

Deaths of Bangladeshi workers

A concern that must be addressed urgently

BANGLADESHI workers abroad, at least in some countries, are in deep trouble -- a fact amply illustrated by the arrival of the dead bodies of 904 workers in the last five months. And a staggering 44 per cent of the fatalities has been attributed to cardiac arrest -- a not so common cause of death among people in the 25-40 age group. Equally worrying is the death from workplace accidents that accounts for more than 25 per cent.

We are raising the issue in this column for the second time in a week because of the abnormally high number of deaths of Bangladeshi workers. When young men, who were in perfectly good health while going abroad, die in such numbers, questions are bound to arise regarding the living and working conditions in some of the host countries. Doctors have held tension, uncertainty, poor salary and non-fulfillment of contractual obligations by their employers as the factors leading to cardiac arrest. Many of the workers apparently failed to cope with the unusual pressure as they had paid a high price for getting a job abroad and didn't know how they would repay the loans they had contracted for the purpose. As for workplace accidents, it seems employers are oblivious of the workers' safety needs. Otherwise, how could 268 people die in five months? The whole story smacks of negligence and violation of human and labour rights.

The living and working conditions that push workers to death will have to come under some sort of scrutiny or monitoring by the governments of the host countries. Stories have occasionally appeared in the local media bringing to light the agonies of workers which need to be taken cognizance of. The issue cannot fail to draw the attention of labour and human rights activists groups.

Now, the government must take up the matter with the host governments, get to the bottom of it and let the public know about it. While it is the responsibility of the host countries to monitor the working conditions offered by employers in the interest of upholding their image, it devolves upon the sender countries to ascertain as to why so many of our workers are dying overseas and what must be done to stem the phenomenon. The question of paying adequate compensation is very pertinent and our government has to initiate a dialogue on the matter with the host countries.

Trained hands in the wilderness

Utilise their services without ado

FOR months since the IT-intensive project for voter-list preparation with photograph got implemented, a huge chunk of trained manpower has remained idle, thanks to lack of forward human resource planning. Whilst we planned and admirably executed the highly ambitious and widely acclaimed electoral roll preparation-cum-facilitation of ID card issuance project, we had no plans as to how we would utilise the services of the manpower that the army had trained up, after the job got done.

A pool of a little over one lakh data entry operators created at a cost of Taka 11 crore has been rusting away all this time. Admittedly, despite resource constraints, we can't allow such a valuable resource to fritter away. Hopefully, the basic IT skills imparted to them have been retained requiring perhaps an intensive spell of retraining to be revitalised and put back into action. But the process must begin now with a course clearly charted for their absorption in right places and fuller utilisation of their services.

There are a plenty of potential placements for them. An immediate possibility that comes to mind has to do with the revision and updating of the voter-list, a task, however, that would entail services of upwards of some 4000 data operators. And it is likely to be a seasonal employment for four to five months. So, we have to look for durable prospects.

Of course, they can be pressed into service towards materialising the government's vision of a digital Bangladesh. To this end, they can be placed at the offices of upazila chairmen and other local bodies, utilised in the computerisation of land records, and the qualified among them can be recruited as teachers at primary and secondary education stages for which new openings are being created anyway.

Besides, quite importantly, they can form a nucleus, with some additional training imparted to them, for generating a strong base of computer savvy people among the generality.

Embrace of hope

We would like to see in the meeting of the two more than mere symbolism -- we would like to see it as an embrace of hope that would bring a qualitative change in our polity and politics.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

WHEN the leader of the opposition Khaleda Zia visited Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to offer her condolences at the passing away of Dr. Wazed Miah, they had tearfully embraced each other, and for once, all the differences were set aside and the two met as humane beings. One would have liked to see them meet under happier circumstances and not one occasioned by the death of a spouse.

This was perhaps the first time since the two became the leaders of their respective parties that a meeting between them has taken place without rancour or acrimony or open display of mutual apathy being flaunted with palpable delight.

It was grief that brought them together. It is a pity that death had to be the reason for the two ladies to meet. It is worth recalling that the late Dr. Wazed Miah at one point in time had tried, in vain, to bring about reconciliation between the two.

And in Bangladesh the meeting was news. There is good reason why, in our country, a perfectly civil and normal act of our leaders makes the headlines. Meetings and exchanges of pleasantries between the leaders of the two major political parties are an exception rather than the norm, and anything out of the normal run of their conduct catches our attention, as this recent gesture of Begum Zia has.

But in giving the importance that the media has to the event it has perhaps reflected the desire of the vast majority of the Bangladeshis to see the two shed permanently the divide that keeps them psycho-

logically apart.

It is quite understandable that while Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina will continue to be political opponents, being leaders of the two parties that matter most in our politics, what is quite unacceptable is that the political divide should continue to pervade their psyches to a degree that prevents them from indulging in common and customary social interaction, as is expected of political personalities representing a vast majority of our people.

Unfortunately, this attitude has trickled down to the party members, particularly the senior leadership, and the impression of the public is that one considers the other not as political opponent but sworn enemy. There is predominance of mistrust and suspicion that shapes their attitudes towards each other.

Given that the political environment in Bangladesh has been primarily the product of AL-BNP relationship, no wonder that it has been a vitiated atmosphere that the people had to endure since the time democracy was restored in the country.

I for one feel that there is much in common that the two leaders have with each other. Both have suffered great personal tragedies and both have had the mantle of leadership thrust upon them. They are leaders not by default anymore but by choice of the people, and both have had the good fortune of being entrusted by the people, twice each, to govern the country.

The two had joined hands to dislodge a pseudo-democratic government in 1991 and both had committed to help democracy flourish. Both have been the victims of harassment from time to time of the powers



A reconciliation devoutly to be wished.

that be, and only recently both have had to suffer the indignity of incarceration on allegation of corruption.

Unfortunately, it is history, or subjective perception of it, that has had much to do with the shaping of attitudes of the two leaders. It is unfortunate that the House of Sheikh Mujib and the House of Zia have developed an irreconcilable attitude towards each other. The former feels that Zia was the beneficiary of the death of Bangabandhu and had a hand in the August 15 killings. And Khaleda Zia feels that popular movements have suffered because of the attitude of compromise of Sheikh Hasina.

The people want to see the state of animus between AL and BNP come to an end. The inevitability of being ruled by either of the two houses has come to be accepted by the people. The news that Sheikh Rehana is likely to be given a high party post confirms the fact that political personalities might change but not hereditary rights. And, therefore, the better the understanding and

harmony between the two houses the better would be the way national issues will be addressed. (On principle one should not have any grudge against such an arrangement. If some big business houses can go by the law of heredity why cannot the political houses? Our only plea is do not turn politics into business.)

There is need for unanimity on national issues. Certain matters of national interest must be addressed cutting across party lines and in this the two leaders must show the way. If family grief and distress can bring apparently intractable opponents together why can't national issues that cause distress to the people move them enough to forget their differences?

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Let there be a new beginning

Let us build further on the new friendly relations between Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Let the two ladies put their personal hatred aside for the time being and work together to get democracy going for the first time in this country.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

WE were excited and jubilant when Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia met briefly and exchanged pleasantries on the occasion of Armed Forces Day last year. It was a rarity seeing them speaking to one another, although the whole scene lasted not longer than one or two minutes. Many thought that our worst days were over and soon we would have democracy and a peaceful country. No, that was not to be. We were quickly back to dirty politics.

When Sheikh Hasina led her alliance to victory, Begum Zia, far from congratulating Sheikh Hasina on her victory, termed the election unfair. The opposition led by her in the parliament has yet to play a positive role in institutionalising democracy and forcing the government to be more responsive to the needs and sufferings of the people.

This is not to say that Sheikh Hasina and her government are without blemish. The opposition deserves to be treated with more courtesy and consideration than what has been shown to them by the government. The prime minister, in true spirit of democratic

culture, should have invited Khaleda Zia for talks immediately after the BDR mutiny. But she felt no need to do so. Unfortunately, this is our politics and our brand of democracy.

I could not believe my ears and eyes when I first heard and then saw on TV that Begum Zia had gone to Sudha Sadan to personally convey her condolences to Sheikh Hasina on the death of her husband.

It was reported in the media that the BNP chairperson embraced Sheikh Hasina as she consoled her, and that she remained with the prime minister for about half an hour. What a noble gesture from Begum Zia, standing beside Sheikh Hasina, consoling her and sharing her grief at a time when sorrow and grief were consuming her arch political rival! This is the sort of behaviour we are not accustomed to seeing from our two top political leaders.

Undeniably, this was democracy and humanity at its best. While it has definitely enhanced the political stature of Begum Khaleda Zia, it has also kindled new hope of a harmonious relationship between the government and the opposition. Let us hope that, unlike the last dramatic event, this personal contact between the two ladies will

have a positive impact on our politics.

We have a myriad of problems created by our power hungry, corrupt, autocratic and myopic rulers over the years. And now comes the global economic crisis on a scale never seen before to exacerbate our problems. We cannot afford the politics of loot and plunder and, especially, the politics of street violence and shutting down of mills, factories and educational institutions.

We need electricity, water, irrigation, roads and bridges. We need employment for our growing population. We need to fight poverty, corruption and Islamist militancy. We need honest, hard working and patriotic people to rule us. We need political harmony and peace. We need the criminals of our state exchequer to be brought to justice. In fine, we need genuine democracy and rule of law.

Let us build further on the new friendly relations between Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Let the two ladies put their personal hatred aside for the time being and work together to get democracy going for the first time in this country. Without genuine democracy, we can hardly achieve anything substantive to tide over the crisis we are facing.

No matter how much we may have tried in the past to put these two ladies out of politics, they remain a potent political force to be reckoned with. Let good sense prevail on them. They have achieved enough. From mere housewives they have become powerful political leaders. They have walked the centre stage of politics for more than three decades. They have blended power and

wealth the way very few could have aspired, given that they live in a male dominated society.

Let there be a change of heart for the better now that both the ladies share the agony and poignance of losing their beloved husbands. Let there be a new beginning in our politics. Let the government on its part drop the case of eviction of Khaleda Zia from her cantonment house as a conciliatory move. After all, the government gifted the house to her. She did not occupy it illegally.

In return, let Begum Khaleda Zia extend a hand of friendship and cooperation to Sheikh Hasina in addressing issues of national importance. Let the two ladies make a vow to establish true democracy, wage a crusade against corruption, and try putting a smile on the faces of the teeming millions of this country who have so far only suffered from starvation, malnutrition, illiteracy and indignity in a country which they and their forefathers had freed from alien rule by fighting a bloody war of independence and winning in the end.

I am cautiously optimistic that we will see the government and the opposition cooperate with one another in ushering in genuine democracy and in improving the lot of the common people of this country. Should this not happen, and should our politics remain mired in mudslinging and corruption despite our experience of 1/11, we should be prepared for still worse days to come.

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Streamlining field administration

The list of transferred and retained subjects should be finalised right now to make the upazila parishads effective. The progress of work, including the finalisation of business rules of the upazila parishad, is not to the satisfaction of the people who want strong local government.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

AN effective and orderly field administration can deliver public services discreetly and build up the image of the government with good governance. There are many problems besetting the administration at the field level, creating confusion about jurisdictions, responsibilities and allocation of businesses.

A few days back, as reported in a local daily, many upazila nirbahi officers submitted representations to the Ministry of Establishment for withdrawing from their present stations.

Under the new Upazila Parishad (Repealed and Re-introduction) Act, 2009, UNOs have been designated as secretaries of the upazila parishad instead of chief executive officers, marking a major shift in existing administrative norms.

Besides, the tussle between the chairman and the MP of the upazila, in some stations, is at a stage where the UNO might be the victim of tug of war. This has become more serious where the MP and the chairman are

from different political parties. In a circular issued on May 4, by the local government division, the UNO will have no voting right, and can only facilitate decision-making of the upazila parishad.

The deputy commissioner is the chairman of the district law and order committee, but the chief judicial magistrate is not a member of the committee. Thus, the meetings headed by the deputy commissioner are useless exercises that cannot resolve pending issues or take any decisions thereon.

Sometimes, the superintendent of police also does not attend such meetings, knowing that the DC was a toothless tiger. Magistrates working with the deputy commissioner cannot reply to any question since they do not hold the responsibility of the court as trying magistrates.

Magistrates working at district and upazila level are not clear about their roles in maintaining law and order since judicial magistrates take cognisance of criminal offences. Executive magistrates exercise their power under 144 Cr PC and take pre-

ventive actions provided the situation demands so. But preventive actions are closely related with sensitive cases pending in the court.

There is a provision for a standing committee for law and order in the upazila parishad manual, but the government has very recently constituted a separate committee making the UNO the chairman, the MP the chief adviser, and the upazila chairman and vice chairman as advisers. There is confusion about whether the chairman's decision shall be final or the chief adviser's directives shall be mandatory in the eyes of the law.

UNOs are key players in some places, or secretaries in some places -- who point out rules but do not participate in decision-making -- thus generating confusion at the field level. The vice-chairmen are in total confusion about their responsibilities and roles in the upazila administration.

It is learnt that in some places upazila chairmen have occupied the offices of the UNOs considering their supreme jurisdiction over all areas. Some UNOs are apprehending that the tussle will start when the leasing out of hats, bazaars and water bodies comes up in few days.

It is learnt that a food procurement committee was constituted a few days back without the upazila food controller, even as a member of the committee. Later on, the upazila chairman was made chairman, the UNO the vice-chairman, and the UFC the member secretary. In fact, field level officers are very frustrated at seeing the failure of the

government to understand the problems of field administration.

The list of transferred and retained subjects should be finalised right now to make the upazila parishads effective. The progress of work, including the finalisation of business rules of the upazila parishad, is not to the satisfaction of the people who want strong local government. This is causing frustration among them.

The circular of May 4, however, defined a parishad as a corporate body that can sue or be sued as a legal entity. The aforesaid circular highlighted the UNO as facilitator without indicating his domain of authority and jurisdiction. Of course, the circular does not allow interference of MPs in the day-to-day administration of the upazila parishad.

Field level administration is the key to the public service delivery system. It is difficult to win the confidence of the public with a shattered and confused administrative structure down below. It is, thus, high time to address the issues generating anomalies in the administration at the field level, and overcome those with clear delegation of authority and identification of responsibilities.

For this purpose, the government might consider constituting a commission urgently to identify areas of confusion and suggests measures to streamline field level administration vis-a-vis allocation of businesses among officials of various departments, with the deputy commissioner as chief coordinator of field level administration.

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