

Why are Bangladeshi workers dying abroad?

The causes given lack credibility

THE figures are simply staggering. In the first week of this month, the bodies of altogether 64 Bangladeshi expatriates working in various countries were brought back home. As a newspaper report makes it clear, on Friday alone a total of twelve such bodies arrived in Dhaka. The worry about these dead, indeed about the causes of their death, is only made worse considering that in the first three months of this year, January to March, the bodies of 635 Bangladeshi workers were brought back home. In April, 199 bodies were received at ZIA.

Various reasons have been advanced to explain the deaths of these expatriate workers. These include cardiac failures, accidents and other, largely unspecified causes. Those reasons do not of course satisfy either the families of the dead or citizens by and large. Which is why there is a huge need for an answer to the question of why such a big number of Bangladeshis have been dying abroad. For us in Bangladesh, it is always a matter of great sadness when even a single one of our workers dies abroad in inexplicable circumstances. One unnatural death is one too many. And here we have hundreds of deaths occurring and no one either in the host countries or among the Bangladesh authorities appears to be able to provide a logical explanation behind these tragic happenings. A crucial question now is whether the Bangladesh authorities are aware of the causes of these deaths. If they are not, which is more likely the case, why have they not taken steps to ascertain from the authorities in the Middle East, Malaysia, Korea and other countries the nature of the deaths? This need to probe the deaths is important because otherwise the impression grows that the poverty of the workers and their families does not greatly enthuse the authorities into action. In a social situation where the remittances of our expatriate workers acts as a spur to the national economy, such neglect of their welfare abroad is simply unpardonable.

A word about the role of the host countries is now in order. Since foreign workers are employed in their territory, it is their moral and legal responsibility to ensure that these workers enjoy minimum health service and earn the income they were promised at the time of their employment. It is true that these workers mostly work for private firms, but when they face hazards at the hands of these firms and find themselves at risk, the governments of the host countries must get to the bottom of such problems. After all, there is the great need for them to preserve their good image abroad.

The problem is a grave one. That is reason why we must plumb the depths of it. When a healthy man goes abroad to earn a living, we do not expect him to return home within months as a corpse.

Screening at ZIA slipshod?

Swine flu could slip into the country

EVEN though a health check desk has been set up at the Zia International Airport (ZIA) since April 29 to ward off risk of swine flu contagion by screening out suspected cases, there have been but a few going through the routine procedure. Some passengers approached by our reporter seemed unaware of any health desk and also the necessity for them to report. Although inbound passengers from 19 countries are to pass through the procedure, the big signboard put up at ZIA asking travellers to report name only seven countries. Actually, the whole idea of listing countries is being continually overtaken by the fact that suspected cases are surfacing in newer countries with each passing day.

So, there is lack of focus to begin with. This obviously needs to be replaced with a hands-on approach that will have inbound passengers with 'runny nose, sneeze or cough' checked, regardless of countries they flew in from. But it must be caring and concerned about the passengers without any hint of hassle; instead, with a persuasive message conveyed to them that by going through the check-up they would not only be helping themselves but also others by preventing the spread of the virus.

It is surprising that we have set up arrangements without having trained immigration and health officials in the fundamentals of handling such a specialised job. Although special training sessions are on the card, the question is: why were they not imparted adequate training before they were put on the job in the first place? For, this is vital not only for self-protection but also for management of the whole operation.

There is no doubt that this presents a logistical challenge but we can take the cue from other international airports, especially of the region, to mount an effective vigil on entry of A(H1N1) influenza through our airports. Apart from the airport, we must keep vigil on sea and land ports. It is good to learn that nine entry points have been placed on the radar. The need for taking adequate precautions and preventive measures can hardly be overemphasised.

Let logic and decency prevail

So, the almost imminent duel between the party in power and the opposition has every reason to scare peace-lovers. Opposition for the sake of opposition, irrespective of the issues, should not be the political custom of any civilised state.

SAYEED ARMAN

THE cabinet's decision to revoke the allotment of Khaleda Zia's residence on Moimul Road, Dhaka Cantonment, has put the opposition party in a combative mood. It goes without saying that it has heated up the country's political front.

The opposition leaders have expressed strong resentment against this move and have declared that there will be further agitation unless the government backs off, while the ruling party asserts that it will not shift from its stand.

It is known that a cantonment is a highly sensitive area that remains under stringent surveillance round the clock. So, a non-military, prominent political figure owning a house in a cantonment is naturally viewed from a different angle. The grounds on which Khaleda Zia was allowed to live in

that house were quite different right after her husband ex-president Ziaur Rahman's assassination back in 1981.

Moreover, she possesses another residence, which means that even if she gives up the house in the cantonment she will not be inconvenienced. Keeping that in view, she could have perhaps grabbed the opportunity to prove her munificence by quitting the controversial house.

Khaleda Zia held political meetings with her leaders and general activists, including courtesy calls by foreign diplomats, for a couple of decades in an area that has strategic importance and military establishments. Wasn't that an obvious breach of military security?

Another point is that, when out of power, Khaleda Zia enjoys more safety than her Awami League counterpart, Sheikh Hasina, as the latter lives in a civilian area with no special security arrangements.

Nevertheless, the ongoing tussle between the government and the opposition over a leader's residence is a hyperbolic political battle, if judged in broad terms. The country is now in the middle of multifarious adversities. The people are yet to get over the shockwaves generated by the heinous BDR killings, and there is the ever-mounting menace of power crisis and the impact of the global economic meltdown.

If the two major parties lock horns over something less vital, nothing will be more unfortunate than that. As plain on-lookers of the country's political activities over almost four decades, we have all along found that our politicians cynical towards their ideological opponents. They have almost in all cases failed to reach agreement on anything that involves the people's interest.

Nothing appeases or enrages the politicians more than winning or losing polls. We remember several nightmarish instances when they triggered clashes all over the country in the recent past, mainly for political vengeance. They failed to restrain their activists from damaging vehicles, assaulting pedestrians, and destabilising public educational institutions. While going on strikes to paralyse countrywide communication, they seem to have the least concern

about the ordinary citizens who have to go out every day to make a living.

So, the almost imminent duel between the party in power and the opposition has every reason to scare peace-lovers. Opposition for the sake of opposition, irrespective of the issues, should not be the political custom of any civilised state.

We don't know when and how this dispute will be resolved. But the people certainly expect both the concerned sides to accept whatever the court decides, provided that the issue finally reaches there for settlement. Both parties should abstain from provocation by making a mountain out of a molehill. Since the government holds the upper hand it should display utmost tolerance in this regard.

Khaleda Zia, as the country's premier, should be allowed to have adequate time and legal privileges to defend herself. The process should not look like an effort to evict her forcibly, so that it doesn't lead to untoward consequences.

Similarly, she should instruct her party members not to agitate on the streets in case she has to leave the cantonment at the end. Let logic and decency prevail over political obduracy.

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Why Mumbai's voters went missing

Muslims seem to possess neither the time nor patience needed for unity. There are perhaps thirty small parties searching for minute conclaves on the electoral map, including exotic outfits like the Muslim Munnethra Khazhagam in Tamil Nadu.

M.J. AKBAR

NORMALLY, media chases news. Sometimes, news chases media. Occasionally, there is a deadlock. That is when media is forced to look for rabbits in a hat. After all, news can exist albeit forlorn and forgotten without media, but media can't survive without news.

The media search for the missing Mumbai voter was a bit of a non-story. In 2004, 47% of Mumbai voted, in 2009 the figure was 44%, or perhaps a bit less. The instant shock-horror analysis asked in a wailing monotone: whatever happened to the 100,000 Mumbaikars who stormed television screens after the Pakistani invasion of Mumbai and threatened to start a revolution armed with blazing candles?

They went back to their smoke-and-spirits parties after their fifteen minutes of fame was over, darling. Those demonstrators had exhausted their discomfort-quota for years. Voting in May requires some serious tactical negotiations with the elements. If the price of democracy is going to be sunburn, why not wait for the vote to reach the net? It can't be too long. We are the champions of IT, aren't we?

Facts lay hidden in a different question: not in the absence of the rich, but the boycott of the poor. Most non-voters of Mumbai are either edge-of-nerves middle class or edge-of-hunger poor. They did not vote five years ago, and they did not vote again.

The drop of about 4% is easily explicable, as long as you are not transfixed on

celebrities framed by candlelight. In 2004, Mumbai Muslims voted aggressively to defeat the BJP-led NDA because of the Gujarat riots and lifted the average turnout to 47%. This year, they are indifferent to the Congress and hostile to the BJP-Shiv Sena. There is no one to vote for.

The Congress has once again fudged its way through five years over the Srikrishna Commission report, which named the guilty in the 1992-93 riots. As for their other demand, job reservations: the joke is that other communities get jobs, while Muslims get enquiry commissions.

Anger has fractured Muslim voters in 2009. They are hostile to the Congress in states where it is in power, like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Assam. But many are voting for the Congress where it is not in power, like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. However, there is no consolidation, of the kind we saw in 2004.

In Kerala, a section has responded positively to the Left's anti-American stance, but only May 16 will tell whether this has reversed the prevalent anti-incumbency. In Bengal, which has the highest percentage of minority voters, they are split.

Disillusionment, however, might led the way towards yet another illusion. The most popular hope now is for a "Muslim BSP." According to some estimates, Muslim voters can influence the result in 74 Lok Sabha seats. There were only 37 Muslim MPs in the last Lok Sabha. The maximum number of MPs, 46, won in 1980 when Indira Gandhi wooed Muslims back from Emergency trauma with higher



Is this as far as Indian Muslims' political involvement goes?

representation. Since then it has been downhill. The Congress wants every Muslim vote in Delhi, but is never ready to name a Muslim candidate on its slate. It rangles.

Success is easier sought than achieved. It took nearly two decades of effort by two generations of leaders, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, to fuse the Dalit vote to the elephant symbol.

Muslims seem to possess neither the time nor patience needed for unity. There are perhaps thirty small parties searching for minute conclaves on the electoral map, including exotic outfits like the Muslim Munnethra Khazhagam in Tamil Nadu.

The only effective effort outside Kerala's Muslim League has been Maulana Badruddin Ajmal's AUDF in Assam which won nine seats in the Assembly and, more important, scared the daylight of the Congress in twenty more. It has spread its wings just a bit, moving into Maharashtra and Bengal.

There is much interest, also, in how the

Azamgarh-centric Ulama Council will fare in Uttar Pradesh. This group achieved lift-off after the UPA refused to order an enquiry into the encounter at Batla House near Jamia Milia last year, and the consequent demonisation by the police of young men from Azamgarh.

Such varied efforts might result in just one MP, probably from Assam, where Maulana Ajmal could produce an upset. What will be significant is the post-poll phase of mobilisation. Will collective interest overcome individual ambition and that pervasive bane of Indian politics, distrust?

An invention awaits the next genius: a camera that can photograph the mind. Television politics has become a screaming contest between politicians, perhaps because the camera has lost the art of stimulation. Since there is no hope of getting a different kind of politician, we need a different sort of camera. It will chase the mind for news.

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Politicisation is the problem

Civil servants of all descriptions are the servants of the republic and not of the party in power. They are not expected to be loyal to the party in power, but are required to serve governments of different political ideologies without being partisan. The problem is the politicisation.

A. N. M. NURUL HAQUE

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has directed the civil servants to discharge their duties for the well-being of the people, keeping in mind that they are the servants of the people, not their masters. She said this while inaugurating a two-day silver jubilee function of Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre at Savar recently.

This call has dealt with an important issue involving the relations between the government officials and the people. But this does not depend only on the government officials themselves, but also on the people who rule the country.

Unless the political government that rules the country wants to establish pro-people governance, the government officials will not consider themselves as the servants of the people. Still, we welcome the prime minister's call to the government officials to dedicate themselves to the cause of the people and discharge their

duties with a pro-people attitude because the bureaucracy needs to be put on the right track.

The BNP-led coalition government at the very fag end of its tenure gave mass promotions to civil servants entirely on political considerations, apparently for taking them on its side during the election.

According to a source in the establishment ministry, 2,380 officials were promoted in the different tiers of bureaucracy during the four-party alliance tenure. The bureaucracy has come under keen public scrutiny due to such promotions.

The AL-led government's latest move to identify government officials sympathetic to the rival political parties is a continuation of the vicious tradition, and has worrying consequences on the overall administration of the country. This has been a major cause of deterioration of the quality of governance, for which the nation is paying a bitter price.

Bangladesh inherited its bureaucratic system from the British rulers. The civil

service in this sub-continent under the British regime was regulated as per the terms and conditions laid down in the India Act, 1935, which contained fair and beneficial provisions aiming to protect the interest of civil servants for performing their duties neutrally.

The bureaucracy in Bangladesh, unlike India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, has failed to maintain political neutrality, though it is reinforced by rules restricting its political activities. Section 30 of the Government Servants Conduct Rules of 1979 says: "No government servant shall bring, or attempt to bring political or other outside influence, directly or indirectly, to bear on the government or any government servant in support of any claim arising in connection with his employment."

Section 32 of the said rules adds: "Contravention of any of these rules shall be construed as misconduct within the meaning of the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985, and a government servant found guilty of such contravention shall render himself liable to disciplinary action under the aforesaid rules."

But Sections 30 and 32 are honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Not a single instance can be cited in which a civil servant was awarded punishment for breach of conduct in his involvement in political activities.

Bangladesh does not as yet have any

civil service act or any other law regulating the civil service. The Government Servants Conduct Rules of 1979, the Government Servants (Special Provisions) Ordinance 1979, the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules 1985, and the Public Servants Dismissed on Conviction Ordinance 1985 contain the important rules regulating the civil service.

But these rules and ordinances do not provide protection to the civil servants from being repressed by the political party in power. This is also a reason for the bureaucrats becoming partisans. All efforts should be made to put the bureaucracy on the right track.

There is good reason for the nation to be worried about the increasing politicisation of the bureaucracy, as it is the most stable and vital component for good governance. The frequent mass promotions on political considerations have a demoralising effect across the tiers of the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy is bound to become spoiled if partisan loyalty rather than merit becomes the criterion for promotion.

Civil servants of all descriptions are the servants of the republic and not of the party in power. They are not expected to be loyal to the party in power, but are required to serve governments of different political ideologies without being partisan. The problem is the politicisation.

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