

Such disaster shouldn't happen again

Govt. need to take specific preventive steps

HOW dangerously we live in Dhaka city is felt to the bones in the wake of Wednesday's dreadful accident at Moghbazar railway crossing. The frightful thing is the frequency of such accidents, this being the third time within a year in the city and twice in six months at Moghbazar crossing itself.

Even with our lowered risk sensibilities -- in order that we could keep functioning at all -- the man-made disaster at Moghbazar should go down as a learning experience that we make use of, and not squander. As for the government, it is a ringing call to duty.

Onlookers and TV footage watchers of a virtual horror-movie playing out with a speeding train ramming a bus as it came down crushing vehicles, thankfully without fatality, must have been shaken to their core. That by itself wouldn't, however, be enough to turn things around. From this point on, they should demand through as many forums they could get, remedial steps and must be prepared to do the part they are obliged to, instead of resting content with playing spectator, limiting themselves to expression of sighs and moans.

Some specific civic bodies in tandem with ward commissioners and local MPs should get a move on. Unfortunately, we have environmental activists but none to focus on safety hazards at railway crossings and along the rail tracks passing through crowded city areas.

For our part, we are suggesting four specific steps that can be taken by way of implementing an accident prevention strategy in the immediate term. First of all, it is of utmost importance that because railway crossings are placed on two-way thoroughfares, the cross bars on both sides are simultaneously lowered with two bars on each side clamping down. This will prevent any vehicle from crossing through the unbarred side which often happens. Secondly, some synchronisation will have to be effected between the signalling at the nearer traffic intersections and the signalling at the railway crossings. Especially, traffic policemen should be directed to hold traffic in spite of the automatic blinking of the green signal in response to timings of train movement. Traffic cops and railway signal personnel can have walkie-talkies to communicate. Thirdly, the authorities should install big red signals with high visibility and loudly ringing alarm bells on both sides of the level crossing with manpower at these locations increased. Last but not least, the car owners and vehicle drivers need to exercise caution and self-discipline to stop short at a safe distance from the bars. For, the Moghbazar incident could be entirely blamed on the driver who pressed forward and landed on the danger zone defying all instructions to the contrary.

There is another set of vulnerabilities which we would like to draw the attention of the government to. This relates to mushrooming of bazars and the different trades being operated on both sides of railway tracks going through crowded city areas exposing all sorts of people to mortal dangers. Accidents are just waiting to happen there. Something must be done about relocating such hazardous settlements.

The passing of Gaziul Haque

His death diminishes us all

THE passing of Gaziul Haque on Wednesday marks yet one more step in the passage of an iconic generation into the past. For Gaziul Haque came of a generation which was to leave a lasting imprint on the psyche of the Bengali nation in terms of a shaping of its destiny. He was one of those young men who played an active role in the shaping of what eventually came to be known as the Language Movement of February 1952. Indeed, Haque's place in Bangladesh's history was assured when he chaired the meeting at Dhaka University which decided to violate Section 144 as a way of demanding the right of Bengali to be adopted as the state language of Pakistan. It was a seminal move that would have widespread ramifications for the people of Bangladesh.

That was how Gaziul Haque found his way into history. In the years after 1952, he was to play an important role in the evolution of politics in pre-liberation Bangladesh. His commitment to secular politics, like that of so many others of his generation, was to provide the foundations upon which the idea of a free Bangladesh was to be concretized. An important aspect of his political character was his principled refusal to kowtow to unconstitutional government. Which is why in 1969, Gaziul Haque joined the multitudes in the struggle against the autocratic regime of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. Which is why, again, in 1990 his was a vocal presence in the agitation against the Ershad regime. His commitment to democratic politics, his belief that out of all the crises the nation faced would emerge a society finally on the path to a realization of its original principles were thoughts he never let go of despite occasional bouts of disillusionment.

Gaziul Haque's was a gregarious soul. He was a wit whose sense of humour brightened conversation. As a raconteur, he had few equals.

We pay our heartfelt tribute to the valiant freedom fighter that was the inimitable Gaziul Haque. His death diminishes us all.

The end of poverty?

The man with a private jet will look down upon the man without it. Or, someone having a mega yacht will envy somebody who has a super yacht. The end of poverty is a distant dream, but a change is obvious. It will take a lot more to feel rich, and a lot less to feel poor.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

BACK in 1975, this is how *Time* magazine presented the conflict between rich and poor. Roughly 750 million people in two dozen or so industrialised countries consumed most of the world's resources, produced most of its manufactured goods and enjoyed the highest standard of living. In stark contrast, 2 billion people in about 100 countries lived in the shadows of death by disease and starvation.

Mollie Orshansky, who developed the poverty measurements used by the US government, describes that conflict in simpler terms. She defines the poor as people who are deprived of goods, services and pleasures taken for granted by the rest of us. If it's true amongst countries, it's also true within each of them. A small segment of the population is affluent, whereas a preponderant majority lives from hand to mouth.

In the last 50 years, the world population has grown from 3 billion to 6.4 billion. The World Bank estimates that almost half of them are victims of extreme and moderate poverty, living on less than \$2.50 a day. If we go by the Copenhagen Declaration at the UN Summit on Social Development, then the net expands further. A much higher percentage of people are severely deprived of basic human needs, including, food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information.

It's comforting that the percentage of world population living in poverty has been

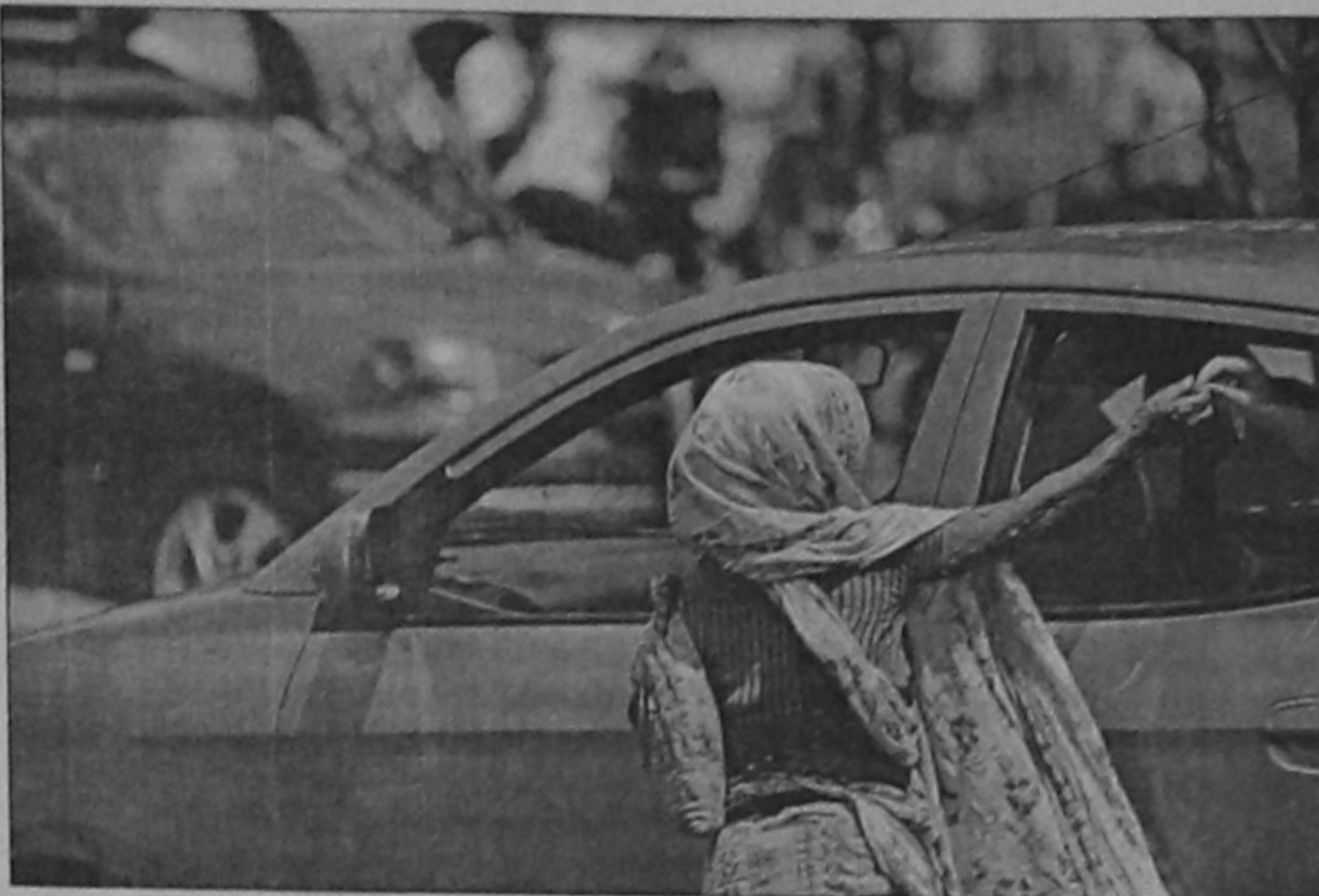
declining over the years, going from over 90% in 1820 to 51.3% in 1992. Another study shows that this percentage has steadily diminished from 51.8% in 1981 to 25.2% in 2005. But what throws a spanner in the works is that while bridging the gap between rich and poor, the riverbanks are drifting apart. Poverty reduction is bringing down the number of the poor, but the poor are also getting poorer compared to the rich.

How is it possible? When French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote *The Philosophy of Poverty* in 1847, he perceived an inner connection between poverty and property. He proposed to abolish property in order to abolish poverty.

In 1880, Karl Marx wrote *The Poverty of Philosophy* in response to Proudhon. Poverty, he argued, was not just a question of how much a labourer was paid. It was mostly the result of the increased alienation from society that capitalism brought with it. The accumulation of wealth at one pole is accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalisation and moral degradation at the opposite pole, he explained.

So, the accumulation of wealth has happened in some hands and countries faster than others. Economic historian Angus Maddison analysed the growth of inequality over the last two thousand years. What she found was that the ratio of inequality between the richest economies and the poorest economies of the world was barely more than two to one until about five centuries ago.

But it began to accelerate for more than



A perennial curse?

two hundred years. Usha Patnaik, an Indian economic historian, shows the significance of capital transfers from places such as the Indian subcontinent and the British West Indies to Britain. It was around that time that such capital accumulation heavily contributed to the success of the industrial revolution.

The UN Millennium Development Goals aim to halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day. The question is whether it will reduce poverty or increase inequality amongst them. The experience is that the poor are being reduced along with poverty. Once mainstream, they are being marginalised.

And that marginalisation is seeping into the rocks of the society, including national parliament. The rich tend to dominate our own parliament, and nominations are auctioned to the highest bidders. Even in the world's largest democracy, the rich are gaining over the poor. In 2009, 300 crore patis

have been elected to the Lok Sabha, double the number elected in 2004. The number of its MPs with criminal records also went up from 128 in 2004 to 153 in 2009.

Is the debris of dwindling poverty cementing the building blocks of inequality? In other words, is the suffering of have-nots getting transformed into the anguish of have-not-enoughs? Is the hunger that once growled in the stomach of the hungry, now going to howl in the heart of the envious?

How will the rich-poor conflict look in future? A negligible percentage of people will still be poor, even if most people will have their basic needs satisfied. Yet, the man with a private jet will look down upon the man without it. Or, someone having a mega yacht will envy somebody who has a super yacht.

The end of poverty is a distant dream, but a change is obvious. It will take a lot more to feel rich, and a lot less to feel poor.

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Sri Lanka: Winning the peace

The war there is over, but not necessarily Sri Lanka's travails. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has won the war. Now it must work hard to win the peace.

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE Latin historian Tacitus wrote: "They made solitude or silence and called it peace." Let this not be said of the Sri Lankan situation. The war there is over, but not necessarily Sri Lanka's travails. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has won the war. Now it must work hard to win the peace. Or futurity will see this only as an Ozymandian moment that was not seized upon. It is anticipated that the world will remain focused on Sri Lanka, to see how the victors are able to meet the ensuing challenges resulting from the end to the conflict.

Two important contemporary concepts, both endorsed by the international community at the United Nations, will be tested in Sri Lanka. One is with regard to "Peace-Building." It implies a series of measures to stabilise a post-conflict society into such an equilibrium so as to prevent it from sliding back into a situation of chaos. In this respect, much will depend on how the genuine grievances of the Tamil minority community are tackled.

A good way to go about it would be to focus on the "low hanging fruits" to start with. These are complaints that may be immediately remedied. "Quick Impact Projects," or QIPs, that can be easily implemented will be seen as a gesture of goodwill. These are manageable projects, and could start with the delivery of welfare to the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the refugee camps.

A graduated progression along the "four Rs" for the affected -- relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation -- will help immeasurably. These will assist in the creation of the much-needed structure of confidence. The setting up of a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" was effective in South Africa. Will it be relevant to Sri Lanka? The government may find it worth examining.

The second is the concept of "Responsibility to Protect," or "R2P" the jargon by which it is known in the international community. Simply put, it means that it is the responsibility of every state to protect its own citizens: if the state is unable or unwilling to do so then the responsibility would devolve on the international community,

which would discharge it working through the United Nations. The process would begin with diplomatic means, and force would only be used in the last resort. The principle was unanimously adopted at the Summit of World Leaders at the UN in New York in 2005, and would be applicable if one or more of four situations existed: "genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity."

One might as well add that the Sri Lankan government, with a modicum of understandable reason, is extremely sensitive to this idea. They connect it with the erosion of sovereignty. They argue that none of the four circumstances is present in Sri Lanka. The UN is also chary of broadening the application of the concept too much, as is evident in several statements made by Professor Ed Luck, the secretary general's Special Advisor for "R2P." Military intervention, in any case a last resort, is well nigh ruled out because neither China nor Russia would approve it in the Security Council.

But nothing prevents Sri Lanka itself from seeking international support and succour to resolve the issues. This can be done with the government itself in the driver's seat. This would only enhance the government's credibility. The large Tamil diaspora is already becoming active. Learning from others also comes to mind. What about examining how issues of racial harmony are being dealt with, successfully to date, in

another Asian island country with which Sri Lanka shares so many commonalities, Singapore?

All are aware of Sri Lanka's great potential, both economic and political, to play a positive and constructive role in the region and in the world. In the past, Sri Lankans have helped shape some of the global norms and standards by which we live today. One is reminded of their active participation in many international fora. This includes the development of the idea of "Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace." They have contributed enormously to global thinking, progress and stability. The world now awaits the re-engagement of Sri Lanka in the sculpting of the global future.

Earlier post colonial South Asian generations placed great store by the views of the great British Fabian Socialist thinker and writer, Harold Laski. It used to be said, for instance, that in Jawaharlal Nehru's first Indian cabinet "there was always an empty chair for Harold Laski." Laski once said: "The one way to avoid violent outbreak is not exclusion of people from power, but their participation in it." Alas, in contemporary South Asia this is a lesson lost on many societies!

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You are not alone

How we respond to this injustice will send a message about our resolution to tackle similar injustices across the globe. To those that stand for human rights, freedom and democracy, our message remains clear -- you are not alone.

GORDON BROWN

TODAY is the 64th birthday of Aung San Suu Kyi. The fact that she remains under arrest is tragic for Burma and for all those throughout the world who believe in democracy and the rule of law. The trial of Aung San Suu Kyi is an absurd mockery of justice. The real injustice was not that someone broke into her compound, but that she was imprisoned in the first place.

Aung San Suu Kyi has now been imprisoned for 13 of the last 19 years since the party she led won the last elections in her country. More than 2000 others are imprisoned across Burma for sharing her commitment to a better and brighter future for the long-suffering population.

Even in the face of such injustice, Aung San Suu Kyi has always supported the path of peace and reconciliation. But the regime has consistently spurned her offer of dialogue and reconciliation. They want to isolate her from the people of Burma, for whom she has long been a symbol of hope and defiance.

Her refusal to buckle in the face of tyranny is an inspiration. But words of support are not enough. The region, the EU and the UN are all urging the junta to release Aung San Suu Kyi.

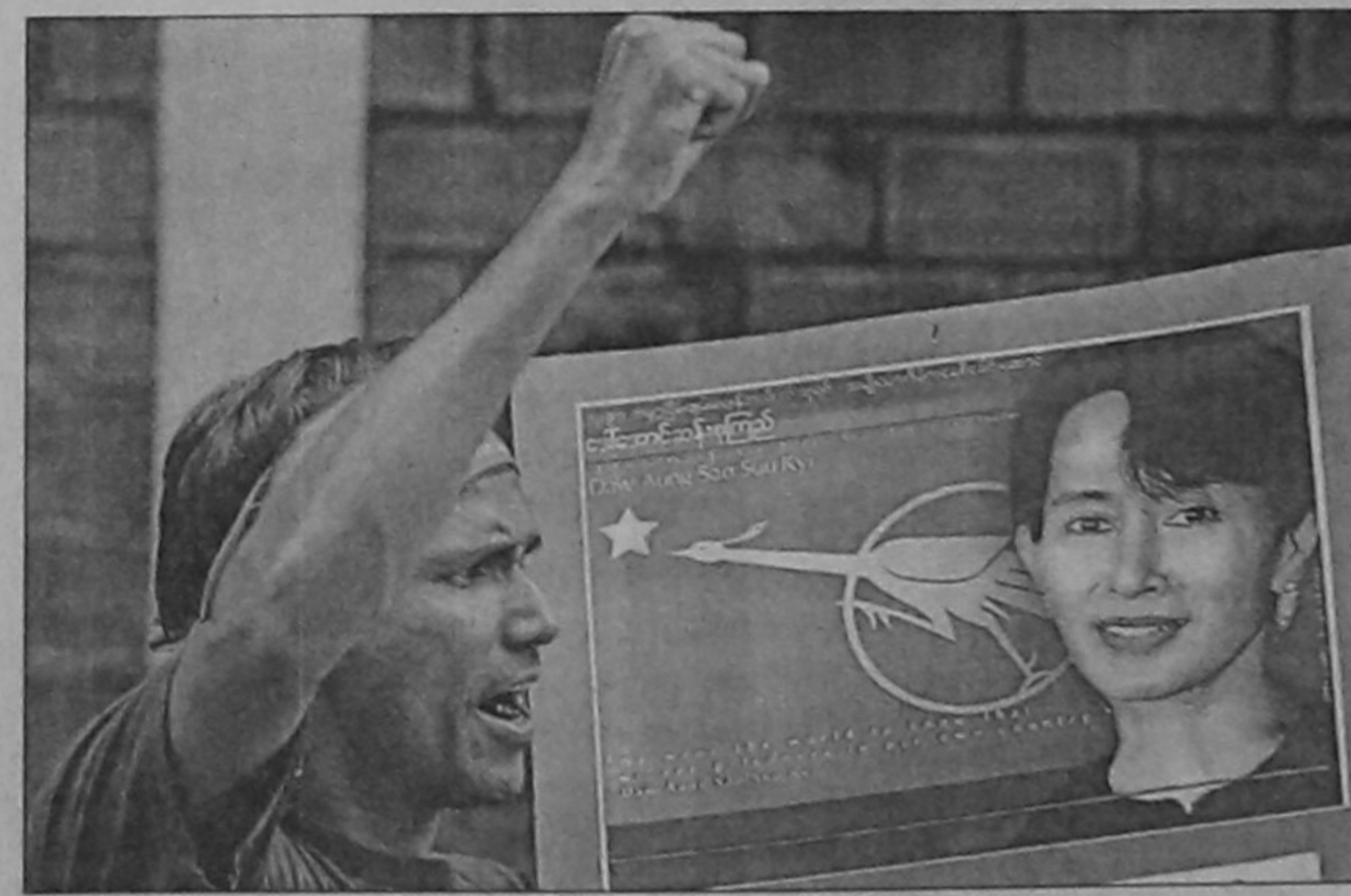
So far all requests for moderation have been spurned. In the face of such obstinacy the world must now act. I believe there are three things we must do.

Firstly, we need support the countries of the region as they step up efforts to secure democracy and reconciliation. I have been struck by how Burma's neighbours have led the world community in calling for Aung San Suu Kyi's release. We need to translate this outrage into ongoing political pressure for change.

Secondly, we need the UN Security Council to reinforce its calls for Aung San Suu Kyi's release and to support the Secretary-General's efforts to bring about political progress through an early visit to Burma.

Thirdly, we should impose a new set of tough sanctions that target the regime's economic interests. We will be pushing for stronger European Union action in this regard. Such a step would hit the business interests of the generals and their cronies. I also believe we should identify and target those judges complicit in the recent political show trials.

The growing sense of outrage and the unity of the international community behind this message should mark a turning point. The regime is at a cross roads. Long-



In solidarity.

promised elections in 2010 will remain a charade while political prisoners are being tortured, ethnic minorities are persecuted, the media muzzled, freedom of speech and assembly are non-existent and Aung San Suu Kyi is silenced. The regime can choose to ignore the clamour for change. But this will only condemn the country to deeper isolation, poverty, conflict and despair.

Or it can choose the path of reform as the region has urged. Burma is rich in natural and human resources, at the heart of a dynamic continent. Democratic reform would unleash the country's enormous potential. Britain and the international community would be ready to extend the hand of friendship. If the Burmese Generals rethink their

ways, we will be ready to recognize and embrace any genuine reforms they make.

Some may question why Burma warrants so much attention. There are other countries where human rights are ignored or people live in poverty. But the Burmese junta stands virtually alone in the scale of its misrule and the sheer indifference to the suffering of its 50 million people. How we respond to this injustice will send a message about our resolution to tackle similar injustices across the globe. To those that stand for human rights, freedom and democracy, our message remains clear -- you are not alone.

Gordon Brown is Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.