

## Shrinking manpower export market

*Well-thought-out action plan need of the hour*

**S**INCE January up until now, the statistics for returnee Bangladeshi wage earners make a rather bleak reading, if not a panicky one as yet.

As against around 16,000 returnees in January, the figure for February declined to 8,000 but in March it has registered a steep rise. Aside from 4,000 returning until March 16, only a day earlier, Malaysia had cancelled 55,000 work visas for Bangladesh.

What ought to be the parameters of risk assessment? The first thing to note is it's not only the serving employees with contracts for work who are having to return but also the future prospects in traditional labour markets are coming to crunch. The outlook, by most radical estimates, is likely to last at least till the end of 2009 with the financial meltdown barely improving not until the first quarter of 2010. That is the scenario we have to address.

Only a timely action plan that is targeted and implemented vigorously can help us head off further blows to the remittance prospects. In fact, the crisis could turn out to be an opportunity provided we have the eyes to see and cash in on it.

The first thrust of the action plan will have to be the retention of jobs held by Bangladeshis through state-level intercessions. In this context, the reported assurance of the Malaysian authorities of a positive result by March in the matter of revoking cancellation of 55,000 work visas for Bangladeshis must come true.

The second and most important element of the action plan ought to be a campaign for new market search. There is an entire range of untapped potential in East Europe, Africa and even Latin America. In particular, Rumania and Sudan are said to be on our radar screen followed by Iraq which had been a destination for our workers up until the war came and is now opening up.

The overarching need is to create a reservoir of workforce, primarily in the skilled category to feed the demands in the developed as well as emerging markets. Their demand pattern is changing and those in charge of training manpower should also change their focus accordingly.

As for the returnees, while we look for their reemployment overseas, the concurrent effort must be made for their rehabilitation in the local economy as far as practicable. They should not be allowed to rust. Those who have had some savings may be encouraged to set up business, possibly with a little bank-rolling, while micro-finance is provided to others devoid of seed money.

Rather than heaving sighs and moans, let's go for an action plan rightaway.

## Ship-breaking shutdown

*Environmental compliance is the key*

**W**E applaud the recent High Court directive to the government to immediately shutter operations of all the nation's 36 ship-breaking yards for operating without proper environmental clearance, and hope that the industry will at long last finally take corrective measures and bring itself into compliance with the law of the land.

This court order is long overdue. Simply put, the industry has been operating in blatant defiance of the most basic environmental regulations that are on the books. The court has done nothing more than order compliance with the existing law, and no one can have any complaint if laws are implemented as they should be.

The way the industry is run is highly dangerous and polluting one and one that is linked to all kinds of abuses. Nevertheless, mindful of the fact that the metal salvaged from ship-breaking is key to our own steel industry, and that ship-breaking provides foreign exchange and jobs, we want the industry to be saved from wrongful exploitation leading to its ruin.

If ship-breaking continues in Bangladesh it must be done under stringent conditions and with close regulatory oversight against abuse and environmental damage.

Many argue that we need to be even more vigilant and that the laws need to be even more stringent than they are today. But what is incontrovertible and unacceptable is that even the minimal existing environmental regulations have been contemptuously ignored by every single one of the 36 ship-breaking yards operating in the country.

Industries that provide profits and jobs at the expense of the environment ultimately do more harm than good. The decision to enforce the law to save ourselves from the toxic effects of non-compliance is a good one. Let us now hope that the court order is respected and that in future all environmental regulations in this industry are followed to the letter.

## Time to take lessons and move on

I bring this out to highlight the fact that such comments not only divert attention from the main issues, they also often lead to the matter being left unresolved, with many questions unanswered. And this is perhaps a very important lesson -- when to say, what to say and how much to say.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

**T**O ask people to move on is a bold call to make when the tears of the loved ones of those killed in the Pilkhana massacre have not yet run dry. But before moving on we must first ensure that the lessons that should be learnt from the sad event are internalised by all concerned.

One of the lessons that we citizens have learned is that we must close ranks in times of tragedy like February 25, but, regrettably, it seems that our political leaders will never learn this important truth. And thus one is disappointed at what both the ruling party and the opposition are making of the incident.

We do not want to see the parties do politics with the mutiny and all that followed in its wake. While there is reason to be wary of things to come in the future, the matter has been complicated by the various versions of who and what might be the motivation of the mutineers, as well as by the two major parties' casting oblique reference at the other's acts of omission or commission.

However, there is an accord of views between the AL and the BNP that the mutiny was well orchestrated and well planned, and the aim was to destabilise the country.

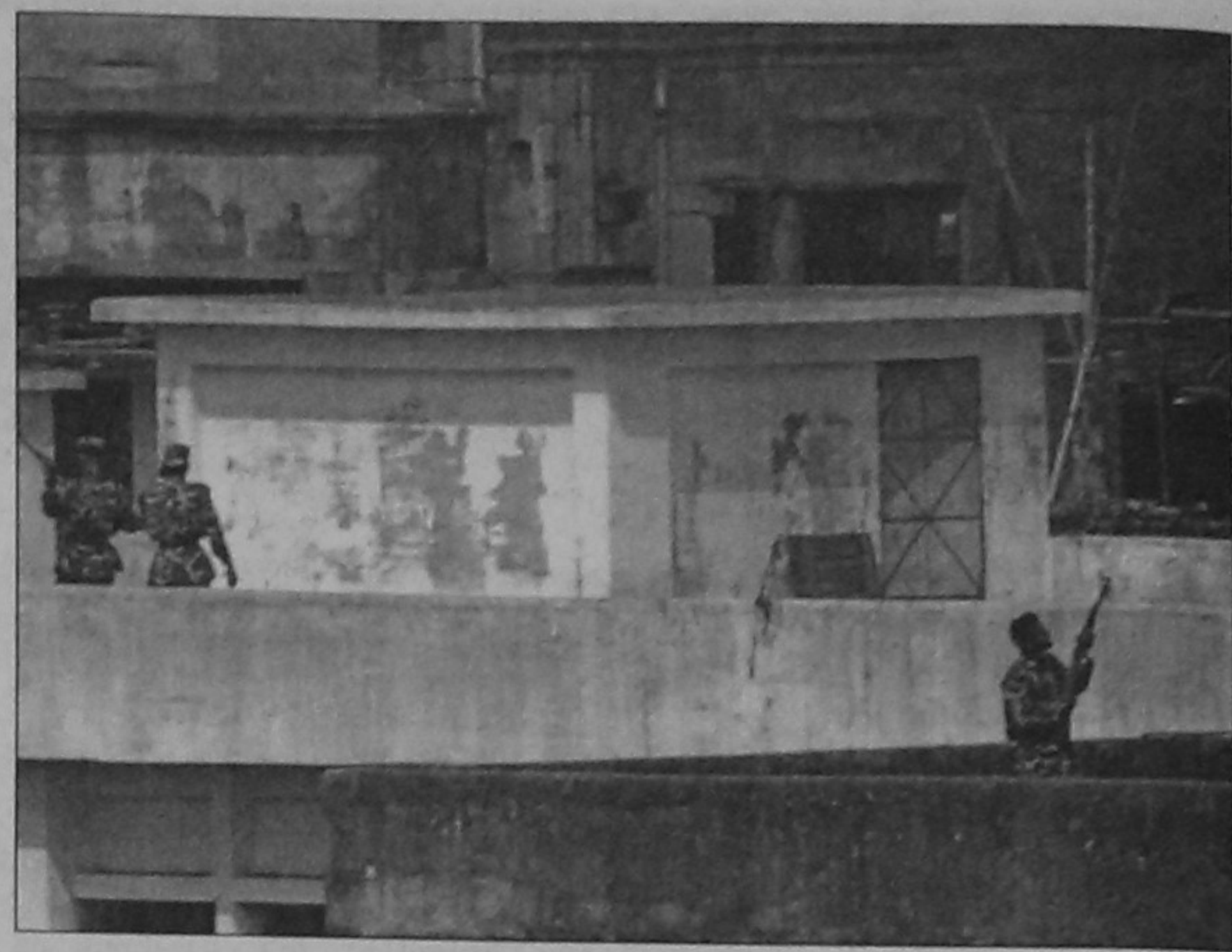
If the rebels were not alone in this, or if the so-called grievances were exploited to create turmoil to exploit the consequences, then who is or are the mastermind? That is the moot point that must be unearthed by the investigation committee. And that is why everyone's focus is on

the committee's findings. It is also important to pinpoint the various stakeholders in the deadly game.

It is important to determine as to who would have benefited most by the ensuing chaos. It would be necessary to bring to light external involvement, if any. And while the enquiry commissions are perhaps going about establishing or eliminating external linkages we ought to give due attention to the possibility that the mutiny may well have been engineered fully by an indigenous group or groups who had significant stake in the political uncertainty that was intended.

It may not be out of place to mention that some Indian media had already identified the masterminds, quoting their own sources of course, only a day or two after the mutiny. And some quarters in Dhaka did not hesitate to obliquely point fingers at one another's complicity in the matter. I bring this out to highlight the fact that such comments not only divert attention from the main issues, they also often lead to the matter being left unresolved, with many questions unanswered. And this is perhaps a very important lesson -- when to say, what to say and how much to say. And all these must be related to the likely impact that the remarks will have on the course of the investigations.

One, therefore, feels that the daily revelation of findings of the commissions by the commerce minister, including involvement of different groups in the BDR mutiny, instead of helping the investigation, is likely to affect its outcome negatively. While there is need for the media to be kept informed about the



Experience is the best teacher.

progress of work of the committee, feeding of selective information may appear to be motivated.

What detract credibility from his comments are the comments of his colleagues that clearly contradict what the commerce minister has said so far on the matter. If he is also supposed to be the government spokesman on the matter the commerce minister should hold his horses till after the investigation is completed.

But there are two other important lessons that I wish to touch upon, briefly.

The government must think seriously of setting up a crisis management group, either independently or as a part of the National Security Council whose formation is long overdue. It is nice to see some, who had been going hammer and tongs against the idea of NSC, fearing that it would amount to indirect military control of the government, are now propagating its cause.

The way that the Pilkhana mutiny was handled at the field level suggests everything but a cogent and rationale process of thinking.

The other important lesson of the heartrending event is the need for a rapid reaction force.

We will not have a Pilkhana situation everyday, but there is always the possibility of hostage situation occurring. We could be faced with a situation where a VIP could be taken hostage, a shopping complex full of shoppers held up, or students in a school taken hostage by some extremists groups.

These are speculative scenarios but not quite beyond the realms of possibility. And this calls for a force that could be quickly inserted in the objective area. We could organise a new force or recast Rsb for the job.

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## Basundhara blaze: An eye opener

There have been fires in markets, apparel industries and residential buildings. We do not bother to think about the dangers of violating building codes. Most builders of high-rise buildings do not think in terms of sound structural design based on correct materials in correct proportions.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

**U**RBAN life in a mega city like Dhaka is under threat. Risks and hazards as the fall-out of unplanned urbanisation have bedeviled the lives of the city dwellers. Planned Dhaka city continues to be a distant dream.

In fact, the whole city has been experiencing vertical growth, with scanty chance of horizontal expansion. City dwellers live in apartments that are mostly death traps, and shop in supermarkets that are not protected against fires or accidents.

The reasons are lack of open spaces, mushrooming of tall buildings even in narrow lanes, and construction of big shopping centres on roads fronts. The little space left is inaccessible by ambulance and fire brigade.

A city must be a place where the residents can live in safety and equanimity.

Distressingly, corruption in city management has made the service delivery systems inoperative. Bad governance in public utility offices, Rajuk and the City Corporation is responsible for the sluggish implementation of development projects.

We have many reports about the pitfalls in urban administration. Managing tenders and approval of blueprints of buildings by offering kickbacks has become the practice.

Under the building and construction act, all types of buildings require a permit from Rajuk. Few people comply with the building codes. It is easy to manage a permit by exerting undue influence and by exploiting connections or kinship.

There have been fires in markets, apparel industries and residential buildings. We do not bother to think about the dangers of violating building codes. Most builders of high-rise buildings do not think in terms of sound structural design

based on correct materials in correct proportions.

Residents of Dhaka experienced a terrible fire in the Basundhara City shopping complex, which took some lives and damaged property. It is a twenty-storey shopping mall with "iconic features," built at a cost of Tk.420 crore. The devastating fire caused considerable damage, amounting to Tk.200 crore according to the corporate authority.

It was a reminder of the indifference towards the dangers of unplanned urbanisation. Basundhara City, one of the largest shopping mall in Asia, was badly damaged by the roaring blaze that broke out in the corporate and commercial offices on the top floors minutes before 2pm on March 13, killing seven and injuring twenty five. An electrical short-circuit may have started the fire. The atmosphere that was created around the buildings was one of fear and apprehension. The complex had all the equipments to fight fires but the blaze on the top floors was unreachable, beyond the ill-equipped fire service.

A strong wind blowing over the city fanned flames rendering the task of dousing the fire impossible. According to the news, the fire brigade sprayed water from a sky lift that could barely touched the fifteenth floor. The fire-fighters were helped by the army, air force, Rab and

police. They were able to tame the fire at 9pm.

Most fire accidents normally take place immediately after winter, between February and March. Many godowns and commercial establishments have been gutted after winter. The Basundhara blaze and the fire at BSEC building are no exception. Thing is that there is little mass awareness about the dangers of fire accidents. The inhabitants of various dwelling units are agonisingly exposed to the indifference and incapacities of the caretakers and their employees.

The fire service is not modernised to the extent desired. It does not have high-tech equipment and the personnel are not properly trained. The multi-storied buildings should have well trained staff and necessary logistics to tackle any accident. In a talk show some experts opined that hardly twenty percent of the high-rise buildings have sufficient modern fire extinguishing systems. The caretakers and dwellers do not have capacity building training to face any eventuality.

The consequences will be catastrophic if an earthquake jolts tall buildings. Basundhara was well built with a solid concrete foundation. But some combustible materials were certainly vulnerable to fire.

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## Justice and its discontents

Africa has seen its share of peace deals that have been achieved without retribution. Similarly, for the leaders of the ANC in South Africa, the choice to forego prosecutions against the former leaders of apartheid was considered crucial for a peaceful and workable transition.

MUNYEMA HASAN

**T**HE International Criminal Court (ICC) has hurled its noose yet again, this time over a sitting head of state, Sudan's Omar Hassan al-Bashir. It has split the world into two camps, with big players such as China, the Arab League and the African Union trying to delay the arrest and the others slapping accusations on them for loosening the reins of justice.

Whatever their (vested) interests may be, has the distinction between right and wrong been so clearly drawn? How credible is the ICC's style of justice? Most importantly, what will be the consequences of this indictment on the civilians in Darfur and in Sudan?

The ICC establishment in 1998 came as a massive breakthrough for criminal justice. Its legal mandate covered heinous crimes. Unlike other ad-hoc tribunals, such as in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, the ICC was a permanent tribunal. It provided a platform to root out the culture of impunity and deter future crimes.

Yet, with an Orwellian twist, the world's biggest and mightiest exempted their

actions from the scrutiny of the ICC. The US, China, Russia, India, Pakistan and Israel among others have either not signed or not ratified the instrument, making a mockery out of global justice.

Since the ICC's jurisdiction extends only to territories or nationals of states that have acceded to the ICC Statute, the bigwigs remain out of its radar despite their records of violence. On the contrary, ICC prosecutions have targeted weak and dysfunctional states, mostly concentrated in Africa. This is no less than selective justice.

When justice rears its head, there is a temptation to simplify good and evil; to expedite the process and secure quick results. The ICC's assessment of the conflict in Darfur has been seen in a similar light, devoid of historical and political context. A professor of Columbia University, Mahmood Mamdani, has revealed several factual inaccuracies in the evidence presented by the ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo.

He accuses al-Bashir for promoting a racialisation of identities between the Arabs and the non-Arab Zurgas or

Africans. History is witness that this racialisation had its roots in the British colonial period and provided the frame for government policy.

Similarly Ocampo accuses al-Bashir of ethnic cleansing through land grabbing. Mamdani again refutes this claim by showing that land grabbing was a consequence of historical events beginning from the colonial designation of land to rapid desertification during the mid-'80s, and finally the counterinsurgency that the Bashir regime unleashed in 2003-04 as a response to the insurgency backed by peasant tribes.

These arguments do not exonerate al-Bashir of his crimes. Rather they necessitate that the punishment be proportionate to the crime committed. As it stands now, the ICC's take on justice seems to be politicised, which will almost certainly undermine its legitimacy.

Bashir's defiant reaction to the ICC decision was to tell his supporters to "immerse it in water and drink it." He expelled 13 major international aid agencies along with a few local ones. These agencies provided much of the food, water and medicine to the 2.75 million refugees who live in temporary camps in Darfur. The Sudanese government has no contingency plan to replace these essential services.

This should have been anticipated, for peace and justice in Africa have often been perceived as mutually exclusive. Human rights workers and humanitarian actors perpetually face moral and ethical dilem-

mas, as denouncing human rights abuses risks endangering crucial access to victims of a conflict. That is precisely what has happened in Sudan. The ICC indictment has unleashed a humanitarian crisis and peace seems beyond the horizon.

These arguments are not to stifle the quest for justice but to make a careful assessment of the credibility and consequences of it, which will ultimately be borne by the victims of the Darfur conflict. Prosecutions by international tribunals may actually create stumbling blocks for more politically realistic alternatives to address past grievances, including amnesty, exile or ostracism.

Africa has seen its share of peace deals that have been achieved without retribution, such as in Mozambique and Sierra Leone where the RENAMO and RUF respectively were incorporated into government and are now the official opposition. Similarly, for the leaders of the ANC in South Africa, the choice to forego prosecutions against the former leaders of apartheid was considered crucial for a peaceful and workable transition.

These are not generalisable to every conflict ridden state in Africa. But these difficult choices were made to avoid a far greater humanitarian and political crisis. Whether the current situation in Darfur warrants a similar choice is a question that should be answered immediately. That would do more for securing justice for the victims and survivors of this conflict.

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