

# Eid, Korbani, Sidr and what needs to be done

M.A. ROUF CHOWDHURY

THE Eid-ul-Azha this year is like no other Eid we have celebrated before. We are enveloped by an ominous cloud of human tragedy unleashed by Cyclone Sidr last month that left little or nothing standing in its path in the south-southwest of Bangladesh.

More than 5 million people were left homeless, asset-less, and with virtually nothing to look forward to. In the backdrop of such devastation Eid and korbani this year will have special significance. With less than a week to go for Eid, we usually prepare for sacrificing one or more animals, buy expensive clothes and gifts, and organise elaborate festivities.

The measure of our joy is often equated with the number and size of our sacrificial animals and the extravagance of our preparation. There is something wrong with entertaining this mind-set even in the best of times, but in the wake of last month's unprecedented tragedy, there is everything wrong with this approach.

## Religious view

I was fortunate to be able to interact with the khatib of Baitul Mukarram mosque and a few other religious leaders last week on this subject. In their view korbani means only sacrifice, and has no relationship with any extravagance.

Korbani is *wajib* (almost binding) for any person who is able to pay *zakat*. Such persons, no doubt, should fulfill their obligation to give korbani. However, giving korbani in the name of others is only *nafl* (not binding, but gives *sawab*) and sacrificing more animals does not enhance our *sawab*.

Lavish expenditure during Eid is best avoided. Other than the *wajib* korbani the rest of the festivities and *nafl* korbani can be substituted by donating the savings so made to the Sidr victims.

In my opinion, there can be no more pious deed than saving lives. We can help save the lives of many Sidr victims if we curtail some of our expenditures on *nafl* korbani and grand celebrations and donate those savings. I believe Islam encourages us to do so.

## Social and economic impact

The transfer of funds to Sidr victims by drastically reducing the number of korbani will not be a seamless costless transaction. It is very likely to have serious economic and social repercussions, some of which can have long-term consequences. A socio-economic impact analysis identifying the losers, quantum of loss, and tenure of impact is necessary.

**Orphanages, madrassas, mosques, and welfare institutions**

Last year we sacrificed 20-22 lakh large animals (cows and buffaloes) during Eid. The skins of those animals were almost entirely donated to these institutions. They sold these skins at the average rate of Tk 2,500 per piece and for 20 lakh pieces earned an estimated amount of Tk 500 crores. This constituted the lion's share of their income. If this year the number of korbani falls drastically then they will have no preparation for alternative sources of income. As a result lakhs of orphans may become homeless without any

Sidr, thousands of madrassas may have to close down, and a large number of religious-denominated welfare activities may come to a grinding halt.

**Leather, industry and exports**

Last year the leather industry processed 56 lakh pieces of skin of which 40 percent were procured through korbani. The industry has investments of thousands of crores and employs lakhs of people. Our leather and leather products exports amounted to Tk 2,800 crores last year, and there is a projected growth of 20 percent for this year. So, if the number of korbani falls dramatically this year, it will not be possible to collect enough skins to keep the industry running. As a result the huge investments, employment, and exports will all be at serious risk. This will have long-term consequences for our economy.

**Action needed**

In the present context it is the moral responsibility of every citizen to do whatever we can to help our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters

who have been so cruelly victimised by Sidr. We have an opportunity this Eid to achieve savings by reducing korbani and extravagant expenditure and transferring these savings to the Sidr victims. On the other hand, the socio-economic impact analysis tells us that it is not possible to affect this transfer in a seamless, costless manner but rather that there are serious potential risks.

While the right thing to do would be to transfer savings from Eid to the Sidr victims we must ensure that careful balance is maintained to avoid the accompanying risks of disruption. Under the circumstances we need to:

- Embrace restraint in our celebrations and expenditures.
- Reduce the number of korbani, restricting them to only those that are *wajib* and spend less on the animals and on showmanship associated with it.
- Transfer savings so made to the Sidr victims.

As a result of the above actions, I believe the number of korbani will reduce by 10-20 percent, i.e. approximately 2-4 lakh fewer cows will be sacrificed. If savings per cow is Tk



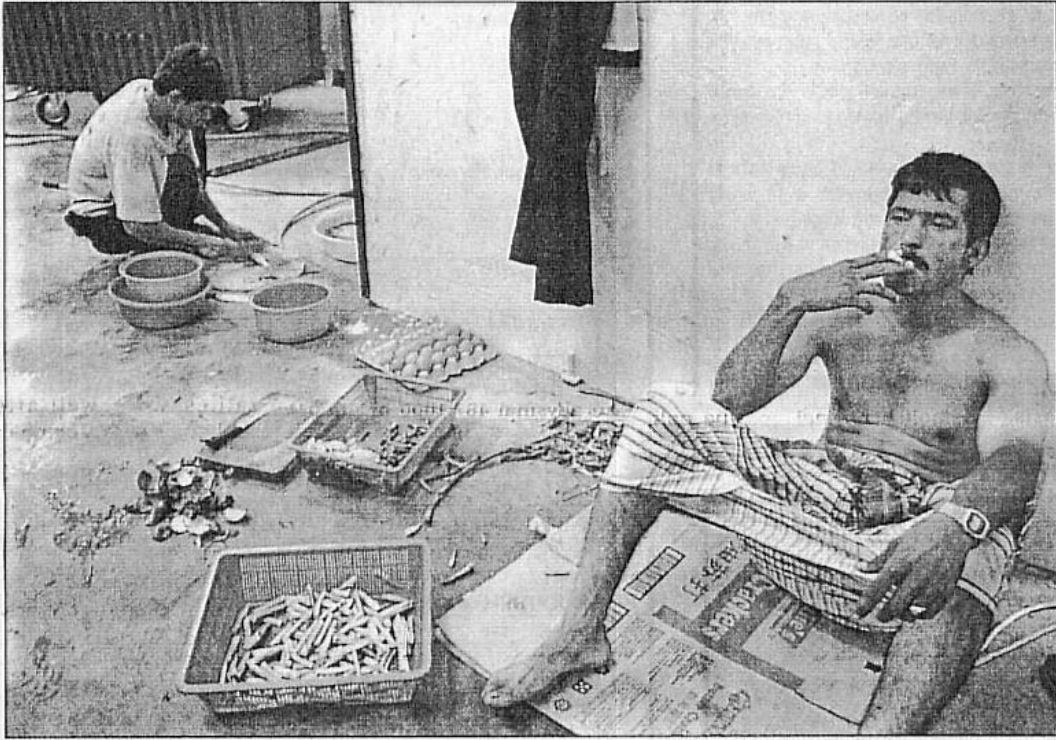
12,500 we can transfer Tk 250-500 crores. On the other hand orphanages and madrassas may receive Tk 50-100 crores less but hopefully they will be

able to endure this. The leather industry will also no doubt suffer, but it will survive. I believe this will ensure a win-win solution, beneficial and accept-

able to everyone.

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# Ratifying the UN Convention on migrant worker rights



TASNEEM SIDDIQUI

THE UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families 1990 (hereinafter referred to as 'the Convention') came into force in June 2005. The Convention is the most comprehensive instrument available for defining the rights of migrant workers and their families. It recognises the vulnerability of migrant workers and their family members, and their need for international protection.

Article 2 of the Convention defines a migrant worker as "a person who is to be engaged, is engaged, or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national." The Convention recognises the need to provide protection not only to migrant workers but also to their family members, without discrimination (articles 4, 7).

The Convention distinguishes between regular and irregular migrant workers, recognising that whilst regular migrant workers have a legitimate claim to more rights it is important to safeguard the fundamental human rights of all.

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## Importance of migration to Bangladesh

Labour migration from Bangladesh has a long history, with the government of Bangladesh promoting international labour migration as part of an overall development plan since 1976.

It is estimated that there are 4.55 million Bangladeshis working abroad as migrant workers, with over 90% living in the Middle East and in South East Asia. This excludes the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK and North America, estimated at a further 1.5 million persons.

Migration plays a critical role in sustaining the Bangladeshi economy. In 2005-06, official remittances into Bangladesh constituted \$4.8 billion, equal to 7.73% of GDP, and over three times higher than net aid flows into Bangladesh. It is estimated that in 2006-07 remittances will exceed \$6 billion.

The employment of Bangladeshis overseas reduces pressure on the labour market

within Bangladesh. In addition, it has supported domestic job creation in both the public and private sectors.

A new ministry has been created, and the size of other ministries and departments like civil aviation, customs and immigration departments and the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training is, to a large extent, determined by the flow of migrant workers. A powerful private sector has emerged centering the processing of migration, employing 2 million persons as private recruiting agents, sub-agents, travel agents, and medical and transportation workers.

**Vulnerabilities of the migrant labour force**

Bangladeshi migrant workers have suffered from unscrupulous recruitment practices, leading to high costs, fraudulent practices and pauperisation. In destination countries, due to the arbitrariness of employers and discriminatory policies of receiving states, migrants experience exploitation and the loss of rights in the form of low and irregular wages, bad working conditions and restricted job mobility. Upon returning, Bangladeshi migrants experience difficulties in reintegrating due to the absence of an institutional support system.

**Bangladesh: Signatory to the Convention**

In 1997, the government of Bangladesh agreed, in principle, to ratify the Convention and sought the advice of the Law Commission in this regard. The Law Commission observed that the Convention has only a minor provision that contradicts the legal system of Bangladesh, which it felt could be addressed easily by entering a reservation. Otherwise, the Convention could be ratified, according to the Law Commission.

Accordingly, on October 7, 1998, Bangladesh signed the Convention; but still has not

ratified the instrument. This is despite an active campaign by the civil society and policy advocates, and the huge significance of the labour migration sector to the country's economy.

The key justification offered for non-ratification of the Convention is the concern that it may affect Bangladesh's overseas labour market and foreign exchange earnings from this sector. There is a fear that because other migrant sending countries have not yet ratified the Convention, Bangladesh will find it more difficult to send workers abroad.

These concerns are not based upon any research. In the negotiations between delegations of the Bangladesh government and labour receiving countries, the latter never expressed any concern about this convention. Besides, other major labour sending countries have ratified the Convention, notably Egypt, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Syria. These countries have not faced adverse repercussions in sending their workers.

If Bangladesh ratified the Convention its obligations would be: to put in place the provisions of pre-departure information campaigns and training sessions; monitoring and imposition of sanctions on brokers and recruiters operating illegally; and the provision of extending improved consular services to citizens working abroad.

Over the years, the government has taken some important measures to better govern the migration sector. It has established a new ministry, prepared a strategy to explore and consolidate labour markets, and introduced a system of recruitment through a computerised database. More importantly, in 2006, Bangladesh became the first country in South Asia to legislate an Overseas Employment Policy.

The policy empowers both men and women the right to choose overseas employment from an equal stand. It respects the dignity and security of workers and ensures the social protection of the left behind families of migrants.

The current caretaker government has undertaken a series of measures to curb the irregularities in the recruitment industry and has greatly increased market access on better terms and conditions. In the recent past, it proactively responded to the problems faced by migrant workers in Malaysia by sending high level delegations, suspending High Commission staff suspected of malpractice, increasing the number of labour attaches and dissolving the executive committee of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira).

One can see that successive governments, out of their own concern about migrants' vulnerability, have undertaken the above steps, which involved financial commitment. Therefore, the point often raised by the members of bureaucracy that ratification of the convention would put Bangladesh into major financial commitment may not be that important. Besides, good business sense should make the government commit resources to a sector

that has fetched \$6 billion worth of foreign exchange in 2007. There is no doubt that investment in migrant protection measures will substantially increase earnings from the sector.

**Why should Bangladesh ratify?**

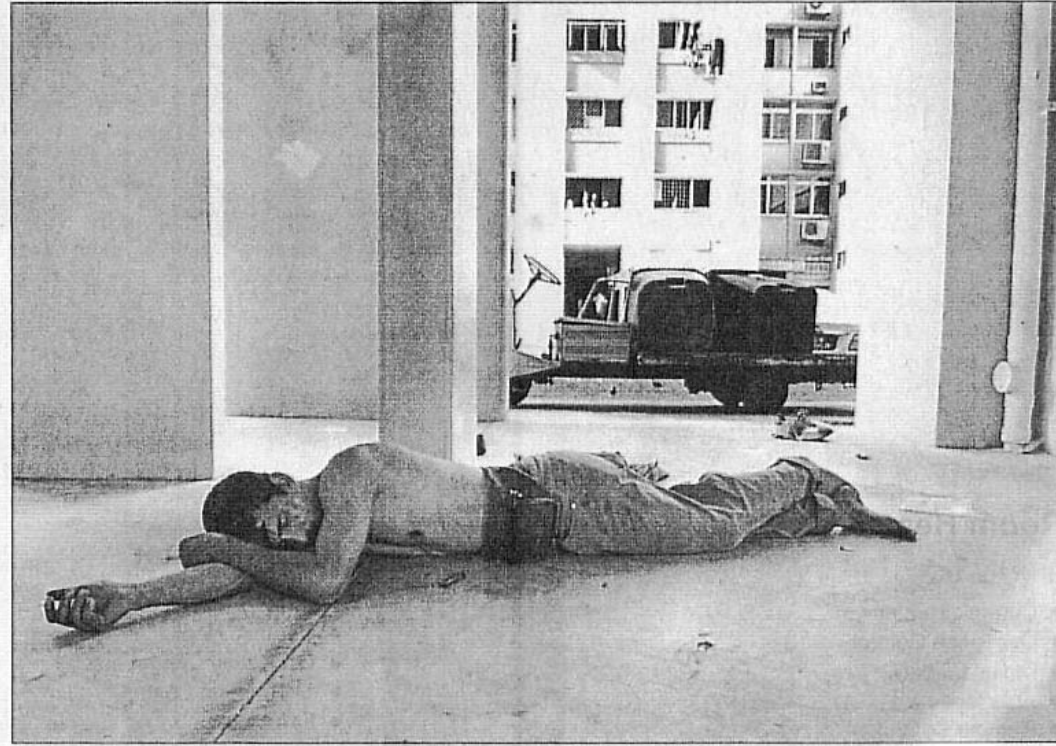
Bangladesh is a major sending country, and in protecting the rights of its migrant workers it should do its utmost to meet international standards. The 1990 Convention provides the best framework for such protection.

Because it is the most important foreign exchange earning sector further financial commitment to the sector, that may follow ratification, is likely to increase efficiency of the agencies concerned, protect the migrant workers from vulnerability, improve the welfare services and further increase the remittance flow.

The experiences of Sri Lanka and the Philippines show that ratification will not adversely affect Bangladesh's relationships with labour receiving countries.

Ratification will convey the message that the government cares for its migrant workforce. It will also enhance Bangladesh's image as a country that upholds migrants' rights.

The Bangladesh Law Commission has recommended ratification of the Convention.



## We urge the government

On behalf of the 4.5 million Bangladeshi short-term migrant workers and 1.5 million long-term diaspora, their associations and different civil society bodies, RMMRU (Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit) urges the government to immediately ratify the Convention and frame national legislation to implement the provisions of the Convention.

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# Community radio

ALAMGIR KHAN

THE campaign for community radio, which has been going on in Bangladesh for the past several years, is to the joy of many who have been fighting for it, soon going to be a success thanks to an initiative taken by the caretaker government.

Community radio, a new type of broadcasting in the country, embodies the concept of community ownership of a medium to broadcast their own views about their particular needs.

So far cold-shouldered by policy level people because they were afraid of losing their grip over local matters and undermin-

ing of their monstrous power, the concept is now being embraced warmly. On October 29, the Ministry of Information organised a meeting to open community radio, and discussed and approved the concept paper, draft policy, and application forms for it. The idea now waits for the chance to beat its wings into reality right after the approval through an inter-ministerial meeting.

This has become more urgent since Cyclone Sidr struck the coastal regions of the country, with its cruel hands claiming thousands of lives, devastating property worth crores of Taka and causing millions of heartbreaks.

Central level inadequacy and the inability to cope with local matters such as education, natural disaster, cultural life and many other issues have become conspicuous once again.

This has created the need for people to share their views and concerns in their own regional languages through a local media to have their voices heard by policy-making groups sitting far away, a crying need now.

Community radio, though a new idea here, is 60 years old now. Introduced in 1947 at Sutatenza, a village in Colombia, by a young priest and amateur radio operator, with the objective of running informal education, the idea of

community radio then matured into a truly community type in ownership and sharing, and also turned radical through Miner's Radio of Bolivia in 1949.

Since then the movement for community radio has spread worldwide and even coalesced into the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (WACRB) in 1983, giving further boost to its campaign.

Across the globe, once remote and isolated corners are now filled with thousands of such community radios. Finding its foothold in our backyard in South Asia through the state-supported Kothmale Community Radio in Sri Lanka in 1989, a truly commu-

nity-owned radio station in South Asia began with the pioneering Radio Sagarmatha in 1997 in Nepal, which brought the King's deadly rage upon itself in 2005 but is still alive and kicking.

India caught up soon in 2001 with a decision to issue licenses for private radio stations, and, in 2006, with the approval of a community radio policy, was the first of its kind in the region. Now, there are many such radio stations in that country and also in neighbouring ones.

As for the role of community radio in Bangladesh, A.H.M. Bazlur Rahman, chief executive officer of Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and

Communication (BNNRC), one of the key campaigners, said that community radio could play an important role by broadcasting the needs of the affected people during the post-disaster period, broadcasting news of lost children and details of the criminals in the local dialect more quickly and effectively, and also in disaster management, gender equality, environment protection, anti-fundamental activities, early marriage prevention, child mortality and awareness against dowry, agricultural development, and many other important issues.

Community radio in Bangladesh has the enormous

prospect of becoming a partner in development in economy, education, environment, bringing the marginalised into the mainstream, etc.

The recent cyclone has shown one of its aspects clearly, which is to face the challenge of cyclones and tidal bores in the coastal districts of Patuakhali, Bhola, Chittagong, etc. There, such radios will be helpful in spreading warnings, taking precaution, minimising damages and mitigating sufferings through information shared before, during, and after a disaster.

The main stumbling block to it so far has been the lack of a broadcasting policy in our

country. Though the Ministry of Information made a draft broadcasting policy in 2003, with the encouraging recognition of community broadcasting as part of the three types of broadcasters -- government, private, and community -- it did not see the light of vote in the parliament.

Now that the present government has taken a positive step for piloting such radios, it has a good chance to grow in the future and contribute further by becoming a partner in the overall development of the country.

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