidding tasks.

To smoothen the way for industrial reform, the council of advisors would do well to prioritise certain criteria for industrial regeneration and management reforms. And these criteria cannot exclude workers skilled in manufacturing products that are in increasing demand worldwide because of environmental factors, and low cost of production.

In jute, Bangladesh has a competitive advantage because of its raw material supply as well as its skilled labour. Let's not lose these through hastily arrived at solutions. Let's take another look, and involve knowledgeable persons outside the government who might be able to find a better way than that suggested by bureaucrats. A long-term industrial solution may project a better image for Bangladesh than a plan for dis-employment.

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Sheikh Hasina's arrest and its aftermath

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

HEIKH Hasina's arrest has sparked off a spate of comments, mainly accusing the government of being unnecessarily harsh on her, if the post-arrest news commentaries and the talk shows on TV are any guide, given that AL supporters greatly outnumber the party's detractors in spite of the dismal performance of the last AL government.

The media pictures of the arrest, showing Hasina holding a "tasbih" (prayer beads) in her hand and looking grim, were simply superb, to say the least. Even some of the worst critics of her rule have called the arrest unjustified.

In a third world country like ours, where, for centuries, a tiny, wealthy class of people has ruled over the vast multitude of poor people, and where foreign rulers have been replaced by native rulers, we have a queer concept of the ruler and the ruled.

Here, in this land of ours, the common people are wont to behave like a herd of sheep or cattle, and anyone who can somehow step into the corridors of power and throw a few crumbs among the half-naked and unfed crowds becomes an instant hero or heroine, and is indeed the leader of the people.

We take very little time in lionising this leader for a small deed not worthy of notice in civilised societies, and condemning the same leader for deeds which run counter to our interest or to the winds of change blowing at the time.

We adore the leader and sing hymns in his or her praise, to the point of deification. And soon the leader becomes conceited and megalomaniac, and begins to think that it is he or she who alone matters and the rest of the flock must obey and show fealty to him/her.

The leader becomes arrogant, peevish, and resentful of criticism, and scornful of those who speak of equal opportunities and the rule of law. Do we find these traits in our leaders? Khaleda loves being addressed as "Madam" and Hasina as "netri" (leader) by party leaders

and workers, like Hitler was called "fuehrer" (leader) by the Nazis. Besides, one has been given the appellation

"jono-netri" (leader of the people), and the other "desh-netri" (leader of the country).

Gen Hussain Muhammad Ershad loved being addressed as "sir." He also desired that his wife Rawshon Ershad be referred to as "First Lady."

We also have a breed of sycophants and cronies amongst us, who keep multiplying as months progress into a year and years into a decade. This is a dangerous

fall from power but also his wholesale burial as political garbage.

And interestingly enough, as we become quickly disenchanted with the new ruler and see the litany of his vices and irritating pranks, we turn to this political garbage, retrieve him or her from the lowly pedestal and make him or her an idol of the opposition to the powers that be.

We as a nation are either short on memory or long on forgetfulness, which is why we do not stick with anything for long. It is against this background that both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have not

taken into custody as well.

Let us not forget that both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia had a role to play, as they both presided over administrations besmirched with rampant corruption and criminalisation of politics.

Now coming to the point of Sheikh Hasina's arrest, Heaven has not fallen down just because she has been arrested and kept in a sub-jail. In democracy, nobody is above the law. And if that be the case, why can't Sheikh Hasina be arrested when there is a prima facie case of extortion against her?

What makes her, or for that

try, and being a former prime minister and the chief of AL does not give Sheikh Hasina any immunity from arrest and prosecution. Let the court of justice decide, and set her free on bail if the cause of justice warrants it.

But to say that arresting Sheikh Hasina is unwarranted is putting the cart before the horse, and runs very much counter to the spirit of democracy. It is one thing that we have not practiced democracy in this country all these years, but this does not mean that we will not practice democracy now and in future.

Sheikh Hasina has tried to draw a parallel between her arrest by the government and the arrest of her illustrious father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by the Pakistan army in 1971. This is preposterous and utterly ludicrous. While she has none of the great qualities and charisma of that icon and pride of this country, she often tries to invoke his fond memories and say that she is like him, only to further her selfish interest in building a personal fortune.

Have we forgotten how she misgoverned this country and made a mess of it? Do we want to give her a shot in the arm so that she and the likes of her in AL can go on looting and plundering again as they had done before? Has the nation forgotten the passing of the Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act, whereby she and her sister sought to live in comfort and dignity, almost like members of a royal family, for as long as they lived, all at state expense?

Or do we want a transition to a truly democratic dispensation in this country, and make those guilty of hindering this democratic process account for their misdeeds? Let us opt for the latter, and let us not go back to those dark days again!

Brigadier General Shamsuddin Ahmed is a Freedom Fighter.



breed of people. They will either praise you to the skies, or pull you down to earth and consign you to the dustbin of history in no time. They will either bow their heads down in obeisance to you, or slander you or stab you in the back.

We have another quality in abundance in us. While the sycophants keep singing for the ruler of the day, we decry the leader for all his failings and follies, which are plentiful, and join the opposition chorus in condemning him and demanding not only his immediate

only survived all these years but also remained potent forces in our politics, despite their horrendous records of failure to deliver and their myriad misdeeds while in power.

As it is, our euphoria with the caretaker government seems to be ebbing away fast, now that a hint of the military jostling with power is discernible in the eyes of those who pathologically suffer from military phobia. No wonder, therefore, that there is a surfeit of sympathy for Sheikh Hasina who is in jail, and for Khaleda Zia who is likely to be

matter Khaleda Zia, so special that they cannot be arrested for crimes and offences which warrant that the offender or the accused be taken into custody in the interest of justice and fair trial? Allowing powerful and politically influential people like Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia to move freely is likely to jeopardise the case of the prosecution and the collection of relevant evidence against them.

Being the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of this coun-

try, and being a former prime minister and the chief of AL does not give Sheikh Hasina any immunity from arrest and prosecution. Let the court of justice decide, and set her free on bail if the cause of justice warrants it.

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As a symbol of protest, the Dhaka University Teacher's Association (DUTA) has observed protest programmes against such treatment of Hasina and Khaleda, and demanded removal of Law Adviser Barrister Moinul Hossain for breach of oath.

Admittedly, such organized

programmes and firm demands did not feature previously during the tenure of the current government. However, the law adviser has repeatedly claimed that this government is not arbitrary like the previous ones.

Like it or not, Mr. Hossain's inconsistent interpretations regarding Hasina's arrest, and incessant self-opinionated remarks, have given rise to hard-feelings in a large section of the citizenry, who have now started to smell a rat.

I do not have the insolence to infer anything adverse from his

words. However, the sceptics repeatedly remind us that a veteran lawyer, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, led the country to virtual mayhem, forcing the events of 1/1.

Interestingly, even the die-hard fans of the previous 4-party regime did not have the impudence to express happiness after Hasina's arrest. However, some people brought out processions to celebrate that occasion and, that too, under police protection in an emergency, when all sorts of processions are completely banned. Yes, there were processions against the arrest as well, for which the processions are going to be punished by the security forces.

However, such a dual policy in our polity reminds us of the previous political governments, upon whom we shower criticism only. It is common knowledge in Bangladesh that all previous political governments used to resort to double standards just for fulfilling their parochial interests, and for harassing the opposition.

Apparently, the fate of the two ladies has already been sealed.

The anti-Hasina elements in Awami League (AL) have been quite quiet since her arrest. Most of them have even changed their positions in favour of Hasina. This, however, does not suggest that they are under less pressure from the "minus two" proponents in the government.

They are, rather, under renewed pressure from their party's rank and file, without whose support their political future is all but nothing.

Meanwhile, the reformists in Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), too, have softened their voices against Khaleda Zia.

Though they created and maintained a robust campaign against Khaleda Zia, the response from the grassroots has not been that encouraging. Though Khaleda Zia has to take most of the responsibility for her regime's mis-governance during 2001-2006, her implication

regarding corruption of the reformists is not unfounded.

Though it is not always easy to gauge public mood from an ivory tower, it is the general people's feelings and emotions that matter a lot in Bangladesh. Hasina's arrest has created mistrust in a large section of the people. Pent-up emotions are also growing strong in them. Khaleda's arrest is unlikely to dispel that.

Given the two ladies' stature and status in Bangladesh politics, it might be possible to eliminate them physically, but effacing their political position is not going to be a piece of cake, as is mistakenly thought by the manufacturers of the "minus two" formula.

There is the likelihood that they might even turn out to be even stronger in absentia.

Though their success in running their parties efficiently is enormously questionable, their presence still means a lot to the party men, as they are the ones who can provide sustainability to the parties, if not anything else. Reportedly, the government is said to be preparing to go harder against the two ladies. A reaction is, however, building up among the party men and the citizens.

Even the people, who were once severely critical of the two ladies, seem to be sympathetic towards them. Such a change of attitude matters a lot in this hyper-sensitive country, no matter whether the people running the interim government can sense it or not.

Some, thus, apprehend that the government's misconceived actions against the two ladies might turn them into "deities" rather than "devils." Hence, the paradoxical question turns up: Are they being banished or embellished?

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Modern slavery

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"daughter of darkness." In 1833, the British Empire outlawed the practice.

Since then, amidst immense turmoil, slavery was gradually uprooted, and in 1926 the League of Nations introduced a Slavery Convention, which obliged member nations to abolish slavery. In 1930, the ILO Convention on the abolition of slavery and a 1956 supplementary Convention strengthened the law. Now, in this modern era, with so much progress and humanisation, we are faced with the age-old, once-gone slavery in a different form and name - "human trafficking." This has emerged as a growing global menace to the lives and freedom of millions of men, women and children.

ILO estimates that there are 12.3 million people enslaved in forced labour, bonded labour, forced child labour, sexual servitude, and involuntary servitude. ADB estimates that one to two million people are sold across international borders every year, of which a large number are from poor Asian countries --

150,000 from South Asia, 225,000 from Southeast Asia (source: US State Department). 80% of the victims are female, and up to 50% are children. About 25,000 women and children are trafficked from Bangladesh. The UNODC database that records actual instances of trafficking lists 127 countries of origin and 137 countries where exploitation actually has taken place.

In Asia, most trafficking occurs within the region. The main countries of origin are China and Thailand, followed by Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. The main destination countries in the region are Thailand, Japan, Israel, Turkey and India. Southeast Asia is seen as a key transfer point, both in the region and outside. Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are the countries from where human trafficking originates, while India and Pakistan are the countries of destination, or transit to other regions.

Trafficking denotes the recruit-

ment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threats, or use of force or other forms of coercion, like abduction, fraud, deprivation, deception, and abuse of power, or the giving or receiving of payment or profits to achieve the consent of a person having control over the other person for the purpose of any kind of exploitation.

Exploitation includes the exploitation of prostitution of others, or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, and the removal of organs (source: Palermo Protocols, UN).

Analysed as a market, human trafficking includes both supply and demand forces. On the supply side, poverty, corruption, lack of education, gender-based discrimination, lack of information among the public about trafficking, weak enforcement of existing relevant laws and policies, lack of good governance, lack of employment opportunities, regional imbalances, political instability, uprooting of communities for mega projects, growing deprivation and marginalisation of the poor, insufficient penalties against the traffickers, and the eternal human yearning for improving one's life make people vulnerable to the lures of trafficking. Market demand, especially from male sex buyers, creates a strong profit incentive for traffickers to entrap more victims, fueling the growth of trafficking in people.

Human trafficking has turned into a most profitable business, only next to the illicit trade in drugs and arms, with an annual profit generation of \$