

Glimpses of positive sign on manpower front

Tackling men behind the workers' misery is the issue

OVER these past many years, thousands of our workers who have either not been able to go abroad or have been compelled to return home by the host countries have spoken of their travails brought on by unscrupulous agencies, especially at home but also abroad. In light of what has lately been happening to Bangladesh's workers in certain countries, these realities take on added significance. And now that none other than Expatriates Welfare Minister Khondokar Mosharraf Hossain has spoken of the nefarious roles played by brokers in the manpower business, it is proper to ask what happens from here on.

The minister has just come back home from what must have been an eye opener of a trip to Kuala Lumpur to gauge the conditions of Bangladeshi workers and the prospects for our workers there. The Bangladesh mission has been looking after a large number of these workers pending their return home, but it is safe to suggest that a much bigger number is out there spending days in unmitigated misery. Nevertheless, the minister has come back with rather encouraging news about the future of our workers. A spirit of mutuality has come into the issue given that both Bangladesh and Malaysia have agreed to combat the problem created by unscrupulous recruiting agencies and brokers at each other's end.

It is certainly a positive development that one expects will yield results. At the same time, the emphasis being placed on the Bangladesh mission's role in ensuring Bangladeshi workers' welfare in Malaysia is a noteworthy approach to the problem. The plan to increase manpower in the labour wing of the mission in Kuala Lumpur should lead to a streamlining of the work of the High Commission. That will come through verification by the mission of job conditions in the host country and also through ensuring that no fake organisation or agency in Malaysia is able to interfere with the lives of our workers. We read into such developments some very clear signs of optimism. However, it is also necessary that the same degree of supervision be applied in the case of the recruiting agencies here at home. That is where the roots of the problem lie.

Minister Mosharraf Hossain has noted that there is a chance that Kuala Lumpur will reconsider taking in workers from among the 55,000 whose visas were cancelled early last month. We expect the possibility to turn into a reality at the earliest. Finally, let us point out that the rapidity with which our workers have taken a battering abroad in recent months calls for a wholesale review of our manpower policy. There is no alternative to a change in perceptions and policy.

G20 summit in London

Time for a global new deal

THE meeting of world leaders at the G20 summit that kicked off yesterday in London comes at a crucial moment for the global economy, and we hold out hope that it will help pull the world out of the global depression into which it has been plunged, or, at least, that it will set in place steps that will allow for an eventual turn-around and recovery.

We are hopeful about the summit for two reasons: the first of these is that it is a meeting of the G20 rather than the traditional G8, a long overdue recognition of the fact that the BRIC countries, and others, also are deserving of a seat at the table, and so it is not just a meeting of the highly industrialised western countries dictating terms for the rest of the world to follow.

The second reason we are hopeful is that the stated objective of the meeting is to bring the world's biggest economies together to help restore global economic growth through enhanced international co-ordination.

In other words, the world powers have apparently recognised the reality that the current economic crisis is something that has far-reaching effects, and that the only way out of it is for coordinated action.

Co-operation will indeed be the key to ensure that countries do not employ self-defeating beggar-thy-neighbour or race-to-the-bottom strategies to cope with the downturn.

Prior to the summit, the participating world leaders have pledged to take whatever action is necessary to stabilise the financial markets, to reform and strengthen the global financial and economic system in order to restore confidence and trust, and to put the global economy on track for sustainable growth, high levels of employment and poverty reduction. This is the approach necessary at the present moment, and we are especially gratified to note the focus on poverty reduction as a desired outcome of the summit.

The rhetoric, in advance of the summit, thus hit all the right notes. Our concern is that with the summit getting underway the earlier commitments and priorities will be maintained and the cooperation that is necessary to move forward and has been pledged will be there in actuality when the time comes to implement the recommendations that come out of the summit.

One discordant note is that the summit would have been enhanced further had there been a representative from the LDC countries, which would have further democratised the proceedings and ensured that the interests of hundreds of millions of the poorest of the poor were represented. Let us hope their absence from the table does not signify that their concerns will be neglected.

A common enemy

But surely anger is more appropriately aimed at those who perpetrated the carnage rather than those who arguably should have done a better job of preventing it. The fury that has been directed at the government seems to me to be almost entirely misplaced.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

I don't get it. To me, the most inexplicable aspect of the fallout from the Pilkhana massacre is the wedge that has been driven between the army and the ruling Awami League as a result of the incident.

This is no minor consideration. In fact, prior to the massacre, one of the major developments of the past two years of caretaker rule had been the resultant detente between the army and the AL. The implications with respect to the balance of political power in the country were significant.

Equally significant was that the working relationship between the in-coming government and the army had appeared to be in good shape after the elections, with the army apparently content to return to the cantonment and take a back-seat role in affairs of state.

In that sense, come to think of it, the wedge that has been driven between the army and the government is not exactly inexplicable: the whole point of the massacre was to, at the very least, drive a wedge between them.

But what I suppose I find inexplicable is that such a transparent ploy appears to have been so successful, and how easily emotions and grief can be manipulated in the service of such an obviously ill-motivated political agenda.

Let us stipulate, for the sake of argument, that the government did indeed err in its handling of the siege (and for the record, I still maintain that, given the difficulty of the situation, the government did a creditable job).

Certainly I can understand that there

might be some anger against the government on the part of those who feel that it should have performed better during the crisis.

And even though I believe that all the evidence suggests that to have ordered a storming of the BDR compound would have most likely precipitated an even greater catastrophe, I can understand the emotions of those who feel that this would have been the correct course of action.

But surely anger is more appropriately aimed at those who perpetrated the carnage rather than those who arguably should have done a better job of preventing it. The fury that has been directed at the government seems to me to be almost entirely misplaced.

But that, of course, is the point. The anti-government campaign that has been ginned up in the aftermath of Pilkhana is part of a systematic effort to continue to manipulate public opinion and misdirect public anger away from those who are truly culpable for the carnage.

Just as the perpetrators of the massacre manipulated misguided BDR jawans into revolting, and manipulated public opinion in favour of the mutineers in the early hours of the siege, now they are manipulating the nation's (and, more troublingly, the army's) grief and fury to deflect attention and anger away from where it belongs: at the feet of those who were behind the killings.

We shouldn't fall for it. There is a massive campaign of lies and misinformation being undertaken, attempting to suggest that the government itself is behind the massacre that has plunged the nation into crisis. Anti-government conspiracy theories in the most intricate and implausible detail



United in grief.

are making the rounds, both of the print media and on-line.

It is astounding to me that anyone could believe some of the transparently false and ill-informed conspiracy theories that are out there, but there appear to be no shortage of takers.

But those who do not have a political agenda but are spouting the same mendacious talking points need to wake up and understand how they are being manipulated by those who do.

As for the government, this should be, in fact, if handled correctly, an opportunity for it to cement its detente with the army. The enemies of the government, and make no mistake, it is enemies of this government who were behind the massacre, have committed a fatal error, which should be the key to their eventual downfall.

They have killed 57 army officers in cold blood. In doing so, they have made an enemy of the army. Thus, the government and the army now have a common enemy. The army should now be fully on board when it comes to the fight against the enemies of the government who attempted to destabilise the country by wreaking mayhem at Pilkhana.

The government needs to redirect the anger that exists within the army towards those who were behind the massacre. If it succeeds in doing so, not only might the perpetrators be brought to justice, but, with the army on board against them and making common cause with the government, our entire domestic political landscape could be transformed.

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Repressed history syndrome

This nation has blocked out many of its painful memories, dividing us into two sides. One side likes to remember what another likes to forget. If this investigation also blocks out truth, it will widen that division. If history is piled up, it creates its own syndrome. It furiously recalls what it is forced to repress.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE mystery of BDR killing is piling up, delay on delay, blunder on blunder, speculation on speculation, and then body count on body count; ten deaths in custody already in roughly one month. While the investigation gets another 30 days and the government mulls over getting the Interpol involved after FBI and Scotland Yard, the handle is getting bigger than the blade.

We shouldn't investigate an ongoing investigation, because it could interfere with its outcome. But we can't but ask questions if something doesn't make sense. Take for example our minister of commerce. There was something quirky about the way he said what he said and then suddenly rescinded it. For several days, he said he had evidence that Islamic militants had a hand in the BDR killing. Then all of a sudden he changed his story in the swing of a confession.

What was it? Was it some kind of a delusion? Actors face this problem at times. They don't recover from characters portrayed by them. It seems the honourable minister has suffered from the same problem. The man who stood in front of the dressing mirror in the morning got perplexed in front of the phalanx of television mikes in the afternoon. He completely forgot that they were supposed to be two different men that he was a private man in a public role, a minister not a minstrel, whose job was to tell us what really happened.

Instead, he entertained us with his version of the story, and told us what he thought we ought to hear. What he said in his official capacity was actually what he thought as a private man. In the uplands of enlightenment, there should have been consequences. In this flatland of forgiveness, one doesn't have to take responsibility for one's mistakes.

This is where the anger turns from the

minister and targets on us. This is where we sense in us a territory of ignorance about ourselves. After thirty-eight years of independence we can still do nothing when our politicians take us for a ride. All that time we thought this master coordinator was bringing us updates from the investigation. But he was conducting his own investigation in the swamps of his own mind.

Going by the trend, one is afraid if more blight will pile up on blight in the next 30 days. It's a long time, more time for more goof-ups, perhaps more time for more things to be said and retracted. Perhaps more private men will become more oblivious of their public roles, bringing personal analysis into national synthesis in more swings of more confessions.

It's possible that the atrocity at BDR was an external sabotage. It's possible that there was a deadly blend of conspiracy and grievances, which flared up in a brutal carnage. But a procrastinated investigation runs the risk of distortions for the same reason an overexposed film stands the chance of getting damaged. Truth gets rusty and loses its shine.

So justice, like flowers, has a season. It's diluted if delayed, harassed if hurried. That's why what is happening somehow doesn't feel right. Apart from other things, the timing of the investigation has shifted a few times. It seems like we are getting jus-

tice made in a tailoring shop. Come delivery day, it asks for an extension of time.

It's said in the marketing world that brands stumble before they walk. Can we say the same thing about this investigation? No problem if it has stumbled a few times, extensions given, committees reshuffled, so forth and so on. Let us hope these have been done to make corrections so that the investigation runs without further interruption.

We need that assurance from the government, preferably from a new and laconic coordinator, who will not speak his mind but mind his speak. It must come, not from a ventriloquist's dummy, but someone who understands that history works like the mind. If a painful experience is blocked out, it returns to hurt again. In psychotherapy, they call it Repressed Memory Syndrome.

This nation has blocked out many of its painful memories, dividing us into two sides. One side likes to remember what another likes to forget. If this investigation also blocks out truth, it will widen that division.

If history is piled up, it creates its own syndrome. It furiously recalls what it is forced to repress.

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S.M. Murshed, judge and politician

The magnificence of S.M. Murshed, however, has stayed undiminished across the years. He remains the focus of morality in these troubled times. That is the tribute on a grand scale.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

BACK in 1968, Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan was in terrific form. He celebrated the tenth year of his seizure of power through a frenzy of exhibition as well as exhibitionism. In what used to be East Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was already in deep trouble, or so the president's people thought, with the Agartala Case looming large over his future. The future, as Ayub saw it, was safe. Maybe even assured.

It was misjudgment of the most terrible kind. So when retired Air Marshal Asghar Khan announced that he was coming into politics, the media reduced the event to a little item in the negligible portions of newspapers. The same was resorted to when Justice S.M. Murshed took the surprising but courageous step of telling the country that he too was there to participate in the country's politics. And, obviously, the fundamental reason behind the entry of the air marshal and the judge was to give the opposition a shot in the arm. It rocked

the boat in which the field marshal and his complacent loyalists had so long been cruising.

The one point that will for long remain pinned to the Bengali consciousness is the role S.M. Murshed performed without ambivalence in the centenary celebrations of Tagore's birth in 1961. That was perhaps Murshed's defining moment; and he never looked back after that. And that is why it was with little regret or agonising that he walked away from the judiciary in the latter part of the sixties. His coming into politics in 1968 was, therefore, little that could really surprise those who knew him.

Consider the times in which Justice Murshed took the plunge into politics. The trial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in what the government was putting across as a case of conspiracy to have the eastern wing secede from the rest of Pakistan had only exacerbated sentiments among the Bengalis. To be sure, Maulana Bhashani was there, ever ready to take up the cudgel on behalf of the people. But his politics, so long agitational, only promised to be even more so in the

days to come.

In contrast, Murshed was offering a condition in which Bengali politics, and by extension, overall Pakistani politics, would attain the opportunity of intellectualising itself through democratic reasoning. But Murshed did not delude himself. His goal was not to officiate as the Bengali spokesman or even as a Pakistani spokesman in the absence of their recognised leaders. Neither was he willing to place himself in a situation where he or anyone else would take his entry into the political arena as indispensable.

It was not for Murshed to consider the issue of power, of wielding it or sharing it with anyone. His job was to keep politics responsive enough to the people to keep itself going. It was also what Ashgar Khan was trying to do in West Pakistan. But the difference between the two men was that Khan, because of his long association with the regime and that too with the military part of it, was a novice when it came to operating with political elements.

Murshed was the quintessential scholar, the man who measured men and matters in terms of everything that came in association with the modern. He observed issues from a decidedly judicial or legal point of view. And he looked at the social picture through the prism of morality. It was his

understanding that Pakistan as it stood in the winter of 1968 was quite incapable of carrying itself forth with dignity or credibility unless it was willing to bore deep into its soul. The Six Points of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were on the table. The Points, Murshed knew, were not the last word. But they were certainly the premise from which a new beginning had to be made.

The stock of Justice Murshed rose, as thoughts of a departure by Ayub Khan began seizing the popular imagination. It was said in varied circles, including official ones, that Murshed would be the man to preside over the transition to a new state of politics in Pakistan. It is interesting to imagine the state of the country as it would have shaped up under an administration led by a President Murshed.

Fate, and the machinations of duplicitous men in the barracks, made sure that history would run away from Murshed and then crush the country under its weight, just two years into the future. The magnificence of S.M. Murshed, however, has stayed undiminished across the years. He remains the focus of morality in these troubled times. That is the tribute on a grand scale.

Today is the 30th anniversary of the death of Justice Syed Mahub Murshed.