

The plight of the children Need for uniformity in laws defining a child compelling

TWELVE year-old Raju from Kamrangirchar epitomises the sad story of the nation's poor children working in hazardous circumstances and for a pittance. Raju, a school dropout, works the entire day in a factory producing aluminium goods, the dust from the particles not only powdering his face but clearly making their way into his body system in various ways. And that is the hazard he and children like him constantly face despite the laws that exist to prevent child labour in the country. As a series of reports in this newspaper noted yesterday, under-aged children not only are exposed to such hazards as inhaling chemicals in their places of work but also happen to be confined in spaces that are as unhygienic as can be imagined. At the end of the week, these children, depending on their age, go home with between Tk. 200 and Tk. 400. It is a morbid sight.

Poverty degrades. And how it does that can be seen from the fact that neither the governmental authorities nor the NGOs have evinced much interest in the security and welfare of these children and their families. At a period in life when these children should be going to school, it is precisely the reverse that one notices. Many of these children (there are 3.2 million child labourers in Bangladesh, according to the National Child Labour Survey 2002-2003) have dropped out of school in order to assist their families eke out a living. Quite some years ago, when international pressure piled up on some of our industries about taking child workers out of their premises and taking them to school, great enthusiasm was noticed in the country. That enthusiasm evidently did not translate into a change in the lives of these children we speak of today. And that is extremely disappointing, given that on every conceivable occasion, government functionaries endlessly mouth platitudes about an application of the laws against child labour. The next step, predictably, is a return to the old ways, to what has always been happening.

A peculiar, even quixotic aspect of the whole situation relates to the definition of a child in this country. There are as many as forty sector-oriented laws in Bangladesh and among these laws one will find various definitions of who or what constitutes a child. A child has variously been described as one who is under the age of 18, 16, 15 and 12 years. The United Nations and the International Labour Organisation make it clear, however, that a child is anyone under eighteen. That should resolve the issue for us in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, a clear lack of uniformity in the laws relating to age precludes any meaningful steps being taken to deal with the predicament that poor children face in their workplaces. It is a matter the authorities need to mull over. Unless they do, the embarrassment which goes for children's employment could well become a scandal.

Dhaka College conundrum Switch to reasoning, not impulsive action

DISTURBANCES gripped the road stretch from Science Laboratory to Azimpur on Wednesday morning as Dhaka College students clashed with police while demonstrating to press home their demand for upgrading their college into a full-fledged university. Resultantly, several persons were injured, including eight students, two policemen and some pedestrians. Normal traffic flow and business activity in and around the college premises were disrupted as people in the vicinity became panicky.

Dhaka College has often been in the news, not always for the right reasons. As one of the most prestigious colleges in the country, its students are expected to set high standards of morality, behaviour and conduct. Citizens are at a loss to understand why in articulating a demand centring around elevation of the college to university status, the students would have to resort to agitation. There are standard methods of doing so -- represent to the college authority and the college authority in turn taking up the matter with the higher authorities. There are certain criteria for upgrading a college into university and it is upon fulfillment of these that an educational institution is elevated with all the logistical, manpower and financial implications that go with it. So, a process is involved here and even if it is merited, it just can't happen overnight.

At the same time, in controlling such a situation the police should take recourse to persuasion and patient handling appealing to the good sense of the students rather than acting abrasively. True, the police have to maintain public order, but the basic approach ought to be that of trouble-shooting and calming the nerves, if necessary through timely cooperation with the college authorities.

Just as the college authorities need to encourage the students to take to the path of reasoning, dialogue and negotiation which is, of course, better done through elective students unions, so also the Home Ministry needs to analyse typical incidents of police-student confrontations and arrive at a policy solution to what has been a persistently disquieting phenomenon. We have to settle for the best practice approach.

The opposition's role

Public welfare being the common goal, the opposition has a positive role to help the government by pin-pointing the deficiencies of the policies and suggesting alternative ways to make up the same.

MD. ALI AKBAR

THE print media carried articles evaluating the first 100-day performance of the government, but there was none of the sort concerning the doings of the opposition in the new parliament. Although the government runs the show, the opposition too has something to do -- watch-dogging and counseling. Is it doing its part?

In a democratic polity, the opposition is a part and parcel of governance. Public welfare being the common goal, it has a positive role to help the government by pin-pointing the deficiencies of the policies and suggesting alternative ways to make up the same.

In our setting, the opposition continues to play rather a dismissive, feisty role, opposing the government in its every move. It ends up without indicating any alternatives that it might reckon would be better.

Let us recall how bitterly the opposition decried the government when it came to discussing the possibility of giving transit facility to India. The political storm that was raised soon died down, but with that was gone the chance of negotiating our

access to Nepal, Bhutan and China through India.

In resisting the move, the opposition brought the old, perceived security threat into focus without thinking of the scope of securing some of our vital interests in the bargain. As a matter of fact, many think the leaders in the opposition themselves are to blame for having endangered national security for sheer political opportunism.

Being political camp followers of, or heirs to, the post-'75 undemocratic regimes, the opposition leaders today cannot absolve themselves of the stigma of having steamrolled the people's democratic aspiration under cover of the 5th amendment to the constitution.

In 1975, the stuttering nation was virtually brought to its knees, and national security in peril, through the brutal killings of great leaders, including the country's founding president and father of the nation, Bangabandhu. Now the government stands by the epoch-making HC verdict that declared all actions under the 5th amendment unconstitutional.

The opposition now stands in the way of the government's upholding of the historical verdict of the HC. They, in addition to filing an appeal with the Supreme

Court, are now trying to have us believe that the government is going to exclude "Bismillah" from the constitution, while the government asserts it will not.

The 5th amendment lent legal cover to the now defunct infamous "Indemnity ordinance" that was promulgated to indemnify the '75 killers of national leaders from trial. Further, it sought to wean us away from the state principle of secularism -- the solemn credo of our independent Bengali nationhood. By appealing against the HC verdict, the opposition clearly seeks to defend the post-'75 unconstitutional/undemocratic rule.

In fact, religious fundamentalism was patronised at that time, and pitted against secularist politics in the country. Even now the opposition leaders are brazenly siding with the ultra-rightist forces. Begum Zia's recent observation about non-existence of Islamic militants is reminiscent of her crafty assertion in 2005 that there was nobody called Bangla Bhai and that he was but a media creation.

Given the recent arrests and busting of militant hideouts with huge arms and ammo, should not the opposition wake up to the reality of growing security threat from the religious extremists? If not, how could they explain the latest threat to blow up the US, Australian and some other embassies?

After ascending to power in 2001, the BNP-Jamaat regime had allegedly let loose an unprecedented reign of terror and oppression on the then opposition activ-

ists and the minority communities. Now that the HC has directed the government to constitute an enquiry commission within two months to thoroughly probe the post-2001 poll brutalities, it is incumbent upon the government to act accordingly.

If the opposition regrets the macabre episode it turned a blind eye to when it was at the helm, then it should now support the government in bringing the culprits to justice. Interestingly, the opposition supported the treasury in passing the Upazila Parishad Bill, 2009 making the MPs advisers to the Upazila Parishads, albeit, many interpret it as being more for shared convenience than principled stand.

Before voicing support to the bill, the opposition would have done better to project their well position in support of empowering the MPs over the upazila chairmen, so their electorate could have been apprised of the rationale behind the opposition's concord with the government in this particular instance.

Again, the opposition's abrupt call upon the 4-month government to quit is too premature to have any appeal whatsoever. One wonders how the nascent government could be expected to resolve the nagging water and power crises in no time, which the BNP-Jamaat regime could not do in their term. Pragmatism should, therefore, guide the opposition.

MD. ALI AKBAR is a Deputy Secretary to the Government.

No excuse for denying adult literacy

There is no excuse for denying the rights of the adult learners, keeping in mind the international benchmarks for good quality adult literacy programs, and genuinely ensuring education "for all."

S. M. ZAKIR HOSSAIN

THERE is no doubt about the financial crunch we are facing now, but do we know about the other crisis we have been facing in Bangladesh for a long time? It is in providing quality basic education for all, especially women. Bangladesh may be able to overcome the current financial downturn, but we may not be able to achieve education for all (EFA) by 2015. None of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will be achievable without substantive progress in EFA.

As part of the Millennium Declaration, the general assembly of the United Nations adopted MDG in September 2000. The first international commitment on EFA was launched in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and it was reaffirmed in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000 and again in September 2000. 6 key education goals have been incorporated in EFA and achieving the EFA goals contributes to the global pursuit of the eight MDGs, especially MDG 2 on universal primary education and MDG 3 on gender equality in education, by 2015.

According to the 2009 Unesco EFA global monitoring report, more and more people are learning how to read and write,

but 776 million adults are still illiterate. In 2008, the adult literacy rate in Bangladesh was 48.8% as per the report of Bureau of Statistics and Unesco, while the rate was 64% as per a government source in 2000.

The policy preference for adult non-formal basic education in Bangladesh has been declining for the last few years and resource allocation has also progressively dwindled. A number of national and international organizations, like ActionAid Bangladesh, Brac, FIVDB (Friends in Village Development, Bangladesh), Dam (Dhaka Ahsania Mission), Plan Bangladesh, Room to Read, Save the Children, have larger programs but, individually, they do not have much national impact in terms of providing basic literacy and numeracy.

For example, ActionAid Bangladesh uses the Reflect Approach, which won the Unesco award in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2008, in its programs that provide adult literacy to about 20,000 poor people per year. According to CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) statistics as of 2004, more than 400 NGOs were engaged in adult literacy programs that reached 6,51,502 people.

The coverage is poor in view of the demand. Therefore, a sectoral representation of NGOs, including international

NGOs, in the domain of non-formal adult education would be realistic, and emphasis on this issues by the donors and the government is urgently needed.

The Global Campaign for Education (GCE), in cooperation with ActionAid International, conducted a worldwide survey to identify the benchmarks to run effective adult literacy programs. Under auspices of Unesco they explored 12 core benchmarks on adult literacy, which were first published in the report 'Writing the Wrongs' in 2006. The benchmarks are:

- Literacy is about acquiring and using reading, writing and numeracy skills, thereby developing active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality.
- Literacy should be seen as a continuous process that requires regular and sustained learning.
- Governments must take the responsibility, providing leadership and resources and working in collaboration with civil society.
- Governments should invest in feedback and evaluation mechanisms, data systematisation and strategic research.
- Facilitators should be paid at least the equivalent of the minimum wage of a primary school teacher.
- Facilitators should receive substantial initial training and regular refresher training, as well as having opportunities for professional development.
- Facilitators should work with groups of no more than 30 learners and there should be at least one trainer/supervisor

to 15 learner groups.

- Learners in multilingual contexts should be given a choice about the language in which they want to learn.
- Learners should be actively stimulated through the use of a wide range of participatory methods and through addressing issues of relevance to their lives.
- Governments should stimulate the markets for production and distribution of suitable reading materials and should support production of materials by learners and facilitators.
- Governments should commit to spend \$50 and \$100 per learner per year for at least three years.
- Governments should dedicate at least 3% of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy. International donors should fill any remaining resource gaps.

Progress towards EFA accelerates the progress towards MDGs, and accelerated progress towards adult literacy is a condition for accelerated progress towards EFA. It is tough to run adult literacy programs without the help of the government and donors, and they should invest more on adult literacy since we still have to go a long way to reach the MDGs. So, there is no excuse for denying the rights of the adult learners, keeping in mind the international benchmarks for good quality adult literacy programs, and genuinely ensuring education "for all."

S. M. Zakir Hossain is an Advocate and Human Rights Activist. Email: lawforpoor@yahoo.com

Nuclear nonstarter

Despite the Taliban's recent advances and the shakiness of President Asif Ali Zardari's government, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are secure and will remain so.

SUMIT GANGULY

KEY Obama administration officials, including the national security adviser, General James Jones, have expressed concerns about the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons in light of the seemingly inexorable advance of the Taliban toward the nation's capital. The public airing of such misgivings, at one level, is certainly understandable. No responsible policymaker would want to consider the possibility of even a small part of Pakistan's nuclear assets falling into the hands of one of the most vicious, anti-American, Islamist groups.

Yet such alarm may be premature. Despite the Taliban's recent advances and the shakiness of President Asif Ali Zardari's government, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are secure and will remain so. How can I make such a bold assertion? The answer is complex and has much to do with the role of nuclear weapons in Pakistan's overall security strategy.

Unless the Pakistani Army, the overseer of the nuclear-weapons program, starts to

fragment, the fears of nuclear weapons ending up with the Taliban are greatly exaggerated. Today the military regards nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent against its perceived archenemy, India. Consequently, it will not allow this vital capability to slip into the hands of unpredictable, if occasional, allies such as the Taliban.

Despite the civilian origins of the program in the early 1970s, the Pakistani army has managed to maintain an ironclad grip on the program. The army presided over its development and created a virtually impregnable stronghold on the country's nuclear-weapons infrastructure. In a state characterised by bureaucratic failure and instability, the nuclear-weapons program is an oasis of efficiency, competence and success. It's easy to understand why.

From the perspective of the Pakistani military establishment, the command and control of its nuclear-weapons infrastructure is the final guarantee against a perceived existential threat from India. It's hard to imagine the military voluntarily relinquishing control of its nuclear force to an Islamist government, should it come

to that.

There are three possible scenarios in which the Taliban could come into possession of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. One scenario involves a Taliban defeat of the Pakistani army. Despite the success of the Taliban in the Swat Valley, this is highly unlikely. The many flaws of the Pakistani military notwithstanding, it still remains a formidable and mostly professional military force. In 1972, in the aftermath of the breakup of Pakistan, it suppressed an ethnic insurgency in Baluchistan.

If it perceives a genuine and immediate threat to the safety and security of its nuclear arsenal, it will move with similar alacrity against the Taliban, and indeed it has already stepped up its fighting in the Swat Valley. Consequently, the likelihood of the Taliban seizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons capabilities in a fight with the Pakistani military borders on the chimerical.

The second scenario is slightly more plausible: key Taliban sympathisers within the Pakistani military, acting in concert with the Pakistani Taliban, manage to seize components of Pakistan's nuclear-weapons complex. Some experts have expressed concern about such a possibility, but though theoretically possible it is extremely unlikely.

The present chief of staff of the Pakistan army, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, was previously the head of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence directorate.

With that background and connections in the intelligence service, there is little reason to believe that he does not exercise rigorous oversight of the army from his present position. Indeed, it strains the imagination to believe that the ISI -- the very organisation that spawned the original Taliban -- would not be aware of lurking Taliban sympathisers in its midst.

The third scenario -- the Taliban seizes a nuclear weapon while in transit along one of Pakistan's troubled roads -- is also not likely to happen. The Pakistani Air Force has transport aircraft that can easily fly components of nuclear weapons to their relevant destinations for final assembly. Otherwise, the missiles are kept in highly secure military bases.

There is much reason to be concerned about Pakistan's political stability given the growing power and reach of the Taliban and other Islamist groups within the country. However, until the Pakistani military starts showing signs of disintegration, policymakers in Washington and elsewhere need not lose much sleep about the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. The Taliban will not be allowed to come close to seizing these vital strategic assets.

Ganguly is the director of research of the Center on American and Global Security at Indiana University, Bloomington.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.